The Stolen Statesman

Being the Story of a Hushed Up Mystery

William Le Queux

Title: The Stolen Statesman
       Being the Story of a Hushed Up Mystery

Author: William Le Queux

Release Date: October 21, 2012 [EBook #41130]

Language: English

Produced by Nick Hodson of London, England

William Le Queux

"The Stolen Statesman"

"Being the Story of a Hushed Up Mystery"

Chapter One.

Concerning Sheila Monkton.

As the Right Honourable Reginald Monkton walked towards Charing Cross on that June morning his fifty-odd years appeared to weigh lightly upon him True, his hair was tinged with grey, yet that was but natural after over twenty years of political strife and Party bickering, of hard-fought divisions in the House, and of campaigns of various sorts up and down the country. His career had been a brilliantly outstanding one ever since he had graduated at Cambridge. He had risen to be a Bencher of the Inner Temple; had been, among other things, Quain Professor of Law at University College, London. In Parliament he had sat for North-West Manchester for ten years, afterwards for East Huntingdon, and later for the Govan Division of Glasgow. Among other political appointments he had held was that of a Junior Lord of the Treasury, afterwards that of Parliamentary Under-Secretary to the Home Office, and now in the latest Administration he had been given the portfolio of Colonial Secretary.

His one regret was that while he loved the country, and more especially Fydinge, that fine old Elizabethan manor house in Leicestershire, not far from Melton Mowbray, yet he was compelled to live in London and endure the fevered political and social life of the metropolis.

That morning, as he turned from Charing Cross towards Pall Mall, he was in a pensive mood. True, that little knot of people had spontaneously expressed their approval, and perhaps he was secretly gratified. Whatever popular men may say to the contrary, it is always the small appreciations that please. Reginald Monkton was far more gratified by a schoolgirl asking for his autograph in her well-thumbed album, than by the roars of applause that greeted his open and fearless speeches in the huge halls of Manchester, Birmingham, or Glasgow.

The millions of Britain knew him. His portrait appeared regularly in the illustrated papers, sometimes in declamatory attitude with his mouth open, his right fist in the palm of his left hand, addressing a great audience. But that morning, as he passed the “Senior”—as the United Service Club is known to officialdom—his thoughts were serious. He had

tasted most of the sweets of life, and all the delights of popularity. Yet that day, the eighth of June, was the fourth anniversary of the death of Sheila, his beloved wife, the fine, self-sacrificing helpmate of his early days, the woman who had moulded his career and seen him through many hours of disappointment and tribulation, and who, with her woman's amazing intuition and tact, had at the crisis of his life given him that sound advice which had swept him high upon the crest of the wave of popularity.

He recollected that it was on a bright sunny June day—just as that was—when, in that little villa amid the feathery palms at Mentone, he had held his dear one's wasted hard while her eyes had slowly closed in her last long sleep.

A lump arose in his throat as he turned into Cockspur Street, heedless of the busy bustle of London life, or that two honourable Members had nodded to him. So absorbed was he that he had only stared at them blankly and passed on.

Like many another man whose name is a household word in Britain to-day, all his popularity counted as nothing to him, and even though he led the busy life of a Cabinet Minister, yet he was very lonely at heart.

For a second he held his breath, then, setting his wide jaws in hard determination to put aside those bitter thoughts of the past, and still unaware that he was being followed, he crossed the road and entered the Carlton Hotel.

The young woman in plain navy blue who had followed him from Downing Street passed by, and continued until she reached the corner of Waterloo Place, when she turned, retraced her steps, and, entering the hotel by the door in Pall Mall, glanced into the palm-court with quick, furtive eyes. Then, apparently satisfying herself, she went along the narrow corridor and emerged into the Haymarket.

Again turning the corner into Pall Mall she drew out her handkerchief to dab her nose again, and afterwards hailed a taxi and drove away.

On the kerb opposite stood the thick-set young man, who, having seen her signal, watched her leave, and then crossed and entered the hotel.

Reginald Monkton, on entering the palm-court after leaving his hat and cane, found his daughter Sheila seated at one of the little tables with a spruce, well-set-up, refined young man, awaiting him.

The young man sprang up eagerly, and, putting out his hand, exclaimed:

“It’s awfully good of you to come, Mr Monkton! I know how terribly busy you must be.”

“Delighted, my dear Austin,” declared the statesman. “Delighted! The Cabinet was just over in time, so I’ve walked along. Well, Sheila,” he asked merrily, turning to his daughter, “what have you been doing this morning?”

“Oh!” replied the pretty, fair-haired girl, who was very daintily, yet not showily, dressed. “I’ve not been doing much, father. I went to Bond Street for you, and then I called on Cicely Wheeler. She and her husband are off to Dinard to-morrow. I’ve asked them to dine with us to-night.”

“Ah! Then you will have to entertain them, I fear, as I must be down at the House.”

“What a pity!” replied the girl in disappointment. “I thought you said you would dine at home to-night!”

“I intended to do so, but find it will be impossible,” declared her father as the trio made a move into the restaurant, filled as it was with a gay London throng who were lunching to the well-modulated strains of the Roumanian orchestra.

Of the many pretty girls seated at the tables certainly none could compare with Sheila Monkton. Indeed, more than one young man turned to admire her as she seated herself and drew off her gloves, and they envied the good-looking young fellow with whom she was laughing so happily. She had just turned twenty. Her clear-cut features were flawless; her healthy complexion, her clear hazel eyes, her soft fair hair, and her small mouth combined to impart to her sweetness and daintiness that were both peculiarly attractive. Her black velvet hat trimmed with saxe blue suited her soft countenance admirably, while the graceful poise of her head had often been admired by artists; indeed, she was at that very

period sitting to Howe, the R.A., for her portrait for next year's Academy.

As for Austin Wingate, her companion, he was about twenty-four, and if not exactly an Adonis he was handsome enough, clean-shaven, with black hair, eyes of a dark grey, and a mouth which needed no moustache to hide it. His figure was that of the young man of pre-war days whom you met by the dozen in the High at Oxford, broad-shouldered, muscular, and full of natural energy and grace.

Women who met Austin Wingate for the first time usually thought him an ordinary easy-going fellow of that type known as a "nut," who was careless as long as he lived his own go-ahead town life, the centre of which was the Automobile Club. Yet they would soon discern a certain deep thoughtful expression in his eyes and a gravity about the lips which at once upset the first estimate they had made of his character.

It was true that young Wingate was a merry, careless young fellow. He lived in cosy chambers in Half Moon Street, and his circle of friends, young men of his own age, were a rather wild lot. Most of them were ardent motorists, and nearly all were habitués of that centre of motoring in Pall Mall.

Of late Monkton's daughter had been seen about with him a good deal, and in the select little world of politicians' wives there had been many whisperings over teacups.

That day, however, Monkton was lunching openly with the pair, and several people in the restaurant, recognising the trio, put together their heads and gossiped.

While the two young people chattered merrily, Monkton, who had tried to crush down those ghosts of the past that had obsessed him while he walked along Whitehall, glanced across at his pretty daughter and sighed as he commenced his meal. Ah! how complete was the image of his dead wife. It was as though she sat there before him in those long-ago days of over twenty-five years ago, when she was the daughter of a country vicar and he was on the threshold of his career.

He saw how happy Sheila was with the young man who had so recently come into her life. Sometimes he had resented their acquaintance, yet to

resent it was, he reflected, only jealousy after all. He himself had but little to live for. As a member of the Cabinet he had gained his goal. He would, he knew, never fulfil the prophecy of his humble admirer standing in Downing Street. He could never become Premier. There were abler men than he, men with greater influence with the nation, men who had schemed for the office for half a lifetime. No. Death might come to him soon—how soon he knew not. And then Sheila should marry. Therefore, even though the wrench would be a great one, personally he, honest man that he was, felt that he should make a sacrifice, and promote a union between the pair.

Sheila was his only home companion and comfort. True, she scolded him severely sometimes. Sometimes she pouted, put on airs, and betrayed defiance. But do not all young girls? If they did not they would be devoid of that true spirit of independence which every woman should possess.

Again he glanced at her while she laughed happily with the young man who loved her, but who had never admitted it. Then he looked across the room, where sat Benyon, a well-known member of the Opposition, with his fat, opulent wife, who had, until recently, been his housekeeper. The eyes of the two men met, and the Cabinet Minister waved his hand in recognition, while the stout, over-dressed woman stared.

Half the people in the restaurant had, by this time, recognised Reginald Monkton by the many photographs which appeared almost daily, for was he not the popular idol of his Party, and did not the *Court Circular* inform the nation of the frequent audiences he had of His Majesty the King?

“Well, Austin?” asked the Minister, when the waiter had served an exquisitely cooked entrée. “How are things out at Hendon?”

“Oh! we are all very busy, sir. Wilcox is experimenting with his new airship. At last he has had some encouragement from the Government, and we are all delighted. My shops are busy. We sent three planes to Spain yesterday. King Alphonso ordered them when he was over in the early spring.”

“Austin has promised to take me up for a flight one day, dad!” exclaimed the girl enthusiastically. “He wants to ask you if he may.”

Her father did not reply for some moments. Then he said judiciously:

“Well, dear, we must see. Perhaps he might take you just a little way—once round the aerodrome—eh?”

“Of course not far,” said his daughter, glancing significantly at her lover.

“There is no risk, Mr Monkton, I assure you. Miss Sheila is very anxious to go up, and I shall be most delighted to take her—with your consent, of course,” Wingate said. “My suggestion is just a circuit or two around the aerodrome. We are completing a new machine this week, and after I’ve tried her to see all is safe. I’d like to take Sheila up.”

“We must see—we must see,” replied her indulgent father, assuming a non-committal attitude. He, however, knew that in all England no man knew more of aerial dynamics than Austin Wingate, and, further, that beneath his apparently careless exterior with his immaculate clothes and his perfectly-brushed hair was a keen and scientific mind, and that he was working night and day directing the young and rising firm of aeroplane makers at Hendon, of which he was already managing director.

Sheila’s meeting with him had been the outcome of one of his experiments. One afternoon in the previous summer he had been driving a new hydroplane along the Thames, over the Henley course, when he had accidentally collided with a punt which Sheila, in a white cotton dress, was manipulating with her pole.

In an instant the punt was smashed and sunk, and Miss Monkton and her two girl companions were flung into the water. After a few minutes of excitement all three were rescued, and the young inventor, on presenting himself to express his deep regret, found himself face to face with “Monkton’s daughter,” as Sheila was known in Society.

The girl with her two friends, after changing their clothes at the Red Lion, had had tea with the author of the disaster, who was unaware of their names, and who later on returned to London, his hydroplane being badly damaged by the collision.

Six months went past, yet the girl’s face did not fade from Austin

Wingate's memory. He had been a fool, he told himself, not to ascertain her name and address. He had given one of the girls his card, and she had told him her name was Norris. That was all he knew. On purpose to ascertain who they were he had been down to Henley a fortnight after the accident, but as the girls had not stayed at the Red Lion, but were evidently living in some riverside house or bungalow, farther up the river, he could obtain no knowledge or trace of her.

One bright Saturday afternoon in November the usual gay crowd had assembled at the aerodrome at Hendon to watch the aviation, a science not nearly so well developed in 1912 as it is to-day. At the Wingate works, on the farther side of the great open grass lands, Austin was busy in the long shed directing the final touches to a new machine, which was afterwards wheeled out, and in which he made an experimental flight around the aerodrome, which the public, many of them seated at tea-tables on the lawn, watched with interest.

After making several circles and performing a number of evolutions, he came to earth close to a row of smart motor-cars drawn up on the lawn reserved for subscribers, and unstrapping himself sprang gaily out.

As he did so he saw, seated in the driver's seat of a fine limousine straight before him, a girl in motoring kit chatting with an elderly man who stood beside the car.

The girl's eyes met his, and the recognition was instantly mutual. She smiled merrily across to him, whereupon he crossed to her, just as he was, in his mechanic's rather greasy brown overalls, and bowing before her exclaimed:

"How fortunate! Fancy meeting again like this!" Whereupon, with her cheeks flushed with undisguised pleasure, she shook his hand, and then turning to the tall elderly man explained:

"This is the gentleman who smashed our punt at Henley, father! We have not met since."

"I fear it was very careless of me, sir," Wingate said. "But I offer a thousand apologies."

“The accident might have been far worse,” declared the girl’s father, smiling. “So let it rest at that.”

“I had no idea that it was you in the air just now,” exclaimed the girl, and then for ten minutes or so the trio stood chatting, during which time he explained that his works were on the opposite side of the aerodrome, after which he shook hands and left them.

“Whose car is that big grey one, third in the row yonder?” he asked eagerly of one of the gatekeepers, a few moments later.

“Oh, that, sir? Why, that belongs to Mr Reginald Monkton, the Colonial Secretary. There he is—with his daughter.”

So his sweet, dainty friend of the river was daughter of the popular Cabinet Minister!

He drew a long breath and bit his lip. Then climbing back into his machine, he waved father and daughter adieu and was soon skimming across to the row of long sheds which comprised the Wingate Aeroplane Factory.

The young man was sensible enough to know that he could never aspire to the hand of the Cabinet Minister’s daughter, yet a true and close friendship had quickly sprung up between her father and himself, with the result that Wingate was now a frequent and welcome visitor to the cosy old-world house in Mayfair, and as proof the well-known statesman had accepted Austin’s invitation to lunch at the Carlton on that well-remembered day of the Cabinet meeting, the true importance of which is only known to those who were present at the deliberations in Downing Street that morning.

Curious, indeed, were the events that were to follow, events known only to a few, and here chronicled for the first time.

Chapter Two.

The Discovery in Chesterfield Street.

In the absence of her father, Sheila Monkton was compelled to entertain her guests at dinner alone. There were three: Sir Pemberton Wheeler and his young dark-haired wife Cicely, an old schoolfellow of Sheila's, and Austin Wingate.

They were a merry quartette as they sat in the cosy dining-room in Chesterfield Street, a few doors from Curzon Street, waited on by Grant, the white-headed, smooth-faced old butler who had been in the service of Monkton's father before him.

The house was an old-fashioned Georgian one. Upon the iron railings was a huge extinguisher, recalling the days of linkmen and coaches, while within was a long, rather narrow hall and a spiral staircase of stone worn hollow by the tread of five generations. The rooms were not large, but very tastefully, even luxuriously, furnished, with many fine paintings, pieces of beautiful statuary, and magnificent bronzes, while everywhere were soft carpets upon which one's feet fell noiselessly. In that house, indeed in that very room wherein the four sat laughing in the June twilight, the pale-pink shades of the lamps shedding a soft glow over the table with its flowers and silver, many of the most prominent British statesmen had been entertained by the Colonial Secretary, and many a State secret had been discussed within those four dark-painted walls.

"The Prime Minister dined with us last Thursday," Sheila remarked to Cicely Wheeler. "Lord Horsham came in later, and they had one of their private conferences."

"Which meant that you were left to amuse yourself alone, eh?" laughed Sir Pemberton Wheeler, and he glanced mischievously towards Austin on the other side of the table.

"Yes. That is quite true." Sheila laughed, instantly grasping his meaning. "Mr Wingate did not happen to be here. When father has a political dinner no ladies are invited. Some of those dinners are horribly boring, I can

assure you," declared the girl.

"Their eternal discussion of this measure and the other measure, and—oh! how they all intrigue, one Party against the other! Do you know that I've sat here and heard some most remarkable schemes."

"Secrets, I suppose?" remarked Austin, twisting the stem of his windlass between his fingers.

"Yes—I've heard them discuss what they call matters of policy which, to me, appear merely to be the most ingenious methods of gulling the public."

"Ah! my dear Miss Monkton, few politicians are so straight and open as your father. That is why the Opposition are so deadly in fear of him. His speech last week regarding the recent trouble in the Malay States was an eye-opener. He lifted the veil from a very disconcerting state of affairs, much to the chagrin and annoyance of those to whose advantage it was to hush-up the matter."

"That is what father is always saying," declared Sheila. "He often sighs when going through despatches which the messengers bring, and exclaims aloud 'Ah! if the public only knew!—if they only knew! What would they think—what would they say?'"

"Then something is being concealed from the nation?" Austin remarked.

"Something!" echoed the girl. "Why, a very great deal. Of that I am quite certain."

"You know nothing of its nature?" asked her friend Cicely, with her woman's eagerness to inquire.

"Of course not, dear. Father never confides any secrets to me," she replied. "He always says that women gossip too much, and that it is through the chattering wives of Members of the House, whom he calls the jays, that much mischief is done."

"The jays!" laughed Sir Pemberton. "Very good! I suppose he has given them that name because of their fine feathers. Personally I shall be glad

to get to Dinard out of it all for a while."

"We always enjoy Dinard, Sheila," declared his wife. "You really must get your father to bring you to the Royal this summer. We shall be there all the season. We sent the car over a week ago."

Cicely, or Lady Wheeler to give her her title, was a giddy little woman who, after being a confirmed flirt and known in Mayfair as one of its prettiest butterflies, had married a man more than double her age, for Wheeler was fifty, interested in spinning-mills in Yorkshire, and sat in Parliament for the constituency in which his mills were situated. At the last moment she had jilted young Stenhouse, of the Grenadier Guards, for the more alluring prospect of Wheeler's title and his money. Hence the *Morning Post* had one day announced to the world that her marriage with the good-looking young Captain would "not take place," and a week later her photograph had appeared as the future Lady Wheeler.

She had joined that large circle of London society who are what is known in their own particular jargon as "spooky." She attended séances, consulted mediums, and believed in the statements of those who pretended to have made psychic discoveries. Yet Sheila, who was far too level-headed to follow London's latest craze, was devoted to her, and had been ever since they studied together at that fashionable school near Beachy Head.

"I spoke to father to-day about a little trip across to you," Sheila replied, "and he thinks he may be able to do it when the House is up."

"That's good," declared Sir Pemberton in his plethoric voice. "Get him to bring his car over too, and we'll have a tour together through Brittany and down to Nantes and the Touraine."

"I'd love to see the old châteaux there," Sheila declared. "There's a big illustrated book about them in the library—Blois, Chenonceaux, Chinon, Loches, and the rest."

"Well, your father certainly requires a rest after all the stress of this session."

"Certainly he does," declared Cicely. "Get round dear old Macalister, the

doctor, to order him a rest and suggest a motor-tour as relaxation."

"Besides, it always delights the public to know that a Cabinet Minister has gone away on holiday. It shows that he is overworked in the interests of the nation," laughed Austin, who was nothing if not matter-of-fact.

At last, the dinner having ended, Sheila and Cicely rose and left the men, after which Grant sedately served them with coffee, two glasses of triple-sec, and cigarettes.

For ten minutes or so they gossiped, after which they rejoined the ladies in the long, old-fashioned drawing-room upstairs.

At Wheeler's suggestion Sheila went to the piano and sang one of those gay chansons of the Paris cafés which she had so often sung at charity concerts. She had begun to learn French at eight years of age, and after her school at Eastbourne had been at Neuilly for three years before coming out.

She chose "Mon p'tit Poylt," that gay song to which Lasaigues had written the music and which was at the moment being sung at half the café concerts in France. Playing her own accompaniment in almost the professional style of the entertainer, she began to sing the merry tuneful song, with its catchy refrain:

"On s'aimait, on n'était pas rosse.
On s'frôlait gentiment l'museau;
On rigolait comme des gosses.
On s'bécotait comm' des moineaux."

The trio listening laughed merrily, for she played and sang with all the verve of a Parisian chanteuse. Besides, both music and words were full of a gay abandon which was quite unexpected, and which charmed young Wingate, who knew that, though the Cabinet Minister held him in high esteem as a friend, yet to marry Sheila was entirely out of the question. He realised always that he was a mere designer of aeroplanes, "a glorified motor-mechanic" some jealous enemies had declared him to be. How could he ever aspire to the hand of "Monkton's daughter?"

Level-headed and calm as he always was, he had from the first realised

his position and retained it. Mr Monkton had admitted him to his friendship, and though always extremely polite and courteous to Sheila, he remained just a friend of her father.

At last she concluded, and, rising, made a mock bow to her three listeners, all of whom congratulated her, the mill-owner declaring:

“You really ought to give a turn at the Palace Theatre, Sheila! I’ve heard lots of worse songs there!”

”‘Tiny Tentoes, the Cabinet Minister’s daughter’ would certainly be a good draw!” declared Cicely.

“Oh! well, I know you all like French songs, so I sang it. That’s all,” answered their sprightly young hostess. “But look! it’s past eleven, and father said he would be back before ten to see you before you left. I’ll telephone to the House.”

And she descended to the small library on the ground floor, where she quickly “got on” to the House of Commons.

When she re-entered the drawing-room she exclaimed:

“He left the House more than an hour ago. I wonder where he is? He ought to have been back long before this.”

Then at her guests’ request she sang another French chanson—which, through the half-open window, could have been heard out in Curzon Street—greatly to the delight of the little party.

At last, just before midnight. Cicely, pleading that they had to leave by the Continental mail early next morning, excused herself and her husband, and left in a taxi, for which Grant had whistled, after which Sheila and Austin found themselves alone.

When two people of the opposite sex, and kindred spirits as they were, find themselves alone the usual thing happens. It did in their case. While Sheila looked over her music, in response to Austin’s request to sing another song while awaiting the return of her father, their hands touched. He grasped hers and gazed straight into her face.

In those hazel eyes he saw that love-look—that one expression which no woman can ever disguise, or make pretence; that look which most men know. It is seldom in their lives they see it, and when once it is observed it is never forgotten, even though the man may live to be a grandfather.

At that instant of the unconscious contact of the hands, so well-remembered afterwards by both of them, Sheila flushed, withdrew her hand forcibly, and rose, exclaiming with pretended resentment:

“Don’t, Austin—please.”

Meanwhile there had been what the newspapers term a “scene” in the House of Commons that evening. An important debate had taken place upon the policy of the Imperial Government towards Canada, a policy which the Opposition had severely criticised in an attempt to belittle the splendid statesmanship of the Colonial Secretary, who, having been absent during greater part of the debate, entered and took his seat just as it was concluding.

At last, before a crowded House, Reginald Monkton, who, his friends noticed, was looking unusually pale and worn, rose and replied in one of those brief, well-modulated, but caustic speeches of his in which he turned the arguments of the Opposition against themselves. He heaped coals of fire upon their heads, and denounced them as “enemies of Imperialism and destroyers of Empire.” The House listened enthralled.

He spoke for no more than a quarter of an hour, but it was one of the most brilliant oratorical efforts ever heard in the Lower Chamber, and when he reseated himself, amid a roar of applause from the Government benches, it was felt that the tide had been turned and the Opposition had once more been defeated.

Hardly had Monkton sat down when, remembering that he had guests at home, he rose and walked out.

He passed out into Palace Yard just before ten o’clock and turned his steps homeward, the night being bright and starlit and the air refreshing. So he decided to walk.

Half-an-hour after Cicely and her husband had left Chesterfield Street

Sheila again rang up the House and made further inquiry, with the same result, namely, that the Colonial Minister had left Westminster just before ten o'clock. Monkton had been seen in St. Stephen's Hall chatting for a moment with Horace Powell, the fiery Member for East Islington, whom he had wished "good-night" and then left.

So for still a further half-hour Sheila, though growing very uneasy, sat chatting with Austin, who, be it said, had made no further advances. He longed to grasp her slim white hand and press it to his lips. But he dared not.

"I can't think where father can be!" exclaimed the girl presently, rising and handing her companion the glass box of cigarettes. "Look! it is already one o'clock, and he promised most faithfully he would be back to wish the Wheelers farewell."

"Oh! he may have been delayed—met somebody and gone to the club perhaps," Austin suggested. "You know how terribly busy he is."

"I know, of course—but he always rings me up if he is delayed, so that I need not sit up for him, and Grant goes to bed."

"Well, I don't see any necessity for uneasiness," declared the young man. "He'll be here in a moment, no doubt. But if he is not here very soon I'll have to be getting along to Half Moon Street."

Through the next ten minutes the eyes of both were constantly upon the clock until, at a quarter-past one, Wingate rose, excusing himself, and saying:

"If I were you I shouldn't wait up any longer. You've had a long day. Grant will wait up for your father."

"The good old fellow is just as tired as I am—perhaps more so," remarked the girl sympathetically. And then the pair descended to the hall, where Sheila helped him on with his coat.

"Well—good-night—and don't worry," Austin urged cheerfully as their hands met. The contact sent a thrill through him. Yes. No woman had ever stirred his soul in that manner before. He loved her—yes, loved her

honestly, truly, devotedly, and at that instant he knew, by some strange intuition, that their lives were linked by some mysterious inexplicable bond. He could not account for it, but it was so. He knew it.

By this time Grant had arrived in the hall to let out Miss Sheila's visitor, and indeed he had opened the door for him, when at that same moment a taxi, turning in from Curzon Street, slowly drew up at the kerb before the house.

The driver alighted quickly and, crossing hurriedly to Austin, said:

"I've got a gentleman inside what lives 'ere, sir. 'E ain't very well, I think."

Startled by the news Austin and Grant rushed to the cab, and with the assistance of the driver succeeded in getting out the unconscious form of the Colonial Secretary.

"I'd send the lady away, sir—if I were you," whispered the taxi-driver to Wingate. "I fancy the gentleman 'as 'ad just a drop too much wine at dinner. 'E seems as if 'e 'as!"

Amazed at such a circumstance Sheila, overhearing the man's words, stood horrified. Her father was one of the most temperate of men. Such a home-coming as that was astounding! The three men carried the prostrate statesman inside into the small sitting-room on the right, after which Austin, completely upset, handed the taxi-man five shillings, and with a brief word of thanks dismissed him.

Meanwhile Sheila had rushed into the dining-room to obtain a glass of water, hoping to revive her father. Old Grant, faithful servant that he was, had thrown himself upon his knees by the couch whereon his master had been placed.

He peered into his pale face, which was turned away from the silk-shaded electric light, and then suddenly gasped to Wingate: "Why! It isn't Mr Reginald at all, sir! He's wearing his clothes, his watch and chain—and everything! But he's a stranger—it isn't Mr Reginald! Look for yourself!"

Chapter Three.

The Whispered Name.

Austin Wingate approached the unconscious man, and scrutinised the white, drawn features closely. When Grant had uttered those words, he could hardly believe his ears. Had the shock been too much for the old man's reason?

But as he gazed intently, the conviction grew upon him that Grant was right. There was a little resemblance between the Cabinet Minister and the insensible man lying there. Their figures were much the same, and in the half-light a mere cursory glance could not have detected them apart.

But to those who, like Grant and Austin, knew Reginald Monkton intimately, there were striking points of difference at once apparent.

Wingate drew a deep sigh of relief.

"You are right. Grant, it is not your master! He looks ghastly, doesn't he? The driver said that he was drunk, but I don't believe it. The man, whoever he is, seems to me as if he were dying."

At that moment, Sheila, her cheeks pale, her hand trembling so that she spilled the glass of water she was carrying, came into the sitting-room.

Austin rushed towards her and, taking the glass from her, pressed her trembling hand. At a moment of acute tension like that, he knew she would not resent the action.

"Sheila, for God's sake keep calm. It is not what we thought. The man we carried in here is not your father. He is a stranger, wearing your father's clothes. Look for yourself, and you will see where the likeness ends."

"Not my father?" she repeated mechanically, and flung herself down beside Grant. A moment's inspection was enough to convince her. She rose from her knees.

“Thank God!” she cried, fervently. It had cut her to the heart to think that the father whom she so loved and revered should be brought home in such a condition. She was grateful that none but those three had been present.

But to her gratitude succeeded a sudden wave of fear, and her face went paler than before.

“But, Austin, there must be some terrible mystery behind this. Why is this man wearing father’s clothes? And why—” she broke suddenly into a low wail—“is father not home?”

Austin could make no answer; the same thought had occurred to him.

“My poor child, there is a mystery, but you must summon all your courage till we can discover more,” he murmured soothingly. “Now I must go and ’phone for the doctor. In my opinion, this man is not suffering from excess, as that driver led us to believe. He appears to be in a dying state.”

When he had gone to ring up the family doctor, who lived close by in Curzon Street, Sheila again knelt down beside the prostrate form.

Presently the man’s lips began to move and faint sounds issued from them. He seemed trying to utter a name, and stumbling over the first syllable.

They strained their ears, and thought they caught the word “Moly” repeated three times.

There was silence for a few seconds, and then the muttering grew louder and they thought they heard the name “Molyneux.”

“Oh, if only he could wake from his sleep or lethargy!” Sheila exclaimed impatiently. “If he could only throw some light upon this awful mystery?”

He relapsed into silence again, and then presently recommenced his mutterings. This time, he pronounced the syllables even less clearly than before. And now they fancied the name was more like “Mulliner.”

Would he come back to consciousness and be able to answer questions, or would those be his last words on earth? They could not tell. His form had relapsed into its previous rigidity and his face had grown more waxen in its hue.

What was the explanation of his being dressed in her father's clothes? Sheila was sure they were the same Reginald Monkton had won on setting out that evening.

A sudden thought struck her. She inserted her hand gently in his waistcoat pocket, and drew out a gold watch. It was her father's; she had given it to him on his last birthday. She felt in the breast pocket of his coat, but it was empty. That told her little, for she did not know if he had taken any papers with him.

She felt in his pockets one by one, but only discovered a little loose silver. It was her father's habit always to carry a few banknotes in a leather case. If he had done so to-night these had been abstracted. But if the money had been taken, why not the watch? And then she recollected it was inscribed with his name.

While she was pondering these disturbing queries. Doctor Macalister entered the room with Austin, who had imparted to him the startling news in a few words.

He bent over the quiet form, murmuring as he did so: "He is dressed in Mr Monkton's clothes, certainly. I might have been deceived at the first glance myself."

He unbuttoned the waistcoat and shirt, and laid his stethoscope on the chest of the inanimate body.

"Dead!" he said briefly, when he had made his examination. "One cannot, of course, at present tell the cause of death, although the appearances point to heart-failure."

Sheila looked up at him, her lovely eyes heavy with grief and foreboding.

"He spoke a little before you came in," she said. "He seemed to utter two names, Molyneux and Mulliner. He repeated them three times."

The kindly old doctor who had brought her into the world looked at her with compassionate eyes. “The part he bore in this mystery, whether he was a victim or accomplice, will never be revealed by him. He must have been near death when he was put into that taxi. I suppose you did not notice the number?”

No, neither Grant nor Austin had thought of it. They had been too much perturbed at the time.

“Well, I have no doubt the driver can be found. Now I must telephone for the police, and have the body removed.”

He drew young Wingate aside for a moment. “You say you have inquired at the House of Commons. Have you rung up Monkton’s clubs? He has only two. No; well, better do so. It is a forlorn hope; I knew the man so well. He would never keep Sheila waiting like this if he were with means of communication. There has been foul play—we can draw no other conclusion.”

It was the one Wingate had drawn himself, and he quite agreed it was a forlorn hope. Still, he would make sure. He rang up the Travellers’ and the Carlton. The answer was the same from both places. Mr Monkton had not been at either club since the previous day.

The police arrived in due course, and bore away the body of the man who wore the clothes of the well-known and popular Cabinet Minister.

And, at their heels, came the inspector of the division, accompanied by Mr Smeaton, the famous detective, one of the pillars of Scotland Yard, and the terror of every criminal.

Smeaton was a self-made man, risen from the ranks, but he had the manners of a gentleman and a diplomatist. He bowed gravely to the pale-faced girl, who was so bravely keeping back her tears. With Austin he had a slight acquaintance.

“I am more than grieved to distress you at such a time. Miss Monkton, but the sooner we get on the track of this mystery the better. Will you tell me, as briefly as you like, and in your own time, what you know of your father’s habits?”

In tones that broke now and then from her deep emotion, Sheila imparted the information he asked for. She laid especial emphasis on the fact that, before leaving home in the evening, he outlined to her the programme of his movements. If anything happened that altered his plans he invariably telephoned to her, or sent a letter by special messenger.

The keen-eyed detective listened attentively to her recital.

“Can you recall any occasion on which he failed to notify you?” he asked when she had finished.

“No,” she answered firmly. Then she recollected. “Stay! There was one occasion. He was walking home from the House on a foggy night, and was knocked down by a taxi, and slightly injured. They took him to a hospital, and I was telephoned from there, and went to him.”

A gleam of hope shone in Austin’s eyes.

“We never thought of that.”

The great detective shook his head.

“But *we* thought of it, Mr Wingate. My friend here has had every hospital in the radius rung up. No solution there.”

There was silence for a long time. It seemed that the last hope had vanished. Smeaton stood for a long time lost in thought. Then he roused himself from his reverie.

“It’s no use blinking the fact that we are confronted with a more than usually difficult case,” he said, at length. “Still, it is our business to solve problems, and we shall put our keenest wits to work. I wish it were possible, for Miss Monkton’s sake, to keep it from the Press.”

“But would that be impossible?” cried Wingate.

“I fear so. If a little servant-maid disappears from her native village, the newspaper-men get hold of it in twenty-four hours. Here, instead of an obscure little domestic, you have a man, popular, well-known to half the population of England, whose portrait has been in every illustrated paper

in the three Kingdoms. I fear it would be impossible. But I will do my best. The Home Secretary may give certain instructions in this case."

Then turning to Sheila he said:

"Good-night, Miss Monkton. Rely upon it, we will leave no stone unturned to find your father, and bring him back to you."

He was gone with those comforting words. But with his departure, hope seemed to die away, and Sheila was left to confront the misery of the present.

The faithful Grant, who had been hovering in the background, came forward, and spoke to her in the coaxing tone he had used when she was a child.

"Now, Miss Sheila, you must go and rest."

"Oh, no!" she cried wildly. "What is the use of resting? I could not sleep. I can never rest until father comes back to me." She broke into a low wail of despair.

Grant looked at Wingate, with a glance that implored him to use his influence. The faithful old man feared for her reason.

"Sheila, Grant is right," said Austin gravely. "You must rest, even if you cannot sleep. You will need all your strength for to-morrow, perhaps for many days yet, before we get to the heart of this mystery. Let the servants go back to bed. Grant and I will wait through the night, in case good news may come to us."

There were times when, as the old butler remembered, she had been a very wilful Sheila, but she showed no signs of wilfulness now. The grave tones and words of Austin moved her to obedience.

"I will do as you tell me," she said in a hushed and broken voice. "I will go and rest—not to sleep, till I have news of my darling father."

Through the weary hours of the night, the two men watched and dozed by turns, waiting in the vain hope of word or sign of Reginald Monkton.

None came, and in the early morning Sheila stole down and joined them. Her bearing was more composed, and she had washed away the traces of her tears.

“I intend to be very brave,” she told them. “I have roused the maids, and I am going to give you breakfast directly, after your long vigil.”

Impulsively she stretched out a hand to each, the youthful lover and the aged servitor. “You are both dear, good friends, and my father will thank you for your care when he comes back to me.”

Moved by a common impulse the two men, the young and the old, bent and imprinted a reverent kiss on the slender hands she extended to them.

It was a moment of exquisite pathos, the fair, slim girl, resplendent yesterday in the full promise of her youth and beauty; to-day stricken with grief and consumed with the direst forebodings of the fate of a beloved father.

Chapter Four.

The Man who Knew.

Three days had gone by, and the mystery of Reginald Monkton's disappearance remained as insoluble as ever. Well, it might be so, since there did not seem a single clue, with the exception of the name muttered by the dying man, which at first had sounded like Molyneux, and afterwards like Mulliner. Neither Sheila nor Grant, who had listened to those faint sounds issuing from the dying lips, could be certain which of the two was correct.

Wingate had seen Smeaton twice, and that astute person assured him that the keenest brains at Scotland Yard were working on the case. But he was very reticent, and from his manner the young man was forced to draw the conclusion that the prospects of success were very slight.

If it had been simply a case of disappearance, uncomplicated by other circumstances, many theories could have been formed. There were plenty of instances of men whose reason had become temporarily unhinged, and who had lost consciousness of their own identity.

Again, men have disappeared voluntarily because they have been threatened with exposure of some shameful secret of the past, and will willingly pay the penalty of separation from their own kith and kin to avoid it.

But no such theories seemed tenable in this instance. Monkton's life, in the opinion of all who knew him, had been a well-ordered and blameless one. He had been a devoted husband; and he was a devoted father, wrapped up in his charming daughter, the sole legacy of that happy marriage.

In the case of such a man, with so stainless a record, it was unthinkable that anything could leap to light from the past which could shame him to such an extent that he would, of his own act, abandon his office, and isolate himself from his child.

Even granting such an hypothesis for a moment, and brushing aside all the evidences of his past life and all the knowledge of him gained through years by his relatives and intimate friends, how did such a theory fit in with the appearance on the scene of the stranger now dead?

“You fear the worst?” queried Wingate one day, as Smeaton sat with him in his cosy rooms in Half Moon Street.

“It is too early yet to give a decided opinion, if, in a case of such complexity, one could ever give a decided opinion at all,” was the detective’s answer. “But at present things point that way. What was the motive underlying the scheme? You can give the answer quickly—that all inquiries as to the real man are being stifled.”

“In other words, that Mr Monkton has been done away with, for motives we do not know, by the person or persons who put the man into the taxi?”

Smeaton nodded. “That’s what it seems to be at the moment, Mr Wingate. But we should be poor detectives if we pinned ourselves to any one theory, especially on such evidence—or rather want of evidence—as we have got at present. Cases as mysterious as this—and there was never one more mysterious—have been solved by unexpected means. If we can get hold of that driver who brought the dying man to Chesterfield Street, we may light upon something useful.”

“If he was an accomplice, as seems possible, he will never turn up,” said Wingate gloomily.

“Accomplice or not, I think the reward will tempt him,” replied Smeaton, “even if he has to make up his tale before he comes. I expected he would come forward before now. But one of two things may have happened. Either he may be cogitating over what he shall say when he does come, or he may be an ignorant sort of fellow, who hardly ever reads the newspapers.”

“Anyway,” resumed Smeaton, after a thoughtful pause, “if and when he does turn up, we shall know, with our long experience, what sort of a customer he is. You may rely upon it that if there is anything to be got out of him, we shall get it, whether it proves valuable or not.”

It was not a very cheering interview, certainly, but how could there be any chance of hopefulness at present?

During the few days, however, the police had not been idle. They had made a few discoveries, although they were of a nature to intensify rather than tend to a solution of the mystery.

They had established one most important fact.

Monkton had excused himself from dining at home on the plea that he must be down at the House, the inference being that he would snatch a hasty meal there, in the pause of his Ministerial work.

Instead of that, he had dined about seven o'clock in an obscure little Italian restaurant in Soho. Luigi, the proprietor, had at once recognised him from his portraits in the illustrated papers, and from having seen him at the Ritz, where he had been a waiter.

He had entered the café a few minutes before seven, and had looked round, as if expecting to find somebody waiting for him. Luigi had taken him the menu, and he had said he would wait a few minutes before giving his order, as a guest would arrive.

On the stroke of seven a tall, bearded man, evidently a foreigner, who walked with a limp, joined him. Questioned by Smeaton as to the nationality of the man, the proprietor replied that he could not be sure. He would take him for a Russian. He was quite certain that he was neither French nor Italian. And he was equally certain that he was not a German.

The new arrival joined Mr Monkton, who at once ordered the dinner. Neither of the men ate much, but consumed a bottle of wine between them.

They talked earnestly, and in low tones, during the progress of the meal, which was finished in about half-an-hour. Cigars, coffee, and liqueurs were then ordered, and over these they sat till half-past eight, conversing in the same low tones all the time.

Luigi added that the Russian—if he was of that nationality, as he suspected—seemed to bear the chief burden of the conversation. Mr

Monkton played the part of listener most of the time, interjecting remarks now and again.

Asked if he overheard any of the talk between them, he replied that he did not catch a syllable. When he approached the table they remained silent, and did not speak again until he was well out of earshot.

“And you are quite positive it was Mr Monkton?” Smeaton had questioned, when Luigi had finished his recital. It had struck him that Luigi might have been mistaken after all.

Luigi was quite sure. He reminded Smeaton that before taking on the little restaurant in Soho he had been a waiter at the Ritz, where he had often seen the Cabinet Minister. It was impossible he could be mistaken.

He added in his excellent English, for he was one of those foreigners who are very clever linguists. “Besides, there is one other thing that proves it, even supposing I was misled by a chance likeness—though Mr Monkton’s is not a face you would easily forget—as I helped him on with his light overcoat he remarked to his friend, ‘I must hurry on as fast as I can. I am overdue at the House.’”

That seemed to settle the point. There might be a dozen men walking about London with sufficient superficial resemblance to deceive an ordinary observer, but there was no Member of the House of Commons who could pass for Monkton.

It was evident, then, that he had gone to that little, out-of-the-way restaurant to keep an appointment. The man he met was his guest, as Monkton paid for the dinner. The excuse he made for not dining at home was a subterfuge. The appointment was therefore one that he wished to conceal from his daughter, unless he did not deem it a matter of sufficient importance to warrant an explanation.

Monkton’s secretary was also interrogated by the detective. He was a fat-faced, rather pompous young man, with a somewhat plausible and ingratiating manner. He had been with Monkton three years. Sheila had seen very little of him, but what little she had seen did not impress her in his favour. And her father had owned that he liked him least of any one of the numerous secretaries who had served him.

This young man, James Farloe by name, had very little to tell. He was at the House at eight o'clock, according to Monkton's instructions, and expected, him at that hour. He did not come in till after half-past, and he noticed that his manner was strange and abrupt, as if he had been disturbed by something. At a few minutes before ten he left, presumably for home. When he bade Farloe good-night he still seemed preoccupied.

In these terrible days Austin Wingate's business occupied but second place in his thoughts. He was prepared to devote every moment he could snatch to cheer and sustain the sorrowing Sheila.

A week had gone by, but thanks to certain instructions given by the authorities, at the instance of the Prime Minister, who deplored the loss of his valuable colleague, the matter was being carefully hushed-up.

Late one afternoon, while Smeaton was seated in his bare official room on the second floor at Scotland Yard, the window of which overlooked Westminster Bridge, a constable ushered in a taxi-driver, saying:

"This man has come to see you, sir, regarding a fare he drove to Chesterfield Street the other night."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Smeaton, lounging back in his chair, having been busy writing reports. "Sit down. What is your name?"

"Davies, sir—George Davies," replied the man, twisting his cap awkwardly in his hands as he seated himself.

Smeaton could not sum him up. There was no apparent look of dishonesty about him, but he would not like to have said that he conveyed the idea of absolute honesty. There was something a little bit foxy in his expression, and he was decidedly nervous. But then Scotland Yard is an awe-inspiring place to the humbler classes, and nervousness is quite as often a symptom of innocence as of guilt.

"I only 'eard about this advertisement from a pal this morning. I never reads the papers," the taxi-driver said.

"Well, now you have come, we want to hear all you can tell us. That gentleman died, you know!"

The man shifted uneasily, and then said in a deep, husky voice:

“I’ve come ’ere, sir, to tell you the truth. I’ll tell you all I know,” he added, “providing I’m not going to get into any trouble.”

“Not if you are not an accomplice,” Smeaton said, his keen eyes fixed upon his visitor.

The man paused and then with considerable apprehension said:

“Well—I don’t know ’ow I can be really an accomplice. All I know about it is that I was passin’ into Victoria Street goin’ towards the station, when three gentlemen standin’ under a lamp just opposite the entrance to Dean’s Yard hailed me. I pulls up when I sees that two of ’em ’ad got another gentleman by the arms. ‘Look ’ere, driver,’ says one of ’em, ‘this friend of ours ’as ’ad a drop too much wine, and we don’t want to go ’ome with ’im because of ’is wife. Will you take ’im? ’E lives in Chesterfield Street, just off Curzon Street,’ and ’e gives me the number.”

“Yes,” said Smeaton anxiously. “And what then?”

“Well, sir, ’e gives me five bob and puts the gentleman into my cab, and I drove ’im to the address, where ’is servant took charge of ’im. Did ’e really die afterwards?” he asked eagerly.

“Yes—unfortunately he did,” was the police official’s reply. “But tell me, Davies. Did you get a good look at the faces of the two men?”

“Yes, sir. They were all three under the lamp.”

“Do you think you could recognise both of them again—eh?”

“Of course I could. Why, one of ’em I’ve seen about lots o’ times. Indeed, only yesterday, about three o’clock, while I was waitin’ on the rank in the Strand, opposite the Savoy, I saw ’im come out with a lady, and drive away in a big grey car. If I’d a known then, sir, I could ’ave stopped ’im!”

Chapter Five.

Contains some Curious Facts.

At the beginning of the interview, the demeanour of the taxi-driver had betrayed signs of nervousness and trepidation. He had hesitated and stumbled in his speech, so much so that Smeaton, the detective, was still in doubt as to his honesty.

Smeaton, however, was a past-master in the art of dealing with a difficult witness. So reassuring was his manner that at the end of five minutes he had succeeded in inspiring the taxi-driver with confidence. His nervousness and hesitation were succeeded by loquacity.

Urged to give a description of the two men, he explained, with amplitude of detail, that the man who had come out of the Savoy was of medium height and clean-shaven, with angular features and piercing dark eyes. He was of striking appearance, the kind of man you would be sure to recognise anywhere. The lady with him was smartly dressed and appeared to be about thirty or under.

“Seems to me I’ve known ’im about London for years, although I can’t remember as I ever drove ’im,” he added.

The other man was, Davies said, tall and bearded, and certainly a foreigner, although he could not pretend to fix his nationality.

A tall, bearded man, and a foreigner! Smeaton pricked up his ears. The description tallied somewhat with that of the person who had dined with Monkton in the little restaurant in Soho.

Davies was dismissed with encouraging words and a liberal *douceur*. Given Smeaton the semblance of a clue, and he was on the track like a bloodhound.

Within twenty minutes of the taxi-driver’s departure, he was interviewing one of the hall-porters at the Savoy, an imposing functionary, and an old friend.

Smeaton had a large and extensive acquaintance among people who could be useful. He knew the hall-porters of all the big hotels. They were men of quick intelligence, keen powers of observation, and gathered much important information. He had unravelled many a mystery with their assistance.

The detective, standing aside in the hall, described the man as he had been featured by Davies. Did the hall-porter recognise him?

The answer was in the affirmative.

“He’s not a man you would be likely to forget, Mr Smeaton,” he said. “He is a pretty frequent visitor here. He lunches two or three times a week, and is popular with the waiters, through being pretty free with his tips. Most times he comes alone. Now and again he brings a guest, but nobody we know.”

“And his name?” questioned Smeaton eagerly.

“Well, that’s the funny part of it,” explained the other man. “We get to know the names of the habitués sooner or later, but none of us have ever heard his. He never seems to meet anybody here that he knows, and none of the waiters have ever heard one of his guests address him by name. The maître d’hôtel and I have often talked him over, and wondered who and what he was.”

Smeaton showed his disappointment. “That is unfortunate. Let us see if we can be more successful in another direction. Yesterday afternoon, about three o’clock, this man, whose name we don’t know, drove away from this place in a taxi, accompanied by a lady. My informant tells me she was smartly dressed, and he puts her age at about thirty, or perhaps less.”

The hall-porter indulged in a smile of satisfaction.

“I think I can help you there, Mr Smeaton. I was passing through the palm-court at the time, and saw them go out together. We all know the lady very well. She is here pretty often. Sometimes she comes with a big party, sometimes with a lady friend, sometimes with a gentleman. Her name is Saxton, and she has a flat in Hyde Park Mansions. One of her

friends told me she is a widow."

"What sort of a person is she? How would you class her? She seems to dress well, and is, I suppose, attractive."

The hall-porter mused a moment before he replied. Like most of his class, he was an expert at social classification.

"Not one of the 'nobs,' certainly," he answered at length, with a smile. "Semi-fashionable, I should say; moves in society with a small 's.' Her friends seem of two sorts, high-class Bohemians—you know the sort I mean,—and rich middle-class who spend money like water."

"I see," said Smeaton. "And she lives in Hyde Park Mansions off the Edgware Road, or, to be more correct, Lisson Grove. She is evidently not rich."

They bade each other a cordial good-day, Smeaton having first expressed his gratitude for the information, and left in the hall-porter's capacious palm a more substantial proof of his satisfaction.

The next thing to be done was to interview the attractive widow. Before doing so, he looked in at Chesterfield Street, and, as he expected, found Wingate and Sheila together.

He told them of the visit of Davies, and his subsequent conversation with the hall-porter at the Savoy.

When he mentioned the name of Saxton, Sheila uttered an exclamation. "Why, Mr Farloe has a sister of the name of Saxton, a widow! He brought her once to one of our parties, and I remember she was very gushing. She begged me to go and see her at her flat, and I am pretty certain Hyde Park Mansions was the place she named, although I can't be positive."

"Did you go. Miss Monkton?"

"No. As I have told you, I never liked Mr Farloe, and I liked his sister less. She was pretty, and I think men would find her attractive. But there seemed to me an under-current of slyness and insincerity about her."

It was rather a weakness of Wingate's that he credited himself with great analytical powers, and believed he was eminently suited to detective work. So he broke in:

"Perhaps Miss Monkton and I could help you a bit, by keeping a watch on this woman. I have time to spare, and it would take her out of herself."

Smeaton repressed a smile. Like most professionals, he had little faith in the amateur. But it would not be polite to say so.

"By all means, Mr Wingate. We can do with assistance. 'Phone me up or call at Scotland Yard whenever you have anything to communicate. Now, I think I will be off to Hyde Park Mansions and see what sort of a customer Mrs Saxton is." A taxi bore him to his destination, and in a few moments he was ringing at the door of the flat.

A neat maid admitted him, and in answer to his inquiries said her mistress was at home.

"What name shall I say, please?" she asked in a hesitating voice. He produced his case and handed the girl a card.

"Of course, you know I am a stranger," he explained. "Will you kindly take this to Mrs Saxton, and tell her that I will take up as little of her time as possible."

After the delay of a few moments, he was shown into a pretty drawing-room, tastefully furnished. The lady was sitting at a tea-table, and alone.

"Please sit down," she said; her tones were quite affable. She did not in the least appear to resent this sudden intrusion into her domestic life. "Lily, bring another cup. You will let me offer you some tea?"

She was certainly a most agreeable person—on the right side of thirty, he judged. Smeaton was somewhat susceptible to female influence, although, to do him justice, he never allowed this weakness to interfere with business.

He explained that tea was a meal of which he never partook. Mrs Saxton, it appeared, was a most hospitable person, and promptly suggested a

whisky-and-soda. He must take something, she protested, or she would feel embarrassed.

The detective accepted, and felt that things had begun very smoothly. The velvet glove was very obvious, even if, later, he should catch a glimpse of the iron hand encased within.

“I must apologise for intruding upon you, Mrs Saxton, in this fashion. But I am in want of a little information, and I believe you can furnish me with it, if you are disposed to.”

Mrs Saxton smiled at him very sweetly, and regarded him with eyes of mild surprise. Very fine eyes they were, he thought. It was a pity that she had taken the trouble to enhance their brilliancy by the aid of art. She was quite good-looking enough to rely upon her attractions, without surreptitious assistance.

“How very interesting,” she said in a prettily modulated, but rather affected voice. “I am all curiosity.”

She was purring perhaps a little bit too much for absolute sincerity, but it was pleasant to be met with such apparent cordiality.

Smeaton came to the point at once. “I am at the present moment considerably interested in the gentleman with whom you left the Savoy yesterday afternoon in a taxi-cab.”

There was just a moment’s pause before she replied. But there were no signs of confusion about her. Her eyes never left his face, and there was no change in her voice when she spoke. She was either perfectly straightforward, or as cool a hand as he had ever met.

“You are interested in Mr Stent? How strange! Gentlemen of your profession do not generally interest themselves in other persons without some strong motive, I presume?”

“The motive is a pretty strong one. At present, other interests require that I do not divulge it,” replied Smeaton gravely. He was pleased with one thing, he had already got the name of the man; he preferred not to confess that he did not know it. And her frank allusion to him as Mr Stent

seemed to show that she had nothing to hide. Unless, of course, it was a slip.

“I know I am asking something that you may consider an impertinence,” he went on. “But, if you are at liberty to do so, I should like you to tell me all you know of this gentleman; in short, who and what he is.”

She laughed quite naturally. “But I really fear I can tell you very little. I suppose going away together in a taxi appears to argue a certain amount of intimacy. But in this case it is not so. I know next to nothing of Mr Stent. He is not even a friend, only a man whose acquaintance I made in the most casual manner. And, apart from two occasions about which I will tell you presently, I don’t suppose I have been in his company a dozen times.”

It was a disappointment, certainly, and this time Smeaton did not believe she was speaking the truth. In spite of the silvery laugh and the apparently frank manner. But he must put up with what she chose to give him.

“Do you mind telling me how you first made his acquaintance, Mrs Saxton?”

“Not in the least,” she replied graciously. “Two years ago I was staying in the Hotel Royal at Dinard. Mr Stent was there too. He seemed a very reserved, silent sort of man, and kept himself very much aloof from the others, myself included, although, as I daresay you have guessed, I am of a gregarious and unconventional disposition.”

She gave him a flashing smile, and Smeaton bowed gallantly. “I should say you were immensely popular,” he observed judiciously.

“Thanks for the compliment; without vanity, I think I may say most people take to me. Well, one day Mr Stent and I found ourselves alone in the drawing-room, and the ice was broken. After that we talked together a good deal, and occasionally went to the Casino, and took walks together. He left before I did, and I did not meet him again till next year at Monte Carlo.”

“Did you learn anything about his private affairs, his profession or

occupation?”

“Not a word. The conversation was always general. He was the last man in the world to talk about himself. He was at Monte Carlo about a week. I did not see very much of him then, as I was staying with a party in Mentone; he was by himself, as before.”

“Did he give you the impression of a man of means?”

“On the whole, I should say, yes. One night he lost a big sum in the Rooms, but appeared quite unconcerned. Since then I have met him about a dozen times, or perhaps less, at different places, mostly restaurants. Yesterday he came through the palm-court, as I was sitting there after lunch, and we exchanged a few words.”

“Did you not see him at lunch; you were both there?” questioned Smeaton quickly.

“I saw him at a table some distance from mine, but he did not see me. I mentioned that I was going back to Hyde Park Mansions. He said he was driving in the direction of St. John’s Wood, and would drop me on his way. He left me at the entrance to the flats.”

Smeaton rose. He knew that if he stopped there for another hour he would get nothing more out of her.

“Thanks very much, Mrs Saxton, for what you have told me. One last question, and I have done. Do you know where he lives?”

There was just a moment’s hesitation. Did she once know, and had she forgotten? Or was she debating whether she would feign ignorance? He fancied the latter was the correct reason.

“I don’t remember, if I ever knew, the exact address, but it is somewhere in the direction of St. Albans.”

Smeaton bowed himself out, and meditated deeply. “She’s an artful customer, for all her innocent air, and knows more than she will tell, till she’s forced,” was his inward comment. “Now for two things—one, to find out what there is to be found at St. Albans; two, to get on the track of the

bearded man.”

Chapter Six.

Just Too Late.

Mr Smeaton was not a man to waste time. Within ten minutes of his arrival at Scotland Yard he had sent two sergeants of the C.I. Department to keep Mrs Saxton under close surveillance, and to note the coming and going of all visitors. As her flat was on the ground floor, observation would be rendered comparatively easy.

The evening's report was barren of incident. Mrs Saxton had remained at home. The only visitor had been a young man, answering to the description of James Farloe, her brother. He had called about dinner-time, and left a couple of hours later.

For the moment Smeaton did not take Farloe very seriously into his calculations. Mrs Saxton would tell her brother all about his visit, and to interrogate him would be a waste of time. He would tell him nothing more about Stent than he had already learned.

He had noticed, with his trained powers of observation which took in every detail at a glance, that there was a telephone in a corner of the small hall.

If her connection with the mysterious Stent were less innocent than she had led him to believe, she would have plenty of time to communicate with this gentleman by means of that useful little instrument.

Later, he instructed a third skilled subordinate to proceed the next morning in a car to St. Albans, and institute discreet inquiries on the way. Afterwards, he thought of the two amateur detectives in Chesterfield Street, and smiled. Sheila was a charming girl, pathetically beautiful in her distress, and Wingate was a pleasant young fellow. So he would give them some encouragement.

He wrote a charming little note, explaining what he had done with regard to Mrs Saxton. He suggested they should establish their headquarters at a small restaurant close by, lunch and dine there as often as they could.

If occasion arose, they could co-operate with his own men, who would recognise them from his description. He concluded his letter with a brief résumé of his conversation with Mrs Saxton.

Poor souls, he thought, nothing was likely to come out of their zeal. But it would please them to think they were at least doing something towards the unravelling of the mystery.

In this supposition he was destined to be agreeably disappointed in the next few hours.

Wingate, after reading the letter, escorted Sheila on a small shopping expedition in the West End. They were going to lunch afterwards at the restaurant in close proximity to Hyde Park Mansions.

The shopping finished, Wingate suddenly recollected he must send a wire to the works at Hendon, and they proceeded to the nearest post-office in Edgware Road.

It was now a quarter to one, and they had settled to lunch at one o'clock, so they walked along quickly. When within a few yards of the post-office, Sheila laid her hand upon his arm.

"Stop a second!" she said in an excited voice. "You see that woman getting out of a taxi. It is Mrs Saxton. Let her get in before we go on."

He obeyed. The elegant, fashionably-attired young woman paid the driver, and disappeared within the door. The pair of amateur detectives followed on her heels.

Sheila's quick eyes picked her out at once, although the office was full of people. Mrs Saxton was already in one of the little pens, writing a telegram.

Unobserved by the woman so busily engaged, Sheila stepped softly behind her, and waited till she had finished. She had splendid eyesight, and she read the words distinctly. They ran as follows:

"Herbert. Poste Restante, Brighton. Exercise discretion. Maude."

Then she glided away, and, with Wingate, hid herself behind a group of people. She had only met the woman once, but it was just possible she might remember her if their glances met.

Mrs Saxton took the telegram to the counter, and they heard her ask how long it would take to get to Brighton. Then, having received an answer to the query, which they could not catch, she went out.

They looked at each other eagerly. They had made a discovery, but what were they to do with it?

“Ring up Smeaton at once, and tell him,” suggested Sheila. “He will know what to do.”

After a moment’s reflection, Wingate agreed that this was the proper course. While they were discussing the point, the man himself hurried in. His quick eye detected them at once, and he joined them.

“I’ve just missed Mrs Saxton—eh?” he queried.

Sheila explained to him how they had arrived there by accident, and had seen her stepping out of the taxi. Smeaton went on to explain.

“I looked round this morning to see how my men were getting on, and found a taxi waiting before the door. I had to hide when she came out, but one of my men heard her give the address of this office. I picked up another taxi, and drove as hard as I could. My fellow kept the other well in sight, but just as we were gaining on her, I was blocked, and lost three minutes. She came here, of course, to send a wire. But it is only a little delay. I can get hold of that wire very shortly.”

“But there is no need,” cried Sheila triumphantly. “At any rate, for the present. I looked over her shoulder, and read every word of it. I will tell it you.”

She repeated the words. He had showed obvious signs of vexation at having just missed the woman he was hunting, and now his brow cleared.

“Very clever of you. Miss Monkton—very clever,” he said in appreciative

tones. “Now, who is Herbert, that’s the question?”

“Stent, no doubt,” suggested Wingate, with a certain amount of rashness.

The detective regarded him with his kindly but somewhat quizzical smile. “I very much doubt if it is Stent, Mr Wingate. I sent a man down early this morning to St. Albans, where I believe he lives. I should say Herbert is another man altogether.” The young people readily accepted the professional’s theory. They recognised that they were only amateurs.

There was a long pause. They stood humbly waiting for the great man to speak, this man of lightning intuition and strategic resource.

It seemed an interminable time to the expectant listeners before he again opened his lips. Before he did speak, he pulled out his watch and noted the time.

“This may be important, and we cannot afford to lose a moment,” he said at length. “How do you stand, Mr Wingate, as regards time? Can you spare me the whole of the day?”

“The whole of to-day, to-morrow, and the next day, if it will help,” cried the young man fervently.

“There is a fairly fast train from Victoria in forty minutes from now. You have plenty of time to catch it. I want you to go to the post-office in Brighton, and get hold of that telegram.”

“But it is addressed to the name of Herbert.”

“No matter,” said Smeaton, a little impatiently. “If the real Herbert has not been before you—and I should guess it is an unexpected message—they will hand it to you; they are too busy to be particular. If he has already been, trump up a tale that he is a friend of yours, and not being sure that he would be able to call himself, had asked you to look in for it, so as to make sure.”

“I see,” said Wingate. He felt an increased admiration for the professional detective. He was not quite sure that he would have been ready with this glib explanation.

“I should love to go too,” said Sheila, looking wistfully at the ever-resourceful Smeaton, whom she now frankly accepted as the disposer of their destinies.

“Forgive me if I oppose you this once, my dear Miss Monkton,” he said in his kindest and most diplomatic manner. “Two are not always company in detective business, unless they’ve been trained to work together. Besides, I shall want Mr Wingate to keep in close touch with me on the ’phone, and he will have no time to look after a lady.”

Having settled that matter, he turned to Wingate. “First of all, here are a couple of my cards; one to show the post-office if there is anything awkward—this for the chief constable of Brighton if you have need of his assistance. I will scribble an introduction on it.” He suited the action to the word. “Now, the sooner you are off the better. I will put Miss Monkton into a taxi. You be off, and try to get hold of that wire.”

There was no resisting his powerful personality. He controlled the situation like an autocrat.

“Stay, just one thing more. I shall be at Scotland Yard till seven, and at home about eight. Here is my private ’phone number, if unseen developments arise.”

He thought of everything, he foresaw the improbable. They were lost in admiration. At the moment of departing, he rather damped their enthusiasm by muttering, almost to himself:

“If I could put my hand on one of my own men, I wouldn’t trouble you, but there is no time, and delay is dangerous.”

A hasty hand-shake to Sheila, a fond lover’s look into her eyes, and Wingate was out of the post-office, and into a taxi, en route for Victoria.

He thought of her all the time he was travelling to Brighton. In these last few days her great sorrow had brought her very near to him. He had read her disappointment when Smeaton had forbidden her to accompany him. But she would not resent that on him; she knew he was working in her interests, that his one thought was to help in solving the tragic mystery that was clouding her young life.

The train arrived at Brighton punctual to the minute, and mindful of Smeaton's remark that delay was dangerous, he drove straight to the post-office.

He was, in a certain sense, elated with the mission that had been entrusted him, through the mere accident of Smeaton not having had time to put his hand on an experienced man. But he felt some trepidation as he walked through the swing-doors. Surely people who set forth on detective work must have nerves of steel and foreheads of triple brass.

He bought some stamps first, not because he wanted them, but in order to screw up his courage to sticking-point.

A sharp-featured, not too amiable-looking young woman served him. When he had completed his purchase, he asked in as cordial a voice as he could assume:

"Are there any letters or telegrams for the name of Herbert?"

The young woman regarded him with a suspicious glance.

"Is your name Herbert, may I ask?"

At that moment, he blessed Smeaton for the lie which he had made him a present of at starting. He proceeded to retail it for the young woman's benefit.

She smiled a sour smile, and he felt his face flush. Decidedly he wanted more experience.

"Nothing doing this time," she said insolently, in a rasping cockney voice. "You'd better hurry up next time. The real owner of the telegram took it away half-an-hour ago!"

Chapter Seven.

The Mysterious Mrs Saxton.

After Wingate's hurried departure, Smeaton put Sheila into a taxi, and quickly took his way back to Scotland Yard. Here he found a note awaiting him from the Home Secretary, requesting him to step round to the Home Office.

They knew each other well, these two men, and had been brought together several times on affairs of public importance. Before he had thrown all his energies into politics Mr Carlingford had been one of the most successful barristers of the day. His intellect was of the keen and subtle order.

He was, of course, profoundly interested in the mysterious disappearance of his colleague, the Colonial Secretary, and had sent for the detective to talk over the matter.

"Sit down, Smeaton. Have you any news? I know you are not a man to let the grass grow under your feet."

Smeaton explained the situation as it stood at present.

"We have partly identified one, and in my opinion the more important, of the two men who put him in the taxi. His name is given to me as Stent, and he is supposed to have a house somewhere in the neighbourhood of St. Albans. One of my best sergeants is down there to-day, making inquiries. I fancy we are also on the track of the second man."

He added that it was to Farloe's sister, Mrs Saxton, that he was indebted for the somewhat scanty information he possessed.

"I met that lady last winter at Mentone," remarked the Home Secretary. "She was an attractive young woman, with ingratiating manners. I remember she introduced herself to me, telling me that her brother was Monkton's secretary. My impression at the time, although I don't know that I had any particular evidence to go on, was that there was just a little

touch of the adventuress about her."

"Precisely my impression," agreed the man from "over the way."

"I never took to that fellow, Farloe, either," continued the statesman. "I don't think Monkton was particularly attached to him, although he admitted he was the best secretary he ever had. I always thought there was something shifty and underhand about him."

They talked for a few moments longer, exchanging probable and possible theories, and then Smeaton rose to take his leave.

"Well, Mr Carlingford, thanks to your kind help we have been able to keep it out of the Press so far. I hope our inquiries will soon bear some fruit," he said, and then left the room.

Sheila had gone home feeling very sad and lonely. All her plans for the day had been upset by Wingate's sudden journey to Brighton.

She had looked forward to spending some hours in the society of her lover. The excitement of the detective business in which they proposed to engage for the rest of the day would have taken her out of herself, and kept alive the courage which flagged sorely now and again, as she confronted the apparently insoluble problem of her beloved father's disappearance.

Her luncheon finished, she went into her own dainty little sitting-room and tried to read. But she could not focus her attention. Her thoughts strayed away from the printed page, and at last she flung down the book impatiently.

"I wish that I had insisted on going down to Brighton with Austin," she said to herself. "I think I must get out. I shall go mad if I stop within these four walls."

As she was making up her mind, the door opened, and old Grant entered.

"A lady would like to see you. Miss," he said. "She says her name is Saxton and that you know her, as she is Mr Farloe's sister. She says she

has been here once, but I don't seem to remember her."

Sheila was immediately interested. Their acquaintance was of the slightest. She recalled the incident at the post-office, and wondered what was the object of the visit.

"Yes, she came once to a big party. Grant. You have shown her into the drawing-room, I suppose? I will see her."

She went at once to the drawing-room. Mrs Saxton rose as she entered, and advanced towards her with outstretched hand, her pretty, rather hard features subdued to an expression of deep sympathy.

"My dear Miss Monkton, I do hope you will not regard my visit as an intrusion," she exclaimed fussily. "But, owing to my brother's connection with your family, I was bound to know something of what has happened. And I feel so deeply for you."

Sheila replied with some conventional phrase, but her manner was constrained and cold. Mrs Saxton was acting, no doubt to the best of her capacity, but there was an absence of sincerity in voice and glance.

She had come, not out of sympathy, but for her own ends. Sheila remembered what Smeaton had said, namely, that she knew a good deal more than she chose to tell. She also remembered the telegram which had been despatched a few hours ago. Was it possible Mrs Saxton had caught sight of her at the post-office in Edgware Road after all, and had come with the intention of pumping her?

Whatever the motives might be, Sheila made up her mind to one thing—that she would say as little as possible, and ask questions rather than answer them.

"What has Mr Farloe told you?"

"Oh, as little as he possibly could. But although it has been very cleverly kept from the Press, rumours are flying about at the clubs, in the House of Commons, everywhere. Your father has not been seen for several days, and he is much too important a man not to be missed."

Sheila made no answer. She was resolved to take a very passive *röle* in this interview which had been thrust upon her. She looked steadily at Mrs Saxton, who bore the scrutiny of those candid young eyes with absolute composure, and waited for her to resume the conversation.

“A rather strange thing happened the other day,” went on her visitor, after a somewhat lengthy pause. “I had a visit from a Scotland Yard official, of the name of Smeaton. He told me he was very much interested in a Mr Stent, whose acquaintance I happened to make abroad a couple of years ago. I wonder if this Mr Stent happens to be a friend of yours, or your father’s?” This time Sheila felt she could make a direct answer without committing herself. “I certainly do not know the man myself. For my father I cannot, of course, speak positively. In his position he must have known heaps of people, more or less intimately. But, as I have never seen him in this house, he could not have been a friend.”

Mrs Saxton spoke again in her well-bred, but somewhat artificial voice:

“I hope you will excuse me for having put the question. But it struck me after he had left that his visit might have been connected with the sad events that have happened here, and that he believed Mr Stent to have been mixed up with them.”

“Were you able to give him any information?” asked Sheila quickly. She thought it was her turn to question now.

“Nothing, I am afraid, of any value. I had simply met him abroad at an hotel, in the first place, and came across him about a dozen times afterwards. You know what a lot of people one picks up in that casual sort of way, people you know absolutely nothing about.”

Sheila agreed that this was a common experience, and after the interchange of a few commonplaces, Mrs Saxton took leave. She renewed her expressions of sympathy, and begged Miss Monkton to make use of her in any way, if she thought she could render assistance.

What had been the motive of her visit? To reiterate the slenderness of her knowledge of the man Stent, so that the fact would be communicated to Smeaton? Or had she hoped to find an artless and impressionable girl, who would confide to her all that had been done, up to the present, to

unravel the mystery of Monkton's disappearance?

If so, she had signally failed. She had gone away, having learned nothing. And Sheila had put no questions herself, although she was burning to ask her: "Who is that man at Brighton to whom you sent the telegram of warning?"

It had been a day of surprises, and events proceeded very rapidly, mostly in the direction of disappointments.

In the first place, Smeaton was rung up from Brighton by Wingate, who reported the failure of his attempt to get hold of the telegram, and asked for further instructions.

The detective mused a few moments before replying. He placed little or no reliance on the efforts of amateurs, however full of zeal. Still, the young man was there, and he might as well make use of him.

"Would it be inconveniencing you to spend a few more hours down there?" he asked at length over the wire from his room at Scotland Yard.

The reply was what might be expected. Wingate would be only too happy to place himself entirely at Smeaton's disposal.

"Thanks. In that case, I would ask you to keep a watch on the post-office for as long as you think worth while. This fellow will be pretty certain to call again in an hour or two for another wire. You may depend their correspondence has not finished with that first telegram."

So that was settled; it was a toss-up whether or not anything would result from Wingate's observations.

A little later one of the two men who were watching Hyde Park Mansions reported that Mrs Saxton had driven to Chesterfield Street, and remained in Monkton's house for some twenty minutes.

Smeaton at once rang up Sheila Monkton, and obtained particulars of the brief interview, which confirmed his opinion that Farloe's attractive sister was engaged in some deep game.

This opinion was further corroborated by the arrival of the detective he had sent down to St. Albans at an early hour that morning.

This man had scoured the neighbourhood on his motor-cycle within a radius of twelve miles from the city of St. Albans. Nobody of the name of Stent was known, and so far as his information went, which he had picked up at various shops and local inns, nobody of that name had ever been a resident, at any rate within the last four or five or six years.

Smeaton cursed Mrs Saxton heartily. A really innocent woman might have made a mistake. But he was sure in his own mind that this innocent-looking young person with the charming manners and the well-bred voice had deliberately put him on a wrong scent.

And for what motive? Perhaps in order to gain time. Well, he had lost a few hours, but he intended to run Mr Stent to earth yet, without her assistance.

Chapter Eight.

The Man from Boundary Road.

Austin Wingate's feelings as he left the post-office in Brighton can easily be imagined. He had failed ignominiously in his mission, and the sarcastic young woman who had spoken so insolently to him was laughing at his discomfiture.

It was some moments before he could sufficiently recover his composure to go to the nearest telephone—he did not dare to re-enter the post-office so soon—and communicate with Smeaton.

He was fortified by the detective's request to remain at his post for some time longer, in the hope of turning a failure into something of a partial success. He lit a big cigar and prepared for a long vigil.

He began to think there were certain discomforts attached to detective work. He found himself commiserating the two unfortunate creatures who had been appointed to keep watch at Hyde Park Mansions.

He was better off than they in one important particular. They only worked for pay, not, probably, of a very munificent description. If he succeeded, he would not only earn the praises of Smeaton, but he would be rewarded with the tender light of gratitude in the beautiful eyes of his beloved Sheila.

So he kept resolutely at his post, lounging up and down the street, with his glance ever alert for any likely stranger who should come along.

An hour passed, and then the minutes went very slowly. He kept looking at his watch. Smeaton was sure the strange man would come back for a further communication. Putting himself in the man's place, he reasoned that he had wired a reply to Mrs Saxton, and that he would allow himself a certain time for his wire to reach London, and the return wire to get to Brighton.

Calculating on this basis—and he felt rather proud of the process—Austin

reckoned that the man would be back in a couple of hours from when he left the post-office. The insolent young woman had told him that the wire had been fetched away half-an-hour before Wingate's arrival.

If this reasoning was correct, the man he was in search of would make his appearance in about another ten minutes from the last time Austin had looked at his watch.

He felt his nerves quivering as the moment drew near and then passed. The street was very busy, many people entering and leaving the post-office.

Another ten minutes had elapsed, and then a tall, bearded man came along. There was something peculiar in his gait: he seemed to walk stiffly with one leg.

He proceeded slowly in the direction of the post-office, and entered the swing-doors. A chill came over the ardent Wingate as he recognised that the man might be merely going in to buy stamps, or send a wire—not to receive one.

He stole across from the opposite side of the street, where he had been marching up and down for such an interminable time, and peered through the glass door.

A thrill of exultation swept through him as he saw the young woman hand the stranger a telegram, which he opened, read rapidly, and then thrust in his breast pocket. Wingate at once darted back to his previous post.

At a respectful distance he followed the stranger with the peculiar limping walk. They came on to the sea front, and his quarry finally disappeared into that well-known hostelry, "The Old Ship."

It was now much more than an even chance, taking all the circumstances into consideration, that this was the man who was in communication with Mrs Saxton, and that the telegram he had seen him read was from her.

The man, further, answered to the description given by Davies of one of the two men who had hailed his taxi at Dean's Yard. The taxi-driver had said nothing about the peculiarity in his walk, which had impressed

Wingate at once, probably for the obvious reason that Davies had not had an opportunity of observing it. He had only seen him for a couple of minutes, during which time he was occupied in taking instructions for the disposal of his fare.

“The Old Ship” had been a favourite resort of Wingate’s for some years. In fact, until within the last few months, when his business occupations had permitted less leisure, there was hardly a week in which he had not motored down there.

The manager he knew well, also the head-waiter, and two or three of his subordinates. If the man he was tracking was staying there, it would be the easiest thing in the world to make a few judicious inquiries ere he again ’phoned Smeaton. The first person he met, as he stepped into the hall, was Bayfield, the portly and rubicund head-waiter himself.

“Good-day, Mr Wingate. Very pleased to see you, sir. We were saying only the other day that you had quite deserted us.”

“Been awfully busy, Bayfield; couldn’t get away. But it was such a lovely day that I made up my mind I would rush down for a breath of fresh air.”

“Quite right, sir,” cried the cheerful Bayfield, in an approving voice. “It will do you good. All work and no play—you know the old proverb, sir—eh? You are staying the night, I hope?”

Wingate hesitated. “I didn’t intend to when I started from town. Anyway, I will have dinner, and make plans afterwards. Have you many people stopping here?”

“Never knew the house so empty, although, of course, we don’t expect to have many this time of year. A lot of people come in to the *table d’hôte*, but at the moment, in the house itself, we’ve only an elderly couple, a few stray people, and a foreign gentleman, who has been a visitor, on and off, for the last few months.”

It was a fine opportunity to engage Bayfield in conversation upon the subject of the “foreign” gentleman, and pick up what he could. Bayfield was a chatty, old-fashioned creature nearly seventy, and could be trusted not to exhibit undue reticence when unfolding himself to a customer

whom he had known for some years.

But Wingate made up his mind not to press matters too much. He would prospect a little on his own account first, before he availed himself of the head-waiter's loquacity.

A minute later he entered the smoking-room, lit another cigar, and prepared to cogitate over matters. At the moment of his entrance there was nobody else in the apartment. A few seconds later the bearded stranger came in, rang the bell, ordered something, and seated himself before a small writing-table in the corner of the room. Then he pulled from his breast pocket a bundle of papers.

He read through some of them, various letters and memoranda they seemed to be, slowly and carefully, and laid them aside after perusal, making notes meanwhile.

Then, almost, but not quite, at the end of the packet, came the telegram which he had received at the post-office. He placed this on the top of the little pile, and went on with what remained.

It was a tantalising moment for Austin. There was the telegram within six feet of him. Wild thoughts coursed through his brain. An idea occurred to him. He stumped his cigar upon the ash-tray, till it failed to emit the feeblest glow. He had already observed that, through carelessness, nearly every match-box in the room was empty.

Noiselessly he stole across the few feet of space that divided him from the stranger, and stood on his right hand. Another document had been laid upon the pile, and only the corner of the telegram was peeping forth. A second or two sooner, and he could have read it. He was full of chagrin.

"Excuse me, sir, but can you oblige me with a match? They don't seem to provide them in this establishment."

The visitor turned, and for a moment regarded him keenly. What he saw seemed to impress him favourably: an open, honest English face, perfectly candid eyes that looked into his own, without a suspicion of guile in their direct gaze.

“With pleasure, sir. They seem very remiss.”

He spoke with a slight foreign accent, but his tones were cultivated, and his manner was courtesy itself. He held out his match-box. Wingate fancied his glance travelled uneasily to the pile of papers upon the table.

The young man turned half round to strike the match. There was hardly anything of the telegram to read, so obscured was it by the letter lying on the top of it, in which he was not interested.

But what he could see, with his abnormally quick vision, was sufficient. The signature showed distinctly, the same that had appeared on the previous wire—the name MAUDE!

He bowed and withdrew. The foreigner finished his examination of the pile of correspondence he had produced, gathered it up, and transferred it to his breast pocket. Then, with a courteous smile to Wingate, he quitted the room.

The young man breathed a sigh of relief. He was both astonished and delighted at his own resource, at the extent of his discovery. The contents of the telegram could be obtained by Smeaton at his leisure.

What he, Austin Wingate, amateur detective, had proved was that the mysterious man who was staying there was the same person who was in communication with Maude, otherwise Mrs Saxton, of Hyde Park Mansions.

He had done good spade work. Of that he was sure. It was now half-past seven. Plenty of time to ’phone Smeaton, tell him what he had discovered, and inquire how he was to proceed.

The detective decided on his campaign without a moment’s hesitation.

“Well done, Mr Wingate, an excellent result,” he said over the wire. “Stay the night and keep the fellow under observation. We must have him identified. I will send Davies down by the first train to-morrow morning. I will ’phone you full instructions, say, in a couple of hours. Meet him at the station in the morning, smuggle him into the hotel as quickly as you can; I leave the details to you. Let him see our foreign friend, and say if he is

the man we think him to be." He paused a moment, then added:

"You say the manager and Bayfield are well-known to you. They are also old friends of mine. I have unearthed more than one mystery with their help. Mention my name, show them my card, if you think it will ease matters. They will give you any assistance you want. Once again, bravo, and well-done. I'll ring you up as soon as I have fixed Davies."

Wingate felt he was walking on air as he returned to the hotel. With his new-born cunning he had not 'phoned from "The Old Ship," but from the post-office.

The dining-room was not at all full. The elderly couple and the foreigner sat at their respective tables. A few other people were dotted about.

At the end of an hour Wingate had the room to himself, with the head-waiter, his old friend, hovering around, ready for a prolonged chat.

"I'm rather interested in that foreign chap, Bayfield," he said carelessly. "What do you know about him? Is he a quiet sort of Anarchist, or what?"

Bayfield was quite ready to communicate all he knew, in confidential whispers, for Wingate was always very popular with his inferiors. He gave himself no airs, and he was more than liberal with tips.

"He's a bit of a mystery, sir, but he's a very quiet sort of a gentleman. He began coming here about three months ago. I should say, since he started, he has stayed two or three days out of every week. He has heaps of letters. Sometimes he goes off at a minute's notice, and then we have to send his letters after him."

"Where does he live, and what's his name?"

"He lives in the Boundary Road, St. John's Wood, and his name is Bolinski; a Russian, I suppose. All their names seem to end in 'ski' or 'off.'"

So his name was Bolinski, and he lived in Boundary Road, St. John's Wood. Here was valuable information for Smeaton. Wingate chatted a little longer with Bayfield, and then went for a walk along the front,

returning in time to receive the detective's message 'phoned to the hotel.

At this juncture he thought it was wise policy to take both the manager and Bayfield into his confidence. He showed them Smeaton's card, and explained that for reasons he was not at liberty to disclose, he wanted to identify Bolinski. A man was coming down for that purpose by an early train to-morrow morning, and he wanted to smuggle him into the hotel as early as possible.

The manager smiled. "That's all right, Mr Wingate. Inspector Smeaton is an old friend of mine, and I have helped him a bit here, and more in London. Our friend breakfasts on the stroke of half-past nine. Get your man in here a little before nine, and Bayfield will take him in charge, and give him a glimpse of the distinguished foreigner."

Next morning the taxi-driver Davies arrived, attired in a brand new suit, and looking eminently respectable in mufti.

Wingate met him at the station, piloted him to "The Old Ship," and handed him over to the careful guardianship of the astute Bayfield.

At nine-thirty, Bolinski, fresh and smart, came down to his breakfast, seating himself at his usual table. Davies crept in, and took a good look at him, unobserved by the object of his scrutiny.

Wingate was waiting in the hall, with the manager. The face of Davies was purple with emotion and the pleasurable anticipation of further and substantial reward.

"That's the man, right enough, sir!" he said in an excited whisper. "I'd swear to him out of a thousand if they was all standin' before me."

Chapter Nine.

Rumours in London.

Some few days had elapsed, and the Monkton mystery remained in the same deep obscurity. The inquest had been resumed, and an “open verdict” was returned by the jury. But nothing as yet had been published in the Press. All that the public knew was by an obscure paragraph which stated that the Colonial Secretary had been suffering from ill-health, and, having been ordered complete rest by his doctor, he had gone abroad.

The body of the dead man had not been identified. There was nothing to prove conclusively the cause of death, so the matter was left in the hands of the police for investigation.

Some little progress had been made in the direction of Bolinski. Luigi, the proprietor of the restaurant in Soho, had been taken to the Boundary Road in St. John’s Wood, and had waited for the mysterious foreigner to come out of the house.

When he appeared, limping along with that peculiar gait of his, Luigi unhesitatingly declared that he was the man who had dined on the eventful night with the missing Mr Monkton. He could have identified him anyway by his features and figure, but the dragging walk left no room for doubt. Luigi, like Wingate, had noticed it at once.

A few facts about him were established. He was either a bachelor or a widower, as the only other occupants of the house were a married couple, also foreigners, who looked after the establishment. Inquiries in the neighbourhood proved that he spent about half the week there, going up to business every morning.

They tracked him to his office in the city, a couple of rooms on the second floor of a big block of recently erected buildings in the vicinity of Liverpool Street Station. His staff was small, consisting of a young clerk of about eighteen, and a woman of about thirty-five, by her appearance a Jewess of foreign, probably Polish, nationality.

The name Bolinski was inscribed in large latters on a plate outside the door. No business or profession was stated. Patient investigation revealed the fact that he was supposed to be a financial agent, was connected with certain small, but more or less profitable, enterprises abroad, and had a banking account at the head office of one of the biggest banks in England.

Such facts as these rather deepened the mystery. What circumstances had produced an even momentary association between Reginald Monkton, a statesman of more than ordinary eminence, a man of considerable fortune, with a financier of fifth or sixth rate standing, who lived in a small house in St. John's Wood.

While the Russian was being subjected to these investigations, the other man. Stent, had suddenly absented himself from the Savoy. This was annoying, as Smeaton had sworn to hunt him to his lair, with the aid of his old ally, the hall-porter.

Mrs Saxton was still being kept under strict surveillance, but she, too, was lying very low. She left the flat very seldom, and her movements had in them nothing suspicious. Her brother, James Farloe, went there every day, but she did not appear to be in further communication with Bolinski. Nothing had come to light since those two telegrams despatched to Brighton.

In the meantime rumour was growing in every direction, more especially in political and club circles. What had become of Monkton? Why was he no longer in his place in the House of Commons? Why had his name disappeared from the Parliamentary reports? Was he really ill and abroad?

At no place was the subject discussed with greater interest than at that celebrated resort of intellectual Bohemianism, the Savage Club. Here were gathered together the brightest spirits of the stage, the Bar, and modern journalism with its insatiable appetite for sensational news and thrilling headlines.

Prominent amongst the journalistic section was Roderick Varney, a brilliant young man of twenty-eight, of whom his friends predicted great

things. After a most successful career at Oxford, he had entered the Middle Temple, and in due course been called to the Bar.

Having no connection among solicitors, briefs did not flow in, and he turned his attention to the Press. Here he speedily found his true vocation. He was now on the staff of a powerful syndicate which controlled an important group of daily and weekly newspapers.

The bent of his mind lay in the direction of criminal investigation. On behalf of one of the syndicated newspapers, he had helped to solve a mystery which had puzzled the trained detectives of Scotland Yard.

Thinking over the Monkton matter, he had come to the conclusion that there might be a great “scoop” in it.

Unfortunately, he knew so little of the actual facts; there were such slender premises to start from. Rumours, more or less exaggerated, were not of much use to him, and those were all that he had at his disposal.

And then, as he sat in the smoking-room of the Savage, overlooking the Thames, a big idea occurred to him. He would go to headquarters at once, to Chesterfield Street, and ask for Miss Monkton. He would send in a brief note first, explaining his errand.

He had dined, and it was getting on for half-past eight. No time to lose. In under ten minutes from the time the idea had struck him, he was at the door of Reginald Monkton’s house.

Grant showed him into the library, and took in the note. Sheila and Wingate had dined together, and were sitting in the drawing-room.

The sad events had drawn them so closely together that they might now be said to be acknowledged lovers. Austin had never made any pretence of his regard for her, and Sheila was no longer reserved or elusive.

She handed him the letter, and Wingate read it carefully.

“I know the man a little,” he said, when he had gathered the contents. “I belong to the Savage, and go there occasionally. He has the reputation of a brilliant journalist, and has written one or two quite good books on the

subject of criminology. Suppose we have him in, and see what he wants. Smeaton is a first-class man, no doubt, but this chap unearthed the Balham mystery that baffled Scotland Yard; all London rang with it, at the time. A fresh brain might help us."

Sheila yielded to her lover's suggestion. Privately, she thought etiquette demanded that they should first ring up to consult Smeaton as to whether the newcomer should be shown the door or not. But Wingate had been so good, so tender to her in her hour of trial, that she did not like to oppose him.

Varney came in and at once made a good impression upon her. He was quite a gentleman; his voice and manner showed unmistakable signs of cultivation.

He plunged at once into the matter without insincere apologies.

Plenty of rumours were flying about, he explained, many of them, no doubt, quite baseless; most, or all of them, exaggerated. He had a faculty for this kind of investigation, and had been successful in a very complicated and baffling case at Balham. If they would give him first-hand information he would be pleased to place his services at their disposal.

"You know, of course, that nothing will be allowed to appear in the Press," said Wingate, when the young journalist had finished. "The Home Secretary has given instructions to that effect."

Varney admitted he was under the impression something of the kind had occurred. Otherwise his chief would have sent for him at once.

"So you see I am not out for immediate kudos," he said, with a very frank smile. "Under different circumstances I daresay I should act very much like any other enterprising journalist anxious to establish a reputation."

There was a moment's pause. Wingate looked at Sheila, and she returned his glance of inquiry. Should they trust this singular young man, who spoke with such apparent frankness? Or should they refer him to the detective-inspector who had the case in hand?

Varney perceived their natural hesitation, and hastened to turn it in his favour.

“Let us make a bargain,” he said, in a voice of real heartiness. “Forget for the moment that I am a predatory journalist, on the prowl for sensational news. Just consider me as a man who has a bent for this particular form of investigation, and takes a delight in it. Treat me as a friend, and I will prove myself worthy of your confidence, and help you as far as my brains and resources will permit.”

It was Sheila who spoke first, with her woman’s impulse. “Austin,” she said, “I think we may trust Mr Varney.”

The journalist bowed. “Many thanks. Miss Monkton,” He smiled a little as he added: “Ring up my old friend Smeaton, who, I know, has charge of the case, and get his permission if you like. You know, that was your first thought—was it not?”

Sheila blushed. “Yes, you are quite right, it was. How did you guess?”

“Very easily. By putting myself in your place, and imagining how I should think and act under similar circumstances.”

Then Wingate followed his sweetheart’s lead.

“Well, Mr Varney, I agree with Miss Monkton. We accept you as an ally, without reference to Smeaton. What do you want us to do?”

“I want you to tell me, as fully as you can, everything that has happened, in the minutest detail, from the night of Mr Monkton’s strange disappearance until the present moment.”

It was a long recital. Varney listened attentively and made notes from time to time, as some point struck him. But he did not make many. He seemed to possess a marvellous and retentive memory.

The narrative finished, Varney rose.

“Thanks, I have got it all clear. Now, all this will want thinking over, and it will take me some hours. As soon as I have established something to

work upon I will communicate with you. We don't often see you at the Savage, Mr Wingate, or we might meet there."

"I have not much leisure," was Wingate's reply, "and all I have at my disposal is at Miss Monkton's service for the present."

"I quite understand." He could not fail to read in the slight glow on Sheila's cheek that the pair were lovers. "Well, good-night. Many thanks for the cordial reception you have given me. I shall do my best. I shall hope to earn the compliments of my old friend Smeaton once again."

It was close upon ten o'clock when he left the house in Chesterfield Street. Though it was summer time, the night was a dark one. There was no moon, and heavy clouds obscured the stars.

A man stepped out from under the street lamp nearly opposite, and walked quickly in the direction of Curzon Street. Varney had seen him many times in the House of Commons, and recognised him at once. It was James Farloe, the secretary.

Varney followed him up Curzon Street, through the narrow passage that runs past Lansdowne House. For a moment Farloe halted, as if undecided which direction to take. Then, his mind made up, he turned northward, and made his way into Oxford Street.

He walked along there for a little while, then crossed over to the north side, and, turning up one of the numerous side streets, took a devious route into Edgware Road.

It immediately struck Varney that he was going to visit Mrs Saxton at Hyde Park Mansions. In that case, he would have had his hunt for nothing. Smeaton had his men stationed there, and he was not wanted.

However, he would make sure, before he gave up the chase, and he was afterwards glad that he had not jumped too readily at conclusions.

It soon became apparent that this was not Farloe's destination, for he passed Chapel Street, and continued straight along the Edgware Road till he came to where it joins on to Maida Vale. Here he turned to the right, and was immediately in the St. John's Wood district.

Varney was now pretty certain in his own mind as to the secretary's goal, and a few moments more confirmed his conjectures. He halted at a house in the Boundary Road, and knocked gently at the door. It was opened by a tall man, whom Varney at once recognised as Bolinski, from the description given of him by Wingate.

He waited about for an hour, but Farloe did not come out. Theirs was evidently a long conference. The secretary was apparently the channel of communication between the Russian and Mrs Saxton. This accounted for the sudden cessation of telegrams. The astute lady had found out she was being watched.

Varney walked back to Baker Street Station, where he took a ticket for Charing Cross, the nearest halting-place for the Savage Club in the Adelphi.

"I wonder if Smeaton has left Farloe altogether out of his calculations," was his inward comment on the night's proceedings. "But it can't be; he is too old a bird for that. Well, it's evident he is in with the gang, whoever they are—as well as his sister."

Chapter Ten.

In the Lobby of the House.

The weeks had slipped by. Smeaton was not at all satisfied with the progress he was making. His inquiries had led him into a *cul-de-sac*. The absence of the man Stent from the Savoy worried him. It looked as though the man had received a hint from Mrs Saxton, and taken the alarm. In addition, he had constant inquiries from the Home Secretary as to what progress he was making.

He paid a visit to Chesterfield Street to talk over matters. Before he left, Sheila screwed up her courage to tell him of Varney's visit, and their acquiescence in his proposal to investigate on his own account.

She had expected that he would display resentment at their having taken such a step before consulting him. But, to her relief, he did nothing of the kind.

"Varney is a rather clever young chap," he admitted, "and if he devoted himself entirely to detective work, and acquired plenty of experience, I believe he would be as good as, if not better than, many of us. In the Caxley mystery he certainly got on the right track, while we went blundering on wrong lines altogether. And the revelations in the Balham affair were entirely due to him."

"He spoke very highly of you," said Sheila, with woman's *finesse*. "I am glad you don't think we did wrong."

"Not at all, my dear young lady. Tell him not to hesitate to come to me—if he is in need of any special facilities that I can give."

"No news of Mrs Saxton, I suppose?" asked Sheila, as Smeaton was on the point of leaving the drawing-room.

"None at all. She is at home, and nobody seems to go near her but her brother. I told you how she put me on the wrong scent about Stent. Once or twice I have thought of going there again and taxing her with it. But

what would be the good? She would still stick to her story that she knew next to nothing about him. In giving me the St. Albans clue she would swear she had mixed him up with somebody else. My men seem cooling their heels to no purpose. She knows she is being watched, and she won't give us a chance. I expect she does all her necessary work on the telephone, and we must attend to that point at once."

Next morning Mrs Saxton aroused herself from her apparent inactivity, and gave her watchers a big surprise, which added to Smeaton's growing dissatisfaction with the state of affairs.

At about eleven o'clock her maid whistled up a taxi. Mason, the head detective on duty, immediately communicated with his own taxi-driver, waiting in readiness round the corner, and entered the cab, giving instructions to follow the other when it started.

She came out without any luggage, simply carrying a small vanity bag. She might be going shopping, to pay a visit, to send a telegram, or a hundred-and-one things. His duty was to follow her.

The woman's cab drove down the Edgware Road, crossed the Park, and stopped at the Hyde Park Tube Station. Here Mrs Saxton paid the fare, and went into the booking-office. Mason at her heels. She took a ticket to Piccadilly Circus, and Mason did the same. They went down together in the same lift, Mrs Saxton near the door of exit, he at the other end of the lift.

He was puzzled as to her movements. If she wanted to get to Piccadilly Circus, why had she taken this roundabout route? The taxi would have taken her there direct.

The train was full. For a few seconds he was separated from her by a surging and struggling crowd blocking the entrances to the long cars. By dint of hard fighting he managed to get in the same carriage.

So far, luck seemed in his favour. It was a non-stop train, and went past Down Street. At the next station, Dover Street, he saw her turn half round, and cast a furtive glance in his direction. She was evidently debating within herself if she would chance getting out there.

While thus deliberating, the train re-started. At Piccadilly Circus there was a considerable exodus, as there always is. The process of disembarking was slow, owing to the number of passengers.

They both emerged into Jermyn Street, and went along to the Haymarket. Here she looked round, apparently for a taxi, but there was not one in sight. It struck him, as he caught a side glimpse of her features, that she was looking worried and harassed. Evidently his persistent dogging had shaken her nerves.

She walked slowly, with the deliberate gait of a person who was perturbed, and thinking hard. She entered a big drapery shop, where Mason was compelled to follow her for reasons.

Had it been an ordinary kind of shop, he would have waited outside, till she came out. This particular establishment, however, had two entrances, one in Regent Street and one in Piccadilly. She knew this, of course, and would slip out of the one he was not watching. So he followed her in.

Having bought a pair of long cream gloves she glanced furtively around, and then left the shop, passing into Regent Street. Afterwards she spent some time looking into the shop windows up and down that busy thoroughfare, ultimately returning to the Piccadilly Tube Station, where she took a ticket for Knightsbridge, Mason following all the while.

Her face was wan and haggard with the relentless chase, but her eyes expressed indomitable resolution. They seemed to flash across at him as they sat in the same car the unspoken message: “I will outwit you yet.”

At Knightsbridge both watcher and watched ascended in the same lift, with its clanging lattice gate, and it was quite plain that Mrs Saxton was now in a quandary how to escape. In a careless attitude she passed from the street back into the booking-hall, where she pretended to idle up and down, as though awaiting someone. Now and then she looked up at the clock as though anxious and impatient.

Mason believed her anxiety to be merely a ruse, but was both surprised and interested when a small ragged urchin entering the place suddenly recognised her, and handed her a note.

She took it eagerly, and without examining it crushed it hurriedly into her little black silk bag, giving the little fellow a shilling, whereupon he thanked her and ran merrily out.

Next instant Mason slipped forth after the lad in order to question him, leaving the woman safely in the booking-hall. In a few seconds he stopped the boy and asked good-humouredly who had given him the letter.

“A gentleman in Notting ’Ill,” was the urchin’s prompt reply. “I don’t know ’im. ’E only said that a lady in a big black ’at, and dressed all in black and carryin’ a bag, would be waitin’ for me, and that I were to give the note to ’er.”

“Is that all you know, my good lad?” Mason inquired quickly, giving him another shilling.

“Yus. That’s all I knows, sir,” he replied.

While speaking, the detective had kept his eye upon the booking-hall, and swiftly returned to it, only, however, to find that the woman was not there.

The descending lift was full, the lattice gates were closed and it had just started down when he peered within.

In the lift was Mrs Saxton, who, with a smile of triumph, disappeared from his view.

Mason, in a sorry and chastened frame of mind, took the next lift, which, as always happens under such circumstances, was unusually long in arriving. To him, it seemed an eternity.

He got down to the platform, in time to see the tail of a departing train. Mrs Saxton had not waited in the booking-hall in vain. She had two minutes’ start of him, and he might hunt London over before he would again find her.

Only one thing was certain: Mrs Saxton was certainly a very clever woman, who, no doubt, had prepared that very clever ruse of the arrival

of the letter, well-knowing that the messenger must draw off the detective's attention, and thus give her time to slip away.

That same evening James Farloe, who had been chatting in the Lobby of the House of Commons with a couple of Members of the Opposition, was suddenly called aside by Sir Archibald Turtrell, Member for North Canterbury, who, in a low, mysterious whisper, asked:

"Look here, Farloe, is this rumour true?"

"What rumour?" inquired the private secretary, who was a well-known figure about the House, as are those of all secretaries to Ministers of the Crown.

"Why, that Mr Monkton is missing, and that he is not at Cannes as the papers say. Everyone is discussing it."

The sleek, well-dressed young man in a morning suit with a white slip within his waistcoat, laughed sarcastically, as he replied:

"I wonder. Sir Archibald, who it is who spreads such ridiculous rumours. I had a letter from Mr Monkton only this morning from Cannes. That's all I know."

"And yet a telegram that I sent to the Beau Site yesterday has been returned to-night undelivered!"

For a second Farloe held his breath. Serious inquiry was apparently being made by Members of the House, in spite of all the precautions of the Home Secretary.

"Oh," he replied, with well-feigned carelessness. "The Colonial Secretary left the Beau Site over a fortnight ago. People were worrying him, so his doctor sent him to a furnished villa."

"What is his address?"

"I'm very sorry. Sir Archibald, but I am unable to give it. I have instructions to that effect," was the secretary's cautious reply. "If you give me your note, or write to his club, I will see that it is attended to. Doctor

Monier wrote me three days ago asking me not to send his patient any matters concerning public affairs that might worry him."

"But his daughter still remains in Chesterfield Street," observed the Baronet. "It is strange she is not with him. The rumour is growing that Monkton has disappeared, and that the police are searching for him."

"I know," laughed the other. "I have heard so. It is all too ridiculous. The truth has already been published in the Press. Mr Monkton has had a very serious nervous breakdown, and is on the Riviera—even though it is summer."

"You are quite certain of that—eh, Farloe?"

"Why should I tell you an untruth?" asked the secretary blandly.

They were standing near the Members' post-office, and the Baronet, having exchanged a nod with the Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, who was just passing into the House itself, gazed full into the secretary's eyes.

"Tell me, Farloe—tell me in strict confidence," he urged. "I'll not whisper a word, but—well, do you happen to know anyone of the name of Stent?"

The young man hesitated, though he preserved the most complete and remarkable control.

"Stent? Stent?" he repeated. "No. The name is quite unfamiliar to me."

"Are you quite certain? Think."

"I have already thought. I have never heard that name," was the reply.

"You are quite positive that he is not acquainted with Mr Monkton in some peculiar and mysterious way?"

"How should I possibly know? All the Colonial Minister's friends are not known to me. Mr Monkton is a very popular man, remember. But why," he added, "do you ask about this man Stent?"

“Because it is told to me that he is a mysterious friend of Monkton’s.”

“Not as far as I am aware,” declared Farloe. “I certainly have no knowledge of their friendship, and the name is so unusual that one would certainly recollect it.”

The Baronet smiled. Farloe, seeing that he was unconvinced, was eager to escape from any further awkward cross-examination.

“I really wish that you would be frank with me,” said Sir Archibald, who was one of Britain’s business magnates and a great friend of Monkton’s. “I am informed that this person Stent is in possession of the true and actual facts concerning the Minister’s curious disappearance.”

Farloe realised that something was leaking out, yet he maintained a firm attitude of pretended resentment.

“Well, Sir Archibald,” he protested. “I cannot well see how I can be more frank with you. I’ve never heard of this mysterious person.”

“H’m!” grunted the Baronet, unconvinced. “Perhaps one day, my dear Farloe, you will regret this attempt to wriggle out of a very awkward situation.” Then, after a pause, he added: “You know quite as well as I, with others, know, that my friend Monkton is missing!” and the Baronet turned abruptly, leaving Farloe standing in the Lobby. He passed the two police constables and the idling detective, and entered the House itself.

Farloe, utterly aghast at Sir Archibald’s remarks and the knowledge he evidently possessed, walked blindly out of St. Stephen’s full of grave thoughts.

Not only were the police hot upon the trail which might lead them to the astounding truth concerning the death of the man who, dressed in the Colonial Minister’s clothes, had expired in the house in Chesterfield Street, but the facts were being rumoured that night in the world of politics, and to-morrow the chattering little world which revolves in the square mile around Piccadilly and calls itself Society, would also be agog with the sinister story.

At the corner of Dean’s Yard, not a hundred yards from where the taxi-

man Davies had been hailed and the unidentified stranger had been put into his cab, Farloe found a passing taxi and in it drove to his rooms, a cosy little first-floor flat in Ryder Street, St. James's.

So eager was he that, without taking off his hat, he went at once to the telephone on his writing-table and asked for "trunk." Ten minutes later he spoke to somebody.

"Get in your car, and come here at once!" he said. "There's not an instant to be lost. I'll wait up for you, but don't delay a moment. I can't talk over the 'phone, but the situation is very serious. Bring a suit-case. You may have to go to the Continent by the nine o'clock train in the morning."

He listened attentively to the reply.

"Eh—what? Oh!—yes. I sent a boy with a letter to Knightsbridge station. She's got away all right. Do get here as quickly as you can—won't you? Leave your car in some garage, and walk here. Don't stop the car outside. I'll leave the hall-door ajar for you. No—I can't tell you anything more over the 'phone—I really can't."

Chapter Eleven.

Mainly Concerns Mr Stent.

James Farloe hung up the telephone receiver, and, lighting a cigar, sat down to think, while wailing for his visitor.

He was rather a good-looking young fellow, but, examined closely, his face was not prepossessing. There was a certain furtive expression about him, as of a man continually on the watch lest he should betray himself, and the eyes were shifty. His sister was probably as insincere as himself, but, on the whole, she made a better impression.

He was too perturbed to sit for long, for, truth to tell, his thoughts were not pleasant company. Two or three times he got up and paced the room, with a noiseless stealthy tread that was characteristic of him. Then, tired of the monotony of waiting, he selected a book from the limited store in a small revolving bookcase, and tried to read.

But the words danced before his unquiet eyes, and conveyed no meaning. Again and again he had to resort to his noiseless pacings of the thickly-carpeted room, to allay the tedium of waiting.

But the slow minutes passed at last. He drew out his watch, noted the time, and drew a sigh of relief. It was one-thirty a.m.

“He can’t be long now,” he muttered. “At this hour of the night he can put on any speed he likes. He’s an obstinate devil, but he would be pretty sure to start straight away, after my urgent summons.”

Even as he spoke, the figure of a man in a motor-cap and heavy overcoat was stealing quietly along Ryder Street. A moment more, and footsteps were heard on the stairs.

Farloe hastened to open the hall-door of his cosy little suite, and closed it noiselessly after the entrance of his visitor. They nodded to each other. The man advanced, and stood under the electric light suspended from the middle of the ceiling.

He was of medium height, well-dressed, and of gentlemanly appearance. He had aquiline features, and piercing dark eyes.

He was the man who had been identified by Davies the driver as one of the two who had put the dying man in his taxi at Dean's Yard, with instructions to drive him to Chesterfield Street—the man known to the police, through the information given by Mrs Saxton, by the name of Stent.

They did not waste time in preliminary remarks or greetings; they were probably too old acquaintances to indulge in such trivial formalities, but proceeded to business at once.

"So she got clear away?" remarked the man known as Stent. "I always said she was one of the smartest women in England. How did she outwit the detective?"

Farloe smiled. "It was beautifully simple," he replied. "She 'phoned me up in the morning to say she was starting in a few moments, and that she was sure this fellow would hang on to her as long as he could. She asked me if I could suggest any way of outwitting him. At the moment I couldn't."

Stent darted a glance at his companion which was not exactly one of appreciation. "Your sister is quicker at that sort of thing than you," he said briefly.

Farloe did not appear to notice the slight conveyed in the words and tone, and went on in his smooth voice:

"I expect so. Anyway, she had it cut and dried. She was going to lead him a nice little dance till it was time to get rid of him. She would take him down to Piccadilly Circus, trot him about there for some little time, and then get back to the Knightsbridge Tube Station."

"Yes—and then?"

"I was to send a boy with a note to the Tube station at a certain time. I picked up a boy, giving him a full description of her, and packed him off. All happened as she expected. The man was tempted away by the boy,

out of whom he could get nothing that would be of any use to him, and for a few moments left her unwatched. Hers was a bold stroke. While he was interviewing the urchin, she slipped into a descending lift, and left Mr Detective glaring at her from outside."

Stent laughed appreciatively. "Well done!" he remarked. "But I have no doubt she would have hit upon something else had that failed."

Farloe assented briefly. He was very fond of his sister, but it had always been rather a sore point with him to know that she had impressed everybody with the fact that she was much the cleverer and subtler of the two.

There was a brief pause. Then Farloe pointed to the table, upon which stood glasses, a decanter of whisky, and a syphon of soda-water.

"Help yourself, and sit down while we chat," he said pleasantly. "I'm sorry to have brought you out so late."

Stent helped himself liberally to the spirit, took a long draught, and sat down in one of the two big saddle-bag chairs. When he had entered the room, Farloe had noticed certain signs of irritation. Perhaps the soothing influence of the whisky helped to restore him to a more equable frame of mind. Anyway, when he answered Farloe his voice was quite smooth and amiable.

"Yes, I was deucedly put out at having to start off at a minute's notice. If I hadn't said good-bye to nerves long ago, you would have made me feel quite jumpy, with your talk about bringing a suit-case with me, and having to cross the Channel. Now let me know the meaning of it all. I've brought the suit-case in the car. Tell me," he urged, fixing the younger man with his keen piercing gaze. Farloe shifted a little uneasily under that intense glance. Somehow, he never felt quite at his ease in Stent's presence.

"I haven't your nerves, or, rather the want of them, that I admit. And perhaps I take fright a little too easily. Still, I think you ought to be informed of this: that certain people are beginning to know—well—a bit too much."

Stent's hard, resolute mouth curved in a smile that was half incredulous,

half contemptuous.

“Certain people always know too much—or too little. In this case, I should say it was the latter.”

But Farloe stuck to his guns. “I was tackled to-night at the House by Sir Archibald Turtrell. You know of him, of course?”

The other nodded. There was vindictiveness in his tone, as he replied: “A regular old cackler and bore.”

“I don’t dispute he is both, but that doesn’t alter the fact that he pushed me very hard with some searching questions. I parried them as best I could, but from his last remarks I could see he didn’t believe a word I was saying.”

Stent shifted uneasily in his chair; his ill-humour was evidently returning.

“My dear Farloe, you must excuse me for saying that you don’t always act with the greatest discretion. Why the devil do you want to go to the House at all for, laying yourself open to be cross-examined by anybody and everybody you meet? Look how differently your sister has acted; she has lain as low as possible, and finally shown them a clean pair of heels. I don’t advise you to do exactly the same, for obvious reasons, but it would be advisable to keep very much out of the way till things have blown over.”

The younger man was evidently not thin-skinned, or he would have indulged in some outburst at those very candid remarks. Stent went on, in his hard, but not altogether unpleasant voice:

“It has often struck me that this sort of thing is not quite suitable to a man of your temperament. But now you are in it, you must cultivate the art of keeping your nerves in better order, as I have done. Don’t start at shadows. What you have told me doesn’t disturb me in the least; it is just what might be expected.”

“You haven’t forgotten that young beggar Varney is on the track?” put in Farloe quietly. “I saw him go into Monkton’s house as late as yesterday. He is more to be feared than Smeaton, in my opinion.”

“I don’t care a snap of the finger for the young pup,” cried the other, in his most obstinate voice, and a tightening of the resolute jaw that was so well-matched with the dark, piercing eyes.

Farloe waited till his companion’s momentary irritation had subsided, then he put a question.

“You are quite sure that the police have not traced you yet?”

“Absolutely,” came Stent’s reply. He added, in his grimmest manner; “I’ve not given them a chance.”

They talked on for a long time, the elder man combating sometimes half humorously, sometimes with ill-concealed irritation, the pessimism of the other. At length when he rose it was nearly three o’clock.

“You will let me put you up for the night,” urged Farloe.

“To be in time for the Paris train in the morning?” laughed the other. “No, thanks, my friend. I want to be somewhere else about that time.”

He had drunk a good deal during the interview, and Farloe knew that he was getting into one of those dare-devil moods, in which it was rather dangerous to play with him, or to cross him.

“As you please,” he said, a little sullenly. “I hope you are quite right in your confidence that they have not got on our tracks yet.”

“Make your mind easy, my dear chap. Your sister took care of that by putting our friend Smeaton on a wrong scent. I have often laughed when I thought of them hunting every nook and corner around St. Albans for the gentleman with whom she had only a casual acquaintance.”

Farloe made no reply. Stent held out one hand, and with the other clapped the young man on the shoulder with rough good humour.

“Good-night, old man. Go to bed and sleep soundly, for I’m going. And, I say, don’t bring me out again on a midnight ride like this unless there is very strong reason. Now, just a last word—and I say it in all seriousness—I am not a bit discouraged by what you have told me. Let them smell

about, but they'll find nothing."

He turned to the door, and fired a parting shot:

"Now, you follow my advice not to give way to idle fancies, and you'll turn out as well as any of us. And we shall all be proud of you. Once again, good-night."

As he spoke the last word, the telephone bell rang, and he paused, and turned round.

Farloe looked at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"Past three, by Jove! There's only one person would ring me up at this time of night. It's Maude. Perhaps it is important; you had better stay a moment," he said.

Stent stayed. Farloe took off the receiver, and listened for a little time to the voice at the other end. Although Stent could not distinguish the words, now and then he caught an inflection that he recognised. Farloe's conjecture was right. It was Mrs Saxton who had rung him up.

Then Stent heard the young man's reply.

"Hold on a minute, he is here. He was just going when you rang."

He beckoned to Stent. "She wanted me to send you word that she wished to meet you. You can arrange it with her yourself."

They talked for a few seconds. At one of her remarks Stent laughed heartily. He turned to Farloe.

"She is suggesting that we don't make it the Knightsbridge Tube Station." Then he turned again to the instrument.

"That was a capital move of yours; your brother has just been telling me about it. Really, I think just now it might be as convenient a place as any; they would never think you would have the cheek to go there again so soon. Let us meet at the old spot. That's safe enough. To-morrow then. All right. Good-bye."

Chapter Twelve.

The Occupier of Forest View.

When Mason, Detective-Sergeant, C.I.D., with crestfallen air narrated the history of his adventures with the elusive Mrs Saxton, he had expected his chief to indulge in a few sarcastic comments. But Smeaton only shrugged his shoulders expressively. After all, he had come off only second best in his encounter with her himself.

“A very clever woman, Mason,” he said, after some hesitation. “I found that out at the start. It means she has made a bolt of it. It will be some time before Hyde Park Mansions sees her again.”

He was right. Three days elapsed, and the fugitive did not return. On the fourth, Mason, acting in accordance with instructions, went boldly up to the flat and rang the bell.

The neat-looking maid told him that her mistress had gone abroad.

Mason affected to be very much put out. “Dear me, it’s very annoying. I wanted to see her on most urgent business. Can you oblige me with her address?”

“She didn’t leave one, sir. She said she would be back in a month or six weeks, and would be travelling about from place to place all the time. She told us that any letters could wait till her return.”

Mason observed her sharply while she gave this information in quite a natural manner. She seemed a simple, innocent kind of girl. Of course, she might be in league with the escaped woman, but he was rather inclined to believe she was telling the truth.

Mrs Saxton had begun to find the atmosphere a trifle uncomfortable, and had duped her servants with this story of going abroad, he reasoned with himself. She might give London itself a wide berth, but she was somewhere near where she could be in pretty close touch with her friends. Of that he was certain.

Things, therefore, were at a deadlock as concerned Stent and this woman.

Meanwhile, young Varney, confident that Farloe was a mysterious and important connecting link, kept a steady watch upon the chambers in Ryder Street.

For the first three days his exertions went unrewarded. But on the fourth he followed Farloe in a taxi to the Great Eastern Hotel, in Liverpool Street, where he was joined by a man whom, by his strongly marked aquiline features and piercing eyes, he suspected to be the elusive Stent.

When the pair left the hotel, he followed them. It was the luncheon hour, and the city streets were crowded. For full five minutes he kept them in sight, and then he became separated and lost them.

On the second occasion he was more fortunate. About three o'clock one afternoon the pair came forth from Farloe's chambers, and together walked leisurely, talking earnestly the while.

As far as Victoria Station they went together to the Brighton line. There they parted. The elder man entered the booking-hall of the London and Brighton line, and asked for a ticket to Horsham. Varney did the same.

It was a slow train, and half-empty. When Horsham was reached, only three passengers alighted: himself, the man he was watching, and a young woman.

He inquired of the ticket-collector if at any place near he could hire a cycle, as he thought of coming down for a week's holiday, and would like to explore the country for an hour or so.

The man directed him to a shop close by. He seemed a very civil young fellow, and Varney chatted with him for a few seconds.

"By the way," he said, as he moved away. "That gentleman who went out just now—isn't he Mr Emerson, the well-known barrister?"

The young man shook his head. "No, sir. Mr Strange has recently come to live here, about five months ago. He's taken Forest View, an old-

fashioned house a mile and a half away."

"Curious," remarked the amateur detective, in a voice of well-feigned surprise. "Really, how very easily one may be mistaken. I see Mr Emerson three or four times each week, and I could have sworn it was he."

The ticket-collector smiled civilly, but made no reply. He was not interested in this sudden creation of Varney's lively imagination.

The journalist crossed to the cycle shop and there hired a machine, paying down the usual deposit. He wheeled it until he met a small boy, from whom he inquired the whereabouts of Forest View.

He was on the right road, the boy informed him. The house with green iron gates lay on the left-hand side. His machine would take him there in a few minutes.

However, he did not mount it, as in that case he would quickly overtake Mr Strange, who was proceeding there on foot. He preferred that this gentleman should get there first, so as to give him an opportunity of having a good look round.

Twenty minutes' easy walking brought him to the big iron gates of Forest View. He had seen the man disappear within, about a couple of hundred yards in front of him. There was not a soul in sight; he could reconnoitre at his leisure.

The house, old-fashioned, low and rather rambling, lay well back from the white high road, at right angles to it. A thick hedge led up to within a few feet of the entrance. It seemed to boast a fair piece of ground, at least three acres. The entrance to some rather dilapidated stabling was lower down the road.

He felt a sense of triumph. Smeaton, he knew, was still searching for Stent, and he, the amateur, had forestalled him. Was he right, after all, in his surmise that by some curious lapse the man of wider experience had left Farloe out of his calculations, and the man Stent was identical with the man Strange?

His survey finished, he mounted his machine, and rode along, thinking out his plans.

“Find a nice comfortable inn somewhere near, but not too close, pose as an artist out for a brief holiday, and find out all there is to be found about the mysterious Mr Strange,” was the result of his meditations.

A mile lower down the road he came upon a small, old-fashioned inn, with a swinging sign, and trailing roses over the porch and walls. There he entered, and called for some refreshment.

“Thirsty with your ride—eh, sir?” asked the landlord pleasantly.

“A bit, although I haven’t ridden very far yet. I hired a machine in the town in order to have a look round. I want a week’s holiday badly, and I should like to hit upon some quiet quarters about here. It seems a nice piece of country.”

The landlord pricked up his ears. “Perhaps it’s the George in Horsham you might prefer.”

“Oh dear no! I want an old-fashioned inn, like this. But I suppose you don’t take guests?”

The fat landlord glanced at him hesitatingly. Varney was attired in a well-cut Norfolk suit, and his plush Homburg hat must have hailed from Bond Street. He looked the sort of man for a fashionable hotel, not an obscure bacon-and-egg inn.

“Well, sir, we do now and again. We don’t pretend to do you like the big places with French dishes and that sort of thing. But my wife is a good plain cook, and you won’t get better meat and chickens than we have.”

Terms were soon arranged. Varney—or Mr Franks as he announced himself to the landlord—would come down to-morrow, bringing with him a few sketching materials.

Next day Varney returned with a portable easel, and other paraphernalia appertaining to his supposed art. He had not been in the house half-an-hour before he engaged the landlord in a conversation about the local

gentry. And it was soon deftly focussed upon the owner of Forest View.

Mr Peter Chawley was by nature a gregarious and communicative soul. He was only reticent when policy or prudence counselled such a course of action.

“Mr Strange has been here about five months,” he informed young Varney, in his fat, somewhat wheezy voice, “but we don’t know very much about him. When he first came, he used to go up to London pretty often, but for some time he has hardly stirred out of the house.”

“Has he any acquaintances in the place?”

Mr Chawley shook his head. “Doesn’t want any, so he told the Vicar when he called upon him. Said he had come here for a quiet life, and wanted to get away from his business in London and the friends he had already. Of course, that was a pretty broad hint—so nobody called. He doesn’t deal with anybody here for a pennyworth of matches. Gets everything from London.”

“What household has he? And is he a widower, or bachelor, or married?”

“Told the Vicar he was a widower. He has three maids: the cook, a middle-aged woman, housemaid, and parlourmaid—all three he brought with him. The gardener’s a local man, a young chap, and comes in here once in a while; but he knows no more than the rest of us. He hardly ever enters the house, and the maids don’t chatter.”

Forest View was a household that evidently kept its own secrets. The maids did not chatter, even to the young local gardener. Mystery here, thought Varney, without a doubt. It was his business to fathom it. Was he really Stent? That was the point.

“He got the house pretty cheap,” went on Mr Chawley, who was not easily stopped when he indulged in reminiscence, “because it had been unlet for five years. It’s a funny old place, all nooks and corners, without any modern convenience. Some people say it’s haunted, and I’ve heard that there is a secret room in it, like what they used to hide the priests in in the old days.”

A mysterious house, with a mysterious owner, truly, thought Varney, as the landlord rambled on.

“Does he have anybody to see him?”

“He never seems to have had but one visitor, a gentleman rather older than himself. He used to run down for two or three days at a time. For some time now he’s been staying with him altogether.”

Varney pricked up his ears. Was he going to discover anything useful?

“Do you know his friend’s name?” he asked eagerly.

“No, sir. The gardener has never heard it, but then, as I say, he hardly ever goes inside the house.”

The next day, and the day after, Varney watched Forest View closely. From the roadway he had a fairly clear view of the sloping lawn. But neither its occupier nor his visitor were tempted out by the beautiful weather. They were certainly an extraordinary pair to shut themselves up in a gloomy house on these bright sunshiny days.

On the third day, however, both emerged from their seclusion, and sauntered on to the lawn. The visitor seemed to stoop slightly, and walk with the languid air of a man who had recently recovered from an illness.

They walked about only for a little while, and, as they went back into the house, Varney, from his hiding-place behind the hedge, heard Mr Strange say:

“Well, if you think you feel fit enough, we will walk into Horsham after lunch. We can drive back. It may do you good.”

An idea had formed itself in Varney’s brain, fitting in with one of the theories he had formed about this remarkable case.

A little after one o’clock the supposed artist stole through the door of the inn, a basket in one hand, a good-sized bag in the other.

A few yards down the road he disappeared up a side road, crossed a

field, and advanced towards an old disused barn which he had noted on the previous day, and slipped inside.

A few moments later there issued a strange and shabbily dressed figure, with a slouching walk. On his left arm hung a basket, full of roses, which had been bought a short time ago from Mrs Chawley. They were so beautiful, Varney told her, that he must paint them.

In the guise of a decrepit flower-seller he limped along to the narrow main street of Horsham, and hung about till the pair from Forest View arrived, when he faced them and advancing towards them with his basket before him, he whined when he had got up to them:

“Buy a bunch of roses, sir. Threepence a bunch. All fresh picked, sir.”

“No,” said Strange gruffly, “we don’t want any, got lots of them,” and the pair turned away in ignorance that within that basket, concealed by the flowers, was a small detective camera by which a snapshot of both of them had already been cleverly secured in secret.

Varney made his way back at once to the old barn, where he discarded his shabby jacket and cap.

Early next morning he was on his way to Smeaton. He had a hope that his investigations had been fruitful, but he could not be sure. Certainly the face and figure of the man Strange answered to the description of the person named Stent whom Scotland Yard had been unable to trace.

Having developed and printed the photograph at his own rooms, he was shown into Smeaton’s bare official sanctum which overlooked Westminster Bridge, when the celebrated official rose and gripped his hand.

“Well, Varney?” he asked, “have you done anything in the Monkton mystery—eh?”

“Yes. A bit. Look here. Is this Stent—or not? If it is. I’ve found him.”

The detective took the damp print and examined it curiously in the light by the window.

“Well—the only man who can really identify it is our friend at the Savoy Hotel. Let’s take a taxi and go and see him.”

Chapter Thirteen.

Contains Further Discoveries.

They found the hall-porter at the Savoy hotel, and showed him the print. It was not a very wonderful specimen of the photographer's art, but it was enough for Smeaton's old friend.

"That's him—right enough!" the man in uniform exclaimed. "And you say that you were told his name was Stent by the lady we spoke about, and this gentleman has discovered him under another name. Well, I always thought there was something mysterious about him."

After such confirmation it could no longer be doubted that Varney had run the supposed Stent to earth. He felt a distinct sense of triumph. He had hoped his exertions might have produced some startling results, but still, he had done something.

Smeaton was not an envious man, and congratulated him heartily. "It's really a feather in your cap, my dear Varney," he said amiably. "You got on the right track this time."

Varney thanked him for his encouraging words. "Now, what's the next move? I leave it to you."

Smeaton thought a few seconds before he answered. When he spoke, he voiced the man's inmost thoughts.

"I think the best thing you can do is to go back and keep up the sketching business. We want to find out all we can about that house and its mysterious inmates. And we especially want to know something about that invalid visitor. There is just a chance, of course, that you may find Mrs Saxton popping up there."

As all this exactly coincided with his own theory, Varney acquiesced readily. He would go back to Horsham the next day, and resume his watch on Forest View.

“You can’t be watching in two places at once,” added Smeaton presently. “So we will take up Farloe.”

So it was decided. Mrs Saxton having disappeared, with small likelihood of her return, there remained three people to be shadowed: the secretary, Bolinski, and the man who went by the name of Strange, and who, for reasons of his own, was keeping away from the Savoy, and coming to London as seldom as possible.

Varney’s discovery, of which he was not a little proud, was duly reported to Sheila by the young man himself, who called upon her as soon as he had left Smeaton.

She could not but admire his energy and determination, and she told him so, in no measured terms. But when he had gone, she could not help thinking how futile it all seemed.

“They all find a little something, and then they seem to come up against a dead end,” she said to Wingate, when he paid her his usual daily visit. “Weeks have gone by, and the mystery is as deep as ever. How can it be otherwise? What have they got to go upon?”

And Wingate, taking her slender hand in his and pressing it, agreed that it was so. He felt, as she did, that anything would be better than this horrible uncertainty.

They had grown very dear to each other in these dark and dismal days. She had liked him from the first, and recognised in him one of those straight, clean-living young Englishmen to whom a girl might safely entrust her life and happiness. He was so tender, so chivalrous, so sympathetic.

If, for a few moments, she threw off the heavy load of sorrow weighing upon her, and showed some semblance of her former bright spirit, he fell at once into her mood. And if she preferred silence, her sorrow-laden eyes filled with tears, he sat silent too, only evincing by a glance, or the pressure of her hand, that he understood and sympathised.

It was not a time for ardent love-making. But for this tragedy in her life, he might never have summoned courage to make love to her at all. The

daughter of Reginald Monkton, the rich and popular statesman, seemed so far out of his reach. With her beauty and her advantages, she could aspire to a brilliant match.

Her position now, that of a lonely and orphaned girl, had altered everything, and swept away social barriers. Insensibly, she had been drawn to him, till it seemed he was part of her life.

And a time came when he could tell her of the desire of his heart. One evening, when they had been saying good-bye, she had suddenly broken down, and burst into bitter sobbing.

He had taken her in his arms, and whispered soothing words, while his pulses beat at the contact of her slender form. She had lain in the big chair, crying more quietly as he strove to comfort her. And then she had lifted up her pitiful face to his, and said:

“Oh! Austin, how good and gentle you are with me. How could I have borne it without you?”

He took heart of grace at those tender words. His clasp round her tightened.

“I have been of some help to you, then, dearest?”

“The greatest,” she answered fervently. “If you did not come to me every day, I think I should go mad.”

He bent down and laid his lips upon her bowed head.

“Dearest, if I have been able to comfort you now, could you let me comfort and cherish you all my life? It is hardly a time to speak of such things, but I have loved you from the first moment we met—do you remember that day on the river, and afterwards, when I saw you at Hendon, and you asked me to call?”

“Yes, I remember,” she said in a low whisper.

“Well, dearest, even if the worst should befall, you will want somebody to share your grief with you till time heals your sorrow. I shall not press you

till the first bitterness has passed. Then, when you feel you can take up your life again, may I come to you, and repeat what I have said to-night?”

“Yes. Come again some day when my tears have had time to dry, and I will answer as you wish.”

Reverently he kissed the lips that were still trembling from her recent emotion. That night he seemed to walk on air when he left the house, where he had spent so many happy hours before this terrible tragedy had overtaken them.

He had loved her in the bloom and brightness of her youthful beauty, courted and caressed by all who knew her, the idol of her father, the light of his home, moving like a young princess among her subjects. But he loved her ten times more now—pale and sad, with sorrow for her companion day and night.

Meanwhile, down at Forest View things were going very quietly. Varney had long chats with the landlord, and of an evening he picked up a few acquaintances in the inn, and talked with them, always leading the conversation round to the subject of Mr Strange.

But he could discover nothing of any value. Nobody knew anything of the man’s antecedents. As a matter of fact, he did not seem to interest anybody in the place. They simply regarded him as an eccentric sort of person who wished to have nothing to do with his neighbours.

He learned that, immediately on his arrival. Strange had ordered a telephone to be installed. He also gathered from the local postman, whose acquaintance he cultivated, that very few letters were received. Further, that most of them were in a feminine hand. And these had been coming rather more frequently of late.

He at once jumped to the conclusion that the female correspondent was Mrs Saxton. But that did not help him much. They knew already that Strange and she were closely connected.

The two maids walked down to Horsham occasionally. So far he had not set eyes upon the cook, who, apparently, did not require any change of scene.

He was a presentable young fellow enough, and he imagined it would not be difficult to scrape up an acquaintance with the young women. The one whom he took to be the parlourmaid, by her superior bearing, was a good-looking girl.

He tried her first. He opened his campaign by overtaking her on the road, and remarking on the pleasantness of the weather. If she resembled the majority of her class, she would not object to exchanging a few remarks with a decent-looking member of the other sex.

For himself, he was quite prepared to indulge in a flirtation, even a little mild love-making, if it would enable him to worm something out of her about the mysterious inmates of Forest View.

But the parlourmaid was one too many for him. She made no answer to his remark, and when he continued to walk along beside her, in the hope that her silence was only meant for coquetry, she stopped suddenly and faced him.

“Look here, young man,” she said, regarding him with a distinctly hostile countenance; “I’ll thank you not to address any more remarks to me. I suppose you think yourself a gentleman, and because I’m in service I shall be flattered by your taking notice of me. Well, just understand I’m not that sort. When you meet me again, perhaps you’ll remember it.”

She quickened her footsteps, and left Varney feeling very foolish. It was a rebuff alike to the man and the amateur detective. Yes, he had blundered.

She had a good figure, and she carried herself well, walking with a light springy step. She was dressed plainly in neat but evidently inexpensive clothes, such as were suitable to her class. If she had been attired in proper garments, she would have been taken for a young lady immediately.

The thing that puzzled him most was her voice. She had addressed him as “young man,” and there was a certain blunt insolence in her remarks which negatived the idea of refinement.

But even if her speech had been absolutely vulgar, the voice was unmistakably high-bred and cultivated; in a word, the voice of a lady. How

came it that Mr Strange's parlourmaid wore the clothes of a servant, and spoke in the tones of a highly educated young woman? It was one more mystery.

Nothing daunted, he pursued the same tactics with the housemaid when he met her walking alone. She was a plain girl, evidently of a different class. At the start she was more civil, but after a minute or two, during which she had given the briefest answers to his ingratiating questions, she had turned upon him like the other, only in a less hostile manner, and explained to him that she did not desire either his conversation or his company.

She was a little more polite than the parlourmaid, but that was all. She addressed him respectfully but firmly.

"Excuse me, sir, but if it's the same to you, I'd rather walk alone. I'm not fond of making the acquaintance of gentlemen I know nothing about."

Poor Varney felt he was not a success with the fair sex. Or did they suspect him?

A further piece of information, however, he got from his friend the postman. He had asked Wingate and Sheila to occasionally put a blank sheet of paper in an envelope, and address it to him under the name of Franks, to keep up appearances.

He met the man one morning outside Forest View and asked if there were any letters for him.

"None by this post, sir. Never had such a light round. This is the last; it's for Mr Gregory, at Forest View, the gentleman what's staying there."

So Gregory was the name of the invalid, who kept so closely to the house.

But Gregory, no doubt, was an assumed name, like Stent alias Strange.

Chapter Fourteen.

The Cipher of the Two C's.

"I am going to ask you a question, dearest; I fear it is a painful one, but I think it ought to be put."

It was Austin Wingate who spoke. He had dined with Sheila at Chesterfield Street, and after dinner the lovers had gone to her own sitting-room, which was on the first floor.

She looked at him steadfastly. "Painful or not, Austin, please put it. You would not hurt me, I know, unless you felt it was absolutely necessary."

"Of course not, Sheila," answered the young man fervently. "In our anxiety to solve this mystery concerning your father we must shrink from nothing. The question I am going to ask you, dear, is this: Have you ever had any cause to suspect there was some hidden mystery in your father's life? Do not be offended—will you?"

She smiled faintly. "What is called a skeleton in the cupboard, you mean—eh? It seems impossible when one comes to consider the kind of man he was. In political matters he was reserved; that was natural. I have heard him laugh often over the efforts of people to draw him. But, in every other respect he seemed as frank and open as the day."

"He gave me that impression certainly," assented Wingate. "During my mother's lifetime I don't know that I counted greatly in his life. He was so wrapped up in her that he seemed to have no room for anybody else," went on the girl, in a musing voice. "Then, after her death, and when his first passionate grief died down, he listened to me. I could not hope to fill her place, but I became very necessary to him. He has told me many times that but for me he would have been the most miserable man on earth. I gave him new interests, and weaned him away from his sad thoughts."

Wingate leaned forward, and kissed her tenderly upon the brow. "You were born for the *rôle* of ministering angel, my darling," he declared.

She thanked him with a grateful glance for the pretty compliment. “You ask me if I ever had cause to suspect that there was some hidden mystery in his life. I can only answer, none. His life seemed to me like an open book, that all who ran might read.”

Wingate was silent for a little time. This was the impression made upon his daughter, an only child, who would have the most intimate opportunity of judging him. It was the impression he had made upon close friends and casual acquaintances alike.

And yet who could be sure? A man trained to the law, versed in public affairs, was he likely to wear his heart upon his sleeve?

When he spoke, it was in a hesitating voice: “I agree that intuition is a very safe guide in many instances. And I believe with you that your father’s life was a blameless one. Still, there is one little thing we must not overlook.”

“And that little thing?” she questioned in a low voice.

“What was the connection between him and the man whom they have identified as Bolinski? Why does a man in his position make an appointment with a person so evidently not of his own world, unless to discuss something of a secret and mysterious nature? Remember where they met, in a little hole-and-corner restaurant in Soho.”

“It has puzzled me, I admit,” replied Sheila. “It is strange, too, that he told me nothing of the appointment, for he used to inform me of his most trivial movements. Thinking over it, as I have over every other incident, I believe it was connected with politics—there are plenty of under-currents in them, as we know. He would not say anything to me about this meeting for fear I might drop an incautious word to some of our friends.”

“It is evident that he apprehended no treachery from this man,” was Wingate’s next remark, “or he would have taken some means to safeguard himself. I mean, for one thing, he would not have left the House of Commons alone. It may be, as you suggest, that this curious meeting, in an out-of-the-way and obscure restaurant, may have had some political motive. But I can hardly bring myself to believe it. I am sure that what brought such a strangely assorted couple together was a

private and personal matter."

"And that we have no means of knowing," said Sheila sadly.

He was glad that she had not resented his question, and the suggestions that arose from it. It emboldened him to proceed.

"As I have said, it is our duty to leave no stone unturned, to look even in unlikely places for any fresh evidence which might afford a clue. There must be a mass of papers in this house I think you ought to go through them, darling."

She gave a little cry. "Oh!" she said in a tearful voice. "It seems almost like sacrilege."

"If such a search were conducted by other hands, it might be so, but assuredly not in your case."

She thought a little, and her common-sense came to her aid.

"You are quite right, Austin, as you always are. It will be a terrible task, but, as you say, we must leave no stone unturned. I will begin to-morrow, and keep on till I have finished."

He called late next day, and found that she had got about half-way through the various piles. But so far she had found nothing of importance.

"I came across a few diaries. He seems to have kept them for the best part of five years, and then dropped the practice. They contain records of appointments, whom he met, and political events, but there's not a single entry that throws any light upon this affair."

"I wonder if Farloe has any of his papers, or, more likely still, has abstracted any?" said Wingate in a musing voice.

Sheila shuddered at the name. "No wonder that I always hated him," she cried vehemently. "Shall we ever learn the part he played in this mystery?"

It took her a few days to go through her task, for she was fearful of

missing a line in those carefully docketed piles of papers. But it was all to no purpose.

If there had been a secret in Reginald Monkton's life, no evidence had been preserved in these documents.

"Newsom-Perry is pretty sure to have some papers in his possession," said Wingate, when she had finished her futile task. "I want to spare you everything I can, dear. Will you give me a note to him, and I will ask him to hand them over to you?"

Mr Newsom-Perry was Monkton's solicitor, the head of the firm which had acted for the missing statesman, and his father before him.

Wingate presented himself at Lincoln's Inn Fields, and sent in his sweetheart's note.

The solicitor, a genial, kindly-looking man of fifty or thereabouts, welcomed the young man cordially.

"Pleased to see you, Mr Wingate," he said, as they shook hands. "Poor Monkton has spoken to me several times of you, in warm terms. I understand that you were a frequent visitor at the house before the sad event."

Wingate explained that he was with Sheila awaiting her father, on the night when the dying man was brought to Chesterfield Street.

The shrewd, kindly eyes watched him as he made the explanation. Mr Newsom-Perry had his own ideas as to how matters stood between the young couple.

"And what can I do for you, Mr Wingate?"

"We thought it pretty certain that you would have some papers of Mr Monkton's here. If that is the case, would you let his daughter look through them, in the hope of finding something that might throw a light upon the case?"

"Under the circumstances, by all means, Mr Wingate. Of course, we have

got all his business documents, leases, and that kind of thing. Those would be useless for your purpose?”

“I should say, quite useless.”

“But I have a couple of boxes of private papers which he brought about two years ago. He had been sorting out, he said, and his own house was as full as it could hold. Knowing we had plenty of room, he thought we would not mind storing them. I will send them round some time to-day. When she has gone through them perhaps Miss Monkton will let me have them back until, until—” He laughed, and did not finish the sentence.

“I quite understand. Now I will take up as little time as possible, but there are one or two questions I should like to ask you, if I may.”

The solicitor nodded genially. “Go on, sir.”

“I take it that, having known Mr Monkton all your life, and your firm having acted for his father, you were entirely in your client’s confidence.”

“That is so. Monkton and I were personal friends, as well as solicitor and client. We were at Cambridge together, before either of us commenced our respective careers.”

“Has he, to your knowledge, ever made any active enemies?”

“Not that I know of. Political enemies, no doubt, he has by the score—myself included. But you know what English politics are. It’s a fair stand-up fight, and the loser grumbles a bit, but bears no rancour. Men abuse each other across the floor of the House, and are good friends again in the smoking-room.”

“One other question, a somewhat delicate one, and I have done. Had he ever an entanglement of any kind, the effects of which might pursue him in later life?”

The solicitor rubbed his chin, and quite frankly replied:

“Not to my knowledge. That does not, however, conclusively prove a negative.”

“But you were close personal friends, in addition to your business relation. Would it not be natural that, under such circumstances, he would come to you for advice?”

There seemed an extra gleam of shrewdness in the solicitor’s eyes as he answered:

“In such circumstances as you suggest it is by no means easy to predict what course a man would take. If Monkton had got into some entanglement that, to put it bluntly—although, mind you, I don’t believe such a thing occurred—reflected some doubt either on his character or on his intelligence, it is just as likely as not that his old friend would be the last person to whom he would care to expose himself. He would be equally likely to go to a stranger.”

Wingate was fain to admit the force of the argument.

“One can never be sure of any man, even if you have known him all your life,” he added, as they shook hands. “Nobody knows that better than our profession. But I would stake my existence that there were no skeletons in Monkton’s cupboard. The man was as straight as a die, and he was passionately attached to his beautiful wife. Well, Mr Wingate, give my best regards to dear Miss Sheila. I will send those boxes round to-day.”

He was as good as his word. Late in the afternoon they arrived, and Sheila at once set to work reading the various papers, not, it must be confessed, in a very hopeful spirit.

But when Wingate came round in the evening he found her in a state of greatest excitement.

She took from an envelope a letter containing only a few words and passed it to him. “Read that, and tell me what you make of it,” she said. “There is no formal beginning, and no signature. But you see it is addressed to my father, and was evidently delivered by hand.”

Upon the flap of the faded envelope Wingate saw some initials, two C’s in a cipher scroll embossed in black, an old-fashioned monogram such as was in vogue in the early “sixties.”

Then he read upon the half-sheet of notepaper, traced in a bold hand in ink that was brown, as follows:

> “You have ruined and disgraced me, and forced me to fly the country and become a wanderer on the face of the earth. Well, I will be even with you. I will wait, if necessary all my life, till my turn comes. Then, when it does, I will strike you at the zenith of your career, and mete out to you the suffering you have dealt to me.”

Chapter Fifteen.

In which Smeaton Makes a Discovery.

Wingate laid down the letter and looked at Sheila, who was regarding him expectantly.

“What do you make of it?” she repeated.

“It is evident that he had an enemy, and a very bitter one,” answered her lover. “The sentences are deliberate, but they appear to have been written by a man who was in a white heat of passion when he penned them.”

“Smeaton ought to see that letter, without loss of time, dear,” she said.

“I quite agree. His trained intelligence may get more out of it than we can. I will make an appointment with him for to-morrow morning, and I will be here when he comes.”

Smeaton arrived next morning, hoping that at last he might discover a substantial clue. He read the brief note carefully and deliberately.

“Is it important, do you think?” inquired Sheila eagerly.

“In my opinion it is of very considerable importance. Miss Monkton,” he replied. “I think it will help us.”

“It certainly proves that he had a secret enemy,” interjected Wingate, “and one who would hesitate at nothing that would secure him revenge.”

“I quite agree, sir. The letter breathes the most intense hatred in every line. The motive of that hatred we have got to discover.”

Then the detective, turning to Sheila, said: “Now, Miss Monkton, there is a little information that I am sure you will be able to give us. I am not so well posted in your father’s biography as I ought to be. But, before he became a prominent politician, I understand that he was a barrister with

an extensive and lucrative practice."

"That is so," corroborated Sheila. "He did not often talk about those times, but I have always understood that he made quite a big income at the Bar."

"And when did he retire from his profession?"

"About fifteen years ago."

"And he resolved to say good-bye to the Bar and devote himself entirely to politics?"

Sheila nodded. "That is quite true. He had a very firm opinion that a man could not serve two masters."

"Was he on the Chancery or the Common Law side?" was Smeaton's next question.

"On the Common Law," replied Sheila. "But why do you ask that question?"

"You shall know in good time. Miss Monkton. Well, we may take it, then, that this vindictive letter was written more than fifteen years ago."

"While he was still at the Bar," interrupted Wingate, who was beginning to realise the point of the detective's reasoning. "You are assuming that this venomous epistle did not come from a political enemy."

"It is an assumption for which I have reasonable grounds," was Smeaton's answer. "There has been no bitterness in party politics ever since Mr Monkton became a conspicuous figure in the House. And we know that, while he was most popular with his own side, he was respected and liked by his political opponents."

"Is it too much to ask you to give us the benefit of any theory you have formed, Mr Smeaton?" suggested Sheila, in her pretty, gracious way.

"With all the pleasure in life, my dear young lady. This letter goes back, in my opinion, to your father's barrister days, when he was one of the

foremost counsel in England. I asked you just now whether he was on the Equity or the Common Law side, and you wondered why I asked the question."

"I am still wondering," said Sheila simply.

"On the Equity side they try all sorts of cases concerned with points of law, the majority of them of a very dry and uninteresting character. I should not look in an Equity case for a defeated litigant who would turn into a vindictive enemy of the type of the writer of this letter."

The young people began to see, as yet very dimly, whither he was leading them.

"On the Common Law side, on the contrary, we are brought into the world of human passion and emotion; one in which the issues of life or death are at stake. We will suppose that your father, in the plenitude of his powers, is retained as counsel against some adroit rogue, some swindling company promoter, for example, who up to that moment had managed to keep himself well on the right side of the law."

They began to see light, and listened with the closest attention.

"We will say this swindler, a more than usually clever rascal, is living in luxury with his ill-gotten gains, when he makes a slip that brings him within reach of the long arm of justice. One of his victims (or perhaps several in combination) brings an action against him for the return of the money he has inveigled out of him by his lying prospectuses. He employs big counsel to defend him, but your father wins his case. The wealthy rogue is forced to disgorge, finds his occupation gone, and is reduced to penury."

Sheila nodded to show that she was following his argument.

"I am assuming for a moment that it is a civil action, and that it disclosed sufficient evidence to justify his arrest on a criminal charge later on. I deduce that from the fact that he was not a convicted felon at the time of writing that letter, otherwise he would not have been able to write and send it to your father. The meaning of the words 'forced me to fly the country' indicate, in my opinion, that he was in hourly fear of arrest."

“It seems a very feasible theory,” remarked Wingate.

“The rest is easy to understand. He nourishes a morbid hatred for the man who has been the means of menacing his liberty, and driving him from the society he polluted. He regards him as a personal enemy, not merely the instrument of the justice he has defied. While smarting under this, to his distorted ideas, sense of wrong, he pens the letter and has it conveyed to your father by some trusted confederate. As there is no stamp or postmark on it, it was conveyed by hand.”

Wingate looked at Sheila, and she returned his glance. They were both greatly impressed by the detective’s clear reasoning.

Smeaton took up the half-sheet of notepaper, and submitted it to a close observation.

“The man who wrote it is, I should judge, a keen business man of methodical habits, inclined to neatness, of a strong but not impulsive character. An impulsive man would have torn the sheet across, leaving a rough and jagged edge. It has been pressed down with the finger and thumb, and then carefully cut.”

He held the small sheet up to the light, and made further observations.

“A peculiar paper, peculiar, I mean, as to the texture. The watermark, in its entirety, is, fortunately for us, on this half-sheet. That enables us to trace where it comes from. Come here for a moment and stand beside me.”

They did so, followed his pointing finger, and saw a shield bearing a coat-of-arms, and beneath, the words: “Westford Mill.”

“That will help you,” cried Sheila eagerly.

“I hope so. It is, as I said, a paper of peculiar texture, and doubtless many tons of it have been sold. If, as I guess, it is now off the market, I shall be compelled to fix a date. If I do that, it would considerably narrow the field of my inquiries.”

After a little further conversation, Smeaton took his leave with the letter in

his possession. Sheila and Wingate, when they were alone, indulged in mutual admiration of his powers of analysis and deduction.

The detective, an hour later, looked in upon Mr Newsom-Perry, with whom he was slightly acquainted, and handed him the document.

“We found this amongst the papers you sent to Miss Monkton,” he explained. “I called on the chance of finding that your client had spoken to you, at one time or another, of some man who sent him a threatening letter. I may say that we have found no allusion to it amongst the other papers.”

“Which seems to show that Monkton did not attach any importance to it himself, I should say,” remarked the solicitor. “No, so far as I am concerned he never alluded to the matter. You attach some importance to it—eh?”

“Some,” replied Smeaton guardedly.

“Of course, you have a wider experience of these things than I, and you are wise to neglect no possible clue. Still, I should think that any big counsel in extensive practice has many letters of this kind from impulsive and angry litigants, who regard him as the author of their ruin.”

Smeaton rose. “It may be so,” he said quietly. “This man was angry, but he was not impulsive; the handwriting alone proves that. He wrote the letter at white heat, but he is of a resolute and determined character.”

Even though the writer of the anonymous threat had overlooked the fact that a watermark was on the paper, the latter point was not half so easy to clear up as Sheila and Wingate expected.

To the chief firms of paper makers and paper agents in the City Smeaton, through the following days, showed a tracing of the watermark, but without result.

Nobody could identify it.

The managing director of one firm of paper agents in Queen Victoria Street declared it to be a foreign paper, even though it was marked

“Westford Mill.”

“The vogue for English notepaper on the Continent has led French and German mills to produce so-called ‘English writing paper’,” he added. “And if I am not mistaken this is a specimen.”

For nearly a week Smeaton prosecuted his inquiries of stationers, wholesale and retail, in all parts of the metropolis, taking with him always the tracing of the watermark. He did not carry the letter, for obvious reasons.

One day at a small retail stationer’s in the Tottenham Court Road, when he showed the tracing to the elderly shopkeeper, the man exclaimed:

“Oh, yes! I’ve seen that before. It’s foreign. When I was an assistant at Grimmel and Grice’s in Bond Street, Mr Grice bought a quantity of it from Paris because of its unusual colour and texture. It was quite in vogue for a time, and it could only be obtained from us.”

“Then all of this particular paper came from Grimmel and Grice’s?”

“Certainly, sir, I recollect the ‘Westford Mill’ well. We supplied it to half the aristocracy of London.”

Smeaton, much pleased with his discovery, took a taxi to Bond Street, and entering the fashionable stationers’ addressed himself to the first person he saw, a young man of about twenty-five.

“Do you make this paper nowadays?” he asked.

The shopman examined it, and shook his head. “No, sir, that paper has not been sold here since I’ve been in the business.”

“And how long would that be?”

“A matter of six years or so.”

“I am anxious to make some further inquiries,” said Smeaton, after a moment’s pause. “Who is the oldest assistant in the shop?”

“Mr Morgan, sir. He’s been with Grimmel and Grice a matter of nearly fifty years, man and boy. He’s on the other side. I will take you to him.”

Smeaton was introduced to the veteran Mr Morgan, an alert-looking man, in spite of his years. Smeaton explained his name and errand, adding that he was from Scotland Yard. Morgan at once became interested. He looked at the watermark.

“I remember that paper well,” he said at length. “It had a tremendous vogue for a little time; we couldn’t get it over from Paris fast enough. Then it went as suddenly out of fashion.”

“I suppose you can’t help me with any dates?”

“Oh, but indeed I can, Mr Smeaton. I have a wonderful memory for everything connected with the business. Old Mr Grice used to say that my memory was as good as the firm’s books. The paper started just twenty-five years ago, and it ran for five years. After that, no more was made.”

Smeaton expressed his gratitude. Mr Morgan’s excellent memory would shorten his labours considerably.

“Can you give me any clue to these letters on the envelope, I wonder?”

But here Mr Morgan was at fault. “We supplied hundreds upon hundreds of customers at the time. And all our old ledgers were burnt in our fire fifteen years ago. But I think I recognise the workmanship of the cipher. I should say that stamp was cut by Millingtons in Clerkenwell Road. They made a speciality of that kind of thing years ago. If you go there, they may have some record. They’re new people there now; old Mr Millington is my senior by ten years or more. He sold the business about fifteen years ago. But he is still alive, and lives somewhere in the Camberwell direction.”

Smeaton entered the address in his notebook, and shook Mr Morgan cordially by the hand. He would go to the Clerkenwell Road, and, if necessary, hunt up the ancient Mr Millington. If he possessed as good a memory as his friend some very useful information might be gathered.

Chapter Sixteen.

Who was Monkton's Enemy?

At the dingy little shop in Clerkenwell Smeaton received a check. The proprietor was out, and a stupid-looking youth who was in charge could give no information. He turned the envelope listlessly in his fingers, handed it back to the detective, and suggested that he should call later in the day, when his master would be in.

The business bore the appearance of decay, Smeaton thought, and if the master should prove no more intelligent than his assistant, it would only be a waste of time to question him.

Subsequently he called and saw the head of the declining firm, and from him learnt that the last he had heard of old Mr Millington was that he was living in New Church Road, Camberwell.

He at once took a taxi there, but on arrival was sadly disappointed to see that the house was to let, and that inquiries were to be made of a firm of house-agents.

He was soon at their office, and here he found an intelligent clerk, to whom he explained that he wished to make a few inquiries.

"I seem to remember the name," said the clerk at length. "I believe he was the tenant when I first came into this business; a nice, quiet old man, who paid his rent on the day. The house has been let to two people since then."

"Do you know where Millington went when he left?"

But the clerk's mind was a blank on the subject. A bright idea, however, struck him, which, in a moment, would have occurred to Smeaton.

"Look here, sir. Why don't you go and see the landlord, Mr Clarke? His house is in the Camberwell Road, only five minutes' walk from here."

The detective thanked him, and armed with the address set forth on a fresh pilgrimage. In a few moments he was interviewing the landlord, a retired builder who had invested his savings in small property.

“Pleased to give you any help I can,” he said heartily, when the detective had explained the object of his visit. “I remember Millington well; very decent old chap he was too; paid his rent punctually. He moved away some years ago. I don’t know where he went. But I don’t think it matters much. I heard about twelve months ago that the old man was dead.”

Smeaton’s face clouded. So all his inquiries had been waste of time. Millington would never throw any light upon the anonymous and threatening letter.

He went back to Bond Street and saw Mr Morgan.

“I am told that Mr Millington is dead,” he said to him. “I suppose you had not heard of it?”

Morgan looked surprised. “When did he die, sir?”

“My informant told me he heard of it about a year ago.”

“A mistake, sir, a mistake, somebody of the same name,” cried Mr Morgan. “Two months ago I met him in the Strand, and we chatted for a few seconds. We didn’t say much to each other for I was in a hurry to get back to the shop.”

“He never mentioned to you that he had left Camberwell?”

“No; as he said nothing about it I took it for granted that he was still there. But I don’t suppose we exchanged a couple of dozen words altogether. I remember I told him he was looking as well as ever, and he laughed, and said he came of a long-lived family.”

Smeaton breathed again. An hour later he was back again at Camberwell, on the track of the retired engraver.

A man cannot move a houseful of furniture without leaving some traces. After visits to half-a-dozen moving establishments, he hit upon the right

one in the Walworth Road. The proprietor referred to his books, and gave Smeaton the information he wanted. The goods had been taken down by road to Beech Cottage, Lower Halliford, a little village in the Thames Valley.

So far, so good. Unless he had been seized with another desire for change, Millington would be found at Beech Cottage, Lower Halliford.

It was too late to pursue the affair further that day. Smeaton would run down the next morning. Millington was an old man; his wits would probably be brighter in the early hours.

The morning found him knocking at the door of Beech Cottage, a pretty little cottage overhung with climbing roses, facing the river. The door was opened by a stout, pleasant-faced woman, whom he at once discovered to be Millington's niece and housekeeper.

"My uncle is not very well this morning," she told him; "he suffers a good deal from asthma. But if you'll come into the parlour, I'll take your card in. He likes to see people when he can, for it's terribly dull down here."

A moment later she reappeared. "My uncle will be glad to see you, sir. I was afraid he was a bit too poorly, but a visitor brightens him up at once. Please step this way."

Mr Millington was seated in a small room overlooking a somewhat rough and uncultivated piece of garden at the back. He was a bright-looking old man, of small stature, with a wonderfully pink complexion, and small twinkling eyes. He was dressed in a nondescript sort of attire, a long frock-coat, a skullcap, and a pair of carpet slippers.

"Sit down, sir, please," he said, in a voice that was cordial, if a trifle wheezy. "I see by your card you are from Scotland Yard—eh? What can I do for you?"

Smeaton went to the point at once.

"I heard of you from Morgan, of Grimmel and Grice. I went there to make a few inquiries, and he recommended me to you."

Mr Millington nodded his head.

“A very good fellow, Morgan; he always put as much business in my way as he could.”

“He directed me to you,” Smeaton said, and he pulled out the envelope and handed it to Millington. “This kind of cipher Mr Morgan tells me was in great vogue between twenty and twenty-five years ago. He thinks that you cut it. Will you kindly examine it, and tell me if you recognise it as your handiwork?”

The answer came readily: “It’s mine, sure enough.”

“Good. The envelope itself is quite an ordinary one, as you see. Now, can you carry your mind back, and give me any particulars of the transaction? Can you tell for whom those letters were cut, and what they stand for?”

Mr Millington put his hand to his forehead. “Let me think a moment,” he said in the quavering voice of old age. “Let me think for a moment, and something will come back to me. At my time of life it’s a good way to go back.”

Smeaton waited in silence for some little time, and then it seemed the old man had struck some chord of memory.

Suddenly he sat upright in his easy-chair, and his eyes sparkled. “It is coming back by degrees,” he said in his thin, husky voice; “it is coming back.”

There was another pause, in which it seemed he was trying to arrange his ideas clearly. Then he spoke slowly but distinctly.

“I remember I had a lot of trouble over the job. The order was first given to some stationers in the City, but the gentleman was so fussy and confused in his instructions that they sent him down straight to me. I thought I understood what he wanted, but I had to engrave it three times before he was satisfied. That’s why I happen to remember it so well.”

“Now, do you remember, or did you ever know, the name of this fussy person who was so hard to please?”

“I ought to remember it,” said Millington plaintively. “It was not an uncommon name either; I should recall it in a moment if I heard it. But it has escaped me.”

Smeaton’s face clouded. “That’s unfortunate, but it may come back to you presently. Proper names are the hardest things to remember as we get on in life.”

Millington struggled for a little time longer with the ebbing tide of reminiscence, but to no purpose.

Smeaton went on another tack.

“Did you bring away from your business any documents or memoranda that would throw light upon this particular transaction?”

The old man reflected for a little while.

“I’m afraid I was a very poor man of business, sir,” he said at length. “I made rough notes from time to time as I received and executed orders, but that was all. I trusted to my memory, which in those days was a good one.”

“Have you any of those old note-books left?”

“Yes, I’ve got some of them upstairs in a couple of boxes which have never been opened since I left the Clerkenwell Road. Would you like me to run through them? It would only mean half-a-day’s work, or less.”

“I should be infinitely obliged if you would, Mr Millington. I will run down here about the same time to-morrow morning. Just one thing more before I go. Were you acquainted with your customer’s handwriting? Did you ever receive any letters from him?”

“He wrote me several times with regard to the work I did for him, but I shouldn’t be able to recognise his hand, even if I saw it.”

Smeaton left, very much chagrined at the result of his visit.

Next morning he, however, presented himself at Beech Cottage.

Millington received him with an apologetic air. He explained that he had searched his note-books diligently, but he could find nothing that referred to the cipher letters, the two C's entwined, or the man who had ordered them.

"I've a notion," he said, when he had finished his rather rambling statement, "that the gentleman who gave the order came from Manchester or Liverpool. But there I may be mixing it up with something else."

And Smeaton left, knowing that nothing more could be got out of him. The identity of the writer of the threatening letter had yet to be discovered.

Another point had suddenly occurred to him. Was the man who had had the cipher engraved the actual writer of the letter? And the greatest point of all was the whereabouts of the Stolen Statesman: was he dead, or was he still living?

Smeaton ascended in the lift to his room at Scotland Yard, where a surprise awaited him, in the shape of a telegram from Varney, handed in at a village five miles from Horsham, in Sussex, three hours before. It read:

"Come down here at once. Something unexpected.—Varney."

Chapter Seventeen.

The Room of Secrets.

Smeaton at once hunted up the time-table. There was a fast train to Horsham in twenty minutes and he could just catch it.

He ordered a telegram to be despatched to Varney at the inn which he had given as a rendezvous, stating the time at which he would arrive, and later found the young man at the door, awaiting him.

“Thought I had better stop here till you arrived,” he said as they shook hands, “otherwise I would have come to Horsham Station. But the Forest View people know me now, and I didn’t want one of them to see me talking to a stranger. They might put two and two together.”

The two men ordered some refreshment, and adjourned to the snug little parlour, which was empty.

“No fear of being disturbed here, Smeaton, at this time of day; I know the place well. There will be nobody near for hours, except a passing carter for a glass of beer, and he won’t disturb us.”

“I was glad to have your wire,” said the detective, “for I was beginning to get a bit anxious. For several hours now I have been on the track of what I thought was a warm scent, only to find it a cold one. I’ll tell you about it when you have had your say.”

Varney plunged at once into his narrative. And certainly the story he had to tell was a very thrilling one. The main points were these.

Having been in the neighbourhood for some time, and being of a gregarious disposition, he had picked up a few acquaintances, with whom he indulged in an occasional chat when the opportunity offered.

All these people, he was sure, accepted his own explanation of his presence there, and did not for a moment suspect in the *soi-disant* artist who rambled about with his sketching materials the young journalist so

well-known in Fleet Street.

He had become acquainted with a local doctor, Mr Janson, a man a few years older than himself, who had bought a practice in the neighbourhood quite recently. They had met, in the first instance, at the inn where Varney was staying, the doctor having been called in by the landlady to prescribe for some trifling ailment from which she was suffering.

The two men had exchanged a few commonplace remarks, and bidden each other good-bye. Next day Varney overtook him on the road, and they walked into Horsham together. In the course of their journey a little personal history was exchanged, of course utterly fictitious on the side of the pretended artist.

From the casual conversation there emerged certain facts. Mr Janson was a man of considerable culture, and of strong artistic leanings. More especially was he an ardent worshipper of the Old Masters. For several years his annual holiday had been spent in Italy, for which country, its galleries, and its associations he expressed the most fervent admiration.

Varney, little knowing what was to come out of this chance acquaintance, soon established common grounds of interest. His mother had been an Italian, and he had spent ten years of his boyhood in that delightful land. He could speak the language like a native. Janson, who was a poor linguist, expressed his envy of the other's accomplishment.

"I can read any Italian book you put before me, and I can make them understand what I want," he had told Varney. "But when they talk to me, I am lost. I can't catch the words, because the accent baffles me. If an Englishman were to talk Italian, I daresay I could follow him."

They met several times afterwards, and the acquaintance ripened to such an extent that the doctor asked the young stranger to come round to his house, after the day's round was over, for a chat and a smoke. Janson was a bachelor; he had only been a few months in the neighbourhood, and had not as yet made many friends.

A man who knew a good deal about the subject which interested him most, and could talk fairly well on art—for Varney was a connoisseur of

no mean order—was a godsend to the man of medicine, sitting by himself in his lonely house.

All this was the prelude to the startling facts which were the cause of Varney's urgent telegram.

The previous morning just before his dinner hour, the gardener had looked in at the inn for his morning glass of beer, and informed the landlord that a visitor was expected at Forest View.

"Mr Strange comes to me after breakfast, and tells me to take in a picking of some special peas we planted, for lunch. He ain't much of a one to talk at the best of times, but he was quite affable and chatty this morning. He tells me he is expecting a foreign gentleman who's very particular about his food, and he wants to show him what we can do."

This piece of news was retailed to Varney, who was, of course, immediately interested. According to local report, this was only the second occasion on which Forest View had received a visitor.

He kept a hidden watch on the house. A few minutes past twelve. Strange, to give him the name he was known by down there, drove his motor-car in the direction of Horsham. Evidently he was going to meet the visitor at the station.

In due course the car came back with its two occupants. The stranger was a man of small stature, with grey moustache and beard, of a dark complexion, and unmistakably a foreigner.

They dismounted at the gate, the garage being approached by an entrance a little lower down. Varney noticed that the foreigner got out very slowly, leaning heavily on his host's arm as he did so. It was plain that this visitor, like the other, was in indifferent health.

Varney hung about during the greater part of the day, but he saw nobody. All the inmates of this singular establishment seemed to prefer the seclusion of the house.

After the inn had closed, he smoked a last pipe, and then went to bed. He was rather wakeful that night, and did not go to sleep for an hour or so.

Suddenly he was awakened by a loud knocking. Jumping up, he looked at his watch—it was two o'clock. He was evidently the first to hear it, for he could distinguish no sounds from the room at the other end of the passage, where the landlord and his wife slept.

He flung up his window and called out: "Hullo! Who's that?"

He was answered by the familiar voice of Janson.

"Sorry to disturb you like this, Mr Franks," cried the doctor, addressing him by his assumed name. "But I want your help. A foreign gentleman, an Italian, arrived at Forest View this morning, and he was taken alarmingly ill about half-an-hour ago. The poor chap's hours are numbered. I have been trying to talk to him in his own language; he seems to understand me all right, but I can hardly follow a sentence of his, and there's nobody in the house who understands him either."

The incongruity of the situation forced itself upon Varney immediately. "What in the world makes a man come to a house where he can understand nobody, and nobody can understand him," he whispered down.

"The same thought occurred to me," came the answering whisper. "Mr Strange explained it. He said that their parlourmaid understood Italian perfectly, having lived in Italy for some years. She had gone up to London early yesterday morning and would not be back till late to-morrow."

It flashed instantly across Varney's mind that his suspicions about the young woman were correct: that she belonged to a different class from that which furnishes parlourmaids. She was a lady masquerading as a servant. Strange's fiction of her having lived abroad was invented to keep up appearances.

"He is very rambling, but I ran gather this much," went on Janson in low tones. "He wants to leave some instructions before he dies. I thought of you at once."

"Right; I will be with you in a couple of minutes."

By this time the landlord and his wife were awake, and he heard the

man’s heavy footsteps along the passage. He opened his door, and briefly explained the situation.

In a very short time he and the doctor were in the bedroom of the dying man. Strange was at the bedside, looking intently at the prostrate figure, without a trace of emotion in his sharp, inscrutable features. He withdrew a little distance as Janson approached, and murmured something in a low voice to the other. It was an apology for disturbing him.

The man lay motionless for some few minutes, the pallor of death settling deeper over the once swarthy features. Janson turned to Varney.

“I’m afraid it is too late, Mr Franks. He is sinking rapidly. If you could have been here when I first came.”

Was it fancy, or did he see an expression of relief steal across Strange’s impenetrable mask?

If so, he was doomed to disappointment. The dying man stirred, and his lips moved. Varney leaned over, and his quick ear caught some muttered words, growing fainter and fainter with the waning of the flickering strength.

The words were in the bastard tongue of Piedmont, difficult to understand by anyone who has not lived in Northern Italy.

“*Dio*!” gasped the dying man. “Forgive me. The doctors have long ago told me I should die suddenly, but—I—I never expected this. Oh, that somebody here could understand me?” he whispered to himself.

“I do. Signore,” said Varney, as he leaned over him.

In the dying man’s eyes came a gleam of satisfaction and hope.

“Ah! Thank Heaven! Then listen,” he said. “I want you to do something for me—something—” and he halted as though in reflection. “Well,” he went on, “twenty years ago I did a great wrong in conjunction with another man. Go to him and tell him that Giovanni Roselli, his old comrade, implores him, from his deathbed, to make reparation. You will find him in Manchester. He was the head of the Compagnia Corezzo, and his name

is James—”

The surname was never told. As he strove to utter it, the end came. Giovanni Roselli had delivered his message, but he had gone into the shadows, before he could utter the full name of the man to whom it was conveyed. Varney translated the dying man’s message to Strange, but he made no comment.

Smeaton sat in silence for a long time when the recital was finished.

“A house of sinister inmates with sinister secrets,” he said at length. “What you have told me may have a bearing upon something that has gone before.”

Briefly he narrated to Varney the discovery of the threatening letter, and his visit to the engraver and stationer.

Varney saw at once what had occurred to him.

“The Compagnia Corezzo gives us a clue—eh?—the initials ‘C.C.,’ which are the initials on the envelope. Was it an envelope from the company’s office? You say that the old engraver thought the man who ordered the cipher came from Manchester or Liverpool. Roselli tells us we can find his man in Manchester?” Smeaton rose. “I’m in hopes that something may come out of it all,” he said, as they shook hands. “Anyway, stay down here, and keep a close watch on the place. An inquest will be held and sooner or later something of importance will happen. I’ve kept the taxi waiting; shall I give you a lift to Horsham? But I noticed a bike outside the inn-door. I suppose it is yours.” Varney nodded. “Yes, it is part of my machinery. I shall go for a good long spin, and think over all that has happened.”

As Smeaton put his foot on the step of the taxi a sudden thought struck him. He turned back, and drew the young man aside.

“Keep your eye on the parlourmaid especially,” he whispered. “If we ever get to the bottom of it, we shall find she plays an important part in this mystery.”

“I quite agree,” was Varney’s answer, as the two men finally parted.

Chapter Eighteen.

Another Mystery.

Next day Smeaton sat in his official room, puzzling over the Monkton case, and sorely perplexed.

He had followed several trails now, but all, it seemed, to no purpose. Farloe and his sister had been shadowed without any result. The visit to Millington had ended in failure.

Varney had discovered something, and he would follow the clue with the pertinacity of a bloodhound pursuing a faint and elusive scent. But he himself was thoroughly disheartened.

There suddenly came a tap at the door, and a constable entered.

“A very old gentleman wants to see you, sir. He says you will remember him,” and he handed the detective a slip of paper on which was written “Mr Millington.”

“The gentleman seems to have one foot in the grave, and half of the other, to judge by appearances,” the constable went on. “The journey has tried him terribly. He’s wheezing so, that you’d think each moment would be his last. I made him sit down, and he’s trying to recover himself and get his breath.”

Smeaton sprang up. It was with difficulty he could retain his official calm. This plucky old man had not made the journey up to town for nothing. He had remembered something, or discovered something.

“That’s right. Baker,” he said. “Give him time, and when he is ready, show him in.”

It was a full five minutes before Millington was in a fit state to present himself. At last he entered, still husky of voice, but with a beaming aspect.

Smeaton greeted him cordially. “Mr Millington, this is indeed good of you. But why did you distress yourself with the journey? If you had sent me a wire, I would have run down to you,” he said.

“I owe you some amends, sir, for my failure yesterday. And besides, a little jaunt does me good.”

He smiled cheerfully, evidently wishing to convey that, at his time of life, an excursion up to London was a tonic.

“Again many thanks,” cried the grateful Smeaton. “Well, you came to see me, because you have remembered something—or found something fresh—eh?”

The old man spoke earnestly.

“All day after you left, sir, I was wild with myself to think what a useless old cumber-ground I was; me that used to have such a good memory, too. I thought and thought again, hoping that something would come back from that twenty or twenty-five years ago.”

“There was no need to distress yourself,” said Smeaton kindly.

“And then in a flash I remembered another box in which I had stuffed a lot of odd papers. Well, sir, I opened that box, went over those papers one by one, and this is what I found.”

He held out in his shaking hand an old letter. Smeaton took it from him.

“Before you read it, Mr Smeaton, I must explain that this gentleman always treated me in a very friendly way. We were both very fond of heraldry, and he used often to come to my shop and chat over our hobby. That accounts for the familiar way in which he addresses me.”

This is what Smeaton read:

“Dear Mr Millington,—I enclose you a cheque for the last work you did for me, which is as satisfactory as ever. It will be news to you that my company, the Compagnia Corezzo, is about to go into voluntary liquidation. I have accepted the position of manager of a big firm in

Manchester, and shall take up my new post in the course of a few weeks. If I can possibly find time between now and then, I shall run in to say good-bye.

“I may have an opportunity of putting further work in your way. If that opportunity arises, I shall have the greatest pleasure in availing myself of it. I am afraid I shall not come across anybody who takes such a keen interest in my favourite hobby.—Yours truly, James Whyman.”

Over Smeaton’s face came a glow of satisfaction. He had got the name he wanted. Was he on the right track at last? He took the threatening letter out of his pocket, and compared the handwritings.

But here disappointment awaited him. They were totally dissimilar. Whyman wrote a small and niggling hand, the hand of a mean man. The other calligraphy was large, bold and free.

One thing was clear: James Whyman was not the writer of the threatening letter. That letter had been put in an envelope which belonged to the Compagnia Corezzo. Mr Whyman was, at that period, connected with that company, and the man who had given instructions for the cutting of the cipher. A visit to Manchester was the next item on the programme.

“It all came back to me with that letter,” remarked the old man presently. “I can see him standing in my shop, as if it were yesterday, quite a young man, not a day over thirty, I should say; very fussy, very precise, and always beating you down to the last farthing. But very pleasant withal.”

He was thirty at that time; he would, then, be in the ’fifties now, reasoned Smeaton. The odds therefore were that Mr James Whyman was still in the land of the living.

“Mr Millington, you have helped me very much,” said the detective, as the old gentleman rose to go. “Now, in your state of health I am not going to allow you to fatigue yourself by catching ’buses and trains. I shall get a taxi here, and it will drive you straight to Lower Halliford, at my expense.”

Poor Millington’s frugal soul cried out aloud at such wanton expenditure, but he was overborne by Smeaton. He departed in the vehicle, beaming

with the sense of his own importance, and conscious that he was still of some use in the world.

The evening of that same day found the detective at the Queen's Hotel, Manchester. It was pleasant to him to find that his investigations produced a speedy result. Mr Whyman was a well-known citizen, so the head-waiter informed him. He had been first manager and then director of one of the largest businesses there. Two years ago he had retired from active participation in the concern, and had, he believed, taken a big house at Southport. He was a widower with two children. The son had a post in Hong-Kong. The daughter had married and was living in Cheshire.

The waiter added that he was popular, and highly respected by all who knew him, perhaps a bit close-fisted, and hard at a bargain. Since his retirement he was often a visitor at the Hotel.

The next morning Smeaton, having found Mr Whyman's address in the telephone directory, rang him up. He announced his name and profession, explaining that some documents had me into his possession which he would like to submit for inspection. Might he take the liberty of coming over to Southport during the day at some hour convenient to himself?

Mr Whyman's reply was given cordially and unhesitatingly. "With pleasure, Mr Smeaton. Shall we say five o'clock? I am afraid I cannot make it earlier, as I have got a very full day in front of me. I am retired from business in a sense, but I am still interested in a lot of things that require personal attention."

At five o'clock to the minute Smeaton was at the fine house of Mr Whyman, near the end of the Esplanade at Southport, commanding a splendid view of the Welsh and Cumberland hills. It was evident that Mr Whyman had prospered in a worldly sense. The house was an imposing one. A butler opened the door, and ushered him into the morning-room, a square, lofty apartment, solidly and handsomely furnished.

A moment later the owner entered. He was a tall, finely-built man, with regular, handsome features.

Smeaton regarded him closely as they shook hands. There was an obvious frankness and geniality about his manner that fully accounted, for his general popularity. The face was honest, its expression open. His eyes met yours unwaveringly.

And yet this was the man who, according to the dead man, Giovanni Roselli, had been the perpetrator of a great wrong to some person or persons unknown. Well, Smeaton had too vast an experience to trust overmuch to outside appearances. Still, he had never seen anybody who looked less like a rogue than Mr James Whyman, as he stood smiling at him with the most cordial expression in his clear blue eyes.

If he was, or had been at some period of his career, a rogue. Nature had taken the greatest pains to disarm the suspicions of those on whom he practised his rascality.

Whyman pointed to the table, on which were laid glasses, a decanter of whisky, soda-water, and cigars.

“Let me offer you some refreshment after your journey. You smoke? Good. I think you will like those cigars. Let me help you. Now, sir, sit down, and we will get at once to the matter which brings you here.”

Smeaton produced the envelope, and handed it to his genial host. “I think you will recognise those entwined letters, Mr Whyman. I may tell you that I traced the man who cut them—a man named Millington.”

Whyman interrupted him in his brisk, bluff way, and there was not a shade of embarrassment in voice or manner:

“Ah, my dear old friend Millington! Why, he must be quite ancient by now, for he wasn’t a chicken when I knew him.”

“A very old man, and his memory is treacherous. At first he could remember very little. But later on he found a letter from you which brought it all back to him. I was then able to establish the two things I wanted: your own name, and the name of the Italian company you represented.”

Whyman turned the envelope in his hand, after having cast a glance at

the cipher. The candid blue eyes regarded the detective steadily as he spoke.

“Yes, that die was cut by my instructions, certainly. Now, in what way can I assist you, Mr Smeaton, beyond confirming that fact?”

Smeaton passed him the threatening letter. “There is no question the envelope came out of your office. Now, do you recognise this handwriting?”

The other man read it carefully, and then passed it back, without a trace of confusion.

“I am certain that I have never seen that handwriting before. How the envelope was obtained I cannot pretend to guess. Hundreds of people, of course, were in and out of my office during the time I was with the company.”

“I presume you had several clerks in your employ?”

Mr Whyman smiled. “Quite the opposite. It was a small and struggling concern, unprosperous from the start. I only had three assistants at the London branch: an elderly man, and two juniors. I should recognise the writing of any one of those if it were put before me.”

Was he speaking the truth or not? Was he honestly puzzled as he appeared, or shielding the writer of that threatening epistle with his assumption of ignorance? Smeaton could not be sure. The only evidence he possessed as to character was that furnished by the deathbed revelations of Roselli, and that was unfavourable.

He resolved to try a random shot. “I think at one time you were acquainted with a man of the name of Giovanni Roselli, an Italian.”

The shot went home. There was a flicker in the steady blue eyes, the voice had lost its bluff and genial ring. He spoke hesitatingly, picking his words.

“Ah, yes. Many years ago I knew a fellow named Roselli, in Turin—not very intimately; we did a little deal in marble together on one occasion.

What do you know about him?”

Smeaton shrugged his shoulders carelessly. “Not much. In our business we come across many little things that we have not set out to find, but which emerge from greater issues. However, I did not come here to talk about this foreigner, but in the hope that you might be able to help me with that letter.”

When Whyman spoke again all traces of his momentary embarrassment had passed.

“I am only too sorry that I cannot. I should say that envelope must have been stolen from my office.”

“Very likely,” said Smeaton quietly. Then he rose to go.

Whyman at once became effusively hospitable. “I wish you would dine and stay the night with me. I should be most delighted to have a good long chat with you, especially if you could tell me some of your experiences which are no longer secrets. To-morrow, perhaps, I could take you for a spin in the country in my car.”

Smeaton hesitated. Why did this man, whom he suspected of being a rogue under all this genial veneer, suddenly develop such a partiality for the society of an utter stranger? Did he want to pump him as to what he knew concerning Roselli, whom of course, he did not know was dead?

He decided he would stay. If it came to pumping, Smeaton flattered himself he would prove the better of the two at that particular game. He might even make Whyman betray himself in an unguarded moment.

They spent quite a pleasant time together. Smeaton was shown over the house and grounds. The dinner was good, the wines and cigars excellent. The detective entertained his host with reminiscences of work at “the Yard” that involved no indiscretion. They sat up chatting till past midnight. But the name of Roselli was not mentioned again on either side.

“Good-night, Mr Smeaton, good-night. I have enjoyed your company immensely. Breakfast at half-past nine—eh?”

He might be a rogue at bottom, and his wealth might not have been acquired honestly, but he was a very pleasant one. And as a host he was beyond reproach.

When Smeaton entered the dining-room the next morning, the butler was waiting for him with a letter in his hand.

“Mr Whyman was called away early this morning, sir. He has left this note for you.”

“Dear Mr Smeaton,” ran the brief epistle. “A thousand apologies for treating you in this discourteous fashion. I received a letter just now calling me abroad on urgent business that brooks no delay. I may be absent some few weeks. Trusting we shall meet again—Yours sincerely, James Whyman.”

Smeaton was too accustomed to surprises to exhibit any emotion. He sat down and ate an ample breakfast, and cogitated over the sudden departure of his host.

The one obvious fact was that Whyman had flown. He need not waste time over that. The important thing remained: what was the reason of his hurried flight?

Before he left the room Smeaton crossed over to a writing-desk in the window, and peered into the waste-paper basket at the side. A forlorn hope—it was empty. A torn-up envelope might have revealed the postmark.

But Mr Whyman was evidently too old a bird to leave anything behind him that would enlighten one of the keenest detectives in England.

Chapter Nineteen.

Still Another Club.

“Now that we are alone, sir, permit me to present myself in proper form. My name is Caleb Boyle, profession gentleman, educated at that glorious old school, Winchester, and graduate of Trinity College. Cambridge.”

Mr Boyle made a low bow as he completed his self-introduction, which took place in Smeaton’s room at Scotland Yard. He was full of gesture, employing a pantomime of arms, hands and face to accentuate his remarks.

Smeaton bowed, pointed to a chair, and examined him with minute attention. He was a tall, angular man, thin almost to emaciation. Judging by his figure, you might have put him at forty, but the lines on his face suggested another ten or fifteen years.

“I intended no discourtesy to you personally when I declined to give my card to your satellites or subordinates, or whatever name you give to the hangers-on of a great man.”

Here the fluent Mr Boyle made another of his grotesque bows to lend point to the compliment, and again Smeaton inclined his head politely. He had not as yet quite taken his bearings with regard to this extraordinary creature.

“To such persons, Mr Smeaton, I do not take the trouble to reveal my identity; it would be a waste of time. It is my invariable practice to go straight to the fountain-head when I have anything of importance to communicate.” Here Mr Boyle swelled out his chest, and said in a voice of intense conviction: “I have no toleration for whipper-snappers, and those, sir, are what one finds, spreading like a fungus, in every department of our public life.”

It seemed to the police official’s well-balanced mind that his visitor was a pompous ass, with a slight suspicion of insanity thrown in. He was not a man to suffer fools gladly, but this particular fool had called on him for

some purpose, and he must exercise patience till the purpose was revealed.

He must bear with him and coax him. For he felt intuitively that Boyle was one of those men who take a long time in coming to the point.

“We are always happy to receive information here,” he said courteously. “You will understand that I am a very busy man.”

If he thought such a direct hint would arrest the flow of his visitor’s fatal fluency, he was grievously mistaken. Boyle raised an arresting hand, and indulged in some more contortions of arms and hands.

“I recognise the fact, sir, I fully recognise it. A man in your responsible position must find the working hours all too short for what you have to do. You bear upon your shoulders, capable as they are, the weight of Atlas, if I may say so.”

Smeaton had to smile, in spite of himself, at the fanciful imagery. “Not quite so bad as that, Mr Boyle. But a lot has to be got into a limited time, and therefore—”

But his sentence was not allowed to finish. “Say no more, sir, on that head. I can understand that the time of a valuable official is not to be wasted; in short, that you wish me to come to the point.”

Smeaton nodded his head vigorously. Perhaps there was some remnant of common-sense in the creature after all.

Mr Boyle gracefully threw one leg over the other, bestowed upon the detective an affable but somewhat mechanical smile, and resumed his discourse.

“Before coming to the reason of my visit, I must trouble you with a few details of my family history, in order that you may know something of the person you are dealing with. I promise you I shall not be prolix.”

Smeaton groaned inwardly, but he knew he was helpless. As well try to stop a cataract in full flood as arrest the resistless flow of Mr Boyle’s glib fluency.

“I may tell you I am something of an athlete. I played two years in the Winchester Eleven. I rowed in my College boat. If I had stopped on a year longer I should have rowed for the ‘Varsity.’”

He paused, probably to ascertain the effect produced upon his listener by these deeds of prowess. Smeaton exhorted him to proceed, in a faint voice.

“Enough of those early days, when the youthful blood ran in one’s veins like some potent wine. Manhood succeeded the school and college days. I am telling you all this because, as you will perceive presently, it has some bearing upon my visit to you.”

He paused again, to mark the effect of his glowing periods. And again Smeaton, in a voice grown fainter, bade him get on with his story.

Suddenly the weird visitor rose, stretched himself to his full height, and with a dramatic gesture pointed a long, lean finger at the harassed detective. His voice rose and fell with the fervour of his pent-up feelings.

“The man you look upon to-day is only the shadow of what he was in his early prime. The name of Caleb Boyle was well-known about town, in the busy haunts of men. I have sat at great men’s tables, I have partaken of delicate fare, I have quaffed rare wines, fair ladies have favoured me with their smiles.”

He paused for a moment, dropped the pointing hand, and sat down again on his chair, seemingly overcome with his own rhetoric. Smeaton regarded him steadily, uncertain as to what new form his eccentricity would take, but spoke no word.

In a few seconds he had recovered himself, and smiled wanly at his companion.

“Enough of that. You are a man of vast experience, and you have seen men and cities. But I bet you would never guess that not so many years ago I was one of the young bloods of this town, one of what our neighbours across the Channel call the *jeunesse dorée*.”

And at last Smeaton was moved to speech. He looked at the well-cut but

worn clothes; he remembered Winchester and Cambridge; he recognised the flamboyant and ill-controlled temperament. He drew his deductions swiftly.

“You were born with a silver spoon in your mouth,” he said bluntly; “you had every advantage that birth and education could give you. Through some fatal tendency, perhaps inherited, you threw away all your chances, and are living on your memories—and very little else.”

So far from being offended with this plain exposition of facts, Mr Boyle smiled affably, and, leaning forward, patted the detective approvingly on the shoulder.

“You’re a man after my own heart, sir; you go to the very marrow of things. You have hit it off correctly. But mark you, I regret nothing; I would alter nothing if the time came over again. I have lived, sir: warmed both hands at the fire of life; filled the cup of enjoyment to the brim. Nothing has daunted me, nothing ever will daunt me. Old as I am, derelict as I may be, I still look the world in the face, and, in the words of the poet, ‘Stand four-square to all the winds that blow.’”

Smeaton stirred uncomfortably. Was the man simply an original kind of beggar, and was all this the preface to a request for a modest loan? He had assurance enough for anything!

“Mr Boyle, my time is really very much occupied. May I beg you to come to the point, and state the object of your visit? These personal reminiscences and reflections are, of course, highly interesting, but—” He made an eloquent pause.

“I have transgressed, I have abused your patience,” observed this singular man, in a voice of contrition; “I came to ask you a simple question, and here it is, plain, straight, and put as briefly as possible: *What is at the bottom of Reginald Monkton’s disappearance*?”

Smeaton looked up sharply. “Who says that he has disappeared?” he asked with some asperity.

Mr Boyle smiled blandly. “Why beat about the bush? Monkton is not in his place in the House. There is not a line in the papers about his

movements, except that he is on the Riviera. The public may not yet have tumbled to it. But Fleet Street knows. The House of Commons knows. The clubs know. And last—you and I know. I still have some connection with the world in which I was once not an insignificant figure."

Smeaton hardly knew what to answer. The man had every quality that offended his well-ordered mind, but he was not the absolute fool he had taken him for.

"Cannot a statesman, worn out and weary with hard work, take a brief holiday without letting loose all these absurd rumours?" he asked with pretended petulance.

Mr Boyle shrugged his shoulders. "My dear sir, I know as well as you do that this matter is in your hands, and you are hushing it up in the hopes that you will find a solution, and avoid a scandal. So far you have failed. If you had succeeded, either Monkton would have been back by now, or you would know of his death, and there would have been a public explanation. You have failed, and do you know why?"

"I shall be very glad to know why," Smeaton replied, goaded into a half-admission by the contemptuous tone of the other man.

"Because, although you have some very clever men here you want a leavening of men of different calibre. It is good to know every corner of the slums, to be acquainted with every incident in the career of burglar Bill and light-fingered Jack, to know the haunts of all the international thieves and forgers and anarchists. That is sound and useful knowledge."

"I am glad you think so," said Smeaton sarcastically.

"In a case like this, however, you want another sort of knowledge altogether," pursued Mr Boyle, callously indifferent to the detective's sarcasm. "You want a man who has mixed in the big world from his boyhood, who knows all the ins and outs, all the intrigue of social life, all the gossip, all the scandal that has been going round the clubs and drawing-rooms for the last forty years."

"In other words, men like yourself—eh? We have plenty such in our pay."

“But they are not a recognised part of your official organisation,” rejoined Mr Boyle quickly. “As you are kind enough to suggest myself,” he added modestly, “I think I may say that in certain cases I should earn my salary. But I admit that at the burglar business I should be no use at all.”

There was a long silence. Smeaton was trying to smother his indignation. He had taken a dislike to the man from the first moment he had set eyes upon him. His long-windedness, his self-conceit, his grotesque gestures, his assumption of superiority, his gibes at Scotland Yard methods, had added to it. But he must bear with him; he was sure that Boyle had something more to say before he took his leave.

Mr Boyle pursued his discourse, quite unconscious of the other’s antipathy.

“In spite of troubles that would have crushed a weaker man, I think I have worn well: I am frequently taken for ten years younger than I am. As a fact, there is only one year’s difference between Monkton and myself. We were at a tutor’s together, and we went up to Cambridge in the same year.”

Smeaton breathed a sigh of relief. He had an intuition that at last this exasperating person was coming to the point.

“The Monkton of those days was very different from the Monkton of later years—the keen politician, the statesman conscious of the grave responsibilities of office. He was full of fun and go, one of a band of choice spirits who kept things lively, and, as a matter of course, got into many scrapes, and came more than once into conflict with the authorities.”

Smeaton listened intently. This was certainly not the prevalent idea of the statesman who had so mysteriously disappeared.

“I saw a great deal of him afterwards. We moved in much the same set. He married early, and everybody said that he was devotedly attached to his wife. So, no doubt, he was. At the same time, he had been a great admirer of the fair sex, and it was rumoured that there had been tender passages between him and several well-known ladies occupying high positions in society.”

The flamboyant manner had departed. For the moment he seemed an ordinary, sensible man, setting forth a sober statement of actual fact.

“There was one lady, in particular, with whom his name was especially connected. She was at that time some live or six years younger than Monkton, and married—people said, against her will—to a very unpopular nobleman much older than herself, who was madly jealous of her. It was reported at the clubs that the husband strongly resented Monkton’s attentions, and that on one occasion a *fracas* had taken place between the two men, in which Monkton had been severely handled. Some corroboration was lent to the statement by the fact that he did not appear in the Courts for a week after the occurrence was supposed to have taken place.”

“Did this *fracas* to which you allude take place before or after his marriage?” asked the detective.

“Speaking from memory, I should say about a year before.”

And at this point Mr Boyle rose, drew a pair of faded gloves from his pocket, and put them on preparatory to his departure.

“In a case of this kind, Mr Smeaton, it is well to remember the French proverb, ‘Look out for the woman.’ You, no doubt, have followed several clues, and evidently to no purpose. Well, I will give you one gratis—keep your eye upon Lady Wrenwyck, now a middle-aged woman, but, at the time to which I refer, one of the most celebrated beauties of her day, and, according to rumour, wildly in love with Reginald Monkton. It may lead to nothing, of course, but I think the tip is worth following.”

“I am obliged to you, and will certainly act upon your advice,” said Smeaton gravely, as he held out his hand.

As Mr Boyle took it his former eccentricities of manner returned. He bowed profoundly, and spoke in his high, artificial voice.

“Sir, I am more than flattered. I shall go later on to Miss Monkton. I should much like to make the acquaintance of my old friend’s daughter.”

Smeaton was aghast at this declaration. He had a shrewd suspicion that

his real object in interviewing Sheila was to trade on his old acquaintance with her father, and probably obtain a loan. It was a hundred to one that such a mercurial creature would drop some disquieting hints about Lady Wrenwyck.

“I would beg of you to postpone your call, Mr Boyle. Miss Monkton is, naturally, in a state of great depression and anxiety. I should, however, very much like you to see Mr Austin Wingate, who is her best friend. If you will favour me with your address, I will arrange a meeting.”

Mr Boyle, indulged in another of his grotesque bows. He scribbled on a piece of paper, and handed it to the detective.

“I should be glad to have that meeting arranged as soon as possible, Mr Smeaton.” There was a shade of anxiety in his voice. Smeaton was sure that philanthropy was not the sole motive of his visit. “Once more, good-bye.”

He advanced to the door, hesitated, with his hand upon the knob, and half turned round, as if about to say something more. Apparently he changed his mind.

“A random thought occurred to me, but it is nothing—not worth pursuing,” he said airily, and passed out.

But Smeaton knew instinctively the reason of that pause. Boyle had screwed up his courage to borrow money, but he could not bring it to the sticking-point.

Had he told the truth or were his statements pure invention?

Chapter Twenty.

A Conference at Downing Street.

“He’s a blatant idiot, with lucid moments. And in one of those rare moments of lucidity he told me about Lady Wrenwyck. You agree with me, I am sure, that, at any cost, he must be kept from Miss Monkton.”

Such was Smeaton’s pithy summing-up of his late visitor to Austin Wingate, who had hurried round on receipt of an urgent note from the detective.

“I agree absolutely,” was Wingate’s emphatic response. “She believes in her father so utterly that it would cut her to the heart to think he was anything short of immaculate, that he had ever shared the weaknesses of ordinary men. You know all good women make idols of their male-folk. Now, tell me a little more about this person Boyle. Is he what we should call a gentleman?”

Smeaton shrugged his shoulders. “I have nothing but his own statement to go upon, you understand. But I should say you might have described him as such once. Now, he is broken down, slightly shabby, has got the ‘seen-better-days’ look, and is, I surmise, hard-up. You will see him, of course, and I give you this hint beforehand: I think he will want to borrow money. I’m sure he was within an ace of tapping me.”

“He can borrow what he likes, in reason, so long as I can keep him away from Chesterfield Street,” said Austin fervently.

Smeaton looked at him approvingly. He was a gallant young lover. No wonder that the girl’s heart had gone out to him in her loneliness and misery.

Wingate scribbled a brief but polite note to Boyle, inviting him to dinner the following day at a Bohemian club in Shaftesbury Avenue of which he was a member. In this tolerant atmosphere his guest’s eccentricities of manner and shabbiness of attire were less likely to provoke comment.

Having arranged this, he took his leave of Smeaton, whom he left cogitating over the new development of affairs.

The detective had no doubt in his own mind that Boyle, flighty and feather-brained as he seemed, could be level-headed on occasions. The story he told him about Lady Wrenwyck certainly bore the impress of truth, but it was impossible for a man of such peculiar mentality to avoid exaggeration. Before going further into the matter, he would like some corroboration. To whom could he apply?

And at once he thought of Mr Chesterton, the Prime Minister. He and Monkton were life-long friends, had been at Cambridge together. Although not actually “born in the purple,” having come from commercial stock, he had been adopted into society from his earliest youth. His rare eloquence and commanding gifts had done the rest, and raised him to his present high position.

An hour later he was closeted with the Premier in the big, heavily-furnished room at Downing Street.

Mr Chesterton received him with that easy and graceful cordiality which was one of his greatest charms.

“I have ventured to intrude upon your time, sir, with reference to the matter which is still baffling us—the mysterious disappearance of your colleague Mr Monkton, the Colonial Secretary. I have had a visit from a peculiar person who calls himself Caleb Boyle, and he has given me some information that may or may not prove valuable. He says he knew Mr Monkton intimately. I am aware that you were life-long friends. Do you happen to know anything of the man Boyle?”

An amused smile flitted over the Prime Minister’s features. “I remember him well, a harum-scarum, chattering, frothy fellow—utterly devoid of brains. Stay, I think perhaps I do him an injustice. I would rather say he suffered from an excess of brain—of the ill-balanced sort. So he has turned up again—eh? I thought he had disappeared for good.”

“I take it, from that remark, that he has had a somewhat chequered career?” queried Smeaton.

“Most chequered,” was Mr Chesterton’s reply. In a few brief sentences he gave the history of Caleb Boyle, so far as he had known it.

He was a man of good family, and possessed of some small fortune. These advantages were nullified by the possession of nearly every quality that made for failure in life. He was headstrong, prodigal, full of an overwhelming conceit in his own capacity. He dabbled a little in everything—and could do nothing well.

He fancied himself an orator, and spouted on politics till he bored everybody to death. Believed himself a poet, and wrote execrable verses. Flattered himself he was an artist of a high order, and painted daubs that moved his friends to mirth.

The Premier paused. Then proceeding, he said:

“He came to London after leaving Cambridge, and went the pace. In a few years he had run through his money. Then began the downward progress. He became a sponger and a leech, borrowed money in every likely quarter—cadged for his luncheons and dinners. He had been very generous and hospitable in his day, and his friends put up with him as long as they could. One by one, they fell away, wearied by his importunities. Then he came to the last stage—he took to drinking to excess. Through the influence of the stauncher of his acquaintance, who still pitied him, he had secured three or four good positions. One after another he had to relinquish them, owing to his intemperate habits. That was the actual finish. He disappeared from a world in which he had once held a very decent footing, and joined the great army of degenerates who live nobody knows where, and Heaven knows how.”

“I take it he is not speaking the truth when he says that he knew Mr Monkton intimately?” asked Smeaton, when Mr Chesterton had finished the brief narrative.

The Premier shrugged his shoulders. “We were all at Cambridge together. He knew Monkton and he knew me, in the way that undergraduates know each other. We met afterwards, occasionally, in some of the many sets that constitute Society. But I am sure that Monkton was never intimate with him. He was one of dozens of men that

he had known at school and college. Boyle always built up his supposed friendships on very slender material. It used to be said that if he knocked against an Archbishop by accident, and begged his pardon, he would swear afterwards that he was on terms of intimacy with him."

There was a pause before Smeaton put his next question.

"This man tells me that at one time there was a scandal about Mr Monkton and a certain Lady Wrenwyck—a woman of fashion and a noted beauty. I take the liberty of asking you to confirm or refute that."

Mr Chesterton frowned slightly. "I take it, Mr Smeaton, you have a good reason for asking me this. But, frankly, I am not fond of raising old ghosts."

Smeaton answered him a little stiffly. "In my calling, sir. we are often compelled to put inconvenient questions, but only when, in our judgment, they are absolutely necessary."

"I accept your statement on that head, unreservedly, Mr Smeaton." The frown cleared from the Premier's brow, and his tone was marked with that fine courtesy which had secured him so many friends.

He paused a moment, drew a sigh, and resumed. "I will be quite frank with you, Smeaton. That chatterbox Boyle has told you the truth. He was not in our particular set, but of course the common rumours reached him. There was a scandal—a very considerable scandal. It distressed his friends greatly, especially those who, like myself, appreciated his exceptional talents, and predicted for him a great career."

Again he paused. Then he resumed:

"I am glad to say our counsels and influence prevailed in the end. We weaned him from this fascinating lady—who fought very hard for him, I must tell you. In the end we won. A year later he married a very charming girl, who made him the best of wives, and to whom, I have every reason to believe, he was devotedly attached."

Smeaton rose, and expressed his thanks for the candid way in which Mr Chesterton had treated him.

“One last question, sir, and I have done,” he said. “What would be the present age of this lady?”

“She is ten years or so Monkton’s junior, and looks ten years younger than that. At least, she did the last time I saw her, and that was a few months ago.”

As he walked across back to Scotland Yard, Smeaton turned it all over in his mind. Lady Wrenwyck was ten years younger than Monkton, and looked ten years younger than her real age. Therefore, without doubt, she was a beautiful and fascinating woman, and still dangerous.

Had he cared to question the Prime Minister more closely, he could have gleaned more information about the Wrenwyck household. But Mr Chesterton was obviously disinclined to raise “old ghosts,” as he called them. He would obtain what he wanted by other methods.

He hunted up Lord Wrenwyck in the peerage, and found him to be a person of some importance, who possessed three houses in the country, and lived in Park Lane. He was also twelfth Baron.

Smeaton summoned one of his subordinates, a promising young fellow, keen at this particular kind of work, and showed him the page in the peerage.

“I want you to find out as quickly as possible all you can about this family. You understand, Johnson—every detail you can pick up.”

Detective-sergeant Johnson, qualifying for promotion, smiled at his chief and gave him his assurance.

“I’ve had more difficult jobs, and perhaps a few easier ones, Mr Smeaton. I’ll get on it at once, and I don’t think you’ll be disappointed,” he said.

Mr Johnson omitted to mention, with a reticence that must be commended, that a cousin of his was a footman next door to the Wrenwyck establishment, and accustomed to look in of an evening at a select hostelry adjacent to Park Lane.

That same evening—for Johnson’s methods were swift and sure—he

waited on his chief at Smeaton's house, with an unmistakable air of triumph on his usually impassive features.

"I have got up some facts, sir. I will read you from my notes. Lady Wrenwyck was a girl when she married; her husband some twenty years older. She was forced into the marriage by her parents, who were of good family, but poor as church mice. Her ladyship was a beautiful girl, she soon went the pace, and had heaps of admirers, young and old. The husband, horribly jealous, thought he had bought her with his money. Terrible scenes between the pair, in which her ladyship held her own."

Smeaton offered the subordinate his rare meed of praise. "You have done devilish well, Johnson. Go on."

Sergeant Johnson proceeded, refreshing himself from his notes. "For several years past they have lived in a sort of armed truce. They live together, that is to say, in the same house, but they never exchange a word with each other, except before guests. If they have to hold communication, it is by means of notes, conveyed through the valet and the lady's maid."

"An extraordinary house, Johnson—eh?" interjected Smeaton, thinking of his own little comfortable household.

"It's a bit funny, sir, to ordinary people, but in Society nothing is uncommon," replied Johnson. "Shall I go on with my notes?"

"Please do," said Smeaton cordially. Johnson was of the younger generation, but he was shaping well. Perhaps it is possible that youngsters have a wider outlook than their elders.

Mr Johnson read on, in a deferential voice:

"His lordship is an invalid—suffers from some affection of the joints, an aggravated form of rheumatism, walks with a stick. Has been absent from Park Lane for a little time. Nobody knows where he is. His confidential man of business, steward or secretary or something, runs the house in his absence."

"And her ladyship?" queried Smeaton eagerly.

“I’m coming to that, sir. Her ladyship has been away for some time; travelling abroad they think. My informant gave me the date of her departure. Here it is, sir.”

Smeaton looked at the little pencilled note. He rose, and shook his subordinate cordially by the hand, saying:

“Really you’ve done more than well. You forget nothing, I see. I shall watch your career with great interest. If I can push you I will. You may rely on that.”

Johnson bowed low at the great man’s praise. “A word here from you, Mr Smeaton, and I’m made in the Service.”

His voice faltered skilfully here, and he withdrew, leaving Smeaton to his reflections.

The great detective meditated long and carefully. He was not a person to jump hastily at conclusions. He sifted the actual from the obvious.

One fact emerged clearly, and it was this: Lady Wrenwyck had left her home, to which she had not returned, two days before the mysterious disappearance of Reginald Monkton—*two days*.

That feather-headed fool, Caleb Boyle, had told him to “find the woman.” Was the feather-headed fool right, and he, Smeaton, upon the wrong road?

Chapter Twenty One.

Shades of Soho.

Wingate smiled as he read the flamboyant note from Caleb Boyle, accepting his invitation to dinner. It concluded with a characteristic flourish. “Trusting that our meeting may prove as agreeable to you, as it is in anticipation to myself. Yours sincerely, C. Boyle.”

It was a beautiful summer morning. His thoughts flew to his well-beloved. What was she doing at this particular moment? He could guess too well. Sitting, with that far-away look in her dear eyes, brooding and lonely amid the ruins of her once happy home.

He did not usually call so early, but to-day must be an exception. A brilliant idea had occurred to the fond young lover; he hastened to put it into execution.

She sprang up when he entered, and the light in her beautiful eyes, the faint flush on her cheek, told him that he was welcome. The soft lips returned his fervent kiss.

“We are going to take a holiday, darling,” he cried gaily. “This is a perfect day; it’s a shame to be stifled in London. We will run down by train to Shepperton. I’ll get a boat and pull you to Hampton Court. We’ll lunch there, and afterwards stroll round the gardens. Then I will bring you back home, I wonder if you remember that day—it seems such a little while ago—when we first met?”

“Shall I ever forget it?” she whispered softly. “I think, perhaps, I fell a little bit in love with you then. And afterwards we met at Hendon, and you came to call on us at Chesterfield Street. And my dear father took a great fancy to you. And now—” she looked at him shyly, and did not finish the sentence.

He took her in his arms and kissed her. “And now, my darling, we are sweethearts for ever and ever.”

A couple of hours later they were on the river. The beauty of the warm summer day, the pleasurable excitement of the journey, the change of scene, had momentarily lifted the shadows and induced forgetfulness. For that brief space she was her old joyous self, a girl in the glorious fulness of her youth, living and beloved.

Her thoughts were such as come to pure girls in such moments.

As they glided down the placid stream, the golden afternoon warm and odorous with the mingled scents of the summer air, so would they journey through life together. She remembered how her father had adored her mother. Austin would be such another true lover to the end of his days.

They returned to Chesterfield Street. She was loth to part with him and pressed him to stay to dinner. He pleaded a business engagement. He could not break faith with Boyle, although he was sorely tempted to do so.

“You will be sure to come to-morrow?” she said, as she kissed him good-night. It cut him to the quick to leave her alone in that sad house, but he had no choice. At all costs, he must keep Boyle away from her.

“Quite sure, my darling. You love me a little?” he whispered as they parted.

“Oh! so much,” she answered with a sweet smile. “Didn’t I tell you this morning that I fell in love with you a long time ago? You have been so kind, so patient, so good. I fear I am a very sad sweetheart, but I know you understand. The ties between my dear father and myself were so close. We were all the world to each other.”

He hastened away, more firmly resolved than ever that Caleb Boyle should never put his foot in Chesterfield Street. That trusting heart must never be pierced by doubts of her father’s rectitude.

Wingate was a few minutes late at the club that evening. He found Mr Boyle awaiting him, in the full glory of evening attire. His host could not help observing that the suit had seen good service, and that the shirt was frayed and dingy as to colour. But Boyle’s ready assurance was not in the least dashed by these circumstances. He advanced with outstretched

hand, and greeted Wingate in his usual fulsome manner.

“I am sorry you troubled to dress, Mr Boyle. This is quite a Bohemian club. I ought to have told you.”

Boyle waved a deprecatory hand. And his self-satisfied manner seemed to imply that, at this hour, evening attire was natural to him, and that he would have assumed it in any case.

They went in to dinner. Boyle began talking at once. He admired the dining-room, the service, the club and its arrangements generally.

“It is some years since I entered these portals,” he remarked in his pompous, affected manner. “I used to know some good fellows in the old days.”

He named Jimmy this, Dicky that, and Tommy the other. Wingate noted that all the members with whom he boasted acquaintance had joined the majority.

“I belonged to a lot of Bohemian clubs when I first started my London career,” he explained. “I was a member of the Garrick, and at the Savage I believe I am still remembered. Ah! that those good old days could come again.”

He heaved a deep sigh, and for a few minutes applied himself to the very excellent meal that was set before him. He ate heartily, consuming big portions of each dish. His host had a shrewd notion that he had economised in the matter of lunch.

When dinner was over, they passed to the smoking-room, where Mr Boyle very speedily disposed of a few whiskies, taking two to the other’s one.

It was here that Wingate touched lightly and delicately upon the visit to Smeaton.

“I would like to impress upon you, Mr Boyle, that, under ordinary circumstances. Miss Monkton would be delighted to receive any old friend of her father’s; but I fear such a visit at present would pain her very

much.”

Boyle rose to the occasion. “It is I who am in fault. It was a thoughtless suggestion on my part, made on the spur of the moment, and prompted, I assure you, by the sincerest feelings of sympathy for her, and esteem for my dear old friend.”

If his motives been of the nature suggested by Smeaton, he was certainly taking it very well. Wingate pressed on him another whisky-and-soda. The offer was accepted with his usual alacrity. His powers of absorption appeared to be unbounded.

Wingate proposed a change of scene. “What do you say to an hour or two at the Empire? We’ll stroll round and get a couple of stalls.”

Mr Boyle was delighted at the suggestion. “Excellent,” he cried, with the glee of a schoolboy. “Dear old Empire, dear old mad and sad Empire, what visions it conjures up! Let us go at once. I will tread again the merry lounge, forget all gnawing care, and summon back the light-heartedness of youth.”

He revelled in it all so much that it was eleven o’clock before Wingate could get him away. And then he had not exhausted his capacity for enjoyment.

“Let us make a night of it,” he cried cheerfully. “You don’t know what a delight it is to mix for a few hours with a man of my own world, like yourself. We had an excellent dinner, but I am sure we could do a little supper together.”

Wingate would have preferred to decline, but, if he did so, Boyle might be offended. And it was, above all things, necessary to keep him in good humour.

“Good man,” cried Mr Boyle, with one of his sweeping gestures. “The night is young. A few paces from here is a snug little restaurant, presided over by my old and excellent friend, Luigi. You will be my guest.”

Wingate started at the name. It was the little house in Soho where Monkton had dined with the bearded Russian on the night of his

disappearance.

The smiling proprietor welcomed Boyle with extreme cordiality. They were very well acquainted.

They had a light supper, and at the conclusion Boyle drew aside the waiter, and whispered something in his ear. Wingate caught the words: “Put it down. I’ll call and pay to-morrow.”

The gentleman in the worn evening suit and the dingy shirt was evidently short of cash. Wingate took advantage of the opportunity. Smeaton had taken a dislike to the man, but what the poor broken-down creature had told him might be of service.

“Pardon me, Boyle,” he said, dropping the formal prefix, “but I could not help overhearing. If you have come out without money, please let me be your banker for the time being.”

There was a long pause. Boyle seized the tumbler of whisky-and-soda that stood at his elbow, and drained it at a draught. For a few seconds he seemed struggling with some hidden emotion. Then his usual flamboyancy returned. He hailed the waiter in a loud voice, and ordered more refreshment.

Then he laid his long, lean hand on the other’s shoulder, and spoke in his deep, rolling tones.

“Why should I play the hypocrite to a good fellow like yourself, Wingate. I’m as poor as a church-rat—you can guess that from my clothes. I asked you to supper on the spur of the moment with eighteenpence in my pocket, knowing that my old friend Luigi would give me credit. I have a roof over my head for the rest of the week. Next week I may not have that. But I don’t moan and whine; I set my teeth and smile, as I am smiling now. Whatever men may think of me, they shall never say that Caleb Boyle showed the white feather.”

He took another deep draught as he finished the pathetic outburst. Wingate felt in his pockets.

“I haven’t much with me, only a couple of sovereigns. But you can square

the bill with that. I have a cheque-book with me, and I shall be delighted to tide you over immediate difficulties, if you will name a sum."

"Would ten pounds be too much?" asked Boyle, in a strangely hesitating voice. For the moment, his assurance seemed to have forsaken him; he seemed to realise to what he had fallen.

"Not at all." The cheque was written and handed to the poor derelict, together with the two pounds in cash.

For once, the usual flow of words did not come. It was a quiet and subdued Boyle who called the waiter, and bade him bring the bill.

"I cannot find words to thank you," he told his benefactor, "I can only say, God bless you. I have done the same to many a poor devil myself, in olden days, but never in a more kindly and generous fashion. I should like, if I may, to tell you a little bit of history."

Wingate nodded. He could not but feel sorry for the poor broken-down creature, who tried to hide his sorrows under this brave and pompous front.

"I was ruined by a devil whom I first met here, before Luigi took the place. He called himself Bellamy, but that was not his real name. He was a foreign fraudulent company promoter by profession. I was young and gullible. He dazzled me with his swindling schemes, until he had stripped me of every penny."

Wingate murmured his sympathy. He surmised that Boyle was exaggerating when he accused the foreigner of having been the sole cause of his ruin. There was no doubt he had contributed pretty considerably towards his own downfall. But was there ever a spendthrift yet who would admit as much?

"But thank Heaven, he was trapped at last. He went a step too far, and was beggared by a lawsuit brought against him by the shareholders of a company he had promoted, and which never paid a dividend. Our old friend Monkton led against him, and trounced him thoroughly, I can tell you. Every penny he possessed was seized, and he fled the country for fear of arrest."

Wingate pricked up his ears.

“You say this man was a foreigner. Would you recognise his handwriting, if you saw it?”

“Certainly. I have more than a dozen of his letters in my possession. If you would care to come round to my rooms, I will show you them to-night.”

Wingate rose quickly. “Is it far?”

Boyle answered without a shade of embarrassment, “Shepherd’s Bush. Not, I regret to say, what you would call a fashionable suburb.”

In another two minutes they were in a taxi speeding towards Boyle’s residence.

Chapter Twenty Two.

One Fact is Established.

Boyle had directed the driver to stop at Uxbridge Road Station, where the two roads branch off, the one on the left leading into Chiswick, that on the right passing through Hanwell and Uxbridge.

He got out, and insisted on paying the fare, out of his newly-acquired wealth.

“We are now at the beginning of Shepherd’s Bush. The Carthorne road, where I live—I should rather say exist—is a few minutes’ walk from here. It would have been impossible to direct the driver. It would require the exploring instinct of a Stanley or a Livingstone to track me to my lair,” he laughed.

He led Wingate through various mean streets, consisting of two long rows of narrow three-storied houses. Several of them were to let. Most of them bore cards in their windows with the words “Furnished apartments.” Poverty everywhere betrayed its ugly features.

Boyle paused before the door of one of these ill-favoured tenements, and applied a latchkey. Wingate stepped into a narrow hall, covered by a strip of oil-cloth, full of holes, the pattern worn away with hard wear. An evil-smelling lamp hung from the ceiling, shedding a feeble light that was little removed from darkness.

Boyle led him to the end of the passage, and took him into a chamber that extended the width of the house. Quickly he struck a match, and lit a lamp.

Wingate felt terribly depressed. But Boyle, fortified, no doubt, by the unexpected possession of those few providential sovereigns, had recovered his accustomed buoyancy. He waved his hand round the faded apartment with a theatrical air.

“Welcome to my poor abode, the present *pied-à-terre* of Caleb Boyle,

once a member of exclusive clubs, and not an unknown figure in London society."

Wingate looked round and shuddered inwardly at what he saw. A horsehair sofa, black and stained with age, a carpet, worn threadbare and full of holes, three cane chairs, one easy-chair, worn and bulged out of shape, a cheap chest of drawers, with half the knobs missing. And at the side of the wall opposite the fire-place, a low, narrow single bedstead covered with a darned and patched counterpane. This was flanked by a yellow deal washstand.

Was it possible that anybody who had once lived decently, could draw a breath in this musty and abominable hole? Certainly there was a courage and power of endurance in the man that compelled Wingate's admiration.

Boyle pushed one of the rickety chairs towards his guest, and crossed to a small hanging cupboard, from the recesses of which he produced a black bottle, which he held up to the lamp.

"There is corn in Egypt," he cried gaily; he seemed in the highest spirits amid these depressing surroundings. "We will carouse while the night is still young. I am sorry I have no soda, and I fear all the houses are shut. But the whisky is good."

He poured out two liberal portions, added some water, and drained his off at a draught. Then he stooped, and lifted the lid of a dilapidated tin box.

"Now for the letters," he said.

In a few moments he had found them, tied together in a packet with a thin piece of twine. On a strip of paper within was: "Letters from Charles Bellamy to Caleb Boyle."

Wingate took them, and rapidly scanned the contents of the first two. There were about a dozen in all. They related to purely business matters, dwelling upon the magnificent prospects of a certain company in which Boyle had taken shares, and exhorting him to patience under the present non-payment of dividends.

Read by the light of subsequent events, they were obviously the letters of

a swindler to the victim he had entrapped in his financial meshes.

But, of course, to Wingate the supreme matter of interest was the handwriting. And here, he could not be positive. He had read the threatening letter, and he knew the contents of it by heart. But that was some time ago, and he could not form a mental picture of it.

“Can you trust me with one of those, Mr Boyle, to show to our friend Smeaton, so that he may compare it with a letter in his possession. I think, so far as my memory serves me, they were written by the same man, but I want to see the two together. If you would rather not part with it, bring it down yourself to-morrow to Scotland Yard, and I will meet you there.”

Boyle was hurt at the suggestion. “My dear Wingate, take the whole packet, if you wish. After the noble way in which you have behaved to-night, is it likely I should refuse such a trifling thing?”

“Thanks, they shall be returned to you directly Smeaton has done with them. A thousand thanks, and now I will say good-night. I have to be up betimes to-morrow morning.”

He left, after refusing Boyle’s earnest request to join him in a final whisky. He fancied there would not be much left in that bottle when the poor broken-down gentleman stumbled into his uninviting bed.

Wingate took the precious packet round to Smeaton next morning. And the detective, after a minute and lengthy examination, declared there could be no doubt that Charles Bellamy was the writer of the threatening letter.

“I will put all the documents in the hands of an expert for confirmation,” he said, “but I am quite certain in my own mind, and I shall follow up the clue at once.”

“You have also another clue, that concerning Lady Wrenwyck,” observed Austin. “Strange that we should be indebted to this peculiar creature, Boyle, for both!”

“He seems to grow more useful as we cultivate his further acquaintance,”

said the detective, a humorous smile softening for a moment his rather harsh features.

“To which of the two do you attach the greater importance?” was Wingate’s next question.

“It is hard to say. But by following both we may arrive at a solution. They must be pursued simultaneously and that requires two men. Personally I think the Bellamy track may produce the better result, and naturally I should like to choose that for myself. On the other hand, the Wrenwyck one requires some experience and *finesse*, both of which qualities I flatter myself I possess. Anyway, I must trust one of the two to a subordinate.”

He passed, and remained silent for a few moments, then made up his mind. He rang the bell, and requested that Johnson should come to him at once.

“I have resolved to take the Bellamy clue,” he explained to Wingate. “It will require some research, possibly lengthy communications with the police of other countries. Here I shall be better equipped than a comparatively new man. Johnson has so far acted with great promptitude in the Wrenwyck matter.”

Detective-sergeant Johnson appeared almost immediately, and to him Smeaton issued brief instructions.

“About Lady Wrenwyck. You have lost no time over this, and I want you to follow it up. This is Mr Wingate, before whom we can speak quite freely. Find out where the lady is and, equally important, if she is alone, or with a companion. I exclude, of course, her maid.”

Mr Johnson bowed. “I quite understand, sir. I know, as a fact, her maid left with her. She was with her ladyship before her marriage, and is, no doubt, entirely in her mistress’s confidence.”

The detective paused a second, and then added a little touch of his own which, he was sure, would not be lost on his chief. Besides, it showed his knowledge of high society, and of the ways of ladies who were a trifle unconventional.

“Of course, sir, in circumstances of a delicate nature, ladies have been known to give their maids a holiday.”

“I quite appreciate that point, Johnson. Well, get on to the job at once, and confer with me when necessary.”

Johnson withdrew, well pleased that his chief had entrusted him with so important a mission. Smeaton turned to his visitor.

“Well, Mr Wingate, we ought to find out something in the next few days. I will get on to the track of Bellamy at once. Kindly drop a note to Boyle that I will keep his letters for a little time. Good-bye for the present. I will communicate with you the moment there is anything worth telling.”

He set to work at once on the Bellamy *dossier*. Up to a certain point the task was comparatively easy. The man was of Polish origin, his real name being Ivan Bolinski. A little further investigation revealed the fact that he was the elder brother of the Bolinski who lived in the Boundary Road, St. John’s Wood, the man who had dined with Monkton at the Soho restaurant, and according to the evidence of Davies, the taxi-driver, one of the pair who had hailed his vehicle for the conveyance of the dying man to Chesterfield Street.

So far, the scent seemed a warm one. Bellamy, to give him his assumed name, was born of an English mother, and, in marked contrast to his brother, betrayed very little of the foreigner in his appearance. He spoke English with a perfect accent.

He had started his career as a money-lender, his operations, which were on a small scale, being confined chiefly to his compatriots. He next blossomed out, in conjunction with a couple of scoundrels of the same kidney, into a promoter of small and shady concerns. Success attended his efforts, and he then flew at higher game. But although he amassed money he was never connected with a single flourishing company. He made thousands out of his victims, but they never saw a penny of their money back until just at the end.

And at this point Smeaton came to the trial at which Monkton had appeared and obtained a verdict for the restitution of the sums acquired by fraudulent misrepresentation. Although only a civil action, the

evidence against Bellamy was so damaging that a criminal prosecution was bound to follow.

This he himself recognised, with the result that within twenty-four hours after the verdict had been given he escaped from England under an assumed name.

Five years later he was convicted in America, and sentenced to a long term of imprisonment, under this assumed name. At the trial it was conclusively proved that he was the same man, Ivan Bolinski, alias Bellamy, who had previously figured in the English Courts, and been driven from the pursuit of his nefarious occupation by the skill and eloquence of Monkton.

He was tracked through a series of wanderings in different countries, where no doubt he still pursued his profession of *chevalier d'industrie*, although he seemed during that period to have escaped the active interference of justice till about five years ago.

At that date he was living at a small village in Cornwall, either on his private means, or perhaps on money allowed him by his brother. Against this brother, so far as his commercial career was concerned, nothing of a suspicious nature was known.

Here Smeaton came to a *cul-de-sac*. At that date Ivan Bolinski was living in this remote Cornish village, under the name of Charlton. Twenty years or so had elapsed since, in a moment of burning hatred, he had penned that threatening letter to the man who had brought to an abrupt close his nefarious career in this country.

To that remote fishing hamlet went Smeaton. He found the quaint little house which had sheltered Bellamy; which he hoped still sheltered him. The door was opened by an elderly woman.

"I have come to inquire about a man named Charlton who came to live here five years ago," he said, going to the point at once.

She was evidently an honest creature who knew nothing of what was going on in the big world outside her little corner of earth.

“Please come in, sir. A gentleman of that name came to lodge here about that time.”

She led him into the tiny parlour, and asked him to be seated. At Smeaton’s request she told him all about her lodger.

“He was in very poor health, sir, when he came here, and he seemed to gradually get worse. He was a very quiet gentleman; spent most of his time reading. When he first came he took long walks, but latterly he had to give these up. He lived a most solitary life, hardly ever wrote or received a letter, and had only one visitor, who came from London to see him occasionally.”

“Can you describe this visitor to me?” asked Smeaton.

“A tall, bearded man, who walked with a limp, and looked like a foreigner. He told me he was his brother. I remarked once how unlike they were, and he smiled and said he took after his mother, and the other after his father. Once he told me that Charlton was not his proper name, that he had taken it for the sake of property.”

A somewhat indiscreet admission, thought Smeaton. But after all those years there was little to fear. He had been forgotten by now, and this simple woman could do him no harm.

The landlady went on with her narrative.

“As I told you, sir, he got worse and worse, and Doctor Mayhew, who lives a little way beyond the village, was always in and out. It must have cost a small fortune, that long illness. Then one night, just before the end, he sent me with a telegram to his brother—it was a long foreign name, and I can’t remember it.”

“Bolinski,” suggested Smeaton.

The woman looked puzzled. “Very likely, sir; I know it began with a B. Next day the brother came down, and stayed with him till he died, a matter of a week. I remember when the doctor was going to give the certificate he told him the right name to put on it. I remember his words: ‘The name of Charlton was assumed, doctor. On the certificate we will

have the real one. It doesn’t matter now. It was assumed for reasons I do not wish to explain, and they would not interest you.’”

“When did he die?” asked Smeaton eagerly.

“A little over two years ago, sir, this very month.”

Then, as the detective rose, she added: “If you would like to step round to Doctor Mayhew’s he is sure to be in at this time. He could give you full particulars of the end.”

“Thanks,” said Smeaton absently, as he bade her good-day.

There was no need to visit the doctor. The woman’s tale had been simple and convincing.

What he knew for a certainty was that Ivan Bolinski, alias Bellamy, alias Charlton, the writer of the threatening letter, had died more than two years before Reginald Monkton’s disappearance.

Was Reginald Monkton dead, or still alive?

Chapter Twenty Three.

Which Makes One Fact Plain.

Mr Johnson felt a pleasurable sense of elation when he embarked on the mission assigned him by his chief. If he could discover anything that would help to elucidate or solve what was known amongst the select few as “the Monkton Mystery,” rapid promotion was assured.

Smeaton was not a jealous man, and besides, if Johnson did score a success, it was his senior who had given him the materials to work upon.

Still, although pleasantly elated, he did not disguise from himself the difficulties of his task. He had to find out where Lady Wrenwyck was hiding—she was hiding, of course, or her whereabouts would have been known to her household. And he did not know the woman by sight.

He grappled with the smaller difficulty first, when he met his cousin the footman, at their usual meeting-place.

“Any chance of getting a peep at a photograph of her ladyship?” he asked. He had told Willet, such was his name, as much as it was good for him to know, and no more.

“I’m very friendly with several of the Wrenwyck lot,” was Willet’s reply. “I daresay I could smuggle one out for you for half-an-hour, but it’s exciting suspicion, isn’t it? And I suppose you don’t want to take too many people into your confidence?”

Johnson agreed with this sentiment emphatically. He could swallow any amount of confidence himself, but he hated reciprocity. Hear everything, and tell nothing, or, at the worst, as little as you can. That was his motto.

“It would lead to gossip, and we should have to fudge up some tale or other, Dick. We’ll let it alone for the present, and only use it as a last resource.”

Mr Willet reflected, and then he remembered. “Look here. I’ve just

thought of the very thing! I've a lot of old illustrated newspapers by me. Not very long ago there was a full-page portrait of her, in fancy dress at the Devonshire House ball—Queen of Sheba or something. It's a splendid likeness. If you once see it, you'd pick her out from a thousand. Stay here for ten minutes, and I'll hunt it out and bring it round."

Willet was as good as his word. In a little over the time he had stated, the portrait was in Johnson's hands, and carefully scrutinised. In the words of his cousin, wherever he met Lady Wrenwyck he would "pick her out of a thousand."

That little difficulty was solved without any loss of time. The important one remained: where was she at the present moment?

On this point Willet could give no information. Her maid had packed her boxes, and they had started off one afternoon when her husband was absent, without a hint of their destination from either of them.

"Doesn't Lord Wrenwyck know? Surely she must have given him some information, even if it was misleading."

"I doubt if Wrenwyck knows any more than we do," replied Willet, alluding to this highly-descended peer with the easy familiarity of his class. "She's disappeared half-a-dozen times since her marriage in this way, and come back when it suited her, just as if nothing had happened."

"A rum household," observed Johnson, who was not so used to high-class ways as his cousin. "But you told me that she had no money when she married him. You can't travel about for weeks on nothing. What does she do for cash on these jaunts?"

Mr Willet shrugged his shoulders. "Not so difficult as you think. The old man made a handsome settlement on her, and I suppose she times her journeys when she's got plenty in hand, and comes back when she's broke. Besides, her bank would let her overdraw, if she wrote to them."

"You're right, I didn't think of that. Her bankers have got her address right enough, and, of course, they wouldn't give it. They would forward a letter though, if one could write one that would draw her."

There was a pause after this. Johnson was pondering as to how it was possible to utilise her bankers—somebody in the household would be sure to know who they were. Willet was pondering too, and, as it appeared, to some purpose.

“Look here, you haven’t told me too much, and I don’t blame you either, under the circumstances, but I see you want to get on her track. I’ve an idea I’ll tell you.”

“You’re full of ’em,” said Johnson appreciatively.

“You may take my word for it, nobody at the Wrenwyck house knows; anyway, nobody I can get hold of. Now, she’s got a bosom friend, a Mrs Adair, rather rapid like herself, and married to just such another grumpy, half-cracked old chap as Wrenwyck himself.”

“I didn’t know he was half-cracked,” interposed Johnson, who never missed the smallest piece of information.

“They all say he is. Wheeler, his valet, tells me he has frightful fits of rage, and after they are over, sits growling and gnashing his teeth—most of ’em false, by the way.”

Mr Willet paused for a moment to accept his cousin’s offer of another drink, and then resumed.

“I don’t want to raise your hopes too high, old man. If she’s on the strict q.t. it’s long odds she won’t let a soul know where she is. But if she has told anybody, it’s Mrs Adair, who, if necessary, would help her with money if she’s short. They’ve been bosom friends for years; when in town they see each other every day.”

Johnson nodded his head judiciously. “It’s an even chance that Mrs Adair knows, if everybody else is in the dark. But how the devil are we to get at Mrs Adair? If we could, she wouldn’t give her away.”

Mr Willet grinned triumphantly. “Of course not, I see that as well as you do; I’m not a juggins. Now this is just where I come in to help the great London detective.”

“You are priceless, Dick,” murmured Mr Johnson in a voice of unfeigned admiration.

“Mrs Adair’s maid is a girl I’ve long had a sneaking regard for. But I had to lie low because she was keeping company with an infernal rotter, who she thought was everything her fancy painted. Two months ago, she found him out, and gave him the chuck. Then I stepped in. We’re not formally engaged as yet, but I think she’s made up her mind she might do worse. It’s a little early yet. I’m taking her out to-morrow night. I’ll pump her and see if Mrs Adair receives any letters from Lady Wrenwyck. My young woman knows the handwriting, and the postmark will tell you what you want—eh?”

Johnson again expressed his admiration of his cousin’s resource, suggested a little *douceur* for his trouble, and gallantly invited him and his sweetheart to take a bit of dinner with him.

But Willet, who was of a jealous disposition, waved him sternly away. “After marriage, if you like, my lad, not before. You’re too good-looking, and not old enough. Never introduce your young lady to a pal. No offence, of course. You’d do the same in my place, or you haven’t got the headpiece I give you credit for.”

Johnson admitted meekly that in the case of an attractive young woman it was wise to take precautions. They parted on the understanding that they would meet at the same place two nights later.

They met at the time appointed, and there was an almost offensive air of triumph about Mr Willet’s demeanour that argued good things. He started by ordering refreshment.

“Now to business,” he said, in his sharp, slangy way. “I’ve pumped Lily all right, and this job seems as easy as falling off a house. No letters have come from the lady, or gone to her, since she left, but—” he made a long pause here. “Every week a letter comes to Mrs Adair with the Weymouth postmark on it and every week Mrs Adair writes to a Mrs Marsh, whom Lily never heard of, and the letter is addressed to the Weymouth post-office. The writing on the envelope that comes to Mrs Adair is not Lady W.’s. Do you tumble?”

“It’s a hundred chances to one that her ladyship is at Weymouth, and her maid addresses the envelope,” was Johnson’s answer.

“I say ditto. Mrs Adair’s letter is posted every Thursday. To-day is Wednesday. Put yourself in the Weymouth train to-morrow, keep a watch on the post-office next morning, and the odds are that letter will be fetched by Lady Wrenwyck, or her maid.”

“Thanks to the portrait I know the mistress, but I don’t know the maid. Describe her to me.”

Mr Willet produced a piece of paper and pencil. “I’m a bit of an artist in my spare time. I’ll draw her for you so exactly that you can’t mistake her.”

He completed the sketch and handed it to his cousin. Later, they parted with mutual expressions of good will.

Friday morning saw Johnson prowling round the Weymouth post-office. He had to wait some time, but his patience was rewarded—he saw both Lady Wrenwyck and her maid.

After issuing from the post-office, they went together to several shops, strolled for a few minutes up and down the sea front, and then returned home.

He had not expected to find them at a hotel, for obvious reasons. He was not therefore surprised when they entered one of the bigger houses facing the sea. They wanted privacy, and their only chance of getting that was in lodgings.

He snatched a hasty lunch, and kept observation on the house till about six o’clock, in the hope that her ladyship would come out again with a companion. But he was disappointed in this expectation.

He made up his mind to force matters a little. He went up boldly to the door and knocked.

“Is Mrs Marsh at home?” he asked the servant who answered the summons.

The girl answered in the affirmative. “Who shall I say, please?” she added.

“Wait a moment. Is she alone?”

It was a random shot, but it had the effect he intended.

“Quite alone. Mr Williams is very bad again to-day. He’s in bed.”

Mr Williams! Just the sort of ordinary name a man would assume under the circumstances.

“She won’t know my name. Just say a Mr Johnson from London wishes to see her on urgent private business.”

As he waited in the hall, he wondered whether she would refuse to see him? Well, if she did, it only meant delay. He would stay on at Weymouth till his business was done.

The maid interrupted his reflections by calling over the banisters, “Will you come up, please?”

The next moment, he was bowing to Lady Wrenwyck, who was seated in an easy-chair, a book, which she had just laid down, on her lap. She was a very beautiful woman still, and although she sat in a strong light, did not look over thirty-five.

She received him a little haughtily. “I do not remember to have seen you before. What is your business with me?”

Johnson fired his first shot boldly. “I believe I have the honour of addressing Lady Wrenwyck?”

Her face went a shade paler. “I do not deny it. Please explain your object in seeking me out. Will you sit down?”

The detective took a chair. “You have no doubt, madam, heard of the mysterious disappearance of an old friend of yours, Mr Monkton.”

He had expected to see her start, or show some signs of embarrassment.

She did nothing of the kind. Her voice, as she answered him, was quite calm.

“I have heard something of it—some wild rumour. I am sorry for his daughter and his friends, for himself, if anything terrible has happened. But why do you come to me about this?”

It was Johnson’s turn to feel embarrassment now. Her fine eyes looked at him unwaveringly, and there was just the suspicion of a contemptuous smile on her beautiful face.

“I knew you were close friends once,” he stammered. “It struck me you might know something—he might have confided something to you.”

He broke down, and there was a long pause. For a space Lady Wrenwyck turned her face away, and looked out on the sea front. Suddenly she divined his errand, and a low ripple of laughter escaped her.

“I think I see the meaning of it all now. You have picked up some ancient rumours of my friendship with Mr Monkton, and you think he is with me here; that I am responsible for his disappearance.”

The detective was too embarrassed to answer her. He was thankful that she had seen things so quickly.

“I don’t know why I should admit anything to you,” she went on, in a contemptuous voice, “but I will admit this much. There was a time when I was passionately in love with him. At that time, if he had lifted up his little finger I would have followed him to the end of the world. He never asked me—he had water in his veins, not blood. That was in the long ago. To-day he is nothing to me—barely a memory. Go back to London, my good man. You will not find Reginald Monkton here.”

Her scornful tone braced the detective, and dispelled his momentary embarrassment.

“Who then is Mr Williams?” he asked doggedly.

“Oh, you know that, do you?—you seem full of useless knowledge. Mr

Williams, an assumed name like my own, is my youngest and favourite brother. There is a tragic family history which I shall not tell you. It suffices to say I am the only member of his family who has not severed relations with him. He is very ill. I am here to nurse him back to health and strength."

Johnson looked dubious. She spoke with the ring of truth, but these women of the world could be consummate actresses when they chose.

She rose from her chair, a smile half contemptuous half amused upon her charming face.

"You don't believe me. Wait a moment, and I will convince you."

She left the room, returning after a moment's absence.

"Follow me and see for yourself," she said coldly, and led the way into a bedroom adjoining the room in which they had been talking.

"Look here," she pointed to the bed. "He is asleep; I gave him a composing draught an hour ago."

Johnson looked. A man of about thirty-five, bearing a remarkable likeness to herself, was lying on his side, his hand supporting his head. The worn, drawn features spoke of pain and suffering from which, for the moment, he was relieved.

The detective stole from the room on tiptoe, followed by Lady Wrenwyck. "You know Mr Monkton by sight, I presume? Have you seen enough? If so, I beg you to relieve me of your presence and your insulting suspicions." She pointed to the stairs with an imperious hand.

Johnson had never felt a bigger fool in his life—he would have liked the earth to open and swallow him.

"I humbly apologise," he faltered, and sneaked down the stairs, feeling like a whipped mongrel.

Chapter Twenty Four.

The Mystery of the Maid-Servant.

When Johnson reported himself to his chief at Scotland Yard he had in a great measure recovered his self-possession. He had only failure to his credit, but that was not his fault. He had followed up the clue given to him with exemplary speed. The weakness lay in the unsubstantial nature of the clue.

Smeaton listened to his recital, and made no caustic or petulant comment. He was a kindly man, and seldom reproached his subordinates, except for instances of sheer stupidity. He never inquired into their methods. Whether they obtained their results by luck or judgment was no concern of his, so long as the results were obtained.

“Sit down. Let us talk this over,” he said genially. “It was a clue worth following, wasn’t it?”

“Undoubtedly, sir,” replied Johnson. “It was one of the few alternatives possible in such a case. I assure you, sir, I set out with high hopes.”

“It’s a failure, Johnson, but that’s no fault of yours; you did all that could be expected. I have had my rebuff, too. I have tracked the writer of the threatening letter, only to find he died two years before Monkton’s disappearance. That was a nasty knock also. And yet that was a good clue too—of the two, a trifle better perhaps than yours.”

Detective-sergeant Johnson made no answer. Smeaton looked at him sharply. “You would say that was something to work on, wouldn’t you?”

Johnson reflected a moment. When you are going to exalt your own intelligence at the expense of your superior’s intellect, it demands diplomacy.

He spoke deferentially. “May I speak my mind plainly?” he asked.

“I desire perfect frankness.” Smeaton was not a little man. He knew that

elderly men, in spite of their experience, grow stale, and often lose their swiftness of thought. It was well to incline their ears to the rising generation.

“It was a clue worth following, sir, but personally I don’t attach great importance to it.”

“Give me your reasons, Johnson. I know you have an analytical turn of mind. I shall be delighted to hear them.”

And Johnson gave his reasons. “This was a threatening letter. I daresay every big counsel receives them by the dozen. Now, let us construct for a moment the mentality of the writer; we will call him by his real name, Bolinski. A man of keen business instincts, or he would not have been the successful rogue he was. Naturally, therefore, a man of equable temperament.”

“It was not the letter of a man of equable temperament,” interposed Smeaton grimly.

“A temporary aberration,” rejoined the scientific detective. “Even men of calm temperament get into uncontrollable rages occasionally. He wrote it at white heat, strung to momentary madness by the ruin that confronted him. That is understandable. What is *not* understandable is that a man of that well-balanced mind should cherish rancour for a period of twenty-odd years.”

“There is something in what you say, Johnson. I confess that you are more subtle than I am.”

Johnson pursued his advantage. “After the lapse of twelve months, by which time he had probably found his feet again, he would recognise it, to use a phrase we both know well, sir, as ‘a fair cop.’ He had defied the law; the law had got the better of him. He would take off his hat, and say to the law: ‘I give you best. You are the better man, and you won.’”

Smeaton regarded his subordinate with genuine admiration.

“I am not too old to learn, Johnson; you have taught me something to-night.” He paused a moment, and added slowly: “You have taught me to

distinguish the probable from the possible."

Johnson rose, feeling he had done well and impressed his sagacity upon his chief.

"I believe, sir, when you think it over you will admit that such a delayed scheme of vengeance would not be carried out, after the lapse of so many years, by a man of ordinary sanity. I admit it might be carried out by a lunatic, or a person half-demented, on the borderland—a man who had brooded over an ancient wrong till he became obsessed."

Smeaton nodded, in comprehension. His subordinate was developing unsuspected powers.

"Wait a moment, Johnson. We know certain things. We know Bolinski—who wrote the threatening letter—is out of it, so far as active participation is concerned. Lady Wrenwyck is out of it. We know the two who put the dying man in the cab. We know about Farloe and Saxton. We know about the Italian who died at Forest View. We know about the man Whyman, who invited me to stay the night, and disappeared before I was up next morning. You know all these things, everything that has taken place since I took up the case. You have thought it all over."

"I have thought it all over," replied Johnson, always deferential and always imperturbable.

"Don't go yet," said Smeaton. "Frankly, we seem to have come to a dead end. Have *you* anything to suggest?"

Johnson's triumph was complete. That the great Smeaton should seek the advice of a lieutenant, except in the most casual and non-committal way, was a thing unprecedented.

But, following the example of other great men, he did not lose his head. He spoke with his accustomed deliberation, his usual deference.

"The mystery, if it ever is solved, sir, will be solved at Forest View. Keep a watch on that house, day and night." He emphasised the last word, and looked squarely at his chief.

Smeaton gave a sudden start. “You know Varney is watching it.”

“A clever fellow, sir; relies upon intuition largely and has little patience with our slower methods. He watches it by day—well, no doubt—but he doesn’t watch it by night. Many strange things happen when the sun has gone down.”

Smeaton smiled a little uneasily. “You are relying on intuition now yourself, Johnson. But this conversation has given me food for thought. I will carry out your suggestion. In the meantime understand that, in this last mission, you have done all that is possible. I shall send in a report to that effect.”

Johnson withdrew, well pleased with the interview. He had greatly advanced himself in his chief’s estimation and he had skilfully avoided wounding Smeaton’s *amour propre*.

The day was fated to be one of unpleasant surprises. A few hours later Varney dashed into his room, in a state of great excitement.

“Astounding news—infernal news!” he cried, dashing his hat down on the table. “But first look at this, and see if you recognise the original.”

He handed Smeaton a snapshot. The detective examined it carefully. Truth to tell, it was not a very brilliant specimen of photographic art.

“The cap and apron puzzled me a little at first,” he said at length. “But it is certainly Mrs Saxton; in other words, I take it, the parlourmaid at Forest View.”

“Just what I suspected,” cried Varney. “I was thinking about the woman, firmly convinced in my own mind that she was different from what she pretended to be. In a flash I thought of Mrs Saxton. I got a snap at her in the garden yesterday morning, without her seeing me, so as to bring it to you for identification.”

“Forest View seems to be the centre of the mystery,” said Smeaton slowly. “Well, this is not the infernal news, I suppose? There is something more to come.”

And Varney blurted out the astonishing tale. “Forest View is empty. They made tracks in the night—while we were all sound asleep.”

Smeaton thought of Johnson’s recommendation to watch the house by night as well as day. He reproached himself for his own carelessness when dealing with such wary adversaries.

“Tell me all about it,” he said sharply.

Varney went on with his story.

“It has been my custom to stroll round there every night about eleven o’clock, when the lights are put out, generally to the minute,” he said. “I did the same thing last evening; they were extinguished a few minutes later than usual, but I did not attach any importance to that.”

“They were packing up, I suppose, and got a little over their time,” observed Smeaton.

“No doubt. I am usually a light sleeper, but I had taken a long cycle ride in the afternoon, and slept heavily till late in the morning. I took my usual stroll after breakfast. The gate was closed, but there were marks of heavy wheels on the gravel, and all the blinds were down. I went up to the door, and rang the bell. Nobody answered.”

“Did they take all the furniture?” queried Smeaton. “No, they could not have moved it in the time.”

“I am certain, from the marks, only one van had gone in and come out. They only removed what was valuable and important. I questioned the local constable. He saw a van pass, going in the direction of London, but had no idea of where it had come from. Some of them, I expect, got into the van, and the others took a circuitous route in the motor.”

Smeaton listened to all this with profound chagrin. He rose and paced the room.

“I am fed up with the whole thing, Varney,” he said, in a despondent voice. “I have followed two clues already that seemed promising, and they turn into will-o’-the-wisps. And now we’ve got to begin all over again

with this Forest View lot.”

Varney agreed. As a relief from the strain and tension of this most baffling case, he suggested that Smeaton should dine with him at the Savage Club that night, to talk things over.

After an excellent dinner, they recovered somewhat from the depression caused by the recent untoward events. They went into the Alhambra for an hour, and then strolled up Coventry Street.

They waited at the corner of the Haymarket to cross the street. The traffic from the theatres was very congested, and the vehicles were crawling slowly westward.

Suddenly Smeaton clutched at his companion’s arm, and pointed to a taxi that was slowly passing them beneath the glare of the street lamps.

“Look inside,” he cried excitedly.

Varney took a few quick paces forward, and peered through the closed window. He returned to Smeaton, his face aglow.

“The parlourmaid at Forest View, otherwise Mrs Saxton, by all that’s wonderful!”

“Did you notice the man?”

“No, I hadn’t time. The driver started on at proper speed before I could focus him.”

“Do you know, the face in that gleam of light looked wonderfully like that of Reginald Monkton!” he said. “I committed the number of the taxi to memory. To-morrow, we shall know where it took them.”

Next morning, the taxi-driver was found, and told his tale simply and straightforwardly.

“I picked them up in the Strand, sir, an elderly gent and a youngish lady. I was standing by the kerb, having just put down a fare. They had stepped out of another taxi a few yards below, they waited till it drove away, and

then they came up and got into mine. I thought it a bit peculiar."

"Where did you put them down?"

"At the corner of Chesterfield Street, Mayfair. I asked them if I should wait, but the lady shook her head. The gentleman seemed ailing like; he walked very slow, and leaned heavily on her arm."

Smeaton tipped the man, who in a few moments left his room.

If it was Monkton, as he believed, why had he gone to Chesterfield Street? And having gone there, why had he alighted at the corner, instead of driving up to the house?

In a few moments he took up the telephone receiver and asked for the number of Mr Monkton's house.

Chapter Twenty Five.

Still More Mystery.

Grant answered the ’phone in Chesterfield Street. To Smeaton’s inquiry, he replied that Miss Monkton had just left the house with Mr Wingate. They were lunching out somewhere, but she had left word that she would be back about three o’clock.

“Any message, sir?” he concluded.

“No, thank you. Grant. I want to see her rather particularly. I’ll look round about three o’clock. I suppose she’s likely to be pretty punctual?”

Grant replied that, as a rule, she kept her time. He added, with the privileged freedom of an old servant: “But you know, sir, when young folk get together, they are not in a great hurry to part. And poor Miss Sheila hasn’t much brightness in her life now. I don’t know what she would do if it wasn’t for Mr Wingate.”

About two o’clock Varney walked into Smeaton’s room at Scotland Yard. He had taken an early morning train to Forest View, to find out what he could concerning the mysterious flitting. He had interviewed the house-agent at Horsham, and had learned a few facts which he communicated to the detective.

There had been mystery about the man who called himself Strange from the beginning. When he proposed to take the house, he had been asked for references, according to the usual custom. He had demurred to this, explained that he did not care to trouble his friends on such a matter, and made a counter-proposition. He would pay a quarter’s rent at once, and every three months pay in advance.

The landlord and the house-agent both thought this a queer proceeding, and were half inclined to insist upon references. But the house had been to let for some time, and the loss of rent was a consideration. The man Strange might be an eccentric sort of person, who disliked putting himself under an obligation, even of such a trifling kind. They gave him the

benefit of the doubt, feeling so far as the money was concerned that they were on the safe side.

Another peculiar thing about Mr Strange was that, during the whole of his residence at Forest View, he had never been known to give a cheque. The landlord's rent was paid in banknotes, the tradesmen's accounts in gold and silver.

Smeaton put an obvious question: "Have they heard anything from Stent?"

"I am coming to that now, and here is more mystery, as might naturally be expected," was Varney's answer. "A young man called at the house-agent's late yesterday afternoon. He was described to me as a youngish, well-dressed fellow, rather thick-set and swarthy. I take it, we know nothing of him in connection with this case?"

Varney looked at Smeaton interrogatively. The detective shook his head.

"No; you have been told of everybody I know."

"Well, this chap came with a queer sort of story," Varney went on. "He explained that he was a friend of Stent, I should say Strange. Two or three days ago Strange had received an urgent summons from abroad, which admitted of no delay. He had posted off at once to Croydon, got hold of a furniture dealer there, brought him back, and sold the furniture to him. He was to fetch it before the end of the week. Strange had given this fellow a letter to the agent, authorising him to let the dealer have the furniture, and hand him the proceeds, less a sum of twenty-five pounds which had been paid as deposit. Out of these proceeds the agent was to deduct the sum accruing for rent, the tenancy being up in four months' time—and keep the balance till Strange sent for it, or gave instructions for it to be sent to him!"

"And, of course, nothing more will be heard of Stent," interrupted Smeaton. "The balance will lie in the agent's hands unclaimed."

"It looks like it," said Varney. "The agent thought it all sounded very fishy, although this young fellow carried it off in a pretty natural manner. It was only when he was asked to give his name and address that he showed

any signs of embarrassment. But, after a moment's hesitation, it came out pat enough. He was a Mr James Blake, of Verbena Road, Brixton, by profession an insurance agent."

"A false name and address, of course?" queried Smeaton.

"Yes and no," replied Varney. "I got up to Victoria about twelve o'clock, and hurried at once to Verbena Road. There, sure enough, was a plate on the door, 'James Blake, Insurance Agent.' I rang the bell and asked to see him; I had prepared a story for him on my way there. Fortunately he was in."

"And he was not the swarthy, thick-set young man who had gone to Horsham?"

"Certainly not. He was a man of about forty-five with a black beard. In five minutes he told me all about himself, and his family, a wife and two daughters. One was a typist in the city, the other an assistant in a West End hat shop. Our dark-faced friend apparently picked the name out of the directory at random, or knew something of the neighbourhood and its residents. We may be quite sure Horsham will not see him again for a very long time. By the way, I forgot to tell you that Stent went round the day before, and paid up all the tradespeople."

"No want of money," observed Smeaton. "They evidently didn't 'shoot the moon' on account of poverty. There's no doubt they spotted you, and guessed they were under observation."

"It looks like it," admitted Varney reluctantly. Smeaton had uttered no word of reproach, but it was a blow to the young man's pride to know that he had allowed his quarry to escape.

"Well, we must think this over a bit, before we can decide on further steps," said the detective at length, in a desponding tone. "I am off to Chesterfield Street in a few moments, to see if I can learn anything fresh there. We know that Mrs Saxton was at the corner of the street last night, if we are not positive about her companion."

Grant opened the door to him when, on the stroke of three, he alighted from a taxi.

Half-an-hour went by, and still Sheila did not make her appearance. Smeaton began to fidget and walk up and down the dining-room, for he hated waiting for anybody. Then the door-bell rang. He rose and hastened into the hall, just as Grant opened the door.

He saw a dark-haired young woman, neatly dressed in navy blue, standing there. He thought there was a slight tremor of nervousness in her voice as she asked if Miss Monkton was at home.

Grant explained that she was out, but he expected her back every minute. Would she come in and wait?

Apparently she was on the point of doing so, when she caught sight of Smeaton standing in the background.

Her face flushed, and then went pale. She drew back, and her nervousness seemed to increase. It was impossible for her to keep her voice steady. “No—no, thank you,” she stammered, as she edged back. “It is of really no importance. I will call another day—to-morrow perhaps.”

“What name shall I say?” asked Grant, surprised at her agitation.

She grew more confused than ever. “I won’t trouble you; it doesn’t matter in the least. I mean. Miss Monkton would not know my name, if I told it you.”

With a swift gesture, she turned and fled. She had been nervous to start with, but Smeaton’s steady and penetrating gaze seemed to have scared her out of her wits.

The detective chatted for a moment or two with Grant, but made no comment upon the strange visitor. Still, it struck him as a curious thing, as one more of the many mysteries of which this house was so full. Would the young woman come back to-morrow, he wondered?

Five minutes later Sheila and her lover arrived. They had spent the best part of the morning in each other’s company, and had lingered long over their lunch. But Wingate was loth to part from her, and insisted upon seeing her home.

She was puzzled, too, at the advent of this dark-haired young woman. “Oh, how I wish I had been a few minutes earlier,” she cried. “I shall worry about it all night.”

“Strange things seem to happen every day,” grumbled Smeaton. “A very mysterious thing happened at the corner of this street last night.”

Then he told them briefly of the midnight move from Forest View, of his dinner with Varney, and how they had seen Mrs Saxton in the taxi-cab in Coventry Street; of the taxi-driver’s story that he had driven her to the corner of Chesterfield Street, where she had got out, and dismissed the cab.

“But surely she was not alone,” cried Sheila.

“A man was with her, but the cab passed too rapidly for us to get a look at him,” replied Smeaton evasively. After all, it was only a suspicion, he could not be positive.

He paused a second, and went on hesitatingly.

“I can’t imagine what her motive could be in coming so near. I came round to-day because I had an idea that she might have called here on some pretext.”

“But, if she had done so, of course I should have rung you up,” said Sheila quickly.

“Well, I could have been sure of that too, if I had thought it out.” Smeaton’s manner was strangely hesitating, it seemed to them, not knowing that he was only revealing half of what was in his mind. “I hardly know why I came at all. I think the case is getting on my nerves. Well, I won’t keep you any longer. Let me know if that young woman calls again, and if her visit concerns me in any way.”

He left, and when he had gone Sheila turned to her lover. “Mr Smeaton was very peculiar to-day, wasn’t he, Austin? He gave me the impression of keeping something back—something that he wanted to tell and was afraid.”

Austin agreed with his well-beloved. There was certainly something mysterious about the great detective that afternoon.

Meanwhile Smeaton walked back to his office, more puzzled and baffled than ever. Why on earth had Mrs Saxton and her companion driven to Chesterfield Street? And what had become of the other inmates of Forest View?

Chapter Twenty Six.

The Secret Picture.

Sheila Monkton spent a restless night; truth to tell, her nights were never very peaceful. Even when she snatched her fitful sleep, the sinister figures of Stent, Farloe, and all the others who had become part of that haunting tragedy, flitted through her dreams, and made her welcome the daylight.

And now she had still more perturbing food for thought. Why had Mrs Saxton, object of suspicion as she knew herself to be, ventured so near her? What did that surreptitious excursion portend?

And who was that strange female who had called, and who would leave neither name nor message and had fled precipitately at sight of Smeaton in the hall?

She made up her mind, when she wakened in the morning, to remain at home all day. It might turn out to be nothing, but she felt sure that this woman had some object in calling upon her. The air had been thick with mystery for many weeks; she was convinced there was still more in store, and it would be brought by this strange visitor.

Yet she waited in vain; the young woman dressed in the navy blue costume, as described by the old manservant, did not make a second call. And poor Sheila spent still another night as wakeful as the preceding one. She came down to breakfast languid and heavy-eyed.

She opened her letters listlessly, till she came to one larger than the rest, out of which dropped a photograph. At sight of it she exclaimed warmly to herself: “What a charming likeness. It is the image of dear Gladys. How sweet of her to send it to me!”

She threw away the envelopes, and took the photo to the window to examine it more closely. It was a picture of her greatest friend, a girl a year older than herself, the Lady Gladys Rainham, only daughter of the Earl of Marshlands.

Her father had been intimate with the Earl since boyhood, and the passing years had intensified their friendship, which had extended to their families. Until this great sorrow had fallen upon Sheila, hardly a day passed without the two girls getting a glimpse of each other.

The Rainhams were amongst the few friends who knew the true facts of Monkton's disappearance. And, in almost morbid sensitiveness, Sheila had withdrawn a little from them. Even sympathy hurt her at such a time.

But the sudden arrival of this photo of the young Society beauty brought old memories of friendship and affection. They had played together as children; they had told their girlish secrets to each other, and it struck her that she had been wrong, and a little unkind, in withdrawing herself from the sympathy of those who were so interested in her welfare.

Gladys, no doubt, had been hurt by this attitude. She had written no note, she had not even signed the photograph. She had just sent it to recall herself to her old friend and companion. It had been sent as signal that if Sheila chose to make the smallest advance, the old relations would be at once re-established.

On the spur of the moment, she wrote a warm and impulsive note, begging Gladys to come and lunch with her that day.

"Forgive me for my long silence and absorption," she concluded. "But I know you will understand what I have lately suffered."

She sent the note round to Eaton Square by her maid, with instructions to wait for an answer. It came, and Sheila's face flushed with pleasure as she read it.

"I quite understand, and I have nothing to forgive," wrote the warm-hearted girl. "But it will be heavenly to see you again and talk together as we used."

She came round half-an-hour before lunch-time, and the pair reunited, kissed, and clung together, and cried a little, after the manner of women. Then Sheila thanked her for the present of the photo, which, she declared, did not make her look half as beautiful as she was.

Gladys looked puzzled. “But I never sent any photo to you, Sheila! Which one is it? Let me see it.”

Sheila handed it to her friend, who exclaimed, after examining it: “It is the one they took of me at the Grandcourt House Bazaar; I think it is quite a good one. But, Sheila darling, if I had sent it to you I should have written a note, at least have signed it. All this is strange—very strange! What does it mean?”

Miss Monkton coloured a little as she answered:

“Yes, I did think it strange that you did not write. I thought it so far as I am capable of thinking. But I know I have been very difficult lately, and I fancied perhaps you didn’t want to make advances, and that you just sent that as a reminder of old times, trusting to me to respond.”

Lady Gladys kissed her warmly. “Ah! you poor darling, I quite see,” she said. “But who could have sent it? That is the puzzle.”

They both discussed it, at intervals, at table, and could arrive at no solution. When Lady Gladys had left, Sheila puzzled over it all by herself, with no better result. Then, at last, weary of thinking, she telephoned to Wingate.

Austin, who was in his office, agreed that the thing was very mysterious, and that he was as much mystified as she was. He ended the brief conversation by advising her to go to Smeaton.

“Our brains are no good at this sort of thing,” he said candidly. “The atmosphere of mystery seems to suit them at Scotland Yard—they breathe it every day.”

She drove at once to Scotland Yard, where they knew her well by now. Smeaton was disengaged, and she was taken to his room at once.

“Any news. Miss Monkton?” he asked eagerly. “Has that young woman called?”

The girl shook her head. “No, I waited in all day yesterday, but to no purpose. Now another strange thing has happened,” and she told him

briefly of the receipt of the photograph from some unknown person.

“You didn’t look at the envelope, I suppose?”

“No, Mr Smeaton. I hardly ever do look at envelopes. I threw it away with the rest. It would have given you a clue, of course.”

“It might,” returned Smeaton, who was nothing if not cautious. He ruminated for a few moments, and then said, abruptly, “You have brought it with you?”

Sheila, who had taken that precaution, handed it to him. He turned it over, peering at it in that slow, deliberate fashion of a man who examines with the microscopic detail everything submitted to him.

“Taken, I see, by the well-known firm of Kester and Treeton in Dover Street. Well, somebody ordered it, so we’ve got to find out who that somebody was. I will go to them at once, and let you know the result in due course.”

Sheila looked at him eagerly. She had great faith in him, although so far he had had nothing but failure to report.

“Have you formed any opinion about it?” she asked timidly.

Smeaton smiled grimly, but he answered her very kindly.

“My dear Miss Monkton, I have formed many theories about your father’s disappearance, and, alas! they have all been wrong. I am leaning to distrust my own judgment. I will say no more than this. This curious incident may end as everything else has done, but I think it is worth following up. I will put you into your car, and go on to the photographers.”

“Let me drive you there, and wait,” urged Sheila eagerly. “I shall know the result so much quicker.”

The photographers in Dover Street had palatial premises. Smeaton was ushered from one apartment to another, till he reached the private sanctum of the head of the firm, where he produced his card, and explained his errand.

Mr Kester was very obliging; he would do all he could to help, and it would only be a matter of a few moments. They kept a record of every transaction, and in all probability this was quite a recent one.

He returned very shortly. It seemed that a young lady had called a couple of days ago, and asked for half-a-dozen portraits of Lady Gladys. On account of the Grandcourt House Bazaar, there had been a great run on the photos of the various stallholders, he explained. They happened to have a few copies of this particular picture in stock. The lady purchased six and took them away with her, saying that “they were for reproduction in the illustrated newspapers and the usual copyright fee would be paid.”

“Can you give me a description of the person who bought them?” was Smeaton’s first question, when Mr Kester had concluded his story.

“My assistant who served her is a very intelligent girl. Let us have her in.”

Kester ’phoned and requested Miss Jerningham to be sent to him. The fluffy-haired young lady remembered the incident perfectly, and described the dress and appearance of the young woman who had bought the photographs.

If her description was to be trusted, it was the same person who had asked to see Miss Monkton and refused to leave her name.

Smeaton, who had grown so utterly tired of theories and clues, began to believe he was on something tangible at last.

He rejoined Sheila, but he did not say much.

“I shall follow this clue,” he told her. “The photo was sent for a purpose, and that woman knows why it was sent. I believe you will hear from her again, unless I scared her away.”

“Mr Smeaton, do tell me what you really think. I am sure there is something curious in your mind,” implored the agitated Sheila.

But the detective was not to be charmed from his reserve.

“I must think over it a lot more yet. Miss Monkton, before I can hazard

any opinion," he told her in his grave, deliberate way. "If I were to reveal any half-formed idea that is running through my brain, it is one I should have to dismiss as inapplicable to the circumstances as I see them at present."

From that he would not budge. Sheila drove away with a heavy heart. Wingate came round to dinner that night, and they talked about nothing else. The only thing they could arrive at with any certainty was that the mysterious visitor, the young woman dressed in navy blue serge costume, was the sender of the photo. But that did not help them to discover the reason she had sent it.

That night Sheila lay awake, very depressed and anxious, still puzzling over this latest mystery. Presently she dozed, and then, after a few moments of fitful sleep, woke with a start. Was it in that brief dream that some chords of memory had been suddenly stirred of a conversation held long ago between her father and a young man named Jack Wendover, a second secretary in the diplomatic service at Madrid?

Jack Wendover had told him of an ingenious method of communication invented by a married couple, who were spies in the pay of a foreign Government. She could hear him explaining it to Reginald Monkton, as she sat up in the dark, in that semiconscious state between dreaming and waking.

"They were clever. They wouldn't trust to ciphers or anything of that sort, when they were separated; it was much too commonplace. They sent each other photographs. The receiver cut the photograph down, and found between the two thicknesses of cardboard a piece of tissue paper, upon which was written the message that the sender wished to convey."

She could hear her father's hearty laughter, as he said: "Truly, a most ingenious method. Has that really been done?"

She had not been reminded of that for nothing, she felt sure. Why had this sudden recollection of an old conversation come to her in the dead of the night, if not for some purpose?

The photo was still lying upon her desk in the morning-room. The house was quite quiet. Grant slept in the basement and the maids and the

footman were at the top of the house.

She rose, slipped on a dressing-gown, and lighted a candle. Then noiselessly she descended the stairs and reached the morning-room. She took a small penknife from the drawer of her desk, and carefully split the mount of the photograph.

When she had finished, a piece of tissue paper fluttered to the floor, and upon that paper was a message.

As she read it she held her breath. Her beautiful eyes grew soft and misty, while a lovely flush crept over her fair features. Tenderly, almost reverently, she raised the flimsy paper to her lips.

“Not even to Austin,” she murmured, in a voice that was half a sob. “Not even to Austin—dear as he is to me—not even to him.”

Chapter Twenty Seven.

The Story of the Portraits.

Austin Wingate was sitting in his office the next morning. The post had been unusually heavy, and he had a busy day in front of him. In view of the pressure of business which he saw was impending, he was about to ring up Sheila to tell her that he would not come to Chesterfield Street to dinner, as had been arranged, but would see her later in the evening. She, however, rang him up first.

“I want to see you as soon as you can possibly get away,” she told him. “Something very wonderful has happened; I can’t tell you over the ’phone. Can you come to lunch—or before, if possible?”

No true lover puts his business before his sweetheart. He replied unhesitatingly that he would be with her inside a couple of hours. That would give him time to attend to his most pressing correspondence. The rest, or that portion of it which could not be delegated to his subordinate, must wait till to-morrow.

Sheila had changed her mind. Overnight she had resolved not to communicate that wonderful message even to him. Had it not enjoined her to the strictest secrecy?

But on calmer reflection other thoughts had prevailed. The sender of that message did not know of the relations between them. Austin was a part of her life, her second self. How could she keep such an important thing from him, from the lover who had encompassed her with such tender devotion through this terrible time?

“Dear, kind Austin,” she murmured, as she thought of the readiness with which he had acceded to her request. “He never fails me in the slightest thing. No girl could ever have a truer lover.”

In two hours he would be here, and she could show him the paper on which was written that mysterious message. How should she get through the interval? The minutes seemed as if they would never pass.

She was sitting in the cosy library where her father had spent most of his time when at home. What long chats they had enjoyed together in that dear old room. Her eyes filled with tears as she recalled those happy days, which, alas! seemed so far away. She was aroused from her reveries by the entrance of Grant.

“The young person who called the other day, and refused to leave her name, is here. Miss,” he told her. “She won’t give any name now; merely says she would like to see you for a few minutes. I have shown her into the drawing-room.”

Sheila’s face flushed with excitement. Hurriedly she went upstairs to her mysterious visitor.

The dark-haired young woman rose at Sheila’s entrance. It was easy to see she was terribly nervous.

“I am speaking to Miss Monkton, am I not? I must apologise for intruding upon you, but I shall not keep you more than a few seconds. I came just to ask you, to know if—if—” she stammered so that she could hardly get her words out.

“You wanted to know if—?” repeated Sheila encouragingly. She was terribly excited herself, but the calmer of the two.

“Did you receive a portrait of a friend of yours, Lady Gladys Rainham, the envelope containing it directed in a strange handwriting?”

“I did receive that portrait. At the time I did not notice the handwriting. I concluded it had been sent me by Lady Gladys herself.” A sudden light dawned upon Sheila, as she spoke. “It was you who sent it, was it not?”

“Yes, it was I, acting upon instructions.”

“By whom were those instructions given?” asked Sheila eagerly.

The young woman’s manner was more embarrassed than ever. “I am very sorry, but that I must not tell you. Later on, I daresay you will know all.”

“But you have something more to tell me, surely?”

“Yes. That photograph was sent for a purpose. I called the other day, but you were out. It contains a message. Cut it in two, and you will find a letter inside.”

“I have already done so,” was Sheila’s reply. “When my friend Lady Gladys denied having sent it to me, I puzzled and puzzled over it. And then, I think it must have been in a dream, I recalled something that had happened long ago which set me on the right track. I went downstairs in the night, cut the photograph as you suggested, and found the message inside.”

The mysterious visitor looked towards the door, and made a movement of departure.

“My task is done then, and I will detain you no longer.”

But Sheila stayed her impetuously. “But you will not leave me so abruptly. You can understand my terrible anxiety. You will relieve it by telling me what you know.”

In her agitation, she laid her hand upon the arm of her strange visitor, but the young woman freed herself, and advanced towards the door.

“I can understand and sympathise with you,” she said in a faltering voice. “But please do not press me, it is useless. I am under the most solemn promise to say no more. You must wait and be patient.” In another moment she had left the room, leaving poor Sheila bewildered and tearful.

Austin Wingate came later, was told of the strange visitor, and shown the message which had been contained in the photograph.

He took her in his aims and kissed her fondly. “My darling, you must still be brave and patient,” he said tenderly.

She looked up at him with her sweet smile. “I have waited so long, Austin, I can wait a little longer, always providing that you are here to comfort me.”

Wingate did not leave her till late in the afternoon. The day was too far advanced for him to return to his office. He strolled to the Wellington Club.

Just as he was going in, he caught sight of Farloe. He took a sudden resolve, and went up to the secretary, who did not seem too pleased to see him.

“Good-day, Mr Farloe. May I walk with you a little way? There is something I should like to ask you.”

The young man assented, but by no means with a good grace. They had taken an instinctive dislike to each other from the first. They walked together in silence for a few paces, and then Wingate suddenly blurted out:

“What has become of Reginald Monkton? I know you could tell us, if you chose.”

The secretary’s face blanched to the lips. He tried to smile, but the smile was a very forced one.

“Your question, and your manner of putting it, Mr Wingate, are both very offensive. I know no more of Monkton’s whereabouts than you do. It is generally reported that he is abroad.”

“And you know as well as I do that it is not the fact,” answered Wingate sternly. “Have a care, Mr Farloe. We know a good deal about you.”

The secretary assumed an air of extreme *hauteur*, but his face was whiter than ever.

“It is extremely kind of you to interest yourself in my affairs, but I am afraid they will hardly repay the trouble of investigation. Perhaps you will allow me to bid you good-day.”

“Please give me another moment or two, Mr Farloe. We know this much about you, that you are in close communication with Stent and Bolinski, the two men who sent that dying man in the taxi to Chesterfield Street.”

For a moment the two men glared at each other, Wingate's face aflame with anger, the other with an expression half of fear, half of defiance, stealing over his white mask.

"You refuse to tell me anything?" asked Wingate at length.

"I have nothing to tell you," answered the other, in a voice that he could not keep quite steady. "Once again, good-day." He turned on his heel, and walked rapidly away.

For fully five minutes he walked quickly in an easterly direction. Then he turned round, and cast stealthy glances backwards. Apparently he could not get it out of his mind that Wingate might be pursuing him.

But he scanned the faces of the hurrying foot-passengers, and he could discern no hostile countenance. Well-dressed loungers, women intent on shopping and bargains, a man dressed in working costume, walking with a slouching gait. These were all he saw.

He hailed a taxi, and shouted in a loud voice: "Broad Street Station." He had to shout loudly, for the roar of the traffic was deafening.

The working-man with the slouching gait caught the words. A second taxi was just behind. He opened the door and jumped in, after having whispered in the ear of the driver, "Follow that fellow."

At Broad Street Station Farloe alighted, needless to say the man who had pursued him close on his heels. Two tickets were taken for Hackney Station, one first-class, the other third-class.

The disguised working-man, otherwise Varney, had been considerably chagrined at the disappearance of the Forest View household, and had sworn to be even with them. He had watched Farloe ever since, knowing that through him he would get at the whereabouts of Stent and Bolinski.

Farloe alighted at Hackney Station, and after walking for about a quarter of a mile, turned up one of the many mean streets that abound in that neighbourhood. The secretary knocked at the door of one of the dingiest houses in the row, and disappeared inside.

Varney kept his watch. At the end of an hour or so three men emerged from the shabby dwelling. As he expected, the two others were Stent and Bolinski.

The three men made their way into Mare Street, and turned into the saloon bar of a big public-house. Something of importance was evidently in progress.

Varney reflected. They would be some minutes before they had finished their drinks and their conversation. In the meantime, he had taken the name of the street and the number of the house. He could allow himself five minutes to ring up Scotland Yard.

Smeaton was fortunately in. In a few brief words he told the detective of his discovery. Smeaton's reply come back.

"Things are happening. I will send at once a couple of sergeants to help you. Hold on till my men arrive and then come straight on to me."

It is a far cry from Scotland Yard to Mare Street, Hackney. But, occupied with his own thoughts, it seemed only a few minutes to Varney when the two detectives drove up, and alighted at the door of the public-house. A swift taxi can do wonders in annihilating space.

The elder of the two men, whom Varney knew slightly, advanced towards him.

"Good-day, Mr Varney. We struck here first, as being the nearest. They're still inside, eh?"

"I should have left, if not. Well, I suppose you will take up my job."

"That's about it, sir. Mr Smeaton told me he would like to see you as soon as possible. I think he has got something important to communicate. We'll wait for these two gentlemen. Stent and the Russian, to come out—Farloe we have nothing against at present—and then we'll clap the darbies on them in a twinkling."

Varney, for a moment, looked incredulous. "But on what charge?"

The detective grinned. “One that we only knew of yesterday. A charge of fraud in connection with certain rubber property. Another man of the name of Whyman is in it, but he seems to have got clear away.”

Varney, his brain in a whirl, took his way back to Scotland Yard, still in his costume of a working-man.

“Well, what does it all mean?” he gasped, when he got into Smeaton’s room.

The great detective smiled genially. “It means, my dear Varney, that we are nearing the end of the Monkton mystery which has baffled us so long.”

“And the solution?” queried the other eagerly.

“That I cannot tell you yet. But when it does come, I am afraid neither you nor I will reap much glory out of it.”

And Varney could get nothing out of him except those few cryptic words.

“Something has happened quite recently?” he hazarded.

The detective answered with that same slow, wise smile of his. “Perhaps. I can tell you nothing more now. Wait a moment, till I answer that telephone.”

A few words passed, and then he turned to Varney. “My men report they have laid Stent and Bolinski by the heels on the charge of fraud.”

Chapter Twenty Eight.

In the Mists.

Detective-sergeant Johnson stood in Smeaton's room, listening to the final instructions of his chief with his usual respectful air.

"Be as diplomatic as possible, Johnson. Let him suspect that we know everything, without committing yourself to any actual statement. Above all, impress upon him the fact that he must come. We would prefer he did so voluntarily. If he should prove obstinate, give him clearly to understand that we have other means at our disposal."

Johnson spoke with quiet confidence. "I think you may safely leave it to me. After what you have told me, I am sure I can persuade the gentleman to accompany me. But, of course, I shall say nothing openly, simply confine myself to broad hints that ran only bear one meaning."

Smeaton regarded Johnson approvingly. For some time past he had discerned in this comparatively young man qualities that bade fair to secure him a high position in his profession. He was level-headed, quick at instructions, possessed of considerable initiative, cautious, yet daring on occasion, confident without being boastful.

"One last word before you leave. You will make quite sure he is in the house before you enter it; in other words, that he has returned to London."

"I heard yesterday from my cousin, who had met his valet, that his lordship arrived late the previous evening. But to make sure, I have appointed to meet Willet this afternoon, so as to get the latest news."

"Quite right, Johnson, quite right," said the great detective in his most cordial tones. "Never leave anything to chance."

The subordinate bowed himself out, well pleased that he was advancing himself so steadily in his chief's favour.

An hour later he was in the saloon bar of the exclusive establishment which was patronised by the upper servants of Mayfair. Here he found his cousin awaiting him, who greeted him heartily. The two men had corresponded a few times, but they had not met since the day when Willet had produced the portrait of Lady Wrenwyck.

“Glad to see you, old chap,” cried the footman heartily. “I’ve been longing to hear how you got on with that little job at Weymouth. No difficulty in finding her ladyship, I suppose?”

“Tumbled to her at once,” answered Johnson, who adapted his tone and language to those of the company in which he found himself for the time being. “Took a walk down to the post-office, and she and the maid fell into my arms in a manner o’ speaking.”

Johnson paused, not quite knowing what to say next. Willet looked at him inquiringly, but meeting with no response exhibited signs of injured dignity.

“Look here, old man, it ain’t my business to pry into secrets that don’t concern me. But I helped you a goodish bit in that quarter, and I don’t think you need be so devilish close.”

Johnson goaded himself to speech; if he was to retain his cousin’s friendship he must say something. And the man spoke the truth; he had helped him to the extent of making the preliminaries very easy.

“Now, look here, laddie, I should like to tell you everything. You helped me a lot, but on my honour I can’t do it. Large interests and great people are affected in the matter. But I will tell you this much, and you must believe me or not, as you please: I found her ladyship right enough, only to discover that I was on the wrong scent. Now and again, you know, we do make bloomers at the Yard.”

Mr Willet’s affability was at once restored by this frank and manly statement. “Say no more, old man; mum’s the word. Fill up, to show there’s no ill-feeling.”

Johnson filled up, and drank his relative’s health with becoming cordiality. He wanted something more out of him yet.

“So far as Lady Wrenwyck is concerned. I’ve no further use for her. But I haven’t quite done with all the people in the Wrenwyck house itself. Only this time I’m on another track altogether.”

Willet’s eyes bulged out of his head with curiosity, but he knew from experience that wild horses would not drag out of Johnson anything that astute detective had made up his mind to conceal.

“I suppose it’s the old man you’re after, this time?” he hazarded.

“Guessed right the first time, old chap. I want to have a few minutes’ conversation with his lordship. That’s why I wrote asking you if you knew anything of his movements.”

“By gad! you are a deep ’un,” cried Willet admiringly.

“Thanks,” said Johnson easily, but it was plain to see the compliment had not fallen on deaf ears. “Well, now, you say he’s back in town. If I knock at the door in the course of half-an-hour or so, do you think I’m likely to find him in?”

“It’s a pretty safe find. He hardly ever goes out when in London, drives down to the Carlton once or twice a week, and stays a couple of hours. But anyway. I’m pretty sure you’ll find him in to-day, and I’ll tell you for why.”

“Yes?” interrupted Johnson eagerly. Willet was certainly invaluable in the way of giving information.

“Her ladyship is giving a big party this afternoon—I think it’s a philanthropic sort of hustle, in aid of some charity. On these occasions he usually shuts himself up in his own den till the last carriage has driven away. Then he comes out growling and cursing because his house has been turned upside down, and everybody gives him as wide a berth as possible.”

“He seems an amiable sort of person,” observed Johnson.

“Touched, my dear boy, touched,” replied Willet, tapping his somewhat retreating forehead. “And getting worse, so I’m told. Triggs, his valet, told

me yesterday it can't be long before they'll have to put him under restraint."

"You've no idea where he's been the last few weeks, I suppose," was Johnson's next question.

"Nobody has. He seems to have done the same sort of disappearance as his wife, with this difference, that she did take her maid, and he left Triggs behind. But he came back in the devil's own rage; been carrying on like a madman ever since. Triggs is going to give him notice; says flesh and blood can't stand it."

Johnson parted from his cousin with mutual expressions of esteem and good-will. A few minutes later he was standing outside the open portals of Wrenwyck House, one of the finest mansions in Park Lane.

A big party was evidently in progress. Carriages were driving up every moment to take up and set down the guests. Johnson could picture the beautiful hostess, standing at the top of the stairs, a regal and smiling figure.

A humorous smile crossed his countenance as he recalled the one and only occasion on which they had met in the unpretentious lodgings on the Weymouth front. Well, that was one of the things that never would be revealed to her circle, unless she chose to confide it to her bosom friend, Mrs Adair.

He took advantage of a momentary lull in the restless tide of traffic, to accost a tall footman.

"I want particularly to see Lord Wrenwyck, if he is at home," he said boldly. "I daresay he will be at leisure, as I understand he shuts himself up when this sort of function is going on."

The footman's manner showed that he was half contemptuous, half impressed. With the unerring eye of his class he saw at once that Johnson was not of the class from which the guests of Wrenwyck House were recruited. On the other hand, he seemed to possess an intimate knowledge of the private habits of its owner.

“His lordship is in, but I should very much doubt if he will see you,” he said with just a touch of insolence. “If you tell me your name and business, I will inquire.”

Johnson slipped a card into an envelope and handed it to this tall and important person.

“I’m afraid my business is of too private a nature to communicate to a third party,” he said quietly. “If you’ll have the goodness to hand that envelope to his lordship, and tell him my card is inside, I think it’s very probable he will see me.”

Five minutes later the astonished menial returned, and the contempt of his bearing was somewhat abated.

“Please follow me,” he said, in a voice that was almost civil. A moment later the detective was in the presence of the wealthy and eccentric peer.

His immediate thought was that he had never met a more forbidding personality. Hard, angry eyes, that shot forth their baleful fire at the slightest provocation, a long hawk nose, a cruel, sensual mouth, were the salient features of a face that instinctively gave you the impression of evil.

His greeting was in accord with his appearance.

“Explain at once, if you please, the reason of this extraordinary intrusion. I see you come from Scotland Yard. What the devil have I to do with such a place?”

Johnson did not allow himself to be disturbed by the other’s rough and insolent manner.

“I have brought you a message from my chief, Mr Smeaton,” he said, in his most urbane manner. “I have no doubt you have heard of him.”

Lord Wrenwyck looked on the point of indulging in another angry explosion, but something in the steady gaze of the self-possessed young man seemed to momentarily disconcert him. He only growled, and muttered something too low for Johnson to catch.

“My chief, Mr Smeaton, occupies a very special position,” resumed the imperturbable detective. “In virtue of that position, he becomes acquainted with many curious facts, some of them connected with persons in high positions. Some of these facts he has to make known, in accordance with his sense of public duty. There are others which never go beyond his own cognisance and that of a few of his trusted subordinates. I trust your lordship gathers my meaning, which I am trying to convey as pleasantly as possible.”

Lord Wrenwyck stirred his crippled limbs, and shook his fist vindictively at the other.

“Come to the point, curse you, and spare me all this rigmarole.”

“To come to the point, my lord, Mr Smeaton requests your attendance at Scotland Yard, where he proposes to give himself the pleasure of a short conversation with you.”

The hard, angry eyes were now sullen and overcast, but they were no longer defiant.

“Suppose I tell you and your precious Mr Smeaton to go to the devil! What then?”

“I don’t think either of us will hasten our journey in that direction on account of your lordship’s intervention,” replied Johnson with ready humour.

He paused a moment, and then added with a gravity that could not be mistaken: “The arm of the law is very long, and can reach a great nobleman like yourself. Take my advice. Lord Wrenwyck. Let me convey you in a taxi to Scotland Yard, to interview my chief. Come voluntarily while you can,” he paused and added in significant terms: “Believe me, you won’t have the option after to-day.”

Cursing and growling, the crippled peer stood up, and announced his readiness to accompany this imperturbable young man. A few minutes later, he and Smeaton were face to face.

On the evening of that day, Sheila and Wingate dined together at a small restaurant far removed from the haunts of the fashionable world.

Thanks to the strange and unexampled circumstances, their courtship had been conducted on very unconventional lines. But to-night an unobtrusive maiden aunt of Wingate's played propriety.

At an early hour, they left the restaurant. The maiden aunt was first dropped at her modest house in Kensington, and then the car took them to Chesterfield Street.

When Grant had opened the door, Wingate had put out his hand in farewell. He was always punctilious and solicitous about the conventions, in Sheila's unprotected position.

But she demurred to this early parting. "It is only a little after nine," she told him. "You must come in for five minutes' chat before you go."

What lover could refuse such an invitation, proffered by such sweet lips? As they were going up the staircase to the drawing-room. Grant handed her a letter.

"It was left about an hour ago by that young person. Miss; the one who wouldn't leave her name."

She opened it, and, after perusal, handed it to her betrothed. "Oh, Austin, what can this mean?"

Austin Wingate read the brief words: "There is a great surprise in store. It may come at any moment."

They sat down in silence, not trusting themselves to speak, to hazard a conjecture as to this mysterious message. At such a moment, so tense with possibilities, they almost forgot they were lovers. And while trying to read in their mutual glances the inmost thoughts of each other, there came the faint tinkle of the door-bell.

Sheila started up as her ears caught the sound. "Listen, Austin! Who's that?" she asked breathlessly.

A few moments later they heard old Grant open the door. Next second a loud cry of alarm rang through the house. The voice was Grant’s.

Austin, hearing it, dashed from the room and down the stairs.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

Contains many Surprises.

Wingate, hearing Grant's cry as he opened the hall-door, had only reached the head of the stairs, followed by Sheila, when he met the faithful old butler rushing towards him, crying—"Oh, Miss Sheila, we have —we have a visitor! Come down." *In the hall stood Reginald Monkton*! He was sadly and woefully changed from the alert, vigorous man from whom his daughter had parted on that fateful night which seemed so far distant. The once upright figure was stooping with fatigue and weariness, his face was thin and shrunken, his fine eyes, that used to flash forth scorn on his opponents, had lost their brilliant fire. Behind him stood Mrs Saxton, dressed in a sober garb of grey.

As he caught sight of Sheila, a broken cry escaped from him: "At last, at last, my beloved child."

Sheila sprang forward, and in a moment they were locked in each other's arms, tears of happiness raining down her face.

For some seconds nobody spoke a word. Austin Wingate was trying hard to control his emotion. Grant, in the background, was crying like a child. Then Mrs Saxton advanced, her own eyes dim with the pathos of the scene—of this sudden reunion of father and daughter.

"I have brought him back to you," she said, in a voice that trembled. "But he is very weak and ill. Let us take him to the library at once. You shall learn everything from me."

Tenderly, the two, Sheila and her lover, led the poor, worn man to the room in which he had spent so many happy hours, Mrs Saxton following. They placed him in the big arm-chair, and his daughter knelt beside him. Wingate standing in front.

Then suddenly, the girl pointed a trembling finger at the woman gowned in grey, and her eyes took on a hard, steely look. "What has she to do with it?" she asked, hoarsely.

Almost in a whisper came her father's words: "Everything; she had to do with it from the beginning. But listen to her; for without her aid I should not be here to-night; perhaps I should never have been here, or, if so, such a hopeless wreck that life would have been no blessing." His voice broke as he ended, and he raised Sheila's hand to his lips.

And then Mrs Saxton spoke, at first hesitatingly, and in tones that trembled with her terrible emotion. But as she went on her courage came back, and she enunciated her words clearly and distinctly.

"I know you must hate me. Miss Monkton, and I deserve your hatred. Perhaps, later on, you will judge me a little less harshly, in consideration of the fact that I repented at the eleventh hour, and saved him from these fiends who were bent upon his undoing."

Sheila and Wingate regarded her intently, but neither spoke a word to relieve her embarrassment, or give any indication that they regarded her with anything but the deepest loathing.

"Mr Monkton and I have been to Scotland Yard, and seen Smeaton, the detective. I know from him that you are acquainted with all the actors in this tragedy, including myself. He has told me of your coming across me at the post-office, of your reading the telegram which I sent to Brighton to the man known as Bolinski, who is now in the hands of justice, along with the partner of his crime."

She paused a moment, and then resumed her narrative in the midst of a chilling and hostile silence.

"My connection with it all arose from my intimate acquaintance with the man Stent. It would not interest you to know how I fell under his influence and domination; it would reflect too much discredit on both—on him who persuaded, on me who yielded. You know already that Stent and Bolinski were the two men who abducted your father. What you do not know is that this plan was maturing for, at least, a couple of years. Further, you do not know that they were not the instigators, but the instruments of this outrage."

"And their motive?" questioned Wingate sharply.

A bitter smile crossed the young woman's face. "A motive ever dear to men of their criminal and rapacious type—greed! Offer them a big enough bribe, and they are the willing tools of the man who lures them. Scruples they have none."

"And who was the instigator?" questioned Wingate again.

"I will come to that all in due course. But more than half-a-dozen times they tried to put their scheme into execution, and failed on every occasion but the last, through a series of accidents. I did not know this for some time after I came upon the scene, when it was revealed to me by Stent, in a moment of unusual confidence."

Here Sheila interrupted. "We know that these two put the dying man dressed in my father's clothes in the taxi. Presently you shall tell us who that man was, and why he was sent. But first let us go back a little before that. Why did my father dine at the Italian restaurant with Bolinski?"

Reginald Monkton lifted his hand. "I will explain that, if you please, Mrs Saxton. I received a letter from this man, signed with an assumed name, stating that he could supply me with some important information that would be of the greatest possible use to the Government. He insisted that absolute secrecy must be observed on his part for fear of unpleasant consequences, and suggested Luigi's restaurant in Soho as the rendezvous. I have had information offered me in this way before, and did not entertain any suspicions. I guessed him to be a needy adventurer who would sell his friends for a consideration, and walked into the trap."

"He kept up the *rôle* of the informer I suppose?" queried Wingate. He was perhaps just a little surprised that a man of the world and an astute lawyer should not have had his doubts as to the genuineness of the letter.

"Perfectly, to all appearance. He told me various things about well-known people which, if they were true, would most certainly be useful. He assumed perfect frankness; he did not suggest that I should credit his statements till I had fully investigated them, and named a fairly modest sum in the event of my being satisfied. Of course, I now see that the whole thing was a pretence. He invented a lot of so-called facts to justify

his having invited me to meet him."

Both Sheila and Wingate looked puzzled. Mrs Saxton broke in:

"Of course, I see what is presenting itself to your minds. What object had he in meeting your father at all, when to all appearances they had carefully laid their plans in another direction? Well, their first idea was this, that, given a proper amount of luck, they might effect his capture outside the restaurant. But there were too many people about, and Mr Monkton was too quick for them. I told you just now they had tried to carry out their plan before in half-a-dozen likely places."

Wingate nodded. "Yes, I see. It was one, probably, of several alternative schemes which they had ready for the same evening. Now, Mrs Saxton, will you tell us who was the dying man they put into the taxi and what was their object in putting him into Mr Monkton's clothes?"

He looked at her steadily; it was with difficulty he could put any civility into his tones as he spoke. But she had turned King's evidence, and he was bound to recognise the fact. The less he showed his hostility, the more he would get out of her.

"It was not for a long time that I was able to piece together certain facts which enable me to answer your question," replied the woman, who had now perfectly recovered her composure.

"He was. I believe, an Irishman by birth, with no friends or relatives in the world. He had been mixed up with Stent and Bolinski for years, and he knew too much. They knew he was a dying man when they put him into the cab. Their object was to get him off their hands, to let him die elsewhere."

"But why did they dress him up in Mr Monkton's clothes," queried Wingate.

"I suppose, in order that the superficial likeness might enable him to be earned into the house, where he was bound to collapse. He had been an inmate of Bolinski's house for some time, and I expect for his own reason Bolinski did not wish him to die there."

Wingate shuddered at a sudden idea that had occurred to him. “Do you think they gave him anything, any drug to hasten his death?” he asked hesitatingly.

“Who ran tell? They had no scruples, though I cannot honestly say I know of any instance in which their callousness led them to take human life.”

“Can you account for his repeating the word ‘Moly’ before he died?”

Mrs Saxton shook her head. “Perhaps you did not catch the word aright. I know he had been privy to this scheme. Perhaps, in his wandering state, he was trying to pronounce the name Monkton, and you mistook the first syllable. I can offer no other explanation.”

There was a brief pause before Wingate spoke again.

“You were on very early in the scene, were you not?”

Mrs Saxton bowed her head in assent. “To my shame I was. Stent made out to me at first that they were getting Mr Monkton away for a brief space to render him harmless. They were connected with some schemes abroad, so he said, which Mr Monkton was using his powerful influence to thwart. I believed him, not knowing the real instigator. I called on Miss Monkton, as you will remember, for the purpose of pumping her, of finding in what quarter suspicion was directed.”

“Yes, we know that. And what part did your brother play in it all?”

A shade of embarrassment crept into her manner. She was willing to sacrifice Stent and Bolinski, but it was natural she should shield her brother as far as she could.

“He believed the first story they told him, which at the beginning imposed upon me. He kept watch for them in a way, told them what he could pick up of the various rumours flying about. He was in a state of great alarm one night, when some Member of the House of Commons had told him that Mr Monkton was acquainted with a man of the name of Stent.”

Reginald Monkton lifted his head. “It is true. I had known him slightly for some years, as a man connected with one or two companies,

respectable ones, in which I had shares. I had no idea that he made the greater part of his money by fraud."

"And what became of Mr Monkton that night?" asked Wingate, turning to Mrs Saxton.

"They caught him unawares, as he was walking from the House, threw a cloth, saturated with a stupefying drug, over his face, put him in a cab, driven by a confederate, and took him to Bolinski's house. They then took off his outer clothes, put them on the person you call the dying man, who could only just walk, and rushed back to Westminster. There they got out, waited a few seconds, hailed a taxi, put him inside, and directed the driver to take him to Chesterfield Street. The rest of that episode you know."

"And when was it that you went to Forest View, and masqueraded in the guise of a parlourmaid?"

A burning colour crept into her face at the question. It was easy to see that she was feeling her position acutely. It was some seconds before she could control herself sufficiently to order her speech.

"They had moved him very speedily from Bolinski's to the house of one of their confederates. Then they took him down to Horsham, where Stent had a house. He came to me one day and said the affairs in which they were interested were maturing slowly. He had hoped to release Mr Monkton very quickly, but owing to the delay it was absolutely necessary they should keep him in custody until the *coup* came off. They kept him in a secret room there—what is called the priest's room. A woman they trusted had been obliged to go abroad. Would I take her place? He said it would only be for a short time."

"And you went?" cried Sheila, with a withering glance.

The woman's voice was almost inaudible, as she answered with bowed head: "Yes, I went, but I swear that when I did so I did not know what was really meditated."

They looked at her in horror, and Wingate repeated the words, "what was really meditated."

“Yes,” she said, almost in a whisper. “It was a refined cruelty, the invention of a cunning and malignant mind. Their object was to break down his reason, to reduce him to a condition worse than that of death itself, and then to restore him to his home and child, shattered in health, mind and reputation.”

Chapter Thirty.

The Mystery Solved.

At those dreadful words, spoken in a low, vibrating voice, a shudder ran through the listeners. Sheila laid her head upon her father's shoulder, and sobbed unrestrainedly. Wingate uttered a cry of horror.

"And whose was the devilish mind that conceived this awful thing, and what was the motive?" he cried, when he had recovered from his stupefaction.

"You will know directly, but it is best I should tell the story in my own way, and in proper sequence. Well, I went to Forest View, to look after Mr Monkton. I may say that Stent never went near him himself, for fear of recognition. I found that he was being treated with drugs, so as to keep him more or less in a state of torpor. When I saw what was being done, I was horrified, and remonstrated. But Stent was always plausible, told me the effect was temporary, and that as soon as he could fix the time for his release, he would give him antidotes that would speedily restore him to his normal state.

"I very shortly conceived the idea of liberating him, but the means were hard to discover. Stent distrusted everybody, and it was only by acceding to all his humours that I was able to worm anything out of him. Half-a-dozen times he permitted me to administer the drug during his absence. It was one of his own preparation—for he was among other things a most skilled chemist. On these occasions I gave your father but a small portion of the dose intended for him. By these means I revived his benumbed faculties, and was able to assure him that I was his friend, and was eagerly seeking the means of restoring him to freedom.

"Then one day, when Stent was in an unusually good temper, he came to me, with that evil smile on his face which I had learned to know and dread. 'A curious thing is going to happen to-morrow. A man is coming here to stay for a little time. Can you guess what he is coming for?' Of course, I answered I could not.

”‘He will stay here under an assumed name, but he is rather a great personage in his own world. He will want, if I know him aright, to go to Monkton’s room every day, and gloat over his handiwork.’

“It was imprudent of me, but I could not help blurting out, ‘Yours as well as his.’

“His smile grew more evil as he said, ‘I am afraid you are a little too tender-hearted for this world, my dear. Anyway, I am paid a big price for the job, and you know I never refuse money.’

“I saw my mistake, and pretended to fall in with his mood, and succeeded in winning him back to amiability. I expressed great curiosity to know the real name of the man who, to use his own expression, was coming down ‘to gloat over his handiwork.’ To this day I shall never know what caused him to satisfy it. But at last he told me.”

Sheila and her lover gazed at the pale-faced woman intently. In their eagerness they almost forgot their loathing.

“The instigator of his abduction, the man who hired this fiend to carry out his deadly, malignant revenge, is a man well-known, wealthy, a peer of the realm. I daresay you have heard of him. He is called Lord Wrenwyck.”

Sheila gasped at this astounding revelation. “The husband of the popular Lady Wrenwyck, who in her youth was a celebrated beauty?”

Then she turned to her father, whose pale, worn face cut her to the heart. “But, dearest, what was his motive for such a dastardly deed?”

Monkton spoke in a low voice, but he did not meet his daughter’s eyes. “A fancied wrong, my child. We crossed each other many years ago, and he has brooded over it till he grew half insane, and thought of this scheme of vengeance.”

“But you will have him punished,” cried his daughter loudly. “You must! You cannot mete out to him what he has done to you, but you will deal with him as the law allows you.”

Monkton turned uneasily in his chair. “It is the dearest wish of my heart to

bring him low, but, in my position, one cannot afford scandal. In a few weeks I shall be restored to my old place, to my old strength. That there has been a mystery is only known to a few. To the public, Reginald Monkton has recovered from a brief illness induced by overstrain and over-work. It is better so."

Sheila gazed at him almost wildly. "That is your resolve. But it seems to me folly; forgive me if I question your decision, if I criticise you."

For a moment the glances of Wingate and Mrs Saxton met, and they read each other's thoughts. Monkton must let Lord Wrenwyck go unpunished; it would be political death to him to have that old folly brought into public gaze.

He interposed hastily. "Dearest Sheila, your father is right. I understand his reasons perfectly. He is not an ordinary man. If he is to keep his position, he must forgo the revenge to which he is so justly entitled."

Sheila looked at him with puzzled eyes. Austin was wise beyond his years, but surely he was wrong in this. She pressed her hand to her head, and murmured faintly, "I do not understand. But I suppose it must be as you say."

Mrs Saxton went on swiftly with her story.

"According to all accounts. Lord Wrenwyck is half insane. He had been mixed up with some financial transactions with Stent, and had taken the man's measure, had satisfied himself that he would carry out any villainous scheme, so long as he was well paid for the risk. He it was who suggested the abduction of Mr Monkton, the systematic drugging at Forest View, where he would come in while his unhappy prisoner was asleep, and watch him with a fiendish smile spreading over his repulsive countenance."

At this point Sheila raised her hands with a gesture of despair. "And yet this fiend is to go scot-free, and live to work further evil."

"He will not do that," said Mrs Saxton quickly. "Smeaton, after our interview, compelled him to go to Scotland Yard. Depend upon it. Lord Wrenwyck will not risk his fate a second time. He will be rendered

powerless by the fact that his cunningly laid scheme was frustrated, and also that it is known to those who could set the law in motion at any moment they chose."

And again Sheila murmured, "You may be right, but I cannot understand."

"I am coming now to the end of my story," Mrs Saxton continued, after this interruption. "I was walking one day into Horsham, and was accosted by a young man who seemed desirous of striking up an acquaintance. I rebuffed him, of course, and learned afterwards that he made similar advances to the young woman who was supposed to be my fellow-servant. At once it struck me that he was spying upon us. He lodged at a small inn a little distance away, and gave out that he was an artist. I mentioned the matter to Stent, but he rather laughed at the idea; told me I had got detectives on the brain. He was destitute of nerves himself, and had an exaggerated belief in his own capacity to outwit everybody.

"Pondering upon the means by which I could extricate my patient—if I may call him so—from a position which I felt convinced was growing more perilous, the idea of using this young man came into my mind. Day after day I impressed upon Stent that my fears were well grounded, and that at any moment he might be faced with discovery. At last I invented a story that I had seen this man who called himself Franks standing outside the house with another person, obviously a detective, and had heard the latter say distinctly; 'Smeaton himself thinks we have given them rope enough.'

"You know the story of the removal in the dead of night?"

She addressed her question to Wingate, appreciating the fact that he showed his hostility less plainly than did his sweetheart.

The young man nodded. "Yes, we know that."

"Stent was at last impressed, and agreed that we must leave Forest View as quickly and secretly as possible. Stent and the other maid—Lord Wrenwyck had left us by then—travelled in the van. I drove Mr Monkton in the motor by a roundabout route—I may tell you I am an expert driver. My destination was supposed to be the house of the confederate where he had first been taken.

“The game was now in my hands, and I knew I could play it. I drove to a different place altogether, some miles from London. I had, fortunately, plenty of money with me. We stayed at an hotel for the night. Next morning we came up to London and took up our quarters in a small inn at Hampstead.”

“What did you do with the car?” asked Wingate.

“We left it at a garage close to the hotel where we stayed the first night, promising to come back for it in a couple of hours. There, no doubt, it is still.”

“And the next step when you got to London?” was Wingate’s next question.

“Owing to the cessation of the drugs, Mr Monkton’s faculties were swiftly restored. He was weak and ill from his long confinement, but he could think clearly. His first impulse was to come home at once. I dissuaded him from this till he had gone to Smeaton and sought his advice. I felt also it was imperative to get rid of Stent and Bolinski in case they meditated further mischief. It happened that the means were in my power, means which I should not have used except in an extreme case. Information in my possession, which I placed at the disposal of Scotland Yard, enabled the authorities to arrest them on a criminal charge. That you have heard, or will hear.”

She paused a moment, and Sheila spoke.

“You drove up to Chesterfield Street the other night with a companion.”

“Your father. He was longing to come back, and to humour him I suggested we should come for a few minutes as far as the house.”

“And the portrait of Lady Gladys that was sent me? That was my father’s idea, of course. And to make sure, you sent that young woman to tell me what to do. But I had guessed before she came.”

“That young woman was a friend of mine, who knows nothing about the general circumstances. I simply made use of her for this particular purpose.”

There was a long pause. Wingate was the first to break it. He had no kindly feelings towards this woman who was ready to betray her old associates when it suited her own interests. Still, he could dissemble better than Sheila.

“You have cleared up all except one thing, Mrs Saxton. What of the Italian who died at Forest View, and the man Whyman who disappeared after Smeaton’s visit to him at Southport?”

“They were both members of a rather wide fraudulent partnership which included Stent and Bolinski. Roselli was evidently seized with remorse on his deathbed, and, much to Stent’s chagrin, conveyed a message in Italian which the young man Franks in his turn conveyed to Smeaton. Had Stent guessed the nature of that message, he would have found some means to keep Franks out of the house. In consequence of my information, the police are searching for Whyman now.”

This extraordinary woman was, by now, perfectly calm and collected. What her inmost feelings were, it would be impossible to guess, but apparently she felt no shame in avowing that she had betrayed her old friends.

There was an embarrassing silence till she spoke again. “I have now concluded my story. If there is nothing more you wish to ask me, I will go.”

Sheila rose, her face cold and hard. “Nothing more, Mrs Saxton. My father will, of course, reward you for the help you gave him, as you have put it yourself, at the eleventh hour. He has no doubt arranged that with you already. You will understand that now I want him to myself.”

“I quite understand.” Without another word, she bowed and left the room, her bearing not devoid of a certain dignity, which might, or might not, have been the result of callousness.

Left to themselves, Sheila breathed a sigh of relief. “The air is sweeter for her departure,” she said simply.

Then she knelt down again, and laid one hand tenderly on her father’s shoulder. The other she extended to Wingate, and drew him towards her.

“Father, dearest,” she said in her sweet, low voice, “I have a secret to tell you, and I could not tell it on a better night than this. Austin and I love each other. You do not know what he has been to me during this terrible time. You will let us be happy?”

Very gentle and kindly was the smile that met her upturned face.

“My darling, you are the dearest thing on earth to me. Could I refuse you anything on such a night as this?” He turned to the young man. “Austin—give me your hand.”

He placed it in Sheila’s, and drawing his daughter to his breast, kissed her. “Dearest, I wish you to follow where your heart leads you. And I think you have chosen well.”

Three Months Later.

Reginald Monkton, restored to his normal health and strength by the devoted ministrations of his daughter, resumed his place in the House. And six months after that happy event the wedding bells rang for Sheila and Austin Wingate, heralding the dawn of a bright future for these sorely tried lovers.

Of the other personages in the story but little remains to be told. Stent and Bolinski, with their accomplice, Whyman, were tried at the Old Bailey and found guilty of extensive and far-reaching frauds, and condemned to a long term of penal servitude.

Mrs Saxton, enriched by the handsome reward bestowed upon her by Monkton, left England for abroad. Farloe disappeared also, and doubtless rejoined his sister under another name. Varney still retains his *penchant* for the detection of crime, but so far has not achieved any notable success.

The beautiful Lady Wrenwyck was speedily relieved from the yoke that had galled her for so many years. A few months after the failure of his diabolical scheme to revenge himself upon his hated rival, her husband’s mind, already tottering became unhinged. He developed symptoms of

homicidal mania, and was placed under restraint. The doctors pronounced it an incurable case.

Caleb Boyle, thanks to the kindness of Wingate, who had taken a great fancy to him, fell upon his feet. He was offered and accepted a post in the big aeroplane works, at a salary that placed him far above the reach of want.

For, reviewing all the efforts made by himself, Varney, and the trained detectives of Scotland Yard, Austin felt that some reward was due to the man, erratic and ill-balanced as he might be, who had come nearest to the solution of the mystery of “The Stolen Statesman.”

The End.

| Chapter 1 | | Chapter 2 | | Chapter 3 | | Chapter 4 | | Chapter 5 | | Chapter 6 | | Chapter 7 | | Chapter 8 | | Chapter 9 | | Chapter 10 | | Chapter 11 | | Chapter 12 | | Chapter 13 | | Chapter 14 | | Chapter 15 | | Chapter 16 | | Chapter 17 | | Chapter 18 | | Chapter 19 | | Chapter 20 | | Chapter 21 | | Chapter 22 | | Chapter 23 | | Chapter 24 | | Chapter 25 | | Chapter 26 | | Chapter 27 | | Chapter 28 | | Chapter 29 | | Chapter 30 |

Gutenberg-tm work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country outside the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg-tm License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg-tm work (any work on which the phrase "Project Gutenberg" appears, or with which the phrase "Project Gutenberg" is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work is derived from the public domain (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase "Project Gutenberg" associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg-tm License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg-tm License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg-tm.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg-tm License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg-tm work in a format other than "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg-tm web site (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg-tm License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg-tm works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works provided

that

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg-tm works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, "Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation."

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg-tm License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg-tm works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg-tm works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from both the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and Michael Hart, the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread public domain works in creating the Project Gutenberg-tm collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain "Defects," such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the "Right of Replacement or Refund" described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS', WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg-tm work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg-tm work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg-tm

Project Gutenberg-tm is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg-tm's goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg-tm collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg-tm and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal

Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's principal office is located at 4557 Melan Dr. S. Fairbanks, AK, 99712., but its volunteers and employees are scattered throughout numerous locations. Its business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's web site and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

For additional contact information:
Dr. Gregory B. Newby
Chief Executive and Director
gbnewby@pglaf.org

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg-tm depends upon and cannot survive without wide spread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg Web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works.

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg-tm concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg-tm eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg-tm eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as Public Domain in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our Web site which has the main PG search facility:

www.gutenberg.org

This Web site includes information about Project Gutenberg-tm, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.