

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha Christie

THE
MURDER
AT THE
VICARAGE

A Miss Marple Mystery

ALL **13**
MISS MARPLE
MYSTERIES

Agatha Christie

The Murder at the Vicarage

HARPER

Agatha Christie

THE BODY IN THE LIBRARY

HARPER

Agatha Christie

THE MOVING FINGER

HARPER

Agatha Christie

A MURDER IS ANNOUNCED

HARPER

Agatha Christie

THEY DO IT WITH MIRRORS

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A POCKET FULL OF RYE

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4:50 from Paddington

HARPER

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THE MIRROR CRACK'D
FROM SIDE TO SIDE

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MISS MARPLE: The Complete Short Stories

HARPER

The Complete Miss Marple Collection

Agatha Christie

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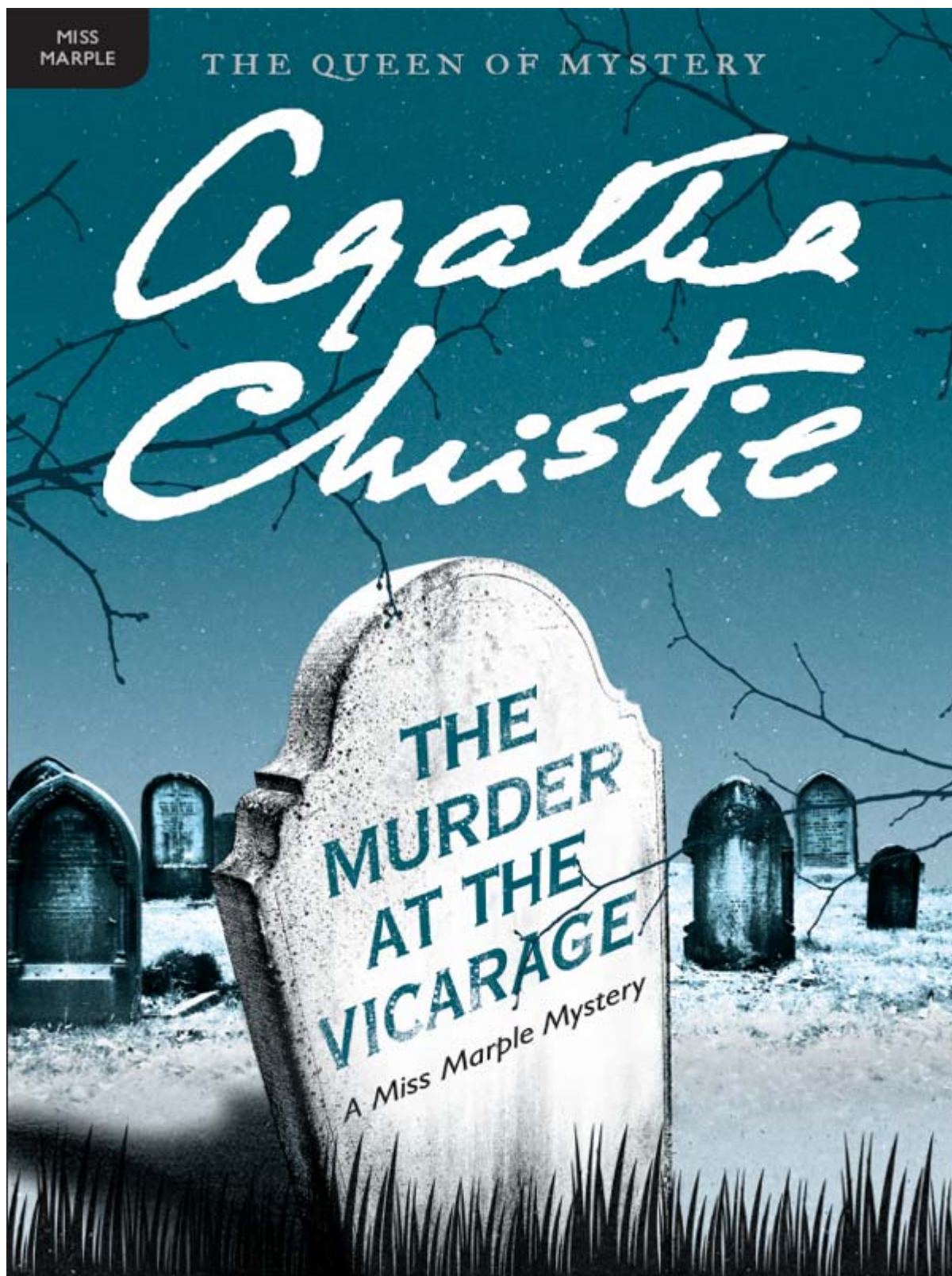
MISS
MARPLE

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha Christie

THE MURDER AT THE VICARAGE

A Miss Marple Mystery



Agatha Christie

The Murder at the Vicarage

A Miss Marple Mystery

HARPER

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To Rosalind

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One

It is difficult to know quite where to begin this story, but I have fixed my choice on a certain Wednesday at luncheon at the Vicarage. The conversation, though in the main irrelevant to the matter in hand, yet contained one or two suggestive incidents which influenced later developments.

I had just finished carving some boiled beef (remarkably tough by the way) and on resuming my seat I remarked, in a spirit most unbecoming to my cloth, that anyone who murdered Colonel Protheroe would be doing the world at large a service.

My young nephew, Dennis, said instantly:

"That'll be remembered against you when the old boy is found bathed in blood. Mary will give evidence, won't you, Mary? And describe how you brandished the carving knife in a vindictive manner."

Mary, who is in service at the Vicarage as a stepping-stone to better things and higher wages, merely said in a loud, businesslike voice, "Greens," and thrust a cracked dish at him in a truculent manner.

My wife said in a sympathetic voice: "Has he been *very* trying?"

I did not reply at once, for Mary, setting the greens on the table with a bang, proceeded to thrust a dish of singularly moist and unpleasant dumplings under my nose. I said, "No, thank you," and she deposited the dish with a clatter on the table and left the room.

"It is a pity that I am such a shocking housekeeper," said my wife, with a tinge of genuine regret in her voice.

I was inclined to agree with her. My wife's name is Griselda—a highly suitable name for a parson's wife. But there the suitability ends. She is not in the least meek.

I have always been of the opinion that a clergyman should be unmarried. Why I should have urged Griselda to marry me at the end of twenty-four hours' acquaintance is a mystery to me. Marriage, I have always held, is a serious affair, to be entered into only after long deliberation and forethought, and suitability of tastes and inclinations is the most important consideration.

Griselda is nearly twenty years younger than myself. She is most distractingly pretty and quite incapable of taking anything seriously. She is incompetent in every way, and extremely trying to live with. She treats the parish as a kind of huge joke arranged for her amusement. I have endeavoured to form her mind and failed. I am more than ever convinced that celibacy is desirable for the clergy. I have frequently hinted as much to Griselda, but she has only laughed.

"My dear," I said, "if you would only exercise a little care—"

"I do sometimes," said Griselda. "But, on the whole, I think things go worse when I'm trying. I'm evidently *not* a housekeeper by nature. I find it better to leave things to Mary and just make up my mind to be uncomfortable and have nasty things to eat."

"And what about your husband, my dear?" I said reproachfully, and proceeding to follow the example of the devil in quoting Scripture for his own ends I added: "She looketh to the ways of her household...."

"Think how lucky you are not to be torn to pieces by lions," said Griselda, quickly interrupting. "Or burnt at the stake. Bad food and lots of dust and dead wasps is really nothing to make a fuss about. Tell me more about Colonel Protheroe. At any rate the early Christians were lucky enough not to have churchwardens."

"Pompous old brute," said Dennis. "No wonder his first wife ran away from him."

"I don't see what else she could do," said my wife.

"Griselda," I said sharply. "I will not have you speaking in that way."

"Darling," said my wife affectionately. "Tell me about him. What was the trouble? Was it Mr. Hawes's becking and nodding and crossing himself every other minute?"

Hawes is our new curate. He has been with us just over three weeks. He has High Church views and fasts on Fridays. Colonel Protheroe is a great opposer of ritual in any form.

"Not this time. He did touch on it in passing. No, the whole trouble arose out of Mrs. Price Ridley's wretched pound note."

Mrs. Price Ridley is a devout member of my congregation. Attending early service on the anniversary of her son's death, she put a pound note in the offertory bag. Later, reading the amount of the collection posted up, she was pained to observe that one ten-shilling note was the highest item mentioned.

She complained to me about it, and I pointed out, very reasonably, that she must have made a mistake.

"We're none of us so young as we were," I said, trying to turn it off tactfully. "And we must pay the penalty of advancing years."

Strangely enough, my words only seemed to incense her further. She said that things had a very odd look and that she was surprised I didn't think so also. And she flounced away and, I gather, took her troubles to Colonel Protheroe. Protheroe is the kind of man who enjoys making a fuss on every conceivable occasion. He made a fuss. It is a pity he made it on a Wednesday. I teach in the Church Day School on Wednesday mornings, a proceeding that causes me acute nervousness and leaves me unsettled for the rest of the day.

"Well, I suppose he must have some fun," said my wife, with the air of trying to sum up the position impartially. "Nobody flutters round him and calls him 'the dear Vicar,' and embroiders awful slippers for him, and gives him bedsocks for Christmas. Both his wife and his daughter are fed up to the teeth with him. I suppose it makes him happy to feel important somewhere."

"He needn't be offensive about it," I said with some heat. "I don't think he quite realized the implications of what he was saying. He wants to go over all the Church accounts—in case of defalcations—that was the word he used. Defalcations! Does he suspect me of embezzling the Church funds?"

"Nobody would suspect you of anything, darling," said Griselda. "You're so transparently above suspicion that really it would be a marvellous opportunity. I wish you'd embezzle the S.P.G. funds. I hate missionaries—I always have."

I would have reproved her for that sentiment, but Mary entered at that moment with a partially cooked rice pudding. I made a mild protest, but Griselda said that the Japanese always ate half-cooked rice and had marvellous brains in consequence.

"I dare say," she said, "that if you had a rice pudding like this every day till Sunday, you'd preach the most marvellous sermon."

"Heaven forbid," I said with a shudder.

"Protheroe's coming over tomorrow evening and we're going over the accounts together," I went on. "I must finish preparing my talk for the C.E.M.S. today. Looking up a reference, I became so engrossed in Canon Shirley's *Reality* that I haven't got on as well as I should. What are you doing this afternoon, Griselda?"

"My duty," said Griselda. "My duty as the Vicarress. Tea and scandal at four thirty."

"Who is coming?"

Griselda ticked them off on her fingers with a glow of virtue on her face.

"Mrs. Price Ridley, Miss Wetherby, Miss Hartnell, and that terrible Miss Marple."

"I rather like Miss Marple," I said. "She has, at least, a sense of humour."

"She's the worst cat in the village," said Griselda. "And she always knows every single thing that happens—and draws the worst inferences from it."

Griselda, as I have said, is much younger than I am. At my time of life, one knows that the worst is usually true.

"Well, don't expect *me* in for tea, Griselda," said Dennis.

"Beast!" said Griselda.

"Yes, but look here, the Protheroes really *did* ask me for tennis today."

"Beast!" said Griselda again.

Dennis beat a prudent retreat and Griselda and I went together into my study.

"I wonder what we shall have for tea," said Griselda, seating herself on my writing table. "Dr. Stone and Miss Cram, I suppose, and perhaps Mrs. Lestrangle. By the way, I called on her yesterday, but she was out. Yes, I'm sure we shall have Mrs. Lestrangle for tea. It's so mysterious, isn't it, her arriving like this and taking a house down here, and hardly ever going outside it? Makes one think of detective stories. You know—'*Who was she, the mysterious woman with the pale, beautiful face? What was her past history? Nobody knew. There was something faintly sinister about her.*' I believe Dr. Haydock knows something about her."

"You read too many detective stories, Griselda," I observed mildly.

"What about you?" she retorted. "I was looking everywhere for *The Stain on the Stairs* the other day when you were in here writing a sermon. And at last I came in to ask you if you'd seen it anywhere, and what did I find?"

I had the grace to blush.

"I picked it up at random. A chance sentence caught my eye and...."

"I know those chance sentences," said Griselda. She quoted impressively, "*And then a very curious thing happened—Griselda rose, crossed the room and kissed her elderly husband affectionately.*" She suited the action to the word.

"Is that a very curious thing?" I inquired.

"Of course it is," said Griselda. "Do you realize, Len, that I might have married a Cabinet Minister, a Baronet, a rich Company Promoter, three subalterns and a ne'er-do-weel with attractive manners, and that instead I chose you? Didn't it astonish you very much?"

"At the time it did," I replied. "I have often wondered why you did it."

Griselda laughed.

"It made me feel so powerful," she murmured. "The others thought me simply wonderful and of course it would have been very nice for *them* to have *me*. But I'm everything you most dislike and

disapprove of, and yet you couldn't withstand me! My vanity couldn't hold out against that. It's so much nicer to be a secret and delightful sin to anybody than to be a feather in their cap. I make you frightfully uncomfortable and stir you up the wrong way the whole time, and yet you adore me madly. You adore me madly, don't you?"

"Naturally I am very fond of you, my dear."

"Oh! Len, you adore me. Do you remember that day when I stayed up in town and sent you a wire you never got because the postmistress's sister was having twins and she forgot to send it round? The state you got into and you telephoned Scotland Yard and made the most frightful fuss."

There are things one hates being reminded of. I had really been strangely foolish on the occasion in question. I said:

"If you don't mind, dear, I want to get on with the C.E.M.S."

Griselda gave a sigh of intense irritation, ruffled my hair up on end, smoothed it down again, said:

"You don't deserve me. You really don't. I'll have an affair with the artist. I will—really and truly. And then think of the scandal in the parish."

"There's a good deal already," I said mildly.

Griselda laughed, blew me a kiss, and departed through the window.

Two

Griselda is a very irritating woman. On leaving the luncheon table, I had felt myself to be in a good mood for preparing a really forceful address for the Church of England Men's Society. Now I felt restless and disturbed.

Just when I was really settling down to it, Lettice Protheroe drifted in.

I use the word drifted advisedly. I have read novels in which young people are described as bursting with energy—*joie de vivre*, the magnificent vitality of youth ... Personally, all the young people I come across have the air of animal wraiths.

Lettice was particularly wraithlike this afternoon. She is a pretty girl, very tall and fair and completely vague. She drifted through the French window, absently pulled off the yellow beret she was wearing and murmured vaguely with a kind of faraway surprise: "Oh! it's you."

There is a path from Old Hall through the woods which comes out by our garden gate, so that most people coming from there come in at that gate and up to the study window instead of going a long way round by the road and coming to the front door. I was not surprised at Lettice coming in this way, but I did a little resent her attitude.

If you come to a Vicarage, you ought to be prepared to find a Vicar.

She came in and collapsed in a crumpled heap in one of my big armchairs. She plucked aimlessly at her hair, staring at the ceiling.

"Is Dennis anywhere about?"

"I haven't seen him since lunch. I understood he was going to play tennis at your place."

"Oh!" said Lettice. "I hope he isn't. He won't find anybody there."

"He said you asked him."

"I believe I did. Only that was Friday. And today's Tuesday."

"It's Wednesday," I said.

"Oh, how dreadful!" said Lettice. "That means that I've forgotten to go to lunch with some people for the third time."

Fortunately it didn't seem to worry her much.

"Is Griselda anywhere about?"

"I expect you'll find her in the studio in the garden—sitting to Lawrence Redding."

"There's been quite a shemozzle about him," said Lettice. "With father, you know. Father's dreadful."

"What was the she—whatever it was about?" I inquired.

"About his painting me. Father found out about it. Why shouldn't I be painted in my bathing dress? If I go on a beach in it, why shouldn't I be painted in it?"

Lettice paused and then went on.

"It's really absurd—father forbidding a young man the house. Of course, Lawrence and I simply shriek about it. I shall come and be done here in your studio."

"No, my dear," I said. "Not if your father forbids it."

"Oh! dear," said Lettice, sighing. "How tiresome everyone is. I feel shattered. Definitely. If only I had some money I'd go away, but without it I can't. If only father would be decent and die, I should be all right."

"You must not say things like that, Lettice."

"Well, if he doesn't want me to want him to die, he shouldn't be so horrible over money. I don't wonder mother left him. Do you know, for years I believed she was dead. What sort of a young man did she run away with? Was he nice?"

"It was before your father came to live here."

"I wonder what's become of her. I expect Anne will have an affair with someone soon. Anne hates me—she's quite decent to me, but

she hates me. She's getting old and she doesn't like it. That's the age you break out, you know."

I wondered if Lettice was going to spend the entire afternoon in my study.

"You haven't seen my gramophone records, have you?" she asked.

"No."

"How tiresome. I know I've left them somewhere. And I've lost the dog. And my wristwatch is somewhere, only it doesn't much matter because it won't go. Oh! dear, I am so sleepy. I can't think why, because I didn't get up till eleven. But life's very shattering, don't you think? Oh! dear, I must go. I'm going to see Dr. Stone's barrow at three o'clock."

I glanced at the clock and remarked that it was now five-and-twenty to four.

"Oh! Is it? How dreadful. I wonder if they've waited or if they've gone without me. I suppose I'd better go down and do something about it."

She got up and drifted out again, murmuring over her shoulder:

"You'll tell Dennis, won't you?"

I said "Yes" mechanically, only realizing too late that I had no idea what it was I was to tell Dennis. But I reflected that in all probability it did not matter. I fell to cogitating on the subject of Dr. Stone, a well-known archaeologist who had recently come to stay at the Blue Boar, whilst he superintended the excavation of a barrow situated on Colonel Protheroe's property. There had already been several disputes between him and the Colonel. I was amused at his appointment to take Lettice to see the operations.

It occurred to me that Lettice Protheroe was something of a minx. I wondered how she would get on with the archaeologist's secretary, Miss Cram. Miss Cram is a healthy young woman of twenty-five, noisy in manner, with a high colour, fine animal spirits and a mouth that always seems to have more than its full share of teeth.

Village opinion is divided as to whether she is no better than she should be, or else a young woman of iron virtue who purposes to

become Mrs. Stone at an early opportunity. She is in every way a great contrast to Lettice.

I could imagine that the state of things at Old Hall might not be too happy. Colonel Protheroe had married again some five years previously. The second Mrs. Protheroe was a remarkably handsome woman in a rather unusual style. I had always guessed that the relations between her and her stepdaughter were not too happy.

I had one more interruption. This time, it was my curate, Hawes. He wanted to know the details of my interview with Protheroe. I told him that the Colonel had deplored his "Romish tendencies" but that the real purpose of his visit had been on quite another matter. At the same time, I entered a protest of my own, and told him plainly that he must conform to my ruling. On the whole, he took my remarks very well.

I felt rather remorseful when he had gone for not liking him better. These irrational likes and dislikes that one takes to people are, I am sure, very unChristian.

With a sigh, I realized that the hands of the clock on my writing table pointed to a quarter to five, a sign that it was really half past four, and I made my way to the drawing room.

Four of my parishioners were assembled there with teacups. Griselda sat behind the tea table trying to look natural in her environment, but only succeeded in looking more out of place than usual.

I shook hands all round and sat down between Miss Marple and Miss Wetherby.

Miss Marple is a white-haired old lady with a gentle, appealing manner—Miss Wetherby is a mixture of vinegar and gush. Of the two Miss Marple is much the more dangerous.

"We were just talking," said Griselda in a honeysweet voice, "about Dr. Stone and Miss Cram."

A ribald rhyme concocted by Dennis shot through my head.

"Miss Cram doesn't give a damn."

I had a sudden yearning to say it out loud and observe the effect, but fortunately I refrained. Miss Wetherby said tersely:

"No nice girl would do it," and shut her thin lips disapprovingly.

"Do what?" I inquired.

"Be a secretary to an unmarried man," said Miss Wetherby in a horrified tone.

"Oh! my dear," said Miss Marple. "*I think married ones are the worst. Remember poor Mollie Carter.*"

"Married men living apart from their wives are, of course, notorious," said Miss Wetherby.

"And even some of the ones living with their wives," murmured Miss Marple. "I remember..."

I interrupted these unsavoury reminiscences.

"But surely," I said, "in these days a girl can take a post in just the same way as a man does."

"To come away to the country? And stay at the same hotel?" said Mrs. Price Ridley in a severe voice.

Miss Wetherby murmured to Miss Marple in a low voice:

"And all the bedrooms on the same floor..."

Miss Hartnell, who is weather-beaten and jolly and much dreaded by the poor, observed in a loud, hearty voice:

"The poor man will be caught before he knows where he is. He's as innocent as a babe unborn, you can see that."

Curious what turns of phrase we employ. None of the ladies present would have dreamed of alluding to an actual baby till it was safely in the cradle, visible to all.

"Disgusting, I call it," continued Miss Hartnell, with her usual tactlessness. "The man must be at least twenty-five years older than she is."

Three female voices rose at once making disconnected remarks about the Choir Boys' Outing, the regrettable incident at the last Mother's Meeting, and the draughts in the church. Miss Marple twinkled at Griselda.

"Don't you think," said my wife, "that Miss Cram may just like having an interesting job? And that she considers Dr. Stone just as an employer?"

There was a silence. Evidently none of the four ladies agreed. Miss Marple broke the silence by patting Griselda on the arm.

"My dear," she said, "you are very young. The young have such innocent minds."

Griselda said indignantly that she hadn't got at all an innocent mind.

"Naturally," said Miss Marple, unheeding of the protest, "you think the best of everyone."

"Do you really think she wants to marry that baldheaded dull man?"

"I understand he is quite well off," said Miss Marple. "Rather a violent temper, I'm afraid. He had quite a serious quarrel with Colonel Protheroe the other day."

Everyone leaned forward interestingly.

"Colonel Protheroe accused him of being an ignoramus."

"How like Colonel Protheroe, and how absurd," said Mrs. Price Ridley.

"Very like Colonel Protheroe, but I don't know about it being absurd," said Miss Marple. "You remember the woman who came down here and said she represented Welfare, and after taking subscriptions she was never heard of again and proved to having nothing whatever to do with Welfare. One is so inclined to be trusting and take people at their own valuation."

I should never have dreamed of describing Miss Marple as trusting.

"There's been some fuss about that young artist, Mr. Redding, hasn't there?" asked Miss Wetherby.

Miss Marple nodded.

"Colonel Protheroe turned him out of the house. It appears he was painting Lettice in her bathing dress."

"I always *thought* there was something between them," said Mrs. Price Ridley. "That young fellow is always mouching off up there. Pity the girl hasn't got a mother. A stepmother is never the same thing."

"I dare say Mrs. Protheroe does her best," said Miss Hartnell.

"Girls are so sly," deplored Mrs. Price Ridley.

"Quite a romance, isn't it?" said the softerhearted Miss Wetherby. "He's a very good-looking young fellow."

"But loose," said Miss Hartnell. "Bound to be. An artist! Paris! Models! The Altogether!"

"Painting her in her bathing dress," said Mrs. Price Ridley. "Not quite nice."

"He's painting me too," said Griselda.

"But not in your bathing dress, dear," said Miss Marple.

"It might be worse," said Griselda solemnly.

"Naughty girl," said Miss Hartnell, taking the joke broad-mindedly. Everybody else looked slightly shocked.

"Did dear Lettice tell you of the trouble?" asked Miss Marple of me.

"Tell me?"

"Yes. I saw her pass through the garden and go round to the study window."

Miss Marple always sees everything. Gardening is as good as a smoke screen, and the habit of observing birds through powerful glasses can always be turned to account.

"She mentioned it, yes," I admitted.

"Mr. Hawes looked worried," said Miss Marple. "I hope he hasn't been working too hard."

"Oh!" cried Miss Wetherby excitedly. "I quite forgot. I knew I had some news for you. I saw Dr. Haydock coming out of Mrs. Lestrangle's cottage."

Everyone looked at each other.

"Perhaps she's ill," suggested Mrs. Price Ridley.

"It must have been very sudden, if so," said Miss Hartnell. "For I saw her walking round her garden at three o'clock this afternoon, and she seemed in perfect health."

"She and Dr. Haydock must be old acquaintances," said Mrs. Price Ridley. "He's been very quiet about it."

"It's curious," said Miss Wetherby, "that he's never *mentioned* it."

"As a matter of fact—" said Griselda in a low, mysterious voice, and stopped. Everyone leaned forward excitedly.

"I happen to *know*," said Griselda impressively. "Her husband was a missionary. Terrible story. *He was eaten*, you know. Actually eaten."

And she was forced to become the chief's head wife. Dr. Haydock was with an expedition and rescued her."

For a moment excitement was rife, then Miss Marple said reproachfully, but with a smile: "Naughty girl!"

She tapped Griselda reprovably on the arm.

"Very unwise thing to do, my dear. If you make up these things, people are quite likely to believe them. And sometimes that leads to complications."

A distinct frost had come over the assembly. Two of the ladies rose to take their departure.

"I wonder if there *is* anything between young Lawrence Redding and Lettice Protheroe," said Miss Wetherby. "It certainly looks like it. What do you think, Miss Marple?"

Miss Marple seemed thoughtful.

"I shouldn't have said so myself. Not *Lettice*. *Quite* another person I should have said."

"But Colonel Protheroe must have thought..."

"He has always struck me as rather a stupid man," said Miss Marple. "The kind of man who gets the wrong idea into his head and is obstinate about it. Do you remember Joe Bucknell who used to keep the Blue Boar? Such a to-do about his daughter carrying on with young Bailey. And all the time it was that minx of a wife of his."

She was looking full at Griselda as she spoke, and I suddenly felt a wild surge of anger.

"Don't you think, Miss Marple," I said, "that we're all inclined to let our tongues run away with us too much. Charity thinketh no evil, you know. Inestimable harm may be done by foolish wagging of tongues in ill-natured gossip."

"Dear Vicar," said Miss Marple, "You are so unworldly. I'm afraid that observing human nature for as long as I have done, one gets not to expect very much from it. I dare say the idle tittle-tattle is very wrong and unkind, but it is so often true, isn't it?"

That last Parthian shot went home.

Three

"Nasty old cat," said Griselda, as soon as the door was closed.

She made a face in the direction of the departing visitors and then looked at me and laughed.

"Len, do you really suspect me of having an affair with Lawrence Redding?"

"My dear, of course not."

"But you thought Miss Marple was hinting at it. And you rose to my defence simply beautifully. Like—like an angry tiger."

A momentary uneasiness assailed me. A clergyman of the Church of England ought never to put himself in the position of being described as an angry tiger.

"I felt the occasion could not pass without a protest," I said. "But Griselda, I wish you would be a little more careful in what you say."

"Do you mean the cannibal story?" she asked. "Or the suggestion that Lawrence was painting me in the nude! If they only knew that he was painting me in a thick cloak with a very high fur collar—the sort of thing that you could go quite purely to see the Pope in—not a bit of sinful flesh showing anywhere! In fact, it's all marvellously pure. Lawrence never even attempts to make love to me—I can't think why."

"Surely knowing that you're a married woman—"

"Don't pretend to come out of the ark, Len. You know very well that an attractive young woman with an elderly husband is a kind of gift from heaven to a young man. There must be some other reason—it's not that I'm unattractive—I'm not."

"Surely you don't want him to make love to you?"

"N-n-o," said Griselda, with more hesitation than I thought becoming.

"If he's in love with Lettice Protheroe—"

"Miss Marple didn't seem to think he was."

"Miss Marple may be mistaken."

"She never is. That kind of old cat is always right." She paused a minute and then said, with a quick sidelong glance at me: "You do believe me, don't you? I mean, that there's nothing between Lawrence and me."

"My dear Griselda," I said, surprised. "Of course."

My wife came across and kissed me.

"I wish you weren't so terribly easy to deceive, Len. You'd believe me whatever I said."

"I should hope so. But, my dear, I do beg of you to guard your tongue and be careful of what you say. These women are singularly deficient in humour, remember, and take everything seriously."

"What they need," said Griselda, "is a little immorality in their lives. Then they wouldn't be so busy looking for it in other people's."

And on this she left the room, and glancing at my watch I hurried out to pay some visits that ought to have been made earlier in the day.

The Wednesday evening service was sparsely attended as usual, but when I came out through the church, after disrobing in the vestry, it was empty save for a woman who stood staring up at one of our windows. We have some rather fine old stained glass, and indeed the church itself is well worth looking at. She turned at my footsteps, and I saw that it was Mrs. Lestrangle.

We both hesitated a moment, and then I said:

"I hope you like our little church."

"I've been admiring the screen," she said.

Her voice was pleasant, low, yet very distinct, with a clearcut enunciation. She added:

"I'm so sorry to have missed your wife yesterday."

We talked a few minutes longer about the church. She was evidently a cultured woman who knew something of Church history

and architecture. We left the building together and walked down the road, since one way to the Vicarage led past her house. As we arrived at the gate, she said pleasantly:

"Come in, won't you? And tell me what you think of what I have done."

I accepted the invitation. Little Gates had formerly belonged to an Anglo-Indian colonel, and I could not help feeling relieved by the disappearance of the brass tables and Burmese idols. It was furnished now very simply, but in exquisite taste. There was a sense of harmony and rest about it.

Yet I wondered more and more what had brought such a woman as Mrs. Lestrangle to St. Mary Mead. She was so very clearly a woman of the world that it seemed a strange taste to bury herself in a country village.

In the clear light of her drawing room I had an opportunity of observing her closely for the first time.

She was a very tall woman. Her hair was gold with a tinge of red in it. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were dark, whether by art or by nature I could not decide. If she was, as I thought, made up, it was done very artistically. There was something Sphinxlike about her face when it was in repose and she had the most curious eyes I have ever seen—they were almost golden in shade.

Her clothes were perfect and she had all the ease of manner of a well-bred woman, and yet there was something about her that was incongruous and baffling. You felt that she was a mystery. The word Griselda had used occurred to me—*sinister*. Absurd, of course, and yet—was it so absurd? The thought sprang unbidden into my mind: "This woman would stick at nothing."

Our talk was on most normal lines—pictures, books, old churches. Yet somehow I got very strongly the impression that there was something else—something of quite a different nature that Mrs. Lestrangle wanted to say to me.

I caught her eye on me once or twice, looking at me with a curious hesitancy, as though she were unable to make up her mind. She kept the talk, I noticed, strictly to impersonal subjects. She made no mention of a husband or relations.

But all the time there was that strange urgent appeal in her glance. It seemed to say: "Shall I tell you? I want to. Can't you help me?"

Yet in the end it died away—or perhaps it had all been my fancy. I had the feeling that I was being dismissed. I rose and took my leave. As I went out of the room, I glanced back and saw her staring after me with a puzzled, doubtful expression. On an impulse I came back:

"If there is anything I can do—"

She said doubtfully: "It's very kind of you—"

We were both silent. Then she said:

"I wish I knew. It's difficult. No, I don't think anyone can help me. But thank you for offering to do so."

That seemed final, so I went. But as I did so, I wondered. We are not used to mysteries in St. Mary Mead.

So much is this the case that as I emerged from the gate I was pounced upon. Miss Hartnell is very good at pouncing in a heavy and cumbrous way.

"*I saw you!*" she exclaimed with ponderous humour. "*And I was so excited. Now you can tell us all about it.*"

"About what?"

"The mysterious lady! Is she a widow or has she a husband somewhere?"

"I really couldn't say. She didn't tell me."

"How very peculiar. One would think she would be certain to mention something casually. It almost looks, doesn't it, as though she had a reason for not speaking?"

"I really don't see that."

"Ah! But as dear Miss Marple says, you are so unworldly, dear Vicar. Tell me, has she known Dr. Haydock long?"

"She didn't mention him, so I don't know."

"Really? But what did you talk about then?"

"Pictures, music, books," I said truthfully.

Miss Hartnell, whose only topics of conversation are the purely personal, looked suspicious and unbelieving. Taking advantage of a momentary hesitation on her part as to how to proceed next, I bade her good night and walked rapidly away.

I called in at a house farther down the village and returned to the Vicarage by the garden gate, passing, as I did so, the danger point of Miss Marple's garden. However, I did not see how it was humanly possible for the news of my visit to Mrs. Lestrangle to have yet reached her ears, so I felt reasonably safe.

As I latched the gate, it occurred to me that I would just step down to the shed in the garden which young Lawrence Redding was using as a studio, and see for myself how Griselda's portrait was progressing.

I append a rough sketch here which will be useful in the light of after happenings, only sketching in such details as are necessary.

I had no idea there was anyone in the studio. There had been no voices from within to warn me, and I suppose that my own footsteps made no noise upon the grass.

I opened the door and then stopped awkwardly on the threshold. For there were two people in the studio, and the man's arms were round the woman and he was kissing her passionately.

The two people were the artist, Lawrence Redding, and Mrs. Protheroe.

I backed out precipitately and beat a retreat to my study. There I sat down in a chair, took out my pipe, and thought things over. The discovery had come as a great shock to me. Especially since my conversation with Lettice that afternoon, I had felt fairly certain that there was some kind of understanding growing up between her and the young man. Moreover, I was convinced that she herself thought so. I felt positive that she had no idea of the artist's feelings for her stepmother.

A nasty tangle. I paid a grudging tribute to Miss Marple. She had not been deceived but had evidently suspected the true state of things with a fair amount of accuracy. I had entirely misread her meaning glance at Griselda.

I had never dreamt of considering Mrs. Protheroe in the matter. There has always been rather a suggestion of Caesar's wife about Mrs. Protheroe—a quiet, self-contained woman whom one would not suspect of any great depths of feeling.

I had got to this point in my meditations when a tap on my study window aroused me. I got up and went to it. Mrs. Protheroe was standing outside. I opened the window and she came in, not waiting for an invitation on my part. She crossed the room in a breathless sort of way and dropped down on the sofa.

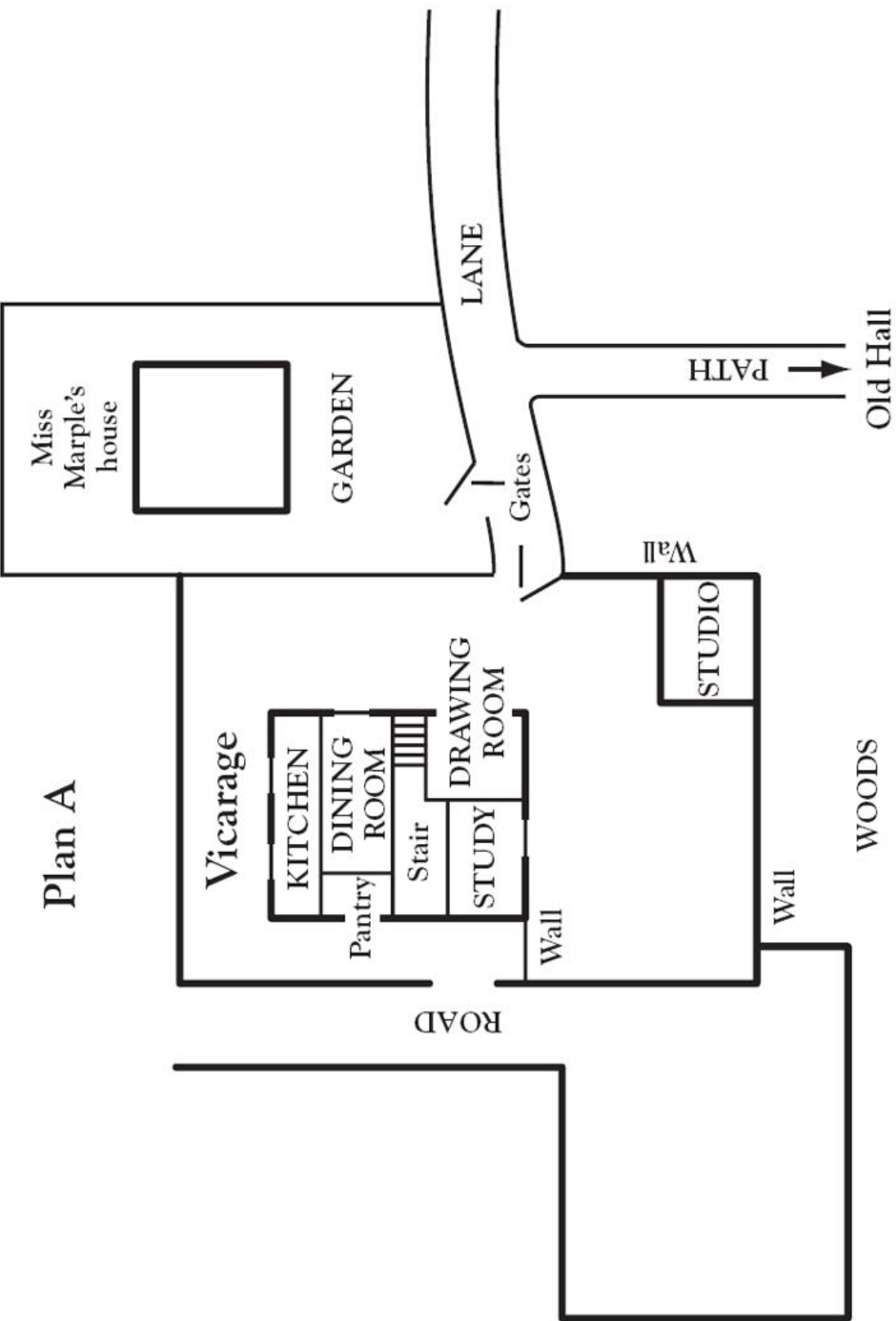
I had the feeling that I had never really seen her before. The quiet self-contained woman that I knew had vanished. In her place was a quick-breathing, desperate creature. For the first time I realized that Anne Protheroe was beautiful.

She was a brown-haired woman with a pale face and very deep set grey eyes. She was flushed now and her breast heaved. It was as though a statue had suddenly come to life. I blinked my eyes at the transformation.

"I thought it best to come," she said. "You—you saw just now?" I bowed my head.

She said very quietly: "We love each other..."

And even in the middle of her evident distress and agitation she could not keep a little smile from her lips. The smile of a woman who sees something very beautiful and wonderful.



Plan A

Miss
Marple's
house

GARDEN

LANE

Gates

PATH

Old Hall

Wall

STUDIO

Vicarage

KITCHEN

DINING
ROOM

Pantry

Stair

STUDY

DRAWING
ROOM

Wall

Wall

WOODS

ROAD

I still said nothing, and she added presently:

"I suppose to you that seems very wrong?"

"Can you expect me to say anything else, Mrs. Protheroe?"

"No—no, I suppose not."

I went on, trying to make my voice as gentle as possible:

"You are a married woman—"

She interrupted me.

"Oh! I know—I know. Do you think I haven't gone over all that again and again? I'm not a bad woman really—I'm not. And things aren't—aren't—as you might think they are."

I said gravely: "I'm glad of that."

She asked rather timorously:

"Are you going to tell my husband?"

I said rather dryly:

"There seems to be a general idea that a clergyman is incapable of behaving like a gentleman. That is not true."

She threw me a grateful glance.

"I'm so unhappy. Oh! I'm so dreadfully unhappy. I can't go on. I simply can't go on. And I don't know what to do." Her voice rose with a slightly hysterical note in it. "You don't know what my life is like. I've been miserable with Lucius from the beginning. No woman could be happy with him. I wish he were dead ... It's awful, but I do ... I'm desperate. I tell you, I'm desperate." She started and looked over at the window.

"What was that? I thought I heard someone? Perhaps it's Lawrence."

I went over to the window which I had not closed as I had thought. I stepped out and looked down the garden, but there was no one in sight. Yet I was almost convinced that I, too, had heard someone. Or perhaps it was her certainty that had convinced me.

When I reentered the room she was leaning forward, drooping her head down. She looked the picture of despair. She said again:

"I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do."

I came and sat down beside her. I said the things I thought it was my duty to say, and tried to say them with the necessary conviction, uneasily conscious all the time that that same morning I had given

voice to the sentiment that a world without Colonel Protheroe in it would be improved for the better.

Above all, I begged her to do nothing rash. To leave her home and her husband was a very serious step.

I don't suppose I convinced her. I have lived long enough in the world to know that arguing with anyone in love is next door to useless, but I do think my words brought to her some measure of comfort.

When she rose to go, she thanked me, and promised to think over what I had said.

Nevertheless, when she had gone, I felt very uneasy. I felt that hitherto I had misjudged Anne Protheroe's character. She impressed me now as a very desperate woman, the kind of woman who would stick at nothing once her emotions were aroused. And she was desperately, wildly, madly in love with Lawrence Redding, a man several years younger than herself. I didn't like it.

Four

I had entirely forgotten that we had asked Lawrence Redding to dinner that night. When Griselda burst in and scolded me, pointing out that it lacked two minutes to dinner time, I was quite taken aback.

"I hope everything will be all right," Griselda called up the stairs after me. "I've thought over what you said at lunch, and I've really thought of some quite good things to eat."

I may say, in passing, that our evening meal amply bore out Griselda's assertion that things went much worse when she tried than when she didn't. The menu was ambitious in conception, and Mary seemed to have taken a perverse pleasure in seeing how best she could alternate undercooking and overcooking. Some oysters which Griselda had ordered, and which would seem to be beyond the reach of incompetence, we were, unfortunately, not able to sample as we had nothing in the house to open them with—an omission which was discovered only when the moment for eating them arrived.

I had rather doubted whether Lawrence Redding would put in an appearance. He might very easily have sent an excuse.

However, he arrived punctually enough, and the four of us went in to dinner.

Lawrence Redding has an undeniably attractive personality. He is, I suppose, about thirty years of age. He has dark hair, but his eyes are of a brilliant, almost startling blue. He is the kind of young man who does everything well. He is good at games, an excellent shot, a

good amateur actor, and can tell a first-rate story. He is capable of making any party go. He has, I think, Irish blood in his veins. He is not, at all, one's idea of the typical artist. Yet I believe he is a clever painter in the modern style. I know very little of painting myself.

It was only natural that on this particular evening he should appear a shade *distract*. On the whole, he carried off things very well. I don't think Griselda or Dennis noticed anything wrong. Probably I should not have noticed anything myself if I had not known beforehand.

Griselda and Dennis were particularly gay—full of jokes about Dr. Stone and Miss Cram—the Local Scandal! It suddenly came home to me with something of a pang that Dennis is nearer Griselda's age than I am. He calls me Uncle Len, but her Griselda. It gave me, somehow, a lonely feeling.

I must, I think, have been upset by Mrs. Protheroe. I'm not usually given to such unprofitable reflections.

Griselda and Dennis went rather far now and then, but I hadn't the heart to check them. I have always thought it a pity that the mere presence of a clergyman should have a dampening effect.

Lawrence took a gay part in the conversation. Nevertheless I was aware of his eyes continually straying to where I sat, and I was not surprised when after dinner he manoeuvred to get me into the study.

As soon as we were alone his manner changed.

"You've surprised our secret, sir," he said. "What are you going to do about it?"

I could speak far more plainly to Redding than I could to Mrs. Protheroe, and I did so. He took it very well.

"Of course," he said, when I had finished, "you're bound to say all this. You're a parson. I don't mean that in any way offensively. As a matter of fact I think you're probably right. But this isn't the usual sort of thing between Anne and me."

I told him that people had been saying that particular phrase since the dawn of time, and a queer little smile creased his lips.

"You mean everyone thinks their case is unique? Perhaps so. But one thing you must believe."

He assured me that so far—"there was nothing wrong in it." Anne, he said, was one of the truest and most loyal women that ever lived. What was going to happen he didn't know.

"If this were only a book," he said gloomily, "the old man would die—and a good riddance to everybody."

I reproved him.

"Oh! I didn't mean I was going to stick him in the back with a knife, though I'd offer my best thanks to anyone else who did so. There's not a soul in the world who's got a good word to say for him. I rather wonder the first Mrs. Protheroe didn't do him in. I met her once, years ago, and she looked quite capable of it. One of those calm dangerous women. He goes blustering along, stirring up trouble everywhere, mean as the devil, and with a particularly nasty temper. You don't know what Anne has had to stand from him. If I had a penny in the world I'd take her away without any more ado."

Then I spoke to him very earnestly. I begged him to leave St. Mary Mead. By remaining there, he could only bring greater unhappiness on Anne Protheroe than was already her lot. People would talk, the matter would get to Colonel Protheroe's ears—and things would be made infinitely worse for her.

Lawrence protested.

"Nobody knows a thing about it except you, padre."

"My dear young man, you underestimate the detective instinct of village life. In St. Mary Mead everyone knows your most intimate affairs. There is no detective in England equal to a spinster lady of uncertain age with plenty of time on her hands."

He said easily that that was all right. Everyone thought it was Lettice.

"Has it occurred to you," I asked, "that possibly Lettice might think so herself?"

He seemed quite surprised by the idea. Lettice, he said, didn't care a hang about him. He was sure of that.

"She's a queer sort of girl," he said. "Always seems in a kind of dream, and yet underneath I believe she's really rather practical. I believe all that vague stuff is a pose. Lettice knows jolly well what she's doing. And there's a funny vindictive streak in her. The queer

thing is that she hates Anne. Simply loathes her. And yet Anne's been a perfect angel to her always."

I did not, of course, take his word for this last. To infatuated young men, their inamorata always behaves like an angel. Still, to the best of my observation, Anne had always behaved to her step-daughter with kindness and fairness. I had been surprised myself that afternoon at the bitterness of Lettice's tone.

We had to leave the conversation there, because Griselda and Dennis burst in upon us and said I was not to make Lawrence behave like an old fogey.

"Oh dear!" said Griselda, throwing herself into an armchair. "How I would like a thrill of some kind. A murder—or even a burglary."

"I don't suppose there's anyone much worth burgling," said Lawrence, trying to enter into her mood. "Unless we stole Miss Hartnell's false teeth."

"They do click horribly," said Griselda. "But you're wrong about there being no one worthwhile. There's some marvellous old silver at Old Hall. Trencher salts and a Charles II Tazza—all kinds of things like that. Worth thousands of pounds, I believe."

"The old man would probably shoot you with an army revolver," said Dennis. "Just the sort of thing he'd enjoy doing."

"Oh, we'd get in first and hold him up!" said Griselda. "Who's got a revolver?"

"I've got a Mauser pistol," said Lawrence.

"Have you? How exciting. Why do you have it?"

"Souvenir of the war," said Lawrence briefly.

"Old Protheroe was showing the silver to Stone today," volunteered Dennis. "Old Stone was pretending to be no end interested in it."

"I thought they'd quarrelled about the barrow," said Griselda.

"Oh, they've made that up!" said Dennis. "I can't think what people want to grub about in barrows for, anyway."

"The man Stone puzzles me," said Lawrence. "I think he must be very absentminded. You'd swear sometimes he knew nothing about his own subject."

"That's love," said Dennis. "Sweet Gladys Cram, you are no sham. Your teeth are white and fill me with delight. Come, fly with me, my bride to be. And at the Blue Boar, on the bedroom floor—"

"That's enough, Dennis," I said.

"Well," said Lawrence Redding, "I must be off. Thank you very much, Mrs. Clement, for a very pleasant evening."

Griselda and Dennis saw him off. Dennis returned to the study alone. Something had happened to ruffle the boy. He wandered about the room aimlessly, frowning and kicking the furniture.

Our furniture is so shabby already that it can hardly be damaged further, but I felt impelled to utter a mild protest.

"Sorry," said Dennis.

He was silent for a moment and then burst out:

"What an absolutely rotten thing gossip is!"

I was a little surprised. "What's the matter?" I asked.

"I don't know whether I ought to tell you."

I was more and more surprised.

"It's such an absolutely rotten thing," Dennis said again. "Going round and saying things. Not even saying them. Hinting them. No, I'm damned—sorry—if I'll tell you! It's too absolutely rotten."

I looked at him curiously, but I did not press him further. I wondered very much, though. It is very unlike Dennis to take anything to heart.

Griselda came in at that moment.

"Miss Wetherby's just rung up," she said. "Mrs. Lestrangle went out at a quarter past eight and hasn't come in yet. Nobody knows where she's gone."

"Why should they know?"

"But it isn't to Dr. Haydock's. Miss Wetherby does know that, because she telephoned to Miss Hartnell who lives next door to him and who would have been sure to see her."

"It is a mystery to me," I said, "how anyone ever gets any nourishment in this place. They must eat their meals standing up by the window so as to be sure of not missing anything."

"And that's not all," said Griselda, bubbling with pleasure. "They've found out about the Blue Boar. Dr. Stone and Miss Cram

have got rooms next door to each other, BUT"—she waved an impressive forefinger—"no communicating door!"

"That," I said, "must be very disappointing to everybody."

At which Griselda laughed.

Thursday started badly. Two of the ladies of my parish elected to quarrel about the church decorations. I was called in to adjudicate between two middle-aged ladies, each of whom was literally trembling with rage. If it had not been so painful, it would have been quite an interesting physical phenomenon.

Then I had to reprove two of our choir boys for persistent sweet sucking during the hours of divine service, and I had an uneasy feeling that I was not doing the job as wholeheartedly as I should have done.

Then our organist, who is distinctly "touchy," had taken offence and had to be smoothed down.

And four of my poorer parishioners declared open rebellion against Miss Hartnell, who came to me bursting with rage about it.

I was just going home when I met Colonel Protheroe. He was in high good humour, having sentenced three poachers, in his capacity as magistrate.

"Firmness," he shouted in his stentorian voice. He is slightly deaf and raises his voice accordingly as deaf people often do. "That's what's needed nowadays—firmness! Make an example. That rogue Archer came out yesterday and is vowing vengeance against me, I hear. Impudent scoundrel. Threatened men live long, as the saying goes. I'll show him what his vengeance is worth next time I catch him taking my pheasants. Lax! We're too lax nowadays! I believe in showing a man up for what he is. You're always being asked to consider a man's wife and children. Damned nonsense. Fiddlesticks. Why should a man escape the consequences of his acts just because he whines about his wife and children? It's all the same to me—no matter what a man is—doctor, lawyer, clergyman, poacher, drunken wastrel—if you catch him on the wrong side of the law, let the law punish him. You agree with me, I'm sure."

"You forget," I said. "My calling obliges me to respect one quality above all others—the quality of mercy."

"Well, I'm a just man. No one can deny that."

I did not speak, and he said sharply:

"Why don't you answer? A penny for your thoughts, man."

I hesitated, then I decided to speak.

"I was thinking," I said, "that when my time comes, I should be sorry if the only plea I had to offer was that of justice. Because it might mean that only justice would be meted out to me...."

"Pah! What we need is a little militant Christianity. I've always done my duty, I hope. Well, no more of that. I'll be along this evening, as I said. We'll make it a quarter past six instead of six, if you don't mind. I've got to see a man in the village."

"That will suit me quite well."

He flourished his stick and strode away. Turning, I ran into Hawes. I thought he looked distinctly ill this morning. I had meant to upbraid him mildly for various matters in his province which had been muddled or shelved, but seeing his white strained face, I felt that the man was ill.

I said as much, and he denied it, but not very vehemently. Finally he confessed that he was not feeling too fit, and appeared ready to accept my advice of going home to bed.

I had a hurried lunch and went out to do some visits. Griselda had gone to London by the cheap Thursday train.

I came in about a quarter to four with the intention of sketching the outline of my Sunday sermon, but Mary told me that Mr. Redding was waiting for me in the study.

I found him pacing up and down with a worried face. He looked white and haggard.

He turned abruptly at my entrance.

"Look here, sir. I've been thinking over what you said yesterday. I've had a sleepless night thinking about it. You're right. I've got to cut and run."

"My dear boy," I said.

"You were right in what you said about Anne. I'll only bring trouble on her by staying here. She's—she's too good for anything else. I see I've got to go. I've made things hard enough for her as it is, heaven help me."

"I think you have made the only decision possible," I said. "I know that it is a hard one, but believe me, it will be for the best in the end."

I could see that he thought that that was the kind of thing easily said by someone who didn't know what he was talking about.

"You'll look after Anne? She needs a friend."

"You can rest assured that I will do everything in my power."

"Thank you, sir." He wrung my hand. "You're a good sort, Padre. I shall see her to say good-bye this evening, and I shall probably pack up and go tomorrow. No good prolonging the agony. Thanks for letting me have the shed to paint in. I'm sorry not to have finished Mrs. Clement's portrait."

"Don't worry about that, my dear boy. Good-bye, and God bless you."

When he had gone I tried to settle down to my sermon, but with very poor success. I kept thinking of Lawrence and Anne Protheroe.

I had rather an unpalatable cup of tea, cold and black, and at half past five the telephone rang. I was informed that Mr. Abbott of Lower Farm was dying and would I please come at once.

I rang up Old Hall immediately, for Lower Farm was nearly two miles away and I could not possibly get back by six fifteen. I have never succeeded in learning to ride a bicycle.

I was told, however, that Colonel Protheroe had just started out in the car, so I departed, leaving word with Mary that I had been called away, but would try to be back by six thirty or soon after.

Five

It was nearer seven than half past six when I approached the Vicarage gate on my return. Before I reached it, it swung open and Lawrence Redding came out. He stopped dead on seeing me, and I was immediately struck by his appearance. He looked like a man who was on the point of going mad. His eyes stared in a peculiar manner, he was deathly white, and he was shaking and twitching all over.

I wondered for a moment whether he could have been drinking, but repudiated the idea immediately.

"Hallo," I said, "have you been to see me again? Sorry I was out. Come back now. I've got to see Protheroe about some accounts—but I dare say we shan't be long."

"Protheroe," he said. He began to laugh. "Protheroe? You're going to see Protheroe? Oh, you'll see Protheroe all right! Oh, my God—yes!"

I stared. Instinctively I stretched out a hand towards him. He drew sharply aside.

"No," he almost cried out. "I've got to get away—to think. I've got to think. I must think."

He broke into a run and vanished rapidly down the road towards the village, leaving me staring after him, my first idea of drunkenness recurring.

Finally I shook my head, and went on to the Vicarage. The front door is always left open, but nevertheless I rang the bell. Mary came, wiping her hands on her apron.

"So you're back at last," she observed.

"Is Colonel Protheroe here?" I asked.

"In the study. Been here since a quarter past six."

"And Mr. Redding's been here?"

"Come a few minutes ago. Asked for you. I told him you'd be back at any minute and that Colonel Protheroe was waiting in the study, and he said he'd wait too, and went there. He's there now."

"No, he isn't," I said. "I've just met him going down the road."

"Well, I didn't hear him leave. He can't have stayed more than a couple of minutes. The mistress isn't back from town yet."

I nodded absentmindedly. Mary beat a retreat to the kitchen quarters and I went down the passage and opened the study door.

After the dusk of the passage, the evening sunshine that was pouring into the room made my eyes blink. I took a step or two across the floor and then stopped dead.

For a moment I could hardly take in the meaning of the scene before me.

Colonel Protheroe was lying sprawled across my writing table in a horrible unnatural position. There was a pool of some dark fluid on the desk by his head, and it was slowly dripping on to the floor with a horrible drip, drip, drip.

I pulled myself together and went across to him. His skin was cold to the touch. The hand that I raised fell back lifeless. The man was dead—shot through the head.

I went to the door and called Mary. When she came I ordered her to run as fast as she could and fetch Dr. Haydock, who lives just at the corner of the road. I told her there had been an accident.

Then I went back and closed the door to await the doctor's coming.

Fortunately, Mary found him at home. Haydock is a good fellow, a big, fine, strapping man with an honest, rugged face.

His eyebrows went up when I pointed silently across the room. But, like a true doctor, he showed no signs of emotion. He bent over the dead man, examining him rapidly. Then he straightened himself and looked across at me.

"Well?" I asked.

"He's dead right enough—been dead half an hour, I should say."

"Suicide?"

"Out of the question, man. Look at the position of the wound. Besides, if he shot himself, where's the weapon?"

True enough, there was no sign of any such thing.

"We'd better not mess around with anything," said Haydock. "I'd better ring up the police."

He picked up the receiver and spoke into it. He gave the facts as curtly as possible and then replaced the telephone and came across to where I was sitting.

"This is a rotten business. How did you come to find him?"

I explained. "Is—is it murder?" I asked rather faintly.

"Looks like it. Mean to say, what else can it be? Extraordinary business. Wonder who had a down on the poor old fellow. Of course I know he wasn't popular, but one isn't often murdered for that reason—worse luck."

"There's one rather curious thing," I said. "I was telephoned for this afternoon to go to a dying parishioner. When I got there everyone was very surprised to see me. The sick man was very much better than he had been for some days, and his wife flatly denied telephoning for me at all."

Haydock drew his brows together.

"That's suggestive—very. You were being got out of the way. Where's your wife?"

"Gone up to London for the day."

"And the maid?"

"In the kitchen—right at the other side of the house."

"Where she wouldn't be likely to hear anything that went on in here. It's a nasty business. Who knew that Protheroe was coming here this evening?"

"He referred to the fact this morning in the village street at the top of his voice as usual."

"Meaning that the whole village knew it? Which they always do in any case. Know of anyone who had a grudge against him?"

The thought of Lawrence Redding's white face and staring eyes came to my mind. I was spared answering by a noise of shuffling feet in the passage outside.

"The police," said my friend, and rose to his feet.

Our police force was represented by Constable Hurst, looking very important but slightly worried.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he greeted us. "the Inspector will be here any minute. In the meantime I'll follow out his instructions. I understand Colonel Protheroe's been found shot—in the Vicarage."

He paused and directed a look of cold suspicion at me, which I tried to meet with a suitable bearing of conscious innocence.

He moved over to the writing table and announced:

"Nothing to be touched until the Inspector comes."

For the convenience of my readers I append a sketch plan of the room.

He got out his notebook, moistened his pencil and looked expectantly at both of us.

I repeated my story of discovering the body. When he had got it all down, which took some time, he turned to the doctor.

"In your opinion, Dr. Haydock, what was the cause of death?"

"Shot through the head at close quarters."

"And the weapon?"

"I can't say with certainty until we get the bullet out. But I should say in all probability the bullet was fired from a pistol of small calibre—say a Mauser .25."

I started, remembering our conversation of the night before, and Lawrence Redding's admission. The police constable brought his cold, fish-like eye round on me.

"Did you speak, sir?"

I shook my head. Whatever suspicions I might have, they were no more than suspicions, and as such to be kept to myself.

"When, in your opinion, did the tragedy occur?"

The doctor hesitated for a minute before he answered. Then he said:

"The man has been dead just over half an hour, I should say. Certainly not longer."

Hurst turned to me. "Did the girl hear anything?"

"As far as I know she heard nothing," I said. "But you had better ask her."

But at this moment Inspector Slack arrived, having come by car from Much Benham, two miles away.

All that I can say of Inspector Slack is that never did a man more determinedly strive to contradict his name. He was a dark man, restless and energetic in manner, with black eyes that snapped ceaselessly. His manner was rude and overbearing in the extreme.

He acknowledged our greetings with a curt nod, seized his subordinate's notebook, perused it, exchanged a few curt words with him in an undertone, then strode over to the body.

"Everything's been messed up and pulled about, I suppose," he said.

"I've touched nothing," said Haydock.

"No more have I," I said.

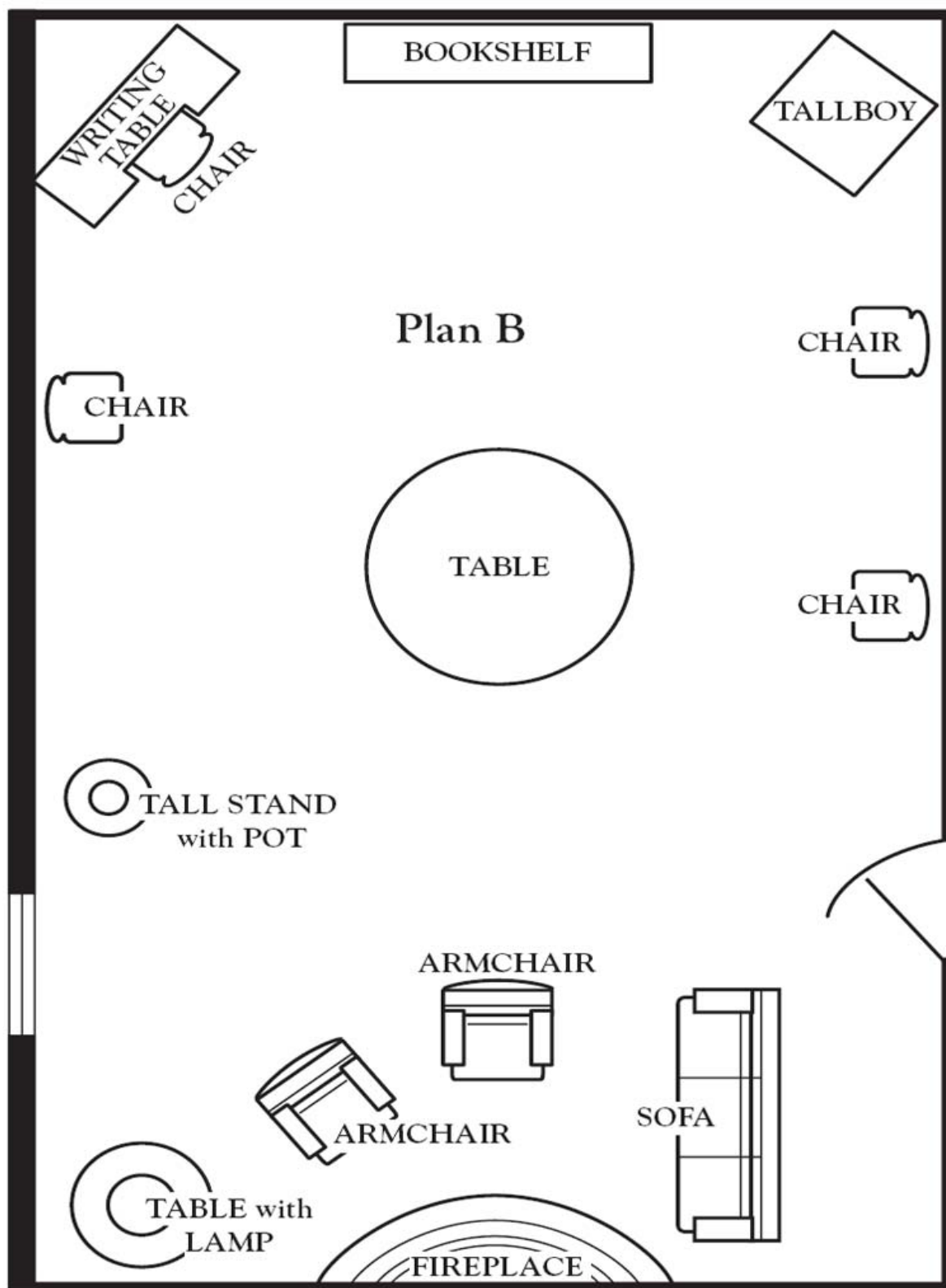
The Inspector busied himself for some time peering at the things on the table and examining the pool of blood.

"Ah!" he said in a tone of triumph. "Here's what we want. Clock overturned when he fell forward. That'll give us the time of the crime. Twenty-two minutes past six. What time did you say death occurred, doctor?"

"I said about half an hour, but—"

The Inspector consulted his watch.

"Five minutes past seven. I got word about ten minutes ago, at five minutes to seven. Discovery of the body was at about a quarter to seven. I understand you were fetched immediately. Say you examined it at ten minutes to—Why, that brings it to the identical second almost!"



"I don't guarantee the time absolutely," said Haydock. "That is an approximate estimate."

"Good enough, sir, good enough."

I had been trying to get a word in.

"About the clock—"

"If you'll excuse me, sir, I'll ask you any questions I want to know. Time's short. What I want is absolute silence."

"Yes, but I'd like to tell you—"

"Absolute silence," said the Inspector, glaring at me ferociously. I gave him what he asked for.

He was still peering about the writing table.

"What was he sitting here for?" he grunted. "Did he want to write a note—Hallo—what's this?"

He held up a piece of notepaper triumphantly. So pleased was he with his find that he permitted us to come to his side and examine it with him.

It was a piece of Vicarage notepaper, and it was headed at the top 6:20.

"Dear Clement"—it began—"Sorry I cannot wait any longer, but I must..."

Here the writing tailed off in a scrawl.

"Plain as a pikestaff," said Inspector Slack triumphantly. "He sits down here to write this, an enemy comes softly in through the window and shoots him as he writes. What more do you want?"

"I'd just like to say—" I began.

"Out of the way, if you please, sir. I want to see if there are footprints."

He went down on his hands and knees, moving towards the open window.

"I think you ought to know—" I said obstinately.

The Inspector rose. He spoke without heat, but firmly.

"We'll go into all that later. I'd be obliged if you gentlemen will clear out of here. Right out, if you please."

We permitted ourselves to be shooed out like children.

Hours seemed to have passed—yet it was only a quarter past seven.

"Well," said Haydock. "That's that. When that conceited ass wants me, you can send him over to the surgery. So long."

"The mistress is back," said Mary, making a brief appearance from the kitchen. Her eyes were round and agog with excitement. "Come in about five minutes ago."

I found Griselda in the drawing room. She looked frightened, but excited.

I told her everything and she listened attentively.

"The letter is headed 6:20," I ended. "And the clock fell over and has stopped at 6:22."

"Yes," said Griselda. "But that clock, didn't you tell him that it was always kept a quarter of an hour fast?"

"No," I said. "I didn't. He wouldn't let me. I tried my best." Griselda was frowning in a puzzled manner.

"But, Len," she said, "that makes the whole thing perfectly extraordinary. Because when that clock said twenty past six it was really only five minutes past, and at five minutes past I don't suppose Colonel Protheroe had even arrived at the house."

Six

We puzzled over the business of the clock for some time, but we could make nothing of it. Griselda said I ought to make another effort to tell Inspector Slack about it, but on that point I was feeling what I can only describe as “mulish.”

Inspector Slack had been abominably and most unnecessarily rude. I was looking forward to a moment when I could produce my valuable contribution and effect his discomfiture. I would then say in a tone of mild reproach:

“If you had only listened to me, Inspector Slack...”

I expected that he would at least speak to me before he left the house, but to our surprise we learned from Mary that he had departed, having locked up the study door and issued orders that no one was to attempt to enter the room.

Griselda suggested going up to Old Hall.

“It will be so awful for Anne Protheroe—with the police and everything,” she said. “Perhaps I might be able to do something for her.”

I cordially approved of this plan, and Griselda set off with instructions that she was to telephone to me if she thought that I could be of any use or comfort to either of the ladies.

I now proceeded to ring up the Sunday School teachers, who were coming at 7:45 for their weekly preparation class. I thought that under the circumstances it would be better to put them off.

Dennis was the next person to arrive on the scene, having just returned from a tennis party. The fact that murder had taken place

at the Vicarage seemed to afford him acute satisfaction.

"Fancy being right on the spot in a murder case," he exclaimed. "I've always wanted to be right in the midst of one. Why have the police locked up the study? Wouldn't one of the other door keys fit it?"

I refused to allow anything of the sort to be attempted. Dennis gave in with a bad grace. After extracting every possible detail from me he went out into the garden to look for footprints, remarking cheerfully that it was lucky it was only old Protheroe, whom everyone disliked.

His cheerful callousness rather grated on me, but I reflected that I was perhaps being hard on the boy. At Dennis's age a detective story is one of the best things in life, and to find a real detective story, complete with corpse, waiting on one's own front doorstep, so to speak, is bound to send a healthy-minded boy into the seventh heaven of enjoyment. Death means very little to a boy of sixteen.

Griselda came back in about an hour's time. She had seen Anne Protheroe, having arrived just after the Inspector had broken the news to her.

On hearing that Mrs. Protheroe had last seen her husband in the village about a quarter to six, and that she had no light of any kind to throw upon the matter, he had taken his departure, explaining that he would return on the morrow for a fuller interview.

"He was quite decent in his way," said Griselda grudgingly.

"How did Mrs. Protheroe take it?" I asked.

"Well—she was very quiet—but then she always is."

"Yes," I said. "I can't imagine Anne Protheroe going into hysterics."

"Of course it was a great shock. You could see that. She thanked me for coming and said she was very grateful but that there was nothing I could do."

"What about Lettice?"

"She was out playing tennis somewhere. She hadn't got home yet." There was a pause, and then Griselda said:

"You know, Len, she was really very quiet—very queer indeed."

"The shock," I suggested.

"Yes—I suppose so. And yet—" Griselda furrowed her brows perplexedly. "It wasn't like that, somehow. She didn't seem so much bowled over as—well—terrified."

"Terrified?"

"Yes—not showing it, you know. At least not meaning to show it. But a queer, watchful look in her eyes. I wonder if she has a sort of idea who did kill him. She asked again and again if anyone were suspected."

"Did she?" I said thoughtfully.

"Yes. Of course Anne's got marvellous self-control, but one could see that she was terribly upset. More so than I would have thought, for after all it wasn't as though she were so devoted to him. I should have said she rather disliked him, if anything."

"Death alters one's feelings sometimes," I said.

"Yes, I suppose so."

Dennis came in and was full of excitement over a footprint he had found in one of the flower beds. He was sure that the police had overlooked it and that it would turn out to be the turning point of the mystery.

I spent a troubled night. Dennis was up and about and out of the house long before breakfast to "study the latest developments," as he said.

Nevertheless it was not he, but Mary, who brought us the morning's sensational bit of news.

We had just sat down to breakfast when she burst into the room, her cheeks red and her eyes shining, and addressed us with her customary lack of ceremony.

"Would you believe it? The baker's just told me. They've arrested young Mr. Redding."

"Arrested Lawrence," cried Griselda incredulously. "Impossible. It must be some stupid mistake."

"No mistake about it, mum," said Mary with a kind of gloating exultation. "Mr. Redding, he went there himself and gave himself up. Last night, last thing. Went right in, threw down the pistol on the table, and 'I did it,' he says. Just like that."

She looked at us both, nodded her head vigorously, and withdrew satisfied with the effect she had produced. Griselda and I stared at each other.

"Oh! It isn't true," said Griselda. "It *can't* be true."

She noticed my silence, and said: "Len, *you* don't think it's true?"

I found it hard to answer her. I sat silent, thoughts whirling through my head.

"He must be mad," said Griselda. "Absolutely mad. Or do you think they were looking at the pistol together and it suddenly went off?"

"That doesn't sound at all a likely thing to happen."

"But it must have been an accident of some kind. Because there's not a shadow of a motive. What earthly reason could Lawrence have for killing Colonel Protheroe?"

I could have answered that question very decidedly, but I wished to spare Anne Protheroe as far as possible. There might still be a chance of keeping her name out of it.

"Remember they had had a quarrel," I said.

"About Lettice and her bathing dress. Yes, but that's absurd; and even if he and Lettice were engaged secretly—well, that's not a reason for killing her father."

"We don't know what the true facts of the case may be, Griselda."

"You *do* believe it, Len! Oh! How can you! I tell you, I'm *sure* Lawrence never touched a hair of his head."

"Remember, I met him just outside the gate. He looked like a madman."

"Yes, but—oh! It's impossible."

"There's the clock, too," I said. "This explains the clock. Lawrence must have put it back to 6:20 with the idea of making an alibi for himself. Look how Inspector Slack fell into the trap."

"You're wrong, Len. Lawrence knew about that clock being fast. 'Keeping the Vicar up to time!' he used to say. Lawrence would never have made the mistake of putting it back to 6:22. He'd have put the hands somewhere possible—like a quarter to seven."

"He mayn't have known what time Protheroe got here. Or he may have simply forgotten about the clock being fast."

Griselda disagreed.

"No, if you were committing a murder, you'd be awfully careful about things like that."

"You don't know, my dear," I said mildly. "You've never done one."

Before Griselda could reply, a shadow fell across the breakfast table, and a very gentle voice said:

"I hope I am not intruding. You must forgive me. But in the sad circumstances—the very sad circumstances...."

It was our neighbour, Miss Marple. Accepting our polite disclaimers, she stepped in through the window, and I drew up a chair for her. She looked faintly flushed and quite excited.

"Very terrible, is it not? Poor Colonel Protheroe. Not a very pleasant man, perhaps, and not exactly popular, but it's none the less sad for that. And actually shot in the Vicarage study, I understand?"

I said that that had indeed been the case.

"But the dear Vicar was not here at the time?" Miss Marple questioned of Griselda. I explained where I had been.

"Mr. Dennis is not with you this morning?" said Miss Marple, glancing round.

"Dennis," said Griselda, "fancies himself as an amateur detective. He is very excited about a footprint he found in one of the flower beds, and I fancy has gone off to tell the police about it."

"Dear, dear," said Miss Marple. "Such a to-do, is it not? And Mr. Dennis thinks he knows who committed the crime. Well, I suppose we all think we know."

"You mean it is obvious?" said Griselda.

"No, dear, I didn't mean that at all. I dare say everyone thinks it is somebody different. That is why it is so important to have *proofs*. I, for instance, am quite *convinced* I know who did it. But I must admit I haven't one shadow of proof. One must, I know, be very careful of what one says at a time like this—criminal libel, don't they call it? I had made up my mind to be *most* careful with Inspector Slack. He sent word he would come and see me this morning, but now he has just phoned up to say it won't be necessary after all."

"I suppose, since the arrest, it isn't necessary," I said.

"The arrest?" Miss Marple leaned forward, her cheeks pink with excitement. "I didn't know there had been an arrest."

It is so seldom that Miss Marple is worse informed than we are that I had taken it for granted that she would know the latest developments.

"It seems we have been talking at cross purposes," I said. "Yes, there has been an arrest—Lawrence Redding."

"Lawrence Redding?" Miss Marple seemed very surprised. "Now I should not have thought—"

Griselda interrupted vehemently.

"I can't believe it even now. No, not though he has actually confessed."

"Confessed?" said Miss Marple. "You say he has confessed? Oh! dear, I see I have been sadly at sea—yes, sadly at sea."

"I can't help feeling it must have been some kind of an accident," said Griselda. "Don't you think so, Len? I mean his coming forward to give himself up looks like that."

Miss Marple leant forward eagerly.

"He gave himself up, you say?"

"Yes."

"Oh!" said Miss Marple, with a deep sigh. "I am so glad—so very glad."

I looked at her in some surprise.

"It shows a true state of remorse, I suppose," I said.

"Remorse?" Miss Marple looked very surprised. "Oh, but surely, dear, dear Vicar, you don't think that he is guilty?"

It was my turn to stare.

"But since he has confessed—"

"Yes, but that just proves it, doesn't it? I mean that he had nothing to do with it."

"No," I said. "I may be dense, but I can't see that it does. If you have not committed a murder, I cannot see the object of pretending you have."

"Oh, of course, there's a reason!" said Miss Marple. "Naturally. There's always a reason, isn't there? And young men are so hot-headed and often prone to believe the worst."

She turned to Griselda.

"Don't you agree with me, my dear?"

"I—I don't know," said Griselda. "It's difficult to know what to think. I can't see any reason for Lawrence behaving like a perfect idiot."

"If you had seen his face last night—" I began.

"Tell me," said Miss Marple.

I described my homecoming while she listened attentively.

When I had finished she said:

"I know that I am very often rather foolish and don't take in things as I should, but I really do not see your point.

"It seems to me that if a young man had made up his mind to the great wickedness of taking a fellow creature's life, he would not appear distraught about it afterwards. It would be a premeditated and cold-blooded action and though the murderer might be a little flurried and possibly might make some small mistake, I do not think it likely he would fall into a state of agitation such as you describe. It is difficult to put oneself in such a position, but I cannot imagine getting into a state like that myself."

"We don't know the circumstances," I argued. "If there was a quarrel, the shot may have been fired in a sudden gust of passion, and Lawrence might afterwards have been appalled at what he had done. Indeed, I prefer to think that this is what did actually occur."

"I know, dear Mr. Clement, that there are many ways we prefer to look at things. But one must actually take facts as they are, must one not? And it does not seem to me that the facts bear the interpretation you put upon them. Your maid distinctly stated that Mr. Redding was only in the house a couple of minutes, not long enough, surely, for a quarrel such as you describe. And then again, I understand the Colonel was shot through the back of the head while he was writing a letter—at least that is what my maid told me."

"Quite true," said Griselda. "He seems to have been writing a note to say he couldn't wait any longer. The note was dated 6:20, and the clock on the table was overturned and had stopped at 6:22, and that's just what has been puzzling Len and myself so frightfully."

She explained our custom of keeping the clock a quarter of an hour fast.

"Very curious," said Miss Marple. "Very curious indeed. But the note seems to me even more curious still. I mean—"

She stopped and looked round. Lettice Protheroe was standing outside the window. She came in, nodding to us and murmuring "Morning."

She dropped into a chair and said, with rather more animation than usual:

"They've arrested Lawrence, I hear."

"Yes," said Griselda. "It's been a great shock to us."

"I never really thought anyone would murder father," said Lettice. She was obviously taking a pride in letting no hint of distress or emotion escape her. "Lots of people wanted to, I'm sure. There are times when I'd have liked to do it myself."

"Won't you have something to eat or drink, Lettice?" asked Griselda.

"No, thank you. I just drifted round to see if you'd got my beret here—a queer little yellow one. I think I left it in the study the other day."

"If you did, it's there still," said Griselda. "Mary never tidies anything."

"I'll go and see," said Lettice, rising. "Sorry to be such a bother, but I seem to have lost everything else in the hat line."

"I'm afraid you can't get it now," I said. "Inspector Slack has locked the room up."

"Oh, what a bore! Can't we get in through the window?"

"I'm afraid not. It is latched on the inside. Surely, Lettice, a yellow beret won't be much good to you at present?"

"You mean mourning and all that? I shan't bother about mourning. I think it's an awfully archaic idea. It's a nuisance about Lawrence—yes, it's a nuisance."

She got up and stood frowning abstractedly.

"I suppose it's all on account of me and my bathing dress. So silly, the whole thing...."

Griselda opened her mouth to say something, but for some unexplained reason shut it again.

A curious smile came to Lettice's lips.

"I think," she said softly, "I'll go home and tell Anne about Lawrence being arrested."

She went out of the window again. Griselda turned to Miss Marple. "Why did you step on my foot?"

The old lady was smiling.

"I thought you were going to say something, my dear. And it is often so much better to let things develop on their own lines. I don't think, you know, that that child is half so vague as she pretends to be. She's got a very definite idea in her head and she's acting upon it."

Mary gave a loud knock on the dining room door and entered hard upon it.

"What is it?" said Griselda. "And Mary, you must remember not to knock on doors. I've told you about it before."

"Thought you might be busy," said Mary. "Colonel Melchett's here. Wants to see the master."

Colonel Melchett is Chief Constable of the county. I rose at once.

"I thought you wouldn't like my leaving him in the hall, so I put him in the drawing room," went on Mary. "Shall I clear?"

"Not yet," said Griselda. "I'll ring."

She turned to Miss Marple and I left the room.

Seven

Colonel Melchett is a dapper little man with a habit of snorting suddenly and unexpected. He has red hair and rather keen bright blue eyes.

"Good morning, Vicar," he said. "Nasty business, eh? Poor old Protheroe. Not that I liked him. I didn't. Nobody did, for that matter. Nasty bit of work for you, too. Hope it hasn't upset your missus?"

I said Griselda had taken it very well.

"That's lucky. Rotten thing to happen in one's house. I must say I'm surprised at young Redding—doing it the way he did. No sort of consideration for anyone's feelings."

A wild desire to laugh came over me, but Colonel Melchett evidently saw nothing odd in the idea of a murderer being considerate, so I held my peace.

"I must say I was rather taken aback when I heard the fellow had marched in and given himself up," continued Colonel Melchett, dropping on to a chair.

"How did it happen exactly?"

"Last night. About ten o'clock. Fellow rolls in, throws down a pistol, and says: 'Here I am. I did it.' Just like that."

"What account does he give of the business?"

"Precious little. He was warned, of course, about making a statement. But he merely laughed. Said he came here to see you—found Protheroe here. They had words and he shot him. Won't say what the quarrel was about. Look here, Clement—just between you and me, do you know anything about it? I've heard rumours—about

his being forbidden the house and all that. What was it—did he seduce the daughter, or what? We don't want to bring the girl into it more than we can help for everybody's sake. Was that the trouble?"

"No," I said. "You can take it from me that it was something quite different, but I can't say more at the present juncture."

He nodded and rose.

"I'm glad to know. There's a lot of talk. Too many women in this part of the world. Well, I must get along. I've got to see Haydock. He was called out to some case or other, but he ought to be back by now. I don't mind telling you I'm sorry about Redding. He always struck me as a decent young chap. Perhaps they'll think out some kind of defence for him. Aftereffects of war, shell shock, or something. Especially if no very adequate motive turns up. I must be off. Like to come along?"

I said I would like to very much, and we went out together.

Haydock's house is next door to mine. His servant said the doctor had just come in and showed us into the dining room, where Haydock was sitting down to a steaming plate of eggs and bacon. He greeted me with an amiable nod.

"Sorry I had to go out. Confinement case. I've been up most of the night, over your business. I've got the bullet for you."

He shoved a little box along the table. Melchett examined it.

"Point two five?"

Haydock nodded.

"I'll keep the technical details for the inquest," he said. "All you want to know is that death was practically instantaneous. Silly young fool, what did he want to do it for? Amazing, by the way, that nobody heard the shot."

"Yes," said Melchett, "that surprises me."

"The kitchen window gives on the other side of the house," I said. "With the study door, the pantry door, and the kitchen door all shut, I doubt if you would hear anything, and there was no one but the maid in the house."

"H'm," said Melchett. "It's odd, all the same. I wonder the old lady—what's her name—Marple, didn't hear it. The study window was open."

"Perhaps she did," said Haydock.

"I don't think she did," said I. "She was over at the Vicarage just now and she didn't mention anything of the kind which I'm certain she would have done if there had been anything to tell."

"May have heard it and paid no attention to it—thought it was a car backfiring."

It struck me that Haydock was looking much more jovial and good-humoured this morning. He seemed like a man who was decorously trying to subdue unusually good spirits.

"Or what about a silencer?" he added. "That's quite likely. Nobody would hear anything then."

Melchett shook his head.

"Slack didn't find anything of the kind, and he asked Redding, and Redding didn't seem to know what he was talking about at first and then denied point blank using anything of the kind. And I suppose one can take his word for it."

"Yes, indeed, poor devil."

"Damned young fool," said Colonel Melchett. "Sorry, Clement. But he really is! Somehow one can't get used to thinking of him as a murderer."

"Any motive?" asked Haydock, taking a final draught of coffee and pushing back his chair.

"He says they quarrelled and he lost his temper and shot him."

"Hoping for manslaughter, eh?" The doctor shook his head. "That story doesn't hold water. He stole up behind him as he was writing and shot him through the head. Precious little 'quarrel' about that."

"Anyway, there wouldn't have been time for a quarrel," I said, remembering Miss Marple's words. "To creep up, shoot him, alter the clock hands back to 6:20, and leave again would have taken him all his time. I shall never forget his face when I met him outside the gate, or the way he said, 'You want to see Protheroe—oh, you'll see him all right!' That in itself ought to have made me suspicious of what had just taken place a few minutes before."

Haydock stared at me.

"What do you mean—what had just taken place? When do you think Redding shot him?"

"A few minutes before I got to the house."

The doctor shook his head.

"Impossible. Plumb impossible. He'd been dead much longer than that."

"But, my dear man," cried Colonel Melchett, "you said yourself that half an hour was only an approximate estimate."

"Half an hour, thirty-five minutes, twenty-five minutes, twenty minutes—possibly, but less, no. Why, the body would have been warm when I got to it."

We stared at each other. Haydock's face had changed. It had gone suddenly grey and old. I wondered at the change in him.

"But, look here, Haydock." The Colonel found his voice. "If Redding admits shooting him at a quarter to seven—"

Haydock sprang to his feet.

"I tell you it's impossible," he roared. "If Redding says he killed Protheroe at a quarter to seven, then Redding lies. Hang it all, I tell you I'm a doctor, and I know. The blood had begun to congeal."

"If Redding is lying," began Melchett. He stopped, shook his head.

"We'd better go down to the police station and see him," he said.

Eight

We were rather silent on our way down to the police station. Haydock drew behind a little and murmured to me:

"You know I don't like the look of this. I don't like it. There's something here we don't understand."

He looked thoroughly worried and upset.

Inspector Slack was at the police station and presently we found ourselves face to face with Lawrence Redding.

He looked pale and strained but quite composed—marvellously so, I thought, considering the circumstances. Melchett snorted and hummed, obviously nervous.

"Look here, Redding," he said, "I understand you made a statement to Inspector Slack here. You state you went to the Vicarage at approximately a quarter to seven, found Protheroe there, quarrelled with him, shot him, and came away. I'm not reading it over to you, but that's the gist of it."

"Yes."

"I'm going to ask a few questions. You've already been told that you needn't answer them unless you choose. Your solicitor—"

Lawrence interrupted.

"I've nothing to hide. I killed Protheroe."

"Ah! well—" Melchett snorted. "How did you happen to have a pistol with you?"

Lawrence hesitated. "It was in my pocket."

"You took it with you to the Vicarage?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I always take it."

He had hesitated again before answering, and I was absolutely sure that he was not speaking the truth.

"Why did you put the clock back?"

"The clock?" He seemed puzzled.

"Yes, the hands pointed to 6:22."

A look of fear sprang up in his face.

"Oh! that—yes. I—I altered it."

Haydock spoke suddenly.

"Where did you shoot Colonel Protheroe?"

"In the study at the Vicarage."

"I mean in what part of the body?"

"Oh!—I—through the head, I think. Yes, through the head."

"Aren't you sure?"

"Since you know, I can't see why it is necessary to ask me."

It was a feeble kind of bluster. There was some commotion outside. A constable without a helmet brought in a note.

"For the Vicar. It says very urgent on it."

I tore it open and read:

"Please—please—come to me. I don't know what to do. It is all too awful. I want to tell someone. Please come immediately, and bring anyone you like with you. Anne Protheroe."

I gave Melchett a meaning glance. He took the hint. We all went out together. Glancing over my shoulder, I had a glimpse of Lawrence Redding's face. His eyes were riveted on the paper in my hand, and I have hardly ever seen such a terrible look of anguish and despair in any human being's face.

I remembered Anne Protheroe sitting on my sofa and saying:

"I'm a desperate woman," and my heart grew heavy within me. I saw now the possible reason for Lawrence Redding's heroic self-accusation. Melchett was speaking to Slack.

"Have you got any line on Redding's movements earlier in the day? There's some reason to think he shot Protheroe earlier than he says. Get on to it, will you?"

He turned to me and without a word I handed him Anne Protheroe's letter. He read it and pursed up his lips in astonishment. Then he looked at me inquiringly.

"Is this what you were hinting at this morning?"

"Yes. I was not sure then if it was my duty to speak. I am quite sure now." And I told him of what I had seen that night in the studio.

The Colonel had a few words with the Inspector and then we set off for Old Hall. Dr. Haydock came with us.

A very correct butler opened the door, with just the right amount of gloom in his bearing.

"Good morning," said Melchett. "Will you ask Mrs. Protheroe's maid to tell her we are here and would like to see her, and then return here and answer a few questions."

The butler hurried away and presently returned with the news that he had despatched the message.

"Now let's hear something about yesterday," said Colonel Melchett. "Your master was in to lunch?"

"Yes, sir."

"And in his usual spirits?"

"As far as I could see, yes, sir."

"What happened after that?"

"After luncheon Mrs. Protheroe went to lie down and the Colonel went to his study. Miss Lettice went out to a tennis party in the two-seater. Colonel and Mrs. Protheroe had tea at four thirty, in the drawing room. The car was ordered for five-thirty to take them to the village. Immediately after they had left Mr. Clement rang up"—he bowed to me—"I told him they had started."

"H'm," said Colonel Melchett. "When was Mr. Redding last here?"

"On Tuesday afternoon, sir."

"I understand that there was a disagreement between them?"

"I believe so, sir. The Colonel gave me orders that Mr. Redding was not to be admitted in future."

"Did you overhear the quarrel at all?" asked Colonel Melchett bluntly.

"Colonel Protheroe, sir, had a very loud voice, especially when it was raised in anger. I was unable to help overhearing a few words here and there."

"Enough to tell you the cause of the dispute?"

"I understood, sir, that it had to do with a portrait Mr. Redding had been painting—a portrait of Miss Lettice."

Melchett grunted.

"Did you see Mr. Redding when he left?"

"Yes, sir, I let him out."

"Did he seem angry?"

"No, sir; if I may say so, he seemed rather amused."

"Ah! He didn't come to the house yesterday?"

"No, sir."

"Anyone else come?"

"Not yesterday, sir."

"Well, the day before?"

"Mr. Dennis Clement came in the afternoon. And Dr. Stone was here for some time. And there was a lady in the evening."

"A lady?" Melchett was surprised. "Who was she?"

The butler couldn't remember her name. It was a lady he had not seen before. Yes, she had given her name, and when he told her that the family were at dinner, she had said that she would wait. So he had shown her into the little morning room.

She had asked for Colonel Protheroe, not Mrs. Protheroe. He had told the Colonel and the Colonel had gone to the morning room directly dinner was over.

How long had the lady stayed? He thought about half an hour. The Colonel himself had let her out. Ah! Yes, he remembered her name now. The lady had been a Mrs. Lestranger.

This was a surprise.

"Curious," said Melchett. "Really very curious."

But we pursued the matter no further, for at that moment a message came that Mrs. Protheroe would see us.

Anne was in bed. Her face was pale and her eyes very bright. There was a look on her face that puzzled me—a kind of grim determination. She spoke to me.

"Thank you for coming so promptly," she said. "I see you've understood what I meant by bringing anyone you liked with you." She paused.

"It's best to get it over quickly, isn't it?" she said. She gave a queer, half-pathetic little smile. "I suppose you're the person I ought to say it to, Colonel Melchett. You see, it was I who killed my husband."

Colonel Melchett said gently:

"My dear Mrs. Protheroe—"

"Oh! It's quite true. I suppose I've said it rather bluntly, but I never can go into hysterics over anything. I've hated him for a long time, and yesterday I shot him."

She lay back on the pillows and closed her eyes.

"That's all. I suppose you'll arrest me and take me away. I'll get up and dress as soon as I can. At the moment I am feeling rather sick."

"Are you aware, Mrs. Protheroe, that Mr. Lawrence Redding has already accused himself of committing the crime?"

Anne opened her eyes and nodded brightly.

"I know. Silly boy. He's very much in love with me, you know. It was frightfully noble of him—but very silly."

"He knew that it was you who had committed the crime?"

"Yes."

"How did he know?"

She hesitated.

"Did you tell him?"

Still she hesitated. Then at last she seemed to make up her mind.

"Yes—I told him...."

She twitched her shoulders with a movement of irritation.

"Can't you go away now? I've told you. I don't want to talk about it anymore."

"Where did you get the pistol, Mrs. Protheroe?"

"The pistol! Oh, it was my husband's. I got it out of the drawer of his dressing table."

"I see. And you took it with you to the Vicarage?"

"Yes. I knew he would be there—"

"What time was this?"

"It must have been after six—quarter—twenty past—something like that."

"You took the pistol meaning to shoot your husband?"

"No—I—meant it for myself."

"I see. But you went to the Vicarage?"

"Yes. I went along to the window. There were no voices. I looked in. I saw my husband. Something came over me—and I fired."

"And then?"

"Then? Oh, then I went away."

"And told Mr. Redding what you had done?"

Again I noticed the hesitation in her voice before she said "Yes."

"Did anybody see you entering or leaving the Vicarage?"

"No—at least, yes. Old Miss Marple. I talked to her for a few minutes. She was in her garden."

She moved restlessly on the pillows.

"Isn't that enough? I've told you. Why do you want to go on bothering me?"

Dr. Haydock moved to her side and felt her pulse.

He beckoned to Melchett.

"I'll stay with her," he said in a whisper, "whilst you make the necessary arrangements. She oughtn't to be left. Might do herself a mischief."

Melchett nodded.

We left the room and descended the stairs. I saw a thin, cadaverous-looking man come out of the adjoining room and on impulse I remounted the stairs.

"Are you Colonel Protheroe's valet?"

The man looked surprised. "Yes, sir."

"Do you know whether your late master kept a pistol anywhere?"

"Not that I know of, sir."

"Not in one of the drawers of his dressing table? Think, man."

The valet shook his head decisively.

"I'm quite sure he didn't, sir. I'd have seen it if so. Bound to."

I hurried down the stairs after the others.

Mrs. Protheroe had lied about the pistol.

Why?

Nine

After leaving a message at the police station, the Chief Constable announced his intention of paying a visit to Miss Marple.

"You'd better come with me, Vicar," he said. "I don't want to give a member of your flock hysterics. So lend the weight of your soothing presence."

I smiled. For all her fragile appearance, Miss Marple is capable of holding her own with any policeman or Chief Constable in existence.

"What's she like?" asked the Colonel, as we rang the bell. "Anything she says to be depended upon or otherwise?"

I considered the matter.

"I think she is quite dependable," I said cautiously. "That is, in so far as she is talking of what she has actually seen. Beyond that, of course, when you get on to what she thinks—well, that is another matter. She has a powerful imagination and systematically thinks the worst of everyone."

"The typical elderly spinster, in fact," said Melchett, with a laugh. "Well, I ought to know the breed by now. Gad, the tea parties down here!"

We were admitted by a very diminutive maid and shown into a small drawing room.

"A bit crowded," said Colonel Melchett, looking round. "But plenty of good stuff. A lady's room, eh, Clement?"

I agreed, and at that moment the door opened and Miss Marple made her appearance.

"Very sorry to bother you, Miss Marple," said the Colonel, when I had introduced him, putting on his bluff military manner which he had an idea was attractive to elderly ladies. "Got to do my duty, you know."

"Of course, of course," said Miss Marple. "I quite understand. Won't you sit down? And might I offer you a little glass of cherry brandy? My own making. A recipe of my grandmother's."

"Thank you very much, Miss Marple. Very kind of you. But I think I won't. Nothing till lunch time, that's my motto. Now, I want to talk to you about this sad business—very sad business indeed. Upset us all, I'm sure. Well, it seems possible that owing to the position of your house and garden, you may have been able to tell us something we want to know about yesterday evening."

"As a matter of fact, I *was* in my little garden from five o'clock onwards yesterday, and, of course, from there—well, one simply cannot help seeing anything that is going on next door."

"I understand, Miss Marple, that Mrs. Protheroe passed this way yesterday evening?"

"Yes, she did. I called out to her, and she admired my roses."

"Could you tell us about what time that was?"

"I should say it was just a minute or two after a quarter past six. Yes, that's right. The church clock had just chimed the quarter."

"Very good. What happened next?"

"Well, Mrs. Protheroe said she was calling for her husband at the Vicarage so that they could go home together. She had come along the lane, you understand, and she went into the Vicarage by the back gate and across the garden."

"She came from the lane?"

"Yes, I'll show you."

Full of eagerness, Miss Marple led us out into the garden and pointed out the lane that ran along by the bottom of the garden.

"The path opposite with the stile leads to the Hall," she explained. "That was the way they were going home together. Mrs. Protheroe came from the village."

"Perfectly, perfectly," said Colonel Melchett. "And she went across to the Vicarage, you say?"

"Yes. I saw her turn the corner of the house. I suppose the Colonel wasn't there yet, because she came back almost immediately, and went down the lawn to the studio—that building there. The one the Vicar lets Mr. Redding use as a studio."

"I see. And—you didn't hear a shot, Miss Marple?"

"I didn't hear a shot then," said Miss Marple.

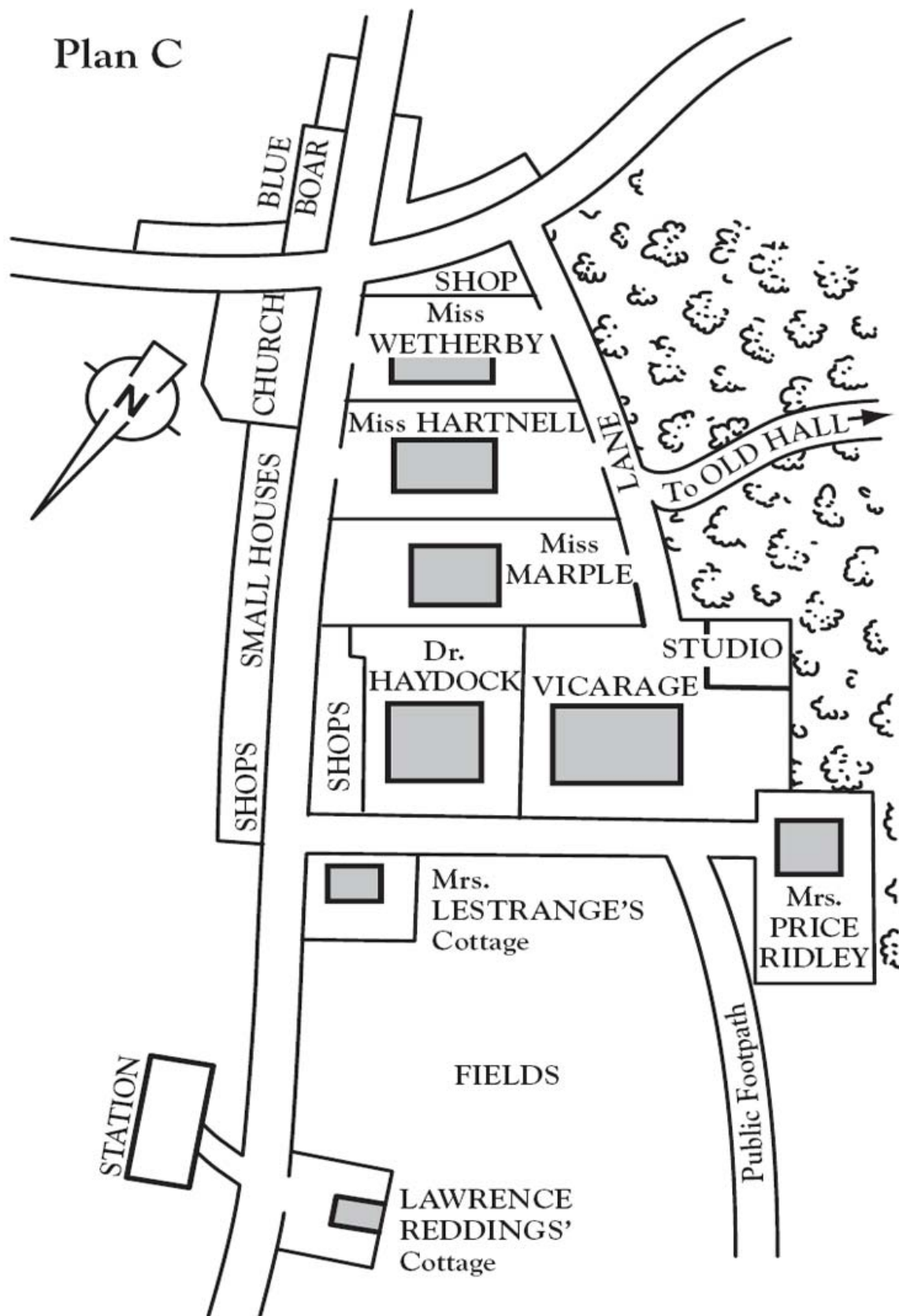
"But you did hear one sometime?"

"Yes, I think there was a shot somewhere in the woods. But quite five or ten minutes afterwards—and, as I say, out in the woods. At least, I think so. It couldn't have been—surely it couldn't have been —"

She stopped, pale with excitement.

"Yes, yes, we'll come to all that presently," said Colonel Melchett. "Please go on with your story. Mrs. Protheroe went down to the studio?"

Plan C



"Yes, she went inside and waited. Presently Mr. Redding came along the lane from the village. He came to the Vicarage gate, looked all round—"

"And saw you, Miss Marple."

"As a matter of fact, he didn't see me," said Miss Marple, flushing slightly. "Because, you see, just at that minute I was bending right over—trying to get up one of those nasty dandelions, you know. So difficult. And then he went through the gate and down to the studio."

"He didn't go near the house?"

"Oh, no! He went straight to the studio. Mrs. Protheroe came to the door to meet him, and then they both went inside."

Here Miss Marple contributed a singularly eloquent pause.

"Perhaps she was sitting for him?" I suggested.

"Perhaps," said Miss Marple.

"And they came out—when?"

"About ten minutes later."

"That was roughly?"

"The church clock had chimed the half hour. They strolled out through the garden gate and along the lane, and just at that minute, Dr. Stone came down the path leading to the Hall, and climbed over the stile and joined them. They all walked towards the village together. At the end of the lane, I think, but I can't be quite sure, they were joined by Miss Cram. I think it must have been Miss Cram because her skirts were so short."

"You must have very good eyesight, Miss Marple, if you can observe as far as that."

"I was observing a bird," said Miss Marple. "A golden crested wren, I think he was. A sweet little fellow. I had my glasses out, and that's how I happened to see Miss Cram (if it was Miss Cram, and I think so), join them."

"Ah! Well, that may be so," said Colonel Melchett. "Now, since you seem very good at observing, did you happen to notice, Miss Marple, what sort of expression Mrs. Protheroe and Mr. Redding had as they passed along the lane?"

"They were smiling and talking," said Miss Marple. "They seemed very happy to be together, if you know what I mean."

"They didn't seem upset or disturbed in any way?"

"Oh, no! Just the opposite."

"Deuced odd," said the Colonel. "There's something deuced odd about the whole thing."

Miss Marple suddenly took our breath away by remarking in a placid voice:

"Has Mrs. Protheroe been saying that she committed the crime now?"

"Upon my soul," said the Colonel, "how did you come to guess that, Miss Marple?"

"Well, I rather thought it might happen," said Miss Marple. "I think dear Lettice thought so, too. She's really a very sharp girl. Not always very scrupulous, I'm afraid. So Anne Protheroe says she killed her husband. Well, well. I don't think it's true. No, I'm almost sure it isn't true. Not with a woman like Anne Protheroe. Although one never can be quite sure about anyone, can one? At least that's what I've found. When does she say she shot him?"

"At twenty minutes past six. Just after speaking to you."

Miss Marple shook her head slowly and pityingly. The pity was, I think, for two full-grown men being so foolish as to believe such a story. At least that is what we felt like.

"What did she shoot him with?"

"A pistol."

"Where did she find it?"

"She brought it with her."

"Well, that she didn't do," said Miss Marple, with unexpected decision. "I can swear to that. She'd no such thing with her."

"You mightn't have seen it."

"Of course I should have seen it."

"If it had been in her handbag."

"She wasn't carrying a handbag."

"Well, it might have been concealed—er—upon her person."

Miss Marple directed a glance of sorrow and scorn upon him.

"My dear Colonel Melchett, you know what young women are nowadays. Not ashamed to show exactly how the creator made

them. She hadn't so much as a handkerchief in the top of her stocking."

Melchett was obstinate.

"You must admit that it all fits in," he said. "The time, the overturned clock pointing to 6:22—"

Miss Marple turned on me.

"Do you mean you haven't told him about that clock yet?"

"What about the clock, Clement?"

I told him. He showed a good deal of annoyance.

"Why on earth didn't you tell Slack this last night?"

"Because," I said, "he wouldn't let me."

"Nonsense, you ought to have insisted."

"Probably," I said, "Inspector Slack behaves quite differently to you than he does to me. I had no earthly chance of insisting."

"It's an extraordinary business altogether," said Melchett. "If a third person comes along and claims to have done this murder, I shall go into a lunatic asylum."

"If I might be allowed to suggest—" murmured Miss Marple.

"Well?"

"If you were to tell Mr. Redding what Mrs. Protheroe has done and then explain that you don't really believe it is her. And then if you were to go to Mrs. Protheroe and tell her that Mr. Redding is all right—why then, they might each of them tell you the truth. And the truth *is* helpful, though I dare say they don't know very much themselves, poor things."

"It's all very well, but they are the only two people who had a motive for making away with Protheroe."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, Colonel Melchett," said Miss Marple.

"Why, can you think of anyone else?"

"Oh! yes, indeed. Why," she counted on her fingers, "one, two, three, four, five, six—yes, and a possible seven. I can think of at least seven people who might be very glad to have Colonel Protheroe out of the way."

The Colonel looked at her feebly.

"Seven people? In St. Mary Mead?"

Miss Marple nodded brightly.

"Mind you I name no names," she said. "That wouldn't be right. But I'm afraid there's a lot of wickedness in the world. A nice honourable upright soldier like you doesn't know about these things, Colonel Melchett."

I thought the Chief Constable was going to have apoplexy.

Ten

His remarks on the subject of Miss Marple as we left the house were far from complimentary.

"I really believe that wizened-up old maid thinks she knows everything there is to know. And hardly been out of this village all her life. Preposterous. What can she know of life?"

I said mildly that though doubtless Miss Marple knew next to nothing of Life with a capital L, she knew practically everything that went on in St. Mary Mead.

Melchett admitted that grudgingly. She was a valuable witness—particularly valuable from Mrs. Protheroe's point of view.

"I suppose there's no doubt about what she says, eh?"

"If Miss Marple says she had no pistol with her, you can take it for granted that it is so," I said. "If there was the least possibility of such a thing, Miss Marple would have been on to it like a knife."

"That's true enough. We'd better go and have a look at the studio."

The so-called studio was a mere rough shed with a skylight. There were no windows and the door was the only means of entrance or egress. Satisfied on this score, Melchett announced his intention of visiting the Vicarage with the Inspector.

"I'm going to the police station now."

As I entered through the front door, a murmur of voices caught my ear. I opened the drawing room door.

On the sofa beside Griselda, conversing animatedly, sat Miss Gladys Cram. Her legs, which were encased in particularly shiny pink

stockings, were crossed, and I had every opportunity of observing that she wore pink striped silk knickers.

"Hullo, Len," said Griselda.

"Good morning, Mr. Clement," said Miss Cram. "Isn't the news about the Colonel really too awful? Poor old gentleman."

"Miss Cram," said my wife, "very kindly came in to offer to help us with the Guides. We asked for helpers last Sunday, you remember."

I did remember, and I was convinced, and so, I knew from her tone, was Griselda, that the idea of enrolling herself among them would never have occurred to Miss Cram but for the exciting incident which had taken place at the Vicarage.

"I was only just saying to Mrs. Clement," went on Miss Cram, "you could have struck me all of a heap when I heard the news. A murder? I said. In this quiet one-horse village—for quiet it is, you must admit—not so much as a picture house, and as for Talkies! And then when I heard it was Colonel Protheroe—why, I simply couldn't believe it. He didn't seem the kind, somehow, to get murdered."

"And so," said Griselda, "Miss Cram came round to find out all about it."

I feared this plain speaking might offend the lady, but she merely flung her head back and laughed uproariously, showing every tooth she possessed.

"That's too bad. You're a sharp one, aren't you, Mrs. Clement? But it's only natural, isn't it, to want to hear the ins and outs of a case like this? And I'm sure I'm willing enough to help with the Guides in any way you like. Exciting, that's what it is. I've been stagnating for a bit of fun. I have, really I have. Not that my job isn't a very good one, well paid, and Dr. Stone quite the gentleman in every way. But a girl wants a bit of life out of office hours, and except for you, Mrs. Clement, who is there in the place to talk to except a lot of old cats?"

"There's Lettice Protheroe," I said.

Gladys Cram tossed her head.

"She's too high and mighty for the likes of me. Fancies herself the country, and wouldn't demean herself by noticing a girl who had to work for her living. Not but what I *did* hear her talking of earning

her living herself. And who'd employ her, I should like to know? Why, she'd be fired in less than a week. Unless she went as one of those mannequins, all dressed up and sidling about. She could do that, I expect."

"She'd make a very good mannequin," said Griselda. "She's got such a lovely figure." There's nothing of the cat about Griselda. "When was she talking of earning her own living?"

Miss Cram seemed momentarily discomfited, but recovered herself with her usual archness.

"That would be telling, wouldn't it?" she said. "But she did say so. Things not very happy at home, I fancy. Catch me living at home with a stepmother. I wouldn't sit down under it for a minute."

"Ah! but you're so high spirited and independent," said Griselda gravely, and I looked at her with suspicion.

Miss Cram was clearly pleased.

"That's right. That's me all over. Can be led, not driven. A palmist told me that not so very long ago. No. I'm not one to sit down and be bullied. And I've made it clear all along to Dr. Stone that I must have my regular times off. These scientific gentlemen, they think a girl's a kind of machine—half the time they just don't notice her or remember she's there. Of course, I don't know much about it," confessed the girl.

"Do you find Dr. Stone pleasant to work with? It must be an interesting job if you are interested in archaeology."

"It still seems to me that digging up people that are dead and have been dead for hundreds of years isn't—well, it seems a bit nosy, doesn't it? And there's Dr. Stone so wrapped up in it all, that half the time he'd forget his meals if it wasn't for me."

"Is he at the barrow this morning?" asked Griselda.

Miss Cram shook her head.

"A bit under the weather this morning," she explained. "Not up to doing any work. That means a holiday for little Gladys."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Oh! It's nothing much. There's not going to be a second death. But do tell me, Mr. Clement, I hear you've been with the police all morning. What do they think?"

"Well," I said slowly, "there is still a little—uncertainty."

"Ah!" cried Miss Cram. "Then they don't think it is Mr. Lawrence Redding after all. So handsome, isn't he? Just like a movie star. And such a nice smile when he says good morning to you. I really couldn't believe my ears when I heard the police had arrested him. Still, one has always heard they're very stupid—the county police."

"You can hardly blame them in this instance," I said. "Mr. Redding came in and gave himself up."

"What?" the girl was clearly dumbfounded. "Well—of all the poor fish! If I'd committed a murder, I wouldn't go straight off and give myself up. I should have thought Lawrence Redding would have had more sense. To give in like that! What did he kill Protheroe for? Did he say? Was it just a quarrel?"

"It's not absolutely certain that he did kill him," I said.

"But surely—if he says he has—why really, Mr. Clement, he ought to know."

"He ought to, certainly," I agreed. "But the police are not satisfied with his story."

"But why should he say he'd done it if he hasn't?"

That was a point on which I had no intention of enlightening Miss Cram. Instead I said rather vaguely:

"I believe that in all prominent murder cases, the police receive numerous letters from people accusing themselves of the crime."

Miss Cram's reception of this piece of information was:

"They must be chumps!" in a tone of wonder and scorn.

"Well," she said with a sigh, "I suppose I must be trotting along." She rose. "Mr. Redding accusing himself of the murder will be a bit of news of Dr. Stone."

"Is he interested?" asked Griselda.

Miss Cram furrowed her brows perplexedly.

"He's a queer one. You never can tell with him. All wrapped up in the past. He'd a hundred times rather look at a nasty old bronze knife out of those humps of ground than he would see the knife Crippen cut up his wife with, supposing he had a chance to."

"Well," I said, "I must confess I agree with him."

Miss Cram's eyes expressed incomprehension and slight contempt. Then, with reiterated good-byes, she took her departure.

"Not such a bad sort, really," said Griselda, as the door closed behind her. "Terribly common, of course, but one of those big, bouncing, good-humoured girls that you can't dislike. I wonder what really brought her here?"

"Curiosity."

"Yes, I suppose so. Now, Len, tell me all about it. I'm simply dying to hear."

I sat down and recited faithfully all the happenings of the morning, Griselda interpolating the narrative with little exclamations of surprise and interest.

"So it was Anne Lawrence was after all along! Not Lettice. How blind we've all been! That must have been what old Miss Marple was hinting at yesterday. Don't you think so?"

"Yes," I said, averting my eyes.

Mary entered.

"There's a couple of men here—come from a newspaper, so they say. Do you want to see them?"

"No," I said, "certainly not. Refer them to Inspector Slack at the police station."

Mary nodded and turned away.

"And when you've got rid of them," I said, "come back here. There's something I want to ask you."

Mary nodded again.

It was some few minutes before she returned.

"Had a job getting rid of them," she said. "Persistent. You never saw anything like it. Wouldn't take no for an answer."

"I expect we shall be a good deal troubled with them," I said. "Now, Mary, what I want to ask you is this: Are you quite certain you didn't hear the shot yesterday evening?"

"The shot what killed him? No, of course I didn't. If I had of done, I should have gone in to see what had happened."

"Yes, but—" I was remembering Miss Marple's statement that she had heard a shot "in the woods." I changed the form of my question. "Did you hear any other shot—one down in the wood, for instance?"

"Oh! That." The girl paused. "Yes, now I come to think of it, I believe I did. Not a lot of shots, just one. Queer sort of bang it was."

"Exactly," I said. "Now what time was that?"

"Time?"

"Yes, time."

"I couldn't say, I'm sure. Well after teatime. I do know that."

"Can't you get a little nearer than that?"

"No, I can't. I've got my work to do, haven't I? I can't go on looking at clocks the whole time—and it wouldn't be much good anyway—the alarm loses a good three-quarters every day, and what with putting it on and one thing and another, I'm never exactly sure what time it is."

This perhaps explains why our meals are never punctual. They are sometimes too late and sometimes bewilderingly early.

"Was it long before Mr. Redding came?"

"No, it wasn't long. Ten minutes—a quarter of an hour—not longer than that."

I nodded my head, satisfied.

"Is that all?" said Mary. "Because what I mean to say is, I've got the joint in the oven and the pudding boiling over as likely as not."

"That's all right. You can go."

She left the room, and I turned to Griselda.

"Is it quite out of the question to induce Mary to say sir or ma'am?"

"I have told her. She doesn't remember. She's just a raw girl, remember?"

"I am perfectly aware of that," I said. "But raw things do not necessarily remain raw for ever. I feel a tinge of cooking might be induced in Mary."

"Well, I don't agree with you," said Griselda. "You know how little we can afford to pay a servant. If once we got her smartened up at all, she'd leave. Naturally. And get higher wages. But as long as Mary can't cook and has those awful manners—well, we're safe, nobody else would have her."

I perceived that my wife's methods of housekeeping were not so entirely haphazard as I had imagined. A certain amount of reasoning

underlay them. Whether it was worthwhile having a maid at the price of her not being able to cook, and having a habit of throwing dishes and remarks at one with the same disconcerting abruptness, was a debatable matter.

"And anyway," continued Griselda, "you must make allowances for her manners being worse than usual just now. You can't expect her to feel exactly sympathetic about Colonel Protheroe's death when he jailed her young man."

"Did he jail her young man?"

"Yes, for poaching. You know, that man, Archer. Mary has been walking out with him for two years."

"I didn't know that."

"Darling Len, you never know anything."

"It's queer," I said, "that everyone says the shot came from the woods."

"I don't think it's queer at all," said Griselda. "You see, one so often hears shots in the wood. So naturally, when you do hear a shot, you just assume as a matter of course that it *is* in the wood. It probably just sounds a bit louder than usual. Of course, if one were in the next room, you'd realize that it was in the house, but from Mary's kitchen with the window right the other side of the house, I don't believe you'd ever think of such a thing."

The door opened again.

"Colonel Melchett's back," said Mary. "And that police inspector with him, and they say they'd be glad if you'd join them. They're in the study."

Eleven

I saw at a glance that Colonel Melchett and Inspector Slack had not been seeing eye to eye about the case. Melchett looked flushed and annoyed and the Inspector looked sulky.

"I'm sorry to say," said Melchett, "that Inspector Slack doesn't agree with me in considering young Redding innocent."

"If he didn't do it, what does he go and say he did it for?" asked Slack sceptically.

"Mrs. Protheroe acted in an exactly similar fashion, remember, Slack."

"That's different. She's a woman, and women act in that silly way. I'm not saying she did it for a moment. She heard he was accused and she trumped up a story. I'm used to that sort of game. You wouldn't believe the fool things I've known women do. But Redding's different. He's got his head screwed on all right. And if he admits he did it, well, I say he did do it. It's his pistol—you can't get away from that. And thanks to this business of Mrs. Protheroe, we know the motive. That was the weak point before, but now we know it—why, the whole thing's plain sailing."

"You think he can have shot him earlier? At six thirty, say?"

"He can't have done that."

"You've checked up his movements?"

The Inspector nodded.

"He was in the village near the Blue Boar at ten past six. From there he came along the back lane where you say the old lady next door saw him—she doesn't miss much, I should say—and kept his

appointment with Mrs. Protheroe in the studio in the garden. They left there together just after six thirty, and went along the lane to the village, being joined by Dr. Stone. He corroborates that all right—I've seen him. They all stood talking just by the post office for a few minutes, then Mrs. Protheroe went into Miss Hartnell's to borrow a gardening magazine. That's all right too. I've seen Miss Hartnell. Mrs. Protheroe remained there talking to her till just on seven o'clock when she exclaimed at the lateness of the hour and said she must get home."

"What was her manner?"

"Very easy and pleasant, Miss Hartnell said. She seemed in good spirits—Miss Hartnell is quite sure there was nothing on her mind."

"Well, go on."

"Redding, he went with Dr. Stone to the Blue Boar and they had a drink together. He left there at twenty minutes to seven, went rapidly along the village street and down the road to the Vicarage. Lots of people saw him."

"Not down the back lane this time?" commented the Colonel.

"No—he came to the front, asked for the Vicar, heard Colonel Protheroe was there, went in—and shot him—just as he said he did! That's the truth of it, and we needn't look further."

Melchett shook his head.

"There's the doctor's evidence. You can't get away from that. Protheroe was shot not later than six thirty."

"Oh, doctors!" Inspector Slack looked contemptuous. "If you're going to believe doctors. Take out all your teeth—that's what they do nowadays—and then say they're very sorry, but all the time it was appendicitis. Doctors!"

"This isn't a question of diagnosis. Dr. Haydock was absolutely positive on the point. You can't go against the medical evidence, Slack."

"And there's my evidence for what it is worth," I said, suddenly recalling a forgotten incident. "I touched the body and it was cold. That I can swear to."

"You see, Slack?" said Melchett.

"Well, of course, if that's so. But there it was—a beautiful case. Mr. Redding only too anxious to be hanged, so to speak."

"That, in itself, strikes me as a little unnatural," observed Colonel Melchett.

"Well, there's no accounting for tastes," said the Inspector. "There's a lot of gentlemen went a bit balmy after the war. Now, I suppose, it means starting again at the beginning." He turned on me. "Why you went out of your way to mislead me about the clock, sir, I can't think. Obstructing the ends of justice, that's what that was."

"I tried to tell you on three separate occasions," I said. "And each time you shut me up and refused to listen."

"That's just a way of speaking, sir. You could have told me perfectly well if you had had a mind to. The clock and the note seemed to tally perfectly. Now, according to you, the clock was all wrong. I never knew such a case. What's the sense of keeping a clock a quarter of an hour fast anyway?"

"It is supposed," I said, "to induce punctuality."

"I don't think we need go further into that now, Inspector," said Colonel Melchett tactfully. "What we want now is the true story from both Mrs. Protheroe and young Redding. I telephoned to Haydock and asked him to bring Mrs. Protheroe over here with him. They ought to be here in about a quarter of an hour. I think it would be as well to have Redding here first."

"I'll get on to the station," said Inspector Slack, and took up the telephone.

"And now," he said, replacing the receiver, "we'll get to work on this room." He looked at me in a meaningful fashion.

"Perhaps," I said, "you'd like me out of the way."

The Inspector immediately opened the door for me. Melchett called out:

"Come back when young Redding arrives, will you, Vicar? You're a friend of his and you may have sufficient influence to persuade him to speak the truth."

I found my wife and Miss Marple with their heads together.

"We've been discussing all sorts of possibilities," said Griselda. "I wish you'd solve the case, Miss Marple, like you did the time Miss Wetherby's gill of picked shrimps disappeared. And all because it reminded you of something quite different about a sack of coals."

"You're laughing, my dear," said Miss Marple, "but after all, that is a very sound way of arriving at the truth. It's really what people call intuition and make such a fuss about. Intuition is like reading a word without having to spell it out. A child can't do that because it has had so little experience. But a grown-up person knows the word because they've seen it often before. You catch my meaning, Vicar?"

"Yes," I said slowly, "I think I do. You mean that if a thing reminds you of something else—well, it's probably the same kind of thing."

"Exactly."

"And what precisely does the murder of Colonel Protheroe remind you of?"

Miss Marple sighed.

"That is just the difficulty. So many parallels come to the mind. For instance, there was Major Hargreaves, a churchwarden and a man highly respected in every way. And all the time he was keeping a separate second establishment—a former housemaid, just think of it! And five children—actually five children—a terrible shock to his wife and daughter."

I tried hard to visualize Colonel Protheroe in the rôle of secret sinner and failed.

"And then there was that laundry business," went on Miss Marple. "Miss Hartnell's opal pin—left most imprudently in a frilled blouse and sent to the laundry. And the woman who took it didn't want it in the least and wasn't by any means a thief. She simply hid it in another woman's house and told the police she'd seen this other woman take it. Spite, you know, sheer spite. It's an astonishing motive—spite. A man in it, of course. There always is."

This time I failed to see any parallel, however remote.

"And then there was poor Elwell's daughter—such a pretty ethereal girl—tried to stifle her little brother. And there was the money for the Choir Boys' Outing (before your time, Vicar) actually taken by the organist. His wife was sadly in debt. Yes, this case

makes one think so many things—too many. It's very hard to arrive at the truth."

"I wish you would tell me," I said, "who were the seven suspects?"

"The seven suspects?"

"You said you could think of seven people who would—well, be glad of Colonel Protheroe's death."

"Did I? Yes, I remember I did."

"Was that true?"

"Oh! Certainly it was true. But I mustn't mention names. You can think of them quite easily yourself. I am sure."

"Indeed I can't. There is Lettice Protheroe, I suppose, since she probably comes into money on her father's death. But it is absurd to think of her in such a connection, and outside her I can think of nobody."

"And you, my dear?" said Miss Marple, turning to Griselda.

Rather to my surprise Griselda coloured up. Something very like tears started into her eyes. She clenched both her small hands.

"Oh!" she cried indignantly. "People are hateful—hateful. The things they say! The beastly things they say..."

I looked at her curiously. It is very unlike Griselda to be so upset. She noticed my glance and tried to smile.

"Don't look at me as though I were an interesting specimen you didn't understand, Len. Don't let's get heated and wander from the point. I don't believe that it was Lawrence or Anne, and Lettice is out of the question. There must be some clue or other that would help us."

"There is the note, of course," said Miss Marple. "You will remember my saying this morning that that struck me as exceedingly peculiar."

"It seems to fix the time of his death with remarkable accuracy," I said. "And yet, is that possible? Mrs. Protheroe would only have just left the study. She would hardly have had time to reach the studio. The only way in which I can account for it is that he consulted his own watch and that his watch was slow. That seems to me a feasible solution."

"I have another idea," said Griselda. "Suppose, Len, that the clock had already been put back—no, that comes to the same thing—how stupid of me!"

"It hadn't been altered when I left," I said. "I remember comparing it with my watch. Still, as you say, that has no bearing on the present matter."

"What do you think, Miss Marple?" asked Griselda.

"My dear, I confess I wasn't thinking about it from that point of view at all. What strikes me as so curious, and has done from the first, is the subject matter of that letter."

"I don't see that," I said. "Colonel Protheroe merely wrote that he couldn't wait any longer—"

"*At twenty minutes past six?*" said Miss Marple. "Your maid, Mary, had already told him that you wouldn't be in till half past six at the earliest, and he appeared to be quite willing to wait until then. And yet at twenty past six he sits down and says he 'can't wait any longer.'"

I stared at the old lady, feeling an increased respect for her mental powers. Her keen wits had seen what we had failed to perceive. It *was* an odd thing—a very odd thing.

"If only," I said, "the letter hadn't been dated—"

Miss Marple nodded her head.

"Exactly," she said. "If it *hadn't* been dated!"

I cast my mind back, trying to recall that sheet of notepaper and the blurred scrawl, and at the top that neatly printed 6:20. Surely these figures were on a different scale to the rest of the letter. I gave a gasp.

"Supposing," I said, "it wasn't dated. Supposing that round about 6:30 Colonel Protheroe got impatient and sat down to say he couldn't wait any longer. And as he was sitting there writing, someone came in through the window—"

"Or through the door," suggested Griselda.

"He'd hear the door and look up."

"Colonel Protheroe was rather deaf, you remember," said Miss Marple.

"Yes, that's true. He wouldn't hear it. Whichever way the murderer came, he stole up behind the Colonel and shot him. Then he saw the note and the clock and the idea came to him. He put 6:20 at the top of the letter and he altered the clock to 6:22. It was a clever idea. It gave him, or so he would think, a perfect alibi."

"And what we want to find," said Griselda, "is someone who has a cast-iron alibi for 6:20, but no alibi at all for—well, that isn't so easy. One can't fix the time."

"We can fix it within very narrow limits," I said. "Haydock places 6:30 as the outside limit of time. I suppose one could perhaps shift it to 6:35 from the reasoning we have just been following out, it seems clear that Protheroe would not have got impatient before 6:30. I think we can say we do know pretty well."

"Then that shot I heard—yes, I suppose it is quite possible. And I thought nothing about it—nothing at all. Most vexing. And yet, now I try to recollect, it does seem to me that it was different from the usual sort of shot one hears. Yes, there was a difference."

"Louder?" I suggested.

No, Miss Marple didn't think it had been louder. In fact, she found it hard to say in what way it had been different, but she still insisted that it was.

I thought she was probably persuading herself of the fact rather than actually remembering it, but she had just contributed such a valuable new outlook to the problem that I felt highly respectful towards her.

She rose, murmuring that she must really get back—it had been so tempting just to run over and discuss the case with dear Griselda. I escorted her to the boundary wall and the back gate and returned to find Griselda wrapped in thought.

"Still puzzling over that note?" I asked.

"No."

She gave a sudden shiver and shook her shoulders impatiently.

"Len, I've been thinking. How badly someone must have hated Anne Protheroe!"

"Hated her?"

“Yes. Don’t you see? There’s no real evidence against Lawrence—all the evidence against him is what you might call accidental. He just happens to take it into his head to come here. If he hadn’t—well, no one would have thought of connecting him with the crime. But Anne is different. Suppose someone knew that she was here at exactly 6:20—the clock and the time on the letter—everything pointing to her. I don’t think it was only because of an alibi it was moved to that exact time—I think there was more in it than that—a direct attempt to fasten the business on her. If it hadn’t been for Miss Marple saying she hadn’t got the pistol with her and noticing that she was only a moment before going down to the studio—Yes, if it hadn’t been for that ...” She shivered again. “Len, I feel that someone hated Anne Protheroe very much. I—I don’t like it.”

Twelve

I was summoned to the study when Lawrence Redding arrived. He looked haggard, and, I thought, suspicious. Colonel Melchett greeted him with something approaching cordiality.

"We want to ask you a few questions—here, on the spot," he said. Lawrence sneered slightly.

"Isn't that a French idea? Reconstruction of the crime?"

"My dear boy," said Colonel Melchett, "don't take that tone with us. Are you aware that someone else has also confessed to committing the crime which you pretend to have committed?"

The effect of these words on Lawrence was painful and immediate.

"S-s-omeone else?" he stammered. "Who—who?"

"Mrs. Protheroe," said Colonel Melchett, watching him.

"Absurd. She never did it. She couldn't have. It's impossible."

Melchett interrupted him.

"Strangely enough, we did not believe her story. Neither, I may say, do we believe yours. Dr. Haydock says positively that the murder could not have been committed at the time you say it was."

"Dr. Haydock says that?"

"Yes, so, you see, you are cleared whether you like it or not. And now we want you to help us, to tell us exactly what occurred."

Lawrence still hesitated.

"You're not deceiving me about—about Mrs. Protheroe? You really don't suspect her?"

"On my word of honour," said Colonel Melchett.

Lawrence drew a deep breath.

"I've been a fool," he said. "An absolute fool. How could I have thought for one minute that she did it—"

"Suppose you tell us all about it?" suggested the Chief Constable.

"There's not much to tell. I—I met Mrs. Protheroe that afternoon —" He paused.

"We know all about that," said Melchett. "You may think that your feeling for Mrs. Protheroe and hers for you was a dead secret, but in reality it was known and commented upon. In any case, everything is bound to come out now."

"Very well, then. I expect you are right. I had promised the Vicar here (he glanced at me) to—to go right away. I met Mrs. Protheroe that evening in the studio at a quarter past six. I told her of what I had decided. She, too, agreed that it was the only thing to do. We—we said good-bye to each other.

"We left the studio, and almost at once Dr. Stone joined us. Anne managed to seem marvellously natural. I couldn't do it. I went off with Stone to the Blue Boar and had a drink. Then I thought I'd go home, but when I got to the corner of this road, I changed my mind and decided to come along and see the Vicar. I felt I wanted someone to talk to about the matter.

"At the door, the maid told me the Vicar was out, but would be in shortly, but that Colonel Protheroe was in the study waiting for him. Well, I didn't like to go away again—looked as though I were shirking meeting him. So I said I'd wait too, and I went into the study."

He stopped.

"Well?" said Colonel Melchett.

"Protheroe was sitting at the writing table—just as you found him. I went up to him—touched him. He was dead. Then I looked down and saw the pistol lying on the floor beside him. I picked it up—*and at once saw that it was my pistol.*

"That gave me a turn. My pistol! And then, straightaway I leaped to one conclusion. Anne must have bagged my pistol some time or other—meaning it for herself if she couldn't bear things any longer. Perhaps she had had it with her today. After we parted in the village

she must have come back here and—and—oh! I suppose I was mad to think of it. But that's what I thought. I slipped the pistol in my pocket and came away. Just outside the Vicarage gate, I met the Vicar. He said something nice and normal about seeing Protheroe—suddenly I had a wild desire to laugh. His manner was so ordinary and everyday and there was I all strung up. I remember shouting out something absurd and seeing his face change. I was nearly off my head, I believe. I went walking—walking—at last I couldn't bear it any longer. If Anne had done this ghastly thing, I was, at least, morally responsible. I went and gave myself up."

There was a silence when he had finished. Then the Colonel said in a businesslike voice:

"I would like to ask just one or two questions. First, did you touch or move the body in any way?"

"No, I didn't touch it at all. One could see he was dead without touching him."

"Did you notice a note lying on the blotter half concealed by his body?"

"No."

"Did you interfere in any way with the clock?"

"I never touched the clock. I seem to remember a clock lying overturned on the table, but I never touched it."

"Now as to this pistol of yours, when did you last see it?"

Lawrence Redding reflected. "It's hard to say exactly."

"Where do you keep it?"

"Oh, in a litter of odds and ends in the sitting room in my cottage. On one of the shelves of the bookcase."

"You left it lying about carelessly?"

"Yes. I really didn't think about it. It was just there."

"So that anyone who came to your cottage could have seen it?"

"Yes."

"And you don't remember when you last saw it?"

Lawrence drew his brows together in a frown of recollection.

"I'm almost sure it was there the day before yesterday. I remember pushing it aside to get an old pipe. I think it was the day before yesterday—but it may have been the day before that."

"Who has been to your cottage lately?"

"Oh! Crowds of people. Someone is always drifting in and out. I had a sort of tea party the day before yesterday. Lettice Protheroe, Dennis, and all their crowd. And then one or other of the old Pussies comes in now and again."

"Do you lock the cottage up when you go out?"

"No; why on earth should I? I've nothing to steal. And no one does lock their house up round here."

"Who looks after your wants there?"

"An old Mrs. Archer comes in every morning to 'do for me' as it's called."

"Do you think she would remember when the pistol was there last?"

"I don't know. She might. But I don't fancy conscientious dusting is her strong point."

"It comes to this—that almost anyone might have taken that pistol?"

"It seems so—yes."

The door opened and Dr. Haydock came in with Anne Protheroe.

She started at seeing Lawrence. He, on his part, made a tentative step towards her.

"Forgive me, Anne," he said. "It was abominable of me to think what I did."

"I—" She faltered, then looked appealingly at Colonel Melchett. "Is it true, what Dr. Haydock told me?"

"That Mr. Redding is cleared of suspicion? Yes. And now what about this story of yours, Mrs. Protheroe? Eh, what about it?"

She smiled rather shamefacedly.

"I suppose you think it dreadful of me?"

"Well, shall we say—very foolish? But that's all over. What I want now, Mrs. Protheroe, is the truth—the absolute truth."

She nodded gravely.

"I will tell you. I suppose you know about—about everything."

"Yes."

"I was to meet Lawrence—Mr. Redding—that evening at the studio. At a quarter past six. My husband and I drove into the village

together. I had some shopping to do. As we parted he mentioned casually that he was going to see the Vicar. I couldn't get word to Lawrence, and I was rather uneasy. I—well, it was awkward meeting him in the Vicarage garden whilst my husband was at the Vicarage."

Her cheeks burned as she said this. It was not a pleasant moment for her.

"I reflected that perhaps my husband would not stay very long. To find this out, I came along the back lane and into the garden. I hoped no one would see me, but of course old Miss Marple had to be in her garden! She stopped me and we said a few words, and I explained I was going to call for my husband. I felt I had to say something. I don't know whether she believed me or not. She looked rather—funny.

"When I left her, I went straight across to the Vicarage and round the corner of the house to the study window. I crept up to it very softly, expecting to hear the sound of voices. But to my surprise there were none. I just glanced in, saw the room was empty, and hurried across the lawn and down to the studio where Lawrence joined me almost at once."

"You say the room was empty, Mrs. Protheroe?"

"Yes, my husband was not there."

"Extraordinary."

"You mean, ma'am, that you didn't see him?" said the Inspector.

"No, I didn't see him."

Inspector Slack whispered to the Chief Constable, who nodded.

"Do you mind, Mrs. Protheroe, just showing us exactly what you did?"

"Not at all."

She rose, Inspector Slack pushed open the window for her, and she stepped out on the terrace and round the house to the left.

Inspector Slack beckoned me imperiously to go and sit at the writing table.

Somehow I didn't much like doing it. It gave me an uncomfortable feeling. But, of course, I complied.

Presently I heard footsteps outside, they paused for a minute, then retreated. Inspector Slack indicated to me that I could return to

the other side of the room. Mrs. Protheroe reentered through the window.

"Is that exactly how it was?" asked Colonel Melchett.

"I think exactly."

"Then can you tell us, Mrs. Protheroe, just exactly where the Vicar was in the room when you looked in?" asked Inspector Slack.

"The Vicar? I—no, I'm afraid I can't. I didn't see him."

Inspector Slack nodded.

"That's how you didn't see your husband. He was round the corner at the writing desk."

"Oh!" she paused. Suddenly her eyes grew round with horror. "It wasn't there that—that—"

"Yes, Mrs. Protheroe. It was while he was sitting there."

"Oh!" She quivered.

He went on with his questions.

"Did you know, Mrs. Protheroe, that Mr. Redding had a pistol?"

"Yes. He told me so once."

"Did you ever have that pistol in your possession?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Did you know where he kept it?"

"I'm not sure. I think—yes, I think I've seen it on a shelf in his cottage. Didn't you keep it there, Lawrence?"

"When was the last time you were at the cottage, Mrs. Protheroe?"

"Oh! About three weeks ago. My husband and I had tea there with him."

"And you have not been there since?"

"No. I never went there. You see, it would probably cause a lot of talk in the village."

"Doubtless," said Colonel Melchett dryly. "Where were you in the habit of seeing Mr. Redding, if I may ask?"

"He used to come up to the Hall. He was painting Lettice. We—we often met in the woods afterwards."

Colonel Melchett nodded.

"Isn't that enough?" Her voice was suddenly broken. "It's so awful—having to tell you all these things. And—and there wasn't anything

wrong about it. There wasn't—indeed, there wasn't. We were just friends. We—we couldn't help caring for each other."

She looked pleadingly at Dr. Haydock, and that softhearted man stepped forward.

"I really think, Melchett," he said, "that Mrs. Protheroe has had enough. She's had a great shock—in more ways than one."

The Chief Constable nodded.

"There is really nothing more I want to ask you, Mrs. Protheroe," he said. "Thank you for answering my questions so frankly."

"Then—then I may go?"

"Is your wife in?" asked Haydock. "I think Mrs. Protheroe would like to see her."

"Yes," I said, "Griselda is in. You'll find her in the drawing room."

She and Haydock left the room together and Lawrence Redding with them.

Colonel Melchett had pursed up his lips and was playing with a paper knife. Slack was looking at the note. It was then that I mentioned Miss Marple's theory. Slack looked closely at it.

"My word," he said, "I believe the old lady's right. Look here, sir, don't you see?—these figures are written in different ink. That date was written with a fountain pen or I'll eat my boots!"

We were all rather excited.

"You've examined the note for fingerprints, of course," said the Chief Constable.

"What do you think, Colonel? No fingerprints on the note at all. Fingerprints on the pistol those of Mr. Lawrence Redding. May have been some others once, before he went fooling round with it and carrying it around in his pocket, but there's nothing clear enough to get hold of now."

"At first the case looked very black against Mrs. Protheroe," said the Colonel thoughtfully. "Much blacker than against young Redding. There was that old woman Marple's evidence that she didn't have the pistol with her, but these elderly ladies are often mistaken."

I was silent, but I did not agree with him. I was quite sure that Anne Protheroe had had no pistol with her since Miss Marple had

said so. Miss Marple is not the type of elderly lady who makes mistakes. She has got an uncanny knack of being always right.

"What did get me was that nobody heard the shot. If it was fired then—somebody *must* have heard it—wherever they thought it came from. Slack, you'd better have a word with the maid."

Inspector Slack moved with alacrity towards the door.

"I shouldn't ask her if she heard a shot in the house," I said. "Because if you do, she'll deny it. Call it a shot in the wood. That's the only kind of shot she'll admit to hearing."

"I know how to manage them," said Inspector Slack, and disappeared.

"Miss Marple says she heard a shot later," said Colonel Melchett thoughtfully. "We must see if she can fix the time at all precisely. Of course it may be a stray shot that had nothing to do with the case."

"It may be, of course," I agreed.

The Colonel took a turn or two up and down the room.

"Do you know, Clement," he said suddenly, "I've a feeling that this is going to turn out a much more intricate and difficult business than any of us think. Dash it all, there's something behind it." He snorted. "Something we don't know about. We're only beginning, Clement. Mark my words, we're only beginning. All these things, the clock, the note, the pistol—they don't make sense as they stand."

I shook my head. They certainly didn't.

"But I'm going to get to the bottom of it. No calling in of Scotland Yard. Slack's a smart man. He's a very smart man. He's a kind of ferret. He'll nose his way through to the truth. He's done several very good things already, and this case will be his *chef d'oeuvre*. Some men would call in Scotland Yard. I shan't. We'll get to the bottom of this here in Downshire."

"I hope so, I'm sure," I said.

I tried to make my voice enthusiastic, but I had already taken such a dislike to Inspector Slack that the prospect of his success failed to appeal to me. A successful Slack would, I thought, be even more odious than a baffled one.

"Who has the house next door?" asked the Colonel suddenly.

"You mean at the end of the road? Mrs. Price Ridley."

"We'll go along to her after Slack has finished with your maid. She might just possibly have heard something. She isn't deaf or anything, is she?"

"I should say her hearing is remarkably keen. I'm going by the amount of scandal she has started by 'just happening to overhear accidentally.'"

"That's the kind of woman we want. Oh! here's Slack."

The Inspector had the air of one emerging from a severe tussle.

"Phew!" he said. "That's a tartar you've got, sir."

"Mary is essentially a girl of strong character," I replied.

"Doesn't like the police," he said. "I cautioned her—did what I could to put the fear of the law into her, but no good. She stood right up to me."

"Spirited," I said, feeling more kindly towards Mary.

"But I pinned her down all right. She heard one shot—and one shot only. And it was a good long time after Colonel Protheroe came. I couldn't get her to name a time, but we fixed it at last by means of the fish. The fish was late, and she blew the boy up when he came, and he said it was barely half past six anyway, and it was just after that she heard the shot. Of course, that's not accurate, so to speak, but it gives us an idea."

"H'm," said Melchett.

"I don't think Mrs. Protheroe's in this after all," said Slack, with a note of regret in his voice. "She wouldn't have had time, to begin with, and then women never like fiddling about with firearms. Arsenic's more in their line. No, I don't think she did it. It's a pity!" He sighed.

Melchett explained that he was going round to Mrs. Price Ridley's, and Slack approved.

"May I come with you?" I asked. "I'm getting interested."

I was given permission, and we set forth. A loud "Hie" greeted us as we emerged from the Vicarage gate, and my nephew, Dennis, came running up the road from the village to join us.

"Look here," he said to the Inspector, "what about that footprint I told you about?"

"Gardener's," said Inspector Slack laconically.

"You don't think it might be someone else wearing the gardener's boots?"

"No, I don't!" said Inspector Slack in a discouraging way.

It would take more than that to discourage Dennis, however.

He held out a couple of burnt matches.

"I found these by the Vicarage gate."

"Thank you," said Slack, and put them in his pocket.

Matters appeared now to have reached a deadlock.

"You're not arresting Uncle Len, are you?" inquired Dennis facetiously.

"Why should I?" inquired Slack.

"There's a lot of evidence against him," declared Dennis. "You ask Mary. Only the day before the murder he was wishing Colonel Protheroe out of the world. Weren't you, Uncle Len?"

"Er—" I began.

Inspector Slack turned a slow suspicious stare upon me, and I felt hot all over. Dennis is exceedingly tiresome. He ought to realize that a policeman seldom has a sense of humour.

"Don't be absurd, Dennis," I said irritably.

The innocent child opened his eyes in a stare of surprise.

"I say, it's only a joke," he said. "Uncle Len just said that any one who murdered Colonel Protheroe would be doing the world a service."

"Ah!" said Inspector Slack, "that explains something the maid said."

Servants very seldom have any sense of humour either. I cursed Dennis heartily in my mind for bringing the matter up. That and the clock together will make the Inspector suspicious of me for life.

"Come on, Clement," said Colonel Melchett.

"Where are you going? Can I come, too?" asked Dennis.

"No, you can't," I snapped.

We left him looking after us with a hurt expression. We went up to the neat front door of Mrs. Price Ridley's house and the Inspector knocked and rang in what I can only describe as an official manner. A pretty parlourmaid answered the bell.

"Mrs. Price Ridley in?" inquired Melchett.

"No, sir." The maid paused and added: "She's just gone down to the police station."

This was a totally unexpected development. As we retraced our steps Melchett caught me by the arm and murmured:

"If she's gone to confess to the crime, too, I really shall go off my head."

Thirteen

I hardly thought it likely that Mrs. Price Ridley had anything so dramatic in view, but I did wonder what had taken her to the police station. Had she really got evidence of importance, or that she thought of importance, to offer? At any rate, we should soon know.

We found Mrs. Price Ridley talking at a high rate of speed to a somewhat bewildered-looking police constable. That she was extremely indignant I knew from the way the bow in her hat was trembling. Mrs. Price Ridley wears what, I believe, are known as "Hats for Matrons"—they make a speciality of them in our adjacent town of Much Benham. They perch easily on a superstructure of hair and are somewhat overweighted with large bows of ribbon. Griselda is always threatening to get a matron's hat.

Mrs. Price Ridley paused in her flow of words upon our entrance.

"Mrs. Price Ridley?" inquired Colonel Melchett, lifting his hat.

"Let me introduce Colonel Melchett to you, Mrs. Price Ridley," I said. "Colonel Melchett is our Chief Constable."

Mrs. Price Ridley looked at me coldly, but produced the semblance of a gracious smile for the Colonel.

"We've just been round to your house, Mrs. Price Ridley," explained the Colonel, "and heard you had come down here."

Mrs. Price Ridley thawed altogether.

"Ah!" she said, "I'm glad *some* notice is being taken of the occurrence. Disgraceful, I call it. Simply disgraceful."

There is no doubt that murder is disgraceful, but it is not the word I should use to describe it myself. It surprised Melchett too, I

could see.

"Have you any light to throw upon the matter?" he asked.

"That's your business. It's the business of the police. What do we pay rates and taxes for, I should like to know?"

One wonders how many times that query is uttered in a year!

"We're doing our best, Mrs. Price Ridley," said the Chief Constable.

"But the man here hadn't even heard of it till I told him about it!" cried the lady.

We all looked at the constable.

"Lady been rung up on the telephone," he said. "Annoyed. Matter of obscene language, I understand."

"Oh! I see." The Colonel's brow cleared. "We've been talking at cross purposes. You came down here to make a complaint, did you?"

Melchett is a wise man. He knows that when it is a question of an irate middle-aged lady, there is only one thing to be done—listen to her. When she had said all that she wants to say, there is a chance that she will listen to you.

Mrs. Price Ridley surged into speech.

"Such disgraceful occurrences ought to be prevented. They ought not to occur. To be rung up in one's own house and insulted—yes, insulted. I'm not accustomed to such things happening. Ever since the war there has been a loosening of moral fibre. Nobody minds what they say, and as to the clothes they wear—"

"Quite," said Colonel Melchett hastily. "What happened exactly?"

Mrs. Price Ridley took breath and started again.

"I was rung up—"

"When?"

"Yesterday afternoon—evening to be exact. About half past six. I went to the telephone, suspecting nothing. Immediately I was foully attacked, threatened—"

"What actually was said?"

Mrs. Price Ridley got slightly pink.

"That I decline to state."

"Obscene language," murmured the constable in a ruminative bass.

"Was bad language used?" asked Colonel Melchett.

"It depends on what you call bad language."

"Could you understand it?" I asked.

"Of course I could understand it."

"Then it couldn't have been bad language," I said.

Mrs. Price Ridley looked at me suspiciously.

"A refined lady," I explained, "is naturally unacquainted with bad language."

"It wasn't that kind of thing," said Mrs. Price Ridley. "At first, I must admit, I was quite taken in. I thought it was a genuine message. Then the—er—person became abusive."

"Abusive?"

"Most abusive. I was quite alarmed."

"Used threatening language, eh?"

"Yes. I am not accustomed to being threatened."

"What did they threaten you with? Bodily damage?"

"Not exactly."

"I'm afraid, Mrs. Price Ridley, you must be more explicit. In what way were you threatened?"

This Mrs. Price Ridley seemed singularly reluctant to answer.

"I can't remember exactly. It was all so upsetting. But right at the end—when I was really *very* upset, this—this—*wretch* laughed."

"Was it a man's voice or a woman's?"

"It was a degenerate voice," said Mrs. Price Ridley, with dignity. "I can only describe it as a kind of perverted voice. Now gruff, now squeaky. Really a very *peculiar* voice."

"Probably a practical joke," said the Colonel soothingly.

"A most wicked thing to do, if so. I might have had a heart attack."

"We'll look into it," said the Colonel; "eh, Inspector? Trace the telephone call. You can't tell me more definitely exactly what was said, Mrs. Price Ridley?"

A struggle began in Mrs. Price Ridley's ample black bosom. The desire for reticence fought against a desire for vengeance. Vengeance triumphed.

"This, of course, will go no further," she began.

"Of course not."

"This creature began by saying—I can hardly bring myself to repeat it—"

"Yes, yes," said Melchett encouragingly.

"*'You are a wicked scandal-mongering old woman!'* Me, Colonel Melchett—a scandal-mongering old woman. *'But this time you've gone too far. Scotland Yard are after you for libel.'*"

"Naturally, you were alarmed," said Melchett, biting his moustache to conceal a smile.

"*'Unless you hold your tongue in future, it will be the worse for you—in more ways than one.'* I can't describe to you the menacing way *that* was said. I gasped, 'who are you?' faintly—like that, and the voice answered, *'The Avenger.'* I gave a little shriek. It sounded so awful, and then—the person laughed. Laughed! Distinctly. And that was all. I heard them hang up the receiver. Of course I asked the exchange what number had been ringing me up, but they said they didn't know. You know what exchanges are. Thoroughly rude and unsympathetic."

"Quite," I said.

"I felt quite faint," continued Mrs. Price Ridley. "All on edge and so nervous that when I heard a shot in the woods, I do declare I jumped almost out of my skin. That will show you."

"A shot in the woods?" said Inspector Slack alertly.

"In my excited state, it simply sounded to me like a cannon going off. 'Oh!' I said, and sank down on the sofa in a state of prostration. Clara had to bring me a glass of damson gin."

"Shocking," said Melchett. "Shocking. All very trying for you. And the shot sounded very loud, you say? As though it were near at hand?"

"That was simply the state of my nerves."

"Of course. Of course. And what time was all this? To help us in tracing the telephone call, you know."

"About half past six."

"You can't give it us more exactly than that?"

"Well, you see, the little clock on my mantelpiece had just chimed the half hour, and I said, 'Surely that clock is fast.' (It does gain, that

clock.) And I compared it with the watch I was wearing and that only said ten minutes past, but then I put it to my ear and found it had stopped. So I thought: 'Well, if that clock *is* fast, I shall hear the church tower in a moment or two.' And then, of course, the telephone bell rang, and I forgot all about it." She paused breathless.

"Well, that's near enough," said Colonel Melchett. "We'll have it looked into for you, Mrs. Price Ridley."

"Just think of it as a silly joke, and don't worry, Mrs. Price Ridley," I said.

She looked at me coldly. Evidently the incident of the pound note still rankled.

"Very strange things have been happening in this village lately," she said, addressing herself to Melchett. "Very strange things indeed. Colonel Protheroe was going to look into them, and what happened to him, poor man? Perhaps I shall be the next?"

And on that she took her departure, shaking her head with a kind of ominous melancholy. Melchett muttered under his breath: "No such luck." Then his face grew grave, and he looked inquiringly at Inspector Slack.

That worthy nodded his head slowly.

"This about settles it, sir. That's three people who heard the shot. We've got to find out now who fired it. This business of Mr. Redding's has delayed us. But we've got several starting points. Thinking Mr. Redding was guilty, I didn't bother to look into them. But that's all changed now. And now one of the first things to do is look up that telephone call."

"Mrs. Price Ridley's?"

The Inspector grinned.

"No—though I suppose we'd better make a note of that or else we shall have the old girl bothering in here again. No, I meant that fake call that got the Vicar out of the way."

"Yes," said Melchett, "that's important."

"And the next thing is to find out what everyone was doing that evening between six and seven. Everyone at Old Hall, I mean, and pretty well everyone in the village as well."

I gave a sigh.

"What wonderful energy you have, Inspector Slack."

"I believe in hard work. We'll begin by just noting down your own movements, Mr. Clement."

"Willingly. The telephone call came through about half past five."

"A man's voice, or a woman's?"

"A woman's. At least it sounded like a woman's. But of course I took it for granted it was Mrs. Abbott speaking."

"You didn't recognize it as being Mrs. Abbott's?"

"No, I can't say I did. I didn't notice the voice particularly or think about it."

"And you started right away? Walked? Haven't you got a bicycle?"

"No."

"I see. So it took you—how long?"

"It's very nearly two miles, whichever way you go."

"Through Old Hall woods is the shortest way, isn't it?"

"Actually, yes. But it's not particularly good going. I went and came back by the footpath across the fields."

"The one that comes out opposite the Vicarage gate?"

"Yes."

"And Mrs. Clement?"

"My wife was in London. She arrived back by the 6:50 train."

"Right. The maid I've seen. That finishes with the Vicarage. I'll be off to Old Hall next. And then I want an interview with Mrs. Lestrangle. Queer, her going to see Protheroe the night before he was killed. A lot of queer things about this case."

I agreed.

Glancing at the clock, I realized that it was nearly lunchtime. I invited Melchett to partake of potluck with us, but he excused himself on the plea of having to go to the Blue Boar. The Blue Boar gives you a first-rate meal of the joint and two-vegetable type. I thought his choice was a wise one. After her interview with the police, Mary would probably be feeling more temperamental than usual.

Fourteen

On my way home, I ran into Miss Hartnell and she detained me at least ten minutes, declaiming in her deep bass voice against the improvidence and ungratefulness of the lower classes. The crux of the matter seemed to be that The Poor did not want Miss Hartnell in their houses. My sympathies were entirely on their side. I am debarred by my social standing from expressing my prejudices in the forceful manner they do.

I soothed her as best I could and made my escape.

Haydock overtook me in his car at the corner of the Vicarage road. "I've just taken Mrs. Protheroe home," he called.

He waited for me at the gate of his house.

"Come in a minute," he said. I complied.

"This is an extraordinary business," he said, as he threw his hat on a chair and opened the door into his surgery.

He sank down on a shabby leather chair and stared across the room. He looked harried and perplexed.

I told him that we had succeeded in fixing the time of the shot. He listened with an almost abstracted air.

"That lets Anne Protheroe out," he said. "Well, well, I'm glad it's neither of those two. I like 'em both."

I believed him, and yet it occurred to me to wonder why, since, as he said, he liked them both, their freedom from complicity seemed to have had the result of plunging him in gloom. This morning he had looked like a man with a weight lifted from his mind, now he looked thoroughly rattled and upset.

And yet I was convinced that he meant what he said. He was fond of both Anne Protheroe and Lawrence Redding. Why, then, this gloomy absorption? He roused himself with an effort.

"I meant to tell you about Hawes. All this business has driven him out of my mind."

"Is he really ill?"

"There's nothing radically wrong with him. You know, of course, that he's had Encephalitis Lethargica, sleepy sickness, as it's commonly called?"

"No," I said, very much surprised, "I didn't know anything of the kind. He never told me anything about it. When did he have it?"

"About a year ago. He recovered all right—as far as one ever recovers. It's a strange disease—has a queer moral effect. The whole character may change after it."

He was silent for a moment or two, and then said:

"We think with horror now of the days when we burnt witches. I believe the day will come when we will shudder to think that we ever hanged criminals."

"You don't believe in capital punishment?"

"It's not so much that." He paused. "You know," he said slowly, "I'd rather have my job than yours."

"Why?"

"Because your job deals very largely with what we call right and wrong—and I'm not at all sure that there's any such thing. Suppose it's all a question of glandular secretion. Too much of one gland, too little of another—and you get your murderer, your thief, your habitual criminal. Clement, I believe the time will come when we'll be horrified to think of the long centuries in which we've punished people for disease—which they can't help, poor devils. You don't hang a man for having tuberculosis."

"He isn't dangerous to the community."

"In a sense he is. He infects other people. Or take a man who fancies he's the Emperor of China. You don't say how wicked of him. I take your point about the community. The community must be protected. Shut up these people where they can't do any harm—even put them peacefully out of the way—yes, I'd go as far as that.

But don't call it punishment. Don't bring shame on them and their innocent families."

I looked at him curiously.

"I've never heard you speak like this before."

"I don't usually air my theories abroad. Today I'm riding my hobby. You're an intelligent man, Clement, which is more than some parsons are. You won't admit, I dare say, that there's no such thing as what is technically termed, 'Sin,' but you're broadminded enough to consider the possibility of such a thing."

"It strikes at the root of all accepted ideas," he said.

"Yes, we're a narrow-minded, self-righteous lot, only too keen to judge matters we know nothing about. I honestly believe crime is a case for the doctor, not the policeman and not the parson. In the future, perhaps, there won't be any such thing."

"You'll have cured it?"

"We'll have cured it. Rather a wonderful thought. Have you ever studied the statistics of crime? No—very few people have. I have, though. You'd be amazed at the amount there is of adolescent crime, glands again, you see. Young Neil, the Oxfordshire murderer—killed five little girls before he was suspected. Nice lad—never given any trouble of any kind. Lily Rose, the little Cornish girl—killed her uncle because he docked her of sweets. Hit him when he was asleep with a coal hammer. Went home and a fortnight later killed her elder sister who had annoyed her about some trifling matter. Neither of them hanged, of course. Sent to a home. May be all right later—may not. Doubt if the girl will. The only thing she cares about is seeing the pigs killed. Do you know when suicide is commonest? Fifteen to sixteen years of age. From self-murder to murder of someone else isn't a very long step. But it's not a moral lack—it's a physical one."

"What you say is terrible!"

"No—it's only new to you. New truths have to be faced. One's ideas adjusted. But sometimes—it makes life difficult."

He sat there, frowning, yet with a strange look of weariness.

"Haydock," I said, "if you suspected—if you knew—that a certain person was a murderer, would you give that person up to the law, or

would you be tempted to shield them?"

I was quite unprepared for the effect of my question. He turned on me angrily and suspiciously.

"What makes you say that, Clement? What's in your mind? Out with it, man."

"Why, nothing particular," I said, rather taken aback. "Only—well, murder is in our minds just now. If by any chance you happened to discover the truth—I wondered how you would feel about it, that was all."

His anger died down. He stared once more straight ahead of him like a man trying to read the answer to a riddle that perplexes him, yet which exists only in his own brain.

"If I suspected—if I knew—I should do my duty, Clement. At least, I hope so."

"The question is—which way would you consider your duty lay?"

He looked at me with inscrutable eyes.

"That question comes to every man some time in his life, I suppose, Clement. And every man has to decide in his own way."

"You don't know?"

"No, I don't know...."

I felt the best thing was to change the subject.

"That nephew of mine is enjoying this case thoroughly," I said. "Spends his entire time looking for footprints and cigarette ash."

Haydock smiled. "What age is he?"

"Just sixteen. You don't take tragedies seriously at that age. It's all Sherlock Holmes and Arsene Lupin to you."

Haydock said thoughtfully:

"He's a fine-looking boy. What are you going to do with him?"

"I can't afford a University education, I'm afraid. The boy himself wants to go into the Merchant Service. He failed for the Navy."

"Well—it's a hard life—but he might do worse. Yes, he might do worse."

"I must be going," I exclaimed, catching sight of the clock. "I'm nearly half an hour late for lunch."

My family were just sitting down when I arrived. They demanded a full account of the morning's activities, which I gave them, feeling,

as I did so, that most of it was in the nature of an anticlimax.

Dennis, however, was highly entertained by the history of Mrs. Price Ridley's telephone call, and went into fits of laughter as I enlarged upon the nervous shock her system had sustained and the necessity for reviving her with damson gin.

"Serve the old cat right," he exclaimed. "She's got the worst tongue in the place. I wish I'd thought of ringing her up and giving her a fright. I say, Uncle Len, what about giving her a second dose?"

I hastily begged him to do nothing of the sort. Nothing is more dangerous than the well-meant efforts of the younger generation to assist you and show their sympathy.

Dennis's mood changed suddenly. He frowned and put on his man of the world air.

"I've been with Lettice most of the morning," he said. "You know, Griselda, she's really *very* worried. She doesn't want to show it, but she is. Very worried indeed."

"I should hope so," said Griselda, with a toss of her head.

Griselda is not too fond of Lettice Protheroe.

"I don't think you're ever quite fair to Lettice."

"Don't you?" said Griselda.

"Lots of people don't wear mourning."

Griselda was silent and so was I. Dennis continued:

"She doesn't talk to most people, but she *does* talk to me. She's awfully worried about the whole thing, and she thinks something ought to be done about it."

"She will find," I said, "that Inspector Slack shares her opinion. He is going up to Old Hall this afternoon, and will probably make the life of everybody there quite unbearable to them in his efforts to get at the truth."

"What do you think *is* the truth, Len?" asked my wife suddenly.

"It's hard to say, my dear. I can't say that at the moment I've any idea at all."

"Did you say that Inspector Slack was going to trace that telephone call—the one that took you to the Abbotts?"

"Yes."

"But can he do it? Isn't it a very difficult thing to do?"

"I should not imagine so. The Exchange will have a record of the calls."

"Oh!" My wife relapsed into thought.

"Uncle Len," said my nephew, "why were you so ratty with me this morning for joking about your wishing Colonel Protheroe to be murdered?"

"Because," I said, "there is a time for everything. Inspector Slack has no sense of humour. He took your words quite seriously, will probably cross-examine Mary, and will get out a warrant for my arrest."

"Doesn't he know when a fellow's ragging?"

"No," I said, "he does not. He has attained his present position through hard work and zealous attention to duty. That has left him no time for the minor recreations of life."

"Do you like him, Uncle Len?"

"No," I said, "I do not. From the first moment I saw him I disliked him intensely. But I have no doubt that he is a highly successful man in his profession."

"You think he'll find out who shot old Protheroe?"

"If he doesn't," I said, "it will not be for the want of trying."

Mary appeared and said:

"Mr. Hawes wants to see you. I've put him in the drawing room, and here's a note. Waiting for an answer. Verbal will do." I tore open the note and read it.

"Dear Mr. Clement,—I should be so very grateful if you could come and see me this afternoon as early as possible. I am in great trouble and would like your advice.

*Sincerely yours,
Estelle Lestrangle."*

"Say I will come round in about half an hour," I said to Mary. Then I went into the drawing room to see Hawes.

Fifteen

Hawes's appearance distressed me very much. His hands were shaking and his face kept twitching nervously. In my opinion he should have been in bed, and I told him so. He insisted that he was perfectly well.

"I assure you, sir, I never felt better. Never in my life."

This was so obviously wide of the truth that I hardly knew how to answer. I have a certain admiration for a man who will not give in to illness, but Hawes was carrying the thing rather too far.

"I called to tell you how sorry I was—that such a thing should happen in the Vicarage."

"Yes," I said, "it's not very pleasant."

"It's terrible—quite terrible. It seems they haven't arrested Mr. Redding after all?"

"No. That was a mistake. He made—er—rather a foolish statement."

"And the police are now quite convinced that he is innocent?"

"Perfectly."

"Why is that, may I ask? Is it—I mean, do they suspect anyone else?"

I should never have suspected that Hawes would take such a keen interest in the details of a murder case. Perhaps it is because it happened in the Vicarage. He appeared as eager as a reporter.

"I don't know that I am completely in Inspector Slack's confidence. As far as I know, he does not suspect anyone in particular. He is at present engaged in making inquiries."

"Yes. Yes—of course. But who can one imagine doing such a dreadful thing?"

I shook my head.

"Colonel Protheroe was not a popular man, I know that. But murder! For murder—one would need a very strong motive."

"So I should imagine," I said.

"Who could have such a motive? Have the police any idea?"

"I couldn't say."

"He might have made enemies, you know. The more I think about it, the more I am convinced that he was the kind of man to have enemies. He had a reputation on the Bench for being very severe."

"I suppose he had."

"Why, don't you remember, sir? He was telling you yesterday morning about having been threatened by that man Archer."

"Now I come to think of it, so he did," I said. "Of course, I remember. You were quite near us at the time."

"Yes, I overheard what he was saying. Almost impossible to help it with Colonel Protheroe. He had such a very loud voice, hadn't he? I remember being impressed by your own words. That when his time came, he might have justice meted out to him instead of mercy."

"Did I say that?" I asked, frowning. My remembrance of my own words was slightly different.

"You said it very impressively, sir. I was struck by your words. Justice is a terrible thing. And to think the poor man was struck down shortly afterwards. It's almost as though you had a premonition."

"I had nothing of the sort," I said shortly. I rather dislike Hawes's tendency to mysticism. There is a touch of the visionary about him.

"Have you told the police about this man Archer, sir?"

"I know nothing about him."

"I mean, have you repeated to them what Colonel Protheroe said—about Archer having threatened him?"

"No," I said slowly. "I have not."

"But you are going to do so?"

I was silent. I dislike hounding a man down who has already got the forces of law and order against him. I held no brief for Archer. He is an inveterate poacher—one of those cheerful ne'er-do-weels that are to be found in any parish. Whatever he may have said in the heat of anger when he was sentenced I had no definite knowledge that he felt the same when he came out of prison.

"You heard the conversation," I said at last. "If you feel it your duty to go to the police with it, you must do so."

"It would come better from you, sir."

"Perhaps—but to tell the truth—well, I've no fancy for doing it. I might be helping to put the rope round the neck of an innocent man."

"But if he shot Colonel Protheroe—"

"Oh, if! There's no evidence of any kind that he did."

"His threats."

"Strictly speaking, the threats were not his, but Colonel Protheroe's. Colonel Protheroe was threatening to show Archer what vengeance was worth next time he caught him."

"I don't understand your attitude, sir."

"Don't you," I said wearily. "You're a young man. You're zealous in the cause of right. When you get to my age, you'll find that you like to give people the benefit of the doubt."

"It's not—I mean—"

He paused, and I looked at him in surprise.

"You haven't any—any idea of your own—as to the identity of the murderer, I mean?"

"Good heavens, no."

Hawes persisted. "Or as to the—motive?"

"No. Have you?"

"I? No, indeed. I just wondered. If Colonel Protheroe had—had confided in you in any way—mentioned anything...."

"His confidences, such as they were, were heard by the whole village street yesterday morning," I said dryly.

"Yes. Yes, of course. And you don't think—about Archer?"

"The police will know all about Archer soon enough," I said. "If I'd heard him threaten Colonel Protheroe myself, that would be a

different matter. But you may be sure that if he actually has threatened him, half the people in the village will have heard him, and the news will get to the police all right. You, of course, must do as you like about the matter."

But Hawes seemed curiously unwilling to do anything himself.

The man's whole attitude was nervous and queer. I recalled what Haydock had said about his illness. There, I supposed, lay the explanation.

He took his leave unwillingly, as though he had more to say, and didn't know how to say it.

Before he left, I arranged with him to take the service for the Mothers' Union, followed by the meeting of District Visitors. I had several projects of my own for the afternoon.

Dismissing Hawes and his troubles from my mind I started off for Mrs. Lestrangle.

On the table in the hall lay the *Guardian* and the *Church Times* unopened.

As I walked, I remembered that Mrs. Lestrangle had had an interview with Colonel Protheroe the night before his death. It was possible that something had transpired in that interview which would throw light upon the problem of his murder.

I was shown straight into the little drawing room, and Mrs. Lestrangle rose to meet me. I was struck anew by the marvellous atmosphere that this woman could create. She wore a dress of some dead black material that showed off the extraordinary fairness of her skin. There was something curiously dead about her face. Only the eyes were burningly alive. There was a watchful look in them today. Otherwise she showed no signs of animation.

"It was very good of you to come, Mr. Clement," she said, as she shook hands. "I wanted to speak to you the other day. Then I decided not to do so. I was wrong."

"As I told you then, I shall be glad to do anything that can help you."

"Yes, you said that. And you said it as though you meant it. Very few people, Mr. Clement, in this world have ever sincerely wished to help me."

"I can hardly believe that, Mrs. Lestrangle."

"It is true. Most people—most men, at any rate, are out for their own hand." There was a bitterness in her voice.

I did not answer, and she went on:

"Sit down, won't you?"

I obeyed, and she took a chair facing me. She hesitated a moment and then began to speak very slowly and thoughtfully, seeming to weigh each word as she uttered it.

"I am in a very peculiar position, Mr. Clement, and I want to ask your advice. That is, I want to ask your advice as to what I should do next. What is past is past and cannot be undone. You understand?"

Before I could reply, the maid who had admitted me opened the door and said with a scared face:

"Oh! Please, ma'am, there is a police inspector here, and he says he must speak to you, please."

There was a pause. Mrs. Lestrangle's face did not change. Only her eyes very slowly closed and opened again. She seemed to swallow once or twice, then she said in exactly the same clear, calm voice: "Show him in, Hilda."

I was about to rise, but she motioned me back again with an imperious hand.

"If you do not mind—I should be much obliged if you would stay."

I resumed my seat.

"Certainly, if you wish it," I murmured, as Slack entered with a brisk regulation tread.

"Good afternoon, madam," he began.

"Good afternoon, Inspector."

At this moment, he caught sight of me and scowled. There is no doubt about it, Slack does not like me.

"You have no objection to the Vicar's presence, I hope?"

I suppose that Slack could not very well say he had.

"No-o," he said grudgingly. "Though, perhaps, it might be better —"

Mrs. Lestrangle paid no attention to the hint.

"What can I do for you, Inspector?" she asked.

"It's this way, madam. Murder of Colonel Protheroe. I'm in charge of the case and making inquiries."

Mrs. Lestrangle nodded.

"Just as a matter of form, I'm asking every one just where they were yesterday evening between the hours of 6 and 7 p.m. Just as a matter of form, you understand."

"You want to know where I was yesterday evening between six and seven?"

"If you please, madam."

"Let me see." She reflected a moment. "I was here. In this house."

"Oh!" I saw the Inspector's eyes flash. "And your maid—you have only one maid, I think—can confirm that statement?"

"No, it was Hilda's afternoon out."

"I see."

"So, unfortunately, you will have to take my word for it," said Mrs. Lestrangle pleasantly.

"You seriously declare that you were at home all the afternoon?"

"You said between six and seven, Inspector. I was out for a walk early in the afternoon. I returned some time before five o'clock."

"Then if a lady—Miss Hartnell, for instance—were to declare that she came here about six o'clock, rang the bell, but could make no one hear and was compelled to go away again—you'd say she was mistaken, eh?"

"Oh, no," Mrs. Lestrangle shook her head.

"But—"

"If your maid is in, she can say not at home. If one is alone and does not happen to want to see callers—well, the only thing to do is to let them ring."

Inspector Slack looked slightly baffled.

"Elderly women bore me dreadfully," said Mrs. Lestrangle. "And Miss Hartnell is particularly boring. She must have rung at least half a dozen times before she went away."

She smiled sweetly at Inspector Slack.

The Inspector shifted his ground.

“Then if anyone were to say they’d seen you out and about then —”

“Oh! but they didn’t, did they?” She was quick to sense his weak point. “No one saw me out, because I was in, you see.”

“Quite so, madam.”

The Inspector hitched his chair a little nearer.

“Now I understand, Mrs. Lestrangle, that you paid a visit to Colonel Protheroe at Old Hall the night before his death.”

Mrs. Lestrangle said calmly: “That is so.”

“Can you indicate to me the nature of that interview?”

“It concerned a private matter, Inspector.”

“I’m afraid I must ask you tell me the nature of that private matter.”

“I shall not tell you anything of the kind. I will only assure you that nothing which was said at that interview could possibly have any bearing upon the crime.”

“I don’t think you are the best judge of that.”

“At any rate, you will have to take my word for it, Inspector.”

“In fact, I have to take your word about everything.”

“It does seem rather like it,” she agreed, still with the same smiling calm.

Inspector Slack grew very red.

“This is a serious matter, Mrs. Lestrangle. I want the truth—” He banged his fist down on a table. “And I mean to get it.”

Mrs. Lestrangle said nothing at all.

“Don’t you see, madam, that you’re putting yourself in a very fishy position?”

Still Mrs. Lestrangle said nothing.

“You’ll be required to give evidence at the inquest.”

“Yes.”

Just the monosyllable. Unemphatic, uninterested. The Inspector altered his tactics.

“You were acquainted with Colonel Protheroe?”

“Yes, I was acquainted with him.”

“Well acquainted?”

There was a pause before she said:

"I had not seen him for several years."

"You were acquainted with Mrs. Protheroe?"

"No."

"You'll excuse me, but it was a very unusual time to make a call."

"Not from my point of view."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I wanted to see Colonel Protheroe alone. I did not want to see Mrs. Protheroe or Miss Protheroe. I considered this the best way of accomplishing my object."

"Why didn't you want to see Mrs. or Miss Protheroe?"

"That, Inspector, is my business."

"Then you refuse to say more?"

"Absolutely."

Inspector Slack rose.

"You'll be putting yourself in a nasty position, madam, if you're not careful. All this looks bad—it looks very bad."

She laughed. I could have told Inspector Slack that this was not the kind of woman who is easily frightened.

"Well," he said, extricating himself with dignity, "don't say I haven't warned you, that's all. Good afternoon, madam, and mind you we're going to get at the truth."

He departed. Mrs. Lestranger rose and held out her hand.

"I am going to send you away—yes, it is better so. You see, it is too late for advice now. I have chosen my part."

She repeated in a rather forlorn voice:

"I have chosen my part."

Sixteen

As I went out I ran into Haydock on the doorstep. He glanced sharply after Slack, who was just passing through the gate, and demanded: "Has he been questioning her?"

"Yes."

"He's been civil, I hope?"

Civility, to my mind, is an art which Inspector Slack has never learnt, but I presumed that according to his own lights, civil he had been, and anyway, I didn't want to upset Haydock any further. He was looking worried and upset as it was. So I said he had been quite civil.

Haydock nodded and passed on into the house, and I went on down the village street, where I soon caught up to the inspector. I fancy that he was walking slowly on purpose. Much as he dislikes me, he is not the man to let dislike stand in the way of acquiring any useful information.

"Do you know anything about the lady?" he asked me point blank.

I said I knew nothing whatever.

"She's never said anything about why she came here to live?"

"No."

"Yet you go and see her?"

"It is one of my duties to call on my parishioners," I replied, evading to remark that I had been sent for.

"H'm, I suppose it is." He was silent for a minute or two and then, unable to resist discussing his recent failure, he went on: "Fishy

business, it looks to me."

"You think so?"

"If you ask me, I say 'blackmail.' Seems funny, when you think of what Colonel Protheroe was always supposed to be. But there, you never can tell. He wouldn't be the first churchwarden who'd led a double life."

Faint remembrances of Miss Marple's remarks on the same subject floated through my mind.

"You really think that's likely?"

"Well, it fits the facts, sir. Why did a smart, well-dressed lady come down to this quiet little hole? Why did she go and see him at that funny time of day? Why did she avoid seeing Mrs. and Miss Protheroe? Yes, it all hangs together. Awkward for her to admit—blackmail's a punishable offence. But we'll get the truth out of her. For all we know it may have a very important bearing on the case. If Colonel Protheroe had some guilty secret in his life—something disgraceful—well, you can see for yourself what a field it opens up."

I suppose it did.

"I've been trying to get the butler to talk. He might have overheard some of the conversation between Colonel Protheroe and Lestrangle. Butlers do sometimes. But he swears he hasn't the least idea of what the conversation was about. By the way, he got the sack through it. The Colonel went for him, being angry at his having let her in. The butler retorted by giving notice. Says he didn't like the place anyway and had been thinking of leaving for some time."

"Really?"

"So that gives us another person who had a grudge against the Colonel."

"You don't seriously suspect the man—what's his name, by the way?"

"His name's Reeves, and I don't say I do suspect him. What I say is, you never know. I don't like that soapy, oily manner of his."

I wonder what Reeves would say of Inspector Slack's manner.

"I'm going to question the chauffeur now."

"Perhaps, then," I said, "you'll give me a lift in your car. I want a short interview with Mrs. Protheroe."

"What about?"

"The funeral arrangements."

"Oh!" Inspector Slack was slightly taken aback. "The inquest's tomorrow, Saturday."

"Just so. The funeral will probably be arranged for Tuesday."

Inspector Slack seemed to be a little ashamed of himself for his brusqueness. He held out an olive branch in the shape of an invitation to be present at the interview with the chauffeur, Manning.

Manning was a nice lad, not more than twenty-five or -six years of age. He was inclined to be awed by the Inspector.

"Now, then, my lad," said Slack, "I want a little information from you."

"Yes, sir," stammered the chauffeur. "Certainly, sir."

If he had committed the murder himself he could not have been more alarmed.

"You took your master to the village yesterday?"

"Yes, sir."

"What time was that?"

"Five thirty."

"Mrs. Protheroe went too?"

"Yes, sir."

"You went straight to the village?"

"Yes, sir."

"You didn't stop anywhere on the way?"

"No, sir."

"What did you do when you got there?"

"The Colonel got out and told me he wouldn't want the car again. He'd walk home. Mrs. Protheroe had some shopping to do. The parcels were put in the car. Then she said that was all, and I drove home."

"Leaving her in the village?"

"Yes, sir."

"What time was that?"

"A quarter past six, sir. A quarter past exactly."

"Where did you leave her?"

"By the church, sir."

"Had the Colonel mentioned at all where he was going?"

"He said something about having to see the vet ... something to do with one of the horses."

"I see. And you drove straight back here?"

"Yes, sir."

"There are two entrances to Old Hall, by the South Lodge and by the North Lodge. I take it that going to the village you would go by the South Lodge?"

"Yes, sir, always."

"And you came back the same way?"

"Yes, sir."

"H'm. I think that's all. Ah! Here's Miss Protheroe."

Lettice drifted towards us.

"I want the Fiat, Manning," she said. "Start her for me, will you?"

"Very good, miss."

He went towards a two-seater and lifted the bonnet.

"Just a minute, Miss Protheroe," said Slack. "It's necessary that I should have a record of everybody's movements yesterday afternoon. No offence meant."

Lettice stared at him.

"I never know the time of anything," she said.

"I understand you went out soon after lunch yesterday?"

She nodded.

"Where to, please?"

"To play tennis."

"Who with?"

"The Hartley Napiers."

"At Much Benham?"

"Yes."

"And you returned?"

"I don't know. I tell you I never know these things."

"You returned," I said, "about seven thirty."

"That's right," said Lettice. "In the middle of the shemozzle. Anne having fits and Griselda supporting her."

"Thank you, miss," said the Inspector. "That's all I want to know."

"How queer," said Lettice. "It seems so uninteresting."

She moved towards the Fiat.

The Inspector touched his forehead in a surreptitious manner.

"A bit wanting?" he suggested.

"Not in the least," I said. "But she likes to be thought so."

"Well, I'm off to question the maids now."

One cannot really like Slack, but one can admire his energy.

We parted company and I inquired of Reeves if I could see Mrs. Protheroe. "She is lying down, sir, at the moment."

"Then I'd better not disturb her."

"Perhaps if you would wait, sir, I know that Mrs. Protheroe is anxious to see you. She was saying as much at luncheon."

He showed me into the drawing room, switching on the electric lights since the blinds were down.

"A very sad business all this," I said.

"Yes, sir." His voice was cold and respectful.

I looked at him. What feelings were at work under that impassive demeanour. Were there things that he knew and could have told us? There is nothing so inhuman as the mask of the good servant.

"Is there anything more, sir?"

Was there just a hint of anxiety to be gone behind that correct expression?

"There's nothing more," I said.

I had a very short time to wait before Anne Protheroe came to me. We discussed and settled a few arrangements and then:

"What a wonderfully kind man Dr. Haydock is!" she exclaimed.

"Haydock is the best fellow I know."

"He has been amazingly kind to me. But he looks very sad, doesn't he?"

It had never occurred to me to think of Haydock as sad. I turned the idea over in my mind.

"I don't think I've ever noticed it," I said at last.

"I never have, until today."

"One's own troubles sharpen one's eyes sometimes," I said.

"That's very true." She paused and then said:

"Mr. Clement, there's one thing I absolutely *cannot* make out. If my husband were shot immediately after I left him, how was it that I

didn't hear the shot?"

"They have reason to believe that the shot was fired later."

"But the 6:20 on the note?"

"Was possibly added by a different hand—the murderer's."

Her cheek paled.

"It didn't strike you that the date was not in his handwriting?"

"How horrible!"

"None of it looked like his handwriting."

There was some truth in this observation. It was a somewhat illegible scrawl, not so precise as Protheroe's writing usually was.

"You are sure they don't still suspect Lawrence?"

"I think he is definitely cleared."

"But, Mr. Clement, who can it be? Lucius was not popular, I know, but I don't think he had any real enemies. Not—not that kind of enemy."

I shook my head. "It's a mystery."

I thought wonderingly of Miss Marple's seven suspects. Who could they be?

After I took leave of Anne, I proceeded to put a certain plan of mine into action.

I returned from Old Hall by way of the private path. When I reached the stile, I retraced my steps, and choosing a place where I fancied the undergrowth showed signs of being disturbed, I turned aside from the path and forced my way through the bushes. The wood was a thick one, with a good deal of tangled undergrowth. My progress was not very fast, and I suddenly became aware that someone else was moving amongst the bushes not very far from me. As I paused irresolutely, Lawrence Redding came into sight. He was carrying a large stone.

I suppose I must have looked surprised, for he suddenly burst out laughing.

"No," he said, "it's not a clue, it's a peace offering."

"A peace offering?"

"Well, a basis for negotiations, shall we say? I want an excuse for calling on your neighbour, Miss Marple, and I have been told there is

nothing she likes so much as a nice bit of rock or stone for the Japanese gardens she makes."

"Quite true," I said. "But what do you want with the old lady?"

"Just this. If there was anything to be seen yesterday evening Miss Marple saw it. I don't mean anything necessarily connected with the crime—that she would think connected with the crime. I mean some outré or bizarre incident, some simple little happening that might give us a clue to the truth. Something that she wouldn't think worthwhile mentioning to the police."

"It's possible, I suppose."

"It's worth trying anyhow. Clement, I'm going to get to the bottom of this business. For Anne's sake, if nobody's else. And I haven't any too much confidence in Slack—he's a zealous fellow, but zeal can't really take the place of brains."

"I see," I said, "that you are that favourite character of fiction, the amateur detective. I don't know that they really hold their own with the professional in real life."

He looked at me shrewdly and suddenly laughed.

"What are you doing in the wood, padre?"

I had the grace to blush.

"Just the same as I am doing, I dare swear. We've got the same idea, haven't we? *How did the murderer come to the study?* First way, along the lane and through the gate, second way, by the front door, third way—is there a third way? My idea was to see if there was any sign of the bushes being disturbed or broken anywhere near the wall of the Vicarage garden."

"That was just my idea," I admitted.

"I hadn't really got down to the job, though," continued Lawrence. "Because it occurred to me that I'd like to see Miss Marple first, to make quite sure that no one did pass along the lane yesterday evening whilst we were in the studio."

I shook my head.

"She was quite positive that nobody did."

"Yes, nobody whom she would call anybody—sounds mad, but you see what I mean. But there might have been someone like a

postman or a milkman or a butcher's boy—someone whose presence would be so natural that you wouldn't think of mentioning it."

"You've been reading G. K. Chesterton," I said, and Lawrence did not deny it.

"But don't you think there's just possibly something in the idea?"

"Well, I suppose there might be," I admitted.

Without further ado, we made our way to Miss Marple's. She was working in the garden, and called out to us as we climbed over the stile.

"You see," murmured Lawrence, "she sees everybody."

She received us very graciously and was much pleased with Lawrence's immense rock, which he presented with all due solemnity.

"It's very thoughtful of you, Mr. Redding. Very thoughtful indeed."

Emboldened by this, Lawrence embarked on his questions. Miss Marple listened attentively.

"Yes, I see what you mean, and I quite agree, it is the sort of thing no one mentions or bothers to mention. But I can assure you that there was nothing of the kind. Nothing whatever."

"You are sure, Miss Marple?"

"Quite sure."

"Did you see anyone go by the path into the wood that afternoon?" I asked. "Or come from it?"

"Oh, yes, quite a number of people. Dr. Stone and Miss Cram went that way—it's the nearest way to the barrow for them. That was a little after two o'clock. And Dr. Stone returned that way—as you know, Mr. Redding, since he joined you and Mrs. Protheroe."

"By the way," I said. "That shot—the one you heard, Miss Marple. Mr. Redding and Mrs. Protheroe must have heard it too."

I looked inquiringly at Lawrence.

"Yes," he said, frowning. "I believe I did hear some shots. Weren't there one or two shots?"

"I only heard one," said Miss Marple.

"It's only the vaguest impression in my mind," said Lawrence. "Curse it all, I wish I could remember. If only I'd known. You see, I was so completely taken up with—with—"

He paused, embarrassed.

I gave a tactful cough. Miss Marple, with a touch of prudishness, changed the subject.

"Inspector Slack has been trying to get me to say whether I heard the shot after Mr. Redding and Mrs. Protheroe had left the studio or before. I've had to confess that I really could not say definitely, but I have the impression—which is growing stronger the more I think about it—that it was after."

"Then that lets the celebrated Dr. Stone out anyway," said Lawrence, with a sigh. "Not that there has ever been the slightest reason why he should be suspected of shooting poor old Protheroe."

"Ah!" said Miss Marple. "But I always find it prudent to suspect everybody just a little. What I say is, you really never *know*, do you?"

This was typical of Miss Marple. I asked Lawrence if he agreed with her about the shot.

"I really can't say. You see, it was such an ordinary sound. I should be inclined to think it had been fired when we were in the studio. The sound would have been deadened and—one would have noticed it less there."

For other reasons than the sound being deadened, I thought to myself.

"I must ask Anne," said Lawrence. "She may remember. By the way, there seems to me to be one curious fact that needs explanation. Mrs. Lestrangle, the Mystery Lady of St. Mary Mead, paid a visit to old Protheroe after dinner on Wednesday night. And nobody seems to have any idea what it was all about. Old Protheroe said nothing to either his wife or Lettice."

"Perhaps the Vicar knows," said Miss Marple.

Now how did the woman know that I had been to visit Mrs. Lestrangle that afternoon? The way she always knows things is uncanny.

I shook my head and said I could throw no light upon the matter.

"What does Inspector Slack think?" asked Miss Marple.

"He's done his best to bully the butler—but apparently the butler wasn't curious enough to listen at the door. So there it is—no one

knows."

"I expect someone overheard something, though, don't you?" said Miss Marple. "I mean, somebody always *does*. I think that is where Mr. Redding may find out something."

"But Mrs. Protheroe knows nothing."

"I didn't mean Anne Protheroe," said Miss Marple. "I meant the women servants. They do so hate telling anything to the police. But a nice looking young man—you'll excuse me, Mr. Redding—and one who has been unjustly suspected—oh! I'm sure they'd tell him at once."

"I'll go and have a try this evening," said Lawrence with vigour. "Thanks for the hint, Miss Marple. I'll go after—well, after a little job the Vicar and I are going to do."

It occurred to me that we had better be getting on with it. I said good-bye to Miss Marple and we entered the woods once more.

First we went up the path till we came to a new spot where it certainly looked as though someone had left the path on the right-hand side. Lawrence explained that he had already followed this particular trail and found it led nowhere, but he added that we might as well try again. He might have been wrong.

It was, however, as he had said. After about ten or twelve yards any sign of broken and trampled leaves petered out. It was from this spot that Lawrence had broken back towards the path to meet me earlier in the afternoon.

We emerged on the path again and walked a little farther along it. Again we came to a place where the bushes seemed disturbed. The signs were very slight but, I thought, unmistakable. This time the trail was more promising. By a devious course, it wound steadily nearer to the Vicarage. Presently we arrived at where the bushes grew thickly up to the wall. The wall is a high one and ornamented with fragments of broken bottles on the top. If anyone had placed a ladder against it, we ought to find traces of their passage.

We were working our way slowly along the wall when a sound came to our ears of a breaking twig. I pressed forward, forcing my way through a thick tangle of shrubs—and came face to face with Inspector Slack.

"So it's you," he said. "And Mr. Redding. Now what do you think you two gentlemen are doing?"

Slightly crestfallen, we explained.

"Quite so," said the Inspector. "Not being the fools we're usually thought to be, I had the same idea myself. I've been here over an hour. Would you like to know something?"

"Yes," I said meekly.

"Whoever murdered Colonel Protheroe didn't come this way to do it! There's not a sign either on this side of the wall, nor the other. Whoever murdered Colonel Protheroe came through the front door. There's no other way he could have come."

"Impossible," I cried.

"Why impossible? Your door stands open. Anyone's only got to walk in. They can't be seen from the kitchen. They know you're safely out of the way, they know Mrs. Clement is in London, they know Mr. Dennis is at a tennis party. Simple as A B C. And they don't need to go or come through the village. Just opposite the Vicarage gate is a public footpath, and from it you can turn into these same woods and come out whichever way you choose. Unless Mrs. Price Ridley were to come out of her front gate at that particular minute, it's all clear sailing. A great deal more so than climbing over walls. The side windows of the upper story of Mrs. Price Ridley's house do overlook most of that wall. No, depend upon it, that's the way he came."

It really seemed as though he must be right.

Seventeen

Inspector Slack came round to see me the following morning. He is, I think, thawing towards me. In time, he may forget the incident of the clock.

"Well, sir," he greeted me. "I've traced that telephone call that you received."

"Indeed?" I said eagerly.

"It's rather odd. It was put through from the North Lodge of Old Hall. Now that lodge is empty, the lodgekeepers have been pensioned off and the new lodgekeepers aren't in yet. The place was empty and convenient—a window at the back was open. No fingerprints on the instrument itself—it had been wiped clear. That's suggestive."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that it shows that call was put through deliberately to get you out of the way. Therefore the murder was carefully planned in advance. If it had been just a harmless practical joke, the fingerprints wouldn't have been wiped off so carefully."

"No. I see that."

"It also shows that the murderer was well acquainted with Old Hall and its surroundings. It wasn't Mrs. Protheroe who put that call through. I've accounted for every moment of her time that afternoon. There are half a dozen other servants who can swear that she was at home till five thirty. Then the car came round and drove Colonel Protheroe and her to the village. The Colonel went to see Quinton, the vet, about one of the horses. Mrs. Protheroe did some

ordering at the grocers and at the fish shop, and from there came straight down the back lane where Miss Marple saw her. All the shops agree she carried no handbag with her. The old lady was right."

"She usually is," I said mildly.

"And Miss Protheroe was over at Much Benham at 5:30."

"Quite so," I said. "My nephew was there too."

"That disposes of her. The maid seems all right—a bit hysterical and upset, but what can you expect? Of course, I've got my eye on the butler—what with giving notice and all. But I don't think he knows anything about it."

"Your inquiries seem to have had rather a negative result, Inspector."

"They do and they do not, sir. There's one very queer thing has turned up—quite unexpectedly, I may say."

"Yes?"

"You remember the fuss that Mrs. Price Ridley, who lives next door to you, was kicking up yesterday morning? About being rung up on the telephone?"

"Yes?" I said.

"Well, we traced the call just to calm her—and where on this earth do you think it was put through from?"

"A call office?" I hazarded.

"No, Mr. Clement. That call was put through from Mr. Lawrence Redding's cottage."

"What?" I exclaimed, surprised.

"Yes. A bit odd, isn't it? Mr. Redding had nothing to do with it. At that time, 6:30, he was on his way to the Blue Boar with Dr. Stone in full view of the village. But there it is. Suggestive, eh? Someone walked into that empty cottage and used the telephone, who was it? That's two queer telephone calls in one day. Makes you think there's some connection between them. I'll eat my hat if they weren't both put through by the same person."

"But with what object?"

"Well, that's what we've got to find out. There seems no particular point in the second one, but there must be a point

somewhere. And you see the significance? Mr. Redding's house used to telephone from. Mr. Redding's pistol. All throwing suspicion on Mr. Redding."

"It would be more to the point to have put through the *first* call from his house," I objected.

"Ah, but I've been thinking that out. What did Mr. Redding do most afternoons? He went up to Old Hall and painted Miss Protheroe. And from his cottage he'd go on his motor bicycle, passing through the North Gate. Now you see the point of the call being put through from there. *The murderer is someone who didn't know about the quarrel and that Mr. Redding wasn't going up to Old Hall any more.*"

I reflected a moment to let the Inspector's points sink into my brain. They seemed to me logical and unavoidable.

"Were there any fingerprints on the receiver in Mr. Redding's cottage?" I asked.

"There were not," said the Inspector bitterly. "That dratted old woman who goes and does for him had been and dusted them off yesterday morning." He reflected wrathfully for a few minutes. "She's a stupid old fool, anyway. Can't remember when she saw the pistol last. It might have been there on the morning of the crime, or it might not. 'She couldn't say, she's sure.' They're all alike!

"Just as a matter of form, I went round and saw Dr. Stone," he went on. "I must say he was pleasant as could be about it. He and Miss Cram went up to that mound—or barrow—or whatever you call it, about half past two yesterday, and stayed there all the afternoon. Dr. Stone came back alone, and she came later. He says he didn't hear any shot, but admits he's absentminded. But it all bears out what we think."

"Only," I said, "you haven't caught the murderer."

"H'm," said the Inspector. "It was a woman's voice you heard through the telephone. It was in all probability a woman's voice Mrs. Price Ridley heard. If only that shot hadn't come hard on the close of the telephone call—well, I'd know where to look."

"Where?"

"Ah! That's just what it's best not to say, sir."

Unblushingly, I suggested a glass of old port. I have some very fine old vintage port. Eleven o'clock in the morning is not the usual time for drinking port, but I did not think that mattered with Inspector Slack. It was, of course, cruel abuse of the vintage port, but one must not be squeamish about such things.

When Inspector Slack had polished off the second glass, he began to unbend and become genial. Such is the effect of that particular port.

"I don't suppose it matters with you, sir," he said. "You'll keep it to yourself? No letting it get round the parish."

I reassured him.

"Seeing as the whole thing happened in your house, it almost seems as though you have a right to know."

"Just what I feel myself," I said.

"Well, then, sir, what about the lady who called on Colonel Protheroe the night before the murder?"

"Mrs. Lestrangle," I cried, speaking rather loud in my astonishment.

The Inspector threw me a reproachful glance.

"Not so loud, sir. Mrs. Lestrangle is the lady I've got my eye on. You remember what I told you—blackmail."

"Hardly a reason for murder. Wouldn't it be a case of killing the goose that laid the golden eggs? That is, assuming that your hypothesis is true, which I don't for a minute admit."

The Inspector winked at me in a common manner.

"Ah! She's the kind the gentlemen will always stand up for. Now look here, sir. Suppose she's successfully blackmailed the old gentleman in the past. After a lapse of years, she gets wind of him, comes down here and tries it on again. *But*, in the meantime, things have changed. The law has taken up a very different stand. Every facility is given nowadays to people prosecuting for blackmail—names are not allowed to be reported in the press. Suppose Colonel Protheroe turns round and says he'll have the law on her. She's in a nasty position. They give a very severe sentence for blackmail. The boot's on the other leg. The only thing to do to save herself is to put him out good and quick."

I was silent. I had to admit that the case the Inspector had built up was plausible. Only one thing to my mind made it inadmissible—the personality of Mrs. Lestrangle.

"I don't agree with you, Inspector," I said. "Mrs. Lestrangle doesn't seem to me to be a potential blackmailer. She's—well, it's an old-fashioned word, but she's a—lady."

He threw me a pitying glance.

"Ah! well, sir," he said tolerantly, "you're a clergyman. You don't know half of what goes on. Lady indeed! You'd be surprised if you knew some of the things I know."

"I'm not referring to mere social position. Anyway, I should imagine Mrs. Lestrangle to be a *déclassée*. What I mean is a question of—personal refinement."

"You don't see her with the same eyes as I do, sir. I may be a man—but I'm a police officer, too. They can't get over me with their personal refinement. Why, that woman is the kind who could stick a knife into you without turning a hair."

Curiously enough, I could believe Mrs. Lestrangle guilty of murder much more easily than I could believe her capable of blackmail.

"But, of course, she can't have been telephoning to the old lady next door and shooting Colonel Protheroe at one and the same time," continued the Inspector.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when he slapped his leg ferociously.

"Got it," he exclaimed. "That's the point of the telephone call. Kind of *alibi*. Knew we'd connect it with the first one. I'm going to look into this. She may have bribed some village lad to do the phoning for her. *He'd* never think of connecting it with the murder."

The Inspector hurried off.

"Miss Marple wants to see you," said Griselda, putting her head in. "She sent over a very incoherent note—all spidery and underlined. I couldn't read most of it. Apparently she can't leave home herself. Hurry up and go across and see her and find out what it is. I've got my old women coming in two minutes or I'd come myself. I do hate old women—they tell you about their bad legs and sometimes insist on showing them to you. What luck that the

inquest is this afternoon! You won't have to go and watch the Boys' Club Cricket Match."

I hurried off, considerably exercised in my mind as to the reason for this summons.

I found Miss Marple in what, I believe, is described as a fluster. She was very pink and slightly incoherent.

"My nephew," she explained. "My nephew, Raymond West, the author. He is coming down today. Such a to-do. I have to see to everything myself. You cannot trust a maid to air a bed properly, and we must, of course, have a meat meal tonight. Gentlemen require such a lot of meat, do they not? And drink. There certainly should be some drink in the house—and a siphon."

"If I can do anything—" I began.

"Oh! How very kind. But I did not mean that. There is plenty of time really. He brings his own pipe and tobacco, I am glad to say. Glad because it saves me from knowing which kind of cigarettes are right to buy. But rather sorry, too, because it takes so long for the smell to get out of the curtains. Of course, I open the window and shake them well very early every morning. Raymond gets up very late—I think writers often do. He writes very clever books, I believe, though people are not really nearly so unpleasant as he makes out. Clever young men know so little of life, don't you think?"

"Would you like to bring him to dinner at the Vicarage?" I asked, still unable to gather why I had been summoned.

"Oh! No, thank you," said Miss Marple. "It's very kind of you," she added.

"There was—er—something you wanted to see me about, I think," I suggested desperately.

"Oh! Of course. In all the excitement it had gone right out of my head." She broke off and called to her maid. "Emily—Emily. Not those sheets. The frilled ones with the monogram, and don't put them too near the fire."

She closed the door and returned to me on tiptoe.

"It's just rather a curious thing that happened last night," she explained. "I thought you would like to hear about it, though at the moment it doesn't seem to make sense. I felt very wakeful last night

—wondering about all this sad business. And I got up and looked out of my window. And what do you think I saw?”

I looked, inquiring.

“Gladys Cram,” said Miss Marple, with great emphasis. “As I live, going into the wood with a suitcase.”

“A suitcase?”

“Isn’t it extraordinary? What should she want with a suitcase in the wood at twelve o’clock at night?”

“You see,” said Miss Marple, “I dare say it has nothing to do with the murder. But it is a Peculiar Thing. And just at present we all feel we must take notice of Peculiar Things.”

“Perfectly amazing,” I said. “Was she going to—er—sleep in the barrow by any chance?”

“She didn’t, at any rate,” said Miss Marple. “Because quite a short time afterwards she came back, and she hadn’t got the suitcase with her.”

Eighteen

The inquest was held that afternoon (Saturday) at two o'clock at the Blue Boar. The local excitement was, I need hardly say, tremendous. There had been no murder in St. Mary Mead for at least fifteen years. And to have someone like Colonel Protheroe murdered actually in the Vicarage study is such a feast of sensation as rarely falls to the lot of a village population.

Various comments floated to my ears which I was probably not meant to hear.

"There's Vicar. Looks pale, don't he? I wonder if he had a hand in it. 'Twas done at Vicarage, after all." "How can you, Mary Adams? And him visiting Henry Abbott at the time." "Oh! But they do say him and the Colonel had words. There's Mary Hill. Giving herself airs, she is, on account of being in service there. Hush, here's coroner."

The coroner was Dr. Roberts of our adjoining town of Much Benham. He cleared his throat, adjusted his eyeglasses, and looked important.

To recapitulate all the evidence would be merely tiresome. Lawrence Redding gave evidence of finding the body, and identified the pistol as belonging to him. To the best of his belief he had seen it on the Tuesday, two days previously. It was kept on a shelf in his cottage, and the door of the cottage was habitually unlocked.

Mrs. Protheroe gave evidence that she had last seen her husband at about a quarter to six when they separated in the village street. She agreed to call for him at the Vicarage later. She had gone to the Vicarage about a quarter past six, by way of the back lane and the

garden gate. She had heard no voices in the study and had imagined that the room was empty, but her husband might have been sitting at the writing table, in which case she would not have seen him. As far as she knew, he had been in his usual health and spirits. She knew of no enemy who might have had a grudge against him.

I gave evidence next, told of my appointment with Protheroe and my summons to the Abbots.' I described how I had found the body and my summoning of Dr. Haydock.

"How many people, Mr. Clement, were aware that Colonel Protheroe was coming to see you that evening?"

"A good many, I should imagine. My wife knew, and my nephew, and Colonel Protheroe himself alluded to the fact that morning when I met him in the village. I should think several people might have overheard him, as, being slightly deaf, he spoke in a loud voice."

"It was, then, a matter of common knowledge? Anyone might know?"

I agreed.

Haydock followed. He was an important witness. He described carefully and technically the appearance of the body and the exact injuries. It was his opinion that the deceased had been shot at approximately 6:20 to 6:30—certainly not later than 6:35. That was the outside limit. He was positive and emphatic on that point. There was no question of suicide, the wound could not have been self-inflicted.

Inspector Slack's evidence was discreet and abridged. He described his summons and the circumstances under which he had found the body. The unfinished letter was produced and the time on it—6:20—noted. Also the clock. It was tacitly assumed that the time of death was 6:22. The police were giving nothing away. Anne Protheroe told me afterwards that she had been told to suggest a slightly earlier period of time than 6:20 for her visit.

Our maid, Mary, was the next witness, and proved a somewhat truculent one. She hadn't heard anything, and didn't want to hear anything. It wasn't as though gentlemen who came to see the Vicar usually got shot. They didn't. She'd got her own jobs to look after. Colonel Protheroe had arrived at a quarter past six exactly. No, she

didn't look at the clock. She heard the church chime after she had shown him into the study. She didn't hear any shot. If there had been a shot she'd have heard it. Well, of course, she knew there must have been a shot, since the gentleman was found shot—but there it was. She hadn't heard it.

The coroner did not press the point. I realized that he and Colonel Melchett were working in agreement.

Mrs. Lestrange had been subpoenaed to give evidence, but a medical certificate, signed by Dr. Haydock, was produced saying she was too ill to attend.

There was only one other witness, a somewhat doddering old woman. The one who, in Slack's phrase, "did for" Lawrence Redding.

Mrs. Archer was shown the pistol and recognized it as the one she had seen in Mr. Redding's sitting room "over against the bookcase, he kept it, lying about." She had last seen it on the day of the murder. Yes—in answer to a further question—she was quite sure it was there at lunchtime on Thursday—quarter to one when she left.

I remembered what the Inspector had told me, and I was mildly surprised. However vague she might have been when he questioned her, she was quite positive about it now.

The coroner summed up in a negative manner, but with a good deal of firmness. The verdict was given almost immediately:

Murder by Person or Persons unknown.

As I left the room I was aware of a small army of young men with bright, alert faces and a kind of superficial resemblance to each other. Several of them were already known to me by sight as having haunted the Vicarage the last few days. Seeking to escape, I plunged back into the Blue Boar and was lucky enough to run straight into the archaeologist, Dr. Stone. I clutched at him without ceremony.

"Journalists," I said briefly and expressively. "If you could deliver me from their clutches?"

"Why, certainly, Mr. Clement. Come upstairs with me."

He led the way up the narrow staircase and into his sitting room, where Miss Cram was sitting rattling the keys of a typewriter with a

practised touch. She greeted me with a broad smile of welcome and seized the opportunity to stop work.

"Awful, isn't it?" she said. "Not knowing who did it, I mean. Not but that I'm disappointed in an inquest. Tame, that's what I call it. Nothing what you might call spicy from beginning to end."

"You were there, then, Miss Cram?"

"I was there all right. Fancy your not seeing me. Didn't you see me? I feel a bit hurt about that. Yes, I do. A gentleman, even if he is a clergyman, ought to have eyes in his head."

"Were you present also?" I asked Dr. Stone, in an effort to escape from this playful badinage. Young women like Miss Cram always make me feel awkward.

"No, I'm afraid I feel very little interest in such things. I am a man very wrapped up in his own hobby."

"It must be a very interesting hobby," I said.

"You know something of it, perhaps?"

I was obliged to confess that I knew next to nothing.

Dr. Stone was not the kind of man whom a confession of ignorance daunts. The result was exactly the same as though I had said that the excavation of barrows was my only relaxation. He surged and eddied into speech. Long barrows, round barrows, stone age, bronze age, paleolithic, neolithic kistvaens and cromlechs, it burst forth in a torrent. I had little to do save nod my head and look intelligent—and that last is perhaps over optimistic. Dr. Stone boomed on. He was a little man. His head was round and bald, his face was round and rosy, and he beamed at you through very strong glasses. I have never known a man so enthusiastic on so little encouragement. He went into every argument for and against his own pet theory—which, by the way, I quite failed to grasp!

He detailed at great length his difference of opinion with Colonel Protheroe.

"An opinionated boor," he said with heat. "Yes, yes, I know he is dead, and one should speak no ill of the dead. But death does not alter facts. An opinionated boor describes him exactly. Because he had read a few books, he set himself up as an authority—against a

man who has made a lifelong study of the subject. My whole life, Mr. Clement, has been given up to this work. My whole life—"

He was spluttering with excitement. Gladys Cram brought him back to earth with a terse sentence.

"You'll miss your train if you don't look out," she observed.

"Oh!" The little man stopped in mid speech and dragged a watch from his pocket. "Bless my soul. Quarter to? Impossible."

"Once you start talking you never remember the time. What you'd do without me to look after you, I really don't know."

"Quite right, my dear, quite right." He patted her affectionately on the shoulder. "This is a wonderful girl, Mr. Clement. Never forgets anything. I consider myself extremely lucky to have found her."

"Oh! Go on, Dr. Stone," said the lady. "You spoil me, you do."

I could not help feeling that I should be in a material position to add my support to the second school of thought—that which foresees lawful matrimony as the future of Dr. Stone and Miss Cram. I imagined that in her own way Miss Cram was rather a clever young woman.

"You'd better be getting along," said Miss Cram.

"Yes, yes, so I must."

He vanished into the room next door and returned carrying a suitcase.

"You are leaving?" I asked in some surprise.

"Just running up to town for a couple of days," he explained. "My old mother to see tomorrow, some business with my lawyers on Monday. On Tuesday I shall return. By the way, I suppose that Colonel Protheroe's death will make no difference to our arrangements. As regards the barrow, I mean. Mrs. Protheroe will have no objection to our continuing the work?"

"I should not think so."

As he spoke, I wondered who actually would be in authority at Old Hall. It was just possible that Protheroe might have left it to Lettice. I felt that it would be interesting to know the contents of Protheroe's will.

"Causes a lot of trouble in a family, a death does," remarked Miss Cram, with a kind of gloomy relish. "You wouldn't believe what a

nasty spirit there sometimes is.”

“Well, I must really be going.” Dr. Stone made ineffectual attempts to control the suitcase, a large rug and an unwieldy umbrella. I came to his rescue. He protested.

“Don’t trouble—don’t trouble. I can manage perfectly. Doubtless there will be somebody downstairs.”

But down below there was no trace of a boots or anyone else. I suspect that they were being regaled at the expense of the Press. Time was getting on, so we set out together to the station, Dr. Stone carrying the suitcase, and I holding the rug and umbrella.

Dr. Stone ejaculated remarks in between panting breaths as we hurried along.

“Really too good of you—didn’t mean—to trouble you ... Hope we shan’t miss—the train—Gladys is a good girl—really a wonderful girl—a very sweet nature—not too happy at home, I’m afraid—absolutely—the heart of a child—heart of a child. I do assure you, in spite of—difference in our ages—find a lot in common....”

We saw Lawrence Redding’s cottage just as we turned off to the station. It stands in an isolated position with no other houses near it. I observed two young men of smart appearance standing on the doorstep and a couple more peering in at the windows. It was a busy day for the Press.

“Nice fellow, young Redding,” I remarked, to see what my companion would say.

He was so out of breath by this time that he found it difficult to say anything, but he puffed out a word which I did not at first quite catch.

“Dangerous,” he gasped, when I asked him to repeat his remark.

“Dangerous?”

“Most dangerous. Innocent girls—know no better—taken in by a fellow like that—always hanging round women ... No good.”

From which I deduced that the only young man in the village had not passed unnoticed by the fair Gladys.

“Goodness,” ejaculated Dr. Stone. “The train!”

We were close to the station by this time and we broke into a fast sprint. A down train was standing in the station and the up London

train was just coming in.

At the door of the booking office we collided with a rather exquisite young man, and I recognized Miss Marple's nephew just arriving. He is, I think, a young man who does not like to be collided with. He prides himself on his poise and general air of detachment, and there is no doubt that vulgar contact is detrimental to poise of any kind. He staggered back. I apologized hastily and we passed in. Dr. Stone climbed on the train and I handed up his baggage just as the train gave an unwilling jerk and started.

I waved to him and then turned away. Raymond West had departed, but our local chemist, who rejoices in the name of Cherubim, was just setting out for the village. I walked beside him.

"Close shave that," he observed. "Well, how did the inquest go, Mr. Clement?"

I gave him the verdict.

"Oh! So that's what happened. I rather thought that would be the verdict. Where's Dr. Stone off to?"

I repeated what he had told me.

"Lucky not to miss the train. Not that you ever know on this line. I tell you, Mr. Clement, it's a crying shame. Disgraceful, that's what I call it. Train I came down by was ten minutes late. And that on a Saturday with no traffic to speak of. And on Wednesday—no, Thursday—yes, Thursday it was—I remember it was the day of the murder because I meant to write a strongly-worded complaint to the company—and the murder put it out of my head—yes, last Thursday. I had been to a meeting of the Pharmaceutical Society. How late do you think the 6:50 was? *Half an hour*. Half an hour exactly! What do you think of that? Ten minutes I don't mind. But if the train doesn't get in till twenty past seven, well, you can't get home before half past. What I say is, why call it the 6:50?"

"Quite so," I said, and wishing to escape from the monologue I broke away with the excuse that I had something to say to Lawrence Redding whom I saw approaching us on the other side of the road.

Nineteen

"Very glad to have met you," said Lawrence. "Come to my place."

We turned in at the little rustic gate, went up the path, and he drew a key from his pocket and inserted it in the lock.

"You keep the door locked now," I observed.

"Yes." He laughed rather bitterly. "Case of stable door when the steed is gone, eh? It is rather like that. You know, padre," he held the door open and I passed inside, "there's something about all this business that I don't like. It's too much of—how shall I put it—an inside job. Someone knew about that pistol of mine. That means that the murderer, whoever he was, must have actually been in this house—perhaps even had a drink with me."

"Not necessarily," I objected. "The whole village of St. Mary Mead probably knows exactly where you keep your toothbrush and what kind of tooth powder you use."

"But why should it interest them?"

"I don't know," I said, "but it does. If you change your shaving cream it will be a topic of conversation."

"They must be very hard up for news."

"They are. Nothing exciting ever happens here."

"Well, it has now—with a vengeance."

I agreed.

"And who tells them all these things anyway? Shaving cream and things like that?"

"Probably old Mrs. Archer."

"That old crone? She's practically a half-wit, as far as I can make out."

"That's merely the camouflage of the poor," I explained. "They take refuge behind a mask of stupidity. You'll probably find that the old lady has all her wits about her. By the way, she seems very certain now that the pistol was in its proper place midday Thursday. What's made her so positive all of a sudden?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"Do you think she's right?"

"There again I haven't the least idea. I don't go round taking an inventory of my possessions every day."

I looked round the small living room. Every shelf and table was littered with miscellaneous articles. Lawrence lived in the midst of an artistic disarray that would have driven me quite mad.

"It's a bit of a job finding things sometimes," he said, observing my glance. "On the other hand, everything is handy—not tucked away."

"Nothing is tucked away, certainly," I agreed. "It might perhaps have been better if the pistol had been."

"Do you know I rather expected the coroner to say something of the sort. Coroners are such asses. I expected to be censured or whatever they call it."

"By the way," I asked, "was it loaded?"

Lawrence shook his head.

"I'm not quite so careless as that. It was unloaded, but there was a box of cartridges beside it."

"It was apparently loaded in all six chambers and one shot had been fired."

Lawrence nodded.

"And whose hand fired it? It's all very well, sir, but unless the real murderer is discovered I shall be suspected of the crime to the day of my death."

"Don't say that, my boy."

"But I do say it."

He became silent, frowning to himself. He roused himself at last and said:

"But let me tell you how I got on last night. You know, old Miss Marple knows a thing or two."

"She is, I believe, rather unpopular on that account."

Lawrence proceeded to recount his story.

He had, following Miss Marple's advice, gone up to Old Hall. There, with Anne's assistance, he had had an interview with the parlourmaid. Anne had said simply:

"Mr. Redding wants to ask you a few questions, Rose."

Then she had left the room.

Lawrence had felt somewhat nervous. Rose, a pretty girl of twenty-five, gazed at him with a limpid gaze which he found rather disconcerting.

"It's—it's about Colonel Protheroe's death."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm very anxious, you see, to get at the truth."

"Yes, sir."

"I feel that there may be—that someone might—that—that there might be some incident—"

At this point Lawrence felt that he was not covering himself with glory, and heartily cursed Miss Marple and her suggestions.

"I wondered if you could help me?"

"Yes, sir?"

Rose's demeanour was still that of the perfect servant, polite, anxious to assist, and completely uninterested.

"Dash it all," said Lawrence, "haven't you talked the thing over in the servants' hall?"

This method of attack flustered Rose slightly. Her perfect poise was shaken.

"In the servants' hall, sir?"

"Or the housekeeper's room, or the bootboy's dugout, or wherever you do talk? There must be *some* place."

Rose displayed a very faint disposition to giggle, and Lawrence felt encouraged.

"Look here, Rose, you're an awfully nice girl. I'm sure you must understand what I'm feeling like. I don't want to be hanged. I didn't

murder your master, but a lot of people think I did. Can't you help me in any way?"

I can imagine at this point that Lawrence must have looked extremely appealing. His handsome head thrown back, his Irish blue eyes appealing. Rose softened and capitulated.

"Oh, sir! I'm sure—if any of us could help in any way. None of us think you did it, sir. Indeed we don't."

"I know, my dear girl, but that's not going to help me with the police."

"The police!" Rose tossed her head. "I can tell you, sir, we don't think much of that Inspector. Slack, he calls himself. The police indeed."

"All the same, the police are very powerful. Now, Rose, you say you'll do your best to help me. I can't help feeling that there's a lot we haven't got yet. The lady, for instance, who called to see Colonel Protheroe the night before he died."

"Mrs. Lestrangle?"

"Yes, Mrs. Lestrangle. I can't help feeling there's something rather odd about that visit of hers."

"Yes, indeed, sir, that's what we all said."

"You did?"

"Coming the way she did. And asking for the Colonel. And of course there's been a lot of talk—nobody knowing anything about her down here. And Mrs. Simmons, she's the housekeeper, sir, she gave it as her opinion that she was a regular bad lot. But after hearing what Gladdie said, well, I didn't know what to think."

"What did Gladdie say?"

"Oh, nothing, sir! It was just—we were talking, you know."

Lawrence looked at her. He had the feeling of something kept back.

"I wonder very much what her interview with Colonel Protheroe was about."

"Yes, sir."

"I believe you know, Rose?"

"Me? Oh, no, sir! Indeed I don't. How could I?"

"Look here, Rose. You said you'd help me. If you overheard anything, anything at all—it mightn't seem important, but anything ... I'd be so awfully grateful to you. After all, anyone might—might chance—just *chance* to overhear something."

"But I didn't, sir, really, I didn't."

"Then somebody else did," said Lawrence acutely.

"Well, sir—"

"Do tell me, Rose."

"I don't know what Gladdie would say, I'm sure."

"She'd want you to tell me. Who *is* Gladdie, by the way?"

"She's the kitchenmaid, sir. And you see, she'd just stepped out to speak to a friend, and she was passing the window—the study window—and the master was there with the lady. And of course he did speak very loud, the master did, always. And naturally, feeling a little curious—I mean—"

"Awfully natural," said Lawrence, "I mean one would simply have to listen."

"But of course she didn't tell anyone—except me. And we both thought it very odd. But Gladdie couldn't say anything, you see, because if it was known she'd gone out to meet—a—a friend—well, it would have meant a lot of unpleasantness with Mrs. Pratt, that's the cook, sir. But I'm sure she'd tell you anything, sir, willing."

"Well, can I go to the kitchen and speak to her?"

Rose was horrified by the suggestion.

"Oh, no, sir, that would never do! And Gladdie's a very nervous girl anyway."

At last the matter was settled, after a lot of discussion over difficult points. A clandestine meeting was arranged in the shrubbery.

Here, in due course, Lawrence was confronted by the nervous Gladdie who he described as more like a shivering rabbit than anything human. Ten minutes were spent in trying to put the girl at her ease, the shivering Gladys explaining that she couldn't ever—that she didn't ought, that she didn't think Rose would have given her away, that anyway she hadn't meant no harm, indeed she

hadn't, and that she'd catch it badly if Mrs. Pratt ever came to hear of it.

Lawrence reassured, cajoled, persuaded—at last Gladys consented to speak. "If you'll be sure it'll go no further, sir."

"Of course it won't."

"And it won't be brought up against me in a court of law?"

"Never."

"And you won't tell the mistress?"

"Not on any account."

"If it were to get to Mrs. Pratt's ears—"

"It won't. Now tell me, Gladys."

"If you're sure it's all right?"

"Of course it is. You'll be glad some day you've saved me from being hanged."

Gladys gave a little shriek.

"Oh! Indeed, I wouldn't like that, sir. Well, it's very little I heard—and that entirely by accident as you might say—"

"I quite understand."

"But the master, he was evidently very angry. 'After all these years'—that's what he was saying—'you dare to come here—' 'It's an outrage—' I couldn't hear what the lady said—but after a bit he said, 'I utterly refuse—utterly—' I can't remember everything—seemed as though they were at it hammer and tongs, she wanting him to do something and he refusing. 'It's a disgrace that you should have come down here,' that's one thing he said. And 'You shall not see her—I forbid it—' and that made me prick up my ears. Looked as though the lady wanted to tell Mrs. Protheroe a thing or two, and he was afraid about it. And I thought to myself, 'Well, now, fancy the master. Him so particular. And maybe no beauty himself when all's said and done. Fancy!' I said. And 'Men are all alike,' I said to my friend later. Not that he'd agree. Argued, he did. But he did admit he was surprised at Colonel Protheroe—him being a churchwarden and handing round the plate and reading the lessons on Sundays. 'But there,' I said, 'that's very often the worst.' For that's what I've heard my mother say, many a time."

Gladdie paused out of breath, and Lawrence tried tactfully to get back to where the conversation had started.

"Did you hear anything else?"

"Well, it's difficult to remember exactly, sir. It was all much the same. He said once or twice, 'I don't believe it.' Just like that. 'Whatever Haydock says, I don't believe it.'"

"He said that, did he? 'Whatever Haydock says?'"

"Yes. And he said it was all a plot."

"You didn't hear the lady speak at all?"

"Only just at the end. She must have got up to go and come nearer the window. And I heard what she said. Made my blood run cold, it did. I'll never forget it. '*By this time tomorrow night, you may be dead,*' she said. Wicked the way she said it. As soon as I heard the news, 'There,' I said to Rose. 'There!'"

Lawrence wondered. Principally he wondered how much of Gladys's story was to be depended upon. True in the main, he suspected that it had been embellished and polished since the murder. In especial he doubted the accuracy of the last remark. He thought it highly possible that it owed its being to the fact of the murder.

He thanked Gladys, rewarded her suitably, reassured her as to her misdoings being made known to Mrs. Pratt, and left Old Hall with a good deal to think over.

One thing was clear, Mrs. Lestrangle's interview with Colonel Protheroe had certainly not been a peaceful one, and it was one which he was anxious to keep from the knowledge of his wife.

I thought of Miss Marple's churchwarden with his separate establishment. Was this a case resembling that?

I wondered more than ever where Haydock came in. He had saved Mrs. Lestrangle from having to give evidence at the inquest. He had done his best to protect her from the police.

How far would he carry that protection?

Supposing he suspected her of crime—would he still try and shield her?

She was a curious woman—a woman of very strong magnetic charm. I myself hated the thought of connecting her with the crime

in any way.

Something in me said, "It can't be her!" Why?

And an imp in my brain replied: "Because she's a very beautiful and attractive woman. That's why."

There is, as Miss Marple would say, a lot of human nature in all of us.

Twenty

When I got back to the Vicarage I found that we were in the middle of a domestic crisis.

Griselda met me in the hall and with tears in her eyes dragged me into the drawing room. "She's going."

"Who's going?"

"Mary. She's given notice."

I really could not take the announcement in a tragic spirit.

"Well," I said, "we'll have to get another servant."

It seemed to me a perfectly reasonable thing to say. When one servant goes, you get another. I was at a loss to understand Griselda's look of reproach.

"Len—you are absolutely heartless. You don't *care*."

I didn't. In fact, I felt almost lighthearted at the prospect of no more burnt puddings and undercooked vegetables.

"I'll have to look for a girl, and find one, and train her," continued Griselda in a voice of acute self-pity.

"Is Mary trained?" I said.

"Of course she is."

"I suppose," I said, "that someone has heard her address us as sir or ma'am and has immediately wrested her from us as a paragon. All I can say is, they'll be disappointed."

"It isn't that," said Griselda. "Nobody else wants her. I don't see how they could. It's her feelings. They're upset because Lettice Protheroe said she didn't dust properly."

Griselda often comes out with surprising statements, but this seemed to me so surprising that I questioned it. It seemed to me the most unlikely thing in the world that Lettice Protheroe should go out of her way to interfere in our domestic affairs and reprove our maid for slovenly housework. It was so completely unLettice-like, and I said so.

"I don't see," I said, "what our dust has to do with Lettice Protheroe."

"Nothing at all," said my wife. "That's why it's so unreasonable. I wish you'd go and talk to Mary yourself. She's in the kitchen."

I had no wish to talk to Mary on the subject, but Griselda, who is very energetic and quick, fairly pushed me through the baize door into the kitchen before I had time to rebel.

Mary was peeling potatoes at the sink.

"Er—good afternoon," I said nervously.

Mary looked up and snorted, but made no other response.

"Mrs. Clement tells me that you wish to leave us," I said.

Mary condescended to reply to this.

"There's some things," she said darkly, "as no girl can be asked to put up with."

"Will you tell me exactly what it is that has upset you?"

"Tell you that in two words, I can." (Here, I may say, she vastly underestimated.) "People coming snooping round here when my back's turned. Poking round. And what business of hers is it, how often the study is dusted or turned out? If you and the missus don't complain, it's nobody else's business. If I give satisfaction to you that's all that matters, I say."

Mary has never given satisfaction to me. I confess that I have a hankering after a room thoroughly dusted and tidied every morning. Mary's practice of flicking off the more obvious deposit on the surface of low tables is to my thinking grossly inadequate. However, I realized that at the moment it was no good to go into side issues.

"Had to go to that inquest, didn't I? Standing up before twelve men, a respectable girl like me! And who knows what questions you may be asked. I'll tell you this. I've never before been in a place

where they had a murder in the house, and I never want to be again."

"I hope you won't," I said. "On the law of averages, I should say it was very unlikely."

"I don't hold with the law. *He* was a magistrate. Many a poor fellow sent to jail for potting at a rabbit—and him with his pheasants and what not. And then, before he's so much as decently buried, that daughter of his comes round and says I don't do my work properly."

"Do you mean that Miss Protheroe has been here?"

"Found her here when I come back from the Blue Boar. In the study she was. And 'Oh!' she says. 'I'm looking for my little yellow berry—a little yellow hat. I left it here the other day.' 'Well,' I says, 'I haven't seen no hat. It wasn't here when I done the room on Thursday morning,' I says. And 'Oh!' she says, 'but I dare say you wouldn't see it. You don't spend much time doing a room, do you?' And with that she draws her finger along the mantelshelf and looks at it. As though I had time on a morning like this to take off all them ornaments and put them back, with the police only unlocking the room the night before. 'If the Vicar and his lady are satisfied that's all that matters, I think, miss,' I said. And she laughs and goes out of the windows and says, 'Oh! but are you sure they are?'"

"I see," I said.

"And there it is! A girl has her feelings! I'm sure I'd work my fingers to the bone for you and the missus. And if she wants a new-fangled dish tried, I'm always ready to try it."

"I'm sure you are," I said soothingly.

"But she must have heard something or she wouldn't have said what she did. And if I don't give satisfaction I'd rather go. Not that I take any notice of what Miss Protheroe says. She's not loved up at the Hall, I can tell you. Never a please or a thank you, and everything scattered right and left. I wouldn't set any store by Miss Lettice Protheroe myself for all that Mr. Dennis is so set upon her. But she's the kind that can always twist a young gentleman round her little finger."

During all this, Mary had been extracting eyes from potatoes with such energy that they had been flying round the kitchen like hailstones. At this moment one hit me in the eye and caused a momentary pause in the conversation.

"Don't you think," I said, as I dabbed my eye with my handkerchief, "that you have been rather too inclined to take offence where none is meant? You know, Mary, your mistress will be very sorry to lose you."

"I've nothing against the mistress—or against you, sir, for that matter."

"Well, then, don't you think you're being rather silly?"

Mary sniffed.

"I was a bit upset like—after the inquest and all. And a girl has her feelings. But I wouldn't like to cause the mistress inconvenience."

"Then that's all right," I said.

I left the kitchen to find Griselda and Dennis waiting for me in the hall. "Well?" exclaimed Griselda.

"She's staying," I said, and sighed.

"Len," said my wife, "you *have* been clever."

I felt rather inclined to disagree with her. I did not think I had been clever. It is my firm opinion that no servant could be a worse one than Mary. Any change, I consider, would have been a change for the better.

But I like to please Griselda. I detailed the heads of Mary's grievance.

"How like Lettice," said Dennis. "She couldn't have left that yellow beret of hers here on Wednesday. She was wearing it for tennis on Thursday."

"That seems to me highly probable," I said.

"She never knows where she's left anything," said Dennis, with a kind of affectionate pride and admiration that I felt was entirely uncalled for. "She loses about a dozen things every day."

"A remarkably attractive trait," I observed.

Any sarcasm missed Dennis.

"She *is* attractive," he said, with a deep sigh. "People are always proposing to her—she told me so."

"They must be illicit proposals if they're made to her down here," I remarked. "We haven't got a bachelor in the place."

"There's Dr. Stone," said Griselda, her eyes dancing.

"He asked her to come and see the barrow the other day," I admitted.

"Of course he did," said Griselda. "She *is* attractive, Len. Even baldheaded archaeologists feel it."

"Lots of S.A.," said Dennis sapiently.

And yet Lawrence Redding is completely untouched by Lettice's charm. Griselda, however, explained that with the air of one who knew she was right.

"Lawrence has got lots of S.A. himself. That kind always likes the—how shall I put it—the Quaker type. Very restrained and diffident. The kind of woman whom everybody calls cold. I think Anne is the only woman who could ever hold Lawrence. I don't think they'll ever tire of each other. All the same, I think he's been rather stupid in one way. He's rather made use of Lettice, you know. I don't think he ever dreamed she cared—he's awfully modest in some ways—but I have a feeling she does."

"She can't bear him," said Dennis positively. "She told me so."

I have never seen anything like the pitying silence with which Griselda received this remark.

I went into my study. There was, to my fancy, still a rather eerie feeling in the room. I knew that I must get over this. Once give in to that feeling, and I should probably never use the study again. I walked thoughtfully over to the writing table. Here Protheroe had sat, red-faced, hearty, self-righteous, and here, in a moment of time, he had been struck down. Here, where I was standing, an enemy had stood....

And so—no more Protheroe....

Here was the pen his fingers had held.

On the floor was a faint dark stain—the rug had been sent to the cleaners, but the blood had soaked through.

I shivered.

"I can't use this room," I said aloud. "I can't use it."

Then my eye was caught by something—a mere speck of bright blue. I bent down. Between the floor and the desk I saw a small object. I picked it up.

I was standing staring at it in the palm of my hand when Griselda came in.

"I forgot to tell you, Len. Miss Marple wants us to go over tonight after dinner. To amuse the nephew. She's afraid of his being dull. I said we'd go."

"Very well, my dear."

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing."

I closed my hand, and looking at my wife, observed:

"If you don't amuse Master Raymond West, my dear, he must be very hard to please."

My wife said: "Don't be ridiculous, Len," and turned pink.

She went out again, and I unclosed my hand.

In the palm of my hand was a blue lapis lazuli earring set in seed pearls.

It was rather an unusual jewel, and I knew very well where I had seen it last.

Twenty-one

I cannot say that I have at any time had a great admiration for Mr. Raymond West. He is, I know, supposed to be a brilliant novelist and has made quite a name as a poet. His poems have no capital letters in them, which is, I believe, the essence of modernity. His books are about unpleasant people leading lives of surpassing dullness.

He has a tolerant affection for "Aunt Jane," whom he alludes to in her presence as a "survival."

She listens to his talk with a flattering interest, and if there is sometimes an amused twinkle in her eye I am sure he never notices it.

He fastened on Griselda at once with flattering abruptness. They discussed modern plays and from there went on to modern schemes of decoration. Griselda affects to laugh at Raymond West, but she is, I think, susceptible to his conversation.

During my (dull) conversation with Miss Marple, I heard at intervals the reiteration "buried as you are down here."

It began at last to irritate me. I said suddenly:

"I suppose you consider us very much out of the things down here?"

Raymond West waved his cigarette.

"I regard St. Mary Mead," he said authoritatively, "as a stagnant pool."

He looked at us, prepared for resentment at his statement, but somewhat, I think, to his chagrin, no one displayed annoyance.

"That is really not a very good simile, dear Raymond," said Miss Marple briskly. "Nothing, I believe, is so full of life under the microscope as a drop of water from a stagnant pool."

"Life—of a kind," admitted the novelist.

"It's all much the same kind, really, isn't it?" said Miss Marple.

"You compare yourself to a denizen of a stagnant pond, Aunt Jane?"

"My dear, you said something of the sort in your last book, I remember."

No clever young man likes having his works quoted against himself. Raymond West was no exception.

"That was entirely different," he snapped.

"Life is, after all, very much the same everywhere," said Miss Marple in her placid voice. "Getting born, you know, and growing up—and coming into contact with other people—getting jostled—and then marriage and more babies—"

"And finally death," said Raymond West. "And not death with a death certificate always. Death in life."

"Talking of death," said Griselda. "You know we've had a murder here?"

Raymond West waved murder away with his cigarette.

"Murder is so crude," he said. "I take no interest in it."

That statement did not take me in for a moment. They say all the world loves a lover—apply that saying to murder and you have an even more infallible truth. No one can fail to be interested in a murder. Simple people like Griselda and myself can admit the fact, but anyone like Raymond West has to pretend to be bored—at any rate for the first five minutes.

Miss Marple, however, gave her nephew away by remarking:

"Raymond and I have been discussing nothing else all through dinner."

"I take a great interest in all the local news," said Raymond hastily. He smiled benignly and tolerantly at Miss Marple.

"Have you a theory, Mr. West?" asked Griselda.

"Logically," said Raymond West, again flourishing his cigarette, "only one person could have killed Protheroe."

"Yes?" said Griselda.

We hung upon his words with flattering attention.

"The Vicar," said Raymond, and pointed an accusing finger at me. I gasped.

"Of course," he reassured me, "I know you didn't do it. Life is never what it should be. But think of the drama—the fitness—churchwarden murdered in the Vicar's study by the Vicar. Delicious!"

"And the motive?" I inquired.

"Oh! That's interesting." He sat up—allowed his cigarette to go out. "Inferiority complex, I think. Possibly too many inhibitions. I should like to write the story of the affair. Amazingly complex. Week after week, year after year, he's seen the man—at vestry meetings—at choirboys' outings—handing round the bag in church—bringing it to the altar. Always he dislikes the man—always he chokes down his dislike. It's unChristian, he won't encourage it. And so it festers underneath, and one day—"

He made a graphic gesture.

Griselda turned to me.

"Have you ever felt like that, Len?"

"Never," I said truthfully.

"Yet I hear you were wishing him out of the world not so long ago," remarked Miss Marple.

(That miserable Dennis! But my fault, of course, for ever making the remark.)

"I'm afraid I was," I said. "It was a stupid remark to make, but really I'd had a very trying morning with him."

"That's disappointing," said Raymond West. "Because, of course, if your subconscious were really planning to do him in, it would never have allowed you to make that remark."

He sighed.

"My theory falls to the ground. This is probably a very ordinary murder—a revengeful poacher or something of that sort."

"Miss Cram came to see me this afternoon," said Miss Marple. "I met her in the village and I asked her if she would like to see my garden."

"Is she fond of gardens?" asked Griselda.

"I don't think so," said Miss Marple, with a faint twinkle. "But it makes a very useful excuse for talk, don't you think?"

"What did you make of her?" asked Griselda. "I don't believe she's really so bad."

"She volunteered a lot of information—really a lot of information," said Miss Marple. "About herself, you know, and her people. They all seem to be dead or in India. Very sad. By the way, she has gone to Old Hall for the weekend."

"What?"

"Yes, it seems Mrs. Protheroe asked her—or she suggested it to Mrs. Protheroe—I don't quite know which way about it was. To do some secretarial work for her—there are so many letters to cope with. It turned out rather fortunately. Dr. Stone being away, she has nothing to do. What an excitement this barrow has been."

"Stone?" said Raymond. "Is that the archaeologist fellow?"

"Yes, he is excavating a barrow. On the Protheroe property."

"He's a good man," said Raymond. "Wonderfully keen on his job. I met him at a dinner not long ago and we had a most interesting talk. I must look him up."

"Unfortunately," I said, "he's just gone to London for the weekend. Why, you actually ran into him at the station this afternoon."

"I ran into you. You had a little fat man with you—with glasses on."

"Yes—Dr. Stone."

"But, my dear fellow—that wasn't Stone."

"Not Stone?"

"Not the archaeologist. I know him quite well. The man wasn't Stone—not the faintest resemblance."

We stared at each other. In particular I stared at Miss Marple.

"Extraordinary," I said.

"The suitcase," said Miss Marple.

"But why?" said Griselda.

"It reminds me of the time the man went round pretending to be the Gas Inspector," murmured Miss Marple. "Quite a little haul, he got."

"An impostor," said Raymond West. "Now this is really interesting."

"The question is, has it anything to do with the murder?" said Griselda.

"Not necessarily," I said. "But—" I looked at Miss Marple.

"It is," she said, "a Peculiar Thing. Another Peculiar Thing."

"Yes," I said, rising. "I rather feel the Inspector ought to be told about this at once."

Twenty-two

Inspector Slack's orders, once I had got him on the telephone, were brief and emphatic. Nothing was to "get about." In particular, Miss Cram was not to be alarmed. In the meantime, a search was to be instituted for the suitcase in the neighbourhood of the barrow.

Griselda and I returned home very excited over this new development. We could not say much with Dennis present, as we had faithfully promised Inspector Slack to breath no word to anybody.

In any case, Dennis was full of his own troubles. He came into my study and began fingering things and shuffling his feet and looking thoroughly embarrassed.

"What is it, Dennis?" I said at last.

"Uncle Len, I don't want to go to sea."

I was astonished. The boy had been so very decided about his career up to now.

"But you were so keen on it."

"Yes, but I've changed my mind."

"What do you want to do?"

"I want to go into finance."

I was even more surprised.

"What do you mean—finance?"

"Just that. I want to go into the city."

"But, my dear boy, I am sure you would not like the life. Even if I obtained a post for you in a bank—"

Dennis said that wasn't what he meant. He didn't want to go into a bank. I asked him what exactly he did mean, and of course, as I suspected, the boy didn't really know.

By "going into finance," he simply meant getting rich quickly, which with the optimism of youth he imagined was a certainty if one "went into the city." I disabused him of this notion as gently as I could.

"What's put it into your head?" I asked. "You were so satisfied with the idea of going to sea."

"I know, Uncle Len, but I've been thinking. I shall want to marry some day—and, I mean, you've got to be rich to marry a girl."

"Facts disprove your theory," I said.

"I know—but a real girl. I mean, a girl who's used to things."

It was very vague, but I thought I knew what he meant.

"You know," I said gently, "all girls aren't like Lettice Protheroe."

He fired up at once.

"You're awfully unfair to her. You don't like her. Griselda doesn't either. She says she's tiresome."

From the feminine point of view Griselda is quite right. Lettice *is* tiresome. I could quite realize, however, that a boy would resent the adjective.

"If only people made a few allowances. Why even the Hartley Napiers are going about grouching about her at a time like this! Just because she left their old tennis party a bit early. Why should she stay if she was bored? Jolly decent of her to go at all, I think."

"Quite a favour," I said, but Dennis suspected no malice. He was full of his own grievances on Lettice's behalf.

"She's awfully unselfish really. Just to show you, she made me stay. Naturally I wanted to go too. But she wouldn't hear of it. Said it was too bad on the Napiers. So, just to please her, I stopped on a quarter of an hour."

The young have very curious views on unselfishness.

"And now I hear Susan Hartley Napier is going about everywhere saying Lettice has rotten manners."

"If I were you," I said, "I shouldn't worry."

"It's all very well, but—"

He broke off.

"I'd—I'd do anything for Lettice."

"Very few of us can do anything for anyone else," I said. "However much we wish it, we are powerless."

"I wish I were dead," said Dennis.

Poor lad. Calf love is a virulent disease. I forebore to say any of the obvious and probably irritating things which come so easily to one's lips. Instead, I said goodnight, and went up to bed.

I took the eight o'clock service the following morning and when I returned found Griselda sitting at the breakfast table with an open note in her hand. It was from Anne Protheroe.

"Dear Griselda,—If you and the Vicar could come up and lunch here quietly today, I should be so very grateful. Something very strange has occurred, and I should like Mr. Clement's advice.

Please don't mention this when you come, as I have said nothing to anyone.

With love,

Yours affectionately,

Anne Protheroe."

"We must go, of course," said Griselda.

I agreed.

"I wonder what can have happened?"

I wondered too.

"You know," I said to Griselda, "I don't feel we are really at the end of this case yet."

"You mean not till someone has really been arrested?"

"No," I said, "I didn't mean that. I mean that there are ramifications, undercurrents, that we know nothing about. There are a whole lot of things to clear up before we get at the truth."

"You mean things that don't really matter, but that get in the way?"

"Yes, I think that expresses my meaning very well."

"I think we're all making a great fuss," said Dennis, helping himself to marmalade. "It's a jolly good thing old Protheroe is dead. Nobody liked him. Oh! I know the police have got to worry—it's their job. But I rather hope myself they'll never find out. I should hate to see Slack promoted going about swelling with importance over his cleverness."

I am human enough to feel that I agree over the matter of Slack's promotion. A man who goes about systematically rubbing people up the wrong way cannot hope to be popular.

"Dr. Haydock thinks rather like I do," went on Dennis. "He'd never give a murderer up to justice. He said so."

I think that that is the danger of Haydock's views. They may be sound in themselves—it is not for me to say—but they produce an impression on the young careless mind which I am sure Haydock himself never meant to convey.

Griselda looked out of the window and remarked that there were reporters in the garden.

"I suppose they're photographing the study windows again," she said, with a sigh.

We had suffered a good deal in this way. There was first the idle curiosity of the village—everyone had come to gape and stare. There were next the reporters armed with cameras, and the village again to watch the reporters. In the end we had to have a constable from Much Benham on duty outside the window.

"Well," I said, "the funeral is tomorrow morning. After that, surely, the excitement will die down."

I noticed a few reporters hanging about Old Hall when we arrived there. They accosted me with various queries to which I gave the invariable answer (we had found it the best), that, "I had nothing to say."

We were shown by the butler into the drawing room, the sole occupant of which turned out to be Miss Cram—apparently in a state of high enjoyment.

"This is a surprise, isn't it?" she said, as she shook hands. "I never should have thought of such a thing, but Mrs. Protheroe is kind, isn't she? And, of course, it isn't what you might call nice for a

young girl to be staying alone at a place like the Blue Boar, reporters about and all. And, of course, it's not as though I haven't been able to make myself useful—you really need a secretary at a time like this, and Miss Protheroe doesn't do anything to help, does she?"

I was amused to notice that the old animosity against Lettice persisted, but that the girl had apparently become a warm partisan of Anne's. At the same time I wondered if the story of her coming here was strictly accurate. In her account the initiative had come from Anne, but I wondered if that were really so. The first mention of disliking to be at the Blue Boar alone might have easily come from the girl herself. Whilst keeping an open mind on the subject, I did not fancy that Miss Cram was strictly truthful.

At that moment Anne Protheroe entered the room.

She was dressed very quietly in black. She carried in her hand a Sunday paper which she held out to me with a rueful glance.

"I've never had any experience of this sort of thing. It's pretty ghastly, isn't it? I saw a reporter at the inquest. I just said that I was terribly upset and had nothing to say, and then he asked me if I wasn't very anxious to find my husband's murderer, and I said 'Yes.' And then whether I had any suspicions, and I said 'No.' And whether I didn't think the crime showed local knowledge, and I said it seemed to certainly. And that was all. And now look at this!"

In the middle of the page was a photograph, evidently taken at least ten years ago—Heaven knows where they had dug it out. There were large headlines:

WIDOW DECLARES SHE WILL NEVER REST TILL SHE HAS HUNTED DOWN
HUSBAND'S MURDERER.

Mrs. Protheroe, the widow of the murdered man, is certain that the murderer must be looked for locally. She has suspicions, but no certainty. She declared herself prostrated with grief, but reiterated her determination to hunt down the murderer.

"It doesn't sound like me, does it?" said Anne.

"I dare say it might have been worse," I said, handing back the paper.

"Impudent, aren't they?" said Miss Cram. "I'd like to see one of those fellows trying to get something out of me."

By the twinkle in Griselda's eye, I was convinced that she regarded this statement as being more literally true than Miss Cram intended it to appear.

Luncheon was announced, and we went in. Lettice did not come in till halfway through the meal, when she drifted into the empty place with a smile for Griselda and a nod for me. I watched her with some attention, for reasons of my own, but she seemed much the same vague creature as usual. Extremely pretty—that in fairness I had to admit. She was still not wearing mourning, but was dressed in a shade of pale green that brought out all the delicacy of her fair colouring.

After we had had coffee, Anne said quietly:

"I want to have a little talk with the Vicar. I will take him up to my sitting room."

At last I was to learn the reason of our summons. I rose and followed her up the stairs. She paused at the door of the room. As I was about to speak, she stretched out a hand to stop me. She remained listening, looking down towards the hall.

"Good. They are going out into the garden. No—don't go in there. We can go straight up."

Much to my surprise she led the way along the corridor to the extremity of the wing. Here a narrow ladder-like staircase rose to the floor above, and she mounted it, I following. We found ourselves in a dusty boarded passage. Anne opened a door and led me into a large dim attic which was evidently used as a lumber room. There were trunks there, old broken furniture, a few stacked pictures, and the many countless odds and ends which a lumber room collects.

My surprise was so evident that she smiled faintly.

"First of all, I must explain. I am sleeping very lightly just now. Last night—or rather this morning about three o'clock, I was convinced that I heard someone moving about the house. I listened for some time, and at last got up and came out to see. Out on the

landing I realized that the sounds came, not from down below, but from up above. I came along to the foot of these stairs. Again I thought I heard a sound. I called up, 'Is anybody there?' But there was no answer, and I heard nothing more, so I assumed that my nerves had been playing tricks on me, and went back to bed.

"However, early this morning, I came up here—simply out of curiosity. And I found *this!*"

She stooped down and turned round a picture that was leaning against the wall with the back of the canvas towards us.

I gave a gasp of surprise. The picture was evidently a portrait in oils, but the face had been hacked and cut in such a savage way as to render it unrecognizable. Moreover, the cuts were clearly quite fresh.

"What an extraordinary thing," I said.

"Isn't it? Tell me, can you think of any explanation?"

I shook my head.

"There's a kind of savagery about it," I said, "that I don't like. It looks as though it had been done in a fit of maniacal rage."

"Yes, that's what I thought."

"What is the portrait?"

"I haven't the least idea. I have never seen it before. All these things were in the attic when I married Lucius and came here to live. I have never been through them or bothered about them."

"Extraordinary," I commented.

I stooped down and examined the other pictures. They were very much what you would expect to find—some very mediocre landscapes, some oleographs and a few cheaply-framed reproductions.

There was nothing else helpful. A large old-fashioned trunk, of the kind that used to be called an "ark," had the initials E.P. upon it. I raised the lid. It was empty. Nothing else in the attic was the least suggestive.

"It really is a most amazing occurrence," I said. "It's so—senseless."

"Yes," said Anne. "That frightens me a little."

There was nothing more to see. I accompanied her down to her sitting room where she closed the door.

"Do you think I ought to do anything about it? Tell the police?"

I hesitated.

"It's hard to say on the face of it whether—"

"It has anything to do with the murder or not," finished Anne. "I know. That's what is so difficult. On the face of it, there seems no connection whatever."

"No," I said, "but it is another Peculiar Thing."

We both sat silent with puzzled brows.

"What are your plans, if I may ask?" I said presently.

She lifted her head.

"I'm going to live here for at least another six months!" She said it defiantly. "I don't want to. I hate the idea of living here. But I think it's the only thing to be done. Otherwise people will say that I ran away—that I had a guilty conscience."

"Surely not."

"Oh! Yes, they will. Especially when—" She paused and then said: "When the six months are up—I am going to marry Lawrence." Her eyes met mine. "We're neither of us going to wait any longer."

"I supposed," I said, "that that would happen."

Suddenly she broke down, burying her head in her hands.

"You don't know how grateful I am to you—you don't know. We'd said good-bye to each other—he was going away. I feel—I feel so awful about Lucius's death. If we'd been planning to go away together, and he'd died then—it would be so awful now. But you made us both see how wrong it would be. That's why I'm grateful."

"I, too, am thankful," I said gravely.

"All the same, you know," she sat up. "Unless the real murderer is found they'll always think it was Lawrence—oh! Yes, they will. And especially when he marries me."

"My dear, Dr. Haydock's evidence made it perfectly clear—"

"What do people care about evidence? They don't even know about it. And medical evidence never means anything to outsiders anyway. That's another reason why I'm staying on here. Mr. Clement, *I'm going to find out the truth.*"

Her eyes flashed as she spoke. She added:

"That's why I asked that girl here."

"Miss Cram?"

"Yes."

"You did ask her, then. I mean, it was your idea?"

"Entirely. Oh! As a matter of fact, she whined a bit. At the inquest—she was there when I arrived. No, I asked her here deliberately."

"But surely," I cried, "you don't think that that silly young woman could have anything to do with the crime?"

"It's awfully easy to appear silly, Mr. Clement. It's one of the easiest things in the world."

"Then you really think—?"

"No, I don't. Honestly, I don't. What I do think is that that girl knows something—or might know something. I wanted to study her at close quarters."

"And the very night she arrives, that picture is slashed," I said thoughtfully.

"You think she did it? But why? It seems so utterly absurd and impossible."

"It seems to me utterly impossible and absurd that your husband should have been murdered in my study," I said bitterly. "But he was."

"I know." She laid her hand on my arm. "It's dreadful for you. I do realize that, though I haven't said very much about it."

I took the blue lapis lazuli earring from my pocket and held it out to her.

"This is yours, I think?"

"Oh, yes!" She held out her hand for it with a pleased smile. "Where did you find it?"

But I did not put the jewel into her outstretched hand.

"Would you mind," I said, "if I kept it a little longer?"

"Why, certainly." She looked puzzled and a little inquiring. I did not satisfy her curiosity.

Instead I asked her how she was situated financially.

"It is an impertinent question," I said, "but I really do not mean it as such."

"I don't think it's impertinent at all. You and Griselda are the best friends I have here. And I like that funny old Miss Marple. Lucius was very well off, you know. He left things pretty equally divided between me and Lettice. Old Hall goes to me, but Lettice is to be allowed to choose enough furniture to furnish a small house, and she is left a separate sum for the purpose of buying one, so as to even things up."

"What are her plans, do you know?"

Anne made a comical grimace.

"She doesn't tell them to me. I imagine she will leave here as soon as possible. She doesn't like me—she never has. I dare say it's my fault, though I've really always tried to be decent. But I suppose any girl resents a young stepmother."

"Are you fond of her?" I asked bluntly.

She did not reply at once, which convinced me that Anne Protheroe is a very honest woman.

"I was at first," she said. "She was such a pretty little girl. I don't think I am now. I don't know why. Perhaps it's because she doesn't like me. I like being liked, you know."

"We all do," I said, and Anne Protheroe smiled.

I had one more task to perform. That was to get a word alone with Lettice Protheroe. I managed that easily enough, catching sight of her in the deserted drawing room. Griselda and Gladys Cram were out in the garden.

I went in and shut the door.

"Lettice," I said, "I want to speak to you about something."

She looked up indifferently.

"Yes?"

I had thought beforehand what to say. I held out the lapis earring and said quietly:

"Why did you drop that in my study?"

I saw her stiffen for a moment—it was almost instantaneous. Her recovery was so quick that I myself could hardly have sworn to the movement. Then she said carelessly:

"I never dropped anything in your study. That's not mine. That's Anne's."

"I know that," I said.

"Well, why ask me, then? Anne must have dropped it."

"Mrs. Protheroe has only been in my study once since the murder, and then she was wearing black and so would not have been likely to have had on a blue earring."

"In that case," said Lettice, "I suppose she must have dropped it before." She added: "That's only logical."

"It's very logical," I said. "I suppose you don't happen to remember when your stepmother was wearing these earrings last?"

"Oh!" She looked at me with a puzzled, trustful gaze. "Is it very important?"

"It might be," I said.

"I'll try and think." She sat there knitting her brows. I have never seen Lettice Protheroe look more charming than she did at that moment. "Oh, yes!" she said suddenly. "She had them on—on Thursday. I remember now."

"Thursday," I said slowly, "was the day of the murder. Mrs. Protheroe came to the study in the garden that day, but if you remember, in her evidence, she only came as far as the study window, not inside the room."

"Where did you find this?"

"Rolled underneath the desk."

"Then it looks, doesn't it," said Lettice coolly, "as though she hadn't spoken the truth?"

"You mean that she came right in and stood by the desk?"

"Well, it looks like it, doesn't it?"

Her eyes met mine serenely.

"If you want to know," she said calmly, "I never have thought she was speaking the truth."

"And I *know you* are not, Lettice."

"What do you mean?"

She was startled.

"I mean," I said, "that the last time I saw this earring was on Friday morning when I came up here with Colonel Melchett. It was lying with its fellow on your stepmother's dressing table. I actually handled them both."

"Oh—!" She wavered, then suddenly flung herself sideways over the arm of her chair and burst into tears. Her short fair hair hung down almost touching the floor. It was a strange attitude—beautiful and unrestrained.

I let her sob for some moments in silence and then I said very gently:

"Lettice, why did you do it?"

"What?"

She sprang up, flinging her hair wildly back. She looked wild—almost terrified.

"What do you mean?"

"What made you do it? Was it jealousy? Dislike of Anne?"

"Oh!—Oh, yes!" She pushed the hair back from her face and seemed suddenly to regain complete self-possession. "Yes, you can call it jealousy. I've always disliked Anne—ever since she came queening it here. I put the damned thing under the desk. I hoped it would get her into trouble. It would have done if you hadn't been such a Nosey Parker, fingering things on dressing tables. Anyway, it isn't a clergyman's business to go about helping the police."

It was a spiteful, childish outburst. I took no notice of it. Indeed, at that moment, she seemed a very pathetic child indeed.

Her childish attempt at vengeance against Anne seemed hardly to be taken seriously. I told her so, and added that I should return the earring to her and say nothing of the circumstances in which I had found it. She seemed rather touched by that.

"That's nice of you," she said.

She paused a minute and then said, keeping her face averted and evidently choosing her words with care:

"You know, Mr. Clement, I should—I should get Dennis away from here soon, if I were you I—think it would be better."

"Dennis?" I raised my eyebrows in slight surprise but with a trace of amusement too.

"I think it would be better." She added, still in the same awkward manner: "I'm sorry about Dennis. I didn't think he—anyway, I'm sorry."

We left it at that.

Twenty-three

On the way back, I proposed to Griselda that we should make a detour and go round by the barrow. I was anxious to see if the police were at work and if so, what they had found. Griselda, however, had things to do at home, so I was left to make the expedition on my own.

I found Constable Hurst in charge of operations.

"No sign so far, sir," he reported. "And yet it stands to reason that this is the only place for a *cache*."

His use of the word *cache* puzzled me for a moment, as he pronounced it *catch*, but his real meaning occurred to me almost at once.

"Whatimeanersay is, sir, where else could the young woman be going starting into the wood by that path? It leads to Old Hall, and it leads here, and that's about all."

"I suppose," I said, "that Inspector Slack would disdain such a simple course as asking the young lady straight out."

"Anxious not to put the wind up her," said Hurst. "Anything she writes to Stone or he writes to her may throw light on things—once she knows we're on to her, she'd shut up like *that*."

Like *what* exactly was left in doubt, but I personally doubted Miss Gladys Cram ever being shut up in the way described. It was impossible to imagine her as other than overflowing with conversation.

"When a man's an h'impostor, you want to know *why* he's an h'impostor," said Constable Hurst didactically.

"Naturally," I said.

"And the answer is to be found in this here barrow—or else why was he forever messing about with it?"

"A *raison d'être* for prowling about," I suggested, but this bit of French was too much for the constable. He revenged himself for not understanding it by saying coldly:

"That's the h'amateur's point of view."

"Anyway, you haven't found the suitcase," I said.

"We shall do, sir. Not a doubt of it."

"I'm not so sure," I said. "I've been thinking. Miss Marple said it was quite a short time before the girl reappeared empty-handed. In that case, she wouldn't have had time to get up here and back."

"You can't take any notice of what old ladies say. When they've seen something curious, and are waiting all eager like, why, time simply flies for them. And anyway, no lady knows anything about time."

I often wonder why the whole world is so prone to generalize. Generalizations are seldom if ever true and are usually utterly inaccurate. I have a poor sense of time myself (hence the keeping of my clock fast) and Miss Marple, I should say, has a very acute one. Her clocks keep time to the minute and she herself is rigidly punctual on every occasion.

However, I had no intention of arguing with Constable Hurst on the point. I wished him good afternoon and good luck and went on my way.

It was just as I was nearing home that the idea came to me. There was nothing to lead up to it. It just flashed into my brain as a possible solution.

You will remember that on my first search of the path, the day after the murder, I had found the bushes disturbed in a certain place. They proved, or so I thought at the time, to have been disturbed by Lawrence, bent on the same errand as myself.

But I remembered that afterwards he and I together had come upon another faintly marked trail which proved to be that of the Inspector. On thinking it over, I distinctly remembered that the first trail (Lawrence's) had been much more noticeable than the second,

as though more than one person had been passing that way. And I reflected that that was probably what had drawn Lawrence's attention to it in the first instance. Supposing that it had originally been made by either Dr. Stone or else Miss Cram?

I remembered, or else I imagined remembering, that there had been several withered leaves on broken twigs. If so, the trail could not have been made the afternoon of our search.

I was just approaching the spot in question. I recognized it easily enough and once more forced my way through the bushes. This time I noticed fresh twigs broken. Someone *had* passed this way since Lawrence and myself.

I soon came to the place where I had encountered Lawrence. The faint trail, however, persisted farther, and I continued to follow it. Suddenly it widened out into a little clearing, which showed signs of recent upheaval. I say a clearing, because the denseness of the undergrowth was thinned out there, but the branches of the trees met overhead and the whole place was not more than a few feet across.

On the other side, the undergrowth grew densely again, and it seemed quite clear that no one had forced a way through it recently. Nevertheless, it seemed to have been disturbed in one place.

I went across and kneeled down, thrusting the bushes aside with both hands. A glint of shiny brown surface rewarded me. Full of excitement, I thrust my arm in and with a good deal of difficulty I extracted a small brown suitcase.

I uttered an ejaculation of triumph. I had been successful. Coldly snubbed by Constable Hurst, I had yet proved right in my reasoning. Here without doubt was the suitcase carried by Miss Cram. I tried the hasp, but it was locked.

As I rose to my feet I noticed a small brownish crystal lying on the ground. Almost automatically, I picked it up and slipped it into my pocket.

Then grasping my find by the handle, I retraced my steps to the path.

As I climbed over the stile into the lane, an agitated voice near at hand called out:

"Oh! Mr. Clement. You've found it! How clever of you!"

Mentally registering the fact that in the art of seeing without being seen, Miss Marple had no rival, I balanced my find on the palings between us.

"That's the one," said Miss Marple "I'd know it anywhere."

This, I thought, was a slight exaggeration. There are thousands of cheap shiny suitcases all exactly alike. No one could recognize one particular one seen from such a distance away by moonlight, but I realized that the whole business of the suitcase was Miss Marple's particular triumph and, as such, she was entitled to a little pardonable exaggeration.

"It's locked, I suppose, Mr. Clement?"

"Yes. I'm just going to take it down to the police station."

"You don't think it would be better to telephone?"

Of course unquestionably it would be better to telephone. To stride through the village, suitcase in hand, would be to court a probably undesirable publicity.

So I unlatched Miss Marple's garden gate and entered the house by the French window, and from the sanctity of the drawing room with the door shut, I telephoned my news.

The result was that Inspector Slack announced he would be up himself in a couple of jiffies.

When he arrived it was in his most cantankerous mood.

"So we've got it, have we?" he said. "You know, sir, you shouldn't keep things to yourself. If you'd any reason to believe you knew where the article in question was hidden, you ought to have reported it to the proper authorities."

"It was a pure accident," I said. "The idea just happened to occur to me."

"And that's a likely tale. Nearly three-quarters of a mile of woodland, and you go right to the proper spot and lay your hand upon it."

I would have given Inspector Slack the steps in reasoning which led me to this particular spot, but he had achieved his usual result of putting my back up. I said nothing.

"Well?" said Inspector Slack, eyeing the suitcase with dislike and would be indifference, "I suppose we might as well have a look at what's inside."

He had brought an assortment of keys and wire with him. The lock was a cheap affair. In a couple of seconds the case was open.

I don't know what we had expected to find—something sternly sensational, I imagine. But the first thing that met our eyes was a greasy plaid scarf. The Inspector lifted it out. Next came a faded dark blue overcoat, very much the worse for wear. A checked cap followed.

"A shoddy lot," said the Inspector.

A pair of boots very down at heel and battered came next. At the bottom of the suitcase was a parcel done up in newspaper.

"Fancy shirt, I suppose," said the Inspector bitterly, as he tore it open.

A moment later he had caught his breath in surprise.

For inside the parcel were some demure little silver objects and a round platter of the same metal.

Miss Marple gave a shrill exclamation of recognition.

"The trencher salts," she exclaimed. "Colonel Protheroe's trencher salts, and the Charles II tazza. Did you ever hear of such a thing!"

The Inspector had got very red.

"So that was the game," he muttered. "Robbery. But I can't make it out. There's been no mention of these things being missing."

"Perhaps they haven't discovered the loss," I suggested. "I presume these valuable things would not have been kept out in common use. Colonel Protheroe probably kept them locked away in a safe."

"I must investigate this," said the Inspector. "I'll go right up to Old Hall now. So that's why our Dr. Stone made himself scarce. What with the murder and one thing and another, he was afraid we'd get wind of his activities. As likely as not his belongings might have been searched. He got the girl to hide them in the wood with a suitable change of clothing. He meant to come back by a roundabout route and go off with them one night whilst she stayed here to disarm

suspicion. Well, there's one thing to the good. This lets him out over the murder. He'd nothing to do with that. Quite a different game."

He repacked the suitcase and took his departure, refusing Miss Marple's offer of a glass of sherry.

"Well, that's one mystery cleared up," I said with a sigh. "What Slack says is quite true; there are no grounds for suspecting him of the murder. Everything's accounted for quite satisfactorily."

"It really would seem so," said Miss Marple. "Although one never can be quite certain, can one?"

"There's a complete lack of motive," I pointed out. "He'd got what he came for and was clearing out."

"Y—es."

She was clearly not quite satisfied, and I looked at her in some curiosity. She hastened to answer my inquiring gaze with a kind of apologetic eagerness.

"I've no doubt I am *quite* wrong. I'm so stupid about these things. But I just wondered—I mean this silver is very valuable, is it not?"

"A tazza sold the other day for over a thousand pounds, I believe."

"I mean—it's not the value of the metal."

"No, it's what one might call a connoisseur's value."

"That's what I mean. The sale of such things would take a little time to arrange, or even if it was arranged, it couldn't be carried through without secrecy. I mean—if the robbery were reported and a hue and cry were raised, well, the things couldn't be marketed at all."

"I don't quite see what you mean?" I said.

"I know I'm putting it badly." She became more flustered and apologetic. "But it seems to me that—that the things couldn't just have been abstracted, so to speak. The only satisfactory thing to do would be to replace these things with copies. Then, perhaps, the robbery wouldn't be discovered for some time."

"That's a very ingenious idea," I said.

"It would be the only way to do it, wouldn't it? And if so, of course, as you say, once the substitution had been accomplished

there wouldn't have been any reason for murdering Colonel Protheroe—quite the reverse.”

“Exactly,” I said. “That’s what I said.”

“Yes, but I just wondered—I don’t know, of course—and Colonel Protheroe always talked a lot about doing things before he actually did do them, and, of course, sometimes never did them at all, but he did say—”

“Yes?”

“That he was going to have all his things valued—a man down from London. For probate—no, that’s when you’re dead—for insurance. Someone told him that was the thing to do. He talked about it a great deal, and the importance of having it done. Of course, I don’t know if he had made any actual arrangements, but if he had....”

“I see,” I said slowly.

“Of course, the moment the expert saw the silver, he’d know, and then Colonel Protheroe would remember having shown the things to Dr. Stone—I wonder if it was done then—legerdemain, don’t they call it? So clever—and then, well, the fat would be in the fire, to use an old-fashioned expression.”

“I see your idea,” I said. “I think we ought to find out for certain.”

I went once more to the telephone. In a few minutes I was through to Old Hall and speaking to Anne Protheroe.

“No, it’s nothing very important. Has the Inspector arrived yet? Oh! Well, he’s on his way. Mrs. Protheroe, can you tell me if the contents of Old Hall were ever valued? What’s that you say?”

Her answer came clear and prompt. I thanked her, replaced the receiver, and turned to Miss Marple.

“That’s very definite. Colonel Protheroe had made arrangements for a man to come down from London on Monday—tomorrow—to make a full valuation. Owing to the Colonel’s death, the matter has been put off.”

“Then there *was* a motive,” said Miss Marple softly.

“A motive, yes. But that’s all. You forget. When the shot was fired, Dr. Stone had just joined the others, or was climbing over the stile in order to do so.”

"Yes," said Miss Marple thoughtfully. "So that rules him out."

Twenty-four

I returned to the Vicarage to find Hawes waiting for me in my study. He was pacing up and down nervously, and when I entered the room he started as though he had been shot.

"You must excuse me," he said, wiping his forehead. "My nerves are all to pieces lately."

"My dear fellow," I said, "you positively must get away for a change. We shall have you breaking down altogether, and that will never do."

"I can't desert my post. No, that is a thing I will never do."

"It's not a case of desertion. You are ill. I'm sure Haydock would agree with me."

"Haydock—Haydock. What kind of a doctor is he? An ignorant country practitioner."

"I think you're unfair to him. He has always been considered a very able man in his profession."

"Oh! Perhaps. Yes, I dare say. But I don't like him. However, that's not what I came to say. I came to ask you if you would be kind enough to preach tonight instead of me. I—I really do not feel equal to it."

"Why, certainly. I will take the service for you."

"No, no. I wish to take the service. I am perfectly fit. It is only the idea of getting up in the pulpit, of all those eyes staring at me...."

He shut his eyes and swallowed convulsively.

It is clear to me that there is something very wrong indeed the matter with Hawes. He seemed aware of my thoughts, for he

opened his eyes and said quickly:

"There is nothing really wrong with me. It is just these headaches—these awful racking headaches. I wonder if you could let me have a glass of water."

"Certainly," I said.

I went and fetched it myself from the tap. Ringing bells is a profitless form of exercise in our house.

I brought the water to him and he thanked me. He took from his pocket a small cardboard box, and opening it, extracted a rice paper capsule, which he swallowed with the aid of the water.

"A headache powder," he explained.

I suddenly wondered whether Hawes might have become addicted to drugs. It would explain a great many of his peculiarities.

"You don't take too many, I hope," I said.

"No—oh, no. Dr. Haydock warned me against that. But it is really wonderful. They bring instant relief."

Indeed he already seemed calmer and more composed.

He stood up.

"Then you will preach tonight? It's very good of you, sir."

"Not at all. And I insist on taking the service too. Get along home and rest. No, I won't have any argument. Not another word."

He thanked me again. Then he said, his eyes sliding past me to the window:

"You—have been up at Old Hall today, haven't you, sir?"

"Yes."

"Excuse me—but were you sent for?"

I looked at him in surprise, and he flushed.

"I'm sorry, sir. I—I just thought some new development might have arisen and that was why Mrs. Protheroe had sent for you."

I had not the faintest intention of satisfying Hawes's curiosity.

"She wanted to discuss the funeral arrangements and one or two other small matters with me," I said.

"Oh! That was all. I see."

I did not speak. He fidgeted from foot to foot, and finally said:

"Mr. Redding came to see me last night. I—I can't imagine why."

"Didn't he tell you?"

"He—he just said he thought he'd look me up. Said it was a bit lonely in the evenings. He's never done such a thing before."

"Well, he's supposed to be pleasant company," I said, smiling.

"What does he want to come and see me for? I don't like it." His voice rose shrilly. "He spoke of dropping in again. What does it all mean? What idea do you think he has got into his head?"

"Why should you suppose he has any ulterior motive?" I asked.

"I don't like it," repeated Hawes obstinately. "I've never gone against *him* in any way. I never suggested that *he* was guilty—even when he accused himself I said it seemed most incomprehensible. If I've had suspicions of anybody it's been of Archer—never of him. Archer is a totally different proposition—a godless irreligious ruffian. A drunken blackguard."

"Don't you think you're being a little harsh?" I said. "After all, we really know very little about the man."

"A poacher, in and out of prison, capable of anything."

"Do you really think he shot Colonel Protheroe?" I asked curiously.

Hawes has an inveterate dislike of answering yes or no. I have noticed it several times lately.

"Don't you think yourself, sir, that it's the only possible solution?"

"As far as we know," I said, "there's no evidence of any kind against him."

"His threats," said Hawes eagerly. "You forget about his threats."

I am sick and tired of hearing about Archer's threats. As far as I can make out, there is no direct evidence that he ever made any.

"He was determined to be revenged on Colonel Protheroe. He primed himself with drink and then shot him."

"That's pure supposition."

"But you will admit that it's perfectly probable?"

"No, I don't."

"Possible, then?"

"Possible, yes."

Hawes glanced at me sideways.

"Why don't you think it's probable?"

"Because," I said, "a man like Archer wouldn't think of shooting a man with a pistol. It's the wrong weapon."

Hawes seemed taken aback by my argument. Evidently it wasn't the objection he had expected.

"Do you really think the objection is feasible?" he asked doubtfully.

"To my mind it is a complete stumbling block to Archer's having committed the crime," I said.

In face of my positive assertion, Hawes said no more. He thanked me again and left.

I had gone as far as the front door with him, and on the hall table I saw four notes. They had certain characteristics in common. The handwriting was almost unmistakably feminine, they all bore the words, "By hand, Urgent," and the only difference I could see was that one was noticeably dirtier than the rest.

Their similarity gave me a curious feeling of seeing—not double but quadruple.

Mary came out of the kitchen and caught me staring at them.

"Come by hand since lunchtime," she volunteered. "All but one. I found that in the box."

I nodded, gathered them up and took them into the study.

The first one ran thus:

"Dear Mr. Clement,—Something has come to my knowledge which I feel you ought to know. It concerns the death of poor Colonel Protheroe. I should much appreciate your advice on the matter—whether to go to the police or not. Since my dear husband's death, I have such a shrinking from every kind of publicity. Perhaps you could run in and see me for a few minutes this afternoon.

Yours sincerely,

Martha Price Ridley."

I opened the second:

"Dear Mr. Clement,—I am so troubled—so excited in my mind—to know what I ought to do. Something has come to my ears that I feel may be important. I have such a horror of being mixed up with the police in any way. I am so disturbed

and distressed. Would it be asking too much of you, dear Vicar, to drop in for a few minutes and solve my doubts and perplexities for me in the wonderful way you always do?

Forgive my troubling you,

Yours very sincerely,

Caroline Wetherby."

The third, I felt, I could almost have recited beforehand.

"Dear Mr. Clement,—Something most important has come to my ears. I feel you should be the first to know about it. Will you call in and see me this afternoon some time? I will wait in for you."

This militant epistle was signed "*Amanda Hartnell.*"

I opened the fourth missive. It has been my good fortune to be troubled with very few anonymous letters. An anonymous letter is, I think, the meanest and cruellest weapon there is. This one was no exception. It purported to be written by an illiterate person, but several things inclined me to disbelieve that assumption.

*"Dear Vicar,—I think you ought to know what is Going On. Your lady has been seen coming out of Mr. Redding's cottage in a surreptitious manner. You know wot i mean. The two are Carrying On together. i think you ought to know.
A Friend."*

I made a faint exclamation of disgust and crumpling up the paper tossed it into the open grate just as Griselda entered the room.

"What's that you're throwing down so contemptuously?" she asked.

"Filth," I said.

Taking a match from my pocket, I struck it and bent down. Griselda, however, was too quick for me. She had stooped down and caught up the crumpled ball of paper and smoothed it out before I could stop her.

She read it, gave a little exclamation of disgust, and tossed it back to me, turning away as she did so. I lighted it and watched it

burn.

Griselda had moved away. She was standing by the window looking out into the garden.

"Len," she said, without turning round.

"Yes, my dear."

"I'd like to tell you something. Yes, don't stop me. I want to, please. When—when Lawrence Redding came here, I let you think that I had only known him slightly before. That wasn't true. I—had known him rather well. In fact, before I met you, I had been rather in love with him. I think most people are with Lawrence. I was—well, absolutely silly about him at one time. I don't mean I wrote him compromising letters or anything idiotic like they do in books. But I was rather keen on him once."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked.

"Oh! Because! I don't know exactly except that—well, you're foolish in some ways. Just because you're so much older than I am, you think that I—well, that I'm likely to like other people. I thought you'd be tiresome, perhaps, about me and Lawrence being friends."

"You're very clever at concealing things," I said, remembering what she had told me in that room less than a week ago, and the ingenuous way she had talked.

"Yes, I've always been able to hide things. In a way, I like doing it."

Her voice held a childlike ring of pleasure to it.

"But it's quite true what I said. I didn't know about Anne, and I wondered why Lawrence was so different, not—well, really not noticing me. I'm not used to it."

There was a pause.

"You do understand, Len?" said Griselda anxiously.

"Yes," I said, "I understand."

But did I?

Twenty-five

I found it hard to shake off the impression left by the anonymous letter. Pitch soils.

However, I gathered up the other three letters, glanced at my watch, and started out.

I wondered very much what this might be that had “come to the knowledge” of three ladies simultaneously. I took it to be the same piece of news. In this, I was to realize that my psychology was at fault.

I cannot pretend that my calls took me past the police station. My feet gravitated there of their own accord. I was anxious to know whether Inspector Slack had returned from Old Hall.

I found that he had, and further, that Miss Cram had returned with him. The fair Gladys was seated in the police station carrying off matters with a high hand. She denied absolutely having taken the suitcase to the woods.

“Just because one of these gossiping old cats had nothing better to do than look out of her window all night you go and pitch upon me. She’s been mistaken once, remember, when she said she saw me at the end of the lane on the afternoon of the murder, and if she was mistaken then, in daylight, how can she possibly have recognized me by moonlight?”

“Wicked it is, the way these old ladies go on down here. Say anything, they will. And me asleep in my bed as innocent as can be. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, the lot of you.”

"And supposing the landlady of the Blue Boar identifies the suitcase as yours, Miss Cram?"

"If she says anything of the kind, she's wrong. There's no name on it. Nearly everybody's got a suitcase like that. As for poor Dr. Stone, accusing him of being a common burglar! And he has a lot of letters after his name."

"You refuse to give us any explanation, then, Miss Cram?"

"No refusing about it. You've made a mistake, that's all. You and your meddlesome Marples. I won't say a word more—not without my solicitor present. I'm going this minute—unless you're going to arrest me."

For answer, the Inspector rose and opened the door for her, and with a toss of the head, Miss Cram walked out.

"That's the line she takes," said Slack, coming back to his chair. "Absolute denial. And, of course, the old lady *may* have been mistaken. No jury would believe you could recognize anyone from that distance on a moonlit night. And, of course, as I say, the old lady may have made a mistake."

"She may," I said, "but I don't think she did. Miss Marple is usually right. That's what makes her unpopular."

The Inspector grinned.

"That's what Hurst says. Lord, these villages!"

"What about the silver, Inspector?"

"Seemed to be perfectly in order. Of course, that meant one lot or the other must be a fake. There's a very good man in Much Benham, an authority on old silver. I've phoned over to him and sent a car to fetch him. We'll soon know which is which. Either the burglary was an accomplished fact, or else it was only planned. Doesn't make a frightful lot of difference either way—I mean as far as we're concerned. Robbery's a small business compared with murder. These two aren't concerned with the murder. We'll maybe get a line on him through the girl—that's why I let her go without any more fuss."

"I wondered," I said.

"A pity about Mr. Redding. It's not often you find a man who goes out of his way to oblige you."

"I suppose not," I said, smiling slightly.

"Women cause a lot of trouble," moralized the Inspector.

He sighed and then went on, somewhat to my surprise: "Of course, there's Archer."

"Oh!" I said, "You've thought of him?"

"Why, naturally, sir, first thing. It didn't need any anonymous letters to put me on his track."

"Anonymous letters," I said sharply. "Did you get one, then?"

"That's nothing new, sir. We get a dozen a day, at least. Oh, yes, we were put wise to Archer. As though the police couldn't look out for themselves! Archer's been under suspicion from the first. The trouble of it is, he's got an alibi. Not that it amounts to anything, but it's awkward to get over."

"What do you mean by its not amounting to anything?" I asked.

"Well, it appears he was with a couple of pals all the afternoon. Not, as I say, that that counts much. Men like Archer and his pals would swear to anything. There's no believing a word they say. *We* know that. But the public doesn't, and the jury's taken from the public, more's the pity. They know nothing, and ten to one believe everything that's said in the witness box, no matter who it is that says it. And of course Archer himself will swear till he's black in the face that he didn't do it."

"Not so obliging as Mr. Redding," I said with a smile.

"Not he," said the Inspector, making the remark as a plain statement of fact.

"It is natural, I suppose, to cling to life," I mused.

"You'd be surprised if you knew the murderers that have got off through the softheartedness of the jury," said the Inspector gloomily.

"But do you really think that Archer did it?" I asked.

It has struck me as curious all along that Inspector Slack never seems to have any personal views of his own on the murder. The easiness or difficulty of getting a conviction are the only points that seem to appeal to him.

"I'd like to be a bit surer," he admitted. "A fingerprint now, or a footprint, or seen in the vicinity about the time of the crime. Can't risk arresting him without something of that kind. He's been seen round Mr. Redding's house once or twice, but he'd say that was to

speak to his mother. A decent body, she is. No, on the whole, I'm for the lady. If I could only get definite proof of blackmail—but you can't get definite proof of anything in this crime! It's theory, theory, theory. It's a sad pity that there's not a single spinster lady living along your road, Mr. Clement. I bet she'd have seen something if there had been."

His words reminded me of my calls, and I took leave of him. It was about the solitary instance when I had seen him in a genial mood.

My first call was on Miss Hartnell. She must have been watching me from the window, for before I had time to ring she had opened the front door, and clasping my hand firmly in hers, had led me over the threshold.

"So good of you to come. In here. More private."

We entered a microscopic room, about the size of a hencoop. Miss Hartnell shut the door and with an air of deep secrecy waved me to a seat (there were only three). I perceived that she was enjoying herself.

"I'm never one to beat about the bush," she said in her jolly voice, the latter slightly toned down to meet the requirements of the situation. "You know how things go the rounds in a village like this."

"Unfortunately," I said, "I do."

"I agree with you. Nobody dislikes gossip more than I do. But there it is. I thought it my duty to tell the police inspector that I'd called on Mrs. Lestrangle the afternoon of the murder and that she was out. I don't expect to be thanked for doing my duty, I just do it. Ingratitude is what you meet with first and last in this life. Why, only yesterday that impudent Mrs. Baker—"

"Yes, yes," I said, hoping to avert the usual tirade. "Very sad, very sad. But you were saying."

"The lower classes don't know who are their best friends," said Miss Hartnell. "I always say a word in season when I'm visiting. Not that I'm ever thanked for it."

"You were telling the Inspector about your call upon Mrs. Lestrangle," I prompted.

"Exactly—and by the way, he didn't thank me. Said he'd ask for information when he wanted it—not those words exactly, but that was the spirit. There's a different class of men in the police force nowadays."

"Very probably," I said. "But you were going on to say something?"

"I decided that this time I wouldn't go near any wretched inspector. After all, a clergyman is a gentleman—at least some are," she added.

I gathered that the qualification was intended to include me.

"If I can help you in any way," I began.

"It's a matter of duty," said Miss Hartnell, and closed her mouth with a snap. "I don't want to have to say these things. No one likes it less. But duty is duty."

I waited.

"I've been given to understand," went on Miss Hartnell, turning rather red, "that Mrs. Lestrangle gives out that she was at home all the time—that she didn't answer the door because—well, she didn't choose. Such airs and graces. I only called as a matter of duty, and to be treated like that!"

"She has been ill," I said mildly.

"Ill? Fiddlesticks. You're too unworldly, Mr. Clement. There's nothing the matter with that woman. Too ill to attend the inquest indeed! Medical certificate from Dr. Haydock! She can wind him round her little finger, everyone knows that. Well, where was I?"

I didn't quite know. It is difficult with Miss Hartnell to know where narrative ends and vituperation begins.

"Oh, about calling on her that afternoon. Well, it's fiddlesticks to say she was in the house. She wasn't. I know."

"How can you possibly know?"

Miss Hartnell's face turned redder. In someone less truculent, her demeanour might have been called embarrassed.

"I'd knocked and rung," she explained. "Twice. If not three times. And it occurred to me suddenly that the bell might be out of order."

She was, I was glad to note, unable to look me in the face when saying this. The same builder builds all our houses and the bells he

installs are clearly audible when standing on the mat outside the front door. Both Miss Hartnell and I knew this perfectly well, but I suppose decencies have to be preserved.

"Yes?" I murmured.

"I didn't want to push my card through the letter box. That would seem so rude, and whatever I am, I am never rude."

She made this amazing statement without a tremor.

"So I thought I would just go round the house and—and tap on the window pane," she continued unblushingly. "I went all round the house and looked in at all the windows, but there was no one in the house at all."

I understood her perfectly. Taking advantage of the fact that the house was empty, Miss Hartnell had given unbridled rein to her curiosity and had gone round the house examining the garden and peering in at all the windows to see as much as she could of the interior. She had chosen to tell her story to me, believing that I should be a more sympathetic and lenient audience than the police. The clergy are supposed to give the benefit of the doubt to their parishioners.

I made no comment on the situation. I merely asked a question.

"What time was this, Miss Hartnell?"

"As far as I can remember," said Miss Hartnell, "it must have been close on six o'clock. I went straight home afterwards, and I got in about ten past six, and Mrs. Protheroe came in somewhere round about the half hour, leaving Dr. Stone and Mr. Redding outside, and we talked about bulbs. And all the time the poor Colonel lying murdered. It's a sad world."

"It is sometimes a rather unpleasant one," I said.

I rose.

"And that is all you have to tell me?"

"I just thought it might be important."

"It might," I agreed.

And refusing to be drawn further, much to Miss Hartnell's disappointment, I took my leave.

Miss Wetherby, whom I visited next, received me in a kind of flutter.

"Dear Vicar, how truly kind. You've had tea? Really, you won't? A cushion for your back? It is so kind of you to come round so promptly. Always willing to put yourself out for others."

There was a good deal of this before we came to the point, and even then it was approached with a good deal of circumlocution.

"You must understand that I heard this on the best authority."

In St. Mary Mead the best authority is always somebody else's servant.

"You can't tell me who told you?"

"I promised, dear Mr. Clement. And I always think a promise should be a sacred thing."

She looked very solemn.

"Shall we say a little bird told me? That is safe isn't it?"

I longed to say, "It's damned silly." I rather wish I had. I should have liked to observe the effect on Miss Wetherby.

"Well, this little bird told that she saw a certain lady, who shall be nameless."

"Another kind of bird?" I inquired.

To my great surprise Miss Wetherby went off into paroxysms of laughter and tapped me playfully on the arm saying:

"Oh, Vicar, you must not be so naughty!"

When she had recovered, she went on.

"A certain lady, and where do you think this certain lady was going? She turned into the Vicarage road, but before she did so, she looked up and down the road in a most peculiar way—to see if anyone she knew were noticing her, I imagine."

"And the little bird—" I inquired.

"Paying a visit to the fishmonger's—in the room over the shop."

I know where maids go on their days out. I know there is one place they never go if they can help—anywhere in the open air.

"And the time," continued Miss Wetherby, leaning forward mysteriously, "was just before six o'clock."

"On which day?"

Miss Wetherby gave a little scream.

"The day of the murder, of course, didn't I say so?"

"I inferred it," I replied. "And the name of the lady?"

"Begins with an L," said Wetherby, nodding her head several times.

Feeling that I had got to the end of the information Miss Wetherby had to impart, I rose to my feet.

"You won't let the police cross-question me, will you?" said Miss Wetherby, pathetically, as she clasped my hand in both of hers. "I do shrink from publicity. And to stand up in court!"

"In special cases," I said, "they let witnesses sit down."

And I escaped.

There was still Mrs. Price Ridley to see. That lady put me in my place at once.

"I will not be mixed up in any police court business," she said grimly, after shaking my hand coldly. "You understand that, on the other hand, having come across a circumstance which needs explaining, I think it should be brought to the notice of the authorities."

"Does it concern Mrs. Lestranger?" I asked.

"Why should it?" demanded Mrs. Price Ridley coldly.

She had me at a disadvantage there.

"It's a very simple matter," she continued. "My maid, Clara, was standing at the front gate, she went down there for a minute or two—*she* says to get a breath of fresh air. Most unlikely, I should say. Much more probable that she was looking out for the fishmonger's boy—if he calls himself a boy—impudent young jackanapes, thinks because he's seventeen he can joke with all the girls. Anyway, as I say, she was standing at the gate and she heard a sneeze."

"Yes," I said, waiting for more.

"That's all. I tell you she heard a sneeze. And don't start telling me I'm not so young as I once was and may have made a mistake, because it was Clara who heard it and she's only nineteen."

"But," I said, "why shouldn't she have heard a sneeze?"

Mrs. Price Ridley looked at me in obvious pity for my poorness of intellect.

"She heard a sneeze on the day of the murder at a time when there was no one in your house. Doubtless the murderer was

concealed in the bushes waiting his opportunity. What you have to look for is a man with a cold in his head."

"Or a sufferer from hay fever," I suggested. "But as a matter of fact, Mrs. Price Ridley, I think that mystery has a very easy solution. Our maid, Mary, has been suffering from a severe cold in the head. In fact, her sniffing has tried us very much lately. It must have been her sneeze your maid heard."

"It was a man's sneeze," said Mrs. Price Ridley firmly. "And you couldn't hear your maid sneeze in your kitchen from our gate."

"You couldn't hear anyone sneezing in the study from your gate," I said. "Or at least, I very much doubt it."

"I said the man might have been concealed in the shrubbery," said Mrs. Price Ridley. "Doubtless when Clara had gone in, he effected an entrance by the front door."

"Well, of course, that's possible," I said.

I tried not to make my voice consciously soothing, but I must have failed, for Mrs. Price Ridley glared at me suddenly.

"I am accustomed not to be listened to, but I might mention also that to leave a tennis racquet carelessly flung down on the grass without a press completely ruins it. And tennis racquets are very expensive nowadays."

There did not seem to be rhyme or reason in this flank attack. It bewildered me utterly.

"But perhaps you don't agree," said Mrs. Price Ridley.

"Oh! I do—certainly."

"I am glad. Well, that is all I have to say. I wash my hands of the whole affair."

She leaned back and closed her eyes like one weary of this world. I thanked her and said good-bye.

On the doorstep, I ventured to ask Clara about her mistress's statement.

"It's quite true, sir, I heard a sneeze. And it wasn't an ordinary sneeze—not by any means."

Nothing about a crime is ever ordinary. The shot was not an ordinary kind of shot. The sneeze was not a usual kind of sneeze. It was, I presume, a special murderer's sneeze. I asked the girl what

time this had been, but she was very vague, some time between a quarter and half past six she thought. Anyway, "it was before the mistress had the telephone call and was took bad."

I asked her if she had heard a shot of any kind. And she said the shots had been something awful. After that, I placed very little credence in her statements.

I was just turning in at my own gate when I decided to pay a friend a visit.

Glancing at my watch, I saw that I had just time for it before taking Evensong. I went down the road to Haydock's house. He came out on the doorstep to meet me.

I noticed afresh how worried and haggard he looked. This business seemed to have aged him out of all knowledge.

"I'm glad to see you," he said. "What's the news?"

I told him the latest Stone development.

"A high-class thief," he commented. "Well, that explains a lot of things. He'd read up his subject, but he made slips from time to time to me. Protheroe must have caught him out once. You remember the row they had. What do you think about the girl? Is she in it too?"

"Opinion as to that is undecided," I said. "For my own part, I think the girl is all right.

"She's such a prize idiot," I added.

"Oh! I wouldn't say that. She's rather shrewd, is Miss Gladys Cram. A remarkably healthy specimen. Not likely to trouble members of my profession."

I told him that I was worried about Hawes, and that I was anxious that he should get away for a real rest and change.

Something evasive came into his manner when I said this. His answer did not ring quite true.

"Yes," he said slowly. "I suppose that would be the best thing. Poor chap. Poor chap."

"I thought you didn't like him."

"I don't—not much. But I'm sorry for a lot of people I don't like." He added after a minute or two: "I'm even sorry for Protheroe. Poor fellow—nobody ever liked him much. Too full of his own rectitude

and too self-assertive. It's an unlovable mixture. He was always the same—even as a young man."

"I didn't know you knew him then."

"Oh, yes! When we lived in Westmorland, I had a practice not far away. That's a long time ago now. Nearly twenty years."

I sighed. Twenty years ago Griselda was five years old. Time is an odd thing....

"Is that all you came to say to me, Clement?"

I looked up with a start. Haydock was watching me with keen eyes.

"There's something else, isn't there?" he said.

I nodded.

I had been uncertain whether to speak or not when I came in, but now I decided to do so. I like Haydock as well as any man I know. He is a splendid fellow in every way. I felt that what I had to tell might be useful to him.

I recited my interviews with Miss Hartnell and Miss Wetherby.

He was silent for a long time after I'd spoken.

"It's quite true, Clement," he said at last. "I've been trying to shield Mrs. Lestrangle from any inconvenience that I could. As a matter of fact, she's an old friend. But that's not my only reason. That medical certificate of mine isn't the put-up job you all think it was."

He paused, and then said gravely:

"This is between you and me, Clement. Mrs. Lestrangle is doomed."

"What?"

"She's a dying woman. I give her a month at longest. Do you wonder that I want to keep her from being badgered and questioned?"

He went on:

"When she turned into this road that evening it was here she came—to this house."

"You haven't said so before."

"I didn't want to create talk. Six to seven isn't my time for seeing patients, and everyone knows that. But you can take my word for it

that she was here."

"She wasn't here when I came for you, though. I mean, when we discovered the body."

"No," he seemed perturbed. "She'd left—to keep an appointment."

"In what direction was the appointment? In her own house?"

"I don't know, Clement. On my honour, I don't know."

I believed him, but—

"And supposing an innocent man is hanged?" I said.

"No," he said. "No one will be hanged for the murder of Colonel Protheroe. You can take my word for that."

But that is just what I could not do. And yet the certainty in his voice was very great.

"No one will be hanged," he repeated.

"This man, Archer—"

He made an impatient movement.

"Hasn't got brains enough to wipe his fingerprints off the pistol."

"Perhaps not," I said dubiously.

Then I remembered something, and taking the little brownish crystal I had found in the wood from my pocket, I held it out to him and asked him what it was.

"H'm," he hesitated. "Looks like picric acid. Where did you find it?"

"That," I replied, "is Sherlock Holmes's secret."

He smiled.

"What is picric acid?"

"Well, it's an explosive."

"Yes, I know that, but it's got another use, hasn't it?"

He nodded.

"It's used medically—in solution for burns. Wonderful stuff."

I held out my hand, and rather reluctantly he handed it back to me.

"It's of no consequence probably," I said. "But I found it in rather an unusual place."

"You won't tell me where?"

Rather childishly, I wouldn't.

He had his secrets. Well, I would have mine.

I was a little hurt that he had not confided in me more fully.

Twenty-six

I was in a strange mood when I mounted the pulpit that night.

The church was unusually full. I cannot believe that it was the prospect of Hawes preaching which had attracted so many. Hawes's sermons are dull and dogmatic. And if the news had got round that I was preaching instead, that would not have attracted them either. For my sermons are dull and scholarly. Neither, I am afraid, can I attribute it to devotion.

Everybody had come, I concluded, to see who else was there, and possibly exchange a little gossip in the church porch afterwards.

Haydock was in church, which is unusual, and also Lawrence Redding. And to my surprise, beside Lawrence I saw the white strained face of Hawes. Anne Protheroe was there, but she usually attends Evensong on Sundays, though I had hardly thought she would today. I was far more surprised to see Lettice. Churchgoing was compulsory on Sunday morning—Colonel Protheroe was adamant on that point, but I had never seen Lettice at evening service before.

Gladys Cram was there, looking rather blatantly young and healthy against a background of wizened spinsters, and I fancied that a dim figure at the end of the church who had slipped in late, was Mrs. Lestrangle.

I need hardly say that Mrs. Price Ridley, Miss Hartnell, Miss Wetherby, and Miss Marple were there in full force. All the village people were there, with hardly a single exception. I don't know when we have had such a crowded congregation.

Crowds are queer things. There was a magnetic atmosphere that night, and the first person to feel its influence was myself.

As a rule, I prepare my sermons beforehand. I am careful and conscientious over them, but no one is better aware than myself of their deficiencies.

Tonight I was of necessity preaching *extempore*, and as I looked down on the sea of upturned faces, a sudden madness entered my brain. I ceased to be in any sense a Minister of God. I became an actor. I had an audience before me and I wanted to move that audience—and more, I felt the power to move it.

I am not proud of what I did that night. I am an utter disbeliever in the emotional Revivalist spirit. Yet that night I acted the part of a raving, ranting evangelist.

I gave out my text slowly.

I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

I repeated it twice, and I heard my own voice, a resonant, ringing voice unlike the voice of the everyday Leonard Clement.

I saw Griselda from her front pew look up in surprise and Dennis follow her example.

I held my breath for a moment or two, and then I let myself rip.

The congregation in that church were in a state of pent-up emotion, ripe to be played upon. I played upon them. I exhorted sinners to repentance. I lashed myself into a kind of emotional frenzy. Again and again I threw out a denouncing hand and reiterated the phrase.

"I am speaking to *you*...."

And each time, from different parts of the church, a kind of sighing gasp went up.

Mass emotion is a strange and terrible thing.

I finished up with those beautiful and poignant words—perhaps the most poignant words in the whole Bible:

"This night thy soul shall be required of thee...."

It was a strange, brief possession. When I got back to the Vicarage I was my usual faded, indeterminate self. I found Griselda rather pale. She slipped her arm through mine.

"Len," she said, "you were rather terrible tonight. I—I didn't like it. I've never heard you preach like that before."

"I don't suppose you ever will again," I said, sinking down wearily on the sofa. I was tired.

"What made you do it?"

"A sudden madness came over me."

"Oh! It—it wasn't something special?"

"What do you mean—something special?"

"I wondered—that was all. You're very unexpected, Len. I never feel I really know you."

We sat down to cold supper, Mary being out.

"There's a note for you in the hall," said Griselda. "Get it, will you, Dennis?"

Dennis, who had been very silent, obeyed.

I took it and groaned. Across the top left-hand corner was written: *By hand—Urgent.*

"This," I said, "must be from Miss Marple. There's no one else left."

I had been perfectly correct in my assumption.

"Dear Mr. Clement,—I should so much like to have a little chat with you about one or two things that have occurred to me. I feel we should all try and help in elucidating this sad mystery. I will come over about half past nine if I may, and tap on your study window. Perhaps dear Griselda would be so very kind as to run over here and cheer up my nephew. And Mr. Dennis too, of course, if he cares to come. If I do not hear, I will expect them and will come over myself at the time I have stated.

*Yours very sincerely,
Jane Marple."*

I handed the note to Griselda.

"Oh, we'll go!" she said cheerfully. "A glass or two of homemade liqueur is just what one needs on Sunday evening. I think it's Mary's

blancmange that is so frightfully depressing. It's like something out of a mortuary."

Dennis seemed less charmed at the prospect.

"It's all very well for you," he grumbled. "You can talk all this highbrow stuff about art and books. I always feel a perfect fool sitting and listening to you."

"That's good for you," said Griselda serenely. "It puts you in your place. Anyway, I don't think Mr. Raymond West is so frightfully clever as he pretends to be."

"Very few of us are," I said.

I wondered very much what exactly it was that Miss Marple wished to talk over. Of all the ladies in my congregation, I considered her by far the shrewdest. Not only does she see and hear practically everything that goes on, but she draws amazingly neat and apposite deductions from the facts that come under her notice.

If I were at any time to set out on a career of deceit, it would be of Miss Marple that I should be afraid.

What Griselda called the Nephew Amusing Party started off at a little after nine, and whilst I was waiting for Miss Marple to arrive I amused myself by drawing up a kind of schedule of the facts connected with the crime. I arranged them so far as possible in chronological order. I am not a punctual person, but I am a neat one, and I like things jotted down in a methodical fashion.

At half past nine punctually, there was a little tap on the window, and I rose and admitted Miss Marple.

She had a very fine Shetland shawl thrown over her head and shoulders and was looking rather old and frail. She came in full of little fluttering remarks.

"So good of you to let me come—and so good of dear Griselda—Raymond admires her so much—the perfect Greuze he always calls her ... No, I won't have a footstool."

I deposited the Shetland shawl on a chair and returned to take a chair facing my guest. We looked at each other, and a little deprecating smile broke out on her face.

"I feel that you must be wondering why—why I am so interested in all this. You may possibly think it's very unwomanly. No—please—I

should like to explain if I may."

She paused a moment, a pink colour suffusing her cheeks.

"You see," she began at last, "living alone, as I do, in a rather out-of-the-way part of the world, one has to have a hobby. There is, of course, woolwork, and Guides, and Welfare, and sketching, but my hobby is—and always has been—Human Nature. So varied—and so very fascinating. And, of course, in a small village, with nothing to distract one, one has such ample opportunity for becoming what I might call proficient in one's study. One begins to class people, quite definitely, just as though they were birds or flowers, group so-and-so, genus this, species that. Sometimes, of course, one makes mistakes, but less and less as time goes on. And then, too, one tests oneself. One takes a little problem—for instance, the gill of picked shrimps that amused dear Griselda so much—a quite unimportant mystery but absolutely incomprehensible unless one solves it right. And then there was that matter of the changed cough drops, and the butcher's wife's umbrella—the last absolutely meaningless unless on the assumption that the greengrocer was not behaving at all nicely with the chemist's wife—which, of course, turned out to be the case. It is so fascinating, you know, to apply one's judgment and find that one is right."

"You usually are, I believe," I said smiling.

"That, I am afraid, is what has made me a little conceited," confessed Miss Marple. "But I have always wondered whether, if some day a really big mystery came along, I should be able to do the same thing. I mean—just solve it correctly. Logically, it ought to be exactly the same thing. After all, a tiny working model of a torpedo is just the same as a real torpedo."

"You mean it's all a question of relativity," I said slowly. "It should be—logically, I admit. But I don't know whether it really is."

"Surely it must be the same," said Miss Marple. "The—what one used to call the factors at school—are the same. There's money, and the mutual attraction people of an—er—opposite sex—and there's queerness of course—so many people are a little queer, aren't they?—in fact, most people are when you know them well. And normal people do such astonishing things sometimes, and abnormal people

are sometimes so very sane and ordinary. In fact, the only way is to compare people with other people you have known or come across. You'd be surprised if you knew how very few distinct types there are in all."

"You frighten me," I said. "I feel I'm being put under the microscope."

"Of course, I wouldn't dream of saying any of this to Colonel Melchett—such an autocratic man, isn't he?—and poor Inspector Slack—well, he's exactly like the young lady in the boot shop who wants to sell you patent leather because she's got it in your size, and doesn't take any notice of the fact that you want brown calf."

That, really, is a very good description of Slack.

"But you, Mr. Clement, know, I'm sure, quite as much about the crime as Inspector Slack. I thought, if we could work together—"

"I wonder," I said. "I think each one of us in his secret heart fancies himself as Sherlock Holmes."

Then I told her of the three summonses I had received that afternoon. I told her of Anne's discovery of the picture with the slashed face. I also told her of Miss Cram's attitude at the police station, and I described Haydock's identification of the crystal I had picked up.

"Having found that myself," I finished up, "I should like it to be important. But it's probably got nothing to do with the case."

"I have been reading a lot of American detective stories from the library lately," said Miss Marple, "hoping to find them helpful."

"Was there anything in them about picric acid?"

"I'm afraid not. I do remember reading a story once, though, in which a man was poisoned by picric acid and lanoline being rubbed on him as an ointment."

"But as nobody has been poisoned here, that doesn't seem to enter into the question," I said.

Then I took up my schedule and handed it to her.

"I've tried," I said, "to recapitulate the facts of the case as clearly as possible."

MY SCHEDULE

Thursday, 21st inst.

12:30 p.m.—Colonel Protheroe alters his appointment from six to six fifteen. Overheard by half village very probably.

12:45—Pistol last seen in its proper place. (But this is doubtful, as Mrs. Archer had previously said she could not remember.)

5:30 (approx.)—Colonel and Mrs. Protheroe leave Old Hall for village in car.

5:30 Fake call put through to me from the North Lodge, Old Hall.

6:15 (or a minute or two earlier)—Colonel Protheroe arrives at Vicarage. Is shown into study by Mary.

6:20—Mrs. Protheroe comes along back lane and across garden to study window. Colonel Protheroe not visible.

6:29—Call from Lawrence Redding's cottage put through to Mrs. Price Ridley (according to Exchange).

6:30–6:35—Shot heard. (Accepting telephone call time as correct.) Lawrence Redding, Anne Protheroe and Dr. Stone's evidence seem to point to its being earlier, but Mrs. P.R. probably right.

6:45—Lawrence Redding arrives Vicarage and finds the body.

6:48—I meet Lawrence Redding.

6:49—Body discovered by me.

6:55—Haydock examines body.

NOTE.—The only two people who have no kind of alibi for 6:30–6:35 are Miss Cram and Mrs. Lestrangle. Miss Cram says she was at the barrow, but no confirmation. It seems reasonable, however, to dismiss her from case as there seems nothing to connect her with it. Mrs. Lestrangle left Dr. Haydock's house some time after six to keep an appointment. Where was the appointment, and with whom? It could hardly have been with

Colonel Protheroe, as he expected to be engaged with me. It is true that Mrs. Lestrangle was near the spot at the time the crime was committed, but it seems doubtful what motive she could have had for murdering him. She did not gain by his death, and the Inspector's theory of blackmail I cannot accept. Mrs. Lestrangle is not that kind of woman. Also it seems unlikely that she should have got hold of Lawrence Redding's pistol.

"Very clear," said Miss Marple, nodding her head in approval. "Very clear indeed. Gentlemen always make such excellent memoranda."

"You agree with what I have written?" I asked.

"Oh, yes—you have put it all beautifully."

I asked her the question then that I had been meaning to put all along.

"Miss Marple," I said. "Who do you suspect? You once said that there were seven people."

"Quite that, I should think," said Miss Marple absently. "I expect every one of us suspects someone different. In fact, one can see they do."

She didn't ask me who I suspected.

"The point is," she said, "that one must provide an explanation for everything. Each thing has got to be explained away satisfactorily. If you have a theory that fits every fact—well, then, it must be the right one. But that's extremely difficult. If it wasn't for that note—"

"The note?" I said, surprised.

"Yes, you remember, I told you. That note has worried me all along. It's wrong, somehow."

"Surely," I said, "that is explained now. It was written at six thirty five and another hand—the murderer's—put the misleading 6:20 at the top. I think that is clearly established."

"But even then," said Miss Marple, "it's all wrong."

"But why?"

"Listen." Miss Marple leant forward eagerly. "Mrs. Protheroe passed my garden, as I told you, and she went as far as the study

window and she looked in and she didn't see Colonel Protheroe."

"Because he was writing at the desk," I said.

"And that's what's all wrong. That was at twenty past six. We agreed that he wouldn't sit down to say he couldn't wait any longer until after half past six—so, why was he sitting at the writing table then?"

"I never thought of that," I said slowly.

"Let us, dear Mr. Clement, just go over it again. Mrs. Protheroe comes to the window and she thinks the room is empty—she must have thought so, because otherwise she would never have gone down to the studio to meet Mr. Redding. It wouldn't have been safe. The room must have been absolutely silent if she thought it was empty. And that leaves us three alternatives, doesn't it?"

"You mean—"

"Well, the first alternative would be that Colonel Protheroe was dead already—but I don't think that's the most likely one. To begin with he'd only been there about five minutes and she or I would have heard the shot, and secondly, the same difficulty remains about his being at the writing table. The second alternative is, of course, that he was sitting at the writing table writing a note, but in that case it must have been a different note altogether. It can't have been to say he couldn't wait. And the third—"

"Yes?" I said.

"Well, the third is, of course, that Mrs. Protheroe was right, and that the room was actually empty."

"You mean that, after he had been shown in, he went out again and came back later?"

"Yes."

"But why should he have done that?"

Miss Marple spread out her hands in a little gesture of bewilderment.

"That would mean looking at the case from an entirely different angle," I said.

"One so often has to do that—about everything. Don't you think so?"

I did not reply. I was going over carefully in my mind the three alternatives that Miss Marple had suggested.

With a slight sigh the old lady rose to her feet.

"I must be getting back. I am very glad to have had this little chat—though we haven't got very far, have we?"

"To tell you the truth," I said, as I fetched her shawl, "the whole thing seems to me a bewildering maze."

"Oh! I wouldn't say that. I think, on the whole, one theory fits nearly everything. That is, if you admit one coincidence—and I think one coincidence is allowable. More than one, of course, is unlikely."

"Do you really think that? About the theory, I mean?" I asked, looking at her.

"I admit that there is one flaw in my theory—one fact that I can't get over. Oh! If only that note had been something quite different—"

She sighed and shook her head. She moved towards the window and absentmindedly reached up her hand and felt the rather depressed-looking plant that stood in a stand.

"You know, dear Mr. Clement, this should be watered oftener. Poor thing, it needs it badly. Your maid should water it every day. I suppose it is she who attends to it?"

"As much," I said, "as she attends to anything."

"A little raw at present," suggested Miss Marple.

"Yes," I said. "And Griselda steadily refuses to attempt to sack her. Her idea is that only a thoroughly undesirable maid will remain with us. However, Mary herself gave us notice the other day."

"Indeed. I always imagined she was very fond of you both."

"I haven't noticed it," I said. "But, as a matter of fact, it was Lettice Protheroe who upset her. Mary came back from the inquest in rather a temperamental state and found Lettice here and—well, they had words."

"Oh!" said Miss Marple. She was just about to step through the window when she stopped suddenly, and a bewildering series of changes passed over her face.

"Oh, dear!" she muttered to herself. "I *have* been stupid. So that was it. Perfectly possible all the time."

"I beg your pardon?"

She turned a worried face upon me.

"Nothing. An idea that has just occurred to me. I must go home and think things out thoroughly. Do you know, I believe I have been extremely stupid—almost incredibly so."

"I find that hard to believe," I said gallantly.

I escorted her through the window and across the lawn.

"Can you tell me what it is that has occurred to you so suddenly?" I asked.

"I would rather not—just at present. You see, there is still a possibility that I may be mistaken. But I do not think so. Here we are at my garden gate. Thank you so much. Please do not come any further."

"Is the note still a stumbling block?" I asked, as she passed through the gate and latched it behind her.

She looked at me abstractedly.

"The note? Oh! Of course that wasn't the real note. I never thought it was. Goodnight, Mr. Clement."

She went rapidly up the path to the house, leaving me staring after her.

I didn't know what to think.

Twenty-seven

Griselda and Dennis had not yet returned. I realized that the most natural thing would have been for me to go up to the house with Miss Marple and fetch them home. Both she and I had been so entirely taken up with our preoccupation over the mystery that we had forgotten anybody existed in the world except ourselves.

I was just standing in the hall, wondering whether I would not even now go over and join them, when the doorbell rang.

I crossed over to it. I saw there was a letter in the box, and presuming that this was the cause of the ring, I took it out.

As I did so, however, the bell rang again, and I shoved the letter hastily into my pocket and opened the front door.

It was Colonel Melchett.

"Hallo, Clement. I'm on my way home from town in the car. Thought I'd just look in and see if you could give me a drink."

"Delighted," I said. "Come into the study."

He pulled off the leather coat that he was wearing and followed me into the study. I fetched the whisky and soda and two glasses. Melchett was standing in front of the fireplace, legs wide apart, stroking his closely cropped moustache.

"I've got one bit of news for you, Clement. Most astounding thing you've ever heard. But let that go for the minute. How are things going down here? Any more old ladies hot on the scent?"

"They're not doing so badly," I said. "One of them, at all events, thinks she's got there."

"Our friend, Miss Marple, eh?"

"Our friend, Miss Marple."

"Women like that always think they know everything," said Colonel Melchett.

He sipped his whisky and soda appreciatively.

"It's probably unnecessary interference on my part, asking," I said. "But I suppose somebody has questioned the fish boy. I mean, if the murderer left by the front door, there's a chance the boy may have seen him."

"Slack questioned him right enough," said Melchett. "But the boy says he didn't meet anybody. Hardly likely he would. The murderer wouldn't be exactly courting observation. Lots of cover by your front gate. He would have taken a look to see if the road was clear. The boy had to call at the Vicarage, at Haydock's, and at Mrs. Price Ridley's. Easy enough to dodge him."

"Yes," I said, "I suppose it would be."

"On the other hand," went on Melchett, "if by any chance that rascal Archer did the job, and young Fred Jackson saw him about the place, I doubt very much whether he'd let on. Archer is a cousin of his."

"Do you seriously suspect Archer?"

"Well, you know, old Protheroe had his knife into Archer pretty badly. Lots of bad blood between them. Leniency wasn't Protheroe's strong point."

"No," I said. "He was a very ruthless man."

"What I say is," said Melchett, "Live and let live. Of course, the law's the law, but it never hurts to give a man the benefit of the doubt. That's what Protheroe never did."

"He prided himself on it," I said.

There was a pause, and then I asked:

"What is this 'astounding bit of news' you promised me?"

"Well, it *is* astounding. You know that unfinished letter that Protheroe was writing when he was killed?"

"Yes."

"We got an expert on it—to say whether the 6:20 was added by a different hand. Naturally we sent up samples of Protheroe's

handwriting. And do you know the verdict? *That letter was never written by Protheroe at all.*"

"You mean a forgery?"

"It's a forgery. The 6:20 they think is written in a different hand again—but they're not sure about that. The heading is in a different ink, but the letter itself is a forgery. Protheroe never wrote it."

"Are they certain?"

"Well, they're as certain as experts ever are. You know what an expert is! Oh! But they're sure enough."

"Amazing," I said. Then a memory assailed me.

"Why," I said, "I remember at the time Mrs. Protheroe said it wasn't like her husband's handwriting at all, and I took no notice."

"Really?"

"I thought it one of those silly remarks women will make. If there seemed one thing sure on earth it was that Protheroe had written that note."

We looked at each other.

"It's curious," I said slowly. "Miss Marple was saying this evening that that note was all wrong."

"Confound the woman, she couldn't know more about it if she had committed the murder herself."

At that moment the telephone bell rang. There is a queer kind of psychology about a telephone bell. It rang now persistently and with a kind of sinister significance.

I went over and took up the receiver.

"This is the Vicarage," I said. "Who's speaking?"

A strange, high-pitched hysterical voice came over the wire:

"*I want to confess,*" it said. "*My God, I want to confess.*"

"Hallo," I said, "hallo. Look here you've cut me off. What number was that?"

A languid voice said it didn't know. It added that it was sorry I had been troubled.

I put down the receiver, and turned to Melchett.

"You once said," I remarked, "that you would go mad if anyone else accused themselves of the crime."

"What about it?"

"That was someone who wanted to confess ... And the Exchange has cut us off."

Melchett dashed over and took up the receiver.

"I'll speak to them."

"Do," I said. "You may have some effect. I'll leave you to it. I'm going out. I've a fancy I recognized that voice."

Twenty-eight

I hurried down the village street. It was eleven o'clock, and at eleven o'clock on a Sunday night the whole village of St. Mary Mead might be dead. I saw, however, a light in a first floor window as I passed, and, realizing that Hawes was still up, I stopped and rang the doorbell.

After what seemed a long time, Hawes's landlady, Mrs. Sadler, laboriously unfastened two bolts, a chain, and turned a key and peered out at me suspiciously.

"Why, it's Vicar!" she exclaimed.

"Good evening," I said. "I want to see Mr. Hawes. I see there's a light in the window, so he's up still."

"That may be. I've not seen him since I took up his supper. He's had a quiet evening—no one to see him, and he's not been out."

I nodded, and passing her, went quickly up the stairs. Hawes has a bedroom and sitting room on the first floor.

I passed into the latter. Hawes was lying back in a long chair asleep. My entrance did not wake him. An empty cachet box and a glass of water, half full, stood beside him.

On the floor, by his left foot, was a crumpled sheet of paper with writing on it. I picked it up and straightened it out.

It began: "*My dear Clement—*"

I read it through, uttered an exclamation and shoved it into my pocket. Then I bent over Hawes and studied him attentively.

Next, reaching for the telephone which stood by his elbow, I gave the number of the Vicarage. Melchett must have been still trying to

trace the call, for I was told that the number was engaged. Asking them to call me, I put the instrument down again.

I put my hand into my pocket to look at the paper I had picked up once more. With it, I drew out the note that I had found in the letter box and which was still unopened.

Its appearance was horribly familiar. It was the same handwriting as the anonymous letter that had come that afternoon.

I tore it open.

I read it once—twice—unable to realize its contents.

I was beginning to read it a third time when the telephone rang. Like a man in a dream I picked up the receiver and spoke.

"Hallo?"

"Hallo."

"Is that you, Melchett?"

"Yes, where are you? I've traced that call. The number is—"

"I know the number."

"Oh, good! Is that where you are speaking from?"

"Yes."

"What about that confession?"

"I've got the confession all right."

"You mean you've got the murderer?"

I had then the strongest temptation of my life. I looked at the anonymous scrawl. I looked at the empty cachet box with the name of Cherubim on it. I remembered a certain casual conversation.

I made an immense effort.

"I—don't know," I said. "You'd better come round."

And I gave him the address.

Then I sat down in the chair opposite Hawes to think.

I had two clear minutes to do so.

In two minutes' time, Melchett would have arrived.

I took up the anonymous letter and read it through again for the third time.

Then I closed my eyes and thought....

Twenty-nine

I don't know how long I sat there—only a few minutes in reality, I suppose. Yet it seemed as though an eternity had passed when I heard the door open and, turning my head, looked up to see Melchett entering the room.

He stared at Hawes asleep in his chair, then turned to me.

"What's this, Clement? What does it all mean?"

Of the two letters in my hand I selected one and passed it to him. He read it aloud in a low voice.

"My dear Clement,—It is a peculiarly unpleasant thing that I have to say. After all, I think I prefer writing it. We can discuss it at a later date. It concerns the recent peculations. I am sorry to say that I have satisfied myself beyond any possible doubt as to the identity of the culprit. Painful as it is for me to have to accuse an ordained priest of the church, my duty is only too painfully clear. An example must be made and—"

He looked at me questioningly. At this point the writing tailed off in an undistinguishable scrawl where death had overtaken the writer's hand.

Melchett drew a deep breath, then looked at Hawes.

"So that's the solution! The one man we never even considered. And remorse drove him to confess!"

"He's been very queer lately," I said.

Suddenly Melchett strode across to the sleeping man with a sharp exclamation. He seized him by the shoulder and shook him, at first

gently, then with increasing violence.

"He's not asleep! He's drugged! What's the meaning of this?"

His eye went to the empty cachet box. He picked it up.

"Has he—"

"I think so," I said. "He showed me these the other day. Told me he'd been warned against an overdose. It's his way out, poor chap. Perhaps the best way. It's not for us to judge him."

But Melchett was Chief Constable of the County before anything else. The arguments that appealed to me had no weight with him. He had caught a murderer and he wanted his murderer hanged.

In one second he was at the telephone, jerking the receiver up and down impatiently until he got a reply. He asked for Haydock's number. Then there was a further pause during which he stood, his ear to the telephone and his eyes on the limp figure in the chair.

"Hallo—hallo—hallo—is that Dr. Haydock's? Will the doctor come round at once to High Street? Mr. Hawes. It's urgent ... what's that?... Well, what number is it then?... Oh, sorry."

He rang off, fuming.

"Wrong number, wrong number—always wrong numbers! And a man's life hanging on it. HALLO—you gave me the wrong number ... Yes—don't waste time—give me three nine—*nine*, not five."

Another period of impatience—shorter this time.

"Hallo—is that you, Haydock? Melchett speaking. Come to 19 High Street at once, will you? Hawes has taken some kind of overdose. At once, man, it's vital."

He rang off, strode impatiently up and down the room.

"Why on earth you didn't get hold of the doctor at once, Clement, I cannot think. Your wits must have all gone wool gathering."

Fortunately it never occurs to Melchett that anyone can possibly have different ideas on conduct to those he holds himself. I said nothing, and he went on:

"Where did you find this letter?"

"Crumpled on the floor—where it had fallen from his hand."

"Extraordinary business—that old maid was right about its being the wrong note we found. Wonder how she tumbled to that. But

what an ass the fellow was not to destroy this one. Fancy keeping it—the most damaging evidence you can imagine!”

“Human nature is full of inconsistencies.”

“If it weren’t, I doubt if we should ever catch a murderer! Sooner or later they always do some fool thing. You’re looking very under the weather, Clement. I suppose this has been the most awful shock to you?”

“It has. As I say, Hawes has been queer in his manner for some time, but I never dreamed—”

“Who would? Hallo, that sounds like a car.” He went across to the window, pushing up the sash and leaning out. “Yes, it’s Haydock all right.”

A moment later the doctor entered the room.

In a few succinct words, Melchett explained the situation.

Haydock is not a man who ever shows his feelings. He merely raised his eyebrows, nodded, and strode across to his patient. He felt his pulse, raised the eyelid and looked intently at the eye.

Then he turned to Melchett.

“Want to save him for the gallows?” he asked. “He’s pretty far gone, you know. It will be touch and go, anyway. I doubt if I can bring him round.”

“Do everything possible.”

“Right.”

He busied himself with the case he had brought with him, preparing a hypodermic injection which he injected into Hawes’s arm. Then he stood up.

“Best thing is to run him into Much Benham—to the hospital there. Give me a hand to get him down to the car.”

We both lent our assistance. As Haydock climbed into the driving seat, he threw a parting remark over his shoulder.

“You won’t be able to hang him, you know, Melchett.”

“You mean he won’t recover?”

“May or may not. I didn’t mean that. I mean that even if he does recover—well, the poor devil wasn’t responsible for his actions. I shall give evidence to that effect.”

"What did he mean by that?" asked Melchett as we went upstairs again.

I explained that Hawes had been a victim of encephalitis lethargica.

"Sleepy sickness, eh? Always some good reason nowadays for every dirty action that's done. Don't you agree?"

"Science is teaching us a lot."

"Science be damned—I beg your pardon, Clement; but all this namby pambyism annoys me. I'm a plan man. Well, I suppose we'd better have a look round here."

But at this moment there was an interruption—and a most amazing one. The door opened and Miss Marple walked into the room.

She was pink and somewhat flustered, and seemed to realize our condition of bewilderment.

"So sorry—so very sorry—to intrude—good evening, Colonel Melchett. As I say, I am so sorry, but hearing that Mr. Hawes was taken ill, I felt I must come round and see if I couldn't do something."

She paused. Colonel Melchett was regarding her in a somewhat disgusted fashion.

"Very kind of you, Miss Marple," he said dryly. "But no need to trouble. How did you know, by the way?"

It was the question I had been yearning to ask!

"The telephone," explained Miss Marple. "So careless with their wrong numbers, aren't they? You spoke to me first, thinking I was Dr. Haydock. My number is three five."

"So that was it!" I exclaimed.

There is always some perfectly good and reasonable explanation for Miss Marple's omniscience.

"And so," she continued. "I just came round to see if I could be of any use."

"Very kind of you," said Melchett again, even more dryly this time. "But nothing to be done. Haydock's taken him off to hospital."

"Actually to hospital? Oh, that's a great relief! I am so very glad to hear it. He'll be quite safe there. When you say 'nothing to be done,'

you don't mean that he won't recover?"

"It's very doubtful," I said.

Miss Marple's eyes had gone to the cachet box.

"I suppose he took an overdose?" she said.

Melchett, I think, was in favour of being reticent. Perhaps I might have been under other circumstances. But my discussion of the case with Miss Marple was too fresh in my mind for me to have the same view, though I must admit that her rapid appearance on the scene and eager curiosity repelled me slightly.

"You had better look at this," I said, and handed her Protheroe's unfinished letter.

She took it and read it without any appearance of surprise.

"You had already deduced something of the kind, had you not?" I asked.

"Yes—yes, indeed. May I ask you, Mr. Clement, what made you come here this evening? That is a point which puzzles me. You and Colonel Melchett—not at all what I should have expected."

I explained the telephone call and that I believed I had recognized Hawes's voice. Miss Marple nodded thoughtfully.

"Very interesting. Very providential—if I may use the term. Yes, it brought you here in the nick of time."

"In the nick of time for what?" I said bitterly.

Miss Marple looked surprised.

"To save Mr. Hawes's life, of course."

"Don't you think," I said, "that it might be better if Hawes didn't recover? Better for him—better for everyone. We know the truth now and—"

I stopped—for Miss Marple was nodding her head with such a peculiar vehemence that it made me lose the thread of what I was saying.

"Of course," she said. "Of course! That's what he wants you to think! That you know the truth—and that it's best for everyone as it is. Oh, yes, it all fits in—the letter, and the overdose, and poor Mr. Hawes's state of mind and his confession. It all fits in—*but it's wrong....*"

We stared at her.

"That's why I am so glad Mr. Hawes is safe—in hospital—where no one can get at him. If he recovers, he'll tell you the truth."

"The truth?"

"Yes—that he never touched a hair of Colonel Protheroe's head."

"But the telephone call," I said. "The letter—the overdose. It's all so clear."

"That's what he wants you to think. Oh, he's very clever! Keeping the letter and using it this way was very clever indeed."

"Who do you mean," I said, "by 'he'?"

"I mean the murderer," said Miss Marple.

She added very quietly:

"I mean Mr. Lawrence Redding...."

Thirty

We stared at her. I really think that for a moment or two we really believed she was out of her mind. The accusation seemed so utterly preposterous.

Colonel Melchett was the first to speak. He spoke kindly and with a kind of pitying tolerance.

"That is absurd, Miss Marple," he said. "Young Redding has been completely cleared."

"Naturally," said Miss Marple. "He saw to that."

"On the contrary," said Colonel Melchett dryly. "He did his best to get himself accused of the murder."

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "He took us all in that way—myself as much as anyone else. You will remember, dear Mr. Clement, that I was quite taken aback when I heard Mr. Redding had confessed to the crime. It upset all my ideas and made me think him innocent—when up to then I had felt convinced that he was guilty."

"Then it was Lawrence Redding you suspected?"

"I know that in books it is always the most unlikely person. But I never find that rule applies in real life. There it is so often the obvious that is true. Much as I have always liked Mrs. Protheroe, I could not avoid coming to the conclusion that she was completely under Mr. Redding's thumb and would do anything he told her, and, of course, he is not the kind of young man who would dream of running away with a penniless woman. From his point of view it was necessary that Colonel Protheroe should be removed—and so he

removed him. One of those charming young men who have *no* moral sense."

Colonel Melchett had been snorting impatiently for some time. Now he broke out.

"Absolute nonsense—the whole thing! Redding's time is fully accounted for up to 6:50 and Haydock says positively Protheroe couldn't have been shot then. I suppose you think you know better than a doctor. Or do you suggest that Haydock is deliberately lying—the Lord knows why?"

"I think Dr. Haydock's evidence was absolutely truthful. He is a very upright man. And, of course, it was Mrs. Protheroe who actually shot Colonel Protheroe—not Mr. Redding."

Again we stared at her. Miss Marple arranged her lace fichu, pushed back the fleecy shawl that draped her shoulders, and began to deliver a gentle old-maidish lecture comprising the most astounding statements in the most natural way in the world.

"I have not thought it right to speak until now. One's own belief—even so strong as to amount to knowledge—is not the same as proof. And unless one has an explanation that will fit all the facts (as I was saying to dear Mr. Clement this evening) one cannot advance it with any real conviction. And my own explanation was not quite complete—it lacked just one thing—but suddenly, just as I was leaving Mr. Clement's study, I noticed the palm in the pot by the window—and—well, there the whole thing was! Clear as daylight!"

"Mad—quite mad," murmured Melchett to me.

But Miss Marple beamed on us serenely and went on in her gentle ladylike voice.

"I was very sorry to believe what I did—very sorry. Because I liked them both. But you know what human nature is. And to begin with, when first he and then she both confessed in the most foolish way—well, I was more relieved than I could say. I had been wrong. And I began to think of other people who had a possible motive for wishing Colonel Protheroe out of the way."

"The seven suspects!" I murmured.

She smiled at me.

"Yes, indeed. There was that man Archer—not likely, but primed with drink (so inflaming) you never know. And, of course, there was your Mary. She's been walking out with Archer a long time, and she's a queer-tempered girl. Motive *and* opportunity—why, she was alone in the house! Old Mrs. Archer could easily have got the pistol from Mr. Redding's house for either of those two. And then, of course, there was Lettice—wanting freedom and money to do as she liked. I've known many cases where the most beautiful and ethereal girls have shown next to no moral scruple—though, of course, gentlemen never wish to believe it of them."

I winced.

"And then there was the tennis racquet," continued Miss Marple.

"The tennis racquet?"

"Yes, the one Mrs. Price Ridley's Clara saw lying on the grass by the Vicarage gate. That looked as though Mr. Dennis had got back earlier from his tennis party than he said. Boys of sixteen are so very susceptible and so very unbalanced. Whatever the motive—for Lettice's sake or for yours, it was a possibility. And then, of course, there was poor Mr. Hawes and you—not both of you naturally—but alternatively, as the lawyers say."

"Me?" I exclaimed in lively astonishment.

"Well, yes. I do apologize—and indeed I never really thought—but there was the question of those disappearing sums of money. Either you or Mr. Hawes must be guilty, and Mrs. Price Ridley was going about everywhere hinting that you were the person in fault—principally because you objected so vigorously to any kind of inquiry into the matter. Of course, I myself was always convinced it was Mr. Hawes—he reminded me so much of that unfortunate organist I mentioned; but all the same one couldn't be absolutely *sure*—"

"Human nature being what it is," I ended grimly.

"Exactly. And then, of course, there was dear Griselda."

"But Mrs. Clement was completely out of it," interrupted Melchett. "She returned by the 6:50 train."

"That's what she *said*," retorted Miss Marple. "One should never go by what people say. The 6:50 was half an hour late that night. But at a quarter past seven I saw her with my own eyes starting for

Old Hall. So it followed that she must have come by the earlier train. Indeed she was seen; but perhaps you know that?"

She looked at me inquiringly.

Some magnetism in her glance impelled me to hold out the last anonymous letter, the one I had opened so short a time ago. It set out in detail that Griselda had been seen leaving Lawrence Redding's cottage by the back window at twenty past six on the fatal day.

I said nothing then or at any time of the dreadful suspicion that had for one moment assailed my mind. I had seen it in nightmare terms—a past intrigue between Lawrence and Griselda, the knowledge of it coming to Protheroe's ears, his decision to make me acquainted with the facts—and Griselda, desperate, stealing the pistol and silencing Protheroe. As I say—a nightmare only—but invested for a few long minutes with a dreadful appearance of reality.

I don't know whether Miss Marple had any inkling of all this. Very probably she had. Few things are hidden from her.

She handed me back the note with a little nod.

"That's been all over the village," she said. "And it did look rather suspicious, didn't it? Especially with Mrs. Archer swearing at the inquest that the pistol was still in the cottage when she left at midday."

She paused a minute and then went on.

"But I'm wandering terribly from the point. What I want to say—and believe it my duty—is to put my own explanation of the mystery before you. If you don't believe it—well, I shall have done my best. Even as it is, my wish to be quite sure before I spoke may have cost poor Mr. Hawes his life."

Again she paused, and when she resumed, her voice held a different note. It was less apologetic, more decided.

"That is my own explanation of the facts. By Thursday afternoon the crime had been fully planned down to the smallest detail. Lawrence Redding first called on the Vicar, knowing him to be out. He had with him the pistol which he concealed in that pot in the stand by the window. When the Vicar came in, Lawrence explained his visit by a statement that he had made up his mind to go away. At

five thirty, Lawrence Redding telephoned from the North Lodge to the Vicar, adopting a woman's voice (you remember what a good amateur actor he was).

"Mrs. Protheroe and her husband had just started for the village. And—a very curious thing (though no one happened to think of it that way)—Mrs. Protheroe took no handbag with her. Really a *most* unusual thing for a woman to do. Just before twenty past six she passes my garden and stops and speaks, so as to give me every opportunity of noticing that she has no weapon with her and also that she is quite her normal self. They realized, you see, that I am a noticing kind of person. She disappears round the corner of the house to the study window. The poor Colonel is sitting at the desk writing his letter to you. He is deaf, as we all know. She takes the pistol from the bowl where it is waiting for her, comes up behind him and shoots him through the head, throws down the pistol and is out again like a flash, and going down the garden to the studio. Nearly anyone would swear that there couldn't have been time!"

"But the shot?" objected the Colonel. "You didn't hear the shot?"

"There is, I believe, an invention called a Maxim silencer. So I gather from detective stories. I wonder if, possibly, the sneeze that the maid, Clara, heard might have actually been the shot? But no matter. Mrs. Protheroe is met at the studio by Mr. Redding. They go in together—and, human nature being what it is, I'm afraid they realize that I shan't leave the garden till they come out again!"

I had never liked Miss Marple better than at this moment, with her humorous perception of her own weakness.

"When they do come out, their demeanour is gay and natural. And there, in reality, they made a mistake. Because if they had really said good-bye to each other, as they pretended, they would have looked very different. But you see, that was their weak point. They simply *dare* not appear upset in any way. For the next ten minutes they are careful to provide themselves with what is called an alibi, I believe. Finally Mr. Redding goes to the Vicarage, leaving it as late as he dares. He probably saw you on the footpath from far away and was able to time matters nicely. He picks up the pistol and the silencer, leaves the forged letter with the time on it written in a

different ink and apparently in a different handwriting. When the forgery is discovered it will look like a clumsy attempt to incriminate Anne Protheroe.

"But when he leaves the letter, he finds the one actually written by Colonel Protheroe—something quite unexpected. And being a very intelligent young man, and seeing that this letter may come in very useful to him, he takes it away with him. He alters the hands of the clock to the same time as the letter—knowing that it is always kept a quarter of an hour fast. The same idea—attempt to throw suspicion on Mrs. Protheroe. Then he leaves, meeting you outside the gate, and acting the part of someone nearly distraught. As I say, he is really most intelligent. What would a murderer who had committed a crime try to do? Behave naturally, of course. So that is just what Mr. Redding does not do. He gets rid of the silencer, but marches into the police station with the pistol and makes a perfectly ridiculous self-accusation which takes everybody in."

There was something fascinating in Miss Marple's resumé of the case. She spoke with such certainty that we both felt that in this way and in no other could the crime have been committed.

"What about the shot heard in the wood?" I asked. "Was that the coincidence to which you were referring earlier this evening?"

"Oh, dear, no!" Miss Marple shook her head briskly. "*That* wasn't a coincidence—very far from it. It was absolutely necessary that a shot should be heard—otherwise suspicion of Mrs. Protheroe might have continued. How Mr. Redding arranged it, I don't quite know. But I understand that picric acid explodes if you drop a weight on it, and you will remember, dear Vicar, that you met Mr. Redding carrying a large stone just in the part of the wood where you picked up that crystal later. Gentlemen are so clever at arranging things—the stone suspended above the crystals and then a time fuse—or do I mean a slow match? Something that would take about twenty minutes to burn through—so that the explosion would come about 6:30 when he and Mrs. Protheroe had come out of the studio and were in full view. A very safe device because what would there be to find afterwards—only a big stone! But even that he tried to remove—when you came upon him."

"I believe you are right," I exclaimed, remembering the start of surprise Lawrence had given on seeing me that day. It had seemed natural enough at the time, but now....

Miss Marple seemed to read my thoughts, for she nodded her head shrewdly.

"Yes," she said, "it must have been a very nasty shock for him to come across you just then. But he turned it off very well—pretending he was bringing it to me for my rock gardens. Only—" Miss Marple became suddenly very emphatic. "It was the wrong sort of stone for my rock gardens! And that put me on the right track!"

All this time Colonel Melchett had sat like a man in a trance. Now he showed signs of coming to. He snorted once or twice, blew his nose in a bewildered fashion, and said:

"Upon my word! Well, upon my word!"

Beyond that, he did not commit himself. I think that he, like myself, was impressed with the logical certainty of Miss Marple's conclusions. But for the moment he was not willing to admit it.

Instead, he stretched out a hand, picked up the crumpled letter and barked out:

"All very well. But how do you account for this fellow Hawes! Why, he actually rang up and confessed."

"Yes, that was what was so providential. The Vicar's sermon, doubtless. You know, dear Mr. Clement, you really preached a most remarkable sermon. It must have affected Mr. Hawes deeply. He could bear it no longer, and felt he must confess—about the misappropriations of the church funds."

"What?"

"Yes—and that, under Providence, is what has saved his life. (For I hope and trust it *is* saved. Dr. Haydock is so clever.) As I see the matter, Mr. Redding kept this letter (a risky thing to do, but I expect he hid it in some safe place) and waited till he found out for certain to whom it referred. He soon made quite sure that it was Mr. Hawes. I understand he came back here with Mr. Hawes last night and spent a long time with him. I suspect that he then substituted a cachet of his own for one of Mr. Hawes's, and slipped this letter in the pocket of Mr. Hawes's dressing gown. The poor young man would swallow

the fatal cachet in all innocence—after his death his things would be gone through and the letter found and everyone would jump to the conclusion that he had shot Colonel Protheroe and taken his own life out of remorse. I rather fancy Mr. Hawes must have found that letter tonight just after taking the fatal cachet. In his disordered state, it must have seemed like something supernatural, and, coming on top of the Vicar's sermon, it must have impelled him to confess the whole thing."

"Upon my word," said Colonel Melchett. "Upon my word! *Most* extraordinary! I—I—don't believe a word of it."

He had never made a statement that sounded more unconvincing. It must have sounded so in his own ears, for he went on:

"And can you explain the other telephone call—the one from Mr. Redding's cottage to Mrs. Price Ridley?"

"Ah!" said Miss Marple. "That is what I call the coincidence. Dear Griselda sent that call—she and Mr. Dennis between them, I fancy. They had heard the rumours Mrs. Price Ridley was circulating about the Vicar, and they thought of this (perhaps rather childish) way of silencing her. The coincidence lies in the fact that the call should have been put through at exactly the same time as the fake shot from the wood. It led one to believe that the two must be connected."

I suddenly remembered how everyone who spoke of that shot had described it as "different" from the usual shot. They had been right. Yet how hard to explain just in what way the "difference" of the shot consisted.

Colonel Melchett cleared his throat.

"Your solution is a very plausible one, Miss Marple," he said. "But you will allow me to point out that there is not a shadow of proof."

"I know," said Miss Marple. "But you believe it to be true, don't you?"

There was a pause, then the Colonel said almost reluctantly:

"Yes, I do. Dash it all, it's the only way the thing could have happened. But there's no proof—not an atom."

Miss Marple coughed.

"That is why I thought perhaps under the circumstances—"

"Yes?"

"A little trap might be permissible."

Thirty-one

Colonel Melchett and I both stared at her.

"A trap? What kind of a trap?"

Miss Marple was a little diffident, but it was clear that she had a plan fully outlined.

"Supposing Mr. Redding were to be rung up on the telephone and warned."

Colonel Melchett smiled.

"All is discovered. Fly! That's an old wheeze, Miss Marple. Not that it isn't often successful! But I think in this case young Redding is too downy a bird to be caught that way."

"It would have to be something specific. I quite realize that," said Miss Marple. "I would suggest—this is just a mere suggestion—that the warning should come from somebody who is known to have rather unusual views on these matters. Dr. Haydock's conversation would lead anyone to suppose that he might view such a thing as murder from an unusual angle. If he were to hint that somebody—Mrs. Sadler—or one of her children—had actually happened to see the transposing of the cachets—well, of course, if Mr. Redding is an innocent man, that statement will mean nothing to him, but if he isn't—"

"Well, he might just possibly do something foolish."

"And deliver himself into our hands. It's possible. Very ingenious, Miss Marple. But will Haydock stand for it? As you say, his views—"

Miss Marple interrupted him brightly.

"Oh, but that's theory! So very different from practice, isn't it? But anyway, here he is, so we can ask him."

Haydock was, I think, rather astonished to find Miss Marple with us. He looked tired and haggard.

"It's been a near thing," he said. "A very near thing. But he's going to pull through. It's a doctor's business to save his patient and I saved him, but I'd have been just as glad if I hadn't pulled it off."

"You may think differently," said Melchett, "when you have heard what we have to tell you."

And briefly and succinctly, he put Miss Marple's theory of the crime before the doctor, ending up with her final suggestion.

We were then privileged to see exactly what Miss Marple meant by the difference between theory and practice.

Haydock's views appeared to have undergone a complete transformation. He would, I think, have liked Lawrence Redding's head on a charger. It was not, I imagine, the murder of Colonel Protheroe that so stirred his rancour. It was the assault on the unlucky Hawes.

"The damned scoundrel," said Haydock. "The damned scoundrel! That poor devil Hawes. He's got a mother and a sister too. The stigma of being the mother and sister of a murderer would have rested on them for life, and think of their mental anguish. Of all the cowardly dastardly tricks!"

For sheer primitive rage, commend me to a thoroughgoing humanitarian when you get him well roused.

"If this thing's true," he said, "you can count on me. The fellow's not fit to live. A defenceless chap like Hawes."

A lame dog of any kind can always count on Haydock's sympathy.

He was eagerly arranging details with Melchett when Miss Marple rose and I insisted on seeing her home.

"It is most kind of you, Mr. Clement," said Miss Marple, as we walked down the deserted street. "Dear me, past twelve o'clock. I hope Raymond has gone to bed and not waited up."

"He should have accompanied you," I said.

"I didn't let him know I was going," said Miss Marple.

I smiled suddenly as I remembered Raymond West's subtle psychological analysis of the crime.

"If your theory turns out to be the truth—which I for one do not doubt for a minute," I said, "you will have a very good score over your nephew."

Miss Marple smiled also—an indulgent smile.

"I remember a saying of my Great Aunt Fanny's. I was sixteen at the time and thought it particularly foolish."

"Yes?" I inquired.

"She used to say: 'The young people think the old people are fools; but the old people *know* the young people are fools!'"

Thirty-two

There is little more to be told. Miss Marple's plan succeeded. Lawrence Redding was not an innocent man, and the hint of a witness of the change of capsule did indeed cause him to do "something foolish." Such is the power of an evil conscience.

He was, of course, peculiarly placed. His first impulse, I imagine, must have been to cut and run. But there was his accomplice to consider. He could not leave without getting word to her, and he dared not wait till morning. So he went up to Old Hall that night—and two of Colonel Melchett's most efficient officers followed him. He threw gravel at Anne Protheroe's window, aroused her, and an urgent whisper brought her down to speak with him. Doubtless they felt safer outside than in—with the possibility of Lettice waking. But as it happened, the two police officers were able to overhear the conversation in full. It left the matter in no doubt. Miss Marple had been right on every count.

The trial of Lawrence Redding and Anne Protheroe is a matter of public knowledge. I do not propose to go into it. I will only mention that great credit was reflected upon Inspector Slack, whose zeal and intelligence had resulted in the criminals being brought to justice. Naturally, nothing was said of Miss Marple's share in the business. She herself would have been horrified at the thought of such a thing.

Lettice came to see me just before the trial took place. She drifted through my study window, wraithlike as ever. She told me then that she had all along been convinced of her stepmother's

complicity. The loss of the yellow beret had been a mere excuse for searching the study. She hoped against hope that she might find something the police had overlooked.

"You see," she said in her dreamy voice, "they didn't hate her like I did. And hate makes things easier for you."

Disappointed in the result of her search, she had deliberately dropped Anne's earring by the desk.

"Since I *knew* she had done it, what did it matter? One way was as good as another. She *had* killed him."

I sighed a little. There are always some things that Lettice will never see. In some respects she is morally colour blind.

"What are you going to do, Lettice?" I asked.

"When—when it's all over, I am going abroad." She hesitated and then went on. "I am going abroad with my mother."

I looked up, startled.

She nodded.

"Didn't you ever guess? Mrs. Lestrangle is my mother. She is—is dying, you know. She wanted to see me and so she came down here under an assumed name. Dr. Haydock helped her. He's a very old friend of hers—he was keen about her once—you can see that! In a way, he still is. Men always went batty about mother, I believe. She's awfully attractive even now. Anyway, Dr. Haydock did everything he could to help her. She didn't come down here under her own name because of the disgusting way people talk and gossip. She went to see father that night and told him she was dying and had a great longing to see something of me. Father was a beast. He said she'd forfeited all claim, and that I thought she was dead—as though I had ever swallowed that story! Men like father never see an inch before their noses!

"But mother is not the sort to give in. She thought it only decent to go to father first, but when he turned her down so brutally she sent a note to me, and I arranged to leave the tennis party early and meet her at the end of the footpath at a quarter past six. We just had a hurried meeting and arranged when to meet again. We left each other before half past six. Afterwards I was terrified that she would be suspected of having killed father. After all, she *had* got a

grudge against him. That's why I got hold of that old picture of her up in the attic and slashed it about. I was afraid the police might go nosing about and get hold of it and recognize it. Dr. Haydock was frightened too. Sometimes, I believe, he really thought she had done it! Mother is rather a—desperate kind of person. She doesn't count consequences."

She paused.

"It's queer. She and I belong to each other. Father and I didn't. But mother—well, anyway, I'm going abroad with her. I shall be with her till—till the end...."

She got up and I took her hand.

"God bless you both," I said. "Some day, I hope, there is a lot of happiness coming to you, Lettice."

"There should be," she said, with an attempt at a laugh. "There hasn't been much so far—has there? Oh, well, I don't suppose it matters. Good-bye, Mr. Clement. You've been frightfully decent to me always—you and Griselda."

Griselda!

I had to own to her how terribly the anonymous letter had upset me, and first she laughed, and then solemnly read me a lecture.

"However," she added, "I'm going to be very sober and Godfearing in future—quite like the Pilgrim fathers."

I did not see Griselda in the rôle of a Pilgrim father.

She went on:

"You see, Len, I have a steadying influence coming into my life. It's coming into your life, too, but in your case it will be a kind of—of rejuvenating one—at least, I hope so! You can't call me a dear child half so much when we have a real child of our own. And, Len, I've decided that now I'm going to be a real 'wife and mother' (as they say in books), I must be a housekeeper too. I've bought two books on Household Management and one on Mother Love, and if that doesn't turn me out a pattern I don't know what will! They are all simply screamingly funny—not intentionally, you know. Especially the one about bringing up children."

"You haven't bought a book on How to Treat a Husband, have you?" I asked, with sudden apprehension as I drew her to me.

"I don't need to," said Griselda. "I'm a very good wife. I love you dearly. What more do you want?"

"Nothing," I said.

"Could you say, just for once, that you love me madly?"

"Griselda," I said—"I adore you! I worship you! I am wildly, hopelessly and quite unclerically crazy about you!"

My wife gave a deep and contented sigh.

Then she drew away suddenly.

"Bother! Here's Miss Marple coming. Don't let her suspect, will you? I don't want everyone offering me cushions and urging me to put my feet up. Tell her I've gone down to the golf links. That will put her off the scent—and it's quite true because I left my yellow pullover there and I want it."

Miss Marple came to the window, halted apologetically, and asked for Griselda.

"Griselda," I said, "has gone to the golf links."

An expression of concern leaped into Miss Marple's eyes.

"Oh, but surely," she said, "that is most unwise—just now."

And then in a nice, old-fashioned, ladylike, maiden lady way, she blushed.

And to cover the moment's confusion, we talked hurriedly of the Protheroe case, and of "Dr. Stone," who had turned out to be a well-known cracksman with several different aliases. Miss Cram, by the way, had been cleared of all complicity. She had at last admitted taking the suitcase to the wood, but had done so in all good faith, Dr. Stone having told her that he feared the rivalry of other archaeologists who would not stick at burglary to gain their object of discrediting his theories. The girl apparently swallowed this not very plausible story. She is now, according to the village, looking out for a more genuine article in the line of an elderly bachelor requiring a secretary.

As we talked, I wondered very much how Miss Marple had discovered our latest secret. But presently, in a discreet fashion, Miss Marple herself supplied me with a clue.

"I hope dear Griselda is not overdoing it," she murmured, and, after a discreet pause, "I was in the bookshop in Much Benham

yesterday—”

Poor Griselda—that book on Mother Love has been her undoing!

“I wonder, Miss Marple,” I said suddenly, “if you were to commit a murder whether you would ever be found out.”

“What a terrible idea,” said Miss Marple, shocked. “I hope I could never do such a wicked thing.”

“But human nature being what it is,” I murmured.

Miss Marple acknowledged the hit with a pretty old-ladyish laugh.

“How naughty of you, Mr. Clement.” She rose. “But naturally you are in good spirits.”

She paused by the window.

“My love to dear Griselda—and tell her—that any little secret is quite safe with me.”

Really Miss Marple is rather a dear....

MISS
MARPLE

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha
Christie

THE BODY IN THE



LIBRARY



A Miss Marple Mystery

Agatha Christie

The Body in the Library

A Miss Marple Mystery

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To My Friend Nan

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Foreword

There are certain clichés belonging to certain types of fiction. The “bold bad baronet” for melodrama, the “body in the library” for the detective story. For several years I treasured up the possibility of a suitable “Variation on a well-known Theme.” I laid down for myself certain conditions. The library in question must be a highly orthodox and conventional library. The body, on the other hand, must be a wildly improbable and highly sensational body. Such were the terms of the problem, but for some years they remained as such, represented only by a few lines of writing in an exercise book. Then, staying one summer for a few days at a fashionable hotel by the seaside I observed a family at one of the tables in the dining room; an elderly man, a cripple, in a wheeled chair, and with him was a family party of a younger generation. Fortunately they left the next day, so that my imagination could get to work unhampered by any kind of knowledge. When people ask “Do you put real people in your books?” the answer is that, for me, it is quite impossible to write about anyone I know, or have ever spoken to, or indeed have even heard about! For some reason, it kills them for me stone dead. But I can take a “lay figure” and endow it with qualities and imaginings of my own.

So an elderly crippled man became the pivot of the story. Colonel and Mrs. Bantry, those old cronies of my Miss Marple, had just the right kind of library. In the manner of a cookery recipe add the following ingredients: a tennis pro, a young dancer, an artist, a girl guide, a dance hostess, etc., and serve up *à la* Miss Marple!

Agatha Christie

One

I

Mrs. Bantry was dreaming. Her sweet peas had just taken a First at the flower show. The vicar, dressed in cassock and surplice, was giving out the prizes in church. His wife wandered past, dressed in a bathing suit, but as is the blessed habit of dreams this fact did not arouse the disapproval of the parish in the way it would assuredly have done in real life....

Mrs. Bantry was enjoying her dream a good deal. She usually did enjoy those early-morning dreams that were terminated by the arrival of early-morning tea. Somewhere in her inner consciousness was an awareness of the usual early-morning noises of the household. The rattle of the curtain rings on the stairs as the housemaid drew them, the noises of the second housemaid's dustpan and brush in the passage outside. In the distance the heavy noise of the front-door bolt being drawn back.

Another day was beginning. In the meantime she must extract as much pleasure as possible from the flower show—for already its dream-like quality was becoming apparent....

Below her was the noise of the big wooden shutters in the drawing room being opened. She heard it, yet did not hear it. For quite half an hour longer the usual household noises would go on, discreet, subdued, not disturbing because they were so familiar. They would culminate in a swift, controlled sound of footsteps along the passage, the rustle of a print dress, the subdued chink of tea

things as the tray was deposited on the table outside, then the soft knock and the entry of Mary to draw the curtains.

In her sleep Mrs. Bantry frowned. Something disturbing was penetrating through to the dream state, something out of its time. Footsteps along the passage, footsteps that were too hurried and too soon. Her ears listened unconsciously for the chink of china, but there was no chink of china.

The knock came at the door. Automatically from the depths of her dreams Mrs. Bantry said: "Come in." The door opened—now there would be the chink of curtain rings as the curtains were drawn back.

But there was no chink of curtain rings. Out of the dim green light Mary's voice came—breathless, hysterical: "Oh, ma'am, oh, ma'am, *there's a body in the library.*"

And then with a hysterical burst of sobs she rushed out of the room again.

II

Mrs. Bantry sat up in bed.

Either her dream had taken a very odd turn or else—or else Mary had really rushed into the room and had said (incredible! fantastic!) that there was a body in the library.

"Impossible," said Mrs. Bantry to herself. "I must have been dreaming."

But even as she said it, she felt more and more certain that she had not been dreaming, that Mary, her superior self-controlled Mary, had actually uttered those fantastic words.

Mrs. Bantry reflected a minute and then applied an urgent conjugal elbow to her sleeping spouse.

"Arthur, Arthur, wake up."

Colonel Bantry grunted, muttered, and rolled over on his side.

"Wake up, Arthur. Did you hear what she said?"

"Very likely," said Colonel Bantry indistinctly. "I quite agree with you, Dolly," and promptly went to sleep again.

Mrs. Bantry shook him.

"You've got to listen. Mary came in and said that there was a body in the library."

"Eh, what?"

"A *body* in the *library*."

"Who said so?"

"Mary."

Colonel Bantry collected his scattered faculties and proceeded to deal with the situation. He said:

"Nonsense, old girl; you've been dreaming."

"No, I haven't. I thought so, too, at first. But I haven't. She really came in and said so."

"Mary came in and said there was a body in the library?"

"Yes."

"But there couldn't be," said Colonel Bantry.

"No, no, I suppose not," said Mrs. Bantry doubtfully.

Rallying, she went on:

"But then why did Mary say there was?"

"She can't have."

"She did."

"You must have imagined it."

"I didn't imagine it."

Colonel Bantry was by now thoroughly awake and prepared to deal with the situation on its merits. He said kindly:

"You've been dreaming, Dolly, that's what it is. It's that detective story you were reading—*The Clue of the Broken Match*. You know—Lord Edgbaston finds a beautiful blonde dead on the library hearthrug. Bodies are always being found in libraries in books. I've never known a case in real life."

"Perhaps you will now," said Mrs. Bantry. "Anyway, Arthur, you've got to get up and see."

"But really, Dolly, it *must* have been a dream. Dreams often do seem wonderfully vivid when you first wake up. You feel quite sure they're true."

"I was having quite a different sort of dream—about a flower show and the vicar's wife in a bathing dress—something like that."

With a sudden burst of energy Mrs. Bantry jumped out of bed and pulled back the curtains. The light of a fine autumn day flooded the room.

"I did *not* dream it," said Mrs. Bantry firmly. "Get up at once, Arthur, and go downstairs and see about it."

"You want me to go downstairs and ask if there's a body in the library? I shall look a damned fool."

"You needn't ask anything," said Mrs. Bantry. "If there *is* a body—and of course it's just possible that Mary's gone mad and thinks she sees things that aren't there—well, somebody will tell you soon enough. *You* won't have to say a word."

Grumbling, Colonel Bantry wrapped himself in his dressing gown and left the room. He went along the passage and down the staircase. At the foot of it was a little knot of huddled servants; some of them were sobbing. The butler stepped forward impressively.

"I'm glad you have come, sir. I have directed that nothing should be done until you came. Will it be in order for me to ring up the police, sir?"

"Ring 'em up about what?"

The butler cast a reproachful glance over his shoulder at the tall young woman who was weeping hysterically on the cook's shoulder.

"I understood, sir, that Mary had already informed you. She said she had done so."

Mary gasped out:

"I was so upset I don't know what I said. It all came over me again and my legs gave way and my inside turned over. Finding it like that—oh, oh, oh!"

She subsided again on to Mrs. Eccles, who said: "There, there, my dear," with some relish.

"Mary is naturally somewhat upset, sir, having been the one to make the gruesome discovery," explained the butler. "She went into the library as usual, to draw the curtains, and—almost stumbled over the body."

"Do you mean to tell me," demanded Colonel Bantry, "that there's a dead body in my library—*my* library?"

The butler coughed.

"Perhaps, sir, you would like to see for yourself."

III

"Hallo, 'allo, 'allo. Police station here. Yes, who's speaking?"

Police-Constable Palk was buttoning up his tunic with one hand while the other held the receiver.

"Yes, yes, Gossington Hall. Yes? Oh, good morning, sir." Police-Constable Palk's tone underwent a slight modification. It became less impatiently official, recognizing the generous patron of the police sports and the principal magistrate of the district.

"Yes, sir? What can I do for you?—I'm sorry, sir, I didn't quite catch—a *body*, did you say?—yes?—yes, if you please, sir—that's right, sir—young woman not known to you, you say?—quite, sir. Yes, you can leave it all to me."

Police-Constable Palk replaced the receiver, uttered a longdrawn whistle and proceeded to dial his superior officer's number.

Mrs. Palk looked in from the kitchen whence proceeded an appetizing smell of frying bacon.

"What is it?"

"Rummett thing you ever heard of," replied her husband. "Body of a young woman found up at the Hall. In the Colonel's library."

"Murdered?"

"Strangled, so he says."

"Who was she?"

"The Colonel says he doesn't know her from Adam."

"Then what was she doing in 'is library?"

Police-Constable Palk silenced her with a reproachful glance and spoke officially into the telephone.

"Inspector Slack? Police-Constable Palk here. A report has just come in that the body of a young woman was discovered this morning at seven-fifteen—"

IV

Miss Marple's telephone rang when she was dressing. The sound of it flurried her a little. It was an unusual hour for her telephone to ring. So well ordered was her prim spinster's life that unforeseen telephone calls were a source of vivid conjecture.

"Dear me," said Miss Marple, surveying the ringing instrument with perplexity. "I wonder who that can be?"

Nine o'clock to nine-thirty was the recognized time for the village to make friendly calls to neighbours. Plans for the day, invitations and so on were always issued then. The butcher had been known to ring up just before nine if some crisis in the meat trade had occurred. At intervals during the day spasmodic calls might occur, though it was considered bad form to ring after nine-thirty at night. It was true that Miss Marple's nephew, a writer, and therefore erratic, had been known to ring up at the most peculiar times, once as late as ten minutes to midnight. But whatever Raymond West's eccentricities, early rising was not one of them. Neither he nor anyone of Miss Marple's acquaintance would be likely to ring up before eight in the morning. Actually a quarter to eight.

Too early even for a telegram, since the post office did not open until eight.

"It must be," Miss Marple decided, "a wrong number."

Having decided this, she advanced to the impatient instrument and quelled its clamour by picking up the receiver. "Yes?" she said.

"Is that you, Jane?"

Miss Marple was much surprised.

"Yes, it's Jane. You're up very early, Dolly."

Mrs. Bantry's voice came breathless and agitated over the wires.

"The most awful thing has happened."

"Oh, my dear."

"We've just found a body in the library."

For a moment Miss Marple thought her friend had gone mad.

"You've found a *what?*"

"I know. One doesn't believe it, does one? I mean, I thought they only happened in books. I had to argue for hours with Arthur this morning before he'd even go down and see."

Miss Marple tried to collect herself. She demanded breathlessly:
"But whose body is it?"

"It's a blonde."

"A what?"

"A blonde. A beautiful blonde—like books again. None of us have ever seen her before. She's just lying there in the library, dead. That's why you've got to come up at once."

"You want *me* to come up?"

"Yes, I'm sending the car down for you."

Miss Marple said doubtfully:

"Of course, dear, if you think I can be of any comfort to you—"

"Oh, I don't want comfort. But you're so good at bodies."

"Oh no, indeed. My little successes have been mostly theoretical."

"But you're very good at murders. She's been murdered, you see, strangled. What I feel is that if one has got to have a murder actually happening in one's house, one might as well enjoy it, if you know what I mean. That's why I want you to come and help me find out who did it and unravel the mystery and all that. It really *is* rather thrilling, isn't it?"

"Well, of course, my dear, if I can be of any *help* to you."

"Splendid! Arthur's being rather difficult. He seems to think I shouldn't enjoy myself about it at all. Of course, I do know it's very sad and all that, but then I don't know the girl—and when you've seen her you'll understand what I mean when I say she doesn't look *real* at all."

V

A little breathless, Miss Marple alighted from the Bantry's car, the door of which was held open for her by the chauffeur.

Colonel Bantry came out on the steps, and looked a little surprised.

"Miss Marple?—er—very pleased to see you."

"Your wife telephoned to me," explained Miss Marple.

"Capital, capital. She ought to have someone with her. She'll crack up otherwise. She's putting a good face on things at the moment, but you know what it is—"

At this moment Mrs. Bantry appeared, and exclaimed:

"Do go back into the dining room and eat your breakfast, Arthur. Your bacon will get cold."

"I thought it might be the Inspector arriving," explained Colonel Bantry.

"He'll be here soon enough," said Mrs. Bantry. "That's why it's important to get your breakfast first. You need it."

"So do you. Much better come and eat something. Dolly—"

"I'll come in a minute," said Mrs. Bantry. "Go on, Arthur."

Colonel Bantry was shooed back into the dining room like a recalcitrant hen.

"*Now!*" said Mrs. Bantry with an intonation of triumph. "Come on."

She led the way rapidly along the long corridor to the east of the house. Outside the library door Constable Palk stood on guard. He intercepted Mrs. Bantry with a show of authority.

"I'm afraid nobody is allowed in, madam. Inspector's orders."

"Nonsense, Palk," said Mrs. Bantry. "You know Miss Marple perfectly well."

Constable Palk admitted to knowing Miss Marple.

"It's very important that she should see the body," said Mrs. Bantry. "Don't be stupid, Palk. After all, it's *my* library, isn't it?"

Constable Palk gave way. His habit of giving in to the gentry was lifelong. The Inspector, he reflected, need never know about it.

"Nothing must be touched or handled in any way," he warned the ladies.

"Of course not," said Mrs. Bantry impatiently. "We know *that*. You can come in and watch, if you like."

Constable Palk availed himself of this permission. It had been his intention, anyway.

Mrs. Bantry bore her friend triumphantly across the library to the big old-fashioned fireplace. She said, with a dramatic sense of climax: "There!"

Miss Marple understood then just what her friend had meant when she said the dead girl wasn't real. The library was a room very typical of its owners. It was large and shabby and untidy. It had big sagging armchairs, and pipes and books and estate papers laid out on the big table. There were one or two good old family portraits on the walls, and some bad Victorian watercolours, and some would-be-funny hunting scenes. There was a big vase of Michaelmas daisies in the corner. The whole room was dim and mellow and casual. It spoke of long occupation and familiar use and of links with tradition.

And across the old bearskin hearthrug there was sprawled something new and crude and melodramatic.

The flamboyant figure of a girl. A girl with unnaturally fair hair dressed up off her face in elaborate curls and rings. Her thin body was dressed in a backless evening dress of white spangled satin. The face was heavily made-up, the powder standing out grotesquely on its blue swollen surface, the mascara of the lashes lying thickly on the distorted cheeks, the scarlet of the lips looking like a gash. The fingernails were enamelled in a deep blood-red and so were the toenails in their cheap silver sandal shoes. It was a cheap, tawdry, flamboyant figure—most incongruous in the solid old-fashioned comfort of Colonel Banttry's library.

Mrs. Banttry said in a low voice:

"You see what I mean? It just isn't *true!*"

The old lady by her side nodded her head. She looked down long and thoughtfully at the huddled figure.

She said at last in a gentle voice:

"She's very young."

"Yes—yes—I suppose she is." Mrs. Banttry seemed almost surprised—like one making a discovery.

Miss Marple bent down. She did not touch the girl. She looked at the fingers that clutched frantically at the front of the girl's dress, as though she had clawed it in her last frantic struggle for breath.

There was the sound of a car scrunching on the gravel outside. Constable Palk said with urgency:

"That'll be the Inspector...."

True to his ingrained belief that the gentry didn't let you down, Mrs. Bantry immediately moved to the door. Miss Marple followed her. Mrs. Bantry said:

"That'll be all right, Palk."

Constable Palk was immensely relieved.

VI

Hastily downing the last fragments of toast and marmalade with a drink of coffee, Colonel Bantry hurried out into the hall and was relieved to see Colonel Melchett, the Chief Constable of the county, descending from a car with Inspector Slack in attendance. Melchett was a friend of the Colonel's. Slack he had never much taken to—an energetic man who belied his name and who accompanied his bustling manner with a good deal of disregard for the feelings of anyone he did not consider important.

"Morning, Bantry," said the Chief Constable. "Thought I'd better come along myself. This seems an extraordinary business."

"It's—it's—" Colonel Bantry struggled to express himself. "It's *incredible—fantastic!*"

"No idea who the woman is?"

"Not the slightest. Never set eyes on her in my life."

"Butler know anything?" asked Inspector Slack.

"Lorrimer is just as taken aback as I am."

"Ah," said Inspector Slack. "I wonder."

Colonel Bantry said:

"There's breakfast in the dining room, Melchett, if you'd like anything?"

"No, no—better get on with the job. Haydock ought to be here any minute now—ah, here he is."

Another car drew up and big, broad-shouldered Doctor Haydock, who was also the police surgeon, got out. A second police car had disgorged two plainclothes men, one with a camera.

"All set—eh?" said the Chief Constable. "Right. We'll go along. In the library, Slack tells me."

Colonel Bantry groaned.

"It's incredible! You know, when my wife insisted this morning that the housemaid had come in and said there was a body in the library, I just wouldn't believe her."

"No, no, I can quite understand that. Hope your missus isn't too badly upset by it all?"

"She's been wonderful—really wonderful. She's got old Miss Marple up here with her—from the village, you know."

"Miss Marple?" The Chief Constable stiffened. "Why did she send for her?"

"Oh, a woman wants another woman—don't you think so?"

Colonel Melchett said with a slight chuckle:

"If you ask me, your wife's going to try her hand at a little amateur detecting. Miss Marple's quite the local sleuth. Put it over us properly once, didn't she, Slack?"

Inspector Slack said: "That was different."

"Different from what?"

"That was a local case, that was, sir. The old lady knows everything that goes on in the village, that's true enough. But she'll be out of her depth here."

Melchett said dryly: "You don't know very much about it yourself yet, Slack."

"Ah, you wait, sir. It won't take me long to get down to it."

VII

In the dining room Mrs. Bantry and Miss Marple, in their turn, were partaking of breakfast.

After waiting on her guest, Mrs. Bantry said urgently:

"Well, Jane?"

Miss Marple looked up at her, slightly bewildered.

Mrs. Bantry said hopefully:

"Doesn't it *remind* you of anything?"

For Miss Marple had attained fame by her ability to link up trivial village happenings with graver problems in such a way as to throw

light upon the latter.

"No," said Miss Marple thoughtfully, "I can't say that it does—not at the moment. I was reminded a little of Mrs. Chetty's youngest—Edie, you know—but I think that was just because this poor girl bit her nails and her front teeth stuck out a little. Nothing more than that. And, of course," went on Miss Marple, pursuing the parallel further, "Edie was fond of what I call cheap finery, too."

"You mean her dress?" said Mrs. Bantry.

"Yes, a very tawdry satin—poor quality."

Mrs. Bantry said:

"I know. One of those nasty little shops where everything is a guinea." She went on hopefully:

"Let me see, what happened to Mrs. Chetty's Edie?"

"She's just gone into her second place—and doing very well, I believe."

Mrs. Bantry felt slightly disappointed. The village parallel didn't seem to be exactly hopeful.

"What I can't make out," said Mrs. Bantry, "is what she could possibly be doing in Arthur's study. The window was forced, Palk tells me. She might have come down here with a burglar and then they quarrelled—but that seems such nonsense, doesn't it?"

"She was hardly dressed for burglary," said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

"No, she was dressed for dancing—or a party of some kind. But there's nothing of that kind down here—or anywhere near."

"N-n-o," said Miss Marple doubtfully.

Mrs. Bantry pounced.

"Something's in your mind, Jane."

"Well, I was just wondering—"

"Yes?"

"Basil Blake."

Mrs. Bantry cried impulsively: "Oh, no!" and added as though in explanation, "I know his mother."

The two women looked at each other.

Miss Marple sighed and shook her head.

"I quite understand how you feel about it."

"Selina Blake is the nicest woman imaginable. Her herbaceous borders are simply marvellous—they make me green with envy. And she's frightfully generous with cuttings."

Miss Marple, passing over these claims to consideration on the part of Mrs. Blake, said:

"All the same, you know, there has been a lot of *talk*."

"Oh, I know—I know. And of course Arthur goes simply livid when he hears Basil Blake mentioned. He was really *very* rude to Arthur, and since then Arthur won't hear a good word for him. He's got that silly slighting way of talking that these boys have nowadays—sneering at people sticking up for their school or the Empire or that sort of thing. And then, of course, the *clothes* he wears!"

"People say," continued Mrs. Bantry, "that it doesn't matter what you wear in the country. I never heard such nonsense. It's just in the country that everyone notices." She paused, and added wistfully: "He was an adorable baby in his bath."

"There was a lovely picture of the Cheviot murderer as a baby in the paper last Sunday," said Miss Marple.

"Oh, but Jane, you don't think *he*—"

"No, no, dear. I didn't mean that at all. That would indeed be jumping to conclusions. I was just trying to account for the young woman's presence down here. St. Mary Mead is such an unlikely place. And then it seemed to me that the only possible explanation was Basil Blake. He *does* have parties. People came down from London and from the studios—you remember last July? Shouting and singing—the most *terrible* noise—everyone very drunk, I'm afraid—and the mess and the broken glass next morning simply unbelievable—so old Mrs. Berry told me—and a young woman asleep in the bath with practically *nothing on!*"

Mrs. Bantry said indulgently:

"I suppose they were film people."

"Very likely. And then—what I expect you've heard—several weekends lately he's brought down a young woman with him—a platinum blonde."

Mrs. Bantry exclaimed:

"You don't think it's *this* one?"

“Well—I wondered. Of course, I’ve never seen her close to—only just getting in and out of the car—and once in the cottage garden when she was sunbathing with just some shorts and a brassière. I never really saw her *face*. And all these girls with their makeup and their hair and their nails look so alike.”

“Yes. Still, it *might* be. It’s an idea, Jane.”

Two

I

It was an idea that was being at that moment discussed by Colonel Melchett and Colonel Bantry.

The Chief Constable, after viewing the body and seeing his subordinates set to work on their routine tasks, had adjourned with the master of the house to the study in the other wing of the house.

Colonel Melchett was an irascible-looking man with a habit of tugging at his short red moustache. He did so now, shooting a perplexed sideways glance at the other man. Finally, he rapped out:

"Look here, Bantry, got to get this off my chest. Is it a fact that you don't know from Adam who this girl is?"

The other's answer was explosive, but the Chief Constable interrupted him.

"Yes, yes, old man, but look at it like this. Might be deuced awkward for you. Married man—fond of your missus and all that. But just between ourselves—if you *were* tied up with this girl in any way, better say so *now*. Quite natural to want to suppress the fact—should feel the same myself. But it won't do. Murder case. Facts bound to come out. Dash it all, I'm not suggesting *you* strangled the girl—not the sort of thing you'd do—I know that. But, after all, she came here—to this house. Put it she broke in and was waiting to see you, and some bloke or other followed her down and did her in. Possible, you know. See what I mean?"

"Damn it all, Melchett, I tell you I've never set eyes on that girl in my life! I'm not that sort of man."

"That's all right, then. Shouldn't blame you, you know. Man of the world. Still, if you say so—Question is, what was she doing down here? She doesn't come from these parts—that's quite certain."

"The whole thing's a nightmare," fumed the angry master of the house.

"The point is, old man, what was she doing in your library?"

"How should I know? *I* didn't ask her here."

"No, no. But she *came* here, all the same. Looks as though she wanted to see you. You haven't had any odd letters or anything?"

"No, I haven't."

Colonel Melchett inquired delicately:

"What were you doing yourself last night?"

"I went to the meeting of the Conservative Association. Nine o'clock, at Much Benham."

"And you got home when?"

"I left Much Benham just after ten—had a bit of trouble on the way home, had to change a wheel. I got back at a quarter to twelve."

"You didn't go into the library?"

"No."

"Pity."

"I was tired. I went straight up to bed."

"Anyone waiting up for you?"

"No. I always take the latchkey. Lorrimer goes to bed at eleven unless I give orders to the contrary."

"Who shuts up the library?"

"Lorrimer. Usually about seven-thirty this time of year."

"Would he go in there again during the evening?"

"Not with my being out. He left the tray with whisky and glasses in the hall."

"I see. What about your wife?"

"I don't know. She was in bed when I got home and fast asleep. She may have sat in the library yesterday evening or in the drawing room. I forgot to ask her."

"Oh well, we shall soon know all the details. Of course, it's possible one of the servants may be concerned, eh?"

Colonel Bantry shook his head.

"I don't believe it. They're all a most respectable lot. We've had 'em for years."

Melchett agreed.

"Yes, it doesn't seem likely that they're mixed up in it. Looks more as though the girl came down from town—perhaps with some young fellow. Though why they wanted to break into this house—"

Bantry interrupted.

"London. That's more like it. We don't have goings on down here—at least—"

"Well, what is it?"

"Upon my word!" exploded Colonel Bantry. "Basil Blake!"

"Who's he?"

"Young fellow connected with the film industry. Poisonous young brute. My wife sticks up for him because she was at school with his mother, but of all the decadent useless young jackanapes! Wants his behind kicked! He's taken that cottage on the Lansham Road—you know—ghastly modern bit of building. He has parties there, shrieking, noisy crowds, and he has girls down for the weekend."

"Girls?"

"Yes, there was one last week—one of these platinum blondes—"

The Colonel's jaw dropped.

"A platinum blonde, eh?" said Melchett reflectively.

"Yes. I say, Melchett, you don't think—"

The Chief Constable said briskly:

"It's a possibility. It accounts for a girl of this type being in St. Mary Mead. I think I'll run along and have a word with this young fellow—Braid—Blake—what did you say his name was?"

"Blake. Basil Blake."

"Will he be at home, do you know?"

"Let me see. What's today—Saturday? Usually gets here sometime Saturday morning."

Melchett said grimly:

"We'll see if we can find him."

II

Basil Blake's cottage, which consisted of all modern conveniences enclosed in a hideous shell of half timbering and sham Tudor, was known to the postal authorities, and to William Booker, builder, as "Chatsworth"; to Basil and his friends as "The Period Piece," and to the village of St. Mary Mead at large as "Mr. Booker's new house."

It was little more than a quarter of a mile from the village proper, being situated on a new building estate that had been bought by the enterprising Mr. Booker just beyond the Blue Boar, with frontage on what had been a particularly unspoilt country lane. Gossington Hall was about a mile farther on along the same road.

Lively interest had been aroused in St. Mary Mead when news went round that "Mr. Booker's new house" had been bought by a film star. Eager watch was kept for the first appearance of the legendary creature in the village, and it may be said that as far as appearances went Basil Blake was all that could be asked for. Little by little, however, the real facts leaked out. Basil Blake was *not* a film star—not even a film actor. He was a very junior person, rejoicing in the title of about fifteenth in the list of those responsible for Set Decorations at Lemville Studios, headquarters of British New Era Films. The village maidens lost interest, and the ruling class of censorious spinsters took exception to Basil Blake's way of life. Only the landlord of the Blue Boar continued to be enthusiastic about Basil and Basil's friends. The revenues of the Blue Boar had increased since the young man's arrival in the place.

The police car stopped outside the distorted rustic gate of Mr. Booker's fancy, and Colonel Melchett, with a glance of distaste at the excessive half timbering of Chatsworth, strode up to the front door and attacked it briskly with the knocker.

It was opened much more promptly than he had expected. A young man with straight, somewhat long, black hair, wearing orange corduroy trousers and a royal-blue shirt, snapped out: "Well, what do you want?"

"Are you Mr. Basil Blake?"

"Of course I am."

"I should be glad to have a few words with you, if I may, Mr. Blake?"

"Who are you?"

"I am Colonel Melchett, the Chief Constable of the County."

Mr. Blake said insolently:

"You don't say so; how amusing!"

And Colonel Melchett, following the other in, understood what Colonel Bantry's reactions had been. The toe of his own boot itched.

Containing himself, however, he said with an attempt to speak pleasantly:

"You're an early riser, Mr. Blake."

"Not at all. I haven't been to bed yet."

"Indeed."

"But I don't suppose you've come here to inquire into my hours of bedgoing—or if you have it's rather a waste of the county's time and money. What is it you want to speak to me about?"

Colonel Melchett cleared his throat.

"I understand, Mr. Blake, that last weekend you had a visitor—a—er—fair-haired young lady."

Basil Blake stared, threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"Have the old cats been on to you from the village? About my morals? Damn it all, morals aren't a police matter. *You* know that."

"As you say," said Melchett dryly, "your morals are no concern of mine. I have come to you because the body of a fair-haired young woman of slightly—er—exotic appearance has been found—murdered."

"Strewth!" Blake stared at him. "Where?"

"In the library at Gossington Hall."

"At Gossington? At old Bantry's? I say, that's pretty rich. Old Bantry! The dirty old man!"

Colonel Melchett went very red in the face. He said sharply through the renewed mirth of the young man opposite him: "Kindly control your tongue, sir. I came to ask you if you can throw any light on this business."

"You've come round to ask me if I've missed a blonde? Is that it? Why should—hallo, 'allo, 'allo, what's this?"

A car had drawn up outside with a scream of brakes. Out of it tumbled a young woman dressed in flapping black-and-white pyjamas. She had scarlet lips, blackened eyelashes, and a platinum-blond head. She strode up to the door, flung it open, and exclaimed angrily:

"Why did you run out on me, you brute?"

Basil Blake had risen.

"So there you are! Why shouldn't I leave you? I told you to clear out and you wouldn't."

"Why the hell should I because you told me to? I was enjoying myself."

"Yes—with that filthy brute Rosenberg. You know what *he's* like."

"You were jealous, that's all."

"Don't flatter yourself. I hate to see a girl I like who can't hold her drink and let a disgusting Central European paw her about."

"That's a damned lie. You were drinking pretty hard yourself—and going on with the black-haired Spanish bitch."

"If I take you to a party I expect you to be able to behave yourself."

"And I refuse to be dictated to, and that's that. You said we'd go to the party and come on down here afterwards. I'm not going to leave a party before I'm ready to leave it."

"No—and that's why I left you flat. I was ready to come down here and I came. I don't hang round waiting for any fool of a woman."

"Sweet, polite person you are!"

"You seem to have followed me down all right!"

"I wanted to tell you what I thought of you!"

"If you think you can boss me, my girl, you're wrong!"

"And if you think you can order me about, you can think again!"

They glared at each other.

It was at this moment that Colonel Melchett seized his opportunity, and cleared his throat loudly.

Basil Blake swung round on him.

"Hallo, I forgot you were here. About time you took yourself off, isn't it? Let me introduce you—Dinah Lee—Colonel Blimp of the

County Police. And now, Colonel, that you've seen my blonde is alive and in good condition, perhaps you'll get on with the good work concerning old Bantry's little bit of fluff. Good morning!"

Colonel Melchett said:

"I advise you to keep a civil tongue in your head, young man, or you'll let yourself in for trouble," and stumped out, his face red and wrathful.

Three

I

In his office at Much Benham, Colonel Melchett received and scrutinized the reports of his subordinates:

"... so it all seems clear enough, sir," Inspector Slack was concluding: "Mrs. Bantry sat in the library after dinner and went to bed just before ten. She turned out the lights when she left the room and, presumably, no one entered the room afterwards. The servants went to bed at half-past ten and Lorrimer, after putting the drinks in the hall, went to bed at a quarter to eleven. Nobody heard anything out of the usual except the third housemaid, and she heard too much! Groans and a blood-curdling yell and sinister footsteps and I don't know what. The second housemaid who shares a room with her says the other girl slept all night through without a sound. It's those ones that make up things that cause us all the trouble."

"What about the forced window?"

"Amateur job, Simmons says; done with a common chisel—ordinary pattern—wouldn't have made much noise. Ought to be a chisel about the house but nobody can find it. Still, that's common enough where tools are concerned."

"Think any of the servants know anything?"

Rather unwillingly Inspector Slack replied:

"No, sir, I don't think they do. They all seemed very shocked and upset. I had my suspicions of Lorrimer—reticent, he was, if you know what I mean—but I don't think there's anything in it."

Melchett nodded. He attached no importance to Lorrimer's reticence. The energetic Inspector Slack often produced that effect on people he interrogated.

The door opened and Dr. Haydock came in.

"Thought I'd look in and give you the rough gist of things."

"Yes, yes, glad to see you. Well?"

"Nothing much. Just what you'd think. Death was due to strangulation. Satin waistband of her own dress, which was passed round the neck and crossed at the back. Quite easy and simple to do. Wouldn't have needed great strength—that is, if the girl were taken by surprise. There are no signs of a struggle."

"What about time of death?"

"Say, between ten o'clock and midnight."

"You can't get nearer than that?"

Haydock shook his head with a slight grin.

"I won't risk my professional reputation. Not earlier than ten and not later than midnight."

"And your own fancy inclines to which time?"

"Depends. There was a fire in the grate—the room was warm—all that would delay rigor and cadaveric stiffening."

"Anything more you can say about her?"

"Nothing much. She was young—about seventeen or eighteen, I should say. Rather immature in some ways but well developed muscularly. Quite a healthy specimen. She was virgo intacta, by the way."

And with a nod of his head the doctor left the room.

Melchett said to the Inspector:

"You're quite sure she'd never been seen before at Gossington?"

"The servants are positive of that. Quite indignant about it. They'd have remembered if they'd ever seen her about in the neighbourhood, they say."

"I expect they would," said Melchett. "Anyone of that type sticks out a mile round here. Look at that young woman of Blake's."

"Pity it wasn't her," said Slack; "then we should be able to get on a bit."

"It seems to me this girl must have come down from London," said the Chief Constable thoughtfully. "Don't believe there will be any local leads. In that case, I suppose, we should do well to call in the Yard. It's a case for them, not for us."

"Something must have brought her down here, though," said Slack. He added tentatively: "Seems to me, Colonel and Mrs. Bantry *must* know something—of course, I know they're friends of yours, sir —"

Colonel Melchett treated him to a cold stare. He said stiffly:

"You may rest assured that I'm taking every possibility into account. *Every* possibility." He went on: "You've looked through the list of persons reported missing, I suppose?"

Slack nodded. He produced a typed sheet.

"Got 'em here. Mrs. Saunders, reported missing a week ago, dark-haired, blue-eyed, thirty-six. 'Tisn't her—and, anyway, everyone knows except her husband that she's gone off with a fellow from Leeds—commercial. Mrs. Barnard—she's sixty-five. Pamela Reeves, sixteen, missing from her home last night, had attended Girl Guide rally, dark-brown hair in pigtail, five feet five—"

Melchett said irritably:

"Don't go on reading idiotic details, Slack. This wasn't a schoolgirl. In my opinion—"

He broke off as the telephone rang. "Hallo—yes—yes, Much Benham Police Headquarters—what? Just a minute—"

He listened, and wrote rapidly. Then he spoke again, a new tone in his voice:

"Ruby Keene, eighteen, occupation professional dancer, five feet four inches, slender, platinum-blond hair, blue eyes, *retroussé* nose, believed to be wearing white diamanté evening dress, silver sandal shoes. Is that right? What? Yes, not a doubt of it, I should say. I'll send Slack over at once."

He rang off and looked at his subordinate with rising excitement. "We've got it, I think. That was the Glenshire Police" (Glenshire was the adjoining county). "Girl reported missing from the Majestic Hotel, Danemouth."

"Danemouth," said Inspector Slack. "That's more like it."

Danemouth was a large and fashionable watering-place on the coast not far away.

"It's only a matter of eighteen miles or so from here," said the Chief Constable. "The girl was a dance hostess or something at the Majestic. Didn't come on to do her turn last night and the management were very fed up about it. When she was still missing this morning one of the other girls got the wind up about her, or someone else did. It sounds a bit obscure. You'd better go over to Danemouth at once, Slack. Report there to Superintendent Harper, and cooperate with him."

II

Activity was always to Inspector Slack's taste. To rush off in a car, to silence rudely those people who were anxious to tell him things, to cut short conversations on the plea of urgent necessity. All this was the breath of life to Slack.

In an incredibly short time, therefore, he had arrived at Danemouth, reported at police headquarters, had a brief interview with a distracted and apprehensive hotel manager, and, leaving the latter with the doubtful comfort of—"got to make sure it *is* the girl, first, before we start raising the wind"—was driving back to Much Benham in company with Ruby Keene's nearest relative.

He had put through a short call to Much Benham before leaving Danemouth, so the Chief Constable was prepared for his arrival, though not perhaps for the brief introduction of: "This is Josie, sir."

Colonel Melchett stared at his subordinate coldly. His feeling was that Slack had taken leave of his senses.

The young woman who had just got out of the car came to the rescue.

"That's what I'm known as professionally," she explained with a momentary flash of large, handsome white teeth. "Raymond and Josie, my partner and I call ourselves, and, of course, all the hotel know me as Josie. Josephine Turner's my real name."

Colonel Melchett adjusted himself to the situation and invited Miss Turner to sit down, meanwhile casting a swift, professional glance over her.

She was a good-looking young woman of perhaps nearer thirty than twenty, her looks depending more on skilful grooming than actual features. She looked competent and good-tempered, with plenty of common sense. She was not the type that would ever be described as glamorous, but she had nevertheless plenty of attraction. She was discreetly made-up and wore a dark tailor-made suit. Though she looked anxious and upset she was not, the Colonel decided, particularly grief-stricken.

As she sat down she said: "It seems too awful to be true. Do you really think it's Ruby?"

"That, I'm afraid, is what we've got to ask you to tell us. I'm afraid it may be rather unpleasant for you."

Miss Turner said apprehensively:

"Does she—does she—look very terrible?"

"Well—I'm afraid it may be rather a shock to you." He handed her his cigarette case and she accepted one gratefully.

"Do—do you want me to look at her right away?"

"It would be best, I think, Miss Turner. You see, it's not much good asking you questions until we're sure. Best get it over, don't you think?"

"All right."

They drove down to the mortuary.

When Josie came out after a brief visit, she looked rather sick.

"It's Ruby all right," she said shakily. "Poor kid! Goodness, I do feel queer. There isn't"—she looked round wistfully—"any gin?"

Gin was not available, but brandy was, and after gulping a little down Miss Turner regained her composure. She said frankly:

"It gives you a turn, doesn't it, seeing anything like that? Poor little Rube! What swine men are, aren't they?"

"You believe it was a man?"

Josie looked slightly taken aback.

"Wasn't it? Well, I mean—I naturally thought—"

"Any special man you were thinking of?"

She shook her head vigorously.

"No—not me. I haven't the least idea. Naturally Ruby wouldn't have let on to me if—"

"If what?"

Josie hesitated.

"Well—if she'd been—going about with anyone."

Melchett shot her a keen glance. He said no more until they were back at his office. Then he began:

"Now, Miss Turner, I want all the information you can give me."

"Yes, of course. Where shall I begin?"

"I'd like the girl's full name and address, her relationship to you and all you know about her."

Josephine Turner nodded. Melchett was confirmed in his opinion that she felt no particular grief. She was shocked and distressed but no more. She spoke readily enough.

"Her name was Ruby Keene—her professional name, that is. Her real name was Rosy Legge. Her mother was my mother's cousin. I've known her all my life, but not particularly well, if you know what I mean. I've got a lot of cousins—some in business, some on the stage. Ruby was more or less training for a dancer. She had some good engagements last year in panto and that sort of thing. Not really classy, but good provincial companies. Since then she's been engaged as one of the dancing partners at the Palais de Danse in Brixwell—South London. It's a nice respectable place and they look after the girls well, but there isn't much money in it." She paused.

Colonel Melchett nodded.

"Now this is where I come in. I've been dance and bridge hostess at the Majestic in Danemouth for three years. It's a good job, well paid and pleasant to do. You look after people when they arrive—size them up, of course—some like to be left alone and others are lonely and want to get into the swing of things. You try to get the right people together for bridge and all that, and get the young people dancing with each other. It needs a bit of tact and experience."

Again Melchett nodded. He thought that this girl would be good at her job; she had a pleasant, friendly way with her and was, he

thought, shrewd without being in the least intellectual.

"Besides that," continued Josie, "I do a couple of exhibition dances every evening with Raymond. Raymond Starr—he's the tennis and dancing pro. Well, as it happens, this summer I slipped on the rocks bathing one day and gave my ankle a nasty turn."

Melchett had noticed that she walked with a slight limp.

"Naturally that put the stop to dancing for a bit and it was rather awkward. I didn't want the hotel to get someone else in my place. That's always a danger"—for a minute her good-natured blue eyes were hard and sharp; she was the female fighting for existence—"that they may queer your pitch, you see. So I thought of Ruby and suggested to the manager that I should get her down. I'd carry on with the hostess business and the bridge and all that. Ruby would just take on the dancing. Keep it in the family, if you see what I mean?"

Melchett said he saw.

"Well, they agreed, and I wired to Ruby and she came down. Rather a chance for her. Much better class than anything she'd ever done before. That was about a month ago."

Colonel Melchett said:

"I understand. And she was a success?"

"Oh, yes," Josie said carelessly, "she went down quite well. She doesn't dance as well as I do, but Raymond's clever and carried her through, and she was quite nice-looking, you know—slim and fair and baby-looking. Overdid the makeup a bit—I was always on at her about that. But you know what girls are. She was only eighteen, and at that age they always go and overdo it. It doesn't do for a good-class place like the Majestic. I was always ticking her off about it and getting her to tone it down."

Melchett asked: "People liked her?"

"Oh, yes. Mind you, Ruby hadn't got much comeback. She was a bit dumb. She went down better with the older men than with the young ones."

"Had she got any special friend?"

The girl's eyes met his with complete understanding.

"Not in the way *you* mean. Or, at any rate, not that *I* knew about. But then, you see, she wouldn't tell me."

Just for a moment Melchett wondered why not—Josie did not give the impression of being a strict disciplinarian. But he only said: "Will you describe to me now when you last saw your cousin."

"Last night. She and Raymond do two exhibition dances—one at 10:30 and the other at midnight. They finished the first one. After it, I noticed Ruby dancing with one of the young men staying in the hotel. I was playing bridge with some people in the lounge. There's a glass panel between the lounge and the ballroom. That's the last time I saw her. Just after midnight Raymond came up in a terrible taking, said where was Ruby, she hadn't turned up, and it was time to begin. I *was* vexed, I can tell you! That's the sort of silly thing girls do and get the management's backs up and then they get the sack! I went up with him to her room, but she wasn't there. I noticed that she'd changed. The dress she'd been dancing in—a sort of pink, foamy thing with full skirts—was lying over a chair. Usually she kept the same dress on unless it was the special dance night—Wednesdays, that is.

"I'd no idea where she'd got to. We got the band to play one more foxtrot—still no Ruby, so I said to Raymond *I'd* do the exhibition dance with him. We chose one that was easy on my ankle and made it short—but it played up my ankle pretty badly all the same. It's all swollen this morning. Still Ruby didn't show up. We sat about waiting up for her until two o'clock. Furious with her, I was."

Her voice vibrated slightly. Melchett caught the note of real anger in it. Just for a moment he wondered. The reaction seemed a little more intense than was justified by the facts. He had a feeling of something deliberately left unsaid. He said:

"And this morning, when Ruby Keene had not returned and her bed had not been slept in, you went to the police?"

He knew from Slack's brief telephone message from Danemouth that that was not the case. But he wanted to hear what Josephine Turner would say.

She did not hesitate. She said: "No, *I* didn't."

"Why not, Miss Turner?"

Her eyes met his frankly. She said:

"*You* wouldn't—in my place!"

"You think not?"

Josie said:

"I've got my job to think about. The one thing a hotel doesn't want is scandal—especially anything that brings in the police. I didn't think anything had happened to Ruby. Not for a minute! I thought she'd just made a fool of herself about some young man. I thought she'd turn up all right—and I was going to give her a good dressing down when she did! Girls of eighteen are such fools."

Melchett pretended to glance through his notes.

"Ah, yes, I see it was a Mr. Jefferson who went to the police. One of the guests staying at the hotel?"

Josephine Turner said shortly:

"Yes."

Colonel Melchett asked:

"What made this Mr. Jefferson do that?"

Josie was stroking the cuff of her jacket. There was a constraint in her manner. Again Colonel Melchett had a feeling that something was being withheld. She said rather sullenly:

"He's an invalid. He—he gets all het up rather easily. Being an invalid, I mean."

Melchett passed on from that. He asked:

"Who was the young man with whom you last saw your cousin dancing?"

"His name's Bartlett. He'd been there about ten days."

"Were they on very friendly terms?"

"Not specially, I should say. Not that *I* knew, anyway."

Again a curious note of anger in her voice.

"What does he have to say?"

"Said that after their dance Ruby went upstairs to powder her nose."

"That was when she changed her dress?"

"I suppose so."

"And that is the last thing you know? After that she just—"

"Vanished," said Josie. "That's right."

"Did Miss Keene know anybody in St. Mary Mead? Or in this neighbourhood?"

"I don't know. She may have done. You see, quite a lot of young men come into Danemouth to the Majestic from all round about. I wouldn't know where they lived unless they happened to mention it."

"Did you ever hear your cousin mention Gossington?"

"Gossington?" Josie looked patently puzzled.

"Gossington Hall."

She shook her head.

"Never heard of it." Her tone carried conviction. There was curiosity in it too.

"Gossington Hall," explained Colonel Melchett, "is where her body was found."

"Gossington Hall?" She stared. "How extraordinary!"

Melchett thought to himself: "Extraordinary's the word!" Aloud he said:

"Do you know a Colonel or Mrs. Bantry?"

Again Josie shook her head.

"Or a Mr. Basil Blake?"

She frowned slightly.

"I think I've heard that name. Yes, I'm sure I have—but I don't remember anything about him."

The diligent Inspector Slack slid across to his superior officer a page torn from his notebook. On it was pencilled:

"Col. Bantry dined at Majestic last week."

Melchett looked up and met the Inspector's eye. The Chief Constable flushed. Slack was an industrious and zealous officer and Melchett disliked him a good deal. But he could not disregard the challenge. The Inspector was tacitly accusing him of favouring his own class—of shielding an "old school tie."

He turned to Josie.

"Miss Turner, I should like you, if you do not mind, to accompany me to Gossington Hall."

Coldly, defiantly, almost ignoring Josie's murmur of assent, Melchett's eyes met Slack's.

Four

I

St. Mary Mead was having the most exciting morning it had known for a long time.

Miss Wetherby, a long-nosed, acidulated spinster, was the first to spread the intoxicating information. She dropped in upon her friend and neighbour Miss Hartnell.

"Forgive me coming so early, dear, but I thought, perhaps, you mightn't have heard the *news*."

"What news?" demanded Miss Hartnell. She had a deep bass voice and visited the poor indefatigably, however hard they tried to avoid her ministrations.

"About the body in Colonel Bantry's library—a *woman's* body—"

"In Colonel Bantry's *library*?"

"Yes. Isn't it *terrible*?"

"His *poor* wife." Miss Hartnell tried to disguise her deep and ardent pleasure.

"Yes, indeed. I don't suppose she had any idea."

Miss Hartnell observed censoriously:

"She thought too much about her garden and not enough about her husband. You've got to keep an eye on a man—all the time—all the time," repeated Miss Hartnell fiercely.

"I know. I know. It's really too dreadful."

"I wonder what Jane Marple will say. Do you think she knew anything about it? She's so sharp about these things."

"Jane Marple has gone up to Gossington."

"What? This morning?"

"Very early. Before breakfast."

"But really! I do think! Well, I mean, I think that is carrying things *too* far. We all know Jane likes to poke her nose into things—but I call this indecent!"

"Oh, but Mrs. Bantry sent for her."

"Mrs. Bantry *sent* for her?"

"Well, the car came—with Muswell driving it."

"Dear me! How very peculiar..."

They were silent a minute or two digesting the news.

"Whose body?" demanded Miss Hartnell.

"You know that dreadful woman who comes down with Basil Blake?"

"That terrible peroxide blonde?" Miss Hartnell was slightly behind the times. She had not yet advanced from peroxide to platinum.

"The one who lies about in the garden with practically nothing on?"

"Yes, my dear. There she was—on the hearthrug—*strangled!*"

"But what do you mean—at *Gossington?*"

Miss Wetherby nodded with infinite meaning.

"Then—Colonel Bantry *too*—?"

Again Miss Wetherby nodded.

"Oh!"

There was a pause as the ladies savoured this new addition to village scandal.

"What a wicked woman!" trumpeted Miss Hartnell with righteous wrath.

"Quite, quite abandoned, I'm afraid!"

"And Colonel Bantry—such a nice quiet man—"

Miss Wetherby said zestfully:

"Those quiet ones are often the worst. Jane Marple always says so."

II

Mrs. Price Ridley was among the last to hear the news.

A rich and dictatorial widow, she lived in a large house next door to the vicarage. Her informant was her little maid Clara.

"A *woman*, you say, Clara? *Found dead on Colonel Bantry's hearthrug?*"

"Yes, mum. And they say, mum, as she hadn't anything on at all, mum, not a stitch!"

"That will do, Clara. It is not necessary to go into details."

"No, mum, and they say, mum, that at first they thought it was Mr. Blake's young lady—what comes down for the weekends with 'im to Mr. Booker's new 'ouse. But now they say it's quite a different young lady. And the fishmonger's young man, he says he'd never have believed it of Colonel Bantry—not with him handing round the plate on Sundays and all."

"There is a lot of wickedness in the world, Clara," said Mrs. Price Ridley. "Let this be a warning to you."

"Yes, mum. Mother, she never *will* let me take a place where there's a gentleman in the 'ouse."

"That will *do*, Clara," said Mrs. Price Ridley.

III

It was only a step from Mrs. Price Ridley's house to the vicarage.

Mrs. Price Ridley was fortunate enough to find the vicar in his study.

The vicar, a gentle, middle-aged man, was always the last to hear anything.

"Such a *terrible* thing," said Mrs. Price Ridley, panting a little, because she had come rather fast. "I felt I must have your advice, your counsel about it, dear vicar."

Mr. Clement looked mildly alarmed. He said:

"Has anything happened?"

"Has anything *happened?*" Mrs. Price Ridley repeated the question dramatically. "The most terrible scandal! None of us had

any idea of it. An abandoned woman, completely unclothed, strangled on Colonel Bantry's hearthrug."

The vicar stared. He said:

"You—you are feeling quite well?"

"No wonder you can't believe it! *I* couldn't at first. The hypocrisy of the man! All these years!"

"Please tell me exactly what all this is about."

Mrs. Price Ridley plunged into a full-swing narrative. When she had finished Mr. Clement said mildly:

"But there is nothing, is there, to point to Colonel Bantry's being involved in this?"

"Oh, dear vicar, you are so unworldly! But I must tell you a little story. Last Thursday—or was it the Thursday before? well, it doesn't matter—I was going up to London by the cheap day train. Colonel Bantry was in the same carriage. He looked, I thought, very abstracted. And nearly the whole way he buried himself behind *The Times*. As though, you know, he didn't want to *talk*."

The vicar nodded with complete comprehension and possible sympathy.

"At Paddington I said good-bye. He had offered to get me a taxi, but I was taking the bus down to Oxford Street—but he got into one, and I distinctly heard him tell the driver to go to—*where do you think?*"

Mr. Clement looked inquiring.

"An address in *St. John's Wood*!"

Mrs. Price Ridley paused triumphantly.

The vicar remained completely unenlightened.

"That, I consider, *proves* it," said Mrs. Price Ridley.

IV

At Gossington, Mrs. Bantry and Miss Marple were sitting in the drawing room.

"You know," said Mrs. Bantry, "I can't help feeling glad they've taken the body away. It's not *nice* to have a body in one's house."

Miss Marple nodded.

"I know, dear. I know just how you feel."

"You can't," said Mrs. Bantry; "not until you've had one. I know you had one next door once, but that's not the same thing. I only hope," she went on, "that Arthur won't take a dislike to the library. We sit there so much. What are you doing, Jane?"

For Miss Marple, with a glance at her watch, was rising to her feet. "Well, I was thinking I'd go home. If there's nothing more I can do for you?"

"Don't go yet," said Mrs. Bantry. "The fingerprint men and the photographers and most of the police have gone, I know, but I still feel something might happen. You don't want to miss anything."

The telephone rang and she went off to answer. She returned with a beaming face.

"I told you more things would happen. That was Colonel Melchett. He's bringing the poor girl's cousin along."

"I wonder why," said Miss Marple.

"Oh, I suppose, to see where it happened and all that."

"More than that, I expect," said Miss Marple.

"What do you mean, Jane?"

"Well, I think—perhaps—he might want her to meet Colonel Bantry."

Mrs. Bantry said sharply:

"To see if she recognizes him? I suppose—oh, yes, I suppose they're bound to suspect Arthur."

"I'm afraid so."

"As though Arthur could have anything to do with it!"

Miss Marple was silent. Mrs. Bantry turned on her accusingly.

"And don't quote old General Henderson—or some frightful old man who kept his housemaid—at me. Arthur isn't like that."

"No, no, of course not."

"No, but he *really* isn't. He's just—sometimes—a little silly about pretty girls who come to tennis. You know—rather fatuous and avuncular. There's no harm in it. And why shouldn't he? After all," finished Mrs. Bantry rather obscurely, "I've got the garden."

Miss Marple smiled.

"You must not worry, Dolly," she said.

"No, I don't mean to. But all the same I do a little. So does Arthur. It's upset him. All these policemen prowling about. He's gone down to the farm. Looking at pigs and things always soothes him if he's been upset. Hallo, here they are."

The Chief Constable's car drew up outside.

Colonel Melchett came in accompanied by a smartly dressed young woman.

"This is Miss Turner, Mrs. Bantry. The cousin of the—er—victim."

"How do you do," said Mrs. Bantry, advancing with outstretched hand. "All this must be rather awful for you."

Josephine Turner said frankly: "Oh, it is. None of it seems *real*, somehow. It's like a bad dream."

Mrs. Bantry introduced Miss Marple.

Melchett said casually: "Your good man about?"

"He had to go down to one of the farms. He'll be back soon."

"Oh—" Melchett seemed rather at a loss.

Mrs. Bantry said to Josie: "Would you like to see where—where it happened? Or would you rather not?"

Josephine said after a moment's pause:

"I think I'd like to see."

Mrs. Bantry led her to her library with Miss Marple and Melchett following behind.

"She was there," said Mrs. Bantry, pointing dramatically; "on the hearthrug."

"Oh!" Josie shuddered. But she also looked perplexed. She said, her brow creased: "I just *can't* understand it! I *can't*!"

"Well, *we* certainly can't," said Mrs. Bantry.

Josie said slowly:

"It isn't the sort of place—" and broke off.

Miss Marple nodded her head gently in agreement with the unfinished sentiment.

"That," she murmured, "is what makes it so very interesting."

"Come now, Miss Marple," said Colonel Melchett goodhumouredly, "haven't you got an explanation?"

"Oh yes, I've got an *explanation*," said Miss Marple. "Quite a feasible one. But of course it's only my own *idea*. Tommy Bond," she continued, "and Mrs. Martin, our new schoolmistress. She went to wind up the clock and a frog jumped out."

Josephine Turner looked puzzled. As they all went out of the room she murmured to Mrs. Bantry: "Is the old lady a bit funny in the head?"

"Not at all," said Mrs. Bantry indignantly.

Josie said: "Sorry; I thought perhaps she thought she *was* a frog or something."

Colonel Bantry was just coming in through the side door. Melchett hailed him, and watched Josephine Turner as he introduced them to each other. But there was no sign of interest or recognition in her face. Melchett breathed a sigh of relief. Curse Slack and his insinuations!

In answer to Mrs. Bantry's questions Josie was pouring out the story of Ruby Keene's disappearance.

"Frightfully worrying for you, my dear," said Mrs. Bantry.

"I was more angry than worried," said Josie. "You see, I didn't know then that anything had happened to her."

"And yet," said Miss Marple, "you went to the police. Wasn't that—excuse me—rather *premature*?"

Josie said eagerly:

"Oh, but I didn't. That was Mr. Jefferson—"

Mrs. Bantry said: "Jefferson?"

"Yes, he's an invalid."

"Not *Conway* Jefferson? But I know him well. He's an old friend of ours. Arthur, listen—Conway Jefferson. He's staying at the Majestic, and it was he who went to the police! Isn't that a coincidence?"

Josephine Turner said:

"Mr. Jefferson was here last summer too."

"Fancy! And we never knew. I haven't seen him for a long time." She turned to Josie. "How—how is he, nowadays?"

Josie considered.

"I think he's wonderful, really—quite wonderful. Considering, I mean. He's always cheerful—always got a joke."

"Are the family there with him?"

"Mr. Gaskell, you mean? And young Mrs. Jefferson? And Peter? Oh, yes."

There was something inhibiting Josephine Turner's usual attractive frankness of manner. When she spoke of the Jeffersons there was something not quite natural in her voice.

Mrs. Bantry said: "They're both very nice, aren't they? The young ones, I mean."

Josie said rather uncertainly:

"Oh yes—yes, they are. I—we—yes, they are, *really*."

V

"And what," demanded Mrs. Bantry as she looked through the window at the retreating car of the Chief Constable, "did she mean by that? 'They are, *really*.' Don't you think, Jane, that there's something—"

Miss Marple fell upon the words eagerly.

"Oh, I do—indeed I do. It's quite *unmistakable*! Her manner changed *at once* when the Jeffersons were mentioned. She had seemed quite natural up to then."

"But what do you think it *is*, Jane?"

"Well, my dear, *you* know them. All I feel is that there is *something*, as you say, about them which is worrying that young woman. Another thing, did you notice that when you asked her if she wasn't anxious about the girl being missing, she said that she was *angry*! And she *looked* angry—*really* angry! That strikes me as *interesting*, you know. I have a feeling—perhaps I'm wrong—that that's her main reaction to the fact of the girl's death. She didn't care for her, I'm sure. She's not grieving in any way. But I do think, very definitely, that the thought of that girl, Ruby Keene, makes her *angry*. And the interesting point is—*why*?"

"We'll find out!" said Mrs. Bantry. "We'll go over to Danemouth and stay at the Majestic—yes, Jane, you too. I need a change for my nerves after what has happened here. A few days at the Majestic—"

that's what we need. And you'll meet Conway Jefferson. He's a dear—a perfect dear. It's the saddest story imaginable. Had a son and daughter, both of whom he loved dearly. They were both married, but they still spent a lot of time at home. His wife, too, was the sweetest woman, and he was devoted to her. They were flying home one year from France and there was an accident. They were all killed: the pilot, Mrs. Jefferson, Rosamund, and Frank. Conway had both legs so badly injured they had to be amputated. And he's been wonderful—his courage, his pluck! He was a very active man and now he's a helpless cripple, but he never complains. His daughter-in-law lives with him—she was a widow when Frank Jefferson married her and she had a son by her first marriage—Peter Carmody. They both live with Conway. And Mark Gaskell, Rosamund's husband, is there too most of the time. The whole thing was the most awful tragedy."

"And now," said Miss Marple, "there's another tragedy—"

Mrs. Bantry said: "Oh yes—yes—but it's nothing to do with the Jeffersons."

"Isn't it?" said Miss Marple. "It was Mr. Jefferson who went to the police."

"So he did ... You know, Jane, that *is* curious...."

Five

I

Colonel Melchett was facing a much annoyed hotel manager. With him was Superintendent Harper of the Glenshire Police and the inevitable Inspector Slack—the latter rather disgruntled at the Chief Constable's wilful usurpation of the case.

Superintendent Harper was inclined to be soothing with the almost tearful Mr. Prestcott—Colonel Melchett tended towards a blunt brutality.

"No good crying over spilt milk," he said sharply. "The girl's dead—strangled. You're lucky that she wasn't strangled in your hotel. This puts the inquiry in a different county and lets your establishment down extremely lightly. But certain inquiries have got to be made, and the sooner we get on with it the better. You can trust us to be discreet and tactful. So I suggest you cut the cackle and come to the horses. Just what exactly do you know about the girl?"

"I knew nothing of her—nothing at all. Josie brought her here."

"Josie's been here some time?"

"Two years—no, three."

"And you like her?"

"Yes, Josie's a good girl—a nice girl. Competent. She gets on with people, and smoothes over differences—bridge, you know, is a touchy sort of game—" Colonel Melchett nodded feelingly. His wife was a keen but an extremely bad bridge player. Mr. Prestcott went

on: "Josie was very good at calming down unpleasantnesses. She could handle people well—sort of bright and firm, if you know what I mean."

Again Melchett nodded. He knew now what it was Miss Josephine Turner had reminded him of. In spite of the makeup and the smart turnout there was a distinct touch of the nursery governess about her.

"I depend upon her," went on Mr. Prestcott. His manner became aggrieved. "What does she want to go playing about on slippery rocks in that damn' fool way? We've got a nice beach here. Why couldn't she bathe from that? Slipping and falling and breaking her ankle. It wasn't fair on *me*! I pay her to dance and play bridge and keep people happy and amused—not to go bathing off rocks and breaking her ankle. Dancers ought to be careful of their ankles—not take risks. I was very annoyed about it. It wasn't fair to the hotel."

Melchett cut the recital short.

"And then she suggested this girl—her cousin—coming down?"

Prestcott assented grudgingly.

"That's right. It sounded quite a good idea. Mind you, I wasn't going to pay anything extra. The girl could have her keep; but as for salary, that would have to be fixed up between her and Josie. That's the way it was arranged. *I* didn't know anything about the girl."

"But she turned out all right?"

"Oh yes, there wasn't anything wrong with her—not to look at, anyway. She was very young, of course—rather cheap in style, perhaps, for a place of this kind, but nice manners—quiet and wellbehaved. Danced well. People liked her."

"Pretty?"

It had been a question hard to answer from a view of the blue swollen face.

Mr. Prestcott considered.

"Fair to middling. Bit weaselly, if you know what I mean. Wouldn't have been much without makeup. As it was she managed to look quite attractive."

"Many young men hanging about after her?"

"I know what you're trying to get at, sir." Mr. Prestcott became excited. "*I* never saw anything. Nothing special. One or two of the boys hung around a bit—but all in the day's work, so to speak. Nothing in the strangling line, I'd say. She got on well with the older people, too—had a kind of prattling way with her—seemed quite a kid, if you know what I mean. It amused them."

Superintendent Harper said in a deep melancholy voice:

"Mr. Jefferson, for instance?"

The manager agreed.

"Yes, Mr. Jefferson was the one I had in mind. She used to sit with him and his family a lot. He used to take her out for drives sometimes. Mr. Jefferson's very fond of young people and very good to them. I don't want to have any misunderstanding. Mr. Jefferson's a cripple; he can't get about much—only where his wheelchair will take him. But he's always keen on seeing young people enjoy themselves—watches the tennis and the bathing and all that—and gives parties for young people here. He likes youth—and there's nothing bitter about him as there well might be. A very popular gentleman and, I'd say, a very fine character."

Melchett asked:

"And he took an interest in Ruby Keene?"

"Her talk amused him, I think."

"Did his family share his liking for her?"

"They were always very pleasant to her."

Harper said:

"And it was he who reported the fact of her being missing to the police?"

He contrived to put into the word a significance and a reproach to which the manager instantly responded.

"Put yourself in my place, Mr. Harper. *I* didn't dream for a minute anything was wrong. Mr. Jefferson came along to my office, storming, and all worked up. The girl hadn't slept in her room. She hadn't appeared in her dance last night. She must have gone for a drive and had an accident, perhaps. The police must be informed at once! Inquiries made! In a state, he was, and quite high-handed. He rang up the police station then and there."

"Without consulting Miss Turner?"

"Josie didn't like it much. I could see that. She was very annoyed about the whole thing—annoyed with Ruby, I mean. But what could she say?"

"I think," said Melchett, "we'd better see Mr. Jefferson. Eh, Harper?"

Superintendent Harper agreed.

II

Mr. Prestcott went up with them to Conway Jefferson's suite. It was on the first floor, overlooking the sea. Melchett said carelessly:

"Does himself pretty well, eh? Rich man?"

"Very well off indeed, I believe. Nothing's ever stinted when he comes here. Best rooms reserved—food usually *à la carte*, expensive wines—best of everything."

Melchett nodded.

Mr. Prestcott tapped on the outer door and a woman's voice said: "Come in."

The manager entered, the others behind him.

Mr. Prestcott's manner was apologetic as he spoke to the woman who turned her head at their entrance from her seat by the window.

"I am so sorry to disturb you, Mrs. Jefferson, but these gentlemen are—from the police. They are very anxious to have a word with Mr. Jefferson. Er—Colonel Melchett—Superintendent Harper, Inspector—er—Slack—Mrs. Jefferson."

Mrs. Jefferson acknowledged the introduction by bending her head.

A plain woman, was Melchett's first impression. Then, as a slight smile came to her lips and she spoke, he changed his opinion. She had a singularly charming and sympathetic voice and her eyes, clear hazel eyes, were beautiful. She was quietly but not unbecomingly dressed and was, he judged, about thirty-five years of age.

She said:

"My father-in-law is asleep. He is not strong at all, and this affair has been a terrible shock to him. We had to have the doctor, and the doctor gave him a sedative. As soon as he wakes he will, I know, want to see you. In the meantime, perhaps I can help you? Won't you sit down?"

Mr. Prestcott, anxious to escape, said to Colonel Melchett: "Well—er—if that's all I can do for you?" and thankfully received permission to depart.

With his closing of the door behind him, the atmosphere took on a mellow and more social quality. Adelaide Jefferson had the power of creating a restful atmosphere. She was a woman who never seemed to say anything remarkable but who succeeded in stimulating other people to talk and setting them at their ease. She struck now the right note when she said:

"This business has shocked us all very much. We saw quite a lot of the poor girl, you know. It seems quite unbelievable. My father-in-law is terribly upset. He was very fond of Ruby."

Colonel Melchett said:

"It was Mr. Jefferson, I understand, who reported her disappearance to the police?"

He wanted to see exactly how she would react to that. There was a flicker—just a flicker—of—annoyance? concern?—he could not say what exactly, but there was *something*, and it seemed to him she had definitely to brace herself, as though to an unpleasant task, before going on.

She said:

"Yes, that is so. Being an invalid, he gets easily upset and worried. We tried to persuade him that it was all right, that there was some natural explanation, and that the girl herself would not like the police being notified. He insisted. Well"—she made a slight gesture—"he was right and we were wrong."

Melchett asked: "Exactly how well did you know Ruby Keene, Mrs. Jefferson?"

She considered.

"It's difficult to say. My father-in-law is very fond of young people and likes to have them round him. Ruby was a new type to him—he

was amused and interested by her chatter. She sat with us a good deal in the hotel and my father-in-law took her out for drives in the car."

Her voice was quite noncommittal. Melchett thought to himself: "She could say more if she chose."

He said: "Will you tell me what you can of the course of events last night?"

"Certainly, but there is very little that will be useful, I'm afraid. After dinner Ruby came and sat with us in the lounge. She remained even after the dancing had started. We had arranged to play bridge later, but we were waiting for Mark, that is Mark Gaskell, my brother-in-law—he married Mr. Jefferson's daughter, you know—who had some important letters to write, and also for Josie. She was going to make a fourth with us."

"Did that often happen?"

"Quite frequently. She's a first-class player, of course, and very nice. My father-in-law is a keen bridge player and whenever possible liked to get hold of Josie to make the fourth instead of an outsider. Naturally, as she has to arrange the fours, she can't always play with us, but she does whenever she can, and as"—her eyes smiled a little—"my father-in-law spends a lot of money in the hotel, the management are quite pleased for Josie to favour us."

Melchett asked:

"You like Josie?"

"Yes, I do. She's always good-humoured and cheerful, works hard and seems to enjoy her job. She's shrewd, though not well educated, and—well—never pretends about anything. She's natural and unaffected."

"Please go on, Mrs. Jefferson."

"As I say, Josie had to get her bridge fours arranged and Mark was writing, so Ruby sat and talked with us a little longer than usual. Then Josie came along, and Ruby went off to do her first solo dance with Raymond—he's the dance and tennis professional. She came back to us afterwards just as Mark joined us. Then she went off to dance with a young man and we four started our bridge."

She stopped, and made a slight insignificant gesture of helplessness.

"And that's all I know! I just caught a glimpse of her once dancing, but bridge is an absorbing game and I hardly glanced through the glass partition at the ballroom. Then, at midnight, Raymond came along to Josie very upset and asked where Ruby was. Josie, naturally, tried to shut him up but—"

Superintendent Harper interrupted. He said in his quiet voice: "Why '*naturally*,' Mrs. Jefferson?"

"Well"—she hesitated, looked, Melchett thought, a little put out—"Josie didn't want the girl's absence made too much of. She considered herself responsible for her in a way. She said Ruby was probably up in her bedroom, said the girl had talked about having a headache earlier—I don't think that was true, by the way; Josie just said it by way of excuse. Raymond went off and telephoned up to Ruby's room, but apparently there was no answer, and he came back in rather a state—temperamental, you know. Josie went off with him and tried to soothe him down, and in the end she danced with him instead of Ruby. Rather plucky of her, because you could see afterwards it had hurt her ankle. She came back to us when the dance was over and tried to calm down Mr. Jefferson. He had got worked up by then. We persuaded him in the end to go to bed, told him Ruby had probably gone for a spin in a car and that they'd had a puncture. He went to bed worried, and this morning he began to agitate at once." She paused. "The rest you know."

"Thank you, Mrs. Jefferson. Now I'm going to ask you if you've any idea who could have done this thing."

She said immediately: "No idea whatever. I'm afraid I can't help you in the slightest."

He pressed her. "The girl never said anything? Nothing about jealousy? About some man she was afraid of? Or intimate with?"

Adelaide Jefferson shook her head to each query.

There seemed nothing more that she could tell them.

The Superintendent suggested that they should interview young George Bartlett and return to see Mr. Jefferson later. Colonel

Melchett agreed, and the three men went out, Mrs. Jefferson promising to send word as soon as Mr. Jefferson was awake.

"Nice woman," said the Colonel, as they closed the door behind them.

"A very nice lady indeed," said Superintendent Harper.

III

George Bartlett was a thin, lanky youth with a prominent Adam's apple and an immense difficulty in saying what he meant. He was in such a state of dither that it was hard to get a calm statement from him.

"I say, it is awful, isn't it? Sort of thing one reads about in the Sunday papers—but one doesn't feel it really happens, don't you know?"

"Unfortunately there is no doubt about it, Mr. Bartlett," said the Superintendent.

"No, no, of course not. But it seems so rum somehow. And miles from here and everything—in some country house, wasn't it? Awfully county and all that. Created a bit of a stir in the neighbourhood—what?"

Colonel Melchett took charge.

"How well did you know the dead girl, Mr. Bartlett?"

George Bartlett looked alarmed.

"Oh, n-n-n-ot well at all, s-s-sir. No, hardly at all—if you know what I mean. Danced with her once or twice—passed the time of day—bit of tennis—*you* know."

"You were, I think, the last person to see her alive last night?"

"I suppose I was—doesn't it sound awful? I mean, she was perfectly all right when I saw her—absolutely."

"What time was that, Mr. Bartlett?"

"Well, you know, I never know about time—wasn't very late, if you know what I mean."

"You danced with her?"

"Yes—as a matter of fact—well, yes, I did. Early on in the evening, though. Tell you what, it was just after her exhibition dance with the pro fellow. Must have been ten, half-past, eleven, I don't know."

"Never mind the time. We can fix that. Please tell us exactly what happened."

"Well, we danced, don't you know. Not that *I'm* much of a dancer."

"How you dance is not really relevant, Mr. Bartlett."

George Bartlett cast an alarmed eye on the Colonel and stammered:

"No—er—n-n-n-o, I suppose it isn't. Well, as I say, we danced, round and round, and I talked, but Ruby didn't say very much and she yawned a bit. As I say, I don't dance awfully well, and so girls—well—inclined to give it a miss, if you know what I mean. She said she had a headache—I know where I get off, so I said righty ho, and that was that."

"What was the last you saw of her?"

"She went off upstairs."

"She said nothing about meeting anyone? Or going for a drive? Or—or—having a date?" The Colonel used the colloquial expression with a slight effort.

Bartlett shook his head.

"Not to me." He looked rather mournful. "Just gave me the push."

"What was her manner? Did she seem anxious, abstracted, anything on her mind?"

George Bartlett considered. Then he shook his head.

"Seemed a bit bored. Yawned, as I said. Nothing more."

Colonel Melchett said:

"And what did you do, Mr. Bartlett?"

"Eh?"

"What did you do when Ruby Keene left you?"

George Bartlett gaped at him.

"Let's see now—what *did* I do?"

"We're waiting for you to tell us."

"Yes, yes—of course. Jolly difficult, remembering things, what? Let me see. Shouldn't be surprised if I went into the bar and had a drink."

"*Did* you go into the bar and have a drink?"

"That's just it. I *did* have a drink. Don't think it was just then. Have an idea I wandered out, don't you know? Bit of air. Rather stuffy for September. Very nice outside. Yes, that's it. I strolled around a bit, then I came in and had a drink and then I strolled back to the ballroom. Wasn't much doing. Noticed what's-her-name—Josie—was dancing again. With the tennis fellow. She'd been on the sick list—twisted ankle or something."

"That fixes the time of your return at midnight. Do you intend us to understand that you spent over an hour walking about outside?"

"Well, I had a drink, you know. I was—well, I was thinking of things."

This statement received more credulity than any other.

Colonel Melchett said sharply:

"What were you thinking about?"

"Oh, I don't know. Things," said Mr. Bartlett vaguely.

"You have a car, Mr. Bartlett?"

"Oh, yes, I've got a car."

"Where was it, in the hotel garage?"

"No, it was in the courtyard, as a matter of fact. Thought I might go for a spin, you see."

"Perhaps you did go for a spin?"

"No—no, I didn't. Swear I didn't."

"You didn't, for instance, take Miss Keene for a spin?"

"Oh, I say. Look here, what are you getting at? I didn't—I swear I didn't. Really, now."

"Thank you, Mr. Bartlett, I don't think there is anything more at present. *At present*," repeated Colonel Melchett with a good deal of emphasis on the words.

They left Mr. Bartlett looking after them with a ludicrous expression of alarm on his unintellectual face.

"Brainless young ass," said Colonel Melchett. "Or isn't he?"

Superintendent Harper shook his head.

"We've got a long way to go," he said.

Six

I

Neither the night porter nor the barman proved helpful. The night porter remembered ringing up to Miss Keene's room just after midnight and getting no reply. He had not noticed Mr. Bartlett leaving or entering the hotel. A lot of gentlemen and ladies were strolling in and out, the night being fine. And there were side doors off the corridor as well as the one in the main hall. He was fairly certain Miss Keene had not gone out by the main door, but if she had come down from her room, which was on the first floor, there was a staircase next to it and a door out at the end of the corridor, leading on to the side terrace. She could have gone out of that unseen easily enough. It was not locked until the dancing was over at two o'clock.

The barman remembered Mr. Bartlett being in the bar the preceding evening but could not say when. Somewhere about the middle of the evening, he thought. Mr. Bartlett had sat against the wall and was looking rather melancholy. He did not know how long he was there. There were a lot of outside guests coming and going in the bar. He had noticed Mr. Bartlett but he couldn't fix the time in any way.

II

As they left the bar, they were accosted by a small boy of about nine years old. He burst immediately into excited speech.

"I say, are you the detectives? I'm Peter Carmody. It was my grandfather, Mr. Jefferson, who rang up the police about Ruby. Are you from Scotland Yard? You don't mind my speaking to you, do you?"

Colonel Melchett looked as though he were about to return a short answer, but Superintendent Harper intervened. He spoke benignly and heartily.

"That's all right, my son. Naturally interests you, I expect?"

"You bet it does. Do you like detective stories? I do. I read them all, and I've got autographs from Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie and Dickson Carr and H. C. Bailey. Will the murder be in the papers?"

"It'll be in the papers all right," said Superintendent Harper grimly.

"You see, I'm going back to school next week and I shall tell them all that I knew her—really knew her *well*."

"What did you think of her, eh?"

Peter considered.

"Well, I didn't like her much. I think she was rather a stupid sort of girl. Mum and Uncle Mark didn't like her much either. Only Grandfather. Grandfather wants to see you, by the way. Edwards is looking for you."

Superintendent Harper murmured encouragingly:

"So your mother and your Uncle Mark didn't like Ruby Keene much? Why was that?"

"Oh, I don't know. She was always butting in. And they didn't like Grandfather making such a fuss of her. I expect," said Peter cheerfully, "that they're glad she's dead."

Superintendent Harper looked at him thoughtfully. He said: "Did you hear them—er—say so?"

"Well, not exactly. Uncle Mark said: 'Well, it's one way out, anyway,' and Mums said: 'Yes, but such a horrible one,' and Uncle Mark said it was no good being hypocritical."

The men exchanged glances. At that moment a respectable, clean-shaven man, neatly dressed in blue serge, came up to them.

"Excuse me, gentlemen. I am Mr. Jefferson's valet. He is awake now and sent me to find you, as he is very anxious to see you."

Once more they went up to Conway Jefferson's suite. In the sitting room Adelaide Jefferson was talking to a tall, restless man who was prowling nervously about the room. He swung round sharply to view the newcomers.

"Oh, yes. Glad you've come. My father-in-law's been asking for you. He's awake now. Keep him as calm as you can, won't you? His health's not too good. It's a wonder, really, that this shock didn't do for him."

Harper said:

"I'd no idea his health was as bad as that."

"He doesn't know it himself," said Mark Gaskell. "It's his heart, you see. The doctor warned Addie that he mustn't be overexcited or startled. He more or less hinted that the end might come any time, didn't he, Addie?"

Mrs. Jefferson nodded. She said:

"It's incredible that he's rallied the way he has."

Melchett said dryly:

"Murder isn't exactly a soothing incident. We'll be as careful as we can."

He was sizing up Mark Gaskell as he spoke. He didn't much care for the fellow. A bold, unscrupulous, hawk-like face. One of those men who usually get their own way and whom women frequently admire.

"But not the sort of fellow I'd trust," the Colonel thought to himself.

Unscrupulous—that was the word for him.

The sort of fellow who wouldn't stick at anything....

III

In the big bedroom overlooking the sea, Conway Jefferson was sitting in his wheeled chair by the window.

No sooner were you in the room with him than you felt the power and magnetism of the man. It was as though the injuries which had left him a cripple had resulted in concentrating the vitality of his shattered body into a narrower and more intense focus.

He had a fine head, the red of the hair slightly grizzled. The face was rugged and powerful, deeply suntanned, and the eyes were a startling blue. There was no sign of illness or feebleness about him. The deep lines on his face were the lines of suffering, not the lines of weakness. Here was a man who would never rail against fate but accept it and pass on to victory.

He said: "I'm glad you've come." His quick eyes took them in. He said to Melchett: "You're the Chief Constable of Radfordshire? Right. And you're Superintendent Harper? Sit down. Cigarettes on the table beside you."

They thanked him and sat down. Melchett said:

"I understand, Mr. Jefferson, that you were interested in the dead girl?"

A quick, twisted smile flashed across the lined face.

"Yes—they'll all have told you that! Well, it's no secret. How much has my family said to you?"

He looked quickly from one to the other as he asked the question. It was Melchett who answered.

"Mrs. Jefferson told us very little beyond the fact that the girl's chatter amused you and that she was by way of being a protégée. We have only exchanged half a dozen words with Mr. Gaskell."

Conway Jefferson smiled.

"Addie's a discreet creature, bless her. Mark would probably have been more outspoken. I think, Melchett, that I'd better tell you some facts rather fully. It's important, in order that you should understand my attitude. And, to begin with, it's necessary that I go back to the big tragedy of my life. Eight years ago I lost my wife, my son, and my daughter in an aeroplane accident. Since then I've been like a man who's lost half himself—and I'm not speaking of my physical plight! I was a family man. My daughter-in-law and my son-in-law have been very good to me. They've done all they can to take the

place of my flesh and blood. But I've realized—especially of late, that they have, after all, their own lives to live.

"So you must understand that, essentially, I'm a lonely man. I like young people. I enjoy them. Once or twice I've played with the idea of adopting some girl or boy. During this last month I got very friendly with the child who's been killed. She was absolutely natural—completely naïve. She chattered on about her life and her experiences—in pantomime, with touring companies, with Mum and Dad as a child in cheap lodgings. Such a different life from any I've known! Never complaining, never seeing it as sordid. Just a natural, uncomplaining, hardworking child, unspoilt and charming. Not a lady, perhaps, but, thank God, neither vulgar nor—abominable word—'lady-like.'

"I got more and more fond of Ruby. I decided, gentlemen, to adopt her legally. She would become—by law—my daughter. That, I hope, explains my concern for her and the steps I took when I heard of her unaccountable disappearance."

There was a pause. Then Superintendent Harper, his unemotional voice robbing the question of any offence, asked: "May I ask what your son-in-law and daughter-in-law said to that?"

Jefferson's answer came back quickly:

"What could they say? They didn't, perhaps, like it very much. It's the sort of thing that arouses prejudice. But they behaved very well—yes, very well. It's not as though, you see, they were dependent on me. When my son Frank married I turned over half my worldly goods to him then and there. I believe in that. Don't let your children wait until you're dead. They want the money when they're young, not when they're middle-aged. In the same way when my daughter Rosamund insisted on marrying a poor man, I settled a big sum of money on her. That sum passed to him at her death. So, you see, that simplified the matter from the financial angle."

"I see, Mr. Jefferson," said Superintendent Harper.

But there was a certain reserve in his tone. Conway Jefferson pounced upon it.

"But you don't agree, eh?"

"It's not for me to say, sir, but families, in my experience, don't always act reasonably."

"I dare say you're right, Superintendent, but you must remember that Mr. Gaskell and Mrs. Jefferson aren't, strictly speaking, my *family*. They're not blood relations."

"That, of course, makes a difference," admitted the Superintendent.

For a moment Conway Jefferson's eyes twinkled. He said: "That's not to say that they didn't think me an old fool! That *would* be the average person's reaction. But I wasn't being a fool. I know character. With education and polishing, Ruby Keene could have taken her place anywhere."

Melchett said:

"I'm afraid we're being rather impertinent and inquisitive, but it's important that we should get at all the facts. You proposed to make full provision for the girl—that is, settle money upon her, but you hadn't already done so?"

Jefferson said:

"I understand what you're driving at—the possibility of someone's benefiting by the girl's death? But nobody could. The necessary formalities for legal adoption were under way, but they hadn't yet been completed."

Melchett said slowly:

"Then, if anything happened to you—?"

He left the sentence unfinished, as a query. Conway Jefferson was quick to respond.

"Nothing's likely to happen to me! I'm a cripple, but I'm not an invalid. Although doctors *do* like to pull long faces and give advice about not overdoing things. Not overdoing things! I'm as strong as a horse! Still, I'm quite aware of the fatalities of life—my God, I've good reason to be! Sudden death comes to the strongest man—especially in these days of road casualties. But I'd provided for that. I made a new will about ten days ago."

"Yes?" Superintendent Harper leaned forward.

"I left the sum of fifty thousand pounds to be held in trust for Ruby Keene until she was twenty-five, when she would come into

the principal."

Superintendent Harper's eyes opened. So did Colonel Melchett's. Harper said in an almost awed voice:

"That's a very large sum of money, Mr. Jefferson."

"In these days, yes, it is."

"And you were leaving it to a girl you had only known a few weeks?"

Anger flashed into the vivid blue eyes.

"Must I go on repeating the same thing over and over again? I've no flesh and blood of my own—no nieces or nephews or distant cousins, even! I might have left it to charity. I prefer to leave it to an individual." He laughed. "Cinderella turned into a princess overnight! A fairy-godfather instead of a fairy-godmother. Why not? It's *my* money. *I* made it."

Colonel Melchett asked: "Any other bequests?"

"A small legacy to Edwards, my valet—and the remainder to Mark and Addie in equal shares."

"Would—excuse me—the residue amount to a large sum?"

"Probably not. It's difficult to say exactly, investments fluctuate all the time. The sum involved, after death duties and expenses had been paid, would probably have come to something between five and ten thousand pounds net."

"I see."

"And you needn't think I was treating them shabbily. As I said, I divided up my estate at the time my children married. I left myself, actually, a very small sum. But after—after the tragedy—I wanted something to occupy my mind. I flung myself into business. At my house in London I had a private line put in connecting my bedroom with my office. I worked hard—it helped me not to think, and it made me feel that my—my mutilation had not vanquished me. I threw myself into work"—his voice took on a deeper note, he spoke more to himself than to his audience—"and, by some subtle irony, everything I did prospered! My wildest speculations succeeded. If I gambled, I won. Everything I touched turned to gold. Fate's ironic way of righting the balance, I suppose."

The lines of suffering stood out on his face again.

Recollecting himself, he smiled wryly at them.

"So you see, the sum of money I left Ruby was indisputably mine to do with as my fancy dictated."

Melchett said quickly:

"Undoubtedly, my dear fellow, we are not questioning that for a moment."

Conway Jefferson said: "Good. Now I want to ask some questions in my turn, if I may. I want to hear—more about this terrible business. All I know is that she—that little Ruby was found strangled in a house some twenty miles from here."

"That is correct. At Gossington Hall."

Jefferson frowned.

"Gossington? But that's—"

"Colonel Bantry's house."

"Bantry! *Arthur Bantry*? But I know him. Know him and his wife! Met them abroad some years ago. I didn't realize they lived in this part of the world. Why, it's—"

He broke off. Superintendent Harper slipped in smoothly:

"Colonel Bantry was dining in the hotel here Tuesday of last week. You didn't see him?"

"Tuesday? Tuesday? No, we were back late. Went over to Harden Head and had dinner on the way back."

Melchett said:

"Ruby Keene never mentioned the Bantrys to you?"

Jefferson shook his head.

"Never. Don't believe she knew them. Sure she didn't. She didn't know anybody but theatrical folk and that sort of thing." He paused and then asked abruptly:

"What's Bantry got to say about it?"

"He can't account for it in the least. He was out at a Conservative meeting last night. The body was discovered this morning. He says he's never seen the girl in his life."

Jefferson nodded. He said:

"It certainly seems fantastic."

Superintendent Harper cleared his throat. He said:

"Have you any idea at all, sir, who can have done this?"

"Good God, I wish I had!" The veins stood out on his forehead. "It's incredible, unimaginable! I'd say it couldn't have happened, if it hadn't happened!"

"There's no friend of hers—from her past life—no man hanging about—or threatening her?"

"I'm sure there isn't. She'd have told me if so. She's never had a regular 'boyfriend.' She told me so herself."

Superintendent Harper thought:

"Yes, I dare say that's what *she* told you! But that's as may be!"

Conway Jefferson went on:

"Josie would know better than anyone if there had been some man hanging about Ruby or pestering her. Can't she help?"

"She says not."

Jefferson said, frowning:

"I can't help feeling it must be the work of some maniac—the brutality of the method—breaking into a country house—the whole thing so unconnected and senseless. There are men of that type, men outwardly sane, but who decoy girls—sometimes children—away and kill them. Sexual crimes really, I suppose."

Harper said:

"Oh, yes, there are such cases, but we've no knowledge of anyone of that kind operating in this neighbourhood."

Jefferson went on:

"I've thought over all the various men I've seen with Ruby. Guests here and outsiders—men she'd danced with. They all seem harmless enough—the usual type. She had no special friend of any kind."

Superintendent Harper's face remained quite impassive, but unseen by Conway Jefferson there was still a speculative glint in his eye.

It was quite possible, he thought, that Ruby Keene might have had a special friend even though Conway Jefferson did not know about it.

He said nothing, however. The Chief Constable gave him a glance of inquiry and then rose to his feet. He said:

"Thank you, Mr. Jefferson. That's all we need for the present."

Jefferson said:

"You'll keep me informed of your progress?"

"Yes, yes, we'll keep in touch with you."

The two men went out.

Conway Jefferson leaned back in his chair.

His eyelids came down and veiled the fierce blue of his eyes. He looked suddenly a very tired man.

Then, after a minute or two, the lids flickered. He called: "Edwards!"

From the next room the valet appeared promptly. Edwards knew his master as no one else did. Others, even his nearest, knew only his strength. Edwards knew his weakness. He had seen Conway Jefferson tired, discouraged, weary of life, momentarily defeated by infirmity and loneliness.

"Yes, sir?"

Jefferson said:

"Get on to Sir Henry Clithering. He's at Melborne Abbas. Ask him, from me, to get here today if he can, instead of tomorrow. Tell him it's urgent."

Seven

I

When they were outside Jefferson's door, Superintendent Harper said:

"Well, for what it's worth, we've got a motive, sir."

"H'm," said Melchett. "Fifty thousand pounds, eh?"

"Yes, sir. Murder's been done for a good deal less than that."

"Yes, but—"

Colonel Melchett left the sentence unfinished. Harper, however, understood him.

"You don't think it's likely in this case? Well, I don't either, as far as that goes. But it's got to be gone into all the same."

"Oh, of course."

Harper went on:

"If, as Mr. Jefferson says, Mr. Gaskell and Mrs. Jefferson are already well provided for and in receipt of a comfortable income, well, it's not likely they'd set out to do a brutal murder."

"Quite so. Their financial standing will have to be investigated, of course. Can't say I like the appearance of Gaskell much—looks a sharp, unscrupulous sort of fellow—but that's a long way from making him out a murderer."

"Oh, yes, sir, as I say, I don't think it's *likely* to be either of them, and from what Josie said I don't see how it would have been humanly possible. They were both playing bridge from twenty

minutes to eleven until midnight. No, to my mind there's another possibility much more likely."

Melchett said: "Boy friend of Ruby Keene's?"

"That's it, sir. Some disgruntled young fellow—not too strong in the head, perhaps. Someone, I'd say, she knew before she came here. This adoption scheme, if he got wise to it, may just have put the lid on things. He saw himself losing her, saw her being removed to a different sphere of life altogether, and he went mad and blind with rage. He got her to come out and meet him last night, had a row with her over it, lost his head completely and did her in."

"And how did she come to be in Bantry's library?"

"I think that's feasible. They were out, say, in his car at the time. He came to himself, realized what he'd done, and his first thought was how to get rid of the body. Say they were near the gates of a big house at the time. The idea comes to him that if she's found there the hue and cry will centre round the house and its occupants and will leave him comfortably out of it. She's a little bit of a thing. He could easily carry her. He's got a chisel in the car. He forces a window and plops her down on the hearthrug. Being a strangling case, there's no blood or mess to give him away in the car. See what I mean, sir?"

"Oh, yes, Harper, it's all perfectly possible. But there's still one thing to be done. *Cherchez l'homme.*"

"What? Oh, very good, sir."

Superintendent Harper tactfully applauded his superior's joke, although, owing to the excellence of Colonel Melchett's French accent he almost missed the sense of the words.

II

"Oh—er—I say—er—c-could I speak to you a minute?" It was George Bartlett who thus waylaid the two men. Colonel Melchett, who was not attracted to Mr. Bartlett and who was anxious to see how Slack had got on with the investigation of the girl's room and the questioning of the chambermaids, barked sharply:

"Well, what is it—what is it?"

Young Mr. Bartlett retreated a step or two, opening and shutting his mouth and giving an unconscious imitation of a fish in a tank.

"Well—er—probably isn't important, don't you know—thought I ought to tell you. Matter of fact, can't find my car."

"What do you mean, can't find your car?"

Stammering a good deal, Mr. Bartlett explained that what he meant was that he couldn't find his car.

Superintendent Harper said:

"Do you mean it's been stolen?"

George Bartlett turned gratefully to the more placid voice.

"Well, that's just it, you know. I mean, one can't tell, can one? I mean someone may just have buzzed off in it, not meaning any harm, if you know what I mean."

"When did you last see it, Mr. Bartlett?"

"Well, I was tryin' to remember. Funny how difficult it is to remember anything, isn't it?"

Colonel Melchett said coldly:

"Not, I should think, to a normal intelligence. I understood you to say just now that it was in the courtyard of the hotel last night—"

Mr. Bartlett was bold enough to interrupt. He said:

"That's just it—was it?"

"What do you mean by 'was it'? You said it *was*."

"Well—I mean I *thought* it was. I mean—well, I didn't go out and look, don't you see?"

Colonel Melchett sighed. He summoned all his patience. He said:

"Let's get this quite clear. When was the last time you saw—actually *saw* your car? What make is it, by the way?"

"Minoan 14."

"And you last saw it—when?"

George Bartlett's Adam's apple jerked convulsively up and down.

"Been trying to think. Had it before lunch yesterday. Was going for a spin in the afternoon. But somehow, you know how it is, went to sleep instead. Then, after tea, had a game of squash and all that, and a bathe afterwards."

"And the car was then in the courtyard of the hotel?"

"Suppose so. I mean, that's where I'd put it. Thought, you see, I'd take someone for a spin. After dinner, I mean. But it wasn't my lucky evening. Nothing doing. Never took the old bus out after all."

Harper said:

"But, as far as you knew, the car was still in the courtyard?"

"Well, naturally. I mean, I'd put it there—what?"

"Would you have noticed if it had *not* been there?"

Mr. Bartlett shook his head.

"Don't think so, you know. Lots of cars going and coming and all that. Plenty of Minoans."

Superintendent Harper nodded. He had just cast a casual glance out of the window. There were at that moment no less than eight Minoan 14s in the courtyard—it was the popular cheap car of the year.

"Aren't you in the habit of putting your car away at night?" asked Colonel Melchett.

"Don't usually bother," said Mr. Bartlett. "Fine weather and all that, you know. Such a fag putting a car away in a garage."

Glancing at Colonel Melchett, Superintendent Harper said: "I'll join you upstairs, sir. I'll just get hold of Sergeant Higgins and he can take down particulars from Mr. Bartlett."

"Right, Harper."

Mr. Bartlett murmured wistfully:

"Thought I ought to let you know, you know. Might be important, what?"

III

Mr. Prestcott had supplied his additional dancer with board and lodging. Whatever the board, the lodging was the poorest the hotel possessed.

Josephine Turner and Ruby Keene had occupied rooms at the extreme end of a mean and dingy little corridor. The rooms were small, faced north on to a portion of the cliff that backed the hotel, and were furnished with the odds and ends of suites that had once,

some thirty years ago, represented luxury and magnificence in the best suites. Now, when the hotel had been modernized and the bedrooms supplied with built-in receptacles for clothes, these large Victorian oak and mahogany wardrobes were relegated to those rooms occupied by the hotel's resident staff, or given to guests in the height of the season when all the rest of the hotel was full.

As Melchett saw at once, the position of Ruby Keene's room was ideal for the purpose of leaving the hotel without being observed, and was particularly unfortunate from the point of view of throwing light on the circumstances of that departure.

At the end of the corridor was a small staircase which led down to an equally obscure corridor on the ground floor. Here there was a glass door which led out on to the side terrace of the hotel, an unfrequented terrace with no view. You could go from it to the main terrace in front, or you could go down a winding path and come out in a lane that eventually rejoined the cliff road farther along. Its surface being bad, it was seldom used.

Inspector Slack had been busy harrying chambermaids and examining Ruby's room for clues. He had been lucky enough to find the room exactly as it had been left the night before.

Ruby Keene had not been in the habit of rising early. Her usual procedure, Slack discovered, was to sleep until about ten or half-past and then ring for breakfast. Consequently, since Conway Jefferson had begun his representations to the manager very early, the police had taken charge of things before the chambermaids had touched the room. They had actually not been down that corridor at all. The other rooms there, at this season of the year, were only opened and dusted once a week.

"That's all to the good as far as it goes," Slack explained gloomily. "It means that if there *were* anything to find we'd find it, but there isn't anything."

The Glenshire police had already been over the room for fingerprints, but there were none unaccounted for. Ruby's own, Josie's, and the two chambermaids—one on the morning and one on the evening shift. There were also a couple of prints made by Raymond Starr, but these were accounted for by his story that he

had come up with Josie to look for Ruby when she did not appear for the midnight exhibition dance.

There had been a heap of letters and general rubbish in the pigeonholes of the massive mahogany desk in the corner. Slack had just been carefully sorting through them. But he had found nothing of a suggestive nature. Bills, receipts, theatre programmes, cinema stubs, newspaper cuttings, beauty hints torn from magazines. Of the letters there were some from "Lil," apparently a friend from the Palais de Danse, recounting various affairs and gossip, saying they "missed Rube a lot. Mr. Findeison asked after you ever so often! Quite put out, he is! Young Reg has taken up with May now you've gone. Barny asks after you now and then. Things going much as usual. Old Grouser still as mean as ever with us girls. He ticked off Ada for going about with a fellow."

Slack had carefully noted all the names mentioned. Inquiries would be made—and it was possible some useful information might come to light. To this Colonel Melchett agreed; so did Superintendent Harper, who had joined them. Otherwise the room had little to yield in the way of information.

Across a chair in the middle of the room was the foamy pink dance frock Ruby had worn early in the evening with a pair of pink satin high-heeled shoes kicked off carelessly on the floor. Two sheer silk stockings were rolled into a ball and flung down. One had a ladder in it. Melchett recalled that the dead girl had had bare feet and legs. This, Slack learned, was her custom. She used makeup on her legs instead of stockings and only sometimes wore stockings for dancing, by this means saving expense. The wardrobe door was open and showed a variety of rather flashy evening dresses and a row of shoes below. There was some soiled underwear in the clothes-basket, some nail parings, soiled face-cleaning tissue and bits of cotton wool stained with rouge and nail-polish in the wastepaper basket—in fact, nothing out of the ordinary! The facts seemed plain to read. Ruby Keene had hurried upstairs, changed her clothes and hurried off again—*where?*

Josephine Turner, who might be supposed to know most of Ruby's life and friends, had proved unable to help. But this, as Inspector

Slack pointed out, might be natural.

"If what you tell me is true, sir—about this adoption business, I mean—well, Josie would be all for Ruby breaking with any old friends she might have and who might queer the pitch, so to speak. As I see it, this invalid gentleman gets all worked up about Ruby Keene being such a sweet, innocent, childish little piece of goods. Now, supposing Ruby's got a tough boy friend—that won't go down so well with the old boy. So it's Ruby's business to keep that dark. Josie doesn't know much about the girl anyway—not about her friends and all that. But one thing she wouldn't stand for—Ruby's messing up things by carrying on with some undesirable fellow. So it stands to reason that Ruby (who, as I see it, was a sly little piece!) would keep very dark about seeing any old friend. She wouldn't let on to Josie anything about it—otherwise Josie would say: 'No, you don't, my girl.' But you know what girls are—especially young ones—always ready to make a fool of themselves over a tough guy. Ruby wants to see him. He comes down here, cuts up rough about the whole business, and wrings the girl's neck."

"I expect you're right, Slack," said Colonel Melchett, disguising his usual repugnance for the unpleasant way Slack had of putting things. "If so, we ought to be able to discover this tough friend's identity fairly easily."

"You leave it to me, sir," said Slack with his usual confidence. "I'll get hold of this 'Lil' girl at that Palais de Danse place and turn her right inside out. We'll soon get at the truth."

Colonel Melchett wondered if they would. Slack's energy and activity always made him feel tired.

"There's one other person you might be able to get a tip from, sir," went on Slack, "and that's the dance and tennis pro fellow. He must have seen a lot of her and he'd know more than Josie would. Likely enough she'd loosen her tongue a bit to him."

"I have already discussed that point with Superintendent Harper."

"Good, sir. *I've* done the chambermaids pretty thoroughly! They don't know a thing. Looked down on these two, as far as I can make out. Scamped the service as much as they dared. Chambermaid was in here last at seven o'clock last night, when she turned down the

bed and drew the curtains and cleared up a bit. There's a bathroom next door, if you'd like to see it?"

The bathroom was situated between Ruby's room and the slightly larger room occupied by Josie. It was illuminating. Colonel Melchett silently marvelled at the amount of aids to beauty that women could use. Rows of jars of face cream, cleansing cream, vanishing cream, skin-feeding cream! Boxes of different shades of powder. An untidy heap of every variety of lipstick. Hair lotions and "brightening" applications. Eyelash black, mascara, blue stain for under the eyes, at least twelve different shades of nail varnish, face tissues, bits of cotton wool, dirty powder-puffs. Bottles of lotions—astrigent, tonic, soothing, etc.

"Do you mean to say," he murmured feebly, "that women use all these things?"

Inspector Slack, who always knew everything, kindly enlightened him.

"In private life, sir, so to speak, a lady keeps to one or two distinct shades, one for evening, one for day. They know what suits them and they keep to it. But these professional girls, they have to ring a change, so to speak. They do exhibition dances, and one night it's a tango and the next a crinoline Victorian dance and then a kind of Apache dance and then just ordinary ballroom, and, of course, the makeup varies a good bit."

"Good lord!" said the Colonel. "No wonder the people who turn out these creams and messes make a fortune."

"Easy money, that's what it is," said Slack. "Easy money. Got to spend a bit in advertisement, of course."

Colonel Melchett jerked his mind away from the fascinating and age-long problem of woman's adornments. He said to Harper, who had just joined them:

"There's still this dancing fellow. Your pigeon, Superintendent?"

"I suppose so, sir."

As they went downstairs Harper asked:

"What did you think of Mr. Bartlett's story, sir?"

"About his car? I think, Harper, that that young man wants watching. It's a fishy story. Supposing that he did take Ruby Keene

out in that car last night, after all?"

IV

Superintendent Harper's manner was slow and pleasant and absolutely noncommittal. These cases where the police of two counties had to collaborate were always difficult. He liked Colonel Melchett and considered him an able Chief Constable, but he was nevertheless glad to be tackling the present interview by himself. Never do too much at once, was Superintendent Harper's rule. Bare routine inquiry for the first time. That left the persons you were interviewing relieved and predisposed them to be more unguarded in the next interview you had with them.

Harper already knew Raymond Starr by sight. A fine-looking specimen, tall, lithe, and good-looking, with very white teeth in a deeply-bronzed face. He was dark and graceful. He had a pleasant, friendly manner and was very popular in the hotel.

"I'm afraid I can't help you much, Superintendent. I knew Ruby quite well, of course. She'd been here over a month and we had practised our dances together and all that. But there's really very little to say. She was quite a pleasant and rather stupid girl."

"It's her friendships we're particularly anxious to know about. Her friendships with men."

"So I suppose. Well, *I* don't know anything! She'd got a few young men in tow in the hotel, but nothing special. You see, she was nearly always monopolized by the Jefferson family."

"Yes, the Jefferson family." Harper paused meditatively. He shot a shrewd glance at the young man. "What did you think of that business, Mr. Starr?"

Raymond Starr said coolly: "What business?"

Harper said: "Did you know that Mr. Jefferson was proposing to adopt Ruby Keene legally?"

This appeared to be news to Starr. He pursed up his lips and whistled. He said:

"The clever little devil! Oh, well, there's no fool like an old fool."

"That's how it strikes you, is it?"

"Well—what else can one say? If the old boy wanted to adopt someone, why didn't he pick upon a girl of his own class?"

"Ruby Keene never mentioned the matter to you?"

"No, she didn't. I knew she was elated about something, but I didn't know what it was."

"And Josie?"

"Oh, I think Josie must have known what was in the wind. Probably she was the one who planned the whole thing. Josie's no fool. She's got a head on her, that girl."

Harper nodded. It was Josie who had sent for Ruby Keene. Josie, no doubt, who had encouraged the intimacy. No wonder she had been upset when Ruby had failed to show up for her dance that night and Conway Jefferson had begun to panic. She was envisaging her plans going awry.

He asked:

"Could Ruby keep a secret, do you think?"

"As well as most. She didn't talk about her own affairs much."

"Did she ever say anything—anything at all—about some friend of hers—someone from her former life who was coming to see her here, or whom she had had difficulty with—you know the sort of thing I mean, no doubt."

"I know perfectly. Well, as far as I'm aware, there was no one of the kind. Not by anything she ever said."

"Thank you, Mr. Starr. Now will you just tell me in your own words exactly what happened last night?"

"Certainly. Ruby and I did our ten-thirty dance together—"

"No signs of anything unusual about her then?"

Raymond considered.

"I don't think so. I didn't notice what happened afterwards. I had my own partners to look after. I do remember noticing she wasn't in the ballroom. At midnight she hadn't turned up. I was very annoyed and went to Josie about it. Josie was playing bridge with the Jeffersons. She hadn't any idea where Ruby was, and I think she got a bit of a jolt. I noticed her shoot a quick, anxious glance at Mr. Jefferson. I persuaded the band to play another dance and I went to

the office and got them to ring up to Ruby's room. There wasn't any answer. I went back to Josie. She suggested that Ruby was perhaps asleep in her room. Idiotic suggestion really, but it was meant for the Jeffersons, of course! She came away with me and said we'd go up together."

"Yes, Mr. Starr. And what did she say when she was alone with you?"

"As far as I can remember, she looked very angry and said: 'Damned little fool. She can't do this sort of thing. It will ruin all her chances. Who's she with, do you know?'

"I said that I hadn't the least idea. The last I'd seen of her was dancing with young Bartlett. Josie said: 'She wouldn't be with *him*. What *can* she be up to? She isn't with that film man, is she?'"

Harper said sharply: "*Film man?* Who was he?"

Raymond said: "I don't know his name. He's never stayed here. Rather an unusual-looking chap—black hair and theatrical-looking. He has something to do with the film industry, I believe—or so he told Ruby. He came over to dine here once or twice and danced with Ruby afterwards, but I don't think she knew him at all well. That's why I was surprised when Josie mentioned him. I said I didn't think he'd been here tonight. Josie said: 'Well, she must be out with *someone*. What on earth am I going to say to the Jeffersons?' I said what did it matter to the Jeffersons? And Josie said it *did* matter. And she said, too, that she'd never forgive Ruby if she went and messed things up.

"We'd got to Ruby's room by then. She wasn't there, of course, but she'd been there, because the dress she had been wearing was lying across a chair. Josie looked in the wardrobe and said she thought she'd put on her old white dress. Normally she'd have changed into a black velvet dress for our Spanish dance. I was pretty angry by this time at the way Ruby had let me down. Josie did her best to soothe me and said she'd dance herself so that old Prestcott shouldn't get after us all. She went away and changed her dress and we went down and did a tango—exaggerated style and quite showy but not really too exhausting upon the ankles. Josie was very plucky about it—for it hurt her, I could see. After that she asked me to help

her soothe the Jeffersons down. She said it was important. So, of course, I did what I could."

Superintendent Harper nodded. He said:

"Thank you, Mr. Starr."

To himself he thought: "It was important, all right! Fifty thousand pounds!"

He watched Raymond Starr as the latter moved gracefully away. He went down the steps of the terrace, picking up a bag of tennis balls and a racquet on the way. Mrs. Jefferson, also carrying a racquet, joined him and they went towards the tennis courts.

"Excuse me, sir."

Sergeant Higgins, rather breathless, stood at Harper's side.

The Superintendent, jerked from the train of thought he was following, looked startled.

"Message just come through for you from headquarters, sir. Labourer reported this morning saw glare as of fire. Half an hour ago they found a burnt-out car in a quarry. Venn's Quarry—about two miles from here. Traces of a charred body inside."

A flush came over Harper's heavy features. He said:

"What's come to Glenshire? An epidemic of violence? Don't tell me we're going to have a Rouse case now!"

He asked: "Could they get the number of the car?"

"No, sir. But we'll be able to identify it, of course, by the engine number. A Minoan 14, they think it is."

Eight

I

Sir Henry Clithering, as he passed through the lounge of the Majestic, hardly glanced at its occupants. His mind was preoccupied. Nevertheless, as is the way of life, something registered in his subconscious. It waited its time patiently.

Sir Henry was wondering as he went upstairs just what had induced the sudden urgency of his friend's message. Conway Jefferson was not the type of man who sent urgent summonses to anyone. Something quite out of the usual must have occurred, decided Sir Henry.

Jefferson wasted no time in beating about the bush. He said:

"Glad you've come. Edwards, get Sir Henry a drink. Sit down, man. You've not heard anything, I suppose? Nothing in the papers yet?"

Sir Henry shook his head, his curiosity aroused.

"What's the matter?"

"Murder's the matter. I'm concerned in it and so are your friends the Bantrys."

"Arthur and Dolly Bantry?" Clithering sounded incredulous.

"Yes, you see, the body was found in their house."

Clearly and succinctly, Conway Jefferson ran through the facts. Sir Henry listened without interrupting. Both men were accustomed to grasping the gist of a matter. Sir Henry, during his term as

Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, had been renowned for his quick grip on essentials.

"It's an extraordinary business," he commented when the other had finished. "How do the Bantrys come into it, do you think?"

"That's what worries me. You see, Henry, it looks to me as though possibly the fact that I know them might have a bearing on the case. That's the only connection I can find. Neither of them, I gather, ever saw the girl before. That's what they say, and there's no reason to disbelieve them. It's most unlikely they *should* know her. Then isn't it possible that she was decoyed away and her body deliberately left in the house of friends of mine?"

Clithering said:

"I think that's far-fetched."

"It's possible, though," persisted the other.

"Yes, but unlikely. What do you want *me* to do?"

Conway Jefferson said bitterly:

"I'm an invalid. I disguise the fact—refuse to face it—but now it comes home to me. I can't go about as I'd like to, asking questions, looking into things. I've got to stay here meekly grateful for such scraps of information as the police are kind enough to dole out to me. Do you happen to know Melchett, by the way, the Chief Constable of Radfordshire?"

"Yes, I've met him."

Something stirred in Sir Henry's brain. A face and figure noted unseeingly as he passed through the lounge. A straight-backed old lady whose face was familiar. It linked up with the last time he had seen Melchett.

He said:

"Do you mean you want me to be a kind of amateur sleuth? That's not my line."

Jefferson said:

"You're *not* an amateur, that's just it."

"I'm not a professional anymore. I'm on the retired list now."

Jefferson said: "That simplifies matters."

"You mean that if I were still at Scotland Yard I couldn't butt in? That's perfectly true."

"As it is," said Jefferson, "your experience qualifies you to take an interest in the case, and any cooperation you offer will be welcomed."

Clithering said slowly:

"Etiquette permits, I agree. But what do you really want, Conway? To find out who killed this girl?"

"Just that."

"You've no idea yourself?"

"None whatever."

Sir Henry said slowly:

"You probably won't believe me, but you've got an expert at solving mysteries sitting downstairs in the lounge at this minute. Someone who's better than I am at it, and who in all probability *may* have some local dope."

"What are you talking about?"

"Downstairs in the lounge, by the third pillar from the left, there sits an old lady with a sweet, placid spinsterish face, and a mind that has plumbed the depths of human iniquity and taken it as all in the day's work. Her name's Miss Marple. She comes from the village of St. Mary Mead, which is a mile and a half from Gossington, she's a friend of the Bantrys—and where crime is concerned she's the goods, Conway."

Jefferson stared at him with thick, puckered brows. He said heavily:

"You're joking."

"No, I'm not. You spoke of Melchett just now. The last time I saw Melchett there was a village tragedy. Girl supposed to have drowned herself. Police quite rightly suspected that it wasn't suicide, but murder. They thought they knew who did it. Along to me comes old Miss Marple, fluttering and dithering. She's afraid, she says, they'll hang the wrong person. She's got no evidence, but she knows who did do it. Hands me a piece of paper with a name written on it. And, by God, Jefferson, she was right!"

Conway Jefferson's brows came down lower than ever. He grunted disbelievingly:

"Woman's intuition, I suppose," he said sceptically.

"No, she doesn't call it that. Specialized knowledge is her claim."

"And what does that mean?"

"Well, you know, Jefferson, we use it in police work. We get a burglary and we usually know pretty well who did it—of the regular crowd, that is. We know the sort of burglar who acts in a particular sort of way. Miss Marple has an interesting, though occasionally trivial, series of parallels from village life."

Jefferson said sceptically:

"What is she likely to know about a girl who's been brought up in a theatrical milieu and probably never been in a village in her life?"

"I think," said Sir Henry Clithering firmly, "that she might have ideas."

II

Miss Marple flushed with pleasure as Sir Henry bore down upon her.

"Oh, Sir Henry, this is indeed a great piece of luck meeting you here."

Sir Henry was gallant. He said:

"To me it is a great pleasure."

Miss Marple murmured, flushing: "So kind of you."

"Are you staying here?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, we are."

"We?"

"Mrs. Bantry's here too." She looked at him sharply. "Have you heard yet? Yes, I can see you have. It is terrible, is it not?"

"What's Dolly Bantry doing here? Is her husband here too?"

"No. Naturally, they both reacted quite differently. Colonel Bantry, poor man, just shuts himself up in his study, or goes down to one of the farms, when anything like this happens. Like tortoises, you know, they draw their heads in and hope nobody will notice them. Dolly, of course, is *quite* different."

"Dolly, in fact," said Sir Henry, who knew his old friend fairly well, "is almost enjoying herself, eh?"

"Well—er—yes. Poor dear."

"And she's brought you along to produce the rabbits out of the hat for her?"

Miss Marple said composedly:

"Dolly thought that a change of scene would be a good thing and she didn't want to come alone." She met his eye and her own gently twinkled. "But, of course, your way of describing it is quite true. It's rather embarrassing for me, because, of course, I am no use at all."

"No ideas? No village parallels?"

"I don't know very much about it all yet."

"I can remedy that, I think. I'm going to call you into consultation, Miss Marple."

He gave a brief recital of the course of events. Miss Marple listened with keen interest.

"Poor Mr. Jefferson," she said. "What a very sad story. These terrible accidents. To leave him alive, crippled, seems more cruel than if he had been killed too."

"Yes, indeed. That's why all his friends admire him so much for the resolute way he's gone on, conquering pain and grief and physical disabilities."

"Yes, it is splendid."

"The only thing I can't understand is this sudden outpouring of affection for this girl. She may, of course, have had some remarkable qualities."

"Probably not," said Miss Marple placidly.

"You don't think so?"

"I don't think her qualities entered into it."

Sir Henry said:

"He isn't just a nasty old man, you know."

"Oh, no, no!" Miss Marple got quite pink. "I wasn't implying that for a minute. What I was trying to say was—very badly, I know—that he was just looking for a nice bright girl to take his dead daughter's place—and then this girl saw her opportunity and played it for all she was worth! That sounds rather uncharitable, I know, but I have seen so many cases of the kind. The young maid-servant at Mr. Harbottle's, for instance. A *very* ordinary girl, but quiet with nice manners. His sister was called away to nurse a dying relative and

when she got back she found the girl completely above herself, sitting down in the drawing room laughing and talking and not wearing her cap or apron. Miss Harbottle spoke to her very sharply and the girl was impertinent, and then old Mr. Harbottle left her quite dumbfounded by saying that he thought she had kept house for him long enough and that he was making other arrangements.

"Such a scandal as it created in the village, but poor Miss Harbottle had to go and live *most* uncomfortably in rooms in Eastbourne. People *said* things, of course, but I believe there was no familiarity of any kind—it was simply that the old man found it much pleasanter to have a young, cheerful girl telling him how clever and amusing he was than to have his sister continually pointing out his faults to him, even if she *was* a good economical manager."

There was a moment's pause, and then Miss Marple resumed.

"And there was Mr. Badger who had the chemist's shop. Made a lot of fuss over the young lady who worked in his toilet section. Told his wife they must look on her as a daughter and have her to live in the house. Mrs. Badger didn't see it that way at all."

Sir Henry said: "If she'd only been a girl in his own rank of life—a friend's child—"

Miss Marple interrupted him.

"Oh! but that wouldn't have been nearly as satisfactory from his point of view. It's like King Cophetua and the beggar maid. If you're really rather a lonely, tired old man, and if, perhaps, your own family have been neglecting you"—she paused for a second—"well, to befriend someone who will be overwhelmed with your magnificence—(to put it rather melodramatically, but I hope you see what I mean)—well, that's much more interesting. It makes you feel a much greater person—a beneficent monarch! The recipient is more likely to be dazzled, and that, of course, is a pleasant feeling for you." She paused and said: "Mr. Badger, you know, bought the girl in his shop some really fantastic presents, a diamond bracelet and a most expensive radio-gramophone. Took out a lot of his savings to do so. However, Mrs. Badger, who was a much more astute woman than poor Miss Harbottle (marriage, of course, *helps*), took the trouble to find out a few things. And when Mr. Badger discovered

that the girl was carrying on with a *very* undesirable young man connected with the racecourses, and had actually pawned the bracelet to give him the money—well, he was completely disgusted and the affair passed over quite safely. And he gave Mrs. Badger a diamond ring the following Christmas.”

Her pleasant, shrewd eyes met Sir Henry’s. He wondered if what she had been saying was intended as a hint. He said:

“Are you suggesting that if there had been a young man in Ruby Keene’s life, my friend’s attitude towards her might have altered?”

“It probably would, you know. I dare say, in a year or two, he might have liked to arrange for her marriage himself—though more likely he wouldn’t—gentlemen are usually rather selfish. But I certainly think that if Ruby Keene had had a young man she’d have been careful to keep very quiet about it.”

“And the young man might have resented that?”

“I suppose that *is* the most plausible solution. It struck me, you know, that her cousin, the young woman who was at Gossington this morning, looked definitely *angry* with the dead girl. What you’ve told me explains *why*. No doubt she was looking forward to doing very well out of the business.”

“Rather a cold-blooded character, in fact?”

“That’s too harsh a judgment, perhaps. The poor thing has had to earn her living, and you can’t expect her to sentimentalize because a well-to-do man and woman—as you have described Mr. Gaskell and Mrs. Jefferson—are going to be done out of a further large sum of money to which they have really no particular moral right. I should say Miss Turner was a hard-headed, ambitious young woman, with a good temper and considerable *joie de vivre*. A little,” added Miss Marple, “like Jessie Golden, the baker’s daughter.”

“What happened to her?” asked Sir Henry.

“She trained as a nursery governess and married the son of the house, who was home on leave from India. Made him a very good wife, I believe.”

Sir Henry pulled himself clear of these fascinating side issues. He said:

"Is there any reason, do you think, why my friend Conway Jefferson should suddenly have developed this 'Cophetua complex,' if you like to call it that?"

"There might have been."

"In what way?"

Miss Marple said, hesitating a little:

"I should think—it's only a suggestion, of course—that perhaps his son-in-law and daughter-in-law *might* have wanted to get married again."

"Surely he couldn't have objected to that?"

"Oh, no, not *objected*. But, you see, you must look at it from *his* point of view. He had a terrible shock and loss—so had they. The three bereaved people live together and the *link* between them is the loss they have all sustained. But Time, as my dear mother used to say, is a great healer. Mr. Gaskell and Mrs. Jefferson are young. Without knowing it themselves, they may have begun to feel restless, to resent the bonds that tied them to their past sorrow. And so, feeling like that, old Mr. Jefferson would have become conscious of a sudden lack of sympathy without knowing its cause. It's usually that. Gentlemen so *easily* feel neglected. With Mr. Harbottle it was Miss Harbottle going away. And with the Badgers it was Mrs. Badger taking such an interest in Spiritualism and always going out to séances."

"I must say," said Sir Henry ruefully, "that I dislike the way you reduce us all to a General Common Denominator."

Miss Marple shook her head sadly.

"Human nature is very much the same anywhere, Sir Henry."

Sir Henry said distastefully:

"Mr. Harbottle! Mr. Badger! And poor Conway! I hate to intrude the personal note, but have you any parallel for *my* humble self in your village?"

"Well, of course, there is Briggs."

"Who's Briggs?"

"He was the head gardener up at Old Hall. *Quite* the best man they ever had. Knew *exactly* when the under-gardeners were slacking off—quite uncanny it was! He managed with only three men

and a boy and the place was kept better than it had been with six. And took several firsts with his sweet peas. He's retired now."

"Like me," said Sir Henry.

"But he still does a little jobbing—if he likes the people."

"Ah," said Sir Henry. "Again like me. That's what I'm doing now—jobbing—to help an old friend."

"Two old friends."

"Two?" Sir Henry looked a little puzzled.

Miss Marple said:

"I suppose you meant Mr. Jefferson. But I wasn't thinking of him. I was thinking of Colonel and Mrs. Bantry."

"Yes—yes—I see—" He asked sharply: "Was that why you alluded to Dolly Bantry as 'poor dear' at the beginning of our conversation?"

"Yes. She hasn't begun to realize things yet. *I* know because I've had more experience. You see, Sir Henry, it seems to me that there's a great possibility of this crime being the kind of crime that never *does* get solved. Like the Brighton trunk murders. But if that happens it will be absolutely disastrous for the Bantrys. Colonel Bantry, like nearly all retired military men, is really *abnormally* sensitive. He reacts very quickly to public opinion. He won't notice it for some time, and then it will begin to go home to him. A slight here, and a snub there, and invitations that are refused, and excuses that are made—and then, little by little, it will dawn upon him and he'll retire into his shell and get terribly morbid and miserable."

"Let me be sure I understand you rightly, Miss Marple. You mean that, because the body was found in his house, people will think that *he* had something to do with it?"

"Of course they will! I've no doubt they're saying so already. They'll say so more and more. And people will cold shoulder the Bantrys and avoid them. That's why the truth has got to be found out and why I was willing to come here with Mrs. Bantry. An open accusation is one thing—and quite easy for a soldier to meet. He's indignant and he has a chance of fighting. But this other *whispering* business will break him—will break them both. So you see, Sir Henry, we've *got* to find out the truth."

Sir Henry said:

"Any ideas as to why the body should have been found in his house? There must be an explanation of that. Some connection."

"Oh, of course."

"The girl was last seen here about twenty minutes to eleven. By midnight, according to the medical evidence, she was dead. Gossington's about eighteen miles from here. Good road for sixteen of those miles until one turns off the main road. A powerful car could do it in well under half an hour. Practically *any* car could average thirty-five. But why anyone should either kill her here and take her body out to Gossington or should take her out to Gossington and strangle her there, I don't know."

"Of course you don't, because it didn't happen."

"Do you mean that she was strangled by some fellow who took her out in a car and he then decided to push her into the first likely house in the neighbourhood?"

"I don't think anything of the kind. I think there was a very careful plan made. What happened was that the plan went wrong."

Sir Henry stared at her.

"Why did the plan go wrong?"

Miss Marple said rather apologetically:

"Such curious things happen, don't they? If I were to say that this particular plan went wrong because human beings are so much more vulnerable and sensitive than anyone thinks, it wouldn't sound sensible, would it? But that's what I believe—and—"

She broke off. "Here's Mrs. Bantry now."

Nine

Mrs. Bantry was with Adelaide Jefferson. The former came up to Sir Henry and exclaimed: "*You?*"

"I, myself." He took both her hands and pressed them warmly. "I can't tell you how distressed I am at all this, Mrs. B."

Mrs. Bantry said mechanically:

"*Don't call me Mrs. B.!*" and went on: "Arthur isn't here. He's taking it all rather seriously. Miss Marple and I have come here to sleuth. Do you know Mrs. Jefferson?"

"Yes, of course."

He shook hands. Adelaide Jefferson said:

"Have you seen my father-in-law?"

"Yes, I have."

"I'm glad. We're anxious about him. It was a terrible shock."

Mrs. Bantry said:

"Let's come out on the terrace and have drinks and talk about it all."

The four of them went out and joined Mark Gaskell, who was sitting at the extreme end of the terrace by himself.

After a few desultory remarks and the arrival of the drinks Mrs. Bantry plunged straight into the subject with her usual zest for direct action.

"We can talk about it, can't we?" she said. "I mean, we're all old friends—except Miss Marple, and she knows all about crime. And she wants to help."

Mark Gaskell looked at Miss Marple in a somewhat puzzled fashion. He said doubtfully:

"Do you—er—write detective stories?"

The most unlikely people, he knew, wrote detective stories. And Miss Marple, in her old-fashioned spinster's clothes, looked a singularly unlikely person.

"Oh no, I'm not clever enough for *that*."

"She's wonderful," said Mrs. Bantry impatiently. "I can't explain now, but she is. Now, Addie, I want to know all about things. What was she really like, this girl?"

"Well—" Adelaide Jefferson paused, glanced across at Mark, and half laughed. She said: "You're so direct."

"Did you like her?"

"No, of course I didn't."

"What was she really like?" Mrs. Bantry shifted her inquiry to Mark Gaskell. Mark said deliberately:

"Common or garden gold-digger. And she knew her stuff. She'd got her hooks into Jeff all right."

Both of them called their father-in-law Jeff.

Sir Henry thought, looking disapprovingly at Mark:

"Indiscreet fellow. Shouldn't be so outspoken."

He had always disapproved a little of Mark Gaskell. The man had charm but he was unreliable—talked too much, was occasionally boastful—not quite to be trusted, Sir Henry thought. He had sometimes wondered if Conway Jefferson thought so too.

"But couldn't you *do* something about it?" demanded Mrs. Bantry.

Mark said dryly:

"We might have—if we'd realized it in time."

He shot a glance at Adelaide and she coloured faintly. There had been reproach in that glance.

She said:

"Mark thinks I ought to have seen what was coming."

"You left the old boy alone too much, Addie. Tennis lessons and all the rest of it."

"Well, I had to have some exercise." She spoke apologetically. "Anyway, I never dreamed—"

"No," said Mark, "neither of us ever dreamed. Jeff has always been such a sensible, levelheaded old boy."

Miss Marple made a contribution to the conversation.

"Gentlemen," she said with her old-maid's way of referring to the opposite sex as though it were a species of wild animal, "are frequently not as levelheaded as they seem."

"I'll say you're right," said Mark. "Unfortunately, Miss Marple, we didn't realize that. We wondered what the old boy saw in that rather insipid and meretricious little bag of tricks. But we were pleased for him to be kept happy and amused. We thought there was no harm in her. No harm in her! I wish I'd wrung her neck!"

"Mark," said Addie, "you really *must* be careful what you say."

He grinned at her engagingly.

"I suppose I must. Otherwise people will think I actually *did* wring her neck. Oh well, I suppose I'm under suspicion, anyway. If anyone had an interest in seeing that girl dead it was Addie and myself."

"Mark," cried Mrs. Jefferson, half laughing and half angry, "you really *mustn't*!"

"All right, all right," said Mark Gaskell pacifically. "But I do like speaking my mind. Fifty thousand pounds our esteemed father-in-law was proposing to settle upon that half-baked nitwitted little slypuss."

"Mark, you mustn't—she's dead."

"Yes, she's dead, poor little devil. And after all, why shouldn't she use the weapons that Nature gave her? Who am I to judge? Done plenty of rotten things myself in my life. No, let's say Ruby was entitled to plot and scheme and we were mugs not to have tumbled to her game sooner."

Sir Henry said:

"What did you say when Conway told you he proposed to adopt the girl?"

Mark thrust out his hands.

"What could we say? Addie, always the little lady, retained her self-control admirably. Put a brave face upon it. I endeavoured to follow her example."

"I should have made a fuss!" said Mrs. Bantry.

"Well, frankly speaking, we weren't entitled to make a fuss. It was Jeff 's money. We weren't his flesh and blood. He'd always been damned good to us. There was nothing for it but to bite on the bullet." He added reflectively: "But we didn't love little Ruby."

Adelaide Jefferson said:

"If only it had been some other kind of girl. Jeff had two godchildren, you know. If it had been one of them—well, one would have *understood* it." She added, with a shade of resentment: "And Jeff 's always seemed so fond of Peter."

"Of course," said Mrs. Bantry. "I always have known Peter was your first husband's child—but I'd quite forgotten it. I've always thought of him as Mr. Jefferson's grandson."

"So have I," said Adelaide. Her voice held a note that made Miss Marple turn in her chair and look at her.

"It was Josie's fault," said Mark. "Josie brought her here."

Adelaide said:

"Oh, but surely you don't think it was deliberate, do you? Why, you've always liked Josie so much."

"Yes, I did like her. I thought she was a good sport."

"It was sheer accident her bringing the girl down."

"Josie's got a good head on her shoulders, my girl."

"Yes, but she couldn't foresee—"

Mark said:

"No, she couldn't. I admit it. I'm not really accusing her of planning the whole thing. But I've no doubt she saw which way the wind was blowing long before we did and kept very quiet about it."

Adelaide said with a sigh:

"I suppose one can't blame her for that."

Mark said:

"Oh, we can't blame anyone for anything!"

Mrs. Bantry asked:

"Was Ruby Keene very pretty?"

Mark stared at her. "I thought you'd seen—"

Mrs. Bantry said hastily:

"Oh yes, I saw her—her body. But she'd been strangled, you know, and one couldn't tell—" She shivered.

Mark said, thoughtfully:

"I don't think she was really pretty at all. She certainly wouldn't have been without any makeup. A thin ferrety little face, not much chin, teeth running down her throat, nondescript sort of nose—"

"It sounds revolting," said Mrs. Bantry.

"Oh no, she wasn't. As I say, with makeup she managed to give quite an effect of good looks, don't you think so, Addie?"

"Yes, rather chocolate-box, pink and white business. She had nice blue eyes."

"Yes, innocent baby stare, and the heavily-blackened lashes brought out the blueness. Her hair was bleached, of course. It's true, when I come to think of it, that in colouring—artificial colouring, anyway—she had a kind of spurious resemblance to Rosamund—my wife, you know. I dare say that's what attracted the old man's attention to her."

He sighed.

"Well, it's a bad business. The awful thing is that Addie and I can't help being glad, really, that she's dead—"

He quelled a protest from his sister-in-law.

"It's no good, Addie; I know what you feel. I feel the same. And I'm not going to pretend! But, at the same time, if you know what I mean, I really am most awfully concerned for Jeff about the whole business. It's hit him very hard. I—"

He stopped, and stared towards the doors leading out of the lounge on to the terrace.

"Well, well—see who's here. What an unscrupulous woman you are, Addie."

Mrs. Jefferson looked over her shoulder, uttered an exclamation and got up, a slight colour rising in her face. She walked quickly along the terrace and went up to a tall middle-aged man with a thin brown face, who was looking uncertainly about him.

Mrs. Bantry said: "Isn't that Hugo McLean?"

Mark Gaskell said:

"Hugo McLean it is. Alias William Dobbin."

Mrs. Bantry murmured:

"He's very faithful, isn't he?"

"Dog-like devotion," said Mark. "Addie's only got to whistle and Hugo comes trotting from any odd corner of the globe. Always hopes that some day she'll marry him. I dare say she will."

Miss Marple looked beamingly after them. She said:

"I see. A romance?"

"One of the good old-fashioned kind," Mark assured her. "It's been going on for years. Addie's that kind of woman."

He added meditatively: "I suppose Addie telephoned him this morning. She didn't tell me she had."

Edwards came discreetly along the terrace and paused at Mark's elbow.

"Excuse me, sir. Mr. Jefferson would like you to come up."

"I'll come at once." Mark sprang up.

He nodded to them, said: "See you later," and went off.

Sir Henry leant forward to Miss Marple. He said:

"Well, what do you think of the principal beneficiaries of the crime?"

Miss Marple said thoughtfully, looking at Adelaide Jefferson as she stood talking to her old friend:

"I should think, you know, that she was a very devoted mother."

"Oh, she is," said Mrs. Bantry. "She's simply devoted to Peter."

"She's the kind of woman," said Miss Marple, "that everyone likes. The kind of woman that could go on getting married again and again. I don't mean a *man's* woman—that's quite different."

"I know what you mean," said Sir Henry.

"What you both mean," said Mrs. Bantry, "is that she's a good listener."

Sir Henry laughed. He said:

"And Mark Gaskell?"

"Ah," said Miss Marple, "he's a downy fellow."

"Village parallel, please?"

"Mr. Cargill, the builder. He bluffed a lot of people into having things done to their houses they never meant to do. And how he charged them for it! But he could always explain his bills away plausibly. A downy fellow. He married money. So did Mr. Gaskell, I understand."

"You don't like him."

"Yes, I do. Most women would. But he can't take me in. He's a very attractive person, I think. But a little unwise, perhaps, to *talk* as much as he does."

"Unwise is the word," said Sir Henry. "Mark will get himself into trouble if he doesn't look out."

A tall dark young man in white flannels came up the steps to the terrace and paused just for a minute, watching Adelaide Jefferson and Hugo McLean.

"And that," said Sir Henry obligingly, "is X, whom we might describe as an interested party. He is the tennis and dancing pro—Raymond Starr, Ruby Keene's partner."

Miss Marple looked at him with interest. She said:

"He's very nice-looking, isn't he?"

"I suppose so."

"Don't be absurd, Sir Henry," said Mrs. Bantry; "there's no supposing about it. He *is* good-looking."

Miss Marple murmured:

"Mrs. Jefferson has been taking tennis lessons, I think she said."

"Do you mean anything by that, Jane, or don't you?"

Miss Marple had no chance of replying to this downright question. Young Peter Carmody came across the terrace and joined them. He addressed himself to Sir Henry:

"I say, are you a detective, too? I saw you talking to the Superintendent—the fat one is a superintendent, isn't he?"

"Quite right, my son."

"And somebody told me you were a frightfully important detective from London. The head of Scotland Yard or something like that."

"The head of Scotland Yard is usually a complete dud in books, isn't he?"

"Oh no, not nowadays. Making fun of the police is very old-fashioned. Do you know who did the murder yet?"

"Not yet, I'm afraid."

"Are you enjoying this very much, Peter?" asked Mrs. Bantry.

"Well, I am, rather. It makes a change, doesn't it? I've been hunting round to see if I could find any clues, but I haven't been

lucky. I've got a souvenir, though. Would you like to see it? Fancy, Mother wanted me to throw it away. I do think one's parents are rather trying sometimes."

He produced from his pocket a small matchbox. Pushing it open, he disclosed the precious contents.

"See, *it's a fingernail. Her fingernail!* I'm going to label it *Fingernail of the Murdered Woman* and take it back to school. It's a good souvenir, don't you think?"

"Where did you get it?" asked Miss Marple.

"Well, it was a bit of luck, really. Because, of course, I didn't know she was going to be murdered *then*. It was before dinner last night. Ruby caught her nail in Josie's shawl and it tore it. Mums cut it off for her and gave it to me and said put it in the wastepaper basket, and I meant to, but I put it in my pocket instead, and this morning I remembered and looked to see if it was still there and it was, so now I've got it as a souvenir."

"Disgusting," said Mrs. Bantry.

Peter said politely: "Oh, do you think so?"

"Got any other souvenirs?" asked Sir Henry.

"Well, I don't know. I've got something that might be."

"Explain yourself, young man."

Peter looked at him thoughtfully. Then he pulled out an envelope. From the inside of it he extracted a piece of brownny tapey substance.

"It's a bit of that chap George Bartlett's shoe-lace," he explained. "I saw his shoes outside the door this morning and I bagged a bit just in case."

"In case what?"

"In case he should be the murderer, of course. He was the last person to see her and that's always frightfully suspicious, you know. Is it nearly dinner time, do you think? I'm frightfully hungry. It always seems such a long time between tea and dinner. Hallo, there's Uncle Hugo. I didn't know Mums had asked *him* to come down. I suppose she sent for him. She always does if she's in a jam. Here's Josie coming. Hi, Josie!"

Josephine Turner, coming along the terrace, stopped and looked rather startled to see Mrs. Bantry and Miss Marple.

Mrs. Bantry said pleasantly:

"How d'you do, Miss Turner. We've come to do a bit of sleuthing!"

Josie cast a guilty glance round. She said, lowering her voice:

"It's awful. Nobody knows yet. I mean, it isn't in the papers yet. I suppose everyone will be asking me questions and it's so awkward. I don't know what I ought to say."

Her glance went rather wistfully towards Miss Marple, who said: "Yes, it will be a very difficult situation for you, I'm afraid."

Josie warmed to this sympathy.

"You see, Mr. Prestcott said to me: 'Don't talk about it.' And that's all very well, but everyone is sure to ask me, and you can't offend people, can you? Mr. Prestcott said he hoped I'd feel able to carry on as usual—and he wasn't very nice about it, so of course I want to do my best. And I really don't see why it should all be blamed on me."

Sir Henry said:

"Do you mind me asking you a frank question, Miss Turner?"

"Oh, do ask me anything you like," said Josie, a little insincerely.

"Has there been any unpleasantness between you and Mrs. Jefferson and Mr. Gaskell over all this?"

"Over the murder, do you mean?"

"No, I don't mean the murder."

Josie stood twisting her fingers together. She said rather sullenly:

"Well, there has and there hasn't, if you know what I mean. Neither of them have *said* anything. But I think they blamed it on me—Mr. Jefferson taking such a fancy to Ruby, I mean. It wasn't my fault, though, was it? These things happen, and I never dreamt of such a thing happening beforehand, not for a moment. I—I was quite dumbfounded."

Her words rang out with what seemed undeniable sincerity.

Sir Henry said kindly:

"I'm quite sure you were. But once it *had* happened?"

Josie's chin went up.

"Well, it was a piece of luck, wasn't it? Everyone's got the right to have a piece of luck sometimes."

She looked from one to the other of them in a slightly defiant questioning manner and then went on across the terrace and into the hotel.

Peter said judicially:

"I don't think *she* did it."

Miss Marple murmured:

"It's interesting, that piece of fingernail. It had been worrying me, you know—how to account for her nails."

"Nails?" asked Sir Henry.

"The dead girl's nails," explained Mrs. Bantry. "They were quite *short*, and now that Jane says so, of course it *was* a little unlikely. A girl like that usually has absolute talons."

Miss Marple said:

"But of course if she tore one off, then she might clip the others close, so as to match. Did they find nail parings in her room, I wonder?"

Sir Henry looked at her curiously. He said:

"I'll ask Superintendent Harper when he gets back."

"Back from where?" asked Mrs. Bantry. "He hasn't gone over to Gossington, has he?"

Sir Henry said gravely:

"No. There's been another tragedy. Blazing car in a quarry—"

Miss Marple caught her breath.

"Was there someone in the car?"

"I'm afraid so—yes."

Miss Marple said thoughtfully:

"I expect that will be the Girl Guide who's missing—Patience—no, Pamela Reeves."

Sir Henry stared at her.

"Now why on earth do you think that, Miss Marple?"

Miss Marple got rather pink.

"Well, it was given out on the wireless that she was missing from her home—since last night. And her home was Daneleigh Vale; that's not very far from here. And she was last seen at the Girl-Guide Rally up on Danebury Downs. That's very close indeed. In fact, she'd have to pass through Danemouth to get home. So it does rather fit in,

doesn't it? I mean, it looks as though she might have seen—or perhaps heard—something that no one was supposed to see and hear. If so, of course, she'd be a source of danger to the murderer and she'd have to be—removed. Two things like that *must* be connected, don't you think?"

Sir Henry said, his voice dropping a little:

"You think—a second murder?"

"Why not?" Her quiet placid gaze met his. "When anyone has committed one murder, they don't shrink from another, do they? Nor even from a third."

"A third? You don't think there will be a *third* murder?"

"I think it's just possible ... Yes, I think it's highly possible."

"Miss Marple," said Sir Henry, "you frighten me. Do you know who is going to be murdered?"

Miss Marple said: "I've a very good idea."

Ten

I

Superintendent Harper stood looking at the charred and twisted heap of metal. A burnt-up car was always a revolting object, even without the additional gruesome burden of a charred and blackened corpse.

Venn's Quarry was a remote spot, far from any human habitation. Though actually only two miles as the crow flies from Danemouth, the approach to it was by one of those narrow, twisted, rutted roads, little more than a cart track, which led nowhere except to the quarry itself. It was a long time now since the quarry had been worked, and the only people who came along the lane were the casual visitors in search of blackberries. As a spot to dispose of a car it was ideal. The car need not have been found for weeks but for the accident of the glow in the sky having been seen by Albert Biggs, a labourer, on his way to work.

Albert Biggs was still on the scene, though all he had to tell had been heard some time ago, but he continued to repeat the thrilling story with such embellishments as occurred to him.

"Why, dang my eyes, I said, whatever be that? Proper glow it was, up in the sky. Might be a bonfire, I says, but who'd be having bonfire over to Venn's Quarry? No, I says, 'tis some mighty big fire, to be sure. But whatever would it be, I says? There's no house or farm to that direction. 'Tis over by Venn's, I says, that's where it is, to be sure. Didn't rightly know what I ought to do about it, but

seeing as Constable Gregg comes along just then on his bicycle, I tells him about it. 'Twas all died down by then, but I tells him just where 'twere. 'Tis over that direction, I says. Big glare in the sky, I says. Mayhap as it's a rick, I says. One of them tramps, as likely as not, set alight of it. But I did never think as how it might be a car—far less as someone was being burnt up alive in it. 'Tis a terrible tragedy, to be sure."

The Glenshire police had been busy. Cameras had clicked and the position of the charred body had been carefully noted before the police surgeon had started his own investigation.

The latter came over now to Harper, dusting black ash off his hands, his lips set grimly together.

"A pretty thorough job," he said. "Part of one foot and shoe are about all that has escaped. Personally I myself couldn't say if the body was a man's or a woman's at the moment, though we'll get some indication from the bones, I expect. But the shoe is one of the black strapped affairs—the kind schoolgirls wear."

"There's a schoolgirl missing from the next county," said Harper; "quite close to here. Girl of sixteen or so."

"Then it's probably her," said the doctor. "Poor kid."

Harper said uneasily: "She wasn't alive when—?"

"No, no, I don't think so. No signs of her having tried to get out. Body was just slumped down on the seat—with the foot sticking out. She was dead when she was put there, I should say. Then the car was set fire to in order to try and get rid of the evidence."

He paused, and asked:

"Want me any longer?"

"I don't think so, thank you."

"Right. I'll be off."

He strode away to his car. Harper went over to where one of his sergeants, a man who specialized in car cases, was busy.

The latter looked up.

"Quite a clear case, sir. Petrol poured over the car and the whole thing deliberately set light to. There are three empty cans in the hedge over there."

A little farther away another man was carefully arranging small objects picked out of the wreckage. There was a scorched black leather shoe and with it some scraps of scorched and blackened material. As Harper approached, his subordinate looked up and exclaimed:

"Look at this, sir. This seems to clinch it."

Harper took the small object in his hand. He said:

"Button from a Girl Guide's uniform?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes," said Harper, "that does seem to settle it."

A decent, kindly man, he felt slightly sick. First Ruby Keene and now this child, Pamela Reeves.

He said to himself, as he had said before:

"What's come to Glenshire?"

His next move was first to ring up his own Chief Constable, and afterwards to get in touch with Colonel Melchett. The disappearance of Pamela Reeves had taken place in Radfordshire though her body had been found in Glenshire.

The next task set him was not a pleasant one. He had to break the news to Pamela Reeves's father and mother....

II

Superintendent Harper looked up consideringly at the façade of Braeside as he rang the front door bell.

Neat little villa, nice garden of about an acre and a half. The sort of place that had been built fairly freely all over the countryside in the last twenty years. Retired Army men, retired Civil Servants—that type. Nice decent folk; the worst you could say of them was that they might be a bit dull. Spent as much money as they could afford on their children's education. Not the kind of people you associated with tragedy. And now tragedy had come to them. He sighed.

He was shown at once into a lounge where a stiff man with a grey moustache and a woman whose eyes were red with weeping both sprang up. Mrs. Reeves cried out eagerly:

"You have some news of Pamela?"

Then she shrank back, as though the Superintendent's commiserating glance had been a blow.

Harper said:

"I'm afraid you must prepare yourself for bad news."

"Pamela—" faltered the woman.

Major Reeves said sharply:

"Something's happened—to the child?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you mean she's dead?"

Mrs. Reeves burst out:

"Oh no, no," and broke into a storm of weeping. Major Reeves put his arm round his wife and drew her to him. His lips trembled but he looked inquiringly at Harper, who bent his head.

"An accident?"

"Not exactly, Major Reeves. She was found in a burnt-out car which had been abandoned in a quarry."

"In a car? In a quarry?"

His astonishment was evident.

Mrs. Reeves broke down altogether and sank down on the sofa, sobbing violently.

Superintendent Harper said:

"If you'd like me to wait a few minutes?"

Major Reeves said sharply:

"What does this mean? Foul play?"

"That's what it looks like, sir. That's why I'd like to ask you some questions if it isn't too trying for you."

"No, no, you're quite right. No time must be lost if what you suggest is true. But I can't believe it. Who would want to harm a child like Pamela?"

Harper said stolidly:

"You've already reported to your local police the circumstances of your daughter's disappearance. She left here to attend a Guides rally and you expected her home for supper. That is right?"

"Yes."

"She was to return by bus?"

"Yes."

"I understand that, according to the story of her fellow Guides, when the rally was over Pamela said she was going into Danemouth to Woolworth's, and would catch a later bus home. That strikes you as quite a normal proceeding?"

"Oh yes, Pamela was very fond of going to Woolworth's. She often went into Danemouth to shop. The bus goes from the main road, only about a quarter of a mile from here."

"And she had no other plans, so far as you know?"

"None."

"She was not meeting anybody in Danemouth?"

"No, I'm sure she wasn't. She would have mentioned it if so. We expected her back for supper. That's why, when it got so late and she hadn't turned up, we rang up the police. It wasn't like her not to come home."

"Your daughter had no undesirable friends—that is, friends that you didn't approve of?"

"No, there was never any trouble of that kind."

Mrs. Reeves said tearfully:

"Pam was just a child. She was very young for her age. She liked games and all that. She wasn't precocious in any way."

"Do you know a Mr. George Bartlett who is staying at the Majestic Hotel in Danemouth?"

Major Reeves stared.

"Never heard of him."

"You don't think your daughter knew him?"

"I'm quite sure she didn't."

He added sharply: "How does he come into it?"

"He's the owner of the Minoan 14 car in which your daughter's body was found."

Mrs. Reeves cried: "But then he must—"

Harper said quickly:

"He reported his car missing early today. It was in the courtyard of the Majestic Hotel at lunch time yesterday. Anybody might have taken the car."

"But didn't someone see who took it?"

The Superintendent shook his head.

"Dozens of cars going in and out all day. And a Minoan 14 is one of the commonest makes."

Mrs. Reeves cried:

"But aren't you doing something? Aren't you trying to find the—the devil who did this? My little girl—oh, my little girl! She wasn't burnt alive, was she? Oh, Pam, Pam ...!"

"She didn't suffer, Mrs. Reeves. I assure you she was already dead when the car was set alight."

Reeves asked stiffly:

"How was she killed?"

Harper gave him a significant glance.

"We don't know. The fire had destroyed all evidence of that kind."

He turned to the distraught woman on the sofa.

"Believe me, Mrs. Reeves, we're doing everything we can. It's a matter of checking up. Sooner or later we shall find someone who saw your daughter in Danemouth yesterday, and saw whom she was with. It all takes time, you know. We shall have dozens, hundreds of reports coming in about a Girl Guide who was seen here, there, and everywhere. It's a matter of selection and of patience—but we shall find out the truth in the end, never you fear."

Mrs. Reeves asked:

"Where—where is she? Can I go to her?"

Again Superintendent Harper caught the husband's eye. He said:

"The medical officer is attending to all that. I'd suggest that your husband comes with me now and attends to all the formalities. In the meantime, try and recollect anything Pamela may have said—something, perhaps, that you didn't pay attention to at the time but which might throw some light upon things. You know what I mean—just some chance word or phrase. That's the best way you can help us."

As the two men went towards the door, Reeves said, pointing to a photograph:

"There she is."

Harper looked at it attentively. It was a hockey group. Reeves pointed out Pamela in the centre of the team.

"A nice kid," Harper thought, as he looked at the earnest face of the pigtailed girl.

His mouth set in a grim line as he thought of the charred body in the car.

He vowed to himself that the murder of Pamela Reeves should not remain one of Glenshire's unsolved mysteries.

Ruby Keene, so he admitted privately, might have asked for what was coming to her, but Pamela Reeves was quite another story. A nice kid, if he ever saw one. He'd not rest until he'd hunted down the man or woman who'd killed her.

Eleven

A day or two later Colonel Melchett and Superintendent Harper looked at each other across the former's big desk. Harper had come over to Much Benham for a consultation.

Melchett said gloomily:

"Well, we know where we are—or rather where we aren't!"

"Where we aren't expresses it better, sir."

"We've got two deaths to take into account," said Melchett. "Two murders. Ruby Keene and the child Pamela Reeves. Not much to identify her by, poor kid, but enough. That shoe that escaped burning has been identified positively as hers by her father, and there's this button from her Girl Guide uniform. A fiendish business, Superintendent."

Superintendent Harper said very quietly:

"I'll say you're right, sir."

"I'm glad it's quite certain she was dead before the car was set on fire. The way she was lying, thrown across the seat, shows that. Probably knocked on the head, poor kid."

"Or strangled, perhaps," said Harper.

Melchett looked at him sharply.

"You think so?"

"Well, sir, there are murderers like that."

"I know. I've seen the parents—the poor girl's mother's beside herself. Damned painful, the whole thing. The point for us to settle is—are the two murders connected?"

"I'd say definitely yes."

"So would I."

The Superintendent ticked off the points on his fingers.

"Pamela Reeves attended rally of Girl Guides on Danebury Downs. Stated by companions to be normal and cheerful. Did not return with three companions by the bus to Medchester. Said to them that she was going into Danemouth to Woolworth's and would take the bus home from there. The main road into Danemouth from the downs does a big round inland. Pamela Reeves took a shortcut over two fields and a footpath and lane which would bring her into Danemouth near the Majestic Hotel. The lane, in fact, actually passes the hotel on the west side. It's possible, therefore, that she overheard or saw something—something concerning Ruby Keene—which would have proved dangerous to the murderer—say, for instance, that she heard him arranging to meet Ruby Keene at eleven that evening. He realizes that this schoolgirl has overheard, and he has to silence her."

Colonel Melchett said:

"That's presuming, Harper, that the Ruby Keene crime was premeditated—not spontaneous."

Superintendent Harper agreed.

"I believe it was, sir. It looks as though it would be the other way—sudden violence, a fit of passion or jealousy—but I'm beginning to think that that's not so. I don't see otherwise how you can account for the death of the Reeves child. If she was a witness of the actual crime, it would be late at night, round about eleven p.m., and what would she be doing round about the Majestic at that time? Why, at nine o'clock her parents were getting anxious because she hadn't returned."

"The alternative is that she went to meet someone in Danemouth unknown to her family and friends, and that her death is quite unconnected with the other death."

"Yes, sir, and I don't believe that's so. Look how even the old lady, old Miss Marple, tumbled to it at once that there was a connection. She asked at once if the body in the burnt car was the body of the missing Girl Guide. Very smart old lady, that. These old ladies are sometimes. Shrewd, you know. Put their fingers on the vital spot."

"Miss Marple has done that more than once," said Colonel Melchett dryly.

"And besides, sir, there's the car. That seems to me to link up her death definitely with the Majestic Hotel. It was Mr. George Bartlett's car."

Again the eyes of the two men met. Melchett said:

"George Bartlett? Could be! What do you think?"

Again Harper methodically recited various points.

"Ruby Keene was last seen with George Bartlett. He says she went to her room (borne out by the dress she was wearing being found there), but did she go to her room and change *in order to go out with him*? Had they made a date to go out together earlier—discussed it, say, before dinner, and did Pamela Reeves happen to overhear?"

Melchett said: "He didn't report the loss of his car until the following morning, and he was extremely vague about it then, pretended he couldn't remember exactly when he had last noticed it."

"That might be cleverness, sir. As I see it, he's either a very clever gentleman pretending to be a silly ass, or else—well, he is a silly ass."

"What we want," said Melchett, "is motive. As it stands, he had no motive whatever for killing Ruby Keene."

"Yes—that's where we're stuck every time. Motive. All the reports from the Palais de Danse at Brixwell are negative, I understand?"

"Absolutely! Ruby Keene had no special boy friend. Slack's been into the matter thoroughly—give Slack his due, he *is* thorough."

"That's right, sir. Thorough's the word."

"If there was anything to ferret out, he'd have ferreted it out. But there's nothing there. He got a list of her most frequent dancing partners—all vetted and found correct. Harmless fellows, and all able to produce alibis for that night."

"Ah," said Superintendent Harper. "Alibis. That's what we're up against."

Melchett looked at him sharply. "Think so? I've left that side of the investigation to you."

"Yes, sir. It's been gone into—very thoroughly. We applied to London for help over it."

"Well?"

"Mr. Conway Jefferson may think that Mr. Gaskell and young Mrs. Jefferson are comfortably off, but that is not the case. They're both extremely hard up."

"Is that true?"

"Quite true, sir. It's as Mr. Conway Jefferson said, he made over considerable sums of money to his son and daughter when they married. That was over ten years ago, though. Mr. Jefferson fancied himself as knowing good investments. He didn't invest in anything absolutely wild cat, but he was unlucky and showed poor judgment more than once. His holdings have gone steadily down. I should say the widow found it difficult to make both ends meet and send her son to a good school."

"But she hasn't applied to her father-in-law for help?"

"No, sir. As far as I can make out she lives with him, and consequently has no household expenses."

"And his health is such that he wasn't expected to live long?"

"That's right, sir. Now for Mr. Mark Gaskell. He's a gambler, pure and simple. Got through his wife's money very soon. Has got himself tangled up rather critically just at present. He needs money badly—and a good deal of it."

"Can't say I liked the looks of him much," said Colonel Melchett. "Wild-looking sort of fellow—what? And he's got a motive all right. Twenty-five thousand pounds it meant to him getting that girl out of the way. Yes, it's a motive all right."

"They both had a motive."

"I'm not considering Mrs. Jefferson."

"No, sir, I know you're not. And, anyway, the alibi holds for both of them. They *couldn't* have done it. Just that."

"You've got a detailed statement of their movements that evening?"

"Yes, I have. Take Mr. Gaskell first. He dined with his father-in-law and Mrs. Jefferson, had coffee with them afterwards when Ruby Keene joined them. Then he said he had to write letters and left

them. Actually he took his car and went for a spin down to the front. He told me quite frankly he couldn't stick playing bridge for a whole evening. The old boy's mad on it. So he made letters an excuse. Ruby Keene remained with the others. Mark Gaskell returned when she was dancing with Raymond. After the dance Ruby came and had a drink with them, then she went off with young Bartlett, and Gaskell and the others cut for partners and started their bridge. That was at twenty minutes to eleven—and he didn't leave the table until after midnight. That's quite certain, sir. Everyone says so. The family, the waiters, everyone. Therefore *he* couldn't have done it. And Mrs. Jefferson's alibi is the same. She, too, didn't leave the table. They're out, both of them—out."

Colonel Melchett leaned back, tapping the table with a paper cutter.

Superintendent Harper said:

"That is, assuming the girl was killed before midnight."

"Haydock said she was. He's a very sound fellow in police work. If he says a thing, it's so."

"There might be reasons—health, physical idiosyncrasy, or something."

"I'll put it to him." Melchett glanced at his watch, picked up the telephone receiver and asked for a number. He said: "Haydock ought to be at home at this time. Now, assuming that she was killed *after* midnight?"

Harper said:

"Then there might be a chance. There was some coming and going afterwards. Let's assume that Gaskell had asked the girl to meet him outside somewhere—say at twenty past twelve. He slips away for a minute or two, strangles her, comes back and disposes of the body later—in the early hours of the morning."

Melchett said:

"Takes her by car thirty-odd miles to put her in Bantry's library? Dash it all, it's not a likely story."

"No, it isn't," the Superintendent admitted at once.

The telephone rang. Melchett picked up the receiver.

"Hallo, Haydock, is that you? Ruby Keene. Would it be possible for her to have been killed *after* midnight?"

"I told you she was killed between ten and midnight."

"Yes, I know, but one could stretch it a bit—what?"

"No, you couldn't stretch it. When I say she was killed before midnight I mean before midnight, and don't try to tamper with the medical evidence."

"Yes, but couldn't there be some physiological what-not? You know what I mean."

"I know that you don't know what you're talking about. The girl was perfectly healthy and not abnormal in any way—and I'm not going to say she was just to help you fit a rope round the neck of some wretched fellow whom you police wallahs have got your knife into. Now don't protest. I know your ways. And, by the way, the girl wasn't strangled willingly—that is to say, she was drugged first. Powerful narcotic. She died of strangulation but she was drugged first." Haydock rang off.

Melchett said gloomily: "Well, that's that."

Harper said:

"Thought I'd found another likely starter—but it petered out."

"What's that? Who?"

"Strictly speaking, he's your pigeon, sir. Name of Basil Blake. Lives near Gossington Hall."

"Impudent young jackanapes!" The Colonel's brow darkened as he remembered Basil Blake's outrageous rudeness. "How's he mixed up in it?"

"Seems he knew Ruby Keene. Dined over at the Majestic quite often—danced with the girl. Do you remember what Josie said to Raymond when Ruby was discovered to be missing? 'She's not with that film fellow, is she?' I've found out it was Blake, she meant. He's employed with the Lemville Studios, you know. Josie has nothing to go upon except a belief that Ruby was rather keen on him."

"Very promising, Harper, very promising."

"Not so good as it sounds, sir. Basil Blake was at a party at the studios that night. You know the sort of thing. Starts at eight with cocktails and goes on and on until the air's too thick to see through

and everyone passes out. According to Inspector Slack, who's questioned him, he left the show round about midnight. At midnight Ruby Keene was dead."

"Anyone bear out his statement?"

"Most of them, I gather, sir, were rather—er—far gone. The—er— young woman now at the bungalow—Miss Dinah Lee—says his statement is correct."

"Doesn't mean a thing!"

"No, sir, probably not. Statements taken from other members of the party bear Mr. Blake's statement out on the whole, though ideas as to time are somewhat vague."

"Where are these studios?"

"Lemville, sir, thirty miles southwest of London."

"H'm—about the same distance from here?"

"Yes, sir."

Colonel Melchett rubbed his nose. He said in a rather dissatisfied tone:

"Well, it looks as though we could wash him out."

"I think so, sir. There is no evidence that he was seriously attracted by Ruby Keene. In fact"—Superintendent Harper coughed primly—"he seems fully occupied with his own young lady."

Melchett said:

"Well, we are left with 'X,' an unknown murderer—so unknown Slack can't find a trace of him! Or Jefferson's son-in-law, who might have wanted to kill the girl—but didn't have a chance to do so. Daughter-in-law ditto. Or George Bartlett, who has no alibi—but unfortunately no motive either. Or with young Blake, who has an alibi and no motive. And that's the lot! No, stop, I suppose we ought to consider the dancing fellow—Raymond Starr. After all, he saw a lot of the girl."

Harper said slowly:

"Can't believe he took much interest in her—or else he's a thundering good actor. And, for all practical purposes, he's got an alibi too. He was more or less in view from twenty minutes to eleven until midnight, dancing with various partners. I don't see that we can make a case against him."

"In fact," said Colonel Melchett, "we can't make a case against anybody."

"George Bartlett's our best hope. If we could only hit on a motive."

"You've had him looked up?"

"Yes, sir. Only child. Coddled by his mother. Came into a good deal of money on her death a year ago. Getting through it fast. Weak rather than vicious."

"May be mental," said Melchett hopefully.

Superintendent Harper nodded. He said:

"Has it struck you, sir—that that may be the explanation of the whole case?"

"Criminal lunatic, you mean?"

"Yes, sir. One of those fellows who go about strangling young girls. Doctors have a long name for it."

"That would solve all our difficulties," said Melchett.

"There's only one thing I don't like about it," said Superintendent Harper.

"What?"

"It's too easy."

"H'm—yes—perhaps. So, as I said at the beginning where are we?"

"Nowhere, sir," said Superintendent Harper.

Twelve

I

Conway Jefferson stirred in his sleep and stretched. His arms were flung out, long, powerful arms into which all the strength of his body seemed to be concentrated since his accident.

Through the curtains the morning light glowed softly.

Conway Jefferson smiled to himself. Always, after a night of rest, he woke like this, happy, refreshed, his deep vitality renewed. Another day!

So for a minute he lay. Then he pressed the special bell by his hand. And suddenly a wave of remembrance swept over him.

Even as Edwards, deft and quiet-footed, entered the room, a groan was wrung from his master.

Edwards paused with his hand on the curtains. He said: "You're not in pain, sir?"

Conway Jefferson said harshly:

"No. Go on, pull 'em."

The clear light flooded the room. Edwards, understanding, did not glance at his master.

His face grim, Conway Jefferson lay remembering and thinking. Before his eyes he saw again the pretty, vapid face of Ruby. Only in his mind he did not use the adjective vapid. Last night he would have said innocent. A naïve, innocent child! And now?

A great weariness came over Conway Jefferson. He closed his eyes. He murmured below his breath:

"Margaret...."

It was the name of his dead wife....

II

"I like your friend," said Adelaide Jefferson to Mrs. Bantry.

The two women were sitting on the terrace.

"Jane Marple's a very remarkable woman," said Mrs. Bantry.

"She's nice too," said Addie, smiling.

"People call her a scandalmonger," said Mrs. Bantry, "but she isn't really."

"Just a low opinion of human nature?"

"You could call it that."

"It's rather refreshing," said Adelaide Jefferson, "after having had too much of the other thing."

Mrs. Bantry looked at her sharply.

Addie explained herself.

"So much high-thinking—idealization of an unworthy object!"

"You mean Ruby Keene?"

Addie nodded.

"I don't want to be horrid about her. There wasn't any harm in her. Poor little rat, she had to fight for what she wanted. She wasn't bad. Common and rather silly and quite good-natured, but a decided little gold-digger. I don't think she schemed or planned. It was just that she was quick to take advantage of a possibility. And she knew just how to appeal to an elderly man who was—lonely."

"I suppose," said Mrs. Bantry thoughtfully, "that Conway was lonely?"

Addie moved restlessly. She said:

"He was—this summer." She paused and then burst out: "Mark will have it that it was all my fault. Perhaps it was, I don't know."

She was silent for a minute, then, impelled by some need to talk, she went on speaking in a difficult, almost reluctant way.

"I—I've had such an odd sort of life. Mike Carmody, my first husband, died so soon after we were married—it—it knocked me

out. Peter, as you know, was born after his death. Frank Jefferson was Mike's great friend. So I came to see a lot of him. He was Peter's godfather—Mike had wanted that. I got very fond of him—and—oh! sorry for him too."

"Sorry?" queried Mrs. Bantry with interest.

"Yes, just that. It sounds odd. Frank had always had everything he wanted. His father and his mother couldn't have been nicer to him. And yet—how can I say it?—you see, old Mr. Jefferson's personality is so strong. If you live with it, you can't somehow have a personality of your own. Frank felt that.

"When we were married he was very happy—wonderfully so. Mr. Jefferson was very generous. He settled a large sum of money on Frank—said he wanted his children to be independent and not have to wait for his death. It was so nice of him—so generous. But it was much too sudden. He ought really to have accustomed Frank to independence little by little.

"It went to Frank's head. He wanted to be as good a man as his father, as clever about money and business, as far-seeing and successful. And, of course, he wasn't. He didn't exactly speculate with the money, but he invested in the wrong things at the wrong time. It's frightening, you know, how soon money goes if you're not clever about it. The more Frank dropped, the more eager he was to get it back by some clever deal. So things went from bad to worse."

"But, my dear," said Mrs. Bantry, "couldn't Conway have advised him?"

"He didn't want to be advised. The one thing he wanted was to do well on his own. That's why we never let Mr. Jefferson know. When Frank died there was very little left—only a tiny income for me. And I—I didn't let his father know either. You see—"

She turned abruptly.

"It would have felt like betraying Frank to him. Frank would have hated it so. Mr. Jefferson was ill for a long time. When he got well he assumed that I was a very-well-off widow. I've never undeceived him. It's been a point of honour. He knows I'm very careful about money—but he approves of that, thinks I'm a thrifty sort of woman.

And, of course, Peter and I have lived with him practically ever since, and he's paid for all our living expenses. So I've never had to worry."

She said slowly:

"We've been like a family all these years—only—only—you see (or don't you see?) I've never been Frank's *widow* to him—I've been Frank's *wife*."

Mrs. Bantry grasped the implication.

"You mean he's never accepted their deaths?"

"No. He's been wonderful. But he's conquered his own terrible tragedy by refusing to recognize death. Mark is Rosamund's husband and I'm Frank's wife—and though Frank and Rosamund aren't exactly here with us—they are still existent."

Mrs. Bantry said softly:

"It's a wonderful triumph of faith."

"I know. We've gone on, year after year. But suddenly—this summer—something went wrong in me. I felt—I felt rebellious. It's an awful thing to say, but I didn't want to think of Frank anymore! All that was over—my love and companionship with him, and my grief when he died. It was something that had been and wasn't any longer.

"It's awfully hard to describe. It's like wanting to wipe the slate clean and start again. I wanted to be me—Addie, still reasonably young and strong and able to play games and swim and dance—just a *person*. Even Hugo—(you know Hugo McLean?) he's a dear and wants to marry me, but, of course, I've never really thought of it—but this summer I *did* begin to think of it—not seriously—only vaguely...."

She stopped and shook her head.

"And so I suppose it's true. *I neglected Jeff*. I don't mean *really* neglected him, but my mind and thoughts weren't with him. When Ruby, as I saw, amused him, I was rather glad. It left me freer to go and do my own things. I never dreamed—of course I never dreamed—that he would be so—so—*infatuated* by her!"

Mrs. Bantry asked:

"And when you did find out?"

"I was dumbfounded—absolutely dumbfounded! And, I'm afraid, angry too."

"I'd have been angry," said Mrs. Bantry.

"There was Peter, you see. Peter's whole future depends on Jeff. Jeff practically looked on him as a grandson, or so I thought, but, of course, he wasn't a grandson. He was no relation at all. And to think that he was going to be—disinherited!" Her firm, well-shaped hands shook a little where they lay in her lap. "For that's what it felt like—and for a vulgar, gold-digging little simpleton—Oh! I could have killed her!"

She stopped, stricken. Her beautiful hazel eyes met Mrs. Bantry's in a pleading horror. She said:

"What an awful thing to say!"

Hugo McLean, coming quietly up behind them, asked:

"What's an awful thing to say?"

"Sit down, Hugo. You know Mrs. Bantry, don't you?"

McLean had already greeted the older lady. He said now in a low, persevering way:

"What was an awful thing to say?"

Addie Jefferson said:

"That I'd like to have killed Ruby Keene."

Hugo McLean reflected a minute or two. Then he said:

"No, I wouldn't say that if I were you. Might be misunderstood."

His eyes—steady, reflective, grey eyes—looked at her meaningly.

He said:

"You've got to watch your step, Addie."

There was a warning in his voice.

III

When Miss Marple came out of the hotel and joined Mrs. Bantry a few minutes later, Hugo McLean and Adelaide Jefferson were walking down the path to the sea together.

Seating herself, Miss Marple remarked:

"He seems very devoted."

"He's been devoted for years! One of those men."

"I know. Like Major Bury. He hung round an Anglo-Indian widow for quite ten years. A joke among her friends! In the end she gave in—but unfortunately ten days before they were to have been married she ran away with the chauffeur! Such a nice woman, too, and usually so well balanced."

"People do do very odd things," agreed Mrs. Bantry. "I wish you'd been here just now, Jane. Addie Jefferson was telling me all about herself—how her husband went through all his money but they never let Mr. Jefferson know. And then, this summer, things felt different to her—"

Miss Marple nodded.

"Yes. She rebelled, I suppose, against being made to live in the past? After all, there's a time for everything. You can't sit in the house with the blinds down forever. I suppose Mrs. Jefferson just pulled them up and took off her widow's weeds, and her father-in-law, of course, didn't like it. Felt left out in the cold, though I don't suppose for a minute he realized who put her up to it. Still, he certainly wouldn't like it. And so, of course, like old Mr. Badger when his wife took up Spiritualism, he was just ripe for what happened. Any fairly nice-looking young girl who listened prettily would have done."

"Do you think," said Mrs. Bantry, "that that cousin, Josie, got her down here deliberately—that it was a family plot?"

Miss Marple shook her head.

"No, I don't think so at all. I don't think Josie has the kind of mind that could foresee people's reactions. She's rather dense in that way. She's got one of those shrewd, limited, practical minds that never do foresee the future and are usually astonished by it."

"It seems to have taken everyone by surprise," said Mrs. Bantry. "Addie—and Mark Gaskell too, apparently."

Miss Marple smiled.

"I dare say he had his own fish to fry. A bold fellow with a roving eye! Not the man to go on being a sorrowing widower for years, no matter how fond he may have been of his wife. I should think they

were both restless under old Mr. Jefferson's yoke of perpetual remembrance.

"Only," added Miss Marple cynically, "it's easier for gentlemen, of course."

IV

At that very moment Mark was confirming this judgment on himself in a talk with Sir Henry Clithering.

With characteristic candour Mark had gone straight to the heart of things.

"It's just dawned on me," he said, "that I'm Favourite Suspect No. 1 to the police! They've been delving into my financial troubles. I'm broke, you know, or very nearly. If dear old Jeff dies according to schedule in a month or two, and Addie and I divide the dibs also according to schedule, all will be well. Matter of fact, I owe rather a lot ... If the crash comes it will be a big one! If I can stave it off, it will be the other way round—I shall come out on top and be a very rich man."

Sir Henry Clithering said:

"You're a gambler, Mark."

"Always have been. Risk everything—that's my motto! Yes, it's a lucky thing for me that somebody strangled that poor kid. I didn't do it. I'm not a strangler. I don't really think I could ever murder anybody. I'm too easygoing. But I don't suppose I can ask the police to believe *that!* I must look to them like the answer to the criminal investigator's prayer! I had a motive, was on the spot, I am not burdened with high moral scruples! I can't imagine why I'm not in the jug already! That Superintendent's got a very nasty eye."

"You've got that useful thing, an alibi."

"An alibi is the fishiest thing on God's earth! No innocent person ever has an alibi! Besides, it all depends on the time of death, or something like that, and you may be sure if three doctors say the girl was killed at midnight, at least six will be found who will swear

positively that she was killed at five in the morning—and where's my alibi then?"

"At any rate, you are able to joke about it."

"Damned bad taste, isn't it?" said Mark cheerfully. "Actually, I'm rather scared. One is—with murder! And don't think I'm not sorry for old Jeff. I am. But it's better this way—bad as the shock was—than if he'd found her out."

"What do you mean, found her out?"

Mark winked.

"Where did she go off to last night? I'll lay you any odds you like she went to meet a man. Jeff wouldn't have liked that. He wouldn't have liked it at all. If he'd found she was deceiving him—that she wasn't the prattling little innocent she seemed—well—my father-in-law is an odd man. He's a man of great self-control, but that self-control can snap. And then—look out!"

Sir Henry glanced at him curiously.

"Are you fond of him or not?"

"I'm very fond of him—and at the same time I resent him. I'll try and explain. Conway Jefferson is a man who likes to control his surroundings. He's a benevolent despot, kind, generous, and affectionate—but his is the tune, and the others dance to his piping."

Mark Gaskell paused.

"I loved my wife. I shall never feel the same for anyone else. Rosamund was sunshine and laughter and flowers, and when she was killed I felt just like a man in the ring who's had a knock-out blow. But the referee's been counting a good long time now. I'm a man, after all. I like women. I don't want to marry again—not in the least. Well, that's all right. I've had to be discreet—but I've had my good times all right. Poor Addie hasn't. Addie's a really nice woman. She's the kind of woman men want to marry, not to sleep with. Give her half a chance and she would marry again—and be very happy and make the chap happy too. But old Jeff saw her always as Frank's wife—and hypnotized her into seeing herself like that. He doesn't know it, but we've been in prison. I broke out, on the quiet, a long time ago. Addie broke out this summer—and it gave him a shock. It split up his world. Result—Ruby Keene."

Irrepressibly he sang:

*"But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!"*

"Come and have a drink, Clithering."

It was hardly surprising, Sir Henry reflected, that Mark Gaskell should be an object of suspicion to the police.

Thirteen

I

Dr. Metcalf was one of the best-known physicians in Danemouth. He had no aggressive bedside manner, but his presence in the sick room had an invariably cheering effect. He was middle-aged, with a quiet pleasant voice.

He listened carefully to Superintendent Harper and replied to his questions with gentle precision.

Harper said:

"Then I can take it, Doctor Metcalf, that what I was told by Mrs. Jefferson was substantially correct?"

"Yes, Mr. Jefferson's health is in a precarious state. For several years now the man has been driving himself ruthlessly. In his determination to live like other men, he has lived at a far greater pace than the normal man of his age. He has refused to rest, to take things easy, to go slow—or any of the other phrases with which I and his other medical advisers have tendered our opinion. The result is that the man is an overworked engine. Heart, lungs, blood pressure—they're all overstrained."

"You say Mr. Jefferson has absolutely refused to listen?"

"Yes. I don't know that I blame him. It's not what I say to my patients, Superintendent, but a man may as well wear out as rust out. A lot of my colleagues do that, and take it from me it's not a bad way. In a place like Danemouth one sees most of the other thing: invalids clinging to life, terrified of over-exerting themselves,

terrified of a breath of draughty air, of a stray germ, of an injudicious meal!"

"I expect that's true enough," said Superintendent Harper. "What it amounts to, then, is this: Conway Jefferson is strong enough, physically speaking—or, I suppose I mean, muscularly speaking. Just what can he do in the active line, by the way?"

"He has immense strength in his arms and shoulders. He was a powerful man before his accident. He is extremely dexterous in his handling of his wheeled chair, and with the aid of crutches he can move himself about a room—from his bed to the chair, for instance."

"Isn't it possible for a man injured as Mr. Jefferson was to have artificial legs?"

"Not in his case. There was a spine injury."

"I see. Let me sum up again. Jefferson is strong and fit in the muscular sense. He feels well and all that?"

Metcalf nodded.

"But his heart is in a bad condition. Any overstrain or exertion, or a shock or a sudden fright, and he might pop off. Is that it?"

"More or less. Over-exertion is killing him slowly, because he won't give in when he feels tired. That aggravates the cardiac condition. It is unlikely that exertion would kill him suddenly. But a sudden shock or fright might easily do so. That is why I expressly warned his family."

Superintendent Harper said slowly:

"But in actual fact a shock *didn't* kill him. I mean, doctor, that there couldn't have been a much worse shock than this business, and he's still alive?"

Dr. Metcalf shrugged his shoulders.

"I know. But if you'd had my experience, Superintendent, you'd know that case history shows the impossibility of prognosticating accurately. People who *ought* to die of shock and exposure *don't* die of shock and exposure, etc., etc. The human frame is tougher than one can imagine possible. Moreover, in my experience, a *physical* shock is more often fatal than a *mental* shock. In plain language, a door banging suddenly would be more likely to kill Mr. Jefferson than

the discovery that a girl he was fond of had died in a particularly horrible manner."

"Why is that, I wonder?"

"The breaking of a piece of bad news nearly always sets up a defence reaction. It numbs the recipient. They are unable—at first—to take it in. Full realization takes a little time. But the banged door, someone jumping out of a cupboard, the sudden onslaught of a motor as you cross a road—all those things are immediate in their action. The heart gives a terrified leap—to put it in layman's language."

Superintendent Harper said slowly:

"But as far as anyone would know, Mr. Jefferson's death might easily have been caused by the shock of the girl's death?"

"Oh, easily." The doctor looked curiously at the other. "You don't think—"

"I don't know what I think," said Superintendent Harper vexedly.

II

"But you'll admit, sir, that the two things would fit in very prettily together," he said a little later to Sir Henry Clithering. "Kill two birds with one stone. First the girl—and the fact of her death takes off Mr. Jefferson too—before he's had any opportunity of altering his will."

"Do you think he will alter it?"

"You'd be more likely to know that, sir, than I would. What do you say?"

"I don't know. Before Ruby Keene came on the scene I happen to know that he had left his money between Mark Gaskell and Mrs. Jefferson. I don't see why he should now change his mind about that. But of course he might do so. Might leave it to a Cats' Home, or to subsidize young professional dancers."

Superintendent Harper agreed.

"You never know what bee a man is going to get in his bonnet—especially when he doesn't feel there's any moral obligation in the disposal of his fortune. No blood relations in this case."

Sir Henry said:

"He is fond of the boy—of young Peter."

"D'you think he regards him as a grandson? You'd know that better than I would, sir."

Sir Henry said slowly:

"No, I don't think so."

"There's another thing I'd like to ask you, sir. It's a thing I can't judge for myself. But they're friends of yours and so you'd know. I'd like very much to know just how fond Mr. Jefferson is of Mr. Gaskell and young Mrs. Jefferson."

Sir Henry frowned.

"I'm not sure if I understand you, Superintendent?"

"Well, it's this way, sir. How fond is he of them as *persons*—apart from his relationship to them?"

"Ah, I see what you mean."

"Yes, sir. Nobody doubts that he was very attached to them both—but he was attached to them, as I see it, because they were, respectively, the husband and the wife of his daughter and his son. But supposing, for instance, one of them had married again?"

Sir Henry reflected. He said:

"It's an interesting point you raise there. I don't know. I'm inclined to suspect—this is a mere opinion—that it would have altered his attitude a good deal. He would have wished them well, borne no rancour, but I think, yes, I rather think that he would have taken very little more interest in them."

"In both cases, sir?"

"I think so, yes. In Mr. Gaskell's, almost certainly, and I rather think in Mrs. Jefferson's also, but that's not nearly so certain. I think he *was* fond of her for her own sake."

"Sex would have something to do with that," said Superintendent Harper sapiently. "Easier for him to look on her as a daughter than to look on Mr. Gaskell as a son. It works both ways. Women accept a son-in-law as one of the family easily enough, but there aren't many times when a woman looks on her son's wife as a daughter."

Superintendent Harper went on:

"Mind if we walk along this path, sir, to the tennis court? I see Miss Marple's sitting there. I want to ask her to do something for me. As a matter of fact I want to rope you both in."

"In what way, Superintendent?"

"To get at stuff that I can't get at myself. I want you to tackle Edwards for me, sir."

"Edwards? What do you want from him?"

"Everything you can think of! Everything he knows and what he thinks! About the relations between the various members of the family, his angle on the Ruby Keene business. Inside stuff. He knows better than anyone the state of affairs—you bet he does! And he wouldn't tell *me*. But he'll tell *you*. And something *might* turn up from it. That is, of course, if you don't object?"

Sir Henry said grimly:

"I don't object. I've been sent for, urgently, to get at the truth. I mean to do my utmost."

He added:

"How do you want Miss Marple to help you?"

"With some girls. Some of those Girl Guides. We've rounded up half a dozen or so, the ones who were most friendly with Pamela Reeves. It's possible that they may know something. You see, I've been thinking. It seems to me that if that girl was really going to Woolworth's she would have tried to persuade one of the other girls to go with her. Girls usually like to shop with someone."

"Yes, I think that's true."

"So I think it's possible that Woolworth's was only an excuse. I want to know where the girl was really going. She may have let slip something. If so, I feel Miss Marple's the person to get it out of these girls. I'd say she knows a thing or two about girls—more than I do. And, anyway, they'd be scared of the police."

"It sounds to me the kind of village domestic problem that is right up Miss Marple's street. She's very sharp, you know."

The Superintendent smiled. He said:

"I'll say you're right. Nothing much gets past her." Miss Marple looked up at their approach and welcomed them eagerly. She listened to the Superintendent's request and at once acquiesced.

"I should like to help you very much, Superintendent, and I think that perhaps I *could* be of some use. What with the Sunday School, you know, and the Brownies, and our Guides, and the Orphanage quite near—I'm on the committee, you know, and often run in to have a little talk with Matron—and then *servants*—I usually have very young maids. Oh, yes, I've quite a lot of experience in when a girl is speaking the truth and when she is holding something back."

"In fact, you're an expert," said Sir Henry.

Miss Marple flashed him a reproachful glance and said:

"Oh, *please* don't laugh at me, Sir Henry."

"I shouldn't dream of laughing at you. You've had the laugh of me too many times."

"One does see so much evil in a village," murmured Miss Marple in an explanatory voice.

"By the way," said Sir Henry, "I've cleared up one point you asked me about. The Superintendent tells me that there were nail clippings in Ruby's wastepaper basket."

Miss Marple said thoughtfully:

"There were? Then that's that...."

"Why did you want to know, Miss Marple?" asked the Superintendent.

Miss Marple said:

"It was one of the things that—well, that seemed *wrong* when I looked at the body. The hands were wrong, somehow, and I couldn't at first think *why*. Then I realized that girls who are very much made-up, and all that, usually have very long fingernails. Of course, I know that girls everywhere do bite their nails—it's one of those habits that are very hard to break oneself of. But vanity often does a lot to help. Still, I presumed that this girl *hadn't* cured herself. And then the little boy—Peter, you know—he said something which showed that her nails *had* been long, only she caught one and broke it. So then, of course, she might have trimmed off the rest to make an even appearance, and I asked about clippings and Sir Henry said he'd find out."

Sir Henry remarked:

"You said just now, 'one of the things that seemed wrong when you looked at the body.' Was there something else?"

Miss Marple nodded vigorously.

"Oh yes!" she said. "There was the dress. The dress was *all* wrong."

Both men looked at her curiously.

"Now why?" said Sir Henry.

"Well, you see, it was an old dress. Josie said so, definitely, and I could see for myself that it was shabby and rather worn. Now that's all wrong."

"I don't see why."

Miss Marple got a little pink.

"Well, the idea is, isn't it, that Ruby Keene changed her dress and went off to meet someone on whom she presumably had what my young nephews call a 'crush'?"

The Superintendent's eyes twinkled a little.

"That's the theory. She'd got a date with someone—a boy friend, as the saying goes."

"Then why," demanded Miss Marple, "was she wearing an old dress?"

The Superintendent scratched his head thoughtfully. He said:

"I see your point. You think she'd wear a new one?"

"I think she'd wear her best dress. Girls do."

Sir Henry interposed.

"Yes, but look here, Miss Marple. Suppose she was going outside to this *rendezvous*. Going in an open car, perhaps, or walking in some rough going. Then she'd not want to risk messing a new frock and she'd put on an old one."

"That would be the sensible thing to do," agreed the Superintendent.

Miss Marple turned on him. She spoke with animation.

"The sensible thing to do would be to change into trousers and a pullover, or into tweeds. That, of course (I don't want to be snobbish, but I'm afraid it's unavoidable), that's what a girl of—of our class would do."

"A well-bred girl," continued Miss Marple, warming to her subject, "is always very particular to wear the right clothes for the right occasion. I mean, however hot the day was, a well-bred girl would never turn up at a point-to-point in a silk flowered frock."

"And the correct wear to meet a lover?" demanded Sir Henry.

"If she were meeting him inside the hotel or somewhere where evening dress was worn, she'd wear her best evening frock, of course—but *outside* she'd feel she'd look ridiculous in evening dress and she'd wear her most attractive sportswear."

"Granted, Fashion Queen, but the girl Ruby—"

Miss Marple said:

"Ruby, of course, wasn't—well, to put it bluntly—Ruby *wasn't* a lady. She belonged to the class that wear their best clothes however unsuitable to the occasion. Last year, you know, we had a picnic outing at Scrantor Rocks. You'd be surprised at the unsuitable clothes the girls wore. Foulard dresses and patent shoes and quite elaborate hats, some of them. For climbing about over rocks and in gorse and heather. And the young men in their best suits. Of course, hiking's different again. That's practically a uniform—and girls don't seem to realize that shorts are very unbecoming unless they are very slender."

The Superintendent said slowly:

"And you think that Ruby Keene—?"

"I think that she'd have kept on the frock she was wearing—her best pink one. She'd only have changed it if she'd had something newer still."

Superintendent Harper said:

"And what's your explanation, Miss Marple?"

Miss Marple said:

"I haven't got one—yet. But I can't help feeling that it's important...."

III

Inside the wire cage, the tennis lesson that Raymond Starr was giving had come to an end.

A stout middle-aged woman uttered a few appreciative squeaks, picked up a sky-blue cardigan and went off towards the hotel.

Raymond called out a few gay words after her.

Then he turned towards the bench where the three onlookers were sitting. The balls dangled in a net in his hand, his racquet was under one arm. The gay, laughing expression on his face was wiped off as though by a sponge from a slate. He looked tired and worried.

Coming towards them, he said: "*That's over.*"

Then the smile broke out again, that charming, boyish, expressive smile that went so harmoniously with his suntanned face and dark lithe grace.

Sir Henry found himself wondering how old the man was. Twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five? It was impossible to say.

Raymond said, shaking his head a little:

"*She'll never be able to play, you know.*"

"All this must be very boring for you," said Miss Marple.

Raymond said simply:

"It is, sometimes. Especially at the end of the summer. For a time the thought of the pay buoys you up, but even that fails to stimulate imagination in the end!"

Superintendent Harper got up. He said abruptly:

"I'll call for you in half an hour's time, Miss Marple, if that will be all right?"

"Perfectly, thank you. I shall be ready."

Harper went off. Raymond stood looking after him. Then he said: "Mind if I sit here for a bit?"

"Do," said Sir Henry. "Have a cigarette?" He offered his case, wondering as he did so why he had a slight feeling of prejudice against Raymond Starr. Was it simply because he was a professional tennis coach and dancer? If so, it wasn't the tennis—it was the dancing. The English, Sir Henry decided, had a distrust for any man who danced too well! This fellow moved with too much grace! Ramon—Raymond—which was his name? Abruptly, he asked the question.

The other seemed amused.

"Ramon was my original professional name. Ramon and Josie—Spanish effect, you know. Then there was rather a prejudice against foreigners—so I became Raymond—very British—"

Miss Marple said:

"And is your real name something quite different?"

He smiled at her.

"Actually my real name is Ramon. I had an Argentine grandmother, you see—" (And that accounts for that swing from the hips, thought Sir Henry parenthetically.) "But my first name is Thomas. Painfully prosaic."

He turned to Sir Henry.

"You come from Devonshire, don't you, sir? From Stane? My people lived down that way. At Alsmonston."

Sir Henry's face lit up.

"Are you one of the Alsmonston Starrs? I didn't realize that."

"No—I don't suppose you would."

There was a slight bitterness in his voice.

Sir Henry said awkwardly:

"Bad luck—er—all that."

"The place being sold up after it had been in the family for three hundred years? Yes, it was rather. Still, our kind have to go, I suppose. We've outlived our usefulness. My elder brother went to New York. He's in publishing—doing well. The rest of us are scattered up and down the earth. I'll say it's hard to get a job nowadays when you've nothing to say for yourself except that you've had a public-school education! Sometimes, if you're lucky, you get taken on as a reception clerk at an hotel. The tie and the manner are an asset there. The only job I could get was showman in a plumbing establishment. Selling superb peach and lemon-coloured porcelain baths. Enormous showrooms, but as I never knew the price of the damned things or how soon we could deliver them—I got fired.

"The only things I *could* do were dance and play tennis. I got taken on at an hotel on the Riviera. Good pickings there. I suppose I was doing well. Then I overheard an old Colonel, real old Colonel,

incredibly ancient, British to the backbone and always talking about Poona. He went up to the manager and said at the top of his voice:

“Where’s the *gigolo*? I want to get hold of the *gigolo*. My wife and daughter want to dance, yer know. Where is the feller? What does he sting yer for? It’s the *gigolo* I want.”

Raymond went on:

“Silly to mind—but I did. I chucked it. Came here. Less pay but pleasanter work. Mostly teaching tennis to rotund women who will never, never, never be able to play. That and dancing with the neglected wallflower daughters of rich clients. Oh well, it’s life, I suppose. Excuse today’s hard-luck story!”

He laughed. His teeth flashed out white, his eyes crinkled up at the corners. He looked suddenly healthy and happy and very much alive.

Sir Henry said:

“I’m glad to have a chat with you. I’ve been wanting to talk with you.”

“About Ruby Keene? I can’t help you, you know. I don’t know who killed her. I knew very little about her. She didn’t confide in me.”

Miss Marple said: “Did you like her?”

“Not particularly. I didn’t dislike her.”

His voice was careless, uninterested.

Sir Henry said:

“So you’ve no suggestions to offer?”

“I’m afraid not ... I’d have told Harper if I had. It just seems to me one of those things! Petty, sordid little crime—no clues, no motive.”

“Two people had a motive,” said Miss Marple.

Sir Henry looked at her sharply.

“Really?” Raymond looked surprised.

Miss Marple looked insistently at Sir Henry and he said rather unwillingly:

“Her death probably benefits Mrs. Jefferson and Mr. Gaskell to the amount of fifty thousand pounds.”

“What?” Raymond looked really startled—more than startled—upset. “Oh, but that’s absurd—absolutely absurd—Mrs. Jefferson—

neither of them—could have had anything to do with it. It would be incredible to think of such a thing.”

Miss Marple coughed. She said gently:

“I’m afraid, you know, you’re rather an idealist.”

“I?” he laughed. “Not me! I’m a hard-boiled cynic.”

“Money,” said Miss Marple, “is a very powerful motive.”

“Perhaps,” Raymond said hotly. “But that either of those two would strangle a girl in cold blood—” He shook his head.

Then he got up.

“Here’s Mrs. Jefferson now. Come for her lesson. She’s late.” His voice sounded amused. “Ten minutes late!”

Adelaide Jefferson and Hugo McLean were walking rapidly down the path towards them.

With a smiling apology for her lateness, Addie Jefferson went on to the court. McLean sat down on the bench. After a polite inquiry whether Miss Marple minded a pipe, he lit it and puffed for some minutes in silence, watching critically the two white figures about the tennis court.

He said at last:

“Can’t see what Addie wants to have lessons for. Have a game, yes. No one enjoys it better than I do. But why *lessons*?”

“Wants to improve her game,” said Sir Henry.

“She’s not a bad player,” said Hugo. “Good enough, at all events. Dash it all, she isn’t aiming to play at Wimbledon.”

He was silent for a minute or two. Then he said:

“Who *is* this Raymond fellow? Where do they come from, these pros? Fellow looks like a dago to me.”

“He’s one of the Devonshire Starrs,” said Sir Henry.

“What? Not really?”

Sir Henry nodded. It was clear that this news was unpleasing to Hugo McLean. He scowled more than ever.

He said: “Don’t know why Addie sent for *me*. She seems not to have turned a hair over this business! Never looked better. Why send for me?”

Sir Henry asked with some curiosity:

“When did she send for you?”

"Oh—er—when all this happened."

"How did you hear? Telephone or telegram?"

"Telegram."

"As a matter of curiosity, when was it sent off?"

"Well—I don't know exactly."

"What time did you receive it?"

"I didn't exactly receive it. It was telephoned on to me—as a matter of fact."

"Why, where were you?"

"Fact is, I'd left London the afternoon before. I was staying at Danebury Head."

"What—quite near here?"

"Yes, rather funny, wasn't it? Got the message when I got in from a round of golf and came over here at once."

Miss Marple gazed at him thoughtfully. He looked hot and uncomfortable. She said: "I've heard it's very pleasant at Danebury Head, and not very expensive."

"No, it's not expensive. I couldn't afford it if it was. It's a nice little place."

"We must drive over there one day," said Miss Marple.

"Eh? What? Oh—er—yes, I should." He got up. "Better take some exercise—get an appetite."

He walked away stiffly.

"Women," said Sir Henry, "treat their devoted admirers very badly."

Miss Marple smiled but made no answer.

"Does he strike you as rather a dull dog?" asked Sir Henry. "I'd be interested to know."

"A little limited in his ideas, perhaps," said Miss Marple. "But with possibilities, I think—oh, definitely possibilities."

Sir Henry in his turn got up.

"It's time for me to go and do my stuff. I see Mrs. Bantry is on her way to keep you company."

IV

Mrs. Bantry arrived breathless and sat down with a gasp.

She said:

"I've been talking to chambermaids. But it isn't any good. I haven't found out a thing more! Do you think that girl can really have been carrying on with someone without everybody in the hotel knowing all about it?"

"That's a very interesting point, dear. I should say, definitely *not*. *Somebody* knows, depend upon it, if it's true! But she must have been very clever about it."

Mrs. Bantry's attention had strayed to the tennis court. She said approvingly:

"Addie's tennis is coming on a lot. Attractive young man, that tennis pro. Addie's looking quite nice-looking. She's still an attractive woman—I shouldn't be at all surprised if she married again."

"She'll be a rich woman, too, when Mr. Jefferson dies," said Miss Marple.

"Oh, don't always have such a nasty mind, Jane! Why haven't you solved this mystery yet? We don't seem to be getting on at all. I thought you'd know *at once*." Mrs. Bantry's tone held reproach.

"No, no, dear. I didn't know at once—not for some time."

Mrs. Bantry turned startled and incredulous eyes on her.

"You mean you know *now* who killed Ruby Keene?"

"Oh yes," said Miss Marple, "I know *that*!"

"But Jane, who is it? Tell me at once."

Miss Marple shook her head very firmly and pursed up her lips.

"I'm sorry, Dolly, but that wouldn't do at all."

"Why wouldn't it do?"

"Because you're so indiscreet. You would go round telling everyone—or, if you didn't tell, you'd *hint*."

"No, I wouldn't. I wouldn't tell a soul."

"People who use that phrase are always the last to live up to it. It's no good, dear. There's a long way to go yet. A great many things that are quite obscure. You remember when I was so against letting Mrs. Partridge collect for the Red Cross, and I couldn't say *why*. The reason was that her nose had twitched in just the same way that that maid of mine, Alice, twitched *her* nose when I sent her out to

pay the books. Always paid them a shilling or so short, and said 'it could go on to the next week's account,' which, of course, was *exactly* what Mrs. Partridge did, only on a much larger scale. Seventy-five pounds it was *she* embezzled."

"Never mind Mrs. Partridge," said Mrs. Bantry.

"But I had to explain to you. And if you care I'll give you a *hint*. The trouble in this case is that everybody has been much too *credulous* and *believing*. You simply cannot *afford* to believe everything that people tell you. When there's anything fishy about, I never believe anyone at all! You see, I know human nature so well."

Mrs. Bantry was silent for a minute or two. Then she said in a different tone of voice:

"I told you, didn't I, that I didn't see why I shouldn't enjoy myself over this case. A real murder in my own house! The sort of thing that will never happen again."

"I hope not," said Miss Marple.

"Well, so do I, really. Once is enough. But it's *my* murder, Jane; I want to enjoy myself over it."

Miss Marple shot a glance at her.

Mrs. Bantry said belligerently:

"Don't you believe that?"

Miss Marple said sweetly:

"Of course, Dolly, if you tell me so."

"Yes, but you never believe what people tell you, do you? You've just said so. Well, you're quite right." Mrs. Bantry's voice took on a sudden bitter note. She said: "I'm not altogether a fool. You may think, Jane, that I don't know what they're saying all over St. Mary Mead—all over the county! They're saying, one and all, that there's no smoke without fire, that if the girl was found in Arthur's library, then Arthur must know something about it. They're saying that the girl was Arthur's mistress—that she was his illegitimate daughter—that she was blackmailing him. They're saying anything that comes into their damned heads! And it will go on like that! Arthur won't realize it at first—he won't know what's wrong. He's such a dear old stupid that he'd never believe people would think things like that about him. He'll be cold-shouldered and looked at askance

(whatever *that* means!) and it will dawn on him little by little and suddenly he'll be horrified and cut to the soul, and he'll fasten up like a clam and just *endure*, day after day, in misery.

"It's because of all that's going to happen to him that I've come here to ferret out every single thing about it that I can! This murder's *got* to be solved! If it isn't, then Arthur's whole life will be wrecked—and I won't have that happen. I won't! I won't! I won't!"

She paused for a minute and said:

"I *won't* have the dear old boy go through hell for something he didn't do. That's the only reason I came to Danemouth and left him alone at home—to find out the truth."

"I know, dear," said Miss Marple. "That's why I'm here too."

Fourteen

I

In a quiet hotel room Edwards was listening deferentially to Sir Henry Clithering.

"There are certain questions I would like to ask you, Edwards, but I want you first to understand quite clearly my position here. I was at one time Commissioner of Police at Scotland Yard. I am now retired into private life. Your master sent for me when this tragedy occurred. He begged me to use my skill and experience in order to find out the truth."

Sir Henry paused.

Edwards, his pale intelligent eyes on the other's face, inclined his head. He said: "Quite so, Sir Henry."

Clithering went on slowly and deliberately:

"In all police cases there is necessarily a lot of information that is held back. It is held back for various reasons—because it touches on a family skeleton, because it is considered to have no bearing on the case, because it would entail awkwardness and embarrassment to the parties concerned."

Again Edwards said:

"Quite so, Sir Henry."

"I expect, Edwards, that by now you appreciate quite clearly the main points of this business. The dead girl was on the point of becoming Mr. Jefferson's adopted daughter. Two people had a motive

in seeing that this should not happen. Those two people are Mr. Gaskell and Mrs. Jefferson."

The valet's eyes displayed a momentary gleam. He said: "May I ask if they are under suspicion, sir?"

"They are in no danger of arrest, if that is what you mean. But the police are bound to be suspicious of them and will continue to be so *until the matter is cleared up.*"

"An unpleasant position for them, sir."

"Very unpleasant. Now to get at the truth one must have *all* the facts of the case. A lot depends, *must* depend, on the reactions, the words and gestures, of Mr. Jefferson and his family. How did they feel, what did they show, what things were said? I am asking you, Edwards, for inside information—the kind of inside information that only you are likely to have. You know your master's moods. From observation of them you probably know what caused them. I am asking this, not as a policeman, but as a friend of Mr. Jefferson's. That is to say, if anything you tell me is not, in my opinion, relevant to the case, I shall not pass it on to the police."

He paused. Edwards said quietly:

"I understand you, sir. You want me to speak quite frankly—to say things that in the ordinary course of events I should not say—and that, excuse me, sir, *you* wouldn't dream of listening to."

Sir Henry said:

"You're a very intelligent fellow, Edwards. That's exactly what I *do* mean."

Edwards was silent for a minute or two, then he began to speak.

"Of course I know Mr. Jefferson fairly well by now. I've been with him quite a number of years. And I see him in his 'off' moments, not only in his 'on' ones. Sometimes, sir, I've questioned in my own mind whether it's good for anyone to fight fate in the way Mr. Jefferson has fought. It's taken a terrible toll of him, sir. If, sometimes, he could have given way, been an unhappy, lonely, broken old man—well, it might have been better for him in the end. But he's too proud for that! He'll go down fighting—that's his motto.

"But that sort of thing leads, Sir Henry, to a lot of nervous reaction. He looks a good-tempered gentleman. I've seen him in

violent rages when he could hardly speak for passion. And the one thing that roused him, sir, was deceit...."

"Are you saying that for any particular reason, Edwards?"

"Yes, sir, I am. You asked me, sir, to speak quite frankly?"

"That is the idea."

"Well, then, Sir Henry, in my opinion the young woman that Mr. Jefferson was so taken up with wasn't worth it. She was, to put it bluntly, a common little piece. And she didn't care tuppence for Mr. Jefferson. All that play of affection and gratitude was so much poppycock. I don't say there was any harm in her—but she wasn't, by a long way, what Mr. Jefferson thought her. It was funny, that, sir, for Mr. Jefferson was a shrewd gentleman; he wasn't often deceived over people. But there, a gentleman isn't himself in his judgment when it comes to a young woman being in question. Young Mrs. Jefferson, you see, whom he'd always depended upon a lot for sympathy, had changed a good deal this summer. He noticed it and he felt it badly. He was fond of her, you see. Mr. Mark he never liked much."

Sir Henry interjected:

"And yet he had him with him constantly?"

"Yes, but that was for Miss Rosamund's sake. Mrs. Gaskell that was. She was the apple of his eye. He adored her. Mr. Mark was Miss Rosamund's husband. He always thought of him like that."

"Supposing Mr. Mark had married someone else?"

"Mr. Jefferson, sir, would have been furious."

Sir Henry raised his eyebrows. "As much as that?"

"He wouldn't have shown it, but that's what it would have been."

"And if Mrs. Jefferson had married again?"

"Mr. Jefferson wouldn't have liked that either, sir."

"Please go on, Edwards."

"I was saying, sir, that Mr. Jefferson fell for this young woman. I've often seen it happen with the gentlemen I've been with. Comes over them like a kind of disease. They want to protect the girl, and shield her, and shower benefits upon her—and nine times out of ten the girl is very well able to look after herself and has a good eye to the main chance."

"So you think Ruby Keene was a schemer?"

"Well, Sir Henry, she was quite inexperienced, being so young, but she had the makings of a very fine schemer indeed when she'd once got well into her swing, so to speak! In another five years she'd have been an expert at the game!"

Sir Henry said:

"I'm glad to have your opinion of her. It's valuable. Now do you recall any incident in which this matter was discussed between Mr. Jefferson and his family?"

"There was very little discussion, sir. Mr. Jefferson announced what he had in mind and stifled any protests. That is, he shut up Mr. Mark, who was a bit outspoken. Mrs. Jefferson didn't say much—she's a quiet lady—only urged him not to do anything in a great hurry."

Sir Henry nodded.

"Anything else? What was the girl's attitude?"

With marked distaste the valet said:

"I should describe it, sir, as jubilant."

"Ah—jubilant, you say? You had no reason to believe, Edwards, that"—he sought about for a phrase suitable to Edwards—"that—er—her affections were engaged elsewhere?"

"Mr. Jefferson was not proposing marriage, sir. He was going to adopt her."

"Cut out the 'elsewhere' and let the question stand."

The valet said slowly: "There *was* one incident, sir. I happened to be a witness of it."

"That is gratifying. Tell me."

"There is probably nothing in it, sir. It was just that one day the young woman, chancing to open her handbag, a small snapshot fell out. Mr. Jefferson pounced on it and said: 'Hallo, Kitten, who's this, eh?'

"It was a snapshot, sir, of a young man, a dark young man with rather untidy hair and his tie very badly arranged.

"Miss Keene pretended that she didn't know anything about it. She said: 'I've no idea, Jeffie. No idea at all. I don't know how it could have got into my bag. *I* didn't put it there!'

"Now, Mr. Jefferson, sir, wasn't quite a fool. That story wasn't good enough. He looked angry, his brows came down heavy, and his voice was gruff when he said:

"Now then, Kitten, now then. *You* know who it is right enough.'

"She changed her tactics quick, sir. Looked frightened. She said: 'I do recognize him now. He comes here sometimes and I've danced with him. I don't know his name. The silly idiot must have stuffed his photo into my bag one day. These boys are too silly for anything!' She tossed her head and giggled and passed it off. But it wasn't a likely story, was it? And I don't think Mr. Jefferson quite believed it. He looked at her once or twice after that in a sharp way, and sometimes, if she'd been out, he asked her where she'd been."

Sir Henry said: "Have you ever seen the original of the photo about the hotel?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir. Of course, I am not much downstairs in the public departments."

Sir Henry nodded. He asked a few more questions, but Edwards could tell him nothing more.

II

In the police station at Danemouth, Superintendent Harper was interviewing Jessie Davis, Florence Small, Beatrice Henniker, Mary Price, and Lilian Ridgeway.

They were girls much of an age, differing slightly in mentality. They ranged from "county" to farmers' and shopkeepers' daughters. One and all they told the same story—Pamela Reeves had been just the same as usual, she had said nothing to any of them except that she was going to Woolworth's and would go home by a later bus.

In the corner of Superintendent Harper's office sat an elderly lady. The girls hardly noticed her. If they did, they may have wondered who she was. She was certainly no police matron. Possibly they assumed that she, like themselves, was a witness to be questioned.

The last girl was shown out. Superintendent Harper wiped his forehead and turned round to look at Miss Marple. His glance was

inquiring, but not hopeful.

Miss Marple, however, spoke crisply.

"I'd like to speak to Florence Small."

The Superintendent's eyebrows rose, but he nodded and touched a bell. A constable appeared.

Harper said: "Florence Small."

The girl reappeared, ushered in by the constable. She was the daughter of a well-to-do farmer—a tall girl with fair hair, a rather foolish mouth, and frightened brown eyes. She was twisting her hands and looked nervous.

Superintendent Harper looked at Miss Marple, who nodded.

The Superintendent got up. He said:

"This lady will ask you some questions."

He went out, closing the door behind him.

Florence shot an uneasy glance at Miss Marple. Her eyes looked rather like one of her father's calves.

Miss Marple said: "Sit down, Florence."

Florence Small sat down obediently. Unrecognized by herself, she felt suddenly more at home, less uneasy. The unfamiliar and terrorizing atmosphere of a police station was replaced by something more familiar, the accustomed tone of command of somebody whose business it was to give orders. Miss Marple said:

"You understand, Florence, that it's of the utmost importance that everything about poor Pamela's doings on the day of her death should be known?"

Florence murmured that she quite understood.

"And I'm sure you want to do your best to help?"

Florence's eyes were wary as she said, of course she did.

"To keep back any piece of information is a very serious offence," said Miss Marple.

The girl's fingers twisted nervously in her lap. She swallowed once or twice.

"I can make allowances," went on Miss Marple, "for the fact that you are naturally alarmed at being brought into contact with the police. You are afraid, too, that you may be blamed for not having spoken sooner. Possibly you are afraid that you may also be blamed

for not stopping Pamela at the time. But you've got to be a brave girl and make a clean breast of things. If you refuse to tell what you know now, it will be a very serious matter indeed—*very* serious—practically *perjury*, and for that, as you know, you can be sent to prison."

"I—I don't—"

Miss Marple said sharply:

"Now don't prevaricate, Florence! Tell me all about it at once! Pamela wasn't going to Woolworth's, was she?"

Florence licked her lips with a dry tongue and gazed imploringly at Miss Marple like a beast about to be slaughtered.

"Something to do with the films, wasn't it?" asked Miss Marple.

A look of intense relief mingled with awe passed over Florence's face. Her inhibitions left her. She gasped:

"Oh, *yes!*"

"I thought so," said Miss Marple. "Now I want all the details, please."

Words poured from Florence in a gush.

"Oh! I've been ever so worried. I promised Pam, you see, I'd never say a word to a soul. And then when she was found all burnt up in that car—oh! it was horrible and I thought I should *die*—I felt it was all my fault. I ought to have stopped her. Only I never thought, not for a minute, that it wasn't all right. And then I was asked if she'd been quite as usual that day and I said 'Yes' before I'd had time to think. And not having said anything then I didn't see how I could say anything later. And, after all, I didn't know anything—not really—only what Pam told me."

"What did Pam tell you?"

"It was as we were walking up the lane to the bus—on the way to the rally. She asked me if I could keep a secret, and I said 'Yes,' and she made me swear not to tell. She was going into Danemouth for a film test after the rally! She'd met a film producer—just back from Hollywood, he was. He wanted a certain type, and he told Pam she was just what he was looking for. He warned her, though, not to build on it. You couldn't tell, he said, not until you saw a person photographed. It might be no good at all. It was a kind of Bergner

part, he said. You had to have someone quite young for it. A schoolgirl, it was, who changes places with a revue artist and has a wonderful career. Pam's acted in plays at school and she's awfully good. He said he could see she could act, but she'd have to have some intensive training. It wouldn't be all beer and skittles, he told her, it would be damned hard work. Did she think she could stick it?"

Florence Small stopped for breath. Miss Marple felt rather sick as she listened to the glib rehash of countless novels and screen stories. Pamela Reeves, like most other girls, would have been warned against talking to strangers—but the glamour of the films would obliterate all that.

"He was absolutely businesslike about it all," continued Florence. "Said if the test was successful she'd have a contract, and he said that as she was young and inexperienced she ought to let a lawyer look at it before she signed it. But she wasn't to pass on that *he'd* said that. He asked her if she'd have trouble with her parents, and Pam said she probably would, and he said: 'Well, of course, that's always a difficulty with anyone as young as you are, but I think if it was put to them that this was a wonderful chance that wouldn't happen once in a million times, they'd see reason.' But, anyway, he said, it wasn't any good going into that until they knew the result of the test. She mustn't be disappointed if it failed. He told her about Hollywood and about Vivien Leigh—how she'd suddenly taken London by storm—and how these sensational leaps into fame did happen. He himself had come back from America to work with the Lemville Studios and put some pep into the English film companies."

Miss Marple nodded.

Florence went on:

"So it was all arranged. Pam was to go into Danemouth after the rally and meet him at his hotel and he'd take her along to the studios (they'd got a small testing studio in Danemouth, he told her). She'd have her test and she could catch the bus home afterwards. She could say she'd been shopping, and he'd let her know the result of the test in a few days, and if it was favourable Mr. Harmsteiter, the boss, would come along and talk to her parents.

"Well, of course, it sounded too wonderful! I was green with envy! Pam got through the rally without turning a hair—we always call her a regular poker face. Then, when she said she was going into Danemouth to Woolworth's she just winked at me.

"I saw her start off down the footpath." Florence began to cry. "I ought to have stopped her. I ought to have stopped her. I ought to have known a thing like that couldn't be true. I ought to have told someone. Oh dear, I wish I was *dead!*"

"There, there." Miss Marple patted her on the shoulder. "It's quite all right. No one will blame you. You've done the right thing in telling me."

She devoted some minutes to cheering the child up.

Five minutes later she was telling the story to Superintendent Harper. The latter looked very grim.

"The clever devil!" he said. "By God, I'll cook his goose for him. This puts rather a different aspect on things."

"Yes, it does."

Harper looked at her sideways.

"It doesn't surprise you?"

"I expected something of the kind."

Superintendent Harper said curiously:

"What put you on to this particular girl? They all looked scared to death and there wasn't a pin to choose between them as far as I could see."

Miss Marple said gently:

"You haven't had as much experience with girls telling lies as I have. Florence looked at you very straight, if you remember, and stood very rigid and just fidgeted with her feet like the others. But you didn't watch her as she went out of the door. I knew at once then that she'd got something to hide. They nearly always relax too soon. My little maid Janet always did. She'd explain quite convincingly that the mice had eaten the end of a cake and give herself away by smirking as she left the room."

"I'm very grateful to you," said Harper.

He added thoughtfully: "Lemville Studios, eh?"

Miss Marple said nothing. She rose to her feet.

"I'm afraid," she said, "I must hurry away. So glad to have been able to help you."

"Are you going back to the hotel?"

"Yes—to pack up. I must go back to St. Mary Mead as soon as possible. There's a lot for me to do there."

Fifteen

I

Miss Marple passed out through the french windows of her drawing room, tripped down her neat garden path, through a garden gate, in through the vicarage garden gate, across the vicarage garden, and up to the drawing room window, where she tapped gently on the pane.

The vicar was busy in his study composing his Sunday sermon, but the vicar's wife, who was young and pretty, was admiring the progress of her offspring across the hearthrug.

"Can I come in, Griselda?"

"Oh, do, Miss Marple. Just *look* at David! He gets so angry because he can only crawl in reverse. He wants to get to something and the more he tries the more he goes backwards into the coal box!"

"He's looking very bonny, Griselda."

"He's not bad, is he?" said the young mother, endeavouring to assume an indifferent manner. "Of course I don't *bother* with him much. All the books say a child should be left alone as much as possible."

"Very wise, dear," said Miss Marple. "Ahem, I came to ask if there was anything special you are collecting for at the moment."

The vicar's wife turned somewhat astonished eyes upon her.

"Oh, heaps of things," she said cheerfully. "There always are."

She ticked them off on her fingers.

"There's the Nave Restoration Fund, and St. Giles's Mission, and our Sale of Work next Wednesday, and the Unmarried Mothers, and a Boy Scouts' Outing, and the Needlework Guild, and the Bishop's Appeal for Deep Sea Fishermen."

"Any of them will do," said Miss Marple. "I thought I might make a little round—with a book, you know—if you would authorize me to do so."

"Are you up to something? I believe you are. Of course I authorize you. Make it the Sale of Work; it would be lovely to get some real money instead of those awful sachets and comic pen-wipers and depressing children's frocks and dusters all done up to look like dolls.

"I suppose," continued Griselda, accompanying her guest to the window, "you wouldn't like to tell me what it's all about?"

"Later, my dear," said Miss Marple, hurrying off.

With a sigh the young mother returned to the hearthrug and, by way of carrying out her principles of stern neglect, butted her son three times in the stomach so that he caught hold of her hair and pulled it with gleeful yells. Then they rolled over and over in a grand rough-and-tumble until the door opened and the vicarage maid announced to the most influential parishioner (who didn't like children):

"Missus is in here."

Whereupon Griselda sat up and tried to look dignified and more what a vicar's wife should be.

II

Miss Marple, clasping a small black book with pencilled entries in it, walked briskly along the village street until she came to the crossroads. Here she turned to the left and walked past the *Blue Boar* until she came to Chatsworth, alias "Mr. Booker's new house."

She turned in at the gate, walked up to the front door and knocked briskly.

The door was opened by the blonde young woman named Dinah Lee. She was less carefully made-up than usual, and in fact looked slightly dirty. She was wearing grey slacks and an emerald jumper.

"Good morning," said Miss Marple briskly and cheerfully. "May I just come in for a minute?"

She pressed forward as she spoke, so that Dinah Lee, who was somewhat taken aback at the call, had no time to make up her mind.

"Thank you so much," said Miss Marple, beaming amiably at her and sitting down rather gingerly on a "period" bamboo chair.

"Quite warm for the time of year, is it not?" went on Miss Marple, still exuding geniality.

"Yes, rather. Oh, quite," said Miss Lee.

At a loss how to deal with the situation, she opened a box and offered it to her guest. "Er—have a cigarette?"

"Thank you so much, but I don't smoke. I just called, you know, to see if I could enlist your help for our Sale of Work next week."

"Sale of Work?" said Dinah Lee, as one who repeats a phrase in a foreign language.

"At the vicarage," said Miss Marple. "Next Wednesday."

"Oh!" Miss Lee's mouth fell open. "I'm afraid I couldn't—"

"Not even a small subscription—half a crown perhaps?"

Miss Marple exhibited her little book.

"Oh—er—well, yes, I dare say I could manage that."

The girl looked relieved and turned to hunt in her handbag.

Miss Marple's sharp eyes were looking round the room.

She said:

"I see you've no hearthrug in front of the fire."

Dinah Lee turned round and stared at her. She could not but be aware of the very keen scrutiny the old lady was giving her, but it aroused in her no other emotion than slight annoyance. Miss Marple recognized that. She said:

"It's rather dangerous, you know. Sparks fly out and mark the carpet."

"Funny old Tabby," thought Dinah, but she said quite amiably if somewhat vaguely:

"There used to be one. I don't know where it's got to."

"I suppose," said Miss Marple, "it was the fluffy, woolly kind?"

"Sheep," said Dinah. "That's what it looked like."

She was amused now. An eccentric old bean, this.

She held out a half crown. "Here you are," she said.

"Oh, thank you, my dear."

Miss Marple took it and opened the little book.

"Er—what name shall I write down?"

Dinah's eyes grew suddenly hard and contemptuous.

"Nosey old cat," she thought, "that's all she came for—prying around for scandal!"

She said clearly and with malicious pleasure:

"Miss Dinah Lee."

Miss Marple looked at her steadily.

She said:

"This is Mr. Basil Blake's cottage, isn't it?"

"Yes, and I'm Miss Dinah Lee!"

Her voice rang out challengingly, her head went back, her blue eyes flashed.

Very steadily Miss Marple looked at her. She said:

"Will you allow me to give you some advice, even though you may consider it impertinent?"

"I *shall* consider it impertinent. You had better say nothing."

"Nevertheless," said Miss Marple, "I am going to speak. I want to advise you, very strongly, not to continue using your maiden name in the village."

Dinah stared at her. She said:

"What—what do you mean?"

Miss Marple said earnestly:

"In a very short time you may need all the sympathy and goodwill you can find. It will be important to your husband, too, that he shall be thought well of. There is a prejudice in old-fashioned country districts against people living together who are not married. It has amused you both, I dare say, to pretend that that is what you are doing. It kept people away, so that you weren't bothered with what I

expect you would call 'old frumps.' Nevertheless, old frumps have their uses."

Dinah demanded:

"How did you know we are married?"

Miss Marple smiled a deprecating smile.

"Oh, my dear," she said.

Dinah persisted.

"No, but how *did* you know? You didn't—you didn't go to Somerset House?"

A momentary flicker showed in Miss Marple's eyes.

"Somerset House? Oh, no. But it was quite easy to *guess*. Everything, you know, gets round in a village. The—er—the kind of quarrels you have—typical of early days of marriage. Quite—*quite* unlike an illicit relationship. It has been said, you know (and, I think, quite truly), that you can only really get under anybody's skin if you are married to them. When there is no—no *legal* bond, people are much more careful, they have to keep assuring themselves how happy and halcyon everything is. They have, you see, to *justify* themselves. They dare not quarrel! Married people, I have noticed, quite enjoy their battles and the—er—appropriate reconciliations."

She paused, twinkling benignly.

"Well, I—" Dinah stopped and laughed. She sat down and lit a cigarette. "You're absolutely marvellous!" she said.

Then she went on:

"But why do you want us to own up and admit to respectability?"

Miss Marple's face was grave. She said:

"Because, any minute now, *your husband may be arrested for murder.*"

III

For several moments Dinah stared at her. Then she said incredulously:

"Basil? Murder? Are you joking?"

"No, indeed. Haven't you seen the papers?"

Dinah caught her breath.

"You mean—that girl at the Majestic Hotel. Do you mean they suspect Basil of killing her?"

"Yes."

"But it's nonsense!"

There was the whir of a car outside, the bang of a gate. Basil Blake flung open the door and came in, carrying some bottles. He said:

"Got the gin and the vermouth. Did you—?"

He stopped and turned incredulous eyes on the prim, erect visitor.

Dinah burst out breathlessly:

"Is she mad? She says you're going to be arrested for the murder of that girl Ruby Keene."

"Oh, God!" said Basil Blake. The bottles dropped from his arms on to the sofa. He reeled to a chair and dropped down in it and buried his face in his hands. He repeated: "Oh, my God! Oh, my God!"

Dinah darted over to him. She caught his shoulders.

"Basil, look at me! It isn't true! I know it isn't true! I don't believe it for a moment!"

His hand went up and gripped hers.

"Bless you, darling."

"But why should they think—You didn't even *know* her, did you?"

"Oh, yes, he knew her," said Miss Marple.

Basil said fiercely:

"Be quiet, you old hag. Listen, Dinah darling, I hardly knew her at all. Just ran across her once or twice at the Majestic. That's all, I swear that's all."

Dinah said, bewildered:

"I don't understand. Why should anyone suspect you, then?"

Basil groaned. He put his hands over his eyes and rocked to and fro.

Miss Marple said:

"What did you do with the hearthrug?"

His reply came mechanically:

"I put it in the dustbin."

Miss Marple clucked her tongue vexedly.

"That was stupid—very stupid. People don't put good hearthrugs in dustbins. It had spangles in it from her dress, I suppose?"

"Yes, I couldn't get them out."

Dinah cried: "But what are you both talking about?"

Basil said sullenly:

"Ask her. She seems to know all about it."

"I'll tell you what I think happened, if you like," said Miss Marple. "You can correct me, Mr. Blake, if I go wrong. I think that after having had a violent quarrel with your wife at a party and after having had, perhaps, rather too much—er—to drink, you drove down here. I don't know what time you arrived—"

Basil Blake said sullenly:

"About two in the morning. I meant to go up to town first, then when I got to the suburbs I changed my mind. I thought Dinah might come down here after me. So I drove down here. The place was all dark. I opened the door and turned on the light and I saw—and I saw—"

He gulped and stopped. Miss Marple went on:

"You saw a girl lying on the hearthrug—a girl in a white evening dress—strangled. I don't know whether you recognized her then—"

Basil Blake shook his head violently.

"I couldn't look at her after the first glance—her face was all blue—swollen. She'd been dead some time and she was *there*—in *my* room!"

He shuddered.

Miss Marple said gently:

"You weren't, of course, quite yourself. You were in a fuddled state and your nerves are not good. You were, I think, panic-stricken. You didn't know what to do—"

"I thought Dinah might turn up any minute. And she'd find me there with a dead body—a girl's dead body—and she'd think I'd killed her. Then I got an idea—it seemed, I don't know why, a good idea at the time—I thought: I'll put her in old Bantry's library. Damned pompous old stick, always looking down his nose, sneering at me as artistic and effeminate. Serve the pompous old brute right, I thought. He'll look a fool when a dead lovely is found on his

hearthrug." He added, with a pathetic eagerness to explain: "I was a bit drunk, you know, at the time. It really seemed positively *amusing* to me. Old Bantry with a dead blonde."

"Yes, yes," said Miss Marple. "Little Tommy Bond had very much the same idea. Rather a sensitive boy with an inferiority complex, he said teacher was always picking on him. He put a frog in the clock and it jumped out at her."

"You were just the same," went on Miss Marple, "only of course, bodies are more serious matters than frogs."

Basil groaned again.

"By the morning I'd sobered up. I realized what I'd done. I was scared stiff. And then the police came here—another damned pompous ass of a Chief Constable. I was scared of him—and the only way I could hide it was by being abominably rude. In the middle of it all Dinah drove up."

Dinah looked out of the window.

She said:

"There's a car driving up now ... there are men in it."

"The police, I think," said Miss Marple.

Basil Blake got up. Suddenly he became quite calm and resolute. He even smiled. He said:

"So I'm for it, am I? All right, Dinah sweet, keep your head. Get on to old Sims—he's the family lawyer—and go to Mother and tell her everything about our marriage. She won't bite. And don't worry. *I didn't do it*. So it's bound to be all right, see, sweetheart?"

There was a tap on the cottage door. Basil called "Come in." Inspector Slack entered with another man. He said:

"Mr. Basil Blake?"

"Yes."

"I have a warrant here for your arrest on the charge of murdering Ruby Keene on the night of September 21st last. I warn you that anything you say may be used at your trial. You will please accompany me now. Full facilities will be given you for communicating with your solicitor."

Basil nodded.

He looked at Dinah, but did not touch her. He said:

"So long, Dinah."

"Cool customer," thought Inspector Slack.

He acknowledged the presence of Miss Marple with a half bow and a "Good morning," and thought to himself:

"Smart old Pussy, *she's* on to it! Good job we've got that hearthrug. That and finding out from the car-park man at the studio that he left that party at *eleven* instead of midnight. Don't think those friends of his meant to commit perjury. They were bottled and Blake told 'em firmly the next day it was twelve o'clock when he left and they believed him. Well, *his* goose is cooked good and proper! Mental, I expect! Broadmoor, not hanging. First the Reeves kid, probably strangled her, drove her out to the quarry, walked back into Danemouth, picked up his own car in some side lane, drove to this party, then back to Danemouth, brought Ruby Keene out here, strangled her, put her in old Bantry's library, then probably got the wind up about the car in the quarry, drove there, set it on fire, and got back here. Mad—sex and blood lust—lucky *this* girl's escaped. What they call recurring mania, I expect."

Alone with Miss Marple, Dinah Blake turned to her. She said:

"I don't know who you are, but you've got to understand this—*Basil didn't do it.*"

Miss Marple said:

"I know he didn't. I know who *did* do it. But it's not going to be easy to prove. I've an idea that something you said—just now—may help. It gave me an idea—the *connection* I'd been trying to find—now what *was* it?"

Sixteen

I

"I'm home, Arthur!" declared Mrs. Bantry, announcing the fact like a Royal Proclamation as she flung open the study door.

Colonel Bantry immediately jumped up, kissed his wife, and declared heartily: "Well, well, that's splendid!"

The words were unimpeachable, the manner very well done, but an affectionate wife of as many years' standing as Mrs. Bantry was not deceived. She said immediately:

"Is anything the matter?"

"No, of course not, Dolly. What should be the matter?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Mrs. Bantry vaguely. "Things are so queer, aren't they?"

She threw off her coat as she spoke and Colonel Bantry picked it up as carefully and laid it across the back of the sofa.

All exactly as usual—yet not as usual. Her husband, Mrs. Bantry thought, seemed to have shrunk. He looked thinner, stooped more; they were pouches under his eyes and those eyes were not ready to meet hers.

He went on to say, still with that affectation of cheerfulness:

"Well, how did you enjoy your time at Danemouth?"

"Oh! it was great fun. You ought to have come, Arthur."

"Couldn't get away, my dear. Lot of things to attend to here."

"Still, I think the change would have done you good. And you like the Jeffersons?"

"Yes, yes, poor fellow. Nice chap. All very sad."

"What have you been doing with yourself since I've been away?"

"Oh, nothing much. Been over the farms, you know. Agreed that Anderson shall have a new roof—can't patch it up any longer."

"How did the Radfordshire Council meeting go?"

"I—well—as a matter of fact I didn't go."

"Didn't *go*? But you were taking the chair?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, Dolly—seems there was some mistake about that. Asked me if I'd mind if Thompson took it instead."

"I *see*," said Mrs. Bantry.

She peeled off a glove and threw it deliberately into the wastepaper basket. Her husband went to retrieve it, and she stopped him, saying sharply:

"Leave it. I hate gloves."

Colonel Bantry glanced at her uneasily.

Mrs. Bantry said sternly:

"Did you go to dinner with the Duffs on Thursday?"

"Oh, that! It was put off. Their cook was ill."

"Stupid people," said Mrs. Bantry. She went on: "Did you go to the Naylor's yesterday?"

"I rang up and said I didn't feel up to it, hoped they'd excuse me. They quite understood."

"They did, did they?" said Mrs. Bantry grimly.

She sat down by the desk and absentmindedly picked up a pair of gardening scissors. With them she cut off the fingers, one by one, of her second glove.

"What *are* you doing, Dolly?"

"Feeling destructive," said Mrs. Bantry.

She got up. "Where shall we sit after dinner, Arthur? In the library?"

"Well—er—I don't think so—eh? Very nice in here—or the drawing room."

"I think," said Mrs. Bantry, "that we'll sit in the library!"

Her steady eye met his. Colonel Bantry drew himself up to his full height. A sparkle came into his eye.

He said:

"You're right, my dear. We'll sit in the library!"

II

Mrs. Bantry put down the telephone receiver with a sigh of annoyance. She had rung up twice, and each time the answer had been the same: Miss Marple was out.

Of a naturally impatient nature, Mrs. Bantry was never one to acquiesce in defeat. She rang up in rapid succession the vicarage, Mrs. Price Ridley, Miss Hartnell, Miss Wetherby, and, as a last resource, the fishmonger who, by reason of his advantageous geographical position, usually knew where everybody was in the village.

The fishmonger was sorry, but he had not seen Miss Marple at all in the village that morning. She had not been her usual round.

"Where *can* the woman be?" demanded Mrs. Bantry impatiently aloud.

There was a deferential cough behind her. The discreet Lorrimer murmured:

"You were requiring Miss Marple, madam? I have just observed her approaching the house."

Mrs. Bantry rushed to the front door, flung it open, and greeted Miss Marple breathlessly:

"I've been trying to get you *everywhere*. Where have you been?" She glanced over her shoulder. Lorrimer had discreetly vanished. "Everything's *too* awful! People are beginning to cold-shoulder Arthur. He looks *years* older. We *must* do something, Jane. *You* must do something!"

Miss Marple said:

"You needn't worry, Dolly," in a rather peculiar voice.

Colonel Bantry appeared from the study door.

"Ah, Miss Marple. Good morning. Glad you've come. My wife's been ringing you up like a lunatic."

"I thought I'd better bring you the news," said Miss Marple, as she followed Mrs. Bantry into the study.

"News?"

"Basil Blake has just been arrested for the murder of Ruby Keene."

"Basil Blake?" cried the Colonel.

"But he didn't do it," said Miss Marple.

Colonel Bantry took no notice of this statement. It is doubtful if he even heard it.

"Do you mean to say he strangled that girl and then brought her along and put her in *my* library?"

"He put her in your library," said Miss Marple. "But he didn't kill her."

"Nonsense! If he put her in my library, of course he killed her! The two things go together."

"Not necessarily. He found her dead in his own cottage."

"A likely story," said the Colonel derisively. "If you find a body, why, you ring up the police—naturally—if you're an honest man."

"Ah," said Miss Marple, "but we haven't all got such iron nerves as you have, Colonel Bantry. You belong to the old school. This younger generation is different."

"Got no stamina," said the Colonel, repeating a well-worn opinion of his.

"Some of them," said Miss Marple, "have been through a bad time. I've heard a good deal about Basil. He did A.R.P. work, you know, when he was only eighteen. He went into a burning house and brought out four children, one after another. He went back for a dog, although they told him it wasn't safe. The building fell in on him. They got him out, but his chest was badly crushed and he had to lie in plaster for nearly a year and was ill for a long time after that. That's when he got interested in designing."

"Oh!" The Colonel coughed and blew his nose. "I—er—never knew that."

"He doesn't talk about it," said Miss Marple.

"Er—quite right. Proper spirit. Must be more in the young chap than I thought. Always thought he'd shirked the war, you know. Shows you ought to be careful in jumping to conclusions."

Colonel Bantry looked ashamed.

"But, all the same"—his indignation revived—"what did he mean trying to fasten a murder on *me*?"

"I don't think he saw it like that," said Miss Marple. "He thought of it more as a—as a joke. You see, he was rather under the influence of alcohol at the time."

"Bottled, was he?" said Colonel Banttry, with an Englishman's sympathy for alcoholic excess. "Oh, well, can't judge a fellow by what he does when he's drunk. When I was at Cambridge, I remember I put a certain utensil—well, well, never mind. Deuce of a row there was about it."

He chuckled, then checked himself sternly. He looked piercingly at Miss Marple with eyes that were shrewd and appraising. He said: "You don't think he did the murder, eh?"

"I'm sure he didn't."

"And you think you know who did?"

Miss Marple nodded.

Mrs. Banttry, like an ecstatic Greek chorus, said: "Isn't she wonderful?" to an unhearing world.

"Well, who was it?"

Miss Marple said:

"I was going to ask you to help me. I think, if we went up to Somerset House we should have a very good idea."

Seventeen

I

Sir Henry's face was very grave.

He said:

"I don't like it."

"I am aware," said Miss Marple, "that it isn't what you call orthodox. But it *is* so important, isn't it, to be quite *sure*—'to make assurance doubly sure,' as Shakespeare has it. I think, if Mr. Jefferson would agree—?"

"What about Harper? Is he to be in on this?"

"It might be awkward for him to know too much. But there might be a hint from you. To watch certain persons—have them trailed, you know."

Sir Henry said slowly:

"Yes, that would meet the case...."

II

Superintendent Harper looked piercingly at Sir Henry Clithering.

"Let's get this quite clear, sir. You're giving me a hint?"

Sir Henry said:

"I'm informing you of what my friend has just informed me—he didn't tell me in confidence—that he proposes to visit a solicitor in Danemouth tomorrow for the purpose of making a new will."

The Superintendent's bushy eyebrows drew downwards over his steady eyes. He said:

"Does Mr. Conway Jefferson propose to inform his son-in-law and daughter-in-law of that fact?"

"He intends to tell them about it this evening."

"I see."

The Superintendent tapped his desk with a penholder.

He repeated again: "I see...."

Then the piercing eyes bored once more into the eyes of the other man. Harper said:

"So you're not satisfied with the case against Basil Blake?"

"Are you?"

The Superintendent's moustaches quivered. He said:

"Is Miss Marple?"

The two men looked at each other.

Then Harper said:

"You can leave it to me. I'll have men detailed. There will be no funny business, I can promise you that."

Sir Henry said:

"There is one more thing. You'd better see this."

He unfolded a slip of paper and pushed it across the table.

This time the Superintendent's calm deserted him. He whistled:

"So that's it, is it? That puts an entirely different complexion on the matter. How did you come to dig up this?"

"Women," said Sir Henry, "are eternally interested in marriages."

"Especially," said the Superintendent, "elderly single women."

III

Conway Jefferson looked up as his friend entered.

His grim face relaxed into a smile.

He said:

"Well, I told 'em. They took it very well."

"What did you say?"

"Told 'em that, as Ruby was dead, I felt that the fifty thousand I'd originally left her should go to something that I could associate with her memory. It was to endow a hostel for young girls working as professional dancers in London. Damned silly way to leave your money—surprised they swallowed it. As though *I'd* do a thing like that!"

He added meditatively:

"You know, I made a fool of myself over that girl. Must be turning into a silly old man. I can see it now. She was a pretty kid—but most of what I saw in her I put there myself. I pretended she was another Rosamund. Same colouring, you know. But not the same heart or mind. Hand me that paper—rather an interesting bridge problem."

IV

Sir Henry went downstairs. He asked a question of the porter.

"Mr. Gaskell, sir? He's just gone off in his car. Had to go to London."

"Oh! I see. Is Mrs. Jefferson about?"

"Mrs. Jefferson, sir, has just gone up to bed."

Sir Henry looked into the lounge and through to the ballroom. In the lounge Hugo McLean was doing a crossword puzzle and frowning a good deal over it. In the ballroom Josie was smiling valiantly into the face of a stout, perspiring man as her nimble feet avoided his destructive tread. The stout man was clearly enjoying his dance. Raymond, graceful and weary, was dancing with an anaemic-looking girl with adenoids, dull brown hair, and an expensive and exceedingly unbecoming dress.

Sir Henry said under his breath:

"And so to bed," and went upstairs.

V

It was three o'clock. The wind had fallen, the moon was shining over the quiet sea.

In Conway Jefferson's room there was no sound except his own heavy breathing as he lay, half propped up on pillows.

There was no breeze to stir the curtains at the window, but they stirred ... For a moment they parted, and a figure was silhouetted against the moonlight. Then they fell back into place. Everything was quiet again, but there was someone else inside the room.

Nearer and nearer to the bed the intruder stole. The deep breathing on the pillow did not relax.

There was no sound, or hardly any sound. A finger and thumb were ready to pick up a fold of skin, in the other hand the hypodermic was ready.

And then, suddenly, out of the shadows a hand came and closed over the hand that held the needle, the other arm held the figure in an iron grasp.

An unemotional voice, the voice of the law, said:

"No, you don't. I want that needle!"

The light switched on and from his pillows Conway Jefferson looked grimly at the murderer of Ruby Keene.

Eighteen

I

Sir Henry Clithering said:

"Speaking as Watson, I want to know your methods, Miss Marple."

Superintendent Harper said:

"I'd like to know what put you on to it first."

Colonel Melchett said:

"You've done it again, by Jove! I want to hear all about it from the beginning."

Miss Marple smoothed the puce silk of her best evening gown. She flushed and smiled and looked very self-conscious.

She said: "I'm afraid you'll think my 'methods,' as Sir Henry calls them, are terribly amateurish. The truth is, you see, that most people—and I don't exclude policemen—are far too trusting for this wicked world. They believe what is told them. I never do. I'm afraid I always like to prove a thing for myself."

"That is the scientific attitude," said Sir Henry.

"In this case," continued Miss Marple, "certain things were taken for granted from the first—instead of just confining oneself to the facts. The facts, as I noted them, were that the victim was quite young and that she bit her nails and that her teeth stuck out a little—as young girls' so often do if not corrected in time with a plate—(and children are very naughty about their plates and taking them out when their elders aren't looking).

"But that is wandering from the point. Where was I? Oh, yes, looking down at the dead girl and feeling sorry, because it is always sad to see a young life cut short, and thinking that whoever had done it was a very wicked person. Of course it was all very confusing her being found in Colonel Bantry's library, altogether too like a book to be *true*. In fact, it made the wrong pattern. It wasn't, you see, *meant*, which confused us a lot. The *real* idea had been to plant the body on poor young Basil Blake (a *much* more likely person), and his action in putting it in the Colonel's library delayed things considerably, and must have been a source of great annoyance to the *real* murderer.

"Originally, you see, Mr. Blake would have been the first object of suspicion. They'd have made inquiries at Danemouth, found he knew the girl, then found he had tied himself up with another girl, and they'd have assumed that Ruby came to blackmail him, or something like that, and that he'd strangled her in a fit of rage. Just an ordinary, sordid, what I call *nightclub* type of crime!

"But that, of course, *all went wrong*, and interest became focused much too soon on the Jefferson family—to the great annoyance of a *certain person*.

"As I've told you, I've got a very suspicious mind. My nephew Raymond tells me (in fun, of course, and quite affectionately) that I have a mind like a *sink*. He says that most Victorians have. All I can say is that the Victorians knew a good deal about human nature.

"As I say, having this rather insanitary—or surely *sanitary*?—mind, I looked at once at the *money* angle of it. Two people stood to benefit by this girl's death—you couldn't get away from that. Fifty thousand pounds is a lot of money—especially when you are in financial difficulties, as both these people were. Of course they both seemed very nice, agreeable people—they didn't seem *likely* people—but one never can tell, can one?

"Mrs. Jefferson, for instance—everyone liked her. But it did seem clear that she had become very restless that summer, and that she was tired of the life she led, completely dependent on her father-in-law. She knew, because the doctor had told her, that he couldn't live long—so *that* was all right—to put it callously—or it *would* have been

all right if Ruby Keene hadn't come along. Mrs. Jefferson was passionately devoted to her son, and some women have a curious idea that crimes committed for the sake of their offspring are almost morally justified. I have come across that attitude once or twice in the village. 'Well, 'twas all for Daisy, you see, miss,' they say, and seem to think that that makes doubtful conduct quite all right. Very *lax* thinking.

"Mr. Mark Gaskell, of course, was a much more likely starter, if I may use such a sporting expression. He was a gambler and had not, I fancied, a very high moral code. But, for certain reasons, I was of the opinion that a *woman* was concerned in this crime.

"As I say, with my eye on motive, the money angle seemed *very* suggestive. It was annoying, therefore, to find that both these people had alibis for the time when Ruby Keene, according to the medical evidence, had met her death.

"But soon afterwards there came the discovery of the burnt-out car with Pamela Reeves's body in it, and then the whole thing leaped to the eye. The alibis, of course, were worthless.

"I now had two *halves* of the case, and both quite convincing, but they did not fit. There must *be* a connection, but I could not find it. The one person whom I *knew* to be concerned in the crime hadn't got a motive.

"It was stupid of me," said Miss Marple meditatively. "If it hadn't been for Dinah Lee I shouldn't have thought of it—the most obvious thing in the world. Somerset House! Marriage! It wasn't a question of only Mr. Gaskell or Mrs. Jefferson—there were the further possibilities of *marriage*. If either of those two was married, or even was *likely* to marry, *then the other party to the marriage contract was involved too*. Raymond, for instance, might think he had a pretty good chance of marrying a rich wife. He had been very assiduous to Mrs. Jefferson, and it was his charm, I think, that awoke her from her long widowhood. She had been quite content just being a daughter to Mr. Jefferson—like Ruth and Naomi—only Naomi, if you remember, took a lot of trouble to arrange a suitable marriage for Ruth.

"Besides Raymond there was Mr. McLean. She liked him very much and it seemed highly possible that she would marry him in the end. *He* wasn't well off—and he was not far from Danemouth on the night in question. So it seemed, didn't it," said Miss Marple, "as though *anyone* might have done it?"

"But, of course, really, in my mind, I *knew*. You couldn't get away, could you, from those bitten nails?"

"Nails?" said Sir Henry. "But she tore her nail and cut the others."

"Nonsense," said Miss Marple. "*Bitten* nails and close *cut* nails are quite different! Nobody could mistake them who knew anything about girl's nails—very ugly, bitten nails, as I always tell the girls in my class. Those nails, you see, were a *fact*. And they could only mean one thing. *The body in Colonel Bantry's library wasn't Ruby Keene at all.*

"And that brings you straight to the one person who must be concerned. *Josie!* Josie identified the body. She knew, she *must* have known, that it wasn't Ruby Keene's body. She said it was. She was puzzled, completely puzzled, at finding that body where it was. She practically betrayed that fact. Why? Because *she* knew, none better, where it ought to have been found! In Basil Blake's cottage. Who directed our attention to Basil? Josie, by saying to Raymond that Ruby might have been with the film man. And before that, by slipping a snapshot of him into Ruby's handbag. Who cherished such bitter anger against the dead girl that she couldn't hide it even when she looked down at her dead? Josie! Josie, who was shrewd, practical, hard as nails, and *all out for money.*

"That is what I meant about believing too readily. Nobody thought of disbelieving Josie's statement that the body was Ruby Keene's. Simply because it didn't seem at the time that she could have any motive for lying. Motive was always the difficulty—Josie was clearly involved, but Ruby's death seemed, if anything, contrary to her interests. It was not till Dinah Lee mentioned Somerset House that I got the connection.

"Marriage! If Josie and Mark Gaskell were actually married—then the whole thing was clear. As we know now, Mark and Josie were

married a year ago. They were keeping it dark until Mr. Jefferson died.

"It was really quite interesting, you know, tracing out the course of events—seeing exactly how the plan had worked out. Complicated and yet simple. First of all the selection of the poor child, Pamela, the approach to her from the film angle. A screen test—of course the poor child couldn't resist it. Not when it was put up to her as plausibly as Mark Gaskell put it. She comes to the hotel, he is waiting for her, he takes her in by the side door and introduces her to Josie—one of their makeup experts! That poor child, it makes me quite sick to think of it! Sitting in Josie's bathroom while Josie bleaches her hair and makes up her face and varnishes her fingernails and toenails. During all this, the drug was given. In an ice cream soda, very likely. She goes off into a coma. I imagine that they put her into one of the empty rooms opposite—they were only cleaned once a week, remember.

"After dinner Mark Gaskell went out in his car—to the seafront, *he* said. That is when he took Pamela's body to the cottage dressed in one of Ruby's old dresses and arranged it on the hearthrug. She was still unconscious, but not dead, when he strangled her with the belt of the frock ... Not nice, no—but I hope and pray she knew nothing about it. Really, I feel quite pleased to think of him being hanged ... That must have been just after ten o'clock. Then he drove back at top speed and found the others in the lounge where Ruby Keene, *still alive*, was dancing her exhibition dance with Raymond.

"I should imagine that Josie had given Ruby instructions beforehand. Ruby was accustomed to doing what Josie told her. She was to change, go into Josie's room and wait. She, too, was drugged, probably in after-dinner coffee. She was yawning, remember, when she talked to young Bartlett.

"Josie came up later to 'look for her'—*but nobody but Josie went into Josie's room*. She probably finished the girl off then—with an injection, perhaps, or a blow on the back of the head. She went down, danced with Raymond, debated with the Jeffersons where Ruby could be, and finally went to bed. In the early hours of the morning she dressed the girl in Pamela's clothes, carried the body

down the side stairs—she was a strong muscular young woman—fetched George Bartlett's car, drove two miles to the quarry, poured petrol over the car and set it alight. Then she walked back to the hotel, probably timing her arrival there for eight or nine o'clock—up early in her anxiety about Ruby!"

"An intricate plot," said Colonel Melchett.

"Not more intricate than the steps of a dance," said Miss Marple.

"I suppose not."

"She was very thorough," said Miss Marple. "She even foresaw the discrepancy of the nails. That's why she managed to break one of Ruby's nails on her shawl. It made an excuse for pretending that Ruby had clipped her nails close."

Harper said: "Yes, she thought of everything. And the only real proof you had, Miss Marple, was a schoolgirl's bitten nails."

"More than that," said Miss Marple. "People *will* talk too much. Mark Gaskell talked too much. He was speaking of Ruby and he said 'her teeth ran down her throat.' But the dead girl in Colonel Bantry's library had teeth that stuck *out*."

Conway Jefferson said rather grimly:

"And was the last dramatic *finale* your idea, Miss Marple?"

Miss Marple confessed. "Well, it *was*, as a matter of fact. It's so nice to be *sure*, isn't it?"

"Sure is the word," said Conway Jefferson grimly.

"You see," said Miss Marple, "once Mark and Josie knew that you were going to make a new will, they'd *have* to do something. They'd already committed *two* murders on account of the money. So they might as well commit a third. Mark, of course, must be absolutely clear, so he went off to London and established an alibi by dining at a restaurant with friends and going on to a night club. Josie was to do the work. They still wanted Ruby's death to be put down to Basil's account, so Mr. Jefferson's death must be thought due to his heart failing. There was digitalin, so the Superintendent tells me, in the syringe. Any doctor would think death from heart trouble quite natural in the circumstances. Josie had loosened one of the stone balls on the balcony and she was going to let it crash down afterwards. His death would be put down to the shock of the noise."

Melchett said: "Ingenious devil."

Sir Henry said: "So the third death you spoke of was to be Conway Jefferson?"

Miss Marple shook her head.

"Oh no—I meant Basil Blake. They'd have got him hanged if they could."

"Or shut up in Broadmoor," said Sir Henry.

Conway Jefferson grunted. He said:

"Always knew Rosamund had married a rotter. Tried not to admit it to myself. She was damned fond of him. Fond of a murderer! Well, he'll hang as well as the woman. I'm glad he went to pieces and gave the show away."

Miss Marple said:

"She was always the strong character. It was her plan throughout. The irony of it is that she got the girl down here herself, never dreaming that she would take Mr. Jefferson's fancy and ruin all her own prospects."

Jefferson said:

"Poor lass. Poor little Ruby...."

Adelaide Jefferson and Hugo McLean came in. Adelaide looked almost beautiful tonight. She came up to Conway Jefferson and laid a hand on his shoulder. She said, with a little catch in her breath:

"I want to tell you something, Jeff. At once. I'm going to marry Hugo."

Conway Jefferson looked up at her for a moment. He said gruffly:

"About time you married again. Congratulations to you both. By the way, Addie, I'm making a new will tomorrow."

She nodded. "Oh yes, I know."

Jefferson said:

"No, you don't. I'm settling ten thousand pounds on you. Everything else I have goes to Peter when I die. How does that suit you, my girl?"

"Oh, *Jeff!*" Her voice broke. "You're *wonderful!*"

"He's a nice lad. I'd like to see a good deal of him—in the time I've got left."

"Oh, you shall!"

"Got a great feeling for crime, Peter has," said Conway Jefferson meditatively. "Not only has he got the fingernail of the murdered girl—one of the murdered girls, anyway—but he was lucky enough to have a bit of Josie's shawl caught in with the nail. So he's got a souvenir of the murderess too! That makes him *very* happy!"

II

Hugo and Adelaide passed by the ballroom. Raymond came up to them.

Adelaide said, rather quickly:

"I must tell you my news. We're going to be married."

The smile on Raymond's face was perfect—a brave, pensive smile.

"I hope," he said, ignoring Hugo and gazing into her eyes, "that you will be very, very happy...."

They passed on and Raymond stood looking after them.

"A nice woman," he said to himself. "A very nice woman. And she would have had money too. The trouble I took to mug up that bit about the Devonshire Starrs ... Oh well, my luck's out. Dance, dance, little gentleman!"

And Raymond returned to the ballroom.

MISS
MARPLE

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha Christie

The MOVING Finger

A Miss Marple Mystery

Agatha Christie

The Moving Finger

A Miss Marple Mystery

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*To my friends
Sydney and Mary Smith*

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One

I

When at last I was taken out of the plaster, and the doctors had pulled me about to their hearts' content, and nurses had wheedled me into cautiously using my limbs, and I had been nauseated by their practically using baby talk to me, Marcus Kent told me I was to go and live in the country.

"Good air, quiet life, nothing to do—that's the prescription for you. That sister of yours will look after you. Eat, sleep and imitate the vegetable kingdom as far as possible."

I didn't ask him if I'd ever be able to fly again. There are questions that you don't ask because you're afraid of the answers to them. In the same way during the last five months I'd never asked if I was going to be condemned to lie on my back all my life. I was afraid of a bright hypocritical reassurance from Sister. "Come now, *what* a question to ask! We don't let our patients go talking in *that* way!"

So I hadn't asked—and it had been all right. I wasn't to be a helpless cripple. I could move my legs, stand on them, finally walk a few steps—and if I did feel rather like an adventurous baby learning to toddle, with wobbly knees and cotton wool soles to my feet—well, that was only weakness and disuse and would pass.

Marcus Kent, who is the right kind of doctor, answered what I hadn't said.

"You're going to recover completely," he said. "We weren't sure until last Tuesday when you had that final overhaul, but I can tell you so authoritatively now. But—it's going to be a long business. A long and, if I may so, a wearisome business. When it's a question of healing nerves and muscles, the brain must help the body. Any impatience, any fretting, will throw you back. And whatever you do, don't 'will yourself to get well quickly.' Anything of that kind and you'll find yourself back in a nursing home. You've got to take life slowly and easily, the *tempo* is marked *Legato*. Not only has your body got to recover, but your nerves have been weakened by the necessity of keeping you under drugs for so long.

"That's why I say, go down to the country, take a house, get interested in local politics, in local scandal, in village gossip. Take an inquisitive and violent interest in your neighbours. If I may make a suggestion, go to a part of the world where you haven't got any friends scattered about."

I nodded. "I had already," I said, "thought of that."

I could think of nothing more insufferable than members of one's own gang dropping in full of sympathy and their own affairs.

"But Jerry, you're looking marvellous—isn't he? Absolutely. Darling, I must tell you—What do you think Buster has done now?"

No, none of that for me. Dogs are wise. They crawl away into a quiet corner and lick their wounds and do not rejoin the world until they are whole once more.

So it came about that Joanna and I, sorting wildly through houseagents' glowing eulogies of properties all over the British Isles, selected Little Furze, Lymstock, as one of the "possibles" to be viewed, mainly because we had never been to Lymstock, and knew no one in that neighbourhood.

And when Joanna saw Little Furze she decided at once that it was just the house we wanted.

It lay about half a mile out of Lymstock on the road leading up to the moors. It was a prim low white house, with a sloping Victorian veranda painted a faded green. It had a pleasant view over a slope of heather-covered land with the church spire of Lymstock down below to the left.

It had belonged to a family of maiden ladies, the Misses Barton, of whom only one was left, the youngest, Miss Emily.

Miss Emily Barton was a charming little old lady who matched her house in an incredible way. In a soft apologetic voice she explained to Joanna that she had never let her house before, indeed would never have thought of doing so, "but you see, my dear, things are so different nowadays—*taxation*, of course, and then my stocks and shares, so *safe*, as I always imagined, and indeed the bank manager *himself* recommended some of them, but they seem to be paying *nothing at all* these days—*foreign*, of course! And really it makes it all so *difficult*. One does not (I'm sure you will understand me, my dear, and not take offence, you look so kind) *like* the idea of letting one's house to strangers—but something must be done, and really, having seen you, I shall be quite *glad* to think of you being here—it needs, you know, *young life*. And I must confess I did shrink from the idea of having *Men* here!"

At this point, Joanna had to break the news of me. Miss Emily rallied well.

"Oh dear, I see. How sad! A flying accident? So brave, these young men. Still, your brother will be practically an invalid—"

The thought seemed to soothe the gentle little lady. Presumably I should not be indulging in those grosser masculine activities which Emily Barton feared. She inquired diffidently if I smoked.

"Like a chimney," said Joanna. "But then," she pointed out, "so do I."

"Of course, of course. So stupid of me. I'm afraid, you know, I haven't moved with the times. My sisters were all older than myself, and my dear mother lived to be ninety-seven—just fancy!—and was most particular. Yes, yes, everyone smokes now. The only thing is, there are no ashtrays in the house."

Joanna said that we would bring lots of ashtrays, and she added with a smile, "We won't put down cigarette ends on your nice furniture, that I do promise you. Nothing makes me so mad myself as to see people do that."

So it was settled and we took Little Furze for a period of six months, with an option of another three, and Emily Barton explained

to Joanna that she herself was going to be very comfortable because she was going into rooms kept by an old parlourmaid, "my faithful Florence," who had married "after being with us for fifteen years. *Such* a nice girl, and her husband is in the building trade. They have a nice house in the High Street and two beautiful rooms on the top floor where I shall be *most* comfortable, and Florence so pleased to have me."

So everything seemed to be most satisfactory, and the agreement was signed and in due course Joanna and I arrived and settled in, and Miss Emily Barton's maid Partridge having consented to remain, we were well looked after with the assistance of a "girl" who came in every morning and who seemed to be half-witted but amiable.

Partridge, a gaunt dour female of middle age, cooked admirably, and though disapproving of late dinner (it having been Miss Emily's custom to dine lightly off a boiled egg) nevertheless accommodated herself to our ways and went so far as to admit that she could see I needed my strength building up.

When we had settled in and been at Little Furze a week Miss Emily Barton came solemnly and left cards. Her example was followed by Mrs. Symmington, the lawyer's wife, Miss Griffith, the doctor's sister, Mrs. Dane Calthrop, the vicar's wife, and Mr. Pye of Prior's End.

Joanna was very much impressed.

"I didn't know," she said in an awestruck voice, "that people really *called—with cards.*"

"That is because, my child," I said, "you know nothing about the country."

"Nonsense. I've stayed away for heaps of weekends with people."

"That is not at all the same thing," I said.

I am five years older than Joanna. I can remember as a child the big white shabby untidy house we had with the fields running down to the river. I can remember creeping under the nets of raspberry canes unseen by the gardener, and the smell of white dust in the stable yard and an orange cat crossing it, and the sound of horse hoofs kicking something in the stables.

But when I was seven and Joanna two, we went to live in London with an aunt, and thereafter our Christmas and Easter holidays were spent there with pantomimes and theatres and cinemas and excursions to Kensington Gardens with boats, and later to skating rinks. In August we were taken to an hotel by the seaside somewhere.

Reflecting on this, I said thoughtfully to Joanna, and with a feeling of compunction as I realized what a selfish, self-centred invalid I had become:

"This is going to be pretty frightful for you, I'm afraid. You'll miss everything so."

For Joanna is very pretty and very gay, and she likes dancing and cocktails, and love affairs and rushing about in high-powered cars.

Joanna laughed and said she didn't mind at all.

"As a matter of fact, I'm glad to get away from it all. I really was fed up with the whole crowd, and although you won't be sympathetic, I was really very cut up about Paul. It will take me a long time to get over it."

I was sceptical over this. Joanna's love affairs always run the same course. She has a mad infatuation for some completely spineless young man who is a misunderstood genius. She listens to his endless complaints and works like anything to get him recognition. Then, when he is ungrateful, she is deeply wounded and says her heart is broken—until the next gloomy young man comes along, which is usually about three weeks later!

So I did not take Joanna's broken heart very seriously. But I did see that living in the country was like a new game to my attractive sister.

"At any rate," she said, "I look all right, don't I?"

I studied her critically and was not able to agree.

Joanna was dressed (by Mirotin) for *le Sport*. That is to say she was wearing a skirt of outrageous and preposterous checks. It was skintight, and on her upper half she had a ridiculous little shortsleeved jersey with a Tyrolean effect. She had sheer silk stockings and some irreproachable but brand new brogues.

"No," I said, "you're all wrong. You ought to be wearing a very old tweed skirt, preferably of dirty green or faded brown. You'd wear a nice cashmere jumper matching it, and perhaps a cardigan coat, and you'd have a felt hat and thick stockings and old shoes. Then, and only then, you'd sink into the background of Lymstock High Street, and not stand out as you do at present." I added: "Your face is all wrong, too."

"What's wrong with that? I've got on my Country Tan Makeup No. 2."

"Exactly," I said. "If you lived in Lymstock, you would have on just a little powder to take the shine off your nose, and possibly a *soupçon* of lipstick—not very well applied—and you would almost certainly be wearing all your eyebrows instead of only a quarter of them."

Joanna gurgled and seemed much amused.

"Do you think they'll think I'm awful?" she said.

"No," I said. "Just queer."

Joanna had resumed her study of the cards left by our callers. Only the vicar's wife had been so fortunate, or possibly unfortunate, as to catch Joanna at home.

Joanna murmured:

"It's rather like Happy Families, isn't it? Mrs. Legal the lawyer's wife, Miss Dose the doctor's daughter, etc." She added with enthusiasm: "I do think this is a nice place, Jerry! So sweet and funny and old-world. You just can't think of anything nasty happening here, can you?"

And although I knew what she said was really nonsense, I agreed with her. In a place like Lymstock nothing nasty could happen. It is odd to think that it was just a week later that we got the first letter.

II

I see that I have begun badly. I have given no description of Lymstock and without understanding what Lymstock is like, it is impossible to understand my story.

To begin with, Lymstock has its roots in the past. Somewhere about the time of the Norman Conquest, Lymstock was a place of importance. That importance was chiefly ecclesiastical. Lymstock had a priory, and it had a long succession of ambitious and powerful priors. Lords and barons in the surrounding countryside made themselves right with Heaven by leaving certain of their lands to the priory. Lymstock Priory waxed rich and important and was a power in the land for many centuries. In due course, however, Henry the Eighth caused it to share the fate of its contemporaries. From then on a castle dominated the town. It was still important. It had rights and privileges and wealth.

And then, somewhere in seventeen hundred and something, the tide of progress swept Lymstock into a backwater. The castle crumbled. Neither railways nor main roads came near Lymstock. It turned into a little provincial market town, unimportant and forgotten, with a sweep of moorland rising behind it, and placid farms and fields ringing it round.

A market was held there once a week, on which day one was apt to encounter cattle in the lanes and roads. It had a small race meeting twice a year which only the most obscure horses attended. It had a charming High Street with dignified houses set flat back, looking slightly incongruous with their ground-floor windows displaying buns or vegetables or fruit. It had a long straggling draper's shop, a large and portentous ironmonger's, a pretentious post office, and a row of straggly indeterminate shops, two rival butchers and an International Stores. It had a doctor, a firm of solicitors, Messrs. Galbraith, Galbraith and Symmington, a beautiful and unexpectedly large church dating from fourteen hundred and twenty, with some Saxon remains incorporated in it, a new and hideous school, and two pubs.

Such was Lymstock, and urged on by Emily Barton, anybody who was anybody came to call upon us, and in due course Joanna, having bought a pair of gloves and assumed a velvet beret rather the worse for wear, sallied forth to return them.

To us, it was all quite novel and entertaining. We were not there for life. It was, for us, an interlude. I prepared to obey my doctor's

instructions and get interested in my neighbours.

Joanna and I found it all great fun.

I remembered, I suppose, Marcus Kent's instructions to enjoy the local scandals. I certainly didn't suspect how these scandals were going to be introduced to my notice.

The odd part of it was that the letter, when it came, amused us more than anything else.

It arrived, I remember, at breakfast. I turned it over, in the idle way one does when time goes slowly and every event must be spun out to its full extent. It was, I saw, a local letter with a typewritten address.

I opened it before the two with London postmarks, since one of them was a bill and the other from a rather tiresome cousin.

Inside, printed words and letters had been cut out and gummed to a sheet of paper. For a minute or two I stared at the words without taking them in. Then I gasped.

Joanna, who was frowning over some bills, looked up.

"Hallo," she said, "what is it? You look quite startled."

The letter, using terms of the coarsest character, expressed the writer's opinion that Joanna and I were not brother and sister.

"It's a particularly foul anonymous letter," I said.

I was still suffering from shock. Somehow one didn't expect that kind of thing in the placid backwater of Lymstock.

Joanna at once displayed lively interest.

"No? What does it say?"

In novels, I have noticed, anonymous letters of a foul and disgusting character are never shown, if possible, to women. It is implied that women must at all cost be shielded from the shock it might give their delicate nervous systems.

I am sorry to say it never occurred to me not to show the letter to Joanna. I handed it to her at once.

She vindicated my belief in her toughness by displaying no emotion but that of amusement.

"What an awful bit of dirt! I've always heard about anonymous letters, but I've never seen one before. Are they always like this?"

"I can't tell you," I said. "It's my first experience, too."

Joanna began to giggle.

"You must have been right about my makeup, Jerry. I suppose they think I just *must* be an abandoned female!"

"That," I said, "coupled with the fact that our father was a tall, dark lantern-jawed man and our mother a fair-haired blue-eyed little creature, and that I take after him and you take after her."

Joanna nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes, we're not a bit alike. Nobody would take us for brother and sister."

"Somebody certainly hasn't," I said with feeling.

Joanna said she thought it was frightfully funny.

She dangled the letter thoughtfully by one corner and asked what we were to do with it.

"The correct procedure, I believe," I said, "is to drop it into the fire with a sharp exclamation of disgust."

I suited the action to the word, and Joanna applauded.

"You did that beautifully," she added. "You ought to have been on the stage. It's lucky we still have fires, isn't it?"

"The wastepaper basket would have been much less dramatic," I agreed. "I could, of course, have set light to it with a match and slowly watched it burn—or watched it slowly burn."

"Things never burn when you want them to," said Joanna. "They go out. You'd probably have had to strike match after match."

She got up and went towards the window. Then, standing there, she turned her head sharply.

"I wonder," she said, "who wrote it?"

"We're never likely to know," I said.

"No—I suppose not." She was silent a moment, and then said: "I don't know when I come to think of it that it is so funny after all. You know, I thought they—they *liked* us down here."

"So they do," I said. "This is just some half-crazy brain on the borderline."

"I suppose so. Ugh—Nasty!"

As she went out into the sunshine I thought to myself as I smoked my after-breakfast cigarette that she was quite right. It was nasty. Someone resented our coming here—someone resented

Joanna's bright young sophisticated beauty—somebody wanted to *hurt*. To take it with a laugh was perhaps the best way—but deep down it wasn't funny....

Dr. Griffith came that morning. I had fixed up for him to give me a weekly overhaul. I liked Owen Griffith. He was dark, ungainly, with awkward ways of moving and deft, very gentle hands. He had a jerky way of talking and was rather shy.

He reported progress to be encouraging. Then he added:

"You're feeling all right, aren't you. Is it my fancy, or are you a bit under the weather this morning?"

"Not really," I said. "A particularly scurrilous anonymous letter arrived with the morning coffee, and it's left rather a nasty taste in the mouth."

He dropped his bag on the floor. His thin dark face was excited.

"Do you mean to say that *you've* had one of them?"

I was interested.

"They've been going about, then?"

"Yes. For some time."

"Oh," I said, "I see. I was under the impression that our presence as strangers was resented here."

"No, no, it's nothing to do with that. It's just—" He paused and then asked, "What did it say? At least—" he turned suddenly red and embarrassed—"perhaps I oughtn't to ask?"

"I'll tell you with pleasure," I said. "It just said that the fancy tart I'd brought down with me wasn't my sister—not 'alf! And that, I may say, is a Bowdlerized version."

His dark face flushed angrily.

"How damnable! Your sister didn't—she's not upset, I hope?"

"Joanna," I said, "looks a little like the angel off the top of the Christmas tree, but she's eminently modern and quite tough. She found it highly entertaining. Such things haven't come her way before."

"I should hope not, indeed," said Griffith warmly.

"And anyway," I said firmly. "That's the best way to take it, I think. As something utterly ridiculous."

"Yes," said Owen Griffith. "Only—"

"Quite so," I said. "Only is the word!"

"The trouble is," he said, "that this sort of thing, once it starts, grows."

"So I should imagine."

"It's pathological, of course."

I nodded. "Any idea who's behind it?" I asked.

"No, I wish I had. You see, the anonymous letter pest arises from one of two causes. Either it's *particular*—directed at one particular person or set of people, that is to say it's *motivated*, it's someone who's got a definite grudge (or thinks they have) and who chooses a particularly nasty and underhand way of working it off. It's mean and disgusting but it's not necessarily crazy, and it's usually fairly easy to trace the writer—a discharged servant, a jealous woman—and so on. But if it's *general*, and not particular, then it's more serious. The letters are sent indiscriminately and serve the purpose of working off some frustration in the writer's mind. As I say, it's definitely pathological. And the craze grows. In the end, of course, you track down the person in question—it's often someone extremely unlikely, and that's that. There was a bad outburst of the kind over the other side of the county last year—turned out to be the head of the millinery department in a big draper's establishment. Quiet, refined woman—had been there for years. I remember something of the same kind in my last practice up north—but that turned out to be purely personal spite. Still, as I say, I've seen something of this kind of thing, and, quite frankly, it frightens me!"

"Has it been going on long?" I asked.

"I don't think so. Hard to say, of course, because people who get these letters don't go round advertising the fact. They put them in the fire."

He paused.

"I've had one myself. Symmington, the solicitor, he's had one. And one or two of my poorer patients have told me about them."

"All much the same sort of thing?"

"Oh yes. A definite harping on the sex theme. That's always a feature." He grinned. "Symmington was accused of illicit relations with his lady clerk—poor old Miss Ginch, who's forty at least, with

pince-nez and teeth like a rabbit. Symmington took it straight to the police. My letters accused me of violating professional decorum with my lady patients, stressing the details. They're all quite childish and absurd, but horribly venomous." His face changed, grew grave. "But all the same, I'm *afraid*. These things can be dangerous, you know."

"I suppose they can."

"You see," he said, "crude, childish spite though it is, sooner or later one of these letters will hit the mark. And then, God knows what may happen! I'm afraid, too, of the effect upon the slow, suspicious uneducated mind. If they see a thing written, they believe it's true. All sorts of complications may arise."

"It was an illiterate sort of letter," I said thoughtfully, "written by somebody practically illiterate, I should say."

"Was it?" said Owen, and went away.

Thinking it over afterwards, I found that "Was it?" rather disturbing.

Two

I

I am not going to pretend that the arrival of our anonymous letter did not leave a nasty taste in the mouth. It did. At the same time, it soon passed out of my mind. I did not, you see, at that point, take it seriously. I think I remember saying to myself that these things probably happen fairly often in out-of-the-way villages. Some hysterical woman with a taste for dramatizing herself was probably at the bottom of it. Anyway, if the letters were as childish and silly as the one we had got, they couldn't do much harm.

The next *incident*, if I may put it so, occurred about a week later, when Partridge, her lips set tightly together, informed me that Beatrice, the daily help, would not be coming today.

"I gather, sir," said Partridge, "that the girl has been Upset."

I was not very sure what Partridge was implying, but I diagnosed (wrongly) some stomachic trouble to which Partridge was too delicate to allude more directly. I said I was sorry and hoped she would soon be better.

"The girl is perfectly well, sir," said Partridge. "She is Upset in her Feelings."

"Oh," I said rather doubtfully.

"Owing," went on Partridge, "to a letter she has received. Making, I understand, Insinuations."

The grimness of Partridge's eye, coupled with the obvious capital I of Insinuations, made me apprehensive that the insinuations were

concerned with me. Since I would hardly have recognized Beatrice by sight if I had met her in the town so unaware of her had I been—I felt a not unnatural annoyance. An invalid hobbling about on two sticks is hardly cast for the role of deceiver of village girls. I said irritably:

“What nonsense!”

“My very words, sir, to the girl’s mother,” said Partridge. “‘Goings On in this house,’ I said to her, ‘there never have been and never will be while I am in charge. As to Beatrice,’ I said, ‘girls are different nowadays, and as to Goings On elsewhere I can say nothing.’ But the truth is, sir, that Beatrice’s friend from the garage as she walks out with got one of them nasty letters too, and he isn’t acting reasonable at all.”

“I have never heard anything so preposterous in my life,” I said angrily.

“It’s my opinion, sir,” said Partridge, “that we’re well rid of the girl. What I say is, she wouldn’t take on so if there wasn’t *something* she didn’t want found out. No smoke without fire, that’s what I say.”

I had no idea how horribly tired I was going to get of that particular phrase.

II

That morning, by way of adventure, I was to walk down to the village. (Joanna and I always called it the village, although technically we were incorrect, and Lymstock would have been annoyed to hear us.)

The sun was shining, the air was cool and crisp with the sweetness of spring in it. I assembled my sticks and started off, firmly refusing to permit Joanna to accompany me.

“No,” I said, “I will not have a guardian angel teetering along beside me and uttering encouraging chirrups. A man travels fastest who travels alone, remember. I have much business to transact. I shall go to Galbraith, Galbraith and Symmington, and sign that transfer of shares, I shall call in at the baker’s and complain about the currant loaf, and I shall return that book we borrowed. I have to

go to the bank, too. Let me away, woman, the morning is all too short."

It was arranged that Joanna should pick me up with the car and drive me back up the hill in time for lunch.

"That ought to give you time to pass the time of day with everyone in Lymstock."

"I have no doubt," I said, "that I shall have seen anybody who is anybody by then."

For morning in the High Street was a kind of rendezvous for shoppers, when news was exchanged.

I did not, after all, walk down to the town unaccompanied. I had gone about two hundred yards, when I heard a bicycle bell behind me, then a scrunching of brakes, and then Megan Hunter more or less fell off her machine at my feet.

"Hallo," she said breathlessly as she rose and dusted herself off.

I rather liked Megan and always felt oddly sorry for her.

She was Symmington the lawyer's stepdaughter, Mrs. Symmington's daughter by a first marriage. Nobody talked much about Mr. (or Captain) Hunter, and I gathered that he was considered best forgotten. He was reported to have treated Mrs. Symmington very badly. She had divorced him a year or two after the marriage. She was a woman with means of her own and had settled down with her little daughter in Lymstock "to forget," and had eventually married the only eligible bachelor in the place, Richard Symmington. There were two boys of the second marriage to whom their parents were devoted, and I fancied that Megan sometimes felt odd man out in the establishment. She certainly did not resemble her mother, who was a small anaemic woman, fadedly pretty, who talked in a thin melancholy voice of servant difficulties and her health.

Megan was a tall awkward girl, and although she was actually twenty, she looked more like a schoolgirlish sixteen. She had a shock of untidy brown hair, hazel green eyes, a thin bony face, and an unexpected charming one-sided smile. Her clothes were drab and unattractive and she usually had on lisle thread stockings with holes in them.

She looked, I decided this morning, much more like a horse than a human being. In fact she would have been a very nice horse with a little grooming.

She spoke, as usual, in a kind of breathless rush.

"I've been up to the farm—you know, Lasher's—to see if they'd got any duck's eggs. They've got an awfully nice lot of little pigs. Sweet! Do you like pigs? I even like the smell."

"Well-kept pigs shouldn't smell," I said.

"Shouldn't they? They all do round here. Are you walking down to the town? I saw you were alone, so I thought I'd stop and walk with you, only I stopped rather suddenly."

"You've torn your stocking," I said.

Megan looked rather ruefully at her right leg.

"So I have. But it's got two holes already, so it doesn't matter very much, does it?"

"Don't you ever mend your stockings, Megan?"

"Rather. When Mummy catches me. But she doesn't notice awfully what I do—so it's lucky in a way, isn't it?"

"You don't seem to realize you're grown up," I said.

"You mean I ought to be more like your sister? All dolled up?"

I rather resented this description of Joanna.

"She looks clean and tidy and pleasing to the eye," I said.

"She's awfully pretty," said Megan. "She isn't a bit like you, is she? Why not?"

"Brothers and sisters aren't always alike."

"No. Of course. I'm not very like Brian or Colin. And Brian and Colin aren't like each other." She paused and said, "It's very rum, isn't it?"

"What is?"

Megan replied briefly: "Families."

I said thoughtfully, "I suppose they are."

I wondered just what was passing in her mind. We walked on in silence for a moment or two, then Megan said in a rather shy voice:

"You fly, don't you?"

"Yes."

"That's how you got hurt?"

"Yes, I crashed."

Megan said:

"Nobody down here flies."

"No," I said. "I suppose not. Would you like to fly, Megan?"

"Me?" Megan seemed surprised. "Goodness, no. I should be sick. I'm sick in a train even."

She paused, and then asked with that directness which only a child usually displays:

"Will you get all right and be able to fly again, or will you always be a bit of a crock?"

"My doctor says I shall be quite all right."

"Yes, but is he the kind of man who tells lies?"

"I don't think so," I replied. "In fact, I'm quite sure of it. I trust him."

"That's all right then. But a lot of people do tell lies."

I accepted this undeniable statement of fact in silence.

Megan said in a detached judicial kind of way:

"I'm glad. I was afraid you looked bad tempered because you were crocked up for life—but if it's just natural, it's different."

"I'm not bad tempered," I said coldly.

"Well, irritable, then."

"I'm irritable because I'm in a hurry to get fit again—and these things can't be hurried."

"Then why fuss?"

I began to laugh.

"My dear girl, aren't you ever in a hurry for things to happen?"

Megan considered the question. She said:

"No. Why should I be? There's nothing to be in a hurry about. Nothing ever happens."

I was struck by something forlorn in the words. I said gently: "What do you do with yourself down here?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"What is there to do?"

"Haven't you got any hobbies? Do you play games? Have you got friends round about?"

"I'm stupid at games. And I don't like them much. There aren't many girls round here, and the ones there are I don't like. They think I'm awful."

"Nonsense. Why should they?"

Megan shook her head.

"Didn't you go to school at all?"

"Yes, I came back a year ago."

"Did you enjoy school?"

"It wasn't bad. They taught you things in an awfully silly way, though."

"How do you mean?"

"Well—just bits and pieces. Chopping and changing from one thing to the other. It was a cheap school, you know, and the teachers weren't very good. They could never answer questions properly."

"Very few teachers can," I said.

"Why not? They ought to."

I agreed.

"Of course I'm pretty stupid," said Megan. "And such a lot of things seem to me such rot. History, for instance. Why, it's quite different out of different books!"

"That is its real interest," I said.

"And grammar," went on Megan. "And silly compositions. And all the blathering stuff Shelley wrote, twittering on about skylarks, and Wordsworth going all potty over some silly daffodils. And Shakespeare."

"What's wrong with Shakespeare?" I inquired with interest.

"Twisting himself up to say things in such a difficult way that you can't get at what he means. Still, I like *some* Shakespeare."

"He would be gratified to know that, I'm sure," I said.

Megan suspected no sarcasm. She said, her face lighting up:

"I like Goneril and Regan, for instance."

"Why these two?"

"Oh, I don't know. They're *satisfactory*, somehow. Why do you think they were like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like they were. I mean *something* must have made them like that?"

For the first time I wondered. I had always accepted Lear's elder daughters as two nasty bits of goods and had let it go at that. But Megan's demand for a first cause interested me.

"I'll think about it," I said.

"Oh, it doesn't really matter. I just wondered. Anyway, it's only English Literature, isn't it?"

"Quite, quite. Wasn't there any subject you enjoyed?"

"Only Maths."

"Maths?" I said, rather surprised.

Megan's face had lit up.

"I loved Maths. But it wasn't awfully well taught. I'd like to be taught Maths really well. It's heavenly. I think there's something heavenly about numbers, anyway, don't you?"

"I've never felt it," I said truthfully.

We were now entering the High Street. Megan said sharply:

"Here's Miss Griffith. Hateful woman."

"Don't you like her?"

"I loathe her. She's always at me to join her foul Guides. I hate Guides. Why dress yourself up and go about in clumps, and put badges on yourself for something you haven't really learnt to do properly? I think it's all rot."

On the whole, I rather agreed with Megan. But Miss Griffith had descended on us before I could voice my assent.

The doctor's sister, who rejoiced in the singularly inappropriate name of Aimée, had all the positive assurance that her brother lacked. She was a handsome woman in a masculine weather-beaten way, with a deep hearty voice.

"Hallo, you two," she bayed at us. "Gorgeous morning, isn't it? Megan, you're just the person I wanted to see. I want some help addressing envelopes for the Conservative Association."

Megan muttered something elusive, propped up her bicycle against the kerb and dived in a purposeful way into the International Stores.

"Extraordinary child," said Miss Griffith, looking after her. "Bone lazy. Spends her time mooning about. Must be a great trial to poor Mrs. Symmington. I know her mother's tried more than once to get her to take up something—shorthand-typing, you know, or cookery, or keeping Angora rabbits. She needs an *interest* in life."

I thought that was probably true, but felt that in Megan's place I should have withstood firmly any of Aimée Griffith's suggestions for the simple reason that her aggressive personality would have put my back up.

"I don't believe in idleness," went on Miss Griffith. "And certainly not for young people. It's not as though Megan was pretty or attractive or anything like that. Sometimes I think the girl's half-witted. A great disappointment to her mother. The father, you know," she lowered her voice slightly, "was definitely a wrong 'un. Afraid the child takes after him. Painful for her mother. Oh, well, it takes all sorts to make a world, that's what I say."

"Fortunately," I responded.

Aimée Griffith gave a "jolly" laugh.

"Yes, it wouldn't do if we were all made to one pattern. But I don't like to see anyone not getting all they can out of life. I enjoy life myself and I want everyone to enjoy it too. People say to me you must be bored to death living down there in the country all the year round. Not a bit of it, I say. I'm always busy, always happy! There's always something going on in the country. My time's taken up, what with my Guides, and the Institute and various committees—to say nothing of looking after Owen."

At this minute, Miss Griffith saw an acquaintance on the other side of the street, and uttering a bay of recognition she leaped across the road, leaving me free to pursue my course to the bank.

I always found Miss Griffith rather overwhelming, though I admired her energy and vitality, and it was pleasant to see the beaming contentment with her lot in life which she always displayed, and which was a pleasant contrast to the subdued complaining murmurs of so many women.

My business at the bank transacted satisfactorily, I went on to the offices of Messrs. Galbraith, Galbraith and Symmington. I don't know

if there were any Galbraiths extant. I never saw any. I was shown into Richard Symmington's inner office which had the agreeable mustiness of a long-established legal firm.

Vast numbers of deed boxes, labelled Lady Hope, Sir Everard Carr, William Yatesby-Hoares, Esq., Deceased, etc., gave the required atmosphere of decorous county families and legitimate long-established business.

Studying Mr. Symmington as he bent over the documents I had brought, it occurred to me that if Mrs. Symmington had encountered disaster in her first marriage, she had certainly played safe in her second. Richard Symmington was the acme of calm respectability, the sort of man who would never give his wife a moment's anxiety. A long neck with a pronounced Adam's apple, a slightly cadaverous face and a long thin nose. A kindly man, no doubt, a good husband and father, but not one to set the pulses madly racing.

Presently Mr. Symmington began to speak. He spoke clearly and slowly, delivering himself of much good sense and shrewd acumen. We settled the matter in hand and I rose to go, remarking as I did so:

"I walked down the hill with your stepdaughter."

For a moment Mr. Symmington looked as though he did not know who his stepdaughter was, then he smiled.

"Oh yes, of course, Megan. She—er—has been back from school some time. We're thinking about finding her something to do—yes, to do. But of course she's very young still. And backward for her age, so they say. Yes, so they tell me."

I went out. In the outer office was a very old man on a stool writing slowly and laboriously, a small cheeky-looking boy and a middle-aged woman with frizzy hair and pinze-nez who was typing with some speed and dash.

If this was Miss Ginch I agreed with Owen Griffith that tender passages between her and her employer were exceedingly unlikely.

I went into the baker's and said my piece about the currant loaf. It was received with the exclamation and incredulity proper to the occasion, and a new currant loaf was thrust upon me in replacement

—“fresh from the oven this minute”—as its indecent heat pressed against my chest proclaimed to be no less than truth.

I came out of the shop and looked up and down the street hoping to see Joanna with the car. The walk had tired me a good deal and it was awkward getting along with my sticks and the currant loaf.

But there was no sign of Joanna as yet.

Suddenly my eyes were held in glad and incredulous surprise.

Along the pavement towards me there came floating a goddess. There is really no other word for it.

The perfect features, the crisply curling golden hair, the tall exquisitely-shaped body! And she walked like a goddess, without effort, seeming to swim nearer and nearer. A glorious, an incredible, a breathtaking girl!

In my intense excitement something had to go. What went was the currant loaf. It slipped from my clutches. I made a dive after it and lost my stick, which clattered to the pavement, and I slipped and nearly fell myself.

It was the strong arm of the goddess that caught and held me. I began to stammer:

“Th-thanks awfully, I’m f-f-frightfully sorry.”

She had retrieved the currant loaf and handed it to me together with the stick. And then she smiled kindly and said cheerfully:

“Don’t mention it. No trouble, I assure you,” and the magic died completely before the flat, competent voice.

A nice healthy-looking well set-up girl, no more.

I fell to reflecting what would have happened if the Gods had given Helen of Troy exactly those flat accents. How strange that a girl could trouble your inmost soul so long as she kept her mouth shut, and that the moment she spoke the glamour could vanish as though it had never been.

I had known the reverse happen, though. I had seen a little sad monkey-faced woman whom no one would turn to look at twice. Then she opened her mouth and suddenly enchantment had lived and bloomed and Cleopatra had cast her spell anew.

Joanna had drawn up at the kerb beside me without my noticing her arrival. She asked if there was anything the matter.

"Nothing," I said, pulling myself together. "I was reflecting on Helen of Troy and others."

"What a funny place to do it," said Joanna. "You looked *most* odd, standing there clasping currant bread to your breast with your mouth wide open."

"I've had a shock," I said. "I have been transplanted to Ilium and back again."

"Do you know who that is?" I added, indicating a retreating back that was swimming gracefully away.

Peering after the girl Joanna said that it was the Symmingtons' nursery governess.

"Is that what struck you all of a heap?" she asked. "She's good-looking, but a bit of a wet fish."

"I know," I said. "Just a nice kind girl. And I'd been thinking her Aphrodite."

Joanna opened the door of the car and I got in.

"It's funny, isn't it?" she said. "Some people have lots of looks and absolutely no S.A. That girl has. It seems such a pity."

I said that if she was a nursery governess it was probably just as well.

Three

I

That afternoon we went to tea with Mr. Pye.

Mr. Pye was an extremely ladylike plump little man, devoted to his *petit point* chairs, his Dresden shepherdesses and his collection of bric-à-brac. He lived at Prior's Lodge in the grounds of which were the ruins of the old Priory.

Prior's Lodge was certainly a very exquisite house and under Mr. Pye's loving care it showed to its best advantage. Every piece of furniture was polished and set in the exact place most suited to it. The curtains and cushions were of exquisite tone and colour, and of the most expensive silks.

It was hardly a man's house, and it did strike me that to live there would be rather like taking up one's abode in a period room at a museum. Mr. Pye's principal enjoyment in life was taking people round his house. Even those completely insensitive to their surroundings could not escape. Even if you were so hardened as to consider the essentials of living a radio, a cocktail bar, a bath and a bed surrounded by the necessary walls. Mr. Pye did not despair of leading you to better things.

His small plump hands quivered with sensibility as he described his treasures, and his voice rose to a falsetto squeak as he narrated the exciting circumstances under which he had brought his Italian bedstead home from Verona.

Joanna and I being both fond of antiquities and of period furniture, met with approval.

"It is really a pleasure, a great pleasure, to have such an acquisition to our little community. The dear good people down here, you know, so painfully bucolic—not to say *provincial*. They don't know anything. Vandals—absolute vandals! And the inside of their houses—it would make you weep, dear lady, I assure you it would make you weep. Perhaps it has done so?"

Joanna said that she hadn't gone quite as far as that.

"But you see what I mean? They mix things so terribly! I've seen with my own eyes a most delightful little Sheraton piece—delicate, perfect—a collector's piece, absolutely—and next to it a Victorian occasional table, or quite possibly a fumed oak revolving bookcase—yes, even that—*fumed oak*."

He shuddered—and murmured plaintively:

"Why are people so blind? You agree—I'm sure you agree, that beauty is the only thing worth living for."

Hypnotized by his earnestness, Joanna said, yes, yes, that was so.

"Then why," demanded Mr. Pye, "do people surround themselves with ugliness?"

Joanna said it was very odd.

"Odd? It's *criminal*! That's what I call it—criminal! And the excuses they give! They say something is *comfortable*. Or that it is *quaint*. Quaint! Such a horrible word."

"The house you have taken," went on Mr. Pye, "Miss Emily Barton's house. Now that is charming, and she has some quite nice pieces. Quite nice. One or two of them are really first class. And she has taste, too—although I'm not quite so sure of that as I was. Sometimes, I am afraid, I think it's really sentiment. She likes to keep things as they were—but not for *le bon motif*—not because of the resultant harmony—but because it is the way her mother had them."

He transferred his attention to me, and his voice changed. It altered from that of the rapt artist to that of the born gossip.

"You didn't know the family at all? No, quite so—yes, through house agents. But, my dears, you *ought* to have known that family! When I came here the old mother was still alive. An incredible person—quite incredible! A *monster*, if you know what I mean. Positively a monster. The old-fashioned Victorian monster, devouring her young. Yes, that's what it amounted to. She was monumental, you know, must have weighed seventeen stone, and all the five daughters revolved round her. 'The girls'! That's how she always spoke of them. The girls! And the eldest was well over sixty then. 'Those stupid girls!' she used to call them sometimes. Black slaves, that's all they were, fetching and carrying and agreeing with her. Ten o'clock they had to go to bed and they weren't allowed a fire in their bedroom, and as for asking their own friends to the house, that would have been unheard of. She despised them, you know, for not getting married, and yet so arranged their lives that it was practically impossible for them to meet anybody. I believe Emily, or perhaps it was Agnes, did have some kind of affair with a curate. But his family wasn't good enough and Mamma soon put a stop to *that!*"

"It sounds like a novel," said Joanna.

"Oh, my dear, it was. And then the dreadful old woman died, but of course it was far too late *then*. They just went on living there and talking in hushed voices about what poor Mamma would have wished. Even repapering her bedroom they felt to be quite sacrilegious. Still they did enjoy themselves in the parish in a quiet way... But none of them had much stamina, and they just died off one by one. Influenza took off Edith, and Minnie had an operation and didn't recover and poor Mabel had a stroke—Emily looked after her in the most devoted manner. Really that poor woman has done nothing but nursing for the last ten years. A charming creature, don't you think? Like a piece of Dresden. So sad for her having financial anxieties—but of course all investments have depreciated."

"We feel rather awful being in her house," said Joanna.

"No, no, my dear young lady. You mustn't feel that way. Her dear good Florence is devoted to her and she told me herself how happy she was to have got such nice tenants." Here Mr. Pye made a little bow. "She told me she thought she had been most fortunate."

"The house," I said, "has a very soothing atmosphere."

Mr. Pye darted a quick glance at me.

"Really? You feel that? Now, that's very interesting. I wondered, you know. Yes, I wondered."

"What do you mean, Mr. Pye?" asked Joanna.

My Pye spread out his plump hands.

"Nothing, nothing. One wondered, that is all. I do believe in atmosphere, you know. People's thoughts and feelings. They give their impression to the walls and the furniture."

I did not speak for a moment or two. I was looking round me and wondering how I would describe the atmosphere of Prior's Lodge. It seemed to me that the curious thing was that it hadn't any atmosphere! That was really very remarkable.

I reflected on this point so long that I heard nothing of the conversation going on between Joanna and her host. I was recalled to myself, however, by hearing Joanna uttering farewell preliminaries. I came out of my dream and added my quota.

We all went out into the hall. As we came towards the front door a letter came through the box and fell on the mat.

"Afternoon post," murmured Mr. Pye as he picked it up. "Now, my dear young people, you will come again, won't you? Such a pleasure to meet some broader minds, if you understand me. Someone with an appreciation of Art. Really you know, these dear good people down here, if you mention the Ballet, it conveys to them pirouetting toes, and *tulle* skirts and old gentlemen with opera glasses in the Naughty Nineties. It does indeed. Fifty years behind the times—that's what I put them down, as. A wonderful country, England. It has *pockets*. Lymstock is one of them. Interesting from a collector's point of view—I always feel I have voluntarily put myself under a glass shade when I am here. The peaceful backwater where nothing ever happens."

Shaking hands with us twice over, he helped me with exaggerated care into the car. Joanna took the wheel, she negotiated with some care the circular sweep round a plot of unblemished grass, then with a straight drive ahead, she raised a hand to wave goodbye to our

host where he stood on the steps of the house. I leaned forward to do the same.

But our gesture of farewell went unheeded. Mr. Pye had opened his mail.

He was standing staring down at the open sheet in his hand.

Joanna had described him once as a plump pink cherub. He was still plump, but he was not looking like a cherub now. His face was a dark congested purple, contorted with rage and surprise.

And at that moment I realized that there had been something familiar about the look of that envelope. I had not realized it at the time—indeed it had been one of those things that you note unconsciously without knowing that you do note them.

"Goodness," said Joanna. "What's bitten the poor pet?"

"I rather fancy," I said, "that it's the Hidden Hand again."

She turned an astonished face towards me and the car swerved.

"Careful, wench," I said.

Joanna refixed her attention on the road. She was frowning.

"You mean a letter like the one you got?"

"That's my guess."

"What is this place?" asked Joanna. "It looks the most innocent sleepy harmless little bit of England you can imagine—"

"Where to quote Mr. Pye, nothing ever happens," I cut in. "He chose the wrong minute to say that. Something has happened."

"But who writes these things, Jerry?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"My dear girl, how should I know? Some local nitwit with a screw loose, I suppose."

"But why? It seems so idiotic."

"You must read Freud and Jung and that lot to find out. Or ask our Dr. Owen."

Joanna tossed her head.

"Dr. Owen doesn't like me."

"He's hardly seen you."

"He's seen quite enough, apparently, to make him cross over if he sees me coming along the High Street."

"A most unusual reaction," I said sympathetically. "And one you're not used to."

Joanna was frowning again.

"No, but seriously, Jerry, why *do* people write anonymous letters?"

"As I say, they've got a screw loose. It satisfies some urge, I suppose. If you've been snubbed, or ignored, or frustrated, and your life's pretty drab and empty, I suppose you get a sense of power from stabbing in the dark at people who are happy and enjoying themselves."

Joanna shivered. "Not nice."

"No, not nice. I should imagine the people in these country places tend to be inbred—and so you would get a fair amount of queers."

"Somebody, I suppose, quite uneducated and inarticulate? With better education—"

Joanna did not finish her sentence, and I said nothing. I have never been able to accept the easy belief that education is a panacea for every ill.

As we drove through the town before climbing up the hill road, I looked curiously at the few figures abroad in the High Street. Was one of those sturdy countrywomen going about with a load of spite and malice behind her placid brow, planning perhaps even now a further outpouring of vindictive spleen?

But I still did not take the thing seriously.

II

Two days later we went to a bridge party at the Symmingtons.

It was a Saturday afternoon—the Symmingtons always had their bridge parties on a Saturday, because the office was shut then.

There were two tables. The players were the Symmingtons, ourselves, Miss Griffith, Mr. Pye, Miss Barton and a Colonel Appleton whom we had not yet met and who lived at Combeacre, a village some seven miles distant. He was a perfect specimen of the Blimp type, about sixty years of age, liked playing what he called a "plucky game" (which usually resulted in immense sums above the line being

scored by his opponents) and was so intrigued by Joanna that he practically never took his eyes off her the whole afternoon.

I was forced to admit that my sister was probably the most attractive thing that had been seen in Lymstock for many a long day.

When we arrived, Elsie Holland, the children's governess, was hunting for some extra bridge scorers in an ornate writing desk. She glided across the floor with them in the same celestial way I had first noticed, but the spell could not be cast a second time. Exasperating that it should be so—a waste of a perfectly lovely form and face. But I noticed now only too clearly the exceptionally large white teeth like tombstones, and the way she showed her gums when she laughed. She was, unfortunately, one of your prattling girls.

"Are these the ones, Mrs. Symmington? It's ever so stupid of me not to remember where we put them away last time. It's my fault, too, I'm afraid. I had them in my hand and then Brian called out his engine had got caught, and I ran out and what with one thing and another I must have just stuffed them in somewhere stupid. These aren't the right ones, I see now, they're a bit yellow at the edges. Shall I tell Agnes tea at five? I'm taking the kiddies to Long Barrow so there won't be any noise."

A nice kind bright girl. I caught Joanna's eye. She was laughing. I stared at her coldly. Joanna always knows what is passing in my mind, curse her.

We settled down to bridge.

I was soon to know to a nicety the bridge status of everyone in Lymstock. Mrs. Symmington was an exceedingly good bridge player and was quite a devotee of the game. Like many definitely unintellectual women, she was not stupid and had a considerable natural shrewdness. Her husband was a good sound player, slightly overcautious. Mr. Pye can best be described as brilliant. He had an uncanny flair for psychic bidding. Joanna and I, since the party was in our honour, played at a table with Mrs. Symmington and Mr. Pye. It was Symmington's task to pour oil on troubled waters and by the exercise of tact to reconcile the three other players at his table. Colonel Appleton, as I have said, was wont to play "a plucky game." Little Miss Barton was without exception the worst bridge player I

have ever come across and always enjoyed herself enormously. She did manage to follow suit, but had the wildest ideas as to the strength of her hand, never knew the score, repeatedly led out of the wrong hand and was quite unable to count trumps and often forgot what they were. Aimée Griffith's play can be summed up in her own words. "I like a good game of bridge with no nonsense—and I don't play any of these rubbishy conventions. I say what I mean. And no postmortems! After all, it's only a game!" It will be seen, therefore, that their host had not too easy a task.

Play proceeded fairly harmoniously, however, with occasional forgetfulness on the part of Colonel Appleton as he stared across at Joanna.

Tea was laid in the dining room, round a big table. As we were finishing, two hot and excited little boys rushed in and were introduced, Mrs. Symmington beaming with maternal pride, as was their father.

Then, just as we were finishing, a shadow darkened my plate, and I turned my head to see Megan standing in the French window.

"Oh," said her mother. "Here's Megan."

Her voice held a faintly surprised note, as though she had forgotten that Megan existed.

The girl came in and shook hands, awkwardly and without any grace.

"I'm afraid I forgot about your tea, dear," said Mrs. Symmington. "Miss Holland and the boys took theirs out with them, so there's no nursery tea today. I forgot you weren't with them."

Megan nodded.

"That's all right. I'll go to the kitchen."

She slouched out of the room. She was untidily dressed as usual and there were potatoes in both heels.

Mrs. Symmington said with a little apologetic laugh:

"My poor Megan. She's just at that awkward age, you know. Girls are always shy and awkward when they've just left school before they're properly grown up."

I saw Joanna's fair head jerk backwards in what I knew to be a warlike gesture.

"But Megan's twenty, isn't she?" she said.

"Oh, yes, yes. She is. But of course she's very young for her age. Quite a child still. It's so nice, I think, when girls don't grow up too quickly." She laughed again. "I expect all mothers want their children to remain babies."

"I can't think why," said Joanna. "After all, it would be a bit awkward if one had a child who remained mentally six while his body grew up."

"Oh, you mustn't take things so literally, Miss Burton," said Mrs. Symmington.

It occurred to me at that moment that I did not much care for Mrs. Symmington. That anaemic, slighted, faded prettiness concealed, I thought, a selfish and grasping nature. She said, and I disliked her a little more still:

"My poor Megan. She's rather a difficult child, I'm afraid. I've been trying to find something for her to do—I believe there are several things one can learn by correspondence. Designing and dressmaking—or she might try and learn shorthand and typing."

The red glint was still in Joanna's eye. She said as we sat down again at the bridge table:

"I suppose she'll be going to parties and all that sort of thing. Are you going to give a dance for her?"

"A dance?" Mrs. Symmington seemed surprised and amused. "Oh, no, we don't do things like that down here."

"I see. Just tennis parties and things like that."

"Our tennis court has not been played on for years. Neither Richard nor I play. I suppose, later, when the boys grow up—Oh, Megan will find plenty to do. She's quite happy just pottering about, you know. Let me see, did I deal? Two No Trumps."

As we drove home, Joanna said with a vicious pressure on the accelerator pedal that made the car leap forward:

"I feel awfully sorry for that girl."

"Megan?"

"Yes. Her mother doesn't like her."

"Oh, come now, Joanna, it's not as bad as that."

"Yes, it is. Lots of mothers don't like their children. Megan, I should imagine, is an awkward sort of creature to have about the house. She disturbs the pattern—the Symmington pattern. It's a complete unit without her—and that's a most unhappy feeling for a sensitive creature to have—and she *is* sensitive."

"Yes," I said, "I think she is."

I was silent a moment.

Joanna suddenly laughed mischievously.

"Bad luck for you about the governess."

"I don't know what you mean," I said with dignity.

"Nonsense. Masculine chagrin was written on your face every time you looked at her. I agree with you. It is a waste."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"But I'm delighted, all the same. It's the first sign of reviving life. I was quite worried about you at the nursing home. You never even looked at that remarkably pretty nurse you had. An attractive minx, too—absolutely God's gift to a sick man."

"Your conversation, Joanna, I find definitely low."

My sister continued without paying the least attention to my remarks.

"So I was much relieved to see you'd still got an eye for a nice bit of skirt. She *is* a good looker. Funny that the S.A. should have been left out completely. It is odd, you know, Jerry. What *is* the thing that some women have and others haven't? What is it makes one woman, even if she only says 'Foul weather' so attractive that every man within range wants to come over and talk about the weather with her? I suppose Providence makes a mistake every now and then when sending out the parcel. One Aphrodite face and form, one temperament ditto. And something goes astray and the Aphrodite temperament goes to some little plain-faced creature, and then all the other women go simply mad and say, 'I can't think what the men see in her. She isn't even good-looking!'"

"Have you quite finished, Joanna?"

"Well, you do agree, don't you?"

I grinned. "I'll admit to disappointment."

"And I don't see who else there is here for you. You'll have to fall back upon Aimée Griffith."

"God forbid," I said.

"She's quite good-looking, you know."

"Too much of an Amazon for me."

"She seems to enjoy her life, all right," said Joanna. "Absolutely disgustingly hearty, isn't she? I shouldn't be at all surprised if she had a cold bath every morning."

"And what are you going to do for yourself?" I asked.

"Me?"

"Yes. You'll need a little distraction down here if I know you."

"Who's being low now? Besides, you forget Paul." Joanna heaved up a not very convincing sigh.

"I shan't forget him nearly as quickly as you will. In about ten days you'll be saying, 'Paul? Paul Who? I never knew a Paul.'"

"You think I'm completely fickle," said Joanna.

"When people like Paul are in question, I'm only too glad that you should be."

"You never did like him. But he really was a bit of a genius."

"Possibly, though I doubt it. Anyway, from all I've heard, geniuses are people to be heartily disliked. One thing, you won't find any geniuses down here."

Joanna considered for a moment, her head on one side.

"I'm afraid not," she said regretfully.

"You'll have to fall back upon Owen Griffith," I said. "He's the only unattached male in the place. Unless you count old Colonel Appleton. He was looking at you like a hungry bloodhound most of the afternoon."

Joanna laughed.

"He was, wasn't he? It was quite embarrassing."

"Don't pretend. You're never embarrassed."

Joanna drove in silence through the gate and round to the garage.

She said then:

"There may be something in that idea of yours."

"What idea?"

Joanna replied:

"I don't see why any man should deliberately cross the street to avoid me. It's rude, apart from anything else."

"I see," I said. "You're going to hunt the man down in cold blood."

"Well, I don't like being avoided."

I got slowly and carefully out of the car, and balanced my sticks. Then I offered my sister a piece of advice.

"Let me tell you this, my girl. Owen Griffith isn't any of your tame whining artistic young men. Unless you're careful you'll stir up a hornet's nest about your ears. That man could be dangerous."

"Oo, do you think so?" demanded Joanna with every symptom of pleasure at the prospect.

"Leave the poor devil alone," I said sternly.

"How dare he cross the street when he saw me coming?"

"All you women are alike. You harp on one theme. You'll have Sister Aimée gunning you, too, if I'm not mistaken."

"She dislikes me already," said Joanna. She spoke meditatively, but with a certain satisfaction.

"We have come down here," I said sternly, "for peace and quiet, and I mean to see we get it."

But peace and quiet were the last things we were to have.

Four

I

It was, I think, about a week later, that Partridge informed me that Mrs. Baker would like to speak to me for a minute or two if I would be so kind.

The name Mrs. Baker conveyed nothing at all to me.

"Who is Mrs. Baker?" I said, bewildered—"Can't she see Miss Joanna?"

But it appeared that I was the person with whom an interview was desired. It further transpired that Mrs. Baker was the mother of the girl Beatrice.

I had forgotten Beatrice. For a fortnight now, I had been conscious of a middle-aged woman with wisps of grey hair, usually on her knees retreating crablike from bathroom and stairs and passages when I appeared, and I knew, I suppose, that she was our new Daily Woman. Otherwise the Beatrice complication had faded from my mind.

I could not very well refuse to see Beatrice's mother, especially as I learned that Joanna was out, but I was, I must confess, a little nervous at the prospect. I sincerely hoped that I was not going to be accused of having trifled with Beatrice's affections. I cursed the mischievous activities of anonymous letter writers to myself at the same time as, aloud, I commanded that Beatrice's mother should be brought to my presence.

Mrs. Baker was a big broad weather-beaten woman with a rapid flow of speech. I was relieved to notice no signs of anger or accusation.

"I hope, sir," she said, beginning at once when the door had closed behind Partridge, "that you'll excuse the liberty I've taken in coming to see you. But I thought, sir, as you was the proper person to come to, and I should be thankful if you could see your way to telling me what I ought to do in the circumstances, because in my opinion, sir, something ought to be done, and I've never been one to let the grass grow under my feet, and what I say is, no use moaning and groaning, but 'Up and doing' as vicar said in his sermon only the week before last."

I felt slightly bewildered and as though I had missed something essential in the conversation.

"Certainly," I said. "Won't you—er—sit down, Mrs. Baker? I'm sure I shall be glad to—er help you in anyway I can—"

I paused expectantly.

"Thank you, sir." Mrs. Baker sat down on the edge of a chair. "It's very good of you, I'm sure. And glad I am that I came to you, I said to Beatrice, I said, and her howling and crying on her bed, Mr. Burton will know what to do, I said, being a London gentleman. And something must be done, what with young men being so hotheaded and not listening to reason the way they are, and not listening to a word a girl says, and anyway, if it was *me*, I says to Beatrice I'd give him as good as I got, and what about that girl down at the mill?"

I felt more than ever bewildered.

"I'm sorry," I said. "But I don't quite understand. What has happened?"

"It's the letters, sir. Wicked letters—indecent, too, using such words and all. Worse than I've ever seen in the Bible, even."

Passing over an interesting sideline here, I said desperately:

"Has your daughter been having more letters?"

"Not her, sir. She had just the one. That one as was the occasion of her leaving here."

"There was absolutely no reason—" I began, but Mrs. Baker firmly and respectfully interrupted me:

"There is no need to tell me, sir, that what was wrote was all wicked lies. I had Miss Partridge's word for that—and indeed I would have known it for myself. You aren't that type of gentleman, sir, that I well know, and you an invalid and all. Wicked untruthful lies it was, but all the same I says to Beatrice as she'd better leave because you know what talk is, sir. No smoke without fire, that's what people say. And a girl can't be too careful. And besides the girl herself felt bashful like after what had been written, so I says, 'Quite right,' to Beatrice when she said she wasn't coming up here again, though I'm sure we both regretted the inconvenience being such—"

Unable to find her way out of this sentence, Mrs. Baker took a deep breath and began again.

"And that, I hoped, would be the end of any nasty talk. But now George, down at the garage, him what Beatrice is going with, he's got one of them. Saying awful things about our Beatrice, and how she's going on with Fred Ledbetter's Tom—and I can assure you, sir, the girl has been no more than civil to him and passing the time of day so to speak."

My head was now reeling under this new complication of Mr. Ledbetter's Tom.

"Let me get this straight," I said. "Beatrice's—er—young man has had an anonymous letter making accusations about her and another young man?"

"That's right, sir, and not nicely put at all—horrible words used, and it drove young George mad with rage, it did, and he came round and told Beatrice he wasn't going to put up with that sort of thing from her, and he wasn't going to have her go behind his back with other chaps—and she says it's all a lie—and he says no smoke without fire, he says, and rushes off being hot-like in his temper, and Beatrice she took on ever so, poor girl, and I said I'll put my hat on and come straight up to you, sir."

Mrs. Baker paused and looked at me expectantly, like a dog waiting for reward after doing a particularly clever trick.

"But why come to me?" I demanded.

"I understood, sir, that you'd had one of these nasty letters yourself, and I thought, sir, that being a London gentleman, you'd

know what to do about them."

"If I were you," I said, "I should go to the police. This sort of thing ought to be stopped."

Mrs. Baker looked deeply shocked.

"Oh, no, sir. I couldn't go to the police."

"Why not?"

"I've never been mixed up with the police, sir. None of us ever have."

"Probably not. But the police are the only people who can deal with this sort of thing. It's their business."

"Go to Bert Rundle?"

Bert Rundle was the constable, I knew.

"There's a sergeant, or an inspector, surely, at the police station."

"Me, go into the police station?"

Mrs. Baker's voice expressed reproach and incredulity. I began to feel annoyed.

"That's the only advice I can give you."

Mrs. Baker was silent, obviously quite unconvinced. She said wistfully and earnestly:

"These letters ought to be stopped, sir, they did ought to be stopped. There'll be mischief done sooner or later."

"It seems to me there is mischief done now," I said.

"I meant *violence*, sir. These young fellows, they get violent in their feelings—and so do the older ones."

I asked:

"Are a good many of these letters going about?"

Mrs. Baker nodded.

"It's getting worse and worse, sir. Mr. and Mrs. Beadle at the Blue Boar—very happy they've always been—and now these letters comes and it sets him thinking things—things that aren't so, sir."

I leaned forward:

"Mrs. Baker," I said, "have you any idea, any idea at all, who is writing these abominable letters?"

To my great surprise she nodded her head.

"We've got our idea, sir. Yes, we've all got a very fair idea."

"Who is it?"

I had fancied she might be reluctant to mention a name, but she replied promptly:

"'Tis Mrs. Cleat—that's what we all think, sir. 'Tis Mrs. Cleat for sure."

I had heard so many names this morning that I was quite bewildered. I asked:

"Who is Mrs. Cleat?"

Mrs. Cleat, I discovered, was the wife of an elderly jobbing gardener. She lived in a cottage on the road leading down to the Mill. My further questions only brought unsatisfactory answers. Questioned as to why Mrs. Cleat should write these letters, Mrs. Baker would only say vaguely that "'T would be like her."

In the end I let her go, reiterating once more my advice to go to the police, advice which I could see Mrs. Baker was not going to act upon. I was left with the impression that I had disappointed her.

I thought over what she had said. Vague as the evidence was, I decided that if the village was all agreed that Mrs. Cleat was the culprit, then it was probably true. I decided to go and consult Griffith about the whole thing. Presumably he would know this Cleat woman. If he thought advisable, he or I might suggest to the police that she was at the bottom of this growing annoyance.

I timed my arrival for about the moment I fancied Griffith would have finished his "Surgery." When the last patient had left, I went into the surgery.

"Hallo, it's you, Burton."

I outlined my conversation with Mrs. Baker, and passed on to him the conviction that this Mrs. Cleat was responsible. Rather to my disappointment, Griffith shook his head.

"It's not so simple as that," he said.

"You don't think this Cleat woman is at the bottom of it?"

"She may be. But I should think it most unlikely."

"Then why do they all think it is her?"

He smiled.

"Oh," he said, "you don't understand. Mrs. Cleat is the local witch."

"Good gracious!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, sounds rather strange nowadays, nevertheless that's what it amounts to. The feeling lingers, you know, that there are certain people, certain families, for instance, whom it isn't wise to offend. Mrs. Cleat came from a family of 'wise women.' And I'm afraid she's taken pains to cultivate the legend. She's a queer woman with a bitter and sardonic sense of humour. It's been easy enough for her, if a child cut its finger, or had a bad fall, or sickened with mumps, to nod her head and say, 'Yes, he stole my apples last week' or 'He pulled my cat's tail.' Soon enough mothers pulled their children away, and other women brought honey or a cake they'd baked to give to Mrs. Cleat so as to keep on the right side of her so that she shouldn't 'ill wish' them. It's superstitious and silly, but it happens. So naturally, now, they think she's at the bottom of this."

"But she isn't?"

"Oh, no. She isn't the type. It's—it's not so simple as that."

"Have you any idea?" I looked at him curiously.

He shook his head, but his eyes were absent.

"No," he said. "I don't know at all. But I don't like it, Burton—some harm is going to come of this."

II

When I got back to the house I found Megan sitting on the veranda steps, her chin resting on her knees.

She greeted me with her usual lack of ceremony.

"Hallo," she said. "Do you think I could come to lunch?"

"Certainly," I said.

"If it's chops, or anything difficult like that and they won't go round, just tell me," shouted Megan as I went round to apprise Partridge of the fact that there would be three to lunch.

I fancy that Partridge sniffed. She certainly managed to convey without saying a word of any kind, that she didn't think much of that Miss Megan.

I went back to the veranda.

"Is it quite all right?" asked Megan anxiously.

"Quite all right," I said. "Irish stew."

"Oh well, that's rather like dogs' dinner anyway, isn't it? I mean it's mostly potato and flavour."

"Quite," I said.

I took out my cigarette case and offered it to Megan. She flushed.

"How nice of you."

"Won't you have one?"

"No, I don't think I will, but it was very nice of you to offer it to me—just as though I was a real person."

"Aren't you a real person?" I said amused.

Megan shook her head, then, changing the subject, she stretched out a long dusty leg for my inspection.

"I've darned my stockings," she announced proudly.

I am not an authority on darning, but it did occur to me that the strange puckered blot of violently contrasting wool was perhaps not quite a success.

"It's much more uncomfortable than the hole," said Megan.

"It looks as though it might be," I agreed.

"Does your sister darn well?"

I tried to think if I had ever observed any of Joanna's handiwork in this direction.

"I don't know," I had to confess.

"Well, what does she do when she gets a hole in her stocking?"

"I rather think," I said reluctantly, "that she throws them away and buys another pair."

"Very sensible," said Megan. "But I can't do that. I get an allowance now—forty pounds a year. You can't do much on that."

I agreed.

"If only I wore black stockings, I could ink my legs," said Megan sadly. "That's what I always did at school. Miss Batworthy, the mistress who looked after our mending was like her name—blind as a bat. It was awfully useful."

"It must have been," I said.

We were silent while I smoked my pipe. It was quite a companionable silence.

Megan broke it by saying suddenly and violently:

"I suppose you think I'm awful, like everyone else?"

I was so startled that my pipe fell out of my mouth. It was a meerschau, just colouring nicely, and it broke. I said angrily to Megan:

"Now, see what you've done."

That most unaccountable of children, instead of being upset, merely grinned broadly.

"I do like you," she said.

It was a most warming remark. It is the remark that one fancies perhaps erroneously that one's dog would say if he could talk. It occurred to me that Megan, for all she looked like a horse, had the disposition of a dog. She was certainly not quite human.

"What did you say before the catastrophe?" I asked, carefully picking up the fragments of my cherished pipe.

"I said I supposed you thought me awful," said Megan, but not at all in the same tone she had said it before.

"Why should I?"

Megan said gravely:

"Because I am."

I said sharply:

"Don't be stupid."

Megan shook her head.

"That's just it. I'm not really stupid. People think I am. They don't know that inside I know just what they're like, and that all the time I'm hating them."

"*Hating* them?"

"Yes," said Megan.

Her eyes, those melancholy, unchildlike eyes, stared straight into mine, without blinking. It was a long mournful gaze.

"You would hate people if you were like me," she said. "If you weren't wanted."

"Don't you think you're being rather morbid?" I asked.

"Yes," said Megan. "That's what people always say when you're saying the truth. And it is true. I'm not wanted and I can quite see why. Mummie doesn't like me a bit. I remind her, I think, of my father, who was cruel to her and pretty dreadful from all I can hear. Only mothers can't say they don't want their children and just go

away. Or eat them. Cats eat the kittens they don't like. Awfully sensible, I think. No waste or mess. But human mothers have to keep their children, and look after them. It hasn't been so bad while I could be sent away to school—but you see, what Mummie would really like is to be just herself and my stepfather and the boys."

I said slowly:

"I still think you're morbid, Megan, but accepting some of what you say as true, why don't you go away and have a life of your own?"

She gave me an unchildlike smile.

"You mean take up a career. Earn my living?"

"Yes."

"What at?"

"You could train for something, I suppose. Shorthand typing—bookkeeping."

"I don't believe I could. I am stupid about doing things. And besides—"

"Well?"

She had turned her face away, now she turned it slowly back again. It was crimson and there were tears in her eyes. She spoke now with all the childishness back in her voice.

"Why should I go away? And be made to go away? They don't want me, but I'll *stay*. I'll stay and make everyone sorry. I'll make them all sorry. Hateful pigs! I hate everyone here in Lymstock. They all think I'm stupid and ugly. I'll show them. I'll show them. I'll—"

It was a childish, oddly pathetic rage.

I heard a step on the gravel round the corner of the house.

"Get up," I said savagely. "Go into the house through the drawing room. Go up to the first floor to the bathroom. End of the passage. Wash your face. Quick."

She sprang awkwardly to her feet and darted through the window as Joanna came round the corner of the house.

"Gosh, I'm hot," she called out. She sat down beside me and fanned her face with the Tyrolean scarf that had been round her head. "Still I think I'm educating these damned brogues now. I've walked miles. I've learnt one thing, you shouldn't have these fancy

holes in your brogues. The gorse prickles go through. Do you know, Jerry, I think we ought to have a dog?"

"So do I," I said. "By the way, Megan is coming to lunch."

"Is she? Good."

"You like her?" I asked.

"I think she's a changeling," said Joanna. "Something left on a doorstep, you know, while the fairies take the right one away. It's very interesting to meet a changeling. Oof, I must go up and wash."

"You can't yet," I said, "Megan is washing."

"Oh, she's been footslogging too, has she?"

Joanna took out her mirror and looked at her face long and earnestly. "I don't think I like this lipstick," she announced presently.

Megan came out through the window. She was composed, moderately clean, and showed no signs of the recent storm. She looked doubtfully at Joanna.

"Hallo," said Joanna, still preoccupied by her face. "I'm so glad you've come to lunch. Good gracious, I've got a freckle on my nose. I must do something about it. Freckles are so earnest and Scottish."

Partridge came out and said coldly that luncheon was served.

"Come on," said Joanna, getting up. "I'm starving."

She put her arm through Megan's and they went into the house together.

Five

I

I see that there has been one omission in my story. So far I have made little or no mention of Mrs. Dane Calthrop, or indeed of the Rev. Caleb Dane Calthrop.

And yet both the vicar and his wife were distinct personalities. Dane Calthrop himself was perhaps a being more remote from everyday life than anyone I have ever met. His existence was in his books and in his study, and in his intimate knowledge of early Church history. Mrs. Dane Calthrop, on the other hand, was quite terrifyingly on the spot. I have perhaps purposely put off mentioning her, because I was from the first a little afraid of her. She was a woman of character and of almost Olympian knowledge. She was not in the least the typical vicar's wife—but that, as I set it down, makes me ask myself, what do I know of vicars' wives?

The only one I remember well was a quiet nondescript creature, devoted to a big strong husband with a magnetic way of preaching. She had so little general conversation that it was a puzzle to know how to sustain a conversation with her.

Otherwise I was depending on the fictional presentment of vicars' wives, caricatures of females poking their noses everywhere, and uttering platitudes. Probably no such type exists.

Mrs. Dane Calthrop never poked her nose in anywhere, yet she had an uncanny power of knowing things and I soon discovered that almost everyone in the village was slightly afraid of her. She gave no

advice and never interfered, yet she represented, to any uneasy conscience, the Deity personified.

I have never seen a woman more indifferent to her material surroundings. On hot days she would stride about clad in Harris tweed, and in rain or even sleet, I have seen her absentmindedly race down the village street in a cotton dress of printed poppies. She had a long thin well-bred face like a greyhound, and a most devastating sincerity of speech.

She stopped me in the High Street the day after Megan had come to lunch. I had the usual feeling of surprise, because Mrs. Dane Calthrop's progress resembled coursing more than walking, and her eyes were always fixed on the distant horizon so that you felt sure her real objective was about a mile and a half away.

"Oh," she said. "Mr. Burton!"

She said it rather triumphantly, as someone might who had solved a particularly clever puzzle.

I admitted that I was Mr. Burton and Mrs. Dane Calthrop stopped focusing on the horizon and seemed to be trying to focus on me instead.

"Now what," she said, "did I want to see you about?"

I could not help her there. She stood frowning, deeply perplexed.

"Something rather nasty," she said.

"I'm sorry about that," I said, startled.

"Ah," cried Mrs. Dane Calthrop. "I hate my love with an A. That's it. Anonymous letters! What's this story you've brought down here about anonymous letters?"

"I didn't bring it," I said. "It was here already."

"Nobody got any until you came, though," said Mrs. Dane Calthrop accusingly.

"But they did, Mrs. Dane Calthrop. The trouble had already started."

"Oh dear," said Mrs. Dane Calthrop. "I don't like that."

She stood there, her eyes absent and faraway again. She said:

"I can't help feeling it's all *wrong*. We're not like that here. Envy, of course, and malice, and all the mean spiteful little sins—but I

didn't think there was anyone who would do that—No, I really didn't. And it distresses me, you see, because *I* ought to know."

Her fine eyes came back from the horizon and met mine. They were worried, and seemed to hold the honest bewilderment of a child.

"How should you know?" I said.

"I usually do. I've always felt that's my function. Caleb preaches good sound doctrine and administers the sacraments. That's a priest's duty, but if you admit marriage at all for a priest, then I think his wife's duty is to know what people are feeling and thinking, even if she can't do anything about it. And I haven't the least idea whose mind is—"

She broke off, adding absently.

"They are such silly letters, too."

"Have you—er—had any yourself?"

I was a little diffident of asking, but Mrs. Dane Calthrop replied perfectly naturally, her eyes opening a little wider:

"Oh yes, two—no, three. I forget exactly what they said. Something very silly about Caleb and the schoolmistress, I think. Quite absurd, because Caleb has absolutely no taste for fornication. He never has had. So lucky, being a clergyman."

"Quite," I said. "Oh quite."

"Caleb would have been a saint," said Mrs. Dane Calthrop, "if he hadn't been just a little too intellectual."

I did not feel qualified to answer this criticism, and anyway Mrs. Dane Calthrop went on, leaping back from her husband to the letters in rather a puzzling way.

"There are so many things the letters might say, but don't. That's what is so curious."

"I should hardly have thought they erred on the side of restraint," I said bitterly.

"But they don't seem to *know* anything. None of the real things."

"You mean?"

Those fine vague eyes met mine.

"Well, of course. There's plenty of adultery here—and everything else. Any amount of shameful secrets. Why doesn't the writer use

those?" She paused and then asked abruptly, "What did they say in your letter?"

"They suggested that my sister wasn't my sister."

"And she is?"

Mrs. Dane Calthrop asked the question with unembarrassed friendly interest.

"Certainly Joanna is my sister."

Mrs. Dane Calthrop nodded her head.

"That just shows you what I mean. I dare say there are other things—"

Her clear uninterested eyes looked at me thoughtfully, and I suddenly understood why Lymstock was afraid of Mrs. Dane Calthrop.

In everybody's life there are hidden chapters which they hope may never be known. I felt that Mrs. Dane Calthrop knew them.

For once in my life, I was positively delighted when Aimée Griffith's hearty voice boomed out:

"Hallo, Maud. Glad I've just caught you. I want to suggest an alteration of date for the Sale of Work. Morning, Mr. Burton."

She went on:

"I must just pop into the grocer's and leave my order, then I'll come along to the Institute if that suits you?"

"Yes, yes, that will do quite well," said Mrs. Dane Calthrop.

Aimée Griffith went into the International Stores.

Mrs. Dane Calthrop said: "Poor thing."

I was puzzled. Surely she could not be pitying Aimée?

She went on, however:

"You know, Mr. Burton, I'm rather afraid—"

"About this letter business?"

"Yes, you see it means—it must mean—" She paused lost in thought, her eyes screwed up. Then she said slowly, as one who solves a problem, "Blind hatred...yes, blind hatred. But even a blind man might stab to the heart by pure chance... And what would happen then, Mr. Burton?"

We were to know that before another day had passed.

II

It was Partridge who brought the news of the tragedy. Partridge enjoys calamity. Her nose always twitches ecstatically when she has to break bad news of any kind.

She came into Joanna's room with her nose working overtime, her eyes bright, and her mouth pulled down into an exaggerated gloom. "There's terrible news, this morning, miss," she observed as she drew up the blinds.

It takes a minute or two for Joanna, with her London habits, to become fully conscious in the morning. She said, "Er ah," and rolled over without real interest.

Partridge placed her early tea beside her and began again. "Terrible it is. Shocking! I couldn't hardly believe it when I heard."

"What's terrible?" said Joanna, struggling into wakefulness.

"Poor Mrs. Symmington." She paused dramatically. "Dead."

"Dead?" Joanna sat up in bed, now wide awake.

"Yes, miss, yesterday afternoon, and what's worse, took her own life."

"Oh no, Partridge?"

Joanna was really shocked—Mrs. Symmington was not, somehow, the sort of person you associated with tragedies.

"Yes, miss, it's the truth. Did it deliberate. Not but what she was drove to it, poor soul."

"Drove to it?" Joanna had an inkling of the truth then. "Not—?"

Her eyes questioned Partridge and Partridge nodded.

"That's right, miss. One of them nasty letters!"

"What did it say?"

But that, to Partridge's regret, she had not succeeded in learning.

"They're beastly things," said Joanna. "But I don't see why they should make one want to kill oneself."

Partridge sniffed and then said with meaning:

"Not unless they were *true*, miss."

"Oh," said Joanna.

She drank her tea after Partridge had left the room, then she threw on a dressing-gown and came in to me to tell me the news.

I thought of what Owen Griffith had said. Sooner or later the shot in the dark went home. It had done with Mrs. Symmington. She, apparently the most unlikely of women, had had a secret... It was true, I reflected, that for all her shrewdness she was not a woman of much stamina. She was the anaemic clinging type that crumples easily.

Joanna nudged me and asked me what I was thinking about.

I repeated to her what Owen had said.

"Of course," said Joanna waspishly, "he would know all about it. That man thinks he knows everything."

"He's clever," I said.

"He's conceited," said Joanna. She added, "Abominably conceited!"

After a minute or two she said:

"How awful for her husband—and for the girl. What do you think Megan will feel about it?"

I hadn't the slightest idea and said so. It was curious that one could never gauge what Megan would think or feel.

Joanna nodded and said:

"No, one never does know with changelings."

After a minute or two she said:

"Do you think—would you like—I wonder if she'd like to come and stay with us for a day or two? It's rather a shock for a girl that age."

"We might go along and suggest it," I agreed.

"The children are all right," said Joanna. "They've got that governess woman. But I expect she's just the sort of creature that would drive someone like Megan mad."

I thought that was very possible. I could imagine Elsie Holland uttering platitude after platitude and suggesting innumerable cups of tea. A kindly creature, but not, I thought, the person for a sensitive girl.

I had thought myself of bringing Megan away, and I was glad that Joanna had thought of it spontaneously without prompting from me.

We went down to the Symmingtons' house after breakfast.

We were a little nervous, both of us. Our arrival might look like sheer ghoulish curiosity. Luckily we met Owen Griffith just coming

out through the gate. He looked worried and preoccupied.

He greeted me, however, with some warmth.

"Oh, hallo, Burton. I'm glad to see you. What I was afraid would happen sooner or later has happened. A damnable business!"

"Good morning, Dr. Griffith," said Joanna, using the voice she keeps for one of our deafer aunts.

Griffith started and flushed.

"Oh—oh, good morning, Miss Burton."

"I thought perhaps," said Joanna, "that you didn't see me."

Owen Griffith got redder still. His shyness enveloped him like a mantle.

"I'm— I'm so sorry—preoccupied—I didn't."

Joanna went on mercilessly: "After all, I *am* life size."

"Merely kit-kat," I said in a stern aside to her. Then I went on:

"My sister and I, Griffith, wondered whether it would be a good thing if the girl came and stopped with us for a day or two? What do you think? I don't want to butt in—but it must be rather grim for the poor child. What would Symmington feel about it, do you think?"

Griffith turned the idea over in his mind for a moment or two.

"I think it would be an excellent thing," he said at last. "She's a queer nervy sort of girl, and it would be good for her to get away from the whole thing. Miss Holland is doing wonders—she's an excellent head on her shoulders, but she really has quite enough to do with the two children and Symmington himself. He's quite broken up—bewildered."

"It was—" I hesitated—"suicide?"

Griffith nodded.

"Oh yes. No question of accident. She wrote, 'I can't go on' on a scrap of paper. The letter must have come by yesterday afternoon's post. The envelope was down on the floor by her chair and the letter itself was screwed up into a ball and thrown into the fireplace."

"What did—"

I stopped, rather horrified at myself.

"I beg your pardon," I said.

Griffith gave a quick unhappy smile.

"You needn't mind asking. That letter will have to be read at the inquest. No getting out of it, more's the pity. It was the usual kind of thing—couched in the same foul style. The specific accusation was that the second boy, Colin, was not Symmington's child."

"Do you think that was true?" I exclaimed incredulously.

Griffith shrugged his shoulders.

"I've no means of forming a judgment. I've only been here five years. As far as I've ever seen, the Symmingtons were a placid, happy couple devoted to each other and their children. It's true that the boy doesn't particularly resemble his parents—he's got bright red hair, for one thing—but a child often throws back in appearance to a grandfather or grandmother."

"That lack of resemblance might have been what prompted the particular accusation. A foul and quite uncalled for bow at a venture."

"Very likely. In fact, probably. There's not been much accurate knowledge behind these poison pen letters, just unbridled spite and malice."

"But it happened to hit the bull's eye," said Joanna. "After all, she wouldn't have killed herself otherwise, would she?"

Griffith said doubtfully:

"I'm not quite sure. She's been ailing in health for some time, neurotic, hysterical. I've been treating her for a nervous condition. It's possible, I think, that the shock of receiving such a letter, couched in those terms, may have induced such a state of panic and despondency that she may have decided to take her life. She may have worked herself up to feel that her husband might not believe her if she denied the story, and the general shame and disgust might have worked upon her so powerfully as to temporarily unbalance her judgment."

"Suicide whilst of unsound mind," said Joanna.

"Exactly. I shall be quite justified, I think, in putting forward that point of view at the inquest."

"I see," said Joanna.

There was something in her voice which made Owen say:

"Perfectly justified!" in an angry voice. He added, "You don't agree, Miss Burton?"

"Oh yes, I do," said Joanna. "I'd do exactly the same in your place."

Owen looked at her doubtfully, then moved slowly away down the street. Joanna and I went on into the house.

The front door was open and it seemed easier than ringing the bell, especially as we heard Elsie Holland's voice inside.

She was talking to Mr. Symmington who, huddled in a chair, was looking completely dazed.

"No, but really, Mr. Symmington, you must take something. You haven't had any breakfast, not what I call a proper breakfast, and nothing to eat last night, and what with the shock and all, you'll be getting ill yourself, and you'll need all your strength. The doctor said so before he left."

Symmington said in a toneless voice:

"You're very kind, Miss Holland, but—"

"A nice cup of hot tea," said Elsie Holland, thrusting the beverage on him firmly.

Personally I should have given the poor devil a stiff whisky and soda. He looked as though he needed it. However, he accepted the tea, and looking up at Elsie Holland:

"I can't thank you for all you've done and are doing, Miss Holland. You've been perfectly splendid."

The girl flushed and looked pleased.

"It's nice of you to say that, Mr. Symmington. You must let me do all I can to help. Don't worry about the children—I'll see to them, and I've got the servants calmed down, and if there's anything I can do, letterwriting or telephoning, don't hesitate to ask me."

"You're very kind," Symmington said again.

Elsie Holland, turning, caught sight of us and came hurrying out into the hall.

"Isn't it terrible?" she said in a hushed whisper.

I thought, as I looked at her, that she was really a very nice girl. Kind, competent, practical in an emergency. Her magnificent blue

eyes were just faintly rimmed with pink, showing that she had been softhearted enough to shed tears for her employer's death.

"Can we speak to you a minute," asked Joanna. "We don't want to disturb Mr. Symmington."

Elsie Holland nodded comprehendingly and led the way into the dining room on the other side of the hall.

"It's been awful for him," she said. "Such a shock. Who ever would have thought a thing like this could happen? But of course, I do realize now that she had been queer for some time. Awfully nervy and weepy. I thought it was her health, though Dr. Griffith always said there was nothing really wrong with her. But she was snappy and irritable and some days you wouldn't know just how to take her."

"What we really came for," said Joanna, "was to know whether we could have Megan for a few days—that, is if she'd like to come."

Elsie Holland looked rather surprised.

"Megan?" she said doubtfully. "I don't know, I'm sure. I mean, it's ever so kind of you, but she's such a queer girl. One never knows what she's going to say or feel about things."

Joanna said rather vaguely:

"We thought it might be a help, perhaps."

"Oh well, as far as that goes, it would. I mean, I've got the boys to look after (they're with Cook just now) and poor Mr. Symmington—he really needs looking after as much as anyone, and such a lot to do and see to. I really haven't had time to see much to Megan. I think she's upstairs in the old nursery at the top of the house. She seems to want to get away from everyone. I don't know if—"

Joanna gave me the faintest of looks. I slipped quickly out of the room and upstairs. The old nursery was at the top of the house. I opened the door and went in. The room downstairs had given on to the garden behind and the blinds had not been down there. But in this room which faced the road they were decorously drawn down.

Through a dim grey gloom I saw Megan. She was crouching on a divan set against the far wall, and I was reminded at once of some terrified animal, hiding. She looked petrified with fear.

"Megan," I said.

I came forward, and unconsciously I adopted the tone one does adopt when you want to reassure a frightened animal. I'm really surprised I didn't hold out a carrot or a piece of sugar. I felt like that.

She stared at me, but she did not move, and her expression did not alter.

"Megan," I said again. "Joanna and I have come to ask you if you would like to come and stay with us for a little."

Her voice came hollowly out of the dim twilight.

"Stay with you? In your house?"

"Yes."

"You mean, you'll take me away from here?"

"Yes, my dear."

Suddenly she began to shake all over. It was frightening and very moving.

"Oh, do take me away! Please do. It's so awful, being here, and feeling so wicked."

I came over to her and her hands fastened on my coat sleeve.

"I'm an awful coward. I didn't know what a coward I was."

"It's all right, funny face," I said. "These things are a bit shattering. Come along."

"Can we go at once? Without waiting a minute?"

"Well, you'll have to put a few things together, I suppose."

"What sort of things? Why?"

"My dear girl," I said. "We can provide you with a bed and a bath and the rest of it, but I'm damned if I lend you my toothbrush."

She gave a very faint weak little laugh.

"I see. I think I'm stupid today. You mustn't mind. I'll go and pack some things. You—you won't go away? You'll wait for me?"

"I'll be on the mat."

"Thank you. Thank you very much. I'm sorry I'm so stupid. But you see it's rather dreadful when your mother dies."

"I know," I said.

I gave her a friendly pat on the back and she flashed me a grateful look and disappeared into a bedroom. I went on downstairs.

"I found Megan," I said. "She's coming."

"Oh now, that *is* a good thing," exclaimed Elsie Holland. "It will take her out of herself. She's rather a nervy girl, you know. Difficult. It will be a great relief to feel I haven't got her on my mind as well as everything else. It's very kind of you, Miss Burton. I hope she won't be a nuisance. Oh dear, there's the telephone. I must go and answer it. Mr. Symmington isn't fit."

She hurried out of the room. Joanna said:

"Quite the ministering angel!"

"You said that rather nastily," I observed. "She's a nice kind girl, and obviously most capable."

"Most. And she knows it."

"This is unworthy of you, Joanna," I said.

"Meaning why shouldn't the girl do her stuff?"

"Exactly."

"I never can stand seeing people pleased with themselves," said Joanna. "It arouses all my worst instincts. How did you find Megan?"

"Crouching in a darkened room looking rather like a stricken gazelle."

"Poor kid. She was quite willing to come?"

"She leapt at it."

A series of thuds out in the hall announced the descent of Megan and her suitcase. I went out and took it from her. Joanna, behind me, said urgently:

"Come on. I've already refused some nice hot tea twice."

We went out to the car. It annoyed me that Joanna had to sling the suitcase in. I could get along with one stick now, but I couldn't do any athletic feats.

"Get in," I said to Megan.

She got in. I followed her. Joanna started the car and we drove off.

We got to Little Furze and went into the drawing room.

Megan dropped into a chair and burst into tears. She cried with the hearty fervour of a child—bawled, I think, is the right word. I left the room in search of a remedy. Joanna stood by feeling rather helpless, I think.

Presently I heard Megan say in a thick choked voice:

"I'm sorry for doing this. It seems idiotic."

Joanna said kindly, "Not at all. Have another handkerchief."

I gather she supplied the necessary article. I reentered the room and handed Megan a brimming glass.

"What is it?"

"A cocktail," I said.

"Is it? Is it really?" Megan's tears were instantly dried. "I've never drunk a cocktail."

"Everything has to have a beginning," I said.

Megan sipped her drink gingerly, then a beaming smile spread over her face, she tilted her head back and gulped it down at a draught.

"It's lovely," she said. "Can I have another?"

"No," I said.

"Why not?"

"In about ten minutes you'll probably know."

"Oh!"

Megan transferred her attention to Joanna.

"I really am awfully sorry for having made such a nuisance of myself howling away like that. I can't think why. It seems awfully silly when I'm so glad to be here."

"That's all right," said Joanna. "We're very pleased to have you."

"You can't be, really. It's just kindness on your part. But I am grateful."

"Please don't be grateful," said Joanna. "It will embarrass me. I was speaking the truth when I said we should be glad to have you. Jerry and I have used up all our conversation. We can't think of anymore things to say to each other."

"But now," I said, "we shall be able to have all sorts of interesting discussions—about Goneril and Regan and things like that."

Megan's face lit up.

"I've been thinking about that, and I think I know the answer. It was because that awful old father of theirs always insisted on such a lot of sucking up. When you've always got to be saying thank you and how kind and all the rest of it, it would make you go a bit rotten and queer inside, and you'd just long to be able to be beastly for a

change—and when you got the chance, you'd probably find it went to your head and you'd go too far. Old Lear was pretty awful, wasn't he? I mean, he did deserve the snub Cordelia gave him."

"I can see," I said, "that we are going to have many interesting discussions about Shakespeare."

"I can see you two are going to be very highbrow," said Joanna. "I'm afraid I always find Shakespeare terribly dreary. All those long scenes where everybody is drunk and it's supposed to be funny."

"Talking of drink," I said turning to Megan. "How are you feeling?"

"Quite all right, thank you."

"Not at all giddy? You don't see two of Joanna or anything like that?"

"No. I just feel as though I'd like to talk rather a lot."

"Splendid," I said. "Obviously you are one of our natural drinkers. That is to say, if that really was your first cocktail."

"Oh, it was."

"A good strong head is an asset to any human being," I said.

Joanna took Megan upstairs to unpack.

Partridge came in, looking sour, and said she had made two cup custards for lunch and what should she do about it?

Six

I

The inquest was held three days later. It was all done as decorously as possible, but there was a large attendance and, as Joanna observed, the beady bonnets were wagging.

The time of Mrs. Symmington's death was put at between three and four o'clock. She was alone in the house, Symmington was at his office, the maids were having their day out, Elsie Holland and the children were out walking and Megan had gone for a bicycle ride.

The letter must have come by the afternoon post. Mrs. Symmington must have taken it out of the box, read it—and then in a state of agitation she had gone to the potting shed, fetched some of the cyanide kept there for taking wasps' nests, dissolved it in water and drunk it after writing those last agitated words, "I can't go on...."

Owen Griffith gave medical evidence and stressed the view he had outlined to us of Mrs. Symmington's nervous condition and poor stamina. The coroner was suave and discreet. He spoke with bitter condemnation of people who write those despicable things, anonymous letters. Whoever had written that wicked and lying letter was morally guilty of murder, he said. He hoped the police would soon discover the culprit and take action against him or her. Such a dastardly and malicious piece of spite deserved to be punished with the utmost rigour of the law. Directed by him, the jury brought in the inevitable verdict. Suicide whilst temporarily insane.

The coroner had done his best—Owen Griffith also, but afterwards, jammed in the crowd of eager village women, I heard the same hateful sibilant whisper I had begun to know so well, “No smoke without fire, that’s what *I* say!” “Must ‘a been something in it for certain sure. She wouldn’t never have done it otherwise....”

Just for a moment I hated Lymstock and its narrow boundaries, and its gossiping whispering women.

II

It is difficult to remember things in their exact chronological order. The next landmark of importance, of course, was Superintendent Nash’s visit. But it was before that, I think, that we received calls from various members of the community, each of which was interesting in its way and shed some light on the characters and personalities of the people involved.

Aimée Griffith came on the morning after the inquest. She was looking, as always, radiant with health and vigour and succeeded, also as usual, in putting my back up almost immediately. Joanna and Megan were out, so I did the honours.

“Good morning,” said Miss Griffith. “I hear you’ve got Megan Hunter here?”

“We have.”

“Very good of you, I’m sure. It must be rather a nuisance to you. I came up to say she can come to us if you like. I dare say I can find ways of making her useful about the house.”

I looked at Aimée Griffith with a good deal of distaste.

“How kind of you,” I said. “But we like having her. She potters about quite happily.”

“I dare say. Much too fond of pottering, that child. Still, I suppose she can’t help it, being practically half-witted.”

“I think she’s rather an intelligent girl,” I said.

Aimée Griffith gave me a hard stare.

“First time I’ve ever heard anyone say that of her,” she remarked. “Why, when you talk to her, she looks through you as though she doesn’t understand what you are saying!”

"She probably just isn't interested," I said.

"If so, she's extremely rude," said Aimée Griffith.

"That may be. But not half-witted."

Miss Griffith declared sharply:

"At best, it's woolgathering. What Megan needs is good hard work—something to give her an interest in life. You've no idea what a difference that makes to a girl. I know a lot about girls. You'd be surprised at the difference even becoming a Guide makes to a girl. Megan's much too old to spend her time lounging about and doing nothing."

"It's been rather difficult for her to do anything else so far," I said. "Mrs. Symmington always seemed under the impression that Megan was about twelve years old."

Miss Griffith snorted.

"I know. I had no patience with that attitude of hers. Of course she's dead now, poor woman, so one doesn't want to say much, but she was a perfect example of what I call the unintelligent domestic type. Bridge and gossip and her children—and even there that Holland girl did all the looking after them. I'm afraid I never thought very much of Mrs. Symmington, although of course I never suspected the truth."

"The truth?" I said sharply.

Miss Griffith flushed.

"I was terribly sorry for Dick Symmington, its all having to come out as it did at the inquest," she said. "It was awful for him."

"But surely you heard him say that there was not a word of truth in that letter—that he was quite sure of that?"

"Of course he *said* so. Quite right. A man's got to stick up for his wife. Dick would." She paused and then explained: "You see, I've known Dick Symmington a long time."

I was a little surprised.

"Really?" I said. "I understood from your brother that he only bought this practice a few years ago."

"Oh yes, but Dick Symmington used to come and stay in our part of the world up north. I've known him for years."

Women jump to conclusions that men do not. Nevertheless, the suddenly softened tone of Aimée Griffith's voice put, as our old nurse would have expressed it, ideas into my head.

I looked at Aimée curiously. She went on—still in that softened tone:

"I know Dick very well... He's a proud man, and very reserved. But he's the sort of man who could be very jealous."

"That would explain," I said deliberately, "why Mrs. Symmington was afraid to show him or tell him about the letter. She was afraid that, being a jealous man, he might not believe her denials."

Miss Griffith looked at me angrily and scornfully.

"Good Lord," she said, "do you think any woman would go and swallow a lot of cyanide of potassium for an accusation that wasn't true?"

"The coroner seemed to think it was possible. Your brother, too—" Aimée interrupted me.

"Men are all alike. All for preserving the decencies. But you don't catch *me* believing that stuff. If an innocent woman gets some foul anonymous letter, she laughs and chucks it away. That's what I—" she paused suddenly, and then finished, "would do."

But I had noticed the pause. I was almost sure that what she had been about to say was "That's what I did."

I decided to take the war into the enemy's country.

"I see," I said pleasantly, "so you've had one, too?"

Aimée Griffith was the type of woman who scorns to lie. She paused a minute—flushed, then said:

"Well, yes. But I didn't let it worry me!"

"Nasty?" I inquired sympathetically, as a fellow sufferer.

"Naturally. These things always are. The ravings of a lunatic. I read a few words of it, realized what it was and chucked it straight into the wastepaper basket."

"You didn't think of taking it to the police?"

"Not then. Least said soonest mended—that's what I felt."

An urge came over me to say solemnly: "No smoke without fire!" but I restrained myself. To avoid temptation I reverted to Megan.

"Have you any idea of Megan's financial position?" I asked. "It's not idle curiosity on my part. I wondered if it would actually be necessary for her to earn her living."

"I don't think it's strictly *necessary*. Her grandmother, her father's mother, left her a small income, I believe. And in any case Dick Symmington would always give her a home and provide for her, even if her mother hasn't left her anything outright. No, it's the *principle* of the thing."

"What principle?"

"Work, Mr. Burton. There's nothing like work, for men and women. The one unforgivable sin is idleness."

"Sir Edward Grey," I said, "afterwards our foreign minister, was sent down from Oxford for incorrigible idleness. The Duke of Wellington, I have heard, was both dull and inattentive at his books. And has it ever occurred to you, Miss Griffith, that you would probably not be able to take a good express train to London if little Georgie Stephenson had been out with his youth movement instead of lolling about, bored, in his mother's kitchen until the curious behaviour of the kettle lid attracted the attention of his idle mind?"

Aimée merely snorted.

"It is a theory of mine," I said, warming to my theme, "that we owe most of our great inventions and most of the achievements of genius to idleness—either enforced or voluntary. The human mind prefers to be spoon-fed with the thoughts of others, but deprived of such nourishment it will, reluctantly, begin to think for itself—and such thinking, remember, is original thinking and may have valuable results.

"Besides," I went on, before Aimée could get in another sniff, "there is the artistic side."

I got up and took from my desk where it always accompanied me a photograph of my favourite Chinese picture. It represents an old man sitting beneath a tree playing cat's cradle with a piece of string on his fingers and toes.

"It was in the Chinese exhibition," I said. "It fascinated me. Allow me to introduce you. It is called 'Old Man enjoying the Pleasure of Idleness.'"

Aimée Griffith was unimpressed by my lovely picture. She said: "Oh well, we all know what the Chinese are like!"

"It doesn't appeal to you?" I asked.

"Frankly, no. I'm not very interested in art, I'm afraid. Your attitude, Mr. Burton, is typical of that of most men. You dislike the idea of women working—of their competing—"

I was taken aback, I had come up against the Feminist. Aimée was well away, her cheeks flushed.

"It is incredible to you that women should want a career. It was incredible to my parents. I was anxious to study for a doctor. They would not hear of paying the fees. But they paid them readily for Owen. Yet I should have made a better doctor than my brother."

"I'm sorry about that," I said. "It was tough on you. If one wants to do a thing—"

She went on quickly:

"Oh, I've got over it now. I've plenty of willpower. My life is busy and active. I'm one of the happiest people in Lymstock. Plenty to do. But I do go up in arms against the silly old-fashioned prejudice that women's place is always the home."

"I'm sorry if I offended you," I said. "And that wasn't really my point. I don't see Megan in a domestic role at all."

"No, poor child. She'll be a misfit anywhere, I'm afraid." Aimée had calmed down. She was speaking quite normally again. "Her father, you know—"

She paused and I said bluntly: "I *don't* know. Everyone says 'her father' and drops their voice, and that is that. What did the man *do*? Is he alive still?"

"I really don't know. And I'm rather vague myself, I'm afraid. But he was definitely a bad lot. Prison, I believe. And a streak of very strong abnormality. That's why it wouldn't surprise me if Megan was a bit 'wanting.'"

"Megan," I said, "is in full possession of her senses, and as I said before, I consider her an intelligent girl. My sister thinks so too. Joanna is very fond of her."

Aimée said:

"I'm afraid your sister must find it very dull down here."

And as she said it, I learnt something else. Aimée Griffith disliked my sister. It was there in the smooth conventional tones of her voice.

"We've all wondered how you could both bear to bury yourselves in such an out-of-the-way spot."

It was a question and I answered it.

"Doctor's orders. I was to come somewhere very quiet where nothing ever happened." I paused and added, "Not quite true of Lymstock now."

"No, no, indeed."

She sounded worried and got up to go. She said then:

"You know—it's got to be put a stop to—all this beastliness! We can't have it going on."

"Aren't the police doing anything?"

"I suppose so. But I think we ought to take it in hand *ourselves*."

"We're not as well equipped as they are."

"Nonsense! We probably have far more sense and intelligence! A little determination is all that is needed."

She said goodbye abruptly and went away.

When Joanna and Megan came back from their walk I showed Megan my Chinese picture. Her face lighted up. She said, "It's heavenly, isn't it?"

"That *is* rather my opinion."

Her forehead was crinkling in the way I knew so well.

"But it would be difficult, wouldn't it?"

"To be idle?"

"No, not to be idle—but to enjoy the pleasures of it. You'd have to be very old—"

She paused. I said: "He *is* an old man."

"I don't mean old that way. Not *age*. I mean old in—in...."

"You mean," I said, "that one would have to attain a very high state of civilization for the thing to present itself to you in that way—a fine point of sophistication? I think I shall complete your education, Megan, by reading to you one hundred poems translated from the Chinese."

III

I met Symmington in the town later in the day.

"Is it quite all right for Megan to stay on with us for a bit?" I asked. "It's company for Joanna—she's rather lonely sometimes with none of her own friends."

"Oh—er— Megan? Oh yes, very good of you."

I took a dislike to Symmington then which I never quite overcame. He had so obviously forgotten all about Megan. I wouldn't have minded if he had actively disliked the girl—a man may sometimes be jealous of a first husband's child—but he didn't dislike her, he just hardly noticed her. He felt towards her much as a man who doesn't care much for dogs would feel about a dog in the house. You notice it when you fall over it and swear at it, and you give it a vague pat sometimes when it presents itself to be patted. Symmington's complete indifference to his stepdaughter annoyed me very much.

I said, "What are you planning to do with her?"

"With Megan?" He seemed rather startled. "Well, she'll go on living at home. I mean, naturally, it is her home."

My grandmother, of whom I had been very fond, used to sing old-fashioned songs to her guitar. One of them, I remembered, ended thus:

"Oh maid, most dear, I am not here
I have no place, no part,
No dwelling more, by sea nor shore,
But only in your heart."

I went home humming it.

IV

Emily Barton came just after tea had been cleared away.

She wanted to talk about the garden. We talked garden for about half an hour. Then we turned back towards the house.

It was then that lowering her voice, she murmured:

"I do hope that that child—that she hasn't been too much *upset* by all this dreadful business?"

"Her mother's death, you mean?"

"That, of course. But I really meant, the—the unpleasantness *behind* it."

I was curious. I wanted Miss Barton's reaction.

"What do you think about that? Was it true?"

"Oh, no, no, surely not. I'm quite sure that Mrs. Symmington never—that he wasn't"—little Emily Barton was pink and confused—"I mean it's quite untrue—although of course it may have been a judgment."

"A judgment?" I said, staring.

Emily Barton was very pink, very Dresden china shepherdess-like.

"I cannot help feeling that all these dreadful letters, all the sorrow and pain they have caused, may have been sent for a *purpose*."

"They were sent for a purpose, certainly," I said grimly.

"No, no, Mr. Burton, you misunderstood me. I'm not talking of the misguided creature who wrote them—someone quite abandoned that must be. I mean that they have been permitted—by Providence! To awaken us to a sense of our shortcomings."

"Surely," I said, "the Almighty could choose a less unsavoury weapon."

Miss Emily murmured that God moved in a mysterious way.

"No," I said. "There's too much tendency to attribute to God the evils that man does of his own free will. I might concede you the Devil. God doesn't really need to punish us, Miss Barton. We're so very busy punishing ourselves."

"What I can't make out is *why* should anyone want to do such a thing?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"A warped mentality."

"It seems very sad."

"It doesn't seem to me sad. It seems to me just damnable. And I don't apologize for the word. I mean just that."

The pink had gone out of Miss Barton's cheeks. They were very white.

"But why, Mr. Burton, *why*? What pleasure can anyone get out of it?"

"Nothing you and I can understand, thank goodness."

Emily Barton lowered her voice.

"They say that *Mrs. Cleat*—but I really cannot believe it."

I shook my head. She went on in an agitated manner:

"Nothing of this kind has ever happened before—never in my memory. It has been such a happy little community. What would my dear mother have said? Well, one must be thankful that she has been spared."

I thought from all I had heard that old Mrs. Barton had been sufficiently tough to have taken anything, and would probably have enjoyed this sensation.

Emily went on:

"It distresses me deeply."

"You've not—er—had anything yourself?"

She flushed crimson.

"Oh, no—oh, no, indeed. Oh! that would be dreadful."

I apologized hastily, but she went away looking rather upset.

I went into the house. Joanna was standing by the drawing room fire which she had just lit, for the evenings were still chilly.

She had an open letter in her hand.

She turned her head quickly as I entered.

"Jerry! I found this in the letter box—dropped in by hand. It begins, 'You painted trollop....'"

"What else does it say?"

Joanna gave a wide grimace.

"Same old muck."

She dropped it on to the fire. With a quick gesture that hurt my back I jerked it off again just before it caught.

"Don't," I said. "We may need it."

"Need it?"

"For the police."

V

Superintendent Nash came to see me the following morning. From the first moment I saw him I took a great liking to him. He was the best type of C.I.D. county superintendent. Tall, soldierly, with quiet reflective eyes and a straightforward unassuming manner.

He said: "Good morning, Mr. Burton, I expect you can guess what I've come to see you about."

"Yes, I think so. This letter business."

He nodded.

"I understand you had one of them?"

"Yes, soon after we got here."

"What did it say exactly?"

I thought a minute, then conscientiously repeated the wording of the letter as closely as possible.

The superintendent listened with an immovable face, showing no signs of any kind of emotion. When I had finished, he said:

"I see. You didn't keep the letter, Mr. Burton?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't. You see, I thought it was just an isolated instance of spite against newcomers to the place."

The superintendent inclined his head comprehendingly.

He said briefly: "A pity."

"However," I said, "my sister got one yesterday. I just stopped her putting it in the fire."

"Thank you, Mr. Burton, that was thoughtful of you."

I went across to my desk and unlocked the drawer in which I had put it. It was not, I thought, very suitable for Partridge's eyes. I gave it to Nash.

He read it through. Then he looked up and asked me:

"Is this the same in appearance as the last one?"

"I think so—as far as I can remember."

"The same difference between the envelope and the text?"

"Yes," I said. "The envelope was typed. The letter itself had printed words pasted on to a sheet of paper."

Nash nodded and put it in his pocket. Then he said:

"I wonder, Mr. Burton, if you would mind coming down to the station with me? We could have a conference there and it would save a good deal of time and overlapping."

"Certainly," I said. "You would like me to come now?"

"If you don't mind."

There was a police car at the door. We drove down in it.

I said:

"Do you think you'll be able to get to the bottom of this?"

Nash nodded with easy confidence.

"Oh yes, we'll get to the bottom of it all right. It's a question of time and routine. They're slow, these cases, but they're pretty sure. It's a matter of narrowing things down."

"Elimination?" I said.

"Yes. And general routine."

"Watching post boxes, examining typewriters, fingerprints, all that?"

He smiled. "As you say."

At the police station I found Symmington and Griffith were already there. I was introduced to a tall lantern-jawed man in plain clothes, Inspector Graves.

"Inspector Graves," explained Nash, "has come down from London to help us. He's an expert on anonymous letter cases."

Inspector Graves smiled mournfully. I reflected that a life spent in the pursuit of anonymous letter writers must be singularly depressing. Inspector Graves, however, showed a kind of melancholy enthusiasm.

"They're all the same, these cases," he said in a deep lugubrious voice like a depressed bloodhound. "You'd be surprised. The wording of the letters and the things they say."

"We had a case just on two years ago," said Nash. "Inspector Graves helped us then."

Some of the letters, I saw, were spread out on the table in front of Graves. He had evidently been examining them.

"Difficulty is," said Nash, "to get hold of the letters. Either people put them in the fire, or they won't admit to having received anything

of the kind. Stupid, you see, and afraid of being mixed up with the police. They're a backward lot here."

"Still we've got a fair amount to get on with," said Graves. Nash took the letter I had given him from his pocket and tossed it over to Graves.

The latter glanced through it, laid it with the others and observed approvingly:

"Very nice—very nice indeed."

It was not the way I should have chosen to describe the epistle in question, but experts, I suppose, have their own point of view. I was glad that that screed of vituperative and obscene abuse gave *somebody* pleasure.

"We've got enough, I think, to go on with," said Inspector Graves, "and I'll ask you gentlemen, if you should get anymore, to bring them along at once. Also, if you hear of someone else getting one—(you, in particular, doctor, among your patients) do your best to get them to come along here with them. I've got—" he sorted with deft fingers among his exhibits, "one to Mr. Symmington, received as far back as two months ago, one to Dr. Griffith, one to Miss Ginch, one written to Mrs. Mudge, the butcher's wife, one to Jennifer Clark, barmaid at the Three Crowns, the one received by Mrs. Symmington, this one now to Miss Burton—oh yes, and one from the bank manager."

"Quite a representative collection," I remarked.

"And not one I couldn't match from other cases! This one here is as near as nothing to one written by that milliner woman. This one is the dead spit of an outbreak we had up in Northumberland—written by a schoolgirl, they were. I can tell you, gentlemen, I'd like to see something *new* sometimes, instead of the same old treadmill."

"There is nothing new under the sun," I murmured.

"Quite so, sir. You'd know that if you were in our profession."

Nash sighed and said, "Yes, indeed."

Symmington asked:

"Have you come to any definite opinion as to the writer?"

Graves cleared his throat and delivered a small lecture.

"There are certain similarities shared by all these letters. I shall enumerate them, gentlemen, in case they suggest anything to your minds. The text of the letters is composed of words made-up from individual letters cut out of a printed book. It's an old book, printed, I should say, about the year 1830. This has obviously been done to avoid the risk of recognition through handwriting which is, as most people know nowadays, a fairly easy matter...the so-called disguising of a hand not amounting to much when faced with expert tests. There are no fingerprints on the letters and envelopes of a distinctive character. That is to say, they have been handled by the postal authorities, the recipient, and there are other stray fingerprints, but no set common to all, showing therefore that the person who put them together was careful to wear gloves. The envelopes are typewritten by a Windsor 7 machine, well worn, with the a and the t out of alignment. Most of them have been posted locally, or put in the box of a house by hand. It is therefore evident that they are of local provenance. They were written by a woman, and in my opinion a woman of middle age or over, and probably, though not certainly, unmarried."

We maintained a respectful silence for a minute or two. Then I said:

"The typewriter's your best bet, isn't it? That oughtn't to be difficult in a little place like this."

Inspector Graves shook his head sadly and said:

"That's where you're wrong, sir."

"The typewriter," said Superintendent Nash, "is unfortunately too easy. It is an old one from Mr. Symmington's office, given by him to the Women's Institute where, I may say, it's fairly easy of access. The ladies here all often go into the Institute."

"Can't you tell something definite from the—er—the touch, don't you call it?"

Again Graves nodded.

"Yes, that can be done—but these envelopes have all been typed by someone using one finger."

"Someone, then, unused to the typewriter?"

"No, I wouldn't say that. Someone, say, who can type but doesn't want us to know the fact."

"Whoever writes these things has been very cunning," I said slowly.

"She is, sir, she is," said Graves. "Up to every trick of the trade."

"I shouldn't have thought one of these bucolic women down here would have had the brains," I said.

Graves coughed.

"I haven't made myself plain, I'm afraid. Those letters were written by an educated woman."

"What, by a lady?"

The word slipped out involuntarily. I hadn't used the term "lady" for years. But now it came automatically to my lips, reechoed from days long ago, and my grandmother's faint unconsciously arrogant voice saying, "Of course, she isn't a *lady*, dear."

Nash understood at once. The word lady still meant something to him.

"Not necessarily a lady," he said. "But certainly not a village woman. They're mostly pretty illiterate down here, can't spell, and certainly can't express themselves with fluency."

I was silent, for I had had a shock. The community was so small. Unconsciously I had visualized the writer of the letters as a Mrs. Cleat or her like, some spiteful, cunning half-wit.

Symmington put my thoughts into words. He said sharply:

"But that narrows it down to about half a dozen to a dozen people in the whole place!"

"That's right."

"I can't believe it."

Then, with a slight effort, and looking straight in front of him as though the mere sound of his own words were distasteful he said:

"You have heard what I stated at the inquest. In case you may have thought that that statement was actuated by a desire to protect my wife's memory, I should like to repeat now that I am firmly convinced that the subject matter of the letter my wife received was absolutely false. I *know* it was false. My wife was a very sensitive woman, and—er—well, you might call it *prudish* in

some respects. Such a letter would have been a great shock to her, and she was in poor health."

Graves responded instantly.

"That's quite likely to be right, sir. None of these letters show any signs of intimate knowledge. They're just blind accusations. There's been no attempt to blackmail. And there doesn't seem to be any religious bias—such as we sometimes get. It's just sex and spite! And that's going to give us quite a good pointer towards the writer."

Symmington got up. Dry and unemotional as the man was, his lips were trembling.

"I hope you find the devil who writes these soon. She murdered my wife as surely as if she'd put a knife into her." He paused. "How does she feel now, I wonder?"

He went out, leaving that question unanswered.

"How does she feel, Griffith?" I asked. It seemed to me the answer was in his province.

"God knows. Remorseful, perhaps. On the other hand, it may be that she's enjoying her power. Mrs. Symmington's death may have fed her mania."

"I hope not," I said, with a slight shiver. "Because if so, she'll—"

I hesitated and Nash finished the sentence for me.

"She'll try it again? That, Mr. Burton, would be the best thing that could happen, for us. The pitcher goes to the well once too often, remember."

"She'd be mad to go on with it," I exclaimed.

"She'll go on," said Graves. "They always do. It's a vice, you know, they can't let it alone."

I shook my head with a shudder. I asked if they needed me any longer, I wanted to get out into the air. The atmosphere seemed tinged with evil.

"There's nothing more, Mr. Burton," said Nash. "Only keep your eyes open, and do as much propaganda as you can—that is to say, urge on everyone that they've got to report any letter they receive." I nodded.

"I should think everyone in the place has had one of the foul things by now," I said.

"I wonder," said Graves. He put his sad head a little on one side and asked, "You don't know, definitely, of anyone who *hasn't* had a letter?"

"What an extraordinary question! The population at large isn't likely to take me into their confidence."

"No, no, Mr. Burton, I didn't mean that. I just wondered if you knew of anyone person who quite definitely, to your certain knowledge, has not received an anonymous letter."

"Well, as a matter of fact," I hesitated, "I do, in a way."

And I repeated my conversation with Emily Barton and what she had said.

Graves received the information with a wooden face and said: "Well, that may come in useful. I'll note it down."

I went out into the afternoon sunshine with Owen Griffith. Once in the street, I swore aloud.

"What kind of place is this for a man to come to lie in the sun and heal his wounds? It's full of festering poison, this place, and it looks as peaceful and as innocent as the Garden of Eden."

"Even there," said Owen dryly, "there was one serpent."

"Look here, Griffith, do they know anything? Have they got any idea?"

"I don't know. They've got a wonderful technique, the police. They're seemingly so frank, and they tell you nothing."

"Yes. Nash is a nice fellow."

"And a very capable one."

"If anyone's batty in this place, *you* ought to know it." I said accusingly.

Griffith shook his head. He looked discouraged. But he looked more than that—he looked worried. I wondered if he had an inkling of some kind.

We had been walking along the High Street. I stopped at the door of the house agents.

"I believe my second instalment of rent is due—in advance. I've got a good mind to pay it and clear out with Joanna right away. Forfeit the rest of the tenancy."

"Don't go," said Owen.

"Why not?"

He didn't answer. He said slowly after a minute or two,

"After all—I dare say you're right. Lymstock isn't healthy just now. It might—it might harm you or—or your sister."

"Nothing harms Joanna," I said. "She's tough. I'm the weakly one. Somehow this business makes me sick."

"It makes *me* sick," said Owen.

I pushed the door of the house agents half open.

"But I shan't go," I said. "Vulgar curiosity is stronger than pusillanimity. I want to know the solution."

I went in.

A woman who was typing got up and came towards me. She had frizzy hair and simpered, but I found her more intelligent than the spectacled youth who had previously held sway in the outer office.

A minute or two later something familiar about her penetrated through to my consciousness. It was Miss Ginch, lately Symmington's lady clerk. I commented on the fact.

"You were with Galbraith and Symmington, weren't you?" I said.

"Yes. Yes, indeed. But I thought it was better to leave. This is quite a good post, though not quite so well paid. But there are things that are more valuable than money, don't you think so?"

"Undoubtedly," I said.

"Those awful letters," breathed Miss Ginch in a sibilant whisper. "I got a dreadful one. About me and Mr. Symmington—oh, terrible it was, saying the most *awful* things! I knew my duty and I took it to the police, though of course it wasn't exactly *pleasant* for me, was it?"

"No, no, most unpleasant."

"But they thanked me and said I had done quite right. But I felt that, after that, if people were talking—and evidently they *must* have been, or where did the writer get the idea from?—then I must avoid even the appearance of evil, though there has never been anything at all *wrong* between me and Mr. Symmington."

I felt rather embarrassed.

"No, no, of course not."

"But people have such evil minds. Yes, alas, such evil minds!"

Nervously trying to avoid it, I nevertheless met her eye, and I made a most unpleasant discovery.

Miss Ginch was thoroughly enjoying herself.

Already once today I had come across someone who reacted pleasurably to anonymous letters. Inspector Graves's enthusiasm was professional. Miss Ginch's enjoyment I found merely suggestive and disgusting.

An idea flashed across my startled mind.

Had Miss Ginch written these letters herself?

Seven

I

When I got home I found Mrs. Dane Calthrop sitting talking to Joanna. She looked, I thought, grey and ill.

"This has been a terrible shock to me, Mr. Burton," she said. "Poor thing, poor thing."

"Yes," I said. "It's awful to think of someone being driven to the stage of taking their own life."

"Oh, you mean Mrs. Symmington?"

"Didn't you?"

Mrs. Dane Calthrop shook her head.

"Of course one is sorry for her, but it would have been bound to happen anyway, wouldn't it?"

"Would it?" said Joanna dryly.

Mrs. Dane Calthrop turned to her.

"Oh, I think so, dear. If suicide is your idea of escape from trouble then it doesn't very much matter what the trouble is. Whenever some very unpleasant shock had to be faced, she'd have done the same thing. What it really comes down to is that she was that kind of woman. Not that one would have guessed it. She always seemed to me a selfish rather stupid woman, with a good firm hold on life. Not the kind to panic, you would think—but I'm beginning to realize how little I really know anyone."

"I'm still curious as to whom you meant when you said 'Poor thing,'" I remarked.

She stared at me.

"The woman who wrote the letters, of course."

"I don't think," I said dryly, "I shall waste sympathy on her."

Mrs. Dane Calthrop leaned forward. She laid a hand on my knee.

"But don't you realize—can't you *feel*? Use your imagination. Think how desperately, violently unhappy anyone must be to sit down and write these things. How lonely, how cut off from human kind. Poisoned through and through, with a dark stream of poison that finds its outlet in this way. That's why I feel so self-reproachful. Somebody in this town has been racked with that terrible unhappiness, and I've had no idea of it. I should have had. You can't interfere with actions— I never do. But that black inward unhappiness—like a septic arm physically, all black and swollen. If you could cut it and let the poison out it would flow away harmlessly. Yes, poor soul, poor soul."

She got up to go.

I did not feel like agreeing with her. I had no sympathy for our anonymous letter writer whatsoever. But I did ask curiously:

"Have you any idea at all, Mrs. Calthrop, who this woman is?"

She turned her fine perplexed eyes on me.

"Well, I can guess," she said. "But then I might be wrong, mightn't I?"

She went swiftly out through the door, popping her head back to ask:

"Do tell me, why have you never married, Mr. Burton?"

In anyone else it would have been an impertinence, but with Mrs. Dane Calthrop you felt that the idea had suddenly come into her head and she had really wanted to know.

"Shall we say," I said, rallying, "that I have never met the right woman?"

"We can say so," said Mrs. Dane Calthrop, "but it wouldn't be a very good answer, because so many men have obviously married the wrong woman."

This time she really departed.

Joanna said:

"You know I really do think she's mad. But I like her. The people in the village here are afraid of her."

"So am I, a little."

"Because you never know what's coming next?"

"Yes. And there's a careless brilliancy about her guesses."

Joanna said slowly: "Do you really think whoever wrote these letters is very unhappy?"

"I don't know what the damned hag is thinking or feeling! And I don't care. It's her victims I'm sorry for."

It seems odd to me now that in our speculations about Poison Pen's frame of mind, we missed the most obvious one. Griffith had pictured her as possibly exultant. I had envisaged her as remorseful—appalled by the result of her handiwork. Mrs. Dane Calthrop had seen her as suffering.

Yet the obvious, the inevitable reaction we did not consider—or perhaps I should say, I did not consider. That reaction was Fear.

For with the death of Mrs. Symmington, the letters had passed out of one category into another. I don't know what the legal position was—Symmington knew, I suppose, but it was clear that with a death resulting, the position of the writer of the letters was much more serious. There could now be no question of passing it off as a joke if the identity of the writer was discovered. The police were active, a Scotland Yard expert called in. It was vital now for the anonymous author to remain anonymous.

And granted that Fear was the principal reaction, other things followed. Those possibilities also I was blind to. Yet surely they should have been obvious.

II

Joanna and I came down rather late to breakfast the next morning. That is to say, late by the standards of Lymstock. It was nine-thirty, an hour at which, in London, Joanna was just unclosing an eyelid, and mine would probably be still tight shut. However when Partridge had said "Breakfast at half past eight, or nine o'clock?" neither Joanna nor I had had the nerve to suggest a later hour.

To my annoyance, Aimée Griffith was standing on the doorstep talking to Megan.

She gave tongue with her usual heartiness at the sight of us.

"Hallo, there, slackers! I've been up for hours."

That, of course, was her own business. A doctor, no doubt, has to have early breakfast, and a dutiful sister is there to pour out his tea, or coffee. But it is no excuse for coming and butting in on one's more somnolent neighbours. Nine-thirty is not the time for a morning call.

Megan slipped back into the house and into the dining room, where I gathered she had been interrupted in her breakfast.

"I said I wouldn't come in," said Aimée Griffith—though why it is more of a merit to force people to come and speak to you on the doorstep, than to talk to them inside the house I do not know. "I just wanted to ask Miss Burton if she'd any vegetables to spare for our Red Cross stall on the main road. If so, I'd get Owen to call for them in the car."

"You're out and about very early," I said.

"The early bird catches the worm," said Aimée. "You have a better chance of finding people in this time of day. I'm off to Mr. Pye's next. Got to go over to Brenton this afternoon. Guides."

"Your energy makes me quite tired," I said, and at that moment the telephone rang and I retired to the back of the hall to answer it, leaving Joanna murmuring rather doubtfully something about rhubarb and French beans and exposing her ignorance of the vegetable garden.

"Yes?" I said into the telephone mouthpiece.

A confused noise of deep breathing came from the other end of the wire and a doubtful female voice said "Oh!"

"Yes?" I said again encouragingly.

"Oh," said the voice again, and then it inquired adenoidally, "Is that—what I mean—is that Little Furze?"

"This is Little Furze."

"Oh!" This was clearly a stock beginning to every sentence. The voice inquired cautiously: "Could I speak to Miss Partridge just a minute?"

"Certainly," I said. "Who shall I say?"

"Oh. Tell her it's Agnes, would you? Agnes Waddle." "Agnes Waddle?"

"That's right."

Resisting the temptation to say, "Donald Duck to you," I put down the telephone receiver and called up the stairs to where I could hear the sound of Partridge's activities overheard.

"Partridge. Partridge."

Partridge appeared at the head of the stairs, a long mop in one hand, and a look of "What is it *now*?" clearly discernible behind her invariably respectful manner.

"Yes, sir?"

"Agnes Waddle wants to speak to you on the telephone."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

I raised my voice. "Agnes Waddle."

I have spelt the name as it presented itself to my mind. But I will now spell it as it was actually written.

"Agnes Woddell—whatever can she want now?"

Very much put out of countenance, Partridge relinquished her mop and rustled down the stairs, her print dress crackling with agitation.

I beat an unobtrusive retreat into the dining room where Megan was wolfing down kidneys and bacon. Megan, unlike Aimée Griffith, was displaying no "glorious morning face." In fact she replied very gruffly to my morning salutations and continued to eat in silence.

I opened the morning paper and a minute or two later Joanna entered looking somewhat shattered.

"Whew!" she said. "I'm so tired. And I think I've exposed my utter ignorance of what grows when. Aren't there runner beans this time of year?"

"August," said Megan. "Well, one has them anytime in London," said Joanna defensively.

"Tins, sweet fool," I said. "And cold storage on ships from the far-flung limits of empire."

"Like ivory, apes and peacocks?" asked Joanna.

"Exactly."

"I'd rather have peacocks," said Joanna thoughtfully.

"I'd like a monkey of my own as a pet," said Megan.

Meditatively peeling an orange, Joanna said:

"I wonder what it would feel like to be Aimée Griffith, all bursting with health and vigour and enjoyment of life. Do you think she's ever tired, or depressed, or—or wistful?"

I said I was quite certain Aimée Griffith was never wistful, and followed Megan out of the open French window on to the veranda.

Standing there, filling my pipe, I heard Partridge enter the dining room from the hall and heard her voice say grimly:

"Can I speak to you a minute, miss?"

"Dear me," I thought. "I hope Partridge isn't going to give notice. Emily Barton will be very annoyed with us if so."

Partridge went on: "I must apologize, miss, for being rung up on the telephone. That is to say, the young person who did so should have known better. I have never been in the habit of using the telephone or of permitting my friends to ring me up on it, and I'm very sorry indeed that it should have occurred, and the master taking the call and everything."

"Why, that's quite all right, Partridge," said Joanna soothingly, "why shouldn't your friends use the phone if they want to speak to you?"

Partridge's face, I could feel, though I could not see it, was more dour than ever as she replied coldly:

"It is not the kind of thing that has ever been done in this house. Miss Emily would never permit it. As I say, I am sorry it occurred, but Agnes Woddell, the girl who did it, was upset and she's young too, and doesn't know what's fitting in a gentleman's house."

"That's one for you, Joanna," I thought gleefully.

"This Agnes who rung me up, miss," went on Partridge, "she used to be in service here under me. Sixteen she was, then, and come straight from the orphanage. And you see, not having a home, or a mother or any relations to advise her, she's been in the habit of coming to me. I can tell her what's what, you see."

"Yes?" said Joanna and waited. Clearly there was more to follow.

"So I am taking the liberty of asking you, miss, if you would allow Agnes to come here to tea this afternoon in the kitchen. It's her day out, you see, and she's got something on her mind she wants to consult me about. I wouldn't dream of suggesting such a thing in the usual way."

Joanna said bewildered:

"But why shouldn't you have anyone to tea with you?"

Partridge drew herself up at this, so Joanna said afterwards, and really looked most formidable, as she replied:

"It has never been the custom of This House, miss. Old Mrs. Barton never allowed visitors in the kitchen, excepting as it should be our own day out, in which case we were allowed to entertain friends here instead of going out, but otherwise, on ordinary days, no. And Miss Emily she keeps to the old ways."

Joanna is very nice to servants and most of them like her but she has never cut any ice with Partridge.

"It's no good, my girl," I said when Partridge had gone and Joanna had joined me outside. "Your sympathy and leniency are not appreciated. The good old overbearing ways for Partridge and things done the way they should be done in a gentleman's house."

"I never heard of such tyranny as not allowing them to have their friends to see them," said Joanna. "It's all very well, Jerry, but they can't *like* being treated like black slaves."

"Evidently they do," I said. "At least the Partridges of this world do."

"I can't imagine why she doesn't like me. Most people do."

"She probably despises you as an inadequate housekeeper. You never draw your hand across a shelf and examine it for traces of dust. You don't look under the mats. You don't ask what happened to the remains of the chocolate soufflé, and you never order a nice bread pudding."

"Ugh!" said Joanna.

She went on sadly. "I'm a failure all round today. Despised by our Aimée for ignorance of the vegetable kingdom. Snubbed by Partridge for being a human being. I shall now go out into the garden and eat worms."

"Megan's there already," I said.

For Megan had wandered away a few minutes previously and was now standing aimlessly in the middle of a patch of lawn looking not unlike a meditative bird waiting for nourishment.

She came back, however, towards us and said abruptly:

"I say, I must go home today."

"What?" I was dismayed.

She went on, flushing, but speaking with nervous determination.

"It's been awfully good of you having me and I expect I've been a fearful nuisance, but I have enjoyed it awfully, only now I must go back, because after all, well, it's my home and one can't stay away for ever, so I think I'll go this morning."

Both Joanna and I tried to make her change her mind, but she was quite adamant, and finally Joanna got out the car and Megan went upstairs and came down a few minutes later with her belongings packed up again.

The only person pleased seemed to be Partridge, who had almost a smile on her grim face. She had never liked Megan much.

I was standing in the middle of the lawn when Joanna returned.

She asked me if I thought I was a sundial.

"Why?"

"Standing there like a garden ornament. Only one couldn't put on you the motto of only marking the sunny hours. You looked like thunder!"

"I'm out of humour. First Aimée Griffith—"("Gracious!" murmured Joanna in parenthesis, "I must speak about those vegetables!") and then Megan beetling off. I'd thought of taking her for a walk up to Legge Tor."

"With a collar and lead, I suppose?" said Joanna.

"What?"

Joanna repeated loudly and clearly as she moved off round the corner of the house to the kitchen garden:

"I said, 'With a collar and lead, I suppose?' Master's lost his dog, that's what's the matter with you!"

III

I was annoyed, I must confess, at the abrupt way in which Megan had left us. Perhaps she had suddenly got bored with us.

After all, it wasn't a very amusing life for a girl. At home she'd got the kids and Elsie Holland.

I heard Joanna returning and hastily moved in case she should make more rude remarks about sundials.

Owen Griffith called in his car just before lunchtime, and the gardener was waiting for him with the necessary garden produce.

Whilst old Adams was stowing it in the car I brought Owen indoors for a drink. He wouldn't stay to lunch.

When I came in with the sherry I found Joanna had begun doing her stuff.

No signs of animosity now. She was curled up in the corner of the sofa and was positively purring, asking Owen questions about his work, if he liked being a G.P., if he wouldn't rather have specialized? She thought, doctoring was one of the most fascinating things in the world.

Say what you will of her, Joanna is a lovely, a heaven-born listener. And after listening to so many would-be geniuses telling her how they had been unappreciated, listening to Owen Griffith was easy money. By the time we had got to the third glass of sherry, Griffith was telling her about some obscure reaction or lesion in such scientific terms that nobody could have understood a word of it except a fellow medico.

Joanna was looking intelligent and deeply interested.

I felt a moment's qualm. It was really too bad of Joanna. Griffith was too good a chap to be played fast and loose with. Women really were devils.

Then I caught a sideways view of Griffith, his long purposeful chin and the grim set of his lips, and I was not so sure that Joanna was going to have it her own way after all. And anyway, a man has no business to let himself be made a fool of by a woman. It's his own look out if he does.

Then Joanna said:

"Do change your mind and stay to lunch with us, Dr. Griffith," and Griffith flushed a little and said he would, only his sister would be expecting him back—

"We'll ring her up and explain," said Joanna quickly and went out into the hall and did so.

I thought Griffith looked a little uneasy, and it crossed my mind that he was probably a little afraid of his sister.

Joanna came back smiling and said that that was all right.

And Owen Griffith stayed to lunch and seemed to enjoy himself. We talked about books and plays and world politics, and about music and painting and modern architecture.

We didn't talk about Lymstock at all, or about anonymous letters, or Mrs. Symmington's suicide.

We got right away from everything, and I think Owen Griffith was happy. His dark sad face lighted up, and he revealed an interesting mind.

When he had gone I said to Joanna:

"That fellow's too good for your tricks."

Joanna said:

"That's what you say! You men all stick together!"

"Why were you out after his hide, Joanna? Wounded vanity?"

"Perhaps," said my sister.

IV

That afternoon we were to go to tea with Miss Emily Barton at her rooms in the village.

We strolled down there on foot, for I felt strong enough now to manage the hill back again.

We must actually have allowed too much time and got there early, for the door was opened to us by a tall rawboned fierce-looking woman who told us that Miss Barton wasn't in yet.

"But she's expecting you, I know, so if you'll come up and wait, please."

This was evidently Faithful Florence.

We followed her up the stairs and she threw open a door and showed us into what was quite a comfortable sitting room, though perhaps a little over-furnished. Some of the things, I suspected, had come from Little Furze.

The woman was clearly proud of her room.

"It's nice, isn't it?" she demanded.

"Very nice," said Joanna warmly.

"I make her as comfortable as I can. Not that I can do for her as I'd like to and in the way she ought to have. She ought to be in her own house, properly, not turned out into rooms."

Florence, who was clearly a dragon, looked from one to the other of us reproachfully. It was not, I felt, our lucky day. Joanna had been ticked off by Aimée Griffith and Partridge and now we were both being ticked off by the dragon Florence.

"Parlourmaid I was for fifteen years there," she added.

Joanna, goaded by injustice, said:

"Well, Miss Barton wanted to let the house. She put it down at the house agents."

"Forced to it," said Florence. "And she living so frugal and careful. But even then, the government can't leave her alone! Has to have its pound of flesh just the same."

I shook my head sadly.

"Plenty of money there was in the old lady's time," said Florence. "And then they all died off one by one, poor dears. Miss Emily nursing of them one after the other. Wore herself out she did, and always so patient and uncomplaining. But it told on her, and then to have worry about money on top of it all! Shares not bringing in what they used to, so she says, and why not, I should like to know? They ought to be ashamed of themselves. Doing down a lady like her who's got no head for figures and can't be up to their tricks."

"Practically everyone has been hit that way," I said, but Florence remained unsoftened.

"It's all right for some as can look after themselves, but not for *her*. She needs looking after, and as long as she's with me I'm going to see no one imposes on her or upsets her in anyway. I'd do anything for Miss Emily."

And glaring at us for some moments in order to drive that point thoroughly home, the indomitable Florence left the room, carefully shutting the door behind her.

"Do you feel like a bloodsucker, Jerry?" inquired Joanna. "Because I do. What's the matter with us?"

"We don't seem to be going down very well," I said. "Megan gets tired of us, Partridge disapproves of you, faithful Florence disapproves of both of us."

Joanna murmured, "I wonder why Megan *did* leave?"

"She got bored."

"I don't think she did at all. I wonder—do you think, Jerry, it could have been something that Aimée Griffith said?"

"You mean this morning, when they were talking on the doorstep."

"Yes. There's wasn't much time, of course, but—" I finished the sentence.

"But that woman's got the tread of a cow elephant! She might have—"

The door opened and Miss Emily came in. She was pink and a little out of breath and seemed excited. Her eyes were very blue and shining.

She chirruped at us in quite a distracted manner.

"Oh dear, I'm so sorry I'm late. Just doing a little shopping in the town, and the cakes at the Blue Rose didn't seem to me quite fresh, so I went on to Mrs. Lygon's. I always like to get my cakes the last thing, then one gets the newest batch just out of the oven, and one isn't put off with the day before's. But I am so distressed to have kept you waiting—really unpardonable—"

Joanna cut in.

"It's our fault, Miss Barton. We're early. We walked down and Jerry strides along so fast now that we arrive everywhere too soon."

"Never too soon, dear. Don't say that. One cannot have too much of a good thing, you know."

And the old lady patted Joanna affectionately on the shoulder.

Joanna brightened up. At last, so it seemed, she was being a success. Emily Barton extended her smile to include me, but with a

slight timidity in it, rather as one might approach a man-eating tiger guaranteed for the moment harmless.

"It's very good of you to come to such a feminine meal as tea, Mr. Burton."

Emily Barton, I think, has a mental picture of men as interminably consuming whiskies and sodas and smoking cigars, and in the intervals dropping out to do a few seductions of village maidens, or to conduct a liaison with a married woman.

When I said this to Joanna later, she replied that it was probably wishful thinking, that Emily Barton would have liked to come across such a man, but alas had never done so.

In the meantime Miss Emily was fussing round the room, arranging Joanna and myself with little tables, and carefully providing ashtrays, and a minute later the door opened and Florence came in bearing a tray of tea with some fine Crown Derby cups on it which I gathered Miss Emily had brought with her. The tea was china and delicious and there were plates of sandwiches and thin bread and butter, and a quantity of little cakes.

Florence was beaming now, and looked at Miss Emily with a kind of maternal pleasure, as at a favourite child enjoying a doll's tea party.

Joanna and I ate far more than we wanted to, our hostess pressed us so earnestly. The little lady was clearly enjoying her tea party and I perceived that, to Emily Barton, Joanna and I were a big adventure, two people from the mysterious world of London and sophistication.

Naturally, our talk soon dropped into local channels. Miss Barton spoke warmly of Dr. Griffith, his kindness and his cleverness as a doctor. Mr. Symmington, too, was a very clever lawyer, and had helped Miss Barton to get some money back from the income tax which she would never have known about. He was so nice to his children, too, devoted to them and to his wife—she caught herself up. "Poor Mrs. Symmington, it's so dreadfully sad, with those young children left motherless. Never, perhaps, a very strong woman—and her health had been bad of late. A brain storm, that is what it must have been. I read about such a thing in the paper. People really do

not know what they are doing under those circumstances. And she can't have known what she was doing or else she would have remembered Mr. Symmington and the children."

"That anonymous letter must have shaken her up very badly," said Joanna.

Miss Barton flushed. She said, with a tinge of reproof in her voice:

"Not a very nice thing to discuss, do you think, dear? I know there have been—er—letters, but we won't talk about them. Nasty things. I think they are better just ignored."

Well, Miss Barton might be able to ignore them, but for some people it wasn't so easy. However I obediently changed the subject and we discussed Aimée Griffith.

"Wonderful, quite wonderful," said Emily Barton. "Her energy and her organizing powers are really splendid. She's so good with girls too. And she's so practical and up-to-date in every way. She really runs this place. And absolutely devoted to her brother. It's very nice to see such devotion between brother and sister."

"Doesn't he ever find her a little overwhelming?" asked Joanna.

Emily Barton stared at her in a startled fashion.

"She has sacrificed a great deal for his sake," she said with a touch of reproachful dignity.

I saw a touch of Oh Yeay! in Joanna's eye and hastened to divert the conversation to Mr. Pye.

Emily Barton was a little dubious about Mr. Pye.

All she could say was, repeated rather doubtfully, that he was very kind—yes, very kind. Very well off, too, and most generous. He had very strange visitors sometimes, but then, of course, he had travelled a lot.

We agreed that travel not only broadened the mind, but occasionally resulted in the forming of strange acquaintances.

"I have often wished, myself, to go on a cruise," said Emily Barton wistfully. "One reads about them in the papers and they sound so attractive."

"Why don't you go?" asked Joanna.

This turning of a dream into a reality seemed to alarm Miss Emily. "Oh, no, no, that would be *quite* impossible."

"But why? They're fairly cheap."

"Oh, it's not only the expense. But I shouldn't like to go alone. Travelling alone would look very peculiar, don't you think?"

"No," said Joanna.

Miss Emily looked at her doubtfully.

"And I don't know how I would manage about my luggage—and going ashore at foreign ports—and all the different currencies—"

Innumerable pitfalls seemed to rise up before the little lady's affrighted gaze, and Joanna hastened to calm her by a question about an approaching garden fête and sale of work. This led us quite naturally to Mrs. Dane Calthrop.

A faint spasm showed for a minute on Miss Barton's face.

"You know, dear," she said, "she is really a very *odd* woman. The things she says sometimes."

I asked what things.

"Oh, I don't know. Such very *unexpected* things. And the way she looks at you, as though you weren't there but somebody else was—I'm expressing it badly but it is so hard to convey the impression I mean. And then she won't—well, *interfere* at all. There are so many cases where a vicar's wife could advise and—perhaps *admonish*. Pull people up, you know, and make them mend their ways. Because people would listen to her, I'm sure of that, they're all quite in awe of her. But she insists on being aloof and faraway, and has such a curious habit of feeling sorry for the most unworthy people."

"That's interesting," I said, exchanging a quick glance with Joanna.

"Still, she is a very well-bred woman. She was a Miss Farroway of Bellpath, very good family, but these old families sometimes *are* a little peculiar, I believe. But she is devoted to her husband who is a man of very fine intellect—wasted, I am sometimes afraid, in this country circle. A good man, and most sincere, but I always find his habit of quoting Latin a little confusing."

"Hear, hear," I said fervently.

"Jerry had an expensive public school education, so he doesn't recognize Latin when he hears it," said Joanna.

This led Miss Barton to a new topic.

"The schoolmistress here is a most unpleasant young woman," she said. "Quite *Red*, I'm afraid." She lowered her voice over the word "Red."

Later, as we walked home up the hill, Joanna said to me:
"She's rather sweet."

V

At dinner that night, Joanna said to Partridge that she hoped her tea party had been a success.

Partridge got rather red in the face and held herself even more stiffly.

"Thank you, miss, but Agnes never turned up after all."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"It didn't matter to *me*," said Partridge.

She was so swelling with grievance that she condescended to pour it out to us.

"It wasn't me who thought of asking her! She rang up herself, said she'd something on her mind and could she come here, it being her day off. And I said, yes, subject to your permission which I obtained. And after that, not a sound or sign of her! And no word of apology either, though I should hope I'll get a postcard tomorrow morning. These girls nowadays—don't know their place—no idea of how to behave."

Joanna attempted to soothe Partridge's wounded feelings.

"She mayn't have felt well. You didn't ring up to find out?"

Partridge drew herself up again.

"No, I did *not*, Miss. No, indeed. If Agnes likes to behave rudely that's her lookout, but I shall give her a piece of my mind when we meet."

Partridge went out of the room still stiff with indignation and Joanna and I laughed.

"Probably a case of 'Advice from Aunt Nancy's Column,'" I said. "'*My boy is very cold in his manner to me, what shall I do about it?*' Failing Aunt Nancy, Partridge was to be applied to for advice, but instead there has been a reconciliation and I expect at this minute

that Agnes and her boy are one of those speechless couples locked in each other's arms that you come upon suddenly standing by a dark hedge. They embarrass you horribly, but you don't embarrass them."

Joanna laughed and said she expected that was it.

We began talking of the anonymous letters and wondered how Nash and the melancholy Graves were getting on.

"It's a week today exactly," said Joanna, "since Mrs. Symmington's suicide. I should think they must have got on to something by now. Fingerprints, or handwriting, or *something*."

I answered her absently. Somewhere behind my conscious mind, a queer uneasiness was growing. It was connected in some way with the phrase that Joanna had used, "a week exactly."

I ought, I dare say, to have put two and two together earlier. Perhaps, unconsciously, my mind was already suspicious.

Anyway the leaven was working now. The uneasiness was growing—coming to a head.

Joanna noticed suddenly that I wasn't listening to her spirited account of a village encounter.

"What's the matter, Jerry?"

I did not answer because my mind was busy piecing things together.

Mrs. Symmington's suicide... She was alone in the house that afternoon... Alone in the house *because the maids were having their day out*... A week ago exactly....

"Jerry, what—"

I interrupted.

"Joanna, maids have days out once a week, don't they?"

"And alternate Sundays," said Joanna. "What on—"

"Never mind Sundays. They go out the same day every week?"

"Yes. That's the usual thing."

Joanna was staring at me curiously. Her mind had not taken the track mine had done.

I crossed the room and rang the bell. Partridge came.

"Tell me," I said, "this Agnes Woddell. She's in service?"

"Yes, sir. At Mrs. Symmington's. At Mr. Symmington's, I should say now."

I drew a deep breath. I glanced at the clock. It was halfpast ten.

"Would she be back now, do you think?"

Partridge was looking disapproving.

"Yes, sir. The maids have to be in by ten there. They're old-fashioned."

I said: "I'm going to ring up."

I went out to the hall. Joanna and Partridge followed me. Partridge was clearly furious. Joanna was puzzled. She said, as I was trying to get the number:

"What are you going to do, Jerry?"

"I'd like to be sure that the girl has come in all right."

Partridge sniffed. Just sniffed, nothing more. But I did not care twopence about Partridge's sniffs.

Elsie Holland answered the telephone the other end.

"Sorry to ring you up," I said. "This is Jerry Burton speaking. Is—has—your maid Agnes come in?"

It was not until after I had said it that I suddenly felt a bit of a fool. For if the girl had come in and it was all right, how on earth was I going to explain my ringing up and asking. It would have been better if I had let Joanna ask the question, though even that would need a bit of explaining. I foresaw a new trail of gossip started in Lymstock, with myself and the unknown Agnes Woddell at its centre.

Elsie Holland sounded, not unnaturally, very much surprised.

"Agnes? Oh, she's sure to be in by now."

I felt a fool, but I went on with it.

"Do you mind just seeing if she has come in, Miss Holland?"

There is one thing to be said for a nursery governess; she is used to doing things when told. Hers not to reason why! Elsie Holland put down the receiver and went off obediently.

Two minutes later I heard her voice.

"Are you there, Mr. Burton?"

"Yes."

"Agnes isn't in yet, as a matter of fact."

I knew then that my hunch had been right.

I heard a noise of voices vaguely from the other end, then Symmington himself spoke.

"Hallo, Burton, what's the matter?"

"Your maid Agnes isn't back yet?"

"No. Miss Holland has just been to see. What's the matter? There's not been an accident, has there?"

"Not an *accident*," I said.

"Do you mean you have reason to believe something has happened to the girl?"

I said grimly: "I shouldn't be surprised."

Eight

I

I slept badly that night. I think that, even then, there were pieces of the puzzle floating about in my mind. I believe that if I had given my mind to it, I could have solved the whole thing then and there. Otherwise why did those fragments tag along so persistently?

How much do we know at anytime? Much more, or so I believe, than we know we know! But we cannot break through to that subterranean knowledge. It is there, but we cannot reach it.

I lay on my bed, tossing uneasily, and only vague bits of the puzzle came to torture me.

There *was* a pattern, if only I could get hold of it. I ought to know who wrote those damned letters. There was a trail somewhere if only I could follow it....

As I dropped off to sleep, words danced irritatingly through my drowsy mind.

"No smoke without fire." No fire without smoke. Smoke... Smoke? Smoke screen... No, that was the war—a war phrase. War. Scrap of paper... Only a scrap of paper. Belgium— Germany....

I fell asleep. I dreamt that I was taking Mrs. Dane Calthrop, who had turned into a greyhound, for a walk with a collar and lead.

II

It was the ringing of the telephone that roused me. A persistent ringing.

I sat up in bed, glanced at my watch. It was half past seven. I had not yet been called. The telephone was ringing in the hall downstairs.

I jumped out of bed, pulled on a dressing-gown, and raced down. I beat Partridge coming through the back door from the kitchen by a short head. I picked up the receiver.

"Hallo?"

"Oh—" It was a sob of relief. "It's *you!*" Megan's voice. Megan's voice indescribably forlorn and frightened. "Oh, please do come—*do* come. Oh, please do! Will you?"

"I'm coming at once," I said. "Do you hear? *At once.*"

I took the stairs two at a time and burst in on Joanna.

"Look here, Jo, I'm going off to the Symmingtons."

Joanna lifted a curly blonde head from the pillow and rubbed her eyes like a small child.

"Why—what's happened?"

"I don't know. It was the child— Megan. She sounded all in."

"What do you think it is?"

"The girl Agnes, unless I'm very much mistaken."

As I went out of the door, Joanna called after me:

"Wait. I'll get up and drive you down."

"No need. I'll drive myself."

"You can't drive the car."

"Yes, I can."

I did, too. It hurt, but not too much. I'd washed, shaved, dressed, got the car out and driven to the Symmingtons' in half an hour. Not bad going.

Megan must have been watching for me. She came out of the house at a run and clutched me. Her poor little face was white and twitching.

"Oh, you've come—you've *come!*"

"Hold up, funny face," I said. "Yes, I've come. Now what is it?"

She began to shake. I put my arm round her.

"I— I found her."

"You found Agnes? Where?"

The trembling grew.

"Under the stairs. There's a cupboard there. It has fishing rods and golf clubs and things. You know."

I nodded. It was the usual cupboard.

Megan went on.

"She was there—all huddled up—and—and *cold*—horribly cold. She was—she was *dead*, you know!"

I asked curiously, "What made you look there?"

"I—I don't know. You telephoned last night. And we all began wondering where Agnes was. We waited up some time, but she didn't come in, and at last we went to bed. I didn't sleep very well and I got up early. There was only Rose (the cook, you know) about. She was very cross about Agnes not having come back. She said she'd been before somewhere when a girl did a flit like that. I had some milk and bread and butter in the kitchen—and then suddenly Rose came in looking queer and she said that Agnes's outdoor things were still in her room. Her best ones that she goes out in. And I began to wonder if—if she'd ever left the house, and I started looking round, and I opened the cupboard under the stairs and—and she was there...."

"Somebody's rung up the police, I suppose?"

"Yes, they're here now. My stepfather rang them up straightaway. And then I—I felt I couldn't bear it, and I rang *you* up. You don't mind?"

"No," I said. "I don't mind."

I looked at her curiously.

"Did anybody give you some brandy, or some coffee, or some tea after—after you found her?"

Megan shook her head.

I cursed the whole Symmington *ménage*. That stuffed shirt, Symmington, thought of nothing but the police. Neither Elsie Holland nor the cook seemed to have thought of the effect on the sensitive child who had made that gruesome discovery.

"Come on, slabface," I said. "We'll go to the kitchen."

We went round the house to the back door and into the kitchen. Rose, a plump pudding-faced woman of forty, was drinking strong

tea by the kitchen fire. She greeted us with a flow of talk and her hand to her heart.

She'd come all over queer, she told me, awful the palpitations were! Just think of it, it might have been *her*, it might have been any of them, murdered in their beds they might have been.

"Dish out a good strong cup of that tea for Miss Megan," I said. "She's had a shock, you know. Remember it was she who found the body."

The mere mention of a body nearly sent Rose off again, but I quelled her with a stern eye and she poured out a cup of inky fluid.

"There you are, young woman," I said to Megan. "You drink that down. You haven't got any brandy, I suppose, Rose?"

Rose said rather doubtfully that there was a drop of cooking brandy left over from the Christmas puddings.

"That'll do," I said, and put a dollop of it into Megan's cup. I saw by Rose's eye that she thought it a good idea.

I told Megan to stay with Rose.

"I can trust you to look after Miss Megan?" I said, and Rose replied in a gratified way, "Oh yes, sir."

I went through into the house. If I knew Rose and her kind, she would soon find it necessary to keep her strength up with a little food, and that would be good for Megan too. Confound these people, why couldn't they look after the child?

Fuming inwardly I ran into Elsie Holland in the hall. She didn't seem surprised to see me. I suppose that the gruesome excitement of the discovery made one oblivious of who was coming and going. The constable, Bert Rundle, was by the front door.

Elsie Holland gasped out:

"Oh, Mr. Burton, isn't it *awful*? Whoever can have done such a dreadful thing?"

"It *was* murder, then?"

"Oh, *yes*. She was struck on the back of the head. It's all blood and hair—oh! it's *awful*—and bundled into that cupboard. Who can have done such a wicked thing? And *why*? Poor Agnes, I'm sure she never did anyone any harm."

"No," I said. "Somebody saw to that pretty promptly."

She stared at me. Not, I thought, a quick-witted girl. But she had good nerves. Her colour was, as usual, slightly heightened by excitement, and I even fancied that in a macabre kind of way, and in spite of a naturally kind heart, she was enjoying the drama.

She said apologetically: "I must go up to the boys. Mr. Symmington is so anxious that they shouldn't get a shock. He wants me to keep them right away."

"Megan found the body, I hear," I said. "I hope somebody is looking after her?"

I will say for Elsie Holland that she looked conscience stricken.

"Oh dear," she said. "I forgot all about her. I do hope she's all right. I've been so rushed, you know, and the police and everything—but it was remiss of me. Poor girl, she must be feeling bad. I'll go and look for her at once."

I relented.

"She's all right," I said. "Rose is looking after her. You get along to the kids."

She thanked me with a flash of white tombstone teeth and hurried upstairs. After all, the boys were her job, and not Megan—Megan was nobody's job. Elsie was paid to look after Symmington's blinking brats. One could hardly blame her for doing so.

As she flashed round the corner of the stairs, I caught my breath. For a minute I caught a glimpse of a Winged Victory, deathless and incredibly beautiful, instead of a conscientious nursery governess.

Then a door opened and Superintendent Nash stepped out into the hall with Symmington behind him.

"Oh, Mr. Burton," he said. "I was just going to telephone you. I'm glad you are here."

He didn't ask me—then—why I was here.

He turned his head and said to Symmington:

"I'll use this room if I may."

It was a small morning room with a window on the front of the house.

"Certainly, certainly."

Symmington's poise was pretty good, but he looked desperately tired. Superintendent Nash said gently:

"I should have some breakfast if I were you, Mr. Symmington. You and Miss Holland and Miss Megan will feel much better after coffee and eggs and bacon. Murder is a nasty business on an empty stomach."

He spoke in a comfortable family doctor kind of way.

Symmington gave a faint attempt at a smile and said:

"Thank you, superintendent, I'll take your advice."

I followed Nash into the little morning room and he shut the door. He said then:

"You've got here very quickly? How did you hear?"

I told him that Megan had rung me up. I felt well-disposed towards Superintendent Nash. He, at any rate, had not forgotten that Megan, too, would be in need of breakfast.

"I hear that you telephoned last night, Mr. Burton, asking about this girl? Why was that?"

I suppose it did seem odd. I told him about Agnes's telephone call to Partridge and her nonappearance. He said, "Yes, I see...."

He said it slowly and reflectively, rubbing his chin.

Then he sighed:

"Well," he said. "It's murder now, right enough. Direct physical action. The question is, what did the girl know? Did she say anything to this Partridge? Anything definite?"

"I don't think so. But you can ask her."

"Yes. I shall come up and see her when I've finished here."

"What happened exactly?" I asked. "Or don't you know yet?"

"Near enough. It was the maids' day out—"

"Both of them?"

"Yes, it seems that there used to be two sisters here who liked to go out together, so Mrs. Symmington arranged it that way. Then when these two came, she kept to the same arrangement. They used to leave cold supper laid out in the dining room, and Miss Holland used to get tea."

"I see."

"It's pretty clear up to a point. The cook, Rose, comes from Nether Mickford, and in order to get there on her day out she has to catch the half past two bus. So Agnes has to finish clearing up lunch

always. Rose used to wash up the supper things in the evenings to even things up.

"That's what happened yesterday. Rose went off to catch the bus at two twenty-five, Symmington left for his office at five-and-twenty to three. Elsie Holland and the children went out at a quarter to three. Megan Hunter went out on her bicycle about five minutes later. Agnes would then be alone in the house. As far as I can make out, she normally left the house between three o'clock and half past three."

"The house being then left empty?"

"Oh, they don't worry about that down here. There's not much locking up done in these parts. As I say, at ten minutes to three Agnes was alone in the house. That she never left it is clear, for she was in her cap and apron still when we found her body."

"I suppose you can tell roughly the time of death?"

"Doctor Griffith won't commit himself. Between two o'clock and four thirty, is his official medical verdict."

"How was she killed?"

"She was first stunned by a blow on the back of the head. Afterwards an ordinary kitchen skewer, sharpened to a fine point, was thrust in the base of the skull, causing instantaneous death."

I lit a cigarette. It was not a nice picture.

"Pretty cold-blooded," I said.

"Oh yes, yes, that was indicated."

I inhaled deeply.

"Who did it?" I said. "And why?"

"I don't suppose," said Nash slowly, "that we shall ever know exactly why. But we can guess."

"She knew something?"

"She knew something."

"She didn't give anyone here a hint?"

"As far as I can make out, no. She's been upset, so the cook says, ever since Mrs. Symmington's death, and according to this Rose, she's been getting more and more worried, and kept saying she didn't know what she ought to do."

He gave a short exasperated sigh.

"It's always the way. They won't come to us. They've got that deep-seated prejudice against 'being mixed up with the police.' If she'd come along and told us what was worrying her, she'd be alive today."

"Didn't she give the other woman *any* hint?"

"No, or so Rose says, and I'm inclined to believe her. For if she had, Rose would have blurted it out at once with a good many fancy embellishments of her own."

"It's maddening," I said, "not to know."

"We can still guess, Mr. Burton. To begin with, it can't be anything very defionite. It's got to be the sort of thing that you think over, and as you think it over, your uneasiness grows. You see what I mean?"

"Yes."

"Actually, I think I know what it was."

I looked at him with respect.

"That's good work, superintendent."

"Well, you see, Mr. Burton, I know something that you don't. On the afternoon that Mrs. Symmington committed suicide both maids were supposed to be out. It was their day out. But actually Agnes came back to the house."

"You know that?"

"Yes. Agnes has a boyfriend—young Rendell from the fish shop. Wednesday is early closing and he comes along to meet Agnes and they go for a walk, or to the pictures if it's wet. That Wednesday they had a row practically as soon as they met. Our letter writer had been active, suggesting that Agnes had other fish to fry, and young Fred Rendell was all worked up. They quarrelled violently and Agnes bolted back home and said she wasn't coming out unless Fred said he was sorry."

"Well?"

"Well, Mr. Burton, the kitchen faces the back of the house but the pantry looks out where we are looking now. There's only one entrance gate. You come through it and either up to the front door, or else along the path at the side of the house to the back door."

He paused.

"Now I'll tell you something. That letter that came to Mrs. Symmington that afternoon *didn't come by post*. It had a used stamp affixed to it, and the postmark faked quite convincingly in lampblack, so that it would seem to have been delivered by the postman with the afternoon letters. But actually *it had not been through the post*. You see what that means?"

I said slowly: "It means that it was left by *hand*, pushed through the letter box some time before the afternoon post was delivered, so that it should be amongst the other letters."

"Exactly. The afternoon post comes round about a quarter to four. My theory is this. The girl was in the pantry looking through the window (it's masked by shrubs but you can see through them quite well) watching out for her young man to turn up and apologize."

I said: "*And she saw whoever it was deliver that note?*"

"That's my guess, Mr. Burton. I may be wrong, of course."

"I don't think you are... It's simple—and convincing—and it means that Agnes knew *who the anonymous letter writer was*."

"Yes."

"But then why didn't she—?"

I paused, frowning.

Nash said quickly:

"As I see it, the girl *didn't realize what she had seen*. Not at first. Somebody had left a letter at the house, yes—but that somebody was nobody she would dream of connecting with the anonymous letters. It was somebody, from that point of view, quite above suspicion.

"But the more she thought about it, the more uneasy she grew. Ought she, perhaps, to tell someone about it? In her perplexity she thinks of Miss Barton's Partridge who, I gather, is a somewhat dominant personality and whose judgment Agnes would accept unhesitatingly. She decides to ask Partridge what she ought to do."

"Yes," I said thoughtfully. "It fits well enough. And somehow or other, Poison Pen found out. How did she find out, superintendent?"

"You're not used to living in the country, Mr. Burton. It's a kind of miracle how things get round. First of all there's the telephone call. Who overheard it your end?" I reflected.

"I answered the telephone originally. Then I called up the stairs to Partridge."

"Mentioning the girl's name?"

"Yes—yes, I did."

"Anyone overhear you?"

"My sister or Miss Griffith might have done so."

"Ah, Miss Griffith. What was she doing up there?"

I explained.

"Was she going back to the village?"

"She was going to Mr. Pye first."

Superintendent Nash sighed.

"That's two ways it could have gone all over the place."

I was incredulous.

"Do you mean that either Miss Griffith or Mr. Pye would bother to repeat a meaningless little bit of information like that?"

"Anything's news in a place like this. You'd be surprised. If the dressmaker's mother has got a bad corn everybody hears about it! And then there is this end. Miss Holland, Rose—they could have heard what Agnes said. And there's Fred Rendell. It may have gone round through him that Agnes went back to the house that afternoon."

I gave a slight shiver. I was looking out of the window. In front of me was a neat square of grass and a path and the low prim gate.

Someone had opened the gate, had walked very correctly and quietly up to the house, and had pushed a letter through the letter box. I saw, hazily, in my mind's eye, that vague woman's shape. The face was blank—but it must be a face that I knew....

Superintendent Nash was saying:

"All the same, this narrows things down. That's always the way we get 'em in the end. Steady, patient elimination. There aren't so very many people it could be now."

"You mean—?"

"It knocks out any women clerks who were at their work all yesterday afternoon. It knocks out the schoolmistress. She was teaching. And the district nurse. I know where she was yesterday. Not that I ever thought it was any of *them*, but now we're *sure*. You

see, Mr. Burton, we've got two definite times now on which to concentrate—yesterday afternoon, and the week before. On the day of Mrs. Symmington's death from, say, a quarter past three (the earliest possible time at which Agnes could have been back in the house after her quarrel) and four o'clock when the post must have come (but I can get that fixed more accurately with the postman). And yesterday from ten minutes to three (when Miss Megan Hunter left the house) until half past three or more probably a quarter past three as Agnes hadn't begun to change."

"What do you think happened yesterday?"

Nash made a grimace.

"What do I think? I think a certain lady walked up to the front door and rang the bell, quite calm and smiling, the afternoon caller... Maybe she asked for Miss Holland, or for Miss Megan, or perhaps she had brought a parcel. Anyway Agnes turns round to get a salver for cards, or to take the parcel in, and our ladylike caller bats her on the back of her unsuspecting head."

"What with?"

Nash said:

"The ladies round here usually carry large sizes in handbags. No saying what mightn't be inside it."

"And then stabs her through the back of the neck and bundles her into the cupboard? Wouldn't that be a hefty job for a woman?"

Superintendent Nash looked at me with rather a queer expression.

"The woman we're after isn't normal—not by a long way—and that type of mental instability goes with surprising strength. Agnes wasn't a big girl."

He paused and then asked: "What made Miss Megan Hunter think of looking in that cupboard?"

"Sheer instinct," I said.

Then I asked: "Why drag Agnes into the cupboard? What was the point?"

"The longer it was before the body was found, the more difficult it would be to fix the time of death accurately. If Miss Holland, for instance, fell over the body as soon as she came in, a doctor might

be able to fix it within ten minutes or so—which might be awkward for our lady friend.”

I said, frowning:

“But if Agnes were suspicious of this person—”

Nash interrupted me.

“She wasn’t. Not to the pitch of definite suspicion. She just thought it ‘queer.’ She was a slow-witted girl, I imagine, and she was only vaguely suspicious with a feeling that something was wrong. She certainly didn’t suspect that she was up against a woman who would do murder.”

“Did you suspect that?” I asked.

Nash shook his head. He said, with feeling:

“I ought to have known. That suicide business, you see, frightened Poison Pen. She got the wind up. Fear, Mr. Burton, is an incalculable thing.”

“Yes, fear. That was the thing we ought to have foreseen. Fear—in a lunatic brain....

“You see,” said Superintendent Nash, and somehow his words made the whole thing seem absolutely horrible. “We’re up against someone who’s respected and thought highly of—someone, in fact, of good social position!”

III

Presently Nash said that he was going to interview Rose once more. I asked him, rather diffidently, if I might come too. Rather to my surprise he assented cordially.

“I’m very glad of your cooperation, Mr. Burton, if I may say so.”

“That sounds suspicious,” I said. “In books when a detective welcomes someone’s assistance, that someone is usually the murderer.”

Nash laughed shortly. He said: “You’re hardly the type to write anonymous letters, Mr. Burton.”

He added: “Frankly, you can be useful to us.”

“I’m glad, but I don’t see how.”

"You're a stranger down here, that's why. You've got no preconceived ideas about the people here. But at the same time, you've got the opportunity of getting to know things in what I may call a social way."

"The murderer is a person of good social position," I murmured.

"Exactly."

"I'm to be the spy within the gates?"

"Have you any objection?"

I thought it over.

"No," I said, "frankly I haven't. If there's a dangerous lunatic about driving inoffensive women to suicide and hitting miserable little maidservants on the head, then I'm not averse to doing a bit of dirty work to put that lunatic under restraint."

"That's sensible of you, sir. And let me tell you, the person we're after is dangerous. She's about as dangerous as a rattlesnake and a cobra and a black mamba rolled into one."

I gave a slight shiver. I said:

"In fact, we've got to make haste?"

"That's right. Don't think we're inactive in the force. We're not. We're working on several different lines."

He said it grimly.

I had a vision of a fine far-flung spider's web....

Nash wanted to hear Rose's story again, so he explained to me, because she had already told him two different versions, and the more versions he got from her, the more likely it was that a few grains of truth might be incorporated.

We found Rose washing up breakfast, and she stopped at once and rolled her eyes and clutched her heart and explained again how she'd been coming over queer all the morning.

Nash was patient with her but firm. He'd been soothing the first time, so he told me, and peremptory the second, and he now employed a mixture of the two.

Rose enlarged pleasurably on the details of the past week, of how Agnes had gone about in deadly fear, and had shivered and said, "Don't ask me," when Rose had urged her to say what was the

matter. "It would be death if she told me," that's what she said, finished Rose, rolling her eyes happily.

Had Agnes given no hint of what was troubling her?

No, except that she went in fear of her life.

Superintendent Nash sighed and abandoned the theme, contenting himself with extracting an exact account of Rose's own activities the preceding afternoon.

This, put baldly, was that Rose had caught the 2:30 bus and had spent the afternoon and evening with her family, returning by the 8:40 bus from Nether Mickford. The recital was complicated by the extraordinary presentiments of evil Rose had had all the afternoon and how her sister had commented on it and how she hadn't been able to touch a morsel of seed cake.

From the kitchen we went in search of Elsie Holland, who was superintending the children's lessons. As always, Elsie Holland was competent and obliging. She rose and said:

"Now, Colin, you and Brian will do these three sums and have the answers ready for me when I come back."

She then led us into the night nursery. "Will this do? I thought it would be better not to talk before the children."

"Thank you, Miss Holland. Just tell me, once more, are you *quite* sure that Agnes never mentioned to you being worried over anything—since Mrs. Symmington's death, I mean?"

"No, she never said anything. She was a very quiet girl, you know, and didn't talk much."

"A change from the other one, then!"

"Yes, Rose talks much too much. I have to tell her not to be impertinent sometimes."

"Now, will you tell me exactly what happened yesterday afternoon? Everything you can remember."

"Well, we had lunch as usual. One o'clock, and we hurry just a little. I don't let the boys dawdle. Let me see. Mr. Symmington went back to the office, and I helped Agnes by laying the table for supper—the boys ran out in the garden till I was ready to take them."

"Where did you go?"

"Towards Combeacre, by the field path—the boys wanted to fish. I forgot their bait and had to go back for it."

"What time was that?"

"Let me see, we started about twenty to three—or just after. Megan was coming but changed her mind. She was going out on her bicycle. She's got quite a craze for bicycling."

"I mean what time was it when you went back for the bait? Did you go into the house?"

"No. I'd left it in the conservatory at the back. I don't know what time it was then—about ten minutes to three, perhaps."

"Did you see Megan or Agnes?"

"Megan must have started, I think. No, I didn't see Agnes. I didn't see anyone."

"And after that you went fishing?"

"Yes, we went along by the stream. We didn't catch anything. We hardly ever do, but the boys enjoy it. Brian got rather wet. I had to change his things when we got in."

"You attend to tea on Wednesdays?"

"Yes. It's all ready in the drawing room for Mr. Symmington. I just make the tea when he comes in. The children and I have ours in the schoolroom—and Megan, of course. I have my own tea things and everything in the cupboard up there."

"What time did you get in?"

"At ten minutes to five. I took the boys up and started to lay tea. Then when Mr. Symmington came in at five I went down to make his but he said he would have it with us in the schoolroom. The boys were so pleased. We played Animal Grab afterwards. It seems so awful to think of now—with that poor girl in the cupboard all the time."

"Would anybody go to that cupboard normally?"

"Oh no, it's only used for keeping junk. The hats and coats hang in the little cloakroom to the right of the front door as you come in. No one might have gone to the other cupboard for months."

"I see. And you noticed nothing unusual, nothing abnormal at all when you came back?"

The blue eyes opened very wide.

"Oh no, inspector, nothing at all. Everything was just the same as usual. That's what was so awful about it."

"And the week before?"

"You mean the day Mrs. Symmington—"

"Yes."

"Oh, that was terrible—terrible!"

"Yes, yes, I know. You were out all that afternoon also?"

"Oh yes, I always take the boys out in the afternoon—if it's fine enough. We do lessons in the morning. We went up on the moor, I remember—quite a long way. I was afraid I was late back because as I turned in at the gate I saw Mr. Symmington coming from his office at the other end of the road, and I hadn't even put the kettle on, but it was just ten minutes to five."

"You didn't go up to Mrs. Symmington?"

"Oh no. I never did. She always rested after lunch. She had attacks of neuralgia—and they used to come on after meals. Dr. Griffith had given her some cachets to take. She used to lie down and try to sleep."

Nash said in a casual voice:

"So no one would take her up the post?"

"The afternoon post? No, I'd look in the letter box and put the letters on the hall table when I came in. But very often Mrs. Symmington used to come down and get it herself. She didn't sleep all the afternoon. She was usually up again by four."

"You didn't think anything was wrong because she wasn't up that afternoon?"

"Oh, no, I never dreamed of such a thing. Mr. Symmington was hanging up his coat in the hall and I said, 'Tea's not quite ready, but the kettle's nearly boiling,' and he nodded and called out, 'Mona, Mona!'—and then as Mrs. Symmington didn't answer he went upstairs to her bedroom, and it must have been the most terrible shock to him. He called me and I came, and he said, 'Keep the children away,' and then he phoned Dr. Griffith and we forgot all about the kettle and it burnt the bottom out! Oh dear, it *was* dreadful, and she'd been so happy and cheerful at lunch."

Nash said abruptly: "What is your own opinion of that letter she received, Miss Holland?"

Elsie Holland said indignantly:

"Oh, I think it was wicked—wicked!"

"Yes, yes, I don't mean that. Did you think it was true?"

Elsie Holland said firmly:

"No, indeed I don't. Mrs. Symmington was very sensitive—very sensitive indeed. She had to take all sorts of things for her nerves. And she was very—well, *particular*." Elsie flushed. "Anything of that sort—*nasty*, I mean—would have given her a great shock."

Nash was silent for a moment, then he asked:

"Have you had any of these letters, Miss Holland?"

"No. No, I haven't had any."

"Are you sure? Please"—he lifted a hand—"don't answer in a hurry. They're not pleasant things to get, I know. And sometimes people don't like to admit they've had them. But it's very important in this case that we should know. We're quite aware that the statements in them are just a tissue of lies, so you needn't feel embarrassed."

"But I haven't, superintendent. Really I haven't. Not anything of the kind."

She was indignant, almost tearful, and her denials seemed genuine enough.

When she went back to the children, Nash stood looking out of the window.

"Well," he said, "that's that! She says she hasn't received any of these letters. And she sounds as though she's speaking the truth."

"She did certainly. I'm sure she was."

"H'm," said Nash. "Then what I want to know is, why the devil hasn't she?"

He went on rather impatiently, as I stared at him.

"She's a pretty girl, isn't she?"

"Rather more than pretty."

"Exactly. As a matter of fact, she's uncommonly good-looking. And she's young. In fact she's just the meat an anonymous letter writer would like. Then why has she been left out?"

I shook my head.

"It's interesting, you know. I must mention it to Graves. He asked if we could tell him definitely of anyone who hadn't had one."

"She's the second person," I said. "There's Emily Barton, remember."

Nash gave a faint chuckle.

"You shouldn't believe everything you're told, Mr. Burton. Miss Barton had one all right—more than one."

"How do you know?"

"That devoted dragon she's lodging with told me—her late parlourmaid or cook. Florence Elford. Very indignant she was about it. Would like to have the writer's blood."

"Why did Miss Emily say she hadn't had any?"

"Delicacy. Their language isn't nice. Little Miss Barton has spent her life avoiding the coarse and unrefined."

"What did the letters say?"

"The usual. Quite ludicrous in her case. And incidentally insinuated that she poisoned off her old mother and most of her sisters!"

I said incredulously:

"Do you mean to say there's really this dangerous lunatic going about and we can't spot her right away?"

"We'll spot her," said Nash, and his voice was grim. "She'll write just one letter too many."

"But, my goodness, man, she won't go on writing these things—not now."

He looked at me.

"Oh yes she will. You see, *she can't stop now*. It's a morbid craving. The letters will go on, make no mistake about that."

Nine

I

I went and found Megan before leaving the house. She was in the garden and seemed almost back to her usual self. She greeted me quite cheerfully.

I suggested that she should come back to us again for a while, but after a momentary hesitation she shook her head.

"It's nice of you—but I think I'll stay here. After all, it is—well, I suppose, it's my home. And I dare say I can help with the boys a bit."

"Well," I said, "it's as you like."

"Then I think I'll stay. I could— I could—"

"Yes?" I prompted.

"If—if anything awful happened, I could ring you up, couldn't I, and you'd come."

I was touched. "Of course. But what awful thing do you think might happen?"

"Oh, I don't know." She looked vague. "Things seem rather like that just now, don't they?"

"For God's sake," I said. "Don't go nosing out anymore bodies! It's not good for you."

She gave me a brief flash of a smile.

"No, it isn't. It made me feel awfully sick."

I didn't much like leaving her there, but after all, as she had said, it was her home. And I fancied that now Elsie Holland would feel

more responsible for her.

Nash and I went up together to Little Furze. Whilst I gave Joanna an account of the morning's doings, Nash tackled Partridge. He rejoined us looking discouraged.

"Not much help there. According to this woman, the girl only said she was worried about something and didn't know what to do and that she'd like Miss Partridge's advice."

"Did Partridge mention the fact to anyone?" asked Joanna.

Nash nodded, looking grim.

"Yes, she told Mrs. Emory—your daily woman—on the lines, as far as I can gather, that there were *some* young women who were willing to take advice from their elders and didn't think they could settle everything for themselves offhand! Agnes mightn't be very bright, but she was a nice respectful girl and knew her manners."

"Partridge preening herself, in fact," murmured Joanna. "And Mrs. Emory could have passed it round the town?"

"That's right, Miss Burton."

"There's one thing rather surprises me," I said. "Why were my sister and I included among the recipients of the anonymous letters? We were strangers down here—nobody could have had a grudge against us."

"You're failing to allow for the mentality of a Poison Pen—all is grist that comes to their mill. Their grudge, you might say, is against humanity."

"I suppose," said Joanna thoughtfully, "that that is what Mrs. Dane Calthrop meant."

Nash looked at her inquiringly, but she did not enlighten him. The superintendent said:

"I don't know if you happened to look closely at the envelope of the letter you got, Miss Burton. If so, you may have noticed that it was actually addressed to Miss Barton, and the *a* altered to a *u* afterwards."

That remark, properly interpreted, ought to have given us a clue to the whole business. As it was, none of us saw any significance in it.

Nash went off, and I was left with Joanna. She actually said: "You don't think that letter can really have been meant for Miss Emily, do you?"

"It would hardly have begun 'You painted trollop,'" I pointed out, and Joanna agreed.

Then she suggested that I should go down to the town. "You ought to hear what everyone is saying. It will be *the* topic this morning!"

I suggested that she should come too, but rather to my surprise Joanna refused. She said she was going to mess about in the garden.

I paused in the doorway and said, lowering my voice:

"I suppose Partridge is all right?"

"Partridge!"

The amazement in Joanna's voice made me feel ashamed of my idea. I said apologetically: "I just wondered. She's rather 'queer' in some ways—a grim spinster—the sort of person who might have religious mania."

"This isn't religious mania—or so you told me Graves said."

"Well, sex mania. They're very closely tied up together, I understand. She's repressed and respectable, and has been shut up here with a lot of elderly women for years."

"What put the idea into your head?"

I said slowly:

"Well, we've only her word for it, haven't we, as to what the girl Agnes said to her? Suppose Agnes asked Partridge to tell her why Partridge came and left a note that day—and Partridge said she'd call round that afternoon and explain."

"And then camouflaged it by coming to us and asking if the girl could come here?"

"Yes."

"But Partridge never went out that afternoon."

"We don't know that. We were out ourselves, remember."

"Yes, that's true. It's possible, I suppose." Joanna turned it over in her mind. "But I don't think so, all the same. I don't think Partridge has the mentality to cover her tracks over the letters. To wipe off

fingerprints, and all that. It isn't only cunning you want—it's knowledge. I don't think she's got that. I suppose—" Joanna hesitated, then said slowly, "they are sure it is a woman, aren't they?"

"You don't think it's a man?" I exclaimed incredulously.

"Not—not an ordinary man—but a certain kind of man. I'm thinking, really, of Mr. Pye."

"So Pye is your selection?"

"Don't you feel yourself that he's a possibility? He's the sort of person who might be lonely—and unhappy—and spiteful. Everyone, you see, rather laughs at him. Can't you see him secretly hating all the normal happy people, and taking a queer perverse artistic pleasure in what he was doing?"

"Graves said a middle-aged spinster."

"Mr. Pye," said Joanna, "*is* a middle-aged spinster."

"A misfit," I said slowly.

"Very much so. He's rich, but money doesn't help. And I do feel he might be unbalanced. He is, really, rather a *frightening* little man."

"He got a letter himself, remember."

"We don't know that," Joanna pointed out. "We only thought so. And anyway, he might have been putting on an act."

"For our benefit?"

"Yes. He's clever enough to think of that—and not to overdo it."

"He must be a first-class actor."

"But of course, Jerry, whoever is doing this *must* be a first-class actor. That's partly where the pleasure comes in."

"For God's sake, Joanna, don't speak so understandingly! You make me feel that you—that you understand the mentality."

"I think I do. I can—just—get into the mood. If I weren't Joanna Burton, if I weren't young and reasonably attractive and able to have a good time, if I were—how shall I put it?—behind bars, watching other people enjoy life, would a black evil tide rise in me, making me want to hurt, to torture—even to destroy?"

"Joanna!" I took her by the shoulders and shook her. She gave a little sigh and shiver, and smiled at me.

"I frightened you, didn't I, Jerry? But I have a feeling that that's the right way to solve this problem. You've got to be the person, knowing how they feel and what makes them act, and then—and then perhaps you'll know what they're going to do next."

"Oh, hell!" I said. "And I came down here to be a vegetable and get interested in all the dear little local scandals. Dear little local scandals! Libel, vilification, obscene language and murder!"

II

Joanna was quite right. The High Street was full of interested groups. I was determined to get everyone's reactions in turn.

I met Griffith first. He looked terribly ill and tired. So much so that I wondered. Murder is not, certainly, all in the day's work to a doctor, but his profession does equip him to face most things including suffering, the ugly side of human nature, and the fact of death.

"You look all in," I said.

"Do I?" He was vague. "Oh! I've had some worrying cases lately."

"Including our lunatic at large?"

"That, certainly." He looked away from me across the street. I saw a fine nerve twitching in his eyelid.

"You've no suspicions as to—*who*?"

"No. No. I wish to God I had."

He asked abruptly after Joanna, and said, hesitatingly, that he had some photographs she'd wanted to see.

I offered to take them to her.

"Oh, it doesn't matter. I shall be passing that way actually later in the morning."

I began to be afraid that Griffith had got it badly. Curse Joanna! Griffith was too good a man to be dangled as a scalp.

I let him go, for I saw his sister coming and I wanted, for once, to talk to her.

Aimée Griffith began, as it were, in the middle of a conversation.

"Absolutely shocking!" she boomed. "I hear you were there—quite early?"

There was a question in the words, and her eyes glinted as she stressed the word "early." I wasn't going to tell her that Megan had rung me up. I said instead:

"You see, I was a bit uneasy last night. The girl was due to tea at our house and didn't turn up."

"And so you feared the worst? Damned smart of you!"

"Yes," I said. "I'm quite the human bloodhound."

"It's the first murder we've ever had in Lymstock. Excitement is terrific. Hope the police can handle it all right."

"I shouldn't worry," I said. "They're an efficient body of men."

"Can't even remember what the girl looked like, although I suppose she's opened the door to me dozens of times. Quiet, insignificant little thing. Knocked on the head and then stabbed through the back of the neck, so Owen tells me. Looks like a boyfriend to me. What do you think?"

"That's your solution?"

"Seems the most likely one. Had a quarrel, I expect. They're very inbred round here—bad heredity, a lot of them." She paused, and then went on, "I hear Megan Hunter found the body? Must have given her a bit of a shock."

I said shortly:

"It did."

"Not too good for her, I should imagine. In my opinion she's not too strong in the head—and a thing like this might send her completely off her onion."

I took a sudden resolution. I had to know something.

"Tell me, Miss Griffith, was it you who persuaded Megan to return home yesterday?"

"Well, I wouldn't say exactly persuaded."

I stuck to my guns.

"But you did say something to her?"

Aimée Griffith planted her feet firmly and stared me in the eyes. She was, just slightly, on the defensive. She said:

"It's no good that young woman shirking her responsibilities. She's young and she doesn't know how tongues wag, so I felt it my duty to give her a hint."

"Tongues—?" I broke off because I was too angry to go on.

Aimée Griffith continued with that maddeningly complacent confidence in herself which was her chief characteristic:

"Oh, I dare say *you* don't hear all the gossip that goes round. I do! I know what people are saying. Mind you, I don't for a minute think there's anything in it—not for a minute! But you know what people are—if they can say something ill-natured, they do! And it's rather hard lines on the girl when she's got her living to earn."

"Her living to earn?" I said, puzzled.

Aimée went on:

"It's a difficult position for her, naturally. And I think she did the right thing. I mean, she couldn't go off at a moment's notice and leave the children with no one to look after them. She's been splendid—absolutely splendid. I say so to everybody! But there it is, it's an invidious position, and people will talk."

"Who are you talking about?" I asked.

"Elsie Holland, of course," said Aimée Griffith impatiently. "In my opinion, she's a thoroughly nice girl, and has only been doing her duty."

"And what are people saying?"

Aimée Griffith laughed. It was, I thought, rather an unpleasant laugh.

"They're saying that she's already considering the possibility of becoming Mrs. Symmington No. 2—that she's all out to console the widower and make herself indispensable."

"But, good God," I said, shocked, "Mrs. Symmington's only been dead a week!"

Aimée Griffith shrugged her shoulders.

"Of course. It's absurd! But you know what people are! The Holland girl is young and she's good-looking—that's enough. And mind you, being a nursery governess isn't much of a prospect for a girl. I wouldn't blame her if she wanted a settled home and a husband and was playing her cards accordingly.

"Of course," she went on, "poor Dick Symmington hasn't the least idea of all this! He's still completely knocked out by Mona Symmington's death. But you know what men are! If the girl is

always there, making him comfortable, looking after him, being obviously devoted to the children—well, he gets to be dependent on her.”

I said quietly:

“So you do think that Elsie Holland is a designing hussy?”

Aimée Griffith flushed.

“Not at all. I’m sorry for the girl—with people saying nasty things! That’s why I more or less told Megan that she ought to go home. It looks better than having Dick Symmington and the girl alone in the house.”

I began to understand things.

Aimée Griffith gave her jolly laugh.

“You’re shocked, Mr. Burton, at hearing what our gossiping little town thinks. I can tell you this—they always think the worst!”

She laughed and nodded and strode away.

III

I came upon Mr. Pye by the church. He was talking to Emily Barton, who looked pink and excited.

Mr. Pye greeted me with every evidence of delight.

“Ah, Burton, good morning, good morning! How is your charming sister?”

I told him that Joanna was well.

“But not joining our village parliament? We’re all agog over the news. Murder! Real Sunday newspaper murder in our midst! Not the most interesting of crimes, I fear. Somewhat sordid. The brutal murder of a little serving maid. No finer points about the crime, but still undeniably, news.”

Miss Barton said tremulously:

“It is shocking—quite shocking.”

Mr. Pye turned to her.

“But you enjoy it, dear lady, you enjoy it. Confess it now. You disapprove, you deplore, but there *is* the thrill. I insist, there *is* the thrill!”

"Such a nice girl," said Emily Barton. "She came to me from St. Clotilde's Home. Quite a raw girl. But most teachable. She turned into such a nice little maid. Partridge was very pleased with her."

I said quickly:

"She was coming to tea with Partridge yesterday afternoon." I turned to Pye. "I expect Aimée Griffith told you."

My tone was quite casual. Pye responded apparently quite unsuspiciously: "She did mention it, yes. She said, I remember, that it was something quite new for servants to ring up on their employers' telephones."

"Partridge would never dream of doing such a thing," said Miss Emily, "and I am really surprised at Agnes doing so."

"You are behind the times, dear lady," said Mr. Pye. "My two terrors use the telephone constantly and smoked all over the house until I objected. But one daren't say too much. Prescott is a divine cook, though temperamental, and Mrs. Prescott is an admirable house-parlourmaid."

"Yes, indeed, we all think you're very lucky."

I intervened, since I did not want the conversation to become purely domestic.

"The news of the murder has got round very quickly," I said.

"Of course, of course," said Mr. Pye. "The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker. Enter Rumour, painted full of tongues! Lymstock, alas! is going to the dogs. Anonymous letters, murders, any amount of criminal tendencies."

Emily Barton said nervously: "They don't think—there's no idea—that—that the two are connected."

Mr. Pye pounced on the idea.

"An interesting speculation. The girl knew something, therefore she was murdered. Yes, yes, most promising. How clever of you to think of it."

"I— I can't bear it."

Emily Barton spoke abruptly and turned away, walking very fast.

Pye looked after her. His cherubic face was pursed up quizzically.

He turned back to me and shook his head gently.

"A sensitive soul. A charming creature, don't you think? Absolutely a period piece. She's not, you know, of her own generation, she's of the generation before that. The mother must have been a woman of a very strong character. She kept the family time ticking at about 1870, I should say. The whole family preserved under a glass case. I do like to come across that sort of thing."

I did not want to talk about period pieces.

"What do you really think about all this business?" I asked.

"Meaning by that?"

"Anonymous letters, murder..."

"Our local crime wave? What do you?"

"I asked you first," I said pleasantly.

Mr. Pye said gently:

"I'm a student, you know, of abnormalities. They interest me. Such apparently unlikely people do the most fantastic things. Take the case of Lizzie Borden. There's not really a reasonable explanation of that. In this case, my advice to the police would be—study *character*. Leave your fingerprints and your measuring of handwriting and your microscopes. Notice instead what people do with their hands, and their little tricks of manner, and the way they eat their food, and if they laugh sometimes for no apparent reason."

I raised my eyebrows. "Mad?" I said.

"Quite, quite mad," said Mr. Pye, and added, "but you'd never know it!"

"Who?"

His eyes met mine. He smiled.

"No, no, Burton, that would be slander. We can't add slander to all the rest of it."

He fairly skipped off down the street.

IV

As I stood staring after him the church door opened and the Rev. Caleb Dane Calthrop came out.

He smiled vaguely at me.

"Good—good morning, Mr—er—er—"

I helped him. "Burton."

"Of course, of course, you mustn't think I don't remember you. Your name had just slipped my memory for the moment. A beautiful day."

"Yes," I said rather shortly.

He peered at me.

"But something—something—ah, yes, that poor unfortunate child who was in service at the Symmingtons.' I find it hard to believe, I must confess, that we have a murderer in our midst, Mr—er—Burton."

"It does seem a bit fantastic," I said.

"Something else has just reached my ears." He leaned towards me. "I learn that there have been anonymous letters going about. Have you heard any rumour of such things?"

"I have heard," I said.

"Cowardly and dastardly things." He paused and quoted an enormous stream of Latin. "Those words of Horace are very applicable, don't you think?" he said.

"Absolutely," I said.

V

There didn't seem anyone more I could profitably talk to, so I went home, dropping in for some tobacco and for a bottle of sherry, so as to get some of the humbler opinions on the crime.

"A narsty tramp," seemed to be the verdict.

"Come to the door, they do, and whine and ask for money, and then if it's a girl alone in the house, they turn narsty. My sister Dora, over to Combeacre, she had a narsty experience one day—Drunk, he was, and selling those little printed poems...."

The story went on, ending with the intrepid Dora courageously banging the door in the man's face and taking refuge and barricading herself in some vague retreat, which I gathered from the delicacy in mentioning it must be the lavatory. "And there she stayed till her lady came home!"

I reached Little Furze just a few minutes before lunchtime. Joanna was standing in the drawing room window doing nothing at all and looking as though her thoughts were miles away.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Nothing particular."

I went out on the veranda. Two chairs were drawn up to an iron table and there were two empty sherry glasses. On another chair was an object at which I looked with bewilderment for some time.

"What on earth is this?"

"Oh," said Joanna, "I think it's a photograph of a diseased spleen or something. Dr. Griffith seemed to think I'd be interested to see it."

I looked at the photograph with some interest. Every man has his own ways of courting the female sex. I should not, myself, choose to do it with photographs of spleens, diseased or otherwise. Still no doubt Joanna had asked for it!

"It looks most unpleasant," I said.

Joanna said it did, rather.

"How was Griffith?" I asked.

"He looked tired and very unhappy. I think he's got something on his mind."

"A spleen that won't yield to treatment?"

"Don't be silly. I mean something real."

"I should say the man's got *you* on his mind. I wish you'd lay off him, Joanna."

"Oh, do shut up. I haven't done anything."

"Women always say that."

Joanna whirled angrily out of the room.

The diseased spleen was beginning to curl up in the sun. I took it by one corner and brought it into the drawing room. I had no affection for it myself, but I presumed it was one of Griffith's treasures.

I stooped down and pulled out a heavy book from the bottom shelf of the bookcase in order to press the photograph flat again between its leaves. It was a ponderous volume of somebody's sermons.

The book came open in my hand in rather a surprising way. In another minute I saw why. *From the middle of it a number of pages had been neatly cut out.*

VI

I stood staring at it. I looked at the title page. It had been published in 1840.

There could be no doubt at all. I was looking at the book from the pages of which the anonymous letters had been put together. Who had cut them out?

Well, to begin with, it could be Emily Barton herself. She was, perhaps, the obvious person to think of. Or it could have been Partridge.

But there were other possibilities. The pages could have been cut out by anyone who had been alone in this room, any visitor, for instance, who had sat there waiting for Miss Emily. Or even anyone who called on business.

No, that wasn't so likely. I had noticed that when, one day, a clerk from the bank had come to see me, Partridge had shown him into the little study at the back of the house. That was clearly the house routine.

A visitor, then? Someone "of good social position." Mr. Pye? Aimée Griffith? Mrs. Dane Calthrop?

VII

The gong sounded and I went in to lunch. Afterwards, in the drawing room I showed Joanna my find.

We discussed it from every aspect. Then I took it down to the police station.

They were elated at the find, and I was patted on the back for what was, after all, the sheerest piece of luck.

Graves was not there, but Nash was, and rang up the other man. They would test the book for fingerprints, though Nash was not hopeful of finding anything. I may say that he did not. There were

mine, Partridge's and nobody else's, merely showing that Partridge dusted conscientiously.

Nash walked back with me up the hill. I asked how he was getting on. "We're narrowing it down, Mr. Burton. We've eliminated the people it couldn't be."

"Ah," I said. "And who remains?"

"Miss Ginch. She was to meet a client at a house yesterday afternoon by appointment. The house was situated not far along the Combeacre Road, that's the road that goes past the Symmingtons.' She would have to pass the house both going and coming...the week before, the day the anonymous letter was delivered, and Mrs. Symmington committed suicide, was her last day at Symmington's office. Mr. Symmington thought at first she had not left the office at all that afternoon. He had Sir Henry Lushington with him all the afternoon and rang several times for Miss Ginch. I find, however, that she did leave the office between three and four. She went out to get some high denomination of stamp of which they had run short. The office boy could have gone, but Miss Ginch elected to go, saying she had a headache and would like the air. She was not gone long."

"But long enough?"

"Yes, long enough to hurry along to the other end of the village, slip the letter in the box and hurry back. I must say, however, that I cannot find anybody who saw her near the Symmingtons' house."

"Would they notice?"

"They might and they might not."

"Who else is in your bag?"

Nash looked very straight ahead of him.

"You'll understand that we can't exclude anybody—anybody at all."

"No," I said. "I see that."

He said gravely: "Miss Griffith went to Brenton for a meeting of Girl Guides yesterday. She arrived rather late."

"You don't think—"

"No, I don't think. But I don't *know*. Miss Griffith seems an eminently sane healthy-minded woman—but I say, I don't *know*."

"What about the previous week? Could she have slipped the letter in the box?"

"It's possible. She was shopping in the town that afternoon." He paused. "The same applies to Miss Emily Barton. She was out shopping early yesterday afternoon and she went for a walk to see some friends on the road past the Symmingtons' house the week before."

I shook my head unbelievably. Finding the cut book in Little Furze was bound, I knew, to direct attention to the owner of that house, but when I remembered Miss Emily coming in yesterday so bright and happy and excited....

Damn it all—excited... Yes, excited—pink cheeks—shining eyes—surely not because—not because—

I said thickly: "This business is bad for one! One sees things—one imagines things—"

"Yes, it isn't very pleasant to look upon the fellow creatures one meets as possible criminal lunatics."

He paused for a moment, then went on:

"And there's Mr. Pye—"

I said sharply: "So you have considered him?"

Nash smiled.

"Oh, yes, we've considered him all right. A very curious character—not, I should say, a very nice character. He's got no alibi. He was in his garden, alone, on both occasions."

"So you're not only suspecting women?"

"I don't think a man wrote the letters—in fact I'm sure of it—and so is Graves—always excepting our Mr. Pye, that is to say, who's got an abnormally female streak in his character. But we've checked up on *everybody* for yesterday afternoon. That's a murder case, you see. *You're* all right," he grinned, "and so's your sister, and Mr. Symmington didn't leave his office after he got there and Dr. Griffith was on a round in the other direction, and I've checked upon his visits."

He paused, smiled again, and said, "You see, we *are* thorough."

I said slowly, "So your case is eliminated down to those four—Miss Ginch, Mr. Pye, Miss Griffith and little Miss Barton?"

"Oh, no, no, we've got a couple more—besides the vicar's lady."

"You've thought of *her*?"

"We've thought of *everybody*, but Mrs. Dane Calthrop is a little too openly mad, if you know what I mean. Still, she *could* have done it. She was in a wood watching birds yesterday afternoon—and the birds can't speak for her."

He turned sharply as Owen Griffith came into the police station.

"Hallo, Nash. I heard you were round asking for me this morning. Anything important?"

"Inquest on Friday, if that suits you, Dr. Griffith."

"Right. Moresby and I are doing the P.M. tonight."

Nash said:

"There's just one other thing, Dr. Griffith. Mrs. Symmington was taking some cachets, powders or something, that you prescribed for her—"

He paused. Owen Griffith said interrogatively:

"Yes?"

"Would an overdose of those cachets have been fatal?"

Griffith said dryly:

"Certainly not. Not unless she'd taken about twenty-five of them!"

"But you once warned her about exceeding the dose, so Miss Holland tells me."

"Oh that, yes. Mrs. Symmington was the sort of woman who would go and overdo anything she was given—fancy that to take twice as much would do her twice as much good, and you don't want anyone to overdo even phenacetin or aspirin—bad for the heart. And anyway there's absolutely no doubt about the cause of death. It was cyanide."

"Oh, I know that—you don't get my meaning. I only thought that when committing suicide you'd prefer to take an overdose of a soporific rather than to feed yourself prussic acid."

"Oh quite. On the other hand, prussic acid is more dramatic and is pretty certain to do the trick. With barbiturates, for instance, you can bring the victim round if only a short time has elapsed."

"I see, thank you, Dr. Griffith."

Griffith departed, and I said goodbye to Nash. I went slowly up the hill home. Joanna was out—at least there was no sign of her, and there was an enigmatical memorandum scribbled on the telephone block presumably for the guidance of either Partridge or myself.

"If Dr. Griffith rings up, I can't go on Tuesday, but could manage Wednesday or Thursday."

I raised my eyebrows and went into the drawing room. I sat down in the most comfortable armchair—(none of them were very comfortable, they tended to have straight backs and were reminiscent of the late Mrs. Barton)—stretched out my legs and tried to think the whole thing out.

With sudden annoyance I remembered that Owen's arrival had interrupted my conversation with the inspector, and that he had just mentioned two other people as being possibilities.

I wondered who they were.

Partridge, perhaps, for one? After all, the cut book had been found in this house. And Agnes could have been struck down quite unsuspecting by her guide and mentor. No, you couldn't eliminate Partridge.

But who was the other?

Somebody, perhaps, that I didn't know? Mrs. Cleat? The original local suspect?

I closed my eyes. I considered four people, strangely unlikely people, in turn. Gentle, frail little Emily Barton? What points were there actually against her? A starved life? Dominated and repressed from early childhood? Too many sacrifices asked of her? Her curious horror of discussing anything "not quite nice"? Was that actually a sign of inner preoccupation with just these themes? Was I getting too horribly Freudian? I remembered a doctor once telling me that the mutterings of gentle maiden ladies when going off under an anaesthetic were a revelation. "You wouldn't think they knew such words!"

Aimée Griffith?

Surely nothing repressed or “inhibited” about her. Cheery, mannish, successful. A full, busy life. Yet Mrs. Dane Calthrop had said, “Poor thing!”

And there was something—something—some remembrance... Ah! I’d got it. Owen Griffith saying something like, “We had an outbreak of anonymous letters up North where I had a practice.”

Had that been Aimée Griffith’s work too? Surely rather a coincidence. Two outbreaks of the same thing. Stop a minute, they’d tracked down the author of those. Griffith had said so. A schoolgirl.

Cold it was suddenly—must be a draught, from the window. I turned uncomfortably in my chair. Why did I suddenly feel so queer and upset?

Go on thinking... Aimée Griffith? Perhaps it was Aimée Griffith, *not* that other girl? And Aimée had come down here and started her tricks again. And that was why Owen Griffith was looking so unhappy and hag ridden. He suspected. Yes, he suspected....

Mr. Pye? Not, somehow, a very nice little man. I could imagine him staging the whole business...laughing....

That telephone message on the telephone pad in the hall...why did I keep thinking of it? Griffith and Joanna—he was falling for her... No, that wasn’t why the message worried me. It was something else....

My senses were swimming, sleep was very near. I repeated idiotically to myself, “No smoke without fire. No smoke without fire... That’s it...it all links up together...”

And then I was walking down the street with Megan and Elsie Holland passed. She was dressed as a bride, and people were murmuring:

“She’s going to marry Dr. Griffith at last. Of course they’ve been engaged secretly for years....”

There we were, in the church, and Dane Calthrop was reading the service in Latin.

And in the middle of it Mrs. Dane Calthrop jumped up and cried energetically:

“It’s got to be stopped, I tell you. It’s got to be stopped!”

For a minute or two I didn't know whether I was asleep or awake. Then my brain cleared, and I realized I was in the drawing room of Little Furze and that Mrs. Dane Calthrop had just come through the window and was standing in front of me saying with nervous violence:

"It has got to be *stopped*, I tell you."

I jumped up. I said: "I beg your pardon. I'm afraid I was asleep. What did you say?"

Mrs. Dane Calthrop beat one fist fiercely on the palm of her other hand.

"It's got to be stopped. These letters! Murder! You can't go on having poor innocent children like Agnes Woddell *killed!*"

"You're quite right," I said. "But how do you propose to set about it?"

Mrs. Dane Calthrop said:

"We've got to do something!"

I smiled, perhaps in rather a superior fashion.

"And what do you suggest that we should do?"

"Get the whole thing cleared up! I said this wasn't a wicked place. I was wrong. It is."

I felt annoyed. I said, not too politely:

"Yes, my dear woman, but what are you going to *do?*"

Mrs. Dane Calthrop said: "Put a stop to it all, of course."

"The police are doing their best."

"If Agnes could be killed yesterday, their best isn't good enough."

"So you know better than they do?"

"Not at all. *I* don't know anything at all. That's why I'm going to call in an expert."

I shook my head.

"You can't do that. Scotland Yard will only take over on a demand from the chief constable of the county. Actually they *have* sent Graves."

"I don't mean *that* kind of an expert. I don't mean someone who knows about anonymous letters or even about murder. I mean someone who knows *people*. Don't you see? We want someone who knows a great deal about *wickedness!*"

It was a queer point of view. But it was, somehow, stimulating.

Before I could say anything more, Mrs. Dane Calthrop nodded her head at me and said in a quick, confident tone:

"I'm going to see about it right away."

And she went out of the window again.

Ten

I

The next week, I think, was one of the queerest times I have ever passed through. It had an odd dream quality. Nothing seemed real.

The inquest on Agnes Woddell was held and the curious of Lymstock attended *en masse*. No new facts came to light and the only possible verdict was returned, "Murder by person or persons unknown."

So poor little Agnes Woddell, having had her hour of limelight, was duly buried in the quiet old churchyard and life in Lymstock went on as before.

No, that last statement is untrue. Not as before....

There was a half-scared, half-avid gleam in almost everybody's eye. Neighbour looked at neighbour. One thing had been brought out clearly at the inquest—it was most unlikely that any stranger had killed Agnes Woddell. No tramps nor unknown men had been noticed or reported in the district. Somewhere, then, in Lymstock, walking down the High Street, shopping, passing the time of day, was a person who had cracked a defenceless girl's skull and driven a sharp skewer home to her brain.

And no one knew who that person was.

As I say, the days went by in a kind of dream. I looked at everyone I met in a new light, the light of a possible murderer. It was not an agreeable sensation!

And in the evenings, with the curtain drawn, Joanna and I sat talking, talking, arguing, going over in turn all the various possibilities that still seemed so fantastic and incredible.

Joanna held firm to her theory of Mr. Pye. I, after wavering a little, had gone back to my original suspect, Miss Ginch. But we went over the possible names again and again.

Mr. Pye?

Miss Ginch?

Mrs. Dane Calthrop?

Aimée Griffith?

Emily Barton?

Partridge?

And all the time, nervously, apprehensively, we waited for something to happen.

But nothing did happen. Nobody, so far as we knew, received anymore letters. Nash made periodic appearances in the town but what he was doing and what traps the police were setting, I had no idea. Graves had gone again.

Emily Barton came to tea. Megan came to lunch. Owen Griffith went about his practice. We went and drank sherry with Mr. Pye. And we went to tea at the vicarage.

I was glad to find Mrs. Dane Calthrop displayed none of the militant ferocity she had shown on the occasion of our last meeting. I think she had forgotten all about it.

She seemed now principally concerned with the destruction of white butterflies so as to preserve cauliflower and cabbage plants.

Our afternoon at the vicarage was really one of the most peaceful we had spent. It was an attractive old house and had a big shabby comfortable drawing room with faded rose cretonne. The Dane Calthrops had a guest staying with them, an amiable elderly lady who was knitting something with white fleecy wool. We had very good hot scones for tea, the vicar came in, and beamed placidly on us whilst he pursued his gentle erudite conversation. It was very pleasant.

I don't mean that we got away from the topic of the murder, because we didn't.

Miss Marple, the guest, was naturally thrilled by the subject. As she said apologetically: "We have so little to talk about in the country!" She had made-up her mind that the dead girl must have been just like her Edith.

"Such a nice little maid, and so willing, but sometimes just a *little* slow to take in things."

Miss Marple also had a cousin whose niece's sister-in-law had had a great deal of annoyance and trouble over some anonymous letters, so the letters, also, were very interesting to the charming old lady.

"But tell me, dear," she said to Mrs. Dane Calthrop, "what do the village people—I mean the townspeople—say? What do *they* think?"

"Mrs. Cleat still, I suppose," said Joanna.

"Oh no," said Mrs. Dane Calthrop. "Not *now*."

Miss Marple asked who Mrs. Cleat was.

Joanna said she was the village witch.

"That's right, isn't it, Mrs. Dane Calthrop?"

The vicar murmured a long Latin quotation about, I think, the evil power of witches, to which we all listened in respectful and uncomprehending silence.

"She's a very silly woman," said his wife. "Likes to show off. Goes out to gather herbs and things at the full of the moon and takes care that everybody in the place knows about it."

"And silly girls go and consult her, I suppose?" said Miss Marple.

I saw the vicar getting ready to unload more Latin on us and I asked hastily: "But why shouldn't people suspect her of the murder now? They thought the letters were her doing."

Miss Marple said: "Oh! But the girl was killed with a *skewer*, so I hear—(very unpleasant!). Well, naturally, that takes *all* suspicion away from this Mrs. Cleat. Because, you see, she could ill-wish her, so that the girl would waste away and die from natural causes."

"Strange how the old beliefs linger," said the vicar. "In early Christian times, local superstitions were wisely incorporated with Christian doctrines and their more unpleasant attributes gradually eliminated."

"It isn't superstition we've got to deal with here," said Mrs. Dane Calthrop, "but *facts*."

"And very unpleasant facts," I said.

"As you say, Mr. Burton," said Miss Marple. "Now *you*—excuse me if I am being too personal—are a stranger here, and have a knowledge of the world and of various aspects of life. It seems to me that you ought to be able to find a solution to this distasteful problem."

I smiled. "The best solution I have had was a dream. In my dream it all fitted in and panned out beautifully. Unfortunately when I woke up the whole thing was nonsense!"

"How interesting, though. Do tell me how the nonsense went!"

"Oh, it all started with the silly phrase 'No smoke without fire.' People have been saying that *ad nauseam*. And then I got it mixed up with war terms. Smoke screens, scrap of paper, telephone messages— No, that was another dream."

"And what was that dream?"

The old lady was so eager about it, that I felt sure she was a secret reader of Napoleon's Book of Dreams, which had been the great standby of my old nurse.

"Oh! only Elsie Holland—the Symmingtons' nursery governess, you know, was getting married to Dr. Griffith and the vicar here was reading the service in Latin—('Very appropriate, dear,' murmured Mrs. Dane Calthrop to her spouse) and then Mrs. Dane Calthrop got up and forbade the banns and said it had got to be stopped!

"But that part," I added with a smile, "was true. I woke up and found you standing over me saying it."

"And I was quite right," said Mrs. Dane Calthrop—but quite mildly, I was glad to note.

"But where did a telephone message come in?" asked Miss Marple, crinkling her brows.

"I'm afraid I'm being rather stupid. That wasn't in the dream. It was just before it. I came through the hall and noticed Joanna had written down a message to be given to someone if they rang up..."

Miss Marple leaned forward. There was a pink spot in each cheek. "Will you think me *very* inquisitive and *very* rude if I ask just what that message was?" She cast a glance at Joanna. "I *do* apologize, my dear."

Joanna, however, was highly entertained.

"Oh, I don't mind," she assured the old lady. "I can't remember anything about it myself, but perhaps Jerry can. It must have been something quite trivial."

Solemnly I repeated the message as best I could remember it, enormously tickled at the old lady's rapt attention.

I was afraid the actual words were going to disappoint her, but perhaps she had some sentimental idea of a romance, for she nodded her head and smiled and seemed pleased.

"I see," she said. "I thought it might be something like that."

Mrs. Dane Calthrop said sharply: "Like what, Jane?"

"Something quite ordinary," said Miss Marple.

She looked at me thoughtfully for a moment or two, then she said unexpectedly:

"I can see you are a very clever young man—but not quite enough confidence in yourself. You ought to have!"

Joanna gave a loud hoot.

"For goodness' sake don't encourage him to feel like that. He thinks quite enough of himself as it is."

"Be quiet, Joanna," I said. "Miss Marple understands me."

Miss Marple had resumed her fleecy knitting. "You know," she observed pensively. "To commit a successful murder must be very much like bringing off a conjuring trick."

"The quickness of the hand deceives the eye?"

"Not only that. You've got to make people look at the wrong thing and in the wrong place—Misdirection, they call it, I believe."

"Well," I remarked. "So far everybody seems to have looked in the wrong place for our lunatic at large."

"I should be inclined, myself," said Miss Marple, "to look for somebody very sane."

"Yes," I said thoughtfully. "That's what Nash said. I remember he stressed respectability too."

"Yes," agreed Miss Marple. "That's *very* important."

Well, we all seemed agreed.

I addressed Mrs. Calthrop. "Nash thinks," I said, "that there will be more anonymous letters. What do you think?"

She said slowly: "There may be, I suppose."

"If the police think that, there will have to be, no doubt," said Miss Marple.

I went on doggedly to Mrs. Dane Calthrop.

"Are you still sorry for the writer?"

She flushed. "Why not?"

"I don't think I agree with you, dear," said Miss Marple. "Not in this case."

I said hotly: "They've driven one woman to suicide, and caused untold misery and heartburnings!"

"Have you had one, Miss Burton?" asked Miss Marple of Joanna.

Joanna gurgled, "Oh yes! It said the most frightful things."

"I'm afraid," said Miss Marple, "that the people who are young and pretty are apt to be singled out by the writer."

"That's why I certainly think it's odd that Elsie Holland hasn't had any," I said.

"Let me see," said Miss Marple. "Is that the Symmingtons' nursery governess—the one you dreamt about, Mr. Burton?"

"Yes."

"She's probably had one and won't say so," said Joanna.

"No," I said, "I believe her. So does Nash."

"Dear me," said Miss Marple. "Now that's *very* interesting. That's the most interesting thing I've heard yet."

II

As we were going home Joanna told me that I ought not to have repeated what Nash said about letters coming.

"Why not?"

"Because Mrs. Dane Calthrop might be It."

"You don't really believe that!"

"I'm not sure. She's a queer woman."

We began our discussion of probables all over again.

It was two nights later that I was coming back in the car from Exhampton. I had had dinner there and then started back and it was already dark before I got into Lymstock.

Something was wrong with the car lights, and after slowing up and switching on and off, I finally got out to see what I could do. I was some time fiddling, but I managed to fix them up finally.

The road was quite deserted. Nobody in Lymstock is about after dark. The first few houses were just ahead, amongst them the ugly gabled building of the Women's Institute. It loomed up in the dim starlight and something impelled me to go and have a look at it. I don't know whether I had caught a faint glimpse of a stealthy figure flitting through the gate—if so, it must have been so indeterminate that it did not register in my conscious mind, but I did suddenly feel a kind of overweening curiosity about the place.

The gate was slightly ajar, and I pushed it open and walked in. A short path and four steps led up to the door.

I stood there a moment hesitating. What was I really doing there? I didn't know, and then, suddenly, just near at hand, I caught the sound of a rustle. It sounded like a woman's dress. I took a sharp turn and went round the corner of the building towards where the sound had come from.

I couldn't see anybody. I went on and again turned a corner. I was at the back of the house now and suddenly I saw, only two feet away from me, an open window.

I crept up to it and listened. I could hear nothing, but somehow or other I felt convinced that there was someone inside.

My back wasn't too good for acrobatics as yet, but I managed to hoist myself up and drop over the sill inside. I made rather a noise unfortunately.

I stood just inside the window listening. Then I walked forward, my hands outstretched. I heard then the faintest sound ahead of me to my right.

I had a torch in my pocket and I switched it on.

Immediately a low, sharp voice said: "Put that out."

I obeyed instantly, for in that brief second I had recognized Superintendent Nash.

I felt him take my arm and propel me through a door and into a passage. Here, where there was no window to betray our presence

to anyone outside, he switched on a lamp and looked at me more in sorrow than in anger.

"You *would* have to butt in just that minute, Mr. Burton."

"Sorry," I apologized. "But I got a hunch that I was on to something."

"And so you were probably. Did you see anyone?"

I hesitated. "I'm not sure," I said slowly. "I've got a vague feeling I saw someone sneak in through the front gate but I didn't really see anyone. Then I heard a rustle round the side of the house."

Nash nodded.

"That's right. Somebody came round the house before you. They hesitated by the window, then went on quickly—heard *you*, I expect."

I apologized again. "What's the big idea?" I asked.

Nash said:

"I'm banking on the fact that an anonymous letter writer can't stop writing letters. She may know it's dangerous, but she'll have to do it. It's like a craving for drink or drugs."

I nodded.

"Now you see, Mr. Burton, I fancy whoever it is will want to keep the letters looking the same as much as possible. She's got the cut-out pages of that book, and can go on using letters and words cut out of them. But the envelopes present a difficulty. She'll want to type them on the same machine. She can't risk using another typewriter or her own handwriting."

"Do you really think she'll go on with the game?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes, I do. And I'll bet you anything you like she's full of confidence. They're always vain as hell, these people! Well, then, I figured out that whoever it was would come to the Institute after dark so as to get at the typewriter."

"Miss Ginch," I said.

"Maybe."

"You don't know yet?"

"I don't *know*."

"But you suspect?"

"Yes. But somebody's very cunning, Mr. Burton. Somebody knows all the tricks of the game."

I could imagine some of the network that Nash had spread abroad. I had no doubt that every letter written by a suspect and posted or left by hand was immediately inspected. Sooner or later the criminal would slip up, would grow careless.

For the third time I apologized for my zealous and unwanted presence.

"Oh well," said Nash philosophically. "It can't be helped. Better luck next time."

I went out into the night. A dim figure was standing beside my car. To my astonishment I recognized Megan.

"Hallo!" she said. "I thought this was your car. What have you been doing?"

"What are you doing is much more to the point?" I said.

"I'm out for a walk. I like walking at night. Nobody stops you and says silly things, and I like the stars, and things smell better, and everyday things look all mysterious."

"All of that I grant you freely," I said. "But only cats and witches walk in the dark. They'll wonder about you at home."

"No, they won't. They never wonder where I am or what *I'm* doing."

"How are you getting on?" I asked.

"All right, I suppose."

"Miss Holland look after you and all that?"

"Elsie's all right. She can't help being a perfect fool."

"Unkind—but probably true," I said. "Hop in and I'll drive you home."

It was not quite true that Megan was never missed.

Symmington was standing on the doorstep as we drove up.

He peered towards us. "Hallo, is Megan there?"

"Yes," I said. "I've brought her home."

Symmington said sharply:

"You mustn't go off like this without telling us, Megan. Miss Holland has been quite worried about you."

Megan muttered something and went past him into the house.
Symmington sighed.

"A grown-up girl is a great responsibility with no mother to look after her. She's too old for school, I suppose."

He looked towards me rather suspiciously.

"I suppose you took her for a drive?"

I thought it best to leave it like that.

Eleven

I

On the following day I went mad. Looking back on it, that is really the only explanation I can find.

I was due for my monthly visit to Marcus Kent... I went up by train. To my intense surprise Joanna elected to stay behind. As a rule she was eager to come and we usually stayed up for a couple of days.

This time, however, I proposed to return the same day by the evening train, but even so I was astonished at Joanna. She merely said enigmatically that she'd got plenty to do, and why spend hours in a nasty stuffy train when it was a lovely day in the country?

That, of course, was undeniable, but sounded very unlike Joanna.

She said she didn't want the car, so I was to drive it to the station and leave it parked there against my return.

The station of Lymstock is situated, for some obscure reason known to railway companies only, quite half a mile from Lymstock itself. Halfway along the road I overtook Megan shuffling along in an aimless manner. I pulled up.

"Hallo, what are you doing?"

"Just out for a walk."

"But not what is called a good brisk walk, I gather. You were crawling along like a dispirited crab."

"Well, I wasn't going anywhere particular."

"Then you'd better come and see me off at the station." I opened the door of the car and Megan jumped in.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"London. To see my doctor."

"Your back's not worse, is it?"

"No, it's practically all right again. I'm expecting him to be very pleased about it."

Megan nodded.

We drew up at the station. I parked the car and went in and bought my ticket at the booking office. There were very few people on the platform and nobody I knew.

"You wouldn't like to lend me a penny, would you?" said Megan. "Then I'd get a bit of chocolate out of the slot machine."

"Here you are, baby," I said, handing her the coin in question. "Sure you wouldn't like some clear gums or some throat pastilles as well?"

"I like chocolate best," said Megan without suspecting sarcasm.

She went off to the chocolate machine, and I looked after her with a feeling of mounting irritation.

She was wearing trodden over shoes, and coarse unattractive stockings and a particularly shapeless jumper and skirt. I don't know why all this should have infuriated me, but it did.

I said angrily as she came back:

"Why do you wear those disgusting stockings?"

Megan looked down at them, surprised.

"What's the matter with them?"

"Everything's the matter with them. They're loathsome. And why wear a pullover like a decayed cabbage?"

"It's all right, isn't it? I've had it for years."

"So I should imagine. And why do you—"

At this minute the train came in and interrupted my angry lecture.

I got into an empty first-class carriage, let down the window and leaned out to continue the conversation.

Megan stood below me, her face upturned. She asked me why I was so cross.

"I'm not cross." I said untruly. "It just infuriates me to see you so slack, and not caring how you look."

"I couldn't look nice, anyway, so what does it matter?"

"My God," I said. "I'd like to see you turned out properly. I'd like to take you to London and outfit you from tip to toe."

"I wish you could," said Megan.

The train began to move. I looked down into Megan's upturned, wistful face.

And then, as I have said, madness came upon me.

I opened the door, grabbed Megan with one arm and fairly hauled her into the carriage.

There was an outraged shout from a porter, but all he could do was dexterously to bang shut the door again. I pulled Megan up from the floor where my impetuous action had landed her.

"What on earth did you do that for?" she demanded, rubbing one knee.

"Shut up," I said. "You're coming to London with me and when I've done with you you won't know yourself. I'll show you what you can look like if you try. I'm tired of seeing you mooch about down at heel and all anyhow."

"Oh!" said Megan in an ecstatic whisper.

The ticket collector came along and I bought Megan a return ticket. She sat in her corner looking at me in a kind of awed respect.

"I say," she said when the man had gone. "You are sudden, aren't you?"

"Very," I said. "It runs in our family."

How to explain to Megan the impulse that had come over me? She had looked like a wistful dog being left behind. She now had on her face the incredulous pleasure of the dog who has been taken on the walk after all.

"I suppose you don't know London very well?" I said to Megan.

"Yes, I do," said Megan. "I always went through it to school. And I've been to the dentist there and to a pantomime."

"This," I said darkly, "will be a different London."

We arrived with half an hour to spare before my appointment in Harley Street.

I took a taxi and we drove straight to Mirotin, Joanna's dressmaker. Mirotin is, in the flesh, an unconventional and breezy woman of forty-five, Mary Grey. She is a clever woman and very good company. I have always liked her.

I said to Megan. "You're my cousin."

"Why?"

"Don't argue," I said.

Mary Grey was being firm with a stout Jewess who was enamoured of a skintight powder-blue evening dress. I detached her and took her aside.

"Listen," I said. "I've brought a little cousin of mine along. Joanna was coming up but was prevented. But she said I could leave it all to you. You see what the girl looks like now?"

"My God, I do," said Mary Grey with feeling.

"Well, I want her turned out right in every particular from head to foot. *Carte blanche*. Stockings, shoes, undies, everything! By the way, the man who does Joanna's hair is close round here, isn't he?"

"Antoine? Round the corner. I'll see to that too."

"You're a woman in a thousand."

"Oh, I shall enjoy it—apart from the money—and that's not to be sneezed at in these days—half my damned brutes of women never pay their bills. But as I say, I shall enjoy it." She shot a quick professional glance at Megan standing a little way away. "She's got a lovely figure."

"You must have X-ray eyes," I said. "She looks completely shapeless to me."

Mary Grey laughed.

"It's these schools," she said. "They seem to take a pride in turning out girls who preen themselves on looking like nothing on earth. They call it being sweet and unsophisticated. Sometimes it takes a whole season before a girl can pull herself together and look human. Don't worry, leave it all to me."

"Right," I said. "I'll come back and fetch her about six."

II

Marcus Kent was pleased with me. He told me that I surpassed his wildest expectations.

"You must have the constitution of an elephant," he said, "to make a comeback like this. Oh well, wonderful what country air and no late hours or excitements will do for a man if he can only stick it."

"I grant you your first two," I said. "But don't think that the country is free from excitements. We've had a good deal in my part."

"What sort of excitement?"

"Murder," I said.

Marcus Kent pursed up his mouth and whistled.

"Some bucolic love tragedy? Farmer lad kills his lass?"

"Not at all. A crafty, determined lunatic killer."

"I haven't read anything about it. When did they lay him by the heels?"

"They haven't, and it's a she!"

"Whew! I'm not sure that Lymstock's quite the right place for you, old boy."

I said firmly:

"Yes, it is. And you're not going to get me out of it."

Marcus Kent has a low mind. He said at once:

"So that's it! Found a blonde?"

"Not at all," I said, with a guilty thought of Elsie Holland. "It's merely that the psychology of crime interests me a good deal."

"Oh, all right. It certainly hasn't done you any harm so far, but just make sure that your lunatic killer doesn't obliterate *you*."

"No fear of that," I said.

"What about dining with me this evening? You can tell me all about your revolting murder."

"Sorry. I'm booked."

"Date with a lady—eh? Yes, you're definitely on the mend."

"I suppose you could call it that," I said, rather tickled at the idea of Megan in the role.

I was at Mirotin's at six o'clock when the establishment was officially closing. Mary Grey came to meet me at the top of the stairs outside the showroom. She had a finger to her lips.

"You're going to have a shock! If I say it myself, I've put in a good bit of work."

I went into the big showroom. Megan was standing looking at herself in a long mirror. I give you my word I hardly recognized her! For the minute it took my breath away. Tall and slim as a willow with delicate ankles and feet shown off by sheer silk stockings and well-cut shoes. Yes, lovely feet and hands, small bones—quality and distinction in every line of her. Her hair had been trimmed and shaped to her head and it was glowing like a glossy chestnut. They'd had the sense to leave her face alone. She was not made-up, or if she was it was so light and delicate that it did not show. Her mouth needed no lipstick.

Moreover there was about her something that I had never seen before, a new innocent pride in the arch of her neck. She looked at me gravely with a small shy smile.

"I do look—rather nice, don't I?" said Megan.

"Nice?" I said. "Nice isn't the word! Come on out to dinner and if every second man doesn't turn round to look at you I'll be surprised. You'll knock all the other girls into a cocked hat."

Megan was not beautiful, but she was unusual and striking looking. She had personality. She walked into the restaurant ahead of me and, as the head waiter hurried towards us, I felt the thrill of idiotic pride that a man feels when he has got something out of the ordinary with him.

We had cocktails first and lingered over them. Then we dined. And later we danced. Megan was keen to dance and I didn't want to disappoint her, but for some reason or other I hadn't thought she would dance well. But she did. She was light as a feather in my arms, and her body and feet followed the rhythm perfectly.

"Gosh!" I said. "You can dance!"

She seemed a little surprised. "Well, of course I can. We had dancing class every week at school."

"It takes more than dancing class to make a dancer," I said.

We went back to our table.

"Isn't this food lovely?" said Megan. "And everything!"

She heaved a delighted sigh.

"Exactly my sentiments," I said.

It was a delirious evening. I was still mad. Megan brought me down to earth when she said doubtfully:

"Oughtn't we to be going home?"

My jaw dropped. Yes, definitely I was mad. I had forgotten everything! I was in a world divorced from reality, existing in it with the creature I had created.

"Good Lord!" I said.

I realized that the last train had gone.

"Stay there," I said. "I'm going to telephone."

I rang up the Llewellyn Hire people and ordered their biggest and fastest car to come round as soon as possible.

I came back to Megan. "The last train has gone," I said. "So we're going home by car."

"Are we? What fun!"

What a nice child she was, I thought. So pleased with everything, so unquestioning, accepting all my suggestions without fuss or bother.

The car came, and it was large and fast, but all the same it was very late when we came into Lymstock.

Suddenly conscience-stricken, I said, "They'll have been sending out search parties for you!"

But Megan seemed in an equable mood. She said vaguely:

"Oh, I don't think so. I often go out and don't come home for lunch."

"Yes, my dear child, but you've been out for tea and dinner too."

However, Megan's lucky star was in the ascendant. The house was dark and silent. On Megan's advice, we went round to the back and threw stones at Rose's window.

In due course Rose looked out and with many suppressed exclamations and palpitations came down to let us in.

"Well now, and I saying you were asleep in your bed. The master and Miss Holland"—(slight sniff after Miss Holland's name)—"had early supper and went for a drive. I said I'd keep an eye to the boys. I thought I heard you come in when I was up in the nursery trying to quiet Colin, who was playing up, but you weren't about when I

came down so I thought you'd gone to bed. And that's what I said when the master came in and asked for you."

I cut short the conversation by remarking that that was where Megan had better go now.

"Good night," said Megan, "and thank you *awfully*. It's been the loveliest day I've ever had."

I drove home slightly light-headed still, and tipped the chauffeur handsomely, offering him a bed if he liked. But he preferred to drive back through the night.

The hall door had opened during our colloquy and as he drove away it was flung wide open and Joanna said:

"So it's you at last, is it?"

"Were you worried about me?" I asked, coming in and shutting the door.

Joanna went into the drawing room and I followed her. There was a coffee pot on the trivet and Joanna made herself coffee whilst I helped myself to a whisky and soda.

"Worried about you? No, of course not. I thought you'd decided to stay in town and have a binge."

"I've had a binge—of a kind."

I grinned and then began to laugh.

Joanna asked what I was laughing at and I told her.

"But Jerry, you must have been mad—quite mad!"

"I suppose I was."

"But, my dear boy, you can't do things like that—not in a place like this. It will be all round Lymstock tomorrow."

"I suppose it will. But, after all, Megan's only a child."

"She isn't. She's twenty. You can't take a girl of twenty to London and buy her clothes without a most frightful scandal. Good gracious, Jerry, you'll probably have to marry the girl."

Joanna was half serious, half laughing.

It was at that moment that I made a very important discovery. "Damn it all," I said. "I don't mind if I do. In fact— I should like it."

A very funny expression came over Joanna's face. She got up and said dryly, as she went towards the door:

"Yes, I've known that for some time...."

She left me standing, glass in hand, aghast at my new discovery.

Twelve

I

I don't know what the usual reactions are of a man who goes to propose marriage.

In fiction his throat is dry and his collar feels too tight and he is in a pitiable state of nervousness. I didn't feel at all like that. Having thought of a good idea I just wanted to get it all settled as soon as possible. I didn't see any particular need for embarrassment.

I went along to the Symmingtons' house about eleven o'clock. I rang the bell and when Rose came, I asked for Miss Megan. It was the knowing look that Rose gave me that first made me feel slightly shy.

She put me in the little morning room and whilst waiting there I hoped uneasily that they hadn't been upsetting Megan.

When the door opened and I wheeled round, I was instantly relieved. Megan was not looking shy or upset at all. Her head was still like a glossy chestnut, and she wore that air of pride and self-respect that she had acquired yesterday. She was in her old clothes again but she had managed to make them look different. It's wonderful what knowledge of her own attractiveness will do for a girl. Megan, I realized suddenly, had grown up.

I suppose I must really have been rather nervous, otherwise I should not have opened the conversation by saying affectionately, "Hallo, catfish!" It was hardly, in the circumstances, a lover-like greeting.

It seemed to suit Megan. She grinned and said, "Hallo!"

"Look here," I said. "You didn't get into a row about yesterday, I hope?"

Megan said with assurance, "Oh, *no*," and then blinked, and said vaguely, "Yes, I believe I did. I mean, they said a lot of things and seemed to think it had been very odd—but then you know what people are and what fusses they make all about nothing."

I was relieved to find that shocked disapproval had slipped off Megan like water off a duck's back.

"I came round this morning," I said, "because I've a suggestion to make. You see I like you a lot, and I think you like me—"

"Frightfully," said Megan with rather disquieting enthusiasm.

"And we get on awfully well together, so I think it would be a good idea if we got married."

"Oh," said Megan.

She looked surprised. Just that. Not startled. Not shocked. Just mildly surprised.

"You mean you really want to marry me?" she asked with the air of one getting a thing perfectly clear.

"More than anything in the world," I said—and I meant it.

"You mean, you're in love with me?"

"I'm in love with you."

Her eyes were steady and grave. She said:

"I think you're the nicest person in the world—but I'm not in love with you."

"I'll make you love me."

"That wouldn't do. I don't want to be *made*."

She paused and then said gravely: "I'm not the sort of wife for you. I'm better at hating than at loving."

She said it with a queer intensity.

I said, "Hate doesn't last. Love does."

"Is that true?"

"It's what I believe."

Again there was a silence. Then I said:

"So it's 'No,' is it?"

"Yes, it's no."

"And you don't encourage me to hope?"

"What would be the good of that?"

"None whatever," I agreed, "quite redundant, in fact—because I'm going to hope whether you tell me to or not."

II

Well, that was that. I walked away from the house feeling slightly dazed but irritatingly conscious of Rose's passionately interested gaze following me.

Rose had had a good deal to say before I could escape.

That she'd never felt the same since that awful day! That she wouldn't have stayed except for the children and being sorry for poor Mr. Symmington. That she wasn't going to stay unless they got another maid quick—and they wouldn't be likely to do that when there had been a murder in the house! That it was all very well for that Miss Holland to say she'd do the housework in the meantime. Very sweet and obliging she was—Oh yes, but it was mistress of the house that she was fancying herself going to be one fine day! Mr. Symmington, poor man, never saw anything—but one knew what a widower was, a poor helpless creature made to be the prey of a designing woman. And that it wouldn't be for want of trying if Miss Holland didn't step into the dead mistress's shoes!

I assented mechanically to everything, yearning to get away and unable to do so because Rose was holding firmly on to my hat whilst she indulged in her flood of spite.

I wondered if there was any truth in what she said. Had Elsie Holland envisaged the possibility of becoming the second Mrs. Symmington? Or was she just a decent kindhearted girl doing her best to look after a bereaved household?

The result would quite likely be the same in either case. And why not? Symmington's young children needed a mother—Elsie was a decent soul—beside being quite indecently beautiful—a point which a man might appreciate—even such a stuffed fish as Symmington!

I thought all this, I know, because I was trying to put off thinking about Megan.

You may say that I had gone to ask Megan to marry me in an absurdly complacent frame of mind and that I deserved what I got—but it was not really like that. It was because I felt so assured, so certain, that Megan belonged to me—that she was my business, that to look after her and make her happy and keep her from harm was the only natural right way of life for me, that I had expected her to feel, too, that she and I belonged to each other.

But I was not giving up. Oh no! Megan was my woman and I was going to have her.

After a moment's thought, I went to Symmington's office. Megan might pay no attention to strictures on her conduct, but I would like to get things straight.

Mr. Symmington was disengaged, I was told, and I was shown into his room. By a pinching of the lips, and an additional stiffness of manner, I gathered that I was not exactly popular at the moment.

"Good morning," I said. "I'm afraid this isn't a professional call, but a personal one. I'll put it plainly. I dare say you'll have realized that I'm in love with Megan. I've asked her to marry me and she has refused. But I'm not taking that as final."

I saw Symmington's expression change, and I read his mind with ludicrous ease. Megan was a disharmonious element in his house. He was, I felt sure, a just and kindly man, and he would never have dreamed of not providing a home for his dead wife's daughter. But her marriage to me would certainly be a relief. The frozen halibut thawed. He gave me a pale cautious smile.

"Frankly, do you know, Burton, I had no idea of such a thing. I know you've taken a lot of notice of her, but we've always regarded her as such a child."

"She's not a child," I said shortly.

"No, no, not in years."

"She can be her age anytime she's allowed to be," I said, still slightly angry. "She's not twenty-one, I know, but she will be in a month or two. I'll let you have all the information about myself you want. I'm well off and have led quite a decent life. I'll look after her and do all I can to make her happy."

"Quite—quite. Still, it's up to Megan herself."

"She'll come round in time," I said. "But I just thought I'd like to get straight with you about it."

He said he appreciated that, and we parted amicably.

III

I ran into Miss Emily Barton outside. She had a shopping basket on her arm.

"Good morning, Mr. Burton, I hear you went to London yesterday."

Yes, she had heard all right. Her eyes were, I thought, kindly, but full of curiosity, too.

"I went to see my doctor," I said.

Miss Emily smiled.

That smile made little of Marcus Kent. She murmured:

"I hear Megan nearly missed the train. She jumped in when it was going."

"Helped by me," I said. "I hauled her in."

"How lucky you were there. Otherwise there might have been an accident."

It is extraordinary how much of a fool one gentle inquisitive old maiden lady can make a man feel!

I was saved further suffering by the onslaught of Mrs. Dane Calthrop. She had her own tame elderly maiden lady in tow, but she herself was full of direct speech.

"Good morning," she said. "I heard you've made Megan buy herself some decent clothes? Very sensible of you. It takes a man to think of something really practical like that. I've been worried about that girl for a long time. Girls with brains are so liable to turn into morons, aren't they?"

With which remarkable statement, she shot into the fish shop.

Miss Marple, left standing by me, twinkled a little and said:

"Mrs. Dane Calthrop is a very remarkable woman, you know. She's nearly always right."

"It makes her rather alarming," I said.

"Sincerity has that effect," said Miss Marple.

Mrs. Dane Calthrop shot out of the fish shop again and rejoined us. She was holding a large red lobster.

"Have you ever seen anything so unlike Mr. Pye?" she said—"very virile and handsome, isn't it?"

IV

I was a little nervous of meeting Joanna but I found when I got home that I needn't have worried. She was out and she did not return for lunch. This aggrieved Partridge a good deal, who said sourly as she proffered two loin chops in an entrée dish: "Miss Burton said specially as she was going to be *in*."

I ate both chops in an attempt to atone for Joanna's lapse. All the same, I wondered where my sister was. She had taken to be very mysterious about her doings of late.

It was half past three when Joanna burst into the drawing room. I had heard a car stop outside and I half expected to see Griffith, but the car drove on and Joanna came in alone.

Her face was very red and she seemed upset. I perceived that something had happened.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

Joanna opened her mouth, closed it again, sighed, plumped herself down in a chair and stared in front of her.

She said:

"I've had the most awful day."

"What's happened?"

"I've done the most incredible thing. It was awful—"

"But what—"

"I just started out for a walk, an ordinary walk—I went up over the hill and on to the moor. I walked miles—I felt like it. Then I dropped down into a hollow. There's a farm there—A God-forsaken lonely sort of spot. I was thirsty and I wondered if they'd got any milk or something. So I wandered into the farmyard and then the door opened and Owen came out."

"Yes?"

"He thought it might be the district nurse. There was a woman in there having a baby. He was expecting the nurse and he'd sent word to her to get hold of another doctor. It—things were going wrong."

"Yes?"

"So he said—to *me*. 'Come on, you'll do—better than nobody.' I said I couldn't, and he said what did I mean? I said I'd never done anything like that, that I didn't know anything—

"He said what the hell did that matter? And then he was *awful*. He turned on me. He said, 'You're a woman, aren't you? I suppose you can do your durnedest to help another woman?' And he went on at me—said I'd talked as though I was interested in doctoring and had said I wished I was a nurse. 'All pretty talk, I suppose! You didn't mean anything real by it, but this *is* real and you're going to behave like a decent human being and not like a useless ornamental nitwit!'

"I've done the most incredible things, Jerry. Held instruments and boiled them and handed things. I'm so tired I can hardly stand up. It was dreadful. But he saved her—and the baby. It was born alive. He didn't think at one time he could save it. Oh dear!"

Joanna covered her face with her hands.

I contemplated her with a certain amount of pleasure and mentally took my hat off to Owen Griffith. He'd brought Joanna slap up against reality for once.

I said, "There's a letter for you in the hall. From Paul, I think."

"Eh?" She paused for a minute and then said, "I'd no idea, Jerry, what doctors had to *do*. The nerve they've got to have!"

I went out into the hall and brought Joanna her letter. She opened it, glanced vaguely at its contents, and let it drop.

"He was—really—rather wonderful. The way he fought—the way he wouldn't be beaten! He was rude and horrible to *me*—but he *was* wonderful."

I observed Paul's disregarded letter with some pleasure. Plainly, Joanna was cured of Paul.

Thirteen

I

Things never come when they are expected.

I was full of Joanna's and my personal affairs and was quite taken aback the next morning when Nash's voice said over the telephone:

"*We've got her*, Mr. Burton!"

I was so startled I nearly dropped the receiver.

"You mean the—"

He interrupted.

"Can you be overheard where you are?"

"No, I don't think so—well, perhaps—"

It seemed to me that the baize door to the kitchen had swung open a trifle.

"Perhaps you'd care to come down to the station?"

"I will. Right away."

I was at the police station in next to no time. In an inner room Nash and Sergeant Parkins were together. Nash was wreathed in smiles.

"It's been a long chase," he said. "But we're there at last."

He flicked a letter across the table. This time it was all typewritten. It was, of its kind, fairly mild.

"It's no use thinking you're going to step into a dead woman's shoes. The whole town is laughing at you. Get out now. Soon

it will be too late. This is a warning. Remember what happened to that other girl. Get out and stay out."

It finished with some mildly obscene language.

"That reached Miss Holland this morning," said Nash.

"Thought it was funny she hadn't had one before," said Sergeant Parkins.

"Who wrote it?" I asked.

Some of the exultation faded out of Nash's face.

He looked tired and concerned. He said soberly:

"I'm sorry about it, because it will hit a decent man hard, but there it is. Perhaps he's had his suspicions already."

"Who wrote it?" I reiterated.

"Miss Aimée Griffith."

II

Nash and Parkins went to the Griffiths' house that afternoon with a warrant.

By Nash's invitation I went with them.

"The doctor," he said, "is very fond of you. He hasn't many friends in this place. I think if it is not too painful to you, Mr. Burton, that you might help him to bear up under the shock."

I said I would come. I didn't relish the job, but I thought I might be some good.

We rang the bell and asked for Miss Griffith and we were shown into the drawing room. Elsie Holland, Megan and Symmington were there having tea.

Nash behaved very circumspectly.

He asked Aimée if he might have a few words with her privately.

She got up and came towards us. I thought I saw just a faint hunted look in her eye. If so, it went again. She was perfectly normal and hearty.

"Want me? Not in trouble over my car lights again, I hope?"

She led the way out of the drawing room and across the hall into a small study.

As I closed the drawing room door, I saw Symmington's head jerk up sharply. I supposed his legal training had brought him in contact with police cases, and he had recognized something in Nash's manner. He half rose.

That is all I saw before I shut the door and followed the others.

Nash was saying his piece. He was very quiet and correct. He cautioned her and then told her that he must ask her to accompany him. He had a warrant for her arrest and he read out the charge—

I forget now the exact legal term. It was the letters, not murder yet.

Aimée Griffith flung up her head and bayed with laughter. She boomed out: "What ridiculous nonsense! As though I'd write a packet of indecent stuff like that. You must be mad. I've never written a word of the kind."

Nash had produced the letter to Elsie Holland. He said:

"Do you deny having written this, Miss Griffith?"

If she hesitated it was only for a split second.

"Of course I do. I've never seen it before."

Nash said quietly: "I must tell you, Miss Griffith, that you were observed to type that letter on the machine at the Women's Institute between eleven and eleven thirty p.m. on the night before last. Yesterday you entered the post office with a bunch of letters in your hand—"

"I never posted this."

"No, *you* did not. Whilst waiting for stamps, you dropped it inconspicuously on the floor, so that somebody should come along unsuspectingly and pick it up and post it."

"I never—"

The door opened and Symmington came in. He said sharply: "What's going on? Aimée, if there is anything wrong, you ought to be legally represented. If you wish me—"

She broke then. Covered her face with her hands and staggered to a chair. She said:

"Go away, Dick, go away. Not you! Not *you!*"

"You need a solicitor, my dear girl."

"Not you. I—I—couldn't bear it. I don't want you to know—all this."

He understood then, perhaps. He said quietly:

"I'll get hold of Mildmay, of Exhampton. Will that do?"

She nodded. She was sobbing now.

Symmington went out of the room. In the doorway he collided with Owen Griffith.

"What's this?" said Owen violently. "My sister—"

"I'm sorry, Dr. Griffith. Very sorry. But we have no alternative."

"You think she—was responsible for those letters?"

"I'm afraid there is no doubt of it, sir," said Nash—he turned to Aimée, "You must come with us now, please, Miss Griffith—you shall have every facility for seeing a solicitor, you know."

Owen cried: "Aimée?"

She brushed past him without looking at him.

She said: "Don't talk to me. Don't say anything. And for God's sake don't *look* at me!"

They went out. Owen stood like a man in a trance.

I waited a bit, then I came up to him. "If there's anything I can do, Griffith, tell me."

He said like a man in a dream:

"Aimée? I don't believe it."

"It may be a mistake," I suggested feebly.

He said slowly: "She wouldn't take it like that if it were. But I would never have believed it. I *can't* believe it."

He sank down on a chair. I made myself useful by finding a stiff drink and bringing it to him. He swallowed it down and it seemed to do him good.

He said: "I couldn't take it in at first. I'm all right now. Thanks, Burton, but there's nothing you can do. Nothing *anyone* can do."

The door opened and Joanna came in. She was very white.

She came over to Owen and looked at me.

She said: "Get out, Jerry. This is my business."

As I went out of the door, I saw her kneel down by his chair.

III

I can't tell you coherently the events of the next twenty-four hours. Various incidents stand out, unrelated to other incidents.

I remember Joanna coming home, very white and drawn, and of how I tried to cheer her up, saying:

"Now who's being a ministering angel?"

And of how she smiled in a pitiful twisted way and said:

"He says he won't have me, Jerry. He's very, *very* proud and stiff!"

And I said: "My girl won't have me, either...."

We sat there for a while, Joanna saying at last:

"The Burton family isn't exactly in demand at the moment!"

I said, "Never mind, my sweet, we still have each other," and Joanna said, "Somehow or other, Jerry, that doesn't comfort me much just now...."

IV

Owen came the next day and rhapsodized in the most fulsome way about Joanna. She was wonderful, marvellous! The way she'd come to him, the way she was willing to marry him—at once if he liked. But he wasn't going to let her do that. No, she was too good, too fine to be associated with the kind of muck that would start as soon as the papers got hold of the news.

I was fond of Joanna, and knew she was the kind who's all right when standing by in trouble, but I got rather bored with all this highfalutin" stuff. I told Owen rather irritably not to be so damned noble.

I went down to the High Street and found everybody's tongues wagging nineteen to the dozen. Emily Barton was saying that she had never really trusted Aimée Griffith. The grocer's wife was saying with gusto that she'd always thought Miss Griffith had a queer look in her eye—

They had completed the case against Aimée, so I learnt from Nash. A search of the house had brought to light the cut pages of

Emily Barton's book—in the cupboard under the stairs, of all places, wrapped up in an old roll of wallpaper.

"And a jolly good place too," said Nash appreciatively. "You never know when a prying servant won't tamper with a desk or a locked drawer—but those junk cupboards full of last year's tennis balls and old wallpaper are never opened except to shove something more in."

"The lady would seem to have had a *penchant* for that particular hiding place," I said.

"Yes. The criminal mind seldom has much variety. By the way, talking of the dead girl, we've got one fact to go upon. There's a large heavy pestle missing from the doctor's dispensary. I'll bet anything you like that's what she was stunned with."

"Rather an awkward thing to carry about," I objected.

"Not for Miss Griffith. She was going to the Guides that afternoon, but she was going to leave flowers and vegetables at the Red Cross stall on the way, so she'd got a whopping great basket with her."

"You haven't found the skewer?"

"No, and I shan't. The poor devil may be mad, but she wasn't mad enough to keep a bloodstained skewer just to make it easy for us, when all she'd got to do was to wash it and return it to a kitchen drawer."

"I suppose," I conceded, "that you can't have everything."

The vicarage had been one of the last places to hear the news. Old Miss Marple was very much distressed by it. She spoke to me very earnestly on the subject.

"It isn't *true*, Mr. Burton. I'm sure it isn't true."

"It's true enough, I'm afraid. They were lying in wait, you know. They actually *saw* her type that letter."

"Yes, yes—perhaps they did. Yes, I can understand *that*."

"And the printed pages from which the letters were cut were found where she'd hidden them in her house."

Miss Marple stared at me. Then she said, in a very low voice: "But that is horrible—really *wicked*."

Mrs. Dane Calthrop came up with a rush and joined us and said: "What's the matter, Jane?" Miss Marple was murmuring helplessly:

"Oh dear, oh dear, what can one *do*?"

"What's upset you, Jane?"

Miss Marple said: "There must be *something*. But I am so old and so ignorant, and I am afraid, so foolish."

I felt rather embarrassed and was glad when Mrs. Dane Calthrop took her friend away.

I was to see Miss Marple again that afternoon, however. Much later when I was on my way home.

She was standing near the little bridge at the end of the village, near Mrs. Cleat's cottage, and talking to Megan of all people.

I wanted to see Megan. I had been wanting to see her all day. I quickened my pace. But as I came up to them, Megan turned on her heel and went off in the other direction.

It made me angry and I would have followed her, but Miss Marple blocked my way.

She said: "I wanted to speak to you. No, don't go after Megan now. It wouldn't be wise."

I was just going to make a sharp rejoinder when she disarmed me by saying:

"That girl has great courage—a very high order of courage."

I still wanted to go after Megan, but Miss Marple said:

"Don't try and see her now. I do know what I am talking about. She must keep her courage intact."

There was something about the old lady's assertion that chilled me. It was as though she knew something that I didn't.

I was afraid and didn't know why I was afraid.

I didn't go home. I went back into the High Street and walked up and down aimlessly. I don't know what I was waiting for, nor what I was thinking about....

I got caught by that awful old bore Colonel Appleton. He asked after my pretty sister as usual and then went on:

"What's all this about Griffith's sister being mad as a hatter? They say she's been at the bottom of this anonymous letter business that's been such a confounded nuisance to everybody? Couldn't believe it at first, but they say it's quite true."

I said it was true enough.

"Well, well—I must say our police force is pretty good on the whole. Give 'em time, that's all, give 'em time. Funny business this anonymous letter stunt—these desiccated old maids are always the ones who go in for it—though the Griffith woman wasn't bad looking even if she was a bit long in the tooth. But there aren't any decent-looking girls in this part of the world—except that governess girl of the Symmingtons. She's worth looking at. Pleasant girl, too. Grateful if one does any little thing for her. Came across her having a picnic or something with those kids not long ago. They were romping about in the heather and she was knitting—ever so vexed she'd run out of wool. 'Well,' I said, 'like me to run you into Lymstock? I've got to call for a rod of mine there. I shan't be more than ten minutes getting it, then I'll run you back again.' She was a bit doubtful about leaving the boys. 'They'll be all right,' I said. 'Who's to harm them?' Wasn't going to have the boys along, no fear! So I ran her in, dropped her at the wool shop, picked her up again later and that was that. Thanked me very prettily. Grateful and all that. Nice girl."

I managed to get away from him.

It was after that, that I caught sight of Miss Marple for the third time. She was coming out of the police station.

V

Where do one's fears come from? Where do they shape themselves? Where do they hide before coming out into the open?

Just one short phrase. Heard and noted and never quite put aside:

"Take me away—it's so awful being here—feeling so wicked...."

Why had Megan said that? What had she to feel wicked about?

There could be nothing in Mrs. Symmington's death to make Megan feel wicked.

Why had the child felt wicked? Why? Why?

Could it be because she felt responsible in anyway?

Megan? Impossible! Megan couldn't have had anything to do with those letters—those foul obscene letters.

Owen Griffith had known a case up North—a schoolgirl....

What had Inspector Graves said?

Something about an *adolescent mind*....

Innocent middle-aged ladies on operating tables babbling words they hardly knew. Little boys chalking up things on walls.

No, no, not *Megan*.

Heredity? Bad blood? An unconscious inheritance of something abnormal? Her misfortune, not her fault, a curse laid upon her by a past generation?

"I'm not the wife for you. I'm better at hating than loving."

Oh, my Megan, my little child. Not *that!* Anything but that. And that old Tabby is after you, she suspects. She says you have courage. Courage to do *what?*

It was only a brainstorm. It passed. But I wanted to see Megan—I wanted to see her badly.

At half past nine that night I left the house and went down to the town and along to the Symmingtons.'

It was then that an entirely new idea came into my mind. The idea of a woman whom nobody had considered for a moment.

(Or had Nash considered her?)

Wildly unlikely, wildly improbable, and I would have said up to today impossible, too. But that was not so. No, not *impossible*.

I redoubled my pace. Because it was now even more imperative that I should see Megan straightaway.

I passed through the Symmingtons' gate and up to the house. It was a dark overcast night. A little rain was beginning to fall. The visibility was bad.

I saw a line of light from one of the windows. The little morning room?

I hesitated a moment or two, then instead of going up to the front door, I swerved and crept very quietly up to the window, skirting a big bush and keeping low.

The light came from a chink in the curtains which were not quite drawn. It was easy to look through and see.

It was a strangely peaceful and domestic scene. Symmington in a big armchair, and Elsie Holland, her head bent, busily patching a boy's torn shirt.

I could hear as well as see for the window was open at the top.
Elsie Holland was speaking.

"But I do think, really, Mr. Symmington, that the boys are quite old enough to go to boarding school. Not that I shan't hate leaving them because I shall. I'm ever so fond of them both."

Symmington said: "I think perhaps you're right about Brian, Miss Holland. I've decided that he shall start next term at Winhays—my old prep school. But Colin is a little young yet. I'd prefer him to wait another year."

"Well of course I see what you mean. And Colin is perhaps a little young for his age—"

Quiet domestic talk—quiet domestic scene—and a golden head bent over needlework.

Then the door opened and Megan came in.

She stood very straight in the doorway, and I was aware at once of something tense and strung up about her. The skin of her face was tight and drawn and her eyes were bright and resolute. There was no diffidence about her tonight and no childishness.

She said, addressing Symmington, but giving him no title (and I suddenly reflected that I never heard her call him anything. Did she address him as father or as Dick or what?)

"I would like to speak to you, please. Alone."

Symmington looked surprised and, I fancied, not best pleased. He frowned, but Megan carried her point with a determination unusual in her.

She turned to Elsie Holland and said:

"Do you mind, Elsie?"

"Oh, of course not," Elsie Holland jumped up. She looked startled and a little flurried.

She went to the door and Megan came farther in so that Elsie passed her.

Just for a moment Elsie stood motionless in the doorway looking over her shoulder.

Her lips were closed, she stood quite still, one hand stretched out, the other clasping her needlework to her.

I caught my breath, overwhelmed by her beauty. When I think of her now, I always think of her like that—in arrested motion, with that matchless deathless perfection that belonged to ancient Greece.

Then she went out shutting the door.

Symmington said rather fretfully:

"Well, Megan, what is it? What do you want?"

Megan had come right up to the table. She stood there looking down at Symmington. I was struck anew by the resolute determination of her face and by something else—a hardness new to me.

Then she opened her lips and said something that startled me to the core.

"I want some money," she said.

The request didn't improve Symmington's temper. He said sharply:

"Couldn't you have waited until tomorrow morning? What's the matter, do you think your allowance is inadequate?"

A fair man, I thought even then, open to reason, though not to emotional appeal.

Megan said: "I want a good deal of money."

Symmington sat up straight in his chair. He said coldly:

"You will come of age in a few months' time. Then the money left you by your grandmother will be turned over to you by the public trustee."

Megan said:

"You don't understand. I want money from *you*." She went on, speaking faster. "Nobody's ever talked much to me about my father. They've not wanted me to know about him. But I do know that he went to prison and I know why. It was for blackmail!"

She paused.

"Well, I'm his daughter. And perhaps I take after him. Anyway, I'm asking you to give me money because—if you don't"—she stopped and then went on very slowly and evenly—"if you don't—I *shall say what I saw you doing to the cachet that day in my mother's room.*"

There was a pause. Then Symmington said in a completely emotionless voice:

"I don't know what you mean."

Megan said: "I think you do."

And she smiled. It was not a nice smile.

Symmington got up. He went over to the writing desk. He took a cheque-book from his pocket and wrote out a cheque. He blotted it carefully and then came back. He held it out to Megan.

"You're grown up now," he said. "I can understand that you may feel you want to buy something rather special in the way of clothes and all that. I don't know what you're talking about. I didn't pay attention. But here's a cheque."

Megan looked at it, then she said:

"Thank you. That will do to go on with."

She turned and went out of the room. Symmington stared after her and at the closed door, then he turned round and as I saw his face I made a quick uncontrolled movement forward.

It was checked in the most extraordinary fashion. The big bush that I had noticed by the wall stopped being a bush. Superintendent Nash's arms went round me and Superintendent Nash's voice just breathed in my ear:

"Quiet, Burton. For God's sake."

Then, with infinite caution he beat a retreat, his arm impelling me to accompany him.

Round the side of the house he straightened himself and wiped his forehead.

"Of course," he said, "you *would* have to butt in!"

"That girl isn't safe," I said urgently. "You saw his face? We've got to get her out of here."

Nash took a firm grip of my arm.

"Now, look here, Mr. Burton, you've got to *listen*."

VI

Well, I listened.

I didn't like it—but I gave in.

But I insisted on being on the spot and I swore to obey orders implicitly.

So that is how I came with Nash and Parkins into the house by the back door which was already unlocked.

And I waited with Nash on the upstairs landing behind the velvet curtain masking the window alcove until the clocks in the house struck two, and Symmington's door opened and he went across the landing and into Megan's room.

I did not stir or make a move for I knew that Sergeant Parkins was inside masked by the opening door, and I knew that Parkins was a good man and knew his job, and I knew that I couldn't have trusted myself to keep quiet and not break out.

And waiting there, with my heart thudding, I saw Symmington come out with Megan in his arms and carry her downstairs, with Nash and myself a discreet distance behind him.

He carried her through to the kitchen and he had just arranged her comfortably with her head in the gas oven and had turned on the gas when Nash and I came through the kitchen door and switched on the light.

And that was the end of Richard Symmington. He collapsed. Even while I was hauling Megan out and turning off the gas I saw the collapse. He didn't even try to fight. He knew he'd played and lost.

VII

Upstairs I sat by Megan's bed waiting for her to come round and occasionally cursing Nash.

"How do you know she's all right? It was too big a risk."

Nash was very soothing.

"Just a soporific in the milk she always had by her bed. Nothing more. It stands to reason, he couldn't risk her being poisoned. As far as he's concerned the whole business is closed with Miss Griffith's arrest. He can't afford to have any mysterious death. No violence, no poison. But if a rather unhappy type of girl broods over her mother's suicide, and finally goes and puts her head in the gas oven—well,

people just say that she was never quite normal and the shock of her mother's death finished her."

I said, watching Megan:

"She's a long time coming round."

"You heard what Dr. Griffith said? Heart and pulse quite all right—she'll just sleep and wake naturally. Stuff he gives a lot of his patients, he says."

Megan stirred. She murmured something.

Superintendent Nash unobtrusively left the room.

Presently Megan opened her eyes. "Jerry."

"Hallo, sweet."

"Did I do it well?"

"You might have been blackmailing ever since your cradle!"

Megan closed her eyes again. Then she murmured:

"Last night—I was writing to you—in case anything went—went wrong. But I was too sleepy to finish. It's over there."

I went across to the writing-table. In a shabby little blotter I found Megan's unfinished letter.

"My dear Jerry," it began primly:

"I was reading my school Shakespeare and the sonnet that begins:

*'So are you to my thoughts as food to life
Or as sweet-season'd showers are to the ground.'*

and I see that I am in love with you after all, because that is what I feel...."

Fourteen

"So you see," said Mrs. Dane Calthrop, "I was quite right to call in an expert."

I stared at her. We were all at the vicarage. The rain was pouring down outside and there was a pleasant log fire, and Mrs. Dane Calthrop had just wandered round, beat up a sofa cushion and put it for some reason of her own on the top of the grand piano.

"But did you?" I said, surprised. "Who was it? What did he do?"

"It wasn't a he," said Mrs. Dane Calthrop.

With a sweeping gesture she indicated Miss Marple. Miss Marple had finished the fleecy knitting and was now engaged with a crochet hook and a ball of cotton.

"That's my expert," said Mrs. Dane Calthrop. "Jane Marple. Look at her well. I tell you, that woman knows more about the different kinds of human wickedness than anyone I've ever known."

"I don't think you should put it quite like that, dear," murmured Miss Marple.

"But you do."

"One sees a good deal of human nature living in a village all the year round," said Miss Marple placidly.

Then, seeming to feel it was expected of her, she laid down her crochet, and delivered a gentle old-maidish dissertation on murder.

"The great thing is in these cases to keep an absolutely open mind. Most crimes, you see, are so absurdly simple. This one was. Quite sane and straightforward—and quite understandable—in an unpleasant way, of course."

"Very unpleasant!"

"The truth was really so very obvious. *You* saw it, you know, Mr. Burton."

"Indeed I did not."

"But you did. You indicated the whole thing to me. You saw perfectly the relationship of one thing to the other, but you just hadn't enough self-confidence to see what those feelings of yours meant. To begin with, that tiresome phrase 'No smoke without fire.' It irritated you, but you proceeded quite correctly to label it for what it was—a smoke screen. Misdirection, you see—everybody looking at the wrong thing—the anonymous letters, but the whole point was that there *weren't* any anonymous letters!"

"But my dear Miss Marple, I can assure you that there *were*. I had one."

"Oh yes, but they weren't real at all. Dear Maud here tumbled to that. Even in peaceful Lymstock there are plenty of scandals, and I can assure you any *woman* living in the place would have known about them and used them. But a man, you see, isn't interested in gossip in the same way—especially a detached logical man like Mr. Symmington. A genuine woman writer of those letters would have made her letters much more to the point.

"So you see that if you disregard the smoke and come to the fire you know where you are. You just come down to the actual facts of what happened. And putting aside the letters, just one thing happened—Mrs. Symmington died.

"So then, naturally, one thinks of who might have wanted Mrs. Symmington to die, and of course the very first person one thinks of in such a case is, I am afraid, the *husband*. And one asks oneself is there any *reason?*—any *motive?*—for instance, *another* woman?

"And the very first thing I hear is that there is a very attractive young governess in the house. So clear, isn't it? Mr. Symmington, a rather dry repressed unemotional man, tied to a querulous and neurotic wife and then suddenly this radiant young creature comes along.

"I'm afraid, you know, that gentlemen, when they fall in love at a certain age, get the disease very badly. It's quite a madness. And Mr.

Symmington, as far as I can make out, was never actually a *good* man—he wasn't very kind or very affectionate or very sympathetic—his qualities were all negative—so he hadn't really the strength to fight his madness. And in a place like this, only his wife's death would solve his problem. He wanted to marry the girl, you see. She's very respectable and so is he. And besides, he's devoted to his children and didn't want to give them up. He wanted everything, his home, his children, his respectability and Elsie. And the price he would have to pay for that was murder.

"He chose, I do think, a very clever way. He knew so well from his experience of criminal cases how soon suspicion falls on the husband if a wife dies unexpectedly—and the possibility of exhumation in the case of poison. So he created a death which seemed only incidental to something else. He created a non-existent anonymous letter writer. And the clever thing was that the police were certain to suspect a *woman*—and they were quite right in a way. All the letters *were* a woman's letters; he cribbed them very cleverly from the letters in the case last year and from a case Dr Griffith told him about. I don't mean that he was so crude as to reproduce any letter verbatim, but he took phrases and expressions from them and mixed them up, and the net result was that the letters definitely represented a woman's mind—a half-crazed repressed personality.

"He knew all the tricks that the police use, handwriting, typewriting tests, etc. He's been preparing his crime for some time. He typed all the envelopes before he gave away the typewriter to the Women's Institute, and he cut the pages from the book at Little Furze probably quite a long time ago when he was waiting in the drawing room one day. People don't open books of sermons much!

"And finally, having got his false Poison Pen well established, he staged the real thing. A fine afternoon when the governess and the boys and his stepdaughter would be out, and the servants having their regular day out. He couldn't foresee that the little maid Agnes would quarrel with her boy and come back to the house."

Joanna asked:

"But what did she *see*? Do you know that?"

"I don't *know*. I can only guess. My guess would be that she didn't see anything."

"That it was all a mare's nest?"

"No, no, my dear, I mean that she stood at the pantry window all the afternoon waiting for the young man to come and make it up and that—quite literally—she saw *nothing*. That is, *no one* came to the house at all, not the postman, nor anybody else.

"It would take her some time, being slow, to realize that that was very odd—because apparently Mrs. Symmington *had* received an anonymous letter that afternoon."

"Didn't she receive one?" I asked, puzzled.

"But of course not! As I say, this crime is so simple. Her husband just put the cyanide in the top cachet of the ones she took in the afternoon when her sciatica came on after lunch. All Symmington had to do was to get home before, or at the same time as Elsie Holland, call his wife, get no answer, go up to her room, drop a spot of cyanide in the plain glass of water she had used to swallow the cachet, toss the crumpled-up anonymous letter into the grate, and put by her hand the scrap of paper with '*I can't go on*' written on it."

Miss Marple turned to me.

"You were quite right about that, too, Mr. Burton. A 'scrap of paper' was all wrong. People don't leave suicide notes on small torn scraps of paper. They use a *sheet* of paper—and very often an envelope too. Yes, the scrap of paper was wrong and you knew it."

"You are rating me too high," I said. "I knew nothing."

"But you did, you really *did*, Mr. Burton. Otherwise why were you immediately impressed by the message your sister left scribbled on the telephone pad?"

I repeated slowly, "'Say that *I can't go on* Friday'—I see! *I can't go on*?"

Miss Marple beamed on me.

"Exactly. Mr. Symmington came across such a message and saw its possibilities. He tore off the words he wanted for when the time came—a message genuinely in his wife's handwriting."

"Was there any further brilliance on my part?" I asked.

Miss Marple twinkled at me.

"You put me on the track, you know. You assembled those facts together for me—in sequence—and on top of it you told me the most important thing of all—that Elsie Holland had never received any anonymous letters."

"Do you know," I said, "last night I thought that *she* was the letter writer and that that was why there had been no letters written to her?"

"Oh dear, me, no... The person who writes anonymous letters practically always sends them to herself as well. That's part of the—well, the excitement, I suppose. No, no, the fact interested me for *quite* another reason. It was really, you see, Mr. Symmington's one weakness. He couldn't bring himself to write a foul letter to the girl he loved. It's a very interesting sidelight on human nature—and a credit to him, in a way—but it's where he gave himself away."

Joanna said:

"And he killed Agnes? But surely that was quite unnecessary?"

"Perhaps it was, but what you don't realize, my dear (not having killed anyone), is that your judgment is distorted afterwards and everything seems exaggerated. No doubt he heard the girl telephoning to Partridge, saying she'd been worried ever since Mrs. Symmington's death, that there was something she didn't understand. He can't take any chances—this stupid, foolish girl has seen *something*, knows something."

"Yet apparently he was at his office all that afternoon?"

"I should imagine he killed her before he went. Miss Holland was in the dining room and kitchen. He just went out into the hall, opened and shut the front door as though he had gone out, then slipped into the little cloakroom. When only Agnes was left in the house, he probably rang the front door bell, slipped back into the cloakroom, came out behind her and hit her on the head as she was opening the front door, and then after thrusting the body into the cupboard, he hurried along to his office, arriving just a little late if anyone had happened to notice it, but they probably didn't. You see, no one was suspecting a *man*."

"Abominable brute," said Mrs. Dane Calthrop.

"You're not sorry for him, Mrs. Dane Calthrop?" I inquired.

"Not in the least. Why?"

"I'm glad to hear it, that's all."

Joanna said:

"But why Aimée Griffith? I know that the police have found the pestle taken from Owen's dispensary—and the skewer too. I suppose it's not so easy for a man to return things to kitchen drawers. And guess where they were? Superintendent Nash only told me just now when I met him on my way here. In one of those musty old deed-boxes in his office. Estate of Sir Jasper Harrington-West, deceased."

"Poor Jasper," said Mrs. Dane Calthrop. "He was a cousin of mine. Such a correct old boy. He would have had a fit!"

"Wasn't it madness to keep them?" I asked.

"Probably madder to throw them away," said Mrs. Dane Calthrop. "No one had any suspicions about Symmington."

"He didn't strike her with the pestle," said Joanna. "There was a clock weight there too, with hair and blood on it. He pinched the pestle, they think, on the day Aimée was arrested, and hid the book pages in her house. And that brings me back to my original question. What about Aimée Griffith? The police actually *saw* her write that letter."

"Yes, of course," said Miss Marple. "She did write *that* letter."

"But why?"

"Oh, my dear, surely you have realized that Miss Griffith had been in love with Symmington all her life?"

"Poor thing!" said Mrs. Dane Calthrop mechanically.

"They'd always been good friends, and I dare say she thought, after Mrs. Symmington's death, that some day, perhaps—well—" Miss Marple coughed delicately. "And then the gossip began spreading about Elsie Holland and I expect that upset her badly. She thought of the girl as a designing minx worming her way into Symmington's affections and quite unworthy of him. And so, I think, she succumbed to temptation. Why not add one more anonymous letter, and frighten the girl out of the place? It must have seemed quite safe to her and she took, as she thought, every precaution."

"Well?" said Joanna. "Finish the story."

"I should imagine," said Miss Marple slowly, "that when Miss Holland showed that letter to Symmington he realized at once who had written it, and he saw a chance to finish the case once and for all, and make himself safe. Not very nice—no, not very nice, but he was frightened, you see. The police wouldn't be satisfied until they'd got the anonymous letter writer. When he took the letter down to the police and he found they'd actually seen Aimée writing it, he felt he'd got a chance in a thousand of finishing the whole thing.

"He took the family to tea there that afternoon and as he came from the office with his attaché case, he could easily bring the tornout book pages to hide under the stairs and clinch the case. Hiding them under the stairs was a neat touch. It recalled the disposal of Agnes's body, and, from the practical point of view, it was very easy for him. When he followed Aimée and the police, just a minute or two in the hall passing through would be enough."

"All the same," I said, "there's one thing I can't forgive you for, Miss Marple—roping in Megan."

Miss Marple put down her crochet which she had resumed. She looked at me over her spectacles and her eyes were stern.

"My dear young man, *something* had to be done. There was no evidence against this very clever and unscrupulous man. I needed someone to help me, someone of high courage and good brains. I found the person I needed."

"It was very dangerous for her."

"Yes, it was dangerous, but we are not put into this world, Mr. Burton, to avoid danger when an innocent fellow-creature's life is at stake. You understand me?"

I understood.

Fifteen

I

Morning in the High Street.

Miss Emily Barton comes out of the grocer's with her shopping bag. Her cheeks are pink and her eyes are excited.

"Oh, dear, Mr. Burton, I really am in such a flutter. To think I really am going on a cruise at last!"

"I hope you'll enjoy it."

"Oh, I'm sure I shall. I should never have dared to go by myself. It does seem so *providential* the way everything has turned out. For a long time I've felt that I ought to part with Little Furze, that my means were really *too* straitened but I couldn't bear the idea of *strangers* there. But now that you have bought it and are going to live there with Megan—it is quite different. And then dear Aimée, after her terrible ordeal, not quite knowing what to do with herself, and her brother getting married (how nice to think you have *both* settled down with us!) and agreeing to come with me. We mean to be away quite a long time. We might even"—Miss Emily dropped her voice—"go round the world! And Aimée is so splendid and so practical. I really do think, don't you, that everything turns out for the *best*?"

Just for a fleeting moment I thought of Mrs. Symmington and Agnes Woddell in their graves in the churchyard and wondered if they would agree, and then I remembered that Agnes's boy hadn't been very fond of her and that Mrs. Symmington hadn't been very

nice to Megan and, what the hell? we've all got to die some time! And I agreed with happy Miss Emily that everything was for the best in the best of possible worlds.

I went along the High Street and in at the Symmingtons' gate and Megan came out to meet me.

It was not a romantic meeting because an out-size Old English sheepdog came out with Megan and nearly knocked me over with his ill-timed exuberance.

"Isn't he *adorable*?" said Megan.

"A little overwhelming. Is he ours?"

"Yes, he's a wedding present from Joanna. We *have* had nice wedding presents, haven't we? That fluffy woolly thing that we don't know what it's for from Miss Marple, and the lovely Crown Derby tea set from Mr. Pye, and Elsie has sent me a toast-rack—"

"How typical," I interjected.

"And she's got a post with a dentist and is very happy. And—where was I?"

"Enumerating wedding presents. Don't forget if you change your mind you'll have to send them all back."

"I shan't change my mind. What else have we got? Oh, yes, Mrs. Dane Calthrop has sent an Egyptian scarab."

"Original woman," I said.

"Oh! Oh! but you don't know the best. *Partridge* has actually sent me a present. It's the most hideous teacloth you've ever seen. But I think she *must* like me now because she says she embroidered it all with her own hands."

"In a design of sour grapes and thistles, I suppose?"

"No, true lovers' knots."

"Dear, dear," I said, "*Partridge* is coming on."

Megan had dragged me into the house.

She said:

"There's just one thing I can't make out. Besides the dog's own collar and lead, Joanna has sent an extra collar and lead. What do you think that's for?"

"That," I said, "is Joanna's little joke."

MISS
MARPLE

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha
Christie

CC GAZETTE

A MURDER
IS
ANNOUNCED

A Miss Marple Mystery

Agatha Christie

A Murder Is Announced

A Miss Marple Mystery

HARPER

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

*To Ralph and Anne Newman
at whose house I first tasted
"Delicious Death!"*

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One

A MURDER IS ANNOUNCED

I

Between 7:30 and 8:30 every morning except Sundays, Johnnie Butt made the round of the village of Chipping Cleghorn on his bicycle, whistling vociferously through his teeth, and alighting at each house or cottage to shove through the letterbox such morning papers as had been ordered by the occupants of the house in question from Mr. Totman, stationer, of the High Street. Thus, at Colonel and Mrs. Easterbrook's he delivered *The Times* and the *Daily Graphic*; at Mrs. Swettenham's he left *The Times* and the *Daily Worker*; at Miss Hinchcliffe and Miss Murgatroyd's he left the *Daily Telegraph* and the *New Chronicle*; at Miss Blacklock's he left the *Telegraph*, *The Times* and the *Daily Mail*.

At all these houses, and indeed at practically every house in Chipping Cleghorn, he delivered every Friday a copy of the *North Benham News and Chipping Cleghorn Gazette*, known locally simply as "*the Gazette*."

Thus, on Friday mornings, after a hurried glance at the headlines in the daily paper

*(International situation critical! U.N.O. meets today!
Bloodhounds seek blonde typist's killer! Three collieries idle.*

Twenty-three die of food poisoning in Seaside Hotel, etc.)

most of the inhabitants of Chipping Cleghorn eagerly opened the *Gazette* and plunged into the local news. After a cursory glance at Correspondence (in which the passionate hates and feuds of rural life found full play) nine out of ten subscribers then turned to the PERSONAL column. Here were grouped together higgledy-piggledy articles for Sale or Wanted, frenzied appeals for Domestic Help, innumerable insertions regarding dogs, announcements concerning poultry and garden equipment; and various other items of an interesting nature to those living in the small community of Chipping Cleghorn.

This particular Friday, October 29th—was no exception to the rule

II

Mrs. Swettenham, pushing back the pretty little grey curls from her forehead, opened *The Times*, looked with a lacklustre eye at the left-hand centre page, decided that, as usual, if there *was* any exciting news *The Times* had succeeded in camouflaging it in an impeccable manner; took a look at the Births, Marriages and Deaths, particularly the latter; then, her duty done, she put aside *The Times* and eagerly seized the *Chipping Cleghorn Gazette*.

When her son Edmund entered the room a moment later, she was already deep in the Personal Column.

"Good morning, dear," said Mrs. Swettenham. "The Smedleys are selling their Daimler. 1935—that's rather a long time ago, isn't it?"

Her son grunted, poured himself out a cup of coffee, helped himself to a couple of kippers, sat down at the table and opened the *Daily Worker* which he propped up against the toast rack.

"*Bull mastiff puppies*," read out Mrs. Swettenham. "I really don't know how people manage to feed big dogs nowadays—I really *don't* ... H'm, Selina Lawrence is advertising for a cook again. I could tell her it's just a waste of time advertising in these days. She hasn't put her address, only a box number—that's *quite* fatal—I could have told

her so—servants simply insist on knowing where they are going. They like a good address ... *False teeth*—I can't think why false teeth are so popular. *Best prices paid ... Beautiful bulbs. Our special selection.* They sound rather cheap ... Here's a girl wants an '*Interesting post—Would travel.*' I dare say! Who wouldn't?... *Dachshunds*... I've never really cared for dachshunds myself—I don't mean because they're *German*, because we've got over all that—I just don't care for them, that's all.—Yes, Mrs. Finch?"

The door had opened to admit the head and torso of a grim-looking female in an aged velvet beret.

"Good morning, Mum," said Mrs. Finch. "Can I clear?"

"Not yet. We haven't finished," said Mrs. Swettenham. "Not quite finished," she added ingratiatingly.

Casting a look at Edmund and his paper, Mrs. Finch sniffed, and withdrew.

"I've only just begun," said Edmund, just as his mother remarked:

"I do wish you wouldn't read that horrid paper, Edmund. Mrs. Finch doesn't like it *at all*."

"I don't see what my political views have to do with Mrs. Finch."

"And it isn't," pursued Mrs. Swettenham, "as though you *were* a worker. You don't do any work at all."

"That's not in the least true," said Edmund indignantly. "I'm writing a book."

"I meant *real* work," said Mrs. Swettenham. "And Mrs. Finch does matter. If she takes a dislike to us and won't come, who else could we get?"

"Advertise in the *Gazette*," said Edmund, grinning.

"I've just told you that's no use. Oh dear me, nowadays unless one has an old Nannie in the family, who will go into the kitchen and do everything, one is simply *sunk*."

"Well, why haven't we an old Nannie? How remiss of you not to have provided me with one. What were you thinking about?"

"You had an *ayah*, dear."

"No foresight," murmured Edmund.

Mrs. Swettenham was once more deep in the Personal Column.

"Second hand Motor Mower for sale. Now I wonder ... Goodness, what a price!... More dachshunds ... 'Do write or communicate desperate Woggles.' What silly nicknames people have ... Cocker Spaniels... Do you remember darling Susie, Edmund? She really was human. Understood every word you said to her ... Sheraton sideboard for sale. Genuine family antique. Mrs. Lucas, Dayas Hall ... What a liar that woman is! Sheraton indeed ...!"

Mrs. Swettenham sniffed and then continued her reading:

"All a mistake, darling. Undying love. Friday as usual.—J ... I suppose they've had a lovers' quarrel—or do you think it's a code for burglars?... More dachshunds! Really, I do think people have gone a little crazy about breeding dachshunds. I mean, there are other dogs. Your Uncle Simon used to breed Manchester Terriers. Such graceful little things. I do like dogs with legs ... Lady going abroad will sell her navy two piece suiting ... no measurements or price given ... A marriage is announced—no, a murder. What? Well, I never! Edmund, Edmund, listen to this....

A murder is announced and will take place on Friday, October 29th, at Little Paddocks at 6:30 p.m. Friends please accept this, the only intimation.

What an extraordinary thing! *Edmund!"*

"What's that?" Edmund looked up from his newspaper.

"Friday, October 29th ... Why, that's *today*."

"Let me see." Her son took the paper from her.

"But what does it mean?" Mrs. Swettenham asked with lively curiosity.

Edmund Swettenham rubbed his nose doubtfully.

"Some sort of party, I suppose. The Murder Game—That kind of thing."

"Oh," said Mrs. Swettenham doubtfully. "It seems a very odd way of doing it. Just sticking it in the advertisements like that. Not at all like Letitia Blacklock who always seems to me such a sensible woman."

"Probably got up by the bright young things she has in the house."

"It's very short notice. Today. Do you think we're just supposed to go?"

"It says 'Friends, please accept this, the only intimation,'" her son pointed out.

"Well, I think these newfangled ways of giving invitations are very tiresome," said Mrs. Swettenham decidedly.

"All right, Mother, you needn't go."

"No," agreed Mrs. Swettenham.

There was a pause.

"Do you really *want* that last piece of toast, Edmund?"

"I should have thought my being properly nourished mattered more than letting that old hag clear the table."

"Sh, dear, she'll *hear* you ... Edmund, what happens at a Murder Game?"

"I don't know, exactly ... They pin pieces of paper upon you, or something ... No, I think you draw them out of a hat. And somebody's the victim and somebody else is a detective—and then they turn the lights out and somebody taps you on the shoulder and then you scream and lie down and sham dead."

"It sounds quite exciting."

"Probably a beastly bore. I'm not going."

"Nonsense, Edmund," said Mrs. Swettenham resolutely. "*I'm* going and *you're* coming with me. That's *settled!*"

III

"Archie," said Mrs. Easterbrook to her husband, "listen to *this*."

Colonel Easterbrook paid no attention, because he was already snorting with impatience over an article in *The Times*.

"Trouble with these fellows is," he said, "that none of them knows the first thing about India! Not the first thing!"

"I know, dear, I know."

"If they did, they wouldn't write such piffle."

"Yes, I know. Archie, do listen.

A murder is announced and will take place on Friday, October 29th (that's today), at Little Paddocks at 6:30 p.m. Friends please accept this, the only intimation."

She paused triumphantly. Colonel Easterbrook looked at her indulgently but without much interest.

"Murder Game," he said.

"Oh."

"That's all it is. Mind you," he unbent a little, "it can be very good fun if it's well done. But it needs good organizing by someone who knows the ropes. You draw lots. One person's the murderer, nobody knows who. Lights out. Murderer chooses his victim. The victim has to count twenty before he screams. Then the person who's chosen to be the detective takes charge. Questions everybody. Where they were, what they were doing, tries to trip the real fellow up. Yes, it's a good game—if the detective—er—knows something about police work."

"Like you, Archie. You had all those interesting cases to try in your district."

Colonel Easterbrook smiled indulgently and gave his moustache a complacent twirl.

"Yes, Laura," he said. "I dare say I could give them a hint or two."

And he straightened his shoulders.

"Miss Blacklock ought to have asked you to help her in getting the thing up."

The Colonel snorted.

"Oh, well, she's got that young cub staying with her. Expect this is his idea. Nephew or something. Funny idea, though, sticking it in the paper."

"It was in the Personal Column. We might never have seen it. I suppose it *is* an invitation, Archie?"

"Funny kind of invitation. I can tell you one thing. They can count *me* out."

"Oh, Archie," Mrs. Easterbrook's voice rose in a shrill wail.

"Short notice. For all they know I might be busy."

"But you're not, are you, darling?" Mrs. Easterbrook lowered her voice persuasively. "And I do think, Archie, that you really *ought* to go—just to help poor Miss Blacklock out. I'm sure she's counting on you to make the thing a success. I mean, you know so much about police work and procedure. The whole thing will fall flat if you don't go and help to make it a success. After all, one must be *neighbourly*."

Mrs. Easterbrook put her synthetic blonde head on one side and opened her blue eyes very wide.

"Of course, if you put it like that, Laura ..." Colonel Easterbrook twirled his grey moustache again, importantly, and looked with indulgence on his fluffy little wife. Mrs. Easterbrook was at least thirty years younger than her husband.

"If you put it like *that*, Laura," he said.

"I really do think it's your *duty*, Archie," said Mrs. Easterbrook solemnly.

IV

The *Chipping Cleghorn Gazette* had also been delivered at Boulders, the picturesque three cottages knocked into one inhabited by Miss Hinchcliffe and Miss Murgatroyd.

"Hinch?"

"What is it, Murgatroyd?"

"Where are you?"

"Henhouse."

"Oh."

Padding gingerly through the long wet grass, Miss Amy Murgatroyd approached her friend. The latter, attired in corduroy slacks and battledress tunic, was conscientiously stirring in handfuls of balancer meal to a repellently steaming basin full of cooked potato peelings and cabbage stumps.

She turned her head with its short man-like crop and weather-beaten countenance toward her friend.

Miss Murgatroyd, who was fat and amiable, wore a checked tweed skirt and a shapeless pullover of brilliant royal blue. Her curly

bird's nest of grey hair was in a good deal of disorder and she was slightly out of breath.

"In the *Gazette*," she panted. "Just listen—what can it *mean*?"

A murder is announced ... and will take place on Friday, October 29th, at Little Paddocks at 6:30 p.m. Friends please accept this, the only intimation."

She paused, breathless, as she finished reading, and awaited some authoritative pronouncement.

"Daft," said Miss Hinchcliffe.

"Yes, but what do you think it *means*?"

"Means a drink, anyway," said Miss Hinchcliffe.

"You think it's a sort of invitation?"

"We'll find out what it means when we get there," said Miss Hinchcliffe. "Bad sherry, I expect. You'd better get off the grass, Murgatroyd. You've got your bedroom slippers on still. They're soaked."

"Oh, dear." Miss Murgatroyd looked down ruefully at her feet. "How many eggs today?"

"Seven. That damned hen's still broody. I must get her into the coop."

"It's a funny way of putting it, don't you think?" Amy Murgatroyd asked, reverting to the notice in the *Gazette*. Her voice was slightly wistful.

But her friend was made of sterner and more single-minded stuff. She was intent on dealing with recalcitrant poultry and no announcement in a paper, however enigmatic, could deflect her.

She squelched heavily through the mud and pounced upon a speckled hen. There was a loud and indignant squawking.

"Give me ducks every time," said Miss Hinchcliffe. "*Far* less trouble..."

V

"Oo, scrumptious!" said Mrs. Harmon across the breakfast table to her husband, the Rev. Julian Harmon, "there's going to be a murder at Miss Blacklock's."

"A murder?" said her husband, slightly surprised. "When?"

"This afternoon ... at least, this evening. 6:30. Oh, bad luck, darling, you've got your preparations for confirmation then. It *is* a shame. And you do so love murders!"

"I don't really know what you're talking about, Bunch."

Mrs. Harmon, the roundness of whose form and face had early led to the soubriquet of "Bunch" being substituted for her baptismal name of Diana, handed the *Gazette* across the table.

"There. All among the second-hand pianos, and the old teeth."

"What a very extraordinary announcement."

"Isn't it?" said Bunch happily. "You wouldn't think that Miss Blacklock cared about murders and games and things, would you? I suppose it's the young Simmonses put her up to it—though I should have thought Julia Simmons would find murders rather crude. Still, there it is, and I do think, darling, it's a *shame* you can't be there. Anyway, I'll go and tell you all about it, though it's rather wasted on me, because I don't really like games that happen in the dark. They frighten me, and I *do* hope I shan't have to be the one who's murdered. If someone suddenly puts a hand on my shoulder and whispers, 'You're dead,' I know my heart will give such a big bump that perhaps it really *might* kill me! Do you think that's likely?"

"No, Bunch. I think you're going to live to be an old, old woman—with me."

"And die on the same day and be buried in the same grave. That would be lovely."

Bunch beamed from ear to ear at this agreeable prospect.

"You seem very happy, Bunch?" said her husband, smiling.

"Who'd *not* be happy if they were me?" demanded Bunch, rather confusedly. "With you and Susan and Edward, and all of you fond of me and not caring if I'm stupid ... And the sun shining! And this lovely big house to live in!"

The Rev. Julian Harmon looked round the big bare dining room and assented doubtfully.

"Some people would think it was the last straw to have to live in this great rambling draughty place."

"Well, I like big rooms. All the nice smells from outside can get in and stay there. And you can be untidy and leave things about and they don't clutter you."

"No labour-saving devices or central heating? It means a lot of work for you, Bunch."

"Oh, Julian, it doesn't. I get up at half past six and light the boiler and rush around like a steam engine, and by eight it's all done. And I keep it nice, don't I? With beeswax and polish and big jars of Autumn leaves. It's not really harder to keep a big house clean than a small one. You go round with mops and things much quicker, because your behind isn't always bumping into things like it is in a small room. And I like sleeping in a big cold room—it's so cosy to snuggle down with just the tip of your nose telling you what it's like up above. And whatever size of house you live in, you peel the same amount of potatoes and wash up the same amount of plates and all that. Think how nice it is for Edward and Susan to have a big empty room to play in where they can have railways and dolls' tea-parties all over the floor and never have to put them away? And then it's nice to have extra bits of the house that you can let people have to live in. Jimmy Symes and Johnnie Finch—they'd have had to live with their in-laws otherwise. And you know, Julian, it isn't nice living with your in-laws. You're devoted to Mother, but you wouldn't really have liked to start our married life living with her and Father. And I shouldn't have liked it, either. I'd have gone on feeling like a little girl."

Julian smiled at her.

"You're rather like a little girl still, Bunch."

Julian Harmon himself had clearly been a model designed by Nature for the age of sixty. He was still about twenty-five years short of achieving Nature's purpose.

"I know I'm stupid—"

"You're not stupid, Bunch. You're very clever."

"No, I'm not. I'm not a bit intellectual. Though I do try ... And I really love it when you talk to me about books and history and

things. I think perhaps it wasn't an awfully good idea to read aloud Gibbon to me in the evenings, because if it's been a cold wind out, and it's nice and hot by the fire, there's something about Gibbon that does, rather, make you go to sleep."

Julian laughed.

"But I do love listening to you, Julian. Tell me the story again about the old vicar who preached about Ahasuerus."

"You know that by heart, Bunch."

"Just tell it me again. *Please.*"

Her husband complied.

"It was old Scrymgour. Somebody looked into his church one day. He was leaning out of the pulpit and preaching fervently to a couple of old charwomen. He was shaking his finger at them and saying, 'Aha! I know what you are thinking. *You* think that the Great Ahasuerus of the First Lesson was Artaxerxes the Second. But he *wasn't!*' And then with enormous triumph, 'He was Artaxerxes the *Third.*'"

It had never struck Julian Hermon as a particularly funny story himself, but it never failed to amuse Bunch.

Her clear laugh floated out.

"The old pet!" she exclaimed. "I think you'll be exactly like that some day, Julian."

Julian looked rather uneasy.

"I know," he said with humility. "I do feel very strongly that I can't always get the proper simple approach."

"I shouldn't worry," said Bunch, rising and beginning to pile the breakfast plates on a tray. "Mrs. Butt told me yesterday that Butt, who never went to church and used to be practically the local atheist, comes every Sunday now on purpose to hear you preach."

She went on, with a very fair imitation of Mrs. Butt's super-refined voice:

"And Butt was saying only the other day, Madam, to Mr. Timkins from Little Worsdale, that we'd got real *culture* here in Chipping Cleghorn. *Not* like Mr. Goss, at Little Worsdale, who talks to the congregation as though they were children who hadn't had any education. Real culture, Butt said, that's what *we've* got. Our Vicar's

a highly educated gentleman—Oxford, not Milchester, and he gives us the full benefit of his education. All about the Romans and the Greeks he knows, and the Babylonians and the Assyrians, too. And even the Vicarage cat, Butt says, is called after an Assyrian king!’ So there’s glory for you,” finished Bunch triumphantly. “Goodness, I must get on with things or I shall never get done. Come along, Tiglath Pileser, you shall have the herring bones.”

Opening the door and holding it dexterously ajar with her foot, she shot through with the loaded tray, singing in a loud and not particularly tuneful voice, her own version of a sporting song.

*"It's a fine murdering day, (sang Bunch)
And as balmy as May
And the sleuths from the village are gone."*

A rattle of crockery being dumped in the sink drowned the next lines, but as the Rev. Julian Harmon left the house, he heard the final triumphant assertion:

"And we'll all go a'murdering today!"

Two

BREAKFAST AT LITTLE PADDOCKS

I

At Little Paddocks also, breakfast was in progress.

Miss Blacklock, a woman of sixty odd, the owner of the house, sat at the head of the table. She wore country tweeds—and with them, rather incongruously, a choker necklace of large false pearls. She was reading Lane Norcott in the *Daily Mail*. Julia Simmons was languidly glancing through the *Telegraph*. Patrick Simmons was checking up on the crossword in *The Times*. Miss Dora Bunner was giving her attention wholeheartedly to the local weekly paper.

Miss Blacklock gave a subdued chuckle, Patrick muttered: "*Adherent*—not *adhesive*—that's where I went wrong."

Suddenly a loud cluck, like a startled hen, came from Miss Bunner.

"Letty—*Letty*—have you seen this? Whatever *can* it mean?"

"What's the matter, Dora?"

"The most extraordinary advertisement. It says Little Paddocks quite distinctly. But whatever can it *mean*?"

"If you'd let me see, Dora dear—"

Miss Bunner obediently surrendered the paper into Miss Blacklock's outstretched hand, pointing to the item with a tremulous forefinger.

"Just look, Letty."

Miss Blacklock looked. Her eyebrows went up. She threw a quick scrutinizing glance round the table. Then she read the advertisement out loud.

"A murder is announced and will take place on Friday, October 29th, at Little Paddocks at 6:30 p.m. Friends please accept this, the only intimation."

Then she said sharply: "Patrick, is this your idea?"

Her eyes rested searchingly on the handsome devil-may-care face of the young man at the other end of the table.

Patrick Simmons' disclaimer came quickly.

"No, indeed, Aunt Letty. Whatever put that idea into your head? Why should I know anything about it?"

"I wouldn't put it past you," said Miss Blacklock grimly. "I thought it might be your idea of a joke."

"A joke? Nothing of the kind."

"And you, Julia?"

Julia, looking bored, said: "Of course not."

Miss Bunner murmured: "Do you think Mrs. Haymes—" and looked at an empty place where someone had breakfasted earlier.

"Oh, I don't think our Phillipa would try and be funny," said Patrick. "She's a serious girl, she is."

"But what's the idea, anyway?" said Julia, yawning. "What does it mean?"

Miss Blacklock said slowly, "I suppose—it's some silly sort of hoax."

"But why?" Dora Bunner exclaimed. "What's the point of it? It seems a very stupid sort of joke. And in very bad taste."

Her flabby cheeks quivered indignantly, and her shortsighted eyes sparkled with indignation.

Miss Blacklock smiled at her.

"Don't work yourself up over it, Bunny," she said. "It's just somebody's idea of humour, but I wish I knew whose."

"It says today," pointed out Miss Bunner. "Today at 6:30 p.m. What do you think is going to happen?"

"*Death!*" said Patrick in sepulchral tones. "Delicious death."

"Be quiet, Patrick," said Miss Blacklock as Miss Bunner gave a little yelp.

"I only meant the special cake that Mitzi makes," said Patrick apologetically. "You know we *always* call it delicious death."

Miss Blacklock smiled a little absentmindedly.

Miss Bunner persisted: "But Letty, what do you really think—?"

Her friend cut across the words with reassuring cheerfulness.

"I know one thing that will happen at 6:30," she said dryly. "We'll have half the village up here, agog with curiosity. I'd better make sure we've got some sherry in the house."

II

"You *are* worried, aren't you Lotty?"

Miss Blacklock started. She had been sitting at her writing-table, absentmindedly drawing little fishes on the blotting paper. She looked up into the anxious face of her old friend.

She was not quite sure what to say to Dora Bunner. Bunny, she knew, mustn't be worried or upset. She was silent for a moment or two, thinking.

She and Dora Bunner had been at school together. Dora then had been a pretty, fair-haired, blue-eyed rather stupid girl. Her being stupid hadn't mattered, because her gaiety and high spirits and her prettiness had made her an agreeable companion. She ought, her friend thought, to have married some nice Army officer, or a country solicitor. She had so many good qualities—affection, devotion, loyalty. But life had been unkind to Dora Bunner. She had had to earn her living. She had been painstaking but never competent at anything she undertook.

The two friends had lost sight of each other. But six months ago a letter had come to Miss Blacklock, a rambling, pathetic letter. Dora's health had given way. She was living in one room, trying to subsist on her old age pension. She endeavoured to do needlework, but her

fingers were stiff with rheumatism. She mentioned their schooldays—since then life had driven them apart—but could—possibly—her old friend help?

Miss Blacklock had responded impulsively. Poor Dora, poor pretty silly fluffy Dora. She had swooped down upon Dora, had carried her off, had installed her at Little Paddocks with the comforting fiction that “the housework is getting too much for me. I need someone to help me run the house.” It was not for long—the doctor had told her that—but sometimes she found poor old Dora a sad trial. She muddled everything, upset the temperamental foreign “help,” miscounted the laundry, lost bills and letters—and sometimes reduced the competent Miss Blacklock to an agony of exasperation. Poor old muddle-headed Dora, so loyal, so anxious to help, so pleased and proud to think she was of assistance—and, alas, so completely unreliable.

She said sharply:

“Don’t, Dora. You know I asked you—”

“Oh,” Miss Bunner looked guilty. “I know. I forgot. But—but you *are*, aren’t you?”

“Worried? No. At least,” she added truthfully, “not exactly. You mean about that silly notice in the *Gazette*?”

“Yes—even if it’s a joke, it seems to me it’s a—a spiteful sort of joke.”

“Spiteful?”

“Yes. It seems to me there’s *spite* there somewhere. I mean—it’s not a *nice* kind of joke.”

Miss Blacklock looked at her friend. The mild eyes, the long obstinate mouth, the slightly upturned nose. Poor Dora, so maddening, so muddle-headed, so devoted and such a problem. A dear fussy old idiot and yet, in a queer way, with an instinctive sense of value.

“I think you’re right, Dora,” said Miss Blacklock. “It’s not a nice joke.”

“I don’t like it at all,” said Dora Bunner with unsuspected vigour. “It frightens me.” She added, suddenly: “And it frightens *you*, Letitia.”

"Nonsense," said Miss Blacklock with spirit.

"It's *dangerous*. I'm sure it is. Like those people who send you bombs done up in parcels."

"My dear, it's just some silly idiot trying to be funny."

"But it *isn't* funny."

It wasn't really very funny ... Miss Blacklock's face betrayed her thoughts, and Dora cried triumphantly, "You see. You think so, too!"

"But Dora, my dear—"

She broke off. Through the door there surged a tempestuous young woman with a well-developed bosom heaving under a tight jersey. She had on a dirndl skirt of a bright colour and had greasy dark plaits wound round and round her head. Her eyes were dark and flashing.

She said gustily:

"I can speak to you, yes, please, no?"

Miss Blacklock sighed.

"Of course, Mitzi, what is it?"

Sometimes she thought it would be preferable to do the entire work of the house as well as the cooking rather than be bothered with the eternal nerve storms of her refugee "lady help."

"I tell you at once—it is in order, I hope? I give you my notices and I *go*—I go at *once!*"

"For what reason? Has somebody upset you?"

"Yes, I am upset," said Mitzi dramatically. "I do not wish to die! Already in Europe I escape. My family they all die—they are all killed—my mother, my little brother, my so sweet little niece—all, all they are killed. But me I run away—I hide. I get to England. I work. I do work that never—never would I do in my own country—I—"

"I know all that," said Miss Blacklock crisply. It was, indeed, a constant refrain on Mitzi's lips. "But why do you want to leave *now?*"

"Because again they come to kill me!"

"Who do?"

"My enemies. The Nazis! Or perhaps this time it is the Bolsheviks. They find out I am here. They come to kill me. I have read it—yes—it is in the newspaper!"

"Oh, you mean in the *Gazette?*"

"*Here*, it is written *here*." Mitzi produced the *Gazette* from where she had been holding it behind her back. "See—here it says a *murder*. At Little Paddocks. That is here, is it not? This evening at 6:30. Ah! I do not wait to be murdered—*no*."

"But why should this apply to *you*? It's—we think it is a joke."

"A *joke*? It is not a joke to murder someone."

"No, of course not. But my dear child, if anyone wanted to murder you, they wouldn't advertise the fact in the paper, would they?"

"You do not think they would?" Mitzi seemed a little shaken. "You think, perhaps, they do not mean to murder anyone at all? Perhaps it is *you* they mean to murder, Miss Blacklock."

"I certainly can't believe anyone wants to murder me," said Miss Blacklock lightly. "And really, Mitzi, I don't see why anyone should want to murder you. After all, why should they?"

"Because they are bad peoples ... Very bad peoples. I tell you, my mother, my little brother, my so sweet niece...."

"Yes, yes." Miss Blacklock stemmed the flow, adroitly. "But I cannot really believe *anyone* wants to murder you, Mitzi. Of course, if you want to go off like this at a moment's notice, I can't possibly stop you. But I think you will be very silly if you do."

She added firmly, as Mitzi looked doubtful:

"We'll have that beef the butcher sent stewed for lunch. It looks very tough."

"I make you a goulash, a special goulash."

"If you prefer to call it that, certainly. And perhaps you could use up that rather hard bit of cheese in making some cheese straws. I think some people may come in this evening for drinks."

"This evening? What do you mean, this evening?"

"At half past six."

"But that is the time in the paper? Who should come then? *Why* should they come?"

"They're coming to the funeral," said Miss Blacklock with a twinkle. "That'll do now, Mitzi. I'm busy. Shut the door after you," she added firmly.

"And that's settled *her* for the moment," she said as the door closed behind a puzzled-looking Mitzi.

"You are so efficient, Letty," said Miss Bunner admiringly.

Three

AT 6:30 P.M.

I

“Well, here we are, all set,” said Miss Blacklock. She looked round the double drawing room with an appraising eye. The rose-patterned chintzes—the two bowls of bronze chrysanthemums, the small vase of violets and the silver cigarette box on a table by the wall, the tray of drinks on the centre table.

Little Paddocks was a medium-sized house built in the early Victorian style. It had a long shallow veranda and green shuttered windows. The long, narrow drawing room which lost a good deal of light owing to the veranda roof had originally had double doors at one end leading into a small room with a bay window. A former generation had removed the double doors and replaced them with portieres of velvet. Miss Blacklock had dispensed with the portieres so that the two rooms had become definitely one. There was a fireplace each end, but neither fire was lit although a gentle warmth pervaded the room.

“You’ve had the central heating lit,” said Patrick.

Miss Blacklock nodded.

“It’s been so misty and damp lately. The whole house felt clammy. I got Evans to light it before he went.”

“The precious precious coke?” said Patrick mockingly.

"As you say, the precious coke. But otherwise there would have been the even more precious coal. You know the Fuel Office won't even let us have the little bit that's due to us each week—not unless we can say definitely that we haven't got any other means of cooking."

"I suppose there was once heaps of coke and coal for everybody?" said Julia with the interest of one hearing about an unknown country.

"Yes, and cheap, too."

"And anyone could go and buy as much as they wanted, without filling in anything, and there wasn't any shortage? There was lots of it there?"

"All kinds and qualities—and *not* all stones and slates like what we get nowadays."

"It must have been a wonderful world," said Julia, with awe in her voice.

Miss Blacklock smiled. "Looking back on it, *I* certainly think so. But then I'm an old woman. It's natural for me to prefer my own times. But you young things oughtn't to think so."

"I needn't have had a job then," said Julia. "I could just have stayed at home and done the flowers, and written notes ... Why did one write notes and who were they to?"

"All the people that you now ring up on the telephone," said Miss Blacklock with a twinkle. "I don't believe you even know *how* to write, Julia."

"Not in the style of that delicious 'Complete Letter Writer' I found the other day. Heavenly! It told you the correct way of refusing a proposal of marriage from a widower."

"I doubt if you would have enjoyed staying at home as much as you think," said Miss Blacklock. "There were duties, you know." Her voice was dry. "However, I don't really know much about it. Bunny and I," she smiled affectionately at Dora Bunner, "went into the labour market early."

"Oh, we did, we did *indeed*," agreed Miss Bunner. "Those naughty, naughty children. I'll never forget them. Of course, Letty was clever. She was a business woman, secretary to a big financier."

The door opened and Phillipa Haymes came in. She was tall and fair and placid-looking. She looked round the room in surprise.

"Hallo," she said. "Is it a party? Nobody told me."

"Of course," cried Patrick. "Our Phillipa doesn't know. The only woman in Chipping Cleghorn who doesn't, I bet."

Phillipa looked at him inquiringly.

"Here you behold," said Patrick dramatically, waving a hand, "the scene of a murder!"

Phillipa Haymes looked faintly puzzled.

"Here," Patrick indicated the two big bowls of chrysanthemums, "are the funeral wreaths and these dishes of cheese straws and olives represent the funeral baked meats."

Phillipa looked inquiringly at Miss Blacklock.

"Is it a joke?" she asked. "I'm always terribly stupid at seeing jokes."

"It's a very nasty joke," said Dora Bunner with energy. "I don't like it at all."

"Show her the advertisement," said Miss Blacklock. "I *must* go and shut up the ducks. It's dark. They'll be in by now."

"Let me do it," said Phillipa.

"Certainly not, my dear. You've finished your day's work."

"I'll do it, Aunt Letty," offered Patrick.

"No, you won't," said Miss Blacklock with energy. "Last time you didn't latch the door properly."

"I'll do it, Letty dear," cried Miss Bunner. "Indeed, I should love to. I'll just slip on my goloshes—and now where did I put my cardigan?"

But Miss Blacklock, with a smile, had already left the room.

"It's no good, Bunny," said Patrick. "Aunt Letty's so efficient that she can never bear anybody else to do things for her. She really much prefers to do everything herself."

"She loves it," said Julia.

"I didn't notice you making any offers of assistance," said her brother.

Julia smiled lazily.

"You've just said Aunt Letty likes to do things herself," she pointed out. "Besides," she held out a well-shaped leg in a sheer stocking,

"I've got my best stockings on."

"Death in silk stockings!" declaimed Patrick.

"Not silk—nylons, you idiot."

"That's not nearly such a good title."

"Won't somebody please tell me," cried Phillipa plaintively, "why there is all this insistence on death?"

Everybody tried to tell her at once—nobody could find the *Gazette* to show her because Mitzi had taken it into the kitchen.

Miss Blacklock returned a few minutes later.

"There," she said briskly, "*that's* done." She glanced at the clock. "Twenty past six. Somebody ought to be here soon—unless I'm entirely wrong in my estimate of my neighbours."

"I don't see why anybody should come," said Phillipa, looking bewildered.

"Don't you, dear?... I dare say you wouldn't. But most people are rather more inquisitive than you are."

"Phillipa's attitude to life is that she just isn't interested," said Julia, rather nastily.

Phillipa did not reply.

Miss Blacklock was glancing round the room. Mitzi had put the sherry and three dishes containing olives, cheese straws and some little fancy pastries on the table in the middle of the room.

"You might move that tray—or the whole table if you like—round the corner into the bay window in the other room, Patrick, if you don't mind. After all, I am *not* giving a party! I haven't asked anyone. And I don't intend to make it obvious that I expect people to turn up."

"You wish, Aunt Letty, to disguise your intelligent anticipation?"

"Very nicely put, Patrick. Thank you, my dear boy."

"Now we can all give a lovely performance of a quiet evening at home," said Julia, "and be quite surprised when somebody drops in."

Miss Blacklock had picked up the sherry bottle. She stood holding it uncertainly in her hand.

Patrick reassured her.

"There's quite half a bottle there. It ought to be enough."

"Oh, yes—yes ..." She hesitated. Then, with a slight flush, she said:

"Patrick, would you mind ... there's a new bottle in the cupboard in the pantry ... Bring it and a corkscrew. I—we—might as well have a new bottle. This—this has been opened some time."

Patrick went on his errand without a word. He returned with the new bottle and drew the cork. He looked up curiously at Miss Blacklock as he placed it on the tray.

"Taking this seriously, aren't you, darling?" he asked gently.

"Oh," cried Dora Bunner, shocked. "Surely, Letty, you can't imagine—"

"Hush," said Miss Blacklock quickly. "That's the bell. You see, my intelligent anticipation is being justified."

II

Mitzi opened the door of the drawing room and admitted Colonel and Mrs. Easterbrook. She had her own methods of announcing people.

"Here is Colonel and Mrs. Easterbrook to see you," she said conversationally.

Colonel Easterbrook was very bluff and breezy to cover some slight embarrassment.

"Hope you don't mind us dropping in," he said. (A subdued gurgle came from Julia.) "Happened to be passing this way—eh what? Quite a mild evening. Notice you've got your central heating on. We haven't started ours yet."

"Aren't your chrysanthemums *lovely*?" gushed Mrs. Easterbrook. "*Such* beauties!"

"They're rather scraggy, really," said Julia.

Mrs. Easterbrook greeted Phillipa Haymes with a little extra cordiality to show that she *quite* understood that Phillipa was not really an agricultural labourer.

"How is Mrs. Lucas' garden getting on?" she asked. "Do you think it will ever be straight again? Completely neglected all through the

war—and then only that dreadful old man Ashe who simply did nothing but sweep up a few leaves and put in a few cabbage plants.”

“It’s yielding to treatment,” said Phillipa. “But it will take a little time.”

Mitzi opened the door again and said:

“Here are the ladies from Boulders.”

“Evening,” said Miss Hinchcliffe, striding over and taking Miss Blacklock’s hand in her formidable grip. “I said to Murgatroyd: ‘Let’s just drop in at Little Paddocks!’ I wanted to ask you how your ducks are laying.”

“The evenings do draw in so quickly now, don’t they?” said Miss Murgatroyd to Patrick in a rather fluttery way. “What *lovely* chrysanthemums!”

“Scraggy!” said Julia.

“Why can’t you be cooperative?” murmured Patrick to her in a reproachful aside.

“You’ve got your central heating on,” said Miss Hinchcliffe. She said it accusingly. “Very early.”

“The house gets so damp this time of year,” said Miss Blacklock.

Patrick signalled with his eyebrows: “Sherry yet?” and Miss Blacklock signalled back: “Not yet.”

She said to Colonel Easterbrook:

“Are you getting any bulbs from Holland this year?”

The door again opened and Mrs. Swettenham came in rather guiltily, followed by a scowling and uncomfortable Edmund.

“Here we are!” said Mrs. Swettenham gaily, gazing round her with frank curiosity. Then, feeling suddenly uncomfortable, she went on: “I just thought I’d pop in and ask you if by any chance you wanted a kitten, Miss Blacklock? Our cat is just—”

“About to be brought to bed of the progeny of a ginger tom,” said Edmund. “The result will, I think, be frightful. Don’t say you haven’t been warned!”

“She’s a very good mouser,” said Mrs. Swettenham hastily. And added: “What *lovely* chrysanthemums!”

“You’ve got your central heating on, haven’t you?” asked Edmund, with an air of originality.

"Aren't people just like gramophone records?" murmured Julia.

"I don't like the news," said Colonel Easterbrook to Patrick, buttonholing him fiercely. "I don't like it at all. If you ask me, war's inevitable—absolutely inevitable."

"I never pay any attention to news," said Patrick.

Once more the door opened and Mrs. Harmon came in.

Her battered felt hat was stuck on the back of her head in a vague attempt to be fashionable and she had put on a rather limp frilly blouse instead of her usual pullover.

"Hallo, Miss Blacklock," she exclaimed, beaming all over her round face. "I'm not too late, am I? When does the murder begin?"

III

There was an audible series of gasps. Julia gave an approving little giggle, Patrick crinkled up his face and Miss Blacklock smiled at her latest guest.

"Julian is just frantic with rage that he can't be here," said Mrs. Harmon. "He *adores* murders. That's really why he preached such a good sermon last Sunday—I suppose I oughtn't to say it was a good sermon as he's my husband—but it really was good, didn't you think?—so much better than his usual sermons. But as I was saying it was all because of *Death Does the Hat Trick*. Have you read it? The girl at Boots' kept it for me specially. It's simply *baffling*. You keep thinking you know—and then the whole thing switches round—and there are a lovely lot of murders, four or five of them. Well, I left it in the study when Julian was shutting himself up there to do his sermon, and he just picked it up and simply *could not* put it down! And consequently he had to write his sermon in a frightful hurry and had to just put down what he wanted to say very simply—without any scholarly twists and bits and learned references—and naturally it was heaps better. Oh, dear, I'm talking too much. But do tell me, when is the murder going to begin?"

Miss Blacklock looked at the clock on the mantelpiece.

"If it's going to begin," she said cheerfully, "it ought to begin soon. It's just a minute to the half hour. In the meantime, have a

glass of sherry."

Patrick moved with alacrity through the archway. Miss Blacklock went to the table by the archway where the cigarette box was.

"I'd love some sherry," said Mrs. Harmon. "But what do you mean by *if*?"

"Well," said Miss Blacklock, "I'm as much in the dark as you are. I don't know what—"

She stopped and turned her head as the little clock on the mantelpiece began to chime. It had a sweet silvery bell-like tone. Everybody was silent and nobody moved. They all stared at the clock.

It chimed a quarter—and then the half. As the last note died away all the lights went out.

IV

Delighted gasps and feminine squeaks of appreciation were heard in the darkness. "It's beginning," cried Mrs. Harmon in an ecstasy. Dora Bunner's voice cried out plaintively, "Oh, I don't like it!" Other voices said, "How terribly, terribly frightening!" "It gives me the creeps."

"Archie, where are you?" "What do I have to *do*?" "Oh dear—did I step on your foot? I'm so sorry."

Then, with a crash, the door swung open. A powerful flashlight played rapidly round the room. A man's hoarse nasal voice, reminiscent to all of pleasant afternoons at the cinema, directed the company crisply to:

"Stick 'em up!

"Stick 'em up, I tell you!" the voice barked.

Delightedly, hands were raised willingly above heads.

"Isn't it wonderful?" breathed a female voice. "I'm so thrilled."

And then, unexpectedly, a revolver spoke. It spoke twice. The ping of two bullets shattered the complacency of the room. Suddenly the game was no longer a game. Somebody screamed....

The figure in the doorway whirled suddenly round, it seemed to hesitate, a third shot rang out, it crumpled and then it crashed to the ground. The flashlight dropped and went out.

There was darkness once again. And gently, with a little Victorian protesting moan, the drawing room door, as was its habit when not propped open, swung gently to and latched with a click.

V

Inside the drawing room there was pandemonium. Various voices spoke at once. "Lights." "Can't you find the switch?" "Who's got a lighter?" "Oh, I don't like it, I don't *like* it." "But those shots were *real*!" "It was a *real* revolver he had." "Was it a burglar?" "Oh, Archie, I want to get out of here." "Please, has somebody got a lighter?"

And then, almost at the same moment, two lighters clicked and burned with small steady flames.

Everybody blinked and peered at each other. Startled face looked into startled face. Against the wall by the archway Miss Blacklock stood with her hand up to her face. The light was too dim to show more than that something dark was trickling over her fingers.

Colonel Easterbrook cleared his throat and rose to the occasion.

"Try the switches, Swettenham," he ordered.

Edmund, near the door, obediently jerked the switch up and down.

"Off at the main, or a fuse," said the Colonel. "Who's making that awful row?"

A female voice had been screaming steadily from somewhere beyond the closed door. It rose now in pitch and with it came the sound of fists hammering on a door.

Dora Bunner, who had been sobbing quietly, called out:

"It's Mitzi. Somebody's murdering Mitzi...."

Patrick muttered: "No such luck."

Miss Blacklock said: "We must get candles. Patrick, will you—?"

The Colonel was already opening the door. He and Edmund, their lighters flickering, stepped into the hall. They almost stumbled over a recumbent figure there.

"Seems to have knocked him out," said the Colonel. "Where's that woman making that hellish noise?"

"In the dining room," said Edmund.

The dining room was just across the hall. Someone was beating on the panels and howling and screaming.

"She's locked in," said Edmund, stooping down. He turned the key and Mitzi came out like a bounding tiger.

The dining room light was still on. Silhouetted against it Mitzi presented a picture of insane terror and continued to scream. A touch of comedy was introduced by the fact that she had been engaged in cleaning silver and was still holding a chamois leather and a large fish slice.

"Be quiet, Mitzi," said Miss Blacklock.

"Stop it," said Edmund, and as Mitzi showed no disposition to stop screaming, he leaned forward and gave her a sharp slap on the cheek. Mitzi gasped and hiccuped into silence.

"Get some candles," said Miss Blacklock. "In the kitchen cupboard. Patrick, you know where the fusebox is?"

"The passage behind the scullery? Right, I'll see what I can do."

Miss Blacklock had moved forward into the light thrown from the dining room and Dora Bunner gave a sobbing gasp. Mitzi let out another full-blooded scream.

"The blood, the *blood!*" she gasped. "You are shot—Miss Blacklock, you bleed to death."

"Don't be so stupid," snapped Miss Blacklock. "I'm hardly hurt at all. It just grazed my ear."

"But Aunt Letty," said Julia, "the blood."

And indeed Miss Blacklock's white blouse and pearls and her hands were a horrifyingly gory sight.

"Ears always bleed," said Miss Blacklock. "I remember fainting in the hairdresser's when I was a child. The man had only just snipped my ear. There seemed to be a basin of blood at once. But we *must* have some light."

"I get the candles," said Mitzi.

Julia went with her and they returned with several candles stuck into saucers.

"Now let's have a look at our malefactor," said the Colonel. "Hold the candles down low, will you, Swettenham? As many as you can."

"I'll come the other side," said Phillipa.

With a steady hand she took a couple of saucers. Colonel Easterbrook knelt down.

The recumbent figure was draped in a roughly made black cloak with a hood to it. There was a black mask over the face and he wore black cotton gloves. The hood had slipped back disclosing a ruffled fair head.

Colonel Easterbrook turned him over, felt the pulse, the heart ... then drew away his fingers with an exclamation of distaste, looking down on them. They were sticky and red.

"Shot himself," he said.

"Is he badly hurt?" asked Miss Blacklock.

"H'm. I'm afraid he's dead ... May have been suicide—or he may have tripped himself up with that cloak thing and the revolver went off as he fell. If I could see better—"

At that moment, as though by magic, the lights came on again.

With a queer feeling of unreality those inhabitants of Chipping Cleghorn who stood in the hall of Little Paddocks realized that they stood in the presence of violent and sudden death. Colonel Easterbrook's hand was stained red. Blood was still trickling down Miss Blacklock's neck over her blouse and coat and the grotesquely sprawled figure of the intruder lay at their feet....

Patrick, coming from the dining room, said, "It seemed to be just one fuse gone ..." He stopped.

Colonel Easterbrook tugged at the small black mask.

"Better see who the fellow is," he said. "Though I don't suppose it's anyone we know...."

He detached the mask. Necks were craned forward. Mitzi hiccuped and gasped, but the others were very quiet.

"He's quite young," said Mrs. Harmon with a note of pity in her voice.

And suddenly Dora Bunner cried out excitedly:

"Letty, Letty, it's the young man from the Spa Hotel in Medenham Wells. The one who came out here and wanted you to give him money to get back to Switzerland and you refused. I suppose the

whole thing was just a pretext—to spy out the house ... Oh, dear—he might easily have killed you....”

Miss Blacklock, in command of the situation, said incisively:

“Phillipa, take Bunny into the dining room and give her a half glass of brandy. Julia dear, just run up to the bathroom and bring me the sticking plaster out of the bathroom cupboard—it’s so messy bleeding like a pig. Patrick, will you ring up the police at once?”

Four

THE ROYAL SPA HOTEL

I

George Rydesdale, Chief Constable of Middleshire, was a quiet man. Of medium height, with shrewd eyes under rather bushy brows, he was in the habit of listening rather than talking. Then, in his unemotional voice, he would give a brief order—and the order was obeyed.

He was listening now to Detective-Inspector Dermot Craddock. Craddock was now officially in charge of the case. Rydesdale had recalled him last night from Liverpool where he had been sent to make certain inquiries in connection with another case. Rydesdale had a good opinion of Craddock. He not only had brains and imagination, he had also, which Rydesdale appreciated even more, the self-discipline to go slow, to check and examine each fact, and to keep an open mind until the very end of a case.

"Constable Legg took the call, sir," Craddock was saying. "He seems to have acted very well, with promptitude and presence of mind. And it can't have been easy. About a dozen people all trying to talk at once, including one of those Mittel Europas who go off at the deep end at the mere sight of a policeman. Made sure she was going to be locked up, and fairly screamed the place down."

"Deceased has been identified?"

"Yes, sir. Rudi Scherz. Swiss Nationality. Employed at the Royal Spa Hotel, Medenham Wells, as a receptionist. If you agree, sir, I thought I'd take the Royal Spa Hotel first, and go out to Chipping Cleghorn afterwards. Sergeant Fletcher is out there now. He'll see the bus people and then go on to the house."

Rydesdale nodded approval.

The door opened, and the Chief Constable looked up.

"Come in, Henry," he said. "We've got something here that's a little out of the ordinary."

Sir Henry Clithering, ex-Commissioner of Scotland Yard, came in with slightly raised eyebrows. He was a tall, distinguished-looking elderly man.

"It may appeal to even your blasé palate," went on Rydesdale.

"I was never blasé," said Sir Henry indignantly.

"The latest idea," said Rydesdale, "is to advertise one's murders beforehand. Show Sir Henry that advertisement, Craddock."

"*The North Benham News and Chipping Cleghorn Gazette*," said Sir Henry. "Quite a mouthful." He read the half inch of print indicated by Craddock's finger. "H'm, yes, somewhat unusual."

"Any line on who inserted this advertisement?" asked Rydesdale.

"By the description, sir, it was handed in by Rudi Scherz himself—on Wednesday."

"Nobody questioned it? The person who accepted it didn't think it odd?"

"The adenoidal blonde who receives the advertisements is quite incapable of thinking, I should say, sir. She just counted the words and took the money."

"What was the idea?" asked Sir Henry.

"Get a lot of the locals curious," suggested Rydesdale. "Get them all together at a particular place at a particular time, then hold them up and relieve them of their spare cash and valuables. As an idea, it's not without originality."

"What sort of a place is Chipping Cleghorn?" asked Sir Henry.

"A large sprawling picturesque village. Butcher, baker, grocer, quite a good antique shop—two tea shops. Self-consciously a beauty spot. Caters for the motoring tourist. Also highly residential."

Cottages formerly lived in by agricultural labourers now converted and lived in by elderly spinsters and retired couples. A certain amount of building done round about in Victorian times."

"I know," said Sir Henry. "Nice old Pussies and retired Colonels. Yes, if they noticed that advertisement they'd all come sniffing round at 6:30 to see what was up. Lord, I wish I had my own particular old Pussy here. Wouldn't she like to get her nice ladylike teeth into this. Right up her street it would be."

"Who's your own particular Pussy, Henry? An aunt?"

"No," Sir Henry sighed. "She's no relation." He said reverently: "She's just the finest detective God ever made. Natural genius cultivated in a suitable soil."

He turned upon Craddock.

"Don't you despise the old Pussies in this village of yours, my boy," he said. "In case this turns out to be a high-powered mystery, which I don't suppose for a moment it will, remember that an elderly unmarried woman who knits and gardens is streets ahead of any detective sergeant. She can tell you what might have happened and what ought to have happened and even what actually *did* happen! And she can tell you *why* it happened!"

"I'll bear that in mind, sir," said Detective-Inspector Craddock in his most formal manner, and nobody would have guessed that Dermot Eric Craddock was actually Sir Henry's godson and was on easy and intimate terms with his godfather.

Rydesdale gave a quick outline of the case to his friend.

"They'd all turn up at 6:30, I grant you that," he said. "But would that Swiss fellow know they would? And another thing, would they be likely to have much loot on them to be worth the taking?"

"A couple of old-fashioned brooches, a string of seed pearls—a little loose change, perhaps a note or two—not more," said Sir Henry, thoughtfully. "Did this Miss Blacklock keep much money in the house?"

"She says not, sir. Five pounds odd, I understand."

"Mere chicken feed," said Rydesdale.

"What you're getting at," said Sir Henry, "is that this fellow liked to playact—it wasn't the loot, it was the fun of playing and acting the

hold-up. Cinema stuff? Eh? It's quite possible. How did he manage to shoot himself?"

Rydesdale drew a paper towards him.

"Preliminary medical report. The revolver was discharged at close range—singeing ... h'm ... nothing to show whether accident or suicide. Could have been done deliberately, or he could have tripped and fallen and the revolver which he was holding close to him could have gone off ... Probably the latter." He looked at Craddock. "You'll have to question the witnesses very carefully and make them say exactly what they saw."

Detective-Inspector Craddock said sadly: "They'll all have seen something different."

"It's always interested me," said Sir Henry, "what people do see at a moment of intense excitement and nervous strain. What they do see and, even more interesting, what they don't see."

"Where's the report on the revolver?"

"Foreign make—(fairly common on the Continent)—Scherz did not hold a permit for it—and did not declare it on coming into England."

"Bad lad," said Sir Henry.

"Unsatisfactory character all round. Well, Craddock, go and see what you can find out about him at the Royal Spa Hotel."

II

At the Royal Spa Hotel, Inspector Craddock was taken straight to the Manager's office.

The Manager, Mr. Rowlandson, a tall florid man with a hearty manner, greeted Inspector Craddock with expansive geniality.

"Glad to help you in any way we can, Inspector," he said. "Really a most surprising business. I'd never have credited it—never. Scherz seemed a very ordinary, pleasant young chap—not at all my idea of a hold-up man."

"How long has he been with you, Mr. Rowlandson?"

"I was looking that up just before you came. A little over three months. Quite good credentials, the usual permits, etc."

"And you found him satisfactory?"

Without seeming to do so, Craddock marked the infinitesimal pause before Rowlandson replied.

"Quite satisfactory."

Craddock made use of a technique he had found efficacious before now.

"No, no, Mr. Rowlandson," he said, gently shaking his head. "That's not really quite the case, is it?"

"We-ll—" The Manager seemed slightly taken aback.

"Come now, there was something wrong. What was it?"

"That's just it. I don't know."

"But you *thought* there was something wrong?"

"Well—yes—I did ... But I've nothing really to go upon. I shouldn't like my conjectures to be written down and quoted against me."

Craddock smiled pleasantly.

"I know just what you mean. You needn't worry. But I've got to get some idea of what this fellow, Scherz, was like. You suspected him of—what?"

Rowlandson said, rather reluctantly:

"Well, there was trouble, once or twice, about the bills. Items charged that oughtn't to have been there."

"You mean you suspected that he charged up certain items which didn't appear in the hotel records, and that he pocketed the difference when the bill was paid?"

"Something like that ... Put it at the best, there was gross carelessness on his part. Once or twice quite a big sum was involved. Frankly, I got our accountant to go over his books suspecting that he was—well, a wrong 'un, but though there were various mistakes and a good deal of slipshod method, the actual cash was quite correct. So I came to the conclusion that I must be mistaken."

"Supposing you hadn't been wrong? Supposing Scherz had been helping himself to various small sums here and there, he could have covered himself, I suppose, by making good the money?"

"Yes, if he *had* the money. But people who help themselves to 'small sums' as you put it—are usually hard up for those sums and spend them offhand."

"So, if he wanted money to replace missing sums, he would have had to get money—by a hold-up or other means?"

"Yes. I wonder if this is his first attempt..."

"Might be. It was certainly a very amateurish one. Is there anyone else he could have got money from? Any women in his life?"

"One of the waitresses in the Grill. Her name's Myrna Harris."

"I'd better have a talk with her."

III

Myrna Harris was a pretty girl with a glorious head of red hair and a pert nose.

She was alarmed and wary, and deeply conscious of the indignity of being interviewed by the police.

"I don't know a thing about it, sir. Not a thing," she protested. "If I'd known what he was like I'd never have gone out with Rudi at all. Naturally, seeing as he worked in Reception here, I thought he was all right. Naturally I did. What I say is the hotel ought to be more careful when they employ people—especially foreigners. Because you never know where you are with foreigners. I suppose he might have been in with one of these gangs you read about?"

"We think," said Craddock, "that he was working quite on his own."

"Fancy—and him so quiet and respectable. You'd never think. Though there have been things missed—now I come to think of it. A diamond brooch—and a little gold locket, I believe. But I never dreamed that it could have been Rudi."

"I'm sure you didn't," said Craddock. "Anyone might have been taken in. You knew him fairly well?"

"I don't know that I'd say *well*."

"But you were friendly?"

"Oh, we were friendly—that's all, just friendly. Nothing serious at all. I'm always on my guard with foreigners, anyway. They've often got a way with them, but you never know, do you? Some of those Poles during the war! And even some of the Americans! Never let on

they're married men until it's too late. Rudi talked big and all that—but I always took it with a grain of salt."

Craddock seized on the phrase.

"Talked big, did he? That's very interesting, Miss Harris. I can see you're going to be a lot of help to us. In what way did he talk big?"

"Well, about how rich his people were in Switzerland—and how important. But that didn't go with his being as short of money as he was. He always said that because of the money regulation he couldn't get money from Switzerland over here. That might be, I suppose, but his things weren't expensive. His clothes, I mean. They weren't really class. I think, too, that a lot of the stories he used to tell me were so much hot air. About climbing in the Alps, and saving people's lives on the edge of a glacier. Why, he turned quite giddy just going along the edge of Boulter's Gorge. Alps, indeed!"

"You went out with him a good deal?"

"Yes—well—yes, I did. He had awfully good manners and he knew how to—to look after a girl. The best seats at the pictures always. And even flowers he'd buy me, sometimes. And he was just a lovely dancer—lovely."

"Did he mention this Miss Blacklock to you at all?"

"She comes in and lunches here sometimes, doesn't she? And she's stayed here once. No, I don't think Rudi ever mentioned her. I didn't know he knew her."

"Did he mention Chipping Cleghorn?"

He thought a faintly wary look came into Myrna Harris's eyes but he couldn't be sure.

"I don't think so ... I think he did once ask about buses—what time they went—but I can't remember if that was Chipping Cleghorn or somewhere else. It wasn't just lately."

He couldn't get more out of her. Rudi Scherz had seemed just as usual. She hadn't seen him the evening before. She'd no idea—no idea *at all*—she stressed the point, that Rudi Scherz was a crook.

And probably, Craddock thought, that was quite true.

Five

MISS BLACKLOCK AND MISS BUNNER

Little Paddocks was very much as Detective-Inspector Craddock had imagined it to be. He noted ducks and chickens and what had been until lately an attractive herbaceous border and in which a few late Michaelmas daisies showed a last dying splash of purple beauty. The lawn and the paths showed signs of neglect.

Summing up, Detective-Inspector Craddock thought: "Probably not much money to spend on gardeners—fond of flowers and a good eye for planning and massing a border. House needs painting. Most houses do, nowadays. Pleasant little property."

As Craddock's car stopped before the front door, Sergeant Fletcher came round the side of the house. Sergeant Fletcher looked like a guardsman, with an erect military bearing, and was able to impart several different meanings to the one monosyllable: "Sir."

"So there you are, Fletcher."

"Sir," said Sergeant Fletcher.

"Anything to report?"

"We've finished going over the house, sir. Scherz doesn't seem to have left any fingerprints anywhere. He wore gloves, of course. No signs of any of the doors or windows being forced to effect an entrance. He seems to have come out from Medenham on the bus, arriving here at six o'clock. Side door of the house was locked at 5:30, I understand. Looks as though he must have walked in

through the front door. Miss Blacklock states that that door isn't usually locked until the house is shut up for the night. The maid, on the other hand, states that the front door was locked all the afternoon—but she'd say anything. Very temperamental you'll find her. Mittel Europa refugee of some kind."

"Difficult, is she?"

"Sir!" said Sergeant Fletcher, with intense feeling.

Craddock smiled.

Fletcher resumed his report.

"Lighting system is quite in order everywhere. We haven't spotted yet how he operated the lights. It was just the one circuit went. Drawing room and hall. Of course, nowadays the wall brackets and lamps wouldn't all be on one fuse—but this is an old-fashioned installation and wiring. Don't see how he could have tampered with the fusebox because it's out by the scullery and he'd have had to go through the kitchen, so the maid would have seen him."

"Unless she was in it with him?"

"That's very possible. Both foreigners—and I wouldn't trust her a yard—not a yard."

Craddock noticed two enormous frightened black eyes peering out of a window by the front door. The face, flattened against the pane, was hardly visible.

"That her there?"

"That's right, sir."

The face disappeared.

Craddock rang the front doorbell.

After a long wait the door was opened by a good-looking young woman with chestnut hair and a bored expression.

"Detective-Inspector Craddock," said Craddock.

The young woman gave him a cool stare out of very attractive hazel eyes and said:

"Come in. Miss Blacklock is expecting you."

The hall, Craddock noted, was long and narrow and seemed almost incredibly full of doors.

The young woman threw open a door on the left, and said: "Inspector Craddock, Aunt Letty. Mitzi wouldn't go to the door. She's

shut herself up in the kitchen and she's making the most marvellous moaning noises. I shouldn't think we'll get *any* lunch."

She added in an explanatory manner to Craddock: "She doesn't like the police," and withdrew, shutting the door behind her.

Craddock advanced to meet the owner of Little Paddocks.

He saw a tall active-looking woman of about sixty. Her grey hair had a slight natural wave and made a distinguished setting for an intelligent, resolute face. She had keen grey eyes and a square determined chin. There was a surgical dressing on her left ear. She wore no makeup and was plainly dressed in a well-cut tweed coat and skirt and pullover. Round the neck of the latter she wore, rather unexpectedly, a set of old-fashioned cameos—a Victorian touch which seemed to hint at a sentimental streak not otherwise apparent.

Close beside her, with an eager round face and untidy hair escaping from a hair net, was a woman of about the same age whom Craddock had no difficulty in recognizing as the "Dora Bunner—companion" of Constable Legg's notes—to which the latter had added an off-the-record commentary of "Scatty!"

Miss Blacklock spoke in a pleasant well-bred voice.

"Good morning, Inspector Craddock. This is my friend, Miss Bunner, who helps me run the house. Won't you sit down? You won't smoke, I suppose?"

"Not on duty, I'm afraid, Miss Blacklock."

"What a shame!"

Craddock's eyes took in the room with a quick, practised glance. Typical Victorian double drawing room. Two long windows in this room, built-out bay window in the other ... chairs ... sofa ... centre table with a big bowl of chrysanthemums—another bowl in window—all fresh and pleasant without much originality. The only incongruous note was a small silver vase with dead violets in it on a table near the archway into the further room. Since he could not imagine Miss Blacklock tolerating dead flowers in a room, he imagined it to be the only indication that something out of the way had occurred to distract the routine of a well-run household.

He said:

"I take it, Miss Blacklock, that this is the room in which the—incident occurred?"

"Yes."

"And you should have seen it last night," Miss Bunner exclaimed. "Such a *mess*. Two little tables knocked over, and the leg off one—people barging about in the dark—and someone put down a lighted cigarette and burnt one of the best bits of furniture. People—young people especially—are so careless about these things ... Luckily none of the china got broken—"

Miss Blacklock interrupted gently but firmly:

"Dora, all these things, vexatious as they may be, are only trifles. It will be best, I think, if we just answer Inspector Craddock's questions."

"Thank you, Miss Blacklock. I shall come to what happened last night, presently. First of all I want you to tell me when you first saw the dead man—Rudi Scherz."

"Rudi Scherz?" Miss Blacklock looked slightly surprised. "Is that his name? Somehow, I thought ... Oh, well, it doesn't matter. My first encounter with him was when I was in Medenham Spa for a day's shopping about—let me see, about three weeks ago. We—Miss Bunner and I—were having lunch at the Royal Spa Hotel. As we were just leaving after lunch, I heard my name spoken. It was this young man. He said: 'It is Miss Blacklock, is it not?' And went on to say that perhaps I did not remember him, but that he was the son of the proprietor of the Hotel des Alpes at Montreux where my sister and I had stayed for nearly a year during the war."

"The Hotel des Alpes, Montreux," noted Craddock. "And did you remember him, Miss Blacklock?"

"No, I didn't. Actually I had no recollection of ever having seen him before. These boys at hotel reception desks all look exactly alike. We had had a very pleasant time at Montreux and the proprietor there had been extremely obliging, so I tried to be as civil as possible and said I hoped he was enjoying being in England, and he said, yes, that his father had sent him over for six months to learn the hotel business. It all seemed quite natural."

"And your next encounter?"

"About—yes, it must have been ten days ago, he suddenly turned up here. I was very surprised to see him. He apologized for troubling me, but said I was the only person he knew in England. He told me that he urgently needed money to return to Switzerland as his mother was dangerously ill."

"But Letty didn't give it to him," Miss Bunner put in breathlessly.

"It was a thoroughly fishy story," said Miss Blacklock, with vigour. "I made up my mind that he was definitely a wrong 'un. That story about wanting the money to return to Switzerland was *nonsense*. His father could easily have wired for arrangements to have been made in this country. These hotel people are all in with each other. I suspected that he'd been embezzling money or something of that kind." She paused and said dryly: "In case you think I'm hardhearted, I was secretary for many years to a big financier and one becomes wary about appeals for money. I know simply all the hard-luck stories there are.

"The only thing that did surprise me," she added thoughtfully, "was that he gave in so easily. He went away at once without any more argument. It's as though he had never expected to get the money."

"Do you think now, looking back on it, that his coming was really by way of a pretext to spy out the land?"

Miss Blacklock nodded her head vigorously.

"That's exactly what I do think—now. He made certain remarks as I let him out—about the rooms. He said, 'You have a very nice dining room' (which of course it isn't—it's a horrid dark little room) just as an excuse to look inside. And then he sprang forward and unfastened the front door, said, 'Let me.' I think now he wanted to have a look at the fastening. Actually, like most people round here, we never lock the front door until it gets dark. *Anyone* could walk in."

"And the side door? There is a side door to the garden, I understand?"

"Yes. I went out through it to shut up the ducks not long before the people arrived."

"Was it locked when you went out?"

Miss Blacklock frowned.

"I can't remember ... I think so. I certainly locked it when I came in."

"That would be about quarter past six?"

"Somewhere about then."

"And the front door?"

"That's not usually locked until later."

"Then Scherz could have walked in quite easily that way. Or he could have slipped in whilst you were out shutting up the ducks. He'd already spied out the lie of the land and had probably noted various places of concealment—cupboards, etc. Yes, that all seems quite clear."

"I beg your pardon, it isn't at all clear," said Miss Blacklock. "Why on earth should anyone take all that elaborate trouble to come and burgle this house and stage that silly sort of hold-up?"

"Do you keep much money in the house, Miss Blacklock?"

"About five pounds in that desk there, and perhaps a pound or two in my purse."

"Jewellery?"

"A couple of rings and brooches, and the cameos I'm wearing. You must agree with me, Inspector, that the whole thing's absurd."

"It wasn't burglary at all," cried Miss Bunner. "I've told you so, Letty, all along. It was *revenge*! Because you wouldn't give him that money! He deliberately shot at you—twice."

"Ah," said Craddock. "We'll come now to last night. What happened exactly, Miss Blacklock? Tell me in your own words as nearly as you can remember."

Miss Blacklock reflected a moment.

"The clock struck," she said. "The one on the mantelpiece. I remember saying that if anything were going to happen it would have to happen soon. And then the clock struck. We all listened to it without saying anything. It chimes, you know. It chimed the two quarters and then, quite suddenly, the lights went out."

"What lights were on?"

"The wall brackets in here and the further room. The standard lamp and the two small reading lamps weren't on."

"Was there a flash first, or a noise when the lights went out?"

"I don't think so."

"I'm sure there *was* a flash," said Dora Bunner. "*And* a cracking noise. Dangerous!"

"And then, Miss Blacklock?"

"The door opened—"

"Which door? There are two in the room."

"Oh, this door in here. The one in the other room doesn't open. It's a dummy. The door opened and there he was—a masked man with a revolver. It just seemed too fantastic for words, but of course at the time I just thought it was a silly joke. He said something—I forget what—"

"Hands up or I shoot!" supplied Miss Bunner, dramatically.

"Something like that," said Miss Blacklock, rather doubtfully.

"And you all put your hands up?"

"Oh, *yes*," said Miss Bunner. "We all did. I mean, it was *part* of it."

"*I didn't*," said Miss Blacklock crisply. "It seemed so utterly silly. And I was annoyed by the whole thing."

"And then?"

"The flashlight was right in my eyes. It dazzled me. And then, quite incredibly, I heard a bullet whizz past me and hit the wall by my head. Somebody shrieked and then I felt a burning pain in my ear and heard the second report."

"It was *terrifying*," put in Miss Bunner.

"And what happened next, Miss Blacklock?"

"It's difficult to say—I was so staggered by the pain and the surprise. The—the figure turned away and seemed to stumble and then there was another shot and his torch went out and everybody began pushing and calling out. All banging into each other."

"Where were you standing, Miss Blacklock?"

"She was over by the table. She'd got that vase of violets in her hand," said Miss Bunner breathlessly.

"I was over here." Miss Blacklock went over to the small table by the archway. "Actually it was the cigarette box I'd got in my hand."

Inspector Craddock examined the wall behind her. The two bullet holes showed plainly. The bullets themselves had been extracted and

had been sent for comparison with the revolver.

He said quietly:

"You had a very near escape, Miss Blacklock."

"He *did* shoot at her," said Miss Bunner. "Deliberately *at* her! I saw him. He turned the flash round on everybody until he found her and then he held it right at her and just fired at *her*. He meant to kill *you*, Letty."

"Dora dear, you've just got that into your head from mulling the whole thing over and over."

"He shot at *you*," repeated Dora stubbornly. "He meant to shoot you and when he'd missed, he shot himself. I'm *certain* that's the way it was!"

"I don't think he meant to shoot himself for a minute," said Miss Blacklock. "He wasn't the kind of man who shoots himself."

"You tell me, Miss Blacklock, that until the revolver was fired you thought the whole business was a joke?"

"Naturally. What else could I think it was?"

"Who do you think was the author of this joke?"

"You thought Patrick had done it at first," Dora Bunner reminded her.

"Patrick?" asked the Inspector sharply.

"My young cousin, Patrick Simmons," Miss Blacklock continued sharply, annoyed with her friend. "It did occur to me when I saw this advertisement that it might be some attempt at humour on his part, but he denied it absolutely."

"And then you were worried, Letty," said Miss Bunner. "You *were* worried, although you pretended not to be. And you were quite right to be worried. It said a murder is announced—and it *was* announced—*your* murder! And if the man hadn't missed, you *would* have been murdered. And then where should we all be?"

Dora Bunner was trembling as she spoke. Her face was puckered up and she looked as though she were going to cry.

Miss Blacklock patted her on the shoulder.

"It's all right, Dora dear—don't get excited. It's so bad for you. Everything's quite all right. We've had a nasty experience, but it's over now." She added, "You must pull yourself together for my sake,

Dora. I rely on you, you know, to keep the house going. Isn't it the day for the laundry to come?"

"Oh, dear me, Letty, how *fortunate* you reminded me! I wonder if they'll return that missing pillowcase. I must make a note in the book about it. I'll go and see to it at once."

"And take those violets away," said Miss Blacklock. "There's nothing I hate more than dead flowers."

"What a pity. I picked them fresh yesterday. They haven't lasted at all—oh, dear, I must have forgotten to put any water in the vase. Fancy that! I'm always forgetting things. Now I must go and see about the laundry. They might be here any moment."

She bustled away, looking quite happy again.

"She's not very strong," said Miss Blacklock, "and excitements are bad for her. Is there anything more you want to know, Inspector?"

"I just want to know exactly how many people make up your household here and something about them."

"Yes, well in addition to myself and Dora Bunner, I have two young cousins living here at present, Patrick and Julia Simmons."

"Cousins? Not a nephew and niece?"

"No. They call me Aunt Letty, but actually they are distant cousins. Their mother was my second cousin."

"Have they always made their home with you?"

"Oh, dear no, only for the last two months. They lived in the South of France before the war. Patrick went into the Navy and Julia, I believe, was in one of the Ministries. She was at Llandudno. When the war was over their mother wrote and asked me if they could possibly come to me as paying guests—Julia is training as a dispenser in Milchester General Hospital, Patrick is studying for an engineering degree at Milchester University. Milchester, as you know, is only fifty minutes by bus, and I was very glad to have them here. This house is really too large for me. They pay a small sum for board and lodging and it all works out very well." She added with a smile, "I like having somebody young about the place."

"Then there is a Mrs. Haymes, I believe?"

"Yes. She works as an assistant gardener at Dayas Hall, Mrs. Lucas's place. The cottage there is occupied by the old gardener and

his wife and Mrs. Lucas asked if I could billet her here. She's a very nice girl. Her husband was killed in Italy, and she has a boy of eight who is at a prep school and whom I have arranged to have here in the holidays."

"And by way of domestic help?"

"A jobbing gardener comes in on Tuesdays and Fridays. A Mrs. Huggins from the village comes up five mornings a week and I have a foreign refugee with a most unpronounceable name as a kind of lady cook help. You will find Mitzi rather difficult, I'm afraid. She has a kind of persecution mania."

Craddock nodded. He was conscious in his own mind of yet another of Constable Legg's invaluable commentaries. Having appended the word "Scatty" to Dora Bunner, and "All right" to Letitia Blacklock, he had embellished Mitzi's record with the one word "Liar."

As though she had read his mind Miss Blacklock said:

"Please don't be too prejudiced against the poor thing because she's a liar. I do really believe that, like so many liars, there is a real substratum of truth behind her lies. I mean that though, to take an instance, her atrocity stories have grown and grown until every kind of unpleasant story that has ever appeared in print has happened to her or her relations personally, she did have a bad shock initially and did see one, at least, of her relations killed. I think a lot of these displaced persons feel, perhaps justly, that their claim to our notice and sympathy lies in their atrocity value and so they exaggerate and invent."

She added: "Quite frankly, Mitzi is a maddening person. She exasperates and infuriates us all, she is suspicious and sulky, is perpetually having 'feelings' and thinking herself insulted. But in spite of it all, I really am sorry for her." She smiled. "And also, when she wants to, she can cook very nicely."

"I'll try not to ruffle her more than I can help," said Craddock soothingly. "Was that Miss Julia Simmons who opened the door to me?"

"Yes. Would you like to see her now? Patrick has gone out. Phillipa Haymes you will find working at Dayas Hall."

“Thank you, Miss Blacklock. I’d like to see Miss Simmons now if I may.”

Six

JULIA, MITZI AND PATRICK

I

Julia, when she came into the room, and sat down in the chair vacated by Letitia Blacklock, had an air of composure that Craddock for some reason found annoying. She fixed a limpid gaze on him and waited for his questions.

Miss Blacklock had tactfully left the room.

"Please tell me about last night, Miss Simmons."

"Last night?" murmured Julia with a blank stare. "Oh, we all slept like logs. Reaction, I suppose."

"I mean last night from six o'clock onwards."

"Oh, I see. Well, a lot of tiresome people came—"

"They were?"

She gave him another limpid stare.

"Don't you know all this already?"

"I'm asking the questions, Miss Simmons," said Craddock pleasantly.

"My mistake. I always find repetitions so dreary. Apparently you don't ... Well, there was Colonel and Mrs. Easterbrook, Miss Hinchcliffe and Miss Murgatroyd, Mrs. Swettenham and Edmund Swettenham, and Mrs. Harmon, the Vicar's wife. They arrived in that order. And if you want to know what they said—they all said the

same thing in turn. 'I see you've got your central heating on' and 'What *lovely* chrysanthemums!'"

Craddock bit his lip. The mimicry was good.

"The exception was Mrs. Harmon. She's rather a pet. She came in with her hat falling off and her shoelaces untied and she asked straight out when the murder was going to happen. It embarrassed everybody because they'd all been pretending they'd dropped in by chance. Aunt Letty said in her dry way that it was due to happen quite soon. And then that clock chimed and just as it finished, the lights went out, the door was flung open and a masked figure said, 'Stick 'em up, guys,' or something like that. It was exactly like a bad film. Really quite ridiculous. And then he fired two shots at Aunt Letty and suddenly it wasn't ridiculous any more."

"Where was everybody when this happened?"

"When the lights went out? Well, just standing about, you know. Mrs. Harmon was sitting on the sofa—Hinch (that's Miss Hinchcliffe) had taken up a manly stance in front of the fireplace."

"You were all in this room, or the far room?"

"Mostly, I think, in this room. Patrick had gone into the other to get the sherry. I think Colonel Easterbrook went after him, but I don't really know. We were—well—as I said, just standing about."

"Where were you yourself?"

"I think I was over by the window. Aunt Letty went to get the cigarettes."

"On that table by the archway?"

"Yes—and then the lights went out and the bad film started."

"The man had a powerful torch. What did he do with it?"

"Well, he shone it on us. Horribly dazzling. It just made you blink."

"I want you to answer this very carefully, Miss Simmons. Did he hold the torch steady, or did he move it about?"

Julia considered. Her manner was now definitely less weary.

"He moved it," she said slowly. "Like a spotlight in a dance hall. It was full in my eyes and then it went on round the room and then the shots came. Two shots."

"And then?"

"He whirled round—and Mitzi began to scream like a siren from somewhere and his torch went out and there was another shot. And then the door closed (it does, you know, slowly, with a whining noise—quite uncanny) and there we were all in the dark, not knowing what to do, and poor Bunny squealing like a rabbit and Mitzi going all out across the hall."

"Would it be your opinion that the man shot himself deliberately, or do you think he stumbled and the revolver went off accidentally?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. The whole thing was so stagey. Actually I thought it was still some silly joke—until I saw the blood from Letty's ear. But even if you were actually going to fire a revolver to make the thing more real, you'd be careful to fire it well above someone's head, wouldn't you?"

"You would indeed. Do you think he could see clearly who he was firing at? I mean, was Miss Blacklock clearly outlined in the light of the torch?"

"I've no idea. I wasn't looking at her. I was looking at the man."

"What I'm getting at is—do you think the man was deliberately aiming at her—at her in particular, I mean?"

Julia seemed a little startled by the idea.

"You mean deliberately picking on Aunt Letty? Oh, I shouldn't think so ... After all, if he wanted to take a pot shot at Aunt Letty, there would be heaps of more suitable opportunities. There would be no point in collecting all the friends and neighbours just to make it more difficult. He could have shot her from behind a hedge in the good old Irish fashion any day of the week, and probably got away with it."

And that, thought Craddock, was a very complete reply to Dora Bunner's suggestion of a deliberate attack on Letitia Blacklock.

He said with a sigh, "Thank you, Miss Simmons. I'd better go and see Mitzi now."

"Mind her fingernails," warned Julia. "She's a tartar!"

II

Craddock, with Fletcher in attendance, found Mitzi in the kitchen. She was rolling pastry and looked up suspiciously as he entered.

Her black hair hung over her eyes; she looked sullen, and the purple jumper and brilliant green skirt she wore were not becoming to her pasty complexion.

"What do you come in my kitchen for, Mr. Policeman? You are police, yes? Always, always there is persecution—ah! I should be used to it by now. They say it is different here in England, but no, it is just the same. You come to torture me, yes, to make me say things, but I shall say *nothing*. You will tear off my fingernails, and put lighted matches on my skin—oh, yes, and worse than that. But I will not speak, do you hear? I shall say nothing—nothing at all. And you will send me away to a concentration camp, and I shall not care."

Craddock looked at her thoughtfully, selecting what was likely to be the best method of attack. Finally he sighed and said:

"O.K., then, get your hat and coat."

"What is that you say?" Mitzi looked startled.

"Get your hat and coat and come along. I haven't got my nail-pulling apparatus and the rest of the bag of tricks with me. We keep all that down at the station. Got the handcuffs handy, Fletcher?"

"Sir!" said Sergeant Fletcher with appreciation.

"But I do not want to come," screeched Mitzi, backing away from him.

"Then you'll answer civil questions civilly. If you like, you can have a solicitor present."

"A lawyer? I do not like a lawyer. I do not want a lawyer."

She put the rolling pin down, dusted her hands on a cloth and sat down.

"What do you want to know?" she asked sulkily.

"I want your account of what happened here last night."

"You know very well what happened."

"I want your account of it."

"I tried to go away. Did she tell you that? When I saw that in the paper saying about murder. I wanted to go away. She would not let

me. She is very hard—not at all sympathetic. She made me stay. But *I* knew—I knew what would happen. *I* knew I should be murdered.”

“Well, you weren’t murdered, were you?”

“No,” admitted Mitzi grudgingly.

“Come now, tell me what happened.”

“I was nervous. Oh, I was nervous. All that evening. I hear things. People moving about. Once I think someone is in the hall moving stealthily—but it is only that Mrs. Haymes coming in through the side door (so as not to dirty the front steps, *she* says. Much *she* cares!). She is a Nazi herself, that one, with her fair hair and her blue eyes, so superior and looking at me and thinking that I—I am only dirt—”

“Never mind Mrs. Haymes.”

“Who does she think *she* is? Has she had expensive university education like I have? Has she a degree in Economics? No, she is just a paid labourer. She digs and mows grass and is paid so much every Saturday. Who is she to call herself a lady?”

“Never mind Mrs. Haymes, I said. Go on.”

“I take the sherry and the glasses, and the little pastries that I have made so nice into the drawing room. Then the bell rings and I answer the door. Again and again I answer the door. It is degrading—but I do it. And then I go back into the pantry and I start to polish the silver, and I think it will be very handy, that, because if someone comes to kill me, I have there close at hand the big carving knife, all sharp.”

“Very foresighted of you.”

“And then, suddenly—I hear shots. I think: ‘It has come—it is happening.’ I run through the dining room (the other door—it will not open). I stand a moment to listen and then there comes another shot and a big thud, out there in the hall, and I turn the door handle, but it is locked outside. I am shut in there like a rat in a trap. And I go mad with fear. I scream and I scream and I beat upon the door. And at last—at last—they turn the key and let me out. And then I bring candles, many many candles—and the lights go on, and I see blood—blood! Ach, Gott in Himmel, the blood! It is not the first

time I have seen blood. My little brother—I see him killed before my eyes—I see blood in the street—people shot, dying—I—”

“Yes,” said Inspector Craddock. “Thank you very much.”

“And now,” said Mitzi dramatically, “you can arrest me and take me to prison!”

“Not today,” said Inspector Craddock.

III

As Craddock and Fletcher went through the hall to the front door it was flung open and a tall handsome young man almost collided with them.

“Sleuths as I live,” cried the young man.

“Mr. Patrick Simmons?”

“Quite right, Inspector. You’re the Inspector, aren’t you, and the other’s the Sergeant?”

“You are quite right, Mr. Simmons. Can I have a word with you, please?”

“I am innocent, Inspector. I swear I am innocent.”

“Now then, Mr. Simmons, don’t play the fool. I’ve a good many other people to see and I don’t want to waste time. What’s this room? Can we go in here?”

“It’s the so-called study—but nobody studies.”

“I was told that you were studying?” said Craddock.

“I found I couldn’t concentrate on mathematics, so I came home.”

In a businesslike manner Inspector Craddock demanded full name, age, details of war service.

“And now, Mr. Simmons, will you describe what happened last night?”

“We killed the fatted calf, Inspector. That is, Mitzi set her hand to making savoury pastries, Aunt Letty opened a new bottle of sherry —”

Craddock interrupted.

“A new bottle? Was there an old one?”

“Yes. Half full. But Aunt Letty didn’t seem to fancy it.”

“Was she nervous, then?”

"Oh, not really. She's extremely sensible. It was old Bunny, I think, who had put the wind up her—prophesying disaster all day."

"Miss Bunner was definitely apprehensive, then?"

"Oh, yes, she enjoyed herself thoroughly."

"She took the advertisement seriously?"

"It scared her into fits."

"Miss Blacklock seems to have thought, when she first read that advertisement, that you had had something to do with it. Why was that?"

"Ah, sure, I get blamed for everything round here!"

"You *didn't* have anything to do with it, did you, Mr. Simmons?"

"Me? Never in the world."

"Had you ever seen or spoken to this Rudi Scherz?"

"Never seen him in my life."

"It was the kind of joke you might have played, though?"

"Who's been telling you that? Just because I once made Bunny an apple pie bed—and sent Mitzi a postcard saying the Gestapo was on her track—"

"Just give me your account of what happened."

"I'd just gone into the small drawing room to fetch the drinks when, Hey Presto, the lights went out. I turned round and there's a fellow standing in the doorway saying, 'Stick your hands up,' and everybody gasping and squealing, and just when I'm thinking—can I rush him? he starts firing a revolver and then crash down he goes and his torch goes out and we're in the dark again, and Colonel Easterbrook starts shouting orders in his barrack-room voice. 'Lights,' he says, and will my lighter go on? No, it won't as is the way of those cussed inventions."

"Did it seem to you that the intruder was definitely aiming at Miss Blacklock?"

"Ah, how could I tell? I should say he just loosed off his revolver for the fun of the thing—and then found, maybe, he'd gone too far."

"And shot himself?"

"It could be. When I saw the face of him, he looked like the kind of little pasty thief who might easily lose his nerve."

"And you're sure you had never seen him before?"

"Never."

"Thank you, Mr. Simmons. I shall want to interview the other people who were here last night. Which would be the best order in which to take them?"

"Well, our Phillipa—Mrs. Haymes—works at Dayas Hall. The gates of it are nearly opposite this gate. After that, the Swettenhams are the nearest. Anyone will tell you."

Seven

AMONG THOSE PRESENT

I

Dayas Hall had certainly suffered during the war years. Couch grass grew enthusiastically over what had once been an asparagus bed, as evidenced by a few waving tufts of asparagus foliage. Grounseel, bindweed and other garden pests showed every sign of vigorous growth.

A portion of the kitchen garden bore evidence of having been reduced to discipline and here Craddock found a sour-looking old man leaning pensively on a spade.

"It's Mrs. 'Aymes you want? I couldn't say where you'd find 'er. 'As 'er own ideas, she 'as, about what she'll do. Not one to take advice. I could show her—show 'er willing—but what's the good, won't listen these young ladies won't! Think they know everything because they've put on breeches and gone for a ride on a tractor. But it's *gardening* that's needed here. And that isn't learned in a day. *Gardening*, that's what this place needs."

"It looks as though it does," said Craddock.

The old man chose to take this remark as an aspersion.

"Now look here, mister, what do you suppose I can do with a place this size? Three men and a boy, that's what it used to 'ave. And that's what it wants. There's not many men could put in the

work on it that I do. 'Ere sometimes I am till eight o'clock at night. Eight o'clock."

"What do you work by? An oil lamp?"

"Naterally I don't mean this time o' year. Naterally. *Summer* evenings I'm talking about."

"Oh," said Craddock. "I'd better go and look for Mrs. Haymes."

The rustic displayed some interest.

"What are you wanting 'er for? Police, aren't you? She been in trouble, or is it the do there was up to Little Paddocks? Masked men bursting in and holding up a roomful of people with a revolver. An' that sort of thing wouldn't 'ave 'appened afore the war. Deserters, that's what it is. Desperate men roaming the countryside. Why don't the military round 'em up?"

"I've no idea," said Craddock. "I suppose this hold-up caused a lot of talk?"

"That it did. What's us coming to? That's what Ned Barker said. Comes of going to the pictures so much, he said. But Tom Riley he says it comes of letting these furriners run about loose. And depend on it, he says, that girl as cooks up there for Miss Blacklock and 'as such a nasty temper—*she's* in it, he said. She's a communist or worse, he says, and we don't like that sort 'ere. And Marlene, who's behind the bar, you understand, she will 'ave it that there must be something very valuable up at Miss Blacklock's. Not that you'd think it, she says, for I'm sure Miss Blacklock goes about as plain as plain, except for them great rows of false pearls she wears. And then she says—Supposin' as them pearls is *real*, and Florrie (what's old Bellamy's daughter) *she* says, 'Nonsense,' she says—'*noovo ar*—that's what they are—costume jewellery,' she says. Costume jewellery—that's a fine way of labelling a string of false pearls. Roman pearls, the gentry used to call 'em once—and Parisian diamonds—my wife was a lady's maid and I know. But what does it all mean—just glass! I suppose it's 'costume jewellery' that young Miss Simmons wears—gold ivy leaves and dogs and such like. 'Tisn't often you see a real bit of gold nowadays—even wedding rings they make of this grey plattinghum stuff. Shabby, I call it—for all that it costs the earth."

Old Ashe paused for breath and then continued:

"'Miss Blacklock don't keep much money in the 'ouse, that I do know,' says Jim 'Uggins, speaking up. 'E should know, for it's 'is wife as goes up and does for 'em at Little Paddocks, and she's a woman as knows most of what's going on. Nosey, if you take me."

"Did he say what Mrs. Huggins' view was?"

"That Mitzi's mixed up in it, that's what she thinks. Awful temper she 'as, and the airs she gives 'erself! Called Mrs. 'Uggins a working woman to 'er face the other morning."

Craddock stood a moment, checking over in his orderly mind the substance of the old gardener's remarks. It gave him a good cross-section of rural opinion in Chipping Cleghorn, but he didn't think there was anything to help him in his task. He turned away and the old man called after him grudgingly:

"Maybe you'd find her in the apple orchard. She's younger than I am for getting the apples down."

And sure enough in the apple orchard Craddock found Phillipa Haymes. His first view was a pair of nice legs encased in breeches sliding easily down the trunk of a tree. Then Phillipa, her face flushed, her fair hair ruffled by the branches, stood looking at him in a startled fashion.

"Make a good Rosalind," Craddock thought automatically, for Detective-Inspector Craddock was a Shakespeare enthusiast and had played the part of the melancholy Jaques with great success in a performance of *As You Like It* for the Police Orphanage.

A moment later he amended his views. Phillipa Haymes was too wooden for Rosalind, her fairness and her impassivity were intensely English, but English of the twentieth rather than of the sixteenth century. Well-bred, unemotional English, without a spark of mischief.

"Good morning, Mrs. Haymes. I'm sorry if I startled you. I'm Detective-Inspector Craddock of the Middleshire Police. I wanted to have a word with you."

"About last night?"

"Yes."

"Will it take long? Shall we—?"

She looked about her rather doubtfully.

Craddock indicated a fallen tree trunk.

"Rather informal," he said pleasantly, "but I don't want to interrupt your work longer than necessary."

"Thank you."

"It's just for the record. You came in from work at what time last night?"

"At about half past five. I'd stayed about twenty minutes later in order to finish some watering in the greenhouse."

"You came in by which door?"

"The side door. One cuts across by the ducks and the hen-house from the drive. It saves you going round, and besides it avoids dirtying up the front porch. I'm in rather a mucky state sometimes."

"You always come in that way?"

"Yes."

"The door was unlocked?"

"Yes. During the summer it's usually wide open. This time of the year it's shut but not locked. We all go out and in a good deal that way. I locked it when I came in."

"Do you always do that?"

"I've been doing it for the last week. You see, it gets dark at six. Miss Blacklocks goes out to shut up the ducks and the hens sometimes in the evening, but she very often goes out through the kitchen door."

"And you are quite sure you did lock the side door this time?"

"I really am quite sure about that."

"Quite so, Mrs. Haymes. And what did you do when you came in?"

"Kicked off my muddy footwear and went upstairs and had a bath and changed. Then I came down and found that a kind of party was in progress. I hadn't known anything about this funny advertisement until then."

"Now please describe just what occurred when the hold-up happened."

"Well, the lights went out suddenly—"

"Where were you?"

"By the mantelpiece. I was searching for my lighter which I thought I had put down there. The lights went out—and everybody giggled. Then the door was flung open and this man shone a torch on us and flourished a revolver and told us to put our hands up."

"Which you proceeded to do?"

"Well, I didn't actually. I thought it was just fun, and I was tired and I didn't think I needed really to put them up."

"In fact, you were bored by the whole thing?"

"I was, rather. And then the revolver went off. The shots sounded deafening and I was really frightened. The torch went whirling round and dropped and went out, and then Mitzi started screaming. It was just like a pig being killed."

"Did you find the torch very dazzling?"

"No, not particularly. It was quite a strong one, though. It lit up Miss Bunner for a moment and she looked quite like a turnip ghost—you know, all white and staring with her mouth open and her eyes starting out of her head."

"The man moved the torch?"

"Oh, yes, he played it all round the room."

"As though he were looking for someone?"

"Not particularly, I should say."

"And after that, Mrs. Haymes?"

Phillipa Haymes frowned.

"Oh, it was all a terrible muddle and confusion. Edmund Swettenham and Patrick Simmons switched on their lighters and they went out into the hall and we followed, and someone opened the dining room door—the lights hadn't fused there—and Edmund Swettenham gave Mitzi a terrific slap on the cheek and brought her out of her screaming fit, and after that it wasn't so bad."

"You saw the body of the dead man?"

"Yes."

"Was he known to you? Had you ever seen him before?"

"Never."

"Have you any opinion as to whether his death was accidental, or do you think he shot himself deliberately?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"You didn't see him when he came to the house previously?"

"No. I believe it was in the middle of the morning and I shouldn't have been there. I'm out all day."

"Thank you, Mrs. Haymes. One thing more. You haven't any valuable jewellery? Rings, bracelets, anything of that kind?"

Phillipa shook her head.

"My engagement ring—a couple of brooches."

"And as far as you know, there was nothing of particular value in the house?"

"No. I mean there is some quite nice silver—but nothing out of the ordinary."

"Thank you, Mrs. Haymes."

II

As Craddock retraced his steps through the kitchen garden he came face to face with a large red-faced lady, carefully corseted.

"Good morning," she said belligerently. "What do you want here?"

"Mrs. Lucas? I am Detective-Inspector Craddock."

"Oh, that's who you are? I beg your pardon. I don't like strangers forcing their way into my garden wasting the gardeners' time. But I quite understand you have to do your duty."

"Quite so."

"May I ask if we are to expect a repetition of that outrage last night at Miss Blacklock's? Is it a gang?"

"We are satisfied, Mrs. Lucas, that it was *not* the work of a gang."

"There are far too many robberies nowadays. The police are getting slack." Craddock did not reply. "I suppose you've been talking to Phillipa Haymes?"

"I wanted her account as an eyewitness."

"You couldn't have waited until one o'clock, I suppose? After all, it would be fairer to question her in *her* time, rather than in *mine*. ..."

"I'm anxious to get back to headquarters."

"Not that one expects consideration nowadays. Or a decent day's work. On duty late, half an hour's pottering. A break for elevenses at ten o'clock. No work done at all the moment the rain starts. When

you want the lawn mown there's always something wrong with the mower. And off duty five or ten minutes before the proper time."

"I understood from Mrs. Haymes that she left here at twenty minutes past five yesterday instead of five o'clock."

"Oh, I dare say she did. Give her her due, Mrs. Haymes is quite keen on her work, though there have been days when I have come out here and not been able to find her anywhere. She is a lady by birth, of course, and one feels it's one's duty to do something for these poor young war widows. Not that it isn't very inconvenient. Those long school holidays and the arrangement is that she has extra time off then. I told her that there are really excellent camps nowadays where children can be sent and where they have a delightful time and enjoy it far more than wandering about with their parents. They need practically not come home at all in the summer holidays."

"But Mrs. Haymes didn't take kindly to that idea?"

"She's as obstinate as a mule, that girl. Just the time of year when I want the tennis court mowed and marked nearly every day. Old Ashe gets the lines crooked. But *my* convenience is never considered!"

"I presume Mrs. Haymes takes a smaller salary than is usual?"

"Naturally. What else could she expect?"

"Nothing, I'm sure," said Craddock. "Good morning, Mrs. Lucas."

III

"It was dreadful," said Mrs. Swettenham happily. "Quite—quite—dreadful, and what I say is that they ought to be far more careful what advertisements they accept at the *Gazette* office. At the time, when I read it, I thought it was very odd. I said so, didn't I, Edmund?"

"Do you remember just what you were doing when the lights went out, Mrs. Swettenham?" asked the Inspector.

"How that reminds me of my old Nannie! *Where was Moses when the light went out?* The answer, of course, was 'In the Dark.' Just like us yesterday evening. All standing about and wondering what was

going to happen. And then, you know, the *thrill* when it suddenly went pitch black. And the door opening—just a dim figure standing there with a revolver and that blinding light and a menacing voice saying ‘Your money or your life!’ Oh, I’ve never enjoyed anything so much. And then a minute later, of course, it was all *dreadful*. *Real* bullets, just *whistling* past our ears! It must have been just like the Commandos in the war.”

“Whereabouts were you standing or sitting at the time, Mrs. Swettenham?”

“Now let me see, where was I? Who was I talking to, Edmund?”

“I really haven’t the least idea, Mother.”

“Was it Miss Hinchcliffe I was asking about giving the hens cod liver oil in the cold weather? Or was it Mrs. Harmon—no, she’d only just arrived. I think I was just saying to Colonel Easterbrook that I thought it was really very dangerous to have an atom research station in England. It ought to be on some lonely island in case the radio activity gets loose.”

“You don’t remember if you were sitting or standing?”

“Does it really matter, Inspector? I was somewhere over by the window or near the mantelpiece, because I know I was *quite* near the clock when it struck. Such a thrilling moment! Waiting to see if anything might be going to happen.”

“You describe the light from the torch as blinding. Was it turned full on to you?”

“It was right in my eyes. I couldn’t see a thing.”

“Did the man hold it still, or did he move it about, from person to person?”

“Oh, I don’t really know. Which did he do, Edmund?”

“It moved rather slowly over us all, so as to see what we were all doing, I suppose, in case we should try and rush him.”

“And where exactly in the room were *you*, Mr. Swettenham?”

“I’d been talking to Julia Simmons. We were both standing up in the middle of the room—the long room.”

“Was everyone in that room, or was there anyone in the far room?”

"Phillipa Haymes had moved in there, I think. She was over by that far mantelpiece. I think she was looking for something."

"Have you any idea as to whether the third shot was suicide or an accident?"

"I've no idea at all. The man seemed to swerve round very suddenly and then crumple up and fall—but it was all very confused. You must realise that you couldn't really see anything. And then that refugee girl started yelling the place down."

"I understand it was you who unlocked the dining room door and let her out?"

"Yes."

"The door was definitely locked on the outside?"

Edmund looked at him curiously.

"Certainly it was. Why, you don't imagine—?"

"I just like to get my facts quite clear. Thank you, Mr. Swettenham."

IV

Inspector Craddock was forced to spend quite a long time with Colonel and Mrs. Easterbrook. He had to listen to a long disquisition on the psychological aspect of the case.

"The psychological approach—that's the only thing nowadays," the Colonel told him. "You've got to understand your criminal. Now the whole setup here is quite plain to a man who's had the wide experience that I have. Why does this fellow put that advert in? Psychology. He wants to advertise himself—to focus attention on himself. He's been passed over, perhaps despised as a foreigner by the other employees at the Spa Hotel. A girl has turned him down, perhaps. He wants to rivet her attention on him. Who is the idol of the cinema nowadays—the gangster—the tough guy? Very well, he will be a tough guy. Robbery with violence. A mask? A revolver? But he wants an audience—he must have an audience. So he arranges for an audience. And then, at the supreme moment, his part runs away with him—he's more than a burglar. He's a killer. He shoots—blindly—"

Inspector Craddock caught gladly at a word:

"You say 'blindly,' Colonel Easterbrook. You didn't think that he was firing deliberately at one particular object—at Miss Blacklock, that is to say?"

"No, no. He just loosed off, as I say, blindly. And that's what brought him to himself. The bullet hit someone—actually it was only a graze, but he didn't know that. He comes to himself with a bang. All this—this make-believe he's been indulging in—is *real*. He's shot at someone—perhaps killed someone ... It's all up with him. And so in blind panic he turns the revolver on himself."

Colonel Easterbrook paused, cleared his throat appreciatively and said in a satisfied voice, "Plain as a pikestaff, that's what it is, plain as a pikestaff."

"It really is wonderful," said Mrs. Easterbrook, "the way you know exactly what happened, Archie."

Her voice was warm with admiration.

Inspector Craddock thought it was wonderful, too, but he was not quite so warmly appreciative.

"Exactly where were you in the room, Colonel Easterbrook, when the actual shooting business took place?"

"I was standing with my wife—near a centre table with some flowers on it."

"I caught hold of your arm, didn't I, Archie, when it happened? I was simply scared to death. I just had to hold on to you."

"Poor little kitten," said the Colonel playfully.

V

The Inspector ran Miss Hinchcliffe to earth by a pigsty.

"Nice creatures, pigs," said Miss Hinchcliffe, scratching a wrinkled pink back. "Coming on well, isn't he? Good bacon round about Christmas time. Well, what do you want to see me about? I told your people last night I hadn't the least idea who the man was. Never seen him anywhere in the neighbourhood snooping about or anything of that sort. Our Mrs. Mopp says he came from one of the

big hotels in Medenham Wells. Why didn't he hold up someone there if he wanted to? Get a much better haul."

That was undeniable—Craddock proceeded with his inquiries.

"Where were you exactly when the incident took place?"

"Incident! Reminds me of my A.R.P. days. Saw some incidents then, I can tell you. Where was I when the shooting started? That what you want to know?"

"Yes."

"Leaning up against the mantelpiece hoping to God someone would offer me a drink soon," replied Miss Hinchcliffe promptly.

"Do you think that the shots were fired blindly, or aimed carefully at one particular person?"

"You mean aimed at Letty Blacklock? How the devil should I know? Damned hard to sort out what your impressions really were or what really happened after it's all over. All I know is the lights went out, and that torch went whirling round dazzling us all, and then the shots were fired and I thought to myself, 'If that damned young fool Patrick Simmons is playing his jokes with a loaded revolver somebody will get hurt.'"

"You thought it was Patrick Simmons?"

"Well, it seemed likely. Edmund Swettenham is intellectual and writes books and doesn't care for horseplay, and old Colonel Easterbrook wouldn't think that sort of thing funny. But Patrick's a wild boy. However, I apologize to him for the idea."

"Did your friend think it might be Patrick Simmons?"

"Murgatroyd? You'd better talk to her yourself. Not that you'll get any sense out of her. She's down the orchard. I'll yell for her if you like."

Miss Hinchcliffe raised her stentorian voice in a powerful bellow:

"Hi-youup, Murgatroyd...."

"Coming ..." floated back a thin cry.

"Hurry up—Polieece," bellowed Miss Hinchcliffe.

Miss Murgatroyd arrived at a brisk trot very much out of breath. Her skirt was down at the hem and her hair was escaping from an inadequate hair net. Her round, good-natured face beamed.

"Is it Scotland Yard?" she asked breathlessly. "I'd no idea. Or I wouldn't have left the house."

"We haven't called in Scotland Yard yet, Miss Murgatroyd. I'm Inspector Craddock from Milchester."

"Well, that's very nice, I'm sure," said Miss Murgatroyd vaguely. "Have you found any clues?"

"Where were you at the time of the crime, that's what he wants to know, Murgatroyd?" said Miss Hinchcliffe. She winked at Craddock.

"Oh, dear," gasped Miss Murgatroyd. "Of course. I ought to have been prepared. *Alibis*, of course. Now, let me see, I was just with everybody else."

"You weren't with me," said Miss Hinchcliffe.

"Oh, dear, Hinch, wasn't I? No, of course, I'd been admiring the chrysanthemums. Very poor specimens, really. And then it all happened—only I didn't really know it had happened—I mean I didn't know that anything like that had happened. I didn't imagine for a moment that it was a real revolver—and all so awkward in the dark, and that dreadful screaming. I got it all wrong, you know. I thought *she* was being murdered—I mean the refugee girl. I thought she was having her throat cut across the hall somewhere. I didn't know it was *him*—I mean, I didn't even know there was a man. It was really just a voice, you know, saying, 'Put them up, please.'"

"Stick 'em up!" Miss Hinchcliffe corrected. "And no suggestion of 'please' about it."

"It's so terrible to think that until that girl started screaming I was actually enjoying myself. Only being in the dark was very awkward and I got a knock on my corn. Agony, it was. Is there anything more you want to know, Inspector?"

"No," said Inspector Craddock, eyeing Miss Murgatroyd speculatively. "I don't really think there is."

Her friend gave a short bark of laughter.

"He's got you taped, Murgatroyd."

"I'm sure, Hinch," said Miss Murgatroyd, "that I'm only too willing to say anything I can."

"He doesn't want that," said Miss Hinchcliffe.

She looked at the Inspector. "If you're doing this geographically I suppose you'll go to the Vicarage next. You might get something there. Mrs. Harmon looks as vague as they make them—but I sometimes think she's got brains. Anyway, she's got something."

As they watched the Inspector and Sergeant Fletcher stalk away, Amy Murgatroyd said breathlessly:

"Oh, Hinch, was I very awful? I do get so flustered!"

"Not at all," Miss Hinchcliffe smiled. "On the whole, I should say you did very well."

VI

Inspector Craddock looked round the big shabby room with a sense of pleasure. It reminded him a little of his own Cumberland home. Faded chintz, big shabby chairs, flowers and books strewn about, and a spaniel in a basket. Mrs. Harmon, too, with her distraught air, and her general disarray and her eager face he found sympathetic.

But she said at once, frankly, "I shan't be any help to you. Because I shut my eyes. I hate being dazzled. And then there were shots and I screwed them up tighter than ever. And I did wish, oh, I did wish, that it had been a *quiet* murder. I don't like bangs."

"So you didn't see anything." The Inspector smiled at her. "But you heard—?"

"Oh, my goodness, yes, there was plenty to *hear*. Doors opening and shutting, and people saying silly things and gasping and old Mitzi screaming like a steam engine—and poor Bunny squealing like a trapped rabbit. And everyone pushing and falling over everyone else. However, when there really didn't seem to be any more bangs coming, I opened my eyes. Everyone was out in the hall then, with candles. And then the lights came on and suddenly it was all as usual—I don't mean really as usual, but we were ourselves again, not just—people in the dark. People in the dark are quite different, aren't they?"

"I think I know what you mean, Mrs. Harmon."

Mrs. Harmon smiled at him.

“And there he was,” she said. “A rather weaselly-looking foreigner—all pink and surprised-looking—lying there dead—with a revolver beside him. It didn’t—oh, it didn’t seem to make *sense*, somehow.”

It did not make sense to the Inspector, either.

The whole business worried him.

Eight

ENTER MISS MARPLE

I

Craddock laid the typed transcript of the various interviews before the Chief Constable. The latter had just finished reading the wire received from the Swiss Police.

"So he had a police record all right," said Rydesdale. "H'm—very much as one thought."

"Yes, sir."

"Jewellery ... h'm, yes ... falsified entries ... yes ... cheque ... Definitely a dishonest fellow."

"Yes, sir—in a small way."

"Quite so. And small things lead to large things."

"I wonder, sir."

The Chief Constable looked up.

"Worried, Craddock?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why? It's a straightforward story. Or isn't it? Let's see what all these people you've been talking to have to say."

He drew the report towards him and read it through rapidly.

"The usual thing—plenty of inconsistencies and contradictions. Different people's accounts of a few moments of stress never agree. But the main picture seems clear enough."

"I know, sir—but it's an unsatisfactory picture. If you know what I mean—it's the wrong picture."

"Well, let's take the facts. Rudi Scherz took the 5:20 bus from Medenham to Chipping Cleghorn arriving there at six o'clock. Evidence of conductor and two passengers. From the bus stop he walked away in the direction of Little Paddocks. He got into the house with no particular difficulty—probably through the front door. He held up the company with a revolver, he fired two shots, one of which slightly wounded Miss Blacklock, then he killed himself with a third shot, whether accidentally or deliberately there is not sufficient evidence to show. The reasons *why* he did all this are profoundly unsatisfactory, I agree. But *why* isn't really a question we are called upon to answer. A Coroner's jury may bring it in suicide—or accidental death. Whichever verdict it is, it's the same as far as we're concerned. We can write *finis*."

"You mean we can always fall back upon Colonel Easterbrook's psychology," said Craddock gloomily.

Rydesdale smiled.

"After all, the Colonel's probably had a good deal of experience," he said. "I'm pretty sick of the psychological jargon that's used so glibly about everything nowadays—but we can't really rule it out."

"I still feel the picture's all wrong, sir."

"Any reason to believe that somebody in the setup at Chipping Cleghorn is lying to you?"

Craddock hesitated.

"I think the foreign girl knows more than she lets on. But that may be just prejudice on my part."

"You think she might possibly have been in it with this fellow? Let him into the house? Put him up to it?"

"Something of the kind. I wouldn't put it past her. But that surely indicates that there really was something valuable, money or jewellery, in the house, and that doesn't seem to have been the case. Miss Blacklock negatived it quite decidedly. So did the others. That leaves us with the proposition that there was something valuable in the house that nobody knew about—"

"Quite a best-seller plot."

"I agree it's ridiculous, sir. The only other point is Miss Bunner's certainty that it was a definite attempt by Scherz to murder Miss Blacklock."

"Well, from what you say—and from her statement, this Miss Bunner—"

"Oh, I agree, sir," Craddock put in quickly, "she's an utterly unreliable witness. Highly suggestible. Anyone could put a thing into her head—but the interesting thing is that this is quite her own theory—no one *has* suggested it to her. Everybody else negatives it. For once she's *not* swimming with the tide. It definitely *is* her own impression."

"And why should Rudi Scherz want to kill Miss Blacklock?"

"There you are, sir. I don't know. Miss Blacklock doesn't know—unless she's a much better liar than I think she is. Nobody knows. So presumably it isn't true."

He sighed.

"Cheer up, Craddock," said the Chief Constable. "I'm taking you off to lunch with Sir Henry and myself. The best that the Royal Spa Hotel in Medenham Wells can provide."

"Thank you, sir." Craddock looked slightly surprised.

"You see, we received a letter—" He broke off as Sir Henry Clithering entered the room. "Ah, there you are, Henry."

Sir Henry, informal this time, said, "Morning, Dermot."

"I've got something for you, Henry," said the Chief Constable.

"What's that?"

"Authentic letter from an old Pussy. Staying at the Royal Spa Hotel. Something she thinks we might like to know in connection with this Chipping Cleghorn business."

"The old Pussies," said Sir Henry triumphantly. "What did I tell you? They hear everything. They see everything. And, unlike the famous adage, they speak all evil. What's this particular one got hold of?"

Rydesdale consulted the letter.

"Writes just like my old grandmother," he complained. "Spiky. Like a spider in the ink bottle, and all underlined. A good deal about how she hopes it won't be taking up our valuable time, but might possibly

be of some slight assistance, etc., etc. What's her name? Jane—something—Murple—no, Marple, Jane Marple."

"Ye Gods and Little Fishes," said Sir Henry, "can it be? George, it's my own particular, one and only, four-starred Pussy. The super Pussy of all old Pussies. And she has managed somehow to be at Medenham Wells, instead of peacefully at home in St. Mary Mead, just at the right time to be mixed up in a murder. Once more a murder is announced—for the benefit and enjoyment of Miss Marple."

"Well, Henry," said Rydesdale sardonically, "I'll be glad to see your paragon. Come on! We'll lunch at the Royal Spa and we'll interview the lady. Craddock, here, is looking highly sceptical."

"Not at all, sir," said Craddock politely.

He thought to himself that sometimes his godfather carried things a bit far.

II

Miss Jane Marple was very nearly, if not quite, as Craddock had pictured her. She was far more benignant than he had imagined and a good deal older. She seemed indeed very old. She had snow-white hair and a pink crinkled face and very soft innocent blue eyes, and she was heavily enmeshed in fleecy wool. Wool round her shoulders in the form of a lacy cape and wool that she was knitting and which turned out to be a baby's shawl.

She was all incoherent delight and pleasure at seeing Sir Henry, and became quite flustered when introduced to the Chief Constable and Detective-Inspector Craddock.

"But really, Sir Henry, how fortunate ... how very fortunate. So long since I have seen you ... Yes, my rheumatism. Very bad of late. Of course I couldn't have afforded this hotel (really fantastic what they charge nowadays) but Raymond—my nephew, Raymond West, you may remember him—"

"Everyone knows *his* name."

"Yes, the dear boy has been so successful with his clever books—he prides himself upon never writing about anything pleasant. The

dear boy insisted on paying all my expenses. And his dear wife is making a name for herself too, as an artist. Mostly jugs of dying flowers and broken combs on windowsills. I never dare tell her, but I still admire Blair Leighton and Alma Tadema. Oh, but I'm chattering. And the Chief Constable himself—indeed I never expected—so afraid I shall be taking up his time—"

"Completely ga-ga," thought the disgusted Detective-Inspector Craddock.

"Come into the Manager's private room," said Rydesdale. "We can talk better there."

When Miss Marple had been disentangled from her wool, and her spare knitting pins collected, she accompanied them, fluttering and protesting, to Mr. Rowlandson's comfortable sitting-room.

"Now, Miss Marple, let's hear what you have to tell us," said the Chief Constable.

Miss Marple came to the point with unexpected brevity.

"It was a cheque," she said. "He altered it."

"He?"

"The young man at the desk here, the one who is supposed to have staged that hold-up and shot himself."

"He altered a cheque, you say?"

Miss Marple nodded.

"Yes. I have it here." She extracted it from her bag and laid it on the table. "It came this morning with my others from the Bank. You can see, it was for seven pounds, and he altered it to seventeen. A stroke in front of the 7, and *teen* added after the word seven with a nice artistic little blot just blurring the whole word. Really very nicely done. A certain amount of *practice*, I should say. It's the same ink, because I wrote the cheque actually at the desk. I should think he'd done it quite often before, wouldn't you?"

"He picked the wrong person to do it to, this time," remarked Sir Henry.

Miss Marple nodded agreement.

"Yes. I'm afraid he would never have gone very far in crime. I was quite the wrong person. Some busy young married woman, or some girl having a love affair—that's the kind who write cheques for

all sorts of different sums and don't really look through their passbooks carefully. But an old woman who has to be careful of the pennies, and who has formed habits—that's quite the wrong person to choose. Seventeen pounds is a sum I *never* write a cheque for. Twenty pounds, a round sum, for the monthly wages and books. And as for my personal expenditure, I usually cash seven—it used to be five, but everything has gone up so."

"And perhaps he reminded you of someone?" prompted Sir Henry, mischief in his eye.

Miss Marple smiled and shook her head at him.

"You are very naughty, Sir Henry. As a matter of fact he *did*. Fred Tyler, at the fish shop. Always slipped an extra 1 in the shillings column. Eating so much fish as we do nowadays, it made a long bill, and lots of people never added it up. Just ten shillings in his pocket every time, not much but enough to get himself a few neckties and take Jessie Spragge (the girl in the draper's) to the pictures. Cut a splash, that's what these young fellows want to do. Well, the very first week I was here, there was a mistake in my bill. I pointed it out to the young man and he apologized very nicely and looked very much upset, but I thought to myself then: 'You've got a shifty eye, young man.'

"What I mean by a shifty eye," continued Miss Marple, "is the kind that looks very straight at you and never looks away or blinks."

Craddock gave a sudden movement of appreciation. He thought to himself "Jim Kelly to the life," remembering a notorious swindler he had helped to put behind bars not long ago.

"Rudi Scherz was a thoroughly unsatisfactory character," said Rydesdale. "He's got a police record in Switzerland, we find."

"Made the place too hot for him, I suppose, and came over here with forged papers?" said Miss Marple.

"Exactly," said Rydesdale.

"He was going about with the little red-haired waitress from the dining room," said Miss Marple. "Fortunately I don't think her heart's affected at all. She just liked to have someone a bit 'different,' and he used to give her flowers and chocolates which the English boys

don't do much. Has she told you all she knows?" she asked, turning suddenly to Craddock. "Or not quite all yet?"

"I'm not absolutely sure," said Craddock cautiously.

"I think there's a little to come," said Miss Marple. "She's looking very worried. Brought me kippers instead of herrings this morning, and forgot the milk jug. Usually she's an excellent waitress. Yes, she's worried. Afraid she might have to give evidence or something like that. But I expect"—her candid blue eyes swept over the manly proportions and handsome face of Detective-Inspector Craddock with truly feminine Victorian appreciation—"that *you* will be able to persuade her to tell you all she knows."

Detective-Inspector Craddock blushed and Sir Henry chuckled.

"It might be important," said Miss Marple. "He may have told her who it was."

Rydesdale stared at her.

"Who what was?"

"I express myself so badly. Who it was who put him up to it, I mean."

"So you think someone put him up to it?"

Miss Marple's eyes widened in surprise.

"Oh, but surely—I mean ... Here's a personable young man—who filches a little bit here and a little bit there—alters a small cheque, perhaps helps himself to a small piece of jewellery if it's left lying around, or takes a little money from the till—all sorts of small petty thefts. Keeps himself going in ready money so that he can dress well, and take a girl about—all that sort of thing. And then suddenly he goes off, with a revolver, and holds up a room full of people, and shoots at someone. He'd *never* have done a thing like that—not for a moment! He wasn't that kind of person. It doesn't make *sense*."

Craddock drew in his breath sharply. That was what Letitia Blacklock had said. What the Vicar's wife had said. What he himself felt with increasing force. *It didn't make sense*. And now Sir Henry's old Pussy was saying it, too, with complete certainty in her fluting old lady's voice.

"Perhaps you'll tell us, Miss Marple," he said, and his voice was suddenly aggressive, "what did happen, then?"

She turned on him in surprise.

"But how should I know what happened? There was an account in the paper—but it says so little. One can make conjectures, of course, but one has no accurate information."

"George," said Sir Henry, "would it be very unorthodox if Miss Marple were allowed to read the notes of the interviews Craddock had with these people at Chipping Cleghorn?"

"It may be unorthodox," said Rydesdale, "but I've not got where I am by being orthodox. She can read them. I'd be curious to hear what she has to say."

Miss Marple was all embarrassment.

"I'm afraid you've been listening to Sir Henry. Sir Henry is always too kind. He thinks too much of any little observations I may have made in the past. Really, I have no gifts—no gifts at all—except perhaps a certain knowledge of human nature. People, I find, are apt to be far too trustful. I'm afraid that I have a tendency always to believe the *worst*. Not a nice trait. But so often justified by subsequent events."

"Read these," said Rydesdale, thrusting the typewritten sheets upon her. "They won't take you long. After all, these people are your kind—you must know a lot of people like them. You may be able to spot something that we haven't. The case is just going to be closed. Let's have an amateur's opinion on it before we shut up the files. I don't mind telling you that Craddock here isn't satisfied. He says, like you, that it doesn't make sense."

There was silence whilst Miss Marple read. She put the typewritten sheets down at last.

"It's very interesting," she said with a sigh. "All the different things that people say—and think. The things they see—or think that they see. And all so complex, nearly all so trivial and if one thing isn't trivial, it's so hard to spot which one—like a needle in a haystack."

Craddock felt a twinge of disappointment. Just for a moment or two, he wondered if Sir Henry might be right about this funny old lady. She might have put her finger on something—old people were often very sharp. He'd never, for instance, been able to conceal

anything from his own great aunt Emma. She had finally told him that his nose twitched when he was about to tell a lie.

But just a few fluffy generalities, that was all that Sir Henry's famous Miss Marple could produce. He felt annoyed with her and said rather curtly:

"The truth of the matter is that the facts are indisputable. Whatever conflicting details these people give, they all saw one thing. They saw a masked man with a revolver and a torch open the door and hold them up, and whether they think he said 'Stick 'em up' or 'Your money or your life,' or whatever phrase is associated with a hold-up in their minds, they *saw* him."

"But surely," said Miss Marple gently. "They couldn't—actually—have seen anything at all...."

Craddock caught his breath. She'd got it! She was sharp, after all. He was testing her by that speech of his, but she hadn't fallen for it. It didn't actually make any difference to the facts, or to what happened, but she'd realized, as he'd realized, that those people who had seen a masked man holding them up couldn't really have *seen* him at all.

"If I understand rightly," Miss Marple had a pink flush on her cheeks, her eyes were bright and pleased as a child's, "there wasn't any light in the hall outside—and not on the landing upstairs either?"

"That's right," said Craddock.

"And so, if a man stood in the doorway and flashed a powerful torch into the room, *nobody could see anything but the torch*, could they?"

"No, they couldn't. I tried it out."

"And so when some of them say they saw a masked man, etc., they are really, though they don't realize it, recapitulating from what they saw *afterwards*—when the lights came on. So it really all fits in very well, doesn't it, on the assumption that Rudi Scherz was the—I think, 'fall guy' is the expression I mean?"

Rydesdale stared at her in such surprise that she grew pinker still. "I may have got the term wrong," she murmured.

"I am not very clever about Americanisms—and I understand they change very quickly. I got it from one of Mr. Dashiell Hammett's

stories. (I understand from my nephew Raymond that he is considered at the top of the tree in what is called the 'tough' style of literature.) A '*fall guy*,' if I understand it rightly, means someone who will be blamed for a crime really committed by someone else. This Rudi Scherz seems to me exactly the right type for that. Rather stupid really, you know, but full of cupidity and probably extremely credulous."

Rydesdale said, smiling tolerantly:

"Are you suggesting that he was persuaded by someone to go out and take pot shots at a room full of people? Rather a tall order."

"I think he was told that it was a *joke*," said Miss Marple. "He was paid for doing it, of course. Paid, that is, to put an advertisement in the newspaper, to go out and spy out the household premises, and then, on the night in question, he was to go there, assume a mask and a black cloak and throw open a door, brandishing a torch, and cry 'Hands up!'"

"And fire off a revolver?"

"No, no," said Miss Marple. "He never had a revolver."

"But everyone says—" began Rydesdale, and stopped.

"Exactly," said Miss Marple. "Nobody could possibly have *seen* a revolver even if he had one. And I don't think he had. I think that after he'd called 'Hands up' somebody came up quietly behind him in the darkness and fired those two shots over his shoulder. It frightened him to death. He swung round and as he did so, that other person shot him and then let the revolver drop beside him...."

The three men looked at her. Sir Henry said softly:

"It's a possible theory."

"But who is Mr. X who came up in the darkness?" asked the Chief Constable.

Miss Marple coughed.

"You'll have to find out from Miss Blacklock who wanted to kill her."

Good for old Dora Bunner, thought Craddock. Instinct against intelligence every time.

"So you think it was a deliberate attempt on Miss Blacklock's life," asked Rydesdale.

"It certainly has that appearance," said Miss Marple. "Though there are one or two difficulties. But what I was really wondering about was whether there mightn't be a short cut. I've no doubt that whoever arranged this with Rudi Scherz took pains to tell him to keep his mouth shut, but if he talked to anybody it would probably be to that girl, Myrna Harris. And he may—he just may—have dropped some hint as to the kind of person who'd suggested the whole thing."

"I'll see her now," said Craddock, rising.

Miss Marple nodded.

"Yes, do, Inspector Craddock. I'll feel happier when you have. Because once she's told you anything she knows she'll be much safer."

"Safer?... Yes, I see."

He left the room. The Chief Constable said doubtfully, but tactfully:

"Well, Miss Marple, you've certainly given us something to think about."

III

"I'm sorry about it, I am really," said Myrna Harris. "It's ever so nice of you not to be ratty about it. But you see Mum's the sort of person who fusses like anything. And it did look as though I'd—what's the phrase?—been an accessory before the fact" (the words ran glibly off her tongue). "I mean, I was afraid you'd never take my word for it that I only thought it was just a bit of fun."

Inspector Craddock repeated the reassuring phrase with which he had broken down Myrna's resistance.

"I will. I'll tell you *all* about it. But you will keep me out of it if you can because of Mum? It all started with Rudi breaking a date with me. We were going to the pictures that evening and then he said he wouldn't be able to come and I was a bit standoffish with him about it—because after all, it had been his idea and I don't fancy being stood up by a foreigner. And he said it wasn't his fault, and I said that was a likely story, and then he said he'd got a bit of a lark on

that night—and that he wasn't going to be out of pocket by it and how would I fancy a wristwatch? So I said, what do you mean by a lark? And he said not to tell anyone, but there was to be a party somewhere and he was to stage a sham hold-up. Then he showed me the advertisement he'd put in and I had to laugh. He was a bit scornful about it all. Said it was kid's stuff, really—but that was just like the English. They never really grew up—and of course, I said what did he mean by talking like that about Us—and we had a bit of an argument, but we made it up. Only you can understand, can't you, sir, that when I read all about it, and it hadn't been a joke at all and Rudi had shot someone and then shot himself—why, I didn't know *what* to do. I thought if I said I knew about it beforehand, it would look as though I were in on the whole thing. But it really did seem like a joke when he told me about it. I'd have sworn he meant it that way. I didn't even know he'd got a revolver. He never said anything about taking a revolver with him."

Craddock comforted her and then asked the most important question.

"Who did he say it was who had arranged this party?"

But there he drew a blank.

"He never said who it was that was getting him to do it. I suppose nobody was, really. It was all his own doing."

"He didn't mention a name? Did he say he—or she?"

"He didn't say anything except that it was going to be a scream. 'I shall laugh to see all their faces.' That's what he said."

He hadn't had long to laugh, Craddock thought.

IV

"It's only a theory," said Rydesdale as they drove back to Medenham. "Nothing to support it, nothing at all. Put it down as old maid's vapourings and let it go, eh?"

"I'd rather not do that, sir."

"It's all very improbable. A mysterious X appearing suddenly in the darkness behind our Swiss friend. Where did he come from? Who was he? Where had he been?"

"He could have come in through the side door," said Craddock, "just as Scherz came. Or," he added slowly, "he could have come from the kitchen."

"*She* could have come from the kitchen, you mean?"

"Yes, sir, it's a possibility. I've not been satisfied about that girl all along. She strikes me as a nasty bit of goods. All that screaming and hysterics—it could have been put on. She could have worked on this young fellow, let him in at the right moment, rigged the whole thing, shot him, bolted back into the dining room, caught up her bit of silver and her chamois and started her screaming act."

"Against that we have the fact that—er—what's his name—oh, yes, Edmund Swettenham, definitely says the key was turned on the outside of the door, and that he turned it to release her. Any other door into that part of the house?"

"Yes, there's a door to the back stairs and kitchen just under the stairs, but it seems the handle came off three weeks ago and nobody's come to put it on yet. In the meantime you can't open the door. I'm bound to say that story seems correct. The spindle and the two handles were on a shelf outside the door in the hall and they were thickly coated with dust, but of course a professional would have ways of opening that door all right."

"Better look up the girl's record. See if her papers are in order. But it seems to me the whole thing is very theoretical."

Again the Chief Constable looked inquiringly at his subordinate. Craddock replied quietly:

"I know, sir, and of course if you think the case ought to be closed, it must be. But I'd appreciate it if I could work on it for just a little longer."

Rather to his surprise the Chief Constable said quietly and approvingly:

"Good lad."

"There's the revolver to work on. If this theory is correct, it wasn't Scherz's revolver and certainly nobody so far has been able to say that Scherz ever had a revolver."

"It's a German make."

"I know, sir. But this country's absolutely full of Continentals makes of guns. All the Americans brought them back and so did our chaps. You can't go by that."

"True enough. Any other lines of inquiry?"

"There's got to be a motive. If there's anything in this theory at all, it means that last Friday's business wasn't a mere joke, and wasn't an ordinary hold-up, it was a cold-blooded attempt at murder. *Somebody tried to murder Miss Blacklock*. Now *why*? It seems to me that if anyone knows the answer to that it must be Miss Blacklock herself."

"I understand she rather poured cold water on that idea?"

"She poured cold water on the idea that *Rudi Scherz* wanted to murder her. And she was quite right. And there's another thing, sir."

"Yes?"

"Somebody might try again."

"That would certainly prove the truth of the theory," said the Chief Constable dryly. "By the way, look after Miss Marple, won't you?"

"Miss Marple? Why?"

"I gather she is taking up residence at the Vicarage in Chipping Cleghorn and coming into Medenham Wells twice a week for her treatments. It seems that Mrs. What'shername is the daughter of an old friend of Miss Marple's. Good sporting instincts, that old bean. Oh, well, I suppose she hasn't much excitement in her life and sniffing round after possible murderers gives her a kick."

"I wish she wasn't coming," said Craddock seriously.

"Going to get under your feet?"

"Not that, sir, but she's a nice old thing. I shouldn't like anything to happen to her ... always supposing, I mean, that there's anything *in* this theory."

Nine

CONCERNING A DOOR

I

"I'm sorry to bother you again, Miss Blacklock—"

"Oh, it doesn't matter. I suppose, as the inquest was adjourned for a week, you're hoping to get more evidence?"

Detective-Inspector Craddock nodded.

"To begin with, Miss Blacklock, Rudi Scherz was not the son of the proprietor of the Hotel des Alpes at Montreux. He seems to have started his career as an orderly in a hospital at Berne. A good many of the patients missed small pieces of jewellery. Under another name he was a waiter at one of the small winter sports places. His speciality there was making out duplicate bills in the restaurant with items on one that didn't appear on the other. The difference, of course, went into his pocket. After that he was in a department store in Zürich. There losses from shoplifting were rather above the average whilst he was with them. It seems likely that the shoplifting wasn't entirely due to customers."

"He was a picker up of unconsidered trifles, in fact?" said Miss Blacklock dryly. "Then I was right in thinking that I had not seen him before?"

"You were quite right—no doubt you were pointed out to him at the Royal Spa Hotel and he pretended to recognize you. The Swiss

police had begun to make his own country rather too hot for him, and he came over here with a very nice set of forged papers and took a job at the Royal Spa."

"Quite a good hunting ground," said Miss Blacklock dryly. "It's extremely expensive and very well-off people stay there. Some of them are careless about their bills, I expect."

"Yes," said Craddock. "There were prospects of a satisfactory harvest."

Miss Blacklock was frowning.

"I see all that," she said. "But why come to Chipping Cleghorn? What does he think we've got here that could possibly be better than the rich Royal Spa Hotel?"

"You stick to your statement that there's nothing of especial value in the house?"

"Of course there isn't. *I* should know. I can assure you Inspector, we've not got an unrecognized Rembrandt or anything like that."

"Then it looks, doesn't it, as though your friend Miss Bunner was right? He came here to attack *you*."

("There, Letty, what did I tell you!")

"Oh, nonsense, Bunny.")

"But is it nonsense?" said Craddock. "I think, you know, that it's true."

Miss Blacklock stared very hard at him.

"Now, let's get this straight. You really believe that this young man came out here—having previously arranged by means of an advertisement that half the village would turn up agog at that particular time—"

"But he mayn't have meant *that* to happen," interrupted Miss Bunner eagerly. "It may have been just a horrid sort of warning—to *you*, Letty—that's how I read it at the time—'*A murder is announced*'—I felt in my bones that it was sinister—if it had all gone as planned he would have shot you and got away—and how would anyone have ever known who it was?"

"That's true enough," said Miss Blacklock. "But—"

"I knew that advertisement wasn't a joke, Letty. I said so. And look at Mitzi—*she* was frightened, too!"

"Ah," said Craddock, "Mitzi. I'd like to know rather more about that young woman."

"Her permit and papers are quite in order."

"I don't doubt that," said Craddock dryly. "Scherz's papers appeared to be quite correct, too."

"But why should this Rudi Scherz want to murder me? That's what you don't attempt to explain, Inspector Craddock."

"There may have been someone behind Scherz," said Craddock slowly. "Have you thought of that?"

He used the words metaphorically though it flashed across his mind that if Miss Marple's theory was correct, the words would also be true in a literal sense. In any case they made little impression on Miss Blacklock, who still looked sceptical.

"The point remains the same," she said. "Why on earth should anyone want to murder *me*?"

"It's the answer to that that I want *you* to give me, Miss Blacklock."

"Well, I can't! That's flat. I've no enemies. As far as I'm aware I've always lived on perfectly good terms with my neighbours. I don't know any guilty secrets about anyone. The whole idea is ridiculous! And if what you're hinting is that Mitzi has something to do with this, that's absurd, too. As Miss Bunner has just told you she was frightened to death when she saw that advertisement in the *Gazette*. She actually wanted to pack up and leave the house then and there."

"That may have been a clever move on her part. She may have known you'd press her to stay."

"Of course, if you've made up your mind about it, you'll find an answer to everything. But I can assure you that if Mitzi had taken an unreasoning dislike to me, she might conceivably poison my food, but I'm sure she wouldn't go in for all this elaborate rigmarole."

"The whole idea's absurd. I believe you police have got an anti-foreigner complex. Mitzi may be a liar but she's *not* a cold-blooded murderer. Go and bully her if you must. But when she's departed in a whirl of indignation, or shut herself up howling in her room, I've a good mind to make *you* cook the dinner. Mrs. Harmon is bringing

some old lady who is staying with her to tea this afternoon and I wanted Mitzi to make some little cakes—but I suppose you'll upset her completely. Can't you *possibly* go and suspect somebody else?"

II

Craddock went out to the kitchen. He asked Mitzi questions that he had asked her before and received the same answers.

Yes, she had locked the front door soon after four o'clock. No, she did not always do so, but that afternoon she had been nervous because of "that dreadful advertisement." It was no good locking the side door because Miss Blacklock and Miss Bunner went out that way to shut up the ducks and feed the chickens and Mrs. Haymes usually came in that way from work.

"Mrs. Haymes says she locked the door when she came in at 5:30."

"Ah, and you believe her—oh, yes, you believe her..."

"Do you think we shouldn't believe her?"

"What does it matter what I think? You will not believe *me*."

"Supposing you give us a chance. You think Mrs. Haymes didn't lock that door?"

"I am thinking she was very careful not to lock it."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Craddock.

"That young man, he does not work alone. No, he knows *where* to come, he knows that *when* he comes a door will be left open for him—oh, very conveniently open!"

"What are you trying to say?"

"What is the use of what I say? You will not listen. You say I am a poor refugee girl who tells lies. You say that a fair-haired English lady, oh, no, *she* does not tell lies—she is so British—so honest. So you believe her and not me. But I could tell you. Oh, yes, I could tell you!"

She banged down a saucepan on the stove.

Craddock was in two minds whether to take notice of what might be only a stream of spite.

"We note everything we are told," he said.

"I shall not tell you anything at all. Why should I? You are all alike. You persecute and despise poor refugees. If I say to you that when, a week before, that young man come to ask Miss Blacklock for money and she sends him away, as you say, with a flea in the ear—if I tell you that after that I hear him talking with Mrs. Haymes—yes, out there in the summerhouse—all you say is that I make it up!"

And so you probably are making it up, thought Craddock. But he said aloud:

"You couldn't hear what was said out in the summerhouse."

"There you are wrong," screamed Mitzi triumphantly. "I go out to get nettles—it makes very nice vegetables, nettles. They do not think so, but I cook it and not tell them. And I hear them talking in there. He say to her 'But where can I hide?' And she say 'I will show you'—and then she say, 'At a quarter past six,' and I think, 'Ach so! That is how you behave, my fine lady! After you come back from work, you go out to meet a man. You bring him into the house.' Miss Blacklock, I think, she will not like that. She will turn you out. I will watch, I think, and listen and then I will tell Miss Blacklock. But I understand now I was wrong. It was not love she planned with him, it was to rob and to murder. But you will say I make all this up. Wicked Mitzi, you will say. I will take her to prison."

Craddock wondered. She might be making it up. But possibly she might not. He asked cautiously:

"You are sure it was this Rudi Scherz she was talking to?"

"Of course I am sure. He just leave and I see him go from the drive across to the summerhouse. And presently," said Mitzi defiantly, "I go out to see if there are any nice young green nettles."

Would there, the Inspector wondered, be any nice young green nettles in October? But he appreciated that Mitzi had had to produce a hurried reason for what had undoubtedly been nothing more than plain snooping.

"You didn't hear any more than what you have told me?"

Mitzi looked aggrieved.

"That Miss Bunner, the one with the long nose, she call and call me. Mitzi! Mitzi! So I have to go. Oh, she is irritating. Always

interfering. Says she will teach me to cook. *Her* cooking! It tastes, yes, everything she does, of water, water, *water!*"

"Why didn't you tell me this the other day?" asked Craddock sternly.

"Because I did not remember—I did not think ... Only afterwards do I say to myself, it was planned then—planned with *her*."

"You are quite sure it was Mrs. Haymes?"

"Oh, yes, I am sure. Oh, yes, I am very sure. She is a thief, that Mrs. Haymes. A thief and the associate of thieves. What she gets for working in the garden, it is not enough for such a fine lady, no. She has to rob Miss Blacklock who has been kind to her. Oh, she is bad, bad, bad, that one!"

"Supposing," said the Inspector, watching her closely, "that someone was to say that *you* had been seen talking to Rudi Scherz?"

The suggestion had less effect than he had hoped for. Mitzi merely snorted and tossed her head.

"If anyone say they see me talking to him, that is lies, lies, lies, lies," she said contemptuously. "To tell lies about anyone, that is easy, but in England you have to prove them true. Miss Blacklock tells me that, and it is true, is it not? I do not speak with murderers and thieves. And no English policeman shall say I do. And how can I do cooking for lunch if you are here, talk, talk, talk? Go out of my kitchens, please. I want now to make a very careful sauce."

Craddock went obediently. He was a little shaken in his suspicions of Mitzi. Her story about Phillipa Haymes had been told with great conviction. Mitzi might be a liar (he thought she was), but he fancied that there might be some substratum of truth in this particular tale. He resolved to speak to Phillipa on the subject. She had seemed to him when he questioned her a quiet, well-bred young woman. He had had no suspicion of her.

Crossing the hall, in his abstraction, he tried to open the wrong door. Miss Bunner, descending the staircase, hastily put him right.

"Not that door," she said. "It doesn't open. The next one to the left. Very confusing, isn't it? So many doors."

"There are a good many," said Craddock, looking up and down the narrow hall.

Miss Bunner amiably enumerated them for him.

"First the door to the cloakroom, and then the cloaks cupboard door and then the dining room—that's on that side. And on this side, the dummy door that you were trying to get through and then there's the drawing room door proper, and then the china cupboard and the door of the little flower room, and at the end the side door. Most confusing. Especially these two being so near together. I've often tried the wrong one by mistake. We used to have the hall table against it, as a matter of fact, but then we moved it along against the wall there."

Craddock had noted, almost mechanically, a thin line horizontally across the panels of the door he had been trying to open. He realized now it was the mark where the table had been. Something stirred vaguely in his mind as he asked, "Moved? How long ago?"

In questioning Dora Bunner there was fortunately no need to give a reason for any question. Any query on any subject seemed perfectly natural to the garrulous Miss Bunner who delighted in the giving of information, however trivial.

"Now let me see, really quite recently—ten days or a fortnight ago."

"Why was it moved?"

"I really can't remember. Something to do with the flowers. I think Phillipa did a big vase—she arranges flowers quite beautifully—all autumn colouring and twigs and branches, and it was so big it caught your hair as you went past, and so Phillipa said, 'Why not move the table along and anyway the flowers would look much better against the bare wall than against the panels of the door.' Only we had to take down Wellington at Waterloo. Not a print I'm really very fond of. We put it under the stairs."

"It's not really a dummy, then?" Craddock asked, looking at the door.

"Oh, no, it's a *real* door, if that's what you mean. It's the door of the small drawing room, but when the rooms were thrown into one, one didn't need two doors, so this one was fastened up."

"Fastened up?" Craddock tried it again, gently. "You mean it's nailed up? Or just locked?"

"Oh, locked, I think, and bolted too."

He saw the bolt at the top and tried it. The bolt slid back easily—too easily....

"When was it last open?" he asked Miss Bunner.

"Oh, years and years ago, I imagine. It's never been opened since I've been here, I know that."

"You don't know where the key is?"

"There are a lot of keys in the hall drawer. It's probably among those."

Craddock followed her and looked at a rusty assortment of old keys pushed far back in the drawer. He scanned them and selected one that looked different from the rest and went back to the door. The key fitted and turned easily. He pushed and the door slid open noiselessly.

"Oh, do be careful," cried Miss Bunner. "There may be something resting against it inside. We never open it."

"Don't you?" said the Inspector.

His face now was grim. He said with emphasis:

"This door's been opened quite recently, Miss Bunner. The lock's been oiled and the hinges."

She stared at him, her foolish face agape.

"But who could have done that?" she asked.

"That's what I mean to find out," said Craddock grimly. He thought—"X from outside? No—X was here—in this house—X was in the drawing room that night...."

Ten

PIP AND EMMA

I

Miss Blacklock listened to him this time with more attention. She was an intelligent woman, as he had known, and she grasped the implications of what he had to tell her.

"Yes," she said quietly. "That does alter things ... No one had any right to meddle with that door. Nobody *has* meddled with it to my knowledge."

"You see what it means," the Inspector urged. "When the lights went out, *anybody in this room the other night* could have slipped out of that door, come up behind Rudi Scherz and fired at you."

"Without being seen or heard or noticed?"

"Without being seen or heard or noticed. Remember when the lights went out people moved, exclaimed, bumped into each other. And after that all that could be seen was the blinding light of the electric torch."

Miss Blacklock said slowly, "And you believe that one of those people—one of my nice commonplace neighbours—slipped out and tried to murder me? *Me?* But *why?* For goodness' sake, *why?*"

"I've a feeling that you *must* know the answer to that question, Miss Blacklock."

"But I don't, Inspector. I can assure you, I don't."

"Well, let's make a start. Who gets your money if you were to die?"

Miss Blacklock said rather reluctantly:

"Patrick and Julia. I've left the furniture in this house and a small annuity to Bunny. Really, I've not much to leave. I had holdings in German and Italian securities which became worthless, and what with taxation, and the lower percentages that are now paid on invested capital, I can assure you I'm not worth murdering—I put most of my money into an annuity about a year ago."

"Still, you *have* some income, Miss Blacklock, and your nephew and niece would come into it."

"And so Patrick and Julia would plan to murder me? I simply don't believe it. They're not desperately hard up or anything like that."

"Do you know that for a fact?"

"No. I suppose I only know it from what they've told me ... But I really refuse to suspect them. *Some* day I *might* be worth murdering, but not now."

"What do you mean by some day you might be worth murdering, Miss Blacklock?" Inspector Craddock pounced on the statement.

"Simply that one day—possibly quite soon—I *may* be a very rich woman."

"That sounds interesting. Will you explain?"

"Certainly. You may not know it, but for more than twenty years I was secretary to and closely associated with Randall Goedler."

Craddock was interested. Randall Goedler had been a big name in the world of finance. His daring speculations and the rather theatrical publicity with which he surrounded himself had made him a personality not quickly forgotten. He had died, if Craddock remembered rightly, in 1937 or 1938.

"He's rather before your time, I expect," said Miss Blacklock. "But you've probably heard of him."

"Oh, yes. He was a millionaire, wasn't he?"

"Oh, several times over—though his finances fluctuated. He always risked most of what he made on some new *coup*."

She spoke with a certain animation, her eyes brightened by memory.

"Anyway he died a very rich man. He had no children. He left his fortune in trust for his wife during her lifetime and after death to me absolutely."

A vague memory stirred in the Inspector's mind.

IMMENSE FORTUNE TO COME TO FAITHFUL SECRETARY

—something of that kind.

"For the last twelve years or so," said Miss Blacklock with a slight twinkle, "I've had an excellent motive for murdering Mrs. Goedler—but that doesn't help you, does it?"

"Did—excuse me for asking this—did Mrs. Goedler resent her husband's disposition of his fortune?"

Miss Blacklock was now looking frankly amused.

"You needn't be so very discreet. What you really mean is, was I Randall Goedler's mistress? No, I wasn't. I don't think Randall ever gave me a sentimental thought, and I certainly didn't give him one. He was in love with Belle (his wife), and remained in love with her until he died. I think in all probability it was gratitude on his part that prompted his making his will. You see, Inspector, in the very early days, when Randall was still on an insecure footing, he came very near to disaster. It was a question of just a few thousands of actual cash. It was a big *coup*, and a very exciting one; daring, as all his schemes were; but he just hadn't got that little bit of cash to tide him over. I came to the rescue. I had a little money of my own. I believed in Randall. I sold every penny I had out and gave it to him. It did the trick. A week later he was an immensely wealthy man.

"After that, he treated me more or less as a junior partner. Oh! they were exciting days." She sighed. "I enjoyed it all thoroughly. Then my father died, and my only sister was left a hopeless invalid. I had to give it all up and go and look after her. Randall died a couple of years later. I had made quite a lot of money during our association and I didn't really expect him to leave me anything, but I was very touched, yes, and very proud to find that if Belle predeceased me (and she was one of those delicate creatures whom everyone always says won't live long) I was to inherit his entire

fortune. I think really the poor man didn't know who to leave it to. Belle's a dear, and she was delighted about it. She's really a very sweet person. She lives up in Scotland. I haven't seen her for years—we just write at Christmas. You see, I went with my sister to a sanatorium in Switzerland just before the war. She died of consumption out there."

She was silent for a moment or two, then said:

"I only came back to England just over a year ago."

"You said you might be a rich woman very soon ... How soon?"

"I heard from the nurse attendant who looks after Belle Goedler that Belle is sinking rapidly. It may be—only a few weeks."

She added sadly:

"The money won't mean much to me now. I've got quite enough for my rather simple needs. Once I should have enjoyed playing the markets again—but now ... Oh, well, one grows old. Still, you do see, Inspector, don't you, that if Patrick and Julia wanted to kill me for a financial reason they'd be crazy not to wait for another few weeks."

"Yes, Miss Blacklock, but what happens if you should predecease Mrs. Goedler? Who does the money go to then?"

"D'you know, I've never really thought. Pip and Emma, I suppose...."

Craddock stared and Miss Blacklock smiled.

"Does that sound rather crazy? I believe, if I predecease Belle, the money would go to the legal offspring—or whatever the term is—of Randall's only sister, Sonia. Randall had quarrelled with his sister. She married a man whom he considered a crook and worse."

"And was he a crook?"

"Oh, definitely, I should say. But I believe a very attractive person to women. He was a Greek or a Roumanian or something—what was his name now—Stamfordis, Dmitri Stamfordis."

"Randall Goedler cut his sister out of his will when she married this man?"

"Oh, Sonia was a very wealthy woman in her own right. Randall had already settled packets of money on her, as far as possible in a way so that her husband couldn't touch it. But I believe that when the lawyers urged him to put in someone in case I predeceased

Belle, he reluctantly put down Sonia's offspring, simply because he couldn't think of anyone else and he wasn't the sort of man to leave money to charities."

"And there were children of the marriage?"

"Well, there are Pip and Emma." She laughed. "I know it sounds ridiculous. All I know is that Sonia wrote once to Belle after her marriage, telling her to tell Randall that she was extremely happy and that she had just had twins and was calling them Pip and Emma. As far as I know she never wrote again. But Belle, of course, may be able to tell you more."

Miss Blacklock had been amused by her own recital. The Inspector did not look amused.

"It comes to this," he said. "If you had been killed the other night, there are presumably at least two people in the world who would have come into a very large fortune. You are wrong, Miss Blacklock, when you say that there is no one who has a motive for desiring your death. There are two people, at least, who are vitally interested. How old would this brother and sister be?"

Miss Blacklock frowned.

"Let me see ... 1922... no—it's difficult to remember ... I suppose about twenty-five or twenty-six." Her face had sobered. "But you surely don't think—?"

"I think somebody shot at you with the intent to kill you. I think it possible that that same person or persons might try again. I would like you, if you will, to be very *very* careful, Miss Blacklock. One murder has been arranged and did not come off. I think it possible that another murder may be arranged very soon."

II

Phillipa Haymes straightened her back and pushed back a tendril of hair from her damp forehead. She was cleaning a flower border.

"Yes, Inspector?"

She looked at him inquiringly. In return he gave her a rather closer scrutiny than he had done before. Yes, a good-looking girl, a very English type with her pale ash-blond hair and her rather long

face. An obstinate chin and mouth. Something of repression—of tautness about her. The eyes were blue, very steady in their glance, and told you nothing at all. The sort of girl, he thought, who would keep a secret well.

"I'm sorry always to bother you when you're at work, Mrs. Haymes," he said, "but I didn't want to wait until you came back for lunch. Besides, I thought it might be easier to talk to you here, away from Little Paddocks."

"Yes, Inspector?"

No emotion and little interest in her voice. But was there a note of wariness—or did he imagine it?

"A certain statement has been made to me this morning. This statement concerns you."

Phillipa raised her eyebrows very slightly.

"You told me, Mrs. Haymes, that this man, Rudi Scherz, was quite unknown to you?"

"Yes."

"That when you saw him there, dead, it was the first time you had set eyes on him. Is that so?"

"Certainly. I had never seen him before."

"You did not, for instance, have a conversation with him in the summerhouse of Little Paddocks?"

"In the *summerhouse*?"

He was almost sure he caught a note of fear in her voice.

"Yes, Mrs. Haymes."

"*Who* says so?"

"I am told that you had a conversation with this man, Rudi Scherz, and that he asked you where he could hide and you replied that you would show him, and that a time, a quarter past six, was definitely mentioned. It would be a quarter past six, roughly, when Scherz would get here from the bus stop on the evening of the hold-up."

There was a moment's silence. Then Phillipa gave a short scornful laugh. She looked amused.

"I don't know who told you that," she said. "At least I can guess. It's a very silly, clumsy story—spiteful, of course. For some reason

Mitzi dislikes me even more than she dislikes the rest of us."

"You deny it?"

"Of course it's not true ... I never met or saw Rudi Scherz in my life, and I was nowhere near the house that morning. I was over here, working."

Inspector Craddock said very gently:

"Which morning?"

There was a momentary pause. Her eyelids flickered.

"Every morning. I'm here every morning. I don't get away until one o'clock."

She added scornfully:

"It's no good listening to what Mitzi tells you. She tells lies all the time."

III

"And that's that," said Craddock when he was walking away with Sergeant Fletcher. "Two young women whose stories flatly contradict each other. Which one am I to believe?"

"Everyone seems to agree that this foreign girl tells whoppers," said Fletcher. "It's been my experience in dealing with aliens that lying comes more easy than truth-telling. Seems to be clear she's got a spite against this Mrs. Haymes."

"So, if you were me, you'd believe Mrs. Haymes?"

"Unless you've got reason to think otherwise, sir."

And Craddock hadn't, not really—only the remembrance of a pair of oversteady blue eyes and the glib enunciation of the words *that morning*. For to the best of his recollection he hadn't said whether the interview in the summerhouse had taken place in the morning or the afternoon.

Still, Miss Blacklock, or if not Miss Blacklock, certainly Miss Bunner, might have mentioned the visit of the young foreigner who had come to cadge his fare back to Switzerland. And Phillipa Haymes might have therefore assumed that the conversation was supposed to have taken place on that particular morning.

But Craddock still thought that there had been a note of fear in her voice as she asked:

"In the *summerhouse*?"

He decided to keep an open mind on the subject.

IV

It was very pleasant in the Vicarage garden. One of those sudden spells of autumn warmth had descended upon England. Inspector Craddock could never remember if it was St. Martin's or St. Luke's Summer, but he knew that it was very pleasant—and also very enervating. He sat in a deck chair provided for him by an energetic Bunch, just on her way to a Mothers' Meeting, and, well protected with shawls and a large rug round her knees, Miss Marple sat knitting beside him. The sunshine, the peace, the steady click of Miss Marple's knitting needles, all combined to produce a soporific feeling in the Inspector. And yet, at the same time, there was a nightmarish feeling at the back of his mind. It was like a familiar dream where an undertone of menace grows and finally turns Ease into Terror....

He said abruptly, "You oughtn't to be here."

Miss Marple's needles stopped clicking for a moment. Her placid china-blue eyes regarded him thoughtfully.

She said, "I know what you mean. You're a very conscientious boy. But it's perfectly all right. Bunch's father (he was vicar of our parish, a very fine scholar) and her mother (who is a most remarkable woman—real spiritual power) are very old friends of mine. It's the most natural thing in the world that when I'm at Medenham I should come on here to stay with Bunch for a little."

"Oh, perhaps," said Craddock. "But—but don't snoop around ... I've a feeling—I have really—that it isn't *safe*."

Miss Marple smiled a little.

"But I'm afraid," she said, "that we old women always do snoop. It would be very odd and much more noticeable if I didn't. Questions about mutual friends in different parts of the world and whether they

remember so and so, and do they remember who it was that Lady Somebody's daughter married? All that helps, doesn't it?"

"Helps?" said the Inspector, rather stupidly.

"Helps to find out if people are who they say they are," said Miss Marple.

She went on:

"Because that's what's worrying you, isn't it? And that's really the particular way the world has changed since the war. Take this place, Chipping Cleghorn, for instance. It's very much like St. Mary Mead where I live. Fifteen years ago one *knew* who everybody was. The Bantrys in the big house—and the Hartnells and the Price Ridleys and the Weatherbys ... They were people whose fathers and mothers and grandfathers and grandmothers, or whose aunts and uncles, had lived there before them. If somebody new came to live there, they brought letters of introduction, or they'd been in the same regiment or served in the same ship as someone there already. If anybody new—really new—really a stranger—came, well, they stuck out—everybody wondered about them and didn't rest till they found out."

She nodded her head gently.

"But it's not like that any more. Every village and small country place is full of people who've just come and settled there without any ties to bring them. The big houses have been sold, and the cottages have been converted and changed. And people just come—and all you know about them is what they say of themselves. They've come, you see, from all over the world. People from India and Hong Kong and China, and people who used to live in France and Italy in little cheap places and odd islands. And people who've made a little money and can afford to retire. But nobody *knows* any more who anyone is. You can have Benares brassware in your house and talk about *tiffin* and *chota Hazri*—and you can have pictures of Taormina and talk about the English church and the library—like Miss Hinchcliffe and Miss Murgatroyd. You can come from the South of France, or have spent your life in the East. People take you at your own valuation. They don't wait to call until they've had a letter from

a friend saying that the So-and-So's are delightful people and she's known them all their lives."

And that, thought Craddock, was exactly what *was* oppressing him. He didn't *know*. There were just faces and personalities and they were backed up by ration books and identity cards—nice neat identity cards with numbers on them, without photographs or fingerprints. Anybody who took the trouble could have a suitable identity card—and partly because of that, the subtler links that had held together English social rural life had fallen apart. In a town nobody expected to know his neighbour. In the country now nobody knew his neighbour either, though possibly he still thought he did....

Because of the oiled door, Craddock knew that there had been somebody in Letitia Blacklock's drawing room who was not the pleasant friendly country neighbour he or she pretended to be....

And because of that he was afraid for Miss Marple who was frail and old and who noticed things....

He said: "We can, to a certain extent, check up on these people ..." But he knew that that wasn't so easy. India and China and Hong Kong and the South of France ... It wasn't as easy as it would have been fifteen years ago. There were people, as he knew only too well, who were going about the country with borrowed identities—borrowed from people who had met sudden death by "incidents" in the cities. There were organizations who bought up identities, who faked identity and ration cards—there were a hundred small rackets springing into being. You *could* check up—but it would take time—and time was what he hadn't got, because Randall Goedler's widow was very near death.

It was then that, worried and tired, lulled by the sunshine, he told Miss Marple about Randall Goedler and about Pip and Emma.

"Just a couple of names," he said. "Nicknames at that! They mayn't exist. They may be respectable citizens living in Europe somewhere. On the other hand one, or both, of them may be here in Chipping Cleghorn."

Twenty-five years old approximately—Who filled that description? He said, thinking aloud:

"That nephew and niece of hers—or cousins or whatever they are ... I wonder when she saw them last—"

Miss Marple said gently: "I'll find out for you, shall I?"

"Now, please, Miss Marple, don't—"

"It will be quite simple, Inspector, you really need not worry. And it won't be noticeable if I do it, because, you see, it won't be official. If there is anything wrong you don't want to put them on their guard."

Pip and Emma, thought Craddock, Pip and Emma? He was getting obsessed by Pip and Emma. That attractive dare-devil young man, the good-looking girl with the cool stare....

He said: "I may find out more about them in the next forty-eight hours. I'm going up to Scotland. Mrs. Goedler, if she's able to talk, may know a good deal more about them."

"I think that's a very wise move." Miss Marple hesitated. "I hope," she murmured, "that you have warned Miss Blacklock to be careful?"

"I've warned her, yes. And I shall leave a man here to keep an unobtrusive eye on things."

He avoided Miss Marple's eye which said plainly enough that a policeman keeping an eye on things would be little good if the danger was in the family circle....

"And remember," said Craddock, looking squarely at her, "I've warned *you*."

"I assure you, Inspector," said Miss Marple, "that I can take care of myself."

Eleven

MISS MARPLE COMES TO TEA

I

If Letitia Blacklock seemed slightly absentminded when Mrs. Harmon came to tea and brought a guest who was staying with her, Miss Marple, the guest in question, was hardly likely to notice the fact since it was the first time she had met her.

The old lady was very charming in her gentle gossipy fashion. She revealed herself almost at once to be one of those old ladies who have a constant preoccupation with burglars.

"They can get in anywhere, my dear," she assured her hostess, "absolutely *anywhere* nowadays. So many new American methods. I myself pin my faith to a very old-fashioned device. *A cabin hook and eye*. They can pick locks and draw back bolts but a brass hook and eye defeats them. Have you ever tried that?"

"I'm afraid we're not very good at bolts and bars," said Miss Blacklock cheerfully. "There's really nothing much to burgle."

"A chain on the front door," Miss Marple advised. "Then the maid need only open it a crack and see who is there and they can't force their way in."

"I expect Mitzi, our Mittel European, would love that."

"The hold-up you had must have been very, very frightening," said Miss Marple. "Bunch has been telling me all about it."

"I was scared stiff," said Bunch.

"It was an alarming experience," admitted Miss Blacklock.

"It really seems like Providence that the man tripped himself up and shot himself. These burglars are so *violent* nowadays. How did he get in?"

"Well, I'm afraid we don't lock our doors much."

"Oh, Letty," exclaimed Miss Bunner. "I forgot to tell you the Inspector was most peculiar this morning. He insisted on opening the second door—you know—the one that's never been opened—the one over there. He hunted for the key and everything and said the door had been oiled. But I can't see why because—"

Too late she got Miss Blacklock's signal to be quiet, and paused openmouthed.

"Oh, Lotty, I'm so—sorry—I mean, oh, I *do* beg your pardon, Letty—oh, dear, how stupid I am."

"It doesn't matter," said Miss Blacklock, but she was annoyed. "Only I don't think Inspector Craddock wants that talked about. I didn't know you had been there when he was experimenting, Dora. You do understand, don't you, Mrs. Harmon?"

"Oh, yes," said Bunch. "We won't breathe a word, will we, Aunt Jane. But I wonder *why* he—"

She relapsed into thought. Miss Bunner fidgeted and looked miserable, bursting out at last: "I always say the wrong thing—Oh, dear, I'm nothing but a trial to you, Letty."

Miss Blacklock said quickly, "You're my great comfort, Dora. And anyway in a small place like Chipping Cleghorn there aren't really any secrets."

"Now that is very true," said Miss Marple. "I'm afraid, you know, that things do get round in the most extraordinary way. Servants, of course, and yet it can't only be that, because one has so few servants nowadays. Still, there are the daily women and perhaps they are worse, because they go to everybody in turn and pass the news round."

"Oh!" said Bunch Harmon suddenly. "I've got it! Of course, if that door could open too, someone might have gone out of here in the dark and done the hold-up—only of course they didn't—because it

was the man from the Royal Spa Hotel. Or wasn't it?... No, I don't see after all ..." She frowned.

"Did it all happen in this room then?" asked Miss Marple, adding apologetically: "I'm afraid you must think me sadly *curious*, Miss Blacklock—but it really is so very exciting—just like something one reads about in the paper—I'm just longing to hear all about it and to picture it all, if you know what I mean—"

Immediately Miss Marple received a confused and voluble account from Bunch and Miss Bunner—with occasional emendations and corrections from Miss Blacklock.

In the middle of it Patrick came in and good-naturedly entered into the spirit of the recital—going so far as to enact himself the part of Rudi Scherz.

"And Aunt Letty was there—in the corner by the archway ... Go and stand there, Aunt Letty."

Miss Blacklock obeyed, and then Miss Marple was shown the actual bullet holes.

"What a marvellous—what a providential escape," she gasped.

"I was just going to offer my guests cigarettes—" Miss Blacklock indicated the big silver box on the table.

"People are so careless when they smoke," said Miss Bunner disapprovingly. "Nobody really respects good furniture as they used to do. Look at the horrid burn somebody made on this beautiful table by putting a cigarette down on it. *Disgraceful*."

Miss Blacklock sighed.

"Sometimes, I'm afraid, one thinks too much of one's possessions."

"But it's such a lovely table, Letty."

Miss Bunner loved her friend's possessions with as much fervour as though they had been her own. Bunch Harmon had always thought it was a very endearing trait in her. She showed no sign of envy.

"It is a lovely table," said Miss Marple politely. "And what a very pretty china lamp on it."

Again it was Miss Bunner who accepted the compliment as though she and not Miss Blacklock was the owner of the lamp.

"Isn't it delightful? Dresden. There is a pair of them. The other's in the spare room, I think."

"You know where everything in this house is, Dora—or you think you do," said Miss Blacklock, good-humouredly. "You care far more about my things than I do."

Miss Bunner flushed.

"I *do* like nice things," she said. Her voice was half defiant—half wistful.

"I must confess," said Miss Marple, "that my own few possessions are very dear to me, too—so many *memories*, you know. It's the same with photographs. People nowadays have so few photographs about. Now I like to keep all the pictures of my nephews and nieces as babies—and then as children—and so on."

"You've got a horrible one of me, aged three," said Bunch. "Holding a fox terrier and squinting."

"I expect your aunt has many photographs of you," said Miss Marple, turning to Patrick.

"Oh, we're only distant cousins," said Patrick.

"I believe Elinor did send me one of you as a baby, Pat," said Miss Blacklock. "But I'm afraid I didn't keep it. I'd really forgotten how many children she'd had or what their names were until she wrote me about you two being over here."

"Another sign of the times," said Miss Marple. "Nowadays one so often doesn't know one's younger relations *at all*. In the old days, with all the big family reunions, that would have been impossible."

"I last saw Pat and Julia's mother at a wedding thirty years ago," said Miss Blacklock. "She was a very pretty girl."

"That's why she has such handsome children," said Patrick with a grin.

"You've got a marvellous old album," said Julia. "Do you remember, Aunt Letty, we looked through it the other day. The hats!"

"And how smart we thought ourselves," said Miss Blacklock with a sigh.

"Never mind, Aunt Letty," said Patrick, "Julia will come across a snapshot of herself in about thirty years' time—and won't she think she looks a guy!"

II

"Did you do that on purpose?" said Bunch, as she and Miss Marple were walking home. "Talk about photographs, I mean?"

"Well, my dear, it *is* interesting to know that Miss Blacklock didn't know either of her two young relatives by sight ... Yes—I think Inspector Craddock will be interested to hear that."

Twelve

MORNING ACTIVITIES IN CHIPPING CLEGHORN

I

Edmund Swettenham sat down rather precariously on a garden roller.

"Good morning, Phillipa," he said.

"Hallo."

"Are you very busy?"

"Moderately."

"What are you doing?"

"Can't you see?"

"No. I'm not a gardener. You seem to be playing with earth in some fashion."

"I'm pricking out winter lettuce."

"Pricking out? What a curious term! Like pinking. Do you know what pinking is? I only learnt the other day. I always thought it was a term for professional duelling."

"Do you want anything particular?" asked Phillipa coldly.

"Yes. I want to see you."

Phillipa gave him a quick glance.

"I wish you wouldn't come here like this. Mrs. Lucas won't like it."

"Doesn't she allow you to have followers?"

"Don't be absurd."

"Followers. That's another nice word. It describes my attitude perfectly. Respectful—at a distance—but firmly pursuing."

"Please go away, Edmund. You've no business to come here."

"You're wrong," said Edmund triumphantly. "I *have* business here. Mrs. Lucas rang up my mamma this morning and said she had a good many vegetable marrows."

"Masses of them."

"And would we like to exchange a pot of honey for a vegetable marrow or so."

"That's not a fair exchange at all! Vegetable marrows are quite unsaleable at the moment—everybody has such a lot."

"Naturally. That's why Mrs. Lucas rang up. Last time, if I remember rightly, the exchange suggested was some skim milk—*skim* milk, mark you—in exchange for some lettuces. It was then very early in the season for lettuces. They were about a shilling each."

Phillipa did not speak.

Edmund tugged at his pocket and extracted a pot of honey.

"So here," he said, "is my alibi. Used in a loose and quite indefensible meaning of the term. If Mrs. Lucas pops her bust round the door of the potting shed, I'm here in quest of vegetable marrows. There is absolutely no question of dalliance."

"I see."

"Do you ever read Tennyson?" inquired Edmund conversationally. "Not very often."

"You should. Tennyson is shortly to make a comeback in a big way. When you turn on your wireless in the evening it will be the *Idylls of the King* you will hear and not interminable Trollope. I always thought the Trollope pose was the most unbearable affectation. Perhaps a little of Trollope, but not to drown in him. But speaking of Tennyson, have you read *Maud*?"

"Once, long ago."

"It's got some points about it." He quoted softly:

"'Faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null.' That's you, Phillipa."

"Hardly a compliment!"

"No, it wasn't meant to be. I gather Maud got under the poor fellow's skin just like you've got under mine."

"Don't be absurd, Edmund."

"Oh, hell, Phillipa, why are you like you are? What goes on behind your splendidly regular features? What do you think? What do you *feel*? Are you happy, or miserable, or frightened, or what? There must be *something*."

Phillipa said quietly:

"What I feel is my own business."

"It's mine, too. I want to make you talk. I want to know what goes on in that quiet head of yours. I've a *right* to know. I have really. I didn't want to fall in love with you. I wanted to sit quietly and write my book. Such a nice book, all about how miserable the world is. It's frightfully easy to be clever about how miserable everybody is. And it's all a habit, really. Yes, I've suddenly become convinced of that. After reading a life of Burne Jones."

Phillipa had stopped pricking out. She was staring at him with a puzzled frown.

"What has Burne Jones got to do with it?"

"Everything. When you've read all about the Pre-Raphaelites you realize just what fashion is. They were all terrifically hearty and slangy and jolly, and laughed and joked, and everything was fine and wonderful. That was fashion, too. They weren't any happier or heartier than we are. And we're not any more miserable than they were. It's all fashion, I tell you. After the last war, we went in for sex. Now it's all frustration. None of it matters. Why are we talking about all this? I started out to talk about *us*. Only I got cold feet and shied off. Because you won't help me."

"What do you want me to do?"

"*Talk!* Tell me things. Is it your husband? Do you adore him and he's dead and so you've shut up like a clam? Is that it? All right, you adored him, and he's dead. Well, other girls' husbands are dead—lots of them—and some of the girls loved their husbands. They tell you so in bars, and cry a bit when they're drunk enough, and then want to go to bed with you so that they'll feel better. It's one way of

getting over it, I suppose. You've got to get over it, Phillipa. You're young—and you're extremely lovely—and I love you like hell. Talk about your damned husband, tell me about him."

"There's nothing to tell. We met and got married."

"You must have been very young."

"Too young."

"Then you weren't happy with him? Go *on*, Phillipa."

"There's nothing to go on about. We were married. We were as happy as most people are, I suppose. Harry was born. Ronald went overseas. He—he was killed in Italy."

"And now there's Harry?"

"And now there's Harry."

"I like Harry. He's a really nice kid. He likes me. We get on. What about it, Phillipa? Shall we get married? You can go on gardening and I can go on writing my book and in the holidays we'll leave off working and enjoy ourselves. We can manage, with tact, not to have to live with Mother. She can fork out a bit to support her devoted son. I sponge, I write tripey books, I have defective eyesight and I talk too much. That's the worst. Will you try it?"

Phillipa looked at him. She saw a tall rather solemn young man with an anxious face and large spectacles. His sandy head was rumpled and he was regarding her with a reassuring friendliness.

"No," said Phillipa.

"Definitely—no?"

"Definitely no."

"Why?"

"You don't know anything about me."

"Is that all?"

"No, you don't know anything about anything."

Edmund considered.

"Perhaps not," he admitted. "But who does? Phillipa, my adored one—" He broke off.

A shrill and prolonged yapping was rapidly approaching.

"Pekes in the high hall garden, (said Edmund)

When twilight was falling (only it's eleven a.m.)

*Phil, Phil, Phil, Phil,
They were crying and calling*

"Your name doesn't lend itself to the rhythm, does it? Sounds like an Ode to a Fountain Pen. Have you got another name?"

"Joan. *Please* go away. That's Mrs. Lucas."

"*Joan, Joan, Joan, Joan.* Better, but still not good. *When greasy Joan the pot doth keel*—that's not a nice picture of married life, either."

"Mrs. Lucas is—"

"Oh, *hell!*" said Edmund. "Get me a blasted vegetable marrow."

II

Sergeant Fletcher had the house at Little Paddocks to himself.

It was Mitzi's day off. She always went by the eleven o'clock bus into Medenham Wells. By arrangement with Miss Blacklock, Sergeant Fletcher had the run of the house. She and Dora Bunner had gone down to the village.

Fletcher worked fast. Someone in the house had oiled and prepared that door, and whoever had done it, had done it in order to be able to leave the drawing room unnoticed as soon as the lights went out. That ruled out Mitzi who wouldn't have needed to use the door.

Who was left? The neighbours, Fletcher thought, might also be ruled out. He didn't see how they could have found an opportunity to oil and prepare the door. That left Patrick and Julia Simmons, Phillipa Haymes, and possibly Dora Bunner. The young Simmonses were in Milchester. Phillipa Haymes was at work. Sergeant Fletcher was free to search out any secrets he could. But the house was disappointingly innocent. Fletcher, who was an expert on electricity, could find nothing suggestive in the wiring or appurtenances of the electric fixtures to show how the lights had been fused. Making a rapid survey of the household bedrooms he found an irritating normality. In Phillipa Haymes' room were photographs of a small boy with serious eyes, an earlier photo of the same child, a pile of

schoolboy letters, a theatre programme or two. In Julia's room there was a drawer full of snapshots of the South of France. Bathing photos, a villa set amidst mimosa. Patrick's held some souvenirs of Naval days. Dora Bunner's held few personal possessions and they seemed innocent enough.

And yet, thought Fletcher, someone in the house must have oiled that door.

His thoughts broke off at a sound below stairs. He went quickly to the top of the staircase and looked down.

Mrs. Swettenham was crossing the hall. She had a basket on her arm. She looked into the drawing room, crossed the hall and went into the dining room. She came out again without the basket.

Some faint sound that Fletcher made, a board that creaked unexpectedly under his feet, made her turn her head. She called up:

"Is that you, Miss Blacklock?"

"No, Mrs. Swettenham, it's me," said Fletcher.

Mrs. Swettenham gave a faint scream.

"Oh! how you startled me. I thought it might be another burglar."

Fletcher came down the stairs.

"This house doesn't seem very well protected against burglars," he said. "Can anybody always walk in and out just as they like?"

"I just brought up some of my quinces," explained Mrs. Swettenham. "Miss Blacklock wants to make quince jelly and she hasn't got a quince tree here. I left them in the dining room."

Then she smiled.

"Oh, I see, you mean how did I get in? Well, I just came in through the side door. We all walk in and out of each other's houses, Sergeant. Nobody dreams of locking a door until it's dark. I mean it would be so awkward, wouldn't it, if you brought things and couldn't get in to leave them? It's not like the old days when you rang a bell and a servant always came to answer it." Mrs. Swettenham sighed. "In India, I remember," she said mournfully, "we had eighteen servants—eighteen. Not counting the ayah. Just as a matter of course. And at home, when I was a girl, we always had three—though Mother always felt it was terribly poverty-stricken not to be able to afford a kitchen maid. I must say that I find life very odd

nowadays, Sergeant, though I know one mustn't complain. So much worse for the miners always getting psitticosis (or is that parrot disease?) and having to come out of the mines and try to be gardeners though they don't know weeds from spinach."

She added, as she tripped towards the door, "I mustn't keep you. I expect you're very busy. Nothing else is going to happen, is it?"

"Why should it, Mrs. Swettenham?"

"I just wondered, seeing you here. I thought it might be a *gang*. You'll tell Miss Blacklock about the quinces, won't you?"

Mrs. Swettenham departed. Fletcher felt like a man who has received an unexpected jolt. He had been assuming—erroneously, he now perceived—that it must have been someone in the house who had done the oiling of the door. He saw now that he was wrong. An outsider had only to wait until Mitzi had departed by bus and Letitia Blacklock and Dora Bunner were both out of the house. Such an opportunity must have been simplicity itself. That meant that he couldn't rule out anybody who had been in the drawing room that night.

III

"Murgatroyd!"

"Yes, Hinch?"

"I've been doing a bit of thinking."

"Have you, Hinch?"

"Yes, the great brain has been working. You know, Murgatroyd, the whole setup the other evening was decidedly fishy."

"Fishy?"

"Yes. Tuck your hair up, Murgatroyd, and take this trowel. Pretend it's a revolver."

"Oh," said Miss Murgatroyd, nervously.

"All right. It won't bite you. Now come along to the kitchen door. You're going to be the burglar. You stand *here*. Now you're going into the kitchen to hold up a lot of nit-wits. Take the torch. Switch it on."

"But it's broad daylight!"

"Use your imagination, Murgatroyd. Switch it on."

Miss Murgatroyd did so, rather clumsily, shifting the trowel under one arm while she did so.

"Now then," said Miss Hinchcliffe, "off you go. Remember the time you played Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Women's Institute? Act. Give it all you've got. 'Stick 'em up!' Those are your lines—and don't ruin them by saying 'Please.'"

Obediently Miss Murgatroyd raised her torch, flourished the trowel and advanced on the kitchen door.

Transferring the torch to her right hand she swiftly turned the handle and stepped forward, resuming the torch in her left hand.

"Stick 'em up!" she fluted, adding vexedly: "Dear me, this is very difficult, Hinch."

"Why?"

"The door. It's a swing door, it keeps coming back and I've got both hands full."

"Exactly," boomed Miss Hinchcliffe. "And the drawing room door at Little Paddocks always swings to. It isn't a swing door like this, but it won't stay open. That's why Letty Blacklock bought that absolutely delectable heavy glass doorstop from Elliot's in the High Street. I don't mind saying I've never forgiven her for getting in ahead of me there. I was beating the old brute down most successfully. He'd come down from eight guineas to six pound ten, and then Blacklock comes along and buys the damned thing. I'd never seen as attractive a doorstop, you don't often get those glass bubbles in that big size."

"Perhaps the burglar put the doorstop against the door to keep it open," suggested Miss Murgatroyd.

"Use your common sense, Murgatroyd. What does he do? Throw the door open, say 'Excuse me a moment,' stoop and put the stop into position and then resume business by saying 'Hands up'? Try holding the door with your shoulder."

"It's still very awkward," complained Miss Murgatroyd.

"Exactly," said Miss Hinchcliffe. "A revolver, a torch and a door to hold open—a bit too much, isn't it? So what's the answer?"

Miss Murgatroyd did not attempt to supply an answer. She looked inquiringly and admiringly at her masterful friend and waited to be enlightened.

"We know he'd got a revolver, because he fired it," said Miss Hinchcliffe. "And we know he had a torch because we all saw it—that is unless we're all victims of mass hypnotism like explanations of the Indian Rope Trick (what a bore that old Easterbrook is with his Indian stories) so the question is, did someone hold that door open for him?"

"But who could have done that?"

"Well, *you* could have for one, Murgatroyd. As far as I remember, you were standing directly behind it when the lights went out." Miss Hinchcliffe laughed heartily. "Highly suspicious character, aren't you, Murgatroyd? But who'd think it to look at you? Here, give me that trowel—thank heavens it isn't really a revolver. You'd have shot yourself by now!"

IV

"It's a most extraordinary thing," muttered Colonel Easterbrook.

"Most extraordinary. Laura."

"Yes, darling?"

"Come into my dressing room a moment."

"What is it, darling?"

Mrs. Easterbrook appeared through the open door.

"Remember my showing you that revolver of mine?"

"Oh, yes, Archie, a nasty horrid black thing."

"Yes. Hun souvenir. Was in this drawer, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was."

"Well, it's not there now."

"Archie, how *extraordinary!*"

"You haven't moved it or anything?"

"Oh, no, I'd never dare to touch the horrid thing."

"Think old mother whatsername did?"

"Oh, I shouldn't think so for a minute. Mrs. Butt would never do a thing like that. Shall I ask her?"

"No—no, better not. Don't want to start a lot of talk. Tell me, do you remember when it was I showed it to you?"

"Oh, about a week ago. You were grumbling about your collars and the laundry and you opened this drawer wide and there it was at the back and I asked you what it was."

"Yes, that's right. About a week ago. You don't remember the date?"

Mrs. Easterbrook considered, eyelids down over her eyes, a shrewd brain working.

"Of course," she said. "It was Saturday. The day we were to have gone in to the pictures, but we didn't."

"H'm—sure it wasn't before that? Wednesday? Thursday or even the week before that again?"

"No, dear," said Mrs. Easterbrook. "I remember *quite* distinctly. It was Saturday the 30th. It just seems a long time because of all the trouble there's been. And I can tell you *how* I remember. It's because it was the day after the hold-up at Miss Blacklock's. Because when I saw your revolver it reminded me of the shooting the night before."

"Ah," said Colonel Easterbrook, "then that's a great load off my mind."

"Oh, Archie, why?"

"Just because if that revolver had disappeared before the shooting—well, it might possibly have been my revolver that was pinched by that Swiss fellow."

"But how would he have known you had one?"

"These gangs have a most extraordinary communication service. They get to know everything about a place and who lives there."

"What a lot you do know, Archie."

"Ha. Yes. Seen a thing or two in my time. Still as you definitely remember seeing my revolver *after* the hold-up—well, that settles it. The revolver that Swiss fellow used can't have been mine, can it?"

"Of course it can't."

"A great relief. I should have had to go to the police about it. And they ask a lot of awkward questions. Bound to. As a matter of fact I never took out a licence for it. Somehow, after a war, one forgets

these peacetime regulations. I looked on it as a war souvenir, not as a firearm."

"Yes, I see. Of course."

"But all the same—where on earth can the damned thing be?"

"Perhaps Mrs. Butt took it. She's always seemed quite honest, but perhaps she felt nervous after the hold-up and thought she'd like to—to have a revolver in the house. Of course, she'll never admit doing that. I shan't even ask her. She might get offended. And what should we do then? This is such a big house—I simply couldn't—"

"Quite so," said Colonel Easterbrook. "Better not say anything."

Thirteen

MORNING ACTIVITIES IN CHIPPING CLEGHORN (CONTINUED)

Miss Marple came out of the Vicarage gate and walked down the little lane that led into the main street.

She walked fairly briskly with the aid of the Rev. Julian Harmon's stout ashplant stick.

She passed the Red Cow and the butcher's and stopped for a brief moment to look into the window of Mr. Elliot's antique shop. This was cunningly situated next door to the Bluebird Tearooms and Café so that rich motorists, after stopping for a nice cup of tea and somewhat euphemistically named "Home Made Cakes" of a bright saffron colour, could be tempted by Mr. Elliot's judiciously planned shop window.

In this antique bow frame, Mr. Elliot catered for all tastes. Two pieces of Waterford glass reposed on an impeccable wine cooler. A walnut bureau, made up of various bits and pieces, proclaimed itself a Genuine Bargain and on a table, in the window itself, were a nice assortment of cheap doorknockers and quaint pixies, a few chipped bits of Dresden, a couple of sad-looking bead necklaces, a mug with "A Present from Tunbridge Wells" on it, and some tit-bits of Victorian silver.

Miss Marple gave the window her rapt attention, and Mr. Elliot, an elderly obese spider, peeped out of his web to appraise the possibilities of this new fly.

But just as he decided that the charms of the Present from Tunbridge Wells were about to be too much for the lady who was staying at the Vicarage (for of course Mr. Elliot, like everybody else, knew exactly who she was), Miss Marple saw out of the corner of her eye Miss Dora Bunner entering the Bluebird Café, and immediately decided that what she needed to counteract the cold wind was a nice cup of morning coffee.

Four or five ladies were already engaged in sweetening their morning shopping by a pause for refreshment. Miss Marple, blinking a little in the gloom of the interior of the Bluebird, and hovering artistically, was greeted by the voice of Dora Bunner at her elbow.

"Oh, good morning, Miss Marple. Do sit down here. I'm all alone."

"Thank you."

Miss Marple subsided gratefully on to the rather angular little blue-painted armchair which the Bluebird affected.

"Such a sharp wind," she complained. "And I can't walk very fast because of my rheumatic leg."

"Oh, I know. I had sciatica one year—and really most of the time I was in *agony*."

The two ladies talked rheumatism, sciatica and neuritis for some moments with avidity. A sulky-looking girl in a pink overall with a flight of bluebirds down the front of it took their order for coffee and cakes with a yawn and an air of weary patience.

"The cakes," Miss Bunner said in a conspiratorial whisper, "are really *quite* good here."

"I was so interested in that very pretty girl I met as we were coming away from Miss Blacklock's the other day," said Miss Marple. "I think she said she does gardening. Or is she on the land? Hynes—was that her name?"

"Oh, yes, Phillipa Haymes. Our 'Lodger,' as we call her." Miss Bunner laughed at her own humour. "Such a nice quiet girl. A *lady*, if you know what I mean."

"I wonder now. I knew a Colonel Haymes—in the Indian cavalry. Her father perhaps?"

"She's *Mrs.* Haymes. A widow. Her husband was killed in Sicily or Italy. Of course, it might be *his* father."

"I wondered, perhaps, if there might be a little romance on the way?" Miss Marple suggested roguishly. "With that tall young man?"

"With Patrick, do you mean? Oh, I don't—"

"No, I meant a young man with spectacles. I've seen him about."

"Oh, of course, Edmund Swettenham. Sh! That's his mother, Mrs. Swettenham, over in the corner. I don't know, I'm sure. You think he admires her? He's such an odd young man—says the most disturbing things sometimes. He's supposed to be *clever*, you know," said Miss Bunner with frank disapproval.

"Cleverness isn't everything," said Miss Marple, shaking her head. "Ah, here is our coffee."

The sulky girl deposited it with a clatter. Miss Marple and Miss Bunner pressed cakes on each other.

"I was so interested to hear you were at school with Miss Blacklock. Yours is indeed an old friendship."

"Yes, indeed." Miss Bunner sighed. "Very few people would be as loyal to their old friends as dear Miss Blacklock is. Oh, dear, those days seem a long time ago. Such a pretty girl and enjoyed life so much. It all seemed so *sad*."

Miss Marple, though with no idea of what had seemed so sad, sighed and shook her head.

"Life is indeed hard," she murmured.

"*And sad affliction bravely borne*," murmured Miss Bunner, her eyes suffusing with tears. "I always think of that verse. True patience; true resignation. Such courage and patience *ought* to be rewarded, that is what I say. What I feel is that *nothing* is too good for dear Miss Blacklock, and whatever good things come to her, she truly *deserves* them."

"Money," said Miss Marple, "can do a lot to ease one's path in life."

She felt herself safe in this observation since she judged that it must be Miss Blacklock's prospects of future affluence to which her

friend referred.

The remark, however, started Miss Bunner on another train of thought.

"Money!" she exclaimed with bitterness. "I don't believe, you know, that until one has really experienced it, one can know what money, or rather the lack of it, *means*."

Miss Marple nodded her white head sympathetically.

Miss Bunner went on rapidly, working herself up, and speaking with a flushed face:

"I've heard people say so often 'I'd rather have flowers on the table than a meal without them.' But how many meals have those people ever missed? They don't know what it is—nobody knows who hasn't been through it—to be really *hungry*. Bread, you know, and a jar of meat paste, and a scrape of margarine. Day after day, and how one longs for a good plate of meat and two vegetables. And the *shabbiness*. Darning one's clothes and hoping it won't show. And applying for jobs and always being told you're too old. And then perhaps getting a job and after all one isn't strong enough. One faints. And you're back again. It's the *rent*—always the *rent*—that's *got* to be paid—otherwise you're out in the street. And in these days it leaves so little over. One's old age pension doesn't go far—indeed it doesn't."

"I know," said Miss Marple gently. She looked with compassion at Miss Bunner's twitching face.

"I wrote to Letty. I just happened to see her name in the paper. It was a luncheon in aid of Milchester Hospital. There it was in black and white, Miss Letitia Blacklock. It brought the past back to me. I hadn't heard of her for years and years. She'd been secretary, you know, to that very rich man, Goedler. She was always a clever girl—the kind that gets on in the world. Not so much looks—as *character*. I thought—well, I thought—perhaps she'll remember me—and she's one of the people I *could* ask for a little help. I mean someone you've known as a girl—been at school with—well, they do *know* about you—they know you're not just a—begging letter-writer—"

Tears came into Dora Bunner's eyes.

"And then Lotty came and took me away—said she needed someone to help her. Of course, I was very surprised—*very* surprised—but then newspapers do get things wrong. How kind she was—and how *sympathetic*. And remembering all the old days so well ... I'd do anything for her—I really would. And I try *very* hard, but I'm afraid sometimes I muddle things—my head's not what it was. I make mistakes. And I forget and say foolish things. She's very patient. What's so nice about her is that she always pretends that I *am* useful to her. That's real kindness, isn't it?"

Miss Marple said gently: "Yes, that's real kindness."

"I used to worry, you know, even after I came to Little Paddocks—about what would become of me if—if anything were to happen to Miss Blacklock. After all, there are so many accidents—these motors dashing about—one never knows, does one? But naturally I never *said* anything—but she must have guessed. Suddenly, one day she told me that she'd left me a small annuity in her will—and—what I value far more—all her beautiful furniture. I was quite *overcome* ... But she said nobody else would value it as I should—and that is quite true—I can't bear to see some lovely piece of china smashed—or wet glasses put down on a table and leaving a mark. I do really look after her things. Some people—some people especially, are so terribly careless—and sometimes worse than careless!

"I'm not really as stupid as I look," Miss Bunner continued with simplicity. "I can see, you know, when Letty's being imposed upon. Some people—I won't name names—but they take *advantage*. Dear Miss Blacklock is, perhaps, just a shade too *trusting*."

Miss Marple shook her head.

"*That's* a mistake."

"Yes, it is. You and I, Miss Marple, know the world. Dear Miss Blacklock—" She shook her head.

Miss Marple thought that as the secretary of a big financier Miss Blacklock might be presumed to know the world too. But probably what Dora Bunner meant was that Letty Blacklock had always been comfortably off, and that the comfortably off do not know the deeper abysses of human nature.

"That Patrick!" said Miss Bunner with a suddenness and an asperity that made Miss Marple jump. "Twice, at least, to my knowledge, he's got money out of her. Pretending he's hard up. Run into debt. All that sort of thing. She's far too generous. All she said to me when I remonstrated with her was: 'The boy's young, Dora. Youth is the time to have your fling.'"

"Well, that's true enough," said Miss Marple. "Such a handsome young man, too."

"Handsome is as handsome does," said Dora Bunner. "Much too fond of poking fun at people. And a lot of going on with girls, I expect. I'm just a figure of fun to him—that's all. He doesn't seem to realize that people have their feelings."

"Young people *are* rather careless that way," said Miss Marple.

Miss Bunner leaned forward suddenly with a mysterious air.

"You won't breathe a word, will you, my dear?" she demanded. "But I can't help feeling that he *was* mixed up in this dreadful business. I think he knew that young man—else Julia did. I daren't hint at such a thing to dear Miss Blacklock—at least I did, and she just snapped my head off. And, of course, it's *awkward*—because he's her nephew—or at any rate her *cousin*—and if the Swiss young man shot himself Patrick might be held morally responsible, mightn't he? If he'd put him up to it, I mean. I'm really terribly confused about the whole thing. Everyone making such a fuss about that other door into the drawing room. That's another thing that worries me—the detective saying it had been oiled. Because you see, I saw —"

She came to an abrupt stop.

Miss Marple paused to select a phrase.

"Most difficult for you," she said sympathetically. "Naturally you wouldn't want anything to get round to the police."

"That's just it," Dora Bunner cried. "I lie awake at nights and worry—because, you see, I came upon Patrick in the shrubbery the other day. I was looking for eggs—one hen lays out—and there he was holding a feather and a cup—an oily cup. And he jumped most guiltily when he saw me and he said: 'I was just wondering what this was doing here.' Well, of course, he's a quick thinker. I should say he

thought that up quickly when I startled him. And how did he come to find a thing like that in the shrubbery unless he was looking for it, knowing perfectly well it was there? Of course, I didn't *say* anything."

"No, no, of course not."

"But I gave him a *look*, if you know what I mean."

Dora Bunner stretched out her hand and bit abstractedly into a lurid salmon-coloured cake.

"And then another day I happened to overhear him having a very curious conversation with Julia. They seemed to be having a kind of quarrel. He was saying: 'If I thought you had anything to do with a thing like that!' and Julia (she's always so calm, you know) said: 'Well, little brother, what would you do about it?' And then, *most* unfortunately, I trod on that board that always squeaks, and they saw me. So I said, quite gaily: 'You two having a quarrel?' and Patrick said, 'I'm warning Julia not to go in for these black-market deals.' Oh, it was all very slick, but I don't believe they were talking about anything of the sort! And if you ask me, I believe Patrick had tampered with that lamp in the drawing room—to make the lights go out, because I remember distinctly that it was the shepherdess—*not* the shepherd. And the next day—"

She stopped and her face grew pink. Miss Marple turned her head to see Miss Blacklock standing behind them—she must just have come in.

"Coffee and gossip, Bunny?" said Miss Blacklock, with quite a shade of reproach in her voice. "Good morning, Miss Marple. Cold, isn't it?"

The doors flew open with a clang and Bunch Harmon came into the Bluebird with a rush.

"Hallo," she said, "am I too late for coffee?"

"No, dear," said Miss Marple. "Sit down and have a cup."

"We must get home," said Miss Blacklock. "Done your shopping, Bunny?"

Her tone was indulgent once more, but her eyes still held a slight reproach.

"Yes—yes, thank you, Letty. I must just pop into the chemists in passing and get some aspirin and some cornplasters."

As the doors of the Bluebird swung to behind them, Bunch asked: "What were you talking about?"

Miss Marple did not reply at once. She waited whilst Bunch gave the order, then she said:

"Family solidarity is a very strong thing. Very strong. Do you remember some famous case—I really can't remember what it was. They said the husband poisoned his wife. In a glass of wine. Then, at the trial, the daughter said she'd drunk half her mother's glass—so that knocked the case against her father to pieces. They do say—but that may be just rumour—that she never spoke to her father or lived with him again. Of course, a father is one thing—and a nephew or a distant cousin is another. But still there it is—no one wants a member of their own family hanged, do they?"

"No," said Bunch, considering. "I shouldn't think they would."

Miss Marple leaned back in her chair. She murmured under her breath, "People are really very alike, everywhere."

"Who am I like?"

"Well, really, dear, you are very much like yourself. I don't know that you remind me of anyone in particular. Except perhaps—"

"Here it comes," said Bunch.

"I was just thinking of a parlourmaid of mine, dear."

"A parlourmaid? I should make a terrible parlourmaid."

"Yes, dear, so did she. She was no good at all at waiting at table. Put everything on the table crooked, mixed up the kitchen knives with the dining room ones, and her cap (this was a long time ago, dear) her cap was *never* straight."

Bunch adjusted her hat automatically.

"Anything else?" she demanded anxiously.

"I kept her because she was so pleasant to have about the house—and because she used to make me laugh. I liked the way she said things straight out. Came to me one day, 'Of course, I don't know, ma'am,' she says, 'but Florrie, the way she sits down, it's just like a married woman.' And sure enough poor Florrie was in trouble—the gentlemanly assistant at the hairdresser's. Fortunately it was in good

time, and I was able to have a little talk with him, and they had a very nice wedding and settled down quite happily. She was a good girl, Florrie, but inclined to be taken in by a gentlemanly appearance."

"She didn't do a murder, did she?" asked Bunch. "The parlourmaid, I mean."

"No, indeed," said Miss Marple. "She married a Baptist Minister and they had a family of five."

"Just like me," said Bunch. "Though I've only got as far as Edward and Susan up to date."

She added, after a minute or two:

"Who are you thinking about now, Aunt Jane?"

"Quite a lot of people, dear, quite a lot of people," said Miss Marple, vaguely.

"In St. Mary Mead?"

"Mostly ... I was really thinking about Nurse Ellerton—really an excellent kindly woman. Took care of an old lady, seemed really fond of her. Then the old lady died. And another came and *she* died. Morphia. It all came out. Done in the kindest way, and the shocking thing was that the woman herself really couldn't see that she'd done anything wrong. They hadn't long to live in any case, she said, and one of them had cancer and quite a lot of pain."

"You mean—it was a mercy killing?"

"No, *no*. They signed their money away to her. She liked money, you know....

"And then there was that young man on the liner—Mrs. Pusey at the paper shop, *her* nephew. Brought home stuff he'd stolen and got her to dispose of it. Said it was things that he'd bought abroad. She was quite taken in. And then when the police came round and started asking questions, he tried to bash her on the head, so that she shouldn't be able to give him away ... Not a nice young man—but very good-looking. Had two girls in love with him. He spent a lot of money on one of them."

"The nastiest one, I suppose," said Bunch.

"Yes, dear. And there was Mrs. Cray at the wool shop. Devoted to her son, spoilt him, of course. He got in with a very queer lot. Do

you remember Joan Croft, Bunch?"

"N-no, I don't think so."

"I thought you might have seen her when you were with me on a visit. Used to stalk about smoking a cigar or a pipe. We had a Bank hold-up once, and Joan Croft was in the Bank at the time. She knocked the man down and took his revolver away from him. She was congratulated on her courage by the Bench."

Bunch listened attentively. She seemed to be learning by heart.

"And—?" she prompted.

"That girl at St. Jean des Collines that summer. Such a quiet girl—not so much quiet as silent. Everybody liked her, but they never got to know her much better ... We heard afterwards that her husband was a *forger*. It made her feel cut off from people. It made her, in the end, a little queer. Brooding does, you know."

"Any Anglo-Indian Colonels in your reminiscences, darling?"

"Naturally, dear. There was Major Vaughan at The Larches and Colonel Wright at Simla Lodge. Nothing wrong with either of them. But I do remember Mr. Hodgson, the Bank Manager, went on a cruise and married a woman young enough to be his daughter. No idea of where she came from—except what she told him of course."

"And that wasn't true?"

"No, dear, it definitely wasn't."

"Not bad," said Bunch, nodding, and ticking people off on her fingers. "We've had devoted Dora, and handsome Patrick, and Mrs. Swettenham and Edmund, and Phillipa Haymes, and Colonel Easterbrook and Mrs. Easterbrook—and if you ask me, I should say you're absolutely right about *her*. But there wouldn't be any reason for her murdering Letty Blacklock."

"Miss Blacklock, of course, might know something about her that she didn't want known."

"Oh, darling, that old Tanqueray stuff? Surely that's dead as the hills."

"It might not be. You see, Bunch, you are not the kind that minds much about what people think of you."

"I see what you mean," said Bunch suddenly. "If you'd been up against it, and then, rather like a shivering stray cat, you'd found a

home and cream and a warm stroking hand and you were called Pretty Pussy and somebody thought the world of you ... You'd do a lot to keep that ... Well, I must say, you've presented me with a very complete gallery of people."

"You didn't get them all right, you know," said Miss Marple, mildly.

"Didn't I? Where did I slip up? Julia? *Julia, pretty Julia is peculiar.*"

"Three and sixpence," said the sulky waitress, materialising out of the gloom.

"And," she added, her bosom heaving beneath the bluebirds, "I'd like to know, Mrs. Harmon, why you call me peculiar. I had an Aunt who joined the Peculiar People, but I've always been good Church of England myself, as the late Rev. Hopkinson can tell you."

"I'm terribly sorry," said Bunch. "I was just quoting a song. I didn't mean you at all. I didn't know your name was Julia."

"Quite a coincidence," said the sulky waitress, cheering up. "No offence, I'm sure, but hearing my name, as I thought—well, naturally if you think someone's talking about you, it's only human nature to listen. Thank you."

She departed with her tip.

"Aunt Jane," said Bunch, "don't look so upset. What is it?"

"But surely," murmured Miss Marple. "That couldn't be so. There's no *reason*—"

"Aunt Jane!"

Miss Marple sighed and then smiled brightly.

"It's nothing, dear," she said.

"Did you think you knew who did the murder?" asked Bunch. "Who was it?"

"I don't know at all," said Miss Marple. "I got an idea for a moment—but it's gone. I wish I did know. Time's so short. So terribly short."

"What do you mean short?"

"That old lady up in Scotland may die any moment."

Bunch said, staring:

"Then you really do believe in Pip and Emma. You think it was them—and that they'll try again?"

"Of course they'll try again," said Miss Marple, almost absentmindedly. "If they tried once, they'll try again. If you've made up your mind to murder someone, you don't stop because the first time it didn't come off. Especially if you're fairly sure you're not suspected."

"But if it's Pip and Emma," said Bunch, "there are only two people it *could* be. It *must* be Patrick and Julia. They're brother and sister and they're the only ones who are the right age."

"My dear, it isn't nearly as simple as that. There are all sorts of ramifications and combinations. There's Pip's wife if he's married, or Emma's husband. There's their mother—she's an interested party even if she doesn't inherit direct. If Letty Blacklock hasn't seen her for thirty years, she'd probably not recognize her now. One elderly woman is very like another. You remember Mrs. Wotherspoon drew her own and Mrs. Bartlett's Old Age Pension although Mrs. Bartlett had been dead for years. Anyway, Miss Blacklock's shortsighted. Haven't you noticed how she peers at people? And then there's the father. Apparently he was a real bad lot."

"Yes, but he's a foreigner."

"By birth. But there's no reason to believe he speaks broken English and gesticulates with his hands. I dare say he could play the part of—of an Anglo-Indian Colonel as well as anybody else."

"Is *that* what you think?"

"No, I don't. I don't indeed, dear. I just think that there's a great deal of money at stake, a great deal of money. And I'm afraid I know only too well the really terrible things that people will do to lay their hands on a lot of money."

"I suppose they will," said Bunch. "It doesn't really do them any good, does it? Not in the end?"

"No—but they don't usually know that."

"I can understand it." Bunch smiled suddenly, her sweet rather crooked smile. "One feels it would be different for oneself ... Even I feel that." She considered: "You pretend to yourself that you'd do a lot of good with all that money. Schemes ... Homes for Unwanted Children ... Tired Mothers ... A lovely rest abroad somewhere for elderly women who have worked too hard...."

Her face grew sombre. Her eyes were suddenly dark and tragic.

"I know what you're thinking," she said to Miss Marple. "You're thinking that I'd be the worst kind. Because I'd kid myself. If you just wanted the money for selfish reasons you'd at any rate see what you were like. But once you began to pretend about doing good with it, you'd be able to persuade yourself, perhaps, that it wouldn't very much matter killing someone...."

Then her eyes cleared.

"But I shouldn't," she said. "I shouldn't really kill anyone. Not even if they were old, or ill, or doing a lot of harm in the world. Not even if they were blackmailers or—or absolute *beasts*." She fished a fly carefully out of the dregs of the coffee and arranged it on the table to dry. "Because people like living, don't they? So do flies. Even if you're old and in pain and can just crawl out in the sun. Julian says those people like living even more than young strong people do. It's harder, he says, for them to die, the struggle's greater. I like living myself—not just being happy and enjoying myself and having a good time. I mean *living*—waking up and feeling, all over me, that I'm *there*—ticking over."

She blew on the fly gently; it waved its legs, and flew rather drunkenly away.

"Cheer up, darling Aunt Jane," said Bunch. "I'd never kill anybody."

Fourteen

EXCURSION INTO THE PAST

After a night in the train, Inspector Craddock alighted at a small station in the Highlands.

It struck him for a moment as strange that the wealthy Mrs. Goedler—an invalid—with a choice of a London house in a fashionable square, an estate in Hampshire, and a villa in the South of France, should have selected this remote Scottish home as her residence. Surely she was cut off here from many friends and distractions. It must be a lonely life—or was she too ill to notice or care about her surroundings?

A car was waiting to meet him. A big old-fashioned Daimler with an elderly chauffeur driving it. It was a sunny morning and the Inspector enjoyed the twenty-mile drive, though he marvelled anew at this preference for isolation. A tentative remark to the chauffeur brought partial enlightenment.

"It's her own home as a girl. Ay, she's the last of the family. And she and Mr. Goedler were always happier here than anywhere, though it wasn't often he could get away from London. But when he did they enjoyed themselves like a couple of bairns."

When the grey walls of the old keep came in sight, Craddock felt that time was slipping backwards. An elderly butler received him, and after a wash and a shave he was shown into a room with a huge fire burning in the grate, and breakfast was served to him.

After breakfast, a tall, middle-aged woman in nurse's dress, with a pleasant and competent manner, came in and introduced herself as Sister McClelland.

"I have my patient all ready for you, Mr. Craddock. She is, indeed, looking forward to seeing you."

"I'll do my best not to excite her," Craddock promised.

"I had better warn you of what will happen. You will find Mrs. Goedler apparently quite normal. She will talk and enjoy talking and then—quite suddenly—her powers will fail. Come away at once, then, and send for me. She is, you see, kept almost entirely under the influence of morphia. She drowns most of the time. In preparation for your visit, I have given her a strong stimulant. As soon as the effect of the stimulant wears off, she will relapse into semiconsciousness."

"I quite understand, Miss McClelland. Would it be in order for you to tell me exactly what the state of Mrs. Goedler's health is?"

"Well, Mr. Craddock, she is a dying woman. Her life cannot be prolonged for more than a few weeks. To say that she should have been dead years ago would strike you as odd, yet it is the truth. What has kept Mrs. Goedler alive is her intense enjoyment and love of being alive. That sounds, perhaps, an odd thing to say of someone who has lived the life of an invalid for many years and has not left her home here for fifteen years, but it is true. Mrs. Goedler has never been a strong woman—but she has retained to an astonishing degree the will to live." She added with a smile, "She is a very charming woman, too, as you will find."

Craddock was shown into a large bedroom where a fire was burning and where an old lady lay in a large canopied bed. Though she was only about seven or eight years older than Letitia Blacklock, her fragility made her seem older than her years.

Her white hair was carefully arranged, a froth of pale blue wool enveloped her neck and shoulders. There were lines of pain on the face, but lines of sweetness, too. And there was, strangely enough, what Craddock could only describe as a roguish twinkle in her faded blue eyes.

"Well, this is interesting," she said. "It's not often I receive a visit from the police. I hear Letitia Blacklock wasn't much hurt by this attempt on her? How is my dear Blackie?"

"She's very well, Mrs. Goedler. She sent you her love."

"It's a long time since I've seen her ... For many years now, it's been just a card at Christmas. I asked her to come up here when she came back to England after Charlotte's death, but she said it would be painful after so long and perhaps she was right ... Blackie always had a lot of sense. I had an old school friend to see me about a year ago, and, lor!"—she smiled—"we bored each other to death. After we'd finished all the 'Do you remembers?' there wasn't anything to say. *Most* embarrassing."

Craddock was content to let her talk before pressing his questions. He wanted, as it were, to get back into the past, to get the feel of the Goedler-Blacklock ménage.

"I suppose," said Belle shrewdly, "that you want to ask about the money? Randall left it all to go to Blackie after my death. Really, of course, Randall never dreamed that I'd outlive him. He was a big strong man, never a day's illness, and I was always a mass of aches and pains and complaints and doctors coming and pulling long faces over me."

"I don't think complaints would be the right word, Mrs. Goedler."

The old lady chuckled.

"I didn't mean it in the complaining sense. I've never been *too* sorry for myself. But it was always taken for granted that I, being the weakly one, would go first. It didn't work out that way. No—it didn't work out that way..."

"Why, exactly, did your husband leave his money the way he did?"

"You mean, why did he leave it to Blackie? Not for the reason you've probably been thinking." The roguish twinkle was very apparent. "What minds you policemen have! Randall was never in the least in love with her and she wasn't with him. Letitia, you know, has really got a man's mind. She hasn't any feminine feelings or weaknesses. I don't believe she was ever in love with any man. She was never particularly pretty and she didn't care for clothes. She

used a little makeup in deference to prevailing custom, but not to make herself look prettier." There was pity in the old voice as she went on: "She never knew any of the fun of being a woman."

Craddock looked at the frail little figure in the big bed with interest. Belle Goedler, he realized, *had* enjoyed—still enjoyed—being a woman. She twinkled at him.

"I've always thought," she said, "it must be terribly dull to be a man."

Then she said thoughtfully:

"I think Randall looked on Blackie very much as a kind of younger brother. He relied on her judgment which was always excellent. She kept him out of trouble more than once, you know."

"She told me that she came to his rescue once with money?"

"That, yes, but I meant more than that. One can speak the truth after all these years. Randall couldn't really distinguish between what was crooked and what wasn't. His conscience wasn't sensitive. The poor dear really didn't know what was just smart—and what was dishonest. Blackie kept him straight. That's one thing about Letitia Blacklock, she's absolutely dead straight. She would never do anything that was dishonest. She's a very fine character, you know. I've always admired her. They had a terrible girlhood, those girls. The father was an old country doctor—terrifically pig-headed and narrow-minded—the complete family tyrant. Letitia broke away, came to London, and trained herself as a chartered accountant. The other sister was an invalid, there was a deformity of kinds and she never saw people or went out. That's why when the old man died, Letitia gave up everything to go home and look after her sister. Randall was wild with her—but it made no difference. If Letitia thought a thing was her duty she'd do it. And you couldn't move her."

"How long was that before your husband died?"

"A couple of years, I think. Randall made his will before she left the firm, and he didn't alter it. He said to me: 'We've no one of our own.' (Our little boy died, you know, when he was two years old.) 'After you and I are gone, Blackie had better have the money. She'll play the markets and make 'em sit up.'"

"You see," Belle went on, "Randall enjoyed the whole money-making game so much—it wasn't just the money—it was the adventure, the risks, the excitement of it all. And Blackie liked it too. She had the same adventurous spirit and the same judgment. Poor darling, she'd never had any of the usual fun—being in love, and leading men on and teasing them—and having a home and children and all the real fun of life."

Craddock thought it was odd, the real pity and indulgent contempt felt by this woman, a woman whose life had been hampered by illness, whose only child had died, whose husband had died, leaving her to a lonely widowhood, and who had been a hopeless invalid for years.

She nodded her head at him.

"I know what you're thinking. But I've *had* all the things that make life worth while—they may have been taken from me—but I have had them. I was pretty and gay as a girl, I married the man I loved, and he never stopped loving me ... My child died, but I had him for two precious years ... I've had a lot of physical pain—but if you have pain, you know how to enjoy the exquisite pleasure of the times when pain stops. And everyone's been kind to me, always ... I'm a lucky woman, really."

Craddock seized upon an opening in her former remarks.

"You said just now, Mrs. Goedler, that your husband left his fortune to Miss Blacklock because he had no one else to leave it to. But that's not strictly true, is it? He had a sister."

"Oh, Sonia. But they quarrelled years ago and made a clean break of it."

"He disapproved of her marriage?"

"Yes, she married a man called—now what was his name—?"

"Stamfordis."

"That's it. Dmitri Stamfordis. Randall always said he was a crook. The two men didn't like each other from the first. But Sonia was wildly in love with him and quite determined to marry him. And I really never saw why she shouldn't. Men have such odd ideas about these things. Sonia wasn't a mere girl—she was twenty-five, and she knew exactly what she was doing. He was a crook, I dare say—I

mean really a crook. I believe he had a criminal record—and Randall always suspected the name he was passing under here wasn't his own. Sonia knew all that. The point was, which of course Randall couldn't appreciate, that Dmitri was really a wildly attractive person to women. And he was just as much in love with Sonia as she was with him. Randall insisted that he was just marrying her for her money—but that wasn't true. Sonia was very handsome, you know. And she had plenty of spirit. If the marriage had turned out badly, if Dmitri had been unkind to her or unfaithful to her, she would just have cut her losses and walked out on him. She was a rich woman and could do as she chose with her life."

"The quarrel was never made up?"

"No. Randall and Sonia never had got on very well. She resented his trying to prevent the marriage. She said, 'Very well. You're quite impossible! This is the last you hear of me!'"

"But it was not the last you heard of her?"

Belle smiled.

"No, I got a letter from her about eighteen months afterwards. She wrote from Budapest, I remember, but she didn't give an address. She told me to tell Randall that she was extremely happy and that she'd just had twins."

"And she told you their names?"

Again Belle smiled. "She said they were born just after midday—and she intended to call them Pip and Emma. That may have been just a joke, of course."

"Didn't you hear from her again?"

"No. She said she and her husband and the babies were going to America on a short stay. I never heard any more...."

"You don't happen, I suppose, to have kept that letter?"

"No, I'm afraid not ... I read it to Randall and he just grunted: 'She'll regret marrying that fellow one of these days.' That's all he ever said about it. We really forgot about her. She went right out of our lives...."

"Nevertheless Mr. Goedler left his estate to her children in the event of Miss Blacklock predeceasing you?"

"Oh, that was my doing. I said to him, when he told me about the will: 'And suppose Blackie dies before I do?' He was quite surprised. I said, 'Oh, I know Blackie is as strong as a horse and I'm a delicate creature—but there's such a thing as accidents, you know, and there's such a thing as creaking gates ...' And he said, 'There's no one—absolutely no one.' I said, 'There's Sonia.' And he said at once, 'And let that fellow get hold of my money? No—indeed!' I said, 'Well, her children then. Pip and Emma, and there may be lots more by now'—and so he grumbled, but he did put it in."

"And from that day to this," Craddock said slowly, "you've heard nothing of your sister-in-law or her children?"

"Nothing—they may be dead—they may be—anywhere."

They may be in Chipping Cleghorn, thought Craddock.

As though she read his thoughts, a look of alarm came into Belle Goedler's eyes. She said, "Don't let them hurt Blackie. Blackie's *good*—really good—you mustn't let harm come to—"

Her voice trailed off suddenly. Craddock saw the sudden grey shadows round her mouth and eyes.

"You're tired," he said. "I'll go."

She nodded.

"Send Mac to me," she whispered. "Yes, tired ..." She made a feeble motion of her hand. "Look after Blackie ... Nothing must happen to Blackie ... look after her..."

"I'll do my very best, Mrs. Goedler." He rose and went to the door. Her voice, a thin thread of sound, followed him....

"Not long now—until I'm dead—dangerous for her—Take care...."

Sister McClelland passed him as he went out. He said, uneasily:

"I hope I haven't done her harm."

"Oh, I don't think so, Mr. Craddock. I told you she would tire quite suddenly."

Later, he asked the nurse:

"The only thing I hadn't time to ask Mrs. Goedler was whether she had any old photographs? If so, I wonder—"

She interrupted him.

"I'm afraid there's nothing of that kind. All her personal papers and things were stored with their furniture from the London house at

the beginning of the war. Mrs. Goedler was desperately ill at the time. Then the storage depository was blitzed. Mrs. Goedler was very upset at losing so many personal souvenirs and family papers. I'm afraid there's nothing of that kind."

So that was that, Craddock thought.

Yet he felt his journey had not been in vain. Pip and Emma, those twin wraiths, were not quite wraiths.

Craddock thought, "Here's a brother and sister brought up somewhere in Europe. Sonia Goedler was a rich woman at the time of her marriage, but money in Europe hasn't remained money. Queer things have happened to money during these war years. And so there are two young people, the son and daughter of a man who had a criminal record. Suppose they came to England, more or less penniless. What would they do? Find out about any rich relatives. Their uncle, a man of vast fortune, is dead. Possibly the first thing they'd do would be to look up their uncle's will. See if by any chance money had been left to them or to their mother. So they go to Somerset House and learn the contents of his will, and then, perhaps, they learn of the existence of Miss Letitia Blacklock. Then they make inquiries about Randall Goedler's widow. She's an invalid, living up in Scotland, and they find out she hasn't long to live. *If this Letitia Blacklock dies before her*, they will come into a vast fortune. What then?"

Craddock thought, "They wouldn't go to Scotland. They'd find out where Letitia Blacklock is living now. And they'd go there—but not as themselves ... They'd go together—or separately? Emma ... I wonder?... Pip and Emma ... I'll eat my hat if Pip, or Emma, or both of them, aren't in Chipping Cleghorn now...."

Fifteen

DELICIOUS DEATH

I

In the kitchen at Little Paddocks, Miss Blacklock was giving instructions to Mitzi.

"Sardine sandwiches as well as the tomato ones. And some of those little scones you make so nicely. And I'd like you to make that special cake of yours."

"Is it a party then, that you want all these things?"

"It's Miss Bunner's birthday, and some people will be coming to tea."

"At her age one does not have birthdays. It is better to forget."

"Well, she doesn't want to forget. Several people are bringing her presents—and it will be nice to make a little party of it."

"That is what you say last time—and see what happened!"

Miss Blacklock controlled her temper.

"Well, it won't happen this time."

"How do you know what may happen in this house? All day long I shiver and at night I lock my door and I look in the wardrobe to see no one is hidden there."

"That ought to keep you nice and safe," said Miss Blacklock, coldly.

"The cake that you want me to make, it is the—?" Mitzi uttered a sound that to Miss Blacklock's English ear sounded like Schwitzebzr or alternatively like cats spitting at each other.

"That's the one. The rich one."

"Yes. It is rich. For it I have *nothing!* Impossible to make such a cake. I need for it chocolate and much butter, and sugar and raisins."

"You can use this tin of butter that was sent us from America. And some of the raisins we were keeping for Christmas, and here is a slab of chocolate and a pound of sugar."

Mitzi's face suddenly burst into radiant smiles.

"So, I make him for you good—good," she cried, in an ecstasy. "It will be rich, rich, of a melting richness! And on top I will put the icing—chocolate icing—I make him so nice—and write on it *Good Wishes*. These English people with their cakes that tastes of sand, never *never*, will they have tasted such a cake. Delicious, they will say—delicious—"

Her face clouded again.

"Mr. Patrick. He called it Delicious Death. My cake! I will not have my cake called that!"

"It was a compliment really," said Miss Blacklock. "He meant it was worth dying to eat such a cake."

Mitzi looked at her doubtfully.

"Well, I do not like that word—*death*. They are not dying because they eat my cake, no, they feel much, much better..."

"I'm sure we all shall."

Miss Blacklock turned away and left the kitchen with a sigh of relief at the successful ending of the interview. With Mitzi one never knew.

She ran into Dora Bunner outside.

"Oh, Letty, shall I run in and tell Mitzi just how to cut the sandwiches?"

"No," said Miss Blacklock, steering her friend firmly into the hall. "She's in a good mood now and I don't want her disturbed."

"But I could just show her—"

"Please don't show her *anything*, Dora. These central Europeans don't *like* being shown. They hate it."

Dora looked at her doubtfully. Then she suddenly broke into smiles.

"Edmund Swettenham just rang up. He wished me many happy returns of the day and said he was bringing me a pot of honey as a present this afternoon. Isn't it kind? I can't imagine how he knew it was my birthday."

"Everybody seems to know. You must have been talking about it, Dora."

"Well, I did just happen to mention that today I should be fifty-nine."

"You're sixty-four," said Miss Blacklock with a twinkle.

"And Miss Hinchcliffe said, 'You don't look it. What age do you think *I* am?' Which was rather awkward because Miss Hinchcliffe always looks so peculiar that she might be any age. She said she was bringing me some eggs, by the way. I said our hens hadn't been laying very well, lately."

"We're not doing so badly out of your birthday," said Miss Blacklock. "Honey, eggs—a magnificent box of chocolates from Julia —"

"I don't know where she gets such things."

"Better not ask. Her methods are probably strictly illegal."

"And your lovely brooch." Miss Bunner looked down proudly at her bosom on which was pinned a small diamond leaf.

"Do you like it? I'm glad. I never cared for jewellery."

"I love it."

"Good. Let's go and feed the ducks."

II

"Ha," cried Patrick dramatically, as the party took their places round the dining room table. "What do I see before me? *Delicious Death*."

"Hush," said Miss Blacklock. "Don't let Mitzi hear you. She objects to your name for her cake very much."

"Nevertheless, *Delicious Death* it is! Is it Bunny's birthday cake?"

"Yes, it is," said Miss Bunner. "I really am having the most wonderful birthday."

Her cheeks were flushed with excitement and had been ever since Colonel Easterbrook had handed her a small box of sweets and declaimed with a bow, "Sweets to the Sweet!"

Julia had turned her head away hurriedly, and had been frowned at by Miss Blacklock.

Full justice was done to the good things on the tea table and they rose from their seats after a round of crackers.

"I feel slightly sick," said Julia. "It's that cake. I remember I felt just the same last time."

"It's worth it," said Patrick.

"These foreigners certainly understand confectionery," said Miss Hinchcliffe. "What they can't make is a plain boiled pudding."

Everybody was respectfully silent, though it seemed to be hovering on Patrick's lips to ask if anyone really *wanted* a plain boiled pudding.

"Got a new gardener?" asked Miss Hinchcliffe of Miss Blacklock as they returned to the drawing room.

"No, why?"

"Saw a man snooping round the henhouse. Quite a decent-looking Army type."

"Oh, *that*," said Julia. "That's our detective."

Mrs. Easterbrook dropped her handbag.

"Detective?" she exclaimed. "But—but—why?"

"I don't know," said Julia. "He prowls about and keeps an eye on the house. He's protecting Aunt Letty, I suppose."

"Absolute nonsense," said Miss Blacklock. "I can protect myself, thank you."

"But surely it's all over now," cried Mrs. Easterbrook. "Though I meant to ask you, why did they adjourn the inquest?"

"Police aren't satisfied," said her husband. "That's what that means."

"But aren't satisfied of what?"

Colonel Easterbrook shook his head with the air of a man who could say a good deal more if he chose. Edmund Swettenham, who disliked the Colonel, said, "The truth of it is, we're all under suspicion."

"But suspicion of *what?*" repeated Mrs. Easterbrook.

"Never mind, kitten," said her husband.

"Loitering with intent," said Edmund. "The intent being to commit murder upon the first opportunity."

"Oh, don't, please don't, Mr. Swettenham." Dora Bunner began to cry. "I'm sure nobody here could possibly want to kill dear, dear Letty."

There was a moment of horrible embarrassment. Edmund turned scarlet, murmured, "Just a joke." Phillipa suggested in a high clear voice that they might listen to the six o'clock news and the suggestion was received with enthusiastic assent.

Patrick murmured to Julia: "We need Mrs. Harmon here. She'd be sure to say in that high clear voice of hers, 'But I suppose somebody *is* still waiting for a good chance to murder you, Miss Blacklock?'"

"I'm glad she and that old Miss Marple couldn't come," said Julia. "That old woman is the prying kind. And a mind like a sink, I should think. Real Victorian type."

Listening to the news led easily into a pleasant discussion on the horrors of atomic warfare. Colonel Easterbrook said that the real menace to civilization was undoubtedly Russia, and Edmund said that he had several charming Russian friends—which announcement was coldly received.

The party broke up with renewed thanks to the hostess.

"Enjoy yourself, Bunny?" asked Miss Blacklock, as the last guest was sped.

"Oh, I did. But I've got a terrible headache. It's the excitement, I think."

"It's the cake," said Patrick. "I feel a bit liverish myself. And you've been nibbling chocolates all the morning."

"I'll go and lie down, I think," said Miss Bunner. "I'll take a couple of aspirins and try and have a nice sleep."

"That would be a very good plan," said Miss Blacklock.

Miss Bunner departed upstairs.

"Shall I shut up the ducks for you, Aunt Letty?"

Miss Blacklock looked at Patrick severely.

"If you'll be sure to latch that door properly."

"I will. I swear I will."

"Have a glass of sherry, Aunt Letty," said Julia. "As my old nurse used to say, 'It will settle your stomach.' A revolting phrase, but curiously apposite at this moment."

"Well, I dare say it might be a good thing. The truth is one isn't used to rich things. Oh, Bunny, how you made me jump. What is it?"

"I can't find my aspirin," said Miss Bunner disconsolately.

"Well, take some of mine, dear, they're by my bed."

"There's a bottle on my dressing table," said Phillipa.

"Thank you—thank you very much. If I can't find mine—but I know I've got it *somewhere*. A new bottle. Now where could I have put it?"

"There's heaps in the bathroom," said Julia impatiently. "This house is chock full of aspirin."

"It vexes me to be so careless and mislay things," replied Miss Bunner, retreating up the stairs again.

"Poor old Bunny," said Julia, holding up her glass. "Do you think we ought to have given her some sherry?"

"Better not, I think," said Miss Blacklock. "She's had a lot of excitement today, and it isn't really good for her. I'm afraid she'll be the worse for it tomorrow. Still, I really do think she has enjoyed herself!"

"She's loved it," said Phillipa.

"Let's give Mitzi a glass of sherry," suggested Julia. "Hi, Pat," she called as she heard him entering the side door. "Fetch Mitzi."

So Mitzi was brought in and Julia poured her out a glass of sherry.

"Here's to the best cook in the world," said Patrick.

Mitzi was gratified—but felt nevertheless that a protest was due.

"That is not so. I am not really a cook. In my country I do intellectual work."

"Then you're wasted," said Patrick. "What's intellectual work compared to a *chef d'oeuvre* like Delicious Death?"

"Oo—I say to you I do not like—"

"Never mind what you like, my girl," said Patrick. "That's my name for it and here's to it. Let's all drink to Delicious Death and to hell with the aftereffects."

III

"Phillipa, my dear, I want to talk to you."

"Yes, Miss Blacklock?"

Phillipa Haymes looked up in slight surprise.

"You're not worrying about anything, are you?"

"Worrying?"

"I've noticed that you've looked worried lately. There isn't anything wrong, is there?"

"Oh no, Miss Blacklock. Why should there be?"

"Well—I wondered. I thought, perhaps, that you and Patrick—?"

"Patrick?" Phillipa looked really surprised.

"It's not so, then. Please forgive me if I've been impertinent. But you've been thrown together a lot—and although Patrick is my cousin, I don't think he's the type to make a satisfactory husband. Not for some time to come, at all events."

Phillipa's face had frozen into a hard immobility.

"I shan't marry again," she said.

"Oh, yes, you will some day, my child. You're young. But we needn't discuss that. There's no other trouble. You're not worried about—money, for instance?"

"No, I'm quite all right."

"I know you get anxious sometimes about your boy's education. That's why I want to tell you something. I drove into Milchester this afternoon to see Mr. Beddingfeld, my lawyer. Things haven't been very settled lately and I thought I would like to make a new will—in view of certain eventualities. Apart from Bunny's legacy, everything goes to you, Phillipa."

"What?" Phillipa spun round. Her eyes stared. She looked dismayed, almost frightened.

"But I don't want it—really I don't ... Oh, I'd rather not ... And anyway, why? Why to *me*?"

"Perhaps," said Miss Blacklock in a peculiar voice, "because there's no one else."

"But there's Patrick and Julia."

"Yes, there's Patrick and Julia." The odd note in Miss Blacklock's voice was still there.

"They are your relations."

"Very distant ones. They have no claim on me."

"But I—I haven't either—I don't know what you think ... Oh, I don't want it."

Her gaze held more hostility than gratitude. There was something almost like fear in her manner.

"I know what I'm doing, Phillipa. I've become fond of you—and there's the boy ... You won't get very much if I should die now—but in a few weeks' time it might be different."

Her eyes met Phillipa's steadily.

"But you're not going to die!" Phillipa protested.

"Not if I can avoid it by taking due precautions."

"Precautions?"

"Yes. Think it over ... And don't worry any more."

She left the room abruptly. Phillipa heard her speaking to Julia in the hall.

Julia entered the drawing room a few moments later.

There was a slightly steely glitter in her eyes.

"Played your cards rather well, haven't you, Phillipa? I see you're one of those quiet ones ... a dark horse."

"So you heard—?"

"Yes, I heard. I rather think I was meant to hear."

"What do you mean?"

"Our Letty's no fool ... Well, anyway, you're all right, Phillipa. Sitting pretty, aren't you?"

"Oh, Julia—I didn't mean—I never meant—"

"Didn't you? Of course you did. You're fairly up against things, aren't you? Hard up for money. But just remember this—if anyone bumps off Aunt Letty now, *you'll* be suspect No. 1."

"But I shan't be. It would be idiotic if I killed her now when—if I waited—"

"So you *do* know about old Mrs. Whatsername dying up in Scotland? I wondered ... Phillipa, I'm beginning to believe you're a very dark horse indeed."

"I don't want to do you and Patrick out of anything."

"Don't you, my dear? I'm sorry—but I don't believe you."

Sixteen

INSPECTOR CRADDOCK RETURNS

Inspector Craddock had had a bad night on his night journey home. His dreams had been less dreams than nightmares. Again and again he was racing through the grey corridors of an old-world castle in a desperate attempt to get somewhere, or to prevent something, in time. Finally he dreamt that he awoke. An enormous relief surged over him. Then the door of his compartment slid slowly open, and Letitia Blacklock looked in at him with blood running down her face, and said reproachfully: "Why didn't you save me? You could have if you'd tried."

This time he really awoke.

Altogether, the Inspector was thankful finally to reach Milchester. He went straight away to make his report to Rydesdale who listened carefully.

"It doesn't take us much further," he said. "But it confirms what Miss Blacklock told you. Pip and Emma—h'm, I wonder."

"Patrick and Julia Simmons are the right age, sir. If we could establish that Miss Blacklock hadn't seen them since they were children—"

With a very faint chuckle, Rydesdale said: "Our ally, Miss Marple, has established that for us. Actually Miss Blacklock had never seen either of them at all until two months ago."

"Then, surely, sir—"

"It's not so easy as all that, Craddock. We've been checking up. On what we've got, Patrick and Julia seem definitely to be out of it. His Naval record is genuine—quite a good record bar a tendency to 'insubordination.' We've checked with Cannes, and an indignant Mrs. Simmons says of course her son and daughter are at Chipping Cleghorn with her cousin Letitia Blacklock. So that's that!"

"And Mrs. Simmons *is* Mrs. Simmons?"

"She's been Mrs. Simmons for a very long time, that's all I can say," said Rydesdale dryly.

"That seems clear enough. Only—those two fitted. Right age. Not known to Miss Blacklock, personally. If we wanted Pip and Emma—well, there they were."

The Chief Constable nodded thoughtfully, then he pushed across a paper to Craddock.

"Here's a little something we've dug up on Mrs. Easterbrook."

The Inspector read with lifted eyebrows.

"Very interesting," he remarked. "Hoodwinked that old ass pretty well, hasn't she? It doesn't tie in with this business though, as far as I can see."

"Apparently not."

"And here's an item that concerns Mrs. Haymes."

Again Craddock's eyebrows rose.

"I think I'll have another talk with the lady," he said.

"You think this information might be relevant?"

"I think it might be. It would be a long shot, of course...."

The two men were silent for a moment or two.

"How has Fletcher got on, sir?"

"Fletcher has been exceedingly active. He's made a routine search of the house by agreement with Miss Blacklock—but he didn't find anything significant. Then he's been checking up on who could have had the opportunity of oiling that door. Checking who was up at the house on the days that that foreign girl was out. A little more complicated than we thought, because it appears she goes for a walk most afternoons. Usually down to the village where she has a cup of coffee at the Bluebird. So that when Miss Blacklock and Miss

Bunner are out—which is most afternoons—they go blackberrying—the coast is clear.”

“And the doors are always left unlocked?”

“They used to be. I don’t suppose they are now.”

“What are Fletcher’s results? Who’s known to have been in the house when it was left empty?”

“Practically the whole lot of them.”

Rydesdale consulted a page in front of him.

“Miss Murgatroyd was there with a hen to sit on some eggs. (Sounds complicated but that’s what she says.) Very flustered about it all and contradicts herself, but Fletcher thinks that’s temperamental and not a sign of guilt.”

“Might be,” Craddock admitted. “She flaps.”

“Then Mrs. Swettenham came up to fetch some horse meat that Miss Blacklock had left for her on the kitchen table because Miss Blacklock had been in to Milchester in the car that day and always gets Mrs. Swettenham’s horse meat for her. That make sense to you?”

Craddock considered.

“Why didn’t Miss Blacklock leave the horse meat when she passed Mrs. Swettenham’s house on her way back from Milchester?”

“I don’t know, but she didn’t. Mrs. Swettenham says she (Miss B.) always leaves it on the kitchen table, and she (Mrs. S.) likes to fetch it when Mitzi isn’t there because Mitzi is sometimes so rude.”

“Hangs together quite well. And the next?”

“Miss Hinchcliffe. Says she wasn’t there at all lately. But she was. Because Mitzi saw her coming out of the side door one day and so did a Mrs. Butt (she’s one of the locals). Miss H. then admitted she might have been there but had forgotten. Can’t remember what she went for. Says she probably just dropped in.”

“That’s rather odd.”

“So was her manner, apparently. Then there’s Mrs. Easterbrook. She was exercising the dear dogs out that way and she just popped in to see if Miss Blacklock would lend her a knitting pattern but Miss Blacklock wasn’t in. She says she waited a little.”

"Just so. Might be snooping round. Or might be oiling a door. And the Colonel?"

"Went there one day with a book on India that Miss Blacklock had expressed a desire to read."

"Had she?"

"Her account is that she tried to get out of having to read it, but it was no use."

"And that's fair enough," sighed Craddock. "If anyone is really determined to lend you a book, you never can get out of it!"

"We don't know if Edmund Swettenham was up there. He's extremely vague. Said he did drop in occasionally on errands for his mother, but thinks not lately."

"In fact, it's all inconclusive."

"Yes."

Rydesdale said, with a slight grin:

"Miss Marple has also been active. Fletcher reports that she had morning coffee at the Bluebird. She's been to sherry at Boulders, and to tea at Little Paddocks. She's admired Mrs. Swettenham's garden—and dropped in to see Colonel Easterbrook's Indian curios."

"She may be able to tell us if Colonel Easterbrook's a pukka Colonel or not."

"She'd know, I agree—he seems all right. We'd have to check with the Far Eastern Authorities to get certain identification."

"And in the meantime"—Craddock broke off—"do you think Miss Blacklock would consent to go away?"

"Go away from Chipping Cleghorn?"

"Yes. Take the faithful Bunner with her, perhaps, and leave for an unknown destination. Why shouldn't she go up to Scotland and stay with Belle Goedler? It's a pretty unget-at-able place."

"Stop there and wait for her to die? I don't think she'd do that. I don't think any nice-natured woman would like that suggestion."

"If it's a matter of saving her life—"

"Come now, Craddock, it isn't quite so easy to bump someone off as you seem to think."

"Isn't it, sir?"

"Well—in one way—it's easy enough I agree. Plenty of methods. Weed-killer. A bash on the head when she's out shutting up the poultry, a pot shot from behind a hedge. All quite simple. But to bump someone off and not be suspected of bumping them off—that's not quite so easy. And they must realize by now that they're all under observation. The original carefully planned scheme failed. Our unknown murderer has got to think up something else."

"I know that, sir. But there's the time element to consider. Mrs. Goedler's a dying woman—she might pop off any minute. That means that our murderer can't afford to wait."

"True."

"And another thing, sir. He—or she—must know that we're checking up on everybody."

"And that takes time," said Rydesdale with a sigh. "It means checking with the East, with India. Yes, it's a long tedious business."

"So that's another reason for—hurry. I'm sure, sir, that the danger is very real. It's a very large sum that's at stake. If Belle Goedler dies —"

He broke off as a constable entered.

"Constable Legg on the line from Chipping Cleghorn, sir."

"Put him through here."

Inspector Craddock, watching the Chief Constable, saw his features harden and stiffen.

"Very good," barked Rydesdale. "Detective-Inspector Craddock will be coming out immediately."

He put the receiver down.

"Is it—?" Craddock broke off.

Rydesdale shook his head.

"No," he said. "It's Dora Bunner. She wanted some aspirin. Apparently she took some from a bottle beside Letitia Blacklock's bed. There were only a few tablets left in the bottle. She took two and left one. The doctor's got that one and is sending it to be analysed. He says it's definitely *not* aspirin."

"She's dead?"

"Yes, found dead in her bed this morning. Died in her sleep, doctor says. He doesn't think it was natural though her health was in

a bad state. Narcotic poisoning, that's his guess. Autopsy's fixed for tonight."

"Aspirin tablets by Letitia Blacklock's bed. The clever clever devil. Patrick told me Miss Blacklock threw away a half bottle of sherry—opened a new one. I don't suppose she'd have thought of doing that with an open bottle of aspirin. Who had been in the house this time—within the last day or two? The tablets can't have been there long."

Rydesdale looked at him.

"All our lot were there yesterday," he said. "Birthday party for Miss Bunner. Any of them could have nipped upstairs and done a neat little substitution. Or of course anyone living in the house could have done it any time."

Seventeen

THE ALBUM

Standing by the Vicarage gate, well wrapped up, Miss Marple took the note from Bunch's hand.

"Tell Miss Blacklock," said Bunch, "that Julian is terribly sorry he can't come up himself. He's got a parishioner dying out at Locke Hamlet. He'll come up after lunch if Miss Blacklock would like to see him. The note's about the arrangements for the funeral. He suggests Wednesday if the inquest's on Tuesday. Poor old Bunny. It's so typical of her, somehow, to get hold of poisoned aspirin meant for someone else. Goodbye, darling. I hope the walk won't be too much for you. But I've simply got to get that child to hospital at once."

Miss Marple said the walk wouldn't be too much for her, and Bunch rushed off.

Whilst waiting for Miss Blacklock, Miss Marple looked round the drawing room, and wondered just exactly what Dora Bunner had meant that morning in the Bluebird by saying that she believed Patrick had "tampered with the lamp" to "make the lights go out." What lamp? And how had he "tampered" with it?

She must, Miss Marple decided, have meant the small lamp that stood on the table by the archway. She had said something about a shepherdess or a shepherd—and this was actually a delicate piece of Dresden china, a shepherd in a blue coat and pink breeches holding what had originally been a candlestick and had now been adapted to

electricity. The shade was of plain vellum and a little too big so that it almost masked the figure. What else was it that Dora Bunner had said? "I remember distinctly that it was the shepherdess. And the next day—" Certainly it was a shepherd now.

Miss Marple remembered that when she and Bunch had come to tea, Dora Bunner had said something about the lamp being one of a *pair*. Of course—a shepherd and a shepherdess. And it had been the shepherdess on the day of the hold-up—and the next morning it had been the *other* lamp—the lamp that was here now, the shepherd. The lamps had been changed over during the night. And Dora Bunner had had reason to believe (or had believed without reason) that it was Patrick who had changed them.

Why? Because, if the original lamp were examined, it would show just how Patrick had managed to "make the lights go out." How had he managed? Miss Marple looked earnestly at the lamp in front of her. The flex ran along the table over the edge and was plugged into the wall. There was a small pear-shaped switch halfway along the flex. None of it suggested anything to Miss Marple because she knew very little about electricity.

Where was the shepherdess lamp? she wondered. In the "spare room" or thrown away, or—where was it Dora Bunner had come upon Patrick Simmons with a feather and an oily cup? In the shrubbery? Miss Marple made up her mind to put all these points to Inspector Craddock.

At the very beginning Miss Blacklock had leaped to the conclusion that her nephew Patrick had been behind the insertion of that advertisement. That kind of instinctive belief was often justified, or so Miss Marple believed. Because, if you knew people fairly well, you knew the kind of things they thought of....

Patrick Simmons....

A handsome young man. An engaging young man. A young man whom women liked, both young women and old women. The kind of man, perhaps, that Randall Goedler's sister had married. Could Patrick Simmons be "Pip"? But he'd been in the Navy during the war. The police could soon check up on that.

Only—sometimes—the most amazing impersonations *did* happen.

You could get away with a great deal if you had enough audacity....

The door opened and Miss Blacklock came in. She looked, Miss Marple thought, many years older. All the life and energy had gone out of her.

"I'm very sorry, disturbing you like this," said Miss Marple. "But the Vicar had a dying parishioner and Bunch had to rush a sick child to hospital. The Vicar wrote you a note."

She held it out and Miss Blacklock took it and opened it.

"Do sit down, Miss Marple," she said. "It's very kind of you to have brought this."

She read the note through.

"The Vicar's a very understanding man," she said quietly. "He doesn't offer one fatuous consolation ... Tell him that these arrangements will do very well. Her—her favourite hymn was *Lead Kindly Light*."

Her voice broke suddenly.

Miss Marple said gently:

"I am only a stranger, but I am so very very sorry."

And suddenly, uncontrollably, Letitia Blacklock wept. It was a piteous overmastering grief, with a kind of hopelessness about it. Miss Marple sat quite still.

Miss Blacklock sat up at last. Her face was swollen and blotched with tears.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It—it just came over me. What I've lost. She—she was the only link with the past, you see. The only one who—who *remembered*. Now that she's gone I'm quite alone."

"I know what you mean," said Miss Marple. "One *is* alone when the last one who *remembers* is gone. I have nephews and nieces and kind friends—but there's no one who knew me as a young girl—no one who belongs to the old days. I've been alone for quite a long time now."

Both women sat silent for some moments.

"You understand very well," said Letitia Blacklock. She rose and went over to her desk. "I must write a few words to the Vicar." She held the pen rather awkwardly and wrote slowly.

"Arthritic," she explained. "Sometimes I can hardly write at all."

She sealed up the envelope and addressed it.

"If you wouldn't mind taking it, it would be very kind."

Hearing a man's voice in the hall she said quickly:

"That's Inspector Craddock."

She went to the mirror over the fireplace and applied a small powder puff to her face.

Craddock came in with a grim, angry face.

He looked at Miss Marple with disapprobation.

"Oh," he said. "So *you're* here."

Miss Blacklock turned from the mantelpiece.

"Miss Marple kindly came up with a note from the Vicar."

Miss Marple said in a flurried manner:

"I am going at once—at once. Please don't let me hamper you in *any way*."

"Were you at the tea party here yesterday afternoon?"

Miss Marple said, nervously:

"No—no, I wasn't. Bunch drove me over to call on some friends."

"Then there's nothing you can tell me." Craddock held the door open in a pointed manner, and Miss Marple scuttled out in a somewhat abashed fashion.

"Nosey Parkers, these old women," said Craddock.

"I think you're being unfair to her," said Miss Blacklock. "She really did come with a note from the Vicar."

"I bet she did."

"I don't think it was idle curiosity."

"Well, perhaps you're right, Miss Blacklock, but my own diagnosis would be a severe attack of Nosey Parkeritis...."

"She's a very harmless old creature," said Miss Blacklock.

"Dangerous as a rattlesnake if you only knew," the Inspector thought grimly. But he had no intention of taking anyone into his confidence unnecessarily. Now that he knew definitely there was a killer at large, he felt that the less said the better. He didn't want the next person bumped off to be Jane Marple.

Somewhere—a killer ... Where?

"I won't waste time offering sympathy, Miss Blacklock," he said. "As a matter of fact I feel pretty bad about Miss Bunner's death. We ought to have been able to prevent it."

"I don't see what you could have done."

"No—well, it wouldn't have been easy. But now we've got to work fast. Who's doing this, Miss Blacklock? Who's had two shots at killing you, and will probably, if we don't work fast enough, soon have another?"

Letitia Blacklock shivered. "I don't know, Inspector—I don't know *at all!*"

"I've checked up with Mrs. Goedler. She's given me all the help she can. It wasn't very much. There are just a few people who would definitely profit by your death. First Pip and Emma. Patrick and Julia Simmons are the right age, but their background seems clear enough. Anyway, we can't concentrate on these two alone. Tell me, Miss Blacklock, would you recognize Sonia Goedler if you saw her?"

"Recognize Sonia? Why, of course—" She stopped suddenly. "No," she said slowly, "I don't know that I would. It's a long time. Thirty years ... She'd be an elderly woman now."

"What was she like when you remember her?"

"Sonia?" Miss Blacklock considered for some moments. "She was rather small, dark...."

"Any special peculiarities? Mannerisms?"

"No—no, I don't think so. She was gay—very gay."

"She mayn't be so gay now," said the Inspector. "Have you got a photograph of her?"

"Of Sonia? Let me see—not a proper photograph. I've got some old snapshots—in an album somewhere—at least I think there's one of her."

"Ah. Can I have a look at it?"

"Yes, of course. Now where did I put that album?"

"Tell me, Miss Blacklock, do you consider it remotely possible that Mrs. Swettenham might be Sonia Goedler?"

"*Mrs. Swettenham?*" Miss Blacklock looked at him in lively astonishment. "But her husband was in the Government Service—in

India first, I think, and then in Hong Kong."

"What you mean is, that that's the story she's told you. You don't, as we say in the Courts, know it of your own knowledge, do you?"

"No," said Miss Blacklock slowly. "When you put it like that, I don't ... But Mrs. Swettenham? Oh, it's absurd!"

"Did Sonia Goedler ever do any acting? Amateur theatricals?"

"Oh, yes. She was good."

"There you are! Another thing, Mrs. Swettenham wears a wig. At least," the Inspector corrected himself, "Mrs. Harmon says she does."

"Yes—yes, I suppose it might be a wig. All those little grey curls. But I still think it's absurd. She's really very nice and exceedingly funny sometimes."

"Then there's Miss Hinchcliffe and Miss Murgatroyd. Could either of them be Sonia Goedler?"

"Miss Hinchcliffe is too tall. She's as tall as a man."

"Miss Murgatroyd then?"

"Oh, but—oh no, I'm sure Miss Murgatroyd couldn't be Sonia."

"You don't see very well, do you, Miss Blacklock?"

"I'm shortsighted; is that what you mean?"

"Yes. What I'd like to see is a snapshot of this Sonia Goedler, even if it's a long time ago and not a good likeness. We're trained, you know, to pick out resemblances, in a way no amateur can ever do."

"I'll try and find it for you."

"Now?"

"What, at once?"

"I'd prefer it."

"Very well. Now, let me see. I saw that album when we were tidying a lot of books out of the cupboard. Julia was helping me. She laughed, I remember, at the clothes we used to wear in those days ... The books we put in the shelf in the drawing room. Where did we put the albums and the big bound volumes of the Art Journal? What a wretched memory I have! Perhaps Julia will remember. She's at home today."

"I'll find her."

The Inspector departed on his quest. He did not find Julia in any of the downstairs rooms. Mitzi, asked where Miss Simmons was, said

crossly that it was not her affair.

"Me! I stay in my kitchen and concern myself with the lunch. And nothing do I eat that I have not cooked myself. Nothing, do you hear?"

The Inspector called up the stairs "Miss Simmons," and getting no response, went up.

He met Julia face to face just as he turned the corner of the landing. She had just emerged from a door that showed behind it a small twisty staircase.

"I was up in the attic," she explained. "What is it?"

Inspector Craddock explained.

"Those old photograph albums? Yes, I remember them quite well. We put them in the big cupboard in the study, I think. I'll find them for you."

She led the way downstairs and pushed open the study door. Near the window there was a large cupboard. Julia pulled it open and disclosed a heterogenous mass of objects.

"Junk," said Julia. "All junk. But elderly people simply will *not* throw things away."

The Inspector knelt down and took a couple of old-fashioned albums from the bottom shelf.

"Are these they?"

"Yes."

Miss Blacklock came in and joined them.

"Oh, so *that's* where we put them. I couldn't remember."

Craddock had the books on the table and was turning the pages.

Women in large cartwheel hats, women with dresses tapering down to their feet so that they could hardly walk. The photos had captions neatly printed underneath them, but the ink was old and faded.

"It would be in this one," said Miss Blacklock. "On about the second or third page. The other book is after Sonia had married and gone away." She turned a page. "It ought to be here." She stopped.

There were several empty spaces on the page. Craddock bent down and deciphered the faded writing. "Sonia ... Self ... R.G." A little further along, "Sonia and Belle on beach." And again on the

opposite page, "Picnic at Skeyne." He turned over another page, "Charlotte, Self, Sonia, R.G."

Craddock stood up. His lips were grim.

"*Somebody has removed these photographs*—not long ago, I should say."

"There weren't any blank spaces when we looked at them the other day. Were there, Julia?"

"I didn't look very closely—only at some of the dresses. But no ... you're right, Aunt Letty, there *weren't* any blank spaces."

Craddock looked grimmer still.

"Somebody," he said, "has removed every photo of Sonia Goedler from this album."

Eighteen

THE LETTERS

I

"**S**orry to worry you again, Mrs. Haymes."

"It doesn't matter," said Phillipa coldly.

"Shall we go into this room here?"

"The study? Yes, if you like, Inspector. It's very cold. There's no fire."

"It doesn't matter. It's not for long. And we're not so likely to be overheard here."

"Does that matter?"

"Not to me, Mrs. Haymes. It might to you."

"What do you mean?"

"I think you told me, Mrs. Haymes, that your husband was killed fighting in Italy?"

"Well?"

"Wouldn't it have been simpler to have told me the truth—that he was a deserter from his regiment?"

He saw her face grow white, and her hands close and unclosethemselves.

She said bitterly:

"Do you have to rake up *everything*?"

Craddock said dryly:

"We expect people to tell us the truth about themselves."

She was silent. Then she said:

"Well?"

"What do you mean by 'Well?,' Mrs. Haymes?"

"I mean, what are you going to do about it? Tell everybody? Is that necessary—or fair—or kind?"

"Does nobody know?"

"Nobody here. Harry"—her voice changed—"my son, he doesn't know. I don't want him to know. I don't want him to know—ever."

"Then let me tell you that you're taking a very big risk, Mrs. Haymes. When the boy is old enough to understand, tell him the truth. If he finds out by himself some day—it won't be good for him. If you go on stuffing him up with tales of his father dying like a hero —"

"I don't do that. I'm not completely dishonest. I just don't talk about it. His father was—killed in the war. After all, that's what it amounts to—for us."

"But your husband is still alive?"

"Perhaps. How should I know?"

"When did you see him last, Mrs. Haymes?"

Phillipa said quickly:

"I haven't seen him for years."

"Are you quite sure that's true? You didn't, for instance, see him about a fortnight ago?"

"What are you suggesting?"

"It never seemed to me very likely that you met Rudi Scherz in the summerhouse here. But Mitzi's story was very emphatic. I suggest, Mrs. Haymes, that the man you came back from work to meet that morning was your husband."

"I didn't meet anybody in the summerhouse."

"He was hard up for money, perhaps, and you supplied him with some?"

"I've not seen him, I tell you. I didn't meet anybody in the summerhouse."

"Deserters are often rather desperate men. They often take part in robberies, you know. Hold-ups. Things of that kind. *And they have*

foreign revolvers very often that they've brought back from abroad."

"I don't know where my husband is. I haven't seen him for years."

"Is that your last word, Mrs. Haymes?"

"I've nothing else to say."

II

Craddock came away from his interview with Phillipa Haymes feeling angry and baffled.

"Obstinate as a mule," he said to himself angrily.

He was fairly sure that Phillipa was lying, but he hadn't succeeded in breaking down her obstinate denials.

He wished he knew a little more about ex-Captain Haymes. His information was meagre. An unsatisfactory Army record, but nothing to suggest that Haymes was likely to turn criminal.

And anyway Haymes didn't fit in with the oiled door.

Someone in the house had done that, or someone with easy access to it.

He stood looking up the staircase, and suddenly he wondered what Julia had been doing up in the attic. An attic, he thought, was an unlikely place for the fastidious Julia to visit.

What had she been doing up there?

He ran lightly up to the first floor. There was no one about. He opened the door out of which Julia had come and went up the narrow stairs to the attic.

There were trunks there, old suitcases, various broken articles of furniture, a chair with a leg off, a broken china lamp, part of an old dinner service.

He turned to the trunks and opened the lid of one.

Clothes. Old-fashioned, quite good-quality women's clothes. Clothes belonging, he supposed, to Miss Blacklock, or to her sister who had died.

He opened another trunk.

Curtains.

He passed to a small attaché-case. It had papers in it and letters. Very old letters, yellowed with time.

He looked at the outside of the case which had the initials C.L.B. on it. He deduced correctly that it had belonged to Letitia's sister Charlotte. He unfolded one of the letters. It began

Dearest Charlotte.

Yesterday Belle felt well enough to go for a picnic. R.G. also took a day off. The Asvogel flotation has gone splendidly, R.G. is terribly pleased about it. The Preference shares are at a premium.

He skipped the rest and looked at the signature:

Your loving sister, Letitia.

He picked up another.

Darling Charlotte.

I wish you would sometimes make up your mind to see people. You do exaggerate, you know. It isn't nearly as bad as you think. And people really don't mind things like that. It's not the disfigurement you think it is.

He nodded his head. He remembered Belle Goedler saying that Charlotte Blacklock had a disfigurement or deformity of some kind. Letitia had, in the end, resigned her job, to go and look after her sister. These letters all breathed the anxious spirit of her affection and love for an invalid. She had written her sister, apparently, long accounts of everyday happenings, of any little detail that she thought might interest the sick girl. And Charlotte had kept these letters. Occasionally odd snapshots had been enclosed.

Excitement suddenly flooded Craddock's mind. Here, it might be, he would find a clue. In these letters there would be written down things that Letitia Blacklock herself had long forgotten. Here was a faithful picture of the past and somewhere amongst it, there might

be a clue that would help him to identify the unknown. Photographs, too. There might, just possibly, be a photograph of Sonia Goedler here that the person who had taken the other photos out of the album did not know about.

Inspector Craddock packed the letters up again, carefully, closed the case, and started down the stairs.

Letitia Blacklock, standing on the landing below, looked at him in amazement.

"Was that you up in the attic? I heard footsteps. I couldn't imagine who—"

"Miss Blacklock, I have found some letters here, written by you to your sister Charlotte many years ago. Will you allow me to take them away and read them?"

She flushed angrily.

"Must you do a thing like that? Why? What good can they be to you?"

"They might give me a picture of Sonia Goedler, of her character—there may be some allusion—some incident—that will help."

"They are private letters, Inspector."

"I know."

"I suppose you will take them anyway ... You have the power to do so, I suppose, or you can easily get it. Take them—take them! But you'll find very little about Sonia. She married and went away only a year or two after I began to work for Randall Goedler."

Craddock said obstinately:

"There may be *something*." He added, "We've got to try everything. I assure you the danger is very real."

She said, biting her lips:

"I know. Bunny is dead—from taking an aspirin tablet that was meant for me. It may be Patrick, or Julia, or Phillipa, or Mitzi next—somebody young with their life in front of them. Somebody who drinks a glass of wine that is poured out for me, or eats a chocolate that is sent to me. Oh! take the letters—take them away. And afterwards burn them. They don't mean anything to anyone but me and Charlotte. It's all over—gone—past. Nobody remembers now...."

Her hand went up to the choker of false pearls she was wearing. Craddock thought how incongruous it looked with her tweed coat and skirt.

She said again:

"Take the letters."

III

It was the following afternoon that the Inspector called at the Vicarage.

It was a dark gusty day.

Miss Marple had her chair pulled close to the fire and was knitting. Bunch was on hands and knees, crawling about the floor, cutting out material to a pattern.

She sat back and pushed a mop of hair out of her eyes, looking up expectantly at Craddock.

"I don't know if it's a breach of confidence," said the Inspector, addressing himself to Miss Marple, "but I'd like you to look at this letter."

He explained the circumstances of his discovery in the attic.

"It's rather a touching collection of letters," he said. "Miss Blacklock poured out everything in the hopes of sustaining her sister's interest in life and keeping her health good. There's a very clear picture of an old father in the background—old Dr. Blacklock. A real old pig-headed bully, absolutely set in his ways, and convinced that everything he thought and said was right. Probably killed thousands of patients through obstinacy. He wouldn't stand for any new ideas or methods."

"I don't really know that I blame him there," said Miss Marple. "I always feel that the young doctors are only too anxious to experiment. After they've whipped out all our teeth, and administered quantities of very peculiar glands, and removed bits of our insides, they then confess that nothing can be done for us. I really prefer the old-fashioned remedy of big black bottles of medicine. After all, one can always pour those down the sink."

She took the letter that Craddock handed her.

He said: "I want you to read it because I think that that generation is more easily understood by you than by me. I don't know really quite how these people's minds worked."

Miss Marple unfolded the fragile paper.

Dearest Charlotte,

I've not written for two days because we've been having the most terrible domestic complications. Randall's sister Sonia (you remember her? She came to take you out in the car that day? How I wish you would go out more). Sonia has declared her intention of marrying one Dmitri Stamfordis. I have only seen him once. Very attractive—not to be trusted, I should say. R.G. raves against him and says he is a crook and a swindler. Belle, bless her, just smiles and lies on her sofa. Sonia, who though she looks so impassive has really a terrific temper, is simply wild with R.G. I really thought yesterday she was going to murder him!

I've done my best. I've talked to Sonia and I've talked to R.G. and I've got them both into a more reasonable frame of mind and then they come together and it all starts over again! You've no idea how tiring it is. R.G. has been making enquiries—and it does really seem as though this Stamfordis man was thoroughly undesirable.

In the meantime business is being neglected. I carry on at the office and in a way it's rather fun because R.G. gives me a free hand. He said to me yesterday: "Thank Heaven, there's one sane person in the world. You're never likely to fall in love with a crook, Blackie, are you?" I said I didn't think I was likely to fall in love with anybody. R.G. said: "Let's start a few new hares in the City." He's really rather a mischievous devil sometimes and he sails terribly near the wind. "You're quite determined to keep me on the straight and narrow path aren't you, Blackie?" he said the other day. And I shall too! I can't understand how people can't see when a thing's dishonest—

but R.G. really and truly doesn't. He only knows what is actually against the law.

Belle only laughs at all this. She thinks the fuss about Sonia is all nonsense. "Sonia has her own money," she said. "Why shouldn't she marry this man if she wants to?" I said it might turn out to be a terrible mistake and Belle said, "It's never a mistake to marry a man you want to marry—even if you regret it." And then she said, "I suppose Sonia doesn't want to break with Randall because of money. Sonia's very fond of money."

No more now. How is father? I won't say Give him my love. But you can if you think it's better to do so. Have you seen more people? You really must not be morbid, darling.

Sonia asks to be remembered to you. She has just come in and is closing and unclosing her hands like an angry cat sharpening its claws. I think she and R.G. have had another row. Of course Sonia can be very irritating. She stares you down with that cool stare of hers.

Lots of love, darling, and buck up. This iodine treatment may make a lot of difference. I've been enquiring about it and it really does seem to have good results.

*Your loving sister,
Letitia.*

Miss Marple folded the letter and handed it back. She looked abstracted.

"Well, what do you think about her?" Craddock urged. "What picture do you get of her?"

"Of Sonia? It's difficult, you know, to see anyone through another person's mind ... Determined to get her own way—that, definitely, I think. And wanting the best of two worlds...."

"*Closing and unclosing her hands like an angry cat,*" murmured Craddock. "You know, that reminds me of someone...."

He frowned.

"Making enquiries ..." murmured Miss Marple.

"If we could get hold of the result of those inquiries," said Craddock.

"Does that letter remind you of anything in St. Mary Mead?" asked Bunch, rather indistinctly since her mouth was full of pins.

"I really can't say it does, dear ... Dr. Blacklock is, perhaps, a little like Mr. Curtiss the Wesleyan Minister. He wouldn't let his child wear a plate on her teeth. Said it was the Lord's Will if her teeth stuck out. 'After all,' I said to him, 'you do trim your beard and cut your hair. It might be the Lord's Will that your hair should grow out.' He said that was quite different. So like a man. But that doesn't help us with our present problem."

"We've never traced that revolver, you know. It wasn't Rudi Scherz. If I knew who had had a revolver in Chipping Cleghorn—"

"Colonel Easterbrook has one," said Bunch. "He keeps it in his collar drawer."

"How do you know, Mrs. Harmon?"

"Mrs. Butt told me. She's my daily. Or rather, my twice weekly. Being a military gentleman, she said, he'd naturally have a revolver and very handy it would be if burglars were to come along."

"When did she tell you this?"

"Ages ago. About six months ago, I should think."

"Colonel Easterbrook?" murmured Craddock.

"It's like those pointer things at fairs, isn't it?" said Bunch, still speaking through a mouthful of pins. "Go round and round and stop at something different every time."

"You're telling me," said Craddock and groaned.

"Colonel Easterbrook was up at Little Paddocks to leave a book there one day. He could have oiled that door then. He was quite straightforward about being there though. Not like Miss Hinchcliffe."

Miss Marple coughed gently. "You must make allowances for the times we live in, Inspector," she said.

Craddock looked at her, uncomprehendingly.

"After all," said Miss Marple. "you *are* the Police, aren't you? People can't say everything they'd like to say to the Police, can they?"

"I don't see why not," said Craddock. "Unless they've got some criminal matter to conceal."

"She means butter," said Bunch, crawling actively round a table leg to anchor a floating bit of paper. "Butter and corn for hens, and sometimes cream—and sometimes, even, a side of bacon."

"Show him that note from Miss Blacklock," said Miss Marple. "It's some time ago now, but it reads like a first-class mystery story."

"What have I done with it? Is this the one you mean, Aunt Jane?"

Miss Marple took it and looked at it.

"Yes," she said with satisfaction. "That's the one."

She handed it to the Inspector.

"I have made inquiries—Thursday is the day," Miss Blacklock had written. *"Any time after three. If there is any for me leave it in the usual place."*

Bunch spat out her pins and laughed. Miss Marple was watching the Inspector's face.

The Vicar's wife took it upon herself to explain.

"Thursday is the day one of the farms round here makes butter. They let anybody they like have a bit. It's usually Miss Hinchcliffe who collects it. She's very much in with all the farmers—because of her pigs, I think. But it's all a bit hush hush, you know, a kind of local scheme of barter. One person gets butter, and sends along cucumbers, or something like that—and a little something when a pig's killed. And now and then an animal has an accident and has to be destroyed. Oh, you know the sort of thing. Only one can't, very well, say it right out to the Police. Because I suppose quite a lot of this barter is illegal—only nobody really knows because it's all so complicated. But I expect Hinch had slipped into Little Paddocks with a pound of butter or something and had put it in the *usual place*. That's a flour bin under the dresser, by the way. It doesn't have flour in it."

Craddock sighed.

"I'm glad I came here to you ladies," he said.

"There used to be clothing coupons, too," said Bunch. "Not usually bought—that wasn't considered honest. No money passes. But people like Mrs. Butt or Mrs. Finch or Mrs. Huggins like a nice woollen dress or a winter coat that hasn't seen too much wear and they pay for it with coupons instead of money."

"You'd better not tell me any more," said Craddock. "It's all against the law."

"Then there oughtn't to be such silly laws," said Bunch, filling her mouth up with pins again. "I don't do it, of course, because Julian doesn't like me to, so I don't. But I know what's going on, of course."

A kind of despair was coming over the Inspector.

"It all sounds so pleasant and ordinary," he said. "Funny and petty and simple. And yet one woman and a man have been killed, and another woman may be killed before I can get anything definite to go on. I've left off worrying about Pip and Emma for the moment. I'm concentrating on Sonia. I wish I knew what she looked like. There was a snapshot or two in with these letters, but none of the snaps could have been of her."

"How do you know it couldn't have been her? Do you know what she looked like?"

"She was small and dark, Miss Blacklock said."

"Really," said Miss Marple, "that's *very* interesting."

"There was one snap that reminded me vaguely of someone. A tall fair girl with her hair all done up on top of her head. I don't know who she could have been. Anyway, it can't have been Sonia. Do you think Mrs. Swettenham could have been dark when she was a girl?"

"Not very dark," said Bunch. "She's got blue eyes."

"I hoped there might be a photo of Dmitri Stamfordis—but I suppose that was too much to hope for ... Well"—he took up the letter—"I'm sorry this doesn't suggest anything to you, Miss Marple."

"Oh! but it does," said Miss Marple. "It suggests a good deal. Just read it through again, Inspector—especially where it says that Randall Goedler was making inquiries about Dmitri Stamfordis."

Craddock stared at her.

The telephone rang.

Bunch got up from the floor and went out into the hall where, in accordance with the best Victorian traditions, the telephone had originally been placed and where it still was.

She reentered the room to say to Craddock:

"It's for you."

Slightly surprised, the Inspector went out to the instrument—carefully shutting the door of the living room behind him.

"Craddock? Rydesdale here."

"Yes, sir."

"I've been looking through your report. In the interview you had with Phillipa Haymes I see she states positively that she hasn't seen her husband since his desertion from the Army?"

"That's right, sir—she was most emphatic. But in my opinion she wasn't speaking the truth."

"I agree with you. Do you remember a case about ten days ago—man run over by a lorry—taken to Milchester General with concussion and a fractured pelvis?"

"The fellow who snatched a child practically from under the wheels of a lorry, and got run down himself?"

"That's the one. No papers of any kind on him and nobody came forward to identify him. Looked as though he might be on the run. He died last night without regaining consciousness. But he's been identified—deserter from the Army—Ronald Haymes, ex-Captain in the South Loamshires."

"Phillipa Haymes' husband?"

"Yes. He'd got an old Chipping Cleghorn bus ticket on him, by the way—and quite a reasonable amount of money."

"So he did get money from his wife? I always thought he was the man Mitzi overheard talking to her in the summerhouse. She denied it flatly, of course. But surely, sir, that lorry accident was before—"

Rydesdale took the words out of his mouth.

"Yes, he was taken to Milchester General on the 28th. The hold-up at Little Paddocks was on the 29th. That lets him out of any possible connection with it. But his wife, of course, knew nothing about the accident. She may have been thinking all along that he

was concerned in it. She'd hold her tongue—naturally—after all he *was* her husband."

"It was a fairly gallant bit of work, wasn't it, sir?" said Craddock slowly.

"Rescuing that child from the lorry? Yes. Plucky. Don't suppose it was cowardice that made Haymes desert. Well, all that's past history. For a man who'd blotted his copybook, it was a good death."

"I'm glad for her sake," said the Inspector. "And for that boy of theirs."

"Yes, he needn't be too ashamed of his father. And the young woman will be able to marry again now."

Craddock said slowly:

"I was thinking of that, sir ... It opens up—possibilities."

"You'd better break the news to her as you're on the spot."

"I will, sir. I'll push along there now. Or perhaps I'd better wait until she's back at Little Paddocks. It may be rather a shock—and there's someone else I rather want to have a word with first."

Nineteen

RECONSTRUCTION OF THE CRIME

I

"I'll put a lamp by you before I go," said Bunch. "It's so dark in here. There's going to be a storm, I think."

She lifted the small reading lamp to the other side of the table where it would throw light on Miss Marple's knitting as she sat in a wide highbacked chair.

As the flex pulled across the table, Tiglath Pileser the cat leapt upon it and bit and clawed it violently.

"No, Tiglath Pileser, you mustn't ... He really is awful. Look, he's nearly bitten it through—it's all frayed. Don't you understand, you idiotic puss, that you may get a nasty electric shock if you do that?"

"Thank you, dear," said Miss Marple, and put out a hand to turn on the lamp.

"It doesn't turn on there. You have to press that silly little switch halfway along the flex. Wait a minute. I'll take these flowers out of the way."

She lifted a bowl of Christmas roses across the table. Tiglath Pileser, his tail switching, put out a mischievous paw and clawed Bunch's arm. She spilled some of the water out of the vase. It fell on the frayed area of flex and on Tiglath Pileser himself, who leapt to the floor with an indignant hiss.

Miss Marple pressed the small pear-shaped switch. Where the water had soaked the frayed flex there was a flash and a crackle.

"Oh, dear," said Bunch. "It's fused. Now I suppose all the lights in here are off." She tried them. "Yes, they are. So stupid being all on the same thingummibob. And it's made a burn on the table, too. Naughty Tiglath Pileser—it's all his fault. Aunt Jane—what's the matter? Did it startle you?"

"It's nothing, dear. Just something I saw quite suddenly which I ought to have seen before...."

"I'll go and fix the fuse and get the lamp from Julian's study."

"No, dear, don't bother. You'll miss your bus. I don't want any more light. I just want to sit quietly and—think about something. Hurry dear, or you won't catch your bus."

When Bunch had gone, Miss Marple sat quite still for about two minutes. The air of the room was heavy and menacing with the gathering storm outside.

Miss Marple drew a sheet of paper towards her.

She wrote first: *Lamp?* and underlined it heavily.

After a moment or two, she wrote another word.

Her pencil travelled down the paper, making brief cryptic notes....

II

In the rather dark living room of Boulders with its low ceiling and latticed window panes, Miss Hinchcliffe and Miss Murgatroyd were having an argument.

"The trouble with you, Murgatroyd," said Miss Hinchcliffe, "is that you won't *try*."

"But I tell you, Hinch, I can't remember a thing."

"Now look here, Amy Murgatroyd, we're going to do some constructive thinking. So far we haven't shone on the detective angle. I was quite wrong over that door business. You didn't hold the door open for the murderer after all. You're cleared, Murgatroyd!"

Miss Murgatroyd gave a rather watery smile.

"It's just our luck to have the only silent cleaning woman in Chipping Cleghorn," continued Miss Hinchcliffe. "Usually I'm thankful for it, but this time it means we've got off to a bad start. Everybody else in the place knows about that second door in the drawing room being used—and we only heard about it yesterday—"

"I still don't quite understand how—"

"It's perfectly simple. Our original premises were quite right. You can't hold open a door, wave a torch and shoot with a revolver all at the same time. We kept in the revolver and the torch and cut out the door. Well, we were wrong. It was the revolver we ought to have cut out."

"But he *did* have a revolver," said Miss Murgatroyd. "I saw it. It was there on the floor beside him."

"When he was dead, yes. It's all quite clear. *He* didn't fire that revolver—"

"Then who did?"

"That's what we're going to find out. But whoever did it, the same person put a couple of poisoned aspirin tablets by Letty Blacklock's bed—and thereby bumped off poor Dora Bunner. And that couldn't have been Rudi Scherz, because he's as dead as a doornail. It was someone who was in the room that night of the hold-up and probably someone who was at the birthday party, too. And the only person *that* lets out is Mrs. Harmon."

"You think someone put those aspirins there the day of the birthday party?"

"Why not?"

"But how could they?"

"Well, we all went to the loo, didn't we?" said Miss Hinchcliffe coarsely. "And I washed my hands in the bathroom because of that sticky cake. And little Sweetie Easterbrook powdered her grubby little face in Blacklock's bedroom, didn't she?"

"Hinch! Do you think *she*—?"

"I don't know yet. Rather obvious, if she did. I don't think if you were going to plant some tablets, that you'd want to be seen in the bedroom at all. Oh, yes, there were plenty of opportunities."

"The men didn't go upstairs."

"There are back stairs. After all, if a man leaves the room, you don't follow him to see if he really is going where you think he is going. It wouldn't be delicate! Anyway, don't *argue*, Murgatroyd. I want to get back to the original attempt on Letty Blacklock. Now, to begin with, get the facts firmly into your head, because it's all going to depend upon you."

Miss Murgatroyd looked alarmed.

"Oh, dear, Hinch, you know what a muddle I get into!"

"It's not a question of your brains, or the grey fluff that passes for brains with you. It's a question of *eyes*. It's a question of what you *saw*."

"But I didn't see *anything*."

"The trouble with you is, Murgatroyd, as I said just now, that you won't *try*. Now pay attention. This is what happened. Whoever it is that's got it in for Letty Blacklock was there in that room that evening. He (I say *he* because it's easier, but there's no reason why it should be a man more than a woman except, of course, that men are dirty dogs), well, he has previously oiled that second door that leads out of the drawing room and which is supposed to be nailed up or something. Don't ask me *when* he did it, because that confuses things. Actually, by choosing my time, I could walk into any house in Chipping Cleghorn and do anything I liked there for half an hour or so with no one being the wiser. It's just a question of working out where the daily women are and when the occupiers are out and exactly where they've gone and how long they'll be. Just good staff work. Now, to continue. He's oiled that second door. It will open without a sound. Here's the setup: Lights go out, door A (the regular door) opens with a flourish. Business with torch and hold-up lines. In the meantime, while we're all goggling, X (that's the best term to use) slips quietly out by door B into the dark hall, comes up behind that Swiss idiot, takes a couple of shots at Letty Blacklock and then shoots the Swiss. Drops the revolver, where lazy thinkers like you will assume it's evidence that the Swiss did the shooting, and nips back into the room again by the time that someone gets a lighter going. Got it?"

"Yes—ye-es, but who was it?"

"Well, if *you* don't know, Murgatroyd, nobody does!"

"*Me?*" Miss Murgatroyd fairly twittered in alarm. "But I don't know anything *at all*. I don't *really*, Hinch!"

"Use that fluff of yours you call a brain. To begin with, where was everybody when the lights went out?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do. You're maddening, Murgatroyd. You know where *you* were, don't you? You were behind the door."

"Yes—yes, I was. It knocked against my corn when it flew open."

"Why don't you go to a proper chiropodist instead of messing about yourself with your feet?. You'll give yourself blood poisoning one of these days. Come on, now—you're behind the door. *I'm* standing against the mantelpiece with my tongue hanging out for a drink. Letty Blacklock is by the table near the archway, getting the cigarettes. Patrick Simmons has gone through the archway into the small room where Letty Blacklock has had the drinks put. Agreed?"

"Yes, yes, I remember all that."

"Good, now somebody else followed Patrick into that room or was just starting to follow him. One of the men. The annoying thing is that I can't remember whether it was Easterbrook or Edmund Swettenham. Do you remember?"

"No, I don't."

"You wouldn't! And there was someone else who went through to the small room: Phillipa Haymes. I remember that distinctly because I remember noticing what a nice flat back she has, and I thought to myself 'that girl would look well on a horse.' I was watching her and thinking just that. She went over to the mantelpiece in the other room. I don't know what it was she wanted there, because at that moment the lights went out.

"So that's the position. In the drawing room are Patrick Simmons, Phillipa Haymes, and *either* Colonel Easterbrook or Edmund Swettenham—we don't know which. Now, Murgatroyd, pay attention. The most probable thing is that it was *one of those three* who did it. If anyone wanted to get out of that far door, they'd naturally take care to put themselves in a convenient place when the lights went out. So, as I say, in all probability, it's one of those three.

And in that case, Murgatroyd, there's not a thing you can do about it!"

Miss Murgatroyd brightened perceptibly.

"On the other hand," continued Miss Hinchcliffe, "there's the possibility that it *wasn't* one of those three. And that's where you come in, Murgatroyd."

"But how should *I* know anything about it?"

"As I said before if you don't nobody does."

"But I don't! I really *don't*! I couldn't see anything *at all*!"

"Oh, yes, you could. You're the only person who *could* see. You were standing behind the door. You couldn't look *at* the torch—because the door was between you and it. You were facing the other way, the same way as the torch was pointing. The rest of us were just dazzled. But *you* weren't dazzled."

"No—no, perhaps not, but I didn't *see* anything, the torch went round and round—"

"Showing you *what*? It rested on *faces*, didn't it? And on tables? And on chairs?"

"Yes—yes, it did ... Miss Bunner, her mouth wide open and her eyes popping out of her head, staring and blinking."

"That's the stuff!" Miss Hinchcliffe gave a sigh of relief. "The difficulty there is in making you use that grey fluff of yours! Now then, keep it up."

"But I didn't see any more, I didn't, really."

"You mean you saw an empty room? Nobody standing about? Nobody sitting down?"

"No, of course not *that*. Miss Bunner with her mouth open and Mrs. Harmon was sitting on the arm of a chair. She had her eyes tight shut and her knuckles all doubled up to her face—like a child."

"Good, that's Mrs. Harmon and Miss Bunner. Don't you see yet what I'm getting at? The difficulty is that I don't want to put ideas into your head. But when we've eliminated who you *did* see—we can get on to the important point which is, was there anyone you *didn't* see. Got it? Besides the tables and the chairs and the chrysanthemums and the rest of it, there were certain people: Julia Simmons, Mrs. Swettenham, Mrs. Easterbrook—*either* Colonel

Easterbrook or Edmund Swettenham—Dora Bunner and Bunch Harmon. All right, you saw Bunch Harmon and Dora Bunner. Cross them off. Now *think*, Murgatroyd, *think*, was there one of those people who definitely *wasn't* there?"

Miss Murgatroyd jumped slightly as a branch knocked against the open window. She shut her eyes. She murmured to herself....

"The flowers ... on the table ... the big armchair ... the torch didn't come round as far as you, Hinch—Mrs. Harmon, yes...."

The telephone rang sharply. Miss Hinchcliffe went to it.

"Hallo, yes? The station?"

The obedient Miss Murgatroyd, her eyes closed, was reliving the night of the 29th. The torch, sweeping slowly round ... a group of people ... the windows ... the sofa ... Dora Bunner ... the wall ... the table with lamp ... the archway ... the sudden spat of the revolver....

"... but that's *extraordinary!*" said Miss Murgatroyd.

"What?" Miss Hinchcliffe was barking angrily into the telephone. "Been there since this morning? What time? Damn and blast you, and you only ring me up *now*? I'll set the S.P.C.A. after you. An oversight? Is *that* all you've got to say?"

She banged down the receiver.

"It's that dog," she said. "The red setter. Been at the station since this morning—since this morning at eight o'clock. Without a drop of water! And the idiots only ring me up now. I'm going to get her right away."

She plunged out of the room, Miss Murgatroyd squeaking shrilly in her wake.

"But listen, Hinch, a most extraordinary thing ... I don't understand it...."

Miss Hinchcliffe had dashed out of the door and across to the shed which served as a garage.

"We'll go on with it when I come back," she called. "I can't wait for you to come with me. You've got your bedroom slippers on as usual."

She pressed the starter of the car and backed out of the garage with a jerk. Miss Murgatroyd skipped nimbly sideways.

"But listen, Hinch, I *must* tell you—"

"When I come back...."

The car jerked and shot forwards. Miss Murgatroyd's voice came faintly after it on a high excited note.

"But, Hinch, *she wasn't there.* ..."

III

Overhead the clouds had been gathering thick and blue. As Miss Murgatroyd stood looking after the retreating car, the first big drops began to fall.

In an agitated fashion, Miss Murgatroyd plunged across to a line of string on which she had, some hours previously, hung out a couple of jumpers and a pair of woollen combinations to dry.

She was murmuring under her breath:

"Really *most* extraordinary ... Oh, dear, I shall never get these down in time—and they were nearly dry...."

She struggled with a recalcitrant clothes peg, then turned her head as she heard someone approaching.

Then she smiled a pleased welcome.

"Hallo—do go inside, you'll get wet."

"Let me help you."

"Oh, if you don't mind ... so annoying if they all get soaked again. I really ought to let down the line, but I think I can just reach."

"Here's your scarf. Shall I put it round your neck?"

"Oh, thank you ... Yes, perhaps ... If I could just reach this peg...."

The woollen scarf was slipped round her neck and then, suddenly, pulled tight....

Miss Murgatroyd's mouth opened, but no sound came except a small choking gurgle.

And the scarf was pulled tighter still....

IV

On her way back from the station, Miss Hinchcliffe stopped the car to pick up Miss Marple who was hurrying along the street.

"Hallo," she shouted. "You'll get very wet. Come and have tea with us. I saw Bunch waiting for the bus. You'll be all alone at the Vicarage. Come and join us. Murgatroyd and I are doing a bit of reconstruction of the crime. I rather think we're just getting somewhere. Mind the dog. She's rather nervous."

"What a beauty!"

"Yes, lovely bitch, isn't she! Those fools kept her at the station since this morning without letting me know. I told them off, the lazy b—s. Oh, excuse my language. I was brought up by grooms at home in Ireland."

The little car turned with a jerk into the small backyard of Boulders.

A crowd of eager ducks and fowls encircled the two ladies as they descended.

"Curse Murgatroyd," said Miss Hinchcliffe, "she hasn't given 'em their corn."

"Is it difficult to get corn?" Miss Marple inquired.

Miss Hinchcliffe winked.

"I'm in with most of the farmers," she said.

Shooing away the hens, she escorted Miss Marple towards the cottage.

"Hope you're not too wet?"

"No, this is a very good mackintosh."

"I'll light the fire if Murgatroyd hasn't lit it. Hiyah, Murgatroyd? Where is the woman? Murgatroyd! Where's that dog? *She's* disappeared now."

A slow dismal howl came from outside.

"Curse the silly bitch." Miss Hinchcliffe tramped to the door and called:

"Hyoup, Cutie—Cutie. Damn" silly name but that's what they called her apparently. We must find her another name. Hiyah, Cutie."

The red setter was sniffing at something lying below the taut string where a row of garments swirled in the wind.

"Murgatroyd's not even had the sense to bring the washing in. Where *is* she?"

Again the red setter nosed at what seemed to be a pile of clothes, and raised her nose high in the air and howled again.

"What's the *matter* with the dog?"

Miss Hinchcliffe strode across the grass.

And quickly, apprehensively, Miss Marple ran after her. They stood there, side by side, the rain beating down on them, and the older woman's arm went round the younger one's shoulders.

She felt the muscles go stiff and taut as Miss Hinchcliffe stood looking down on the thing lying there, with the blue congested face and the protruding tongue.

"I'll kill whoever did this," said Miss Hinchcliffe in a low quiet voice, "if I once get my hands on her...."

Miss Marple said questioningly:

"*Her?*"

Miss Hinchcliffe turned a ravaged face towards her.

"Yes. I know who it is—near enough ... That is, it's one of three possibles."

She stood for another moment, looking down at her dead friend, and then turned towards the house. Her voice was dry and hard.

"We must ring up the police," she said. "And while we're waiting for them, I'll tell you. My fault, in a way, that Murgatroyd's lying out there. I made a game of it ... Murder isn't a game...."

"No," said Miss Marple. "Murder isn't a game."

"You know something about it, don't you?" said Miss Hinchcliffe as she lifted the receiver and dialled.

She made a brief report and hung up.

"They'll be here in a few minutes ... Yes, I heard that you'd been mixed up in this sort of business before ... I think it was Edmund Swettenham told me so ... Do you want to hear what we were doing, Murgatroyd and I?"

Succinctly she described the conversation held before her departure for the station.

"She called after me, you know, just as I was leaving ... That's how I know it's a woman and not a man ... If I'd waited—if only I'd *listened!* God dammit, the dog could have stopped where she was for another quarter of an hour."

"Don't blame yourself, my dear. That does no good. One can't foresee."

"No, one can't ... Something tapped against the window, I remember. Perhaps *she* was outside there, then—yes, of course, she must have been ... coming to the house ... and there were Murgatroyd and I shouting at each other. Top of our voices ... She heard ... She heard it all...."

"You haven't told me yet what your friend said."

"Just one sentence! '*She wasn't there.*'"

She paused. "You see? There were three women we hadn't eliminated. Mrs. Swettenham, Mrs. Easterbrook, Julia Simmons. And one of those three—*wasn't there* ... She wasn't there in the drawing room because she had slipped out through the other door and was out in the hall."

"Yes," said Miss Marple, "I see."

"It's *one* of those three women. I don't know which. But I'll find out!"

"Excuse me," said Miss Marple. "But did she—did Miss Murgatroyd, I mean, say it exactly as you said it?"

"How d'you mean—as I said it?"

"Oh, dear, how can I explain? You said it like this. *She-wasn't-there*. An equal emphasis on every word. You see, there are three ways you could say it. You could say, '*She* wasn't there.' Very personal. Or again, '*She wasn't* there.' Confirming, some suspicion already held. Or else you could say (and this is nearer to the way you said it just now), '*She wasn't there...*' quite blankly—with the emphasis, if there was emphasis—on the '*there.*'"

"I don't know." Miss Hinchcliffe shook her head. "I can't remember ... How the hell can I remember? I think, yes, surely she'd say '*She* wasn't there.' That would be the natural way, I should think. But I simply don't know. Does it make any difference?"

"Yes," said Miss Marple, thoughtfully. "I think so. It's a very *slight* indication, of course, but I think it *is* an indication. Yes, I should think it makes a lot of difference...."

Twenty

MISS MARPLE IS MISSING

I

The postman, rather to his disgust, had lately been given orders to make an afternoon delivery of letters in Chipping Cleghorn as well as a morning one.

On this particular afternoon he left three letters at Little Paddocks at exactly ten minutes to five.

One was addressed to Phillipa Haymes in a schoolboy's hand; the other two were for Miss Blacklock. She opened them as she and Phillipa sat down at the tea table. The torrential rain had enabled Phillipa to leave Dayas Hall early today, since once she had shut up the greenhouses there was nothing more to do.

Miss Blacklock tore open her first letter which was a bill for repairing a kitchen boiler. She snorted angrily.

"Dymond's prices are *preposterous*—quite preposterous. Still, I suppose all the other people are just as bad."

She opened the second letter which was in a handwriting quite unknown to her.

Dear Cousin Letty (it said),

*I hope it will be all right for me to come to you on Tuesday?
I wrote to Patrick two days ago but he hasn't answered. So I*

presume it's all right. Mother is coming to England next month and hopes to see you then.

My train arrives at Chipping Cleghorn at 6:15 if that's convenient?

*Yours affectionately,
Julia Simmons.*

Miss Blacklock read the letter once with astonishment pure and simple, and then again with a certain grimness. She looked up at Phillipa who was smiling over her son's letter.

"Are Julia and Patrick back, do you know?"

Phillipa looked up.

"Yes, they came in just after I did. They went upstairs to change. They were wet."

"Perhaps you'd not mind going and calling them."

"Of course I will."

"Wait a moment—I'd like you to read this."

She handed Phillipa the letter she had received.

Phillipa read it and frowned. "I don't understand...."

"Nor do I, quite ... I think it's about time I did. Call Patrick and Julia, Phillipa."

Phillipa called from the bottom of the stairs:

"Patrick! Julia! Miss Blacklock wants you."

Patrick came running down the stairs and entered the room.

"Don't go, Phillipa," said Miss Blacklock.

"Hallo, Aunt Letty," said Patrick cheerfully. "Want me?"

"Yes, I do. Perhaps you'll give me an explanation of *this?*"

Patrick's face showed an almost comical dismay as he read.

"I meant to telegraph her! What an ass I am!"

"This letter, I presume, is from your sister Julia?"

"Yes—yes, it is."

Miss Blacklock said grimly:

"*Then who, may I ask, is the young woman whom you brought here as Julia Simmons, and whom I was given to understand was your sister and my cousin?*"

"Well—you see—Aunt Letty—the fact of the matter is—I can explain it all—I know I oughtn't to have done it—but it really seemed more of a lark than anything else. If you'll just let me explain—"

"I am waiting for you to explain. *Who is this young woman?*"

"Well, I met her at a cocktail party soon after I got demobbed. We got talking and I said I was coming here and then—well, we thought it might be rather a good wheeze if I brought her along ... You see, Julia, the real Julia, was mad to go on the stage and Mother had seven fits at the idea—however, Julia got a chance to join a jolly good repertory company up in Perth or somewhere and she thought she'd give it a try—but she thought she'd keep Mum calm by letting Mum think that she was here with me studying to be a dispenser like a good little girl."

"I still want to know who this other young woman *is*."

Patrick turned with relief as Julia, cool and aloof, came into the room.

"The balloon's gone up," he said.

Julia raised her eyebrows. Then, still cool, she came forward and sat down.

"O.K.," she said. "That's that. I suppose you're very angry?" She studied Miss Blacklock's face with almost dispassionate interest. "I should be if I were you."

"*Who are you?*"

Julia sighed.

"I think the moment's come when I make a clean breast of things. Here we go. I'm one half of the Pip and Emma combination. To be exact, my christened name is Emma Jocelyn Stamfordis—only Father soon dropped the Stamfordis. I think he called himself De Courcy next.

"My father and mother, let me tell you, split up about three years after Pip and I were born. Each of them went their own way. And they split us up. I was Father's part of the loot. He was a bad parent on the whole, though quite a charming one. I had various desert spells of being educated in convents—when Father hadn't any money, or was preparing to engage in some particularly nefarious deal. He used to pay the first term with every sign of affluence and

then depart and leave me on the nuns' hands for a year or two. In the intervals, he and I had some very good times together, moving in cosmopolitan society. However, the war separated us completely. I've no idea of what's happened to him. I had a few adventures myself. I was with the French Resistance for a time. Quite exciting. To cut a long story short, I landed up in London and began to think about my future. I knew that Mother's brother with whom she'd had a frightful row had died a very rich man. I looked up his will to see if there was anything for me. There wasn't—not directly, that is to say. I made a few inquiries about his widow—it seemed she was quite ga-ga and kept under drugs and was dying by inches. Frankly, it looked as though *you* were my best bet. You were going to come into a hell of a lot of money and from all I could find out, you didn't seem to have anyone much to spend it on. I'll be quite frank. It occurred to me that if I could get to know you in a friendly kind of way, and if you took a fancy to me—well, after all, conditions have changed a bit, haven't they, since Uncle Randall died? I mean any money we ever had has been swept away in the cataclysm of Europe. I thought you might pity a poor orphan girl, all alone in the world, and make her, perhaps, a small allowance."

"Oh, you did, did you?" said Miss Blacklock grimly.

"Yes. Of course, I hadn't seen you then ... I visualized a kind of sob stuff approach ... Then, by a marvellous stroke of luck, I met Patrick here—and he turned out to be your nephew or your cousin, or something. Well, that struck me as a marvellous chance. I went bullheaded for Patrick and he fell for me in a most gratifying way. The real Julia was all wet about this acting stuff and I soon persuaded her it was her duty to Art to go and fix herself up in some uncomfortable lodgings in Perth and train to be the new Sarah Bernhardt.

"You mustn't blame Patrick too much. He felt awfully sorry for me, all alone in the world—and he soon thought it would be a really marvellous idea for me to come here as his sister and do my stuff."

"And he also approved of your continuing to tell a tissue of lies to the police?"

"Have a heart, Letty. Don't you see that when that ridiculous hold-up business happened—or rather after it happened—I began to feel I was in a bit of a spot. Let's face it, I've got a perfectly good motive for putting you out of the way. You've only got my word for it now that I wasn't the one who tried to do it. You can't expect me deliberately to go and incriminate myself. Even Patrick got nasty ideas about me from time to time, and if even *he* could think things like that, what on earth would the police think? That Detective-Inspector struck me as a man of singularly sceptical mind. No, I figured out the only thing for me to do was to sit tight as Julia and just fade away when term came to an end.

"How was I to know that fool Julia, the real Julia, would go and have a row with the producer, and fling the whole thing up in a fit of temperament? She writes to Patrick and asks if she can come here, and instead of wiring her 'Keep away' he goes and forgets to do anything at all!" She cast an angry glance at Patrick. "Of all the utter *idiots!*"

She sighed.

"You don't know the straits I've been put to in Milchester! Of course, I haven't been to the hospital at all. But I had to go *somewhere*. Hours and hours I've spent in the pictures seeing the most frightful films over and over again."

"*Pip and Emma*," murmured Miss Blacklock. "I never believed, somehow, in spite of what the Inspector said, that they were *real*—"

She looked searchingly at Julia.

"You're Emma," she said. "Where's Pip?"

Julia's eyes, limpid and innocent, met hers.

"I don't know," she said. "I haven't the least idea."

"I think you're lying, Julia. When did you see him last?"

Was there a momentary hesitation before Julia spoke?

She said clearly and deliberately:

"I haven't seen him since we were both three years old—when my mother took him away. I haven't seen either him or my mother. I don't know where they are."

"And that's all you have to say?"

Julia sighed.

"I could say I was sorry. But it wouldn't really be true; because actually I'd do the same thing again—though not if I'd known about this murder business, of course."

"Julia," said Miss Blacklock, "I call you that because I'm used to it. You were with the French Resistance, you say?"

"Yes. For eighteen months."

"Then I suppose you learned to shoot?"

Again those cool blue eyes met hers.

"I can shoot all right. I'm a first-class shot. I didn't shoot at you, Letitia Blacklock, though you've only got my word for that. But I can tell you this, that if *I* had shot at you, I wouldn't have been likely to miss."

II

The sound of a car driving up to the door broke through the tenseness of the moment.

"Who can that be?" asked Miss Blacklock.

Mitzi put a tousled head in. She was showing the whites of her eyes.

"It is the police come again," she said. "This, it is persecution! Why will they not leave us alone? I will not bear it. I will write to the Prime Minister. I will write to your King."

Craddock's hand put her firmly and not too kindly aside. He came in with such a grim set to his lips that they all looked at him apprehensively. This was a new Inspector Craddock.

He said sternly:

"Miss Murgatroyd has been murdered. She was strangled—not more than an hour ago." His eye singled out Julia. "You—Miss Simmons—where have you been all day?"

Julia said warily:

"In Milchester. I've just got in."

"And you?" The eye went on to Patrick.

"Yes."

"Did you both come back here together?"

"Yes—yes, we did," said Patrick.

"No," said Julia. "It's no good, Patrick. That's the kind of lie that will be found out at once. The bus people know us well. I came back on the earlier bus, Inspector—the one that gets here at four o'clock."

"And what did you do then?"

"I went for a walk."

"In the direction of Boulders?"

"No. I went across the fields."

He stared at her. Julia, her face pale, her lips tense, stared back. Before anyone could speak, the telephone rang.

Miss Blacklock, with an inquiring glance at Craddock, picked up the receiver.

"Yes. Who? Oh, Bunch. What? No. No, she hasn't. I've no idea ... Yes, he's here now."

She lowered the instrument and said:

"Mrs. Harmon would like to speak to you, Inspector. Miss Marple has not come back to the Vicarage and Mrs. Harmon is worried about her."

Craddock took two strides forward and gripped the telephone.

"Craddock speaking."

"I'm worried, Inspector." Bunch's voice came through with a childish tremor in it. "Aunt Jane's out somewhere—and I don't know where. And they say that Miss Murgatroyd's been killed. Is it true?"

"Yes, it's true, Mrs. Harmon. Miss Marple was there with Miss Hinchcliffe when they found the body."

"Oh, so *that's* where she is." Bunch sounded relieved.

"No—no, I'm afraid she isn't. Not now. She left there about—let me see—half an hour ago. She hasn't got home?"

"No—she hasn't. It's only ten minutes' walk. Where can she be?"

"Perhaps she's called in on one of your neighbours?"

"I've rung them up—*all of them*. She's not there. I'm frightened, Inspector."

"So am I," thought Craddock.

He said quickly:

"I'll come round to you—at once."

"Oh, *do*—there's a piece of paper. She was writing on it before she went out. I don't know if it means anything ... It just seems

gibberish to me."

Craddock replaced the receiver.

Miss Blacklock said anxiously:

"Has something happened to Miss Marple? Oh, I hope not."

"I hope not, too." His mouth was grim.

"She's so old—and frail."

"I know."

Miss Blacklock, standing with her hand pulling at the choker of pearls round her neck, said in a hoarse voice:

"It's getting worse and worse. Whoever's doing these things must be mad, Inspector—quite mad...."

"I wonder."

The choker of pearls round Miss Blacklock's neck broke under the clutch of her nervous fingers. The smooth white globules rolled all over the room.

Letitia cried out in an anguished tone.

"My pearls—my *pearls*—" The agony in her voice was so acute that they all looked at her in astonishment. She turned, her hand to her throat, and rushed sobbing out of the room.

Phillipa began picking up the pearls.

"I've never seen her so upset over anything," she said. "Of course—she always wears them. Do you think, perhaps, that someone special gave them to her? Randall Goedler, perhaps?"

"It's possible," said the Inspector slowly.

"They're not—they couldn't be—*real* by any chance?" Phillipa asked from where, on her knees, she was still collecting the white shining globules.

Taking one in his hand, Craddock was just about to reply contemptuously, "Real? Of course not!" when he suddenly stifled the words.

After all, *could* the pearls be real?

They were so large, so even, so white that their falseness seemed palpable, but Craddock remembered suddenly a police case where a string of real pearls had been bought for a few shillings in a pawnbroker's shop.

Letitia Blacklock had assured him that there was no jewellery of value in the house. If these pearls were, by any chance, genuine, they must be worth a fabulous sum. And if Randall Goedler had given them to her—then they might be worth any sum you cared to name.

They looked false—they *must* be false, but—if they were real?

Why not? She might herself be unaware of their value. Or she might choose to protect her treasure by treating it as though it were a cheap ornament worth a couple of guineas at most. What would they be worth if real? A fabulous sum ... Worth doing murder for—if *anybody knew about them*.

With a start, the Inspector wrenched himself away from his speculations. Miss Marple was missing. He must go to the Vicarage.

III

He found Bunch and her husband waiting for him, their faces anxious and drawn.

"She hasn't come back," said Bunch.

"Did she say she was coming back here when she left Boulders?" asked Julian.

"She didn't actually say so," said Craddock slowly, throwing his mind back to the last time he had seen Jane Marple.

He remembered the grimness of her lips and the severe frosty light in those usually gentle blue eyes.

Grimness, an inexorable determination ... to do what? To go where?

"She was talking to Sergeant Fletcher when I last saw her," he said. "Just by the gate. And then she went through it and out. I took it she was going straight home to the Vicarage. I would have sent her in the car—but there was so much to attend to, and she slipped away very quietly. Fletcher may know something! Where's Fletcher?"

But Sergeant Fletcher, it seemed, as Craddock learned when he rang up Boulders, was neither to be found there nor had he left any message where he had gone. There was some idea that he had returned to Milchester for some reason.

The Inspector rang up headquarters in Milchester, but no news of Fletcher was to be found there.

Then Craddock turned to Bunch as he remembered what she had told him over the telephone.

"Where's that paper? You said she'd been writing something on a bit of paper."

Bunch brought it to him. He spread it out on the table and looked down on it. Bunch leant over his shoulder and spelled it out as he read. The writing was shaky and not easy to read:

Lamp.

Then came the word "*Violets.*"

Then after a space:

Where is bottle of aspirin?

The next item in this curious list was more difficult to make out. "*Delicious death,*" Bunch read. "That's Mitzi's cake."

"*Making enquiries,*" read Craddock.

"Inquiries? What about, I wonder? What's this? *Severe affliction bravely borne* ... What on earth—!"

"*Iodine,*" read the Inspector. "*Pearls.* Ah, pearls."

"And then *Lotty*—no, Letty. Her *e*'s look like *o*'s. And then *Berne*. And what's this? *Old Age Pension.* ..."

They looked at each other in bewilderment.

Craddock recapitulated swiftly:

"Lamp. Violets. Where is bottle of aspirin? Delicious Death. Making enquiries. Severe affliction bravely borne. Iodine. Pearls. Letty. Berne. Old Age Pension."

Bunch asked: "Does it mean anything? Anything at all? I can't see any connection."

Craddock said slowly: "I've just a glimmer—but I don't see. It's odd that she should have put down that about pearls."

"What about pearls? What does it mean?"

"Does Miss Blacklock always wear that three-tier choker of pearls?"

"Yes, she does. We laugh about it sometimes. They're so dreadfully false-looking, aren't they? But I suppose she thinks it's fashionable."

"There might be another reason," said Craddock slowly.

"You don't mean that they're *real*. Oh! they *couldn't* be!"

"How often have you had an opportunity of seeing real pearls of that size, Mrs. Harmon?"

"But they're so glassy."

Craddock shrugged his shoulders.

"Anyway, they don't matter now. It's Miss Marple that matters. We've got to find her."

They'd got to find her before it was too late—but perhaps it was already too late? Those pencilled words showed that she was on the track ... But that was dangerous—horribly dangerous. And where the hell was Fletcher?

Craddock strode out of the Vicarage to where he'd left his car. Search—that was all he could do—search.

A voice spoke to him out of the dripping laurels.

"Sir!" said Sergeant Fletcher urgently. "*Sir*. ..."

Twenty-one

THREE WOMEN

Dinner was over at Little Paddocks. It had been a silent and uncomfortable meal.

Patrick, uneasily aware of having fallen from grace, only made spasmodic attempts at conversation—and such as he did make were not well received. Phillipa Haymes was sunk in abstraction. Miss Blacklock herself had abandoned the effort to behave with her normal cheerfulness. She had changed for dinner and had come down wearing her necklace of cameos but for the first time fear showed from her darkly circled eyes, and betrayed itself by her twitching hands.

Julia, alone, had maintained her air of cynical detachment throughout the evening.

"I'm sorry, Letty," she said, "that I can't pack my bag and go. But I presume the police wouldn't allow it. I don't suppose I'll darken your roof—or whatever the expression is—for long. I should imagine that Inspector Craddock will be round with a warrant and the handcuffs any moment. In fact I can't imagine why something of the kind hasn't happened already."

"He's looking for the old lady—for Miss Marple," said Miss Blacklock.

"Do you think she's been murdered, too?" Patrick asked with scientific curiosity. "But why? What could she know?"

"I don't know," said Miss Blacklock dully. "Perhaps Miss Murgatroyd told her something."

"If she's been murdered too," said Patrick, "there seems to be logically only one person who could have done it."

"Who?"

"Hinchcliffe, of course," said Patrick triumphantly. "That's where she was last seen alive—at Boulders. My solution would be that she never left Boulders."

"My head aches," said Miss Blacklock in a dull voice. She pressed her fingers to her forehead. "Why should Hinch murder Miss Marple? It doesn't make sense."

"It would if Hinch had really murdered Murgatroyd," said Patrick triumphantly.

Phillipa came out of her apathy to say:

"Hinch wouldn't murder Murgatroyd."

"She might have if Murgatroyd had blundered on something to show that she—Hinch—was the criminal."

"Anyway, Hinch was at the station when Murgatroyd was killed."

"She could have murdered Murgatroyd before she left."

Startling them all, Letitia Blacklock suddenly screamed out:

"Murder, murder, *murder*—! Can't you talk of *anything* else? I'm frightened, don't you understand? I'm frightened. I wasn't before. I thought I could take care of myself ... But what can you do against a murderer who's waiting—and watching—and biding his time! Oh, God!"

She dropped her head forward on her hands. A moment later she looked up and apologized stiffly.

"I'm sorry. I—I lost control."

"That's all right, Aunt Letty," said Patrick affectionately. "I'll look after you."

"You?" was all Letitia Blacklock said, but the disillusionment behind the word was almost an accusation.

That had been shortly before dinner, and Mitzi had then created a diversion by coming and declaring that she was not going to cook the dinner.

"I do not do anything more in this house. I go to my room. I lock myself in. I stay there until it is daylight. I am afraid—people are being killed—that Miss Murgatroyd with her stupid English face—who would want to kill *her*? Only a maniac! Then it is a maniac that is about! And a maniac does not care *who* he kills. But me, I do not want to be killed. There are shadows in the kitchen—and I hear noises—I think there is someone out in the yard and then I think I see a shadow by the larder door and then it is footsteps I hear. So I go now to my room and I lock the door and perhaps even I put the chest of drawers against it. And in the morning I tell that cruel hard policeman that I go away from here. And if he will not let me I say: 'I scream and I scream and I scream until you have to let me go!'"

Everybody, with a vivid recollection of what Mitzi could do in the screaming line, shuddered at the threat.

"So I go to my room," said Mitzi, repeating the statement once more to make her intentions quite clear. With a symbolic action she cast off the cretonne apron she had been wearing. "Good night, Miss Blacklock. Perhaps in the morning, you may not be alive. So in case that is so, I say good-bye."

She departed abruptly and the door, with its usual gentle little whine, closed softly after her.

Julia got up.

"I'll see to dinner," she said in a matter-of-fact way. "Rather a good arrangement—less embarrassing for you all than having me sit down at table with you. Patrick (since he's constituted himself your protector, Aunt Letty) had better taste every dish first. I don't want to be accused of poisoning you on top of everything else."

So Julia had cooked and served a really excellent meal.

Phillipa had come out to the kitchen with an offer of assistance but Julia had said firmly that she didn't want any help.

"Julia, there's something I want to say—"

"This is no time for girlish confidences," said Julia firmly. "Go on back in the dining room, Phillipa."

Now dinner was over and they were in the drawing room with coffee on the small table by the fire—and nobody seemed to have anything to say. They were waiting—that was all.

At 8:30 Inspector Craddock rang up.

"I shall be with you in about a quarter of an hour's time," he announced. "I'm bringing Colonel and Mrs. Easterbrook and Mrs. Swettenham and her son with me."

"But really, Inspector ... I can't cope with people tonight—"

Miss Blacklock's voice sounded as though she were at the end of her tether.

"I know how you feel, Miss Blacklock. I'm sorry. But this is urgent."

"Have you—found Miss Marple?"

"No," said the Inspector, and rang off.

Julia took the coffee tray out to the kitchen where, to her surprise, she found Mitzi contemplating the piled-up dishes and plates by the sink.

Mitzi burst into a torrent of words.

"See what you do in my so nice kitchen! That frying pan—only, *only* for omelettes do I use it! And you, what have you used it for?"

"Frying onions."

"Ruined—*ruined*. It will have now to be *washed* and never—*never*—do I wash my omelette pan. I rub it carefully over with a greasy newspaper, that is all. And this saucepan here that you have used—that one, I use him only for milk—"

"Well, I don't know what pans you use for what," said Julia crossly. "You choose to go to bed and why on earth you've chosen to get up again, I can't imagine. Go away again and leave me to wash up in peace."

"No, I will not let you use my kitchen."

"Oh, Mitzi, you *are* impossible!"

Julia stalked angrily out of the kitchen and at that moment the doorbell rang.

"I do not go to the door," Mitzi called from the kitchen. Julia muttered an impolite Continental expression under her breath and stalked to the front door.

It was Miss Hinchcliffe.

"Evening," she said in her gruff voice. "Sorry to barge in. Inspector's rung up, I expect?"

"He didn't tell us you were coming," said Julia, leading the way to the drawing room.

"He said I needn't come unless I liked," said Miss Hinchcliffe. "But I do like."

Nobody offered Miss Hinchcliffe sympathy or mentioned Miss Murgatroyd's death. The ravaged face of the tall vigorous woman told its own tale, and would have made any expression of sympathy an impertinence.

"Turn all the lights on," said Miss Blacklock. "And put more coal on the fire. I'm cold—horribly cold. Come and sit here by the fire, Miss Hinchcliffe. The Inspector said he would be here in a quarter of an hour. It must be nearly that now."

"Mitzi's come down again," said Julia.

"Has she? Sometimes I think that girl's mad—quite mad. But then perhaps we're all mad."

"I've no patience with this saying that all people who commit crimes are mad," barked Miss Hinchcliffe. "Horribly and intelligently sane—that's what I think a criminal is!"

The sound of a car was heard outside and presently Craddock came in with Colonel and Mrs. Easterbrook and Edmund and Mrs. Swettenham.

They were all curiously subdued.

Colonel Easterbrook said in a voice that was like an echo of his usual tones:

"Ha! A good fire."

Mrs. Easterbrook wouldn't take off her fur coat and sat down close to her husband. Her face, usually pretty and rather vapid, was like a little pinched weasel face. Edmund was in one of his furious moods and scowled at everybody. Mrs. Swettenham made what was evidently a great effort, and which resulted in a kind of parody of herself.

"It's awful— isn't it?" she said conversationally. "Everything, I mean. And really the less one says, the better. Because one doesn't know *who* next—like the Plague. Dear Miss Blacklock, don't you think you ought to have a little brandy? Just half a wineglass even? I always think there's nothing like brandy—such a wonderful

stimulant. I—it seems so terrible of us—forcing our way in here like this, but Inspector Craddock *made* us come. And it seems so terrible—she hasn't been found, you know. That poor old thing from the Vicarage, I mean. Bunch Harmon is nearly frantic. Nobody knows *where* she went instead of going home. She didn't come to us. I've not even seen her today. And I should know if she *had* come to the house because I was in the drawing room—at the back, you know, and Edmund was in his study writing—and that's at the front—so if she'd come either way we *should* have seen. And oh, I do hope and pray that nothing has happened to that dear sweet old thing—all her faculties still and *everything*."

"Mother," said Edmund in a voice of acute suffering, "can't you shut up?"

"I'm sure, dear, I don't want to say a *word*," said Mrs. Swettenham, and sat down on the sofa by Julia.

Inspector Craddock stood near the door. Facing him, almost in a row, were the three women. Julia and Mrs. Swettenham on the sofa. Mrs. Easterbrook on the arm of her husband's chair. He had not brought about this arrangement, but it suited him very well.

Miss Blacklock and Miss Hinchcliffe were crouching over the fire. Edmund stood near them. Phillipa was far back in the shadows.

Craddock began without preamble.

"You all know that Miss Murgatroyd's been killed," he began. "We've reason to believe that the person who killed her was a woman. And for certain other reasons we can narrow it down still more. I'm about to ask certain ladies here to account for what they were doing between the hours of four and four-twenty this afternoon. I have already had an account of her movements from—from the young lady who has been calling herself Miss Simmons. I will ask her to repeat that statement. At the same time, Miss Simmons, I must caution you that you need not answer if you think your answers may incriminate you, and anything you say will be taken down by Constable Edwards and may be used as evidence in court."

"You have to say that, don't you?" said Julia. She was rather pale, but composed. "I repeat that between four and four-thirty I was

walking along the field leading down to the brook by Compton Farm. I came back to the road by that field with three poplars in it. I didn't meet anyone as far as I can remember. I did not go near Boulders."

"Mrs. Swettenham?"

Edmund said, "Are you cautioning all of us?"

The Inspector turned to him.

"No. At the moment only Miss Simmons. I have no reason to believe that any other statement made will be incriminating, but anyone, of course, is entitled to have a solicitor present and to refuse to answer questions unless he *is* present."

"Oh, but that would be very silly and a complete waste of time," cried Mrs. Swettenham. "I'm sure I can tell you at once exactly what I was doing. That's what you want, isn't it? Shall I begin now?"

"Yes, please, Mrs. Swettenham."

"Now, let me see." Mrs. Swettenham closed her eyes, opened them again. "Of course I had nothing *at all* to do with killing Miss Murgatroyd. I'm sure *everybody* here knows *that*. But I'm a woman of the world, I know quite well that the police have to ask all the most unnecessary questions and write the answers down very carefully, because it's all for what they call 'the record.' That's it, isn't it?" Mrs. Swettenham flashed the question at the diligent Constable Edwards, and added graciously, "I'm not going too fast for you, I hope?"

Constable Edwards, a good shorthand writer, but with little social *savoir faire*, turned red to the ears and replied:

"It's quite all right, madam. Well, perhaps a *little* slower would be better."

Mrs. Swettenham resumed her discourse with emphatic pauses where she considered a comma or a full stop might be appropriate.

"Well, of course it's difficult to say—exactly—because I've not got, really, a very good sense of time. And ever since the war quite half our clocks haven't gone at all, and the ones that do go are often either fast or slow or stop because we haven't wound them up." Mrs. Swettenham paused to let this picture of confused time sink in and then went on earnestly, "What I *think* I was doing at four o'clock was turning the heel of my sock (and for some extraordinary reason

I was going round the wrong way—in purl, you know, not plain) but if I *wasn't* doing that, I must have been outside snipping off the dead chrysanthemums—no, that was earlier—before the rain.”

“The rain,” said the Inspector, “started at 4:10 exactly.”

“Did it now? That helps a lot. Of course, I was upstairs putting a wash basin in the passage where the rain always comes through. And it was coming through so fast that I guessed at once that the gutter was stopped up again. So I came down and got my mackintosh and rubber boots. I called Edmund, but he didn’t answer, so I thought perhaps he’d got to a very important place in his novel and I wouldn’t disturb him, and I’ve done it quite often myself before. With the broom handle, you know, tied on to that long thing you push up windows with.”

“You mean,” said Craddock, noting bewilderment on his subordinate’s face, “that you were cleaning out the gutter?”

“Yes, it was all choked up with leaves. It took a long time and I got rather wet, but I got it clear at last. And then I went in and got changed and washed—so *smelly*, dead leaves—and then I went into the kitchen and put the kettle on. It was 6:15 by the kitchen clock.”

Constable Edwards blinked.

“Which means,” finished Mrs. Swettenham triumphantly, “that it was exactly twenty minutes to five.”

“Or near enough,” she added.

“Did anybody see what you were doing whilst you were out cleaning the gutter?”

“No, indeed,” said Mrs. Swettenham. “I’d soon have roped them in to help if they had! It’s a most difficult thing to do single-handed.”

“So, by your own statement, you were outside, in a mackintosh and boots, at the time when the rain was coming down, and according to you, you were employed during that time in cleaning out a gutter but you have no one who can substantiate that statement?”

“You can look at the gutter,” said Mrs. Swettenham. “It’s beautifully clear.”

“Did you hear your mother call to you, Mr. Swettenham?”

“No,” said Edmund. “I was fast asleep.”

"Edmund," said his mother reproachfully, "I thought you were *writing*."

Inspector Craddock turned to Mrs. Easterbrook.

"Now, Mrs. Easterbrook?"

"I was sitting with Archie in his study," said Mrs. Easterbrook, fixing wide innocent eyes on him. "We were listening to the wireless together, weren't we, Archie?"

There was a pause. Colonel Easterbrook was very red in the face. He took his wife's hand in his.

"You don't understand these things, kitten," he said. "I—well, I must say, Inspector, you've rather sprung this business on us. My wife, you know, has been terribly upset by all this. She's nervous and highly strung and doesn't appreciate the importance of—of taking due consideration before she makes a statement."

"Archie," cried Mrs. Easterbrook reproachfully, "are you going to say you weren't with me?"

"Well, I wasn't, was I, my dear? I mean one's got to stick to the facts. Very important in this sort of inquiry. I was talking to Lampson, the farmer at Croft End, about some chicken netting. That was about a quarter to four. I didn't get home until after the rain had stopped. Just before tea. A quarter to five. Laura was toasting the scones."

"And had *you* been out also, Mrs. Easterbrook?"

The pretty face looked more like a weasel's than ever. Her eyes had a trapped look.

"No—no, I just sat listening to the wireless. I didn't go out. Not then. I'd been out earlier. About—about half past three. Just for a little walk. Not far."

She looked as though she expected more questions, but Craddock said quietly:

"That's all, Mrs. Easterbrook."

He went on: "These statements will be typed out. You can read them and sign them if they are substantially correct."

Mrs. Easterbrook looked at him with sudden venom.

"Why don't you ask the others where they were? That Haymes woman? And Edmund Swettenham? How do you know he *was*

asleep indoors? Nobody saw him."

Inspector Craddock said quietly:

"Miss Murgatroyd, before she died, made a certain statement. On the night of the hold-up here, *someone* was absent from this room. Someone who was supposed to have been in the room all the time. Miss Murgatroyd told her friend the names of the people she *did* see. By a process of elimination, she made the discovery that there was someone she did *not* see."

"Nobody could see anything," said Julia.

"Murgatroyd could," said Miss Hinchcliffe, speaking suddenly in her deep voice. "She was over there behind the door, where Inspector Craddock is now. She was the only person who could see anything of what was happening."

"*Aha! That is what you think, is it!*" demanded Mitzi.

She made one of her dramatic entrances, flinging open the door and almost knocking Craddock sideways. She was in a frenzy of excitement.

"Ah, you do not ask Mitzi to come in here with the others, do you, you stiff policemen? I am only Mitzi! Mitzi in the kitchen! Let her stay in the kitchen where she belongs! But I tell you that Mitzi, as well as anyone else, and perhaps better, yes, better, can see things. Yes, I see things. I see something the night of the burglary. I see something and I do not quite believe it, and I hold my tongue till now. I think to myself I will not tell what it is I have seen, not yet. I will wait."

"And when everything had calmed down, you meant to ask for a little money from a certain person, eh?" said Craddock.

Mitzi turned on him like an angry cat.

"And why not? Why look down your nose? Why should I not be paid for it if I have been so generous as to keep silence? Especially if some day there will be money—much *much* money. Oh! I have heard things—I know what goes on. I know this Pippemmer—this secret society of which *she*"—she flung a dramatic finger towards Julia—"is an agent. Yes, I would have waited and asked for money—but now I am afraid. I would rather be *safe*. For soon, perhaps, someone will kill *me*. So I will tell what I know."

"All right then," said the Inspector sceptically. "What *do* you know?"

"I tell you." Mitzi spoke solemnly. "On that night I am *not* in the pantry cleaning silver as I say—I am already in the dining room when I hear the gun go off. I look through the keyhole. The hall it is black, but the gun go off again and the torch it falls—and it swings round as it falls—and I see *her*. I see *her* there close to him with the gun in her hand. I see Miss Blacklock."

"Me?" Miss Blacklock sat up in astonishment. "You must be mad!"

"But that's impossible," cried Edmund. "Mitzi couldn't have seen Miss Blacklock."

Craddock cut in and his voice had the corrosive quality of a deadly acid.

"*Couldn't she, Mr. Swettenham? And why not? Because it wasn't* Miss Blacklock who was standing there with the gun? It was *you*, wasn't it?"

"I—of course not—what the *hell!*"

"*You* took Colonel Easterbrook's revolver. *You* fixed up the business with Rudi Scherz—as a good joke. You had followed Patrick Simmons into the far room and when the lights went out, you slipped out through the carefully oiled door. You shot at Miss Blacklock and then you killed Rudi Scherz. A few seconds later you were back in the drawing room clicking your lighter."

For a moment Edmund seemed at a loss for words, then he spluttered out:

"The whole idea is *monstrous*. Why *me*? What earthly motive had *I* got?"

"If Miss Blacklock dies before Mrs. Goedler, two people inherit, remember. The two we know of as Pip and Emma. Julia Simmons has turned out to be Emma—"

"And you think I'm Pip?" Edmund laughed. "Fantastic—absolutely *fantastic*! I'm about the right age—nothing else. And I can prove to you, you damned fool, that I *am* Edmund Swettenham. Birth certificate, schools, university—everything."

"He isn't Pip." The voice came from the shadows in the corner. Phillippa Haymes came forward, her face pale. "*I'm Pip*, Inspector."

"*You*, Mrs. Haymes?"

"Yes. Everybody seems to have assumed that Pip was a boy—Julia knew, of course, that her twin was another girl—I don't know why she didn't say so this afternoon—"

"Family solidarity," said Julia. "I suddenly realized who you were. I'd had no idea till that moment."

"I'd had the same idea as Julia did," said Phillipa, her voice trembling a little. "After I—lost my husband and the war was over, I wondered what I was going to do. My mother died many years ago. I found out about my Goedler relations. Mrs. Goedler was dying and at her death the money would go to a Miss Blacklock. I found out where Miss Blacklock lived and I—I came here. I took a job with Mrs. Lucas. I hoped that, since this Miss Blacklock was an elderly woman without relatives, she might, perhaps, be willing to help. Not me, because I could work, but help with Harry's education. After all, it *was* Goedler money and she'd no one particular of her own to spend it on.

"And then," Phillipa spoke faster, it was as though, now her long reserve had broken down, she couldn't get the words out fast enough, "that hold-up happened and I began to be frightened. Because it seemed to me that the only possible person with a motive for killing Miss Blacklock was *me*. I hadn't the least idea who Julia was—we aren't identical twins and we're not much alike to look at. No, it seemed as though I was the only one bound to be suspected."

She stopped and pushed her fair hair back from her face, and Craddock suddenly realized that the faded snapshot in the box of letters must have been a photograph of Phillipa's mother. The likeness was undeniable. He knew too why that mention of closing and unclosing hands had seemed familiar—Phillipa was doing it now.

"Miss Blacklock has been good to me. Very *very* good to me—I didn't try to kill her. I never thought of killing her. But all the same, I'm Pip." She added, "You see, you needn't suspect Edmund any more."

"Needn't I?" said Craddock. Again there was that acid biting tone in his voice. "Edmund Swettenham's a young man who's fond of money. A young man, perhaps, who would like to marry a rich wife.

But she wouldn't be a rich wife *unless Miss Blacklock died before Mrs. Goedler*. And since it seemed almost certain that Mrs. Goedler would die before Miss Blacklock, well—he had to do something about it—*didn't you, Mr. Swettenham?*"

"It's a damned lie!" Edmund shouted.

And then, suddenly, a sound rose on the air. It came from the kitchen—a long unearthly shriek of terror.

"That isn't Mitzi!" cried Julia.

"No," said Inspector Craddock, "it's someone who's murdered three people...."

Twenty-two

THE TRUTH

When the Inspector turned on Edmund Swettenham, Mitzi had crept quietly out of the room and back to the kitchen. She was running water into the sink when Miss Blacklock entered.

Mitzi gave her a shamefaced sideways look.

"What a liar you are, Mitzi," said Miss Blacklock pleasantly. "Here—that isn't the way to wash up. The silver first, and fill the sink right up. You can't wash up in about two inches of water."

Mitzi turned the taps on obediently.

"You are not angry at what I say, Miss Blacklock?" she asked.

"If I were to be angry at all the lies you tell, I should never be out of a temper," said Miss Blacklock.

"I will go and say to the Inspector that I make it all up, shall I?" asked Mitzi.

"He knows that already," said Miss Blacklock, pleasantly.

Mitzi turned off the taps and as she did so two hands came up behind her head and with one swift movement forced it down into the water-filled sink.

"Only *I* know that you're telling the truth for once," said Miss Blacklock viciously.

Mitzi thrashed and struggled but Miss Blacklock was strong and her hands held the girl's head firmly under water.

Then, from somewhere quite close behind her, Dora Bunner's voice rose piteously on the air:

"Oh Lotty—Lotty—don't do it ... Lotty."

Miss Blacklock screamed. Her hands flew up in the air, and Mitzi, released, came up choking and spluttering.

Miss Blacklock screamed again and again. For there was no one there in the kitchen with her...

"Dora, Dora, forgive me. I had to ... I had to—"

She rushed distractedly towards the scullery door—and the bulk of Sergeant Fletcher barred her way, just as Miss Marple stepped, flushed and triumphant, out of the broom cupboard.

"I could always mimic people's voices," said Miss Marple.

"You'll have to come with me, Madam," said Sergeant Fletcher. "I was a witness of your attempt to drown this girl. And there will be other charges. I must warn you, Letitia Blacklock—"

"Charlotte Blacklock," corrected Miss Marple. "That's who she is, you know. Under that choker of pearls she always wears you'll find the scar of the operation."

"Operation?"

"Operation for goitre."

Miss Blacklock, quite calm now, looked at Miss Marple.

"So you know all about it?" she said.

"Yes, I've known for some time."

Charlotte Blacklock sat down by the table and began to cry.

"You shouldn't have done that," she said. "Not made Dora's voice come. I loved Dora. I really loved Dora."

Inspector Craddock and the others had crowded in the doorway.

Constable Edwards, who added a knowledge of first aid and artificial respiration to his other accomplishments, was busy with Mitzi. As soon as Mitzi could speak she was lyrical with self-praise.

"I do that good, do I not? I am clever! And I am brave! Oh, I am brave! Very very nearly was *I* murdered, too. But I was so brave I risk *everything*."

With a rush Miss Hinchcliffe thrust aside the others and leapt upon the weeping figure of Charlotte Blacklock by the table.

It took all Sergeant Fletcher's strength to hold her off.

"Now then—" he said. "Now then—no, no, Miss Hinchcliffe—"

Between clenched teeth Miss Hinchcliffe was muttering:

"Let me get at her. Just let me get at her. It was she who killed Amy Murgatroyd."

Charlotte Blacklock looked up and sniffed.

"I didn't want to kill her. I didn't want to kill anybody—I had to—but it's Dora I mind about—after Dora was dead, I was all alone—ever since she died—I've been alone—oh, Dora—Dora—"

And once again she dropped her head on her hands and wept.

Twenty-three

EVENING AT THE VICARAGE

Miss Marple sat in the tall armchair. Bunch was on the floor in front of the fire with her arms round her knees.

The Reverend Julian Harmon was leaning forward and was for once looking more like a schoolboy than a man foreshadowing his own maturity. And Inspector Craddock was smoking his pipe and drinking a whisky and soda and was clearly very much off duty. An outer circle was composed of Julia, Patrick, Edmund and Phillipa.

"I think it's your story, Miss Marple," said Craddock.

"Oh no, my dear boy. I only just helped a little, here and there. *You* were in charge of the whole thing, and conducted it all, and you know so much that I don't."

"Well, tell it together," said Bunch impatiently. "Bit each. Only let Aunt Jane start because I like the muddly way her mind works. When did you first think that the whole thing was a put-up job by Blacklock?"

"Well, my dear Bunch, it's hard to say. Of course, right at the very beginning, it did seem as though the ideal person—or rather the *obvious* person, I should say—to have arranged the hold-up *was* Miss Blacklock herself. She was the only person who was known to have been in contact with Rudi Scherz, and how much easier to arrange something like that when it's your own house. The central heating, for instance. No fires—because that would have meant light

in the room. But the only person who could have arranged *not* to have a fire was the mistress of the house herself.

"Not that I thought of all that at the time—it just seemed to me that it was a pity it *couldn't* be as simple as that! Oh, no, I was taken in like everyone else, I thought that someone really did want to kill Letitia Blacklock."

"I think I'd like to get clear first on what really happened," said Bunch. "Did this Swiss boy recognize her?"

"Yes. He'd worked in—"

She hesitated and looked at Craddock.

"In Dr. Adolf Koch's clinic in Berne," said Craddock. "Koch was a world-famous specialist on operations for goitre. Charlotte Blacklock went there to have her goitre removed and Rudi Scherz was one of the orderlies. When he came to England he recognized in the hotel a lady who had been a patient and on the spur of the moment he spoke to her. I dare say he mightn't have done that if he'd paused to think, because he left the place under a cloud, but that was some time after Charlotte had been there, so she wouldn't know anything about it."

"So he never said anything to her about Montreux and his father being a hotel proprietor?"

"Oh, no, she made that up to account for his having spoken to her."

"It must have been a great shock to her," said Miss Marple, thoughtfully. "She felt reasonably safe—and then—the almost impossible mischance of somebody turning up who had known her—not as one of the two Miss Blacklocks—she was prepared for *that*—but definitely as *Charlotte* Blacklock, a patient who'd been operated on for goitre.

"But you wanted to go through it all from the beginning. Well, the beginning, I think—if Inspector Craddock agrees with me—was when Charlotte Blacklock, a pretty, lighthearted affectionate girl, developed that enlargement of the thryoid gland that's called a goitre. It ruined her life, because she was a very sensitive girl. A girl, too, who had always set a lot of stress on her personal appearance. And girls just at that age in their teens are particularly sensitive about themselves.

If she'd had a mother, or a reasonable father, I don't think she would have got into the morbid state she undoubtedly did get into. She had no one, you see, to take her out of herself, and force her to see people and lead a normal life and not think too much about her infirmity. And, of course, in a different household, she might have been sent for an operation many years earlier.

"But Dr. Blacklock, I think, was an old-fashioned, narrow-minded, tyrannical and obstinate man. He didn't believe in these operations. Charlotte must take it from him that nothing could be done—apart from dosage with iodine and other drugs. Charlotte *did* take it from him, and I think her sister also placed more faith in Dr. Blacklock's powers as a physician than he deserved.

"Charlotte was devoted to her father in a rather weak and soppy way. She thought, definitely, that her father knew best. But she shut herself up more and more as the goitre became larger and more unsightly, and refused to see people. She was actually a kindly affectionate creature."

"That's an odd description of a murderess," said Edmund.

"I don't know that it is," said Miss Marple. "Weak and kindly people are often very treacherous. And if they've got a grudge against life it saps the little moral strength that they may possess.

"Letitia Blacklock, of course, had quite a different personality. Inspector Craddock told me that Belle Goedler described her as really *good*—and I think Letitia *was* good. She was a woman of great integrity who found—as she put it herself—a great difficulty in understanding how people couldn't see what was dishonest. Letitia Blacklock, however tempted, would never have contemplated any kind of fraud for a moment.

"Letitia was devoted to her sister. She wrote her long accounts of everything that happened in an effort to keep her sister in touch with life. She was worried by the morbid state Charlotte was getting into.

"Finally Dr. Blacklock died. Letitia, without hesitation, threw up her position with Randall Goedler and devoted herself to Charlotte. She took her to Switzerland, to consult authorities there on the possibility of operating. It had been left very late—but as we know

the operation was successful. The deformity was gone—and the scar this operation had left was easily hidden by a choker of pearls or beads.

"The war had broken out. A return to England was difficult and the two sisters stayed in Switzerland doing various Red Cross and other work. That's right, isn't it, Inspector?"

"Yes, Miss Marple."

"They got occasional news from England—amongst other things, I expect, they heard that Belle Goedler could not live long. I'm sure it would be only human nature for them both to have planned and talked together of the days ahead when a big fortune would be theirs to spend. One has got to realize, I think, that this prospect meant much more to *Charlotte* than it did to Letitia. For the first time in her life, Charlotte could go about feeling herself a normal woman, a woman at whom no one looked with either repulsion or pity. She was free at last to enjoy life—and she had a whole lifetime, as it were, to crowd into her remaining years. To travel, to have a house and beautiful grounds—to have clothes and jewels, and go to plays and concerts, to gratify every whim—it was all a kind of fairy tale come true to Charlotte.

"And then Letitia, the strong healthy Letitia, got flu which turned to pneumonia and died within the space of a week! Not only had Charlotte lost her sister, but the whole dream existence she had planned for herself was cancelled. I think, you know, that she may have felt almost resentful towards Letitia. Why need Letitia have died, just then, when they had just had a letter saying Belle Goedler could not last long? Just one more month, perhaps, and the money would have been Letitia's—and hers when Letitia died....

"Now this is where I think the difference between the two came in. Charlotte didn't really feel that what she suddenly thought of doing was wrong—not really wrong. The money was meant to come to Letitia—it *would* have come to Letitia in the course of a few months—and she regarded herself and Letitia as one.

"Perhaps the idea didn't occur to her until the doctor or someone asked her her sister's Christian name—and then she realized how to nearly everyone they had appeared as the two Miss Blacklocks—

elderly, well-bred Englishwomen, dressed much the same, with a strong family resemblance—(and, as I pointed out to Bunch, one elderly woman is *so* like another). Why shouldn't it be Charlotte who had died and *Letitia* who was alive?

"It was an impulse, perhaps, more than a plan. Letitia was buried under Charlotte's name. 'Charlotte' was dead, 'Letitia' came to England. All the natural initiative and energy, dormant for so many years, were now in the ascendant. As Charlotte she had played second fiddle. She now assumed the airs of command, the feeling of command that had been Letitia's. They were not really so unlike in mentality—though there was, I think, a big difference *morally*.

"Charlotte had, of course, to take one or two obvious precautions. She bought a house in a part of England quite unknown to her. The only people she had to avoid were a few people in her own native town in Cumberland (where in any case she'd lived as a recluse) and, of course, Belle Goedler who had known Letitia so well that any impersonation would have been out of the question. Handwriting difficulties were got over by the arthritic condition of her hands. It was really very easy because so few people had ever really known Charlotte."

"But supposing she'd met people who'd known Letitia?" asked Bunch. "There must have been plenty of those."

"They wouldn't matter in the same way. Someone might say: 'I came across Letitia Blacklock the other day. She's changed so much I really wouldn't have known her.' But there still wouldn't be any suspicion in their minds that she wasn't Letitia. People *do* change in the course of ten years. *Her* failure to recognize *them* could always be put down to her shortsightedness; and you must remember that she knew every detail of Letitia's life in London—the people she met—the places she went. She'd got Letitia's letters to refer to, and she could quickly have disarmed any suspicion by mention of some incident, or an inquiry after a mutual friend. No, it was recognition as *Charlotte* that was the only thing she had to fear.

"She settled down at Little Paddocks, got to know her neighbours and, when she got a letter asking dear Letitia to be kind, she

accepted with pleasure the visit of two young cousins she had never seen. Their acceptance of her as Aunt Letty increased her security.

"The whole thing was going splendidly. And then—she made her big mistake. It was a mistake that arose solely from her kindness of heart and her naturally affectionate nature. She got a letter from an old school friend who had fallen on evil days, and she hurried to the rescue. Perhaps it may have been partly because she was, in spite of everything, lonely. Her secret kept her in a way apart from people. And she had been genuinely fond of Dora Bunner and remembered her as a symbol of her own gay carefree days at school. Anyway, on an impulse, she answered Dora's letter in person. And very surprised Dora must have been! She'd written to *Letitia* and the sister who turned up in answer to her letter was *Charlotte*. There was never any question of pretending to be Letitia to Dora. Dora was one of the few old friends who had been admitted to see Charlotte in her lonely and unhappy days.

"And because she knew that Dora would look at the matter in exactly the same way as she did herself, she told Dora what she had done. Dora approved wholeheartedly. In her confused muddle-headed mind it seemed only right that dear Lotty should not be done out of her inheritance by Letty's untimely death. Lotty *deserved* a reward for all the patient suffering she had borne so bravely. It would have been most unfair if all that money should have gone to somebody nobody had ever heard of.

"She quite understood that nothing must be allowed to get out. It was like an extra pound of butter. You couldn't talk about it but there was nothing wrong about having it. So Dora came to Little Paddocks—and very soon Charlotte began to understand that she had made a terrible mistake. It was not merely the fact that Dora Bunner, with her muddles and her mistakes and her bungling, was quite maddening to live with. Charlotte could have put up with that—because she really cared for Dora, and anyway knew from the doctor that Dora hadn't got a very long time to live. But Dora very soon became a real danger. Though Charlotte and Letitia had called each other by their full names, Dora was the kind of person who always used abbreviations. To her the sisters had always been Letty and

Lotty. And though she schooled her tongue resolutely to call her friend Letty—the old name often slipped out. Memories of the past, too, were rather apt to come to her tongue—and Charlotte had constantly to be on the watch to check these forgetful allusions. It began to get on her nerves.

“Still, nobody was likely to pay attention to Dora’s inconsistencies. The real blow to Charlotte’s security came, as I say, when she was recognized and spoken to by Rudi Scherz at the Royal Spa Hotel.

“I think that the money Rudi Scherz used to replace his earlier defalcations at the hotel may have come from Charlotte Blacklock. Inspector Craddock doesn’t believe—and I don’t either—that Rudi Scherz applied to her for money with any idea of blackmail in his head.”

“He hadn’t the faintest idea he knew anything to blackmail her about,” said Inspector Craddock. “He knew that he was quite a personable young man—and he was aware by experience that personable young men sometimes can get money out of elderly ladies if they tell a hard-luck story convincingly enough.

“But she may have seen it differently. She may have thought that it was a form of insidious blackmail, that perhaps he suspected something—and that later, if there was publicity in the papers as there might be after Belle Goedler’s death, he would realize that in her he had found a gold mine.

“And she was committed to the fraud now. She’d established herself as Letitia Blacklock. With the Bank. With Mrs. Goedler. The only snag was this rather dubious Swiss hotel clerk, an unreliable character, and possibly a blackmailer. If only he were out of the way—she’d be safe.

“Perhaps she made it all up as a kind of fantasy first. She’d been starved of emotion and drama in her life. She pleased herself by working out the details. How would she go about getting rid of him?

“She made her plan. And at last she decided to act on it. She told her story of a sham hold-up at a party to Rudi Scherz, explained that she wanted a stranger to act the part of the ‘gangster,’ and offered him a generous sum for his cooperation.

"And the fact that he agreed without any suspicion is what makes me quite certain that Scherz had no idea that he had any kind of hold over her. To him she was just a rather foolish old woman, very ready to part with money.

"She gave him the advertisement to insert, arranged for him to pay a visit to Little Paddocks to study the geography of the house, and showed him the spot where she would meet him and let him into the house on the night in question. Dora Bunner, of course, knew nothing about all this.

"The day came—" He paused.

Miss Marple took up the tale in her gentle voice.

"She must have spent a very miserable day. You see, it still wasn't too late to draw back ... Dora Bunner told us that Letty was frightened that day and she must have been frightened. Frightened of what she was going to do, frightened of the plan going wrong—but not frightened enough to draw back.

"It had been fun, perhaps, getting the revolver out of Colonel Easterbrook's collar drawer. Taking along eggs, or jam—slipping upstairs in the empty house. It had been fun getting the second door in the drawing room oiled, so that it would open and shut noiselessly. Fun suggesting the moving of the table outside the door so that Phillipa's flower arrangements would show to better advantage. It may have all seemed like a game. But what was going to happen next definitely wasn't a game any longer. Oh, yes, she was frightened ... Dora Bunner was right about that."

"All the same, she went through with it," said Craddock. "And it all went according to plan. She went out just after six to 'shut up the ducks,' and she let Scherz in then and gave him the mask and cloak and gloves and the torch. Then, at 6:30, when the clock begins to chime, she's ready by that table near the archway with her hand on the cigarette box. It's all so natural. Patrick, acting as host, has gone for the drinks. She, the hostess, is fetching the cigarettes. She'd judged, quite correctly, that when the clock begins to chime, everyone will look at the clock. They did. Only one person, the devoted Dora, kept her eyes fixed on her friend. And she told us, in

her very first statement, exactly what Miss Blacklock did. She said that Miss Blacklock had picked up the vase of violets.

"She'd previously frayed the cord of the lamp so that the wires were nearly bare. The whole thing only took a second. The cigarette box, the vase and the little switch were all close together. She picked up the violets, spilt the water on the frayed place and switched on the lamp. Water's a good conductor of electricity. The wires fused."

"Just like the other afternoon at the Vicarage," said Bunch. "That's what startled you so, wasn't it, Aunt Jane?"

"Yes, my dear. I've been puzzling about those lights. I'd realized that there were two lamps, a pair, and that one had been changed for the other—probably during the night."

"That's right," said Craddock. "When Fletcher examined that lamp the next morning it was, like all the others, perfectly in order, no frayed flex or fused wires."

"I'd understood what Dora Bunner meant by saying it had been the *shepherdess* the night before," said Miss Marple, "but I fell into the error of thinking, as she thought, that *Patrick* had been responsible. The interesting thing about Dora Bunner was that she was quite unreliable in repeating things she had heard—she always used her imagination to exaggerate or distort them, and she was usually wrong in what she *thought*—but she was quite accurate about the things she *saw*. She saw Letitia pick up the violets—"

"And she saw what she described as a flash and a crackle," put in Craddock.

"And, of course, when dear Bunch spilt the water from the Christmas roses on to the lamp wire—I realized at once that only Miss Blacklock herself could have fused the lights because only she was near that table."

"I could kick myself," said Craddock. "Dora Bunner even prattled about a burn on the table where someone had 'put their cigarette down'—but nobody had even lit a cigarette ... And the violets were dead because there was no water in the vase—a slip on Letitia's part—she ought to have filled it up again. But I suppose she thought nobody would notice and as a matter of fact Miss Bunner was quite

ready to believe that she herself had put no water in the vase to begin with."

He went on:

"She was highly suggestible, of course. And Miss Blacklock took advantage of that more than once. Bunny's suspicions of Patrick were, I think, induced by her."

"Why pick on me?" demanded Patrick in an aggrieved tone.

"It was not, I think, a serious suggestion—but it would keep Bunny distracted from any suspicion that Miss Blacklock might be stage managing the business. Well, we know what happened next. As soon as the lights went and everyone was exclaiming, she slipped out through the previously oiled door and up behind Rudi Scherz who was flashing his torch round the room and playing his part with gusto. I don't suppose he realized for a moment she was there behind him with her gardening gloves pulled on and the revolver in her hand. She waits till the torch reaches the spot she must aim for—the wall near which she is supposed to be standing. Then she fires rapidly twice and as he swings round startled, she holds the revolver close to his body and fires again. She lets the revolver fall by his body, throws her gloves carelessly on the hall table, then back through the other door and across to where she had been standing when the lights went out. She nicked her ear—I don't quite know how—"

"Nail scissors, I expect," said Miss Marple. "Just a snip on the lobe of the ear lets out a lot of blood. That was very good psychology, of course. The actual blood running down over her white blouse made it seem certain that she *had* been shot at, and that it had been a near miss."

"It ought to have gone off quite all right," said Craddock. "Dora Bunner's insistence that Scherz had definitely aimed at Miss Blacklock had its uses. Without meaning it, Dora Bunner conveyed the impression that she'd actually seen her friend wounded. It might have been brought in Suicide or Accidental Death. And the case would have been closed. That it was kept open is due to Miss Marple here."

"Oh, no, no." Miss Marple shook her head energetically. "Any little efforts on my part were quite incidental. It was you who weren't satisfied, Mr. Craddock. It was *you* who wouldn't let the case be closed."

"I wasn't happy about it," said Craddock. "I knew it was all wrong somewhere. But I didn't see *where* it was wrong, till you showed me. And after that Miss Blacklock had a real piece of bad luck. I discovered that that second door had been tampered with. Until that moment, whatever we agreed *might* have happened—we'd nothing to go upon but a pretty theory. But that oiled door was *evidence*. And I hit upon it by pure chance—by catching hold of a handle by mistake."

"I think you were *led* to it, Inspector," said Miss Marple. "But then I'm old-fashioned."

"So the hunt was up again," said Craddock. "But this time with a difference. We were looking now for someone with a motive to kill Letitia Blacklock."

"And there *was* someone with a motive, and Miss Blacklock knew it," said Miss Marple. "I think she recognized Phillipa almost at once. Because Sonia Goedler seems to have been one of the very few people who had been admitted to Charlotte's privacy. And when one is old (you wouldn't know this yet, Mr. Craddock) one has a much better memory for a face you've seen when you were young than you have for anyone you've only met a year or two ago. Phillipa must have been just about the same age as her mother was when Charlotte remembered her, and she was very like her mother. The odd thing is that I think Charlotte was very pleased to recognize Phillipa. She became very fond of Phillipa and I think, unconsciously, it helped to stifle any qualms of conscience she may have had. She told herself that when she inherited the money, she was going to look after Phillipa. She would treat her as a daughter. Phillipa and Harry should live with her. She felt quite happy and beneficent about it. But once the Inspector began asking questions and finding out about 'Pip and Emma' Charlotte became very uneasy. She didn't want to make a scapegoat of Phillipa. Her whole idea had been to make the business look like a hold-up by a young criminal and his

accidental death. But now, with the discovery of the oiled door, the whole viewpoint was changed. And, except for Phillipa, there wasn't (as far as *she* knew, for she had absolutely no idea of Julia's identity) anyone with the least possible motive for wishing to kill her. She did her best to shield Phillipa's identity. She was quick-witted enough to tell you when you asked her, that Sonia was small and dark and she took the old snapshots out of the album so that you shouldn't notice any resemblance at the same time as she removed snapshots of Letitia herself."

"And to think I suspected Mrs. Swettenham of being Sonia Goedler," said Craddock disgustedly.

"My poor mamma," murmured Edmund. "A woman of blameless life—or so I have always believed."

"But of course," Miss Marple went on, "it was Dora Bunner who was the real danger. Every day Dora got more forgetful and more talkative. I remember the way Miss Blacklock looked at her the day we went to tea there. Do you know why? Dora had just called her Lotty again. It seemed to us a mere harmless slip of the tongue. But it frightened Charlotte. And so it went on. Poor Dora could not stop herself talking. That day we had coffee together in the Bluebird, I had the oddest impression that Dora was talking about *two* people, not one—and so, of course, she was. At one moment she spoke of her friend as not pretty but having so much character—but almost at the same moment she described her as a pretty lighthearted girl. She'd talk of Letty as so clever and so successful—and then say what a sad life she'd had, and then there was that quotation about stern affliction bravely borne—which really didn't seem to fit Letitia's life at all. Charlotte must, I think, have overheard a good deal that morning she came into the café. She certainly must have heard Dora mention about the lamp having been changed—about its being the shepherd and not the shepherdess. And she realized then what a very real danger to her security poor devoted Dora Bunner was.

"I'm afraid that that conversation with me in the café really sealed Dora's fate—if you'll excuse such a melodramatic expression. But I think it would have come to the same in the end ... Because life couldn't be safe for Charlotte while Dora Bunner was alive. She loved

Dora—she didn't want to kill Dora—but she couldn't see any other way. And, I expect (like Nurse Ellerton that I was telling you about, Bunch) she persuaded herself that it was almost a *kindness*. Poor Bunny—not long to live anyway and perhaps a painful end. The queer thing is that she did her best to make Bunny's last day a happy day. The birthday party—and the special cake...."

"Delicious Death," said Phillipa with a shudder.

"Yes—yes, it was rather like that ... she tried to give her friend a delicious death ... The party, and all the things she liked to eat, and trying to stop people saying things to upset her. And then the tablets, whatever they were, in the aspirin bottle by her own bed so that Bunny, when she couldn't find the new bottle of aspirin she'd just bought, would go there to get some. And it would look, as it did look, that the tablets had been meant for *Letitia*. ...

"And so Bunny died in her sleep, quite happily, and Charlotte felt safe again. But she missed Dora Bunner—she missed her affection and her loyalty, she missed being able to talk to her about the old days ... She cried bitterly the day I came up with that note from Julian—and her grief was quite genuine. She'd killed her own dear friend...."

"That's horrible," said Bunch. "Horrible."

"But it's very human," said Julian Harmon. "One forgets how human murderers are."

"I know," said Miss Marple. "Human. And often very much to be pitied. But very dangerous, too. Especially a weak kindly murderer like Charlotte Blacklock. Because, once a weak person gets *really* frightened, they get quite savage with terror and they've no self-control at all."

"Murgatroyd?" said Julian.

"Yes, poor Miss Murgatroyd. Charlotte must have come up to the cottage and heard them rehearsing the murder. The window was open and she listened. It had never occurred to her until that moment that there was anyone else who could be a danger to her. Miss Hinchcliffe was urging her friend to remember what she'd seen and until that moment Charlotte hadn't realized that anyone could have seen anything at all. She'd assumed that everybody would

automatically be looking at Rudi Scherz. She must have held her breath outside the window and listened. Was it going to be all right? And then, just as Miss Hinchcliffe rushed off to the station Miss Murgatroyd got to a point which showed that she had stumbled on the truth. She called after Miss Hinchcliffe: 'She wasn't *there*....'

"I asked Miss Hinchcliffe, you know, if that was the way she said it ... Because if she'd said '*She* wasn't there' it wouldn't have meant the same thing."

"Now that's too subtle a point for me," said Craddock.

Miss Marple turned her eager pink and white face to him.

"Just think what's going on in Miss Murgatroyd's mind ... One does see things, you know, and not know one sees them. In a railway accident once, I remember noticing a large blister of paint at the side of the carriage. I could have *drawn* it for you afterwards. And once, when there was a flying bomb in London—splinters of glass everywhere—and the shock—but what I remember best is a woman standing in front of me who had a big hole halfway up the leg of her stockings and the stockings didn't match. So when Miss Murgatroyd stopped thinking and just tried to remember what she *saw*, she remembered a good deal.

"She started, I think, near the mantelpiece, where the torch must have hit first—then it went along the two windows and there were people in between the windows and her. Mrs. Harmon with her knuckles screwed into her eyes for instance. She went on in her mind following the torch past Miss Bunner with her mouth open and her eyes staring—past a blank wall and a table with a lamp and a cigarette box. And then came the shots—and quite suddenly she remembered a most incredible thing. She'd seen the wall where, later, there were the two bullet holes, the wall where Letitia Blacklock had been standing when she was shot, and at the moment when the revolver went off and Letty was shot, *Letty hadn't been there*....

"You see what I mean now? She'd been thinking of the three women Miss Hinchcliffe had told her to think about. If one of them hadn't been there, it would have been the *personality* she'd have fastened upon. She'd have said—in effect—'*That's* the one! *She*

wasn't there;' But it was a *place* that was in her mind—a place where someone should have been—but the place wasn't filled—there wasn't anybody there. The place was there—but the person wasn't. And she couldn't take it in all at once. 'How extraordinary, Hinch,' she said. 'She wasn't *there*'... So that could only mean Letitia Blacklock...."

"But you knew before that, didn't you?" said Bunch. "When the lamp fused. When you wrote down those things on the paper."

"Yes, my dear. It all came together then, you see—all the various isolated bits—and made a coherent pattern."

Bunch quoted softly:

"*Lamp? Yes. Violets? Yes. Bottle of Aspirin.* You meant that Bunny had been going to buy a new bottle that day, and so she ought not to have needed to take Letitia's?"

"Not unless her own bottle had been taken or hidden. It had to appear as though Letitia Blacklock was the one meant to be killed."

"Yes, I see. And then 'Delicious Death.' The cake—but more than the cake. The whole party setup. A happy day for Bunny before she died. Treating her rather like a dog you were going to destroy. That's what I find the most horrible thing of all—the sort of—of spurious kindness."

"She *was* quite a kindly woman. What she said at the last in the kitchen was quite true. 'I didn't want to kill anybody.' What she wanted was a great deal of money that didn't belong to her! And before that desire—(and it had become a kind of obsession—the money was to pay her back for all the suffering life had inflicted on her)—everything else went to the wall. People with a grudge against the world are always dangerous. They seem to think life owes them something. I've known many an invalid who has suffered far worse and been cut off from life much more than Charlotte Blacklock—and they've managed to lead happy contented lives. It's what in *yourself* that makes you happy or unhappy. But, oh dear, I'm afraid I'm straying away from what we were talking about. Where were we?"

"Going over your list," said Bunch. "What did you mean by 'Making enquiries?' Inquiries about what?"

Miss Marple shook her head playfully at Inspector Craddock.

"You ought to have seen that, Inspector Craddock. You showed me that letter from Letitia Blacklock to her sister. It had the word 'enquiries' in it twice—each time spelt with an e. But in the note I asked Bunch to show you, Miss Blacklock had written '*inquiries*' with an i. People don't often alter their spelling as they get older. It seemed to me very significant."

"Yes," Craddock agreed. "I ought to have spotted that."

Bunch was continuing. "*Severe afflictions bravely borne*. That's what Bunny said to you in the café and of course Letitia hadn't had any affliction. *Iodine*. That put you on the track of goitre?"

"Yes, dear. Switzerland, you know, and Miss Blacklock giving the impression that her sister had died of consumption. But I remembered then that the greatest authorities on goitre and the most skillful surgeons operating on it are Swiss. And it linked up with those really preposterous pearls that Letitia Blacklock always wore. Not really her *style*—but just right for concealing the scar."

"I understand now her agitation the night the string broke," said Craddock. "It seemed at the time quite disproportionate."

"And after that, it *was* Lotty you wrote, not Letty as we thought," said Bunch.

"Yes, I remembered that the sister's name was Charlotte, and that Dora Bunner had called Miss Blacklock Lotty once or twice—and that each time she did so, she had been very upset afterwards."

"And what about Berne and Old Age Pensions?"

"Rudi Scherz had been an orderly in a hospital in Berne."

"And Old Age Pension."

"Oh, my dear Bunch, I mentioned that to you in the Bluebird though I didn't really see the application then. How Mrs. Wotherspoon drew Mrs. Bartlett's Old Age Pension as well as her own—though Mrs. Bartlett had been dead for years—simply because one old woman is so like another old woman—yes, it all made a pattern and I felt so worked up I went out to cool my head a little and think what could be done about proving all this. Then Miss Hinchcliffe picked me up and we found Miss Murgatroyd..."

Miss Marple's voice dropped. It was no longer excited and pleased. It was quiet and remorseless.

"I knew then something had *got* to be done. Quickly! But there still wasn't any *proof*. I thought out a possible plan and I talked to Sergeant Fletcher."

"And I have had Fletcher on the carpet for it!" said Craddock. "He'd no business to go agreeing to your plans without reporting first to me."

"He didn't like it, but I talked him into it," said Miss Marple. "We went up to Little Paddocks and I got hold of Mitzi."

Julia drew a deep breath and said, "I can't imagine how you ever got her to do it."

"I worked on her, my dear," said Miss Marple. "She thinks far too much about herself anyway, and it will be good for her to have done something for others. I flattered her up, of course, and said I was sure if she'd been in her own country she'd have been in the Resistance movement, and she said, 'Yes, indeed.' And I said I could see she had got just the temperament for that sort of work. She was brave, didn't mind taking risks, and could act a part. I told her stories of deeds done by girls in the Resistance movements, some of them true, and some of them, I'm afraid, invented. She got tremendously worked up!"

"Marvellous," said Patrick.

"And then I got her to agree to do her part. I rehearsed her till she was word perfect. Then I told her to go upstairs to her room and not come down until Inspector Craddock came. The worst of these excitable people is that they're apt to go off half-cocked and start the whole thing before the time."

"She did it very well," said Julia.

"I don't quite see the point," said Bunch. "Of course, I wasn't there—" she added apologetically.

"The point was a little complicated—and rather touch and go. The idea was that Mitzi whilst admitting, as though casually, that blackmail *had* been in her mind, was now so worked up and terrified that she was willing to come out with the truth. She'd seen, through the keyhole of the dining room, Miss Blacklock in the hall with a revolver behind Rudi Scherz. She'd seen, that is, *what had actually taken place*. Now the only danger was that Charlotte Blacklock might

have realized that, as the key was in the keyhole, Mitzi couldn't possibly have seen anything at all. But I banked on the fact that you don't think of things like that when you've just had a bad shock. All she could take in was that Mitzi had seen her."

Craddock took over the story.

"But—and this was essential—I pretended to receive this with scepticism, and I made an immediate attack as though unmasking my batteries at last, upon someone who had not been previously suspected. I accused Edmund—"

"And very nicely *I played my part*," said Edmund. "Hot denial. All according to plan. What wasn't according to plan, Phillipa, my love, was you throwing in your little chirp and coming out into the open as 'Pip.' Neither the Inspector nor I had any idea you were Pip. *I* was going to be Pip! It threw us off our stride for the moment, but the Inspector made a masterly comeback and made some perfectly filthy insinuations about my wanting a rich wife which will probably stick in your subconscious and make irreparable trouble between us one day."

"I don't see why that was necessary?"

"Don't you? It meant that, *from Charlotte Blacklock's point of view*, the only person who suspected or knew the truth, was *Mitzi*. The suspicions of the police were elsewhere. They had treated Mitzi for the moment as a liar. But if Mitzi were to persist, they might listen to her and take her seriously. So Mitzi had got to be silenced."

"Mitzi went straight out of the room and back to the kitchen—just like I had told her," said Miss Marple. "Miss Blacklock came out after her almost immediately. Mitzi was apparently alone in the kitchen. Sergeant Fletcher was behind the scullery door. And I was in the broom cupboard in the kitchen. Luckily I'm very thin."

Bunch looked at Miss Marple.

"What did you expect to happen, Aunt Jane?"

"One of two things. Either Charlotte would offer Mitzi money to hold her tongue—and Sergeant Fletcher would be a witness to that offer, or else—or else I thought she'd try to kill Mitzi."

"But she couldn't hope to get away with *that*? She'd have been suspected at once."

"Oh, my dear, she was past reasoning. She was just a snapping terrified cornered rat. Think what had happened that day. The scene between Miss Hinchcliffe and Miss Murgatroyd. Miss Hinchcliffe driving off to the station. As soon as she comes back Miss Murgatroyd will explain that Letitia Blacklock wasn't in the room that night. There's just a few minutes in which to make sure Miss Murgatroyd can't tell anything. No time to make a plan or set a stage. Just crude murder. She greets the poor woman and strangles her. Then a quick rush home, to change, to be sitting by the fire when the others come in, as though she'd never been out.

"And then came the revelation of Julia's identity. She breaks her pearls and is terrified they may notice her scar. Later, the Inspector telephones that he's bringing everyone there. No time to think, to rest. Up to her neck in murder now, no mercy killing—or undesirable young man to be put out of the way. Crude plain murder. Is she safe? Yes, so far. And then comes Mitzi—yet *another* danger. Kill Mitzi, stop her tongue! She's beside herself with fear. Not human any longer. Just a dangerous animal."

"But why were you in the broom cupboard, Aunt Jane?" asked Bunch. "Couldn't you have left it to Sergeant Fletcher?"

"It was safer with two of us, my dear. And besides, I knew I could mimic Dora Bunner's voice. If anything could break Charlotte Blacklock down—that would."

"And it did ...!"

"Yes ... She went to pieces."

There was a long silence as memory laid hold of them and then, speaking with determined lightness, to ease the strain, Julia said:

"It's made a wonderful difference to Mitzi. She told me yesterday that she was taking a post near Southampton. And she said (Julia produced a very good imitation of Mitzi's accent):

"I go there and if they say to me you have to register with the police—you are an alien, I say to them, "Yes, I will register! The police, they know me very well. I assist the police! Without me the police never would they have made the arrest of a very dangerous criminal. I risked my life because I am brave—brave like a lion—I do

not care about risks." "Mitzi," they say to me, "you are a *heroine*, you are superb." "Ach, it is nothing, I say."""

Julia stopped.

"And a great deal more," she added.

"I think," said Edmund thoughtfully, "that soon Mitzi will have assisted the police in not one but hundreds of cases!"

"She's softened towards me," said Phillipa. "She actually presented me with the recipe for Delicious Death as a kind of wedding present. She added that I was on no account to divulge the secret to Julia, because Julia had ruined her omelette pan."

"Mrs. Lucas," said Edmund, "is all over Phillipa now that since Belle Goedler's death Phillipa and Julia have inherited the Goedler millions. She sent us some silver asparagus tongs as a wedding present. I shall have enormous pleasure in *not* asking her to the wedding!"

"And so they lived happily ever after," said Patrick. "Edmund and Phillipa—and Julia and Patrick?" he added tentatively.

"Not with me, you won't live happily ever after," said Julia. "The remarks that Inspector Craddock improvised to address to Edmund apply far more aptly to you. You *are* the sort of soft young man who would like a rich wife. Nothing doing!"

"There's gratitude for you," said Patrick. "After all I did for that girl."

"Nearly landed me in prison on a murder charge—that's what your forgetfulness nearly did for me," said Julia. "I shall never forget that evening when your sister's letter came. I really thought I was for it. I couldn't see any way out."

"As it is," she added musingly, "I think I shall go on the stage."

"What? You, too?" groaned Patrick.

"Yes. I might go to Perth. See if I can get your Julia's place in the Rep there. Then, when I've learnt my job, I shall go into theatre management—and put on Edmund's plays, perhaps."

"I thought you wrote novels," said Julian Harmon.

"Well, so did I," said Edmund. "I began writing a novel. Rather good it was. Pages about an unshaven man getting out of bed and what he smelt like, and the grey streets, and a horrible old woman

with dropsy and a vicious young tart who dribbled down her chin—and they all talked interminably about the state of the world and wondered what they were alive for. And suddenly I began to wonder too ... And then a rather comic idea occurred to me ... and I jotted it down—and then I worked up rather a good little scene ... All very obvious stuff. But somehow, I got interested ... And before I knew what I was doing I'd finished a roaring farce in three acts."

"What's it called?" asked Patrick. "*What the Butler Saw?*"

"Well, it easily might be ... As a matter of I've called it *Elephants Do Forget*. What's more, it's been accepted and it's going to be produced!"

"Elephants Do Forget," murmured Bunch. "I thought they didn't?"

The Rev. Julian Harmon gave a guilty start.

"My goodness. I've been so interested. My *sermon!*"

"Detective stories again," said Bunch. "Real-life ones this time."

"You might preach on Thou Shall Do No Murder," suggested Patrick.

"No," said Julian Harmon quietly. "I shan't take that as my text."

"No," said Bunch. "You're quite right, Julian. I know a much nicer text, a happy text." She quoted in a fresh voice, "For lo the Spring is here and the Voice of the Turtle is heard in the Land—I haven't got it quite right—but you know the one I mean. Though why a *turtle* I can't think. I shouldn't think turtles have got nice voices at all."

"The word turtle," explained the Rev. Julian Harmon, "is not very happily translated. It doesn't mean a reptile but the turtle dove. The Hebrew word in the original is—"

Bunch interrupted him by giving him a hug and saying:

"I know one thing—*You* think that the Ahasuerus of the Bible is Artaxerxes the Second, but between you and me it was Artaxerxes the Third."

As always, Julian Harmon wondered why his wife should think that story so particularly funny.

"Tiglath Pileser wants to go and help you," said Bunch. "He ought to be a very proud cat. *He* showed us how the lights fused."

Epilogue

“We ought to order some papers,” said Edmund to Phillipa upon the day of their return to Chipping Cleghorn after the honeymoon. “Let’s go along to Totman’s.”

Mr. Totman, a heavy-breathing, slow-moving man, received them with affability.

“Glad to see you back, sir. *And* madam.”

“We want to order some papers.”

“Certainly sir. And your mother is keeping well, I hope? Quite settled down at Bournemouth?”

“She loves it,” said Edmund, who had not the faintest idea whether this was so or not, but like most sons, preferred to believe that all was well with those loved, but frequently irritating beings, parents.

“Yes, sir. Very agreeable place. Went there for my holiday last year. Mrs. Totman enjoyed it very much.”

“I’m glad. About papers, we’d like—”

“And I hear you have a play on in London, sir. Very amusing, so they tell me.”

“Yes, it’s doing very well.”

“Called *Elephants Do Forget*, so I hear. You’ll excuse me, sir, asking you, but I always thought that they *didn’t*—forget, I mean.”

“Yes—yes, exactly—I’ve begun to think it was a mistake calling it that. So many people have said just what you say.”

“A kind of natural-history fact, I’ve always understood.”

“Yes—yes. Like earwigs making good mothers.”

“Do they indeed, sir? Now, that’s a fact I *didn’t* know.”

"About the papers—"

"*The Times*, sir, I think it was?" Mr. Totman paused with pencil uplifted.

"The *Daily Worker*," said Edmund firmly. "And the *Daily Telegraph*," said Phillipa. "And the *New Statesman*," said Edmund. "The *Radio Times*," said Phillipa. "The *Spectator*," said Edmund. "The *Gardener's Chronicle*," said Phillipa.

They both paused to take breath.

"Thank you, sir," said Mr. Totman. "And the *Gazette*, I suppose?"

"No," said Edmund.

"No," said Phillipa.

"Excuse me, you *do* want the *Gazette*?"

"No."

"No."

"You mean"—Mr. Totman liked to get things perfectly clear—"You *don't* want the *Gazette*!"

"No, we don't."

"Certainly not."

"You don't want the *North Benham News and the Chipping Cleghorn Gazette*—"

"No."

"You don't want me to send it along to you every week?"

"No." Edmund added: "Is that quite clear now?"

"Oh, yes, sir—yes."

Edmund and Phillipa went out, and Mr. Totman padded into his back parlour.

"Got a pencil, Mother?" he said. "My pen's run out."

"Here you are," said Mrs. Totman, seizing the order book. "I'll do it. What do they want?"

"*Daily Worker, Daily Telegraph, Radio Times, New Statesman, Spectator*—let me see—*Gardener's Chronicle*."

"*Gardener's Chronicle*," repeated Mrs. Totman, writing busily. "And the *Gazette*."

"They don't want the *Gazette*."

"What?"

"They don't want the *Gazette*. They said so."

“Nonsense,” said Mrs. Totman. “You don’t hear properly. Of course they want the *Gazette!* Everybody has the *Gazette*. How else would they know what’s going on round here?”

Credits

Cover illustration and design by Sara Wood

MISS
MARPLE

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha Christie



**THEY
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WITH
MIRRORS**



A Miss Marple Mystery

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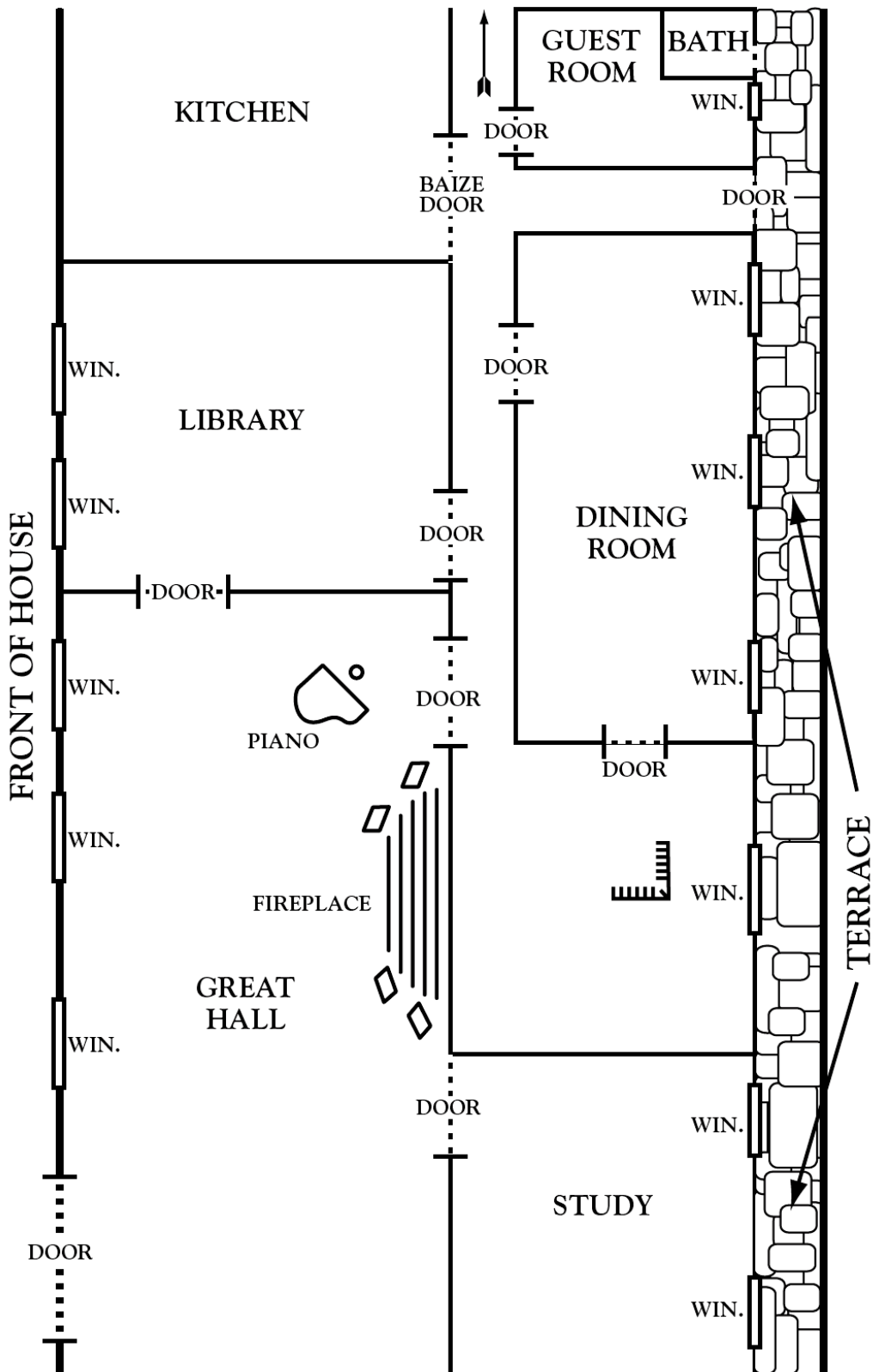
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One

Mrs. Van Rydock moved a little back from the mirror and sighed.

"Well, that'll have to do," she murmured.

"Think it's all right, Jane?"

Miss Marple eyed the Lanvanelli creation appraisingly.

"It seems to me a very beautiful gown," she said.

"The gown's all right," said Mrs. Van Rydock and sighed.

"Take it off, Stephanie," she said.

The elderly maid with the grey hair and the small pinched mouth, eased the gown carefully up over Mrs. Van Rydock's up-stretched arms.

Mrs. Van Rydock stood in front of the glass in her peach satin slip. She was exquisitely corseted. Her still shapely legs were encased in fine nylon stockings. Her face, beneath a layer of cosmetics and constantly toned up by massage, appeared almost girlish at a slight distance. Her hair was less grey than tending to hydrangea blue and was perfectly set. It was practically impossible when looking at Mrs. Van Rydock, to imagine what she would be like in a natural state. Everything that money could do had been done for her—reinforced by diet, massage, and constant exercises.

Ruth Van Rydock looked humorously at her friend.

"Do you think most people would guess, Jane, that you and I are practically the same age?"

Miss Marple responded loyally.

"Not for a moment, I'm sure," she said reassuringly. "I'm afraid, you know, that I look every minute of *my* age!"

Miss Marple was white-haired, with a soft pink-and-white wrinkled face and innocent china blue eyes. She looked a very sweet old lady. Nobody would have called Mrs. Van Rydock a sweet old lady.

"I guess you do, Jane," said Mrs. Van Rydock. She grinned suddenly, "And so do I. Only not in the same way. 'Wonderful how that old hag keeps her figure.' That's what they say of me. But they know I'm an old hag all right! And, my God, do I feel like one!"

She dropped heavily onto the satin, quilted chair.

"That's all right, Stephanie," she said. "You can go."

Stephanie gathered up the dress and went out.

"Good old Stephanie," said Ruth Van Rydock. "She's been with me for over thirty years now. She's the only woman who knows what I really look like! Jane, I want to talk to you."

Miss Marple leant forward a little. Her face took on a receptive expression. She looked, somehow, an incongruous figure in the ornate bedroom of the expensive hotel suite. She was dressed in rather dowdy black, carried a large shopping bag, and looked every inch a lady.

"I'm worried, Jane. About Carrie Louise."

"Carrie Louise?" Miss Marple repeated the name musingly. The sound of it took her a long way back.

The pensionnat in Florence. Herself, the pink and white English girl from a Cathedral close. The two Martin girls, Americans, exciting to the English girl because of their quaint ways of speech and their forthright manner and vitality. Ruth, tall, eager, on top of the world, Carrie Louise, small, dainty, wistful.

"When did you see her last, Jane?"

"Oh! not for many many years. It must be twenty-five at least. Of course, we still send cards at Christmas."

Such an odd thing, friendship! She, young Jane Marple, and the two Americans. Their ways diverging almost at once, and yet the old affection persisting; occasional letters, remembrances at Christmas. Strange that Ruth whose home—or rather homes—had been in America should be the sister whom she had seen the more often of the two. No, perhaps not strange. Like most Americans of her class, Ruth had been cosmopolitan. Every year or two she had come over

to Europe, rushing from London to Paris, on to the Riviera, and back again, and always keen to snatch a few moments wherever she was, with her old friends. There had been many meetings like this one. In Claridge's, or the Savoy, or the Berkeley, or the Dorchester. A *recherché* meal, affectionate reminiscences, and a hurried and affectionate good-bye. Ruth had never had time to visit St. Mary Mead. Miss Marple had not, indeed, ever expected it. Everyone's life has a *tempo*. Ruth's was presto whereas Miss Marple's was content to be adagio.

So it was American Ruth whom she had seen most of, whereas Carrie Louise who lived in England, she had not now seen for over twenty years. Odd, but quite natural, because when one lives in the same country there is no need to arrange meetings with old friends. One assumes that, sooner or later, one will see them without contrivance. Only, if you move in different spheres, that does not happen. The paths of Jane Marple and Carrie Louise did not cross. It was as simple as that.

"Why are you worried about Carrie Louise, Ruth?" asked Miss Marple.

"In a way that's what worries me most! I just don't know."

"She's not ill?"

"She's very delicate—always has been. I wouldn't say she'd been any worse than usual—considering that she's getting on just as we all are."

"Unhappy?"

"Oh *no*."

No, it wouldn't be that, thought Miss Marple. It would be difficult to imagine Carrie Louise unhappy—and yet there were times in her life when she must have been. Only—the picture did not come clearly. Bewildered—yes—incredulous—yes—but violent grief—no.

Mrs. Van Rydock's words came appositely.

"Carrie Louise," she said, "has always lived right out of this world. She doesn't know what it's like. Maybe it's *that* that worries me."

"Her circumstances," began Miss Marple, then stopped, shaking her head. "No," she said.

"No, it's she herself," said Ruth Van Rydock. "Carrie Louise was always the one of us who had ideals. Of course, it was the fashion when we were young to have ideals—we all had them, it was the proper thing for young girls. You were going to nurse lepers, Jane, and I was going to be a nun. One gets over all that nonsense. Marriage, I suppose one might say, knocks it out of one. Still, take it by and large, I haven't done badly out of marriage."

Miss Marple thought that Ruth was expressing it mildly. Ruth had been married three times, each time to an extremely wealthy man, and the resultant divorces had increased her bank balance without in the least souring her disposition.

"Of course," said Mrs. Van Rydock, "I've always been tough. Things don't get me down. I've not expected too much of life and certainly not expected too much of men—and I've done very well out of it—and no hard feelings. Tommy and I are still excellent friends, and Julius often asks me my opinion about the market." Her face darkened. "I believe that's what worries me about Carrie Louise—she's always had a tendency, you know, to marry *cranks*."

"Cranks?"

"People with ideals. Carrie Louise was always a pushover for ideals. There she was, as pretty as they make them, just seventeen and listening with her eyes as big as saucers to old Gulbrandsen holding forth about his plans for the human race. Over fifty, and she married him, a widower with a family of grown-up children—all because of his philanthropic ideas. She used to sit listening to him spellbound. Just like Desdemona and Othello. Only fortunately there was no Iago about to mess things up—and anyway Gulbrandsen wasn't coloured. He was a Swede or a Norwegian or something."

Miss Marple nodded thoughtfully. The name of Gulbrandsen had an international significance. A man who with shrewd business acumen and perfect honesty had built up a fortune so colossal that really philanthropy had been the only solution to the disposal of it. The name still held significance. The Gulbrandsen Trust, the Gulbrandsen Research Fellowships, the Gulbrandsen Administrative Almshouses, and best known of all the vast educational College for the sons of working men.

"She didn't marry him for his money, you know," said Ruth, "I should have if I'd married him at all. But not Carrie Louise. I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't died when she was thirty-two. Thirty-two's a very nice age for a widow. She's got experience, but she's still adaptable."

The spinster listening to her, nodded gently whilst her mind reviewed, tentatively, widows she had known in the village of St. Mary Mead.

"I was really happiest about Carrie Louise when she was married to Johnnie Restarick. Of course, *he* married her for her money—or if not exactly that, at any rate he wouldn't have married her if she hadn't had any. Johnnie was a selfish pleasure-loving lazy hound, but that's so much safer than a crank. All Johnnie wanted was to live soft. He wanted Carrie Louise to go to the best dressmakers and have yachts and cars and enjoy herself with him. That kind of man is so very *safe*. Give him comfort and luxury and he'll purr like a cat and be absolutely charming to you. I never took that scene designing and theatrical stuff of his very seriously. But Carrie Louise was thrilled by it—saw it all as Art with a capital A and really forced him back into those surroundings and then that dreadful Yugoslavian woman got hold of him and just swept him off with her. He didn't really want to go. If Carrie Louise had waited and been sensible, he would have come back to her."

"Did she care very much?" asked Miss Marple.

"That's the funny thing. I don't really believe she did. She was absolutely sweet about it all—but then she would be. She *is* sweet. Quite anxious to divorce him so that he and that creature could get married. And offering to give those two boys of his by his first marriage a home with her because it would be more settled for them. So there poor Johnnie was—he *had* to marry the woman and she led him an awful six months and then drove him over a precipice in a car in a fit of rage. They *said* it was an accident, but *I* think it was just temper!"

Mrs. Van Rydock paused, took up a mirror and gazed at her face searchingly. She picked up her eyebrow tweezers and pulled out a hair.

"And what does Carrie Louise do next but marry this man Lewis Serrocold. Another crank! Another man with ideals! Oh I don't say he isn't devoted to her—I think he is—but he's bitten by that same bug of wanting to improve everybody's lives for them. And really, you know, nobody can do that but yourself."

"I wonder," said Miss Marple.

"Only, of course, there's a fashion in these things, just like there is in clothes. (My dear, have you seen what Christian Dior is trying to make us wear in the way of skirts?) Where was I? Oh yes, fashion. Well, there's a fashion in philanthropy too. It used to be education in Gulbrandsen's day. But that's out of date now. The State has stepped in. Everyone expects education as a matter of right—and doesn't think much of it when they get it! Juvenile delinquency—that's what is the rage nowadays. All these young criminals and potential criminals. Everyone's mad about them. You should see Lewis Serrocold's eyes sparkle behind those thick glasses of his. Crazy with enthusiasm! One of those men of enormous willpower who like living on a banana and a piece of toast and put all their energies into a cause. And Carrie Louise eats it up—just as she always did. But I don't like it, Jane. They've had meetings of the trustees and the whole place has been turned over to this new idea. It's a training establishment now for these juvenile criminals, complete with psychiatrists and psychologists and all the rest of it. There Lewis and Carrie Louise are, living there, surrounded by these boys—who aren't perhaps quite normal. And the place stiff with occupational therapists and teachers and enthusiasts, half of *them* quite mad. Cranks, all the lot of them, and my little Carrie Louise in the middle of it all!"

She paused—and stared helplessly at Miss Marple.

Miss Marple said in a faintly puzzled voice:

"But you haven't told me yet, Ruth, what you are really afraid of."

"I tell you, I don't *know*! And *that's* what worries me. I've just been down there—for a flying visit. And I felt all along that there was something wrong. In the atmosphere—in the house—I know I'm not mistaken. I'm sensitive to atmosphere, always have been. Did I ever tell you how I urged Julius to sell out of Amalgamated Cereals

before the crash came? And wasn't I right? Yes, something is *wrong* down there. But I don't know why or what—if it's these dreadful young jailbirds—or if it's nearer home. I can't say what it is. There's Lewis just living for his ideas and not noticing anything else, and Carrie Louise, bless her, never seeing or hearing or thinking anything except what's a lovely sight, or a lovely sound, or a lovely thought. It's sweet but it isn't *practical*. There *is* such a thing as evil—and I want you, Jane, to go down there right away and find out just exactly what's the matter."

"Me?" exclaimed Miss Marple. "Why me?"

"Because you've got a nose for that sort of thing. You always had. You've always been a sweet innocent looking creature, Jane, and all the time underneath nothing has ever surprised you, you always believe the worst."

"The worst is so often true," murmured Miss Marple.

"Why you have such a poor idea of human nature, I can't think—living in that sweet peaceful village of yours, so old world and pure."

"You have never lived in a village, Ruth. The things that go on in a pure peaceful village would probably surprise you."

"Oh I daresay. My point is that they don't surprise *you*. So you *will* go down to Stonygates and find out what's wrong, won't you?"

"But, Ruth dear, that would be a most difficult thing to do."

"No, it wouldn't. I've thought it all out. If you won't be absolutely mad at me, I've prepared the ground already."

Mrs. Van Rydock paused, eyed Miss Marple rather uneasily, lighted a cigarette, and plunged rather nervously into explanation.

"You'll admit, I'm sure, that things have been difficult in this country since the war, for people with small fixed incomes—for people like you, that is to say, Jane."

"Oh yes, indeed. But for the kindness, the really great kindness of my nephew Raymond, I don't know really where I should be."

"Never mind your nephew," said Mrs. Van Rydock. "Carrie Louise knows nothing about your nephew—or if she does, she knows him as a writer and has no idea that he's your nephew. The point, as I put it to Carrie Louise, is that it's just too bad about dear Jane. Really sometimes hardly enough to eat, and of course far too proud

ever to appeal to old friends. One couldn't, I said, suggest *money*—but a nice long rest in lovely surroundings, with an old friend and with plenty of nourishing food, and no cares or worries—” Ruth Van Rydock paused and then added defiantly, “Now go on—be mad at me if you want to be.”

Miss Marple opened her china blue eyes in gentle surprise.

“But why should I be mad at you, Ruth? A very ingenious and plausible approach. I'm sure Carrie Louise responded.”

“She's writing to you. You'll find the letter when you get back. Honestly, Jane, you don't feel that I've taken an unpardonable liberty? You won't mind—”

She hesitated and Miss Marple put her thoughts deftly into words.

“Going to Stonygates as an object of charity—more or less under false pretences? Not in the least—if it is *necessary*. You think it is necessary—and I am inclined to agree with you.”

Mrs. Van Rydock stared at her.

“But why? What have you heard?”

“I haven't heard anything. It's just your conviction. You're not a fanciful woman, Ruth.”

“No, but I haven't anything definite to go upon.”

“I remember,” said Miss Marple thoughtfully, “one Sunday morning at church—it was the second Sunday in Advent—sitting behind Grace Lamble and feeling more and more worried about her. Quite sure, you know, that something was wrong—badly wrong—and yet being quite unable to say why. A most disturbing feeling and very, very definite.”

“And was there something wrong?”

“Oh yes. Her father, the old admiral, had been *very* peculiar for some time, and the very next day he went for her with the coal hammer, roaring out that she was Antichrist masquerading as his daughter. He nearly killed her. They took him away to the asylum and she eventually recovered after months in hospital—but it was a very near thing.”

“And you'd actually had a premonition that day in church?”

“I wouldn't call it a premonition. It was founded on *fact*—these things usually are, though one doesn't always recognise it at the

time. She was wearing her Sunday hat the wrong way round. Very significant, really, because Grace Lambie was a most precise woman, not at all vague or absentminded—and the circumstances under which she would not notice which way her hat was put on to go to church were really extremely limited. Her father, you see, had thrown a marble paperweight at her and it had shattered the looking glass. She had caught up her hat, put it on, and hurried out of the house. Anxious to keep up appearances and for the servants not to hear anything. She put down these actions, you see, to 'dear Papa's Naval temper,' she didn't realise that his mind was definitely unhinged. Though she ought to have realised it clearly enough. He was always complaining to her of being spied upon and of enemies—all the usual symptoms, in fact."

Mrs. Van Rydock gazed respectfully at her friend.

"Maybe, Jane," she said, "that St. Mary Mead of yours isn't quite the idyllic retreat that I've always imagined it."

"Human nature, dear, is very much the same everywhere. It is more difficult to observe it closely in a city, that is all."

"And you'll go to Stonygates?"

"I'll go to Stonygates. A little unfair, perhaps, on my nephew Raymond. To let it be thought that he does not assist me, I mean. Still the dear boy is in Mexico for six months. And by that time it should all be over."

"What should all be over?"

"Carrie Louise's invitation will hardly be for an indefinite stay. Three weeks, perhaps—a month. That should be ample."

"For you to find out what is wrong?"

"For me to find out what is wrong."

"My, Jane," said Mrs. Van Rydock, "you've got a lot of confidence in yourself, haven't you?"

Miss Marple looked faintly reproachful.

"*You* have confidence in me, Ruth. Or so you say ... I can only assure you that I shall endeavour to justify your confidence."

Two

Before catching her train back to St. Mary Mead (Wednesday special cheap day return) Miss Marple, in a precise and businesslike fashion, collected certain data.

"Carrie Louise and I have corresponded after a fashion, but it has largely been a matter of Christmas cards or calendars. It's just the facts I should like, Ruth dear—and also some idea as to whom exactly I shall encounter in the household at Stonygates."

"Well, you know about Carrie Louise's marriage to Gulbrandsen. There were no children and Carrie Louise took that very much to heart. Gulbrandsen was a widower, and had three grown-up sons. Eventually they adopted a child. Pippa, they called her—a lovely little creature. She was just two years old when they got her."

"Where did she come from? What was her background?"

"Really, now, Jane, I can't remember—if I ever heard, that is. An adoption society, maybe? Or some unwanted child that Gulbrandsen had heard about. Why? Do you think it's important?"

"Well, one always likes to know the background, so to speak. But please go on."

"The next thing that happened was that Carrie Louise found that she was going to have a baby after all. I understand from doctors that that quite often happens."

Miss Marple nodded.

"I believe so."

"Anyway, it did happen, and in a funny kind of way, Carrie Louise was almost disconcerted, if you can understand what I mean. Earlier,

of course, she'd have been wild with joy. As it was, she'd given such a devoted love to Pippa that she felt quite apologetic to Pippa for putting her nose out of joint, so to speak. And then Mildred, when she arrived, was really a very unattractive child. Took after the Gulbrandsens—who were solid and worthy—but definitely homely. Carrie Louise was always so anxious to make no difference between the adopted child and her own child that I think she rather tended to overindulge Pippa and pass over Mildred. Sometimes I think that Mildred resented it. However I didn't see them often. Pippa grew up a very beautiful girl and Mildred grew up a plain one. Eric Gulbrandsen died when Mildred was fifteen and Pippa eighteen. At twenty Pippa married an Italian, the Marchese di San Severiano—oh quite a genuine Marchese—not an adventurer, or anything like that. She was by way of being an heiress (naturally, or San Severiano wouldn't have married her—you know what Italians are!). Gulbrandsen left an equal sum in trust for both his own and his adopted daughter. Mildred married a Canon Strete—a nice man but given to colds in the head. About ten or fifteen years older than she was. Quite a happy marriage, I believe.

"He died a year ago and Mildred has come back to Stonygates to live with her mother. But that's getting on too fast; I've skipped a marriage or two. I'll go back to them. Pippa married her Italian. Carrie Louise was quite pleased about the marriage. Guido had beautiful manners and was very handsome, and he was a fine sportsman. A year later Pippa had a daughter and died in childbirth. It was a terrible tragedy and Guido San Severiano was very cut up. Carrie Louise went to and fro between Italy and England a good deal and it was in Rome that she met Johnnie Restarick and married him. The Marchese married again and he was quite willing for his little daughter to be brought up in England by her exceedingly wealthy grandmother. So they all settled down at Stonygates, Johnnie Restarick and Carrie Louise, and Johnnie's two boys, Alexis and Stephen (Johnnie's first wife was a Russian), and the baby Gina. Mildred married her Canon soon afterwards. Then came all this business of Johnnie and the Yugoslavian woman and the divorce. The boys still came to Stonygates for their holidays and were

devoted to Carrie Louise and then in 1938, I think it was, Carrie Louise married Lewis."

Mrs. Van Rydock paused for breath.

"You've not met Lewis?"

Miss Marple shook her head.

"No, I think I last saw Carrie Louise in 1928. She very sweetly took me to Covent Garden—to the Opera."

"Oh yes. Well, Lewis was a very suitable person for her to marry. He was the head of a very celebrated firm of chartered accountants. I think he met her first over some question of the finances of the Gulbrandsen Trust and the College. He was well off, just about her own age, and a man of absolutely upright life. But he *was* a crank. He was absolutely rabid on the subject of the redemption of young criminals."

Ruth Van Rydock sighed.

"As I said just now, Jane, there are fashions in philanthropy. In Gulbrandsen's time it was education. Before that it was soup kitchens—"

Miss Marple nodded.

"Yes, indeed. Port wine jelly and calf's head broth taken to the sick. My mother used to do it."

"That's right. Feeding the body gave way to feeding the mind. Everyone went mad on educating the lower classes. Well, that's passed. Soon, I expect, the fashionable thing to do will be not to educate your children, preserve their illiteracy carefully until they're eighteen. Anyway the Gulbrandsen Trust and Education Fund was in some difficulties because the state was taking over its functions. Then Lewis came along with his passionate enthusiasm about constructive training for juvenile delinquents. His attention had been drawn to the subject first in the course of his profession—auditing accounts where ingenious young men had perpetrated frauds. He was more and more convinced that juvenile delinquents were not subnormal—that they had excellent brains and abilities and only needed the right direction."

"There is something in that," said Miss Marple. "But it is not entirely true. I remember—"

She broke off and glanced at her watch.

"Oh dear—I mustn't miss the 6:30."

Ruth Van Rydock said urgently:

"And you will go to Stonygates?"

Gathering up her shopping bag and her umbrella Miss Marple said:

"If Carrie Louise asks me—"

"She will ask you. You'll go? Promise, Jane?"

Jane Marple promised.

Three

Miss Marple got out of the train at Market Kindle station. A kindly fellow passenger handed out her suitcase after her, and Miss Marple, clutching a string bag, a faded leather handbag and some miscellaneous wraps, uttered appreciative twitters of thanks.

"So kind of you, I'm sure ... So difficult nowadays—not many porters. I get so flustered when I travel."

The twitters were drowned by the booming noise of the station announcer saying loudly but indistinctly that the 3:18 was standing at Platform 1 and was about to proceed to various unidentifiable stations.

Market Kindle was a large empty windswept station with hardly any passengers or railway staff to be seen on it. Its claim to distinction lay in having six platforms and a bay where a very small train of one carriage was puffing importantly.

Miss Marple, rather more shabbily dressed than was her custom (so lucky that she hadn't given away the old speckledy), was peering around her uncertainly when a young man came up to her.

"Miss Marple?" he said. His voice had an unexpectedly dramatic quality about it, as though the utterance of her name were the first words of a part he was playing in amateur theatricals. "I've come to meet you—from Stonygates."

Miss Marple looked gratefully at him, a charming helpless looking old lady with, if he had chanced to notice it, very shrewd blue eyes. The personality of the young man did not quite match his voice. It

was less important, one might almost say insignificant. His eyelids had a trick of fluttering nervously.

"Oh, thank you," said Miss Marple. "There's just this suitcase."

She noticed that the young man did not pick up her suitcase himself. He flipped a finger at a porter who was trundling some packing cases past on a trolley.

"Bring it out, please," he said, and added importantly, "For Stonygates."

The porter said cheerfully:

"Rightyho. Shan't be long."

Miss Marple fancied that her new acquaintance was not too pleased about this. It was as if Buckingham Palace had been dismissed as no more important than 3 Laburnum Road.

He said, "The railways get more impossible every day!"

Guiding Miss Marple towards the exit, he said: "I'm Edgar Lawson. Mrs. Serrocold asked me to meet you. I help Mr. Serrocold in his work."

There was again the faint insinuation that a busy and important man had, very charmingly, put important affairs on one side out of chivalry to his employer's wife.

And again the impression was not wholly convincing—it had a theatrical flavour.

Miss Marple began to wonder about Edgar Lawson.

They came out of the station and Edgar guided the old lady to where a rather elderly Ford V.8 was standing.

He was just saying, "Will you come in front with me, or would you prefer the back?" when there was a diversion.

A new gleaming two-seater Rolls Bentley came purring into the station yard and drew up in front of the Ford. A very beautiful young woman jumped out of it and came across to them. The fact that she wore dirty corduroy slacks and a simple aertex shirt open at the neck seemed somehow to enhance the fact that she was not only beautiful but expensive.

"There you are, Edgar. I thought I wouldn't make it in time. I see you've got Miss Marple. I came to meet her." She smiled dazzlingly at Miss Marple showing a row of lovely teeth in a sunburnt southern

face. "I'm Gina," she said. "Carrie Louise's granddaughter. What was your journey like? Simply foul? What a nice string bag. I *love* string bags. I'll take it and the coats and then you can get in better."

Edgar's face flushed. He protested.

"Look here, Gina, I came to meet Miss Marple. It was all arranged...."

Again the teeth flashed in that wide, lazy smile.

"Oh I know, Edgar, but I suddenly thought it would be nice if I came along. I'll take her with me and you can wait and bring her cases up."

She slammed the door on Miss Marple, ran round to the other side, jumped in the driving seat, and they purred swiftly out of the station.

Looking back, Miss Marple noticed Edgar Lawson's face.

"I don't think, my dear," she said, "that Mr. Lawson is very pleased."

Gina laughed.

"Edgar's a frightful idiot," she said. "Always so pompous about things. You'd really think he *mattered!*"

Miss Marple asked, "Doesn't he matter?"

"Edgar?" There was an unconscious note of cruelty in Gina's scornful laugh. "Oh, he's bats anyway."

"Bats?"

"They're all bats at Stonygates," said Gina. "I don't mean Lewis and Grandam and me and the boys—and not Miss Bellever, of course. But the others. Sometimes I feel *I'm* going a bit bats myself living there. Even Aunt Mildred goes out on walks and mutters to herself all the time—and you don't expect a Canon's widow to do that, do you?"

They swung out of the station approach and accelerated up the smooth-surfaced, empty road. Gina shot a swift, sideways glance at her companion.

"You were at school with Grandam, weren't you? It seems so queer."

Miss Marple knew perfectly what she meant. To youth it seems very odd to think that age was once young and pigtailed and

struggled with decimals and English literature.

"It must," said Gina with awe in her voice, and obviously not meaning to be rude, "have been a *very* long time ago."

"Yes, indeed," said Miss Marple. "You feel that more with me than you do with your grandmother, I expect?"

Gina nodded. "It's cute of you saying that. Grandam, you know, gives one a curiously ageless feeling."

"It is a long time since I've seen her. I wonder if I shall find her much changed."

"Her hair's grey, of course," said Gina vaguely. "And she walks with a stick because of her arthritis. It's got much worse lately. I suppose that—" she broke off, and then asked, "Have you been to Stonygates before?"

"No, never. I've heard a great deal about it, of course."

"It's pretty ghastly really," said Gina cheerfully. "A sort of Gothic monstrosity. What Steve calls Best Victorian Lavatory period. But it's fun, too, in a way. Only, of course, everything's madly earnest, and you tumble over psychiatrists everywhere underfoot. Enjoying themselves madly. Rather like scoutmasters, only worse. The young criminals are rather pets, some of them. One showed me how to diddle locks with a bit of wire and one angelic-faced boy gave me a lot of points about coshing people."

Miss Marple considered this information thoughtfully.

"It's the thugs I like best," said Gina. "I don't fancy the queers so much. Of course, Lewis and Dr. Maverick think they're *all* queers—I mean they think it's repressed desires and disordered home life and their mothers getting off with soldiers and all that. I don't really see it myself because some people have had awful home lives and yet have managed to turn out quite all right."

"I'm sure it is all a very difficult problem," said Miss Marple.

Gina laughed, again showing her magnificent teeth.

"It doesn't worry me much. I suppose some people have these sorts of urges to make the world a better place. Lewis is quite dippy about it all—he's going to Aberdeen next week because there's a case coming up in the police court—a boy with five previous convictions."

"The young man who met me at the station? Mr. Lawson. He helps Mr. Serrocold, he told me. Is he his secretary?"

"Oh Edgar hasn't brains enough to be a secretary. He's a *case*, really. He used to stay at hotels and pretend he was a V.C. or a fighter pilot and borrow money and then do a flit. I think he's just a rotter. But Lewis goes through a routine with them all. Makes them feel one of the family and gives them jobs to do and all that to encourage their sense of responsibility. I daresay we shall be murdered by one of them one of these days." Gina laughed merrily.

Miss Marple did not laugh.

They turned in through some imposing gates where a commissionaire was standing on duty in a military manner and drove up a drive flanked with rhododendrons. The drive was badly kept and the grounds seemed neglected.

Interpreting her companion's glance, Gina said, "No gardeners during the war, and since we haven't bothered. But it does look rather terrible."

They came round a curve and Stonygates appeared in its full glory. It was, as Gina had said, a vast edifice of Victorian Gothic—a kind of temple to plutocracy. Philanthropy had added to it in various wings and outbuildings which, while not positively dissimilar in style, had robbed the structure as a whole of any cohesion or purpose.

"Hideous, isn't it?" said Gina affectionately. "There's Grandam on the terrace. I'll stop here and you can go and meet her."

Miss Marple advanced along the terrace towards her old friend.

From a distance, the slim little figure looked curiously girlish in spite of the stick on which she leaned and her slow and obviously rather painful progress. It was as though a young girl was giving an exaggerated imitation of old age.

"Jane," said Mrs. Serrocold.

"Dear Carrie Louise."

Yes, unmistakably Carrie Louise. Strangely unchanged, strangely youthful still, although, unlike her sister, she used no cosmetics or artificial aids to youth. Her hair was grey, but it had always been of a silvery fairness and the colour had changed very little. Her skin had still a rose leaf pink and white appearance, though now it was a

crumpled rose leaf. Her eyes had still their starry innocent glance. She had the slender youthful figure of a girl and her head kept its eager birdlike tilt.

"I do blame myself," said Carrie Louise in her sweet voice, "for letting it be so long. *Years* since I saw you, Jane dear. It's just lovely that you've come at last to pay us a visit here."

From the end of the terrace Gina called:

"You ought to come in, Grandam. It's getting cold—and Jolly will be furious."

Carrie Louise gave her little silvery laugh.

"They all fuss about me so," she said. "They rub it in that I'm an old woman."

"And you don't feel like one."

"No, I don't, Jane. In spite of all my aches and pains—and I've got plenty. Inside I go on feeling just a chit like Gina. Perhaps everyone does. The glass shows them how old they are and they just don't believe it. It seems only a few months ago that we were at Florence. Do you remember Fräulein Schweich and her boots?"

The two elderly women laughed together at events that had happened nearly half a century ago.

They walked together to a side door. In the doorway a gaunt, elderly lady met them. She had an arrogant nose, a short haircut and wore stout, well-cut tweeds.

She said fiercely:

"It's absolutely crazy of you, Cara, to stay out so late. You're absolutely incapable of taking care of yourself. What will Mr. Serrocold say?"

"Don't scold me, Jolly," said Carrie Louise pleadingly. She introduced Miss Bellever to Miss Marple.

"This is Miss Bellever who is simply everything to me. Nurse, dragon, watchdog, secretary, housekeeper, and very faithful friend."

Juliet Bellever sniffed, and the end of her big nose turned rather pink, a sign of emotion.

"I do what I can," she said gruffly. "This is a crazy household. You simply can't arrange any kind of planned routine."

"Darling Jolly, of course you can't. I wonder why you ever try. Where are you putting Miss Marple?"

"In the Blue Room. Shall I take her up?" asked Miss Bellever.

"Yes, please do, Jolly. And then bring her down to tea. It's in the library today, I think."

The Blue Room had heavy curtains of a rich, faded blue brocade that must have been, Miss Marple thought, about fifty years old. The furniture was mahogany, big and solid, and the bed was a vast mahogany fourposter. Miss Bellever opened a door into a connecting bathroom. This was unexpectedly modern, orchid in colouring and with much dazzling chromium.

She observed grimly:

"John Restarick had ten bathrooms put into the house when he married Cara. The plumbing is about the only thing that's ever been modernized. He wouldn't hear of the rest being altered—said the whole place was a perfect period piece. Did you ever know him at all?"

"No, I never met him. Mrs. Serrocold and I have met very seldom though we have always corresponded."

"He was an agreeable fellow," said Miss Bellever. "No good, of course! A complete rotter. But pleasant to have about the house. Great charm. Women liked him far too much. That was his undoing in the end. Not really Cara's type."

She added, with a brusque resumption of her practical manner:

"The housemaid will unpack for you. Do you want a wash before tea?"

Receiving an affirmative answer, she said that Miss Marple would find her waiting at the top of the stairs.

Miss Marple went into the bathroom and washed her hands and dried them a little nervously on a very beautiful orchid coloured face towel. Then she removed her hat and patted her soft white hair into place.

Opening her door she found Miss Bellever waiting for her and was conducted down the big gloomy staircase and across a vast dark hall and into a room where bookshelves went up to the ceiling and a big window looked out over an artificial lake.

Carrie Louise was standing by the window and Miss Marple joined her.

"What a very imposing house this is," said Miss Marple. "I feel quite lost in it."

"Yes, I know. It's ridiculous, really. It was built by a prosperous iron master—or something of that kind. He went bankrupt not long after. I don't wonder really. There were about fourteen living rooms—all enormous. I've never seen what people *can* want with more than one sitting room. And all those huge bedrooms. Such a lot of unnecessary space. Mine is terribly overpowering—and quite a long way to walk from the bed to the dressing table. And great heavy dark crimson curtains."

"You haven't had it modernized and redecorated?"

Carrie Louise looked vaguely surprised.

"No. On the whole it's very much as it was when I first lived here with Eric. It's been repainted, of course, but they always do it the same colour. Those things don't really matter, do they? I mean I shouldn't have felt justified in spending a lot of money on that kind of thing when there are so many things that are so much more important."

"Have there been no changes at all in the house?"

"Oh yes—heaps of them. We've just kept a kind of block in the middle of the house as it was—the Great Hall and the rooms off and over. They're the best ones and Johnnie—my second husband—was lyrical over them and said they should never be touched or altered—and, of course, he was an artist and a designer and he knew about these things. But the East and West wings have been completely remodelled. All the rooms partitioned off and divided up, so that we have offices, and bedrooms for the teaching staff, and all that. The boys are all in the College building—you can see it from here."

Miss Marple looked out towards where large red brick buildings showed through a belt of sheltering trees. Then her eyes fell on something nearer at hand, and she smiled a little.

"What a very beautiful girl Gina is," she said.

Carrie Louise's face lit up.

"Yes, isn't she?" she said softly. "It's so lovely to have her back here again. I sent her to America at the beginning of the war—to Ruth. Did Ruth talk about her at all?"

"No. At least she did just mention her."

Carrie Louise sighed.

"Poor Ruth! She was frightfully upset over Gina's marriage. But I've told her again and again that I don't blame her in the least. Ruth doesn't realise, as I do, that the old barriers and class shibboleths are gone—or at any rate are going.

"Gina was doing war work—and she met this young man. He was a marine and had a very good war record. And a week later they were married. It was all far too quick, of course, no time to find out if they were really suited to each other—but that's the way of things nowadays. Young people belong to their generation. We may think they're unwise in many of their doings, but we have to accept their decisions. Ruth, though, was terribly upset."

"She didn't consider the young man suitable?"

"She kept saying that one didn't know anything about him. He came from the middle west and he hadn't any money—and naturally no profession. There are hundreds of boys like that everywhere—but it wasn't Ruth's idea of what was right for Gina. However, the thing was done. I was so glad when Gina accepted my invitation to come over here with her husband. There's so much going on here—jobs of every kind, and if Walter wants to specialise in medicine or get a degree or anything he could do it in this country. After all, this is Gina's home. It's delightful to have her back, to have someone so warm and gay and alive in the house."

Miss Marple nodded and looked out of the window again at the two young people standing near the lake.

"They're a remarkably handsome couple, too," she said. "I don't wonder Gina fell in love with him!"

"Oh, but that—that isn't Wally." There was, quite suddenly, a touch of embarrassment, or restraint, in Mrs. Serrocold's voice. "That's Steve—the younger of Johnnie Restarick's two boys. When Johnnie—when he went away, he'd no place for the boys in the holidays, so I always had them here. They look on this as their

home. And Steve's here permanently now. He runs our dramatic branch. We have a theatre, you know, and plays—we encourage all the artistic instincts. Lewis says that so much of this juvenile crime is due to exhibitionism; most of the boys have had such a thwarted, unhappy home life, and these hold-ups and burglaries make them feel heroes. We urge them to write their own plays and act in them and design and paint their own scenery. Steve is in charge of the theatre. He's so keen and enthusiastic. It's wonderful what life he's put into the whole thing."

"I see," said Miss Marple slowly.

Her long distance sight was good (as many of her neighbours knew to their cost in the village of St. Mary Mead) and she saw very clearly the dark handsome face of Stephen Restarick as he stood facing Gina, talking eagerly. Gina's face she could not see, since the girl had her back to them, but there was no mistaking the expression in Stephen Restarick's face.

"It isn't any business of mine," said Miss Marple, "but I suppose you realise, Carrie Louise, that he's in love with her."

"Oh no—" Carrie Louise looked troubled. "Oh no, I do hope not."

"You were always up in the clouds, Carrie Louise. There's not the least doubt about it."

Four

1

Before Mrs. Serrocold could say anything, her husband came in from the hall carrying some open letters in his hand.

Lewis Serrocold was a short man, not particularly impressive in appearance, but with a personality that immediately marked him out. Ruth had once said of him that he was more like a dynamo than a human being. He usually concentrated entirely on what was immediately occupying his attention and paid no attention to the objects or persons who were surrounding it.

"A bad blow, dearest," he said. "That boy, Jackie Flint. Back at his tricks again. And I really did think he meant to go straight this time if he got a proper chance. He was most earnest about it. You know we found he'd always been keen on railways—and both Maverick and I thought that if he got a job on the railways he'd stick to it and make good. But it's the same story. Petty thieving from the parcels office. Not even stuff he could want or sell. That shows that it *must* be psychological. We haven't really got to the root of the trouble. But I'm not giving up."

"Lewis—this is my old friend, Jane Marple."

"Oh, how d'you do," said Mr. Serrocold absently. "So glad—they'll prosecute, of course. A nice lad, too, not too many brains but a really nice boy. Unspeakable home he came from. I—"

He suddenly broke off, and the dynamo was switched onto the guest.

"Why, Miss Marple, I'm so delighted you've come to stay with us for a while. It will make such a great difference to Caroline to have a friend of old days with whom she can exchange memories. She has, in many ways, a grim time here—so much sadness in the stories of these poor children. We do hope you'll stay with us a very long time."

Miss Marple felt the magnetism and realised how attractive it would have been to her friend. That Lewis Serrocold was a man who would always put causes before people she did not doubt for a moment. It might have irritated some women, but not Carrie Louise.

Lewis Serrocold sorted out another letter.

"At any rate we've *some* good news. This is from the Wiltshire and Somerset Bank. Young Morris is doing extremely well. They're thoroughly satisfied with him and, in fact, are promoting him next month. I always knew that all he needed was responsibility—that, and a thorough grasp of the handling of money and what it means."

He turned to Miss Marple.

"Half these boys don't *know* what money is. It represents to them going to the pictures or to the dogs, or buying cigarettes—and they're clever with figures and find it exciting to juggle them round. Well, I believe in—what shall I say?—rubbing their noses in the stuff—train them in accountancy, in figures—show them the whole inner romance of money, so to speak. Give them skill and then responsibility—let them handle it officially. Our greatest successes have been that way—only two out of thirty-eight have let us down. One's head cashier in a firm of druggists—a really responsible position—"

He broke off to say: "Tea's in, dearest," to his wife.

"I thought we were having it here. I told Jolly."

"No, it's in the Hall. The others are there."

"I thought they were all going to be out."

Carrie Louise linked her arm through Miss Marple's and they went into the Great Hall. Tea seemed a rather incongruous meal in its surroundings. The tea things were piled haphazard on a tray—while utility cups mixed with the remnants of what had been Rockingham

and Spode tea services. There was a loaf of bread, two pots of jam, and some cheap and unwholesome-looking cakes.

A plump middle-aged woman with grey hair sat behind the tea table and Mrs. Serrocold said:

"This is Mildred, Jane. My daughter Mildred. You haven't seen her since she was a tiny girl."

Mildred Strete was the person most in tune with the house that Miss Marple had so far seen. She looked prosperous and dignified. She had married late in her thirties a Canon of the Church of England and was now a widow. She looked exactly like a Canon's widow, respectable and slightly dull. She was a plain woman with a large unexpressive face and dull eyes. She had been, Miss Marple reflected, a very plain little girl.

"And this is Wally Hudd—Gina's husband."

Wally was a big young man, with hair brushed up on his head and a sulky expression. He nodded awkwardly and went on cramming cake into his mouth.

Presently Gina came in with Stephen Restarick. They were both very animated.

"Gina's got a wonderful idea for that backcloth," said Stephen. "You know, Gina, you've got a very definite flair for theatrical designing."

Gina laughed and looked pleased. Edgar Lawson came in and sat down by Lewis Serrocold. When Gina spoke to him, he made a pretence of not answering.

Miss Marple found it all a little bewildering and was glad to go to her room and lie down after tea.

There were more people still at dinner, a young Doctor Maverick who was either a psychiatrist or a psychologist—Miss Marple was rather hazy about the difference—and whose conversation, dealing almost entirely with the jargon of his trade, was practically unintelligible to her. There were also two spectacled young men who held posts on the teaching side and a Mr. Baumgarten who was an occupational therapist and three intensely bashful youths who were doing their "house guest" week. One of them, a fair-haired lad with

very blue eyes was, Gina informed her in a whisper, the expert with the “cosh.”

The meal was not a particularly appetizing one. It was indifferently cooked and indifferently served. A variety of costumes was worn. Miss Bellever wore a high black dress, Mildred Strete wore an evening dress and a woollen cardigan over it. Carrie Louise had on a short dress of grey wool—Gina was resplendent in a kind of peasant getup. Wally had not changed, nor had Stephen Restarick, Edgar Lawson had on a neat, dark blue suit. Lewis Serrocold wore the conventional dinner jacket. He ate very little and hardly seemed to notice what was on his plate.

After dinner Lewis Serrocold and Dr. Maverick went away to the latter’s office. The occupational therapist and the schoolmasters went away to some lair of their own. The three “cases” went back to the college. Gina and Stephen went to the theatre to discuss Gina’s idea for a set. Mildred knitted an indeterminate garment and Miss Bellever darned socks. Wally sat in a chair gently tilted backwards and stared into space. Carrie Louise and Miss Marple talked about old days. The conversation seemed strangely unreal.

Edgar Lawson alone seemed unable to find a niche. He sat down and then got up restlessly.

“I wonder if I ought to go to Mr. Serrocold,” he said rather loudly. “He may need me.”

Carrie Louise said gently, “Oh, I don’t think so. He was going to talk over one or two points with Dr. Maverick this evening.”

“Then I certainly won’t butt in! I shouldn’t dream of going where I wasn’t wanted. I’ve already wasted time today going down to the station when Mrs. Hudd meant to go herself.”

“She ought to have told you,” said Carrie Louise. “But I think she just decided at the last moment.”

“You do realise, Mrs. Serrocold, that she made me look a complete fool! A complete fool!”

“No, no,” said Carrie Louise, smiling. “You mustn’t have these ideas.”

“I know I’m not needed or wanted ... I’m perfectly aware of *that*. If things had been different—if I’d had my proper place in life it

would be very different. Very different indeed. It's no fault of mine that I haven't got my proper place in life."

"Now, Edgar," said Carrie Louise. "Don't work yourself up about nothing. Jane thinks it was very kind of you to meet her. Gina always has these sudden impulses—she didn't mean to upset you."

"Oh yes, she did. It was done on purpose—to humiliate me—"

"Oh Edgar—"

"You don't know half of what's going on, Mrs. Serrocold. Well, I won't say anymore now except good night."

Edgar went out shutting the door with a slam behind him.

Miss Bellever snorted:

"Atrocious manners."

"He's so sensitive," said Carrie Louise vaguely.

Mildred Strete clicked her needles and said sharply:

"He really is a most odious young man. You shouldn't put up with such behavior, Mother."

"Lewis says he can't help it."

Mildred said sharply:

"Everyone can help behaving rudely. Of course I blame Gina very much. She's so completely scatterbrained in everything she undertakes. She does nothing but make trouble. One day she encourages the young man and the next day she snubs him. What can you expect?"

Wally Hudd spoke for the first time that evening.

He said:

"That guy's crackers. That's all there is to it! Crackers!"

2

In her bedroom that night, Miss Marple tried to review the pattern of Stonygates, but it was as yet too confused. There were currents and crosscurrents here—but whether they could account for Ruth Van Rydock's uneasiness it was impossible to tell. It did not seem to Miss Marple that Carrie Louise was affected in any way by what was going on round her. Stephen was in love with Gina. Gina might or

might not be in love with Stephen. Walter Hudd was clearly not enjoying himself. These were incidents that might and did occur in all places and at most times. There was, unfortunately, nothing exceptional about them. They ended in the divorce court and everybody hopefully started again—when fresh tangles were created. Mildred Strete was clearly jealous of Gina and disliked her. That, Miss Marple thought, was very natural.

She thought over what Ruth Van Rydock had told her. Carrie Louise's disappointment at not having a child—the adoption of little Pippa—and then the discovery that, after all, a child was on the way.

"Often happens like that," Miss Marple's doctor had told her. "Relief of tension, maybe, and then Nature can do its work."

He had added that it was usually hard lines on the adopted child.

But that had not been so in this case. Both Gulbrandsen and his wife had adored little Pippa. She had made her place too firmly in their hearts to be lightly set aside. Gulbrandsen was already a father. Paternity meant nothing new to him. Carrie Louise's maternal yearnings had been assuaged by Pippa. Her pregnancy had been uncomfortable and the actual birth difficult and prolonged. Possibly Carrie Louise, who had never cared for reality, did not enjoy her first brush with it.

There remained two little girls growing up, one pretty and amusing, the other plain and dull. Which again, Miss Marple thought, was quite natural. For when people adopt a baby girl, they choose a pretty one. And though Mildred might have been lucky and taken after the Martins who had produced handsome Ruth and dainty Carrie Louise, Nature elected that she should take after the Gulbrandsens who were large and stolid and uncompromisingly plain.

Moreover Carrie Louise was determined that the adopted child should never feel her position and in making sure of this she was overindulgent to Pippa and sometimes less than fair to Mildred.

Pippa had married and gone away to Italy, and Mildred, for a time, had been the only daughter of the house. But then Pippa had died and Carrie Louise had brought Pippa's baby back to Stonygates and once more Mildred had been out of it. There had been the new

marriage—the Restarick boys. In 1934 Mildred had married Canon Strete, a scholarly antiquarian about ten or fifteen years older, and had gone away to live in the south of England. Presumably she had been happy—but one did not really know. There had been no children. And now here she was, back again in the same house where she had been brought up. And once again, Miss Marple thought, not particularly happy in it.

Gina, Stephen, Wally, Mildred, Miss Bellever who liked an ordered routine and was unable to enforce it. Lewis Serrocold, who was clearly blissfully and wholeheartedly happy, an idealist able to translate his ideals into practical measures. In none of these personalities did Miss Marple find what Ruth's words had led her to believe she might find. Carrie Louise seemed secure, remote at the heart of the whirlpool—as she had been all her life. What then, in that atmosphere, had Ruth felt to be wrong ...? Did she, Jane Marple, feel it also?

What of the outer personalities of the whirlpool—the occupational therapists, the schoolmasters, earnest, harmless young men, confident young Dr. Maverick, the three pink-faced, innocent-eyed young delinquents—Edgar Lawson....

And here, just before she fell asleep, Miss Marple's thoughts stopped and revolved speculatively round the figure of Edgar Lawson. Edgar Lawson reminded her of someone or something. There *was* something a little wrong about Edgar Lawson—perhaps more than a little. Edgar Lawson was maladjusted—that was the phrase, wasn't it? But surely that didn't, and couldn't, touch Carrie Louise?

Mentally, Miss Marple shook her head.

What worried her was something more than that.

Five

1

Gently eluding her hostess the next morning, Miss Marple went out into the gardens. Their condition distressed her. They had once been an ambitiously set-out achievement. Clumps of rhododendrons, smooth slopes of lawn, massed borders of herbaceous plants, clipped box-hedges surrounding a formal rose garden. Now all was largely derelict, the lawns raggedly mown, the borders full of weeds with tangled flowers struggling through them, the paths moss-covered and neglected. The kitchen gardens on the other hand, enclosed by red brick walls, were prosperous and well stocked. That, presumably, was because they had a utility value. So, also, a large portion of what had once been lawn and flower garden, was now fenced off and laid out in tennis courts and a bowling green.

Surveying the herbaceous border, Miss Marple clicked her tongue vexedly and pulled up a flourishing plant of groundsel.

As she stood with it in her hand, Edgar Lawson came into view. Seeing Miss Marple, he stopped and hesitated. Miss Marple had no mind to let him escape. She called him briskly. When he came she asked him if he knew where any gardening tools were kept.

Edgar said vaguely that there was a gardener somewhere who would know.

"It's such a pity to see this border so neglected," twittered Miss Marple. "I'm so fond of gardens." And since it was not her intention

that Edgar should go in search of any necessary implement she went on quickly:

"It's about all an old and useless woman can find to do. Now I don't suppose *you* ever bother your head about gardens, Mr. Lawson. You have so much real and important work to do. Being in a responsible position here, with Mr. Serrocold. You must find it all most interesting."

He answered quickly, almost eagerly:

"Yes—yes—it is interesting."

"And you must be of the greatest assistance to Mr. Serrocold."

His face darkened.

"I don't know. I can't be sure. It's what's *behind* it all—"

He broke off. Miss Marple watched him thoughtfully. A pathetic undersized young man, in a neat dark suit. A young man that few people would look at twice, or remember if they did look....

There was a garden seat nearby and Miss Marple drifted towards it and sat. Edgar stood frowning in front of her.

"I'm sure," said Miss Marple brightly, "that Mr. Serrocold relies on you a *great* deal."

"I don't know," said Edgar. "I really don't know." He frowned and almost absently sat down beside her. "I'm in a very difficult position."

"Yes?" said Miss Marple.

The young man Edgar sat staring in front of him.

"This is all highly confidential," he said suddenly.

"Of course," said Miss Marple.

"If I had my rights—"

"Yes?"

"I might as well tell you ... you won't let it go any further I'm sure?"

"Oh no." She noticed he did not wait for her disclaimer.

"My father—actually, my father is a very important man."

This time there was no need to say anything. She had only to listen.

"Nobody knows except Mr. Serrocold. You see, it might prejudice my father's position if the story got out." He turned to her. He smiled. A sad, dignified smile. "You see, *I'm Winston Churchill's son.*"

"Oh," said Miss Marple. "I *see*."

And she did see. She remembered a rather sad story in St. Mary Mead—and the way it had gone.

Edgar Lawson went on, and what he said had the familiarity of a stage scene.

"There were reasons. My mother wasn't free. Her own husband was in an asylum—there could be no divorce—no question of marriage. I don't really blame them. At least, I think I don't ... He's done, always, everything he could. Discreetly, of course. And that's where the trouble has arisen. He's got enemies—and they're against me, too. They've managed to keep us apart. They watch me. Wherever I go, they spy on me. And they make things go wrong for me."

Miss Marple shook her head.

"Dear, dear," she said.

"In London I was studying to be a doctor. They tampered with my exams—they altered the answers. They *wanted* me to fail. They followed me about the streets. They told things about me to my landlady. They hound me wherever I go."

"Oh, but you can't be sure of that," said Miss Marple soothingly.

"I tell you I *know*! Oh they're very cunning. I never get a glimpse of them or find out who they are. But I shall find out ... Mr. Serrocold took me away from London and brought me down here. He was kind—very kind. But even here, you know, I'm not *safe*. They're here, too. Working against me. Making the others dislike me. Mr. Serrocold says that isn't true—but Mr. Serrocold doesn't know. Or else—I wonder—sometimes I've thought—"

He broke off. He got up.

"This is all confidential," he said. "You do understand that, don't you? But if you notice anyone *following* me—*spying*, I mean—you might let me know *who it is*!"

He went away, then—neat, pathetic, insignificant. Miss Marple watched him and wondered....

A voice spoke.

"Nuts," it said. "Just nuts."

Walter Hudd was standing beside her. His hands were thrust deep in his pockets and he was frowning as he stared after Edgar's retreating figure.

"What kind of a joint is this, anyway?" he said. "They're all bughouse, the whole lot of them."

Miss Marple said nothing and Walter went on.

"That Edgar guy—what do you make of him? Says his father's really Lord Montgomery. Doesn't seem likely to me! Not *Monty*! Not from all I've heard about him."

"No," said Miss Marple. "It doesn't seem very likely."

"He told Gina something quite different—some bunk about being really the heir to the Russian throne—said he was some Grand Duke's son or other. Hell, doesn't the chap know who his father really was?"

"I should imagine not," said Miss Marple. "That is probably just the trouble."

Walter sat down beside her, dropping his body onto the seat with a slack movement. He repeated his former statement.

"They're all bughouse here."

"You don't like being at Stonygates?"

The young man frowned.

"I simply don't *get* it—that's all! I don't get it. Take this place—the house—the whole setup. They're rich, these people. They don't need dough—they've got it. And look at the way they live. Cracked antique china and cheap plain stuff all mixed up. No proper upper class servants—just some casual hired help. Tapestries and drapes and chaircovers all satin and brocade and stuff—and it's falling to pieces! Big silver tea urns and what do you know—all yellow and tarnished for want of cleaning. Mrs. Serrocold just doesn't care. Look at that dress she had on last night. Darned under the arms, nearly worn out—and yet she could go to a store and order what she liked. Bond Street or whatever it is. Dough? They're rolling in dough."

He paused and sat, deliberating.

"I understand being poor. There's nothing much wrong with it. If you're young and strong and ready to work. I never had much money, but I was all set to get where I wanted. I was going to open

a garage. I'd got a bit of money put by. I talked to Gina about it. She listened. She seemed to understand. I didn't know much about her. All those girls in uniform, they look about the same. I mean you can't tell from looking at them who's got dough and who hasn't. I thought she was a cut above me, perhaps, education and all that. But it didn't seem to matter. We fell for each other. We got married. I'd got my bit put by and Gina had some too, she told me. We were going to set up a gas station back home—Gina was willing. Just a couple of crazy kids we were—mad about each other. Then that snooty aunt of Gina's started making trouble ... And Gina wanted to come here to England to see her grandmother. Well, that seemed fair enough. It was her home, and I was curious to see England anyway. I'd heard a lot about it. So we came. Just a visit—that's what I thought."

The frown became a scowl.

"But it hasn't turned out like that. We're caught up in this crazy business. Why don't we stay here—make our home here—that's what they say. Plenty of jobs for me. Jobs! I don't want a job feeding candy to gangster kids and helping them play at kids' games ... what's the sense of it all? This place could be swell—*really* swell—don't people who've got money understand their luck? Don't they understand that most of the world can't have a swell place like this and that they've got one? Isn't it plain crazy to kick your luck when you've got it? I don't mind working if I've got to. But I'll work the way I like and at what I like—and I'll work to get somewhere. This place makes me feel I'm tangled up in a spider's web. And Gina—I can't make Gina out. She's not the same girl I married over in the States. I can't—dang it all—I can't even *talk* to her now. Oh hell!"

Miss Marple said gently:

"I quite see your point of view."

Wally shot a swift glance at her.

"You're the only one I've shot my mouth off to so far. Most of the time I shut up like a clam. Don't know what it is about you—you're English right enough, really English—but in the durndest way you remind me of my aunt Betsy back home."

"Now that's very nice."

"A lot of sense she had," Wally continued reflectively. "Looked as frail as though you could snap her in two, but actually she was tough—yes, sir, I'll say she was tough."

He got up.

"Sorry talking to you this way," he apologised. For the first time, Miss Marple saw him smile. It was a very attractive smile and Wally Hudd was suddenly transfigured from an awkward sulky boy into a handsome and appealing young man. "Had to get things off my chest, I suppose. But too bad picking on you."

"Not at all, my dear boy," said Miss Marple. "I have a nephew of my own—only, of course, a great deal older than you are."

Her mind dwelt for a moment on the sophisticated modern writer Raymond West. A greater contrast to Walter Hudd could not have been imagined.

"You've got other company coming," said Walter Hudd. "That dame doesn't like me. So I'll quit. So long, ma'am. Thanks for the talk."

He strode away and Miss Marple watched Mildred Strete coming across the lawn to join her.

2

"I see you've been victimised by that terrible young man," said Mrs. Strete, rather breathlessly, as she sank down on the seat. "What a tragedy that is."

"A tragedy?"

"Gina's marriage. It all came about from sending her off to America. I told Mother at the time it was most unwise. After all, this is quite a quiet district. We had hardly any raids here. I do so dislike the way many people gave way to panic about their families—and themselves, too, very often."

"It must have been difficult to decide what was right to do," said Miss Marple thoughtfully. "Where children were concerned, I mean. With the prospect of possible invasion, it might have meant their

being brought up under a German regime—as well as the danger of bombs.”

“All nonsense,” said Mrs. Strete. “I never had the least doubt that we should win. But Mother has always been quite unreasonable where Gina is concerned. The child was always spoilt and indulged in every way. There was absolutely no need to take her away from Italy in the first place.”

“Her father raised no objection, I understand?”

“Oh San Severiano! You know what Italians are. Nothing matters to them but money. He married Pippa for her money, of course.”

“Dear me. I always understood he was very devoted to her and was quite inconsolable at her death.”

“He pretended to be, no doubt. Why Mother ever countenanced her marrying a foreigner, I can’t imagine. Just the usual American pleasure in a title, I suppose.”

Miss Marple said mildly:

“I have always thought that dear Carrie Louise was almost too unworldly in her attitude to life.”

“Oh I know. I’ve no patience with it. Mother’s fads and whims and idealistic projects. You’ve no idea, Aunt Jane, of all that it has meant. I can speak with knowledge, of course. I was brought up in the middle of it all.”

It was with a very faint shock that Miss Marple heard herself addressed as Aunt Jane. And yet that had been the convention of those times. Her Christmas presents to Carrie Louise’s children were always labelled “With love from Aunt Jane” and as “Aunt Jane” they thought of her, when they thought of her at all. Which was not, Miss Marple supposed, very often.

She looked thoughtfully at the middle-aged woman sitting beside her. At the pursed tight mouth, the deep lines from the nose down, the hands tightly pressed together.

She said gently:

“You must have had—a difficult childhood.”

Mildred Strete turned eager grateful eyes to her.

“Oh I’m so glad that somebody appreciates that. People don’t really know what children go through. Pippa, you see, was the pretty

one. She was older than I was, too. It was always she who got all the attention. Both Father and Mother encouraged her to push herself forward—not that she needed any encouragement—to show off. I was always the quiet one. I was shy—Pippa didn't know what shyness was. A child can suffer a great deal, Aunt Jane."

"I know that," said Miss Marple.

"Mildred's so stupid'—that's what Pippa used to say. But I was younger than she was. Naturally I couldn't be expected to keep up with her in lessons. And it's very unfair on a child when her sister is always put in front of her.

"What a lovely little girl,' people used to say to Mamma. They never noticed *me*. And it was Pippa that Papa used to joke and play with. Someone ought to have seen how hard it was on *me*. All the notice and attention going to her. I wasn't old enough to realise that it's *character* that matters."

Her lips trembled, then hardened again.

"And it was unfair—really unfair—I was their own child. Pippa was only adopted. I was the daughter of the house. She was—nobody."

"Probably they were extra indulgent to her on that account," said Miss Marple.

"They liked her best," said Mildred Strete. And added: "A child whose own parents didn't want her—or more probably illegitimate."

She went on:

"It's come out in Gina. There's bad blood there. Blood will tell. Lewis can have what theories he likes about environment. Bad blood does tell. Look at Gina."

"Gina is a very lovely girl," said Miss Marple.

"Hardly in behaviour," said Mrs. Strete. "Everyone but Mother notices how she is carrying on with Stephen Restarick. Quite disgusting, I call it. Admittedly she made a very unfortunate marriage, but marriage is marriage and one should be prepared to abide by it. After all, she chose to marry that dreadful young man."

"Is he so dreadful?"

"Oh dear, Aunt Jane! He really looks to me quite like a gangster. And so surly and rude. He hardly opens his mouth. And he always looks so dirty and uncouth."

"He is unhappy, I think," said Miss Marple mildly.

"I really don't know why he should be—apart from Gina's behaviour, I mean. Everything has been done for him here. Lewis has suggested several ways in which he could try to make himself useful—but he prefers to skulk about doing nothing." She burst out, "Oh this whole place is impossible—quite impossible. Lewis thinks of nothing but these horrible young criminals. And Mother thinks of nothing but him. Everything Lewis does is right. Look at the state of the garden—the weeds—the overgrowth. And the house—nothing properly done. Oh, I know a domestic staff is difficult nowadays, but it can be got. It's not as though there were any shortage of money. It's just that nobody *cares*. If it were *my* house—" She stopped.

"I'm afraid," said Miss Marple, "that we have all to face the fact that conditions are different. These large establishments are a great problem. It must be sad for you, in a way, to come back here and find everything so different. Do you really prefer living here to—well—somewhere of your own?"

Mildred Strete flushed.

"After all, it's my home," she said. "It was my father's house. Nothing can alter that. I've a right to be here if I choose. And I do choose. If only Mother were not so impossible! She won't even buy herself proper clothes. It worries Jolly a lot."

"I was going to ask you about Miss Bellever."

"Such a comfort having her here. She adores Mother. She's been with her a long time now—she came in John Restarick's time. And was wonderful, I believe, during the whole sad business. I expect you heard that he ran away with a dreadful Yugoslavian woman—a most abandoned creature. She's had any amount of lovers, I believe. Mother was very fine and dignified about it all. Divorced him as quietly as possible. Even went so far as to have the Restarick boys for their holidays—quite unnecessary, really, other arrangements could have been made. It would have been unthinkable, of course, to have let them go to their father and that woman. Anyway, Mother had them here ... And Miss Bellever stood by all through things and was a tower of strength. I sometimes think she makes Mother even

more vague than she need be, by doing all the practical things herself. But I really don't know what Mother would do without her."

She paused and then remarked in a tone of surprise:

"Here is Lewis. How odd. He seldom comes out in the garden."

Mr. Serrocold came towards them in the same single-minded way that he did everything. He appeared not to notice Mildred, because it was only Miss Marple who was in his mind.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I wanted to take you round our institution and show you everything. Caroline asked me to. Unfortunately I have to go off to Liverpool. The case of that boy and the railways parcels office. But Maverick will take you. He'll be here in a few minutes. I shan't be back until the day after tomorrow. It will be splendid if we can get them not to prosecute."

Mildred Strete got up and walked away. Lewis Serrocold did not notice her go. His earnest eyes gazed at Miss Marple through thick glasses.

"You see," he said, "the Magistrates nearly always take the wrong view. Sometimes they're too severe, but sometimes they're too lenient. If these boys get a sentence of a few months it's no deterrent—they get a kind of a kick out of it, even. Boast about it to their girlfriends. But a severe sentence often sobers them. They realise that the game isn't worth it. Or else it's better not to serve a prison sentence at all. Corrective training—constructional training like we have here."

Miss Marple burst firmly into speech.

"Mr. Serrocold," she said. "Are you quite satisfied about young Mr. Lawson? Is he—is he quite normal?"

A disturbed expression appeared on Lewis Serrocold's face.

"I do hope he's not relapsing. What has he been saying?"

"He told me that he was Winston Churchill's son—"

"Of course—of course. The usual statements. He's illegitimate, as you've probably guessed, poor lad, and of very humble beginnings. He was a case recommended to me by a society in London. He'd assaulted a man in the street who he said was spying on him. All very typical—Dr. Maverick will tell you. I went into his case history. Mother was of a poor class but a respectable family in Plymouth.

Father a sailor—she didn't even know his name ... child brought up in difficult circumstances. Started romancing about his father and later about himself. Wore uniform and decorations he wasn't entitled to—all quite typical. But Maverick considers the prognosis hopeful. If we can give him confidence in himself. I've given him responsibility here, tried to make him appreciate that it's not a man's birth that matters, but what he *is*. I've tried to give him confidence in his own ability. The improvement was marked. I was very happy about him. And now you say—"

He shook his head.

"Mightn't he be dangerous, Mr. Serrocold?"

"Dangerous? I don't think he has shown any suicidal tendencies."

"I wasn't thinking of suicide. He talked to me of enemies—of persecution. Isn't that, forgive me—a dangerous sign?"

"I don't really think it has reached such a pitch. But I'll speak to Maverick. So far, he has been hopeful—very hopeful."

He looked at his watch.

"I must go. Ah, here is our dear Jolly. She will take charge of you."

Miss Bellever, arriving briskly, said, "The car is at the door, Mr. Serrocold. Dr. Maverick rang through from the Institute. I said I would bring Miss Marple over. He will meet us at the gates."

"Thank you. I must go. My briefcase?"

"In the car, Mr. Serrocold."

Lewis Serrocold hurried away. Looking after him, Miss Bellever said:

"Someday that man will drop down dead in his tracks. It's against human nature never to relax or rest. He only sleeps four hours a night."

"He is very devoted to this cause," said Miss Marple.

"Never thinks of anything else," said Miss Bellever grimly. "Never dreams of looking after his wife or considering her in any way. She's a sweet creature, as you know, Miss Marple, and she ought to have love and attention. But nothing's thought of or considered here except a lot of whining boys and young men who want to live easily and dishonestly and don't care about the idea of doing a little hard

work. What about the decent boys from decent homes? Why isn't something done for them? Honesty just isn't interesting to cranks like Mr. Serrocold and Dr. Maverick and all the bunch of half-baked sentimentalists we've got here. I and my brothers were brought up the hard way, Miss Marple, and we weren't encouraged to whine. Soft, that's what the world is nowadays!"

They had crossed the garden and passed through a palisaded gate and had come to the entrance gate which Eric Gulbrandsen had erected as an entrance to his College, a sturdily built, hideous, red brick building.

Dr. Maverick, looking, Miss Marple decided, distinctly abnormal himself, came out to meet them.

"Thank you, Miss Bellever," he said. "Now, Miss—er—oh yes, Miss Marple—I'm sure you're going to be interested in what we're doing here. In our splendid approach to this great problem. Mr. Serrocold is a man of great insight—great vision. And we've got Sir John Stillwell behind us—my old chief. He was at the Home Office until he retired, and his influence turned the scales in getting this started. It's a *medical* problem—that's what we've got to get the legal authorities to understand. Psychiatry came into its own in the war. The one positive good that did come out of it—Now first of all I want you to see our initial approach to the problem. Look up—"

Miss Marple looked up at the words carved over the large arched doorway.

RECOVER HOPE ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE

"Isn't that splendid? Isn't that just the right note to strike? You don't want to scold these lads—or punish them. That's what they're hankering after half the time, punishment. We want to make them feel what fine fellows they are."

"Like Edgar Lawson?" said Miss Marple.

"Interesting case, that. Have you been talking to him?"

"He has been talking to me," said Miss Marple. She added apologetically, "I wondered if, perhaps, he isn't a little *mad*?"

Dr. Maverick laughed cheerfully.

"We're all mad, dear lady," he said as he ushered her in through the door. "That's the secret of existence. We're all a little mad."

Six

On the whole it was rather an exhausting day. Enthusiasm in itself can be extremely wearing, Miss Marple thought. She felt vaguely dissatisfied with herself and her own reactions. There was a pattern here—perhaps several patterns, and yet she herself could obtain no clear glimpse of it or them. Any vague disquietude she felt centered round the pathetic but inconspicuous personality of Edgar Lawson. If she could only find in her memory the right parallel.

Painstakingly she rejected the curious behaviour of Mr. Selkirk's delivery van—the absentminded postman—the gardener who worked on Whitmonday—and that very curious affair of the summer weight combinations.

Something that she could not quite put her finger on was wrong about Edgar Lawson—something that went beyond the observed and admitted facts. But for the life of her, Miss Marple did not see how that wrongness, whatever it was, affected her friend Carrie Louise. In the confused patterns of life at Stonygates, people's troubles and desires impinged on each other. But none of them (again as far as she could see) impinged on Carrie Louise.

Carrie Louise ... Suddenly Miss Marple realised that it was she alone, except for the absent Ruth, who used that name. To her husband, she was Caroline. To Miss Bellever, Cara. Stephen Restarick usually addressed her as Madonna. To Wally she was formally Mrs. Serrocold, and Gina elected to address her as Grandam—a mixture, she had explained, of Grande Dame and Grandmamma.

Was there some significance, perhaps, in the various names that were found for Caroline Louise Serrocold? Was she to all of them a symbol and not quite a real person?

When on the following morning Carrie Louise, dragging her feet a little as she walked, came and sat down on the garden seat beside her friend and asked her what she was thinking about, Miss Marple replied promptly:

"You, Carrie Louise."

"What about me?"

"Tell me honestly—is there anything here that worries you?"

"Worries me?" The other woman raised wondering, clear blue eyes. "But, Jane, what should worry me?"

"Well, most of us have worries." Miss Marple's eyes twinkled a little. "I have. Slugs, you know—and the difficulty of getting linen properly darned—and not being able to get sugar candy for making my damson gin. Oh, lots of little things—it seems unnatural that you shouldn't have any worries at all."

"I suppose I must have really," said Mrs. Serrocold vaguely. "Lewis works too hard, and Stephen forgets his meals slaving at the theatre and Gina is very jumpy—but I've never been able to alter people—I don't see how you can. So it wouldn't be any good worrying, would it?"

"Mildred's not very happy, either, is she?"

"Oh no," said Carrie Louise. "Mildred never is happy. She wasn't as a child. Quite unlike Pippa who was always radiant."

"Perhaps," suggested Miss Marple, "Mildred has cause not to be happy?"

Carrie Louise said quietly:

"Because of being jealous? Yes, I daresay. But people don't really need a cause for feeling what they do feel. They're just made that way. Don't you think so, Jane?"

Miss Marple thought briefly of Miss Moncrieff, a slave to a tyrannical invalid mother. Poor Miss Moncrieff who longed for travel and to see the world. And of how St. Mary Mead in a decorous way had rejoiced when Mrs. Moncrieff was laid in the churchyard and Miss Moncrieff, with a nice little income, was free at last. And of how

Miss Moncrieff, starting on her travels, had got no further than Hayéres where, calling to see one of "mother's oldest friends," she had been so moved by the plight of an elderly hypochondriac that she had cancelled her travel reservations and taken up her abode in the villa to be bullied, overworked, and to long, wistfully, once more, for the joys of a wider horizon.

Miss Marple said:

"I expect you're right, Carrie Louise."

"Of course, my being so free from cares is partly due to Jolly. Dear Jolly. She came to me when Johnnie and I were just married and was wonderful from the first. She takes care of me as though I were a baby and quite helpless. She'd do anything for me. I feel quite ashamed sometimes. I really believe Jolly would murder someone for me, Jane. Isn't that an awful thing to say?"

"She's certainly very devoted," agreed Miss Marple.

"She gets so indignant." Mrs. Serrocold's silvery laugh rang out. "She'd like me to be always ordering wonderful clothes, and surrounding myself with luxuries, and she thinks everybody ought to put me first and to dance attendance on me. She's the one person who's absolutely unimpressed by Lewis' enthusiasm. All our poor boys are, in her view, pampered young criminals and not worth taking trouble over. She thinks this place is damp and bad for my rheumatism, and that I ought to go to Egypt or somewhere warm and dry."

"Do you suffer much from rheumatism?"

"It's got much worse lately. I find it difficult to walk. Horrid cramps in my legs. Oh well"—again there came that bewitching elfin smile, "age must tell."

Miss Bellever came out of the French windows and hurried across to them.

"A telegram, Cara, just came over the telephone. *Arriving this afternoon, Christian Gulbrandsen.*"

"Christian?" Carrie Louise looked very surprised. "I'd no idea he was in England."

"The Oak Suite, I suppose?"

"Yes, please, Jolly. Then there will be no stairs."

Miss Bellever nodded and turned back to the house.

"Christian Gulbrandsen is my stepson," said Carrie Louise. "Eric's eldest son. Actually he's two years older than I am. Her's one of the trustees of the Institute—the principal trustee. How very annoying that Lewis is away. Christian hardly ever stays longer than one night. He's an immensely busy man. And there are sure to be so many things they would want to discuss."

Christian Gulbrandsen arrived that afternoon in time for tea. He was a big heavy featured man, with a slow methodical way of talking. He greeted Carrie Louise with every sign of affection.

"And how is our little Carrie Louise? You do not look a day older. Not a day."

His hands on her shoulders—he stood smiling down at her. A hand tugged his sleeve.

"Christian!"

"Ah"—he turned—"it is Mildred? How are you, Mildred?"

"I've not really been at all well lately."

"That is bad. That is bad."

There was a strong resemblance between Christian Gulbrandsen and his half sister Mildred. There was nearly thirty years of difference in age and they might easily have been taken for father and daughter. Mildred herself seemed particularly pleased by his arrival. She was flushed and talkative, and had talked repeatedly during the day of "my brother," "my brother Christian," "my brother, Mr. Gulbrandsen."

"And how is little Gina?" said Gulbrandsen, turning to that young woman. "You and your husband are still here, then?"

"Yes. We've quite settled down, haven't we, Wally?"

"Looks like it," said Wally.

Gulbrandsen's small shrewd eyes seemed to sum up Wally quickly. Wally, as usual, looked sullen and unfriendly.

"So here I am with all the family again," said Gulbrandsen.

His voice displayed a rather determined geniality—but in actual fact, Miss Marple thought, he was not feeling particularly genial. There was a grim set to his lips and a certain preoccupation in his manner.

Introduced to Miss Marple he swept a keen look over her as though measuring and appraising this newcomer.

"We'd no idea you were in England, Christian," said Mrs. Serrocold.

"No, I came over rather unexpectedly."

"It is too bad that Lewis is away. How long can you stay?"

"I meant to go tomorrow. When will Lewis be back?"

"Tomorrow afternoon or evening."

"It seems, then, that I must stay another night."

"If you'd only let us know—"

"My dear Carrie Louise, my arrangements, they were made very suddenly."

"You will stay to see Lewis?"

"Yes, it is necessary that I see Lewis."

Miss Bellever said to Miss Marple, "Mr. Gulbrandsen and Mr. Serrocold are both trustees of the Gulbrandsen Institute. The others are the Bishop of Cromer and Mr. Gilroy."

Presumably, then, it was on business concerned with the Gulbrandsen Institute that Christian Gulbrandsen had come to Stonygates. It seemed to be assumed so by Miss Bellever and everyone else. And yet Miss Marple wondered.

Once or twice the old man cast a thoughtful puzzled look at Carrie Louise when she was not aware of it—a look that puzzled Carrie Louise's watching friend. From Carrie Louise he shifted his gaze to the others, examining them one and all with a kind of covert appraisal that seemed distinctly odd.

After tea Miss Marple withdrew tactfully from the others to the library, but rather to her surprise when she had settled herself with her knitting, Christian Gulbrandsen came in and sat down beside her.

"You are a very old friend, I think, of our dear Carrie Louise?" he said.

"We were at school together in Italy, Mr. Gulbrandsen. Many many years ago."

"Ah yes. And you are fond of her?"

"Yes, indeed," said Miss Marple warmly.

"So, I think, is everyone. Yes, I truly think that. It should be so. For she is a very dear and enchanting person. Always, since my father married her, I and my brothers have loved her very much. She has been to us like a very dear sister. She was a faithful wife to my father and loyal to all his ideas. She has never thought of herself, but put the welfare of others first."

"She has always been an idealist," said Miss Marple.

"An idealist? Yes. Yes, that is so. And therefore it may be that she does not truly appreciate the evil that there is in the world."

Miss Marple looked at him, surprised. His face was very stern.

"Tell me," he said. "How is her health?"

Again Miss Marple felt surprised.

"She seems to me very well—apart from arthritis—or rheumatism."

"Rheumatism? Yes. And her heart? Her heart is good?"

"As far as I know." Miss Marple was still more surprised. "But until yesterday I had not seen her for many years. If you want to know the state of her health, you should ask somebody in the house here. Miss Bellever, for instance."

"Miss Bellever—Yes, Miss Bellever. Or Mildred?"

"Or, as you say, Mildred."

Miss Marple was faintly embarrassed.

Christian Gulbrandsen was staring at her very hard.

"There is not between the mother and daughter, a very great sympathy, would you say?"

"No, I don't think there is."

"I agree. It is a pity—her only child, but there it is. Now this Miss Bellever, you think, is really attached to her?"

"Very much so."

"And Carrie Louise leans on this Miss Bellever?"

"I think so."

Christian Gulbrandsen was frowning. He spoke as though more to himself than to Miss Marple.

"There is the little Gina—but she is so young. It is difficult—" He broke off. "Sometimes," he said simply, "it is hard to know what is best to be done. I wish very much to act for the best. I am

particularly anxious that no harm and no unhappiness should come to that dear lady. But it is not easy—not easy at all.”

Mrs. Strete came into the room at that moment.

“Oh there you are, Christian. We were wondering where you were. Dr. Maverick wants to know if you would like to go over anything with him.”

“That is the new young doctor here? No—no, I will wait until Lewis returns.”

“He’s waiting in Lewis’ study. Shall I tell him—”

“I will have a word with him myself.”

Gulbrandsen hurried out. Mildred Strete stared after him and then stared at Miss Marple.

“I wonder if anything is wrong. Christian is very unlike himself ... Did he say anything—”

“He only asked me about your mother’s health.”

“Her health? Why should he ask you about that?”

Mildred spoke sharply, her large square face flushing unbecomingly.

“I really don’t know.”

“Mother’s health is perfectly good. Surprisingly so for a woman of her age. Much better than mine as far as that goes.” She paused a moment before saying, “I hope you told him so?”

“I don’t really know anything about it,” said Miss Marple. “He asked me about her heart.”

“Her *heart*?”

“Yes.”

“There’s nothing wrong with Mother’s heart. Nothing at all!”

“I’m delighted to hear you say so, my dear.”

“What on earth put all these queer ideas into Christian’s head?”

“I’ve no idea,” said Miss Marple.

Seven

1

The next day passed uneventfully to all appearances, yet to Miss Marple it seemed that there were signs of an inner tension. Christian Gulbrandsen spent his morning with Dr. Maverick in going round the Institute and in discussing the general results of the Institute's policy. In the early afternoon Gina took him for a drive and after that Miss Marple noticed that he induced Miss Bellever to show him something in the gardens. It seemed to her that it was a pretext for ensuring a tête-à-tête with that grim woman. And yet, if Christian Gulbrandsen's unexpected visit had only to do with business matters, why this wish for Miss Bellever's company, since the latter dealt only with the domestic side of matters?

But in all this, Miss Marple could tell herself that she was being fanciful. The only really disturbing incident of the day happened about four o'clock. She had rolled up her knitting and had gone out in the garden to take a little stroll before tea. Rounding a straggling rhododendron she came upon Edgar Lawson who was striding along muttering to himself and who nearly ran into her.

He said, "I beg your pardon," hastily, but Miss Marple was startled by the queer staring expression of his eyes.

"Aren't you feeling well, Mr. Lawson?"

"Well? How should I be feeling well? I've had a shock—a terrible shock."

"What kind of a shock?"

The young man gave a swift glance past her, and then a sharp uneasy glance to either side. His doing so gave Miss Marple a nervous feeling.

"Shall I tell you?" He looked at her doubtfully. "I don't know. I don't really *know*. I've been so spied upon."

Miss Marple made up her mind. She took him firmly by the arm.

"If we walk down this path ... there, now, there are no trees or bushes near. Nobody can overhear."

"No—no, you're right." He drew a deep breath, bent his head and almost whispered his next words. "I've made a discovery. A terrible discovery."

"What kind of a discovery?"

Edgar Lawson began to shake all over. He was almost weeping.

"To have trusted someone! To have believed ... and it was lies—all lies. Lies to keep me from finding out the truth. I can't bear it. It's too wicked. You see, he was the one person I trusted, and now to find out that all the time he's been at the bottom of it all. It's *he* who's been my enemy! It's *he* who has been having me followed about and spied upon. But he can't get away with it anymore. I shall speak out. I shall tell him I know what he has been doing."

"Who is '*he*'?" demanded Miss Marple.

Edgar Lawson drew himself up to his full height. He might have looked pathetic and dignified. But actually he only looked ridiculous.

"I'm speaking of my father."

"Viscount Montgomery—or do you mean Winston Churchill?"

Edgar threw her a glance of scorn.

"They let me think that—just to keep me from guessing the truth. But I know now. I've got a friend—a real friend. A friend who tells me the truth and lets me know just how I've been deceived. Well, my father will have to reckon with *me*. I'll throw his lies in his face! I'll challenge him with the truth. We'll see what he's got to say to that."

And suddenly breaking away, Edgar went off at a run and disappeared in the park.

Her face grave, Miss Marple went back to the house.

"We're all a little mad, dear lady," Dr. Maverick had said.

But it seemed to her that in Edgar's case it went rather further than that.

2

Lewis Serrocold arrived back at six thirty. He stopped the car at the gates and walked to the house through the park. Looking out of her window, Miss Marple saw Christian Gulbrandsen go out to meet him and the two men, having greeted one another, turned and paced to and fro, up and down the terrace.

Miss Marple had been careful to bring her bird glasses with her. At this moment she brought them into action. Was there, or was there not, a flight of siskins by that far clump of trees?

She noted as the glasses swept down before rising that both men were looking seriously disturbed. Miss Marple leant out a little further. Scraps of conversation floated up to her now and then. If either of the men should look up, it would be quite clear that an enraptured bird-watcher had her attention fixed on a point far removed from their conversation.

"—how to spare Carrie Louise the knowledge—" Gulbrandsen was saying.

The next time they passed below, Lewis Serrocold was speaking.

"—if it *can* be kept from her. I agree that it is she who must be considered...."

Other faint snatches came to the listener.

"—Really serious—" "—not justified—" "too big a responsibility to take—" "we should, perhaps, take outside advice—"

Finally Miss Marple heard Christian Gulbrandsen say, "Ach, it grows cold. We must go inside."

Miss Marple drew her head in through the window with a puzzled expression. What she had heard was too fragmentary to be easily pieced together—but it served to confirm that vague apprehension that had been gradually growing upon her and about which Ruth Van Rydock had been so positive.

Whatever was wrong at Stonygates, it definitely affected Carrie Louise.

3

Dinner that evening was a somewhat constrained meal. Both Gulbrandsen and Lewis were absentminded and absorbed in their own thoughts. Walter Hudd glowered even more than usual and, for once, Gina and Stephen seemed to have little to say either to each other or to the company at large. Conversation was mostly sustained by Dr. Maverick who had a lengthy, technical discussion with Mr. Baumgarten, the occupational therapist.

When they moved into the Hall after dinner, Christian Gulbrandsen excused himself almost at once. He said he had an important letter to write.

"So if you will forgive me, dear Carrie Louise, I will go now to my room."

"You have all you want there? Jolly?"

"Yes, yes. Everything. A typewriter, I asked, and one has been put there. Miss Bellever has been most kind and attentive."

He left the Great Hall by the door on the left which led past the foot of the main staircase and along a corridor, at the end of which was a suite of bedroom and bathroom.

When he had gone out, Carrie Louise said:

"Not going down to the theatre tonight, Gina?"

The girl shook her head. She went over and sat by the window overlooking the front drive and the court.

Stephen glanced at her, then strolled over to the big grand piano. He sat down at it and strummed very softly—a queer melancholy little tune. The two occupational therapists, Mr. Baumgarten and Mr. Lacy, and Dr. Maverick, said good night and left. Walter turned the switch of a reading lamp and with a crackling noise half the lights in the Hall went out.

He growled.

"That darned switch is always faulty. I'll go and put a new fuse in."

He left the Hall and Carrie Louise murmured, "Wally's so clever with electrical gadgets and things like that. You remember how he fixed that toaster?"

"It seems to be all he does do here," said Mildred Strete. "Mother, have you taken your tonic?"

Miss Bellever looked annoyed.

"I declare I completely forgot tonight." She jumped up and went into the dining room, returning presently with a small glass containing a little rose-coloured fluid.

Smiling a little, Carrie Louise held out an obedient hand.

"Such horrid stuff and nobody lets me forget it," she said, making a wry face.

And then, rather unexpectedly, Lewis Serrocold said: "I don't think I should take it tonight, my dear. I'm not sure it really agrees with you."

Quietly, but with that controlled energy always so apparent in him, he took the glass from Miss Bellever and put it down on the big oak Welsh dresser.

Miss Bellever said sharply:

"Really, Mr. Serrocold, I can't agree with you there. Mrs. Serrocold has been very much better since—"

She broke off and turned sharply:

The front door was pushed violently open and allowed to swing to with a crash. Edgar Lawson came into the big dim Hall with the air of a star performer making a triumphal entry.

He stood in the middle of the floor and struck an attitude.

It was almost ridiculous—but not quite ridiculous.

Edgar said theatrically:

"So I have found you, O mine enemy!"

He said it to Lewis Serrocold.

Mr. Serrocold looked mildly astonished.

"Why, Edgar, what is the matter?"

"You can say that to me—you! You know what's the matter. You've been deceiving me, spying on me, working with my enemies

against me.”

Lewis took him by the arm.

“Now, now, my dear lad, don’t excite yourself. Tell me all about it quietly. Come into my office.”

He led him across the Hall and through a door on the right closing it behind him. After he had done so, there was another sound, the sharp sound of a key being turned in the lock.

Miss Bellever looked at Miss Marple, the same idea in both their minds. *It was not Lewis Serrocold who had turned the key.*

Miss Bellever said sharply: “That young man is just about to go off his head in my opinion. It isn’t safe.”

Mildred said, “He’s a most unbalanced young man—and absolutely ungrateful for everything that’s been done for him—you ought to put your foot down, Mother.”

With a faint sigh Carrie Louise murmured:

“There’s no harm in him really. He’s fond of Lewis. He’s very fond of him.”

Miss Marple looked at her curiously. There had been no fondness in the expression that Edgar had turned on Lewis Serrocold a few moments previously, very far from it. She wondered, as she had wondered before, if Carrie Louise deliberately turned her back on reality.

Gina said sharply:

“He had something in his pocket. Edgar, I mean. Playing with it.”

Stephen murmured as he took his hands from the keys:

“In a film it would certainly have been a revolver.”

Miss Marple coughed.

“I think, you know,” she said apologetically, “it *was* a revolver.”

From behind the closed doors of Lewis’ office the sound of voices had been plainly discernible. Now, suddenly, they became clearly audible. Edgar Lawson shouted whilst Lewis Serrocold’s voice kept its even, reasonable note.

“Lies—lies—lies, all lies. *You’re* my father. I’m *your* son. You’ve deprived me of my rights. *I* ought to own this place. You hate me—you want to get rid of me!”

There was a soothing murmur from Lewis and then the hysterical voice rose still higher. It screamed out foul epithets. Edgar seemed rapidly losing control of himself. Occasional words came from Lewis—"calm—just be calm—you know none of this is true—" But they seemed not to soothe, but on the contrary to enrage the young man still further.

Insensibly everyone in the Hall was silent, listening intently to what went on behind the locked door of Lewis' study.

"I'll make you listen to me," yelled Edgar. "I'll take that supercilious expression off your face. I'll have revenge, I tell you. Revenge for all you've made me suffer."

The other voice came curtly, unlike Lewis' usual unemotional tones.

"Put that revolver down!"

Gina cried sharply:

"Edgar will kill him. He's crazy. Can't we get the police or something?"

Carrie Louise, still unmoved, said softly:

"There's no need to worry, Gina. Edgar loves Lewis. He's just dramatising himself, that's all."

Edgar's voice sounded through the door in a laugh that Miss Marple had to admit sounded definitely insane.

"Yes, I've got a revolver—and it's loaded. No, don't speak, don't move. You're going to hear me out. It's you who started this conspiracy against me and now you're going to pay for it."

What sounded like the report of a firearm made them all start, but Carrie Louise said:

"It's all right, it's outside—in the park somewhere."

Behind the locked door, Edgar was raving in a high screaming voice.

"You sit there looking at me—looking at me—pretending to be unmoved. Why don't you get down on your knees and beg for mercy? I'm going to shoot, I tell you. I'm going to shoot you dead! I'm your son—your unacknowledged despised son—you wanted me hidden away, out of the world altogether, perhaps. You set your spies to follow me—to hound me down—you plotted against me.

You, my father! My father. I'm only a bastard, aren't I? Only a bastard. You went on filling me up with lies. Pretending to be kind to me, and all the time—all the time ... you're not fit to live. I won't let you live."

Again there came a stream of obscene profanity. Somewhere during the scene Miss Marple was conscious of Miss Bellever saying:

"We must *do* something," and leaving the Hall.

Edgar seemed to pause for breath and then he shouted out,

"You're going to die—to *die*. You're going to die *now*. Take *that*, you devil, and *that!*"

Two sharp cracks rang out—not in the park this time, but definitely behind the locked door.

Somebody, Miss Marple thought it was Mildred, cried out:

"Oh God, what shall we do?"

There was a thud from inside the room and then a sound, almost more terrible than what had gone before, the sound of slow, heavy sobbing.

Somebody strode past Miss Marple and started shaking and rattling the door.

It was Stephen Restarick.

"Open the door. Open the door," he shouted.

Miss Bellever came back into the Hall. In her hand she held an assortment of keys.

"Try some of these," she said breathlessly.

At that moment the fused lights came on again. The Hall sprang into life again after its eerie dimness.

Stephen Restarick began trying the keys.

They heard the inside key fall out as he did so.

Inside, that wild desperate sobbing went on.

Walter Hudd, coming lazily back into the Hall, stopped dead and demanded:

"Say, what's going on round here?"

Mildred said tearfully,

"That awful crazy young man has shot Mr. Serrocold."

"Please." It was Carrie Louise who spoke. She got up and came across to the study door. Very gently she pushed Stephen Restarick

aside. "Let me speak to him."

She called—very softly—"Edgar ... Edgar ... let me in, will you? Please, Edgar."

They heard the key fitted into the lock. It turned and the door was slowly opened.

But it was not Edgar who opened it. It was Lewis Serrocold. He was breathing hard as though he had been running, but otherwise he was unmoved.

"It's all right, dearest," he said. "Dearest, it's quite all right."

"We thought you'd been shot," said Miss Bellever gruffly.

Lewis Serrocold frowned. He said with a trifle of asperity:

"Of course I haven't been shot."

They could see into the study by now. Edgar Lawson had collapsed by the desk. He was sobbing and gasping. The revolver lay on the floor where it had dropped from his hand.

"But we heard the shots," said Mildred.

"Oh yes, he fired twice."

"And he missed you?"

"Of course he missed me," snapped Lewis.

Miss Marple did not consider that there was any of course about it. The shots must have been fired at fairly close range.

Lewis Serrocold said irritably:

"Where's Maverick? It's Maverick we need."

Miss Bellever said:

"I'll get him. Shall I ring up the police as well?"

"Police? Certainly not."

"Of course, we must ring up the police," said Mildred. "He's dangerous."

"Nonsense," said Lewis Serrocold. "Poor lad. Does he look dangerous?"

At the moment he did not look dangerous. He looked young and pathetic and rather repulsive.

His voice had lost its carefully acquired accent.

"I didn't mean to do it," he groaned. "I dunno what came over me—talking all that stuff—I must have been mad."

Mildred sniffed.

"I really must have been mad. I didn't mean to. Please, Mr. Serrocold, I really didn't mean to."

Lewis Serrocold patted him on the shoulder.

"That's all right, my boy. No damage done."

"I might have killed you, Mr. Serrocold."

Walter Hudd walked across the room and peered at the wall behind the desk.

"The bullets went in here," he said. His eye dropped to the desk and the chair behind it. "Must have been a near miss," he said grimly.

"I lost my head. I didn't rightly know what I was doing. I thought he'd done me out of my rights. I thought—"

Miss Marple put in the question she had been wanting to ask for some time.

"Who told you," she asked, "that Mr. Serrocold was your father?"

Just for a second, a sly expression peeped out of Edgar's distracted face. It was there and gone in a flash.

"Nobody," he said. "I just got it into my head."

Walter Hudd was staring down at the revolver where it lay on the floor.

"Where the hell did you get that gun?" he demanded.

"Gun?" Edgar stared down at it.

"Looks mighty like my gun," said Walter. He stooped down and picked it up. "By heck, it *is*! You took it out of my room, you creeping louse you."

Lewis Serrocold interposed between the cringing Edgar and the menacing American.

"All this can be gone into later," he said. "Ah, here's Maverick. Take a look at him, will you, Maverick?"

Dr. Maverick advanced upon Edgar with a kind of professional zest. "This won't do, Edgar," he said. "This won't do, you know."

"He's a dangerous lunatic," said Mildred sharply. "He's been shooting off a revolver and raving. He only just missed my stepfather."

Edgar gave a little yelp and Dr. Maverick said reprovingly:

"Careful, please, Mrs. Strete."

"I'm sick of all this. Sick of the way you all go on here! I tell you this man's a lunatic."

With a bound, Edgar wrenched himself away from Dr. Maverick and fell to the floor at Serrocold's feet.

"Help me. Help me. Don't let them take me away and shut me up. Don't let them...."

An unpleasing scene, Miss Marple thought.

Mildred said angrily, "I tell you he's—"

Her mother said soothingly,

"Please, Mildred. Not now. He's suffering."

Walter muttered,

"Suffering cripes! They're all cuckoo round here."

"I'll take charge of him," said Dr. Maverick. "You come with me, Edgar. Bed and a sedative—and we'll talk everything over in the morning. Now you trust me, don't you?"

Rising to his feet and trembling a little, Edgar looked doubtfully at the young doctor and then at Mildred Strete.

"She said—I was a lunatic."

"No, no, you're not a lunatic."

Miss Bellever's footsteps rang purposefully across the Hall. She came in with her lips pursed together and a flushed face.

"I've telephoned the police," she said grimly. "They will be here in a few minutes."

Carrie Louise cried, "Jolly!" in tones of dismay.

Edgar uttered a wail.

Lewis Serrocold frowned angrily.

"I told you, Jolly, I did *not* want the police summoned. This is a medical matter."

"That's as may be," said Miss Bellever. "I've my own opinion. But I had to call the police. Mr. Gulbrandsen's been shot dead."

Eight

It was a moment or two before anyone took in what she was saying.

Carrie Louise said incredulously:

"Christian shot? Dead? Oh, surely, that's impossible."

"If you don't believe me," said Miss Bellever, pursing her lips, and addressing not so much Carrie Louise, as the assembled company, "go and look for yourselves."

She was angry. And her anger sounded in the crisp sharpness of her voice.

Slowly, unbelievably, Carrie Louise took a step towards the door. Lewis Serrocold put a hand on her shoulder.

"No, dearest, let me go."

He went out through the doorway. Dr. Maverick, with a doubtful glance at Edgar, followed him. Miss Bellever went with them.

Miss Marple gently urged Carrie Louise into a chair. She sat down, her eyes looking hurt and stricken.

"Christian—shot?" she said again.

It was the bewildered, hurt tone of a child.

Walter Hudd remained close by Edgar Lawson, glowering down at him. In his hand he held the gun that he had picked up from the floor.

Mrs. Serrocold said in a wondering voice:

"But who could possibly want to shoot *Christian*?"

It was not a question that demanded an answer.

Walter muttered under his breath:

"Nuts! The whole lot of them."

Stephen had moved protectively closer to Gina. Her young, startled face was the most vivid thing in the room.

Suddenly the front door opened and a rush of cold air, together with a man in a big overcoat, came in.

The heartiness of his greeting seemed incredibly shocking.

"Hullo, everybody, what's going on tonight? A lot of fog on the road. I had to go dead slow."

For a startled moment, Miss Marple thought that she was seeing double. Surely the same man could not be standing by Gina and coming in by the door. Then she realised that it was only a likeness and not, when you looked closely, such a very strong likeness. The two men were clearly brothers with a strong family resemblance, but no more.

Where Stephen Restarick was thin to the point of emaciation, the newcomer was sleek. The big coat with the astrakhan collar fitted the sleekness of body snugly. A handsome young man and one who bore upon him the authority and good humour of success.

But Miss Marple noted one thing about him. His eyes, as he entered the Hall, looked immediately at Gina.

He said, a little doubtfully:

"You *did* expect me? You got my wire?"

He was speaking now to Carrie Louise. He came towards her.

Almost mechanically, she put up her hand to him. He took it and kissed it gently. It was an affectionate act of homage, not a mere theatrical courtesy.

She murmured:

"Of course, Alex dear—of course. Only, you see—things have been happening—"

"Happening?"

Mildred gave the information, gave it with a kind of grim relish that Miss Marple found distasteful.

"Christian Gulbrandsen," she said. "My brother Christian Gulbrandsen has been found shot dead."

"Good God," Alex registered a more than life-size dismay. "Suicide, do you mean?"

Carrie Louise moved swiftly.

"Oh no," she said. "It couldn't be suicide. Not *Christian!* Oh no."

"Uncle Christian would never shoot himself, I'm sure," said Gina.

Alex Restarick looked from one person to the other. From his brother Stephen he received a short confirmative nod. Walter Hudd stared back at him with faint resentment. Alex's eyes rested on Miss Marple with a sudden frown. It was as though he had found some unwanted prop on a stage set.

He looked as though he would like her explained. But nobody explained her, and Miss Marple continued to look an old, fluffy and sweetly bewildered old lady.

"When?" asked Alex. "When did this happen, I mean?"

"Just before you arrived," said Gina. "About—oh three or four minutes ago, I suppose. Why, of course, we actually heard the shot. Only we didn't notice it—not really."

"Didn't notice it? Why not?"

"Well, you see, there were other things going on ..." Gina spoke rather hesitantly.

"Sure were," said Walter with emphasis.

Juliet Bellever came into the Hall by the door from the library.

"Mr. Serrocold suggests that we should all wait in the library. It would be convenient for the police. Except for Mrs. Serrocold. You've had a shock, Cara. I've ordered some hot bottles to be put in your bed. I'll take you up and—"

Rising to her feet, Carrie Louise shook her head.

"I must see Christian first," she said.

"Oh, no, dear. Don't upset yourself—"

Carrie Louise put her very gently to one side.

"Dear Jolly—you don't understand." She looked round and said, "Jane?"

Miss Marple had already moved towards her.

"Come with me, will you, Jane?"

They moved together towards the door. Dr. Maverick, coming in, almost collided with them.

Miss Bellever exclaimed:

"Dr. Maverick. Do stop her. So foolish."

Carrie Louise looked calmly at the young doctor. She even gave a tiny smile.

Dr. Maverick said:

"You want to go and—see him?"

"I must."

"I see." He stood aside. "If you feel you must, Mrs. Serrocold. But afterwards, please go and lie down and let Miss Bellever look after you. At the moment you do not feel the shock, but I assure you that you will do so."

"Yes. I expect you are quite right. I will be quite sensible. Come, Jane."

The two women moved out through the door, past the foot of the main staircase and along the corridor, past the dining room on the right and the double door, leading to the kitchen quarters on the left, past the side door to the terrace and on to the door that gave admission to the Oak Suite that had been allotted to Christian Gulbrandsen. It was a room furnished as a sitting room more than a bedroom, with a bed in an alcove to one side and a door leading into a dressing room and bathroom.

Carrie Louise stopped on the threshold. Christian Gulbrandsen had been sitting at the big mahogany desk with a small portable typewriter open in front of him. He sat there now, but slumped sideways in the chair. The high arms of the chair prevented him from slipping to the floor.

Lewis Serrocold was standing by the window. He had pulled the curtain a little aside and was gazing out into the night.

He looked round and frowned.

"My dearest, you shouldn't have come."

He came towards her and she stretched out a hand to him. Miss Marple retreated a step or two.

"Oh yes, Lewis. I had to—see him. One has to know just exactly how things are."

She walked slowly towards the desk.

Lewis said warningly:

"You mustn't touch anything. The police must have things left exactly as we found them."

"Of course. He was shot deliberately by someone, then?"

"Oh yes." Lewis Serrocold looked a little surprised that the question had even been asked. "I thought—you knew that?"

"I did really. Christian would not commit suicide, and he was such a competent person that it could not possibly have been an accident. That only leaves"—she hesitated a moment—"murder."

She walked up behind the desk and stood looking down at the dead man. There was sorrow and affection in her face.

"Dear Christian," she said. "He was always good to me."

Softly, she touched the top of his head with her fingers.

"Bless you and thank you, dear Christian," she said.

Lewis Serrocold said with something more like emotion than Miss Marple had ever seen in him before:

"I wish to God I could have spared you this, Caroline."

His wife shook her head gently.

"You can't really spare anyone anything," she said. "Things always have to be faced sooner or later. And therefore it had better be sooner. I'll go and lie down now. I suppose you'll stay here, Lewis, until the police come?"

"Yes."

Carrie Louise turned away and Miss Marple slipped an arm around her.

Nine

Inspector Curry and his entourage found Miss Bellever alone in the Great Hall when they arrived.

She came forward efficiently.

"I am Juliet Bellever, companion and secretary to Mrs. Serrocold."

"It was you who found the body and telephoned to us?"

"Yes. Most of the household are in the library—through that door there. Mr. Serrocold remained in Mr. Gulbrandsen's room to see that nothing was disturbed. Dr. Maverick, who first examined the body, will be here very shortly. He had to take a—case over to the other wing. Shall I lead the way?"

"If you please."

"Competent woman," thought the Inspector to himself. "Seems to have got the whole thing taped."

He followed her along the corridor.

For the next twenty minutes the routine of police procedure was duly set in motion. The photographer took the necessary pictures. The police surgeon arrived and was joined by Dr. Maverick. Half an hour later, the ambulance had taken away the mortal remains of Christian Gulbrandsen, and Inspector Curry started his official interrogation.

Lewis Serrocold took him into the library and he glanced keenly round the assembled people making brief notes in his mind. An old lady with white hair, a middle-aged lady, the good-looking girl he'd seen driving her car round the countryside, that odd-looking American husband of hers. A couple of young men who were mixed

up in the outfit somewhere or other and the capable woman, Miss Bellever, who'd phoned him and met him on arrival.

Inspector Curry had already thought out a little speech and he now delivered it as planned.

"I'm afraid this is all very upsetting to you," he said, "and I hope not to keep you too long this evening. We can go into things more thoroughly tomorrow. It was Miss Bellever who found Mr. Gulbrandsen dead and I'll ask Miss Bellever to give me an outline of the general situation as that will save too much repetition. Mr. Serrocold, if you want to go up to your wife, please do and when I have finished with Miss Bellever, I should like to talk to you. Is that all quite clear? Perhaps there is some small room where—"

Lewis Serrocold said:

"My office, Jolly?"

Miss Bellever nodded, and said, "I was just going to suggest it."

She led the way across the Great Hall and Inspector Curry and his attendant sergeant followed her.

Miss Bellever arranged them and herself suitably. It might have been she and not Inspector Curry who was in charge of the investigation.

The moment had come, however, when the initiative passed to him. Inspector Curry had a pleasant voice and manner. He looked quiet and serious and just a little apologetic. Some people made the mistake of underrating him. Actually he was as competent in his way as Miss Bellever was in hers. But he preferred not to make a parade of the fact.

He cleared his throat.

"I've had the main facts from Mr. Serrocold. Mr. Christian Gulbrandsen was the eldest son of the late Eric Gulbrandsen, the founder of the Gulbrandsen Trust and Fellowship ... and all the rest of it. He was one of the trustees of this place and he arrived here unexpectedly yesterday. That is correct?"

"Yes."

Inspector Curry was pleased by her conciseness. He went on.

"Mr. Serrocold was away in Liverpool. He returned this evening by the 6:30 train."

"Yes."

"After dinner this evening, Mr. Gulbrandsen announced his intention of working in his own room and left the rest of the party here after coffee had been served. Correct?"

"Yes."

"Now, Miss Bellever, please tell me in your own words how you came to discover him dead."

"There was a rather unpleasant incident this evening. A young man, a psychopathic case, became very unbalanced and threatened Mr. Serrocold with a revolver. They were locked in this room. The young man eventually fired the revolver—you can see the bullet holes in the wall there. Fortunately Mr. Serrocold was unhurt. After firing the shots, this young man went completely to pieces. Mr. Serrocold sent me to find Dr. Maverick. I got through on the house phone, but he was not in his room. I found him with one of his colleagues and gave him the message and he came here at once. On my own way back, I went to Mr. Gulbrandsen's room. I wanted to ask him if there was anything he would like—hot milk, or whisky before settling for the night. I knocked, but there was no response, so I opened the door. I saw that Mr. Gulbrandsen was dead. I then rang you up."

"What entrances and exits are there to the house? And how are they secured? Could anyone have come in from outside without being heard or seen?"

"Anyone could have come in by the side door to the terrace. That is not locked until we all go to bed, as people come in and out that way to go to the College buildings."

"And you have, I believe, between two hundred and two hundred and fifty juvenile delinquents in the College?"

"Yes. But the College buildings are well secured and patrolled. I should say it was most unlikely that anyone could leave the College unsponsored."

"We shall have to check up on that, of course. Had Mr. Gulbrandsen given any cause for—shall we say, rancour? Any unpopular decisions as to policy?"

Miss Bellever shook her head.

"Oh no, Mr. Gulbrandsen had nothing whatever to do with the running of the College, or with administrative matters."

"What was the purpose of his visit?"

"I have no idea."

"But he was annoyed to find Mr. Serrocold absent, and immediately decided to wait until he returned?"

"Yes."

"So his business here was definitely with Mr. Serrocold?"

"Yes. But it would be—because it would be almost certainly business to do with the Institute."

"Yes, presumably that is so. Did he have a conference with Mr. Serrocold?"

"No, there was no time. Mr. Serrocold only arrived just before dinner this evening."

"But after dinner, Mr. Gulbrandsen said he had important letters to write and went away to do so. He didn't suggest a session with Mr. Serrocold?"

Miss Bellever hesitated.

"No. No, he didn't."

"Surely that was rather odd—if he had waited on at inconvenience to himself to see Mr. Serrocold?"

"Yes, it was odd."

The oddness of it seemed to strike Miss Bellever for the first time.

"Mr. Serrocold did not accompany him to his room?"

"No. Mr. Serrocold remained in the Hall."

"And you have no idea at what time Mr. Gulbrandsen was killed?"

"I think it is possible that we heard the shot. If so, it was at twenty-three minutes past nine."

"You heard a shot? And it did not alarm you?"

"The circumstances were peculiar."

She explained in rather more detail the scene between Lewis Serrocold and Edgar Lawson which had been in progress.

"So it occurred to no one that the shot might actually have come from within the house?"

"No. No, I certainly don't think so. We were all so relieved, you know, that the shot didn't come from in here."

Miss Bellever added rather grimly:

"You don't expect murder and attempted murder in the same house on the same night."

Inspector Curry acknowledged the truth of that.

"All the same," said Miss Bellever, suddenly, "you know I believe that's what made me go along to Mr. Gulbrandsen's room later. I did mean to ask him if he would like anything, but it was a kind of excuse to reassure myself that everything was all right."

Inspector Curry stared at her for a moment.

"What made you think it mightn't be all right?"

"I don't know. I think it was the shot outside. It hadn't meant anything at the time. But afterwards it came back into my mind. I told myself that it was only a backfire from Mr. Restarick's car—"

"Mr. Restarick's car?"

"Yes. Alex Restarick. He arrived by car this evening—he arrived just after all this happened."

"I see. When you discovered Mr. Gulbrandsen's body, did you touch anything in the room?"

"Of course not." Miss Bellever sounded reproachful. "Naturally I knew that nothing must be touched or moved."

"And just now, when you took us into the room, everything was exactly as it had been when you found the body?"

Miss Bellever considered. She sat back screwing up her eyes. She had, Inspector Curry thought, one of those photographic memories.

"One thing was different," she said. "There was nothing in the typewriter."

"You mean," said Inspector Curry, "that when you first went in, Mr. Gulbrandsen had been writing a letter on the typewriter, and that that letter had since been removed?"

"Yes, I'm almost sure that I saw the white edge of the paper sticking up."

"Thank you, Miss Bellever. Who else went into that room before we arrived?"

"Mr. Serrocold, of course. He remained there when I came to meet you. And Mrs. Serrocold and Miss Marple went there. Mrs. Serrocold insisted."

"Mrs. Serrocold and Miss Marple," said Inspector Curry. "Which is Miss Marple?"

"The old lady with white hair. She was a school friend of Mrs. Serrocold's. She came on a visit about four days ago."

"Well, thank you, Miss Bellever. All that you have told us is quite clear. I'll go into things with Mr. Serrocold now. Ah, but perhaps—Miss Marple's an old lady, isn't she? I'll just have a word with her first and then she can go off to bed. Rather cruel to keep an old lady like that up," said Inspector Curry virtuously. "This must have been a shock to her."

"I'll tell her, shall I?"

"If you please."

Miss Bellever went out. Inspector Curry looked at the ceiling.

"Gulbrandsen?" he said. "Why Gulbrandsen? Two hundred odd, maladjusted youngsters on the premises. No reason any of them shouldn't have done it. Probably one of them did. But why Gulbrandsen? The stranger within the gates."

Sergeant Lake said: "Of course, we don't know everything yet."

Inspector Curry said:

"So far, we don't know anything at all."

He jumped up and was gallant when Miss Marple came in. She seemed a little flustered and he hurried to put her at her ease.

"Now don't upset yourself, Ma'am." The old ones like Ma'am, he thought. To them, police officers were definitely of the lower classes and should show respect to their betters. "This is all very distressing, I know. But we've just got to get the facts clear. Get it all clear."

"Oh yes, I know," said Miss Marple. "So difficult, isn't it? To be clear about anything, I mean. Because if you're looking at one thing, you can't be looking at another. And one so often looks at the wrong thing, though whether because one happens to do so or because you're meant to, it's very hard to say. Misdirection, the conjurers call it. So clever, aren't they? And I never *have* known how they manage with a bowl of goldfish—because really that cannot fold up small, can it?"

Inspector Curry blinked a little and said soothingly:

"Quite so. Now, Ma'am, I've had an account of this evening's events from Miss Bellever. A most anxious time for all of you, I'm sure."

"Yes, indeed. It was all so *dramatic*, you know."

"First this to-do between Mr. Serrocold and"—he looked down at a note he had made—"this Edgar Lawson."

"A very odd young man," said Miss Marple. "I have felt all along that there was something wrong about him."

"I'm sure you have," said Inspector Curry. "And then, after that excitement was over, there came Mr. Gulbrandsen's death. I understand that you went with Mrs. Serrocold to see the—er—the body."

"Yes, I did. She asked me to come with her. We are very old friends."

"Quite so. And you went along to Mr. Gulbrandsen's room. Did you touch anything while you were in the room, either of you?"

"Oh no. Mr. Serrocold warned us not to."

"Did you happen to notice, Ma'am, whether there was a letter or a piece of paper, say, in the typewriter?"

"There wasn't," said Miss Marple promptly. "I noticed that at once because it seemed to me odd. Mr. Gulbrandsen was sitting there at the typewriter, so he must have been typing something. Yes, I thought it very odd."

Inspector Curry looked at her sharply. He said:

"Did you have much conversation with Mr. Gulbrandsen while he was here?"

"Very little."

"There is nothing especial—or significant that you can remember?"

Miss Marple considered.

"He asked me about Mrs. Serrocold's health. In particular, about her heart."

"Her heart? Is there something wrong with her heart?"

"Nothing whatever, I understand."

Inspector Curry was silent for a moment or two, then he said:

"You heard a shot this evening during the quarrel between Mr. Serrocold and Edgar Lawson?"

"I didn't actually hear it myself. I am a little deaf, you know. But Mrs. Serrocold mentioned it as being outside in the park."

"Mr. Gulbrandsen left the party immediately after dinner, I understand?"

"Yes, he said he had letters to write."

"He didn't show any wish for a business conference with Mr. Serrocold?"

"No."

Miss Marple added:

"You see, they'd already had one little talk."

"They had? When? I understood that Mr. Serrocold only returned home just before dinner."

"That's quite true, but he walked up through the park, and Mr. Gulbrandsen went out to meet him and they walked up and down the terrace together."

"Who else knows this?"

"I shouldn't think anybody else," said Miss Marple. "Unless, of course, Mr. Serrocold told Mrs. Serrocold. I just happened to be looking out of my window—at some birds."

"Birds?"

"Birds." Miss Marple added after a moment or two, "I thought, perhaps, they might be siskins."

Inspector Curry was uninterested in siskins.

"You didn't," he said delicately, "happen to—er—overhear anything of what they said?"

Innocent, china blue eyes met his.

"Only fragments, I'm afraid," said Miss Marple gently.

"And those fragments?"

Miss Marple was silent a moment, then she said:

"I do not know the actual subject of their conversation, but their immediate concern was to keep whatever it was from the knowledge of Mrs. Serrocold. To spare her—that was how Mr. Gulbrandsen put it, and Mr. Serrocold said, 'I agree that it is she who must be

considered.' They also mentioned a 'big responsibility' and that they should, perhaps, 'take outside advice.'"

She paused.

"I think, you know, you had better ask Mr. Serrocold himself about all this."

"We shall do so, Ma'am. Now there is nothing else that struck you as unusual this evening?"

Miss Marple considered.

"It was all so unusual, if you know what I mean—"

"Quite so. Quite so."

Something flickered into Miss Marple's memory.

"There was one rather unusual incident. Mr. Serrocold stopped Mrs. Serrocold from taking her medicine. Miss Bellever was quite put out about it."

She smiled in a deprecating fashion.

"But that, of course, is such a little thing...."

"Yes, of course. Well, thank you, Miss Marple."

As Miss Marple went out of the room, Sergeant Lake said: "She's old, but she's sharp...."

Ten

Lewis Serrocold came into the office and immediately the whole focus of the room shifted. He turned to close the door behind him, and in doing so he created an atmosphere of privacy. He walked over and sat down, not in the chair Miss Marple had just vacated but in his own chair behind the desk. Miss Bellever had settled Inspector Curry in a chair drawn up to one side of the desk, as though unconsciously she had reserved Lewis Serrocold's chair against his coming.

When he had sat down, Lewis Serrocold looked at the two police officers thoughtfully. His face looked drawn and tired. It was the face of a man who was passing through a severe ordeal, and it surprised Inspector Curry a little because, though Christian Gulbrandsen's death must undeniably have been a shock to Lewis Serrocold, yet Gulbrandsen had not been a close friend or relation, only a rather remote connection by marriage.

In an odd way, the tables seemed to have been turned. It did not seem as though Lewis Serrocold had come into the room to answer police questioning. It seemed rather that Lewis Serrocold had arrived to preside over a court of inquiry. It irritated Inspector Curry a little.

He said briskly: "Now, Mr. Serrocold—"

Lewis Serrocold still seemed lost in thought. He said with a sigh, "How difficult it is to know the right thing to do."

Inspector Curry said:

"I think we will be the judges as to that, Mr. Serrocold. Now about Mr. Gulbrandsen, he arrived unexpectedly, I understand?"

"Quite unexpectedly."

"You did not know he was coming?"

"I had not the least idea of it."

"And you have no idea of why he came?"

Lewis Serrocold said quietly,

"Oh yes, I know why he came. He told me."

"When?"

"I walked up from the station. He was watching from the house and came out to meet me. It was then that he explained what had brought him here."

"Business connected with the Gulbrandsen Institute, I suppose?"

"Oh no, it was nothing to do with the Gulbrandsen Institute."

"Miss Bellever seemed to think it was."

"Naturally. That would be the assumption. Gulbrandsen did nothing to correct that impression. Neither did I."

"Why, Mr. Serrocold?"

Lewis Serrocold said slowly:

"Because it seemed to both of us important that no hint should arise as to the real purpose of his visit."

"What was the real purpose?"

Lewis Serrocold was silent for a minute or two. He sighed.

"Gulbrandsen came over here regularly twice a year for meetings of the trustees. The last meeting was only a month ago. Consequently he was not due to come over again for another five months. I think, therefore, that anyone might realise that the business that brought him must definitely be urgent business, but I still think that the normal assumption would be that it *was* a business visit, and that the matter—however urgent—would be a Trust matter. As far as I know, Gulbrandsen did nothing to contradict that impression—or thought he didn't. Yes, perhaps that is nearer the truth—he thought he didn't."

"I'm afraid, Mr. Serrocold, that I don't quite follow you."

Lewis Serrocold did not answer at once. Then he said gravely:

"I fully realise that with Gulbrandsen's death—which was murder, undeniably murder, I have got to put all the facts before you. But, frankly, I am concerned for my wife's happiness and peace of mind.

It is not for me to dictate to you, Inspector, but if you can see your way to keeping certain things from her as far as possible, I shall be grateful. You see, Inspector Curry, Christian Gulbrandsen came here expressly to tell me that he believed my wife was being slowly and cold-bloodedly poisoned."

"What?"

Curry leaned forward incredulously.

Serrocold nodded.

"Yes, it was, as you can imagine, a tremendous shock to me. I had had no suspicion of such a thing myself, but as soon as Christian told me, I realised that certain symptoms my wife had complained of lately, were quite compatible with that belief. What she took to be rheumatism, leg cramps, pain, and occasional sickness. All that fits in very well *with the symptoms of arsenic poisoning.*"

"Miss Marple told us that Christian Gulbrandsen asked her about the condition of Mrs. Serrocold's heart?"

"Did he now? That is interesting. I suppose he thought that a heart poison would be used since it paved the way to a sudden death without undue suspicion. But I think myself that arsenic is more likely."

"You definitely think, then, that Christian Gulbrandsen's suspicions were well founded?"

"Oh yes, I think so. For one thing, Gulbrandsen would hardly come to me with such a suggestion unless he was fairly sure of his facts. He was a cautious and hardheaded man, difficult to convince, but very shrewd."

"What was his evidence?"

"We had no time to go into that. Our interview was a hurried one. It served only the purpose of explaining his visit, and a mutual agreement that nothing whatever should be said to my wife about the matter until we were sure of our facts."

"And whom did he suspect of administering poison?"

"He did not say, and actually I don't think he knew. He *may* have suspected. I think now that he probably did suspect—otherwise why should he be killed?"

"But he mentioned no name to you?"

"He mentioned no name. We agreed that we must investigate the matter thoroughly, and he suggested inviting the advice and cooperation of Dr. Galbraith, the Bishop of Cromer. Dr. Galbraith is a very old friend of the Gulbrandsens and is one of the trustees of the Institute. He is a man of great wisdom and experience and would be of great help and comfort to my wife if—if it was necessary to tell her of our suspicions. We meant to rely on his advice as to whether or not to consult the police."

"Quite extraordinary," said Curry.

"Gulbrandsen left us after dinner to write to Dr. Galbraith. He was actually in the act of typing a letter to him when he was shot."

"How do you know?"

Lewis said calmly,

"Because I took the letter out of the typewriter. I have it here."

From his breast pocket, he drew out a folded typewritten sheet of paper and handed it to Curry.

The latter said sharply.

"You shouldn't have taken this, or touched anything in the room."

"I touched nothing else. I know that I committed an unpardonable offence in your eyes in moving this, but I had a very strong reason. I felt certain that my wife would insist on coming into the room and I was afraid that she might read something of what is written here. I admit myself in the wrong, but I am afraid I would do the same again. I would do anything—*anything*—to save my wife unhappiness."

Inspector Curry said no more for the moment. He read the typewritten sheet.

Dear Dr. Galbraith. If it is at all possible, I beg that you will come to Stonygates as soon as you receive this. A crisis of extraordinary gravity has arisen and I am at a loss how to deal with it. I know how deep your affection is for our dear Carrie Louise, and how grave your concern will be for anything that affects her. How much has she got to know? How much can

we keep from her? Those are the questions that I find so difficult to answer.

Not to beat about the bush, I have reason to believe that that sweet and innocent lady is being slowly poisoned. I first suspected this when—

Here the letter broke off abruptly.

Curry said:

"And when he had reached this point, Christian Gulbrandsen was shot?"

"Yes."

"But why on earth was this letter left in the typewriter?"

"I can only conceive of two reasons—one that the murderer had no idea to whom Gulbrandsen was writing and what was the subject of the letter. Secondly—he may not have had time. He may have heard someone coming and only had just time to escape unobserved."

"And Gulbrandsen gave you no hint as to who he suspected—if he did suspect anyone?"

There was, perhaps, a very slight pause before Lewis answered. "None whatever."

He added, rather obscurely:

"Christian was a very fair man."

"How do you think this poison, arsenic or whatever it may be—was or is being administered?"

"I thought over that whilst I was changing for dinner, and it seemed to me that the most likely vehicle was some medicine, a tonic, that my wife was taking. As regards food we all partook of the same dishes and my wife has nothing specially prepared for her. But anyone could add arsenic to the medicine bottle."

"We must take the medicine and have it analysed."

Lewis said quietly:

"I already have a sample of it. I took it this evening before dinner."

From a drawer in the desk, he took out a small, corked bottle with a red fluid in it.

Inspector Curry said with a curious glance:

"You think of everything, Mr. Serrocold."

"I believe in acting promptly. Tonight, I stopped my wife from taking her usual dose. It is still in a glass on the oak dresser in the Hall—the bottle of tonic itself is in the drawing room."

Curry leaned forward across the desk. He lowered his voice and spoke confidentially and without officialdom.

"You'll excuse me, Mr. Serrocold, but just *why* are you so anxious to keep this from your wife? Are you afraid she'd panic? Surely, for her own sake, it would be as well if she were warned."

"Yes—yes, that may well be so. But I don't think you quite understand. Without knowing my wife, Caroline, it would be difficult. My wife, Inspector Curry, is an idealist, a completely trustful person. Of her it may truly be said that she sees no evil, hears no evil, and speaks no evil. It would be inconceivable to her that anyone could wish to kill her. But we have to go farther than that. It is not just 'anyone.' It is a case—surely you see that—of somebody possibly very near and dear to her..."

"So that's what you think?"

"We have got to face facts. Close at hand we have a couple of hundred warped and stunted personalities who have expressed themselves often enough by crude and senseless violence. But by the very nature of things, none of *them* can be suspect in this case. A slow poisoner is someone living in the intimacy of family life. Think of the people who are here in this house; her husband, her daughter, her granddaughter, her granddaughter's husband, her stepson whom she regards as her own son, Miss Bellever, her devoted companion and friend of many years. All very near and dear to her—and yet the suspicion must arise—is it one of them?"

Curry answered slowly,

"There *are* outsiders—"

"Yes, in a sense. There is Dr. Maverick, one or two of the staff are often with us, there are the servants—but, frankly, what possible motive could they have?"

Inspector Curry said,

"And there's young—what is his name again—Edgar Lawson?"

"Yes. But he has only been down here as a casual visitor just lately. He has no possible motive. Besides, he is deeply attached to Caroline—just as everyone is."

"But he's unbalanced. What about this attack on you tonight?"

Serrocold waved it aside impatiently.

"Sheer childishness. He had no intention of harming me."

"Not with these two bullet holes in the wall? He shot at you, didn't he?"

"He didn't mean to hit me. It was playacting, no more."

"Rather a dangerous form of playacting, Mr. Serrocold."

"You don't understand. You must talk to our psychiatrist, Dr. Maverick. Edgar is an illegitimate child. He has consoled himself for his lack of a father and a humble origin by pretending to himself that he is the son of a celebrated man. It's a well-known phenomenon, I assure you. He was improving, improving very much. Then, for some reason, he had a setback. He identified me as his 'father' and made a melodramatic attack, waving a revolver and uttering threats. I was not in the least alarmed. When he had actually fired the revolver, he broke down and sobbed, and Dr. Maverick took him away and gave him a sedative. He'll probably be quite normal tomorrow morning."

"You don't wish to bring a charge against him?"

"That would be the worst thing possible—for him, I mean."

"Frankly, Mr. Serrocold, it seems to me he ought to be under restraint. People who go about firing off revolvers to bolster up their egos—! One has to think of the community, you know."

"Talk to Dr. Maverick on the subject," urged Lewis. "He'll give you the professional point of view. In any case," he added, "poor Edgar certainly did not shoot Gulbrandsen. He was in here threatening to shoot *me*."

"That's the point I was coming to, Mr. Serrocold. We've covered the outside. Anyone, it seems, could have come in from *outside*, and shot Mr. Gulbrandsen, since the terrace door was unlocked. But there is a narrower field *inside* the house, and in view of what you have been telling me, it seems to me that very close attention must be

paid to that. It seems possible that, with the exception of old Miss—er—yes, Marple who happened to be looking out of her bedroom window, no one was aware that you and Christian Gulbrandsen had already had a private interview. If so, Gulbrandsen may have been shot to prevent him communicating his suspicions to you. Of course, it is too early to say as yet what other motives may exist. Mr. Gulbrandsen was a wealthy man, I presume?”

“Yes, he was a very wealthy man. He has sons and daughters and grandchildren—all of whom will probably benefit by his death. But I do not think that any of his family are in this country, and they are all solid and highly respectable people. As far as I know, there are no black sheep amongst them.”

“Had he any enemies?”

“I should think it most unlikely. He was—really, he was not that type of man.”

“So it boils down, doesn’t it, to this house and the people in it? Who from *inside* the house could have killed him?”

Lewis Serrocold said slowly,

“That is difficult for me to say. There are the servants and the members of my household and our guests. They are, from your point of view, all possibilities, I suppose. I can only tell you that, as far as I know, everyone except the servants was in the Great Hall when Christian left it and whilst I was there, nobody left it.”

“Nobody at all?”

“I think”—Lewis frowned in an effort of remembrance—“oh yes. Some of the lights fused—Mr. Walter Hudd went to see to it.”

“That’s the young American gentleman?”

“Yes—of course, I don’t know what took place after Edgar and I came in here.”

“And you can’t give me anything nearer than that, Mr. Serrocold?”

Lewis Serrocold shook his head.

“No, I’m afraid I can’t help you. It’s—it’s all quite inconceivable.”

Inspector Curry sighed. He said:

“You can tell the party that they can all go to bed. I’ll talk to them tomorrow.”

When Serrocold had left the room, Inspector Curry said to Lake:

"Well—what do you think?"

"Knows—or thinks he knows, who did it," said Lake.

"Yes. I agree with you. And he doesn't like it a bit...."

Eleven

1

Gina greeted Miss Marple with a rush as the latter came down to breakfast the next morning.

"The police are here again," she said. "They're in the library this time. Wally is absolutely fascinated by them. He can't understand their being so quiet and so remote. I think he's really quite thrilled by the whole thing. I'm not. I hate it. I think it's horrible. Why do you think I'm so upset? Because I'm half Italian?"

"Very possibly. At least perhaps it explains why you don't mind showing what you feel."

Miss Marple smiled just a little as she said this.

"Jolly's frightfully cross," said Gina, hanging on Miss Marple's arm and propelling her into the dining room. "I think really because the police are in charge and she can't exactly 'run' them like she runs everybody else."

"Alex and Stephen," continued Gina severely, as they came into the dining room where the two brothers were finishing their breakfast, "just don't care."

"Gina dearest," said Alex, "you are most unkind. Good morning, Miss Marple. I care intensely. Except for the fact that I hardly knew your Uncle Christian, I'm far and away the best suspect. You do realise that, I hope."

"Why?"

"Well, I was driving up to the house at about the right time, it seems. And they've been checking up on times and it seems that I took too much time between the lodge and the house—time enough, the implication is, to leave the car, run round the house, go in through the side door, shoot Christian and rush out and back to the car again."

"And what were you really doing?"

"I thought little girls were taught quite young not to ask indelicate questions. Like an idiot, I stood for several minutes taking in the fog effect in the headlights and thinking what I'd use to get that effect on a stage. For my new 'Limehouse' ballet."

"But you can tell them that!"

"Naturally. But you know what policemen are like. They say 'thank you' very civilly and write it all down, and you've no idea *what* they are thinking except that one does feel they have rather sceptical minds."

"It would amuse me to see you in a spot, Alex," said Stephen with his thin, rather cruel smile. "Now *I'm* quite all right! I never left the Hall last night."

Gina cried, "But they couldn't possibly think it was one of *us*!"

Her dark eyes were round and dismayed.

"Don't say it must have been a tramp, dear," said Alex, helping himself lavishly to marmalade. "It's so hackneyed."

Miss Bellever looked in at the door and said:

"Miss Marple, when you have finished your breakfast, will you go to the library?"

"You again," said Gina. "Before any of us."

She seemed a little injured.

"Hi, what was that?" asked Alex.

"Didn't hear anything," said Stephen.

"It was a pistol shot."

"They've been firing shots in the room where Uncle Christian was killed," said Gina. "I don't know why. And outside too."

The door opened again and Mildred Strete came in. She was wearing black with some onyx beads.

She murmured good morning without looking at anyone and sat down.

In a hushed voice she said:

"Some tea, please, Gina. Nothing much to eat—just some toast."

She touched her nose and eyes delicately with the handkerchief she held in one hand. Then she raised her eyes and looked in an unseeing way at the two brothers. Stephen and Alex became uncomfortable. Their voices dropped to almost a whisper and presently they got up and left.

Mildred Strete said, whether to the universe or Miss Marple was not quite certain, "Not even a black tie!"

"I don't suppose," said Miss Marple apologetically, "that they knew beforehand that a murder was going to happen."

Gina made a smothered sound and Mildred Strete looked sharply at her.

"Where's Walter this morning?" she asked.

Gina flushed.

"I don't know. I haven't seen him."

She sat there uneasily like a guilty child.

Miss Marple got up.

"I'll go to the library now," she said.

2

Lewis Serrocold was standing by the window in the library.

There was no one else in the room.

He turned as Miss Marple came in and came forward to meet her, taking her hand in his.

"I hope," he said, "that you are not feeling the worse for the shock. To be at close quarters with what is undoubtedly murder must be a great strain on anyone who has not come in contact with such a thing before."

Modesty forbade Miss Marple to reply that she was, by now, quite at home with murder. She merely said that life in St. Mary Mead was not quite so sheltered as outside people believed.

"Very nasty things go on in a village, I assure you," she said. "One has an opportunity of studying things there that one would never have in a town."

Lewis Serrocold listened indulgently, but with only half an ear.

He said very simply: "I want your help."

"But of course, Mr. Serrocold."

"It is a matter that affects my wife—affects Caroline. I think that you are really attached to her?"

"Yes, indeed. Everyone is."

"That is what I believed. It seems that I am wrong. With the permission of Inspector Curry, I am going to tell you something that no one else as yet knows. Or perhaps I should say what only one person knows."

Briefly, he told her what he had told Inspector Curry the night before.

Miss Marple looked horrified.

"I can't believe it, Mr. Serrocold. I really can't believe it."

"That is what I felt when Christian Gulbrandsen told me."

"I should have said that dear Carrie Louise had not got an enemy in the world."

"It seems incredible that she should have. But you see the implication? Poisoning—slow poisoning—is an intimate family matter. It must be one of our closely knit little household—"

"If it is *true*. Are you sure that Mr. Gulbrandsen was not mistaken?"

"Christian was not mistaken. He is too cautious a man to make such a statement without foundation. Besides, the police took away Caroline's medicine bottle and a separate sample of its contents. There was arsenic in both of them—and arsenic was not prescribed. The actual quantitative tests will take longer—but the actual fact of arsenic being present is established."

"Then her rheumatism—the difficulty in walking—all that—"

"Yes, leg cramps are typical, I understand. Also, before you came, Caroline had had one or two severe attacks of a gastric nature—I never dreamed until Christian came—"

He broke off. Miss Marple said softly: "So Ruth was right!"

"Ruth?"

Lewis Serrocold sounded surprised. Miss Marple flushed.

"There is something I have not told you. My coming here was not entirely fortuitous. If you will let me explain—I'm afraid I tell things so badly. Please have patience."

Lewis Serrocold listened whilst Miss Marple told him of Ruth's unease and urgency.

"Extraordinary," he commented. "I had no idea of this."

"It was all so vague," said Miss Marple. "Ruth herself didn't know why she had this feeling. There must be a reason—in my experience there always is—but 'something wrong' was as near as she could get."

Lewis Serrocold said grimly:

"Well, it seems that she was right. Now, Miss Marple, you see how I am placed. Am I to tell Caroline of this?"

Miss Marple said quickly, "Oh no," in a distressed voice, and then flushed and stared doubtfully at Lewis. He nodded.

"So you feel as I do? As Christian Gulbrandsen did. Should we feel like that with an ordinary woman?"

"Carrie Louise is *not* an ordinary woman. She lives by her trust, by her belief in human nature—oh dear, I am expressing myself very badly. But I do feel that until we know who—"

"Yes, that is the crux. But you do see, Miss Marple, that there is a risk in saying nothing—"

"And so you want me to—how shall I put it?—watch over her?"

"You see, you are the only person whom I can trust," said Lewis Serrocold simply. "Everyone here *seems* devoted. But are they? Now your attachment goes back many years."

"And also I only arrived a few days ago," said Miss Marple pertinently.

Lewis Serrocold smiled.

"Exactly."

"It is a very mercenary question," said Miss Marple apologetically. "But who exactly would benefit if dear Carrie Louise were to die?"

"Money!" said Lewis bitterly. "It always boils down to money, does it?"

"Well, I really think it must in this case. Because Carrie Louise is a very sweet person with a great deal of charm, and one cannot really imagine anyone disliking her. She couldn't, I mean, have an *enemy*. So then it does boil down, as you put it, to a question of money, because as you don't need me to tell you, Mr. Serrocold, people will quite often do anything for money."

"I suppose so, yes."

He went on: "Naturally Inspector Curry has already taken up that point. Mr. Gilroy is coming down from London today and can give detailed information. Gilroy, Gilroy, Jaimes and Gilroy are a very eminent firm of lawyers. This Gilroy's father was one of the original trustees and they drew up both Caroline's will and the original will of Eric Gulbrandsen. I will put it in simple terms for you—"

"Thank you," said Miss Marple gratefully. "So mystifying the law, I always think."

"Eric Gulbrandsen after endowment of the College and his various fellowships and trusts and other charitable bequests, and having settled an equal sum on his daughter Mildred and on his adopted daughter Pippa (Gina's mother), left the remainder of his vast fortune in trust, the income from it to be paid to Caroline for her lifetime."

"And after her death?"

"After her death it was to be divided equally between Mildred and Pippa—or their children, if they themselves had predeceased Caroline."

"So that, in fact, it goes to Mrs. Strete and to Gina."

"Yes. Caroline has also quite a considerable fortune of her own—though not in the Gulbrandsen class. Half of this she made over to me four years ago. Of the remaining amount, she left ten thousand pounds to Juliet Bellever, and the rest equally divided between Alex and Stephen Restarick, her two stepsons."

"Oh dear," said Miss Marple. "That's bad. That's very bad."

"You mean?"

"It means everyone in the house had a financial motive."

"Yes. And yet, you know, I can't believe that any of these people would do murder. I simply can't ... Mildred is her daughter—and

already quite well provided for. Gina is devoted to her grandmother. She is generous and extravagant, but has no acquisitive feelings. Jolly Bellever is fanatically devoted to Caroline. The two Restaricks care for Caroline as though she were really their mother. They have no money of their own to speak of, but quite a lot of Caroline's income has gone towards financing their enterprises—especially so with Alex. I simply can't believe either of those two would deliberately poison her for the sake of inheriting money at her death. I just can't believe any of it, Miss Marple."

"There's Gina's husband, isn't there?"

"Yes," said Lewis gravely. "There is Gina's husband."

"You don't really know much about him. And one can't help seeing that he's a very unhappy young man."

Lewis sighed.

"He hasn't fitted in here—no. He's no interest in or sympathy for what we're trying to do. But after all, why should he? He's young, crude, and he comes from a country where a man is esteemed by the success he makes of life."

"Whilst here we are so very fond of failures," said Miss Marple.

Lewis Serrocold looked at her sharply and suspiciously.

She flushed a little and murmured rather incoherently:

"I think sometimes, you know, one can overdo things the other way ... I mean the young people with a good heredity, and brought up wisely in a good home—and with grit and pluck and the ability to get on in life—well, they are really, when one comes down to it—the sort of people a country *needs*."

Lewis frowned and Miss Marple hurried on, getting pinker and pinker and more and more incoherent.

"Not that I don't appreciate—I do indeed—you and Carrie Louise—a really noble work—real compassion—and one should have compassion—because after all it's what people *are* that counts—good and bad luck—and much more expected (and rightly) of the lucky ones. But I do think sometimes one's sense of proportion—oh, I don't mean *you*, Mr. Serrocold. Really I don't know *what* I mean—but the English *are* rather odd that way. Even in war, so much prouder of their defeats and their retreats than of their victories.

Foreigners never can understand why we're so proud of Dunkerque. It's the sort of thing they'd prefer not to mention themselves. But we always seem to be almost embarrassed by a victory—and treat it as though it weren't quite nice to boast about it. And look at all our poets! 'The Charge of the Light Brigade.' And the little Revenge went down in the Spanish Main. It's really a very odd characteristic when you come to think of it!"

Miss Marple drew a fresh breath.

"What I really mean is that everything here must seem rather peculiar to young Walter Hudd."

"Yes," Lewis allowed. "I see your point. And Walter has certainly a fine war record. There's no doubt about his bravery."

"Not that that helps," said Miss Marple candidly. "Because war is one thing, and everyday life is quite another. And actually to commit a murder, I think you do need bravery—or perhaps, more often, just conceit. Yes, conceit."

"But I would hardly say that Walter Hudd had a sufficient motive."

"Wouldn't you?" said Miss Marple. "He hates it here. He wants to get away. He wants to get Gina away. And if it's really money he wants, it would be important for Gina to get all the money before she—er—definitely forms an attachment to someone else."

"An attachment to someone else," said Lewis, in an astonished voice.

Miss Marple wondered at the blindness of enthusiastic social reformers.

"That's what I said. Both the Restaricks are in love with her, you know."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Lewis absently.

He went on:

"Stephen's invaluable to us—quite invaluable. The way he's got those lads coming along—keen—interested. They gave a splendid show last month. Scenery, costumes, everything. It just shows, as I've always said to Maverick, that it's lack of drama in their lives that leads these boys to crime. To dramatise yourself is a child's natural instinct. Maverick says—ah yes, Maverick—"

Lewis broke off.

"I want Maverick to see Inspector Curry about Edgar. The whole thing is so ridiculous really."

"What do you really know about Edgar Lawson, Mr. Serrocold?"

"Everything," said Lewis positively. "Everything, that is, that one needs to know. His background, upbringing—his deep-seated lack of confidence in himself—"

Miss Marple interrupted.

"Couldn't Edgar Lawson have poisoned Mrs. Serrocold?" she asked.

"Hardly. He's only been here a few weeks. And anyway, it's ridiculous! Why should Edgar want to poison my wife? What could he possibly gain by doing so?"

"Nothing material, I know. But he might have—some *odd* reason. He *is* odd, you know."

"You mean unbalanced?"

"I suppose so. No, I don't—not quite. What I mean is, he's all *wrong*."

It was not a very lucid exposition of what she felt. Lewis Serrocold accepted the words at their face value.

"Yes," he said with a sigh. "He's all wrong, poor lad. And he was showing such marked improvement. I can't really understand why he had this sudden setback..."

Miss Marple leaned forward eagerly.

"Yes, that's what I wondered. If—"

She broke off as Inspector Curry came into the room.

Twelve

1

Lewis Serrocold went away and Inspector Curry sat down and gave Miss Marple a rather peculiar smile.

"So Mr. Serrocold has been asking you to act as watchdog," he said.

"Well, yes," she added apologetically. "I hope you don't mind—"

"I don't mind. I think it's a very good idea. Does Mr. Serrocold know just how well qualified you are for the post?"

"I don't quite understand, Inspector."

"I see. He thinks you're just a very nice, elderly lady who was at school with his wife." He shook his head at her. "We know you're a bit more than that, Miss Marple, aren't you? Crime is right down your street. Mr. Serrocold only knows one aspect of crime—the promising beginners. Makes me a bit sick, sometimes. Daresay I'm wrong and old-fashioned. But there are plenty of good decent lads about, lads who could do with a start in life. But there, honesty has to be its own reward—millionaires don't leave trust funds to help the worthwhile. Well—well, don't pay any attention to me. I'm old-fashioned. I've seen boys—and girls—with everything against them, bad homes, bad luck, every disadvantage, and they've had the grit to win through. That's the kind I shall leave my packet to, if I ever have one. But then, of course, that's what I never shall have. Just my pension and a nice bit of garden."

He nodded his head at Miss Marple.

"Superintendent Blacker told me about you last night. Said you'd had a lot of experience of the seamy side of human nature. Well now, let's have your point of view. Who's the nigger in the woodpile? The G.I. husband?"

"That," said Miss Marple, "would be very convenient for everybody."

Inspector Curry smiled softly to himself.

"A G.I. pinched my best girl," he said reminiscently. "Naturally, I'm prejudiced. His manner doesn't help. Let's have the amateur point of view. Who's been secretly and systematically poisoning Mrs. Serrocold?"

"Well," said Miss Marple judicially, "one is always inclined, human nature being what it is, to think of the *husband*. Or if it's the other way round, the wife. That's the first assumption, don't you think, in a poisoning case?"

"I agree with you every time," said Inspector Curry.

"But really—in this case—" Miss Marple shook her head. "No, frankly—I *cannot* seriously consider Mr. Serrocold. Because you see, Inspector, he really *is* devoted to his wife. Naturally he would make a parade of being so—but it isn't a parade. It's very quiet, but it's genuine. He loves his wife, and I'm quite certain he wouldn't poison her."

"To say nothing of the fact that he wouldn't have any motive for doing so. She's made over her money to him already."

"Of course," said Miss Marple primly, "there are other reasons for a gentleman wanting his wife out of the way. An attachment to a young woman, for instance. But I really don't see any signs of it in this case. Mr. Serrocold does not act as though he had any romantic preoccupation. I'm really afraid," she sounded quite regretful about it, "we shall have to wash him out."

"Regrettable, isn't it?" said the Inspector. He grinned. "And anyway, he couldn't have killed Gulbrandsen. It seems to me that there's no doubt that the one thing hinges on the other. Whoever is poisoning Mrs. Serrocold killed Gulbrandsen to prevent him spilling the beans. What we've got to get at now is who had an opportunity to kill Gulbrandsen last night. And our prize suspect—there's no

doubt about it—is young Walter Hudd. It was he who switched on a reading lamp which resulted in a fuse going, thereby giving him the opportunity to leave the Hall and go to the fuse box. The fuse box is in the kitchen passage which opens off from the main corridor. It was during his absence from the Great Hall that the shot was heard. So that's suspect No 1 perfectly placed for committing the crime."

"And suspect No 2?" asked Miss Marple.

"Suspect 2 is Alex Restarick who was alone in his car between the lodge and the house and took too long getting there."

"Anybody else?" Miss Marple leaned forward eagerly—remembering to add, "It's very kind of you to tell me all this."

"It's not kindness," said Inspector Curry. "I've got to have your help. You put your finger on the spot when you said 'Anybody else?' Because there I've got to depend on *you*. You were there, in the Hall last night, and you can tell me *who left it...*"

"Yes—yes, I ought to be able to tell you ... but can I? You see—the circumstances—"

"You mean that you were all listening to the argument going on behind the door of Mr. Serrocold's study."

Miss Marple nodded vehemently.

"Yes, you see we were all really very frightened. Mr. Lawson looked—he really did—quite demented. Apart from Mrs. Serrocold who seemed quite unaffected, we all feared that he would do a mischief to Mr. Serrocold. He was shouting, you know, and saying the most terrible things—we could hear them quite plainly—and what with that and with most of the lights being out—I didn't really notice anything else."

"You mean that whilst that scene was going on, anybody could have slipped out of the Hall, gone along the corridor, shot Mr. Gulbrandsen, and slipped back again?"

"I think it would have been possible..."

"Could you say definitely that anybody was in the Great Hall the whole time?"

Miss Marple considered.

"I could say that Mrs. Serrocold was—because I was watching her. She was sitting quite close to the study door, and she never

moved from her seat. It surprised me, you know, that she was able to remain so calm."

"And the others?"

"Miss Bellever went out—but I think—I am almost sure—that that was *after* the shot. Mrs. Strete? I really don't know. She was sitting behind me, you see. Gina was over by the far window. I *think* she remained there the whole time but, of course, I cannot be sure. Stephen was at the piano. He stopped playing when the quarrel began to get heated—"

"We mustn't be misled by the time you heard the shot," said Inspector Curry. "That's a trick that's been done before now, you know. Fake up a shot so as to fix the time of a crime, and fix it wrong. *If* Miss Bellever had cooked up something of that kind (farfetched—but you never know) then she'd leave as she did, openly, after the shot was heard. No, we can't go by the shot. The limits are between when Christian Gulbrandsen left the Hall to the moment when Miss Bellever found him dead, and we can only eliminate those people who were known not to have had opportunity. That gives us Lewis Serrocold and young Edgar Lawson in the study, and Mrs. Serrocold in the Hall. It's very unfortunate, of course, that Gulbrandsen should be shot on the same evening that this schemozzle happened between Serrocold and this young Lawson."

"Just unfortunate, you think?" murmured Miss Marple.

"Oh? What do you think?"

"It occurred to me," murmured Miss Marple, "that it might have been *contrived*."

"So that's your idea?"

"Well, everybody seems to think it very odd that Edgar Lawson should quite suddenly have a relapse, so to speak. He'd got this curious complex, or whatever the term is, about his unknown father. Winston Churchill and Viscount Montgomery—all quite likely in his state of mind. Just any famous man he happened to think of. But suppose somebody puts it into his head that it's Lewis Serrocold who is really his father, that it's Lewis Serrocold who has been persecuting him—that he ought, by rights, to be the crown prince,

as it were, of Stonygates. In his weak mental state he'll accept the idea—work himself up into a frenzy, and sooner or later will make the kind of scene he did make. And what a wonderful cover *that* will be! Everybody will have their attention fixed on the dangerous situation that is developing—especially if somebody has thoughtfully supplied him with a revolver.”

“Hm, yes. Walter Hudd’s revolver.”

“Oh yes,” said Miss Marple, “I’d thought of that. But you know, Walter is uncommunicative and he’s certainly sullen and ungracious, but I don’t really think he’s *stupid*.”

“So you don’t think it’s Walter?”

“I think everybody would be very relieved if it *was* Walter. That sounds very unkind, but it’s because he is an outsider.”

“What about his wife?” asked Inspector Curry. “Would she be relieved?”

Miss Marple did not answer. She was thinking of Gina and Stephen Restarick standing together as she had seen them on her first day. And she thought of the way Alex Restarick’s eyes had gone straight to Gina as he had entered the Hall last night. What was Gina’s own attitude?

2

Two hours later Inspector Curry tilted back his chair, stretched himself, and sighed.

“Well,” he said, “we’ve cleared a good deal of ground.”

Sergeant Lake agreed.

“The servants are out,” he said. “They were together all through the critical period—those that sleep here. The ones that don’t live in had gone home.”

Curry nodded. He was suffering from mental fatigue.

He had interviewed physiotherapists, members of the teaching staff, and what he called to himself, the “two young lags” whose turn it had been to dine with the family that night. All their stories dovetailed and checked. He could write them off. Their activities and

habits were communal. There were no lonely souls among them. Which was useful for the purposes of alibis. Curry had kept Dr. Maverick who was, as far as he could judge, the chief person in charge of the Institute, to the end.

"But we'll have him in now, Lake."

So the young doctor bustled in, neat and spruce and rather inhuman-looking behind his pince-nez.

Maverick confirmed the statements of his staff, and agreed with Curry's findings. There had been no slackness, no loophole in the College impregnability. Christian Gulbrandsen's death could not be laid to the account of the "young patients" as Curry almost called them—so hypnotized had he become by the fervent medical atmosphere.

"But patients is exactly what they are, Inspector," said Dr. Maverick with a little smile.

It was a superior smile, and Inspector Curry would not have been human if he had not resented it just a little.

He said professionally:

"Now as regards your own movements, Dr. Maverick? Can you give me an account of them?"

"Certainly. I have jotted them down for you with the approximate times."

Dr. Maverick had left the Great Hall at fifteen minutes after nine with Mr. Lacy and Mr. Baumgarten. They had gone to Mr. Baumgarten's rooms where they had all three remained discussing certain courses of treatment until Miss Bellever had come hurrying in and asked Dr. Maverick to go to the Great Hall. That was at approximately half past nine. He had gone at once to the Hall and had found Edgar Lawson in a state of collapse.

Inspector Curry stirred a little.

"Just a minute, Dr. Maverick. Is this young man, in your opinion, definitely a mental case?"

Dr. Maverick smiled the superior smile again.

"We are all mental cases, Inspector Curry."

Tomfool answer, thought the Inspector. He knew quite well *he* wasn't a mental case, whatever Dr. Maverick might be!

"Is he responsible for his actions? He knows what he is doing, I suppose?"

"Perfectly."

"Then when he fired that revolver at Mr. Serrocold it was definitely attempted murder."

"No, no, Inspector Curry. Nothing of *that* kind."

"Come now, Dr. Maverick. I've seen the two bullet holes in the wall. They must have gone dangerously near to Mr. Serrocold's head."

"Perhaps. But Lawson had no intention of killing Mr. Serrocold or even of wounding him. He is very fond of Mr. Serrocold."

"It seems a curious way of showing it."

Dr. Maverick smiled again. Inspector Curry found that smile very trying.

"Everything one does is intentional. Every time you, Inspector, forget a name or a face it is because, unconsciously, you *wish* to forget it."

Inspector Curry looked unbelieving.

"Every time you make a slip of the tongue, that slip has a meaning. Edgar Lawson was standing a few feet away from Mr. Serrocold. He could easily have shot him dead. Instead, he missed him. Why did he miss him? Because he *wanted* to miss him. It is as simple as that. Mr. Serrocold was never in any danger—and Mr. Serrocold himself was quite aware of that fact. He understood Edgar's gesture for exactly what it was—a gesture of defiance and resentment against a universe that has denied him the simple necessities of a child's life—security and affection."

"I think I'd like to see this young man."

"Certainly if you wish. His outburst last night has had a cathartic effect. There is a great improvement today. Mr. Serrocold will be very pleased."

Inspector Curry stared hard at him, but Dr. Maverick was serious as always.

Curry sighed.

"Do you have any arsenic?" he asked.

"Arsenic?" The question took Dr. Maverick by surprise. It was clearly unexpected. "What a very curious question. Why arsenic?"

"Just answer the question, please."

"No, I have no arsenic of any kind in my possession."

"But you have some drugs?"

"Oh certainly. Sedatives. Morphia—the barbiturates. The usual things."

"Do you attend Mrs. Serrocold?"

"No. Dr. Gunter of Market Kimble is the family physician. I hold a medical degree, of course, but I practice purely as a psychiatrist."

"I see. Well, thank you very much, Dr. Maverick."

As Dr. Maverick went out, Inspector Curry murmured to Lake that psychiatrists gave him a pain in the neck.

"We'll get on to the family now," he said. "I'll see young Walter Hudd first."

Walter Hudd's attitude was cautious. He seemed to be studying the police officer with a slightly wary expression. But he was quite cooperative.

There was a good deal of defective wiring in Stonygates—the whole electric system was very old-fashioned. They wouldn't stand for a system like that in the States.

"It was installed, I believe, by the late Mr. Gulbrandsen when electric light was a novelty," said Inspector Curry with a faint smile.

"I'll say that's so! Sweet old feudal English and never been brought up to date."

The fuse which controlled most of the lights in the Great Hall had gone, and he had gone out to the fuse box to see about it. In due course he got it repaired and came back.

"How long were you away?"

"Why, that I couldn't say for sure. The fuse box is in an awkward place. I had to get steps and a candle. I was maybe ten minutes—perhaps a quarter of an hour."

"Did you hear a shot?"

"Why no, I didn't hear anything like that. There are double doors through to the kitchen quarters, and one of them is lined with a kind of felt."

"I see. And when you came back into the Hall, what did you see?"

"They were all crowded round the door into Mr. Serrocold's study. Mrs. Strete said that Mr. Serrocold had been shot—but actually that wasn't so. Mr. Serrocold was quite all right. The boob had missed him."

"You recognised the revolver?"

"Sure I recognised it! It was mine."

"When did you see it last?"

"Two or three days ago."

"Where did you keep it?"

"In the drawer in my room."

"Who knew that you kept it there?"

"I wouldn't know who knows what in this house."

"What do you mean by that, Mr. Hudd?"

"Aw, they're all nuts!"

"When you came into the Hall, was everybody else there?"

"What d'you mean by everybody?"

"The same people who were there when you went to repair the fuse."

"Gina was there ... and the old lady with white hair—and Miss Bellever ... I didn't notice particularly—but I should say so."

"Mr. Gulbrandsen arrived quite unexpectedly the day before yesterday, did he not?"

"I guess so. It wasn't his usual routine, I understand."

"Did anyone seem upset by his arrival?"

Walter Hudd took a moment or two before he answered, "Why no, I wouldn't say so."

Once more there was a touch of caution in his manner.

"Have you any idea why he came?"

"Their precious Gulbrandsen Trust I suppose. The whole setup here is crazy."

"You have these 'setups' as you call it, in the States."

"It's one thing to endow a scheme, and another to give it the personal touch as they do here. I had enough of psychiatrists in the army. This place is stiff with them. Teaching young thugs to make raffia baskets and carve pipe racks. Kids' games! It's sissy!"

Inspector Curry did not comment on this criticism. Possibly he agreed with it.

He said, eyeing Walter carefully:

"So you have no idea who could have killed Mr Gulbrandsen?"

"One of the bright boys from the College practising his technique, I'd say."

"No, Mr. Hudd, that's out. The College, in spite of its carefully produced atmosphere of freedom, is none the less a place of detention and is run on those lines. Nobody can run in and out of it after dark and commit murders."

"I wouldn't put it past them! Well—if you want to fix it nearer home, I'd say your best bet was Alex Restarick."

"Why do you say that?"

"He had the opportunity. He drove up through the grounds alone in his car."

"And why should he kill Christian Gulbrandsen?"

Walter shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm a stranger. I don't know the family setups. Maybe the old boy had heard something about Alex and was going to spill the beans to the Serrocolds."

"With what result?"

"They might cut off the dough. He can use dough—uses a good deal of it by all accounts."

"You mean—in theatrical enterprises?"

"That's what he calls it?"

"Do you suggest it was otherwise?"

Again Walter Hudd shrugged his shoulders.

"I wouldn't know," he said.

Thirteen

1

Alex Restarick was voluble. He also gestured with his hands.

"I know, I know! I'm the ideal suspect. I drive down here alone and on the way to the house, I get a creative fit. I can't expect you to understand. How should you?"

"I might," Curry put in drily, but Alex Restarick swept on.

"It's just one of those things! They come upon you there's no knowing when or how. An effect—an idea—and everything else goes to the winds. I'm producing *Limehouse Nights* next month. Suddenly—last night—the setup was wonderful ...*the* perfect lighting. Fog—and the headlights cutting through the fog and being thrown back—and reflecting dimly a tall pile of buildings. Everything helped! The shots—the running footsteps—and the chug-chugging of the electric power engine—could have been a launch on the Thames. And I thought—that's it—but what am I going to use to get just these effects?—and—"

Inspector Curry broke in.

"You heard shots? Where?"

"Out of the fog, Inspector." Alex waved his hands in the air—plump, well-kept hands. "Out of the fog. That was the wonderful part about it."

"It didn't occur to you that anything was wrong?"

"Wrong? Why should it?"

"Are shots such a usual occurrence?"

"Ah, I knew you wouldn't understand! The shots fitted into the scene I was creating. I *wanted* shots. Danger—opium—crazy business. What did I care what they were really? Backfires from a lorry on the road? A poacher after rabbits?"

"They snare rabbits mostly round here."

Alex swept on:

"A child letting off fireworks? I didn't even think about them *as*—shots. I was in Limehouse—or rather at the back of the stalls—looking at Limehouse."

"How many shots?"

"I don't know," said Alex petulantly. "Two or three. Two close together, I do remember that."

Inspector Curry nodded.

"And the sound of running footsteps, I think you said? Where were they?"

"They came to me out of the fog. Somewhere near the house."

Inspector Curry said gently:

"That would suggest that the murderer of Christian Gulbrandsen came from *outside*."

"Of course. Why not? You don't really suggest, do you, that he came from inside the house?"

Still very gently, Inspector Curry said:

"We have to think of everything."

"I suppose so," said Alex Restarick generously. "What a soul-destroying job yours must be, Inspector! The details, the times and places, the pettifogging *pettiness* of it. And in the end—what good is it all? Does it bring the wretched Christian Gulbrandsen back to life?"

"There's quite a satisfaction in getting your man, Mr. Restarick."

"The Wild Western touch!"

"Did you know Mr. Gulbrandsen well?"

"Not well enough to murder him, Inspector. I had met him, off and on, since I lived here as a boy. He made brief appearances from time to time. One of our captains of industry. The type does not interest me. He has quite a collection, I believe, of Thorwaldsen's statuary—" Alex shuddered. "That speaks for itself, does it not? My God, these rich men!"

Inspector Curry eyed him meditatively. Then he said, "Do you take any interest in poisons, Mr. Restarick?"

"In poisons? My dear man, he was surely not poisoned first and shot afterwards. That would be too madly detective story."

"He was not poisoned. But you haven't answered my question."

"Poison has a certain appeal ... It has not the crudeness of the revolver bullet or the blunt weapon. I have no special knowledge of the subject, if that is what you mean."

"Have you ever had arsenic in your possession?"

"In sandwiches—after the show? The idea has its allurements. You don't know Rose Glidon? These actresses who think they have a name! No, I have never thought of arsenic. One extracts it from weed killer or flypapers, I believe."

"How often are you down here, Mr. Restarick?"

"It varies, Inspector. Sometimes not for several weeks. But I try to get down for weekends whenever I can. I always regard Stonygates as my true home."

"Mrs. Serrocold has encouraged you to do so?"

"What I owe Mrs. Serrocold can never be repaid. Sympathy, understanding, affection—"

"And quite a lot of solid cash as well, I believe?"

Alex looked faintly disgusted.

"She treats me as a son, and she has belief in my work."

"Has she ever spoken to you about her will?"

"Certainly. But may I ask what is the point of all these questions, Inspector? There is nothing wrong with Mrs. Serrocold."

"There had better not be," said Inspector Curry grimly.

"Now what can you possibly mean by that?"

"If you don't know, so much the better," said Inspector Curry. "And if you do—I'm warning you."

When Alex had gone Sergeant Lake said:

"Pretty bogus, would you say?"

Curry shook his head.

"Difficult to say. He may have genuine creative talent. He may just like living soft and talking big. One doesn't know. Heard running footsteps, did he? I'd be prepared to bet he made that up."

"For any particular reason?"

"Definitely for a particular reason. We haven't come to it yet, but we will."

"After all, sir, one of those smart lads may have got out of the College buildings unbeknownst. Probably a few cat burglars amongst them, and if so—"

"That's what we're meant to think. Very convenient. But if that's so, Lake, I'll eat my new soft hat."

2

"I was at the piano," said Stephen Restarick. "I'd been strumming softly when the row blew up. Between Lewis and Edgar."

"What did you think of it?"

"Well—to tell the truth I didn't really take it seriously. The poor beggar has these fits of venom. He's not really loopy, you know. All this nonsense is a kind of blowing off steam. The truth is, we all get under his skin—particularly Gina, of course."

"Gina? You mean Mrs. Hudd? Why does she get under his skin?"

"Because she's a woman—and a beautiful woman, and because she thinks he's funny! She's half Italian, you know, and the Italians have that unconscious vein of cruelty. They've no compassion for anyone who's old or ugly, or peculiar in any way. They point with their fingers and jeer. That's what Gina did, metaphorically speaking. She'd no use for young Edgar. He was ridiculous, pompous, and, at bottom, fundamentally unsure of himself. He wanted to impress, and he only succeeded in looking silly. It wouldn't mean anything to her that the poor fellow suffered a lot."

"Are you suggesting that Edgar Lawson is in love with Mrs. Hudd?" asked Inspector Curry.

Stephen replied cheerfully:

"Oh yes. As a matter of fact we all are, more or less! She likes us that way."

"Does her husband like it?"

"He takes a dim view. He suffers, too, poor fellow. The thing can't last, you know. Their marriage, I mean. It will break up before long. It was just one of these war affairs."

"This is all very interesting," said the Inspector. "But we're getting away from our subject, which is the murder of Christian Gulbrandsen."

"Quite," said Stephen. "But I can't tell you anything about it. I sat at the piano, and I didn't leave the piano until dear Jolly came in with some rusty old keys and tried to fit one to the lock of the study door."

"You stayed at the piano. Did you continue to play the piano?"

"A gentle obbligato to the life and death struggle in Lewis' study? No, I stopped playing when the tempo rose. Not that I had any doubts as to the outcome. Lewis has what I can only describe as a dynamic eye. He could easily break up Edgar just by looking at him."

"Yet Edgar Lawson fired two shots at him."

Stephen shook his head gently.

"Just putting on an act, that was. Enjoying himself. My dear mother used to do it. She died or ran away with someone when I was four, but I remember her blazing off with a pistol if anything upset her. She did it at a nightclub once. Made a pattern on the wall. She was an excellent shot. Quite a bit of trouble she caused. She was a Russian dancer, you know."

"Indeed. Can you tell me, Mr. Restarick, who left the Hall yesterday evening whilst you were there—during the relevant time?"

"Wally—to fix the lights. Juliet Bellever to find a key to fit the study door. Nobody else, as far as I know."

"Would you have noticed if somebody did?"

Stephen considered.

"Probably not. That is, if they just tiptoed out and back again. It was so dark in the Hall—and there was the fight to which we were all listening avidly."

"Is there anyone you are sure *was* there the whole time?"

"Mrs. Serrocold—yes, and Gina. I'd swear to them."

"Thank you, Mr. Restarick."

Stephen went towards the door. Then he hesitated and came back.

"What's all this," he said, "about arsenic?"

"Who mentioned arsenic to you?"

"My brother."

"Ah—yes."

Stephen said:

"Has somebody been giving Mrs. Serrocold arsenic?"

"Why should you mention Mrs. Serrocold?"

"I've read of the symptoms of arsenic poisoning. Peripheral neuritis, isn't it? It would square more or less with what she's been suffering from lately. And then Lewis snatching away her tonic last night. Is *that* what's been going on here?"

"The matter is under investigation," said Inspector Curry in his most official manner.

"Does she know about it herself?"

"Mr. Serrocold was particularly anxious that she should not be—alarmed."

"Alarmed isn't the right word, Inspector. Mrs. Serrocold is never alarmed ... Is that what lies behind Christian Gulbrandsen's death? Did he find out she was being poisoned—but how could he find out? Anyway, the whole thing seems most improbable. It doesn't make sense."

"It surprises you very much, does it, Mr. Restarick?"

"Yes, indeed. When Alex spoke to me, I could hardly believe it."

"Who, in your opinion, would be likely to administer arsenic to Mrs. Serrocold?"

For a moment, a grin appeared upon Stephen Restarick's handsome face.

"Not the usual person. You can wash out the husband. Lewis Serrocold's got nothing to gain. And also he worships that woman. He can't bear her to have an ache in her little finger."

"Who then? Have you any idea?"

"Oh yes. I'd say it was a certainty."

"Explain please."

Stephen shook his head.

"It's a certainty psychologically speaking. Not in any other way. No evidence of any kind. And you probably wouldn't agree."

Stephen Restarick went out nonchalantly, and Inspector Curry drew cats on the sheet of paper in front of him.

He was thinking three things. A, that Stephen Restarick thought a good deal of himself, B, that Stephen Restarick and his brother presented a united front; and C, that Stephen Restarick was a handsome man where Walter Hudd was a plain one.

He wondered about two other things—what Stephen meant by "psychologically speaking" and whether Stephen could possibly have seen Gina from his seat at the piano. He rather thought not.

3

Into the Gothic gloom of the library, Gina brought an exotic glow. Even Inspector Curry blinked a little at the radiant young woman who sat down, leaned forward over the table and said expectantly, "Well?"

Inspector Curry, observing her scarlet shirt and dark green slacks said drily:

"I see you're not wearing mourning, Mrs. Hudd?"

"I haven't got any," said Gina. "I know everyone is supposed to have a little black number and wear it with pearls. But I don't. I hate black. I think it's hideous, and only receptionists and housekeepers and people like that ought to wear it. Anyway Christian Gulbrandsen wasn't really a relation. He's my grandmother's stepson."

"And I suppose you didn't know him very well?"

Gina shook her head.

"He came here three or four times when I was a child, but then in the war I went to America, and I only came back here to live about six months ago."

"You have definitely come back here to live? You're not just on a visit?"

"I haven't really thought," said Gina.

"You were in the Great Hall last night, when Mr. Gulbrandsen went to his room?"

"Yes. He said good night and went away. Grandam asked if he had everything he wanted and he said yes—that Jolly had fixed him up fine. Not those words, but that kind of thing. He said he had letters to write."

"And then?"

Gina described the scene between Lewis and Edgar Lawson. It was the same story as Inspector Curry had by now heard many times, but it took an added colour, a new gusto, under Gina's handling. It became drama.

"It was Wally's revolver," she said. "Fancy Edgar's having the guts to go and pinch it out of his room. I'd never have believed he'd have the guts."

"Were you alarmed when they went into the study and Edgar Lawson locked the door?"

"Oh no," said Gina, opening her enormous brown eyes very wide. "I loved it. It was so ham, you know, and so madly theatrical. Everything Edgar does is always ridiculous. One can't take him seriously for a moment."

"He did fire the revolver, though?"

"Yes. We all thought then that he'd shot Lewis after all."

"And did you enjoy that?" Inspector Curry could not refrain from asking.

"Oh no, I was terrified, then. Everyone was, except Grandam. She never turned a hair."

"That seems rather remarkable."

"Not really. She's that kind of person. Not quite in this world. She's the sort of person who never believes *anything* bad can happen. She's sweet."

"During all this scene, who was in the Hall?"

"Oh, we were all there. Except Uncle Christian, of course."

"Not *all*, Mrs. Hudd. People went in and out."

"Did they?" asked Gina vaguely.

"Your husband, for instance, went out to fix the lights."

"Yes. Wally's great at fixing things."

"During his absence, a shot was heard, I understand. A shot that you all thought came from the park?"

"I don't remember that ... Oh yes, it was just after the lights had come on again and Wally had come back."

"Did anyone else leave the Hall?"

"I don't think so. I don't remember."

"Where were you sitting, Mrs. Hudd?"

"Over by the window."

"Near the door to the library?"

"Yes."

"Did you yourself leave the Hall at all?"

"Leave? With all the excitement? Of course not."

Gina sounded scandalised by the idea.

"Where were the others sitting?"

"Mostly round the fireplace, I think. Aunt Mildred was knitting and so was Aunt Jane—Miss Marple, I mean—Grandam was just sitting."

"And Mr. Stephen Restarick?"

"Stephen? He was playing the piano to begin with. I don't know where he went later."

"And Miss Bellever?"

"Fussing about, as usual. She practically never sits down. She was looking for keys or something."

She said suddenly:

"What's all this about Grandam's tonic? Did the chemist make a mistake in making it up or something?"

"Why should you think that?"

"Because the bottle's disappeared and Jolly's been fussing round madly looking for it, in no end of a stew. Alex told her the police had taken it away. Did you?"

Instead of replying to the question, Inspector Curry said:

"Miss Bellever was upset, you say?"

"Oh! Jolly always fusses," said Gina carelessly. "She likes fussing. Sometimes I wonder how Grandam can stand it."

"Just one last question, Mrs. Hudd. You've no ideas yourself as to who killed Christian Gulbrandsen and why?"

"One of the queers did it, I should think. The thug ones are really quite sensible. I mean they only cosh people so as to rob a till or get money or jewelry—not just for fun. But one of the queers—you know, what they call mentally maladjusted—might do it for fun, don't you think? Because I can't see what other reason there could be for killing Uncle Christian except fun, do you? At least I don't mean fun, exactly—but—"

"You can't think of a motive?"

"Yes, that's what I mean," said Gina gratefully. "He wasn't robbed or anything, was he?"

"But you know, Mrs. Hudd, the College buildings were locked and barred. Nobody could get out from there without a pass."

"Don't you believe it," Gina laughed merrily. "Those boys could get out from anywhere! They've taught me a lot of tricks."

"She's a lively one," said Lake when Gina had departed. "First time I've seen her close up. Lovely figure, hasn't she. Sort of a foreign figure, if you know what I mean."

Inspector Curry threw him a cold glance. Sergeant Lake said hastily that she was a merry one. "Seems to have enjoyed it all, as you might say."

"Whether Stephen Restarick is right or not about her marriage breaking up, I notice that she went out of her way to mention that Walter Hudd was back in the Great Hall, before that shot was heard."

"Which, according to everyone else, isn't so?"

"Exactly."

"She didn't mention Miss Bellever leaving the Hall to look for keys, either."

"No," said the Inspector thoughtfully, "she didn't...."

Fourteen

1

Mrs. Strete fitted into the library very much better than Gina Hudd had done. There was nothing exotic about Mrs. Strete. She wore black with onyx beads, and she wore a hairnet over carefully arranged grey hair.

She looked, Inspector Curry reflected, exactly as the relict of a canon of the Established Church should look—which was almost odd, because so few people ever did look like what they really were.

Even the tight line of her lips had an ascetic ecclesiastical flavour. She expressed Christian Endurance, and possibly Christian Fortitude. But not, Curry thought, Christian Charity.

Moreover it was clear that Mrs. Strete was offended.

"I should have thought that you could have given me *some* idea of when you would want me, Inspector. I have been forced to sit around waiting all the morning."

It was, Curry judged, her sense of importance that was hurt. He hastened to pour oil on the troubled waters.

"I'm very sorry, Mrs. Strete. Perhaps you don't quite know how we set about these things. We start, you know, with the less important evidence—get it out of the way, so to speak. It's valuable to keep to the last a person on whose judgement we can rely—a good observer—by whom we can check what has been told us up to date."

Mrs. Strete softened visibly.

"Oh, I see. I hadn't quite realised...."

"Now you're a woman of mature judgement, Mrs. Strete. A woman of the world. And then this is your home—you're the daughter of the house, and you can tell me all about the people who are in it."

"I can certainly do that," said Mildred Strete.

"So you see that when we come to the question of who killed Christian Gulbrandsen, you can help us a great deal."

"But is there any question? Isn't it perfectly obvious who killed my brother?"

Inspector Curry leant back in his chair. His hand stroked his small neat moustache.

"Well—we have to be careful," he said. "You think it's obvious?"

"Of course. That dreadful American husband of poor Gina's. He's the only stranger here. We know absolutely nothing about him. He's probably one of these dreadful American gangsters."

"But that wouldn't quite account for his killing Christian Gulbrandsen, would it? Why should he?"

"Because Christian had found out something about him. That's what he came here for so soon after his last visit."

"Are you sure of that, Mrs. Strete?"

"Again it seems to me quite obvious. He let it be thought his visit was in connection with the Trust—but that's nonsense. He was here for that only a month ago. And nothing of importance has arisen since. So he must have come on some private business. He saw Walter on his last visit, and he may have recognised him—or perhaps made inquiries about him in the States—naturally he has agents all over the world—and found out something really damaging. Gina is a very silly girl. She always has been. It is just like her to marry a man she knows nothing about—she's always been man mad! A man wanted by the police, perhaps, or a man who's already married, or some bad character in the underworld. But my brother Christian wasn't an easy man to deceive. He came here, I'm sure, to settle the whole business. Expose Walter and show him up for what he is. And so, naturally, Walter shot him."

Inspector Curry, adding some out-sized whiskers to one of the cats on his blotting pad, said:

"Ye—es."

"Don't you agree with me that that's what *must* have happened?"

"It could be—yes," admitted the Inspector.

"What other solution could there be? Christian had no enemies. What I can't understand is why you haven't already arrested Walter?"

"Well, you see, Mrs. Strete, we have to have evidence."

"You could probably get that easily enough. If you wired to America—"

"Oh yes, we shall check up on Mr. Walter Hudd. You can be sure of that. But until we can prove motive, there's not very much to go upon. There's opportunity, of course—"

"He went out just after Christian, pretending the lights had fused —"

"They did fuse."

"He could easily arrange that."

"True."

"That gave him his excuse. He followed Christian to his room, shot him and then repaired the fuse and came back to the Hall."

"His wife says he came back before you heard the shot from outside."

"Not a bit of it! Gina would say anything. The Italians are never truthful. And she's a Roman Catholic, of course."

Inspector Curry sidestepped the ecclesiastical angle.

"You think his wife was in it with him?"

Mildred Strete hesitated for a moment.

"No—no, I don't think that." She seemed rather disappointed not to think so. She went on, "That must have been partly the motive—to prevent Gina's learning the truth about him. After all, Gina is his bread and butter."

"And a very beautiful girl."

"Oh yes. I've always said Gina is good-looking. A very common type in Italy, of course. But if you ask me, it's *money* that Walter

Hudd is after. That's why he came over here and has settled down living on the Serrocolds."

"Mrs. Hudd is very well off, I understand?"

"Not at present. My father settled the same sum on Gina's mother, as he did on me. But, of course, she took her husband's nationality (I believe the law is altered now) and what with the war and his being a Fascist, Gina has very little of her own. My mother spoils her, and her American aunt, Mrs. Van Rydock, spent fabulous sums on her and bought her everything she wanted during the war years. Nevertheless, from Walter's point of view, he can't lay his hands on much until my mother's death when a very large fortune will come to Gina."

"And to you, Mrs. Strete."

A faint colour came into Mildred Strete's cheek.

"And to me, as you say. My husband and myself always lived quietly. He spent very little money except on books—he was a great scholar. My own money has almost doubled itself. It is more than enough for my simple needs. Still one can always use money for benefit of others. Any money that comes to me, I shall regard as a sacred trust."

"But it won't be in a Trust, will it?" said Curry, wilfully misunderstanding. "It will come to you, absolutely."

"Oh yes—in that sense. Yes, it will be mine absolutely."

Something in the ring of that last word made Inspector Curry raise his head sharply. Mrs. Strete was not looking at him. Her eyes were shining, and her long thin mouth was curved in a triumphant smile.

Inspector Curry said in a considering voice:

"So in your view—and, of course, you've had ample opportunities of judging—Mr. Walter Hudd wants the money that will come to his wife when Mrs. Serrocold dies. By the way, she's not very strong is she, Mrs. Strete?"

"My mother has always been delicate."

"Quite so. But delicate people often live as long or longer than people who have robust health."

"Yes, I suppose they do."

"You haven't noticed your mother's health failing just lately?"

"She suffers from rheumatism. But then one must have something as one grows older. I've no sympathy with people who make a fuss over inevitable aches and pains."

"Does Mrs. Serrocold make a fuss?"

Mildred Strete was silent for a moment. She said at last:

"She does not make a fuss herself, but she is used to being made a fuss of. My stepfather is far too solicitous. And as for Miss Bellever, she makes herself positively ridiculous. In any case, Miss Bellever has had a very bad influence in this house. She came here many years ago, and her devotion to my mother, though admirable in itself, has really become somewhat of an infliction. She literally tyrannises over my mother. She runs the whole house and takes far too much upon herself. I think it annoys Lewis sometimes. I should never be surprised if he told her to go. She has no tact—no tact whatever, and it is trying for a man to find his wife completely dominated by a bossy woman."

Inspector Curry nodded his head gently.

"I see ... I see...."

He watched her speculatively.

"There's one thing I don't quite get, Mrs. Strete. The position of the two Restarick brothers?"

"More foolish sentiment. Their father married my poor mother for her money. Two years afterwards, he ran away with a Yugoslavian singer of the lowest morals. He was a very unworthy person. My mother was softhearted enough to be sorry for these two boys. Since it was out of the question for them to spend their holidays with a woman of such notorious morals, she more or less adopted them. They have been hangers-on here ever since. Oh yes, we've plenty of spongers in this house, I can tell you that."

"Alex Restarick had an opportunity of killing Christian Gulbrandsen. He was in his car alone—driving from the lodge to the house—what about Stephen?"

"Stephen was in the Hall with us. I don't approve of Alex Restarick—he is getting to look very coarse and I imagine he leads

an irregular life—but I don't really see him as a murderer. Besides, why should he kill my brother?"

"That's what we always come back to, isn't it?" said Inspector Curry genially. "What did Christian Gulbrandsen know—about someone—that made it necessary for that someone to kill him?"

"Exactly," said Mrs. Strete triumphantly. "It *must* be Walter Hudd."

"Unless it's someone nearer home."

Mildred said sharply:

"What did you mean by that?"

Inspector Curry said slowly:

"Mr. Gulbrandsen seemed very concerned about Mrs. Serrocold's health whilst he was here."

Mrs. Strete frowned.

"Men always fuss over Mother because she looks fragile. I think she likes them to! Or else Christian had been listening to Juliet Bellever."

"You're not worried about your mother's health yourself, Mrs. Strete?"

"No. I hope I'm sensible. Naturally Mother is not young—"

"And death comes to all of us," said Inspector Curry. "But not ahead of its appointed time. That's what we have to prevent."

He spoke meaningly. Mildred Strete flared into sudden animation.

"Oh it's wicked—wicked. No one else here really seems to care. Why should they? I'm the only person who was a blood relation to Christian. To Mother, he was only a grown-up stepson. To Gina, he isn't really any relation at all. But he was my own brother."

"Half brother," suggested Inspector Curry.

"Half brother, yes. But we were both Gulbrandsens in spite of the difference in age."

Curry said gently, "Yes—yes, I see your point...."

Tears in her eyes, Mildred Strete marched out. Curry looked at Lake.

"So she's quite sure it's Walter Hudd," he said. "Won't entertain for a moment the idea of its being anybody else."

"And she may be right."

"She certainly may. Wally fits. Opportunity—and motive. Because if he wants money quick, his wife's grandmother would have to die. So Wally tampers with her tonic, and Christian Gulbrandsen sees him do it—or hears about it in some way. Yes, it fits very nicely."

He paused and said:

"By the way, Mildred Strete likes money ... She mayn't spend it, but she likes it. I'm not sure why ... She may be a miser—with a miser's passion. Or she may like the power that money gives. Money for benevolence, perhaps? She's a Gulbrandsen. She may want to emulate Father."

"Complex, isn't it?" said Sergeant Lake, and scratched his head.

Inspector Curry said:

"We'd better see this screwy young man, Lawson, and after that we'll go to the Great Hall and work out who was where—and if and why—and when ... we've heard one or two rather interesting things this morning."

2

It was very difficult, Inspector Curry thought, to get a true estimate of someone from what other people said.

Edgar Lawson had been described by a good many different people that morning, but looking at him now, Curry's own impressions were almost ludicrously different.

Edgar did not impress him as "queer" or "dangerous" or "arrogant" or even as "abnormal." He seemed a very ordinary young man, very much cast down and in a state of humility approaching that of Uriah Heep's. He looked young and slightly common and rather pathetic.

He was only too anxious to talk and to apologize.

"I know I've done very wrong. I don't know what came over me—really I don't. Making that scene and kicking up such a row. And actually shooting off a pistol. At Mr. Serrocold, too, who's been so good to me and so patient, too."

He twisted his hands nervously. They were rather pathetic hands, with bony wrists.

"If I've got to be had up for it, I'll come with you at once. I deserve it. I'll plead guilty."

"No charge has been made against you," said Inspector Curry crisply. "So we've no evidence on which to act. According to Mr. Serrocold, letting off the pistol was an accident."

"That's because he's so good. There never was a man as good as Mr. Serrocold! He's done everything for me. And I go and repay him by acting like this."

"What made you act as you did?"

Edgar looked embarrassed.

"I made a fool of myself."

Inspector Curry said drily:

"So it seems. You told Mr. Serrocold in the presence of witnesses that you had discovered that he was your father. Was that true?"

"No, it wasn't."

"What put that idea into your head? Did someone suggest it to you?"

"Well, it's a bit hard to explain."

Inspector Curry looked at him thoughtfully, then said in a kindly voice:

"Suppose you try. We don't want to make things hard for you."

"Well, you see, I had rather a hard time of it as a kid. The other boys jeered at me. Because I hadn't got a father. Said I was a little bastard—which I was, of course. Mum was usually drunk and she had men coming in all the time. My father was a foreign seaman, I believe. The house was always filthy and it was all pretty fair hell. And then I got to thinking suppose my Dad had been not just some foreign sailor, but someone important—and I used to make up a thing or two. Kid stuff first—changed at birth—really the rightful heir—that sort of thing. And then I went to a new school and I tried it on once or twice hinting things. Said my father was really an Admiral in the navy. I got to believing it myself. I didn't feel so bad then."

He paused and then went on.

"And then—later—I thought up some other ideas. I used to stay at hotels and told a lot of silly stories about being a fighter pilot—or about being in military intelligence. I got all sort of mixed up. I didn't seem able to stop telling lies.

"Only I didn't really try to get money by it. It was just swank so as to make people think a bit more of me. I didn't want to be dishonest. Mr. Serrocold will tell you—and Dr. Maverick—they've got all the stuff about it."

Inspector Curry nodded. He had already studied Edgar's case history and his police record.

"Mr. Serrocold got me clear in the end and brought me down here. He said he needed a secretary to help him—and I did help him! I really did. Only the others laughed at me. They were always laughing at me."

"What others? Mrs. Serrocold?"

"No, not Mrs. Serrocold. She's a lady—she's always gentle and kind. No, but Gina treated me like dirt. And Stephen Restarick. And Mrs. Strete looked down on me for not being a gentleman. So did Miss Bellever—and what's she? She's a paid companion, isn't she?"

Curry noted the signs of rising excitement.

"So you didn't find them very sympathetic?"

Edgar said passionately:

"It was because of me being a bastard. If I'd had a proper father they wouldn't have gone on like that."

"So you appropriated a couple of famous fathers?"

Edgar blushed.

"I always seem to get to telling lies," he muttered.

"And finally, you said Mr. Serrocold was your father. Why?"

"Because that would stop them once for all, wouldn't it? If *he* was my father they couldn't do anything to me!"

"Yes. But you accused him of being your enemy—of persecuting you."

"I know—" He rubbed his forehead. "I got things all wrong. There are times when I don't—when I don't get things quite right. I get muddled."

"And you took the revolver from Mr. Walter Hudd's room?"

Edgar looked puzzled.

"Did I? Is that where I got it?"

"Don't you remember where you got it?"

Edgar said:

"I meant to threaten Mr. Serrocold with it. I meant to frighten him. It was kid stuff all over again."

Inspector Curry said patiently, "How did you get the revolver?"

"You just said—out of Walter's room."

"You remember doing that now?"

"I must have got it from his room. I couldn't have got hold of it any other way, could I?"

"I don't know," said Inspector Curry. "Somebody—might have given it to you?"

Edgar was silent—his face a blank.

"Is that how it happened?"

Edgar said passionately:

"I don't remember. I was so worked up. I walked about the garden in a red mist of rage. I thought people were spying on me, watching me, trying to hound me down. Even that nice white-haired old lady ... I can't understand it all now. I feel I must have been mad. I don't remember where I was and what I was doing half of the time!"

"Surely you remember who told you Mr. Serrocold was your father?"

Edgar gave the same blank stare.

"Nobody told me," he said sullenly. "It just came to me."

Inspector Curry sighed. He was not satisfied. But he judged he could make no further progress at present.

"Well, watch your step in future," he said.

"Yes, sir. Yes, indeed, I will."

As Edgar went Inspector Curry slowly shook his head.

"These pathological cases are the devil!"

"D'you think he's mad, sir?"

"Much less mad than I'd imagined. Weak-headed, boastful, a liar—yet a certain pleasant simplicity about him. Highly suggestible I should imagine...."

"You think someone did suggest things to him?"

"Oh yes, old Miss Marple was right there. She's a shrewd old bird. But I wish I knew who it was. He won't tell. If we only knew that ... Come on, Lake, let's have a thorough reconstruction of the scene in the Hall."

3

"That fixes it pretty well."

Inspector Curry was sitting at the piano. Sergeant Lake was in a chair by the window overlooking the lake.

Curry went on.

"If I'm half-turned on the piano stool, watching the study door, I can't see you."

Sergeant Lake rose softly and edged quietly through the door to the library.

"All this side of the room was dark. The only lights that were on were the ones beside the study door. No, Lake, I didn't see you go. Once in the library, you could go out through the other door to the corridor—two minutes to run along to the Oak Suite, shoot Gulbrandsen and come back through the library to your chair by the window.

"The women by the fire have their backs to you. Mrs. Serrocold was sitting *here*—on the right of the fireplace, near the study door. Everyone agrees she didn't move and she's the only one who's in the line of direct vision. Miss Marple was here. She was looking past Mrs. Serrocold to the study. Mrs. Strete was on the left of the fireplace—close to the door out of the Hall to the lobby, and it's a very dark corner. She *could* have gone and come back. Yes, it's possible."

Curry grinned suddenly.

"And I could go." He slipped off the music stool and sidled along the wall and out through the door. "The only person who might notice I wasn't still at the piano would be Gina Hudd. And you remember what Gina said, 'Stephen was at the piano to begin with. *I don't know where he was later.*'"

"So you think it's Stephen?"

"I don't know who it is," said Curry. "It wasn't Edgar Lawson or Lewis Serrocold or Mrs. Serrocold or Miss Jane Marple. But for the rest—" He sighed. "It's probably the American. Those fused lights were a bit too convenient—a coincidence. And yet, you know, I rather like the chap. Still, that isn't evidence."

He peered thoughtfully at some music on the side of the piano. "Hindemith? Who's he? Never heard of him. Shostakovich! What names these people have." He got up and then looked down at the old-fashioned music stool. He lifted the top of it.

"Here's the old-fashioned stuff. Handel's Largo. Czerny's Exercises. Dates back to old Gulbrandsen, most of this. 'I know a lovely Garden'—Vicar's wife used to sing that when I was a boy—"

He stopped—the yellow pages of the song in his hand. Beneath them, reposing on Chopin's Preludes, was a small automatic pistol.

"Stephen Restarick," exclaimed Sergeant Lake joyfully.

"Now don't jump to conclusions," Inspector Curry warned him. "Ten to one that's what we're meant to think."

Fifteen

1

Miss Marple climbed the stairs and tapped on the door of Mrs. Serrocold's bedroom.

"May I come in, Carrie Louise?"

"Of course, Jane dear."

Carrie Louise was sitting in front of the dressing table, brushing her silvery hair. She turned her head over her shoulder.

"Is it the police? I'll be ready in a few minutes."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, of course. Jolly insisted on my having my breakfast in bed. And Gina came into the room with it on tiptoe as though I might be at death's door! I don't think people realise that tragedies like Christian's death are much less shock to someone old. Because one knows by then how anything may happen—and how little anything really matters that happens in this world."

"Ye—es," said Miss Marple dubiously.

"Don't you feel the same, Jane? I should have thought you would."

Miss Marple said slowly:

"Christian was murdered."

"Yes ... I see what you mean. You think that *does* matter?"

"Don't you?"

"Not to Christian," said Carrie Louise simply. "It matters, of course, to whoever murdered him."

"Have you any idea who murdered him?"

Mrs. Serrocold shook her head in a bewildered fashion.

"No, I've absolutely no idea. I can't even think of a reason. It must have been something to do with his being here before—just over a month ago. Because otherwise I don't think he would have come here suddenly again for no particular reason. Whatever it was must have started off then. I've thought and I've thought, but I can't remember anything unusual."

"Who was here in the house?"

"Oh! the same people who are here now—yes, Alex was down from London about then. And—oh yes, Ruth was here."

"Ruth?"

"Her usual flying visit."

"Ruth," said Miss Marple again. Her mind was active. Christian Gulbrandsen and Ruth? Ruth had come away worried and apprehensive, but had not known why. Something was wrong was all that Ruth could say. Christian Gulbrandsen had also been worried and apprehensive, but Christian Gulbrandsen had known or suspected something that Ruth did not. He had known or suspected that someone was trying to poison Carrie Louise. How had Christian Gulbrandsen come to entertain those suspicions? What had he seen or heard? Was it something that Ruth also had seen or heard but which she had failed to appreciate at its rightful significance? Miss Marple wished that she knew what it could possibly have been. Her own vague hunch that it (whatever it was) had to do with Edgar Lawson seemed unlikely since Ruth had not even mentioned him.

She sighed.

"You're all keeping something from me, aren't you?" asked Carrie Louise.

Miss Marple jumped a little as the quiet voice spoke.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you are. Not Jolly. But everyone else. Even Lewis. He came in while I was having my breakfast, and he acted very oddly. He drank some of my coffee and even had a bit of toast and marmalade. That's so unlike him, because he always has tea, and he doesn't like marmalade, so he must have been thinking of something

else—and I suppose he must have forgotten to have his own breakfast. He does forget things like meals, and he looked so concerned and preoccupied.”

“Murder—” began Miss Marple.

Carrie Louise said quickly:

“Oh, I know. It’s a terrible thing. I’ve never been mixed up in it before. You have, haven’t you, Jane?”

“Well—yes—actually I have,” Miss Marple admitted.

“So Ruth told me.”

“Did she tell you that last time she was down here?” asked Miss Marple curiously.

“No, I don’t think it was then. I can’t really remember.”

Carrie Louise spoke vaguely, almost absentmindedly.

“What are you thinking about, Carrie Louise?”

Mrs. Serrocold smiled and seemed to come back from a long way away.

“I was thinking of Gina,” she said. “And of what you said about Stephen Restarick. Gina’s a dear girl, you know, and she does really love Wally. I’m sure she does.”

Miss Marple said nothing.

“Girls like Gina like to kick up their heels a bit.” Mrs. Serrocold spoke in an almost pleading voice. “They’re young and they like to feel their power. It’s natural, really. I know Wally Hudd isn’t the sort of man we imagined Gina marrying. Normally she’d never have met him. But she did meet him, and fell in love with him—and presumably she knows her own business best.”

“Probably she does,” said Miss Marple.

“But it’s so very important that Gina should be happy.”

Miss Marple looked curiously at her friend.

“It’s important, I suppose, that everyone should be happy.”

“Oh yes. But Gina’s a very special case. When we took her mother—when we took Pippa—we felt that it was an experiment that had simply got to succeed. You see, Pippa’s mother—”

Carrie Louise paused.

Miss Marple said, “Who was Pippa’s mother?”

Carrie Louise said, "Eric and I agreed that we would never tell anybody that. She never knew herself."

"I'd like to know," said Miss Marple.

Mrs. Serrocold looked at her doubtfully.

"It isn't just curiosity," said Miss Marple. "I really—well—*need* to know. I can hold my tongue, you know."

"You could always keep a secret, Jane," said Carrie Louise with a reminiscent smile. "Dr. Galbraith—he's the Bishop of Cromer now—he knows. But no one else. Pippa's mother was Katherine Elsworth."

"Elsworth? Wasn't that the woman who administered arsenic to her husband? Rather a celebrated case."

"Yes."

"She was hanged?"

"Yes. But you know it's not at all sure that she did it. The husband was an arsenic eater—they didn't understand so much about those things then."

"She soaked flypapers."

"The maid's evidence, we always thought, was definitely malicious."

"And Pippa was her daughter?"

"Yes. Eric and I determined to give the child a fresh start in life—with love and care and all the things a child needs. We succeeded. Pippa was—herself. The sweetest, happiest creature imaginable."

Miss Marple was silent a long time.

Carrie Louise turned away from the dressing table.

"I'm ready now. Perhaps you'll ask the Inspector or whatever he is to come up to my sitting room. He won't mind, I'm sure."

2

Inspector Curry did not mind. In fact, he rather welcomed the chance of seeing Mrs. Serrocold on her own territory.

As he stood there waiting for her, he looked round him curiously. It was not his idea of what he termed to himself "a rich woman's boudoir."

It had an old-fashioned couch and some rather uncomfortable looking Victorian chairs with twisted woodwork backs. The chintzes were old and faded but of an attractive pattern displaying the Crystal Palace. It was one of the smaller rooms, though even then it was larger than the drawing room of most modern houses. But it had a cosy, rather crowded appearance with its little tables, its bric-a-brac, and its photographs. Curry looked at an old snapshot of two little girls, one dark and lively, the other plain, and staring out sulkily on the world from under a heavy fringe. He had seen that same expression that morning. "Pippa and Mildred" was written on the photograph. There was a photograph of Eric Gulbrandsen hanging on the wall, with a gold mount and a heavy ebony frame. Curry had just found a photograph of a good-looking man with eyes crinkling with laughter, whom he presumed was John Restarick, when the door opened and Mrs. Serrocold came in.

She wore black, a floating and diaphanous black. Her little pink-and-white face looked unusually small under its crown of silvery hair, and there was a frailness about her that caught sharply at Inspector Curry's heart. He understood, at that moment, a good deal that had perplexed him earlier in the morning. He understood why people were so anxious to spare Caroline Louise Serrocold everything that could be spared her.

And yet, he thought, she isn't the kind that would ever make a fuss....

She greeted him, asked him to sit down, and took a chair near him. It was less he who put her at her ease than she who put him at his. He started to ask his questions and she answered them readily and without hesitation. The failure of the lights, the quarrel between Edgar Lawson and her husband, the shot they had heard....

"It did not seem to you that the shot was in the house?"

"No, I thought it came from outside. I thought it might have been the backfire of a car."

"During the quarrel between your husband and this young fellow Lawson in the study, did you notice anybody leaving the Hall?"

"Wally had already gone to see about the lights. Miss Bellever went out shortly afterwards—to get something, but I can't

remember what."

"Who else left the Hall?"

"Nobody, so far as I know."

"Would you know, Mrs. Serrocold?"

She reflected a moment.

"No, I don't think I should."

"You were completely absorbed in what you could hear going on in the study?"

"Yes."

"And you were apprehensive as to what might happen there?"

"No—no, I wouldn't say that. I didn't think anything would really happen."

"But Lawson had a revolver?"

"Yes."

"And was threatening your husband with it?"

"Yes. But he didn't mean it."

Inspector Curry felt his usual slight exasperation at this statement. So she was another of them!

"You can't possibly have been sure of that, Mrs. Serrocold."

"Well, but I was sure. In my own mind, I mean. What is it the young people say—putting on an act? That's what I felt it was. Edgar's only a boy. He was being melodramatic and silly and fancying himself as a bold desperate character. Seeing himself as the wronged hero in a romantic story. I was quite sure he would never fire that revolver."

"But he did fire it, Mrs. Serrocold."

Carrie Louise smiled.

"I expect it went off by accident."

Again exasperation mounted in Inspector Curry.

"It was not by accident. Lawson fired that revolver twice—and fired it at your husband. The bullets only just missed him."

Carrie Louise looked startled and then grave.

"I can't really believe that. Oh yes—" she hurried on to forestall the Inspector's protest. "Of course, I have to believe it, if you tell me so. But I still feel there must be a simple explanation. Perhaps Dr. Maverick can explain it to me."

"Oh yes, Dr. Maverick will explain it all right," said Curry grimly. "Dr. Maverick can explain anything. I'm sure of that."

Unexpectedly Mrs. Serrocold said:

"I know that a lot of what we do here seems to you foolish and pointless, and psychiatrists can be very irritating sometimes. But we *do* achieve results, you know. We have our failures, but we have successes too. And what we try to do is *worth* doing. And though you probably won't believe it, Edgar is really devoted to my husband. He started this silly business about Lewis' being his father because he wants so much to have a father like Lewis. But what I can't understand is why he should suddenly get *violent*. He had been so very much better—really practically normal. Indeed, he has always seemed normal to me."

The Inspector did not argue the point.

He said, "The revolver that Edgar Lawson had was one belonging to your granddaughter's husband. Presumably Lawson took it from Walter Hudd's room. Now tell me, have you ever seen *this* weapon before?"

On the palm of his hand he held out the small black automatic.

Carrie Louise looked at it.

"No, I don't think so."

"I found it in the piano stool. It has recently been fired. We haven't had time to check on it fully yet, but I should say that it is almost certainly the weapon with which Mr. Gulbrandsen was shot."

She frowned.

"And you found it in the piano stool?"

"Under some very old music. Music that I should say had not been played for years."

"Hidden, then?"

"Yes. You remember who was at the piano last night?"

"Stephen Restarick."

"He was playing?"

"Yes. Just softly. A funny, melancholy little tune."

"When did he stop playing, Mrs. Serrocold?"

"When did he stop? I don't know."

"But he did stop? He didn't go on playing all through the quarrel?"

"No. The music just died down."

"Did he get up from the piano stool?"

"I don't know. I've no idea what he did until he came over to the study door to try and fit a key to it."

"Can you think of any reason why Stephen Restarick should shoot Mr. Gulbrandsen?"

"None whatever," she added thoughtfully, "I don't believe he did."

"Gulbrandsen might have found something discreditable about him."

"That seems to me very unlikely."

Inspector Curry had a wild wish to reply:

"Pigs may fly but they're very unlikely birds." It had been a saying of his grandmother's. Miss Marple, he thought, was sure to know it.

3

Carrie Louise came down the broad stairway, and three people converged upon her from different directions, Gina from the long corridor, Miss Marple from the library, and Juliet Bellever from the Great Hall.

Gina spoke first.

"Darling!" she exclaimed passionately. "Are you all right? They haven't bullied you or given you third degree or anything?"

"Of course not, Gina. What odd ideas you have! Inspector Curry was charming and most considerate."

"So he ought to be," said Miss Bellever. "Now, Cara, I've got all your letters here and a parcel. I was going to bring them up to you."

"Bring them into the library," said Carrie Louise.

All four of them went into the library.

Carrie Louise sat down and began opening her letters. There were about twenty or thirty of them.

As she opened them, she handed them to Miss Bellever who sorted them into heaps, explaining to Miss Marple as she did so, "Three main categories. One—from relations of the boys. Those I hand over to Dr. Maverick. Begging letters I deal with myself. And

the rest are personal—and Cara gives me notes on how to deal with them.”

The correspondence once disposed of, Mrs. Serrocold turned her attention to the parcel, cutting the string with scissors.

Out of the neat wrappings, there appeared an attractive box of chocolates tied up with a gold ribbon.

“Someone must think it’s my birthday,” said Mrs. Serrocold with a smile.

She slipped off the ribbon and opened the box. Inside was a visiting card. Carrie Louise looked at it with slight surprise.

“With love from Alex,” she read. “How odd of him to send me a box of chocolates by post on the same day he was coming down here.”

Uneasiness stirred in Miss Marple’s mind.

She said quickly:

“Wait a minute, Carrie Louise. Don’t eat one yet.”

Mrs. Serrocold looked faintly surprised.

“I was going to hand them round.”

“Well, don’t. Wait while I ask—is Alex about the house, do you know, Gina?”

Gina said quickly, “Alex was in the Hall just now, I think.”

She went across, opened the door, and called him.

Alex Restarick appeared in the doorway a moment later.

“Madonna darling! So you’re up. None the worse?”

He came across to Mrs. Serrocold and kissed her gently on both cheeks.

Miss Marple said:

“Carrie Louise wants to thank you for the chocolates.”

Alex looked surprised.

“What chocolates?”

“These chocolates,” said Carrie Louise.

“But I never sent you any chocolates, darling.”

“The box has got your card in,” said Miss Bellever.

Alex peered down.

“So it has. How odd. How very odd ... I certainly didn’t send them.”

"What a very extraordinary thing," said Miss Bellever.

"They look absolutely scrumptious," said Gina, peering into the box. "Look, Grandam, there are your favourite Kirsch ones in the middle."

Miss Marple gently but firmly took the box away from her. Without a word she took it out of the room and went to find Lewis Serrocold. It took her some time because he had gone over to the College—she found him in Dr. Maverick's room there. She put the box on the table in front of him. He listened to her brief account of the circumstances. His face grew suddenly stern and hard.

Carefully, he and the doctor lifted out chocolate after chocolate and examined them.

"I think," said Dr. Maverick, "that these ones I have put aside have almost certainly been tampered with. You see the unevenness of the chocolate coating underneath? The next thing to do is to get them analysed."

"But it seems incredible," said Miss Marple. "Why, everyone in the house might have been poisoned!"

Lewis nodded. His face was still white and hard.

"Yes. There is a ruthlessness—a disregard—" he broke off. "Actually, I think all these particular chocolates are Kirsch flavouring. That is Caroline's favourite. So, you see, there is knowledge behind this."

Miss Marple said quietly:

"If it is as you suspect—if there is—*poison*—in these chocolates, then I'm afraid Carrie Louise will have to know what is going on. She must be put upon her guard."

Lewis Serrocold said heavily:

"Yes. She will have to know that someone wants to kill her. I think that she will find it almost impossible to believe."

Sixteen

1

"Ere, Miss. Is it true as there's an 'ideous poisoner at work?"

Gina pushed the hair back from her forehead, and jumped as the hoarse whisper reached her. There was paint on her cheek and paint on her slacks. She and her selected helpers had been busy on the backcloth of the Nile at sunset for their next theatrical production.

It was one of these helpers who was now asking the question. Ernie, the boy who had given her such valuable lessons in the manipulations of locks. Ernie's fingers were equally dextrous at stage carpentry, and he was one of the most enthusiastic theatrical assistants.

His eyes now were bright and beady with pleasurable anticipation.

"Where on earth did you get that idea?" asked Gina indignantly.

Ernie shut one eye.

"It's all round the dorms," he said. "But look 'ere, Miss, it wasn't one of *us*. Not a thing like that. And nobody wouldn't do a thing to Mrs. Serrocold. Even Jenkins wouldn't cosh *her*. 'Tisn't as though it was the old bitch. Wouldn't 'alf like to poison 'er, I wouldn't."

"Don't talk like that about Miss Bellever."

"Sorry, Miss. It slipped out. What poison was it, Miss? Strickline, was it? Makes you arch your back and die in agonies, that does. Or was it Prussian acid?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Ernie."

Ernie winked again.

"Not 'alf you don't. Mr. Alex it was done it, so they say. Brought them chocs down from London. But that's a lie. Mr. Alex wouldn't do a thing like that, would he, Miss?"

"Of course he wouldn't," said Gina.

"Much more likely to be Mr. Birnbaum. When he's giving us P.T. he makes the most awful faces and Don and I think as he's batty."

"Just move that turpentine out of the way."

Ernie obeyed, murmuring to himself:

"Don't 'arf see life 'ere! Old Gulbrandsen done in yesterday and now a secret poisoner. D'you think it's the same person doing both? What ud you say, Miss, if I told you as I know oo it was done 'im in?"

"You can't possibly know anything about it."

"Coo, carn't I neither? Supposin' I was outside last night and saw something."

"How could you have been out? The College is locked up after roll call at seven."

"Roll call ... I can get out whenever I likes, Miss. Locks don't mean nothing to me. Get out and walk round the grounds just for the fun of it, I do."

Gina said:

"I wish you'd stop telling lies, Ernie."

"Who's telling lies?"

"You are. You tell lies and you boast about things that you've never done at all."

"That's what you say, Miss. You wait till the coppers come round and arsk me all about what I saw last night."

"Well, what did you see?"

"Ah," said Ernie, "wouldn't you like to know?"

Gina made a rush at him and he beat a strategic retreat. Stephen came over from the other side of the theatre and joined Gina. They discussed various technical matters and then, side by side, they walked back towards the house.

"They all seem to know about Grandam and the chocs," said Gina. "The boys, I mean. How do they get to know?"

"Local grapevine of some kind."

"And they knew about Alex's card. Stephen, surely it was very stupid to put Alex's card in the box when he was actually coming down here."

"Yes, but who knew he was coming down here? He decided to come on the spur of the moment and sent a telegram. Probably the box was posted by then. And if he hadn't come down, putting his card in would have been quite a good idea. Because he does send Caroline chocolates sometimes."

He went on slowly:

"What I simply can't understand is—"

"Is why anyone should want to poison Grandam," Gina cut in. "I know. It's *inconceivable*! She's so adorable—and absolutely everyone *does* adore her."

Stephen did not answer. Gina looked at him sharply.

"I know what you're thinking, Steve!"

"I wonder."

"You're thinking that Wally—doesn't adore her. But Wally would never poison anyone. The idea's laughable."

"The loyal wife!"

"Don't say that in that sneering tone of voice."

"I didn't mean to sneer. I think you *are* loyal. I admire you for it. But, darling Gina, you can't keep it up, you know."

"What do you mean, Steve?"

"You know quite well what I mean. You and Wally don't belong together. It's just one of those things that doesn't work. He knows it, too. The split is going to come any day now. And you'll both be much happier when it has come."

Gina said:

"Don't be idiotic."

Stephen laughed.

"Come now, you can't pretend that you're suited to each other or that Wally's happy here."

"Oh, I don't know what's the matter with him," cried Gina. "He sulks the whole time. He hardly speaks. I—I don't know what to do about him. Why can't he enjoy himself here? We had such fun

together once—everything was fun—and now he might be a different person. Why do people have to change so?”

“Do I change?”

“No, Steve darling. You’re always Steve. Do you remember how I used to tag round after you in the holidays?”

“And what a nuisance I used to think you—that miserable little kid Gina. Well, the tables are turned now. You’ve got me where you want me, haven’t you, Gina?”

Gina said quickly:

“Idiot.” She went on hurriedly, “Do you think Ernie was lying? He was pretending he was roaming about in the fog last night, and hinting that he could tell things about the murder. Do you think that might be true?”

“True? Of course not. You know how he boasts. Anything to make himself important.”

“Oh I know. I only wondered—”

They walked along side by side without speaking.

2

The setting sun illumined the west façade of the house. Inspector Curry looked towards it.

“Is this about the place where you stopped your car last night?” he asked.

Alex Restarick stood back a little as though considering.

“Near enough,” he said. “It’s difficult to tell exactly because of the fog. Yes, I should say this was the place.”

Inspector Curry stood looking round with an appraising eye.

The gravelled sweep of drive swept round in a slow curve, and at this point, emerging from a screen of rhododendrons, the west façade of the house came suddenly into view with its terrace and yew hedges and steps leading down to the lawns. Thereafter the drive continued in its curving progress, sweeping through a belt of trees and round between the lake and the house until it ended in the big gravel sweep at the east side of the house.

"Dodgett," said Inspector Curry.

Police Constable Dodgett, who had been holding himself at the ready, started spasmodically into motion. He hurled himself across the intervening space of lawn in a diagonal line towards the house, reached the terrace, and went in by the side door. A few moments later, the curtains of one of the windows were violently agitated. Then Constable Dodgett reappeared out of the garden door, and ran back to rejoin them, breathing like a steam engine.

"Two minutes and forty-two seconds," said Inspector Curry, clicking the stop watch with which he had been timing him. "They don't take long, these things, do they?"

His tone was pleasantly conversational.

"I don't run as fast as your constable," said Alex. "I presume it *is* my supposed movements you have been timing?"

"I'm just pointing out that you had the opportunity to do murder. That's all, Mr. Restarick. I'm not making any accusations—as yet."

Alex Restarick said kindly to Constable Dodgett who was still panting:

"I can't run as fast as you can, but I believe I'm in better training."

"It's since 'aving the bronchitis last winter," said Dodgett.

Alex turned back to the Inspector.

"Seriously, though, in spite of trying to make me uncomfortable and observing my reactions—and you must remember that we artistic folk are oh! so sensitive, such tender plants!"—his voice took on a mocking note—"you can't really believe I had anything to do with all this? I'd hardly send a box of poisoned chocolates to Mrs. Serrocold and put my card inside, would I?"

"That might be what we are meant to think. There's such a thing as a double bluff, Mr. Restarick."

"Oh, I see. How ingenious you are. By the way, those chocolates *were* poisoned?"

"The six chocolates containing Kirsch flavouring in the top layer were poisoned, yes. They contained aconitine."

"Not one of my favourite poisons, Inspector. Personally, I have a weakness for curare."

"Curare has to be introduced into the bloodstream, Mr. Restarick, not into the stomach."

"How wonderfully knowledgeable the police force are," said Alex admiringly.

Inspector Curry cast a quiet sideways glance at the young man. He noted the slightly pointed ears, the un-English Mongolian type of face. The eyes that danced with mischievous mockery. It would have been hard at any time to know what Alex Restarick was thinking. A satyr—or did he mean a faun? An overfed faun, Inspector Curry thought suddenly, and somehow there was an unpleasantness about that idea.

A twister with brains—that's how he would sum up Alex Restarick. Cleverer than his brother. Mother had been a Russian or so he had heard. "Russians" to Inspector Curry were what "Bony" had been in the early days of the nineteenth century and what "the Huns" had been in the early twentieth century. Anything to do with Russia was bad in Inspector Curry's opinion, and if Alex Restarick had murdered Gulbrandsen he would be a very satisfactory criminal. But unfortunately Curry was by no means convinced that he had.

Constable Dodgett, having recovered his breath, now spoke.

"I moved the curtains as you told me, sir," he said. "And counted thirty. I noticed that the curtains have a hook torn off at the top. Means that there's a gap. You'd see the light in the room from outside."

Inspector Curry said to Alex:

"Did you notice light streaming out from that window last night?"

"I couldn't see the house at all because of the fog. I told you so."

"Fog's patchy, though. Sometimes it clears for a minute here and there."

"It never cleared so that I could see the house—the main part, that is. The gymnasium building close at hand loomed up out of the mist in a deliciously unsubstantial way. It gave a perfect illusion of dock warehouses. As I told you, I am putting on a Limehouse Ballet and—"

"You told me," agreed Inspector Curry.

"One gets in the habit, you know, of looking at things from the point of view of a stage set, rather than from the point of view of reality."

"I daresay. And yet a stage set's real enough, isn't it, Mr. Restarick?"

"I don't see exactly what you mean, Inspector."

"Well, it's made of real materials—canvas and wood and paint and cardboard. The illusion is in the eye of the beholder, not in the set itself. That, as I say, is real enough, as real behind the scenes as it is in front."

Alex stared at him.

"Now that, you know, is a *very* penetrating remark, Inspector. It's given me an idea."

"For another ballet?"

"No, not for another ballet ... Dear me, I wonder if we've all been rather stupid?"

3

The Inspector and Dodgett went back to the house across the lawn. (Looking for footprints, Alex said to himself. But here he was wrong. They had looked for footprints very early that morning and had been unsuccessful because it had rained heavily at 2 A.M.) Alex walked slowly up the drive, turning over in his mind the possibilities of his new idea.

He was diverted from this however by the sight of Gina walking on the path by the lake. The house was on a slight eminence, and the ground sloped gently down from the front sweeps of gravel to the lake, which was bordered by rhododendrons and other shrubs. Alex ran down the gravel and found Gina.

"If you could black out that absurd Victorian monstrosity," he said, screwing up his eyes, "this would make a very good Swan Lake, with you, Gina, as the Swan Maiden. You are more like the Snow Queen though, when I come to think of it. Ruthless, determined to have

your own way, quite without pity or kindness or the rudiments of compassion. You are very *very* feminine, Gina dear."

"How malicious you are, Alex dear!"

"Because I refuse to be taken in by you? You're very pleased with yourself, aren't you, Gina? You've got us all where you want us. Myself, Stephen, and that large, simple husband of yours."

"You're talking nonsense."

"Oh no, I'm not. Stephen's in love with you, I'm in love with you, and Wally's desperately miserable. What more could a woman want?"

Gina looked at him and laughed.

Alex nodded his head vigorously.

"You have the rudiments of honesty, I'm glad to see. That's the Latin in you. You don't go to the trouble of pretending that you're not attractive to men—and that you're terribly sorry about it if they are attracted to you. You like having men in love with you, don't you, cruel Gina? Even miserable little Edgar Lawson!"

Gina looked at him steadily.

She said in a quiet serious tone:

"It doesn't last very long, you know. Women have a much worse time of it in the world than men do. They're more vulnerable. They have children, and they mind—terribly—about their children. As soon as they lose their looks, the men they love don't love them anymore. They're betrayed and deserted and pushed aside. I don't blame men. I'd be the same myself. I don't like people who are old or ugly or ill, or who whine about their troubles, or who are ridiculous like Edgar, strutting about and pretending he's important and worthwhile. You say I'm cruel? It's a cruel world! Sooner or later it will be cruel to *me*! But now I'm young and I'm nice looking and people find me attractive." Her teeth flashed out in her peculiar, warm sunny smile. "Yes, I enjoy it, Alex. Why shouldn't I?"

"Why indeed?" said Alex. "What I want to know is what you are going to do about it. Are you going to marry Stephen or are you going to marry me?"

"I'm married to Wally."

"Temporarily. Every woman should make one mistake matrimonially—but there's no need to dwell on it. Having tried out the show in the provinces, the time has come to bring it to the West End."

"And you're the West End?"

"Indubitably."

"Do you really want to marry me? I can't imagine you married."

"I insist on marriage. *Affaires*, I always think, are so very old-fashioned. Difficulties with passports and hotels and all that. I shall *never* have a mistress unless I can't get her any other way!"

Gina's laugh rang out fresh and clear.

"You do amuse me, Alex."

"It is my principal asset. Stephen is much better looking than I am. He's extremely handsome and very intense which, of course, women adore. But intensity is fatiguing in the home. With me, Gina, you will find life entertaining."

"Aren't you going to say you love me madly?"

"However true that may be, I shall certainly not say it. It would be one up to you and one down to me if I did. No, all I am prepared to do is to make you a businesslike offer of marriage."

"I shall have to think about it," said Gina, smiling.

"Naturally. Besides, you've got to put Wally out of his misery first. I've a lot of sympathy with Wally. It must be absolute hell for him to be married to you and trailed along at your chariot wheels into this heavy, family atmosphere of philanthropy."

"What a beast you are, Alex!"

"A perceptive beast."

"Sometimes," said Gina, "I don't think Wally cares for me one little bit. He just doesn't notice me anymore."

"You've stirred him up with a stick and he doesn't respond? Most annoying."

Like a flash, Gina swung her palm and delivered a ringing slap on Alex's smooth cheek.

"Touché!" cried Alex.

With a quick, deft movement, he gathered her into his arms and before she could resist, his lips fastened on hers in a long ardent

kiss. She struggled a moment and then relaxed....

"Gina!"

They sprang apart. Mildred Strete, her face red, her lips quivering, glared at them balefully. For a moment, the eagerness of her words choked their utterance.

"Disgusting ... disgusting ... you abandoned beastly girl ... you're just like your mother ... You're a bad lot ... I always knew you were a bad lot ... utterly depraved ... and you're not only an adulteress—you're a murderess too. Oh yes, you are. I know what I know!"

"And what do you know? Don't be ridiculous, Aunt Mildred."

"I'm no aunt of yours, thank goodness. No blood relation to you. Why you don't even know who your mother was or where she came from! But you know well enough what my father was like and my mother. What sort of a child do you think they would adopt? A criminal's child or a prostitute's probably! That's the sort of people they were. They ought to have remembered that bad blood will tell. Though I daresay that it's the Italian in you that makes you turn to *poison*."

"How dare you say that?"

"I shall say what I like. You can't deny now, can you, that somebody tried to poison Mother? And who's the most likely person to do that? Who comes into an enormous fortune if Mother dies? You do, Gina, and you may be sure that the police have not overlooked that fact."

Still trembling, Mildred moved rapidly away.

"Pathological," said Alex. "Definitely pathological. Really *most* interesting. It makes one wonder about the late Canon Strete ... religious scruples, perhaps?... Or would you say impotent?"

"Don't be disgusting, Alex. Oh I hate her, I hate her, I hate her."

Gina clenched her hands and shook with fury.

"Lucky you hadn't got a knife in your stocking," said Alex. "If you had, dear Mrs. Strete might have known something about murder from the point of view of the victim. Calm down, Gina. Don't look so melodramatic and like Italian Opera."

"How dare she say I tried to poison Grandam?"

"Well, darling, *somebody* tried to poison her. And from the point of view of motive you're well in the picture, aren't you?"

"Alex!" Gina stared at him, dismayed. "Do the police think so?"

"It's extremely difficult to know what the police think ... They keep their own counsel remarkably well. They're by no means fools, you know. That reminds me—"

"Where are you going?"

"To work out an idea of mine."

Seventeen

1

"**Y**ou say somebody has been trying to *poison* me?"

Carrie Louise's voice held bewilderment and disbelief.

"You know," she said, "I can't really believe it...."

She waited a few moments, her eyes half closed.

Lewis said gently, "I wish I could have spared you this, dearest."

Almost absently she stretched out a hand to him and he took it.

Miss Marple, sitting close by, shook her head sympathetically.

Carrie Louise opened her eyes.

"Is it really true, Jane?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so, my dear."

"Then everything—" Carrie Louise broke off.

She went on:

"I've always thought I knew what was real and what wasn't ... *This* doesn't seem real—but it is ... so I may be wrong everywhere ... but who could want to do such a thing to me? Nobody in this house could want to—*kill* me?"

Her voice still held incredulity.

"That's what I would have thought," said Lewis. "I was wrong."

"And Christian knew about it? That explains it."

"Explains what?" asked Lewis.

"His manner," said Carrie Louise. "It was very odd, you know. Not at all his usual self. He seemed—upset about me—and as though he was wanting to say something to me—and then not saying it. And he

asked me if my heart was strong. And if I'd been well lately. Trying to hint to me, perhaps. But why not say something straight out? It's so much simpler just to say straight out."

"He didn't want to—cause you pain, Caroline."

"Pain? But why—Oh I see ..." Her eyes widened. "So *that's* what you believe. But you're wrong, Lewis, quite wrong. I can assure you of that."

Her husband avoided her eyes.

"I'm sorry," said Mrs. Serrocold after a moment or two. "But I can't believe anything of what has happened lately is true. Edgar shooting at you. Gina and Stephen. That ridiculous box of chocolates. It just isn't *true*."

Nobody spoke.

Caroline Louise Serrocold sighed.

"I suppose," she said, "that I must have lived outside reality for a long time ... Please, both of you, I think I would like to be alone ... I've got to try and understand...."

2

Miss Marple came down the stairs and into the Great Hall to find Alex Restarick standing near the large, arched entrance door with his hand flung out in a somewhat flamboyant gesture.

"Come in, come in," said Alex happily and as though he were the owner of the Great Hall. "I'm just thinking about last night."

Lewis Serrocold, who had followed Miss Marple down from Carrie Louise's sitting room, crossed the Great Hall to his study and went in and shut the door.

"Are you trying to reconstruct the crime?" asked Miss Marple with subdued eagerness.

"Eh?" Alex looked at her with a frown. Then his brow cleared.

"Oh, *that*," he said. "No, not exactly. I was looking at the whole thing from an entirely different point of view. I was thinking of this place in the terms of the theatre. Not reality, but artificiality! Just come over here. Think of it in the terms of a stage set. Lighting,

entrances, exits. Dramatis Personae. Noises off. All very interesting. Not all my own idea. The Inspector gave it to me. I think he's rather a cruel man. He did his best to frighten me this morning."

"And did he frighten you?"

"I'm not sure."

Alex described the Inspector's experiment and the timing of the performance of the puffing Constable Dodgett.

"Time," he said, "is so very misleading. One thinks things take such a long time, but really, of course, they don't."

"No," said Miss Marple.

Representing the audience, she moved to a different position. The stage set now consisted of a vast, tapestry-covered wall going up to dimness, with a grand piano up L. and a window and window seat up R. Very near the window seat was the door into the library. The piano stool was only about eight feet from the door into the square lobby, which led to the corridor. Two very convenient exits! The audience, of course, had an excellent view of both of them....

But last night there had been no audience. Nobody, that is to say, had been facing the stage set that Miss Marple was now facing. The audience, last night, had been sitting with their backs to that particular stage.

How long, Miss Marple wondered, would it have taken to slip out of the room, run along the corridor, shoot Gulbrandsen and come back? Not nearly so long as one would think. Measured in minutes and seconds, a very short time indeed....

What had Carrie Louise meant when she had said to her husband: "So *that's* what you believe—but you're wrong, Lewis!"

"I must say that that was a very penetrating remark of the Inspector's," Alex's voice cut in on her meditations. "About a stage set being real. Made of wood and cardboard and stuck together with glue and as real on the unpainted as on the painted side. 'The illusion,' he pointed out, 'is in the eyes of the audience.'"

"Like conjurers," Miss Marple murmured vaguely. "*They do it with mirrors* is, I believe, the slang phrase."

Stephen Restarick came in, slightly out of breath.

"Hullo, Alex," he said. "That little rat, Ernie Gregg—I don't know if you remember him?"

"The one who played Feste when you did *Twelfth Night*? Quite a bit of talent there I thought."

"Yes, he's got talent of a sort. Very good with his hands, too. Does a lot of our carpentry. However, that's neither here nor there. He's been boasting to Gina that he gets out at night and wanders about the grounds. Says he was wandering round last night and boasts he saw something."

Alex spun round.

"Saw what?"

"Says he's not going to tell! Actually, I'm pretty certain he's only trying to show off and get into the limelight. He's an awful liar, but I thought perhaps he ought to be questioned."

Alex said sharply, "I should leave him for a bit. Don't let him think we're too interested."

"Perhaps—yes I think you may be right there. This evening, perhaps."

Stephen went on into the library.

Miss Marple, moving gently round the Hall in her character of mobile audience, collided with Alex Restarick as he stepped back suddenly.

Miss Marple said, "I'm so sorry."

Alex frowned at her, said in an absent sort of way,

"I beg your pardon," and then added in a surprised voice, "Oh, it's *you*."

It seemed to Miss Marple an odd remark for someone with whom she had been conversing for some considerable time.

"I was thinking of something else," said Alex Restarick. "That boy Ernie—" He made vague motions with both hands.

Then, with a sudden change of manner, he crossed the Hall and went through the library door shutting it behind him.

The murmur of voices came from behind the closed door, but Miss Marple hardly noticed them. She was uninterested in the versatile Ernie and what he had seen or pretended to see. She had a shrewd suspicion that Ernie had seen nothing at all. She did not believe for a

moment that on a cold raw foggy night like last night, Ernie would have troubled to use his picklocking activities and wander about in the park. In all probability, he never *had* got out at night. Boasting, that was all it had been.

"Like Johnnie Backhouse," thought Miss Marple who always had a good storehouse of parallels to draw upon, selected from inhabitants of St. Mary Mead.

"I seen you last night," had been Johnnie Backhouse's unpleasant taunt to all he thought it might affect.

It had been a surprisingly successful remark. So many people, Miss Marple reflected, have been in places where they are anxious not to be seen!

She dismissed Johnnie from her mind and concentrated on a vague something which Alex's account of Inspector Curry's remarks had stirred to life. Those remarks had given Alex an idea. She was not sure that they had not given her an idea, too. The same idea? Or a different one?

She stood where Alex Restarick had stood. She thought to herself, "This is not a real hall. This is only cardboard and canvas and wood. This is a stage scene...." Scrappy phrases flashed across her mind. "Illusion—" "In the eyes of the audience." "*They do it with mirrors....*" Bowls of goldfish ... yards of coloured ribbon ... vanishing ladies ... All the panoply and misdirection of the conjurer's art....

Something stirred in her consciousness—a picture—something that Alex had said ... something that he had described to her ... Constable Dodgett puffing and panting ... panting ... something shifted in her mind—came into sudden focus....

"Why of *course!*" said Miss Marple. "*That* must be it...."

Eighteen

1

"Oh, Wally, how you startled me!"

Gina, emerging from the shadows by the theatre, jumped back a little, as the figure of Wally Hudd materialised out of the gloom. It was not yet quite dark, but had that eerie half light when objects lose their reality and take on the fantastic shapes of nightmare.

"What are you doing down here? You never come near the theatre as a rule."

"Maybe I was looking for you, Gina. It's usually the best place to find you, isn't it?"

Wally's soft, faintly drawling voice held no special insinuation and yet Gina flinched a little.

"It's a job and I'm keen on it. I like the atmosphere of paint and canvas, and backstage generally."

"Yes. It means a lot to you. I've seen that. Tell me, Gina, how long do you think it will be before this business is all cleared up?"

"The inquest's tomorrow. It will just be adjourned for a fortnight or something like that. At least, that's what Inspector Curry gave us to understand."

"A fortnight," said Wally thoughtfully. "I see. Say three weeks, perhaps. And after that—we're free. I'm going back to the States then."

"Oh! but I can't run off like that," cried Gina. "I couldn't leave Grandam. And we've got these two new productions we're working

on"—

"I didn't say 'we.' I said *I* was going."

Gina stopped and looked up at her husband. Something in the effect of the shadows made him seem very big. A big, quiet figure—and in some way, or so it seemed to her, faintly menacing ... standing over her. Threatening—what?

"Do you mean"—she hesitated—"you don't want me to come?"

"Why, no—I didn't say that."

"You don't care if I come or not? Is that it?"

She was suddenly angry.

"See here, Gina. This is where we've got to have a showdown. We didn't know much about each other when we married—not much about each other's backgrounds, not much about the other one's folks. We thought it didn't matter. We thought nothing mattered except having a swell time together. Well, stage one is over. Your folks didn't—and don't—think much of me. Maybe they're right. I'm not their kind. But if you think I'm staying on here, kicking my heels, and doing odd jobs in what I consider is just a crazy setup—well, think again! I want to live in my own country, doing the kind of job I want to do, and can do. My idea of a wife is the kind of wife who used to go along with the old pioneers, ready for anything, hardship, unfamiliar country, danger, strange surroundings ... Perhaps that's too much to ask of you, but it's that or nothing! Maybe I hustled you into marriage. If so, you'd better get free of me and start again. It's up to you. If you prefer one of these arty boys—it's your life and you've got to choose. But I'm going home."

"I think you're an absolute *pig*," said Gina. "I'm enjoying myself here."

"Is that so? Well, I'm not. You even enjoy murder, I suppose?"

Gina drew in her breath sharply.

"That's a cruel, wicked thing to say. I was very fond of Uncle Christian. And don't you realise that someone has been quietly poisoning Grandam for months? It's horrible!"

"I told you I didn't like it here. I don't like the kind of things that go on. I'm quitting."

"If you're allowed to! Don't you realise you'll probably be arrested for Uncle Christian's murder? I hate the way Inspector Curry looks at you. He's just like a cat watching a mouse with a nasty sharp-clawed paw all ready to pounce. Just because you were out of the Hall fixing those lights, and because you're not English, I'm sure they'll go fastening it on you."

"They'll need some evidence first."

Gina wailed:

"I'm frightened for you, Wally. I've been frightened all along."

"No good being scared. I tell you, they've got nothing on me!"

They walked in silence towards the house.

Gina said:

"I don't believe you really want me to come back to America with you...."

Walter Hudd did not answer.

Gina Hudd turned on him and stamped her foot.

"I hate you. I hate you. You are horrible—a beast—a cruel, unfeeling beast. After all I've tried to do for you! You want to be rid of me. You don't care if you never see me again. Well, I don't care if *I* never see *you* again! I was a stupid little fool ever to marry you, and I shall get a divorce as soon as possible, and I shall marry Stephen or Alexis and be much happier than I ever could be with you. And I hope you go back to the States and marry some horrible girl who makes you really miserable!"

"Fine!" said Wally. "Now we know where we are!"

2

Miss Marple saw Gina and Wally go into the house together.

She was standing at the spot where Inspector Curry had made his experiment with Constable Dodgett earlier in the afternoon.

Miss Bellever's voice behind her made her jump.

"You'll get a chill, Miss Marple, standing about like that after the sun's gone down."

Miss Marple fell meekly into step with her and they walked briskly through the house.

"I was thinking about conjuring tricks," said Miss Marple. "So difficult when you're watching them to see how they're done, and yet, once they are explained, so absurdly simple. (Although, even now, I can't imagine how conjurers produce bowls of goldfish!) Did you ever see the Lady who is Sawn in Half?—*such* a thrilling trick. It fascinated me when I was eleven years old, I remember. And I never *could* think how it was done. But the other day there was an article in some paper giving the whole thing away. I don't think a newspaper should do that, do you? It seems it's not one girl—but *two*. The head of the one and the feet of the other. You think it's one girl and it's really two—and the other way round would work equally well, wouldn't it?"

Miss Bellever looked at her with faint surprise. Miss Marple was not often so fluffy and incoherent as this. "It's been too much for the old lady, all this," she thought.

"When you only look at one side of a thing, you only see one side," continued Miss Marple. "But everything fits in perfectly well if you can only make up your mind what is reality and what is illusion." She added abruptly, "Is Carrie Louise—all right?"

"Yes," said Miss Bellever. "She's all right. But it must have been a shock, you know—finding out that someone wanted to kill her. I mean particularly a shock to *her*, because she doesn't understand violence."

"Carrie Louise understands some things that we don't," said Miss Marple thoughtfully. "She always has."

"I know what you mean—but she doesn't live in the real world."

"Doesn't she?"

Miss Bellever looked at her in surprise.

"There never was a more unworldly person than Cara—"

"You don't think that perhaps—" Miss Marple broke off, as Edgar Lawson passed them, swinging along at a great pace. He gave a kind of shamefaced nod, but averted his face as he passed.

"I've remembered now who he reminds me of," said Miss Marple. "It came to me suddenly, just a few moments ago. He reminds me

of a young man called Leonard Wylie. His father was a dentist, but he got old and blind and his hand used to shake, and so people preferred to go to the son. But the old man was very miserable about it, and moped, said he was no good for anything anymore, and Leonard, who was very softhearted and rather foolish, began to pretend he drank more than he should. He always smelt of whisky, and he used to sham being rather fuddled when his patients came. His idea was that they'd go back to the father again and say the younger man was no good."

"And did they?"

"Of course not," said Miss Marple. "What happened was what anybody with any sense could have told him would happen! The patients went to Mr. Reilly, the rival dentist. So many people with good hearts have no sense. Besides, Leonard Wylie was so unconvincing ... His idea of drunkenness wasn't in the least like real drunkenness, and he overdid the whisky—spilling it on his clothes, you know, to a perfectly impossible extent."

They went into the house by the side door.

Nineteen

Inside the house, they found the family assembled in the library. Lewis was walking up and down, and there was an air of general tension in the atmosphere.

"Is anything the matter?" asked Miss Bellever.

Lewis said shortly, "Ernie Gregg is missing from roll call tonight."

"Has he run away?"

"We don't know. Maverick and some of the staff are searching the grounds. If we cannot find him we must communicate with the police."

"Grandam!" Gina ran over to Carrie Louise, startled by the whiteness of her face. "You look ill."

"I am unhappy. The poor boy...."

Lewis said, "I was going to question him this evening as to whether he had seen anything noteworthy last night. I have the offer of a good post for him and I thought that after discussing that, I would bring up the other topic. Now—" he broke off.

Miss Marple murmured softly:

"Foolish boy ... poor, foolish boy...."

She shook her head, and Mrs. Serrocold said gently:

"So *you* think so too, Jane ...?"

Stephen Restarick came in. He said, "I missed you at the theatre, Gina. I thought you said you would—Hullo, what's up?"

Lewis repeated his information, and as he finished speaking, Dr. Maverick came in with a fair-haired boy with pink cheeks and a

suspiciously angelic expression. Miss Marple remembered his being at dinner on the night she had arrived at Stonygates.

"I've brought Arthur Jenkins along," said Dr. Maverick. "He seems to have been the last person to talk to Ernie."

"Now, Arthur," said Lewis Serrocold, "please help us if you can. Where has Ernie gone? Is this just a prank?"

"I dunno, sir. Straight, I don't. Didn't say nothing to me, he didn't. All full of the play at the theatre he was, that's all. Said as how he'd had a smashing idea for the scenery, what Mrs. Hudd and Mr. Stephen thought was first class."

"There's another thing, Arthur. Ernie claims he was prowling about the grounds after lockup last night. Was that true?"

"Course it ain't. Just boasting, that's all. Perishing liar, Ernie. *He* never got out at night. Used to boast he could, but he wasn't that good with locks! He couldn't do anything with a lock as *was* a lock. Anyway 'e was in larst night, that I do know."

"You're not saying that just to satisfy us, Arthur?"

"Cross my heart," said Arthur virtuously.

Lewis did not look quite satisfied.

"Listen," said Dr. Maverick. "What's that?"

A murmur of voices was approaching. The door was flung open and, looking very pale and ill, the spectacled Mr. Birnbaum staggered in.

He gasped out, "We've found him—*them*. It's horrible...."

He sank down on a chair and mopped his forehead.

Mildred Strete said sharply:

"What do you mean—found *them*?"

Birnbaum was shaking all over.

"Down at the theatre," he said. "Their heads crushed in—the big counterweight must have fallen on them. Alexis Restarick and that boy Ernie Gregg. They're both dead...."

Twenty

"I've brought you a cup of strong soup, Carrie Louise," said Miss Marple. "Now please drink it."

Mrs. Serrocold sat up in the big carved oak four poster bed. She looked very small and childlike. Her cheeks had lost their rose pink flush, and her eyes had a curiously absent look. She took the soup obediently from Miss Marple. As she sipped it, Miss Marple sat down in a chair beside the bed.

"First, Christian," said Carrie Louise, "and now Alex—and poor, sharp, silly little Ernie. Did he really—know anything?"

"I don't think so," said Miss Marple. "He was just telling lies—making himself important by hinting that he had seen or knew something. The tragedy is that somebody believed his lies...."

Carrie Louise shivered. Her eyes went back to their faraway look.

"We meant to do so much for these boys ... we did do something. Some of them have done wonderfully well. Several of them are in really responsible positions. A few slid back—that can't be helped. Modern civilised conditions are so complex—too complex for some simple and undeveloped natures. You know Lewis' great scheme? He always felt that transportation was a thing that had saved many a potential criminal in the past. They were shipped overseas—and they made new lives in simpler surroundings. He wants to start a modern scheme on that basis. To buy up a great tract of territory—or a group of islands. Finance it for some years, make it a cooperative self-supporting community—with everyone having a stake in it. But cut off so that the early temptation to go back to cities and the bad

old ways can be neutralised. It's his dream. But it will take a lot of money, of course, and there aren't many philanthropists with vision now. We want another Eric. Eric would have been enthusiastic."

Miss Marple picked up a little pair of scissors and looked at them curiously.

"What an odd pair of scissors," she said. "They've got two finger holes on one side and one on the other."

Carrie Louise's eyes came back from that frightening far distance.

"Alex gave them to me this morning," she said. "They're supposed to make it easier to cut your right-hand nails. Dear boy, he was so enthusiastic. He made me try them then and there."

"And I suppose he gathered up the nail clippings and took them tidily away," said Miss Marple.

"Yes," said Carrie Louise. "He—" she broke off. "Why did you say that?"

"I was thinking about Alex. He had brains. Yes, he had brains."

"You mean—that's why he died?"

"I think so—yes."

"He and Ernie—it doesn't bear thinking about. When do they think it happened?"

"Late this evening. Between six and seven o'clock probably..."

"After they'd knocked off work for the day?"

"Yes."

Gina had been down there that evening—and Wally Hudd. Stephen, too, said he had been down to look for Gina....

But as far as that went, anybody could have—

Miss Marple's train of thought was interrupted.

Carrie Louise said quietly and unexpectedly:

"How much do you know, Jane?"

Miss Marple looked up sharply. The eyes of the two women met.

Miss Marple said slowly, "If I was quite sure...."

"I think you are sure, Jane."

Jane Marple said slowly, "What do you want me to do?"

Carrie leaned back against her pillows.

"It is in your hands, Jane. You'll do what you think right."

She closed her eyes.

“Tomorrow”—Miss Marple hesitated—“I shall have to try and talk to Inspector Curry—if he’ll listen....”

Twenty-one

Inspector Curry said rather impatiently:

"Yes, Miss Marple?"

"Could we, do you think, go into the Great Hall?"

Inspector Curry looked faintly surprised.

"Is that your idea of privacy? Surely in here—"

He looked round the study.

"It's not privacy I'm thinking of so much. It's something I want to show you. Something Alex Restarick made me see."

Inspector Curry, stifling a sigh, got up and followed Miss Marple.

"Somebody has been talking to you?" he suggested hopefully.

"No," said Miss Marple. "It's not a question of what people have said. It's really a question of conjuring tricks. *They do it with mirrors*, you know—that sort of thing—if you understand me."

Inspector Curry did not understand. He stared and wondered if Miss Marple was quite right in the head.

Miss Marple took up her stand and beckoned the Inspector to stand beside her.

"I want you to think of this place as a stage set, Inspector. As it was on the night Christian Gulbrandsen was killed. You're here in the audience looking at the people on the stage. Mrs. Serrocold and myself and Mrs. Strete and Gina and Stephen—and just like on the stage, there are entrances and exits and the characters go out to different places. Only you don't think when you're in the audience where they are *really* going to. They go out 'to the front door' or 'to the kitchen' and when the door opens you see a little bit of painted

backcloth. But *really* of course they go out to the wings—or the back of the stage with carpenters and electricians, and other characters waiting to come on—they go out—to a different world.”

“I don’t quite see, Miss Marple—”

“Oh, I know—I daresay it sounds very silly—but if you think of this as a play and the scene is ‘the Great Hall at Stonygates’—what exactly is *behind* the scene?—I mean—what is backstage? The *terrace*—isn’t it?—the terrace *and a lot of windows opening onto it*.

“And that, you see, is how the conjuring trick was done. It was the trick of the Lady Sawn in Half that made me think of it.”

“The Lady Sawn in Half?” Inspector Curry was now quite sure that Miss Marple was a mental case.

“A most thrilling conjuring trick. You must have seen it—only not really one girl but two girls. The head of one and the feet of the other. It looks like one person and is really two. And so I thought it could just as well be *the other way about*. Two people could be really one person.”

“Two people really one?” Inspector Curry looked desperate.

“Yes. Not for long. How long did your constable take in the park to run to this house and back? Two minutes and forty-five seconds, wasn’t it? This would be less than that. Well under two minutes.”

“What was under two minutes?”

“The conjuring trick. The trick when it wasn’t two people but one person. In there—in the study. We’re only looking at the visible part of the stage. Behind the scenes, there is the terrace and a *row of windows*. So easy when there are two people in the study to open the study window, get out, run along the terrace (those footsteps Alex heard), in at the side door, shoot Christian Gulbrandsen and run back, and during that time, the other person in the study does both voices so that we’re all quite sure there are *two* people in there. And so there were most of the time, but not for that little period of under—two minutes.”

Inspector Curry found his breath and his voice.

“Do you mean that it was *Edgar Lawson* who ran along the terrace and shot Gulbrandsen? Edgar Lawson who poisoned Mrs. Serrocold?”

"But you see, Inspector, *no one has been poisoning Mrs. Serrocold at all*. That's where the misdirection comes in. Someone very cleverly used the fact that Mrs. Serrocold's sufferings from arthritis were not unlike the symptoms of arsenic poisoning. It's the old conjurer's trick of forcing a card on you. Quite easy to add arsenic to a bottle of tonic—quite easy to add a few lines to a typewritten letter. But the *real* reason for Mr. Gulbrandsen's coming here was the most likely reason—something to do with the Gulbrandsen Trust. Money, in fact. Suppose that there had been embezzlement—embezzlement on a very big scale—you see where that points? To just one person—"

"Lewis Serrocold?"

"*Lewis Serrocold....*"

Twenty-two

Part of a letter from Gina Hudd to her aunt Mrs. Van Rydock:

—and so you see, darling Aunt Ruth, the whole thing has been just like a nightmare—especially the end of it. I’ve told you all about this funny young man Edgar Lawson. He always was a complete rabbit—and when the Inspector began questioning him and breaking him down, he lost his nerve completely and scuttled like a rabbit. Just lost his nerve and ran—literally ran. Jumped out of the window and round the house and down the drive, and then there was a policeman coming to head him off, and he swerved and ran full tilt for the lake. He leaped into a rotten old punt that’s mouldered there for years and pushed off. Quite a mad, senseless thing to do, of course, but as I say he was just a panic-stricken rabbit. And then Lewis gave a great shout and said, “That punt’s rotten” and raced off to the lake, too. The punt went down and there was Edgar struggling in the water. He couldn’t swim. Lewis jumped in and swam out to him. He got to him, but they were both in difficulty because they’d got among the reeds. One of the Inspector’s men went in with a rope round him, but he got entangled, too, and they had to pull him in. Aunt Mildred said “They’ll drown—they’ll drown—they’ll both drown ...” in a silly sort of way, and Grandam just said “Yes.” I can’t describe to you just how she made that one word sound. Just “yes” and it went through you like—like a sword.

Am I being just silly and melodramatic? I suppose I am. But it did sound like that....

And then—when it was all over, and they'd got them out and tried artificial respiration (but it was no good), the Inspector came to us and said to Grandam:

"I'm afraid, Mrs. Serrocold, there's no hope."

Grandam said very quietly:

"Thank you, Inspector."

Then she looked at us all. Me, longing to help but not knowing how, and Jolly, looking grim and tender and ready to minister as usual, and Stephen, stretching out his hands, and funny old Miss Marple looking so sad, and tired, and even Wally looking upset. All so fond of her and wanting to do something.

But Grandam just said, "Mildred." And Aunt Mildred said, "Mother." And they went away together into the house, Grandam looking so small and frail and leaning on Aunt Mildred. I never realised, until then, how fond of each other they were. It didn't show much, you know.

Gina paused and sucked the end of her fountain pen. She resumed:

About me and Wally—we're coming back to the States as soon as we can....

Twenty-three

“What made you guess, Jane?”

Miss Marple took her time about replying. She looked thoughtfully at the other two—Carrie Louise thinner and frailer and yet curiously untouched—and the old man with the sweet smile and the thick white hair. Dr. Galbraith, Bishop of Cromer.

The Bishop took Carrie Louise’s hand in his.

“This has been a great sorrow to you, my poor child, and a great shock.”

“A sorrow, yes, but not really a shock.”

“No,” said Miss Marple. “That’s what I discovered, you know. Everyone kept saying how Carrie Louise lived in another world from this and was out of touch with reality. But actually, Carrie Louise, it was reality you were in touch with, and not the illusion. You are never deceived by illusion like most of us are. When I suddenly realised that, I saw that I must go by what *you* thought and felt. You were quite sure that no one would try to poison you, you couldn’t believe it—and you were quite right *not* to believe it, because it wasn’t so! You never believed that Edgar would harm Lewis—and again you were right. He never *would* have harmed Lewis. You were sure that Gina did not love anyone but her husband—and that, again, was quite true.

“So therefore, if I was to go by you, all the things that *seemed* to be true were only illusions. Illusions created for a definite purpose—in the same ways that conjurers create illusions, to deceive an audience. We were the audience.

"Alex Restarick got an inkling of the truth first because he had the chance of seeing things from a different angle—from the outside angle. He was with the Inspector in the drive, and he looked at the house and realised the possibilities of the windows—and he remembered the sound of running feet he had heard that night, and then, the timing of the constable showed him what a very short time things take to what we should imagine they would take. The constable panted a lot, and later, thinking of a puffing constable, I remembered that Lewis Serrocold was out of breath that night when he opened the study door. He'd just been running hard, you see....

"But it was Edgar Lawson that was the pivot of it all to me. There was always something wrong to me about Edgar Lawson. All the things he said and did were exactly right for what he was supposed to be, but he himself wasn't right. Because he was actually a normal young man playing the part of a schizophrenic—and he was always, as it were, a little larger than life. He was always theatrical.

"It must have all been very carefully planned and thought out. Lewis must have realised on the occasion of Christian's last visit that something had aroused his suspicions. And he knew Christian well enough to know that if he suspected he would not rest until he had satisfied himself that his suspicions were either justified or unfounded."

Carrie Louise stirred.

"Yes," she said. "Christian was like that. Slow and painstaking, but actually very shrewd. I don't know what it was aroused his suspicions but he started investigating—and he found out the truth."

The Bishop said: "I blame myself for not having been a more conscientious trustee."

"It was never expected of you to understand finance," said Carrie Louise. "That was originally Mr. Gilroy's province. Then, when he died, Lewis' great experience put him in what amounted to complete control. And that, of course, was what went to his head."

The pink colour came up in her cheeks.

"Lewis was a great man," she said. "A man of great vision, and a passionate believer in what could be accomplished—with money. He didn't want it for himself—or, at least, not in the greedy vulgar sense

—he did want the power of it—he wanted the power to do great good with it—”

“He wanted,” said the Bishop, “to be God.” His voice was suddenly stern. “He forgot that man is only the humble instrument of God’s will.”

“And so he embezzled the Trust funds?” said Miss Marple.

Dr. Galbraith hesitated.

“It wasn’t only that...”

“Tell her,” said Carrie Louise. “She is my oldest friend.”

The Bishop said:

“Lewis Serrocold was what one might call a financial wizard. In his years of highly technical accountancy, he had amused himself by working out various methods of swindling which were practically foolproof. This had been merely an academic study, but when he once began to envisage the possibilities that a vast sum of money could encompass, he put these methods into practice. You see, he had at his disposal some first class material. Amongst the boys who passed through here, he chose out a small select band. They were boys whose bent was naturally criminal, who loved excitement, and who had a very high order of intelligence. We’ve not got nearly to the bottom of it all, but it seems clear that this esoteric circle was secret and specially trained and by and by were placed in key positions, where, by carrying out Lewis’ directions, books were falsified in such a way that large sums of money were converted without any suspicion being aroused. I gather that the operations and the ramifications are so complicated that it will be months before the auditors can unravel it all. But the net result seems to be that under various names and banking accounts and companies, Lewis Serrocold would have been able to dispose of a colossal sum with which he intended to establish an overseas colony for a cooperative experiment in which juvenile delinquents should eventually own this territory and administer it. It may have been a fantastic dream—”

“It was a dream that might have come true,” said Carrie Louise.

“Yes, it might have come true. But the means Lewis Serrocold adopted were dishonest means, and Christian Gulbrandsen

discovered that. He was very upset, particularly by the realisation of what the discovery and the probable prosecution of Lewis would mean to you, Carrie Louise."

"That's why he asked me if my heart was strong, and seemed so worried about my health," said Carrie Louise. "I couldn't understand it."

"Then Lewis Serrocold arrived back from the North, and Christian met him outside the house and told him that he knew what was going on. Lewis took it calmly, I think. Both men agreed they must do all they could to spare you. Christian said he would write to me and ask me to come here, as a co-trustee, to discuss the position."

"But of course," said Miss Marple. "Lewis Serrocold had already prepared for this emergency. It was all planned. He had brought the young man who was to play the part of Edgar Lawson to the house. There was a real Edgar Lawson—of course—in case the police looked up his record. This false Edgar knew exactly what he had to do—act the part of a schizophrenic victim of persecution—and give Lewis Serrocold an alibi for a few vital minutes.

"The next step had been thought out too. Lewis' story that you, Carrie Louise, were being slowly poisoned—when one actually came to think of it there was only Lewis' story of what Christian had told *him*—that, and a few lines added on the typewriter whilst he was waiting for the police. It was easy to add arsenic to the tonic. No danger for you there—since he was on the spot to prevent you drinking it. The chocolates were just an added touch—and of course the original chocolates weren't poisoned—only those he substituted before turning them over to Inspector Curry."

"And Alex guessed," said Carrie Louise.

"Yes—that's why he collected your nail parings. They would show if arsenic actually had been administered over a long period."

"Poor Alex—poor Ernie."

There was a moment's silence as the other two thought of Christian Gulbrandsen, of Alexis Restarick, and of the boy Ernie—and of how quickly the act of murder could distort and deform.

"But surely," said the Bishop, "Lewis was taking a big risk in persuading Edgar to be his accomplice—even if he had some hold

over him—”

Carrie shook her head.

“It wasn’t exactly a hold over him. Edgar was devoted to Lewis.”

“Yes,” said Miss Marple. “Like Leonard Wylie and his father. I wonder perhaps if—”

She paused delicately.

“You saw the likeness, I suppose?” said Carrie Louise.

“So you knew that all along?”

“I guessed. I knew Lewis had once had a short infatuation for an actress, before he met me. He told me about it. It wasn’t serious, she was a golddigging type of woman and she didn’t care for him, but I’ve no doubt at all that Edgar was actually Lewis’ son....”

“Yes,” said Miss Marple. “That explains everything....”

“And he gave his life for him in the end,” said Carrie Louise. She looked pleadingly at the Bishop. “He did, you know.”

There was a silence, and then Carrie Louise said:

“I’m glad it ended that way ... with his life given in the hope of saving the boy ... people who can be very good can be very bad, too. I always knew that was true about Lewis ... But—he loved me very much—and I loved him.”

“Did you—ever suspect him?” asked Miss Marple.

“No,” said Carrie Louise. “Because I was puzzled by the poisoning. I knew Lewis would never poison me, and yet that letter of Christian’s said definitely that someone *was* poisoning me—so I thought that everything I thought I knew about people must be wrong....”

Miss Marple said, “But when Alex and Ernie were found killed. You suspected then?”

“Yes,” said Carrie Louise. “Because I didn’t think anyone else but Lewis would have dared. And I began to be afraid of what he might do next....”

She shivered slightly.

“I admired Lewis. I admired his—what shall I call it—his goodness? But I do see that if you’re—good, you have to be humble as well.”

Dr. Galbraith said gently:

"That, Carrie Louise, is what I have always admired in you—your humility."

The lovely blue eyes opened wide in surprise.

"But *I'm* not clever—and not particularly good. I can only admire goodness in other people."

"Dear Carrie Louise," said Miss Marple.

Epilogue

"I think Grandam will be quite all right with Aunt Mildred," said Gina. "Aunt Mildred seems much nicer now—not so peculiar, if you know what I mean?"

"I know what you mean," said Miss Marple.

"So Wally and I will go back to the States in a fortnight's time."

Gina cast a look sideways at her husband.

"I shall forget all about Stonygates and Italy and all my girlish past and become a hundred percent American. Our son will be always addressed as Junior. I can't say fairer than that, can I, Wally?"

"You certainly cannot, Kate," said Miss Marple.

Wally, smiling indulgently at an old lady who got names wrong, corrected her gently:

"Gina, not Kate."

But Gina laughed.

"She knows what she's saying! You see—she'll call *you* Petruchio in a moment!"

"I just think," said Miss Marple to Walter, "that you have acted very wisely, my dear boy."

"She thinks you're just the right husband for me," said Gina.

Miss Marple looked from one to the other. It was very nice, she thought, to see two young people so much in love, and Walter Hudd was completely transformed from the sulky young man she had first encountered, into a good-humoured smiling giant....

"You two remind me," she said, "of—"

Gina rushed forward and placed a hand firmly over Miss Marple's mouth.

"No, darling," she exclaimed. "Don't say it. I'm suspicious of these village parallels. They've always got a sting in the tail. You really are a wicked old woman, you know."

Her eyes went misty.

"When I think of you, and Aunt Ruth and Grandam all being young together ... how I wonder what you were all like! I can't imagine it somehow...."

"I don't suppose you can," said Miss Marple. "It was all a long time ago...."

Credits

Cover illustration and design by Sara Wood

MISS
MARPLE

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha Christie

A POCKET FULL OF RYE



A Miss Marple Mystery

A Pocket Full of Rye

A Miss Marple Mystery

Agatha Christie

HARPER

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

Dedication

For Bruce Ingram who liked and published my first short stories

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Chapter One

It was Miss Somers's turn to make the tea. Miss Somers was the newest and the most inefficient of the typists. She was no longer young and had a mild worried face like a sheep. The kettle was not quite boiling when Miss Somers poured the water onto the tea, but poor Miss Somers was never quite sure when a kettle *was* boiling. It was one of the many worries that afflicted her in life.

She poured out the tea and took the cups round with a couple of limp, sweet biscuits in each saucer.

Miss Griffith, the efficient head typist, a grey-haired martinet who had been with Consolidated Investments Trust for sixteen years, said sharply: "Water not boiling *again*, Somers!" and Miss Somers's worried meek face went pink and she said, "Oh dear, I *did* think it was boiling *this* time."

Miss Griffith thought to herself: "She'll last for another month, perhaps, just while we're so busy . . . But really! The mess the silly idiot made of that letter to Eastern Developments—a perfectly straightforward job, and always so stupid over the tea. If it weren't so difficult to get hold of any intelligent typists—and the biscuit tin lid wasn't shut tightly last time, either. *Really—*"

Like so many of Miss Griffith's indignant inner communings the sentence went unfinished.

At that moment Miss Grosvenor sailed in to make Mr. Fortescue's sacred tea. Mr. Fortescue had different tea, and different china and special biscuits. Only the kettle and the water from the cloakroom

tap were the same. But on this occasion, being Mr. Fortescue's tea, the water boiled. Miss Grosvenor saw to that.

Miss Grosvenor was an incredibly glamorous blonde. She wore an expensively cut little black suit and her shapely legs were encased in the very best and most expensive black-market nylons.

She sailed back through the typists' room without deigning to give anyone a word or a glance. The typists might have been so many blackbeetles. Miss Grosvenor was Mr. Fortescue's own special personal secretary; unkind rumour always hinted that she was something more, but actually this was not true. Mr. Fortescue had recently married a second wife, both glamorous and expensive, and fully capable of absorbing all his attention. Miss Grosvenor was to Mr. Fortescue just a necessary part of the office décor—which was all very luxurious and very expensive.

Miss Grosvenor sailed back with the tray held out in front of her like a ritual offering. Through the inner office and through the waiting room, where the more important clients were allowed to sit, and through her own anteroom, and finally with a light tap on the door she entered the holy of holies, Mr. Fortescue's office.

It was a large room with a gleaming expanse of parquet floor on which were dotted expensive oriental rugs. It was delicately panelled in pale wood and there were some enormous stuffed chairs upholstered in pale buff leather. Behind a colossal sycamore desk, the centre and focus of the room, sat Mr. Fortescue himself.

Mr. Fortescue was less impressive than he should have been to match the room, but he did his best. He was a large flabby man with a gleaming bald head. It was his affectation to wear loosely cut country tweeds in his city office. He was frowning down at some papers on his desk when Miss Grosvenor glided up to him in her swanlike manner. Placing the tray on the desk at his elbow, she murmured in a low impersonal voice, "Your tea, Mr. Fortescue," and withdrew.

Mr. Fortescue's contribution to the ritual was a grunt.

Seated at her own desk again Miss Grosvenor proceeded with the business in hand. She made two telephone calls, corrected some

letters that were lying there typed ready for Mr. Fortescue to sign and took one incoming call.

"Ay'm afraid it's impossible just now," she said in haughty accents. "Mr. Fortescue is in conference."

As she laid down the receiver she glanced at the clock. It was ten minutes past eleven.

It was just then that an unusual sound penetrated through the almost soundproof door of Mr. Fortescue's office. Muffled, it was yet fully recognizable, a strangled agonized cry. At the same moment the buzzer on Miss Grosvenor's desk sounded in a long-drawn frenzied summons. Miss Grosvenor, startled for a moment into complete immobility, rose uncertainly to her feet. Confronted by the unexpected, her poise was shaken. However, she moved towards Mr. Fortescue's door in her usual statuesque fashion, tapped and entered.

What she saw upset her poise still further. Her employer behind his desk seemed contorted with agony. His convulsive movements were alarming to watch.

Miss Grosvenor said, "Oh dear, Mr. Fortescue, are you ill?" and was immediately conscious of the idiocy of the question. There was no doubt but that Mr. Fortescue was very seriously ill. Even as she came up to him, his body was convulsed in a painful spasmodic movement.

Words came out in jerky gasps.

"Tea—what the hell—you put in the tea—get help—quick get a doctor—"

Miss Grosvenor fled from the room. She was no longer the supercilious blonde secretary—she was a thoroughly frightened woman who had lost her head.

She came running into the typists' office crying out:

"Mr. Fortescue's having a fit—he's dying—we must get a doctor—he looks awful—I'm sure he's dying."

Reactions were immediate and varied a good deal.

Miss Bell, the youngest typist, said, "If it's epilepsy we ought to put a cork in his mouth. Who's got a cork?"

Nobody had a cork.

Miss Somers said, "At his age it's probably apoplexy."

Miss Griffith said, "We must get a doctor—*at once*."

But she was hampered in her usual efficiency because in all her sixteen years of service it had never been necessary to call a doctor to the city office. There was her own doctor but that was at Streatham Hill. Where was there a doctor near here?

Nobody knew. Miss Bell seized a telephone directory and began looking up Doctors under D. But it was not a classified directory and doctors were not automatically listed like taxi ranks. Someone suggested a hospital—but which hospital? "It has to be the right hospital," Miss Somers insisted, "or else they won't come. Because of the National Health, I mean. It's got to be in the area."

Someone suggested 999 but Miss Griffith was shocked at that and said it would mean the police and that would never do. For citizens of a country which enjoyed the benefits of Medical Service for all, a group of quite reasonably intelligent women showed incredible ignorance of correct procedure. Miss Bell started looking up Ambulances under A. Miss Griffith said, "There's his own doctor—he must *have* a doctor." Someone rushed for the private address book. Miss Griffith instructed the office boy to go out and find a doctor—somehow, *anywhere*. In the private address book, Miss Griffith found Sir Edwin Sandeman with an address in Harley Street. Miss Grosvenor, collapsed in a chair, wailed in a voice whose accent was noticeably less Mayfair than usual, "I made the tea just as usual—really I did—there couldn't have been anything wrong in it."

"*Wrong* in it?" Miss Griffith paused, her hand on the dial of the telephone. "Why do you say that?"

"*He* said it—Mr. Fortescue—he said it was the tea—"

Miss Griffith's hand hovered irresolutely between Welbeck and 999. Miss Bell, young and hopeful, said: "We ought to give him some mustard and water—*now*. Isn't there any mustard in the office?"

There was no mustard in the office.

Some short while later Dr. Isaacs of Bethnal Green, and Sir Edwin Sandeman met in the elevator just as two different ambulances drew up in front of the building. The telephone and the office boy had done their work.

Chapter Two

Inspector Neele sat in Mr. Fortescue's sanctum behind Mr. Fortescue's vast sycamore desk. One of his underlings with a notebook sat unobtrusively against the wall near the door.

Inspector Neele had a smart soldierly appearance with crisp brown hair growing back from a rather low forehead. When he uttered the phrase "just a matter of routine" those addressed were wont to think spitefully: "And routine is about all *you're* capable of!" They would have been quite wrong. Behind his unimaginative appearance, Inspector Neele was a highly imaginative thinker, and one of his methods of investigation was to propound to himself fantastic theories of guilt which he applied to such persons as he was interrogating at the time.

Miss Griffith, whom he had at once picked out with an unerring eye as being the most suitable person to give him a succinct account of the events which had led to his being seated where he was, had just left the room having given him an admirable résumé of the morning's happenings. Inspector Neele propounded to himself three separate highly coloured reasons why the faithful doyenne of the typists' room should have poisoned her employer's mid-morning cup of tea, and rejected them as unlikely.

He classified Miss Griffith as (a) Not the type of a poisoner, (b) Not in love with her employer, (c) No pronounced mental instability, (d) Not a woman who cherished grudges. That really seemed to dispose of Miss Griffith except as a source of accurate information.

Inspector Neele glanced at the telephone. He was expecting a call from St. Jude's Hospital at any moment now.

It was possible, of course, that Mr. Fortescue's sudden illness was due to natural causes, but Dr. Isaacs of Bethnal Green had not thought so and Sir Edwin Sandeman of Harley Street had not thought so.

Inspector Neele pressed a buzzer conveniently situated at his left hand and demanded that Mr. Fortescue's personal secretary should be sent in to him.

Miss Grosvenor had recovered a little of her poise, but not much. She came in apprehensively, with nothing of the swanlike glide about her motions, and said at once defensively:

"I didn't do it!"

Inspector Neele murmured conversationally: "No?"

He indicated the chair where Miss Grosvenor was wont to place herself, pad in hand, when summoned to take down Mr. Fortescue's letters. She sat down now with reluctance and eyed Inspector Neele in alarm. Inspector Neele, his mind playing imaginatively on the themes Seduction? Blackmail? Platinum Blonde in Court? etc., looked reassuring and just a little stupid.

"There wasn't anything wrong with the tea," said Miss Grosvenor. "There couldn't have been."

"I see," said Inspector Neele. "Your name and address, please?"

"Grosvenor. Irene Grosvenor."

"How do you spell it?"

"Oh. Like the Square."

"And your address?"

"14 Rushmoor Road, Muswell Hill."

Inspector Neele nodded in a satisfied fashion.

"No seduction," he said to himself. "No Love Nest. Respectable home with parents. No blackmail."

Another good set of speculative theories washed out.

"And so it was you who made the tea?" he said pleasantly.

"Well, I had to. I always do, I mean."

Unhurried, Inspector Neele took her closely through the morning ritual of Mr. Fortescue's tea. The cup and saucer and teapot had

already been packed up and dispatched to the appropriate quarter for analysis. Now Inspector Neele learned that Irene Grosvenor and only Irene Grosvenor had handled that cup and saucer and teapot. The kettle had been used for making the office tea and had been refilled from the cloakroom tap by Miss Grosvenor.

"And the tea itself?"

"It was Mr. Fortescue's own tea, special China tea. It's kept on the shelf in my room next door."

Inspector Neele nodded. He inquired about sugar and heard that Mr. Fortescue didn't take sugar.

The telephone rang. Inspector Neele picked up the receiver. His face changed a little.

"St. Jude's?"

He nodded to Miss Grosvenor in dismissal.

"That's all for now, thank you, Miss Grosvenor."

Miss Grosvenor sped out of the room hurriedly.

Inspector Neele listened carefully to the thin unemotional tones speaking from St. Jude's Hospital. As the voice spoke he made a few cryptic signs with a pencil on the corner of the blotter in front of him.

"Died five minutes ago, you say?" he asked. His eye went to the watch on his wrist. *Twelve forty-three*, he wrote on the blotter.

The unemotional voice said that Dr. Bernsdorff himself would like to speak to Inspector Neele.

Inspector Neele said, "Right. Put him through," which rather scandalized the owner of the voice, who had allowed a certain amount of reverence to seep into the official accents.

There were then various clicks, buzzes, and far-off ghostly murmurs. Inspector Neele sat patiently waiting.

Then without warning a deep bass roar caused him to shift the receiver an inch or two away from his ear.

"Hallo, Neele, you old vulture. At it again with your corpses?"

Inspector Neele and Professor Bernsdorff of St. Jude's had been brought together over a case of poisoning just over a year ago and had remained on friendly terms.

"Our man's dead, I hear, doc."

"Yes. We couldn't do anything by the time he got here."

"And the cause of death?"

"There will have to be an autopsy, naturally. Very interesting case. Very interesting indeed. Glad I was able to be in on it."

The professional gusto in Bernsdorff's rich tones told Inspector Neele one thing at least.

"I gather you don't think it was natural death," he said dryly.

"Not a dog's chance of it," said Dr. Bernsdorff robustly. "I'm speaking unofficially, of course," he added with belated caution.

"Of course. Of course. That's understood. He was poisoned?"

"Definitely. And what's more—this is quite unofficial, you understand—just between you and me—I'd be prepared to make a bet on what the poison was."

"In-deed?"

"Taxine, my boy. Taxine."

"Taxine? Never heard of it."

"I know. *Most* unusual. Really delightfully unusual! I don't say I'd have spotted it myself if I hadn't had a case only three or four weeks ago. Couple of kids playing dolls' tea parties—pulled berries off a yew tree and used them for tea."

"Is that what it is? Yew berries?"

"Berries or leaves. Highly poisonous. Taxine, of course, is the alkaloid. Don't think I've heard of a case where it was used deliberately. Really *most* interesting and unusual . . . You've no idea, Neele, how tired one gets of the inevitable weed killer. Taxine is a real treat. Of course, I *may* be wrong—don't quote me, for Heaven's sake—but I don't think so. Interesting for you, too, I should think. Varies the routine!"

"A good time is to be had by all, is that the idea? With the exception of the victim."

"Yes, yes, poor fellow." Dr. Bernsdorff's tone was perfunctory. "Very bad luck on him."

"Did he say anything before he died?"

"Well, one of your fellows was sitting by him with a notebook. He'll have the exact details. He muttered something once about tea

—that he'd been given something in his tea at the office—but that's nonsense, of course."

"Why is it nonsense?" Inspector Neele, who had been reviewing speculatively the picture of the glamorous Miss Grosvenor adding yew berries to a brew of tea, and finding it incongruous, spoke sharply.

"Because the stuff couldn't possibly have worked so soon. I understand the symptoms came on immediately he had drunk the tea?"

"That's what they say."

"Well, there are very few poisons that act as quickly as that, apart from the cyanides, of course—and possibly pure nicotine—"

"And it definitely wasn't cyanide or nicotine?"

"My dear fellow. He'd have been dead before the ambulance arrived. Oh no, there's no question of anything of that kind. I *did* suspect strychnine, but the convulsions were not at all typical. Still unofficial, of course, but I'll stake my reputation it's taxine."

"How long would that take to work?"

"Depends. An hour. Two hours, three hours. Deceased looked like a hearty eater. If he had had a big breakfast, that would slow things up."

"Breakfast," said Inspector Neele thoughtfully. "Yes, it looks like breakfast."

"Breakfast with the Borgias." Dr. Bernsdorff laughed cheerfully. "Well, good hunting, my lad."

"Thanks, doctor. I'd like to speak to my sergeant before you ring off."

Again there were clicks and buzzes and far-off ghostly voices. And then the sound of heavy breathing came through, an inevitable prelude to Sergeant Hay's conversation.

"Sir," he said urgently. "*Sir.*"

"Neele here. Did the deceased say anything I ought to know?"

"Said it was the tea. The tea he had at the office. But the M.O. says not. . . ."

"Yes, I know about that. Nothing else?"

"No, sir. But there's one thing that's odd. The suit he was wearing—I checked the contents of the pockets. The usual stuff—handkerchief, keys, change, wallet—but there was one thing that's downright peculiar. The right-hand pocket of his jacket. It had *cereal* in it."

"Cereal?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you mean by cereal? Do you mean a breakfast food? Farmer's Glory or Wheatifax. Or do you mean corn or barley—"

"That's right, sir. Grain it was. Looked like rye to me. Quite a lot of it."

"I see . . . Odd . . . But it might have been a sample—something to do with a business deal."

"Quite so, sir—but I thought I'd better mention it."

"Quite right, Hay."

Inspector Neele sat staring ahead of him for a few moments after he had replaced the telephone receiver. His orderly mind was moving from Phase I to Phase II of the inquiry—from suspicion of poisoning to certainty of poisoning. Professor Bernsdorff's words may have been unofficial, but Professor Bernsdorff was not a man to be mistaken in his beliefs. Rex Fortescue had been poisoned and the poison had probably been administered one to three hours before the onset of the first symptoms. It seemed probable, therefore, that the office staff could be given a clean bill of health.

Neele got up and went into the outer office. A little desultory work was being done but the typewriters were not going at full speed.

"Miss Griffith? Can I have another word with you?"

"Certainly, Mr. Neele. Could some of the girls go out to lunch? It's long past their regular time. Or would you prefer that we get something sent in?"

"No. They can go to lunch. But they must return afterwards."

"Of course."

Miss Griffith followed Neele back into the private office. She sat down in her composed efficient way.

Without preamble, Inspector Neele said:

"I have heard from St. Jude's Hospital. Mr. Fortescue died at 12:43."

Miss Griffith received the news without surprise, merely shook her head.

"I was afraid he was very ill," she said.

She was not, Neele noted, at all distressed.

"Will you please give me particulars of his home and family?"

"Certainly. I have already tried to get into communication with Mrs. Fortescue, but it seems she is out playing golf. She was not expected home to lunch. There is some uncertainty as to which course she is playing on." She added in an explanatory manner, "They live at Baydon Heath, you know, which is a centre for three well-known golf courses."

Inspector Neele nodded. Baydon Heath was almost entirely inhabited by rich city men. It had an excellent train service, was only twenty miles from London and was comparatively easy to reach by car even in the rush of morning and evening traffic.

"The exact address, please, and the telephone number?"

"Bayden Heath 3400. The name of the house is Yewtree Lodge."

"*What?*" The sharp query slipped out before Inspector Neele could control it. "Did you say *Yewtree* Lodge?"

"Yes."

Miss Griffith looked faintly curious, but Inspector Neele had himself in hand again.

"Can you give me particulars of his family?"

"Mrs. Fortescue is his second wife. She is much younger than he is. They were married about two years ago. The first Mrs. Fortescue has been dead a long time. There are two sons and a daughter of the first marriage. The daughter lives at home and so does the elder son, who is a partner in the firm. Unfortunately he is away in the North of England today on business. He is expected to return tomorrow."

"When did he go away?"

"The day before yesterday."

"Have you tried to get in touch with him?"

"Yes. After Mr. Fortescue was removed to hospital I rang up the Midland Hotel in Manchester where I thought he might be staying, but he had left early this morning. I believe he was also going to Sheffield and Leicester, but I am not sure about that. I can give you the names of certain firms in those cities whom he might be visiting."

Certainly an efficient woman, thought the inspector, and if she murdered a man she would probably murder him very efficiently, too. But he forced himself to abandon these speculations and concentrate once more on Mr. Fortescue's home front.

"There is a second son you said?"

"Yes. But owing to a disagreement with his father he lives abroad."

"Are both sons married?"

"Yes. Mr. Percival has been married for three years. He and his wife occupy a self-contained flat in Yewtree Lodge, though they are moving into their own house at Baydon Heath very shortly."

"You were not able to get in touch with Mrs. Percival Fortescue when you rang up this morning?"

"She had gone to London for the day." Miss Griffith went on, "Mr. Lancelot got married less than a year ago. To the widow of Lord Frederick Anstice. I expect you've seen pictures of her. In the *Tatler*—with horses, you know. And at point-to-points."

Miss Griffith sounded a little breathless and her cheeks were faintly flushed. Neele, who was quick to catch the moods of human beings, realized that this marriage had thrilled the snob and the romantic in Miss Griffith. The aristocracy was the aristocracy to Miss Griffith and the fact that the late Lord Frederick Anstice had had a somewhat unsavoury reputation in sporting circles was almost certainly not known to her. Freddie Anstice had blown his brains out just before an inquiry by the Stewards into the running of one of his horses. Neele remembered something vaguely about his wife. She had been the daughter of an Irish Peer and had been married before to an airman who had been killed in the Battle of Britain.

And now, it seemed, she was married to the black sheep of the Fortescue family, for Neele assumed that the disagreement with his

father, referred to primly by Miss Griffith, stood for some disgraceful incident in young Lancelot Fortescue's career.

Lancelot Fortescue! What a name! And what was the other son—Percival? He wondered what the first Mrs. Fortescue had been like? She'd had a curious taste in Christian names. . . .

He drew the phone towards him and dialled TOL. He asked for Baydon Heath 3400.

Presently a man's voice said:

"Baydon Heath 3400."

"I want to speak to Mrs. Fortescue or Miss Fortescue."

"Sorry. They aren't in, either of 'em."

The voice struck Inspector Neele as slightly alcoholic.

"Are you the butler?"

"That's right."

"Mr. Fortescue has been taken seriously ill."

"I know. They rung up and said so. But there's nothing I can do about it. Mr. Val's away up North and Mrs. Fortescue's out playing golf. Mrs. Val's gone up to London but she'll be back for dinner and Miss Elaine's out with her Brownies."

"Is there no one in the house I can speak to about Mr. Fortescue's illness? It's important."

"Well—I don't know." The man sounded doubtful. "There's Miss Ramsbottom—but she don't ever speak over the phone. Or there's Miss Dove—she's what you might call the 'ousekeeper."

"I'll speak to Miss Dove, please."

"I'll try and get hold of her."

His retreating footsteps were audible through the phone. Inspector Neele heard no approaching footsteps but a minute or two later a woman's voice spoke.

"This is Miss Dove speaking."

The voice was low and well poised, with clear-cut enunciation. Inspector Neele formed a favourable picture of Miss Dove.

"I am sorry to have to tell you, Miss Dove, that Mr. Fortescue died in St. Jude's Hospital a short time ago. He was taken suddenly ill in his office. I am anxious to get in touch with his relatives—"

"Of course. I had no idea—" She broke off. Her voice held no agitation, but it was shocked. She went on: "It is all most unfortunate. The person you really want to get in touch with is Mr. Percival Fortescue. He would be the one to see to all the necessary arrangements. You might be able to get in touch with him at the Midland in Manchester or possibly at the Grand in Leicester. Or you might try Shearer and Bonds of Leicester. I don't know their telephone number, I'm afraid, but I know they are a firm on whom he was going to call and they might be able to inform you where he would be likely to be today. Mrs. Fortescue will certainly be in to dinner and she may be in to tea. It will be a great shock to her. It must have been very sudden? Mr. Fortescue was quite well when he left here this morning."

"You saw him before he left?"

"Oh yes. What was it? Heart?"

"Did he suffer from heart trouble?"

"No—no—I don't think so—But I thought as it was so sudden—" She broke off. "Are you speaking from St. Jude's Hospital? Are you a doctor?"

"No, Miss Dove, I'm not a doctor. I'm speaking from Mr. Fortescue's office in the city. I am Detective Inspector Neele of the CID and I shall be coming down to see you as soon as I can get there."

"Detective Inspector? Do you mean—what *do* you mean?"

"It was a case of sudden death, Miss Dove; and when there is a sudden death we get called to the scene, especially when the deceased man hasn't seen a doctor lately—which I gather was the case?"

It was only the faintest suspicion of a question mark but the young woman responded.

"I know. Percival made an appointment twice for him, but he wouldn't keep it. He was quite unreasonable—they've all been worried—"

She broke off and then resumed in her former assured manner.

"If Mrs. Fortescue returns to the house before you arrive, what do you want me to tell her?"

Practical as they make 'em, thought Inspector Neele.

Aloud he said:

"Just tell her that in a case of sudden death we have to make a few inquiries. Routine inquiries."

He hung up.

Chapter Three

Neele pushed the telephone away and looked sharply at Miss Griffith.

"So they've been worried about him lately," he said. "Wanted him to see a doctor. You didn't tell me that."

"I didn't think of it," said Miss Griffith, and added: "He never seemed to me really *ill*—"

"Not ill—but what?"

"Well, just off. Unlike himself. Peculiar in his manner."

"Worried about something?"

"Oh no, not *worried*. It's *we* who were worried—"

Inspector Neele waited patiently.

"It's difficult to say, really," said Miss Griffith. "He had moods, you know. Sometimes he was quite boisterous. Once or twice, frankly, I thought he had been drinking . . . He boasted and told the most extraordinary stories which I'm sure couldn't possibly have been true. For most of the time I've been here he was always very close about his affairs—not giving anything away, you know. But lately he's been quite different, expansive, and positively—well—flinging money about. Most unlike his usual manner. Why, when the office boy had to go to his grandmother's funeral, Mr. Fortescue called him in and gave him a five pound note and told him to put it on the second favourite and then roared with laughter. He wasn't—well, he just wasn't like himself. That's all I can say."

"As though, perhaps, he had something on his mind?"

"Not in the usual meaning of the term. It was as though he were looking forward to something pleasurable—exciting—"

"Possibly a big deal that he was going to pull off?"

Miss Griffith agreed with more conviction.

"Yes—yes, that's much more what I mean. As though everyday things didn't matter anymore. He was excited. And some very odd-looking people came to see him on business. People who'd never been here before. It worried Mr. Percival dreadfully."

"Oh, it worried him, did it?"

"Yes. Mr. Percival's always been very much in his father's confidence, you see. His father relied on him. But lately—"

"Lately they weren't getting along so well."

"Well, Mr. Fortescue was doing a lot of things that Mr. Percival thought unwise. Mr. Percival is always very careful and prudent. But suddenly his father didn't listen to him anymore and Mr. Percival was very upset."

"And they had a real row about it all?"

Inspector Neele was still probing.

"I don't know about a *row* . . . Of course, I realize now Mr. Fortescue can't have been himself—shouting like that."

"Shouted, did he? What did he say?"

"He came right out in the typists' room—"

"So that you all heard?"

"Well—yes."

"And he called Percival names—abused him—swore at him."

"What did he say Percival had done?"

"It was more that he hadn't done anything . . . he called him a miserable pettifogging little clerk. He said he had no large outlook, no conception of doing business in a big way. He said: 'I shall get Lance home again. He's worth ten of you—and he's married well. Lance has got guts even if he did risk a criminal prosecution once—' Oh dear, I oughtn't to have said that!" Miss Griffith, carried away as others before her had been under Inspector Neele's expert handling, was suddenly overcome with confusion.

"Don't worry," said Inspector Neele comfortingly. "What's past is past."

"Oh yes, it was a long time ago. Mr. Lance was just young and high-spirited and didn't really realize what he was doing."

Inspector Neele had heard that view before and didn't agree with it. But he passed on to fresh questions.

"Tell me a little more about the staff here."

Miss Griffith, hurrying to get away from her indiscretion, poured out information about the various personalities in the firm. Inspector Neele thanked her and then said he would like to see Miss Grosvenor again.

Detective Constable Waite sharpened his pencil. He remarked wistfully that this was a Ritzy joint. His glance wandered appreciatively over the huge chairs, the big desk and the indirect lighting.

"All these people have got Ritzy names, too," he said. "Grosvenor—that's something to do with a Duke. And Fortescue—that's a classy name, too."

Inspector Neele smiled.

"His father's name wasn't Fortescue. Fontescu—and he came from somewhere in Central Europe. I suppose this man thought Fortescue sounded better."

Detective Constable Waite looked at his superior officer with awe.

"So you know all about him?"

"I just looked up a few things before coming along on the call."

"Not got a record, had he?"

"Oh no. Mr. Fortescue was much too clever for that. He's had certain connections with the black market and put through one or two deals that are questionable to say the least of it, but they've always been just within the law."

"I see," said Waite. "Not a nice man."

"A twister," said Neele. "But we've got nothing on him. The Inland Revenue have been after him for a long time but he's been too clever for them. Quite a financial genius, the late Mr. Fortescue."

"The sort of man," said Constable Waite, "who might have enemies?"

He spoke hopefully.

"Oh yes—certainly enemies. But he was poisoned at home, remember. Or so it would seem. You know, Waite, I see a kind of pattern emerging. An old-fashioned familiar kind of pattern. The good boy, Percival. The bad boy, Lance—attractive to women. The wife who's younger than her husband and who's vague about which course she's going to play golf on. It's all very familiar. But there's one thing that sticks out in a most incongruous way."

Constable Waite asked "What's that?" just as the door opened and Miss Grosvenor, her poise restored, and once more her glamorous self, inquired haughtily:

"You wished to see me?"

"I wanted to ask you a few questions about your employer—your late employer, perhaps I should say."

"Poor soul," said Miss Grosvenor unconvincingly.

"I want to know if you had noticed any difference in him lately."

"Well, yes. I did, as a matter of fact."

"In what way?"

"I couldn't really say . . . He seemed to talk a lot of nonsense. I couldn't really believe half of what he said. And then he lost his temper very easily—especially with Mr. Percival. Not with me, because of course I *never* argue. I just say, 'Yes, Mr. Fortescue,' whatever peculiar thing he says—said, I mean."

"Did he—ever—well—make any passes at you?"

Miss Grosvenor replied rather regretfully:

"Well, no, I couldn't exactly say *that*."

"There's just one other thing, Miss Grosvenor. Was Mr. Fortescue in the habit of carrying grain about in his pocket?"

Miss Grosvenor displayed a lively surprise.

"Grain? In his pocket? Do you mean to feed pigeons or something?"

"It could have been for that purpose."

"Oh, I'm sure he didn't. Mr. Fortescue? Feed pigeons? Oh no."

"Could he have had barley—or rye—in his pocket today for any special reason? A sample, perhaps? Some deal in grain?"

"Oh no. He was expecting the Asiatic Oil people this afternoon. And the President of the Atticus Building Society . . . No one else."

"Oh well—" Neele dismissed the subject and Miss Grosvenor with a wave of the hand.

"Lovely legs she's got," said Constable Waite with a sigh. "And super nylons—"

"Legs are no help to me," said Inspector Neele. "I'm left with what I had before. A pocketful of rye—and no explanation of it."

Chapter Four

Mary Dove paused on her way downstairs and looked out through the big window on the stairs. A car had just driven up from which two men were alighting. The taller of the two stood for a moment with his back to the house surveying his surroundings. Mary Dove appraised the two men thoughtfully. Inspector Neele and presumably a subordinate.

She turned from the window and looked at herself in the full-length mirror that hung on the wall where the staircase turned . . . She saw a small demure figure with immaculate white collar and cuffs on a beige grey dress. Her dark hair was parted in the middle and drawn back in two shining waves to a knot in the back of the neck . . . The lipstick she used was a pale rose colour.

On the whole Mary Dove was satisfied with her appearance. A very faint smile on her lips, she went on down the stairs.

Inspector Neele, surveying the house, was saying to himself:

Call it a lodge, indeed! Yewtree Lodge! The affectation of these rich people! The house was what he, Inspector Neele, would call a mansion. He knew what a lodge was. He'd been brought up in one! The lodge at the gates of Hartington Park, that vast unwieldy Palladian house with its twenty-nine bedrooms which had now been taken over by the National Trust. The lodge had been small and attractive from the outside, and had been damp, uncomfortable and devoid of anything but the most primitive form of sanitation within. Fortunately these facts had been accepted as quite proper and fitting by Inspector Neele's parents. They had no rent to pay and nothing

whatever to do except open and shut the gates when required, and there were always plenty of rabbits and an occasional pheasant or so for the pot. Mrs. Neele had never discovered the pleasure of electric irons, slow combustion stoves, airing cupboards, hot and cold water from taps, and the switching on of light by a mere flick of a finger. In winter the Neeles had an oil lamp and in summer they went to bed when it got dark. They were a healthy family and a happy one, all thoroughly behind the times.

So when Inspector Neele heard the word Lodge, it was his childhood memories that stirred. But this place, this pretentiously named Yewtree Lodge was just the kind of mansion that rich people built themselves and then called it "their little place in the country." It wasn't in the country either, according to Inspector Neele's idea of the country. The house was a large solid red-brick structure, sprawling lengthwise rather than upward, with rather too many gables, and a vast number of leaded paned windows. The gardens were highly artificial—all laid out in rose beds and pergolas and pools, and living up to the name of the house with large numbers of clipped yew hedges.

Plenty of yew here for anybody with a desire to obtain the raw material of taxine. Over on the right, behind the rose pergola, there was a bit of actual nature left—a vast yew tree of the kind one associates with churchyards, its branches held up by stakes—like a kind of Moses of the forest world. That tree, the inspector thought, had been there long before the rash of newly built red-brick houses had begun to spread over the countryside. It had been there before the golf courses had been laid out and the fashionable architects had walked round with their rich clients, pointing out the advantages of the various sites. And since it was a valuable antique, the tree had been kept and incorporated in the new setup and had, perhaps, given its name to the new desirable residence. Yewtree Lodge. And possibly the berries from that very tree—

Inspector Neele cut off these unprofitable speculations. Must get on with the job. He rang the bell.

It was opened promptly by a middle-aged man who fitted in quite accurately with the mental image Inspector Neele had formed of him

over the phone. A man with a rather spurious air of smartness, a shifty eye and a rather unsteady hand.

Inspector Neele announced himself and his subordinate and had the pleasure of seeing an instant look of alarm come into the butler's eye . . . Neele did not attach too much importance to that. It might easily have nothing to do with the death of Rex Fortescue. It was quite possibly a purely automatic reaction.

"Has Mrs. Fortescue returned yet?"

"No, sir."

"Nor Mr. Percival Fortescue? Nor Miss Fortescue?"

"No, sir."

"Then I would like to see Miss Dove, please."

The man turned his head slightly.

"Here's Miss Dove now—coming downstairs."

Inspector Neele took in Miss Dove as she came composedly down the wide staircase. This time the mental picture did not correspond with the reality. Unconsciously the word housekeeper had conjured up a vague impression of someone large and authoritative dressed in black with somewhere concealed about her a jingle of keys.

The inspector was quite unprepared for the small trim figure descending towards him. The soft dove-coloured tones of her dress, the white collar and cuffs, the neat waves of hair, the faint Mona Lisa smile. It all seemed, somehow, just a little unreal, as though this young woman of under thirty was playing a part: not, he thought, the part of a housekeeper, but the part of Mary Dove. Her appearance was directed towards living up to her name.

She greeted him composedly.

"Inspector Neele?"

"Yes. This is Sergeant Hay. Mr. Fortescue, as I told you through the phone, died in St. Jude's Hospital at 12:43. It seems likely that his death was the result of something he ate at breakfast this morning. I should be glad therefore if Sergeant Hay could be taken to the kitchen where he can make inquiries as to the food served."

Her eyes met his for a moment, thoughtfully, then she nodded.

"Of course," she said. She turned to the uneasily hovering butler. "Crump, will you take Sergeant Hay out and show him whatever he

wants to see."

The two men departed together. Mary Dove said to Neele:

"Will you come in here?"

She opened the door of a room and preceded him into it. It was a characterless apartment, clearly labelled "Smoking Room," with panelling, rich upholstery, large stuffed chairs, and a suitable set of sporting prints on the walls.

"Please sit down."

He sat and Mary Dove sat opposite him. She chose, he noticed, to face the light. An unusual preference for a woman. Still more unusual if a woman had anything to hide. But perhaps Mary Dove had nothing to hide.

"It is very unfortunate," she said, "that none of the family is available. Mrs. Fortescue may return at any minute. And so may Mrs. Val. I have sent wires to Mr. Percival Fortescue at various places."

"Thank you, Miss Dove."

"You say that Mr. Fortescue's death was caused by something he may have eaten for breakfast? Food poisoning, you mean?"

"Possibly." He watched her.

She said composedly, "It seems unlikely. For breakfast this morning there were bacon and scrambled eggs, coffee, toast and marmalade. There was also a cold ham on the sideboard, but that had been cut yesterday, and no one felt any ill effects. No fish of any kind was served, no sausages—nothing like that."

"I see you know exactly what was served."

"Naturally. I order the meals. For dinner last night—"

"No." Inspector Neele interrupted her. "It would not be a question of dinner last night."

"I thought the onset of food poisoning could sometimes be delayed as much as twenty-four hours."

"Not in this case . . . Will you tell me exactly what Mr. Fortescue ate and drank before leaving the house this morning?"

"He had early tea brought to his room at eight o'clock. Breakfast was at a quarter past nine. Mr. Fortescue, as I have told you, had scrambled eggs, bacon, coffee, toast and marmalade."

"Any cereal?"

"No, he didn't like cereals."

"The sugar for the coffee—it is lump sugar or granulated?"

"Lump. But Mr. Fortescue did not take sugar in his coffee."

"Was he in the habit of taking any medicines in the morning? Salts? A tonic? Some digestive remedy?"

"No, nothing of that kind."

"Did you have breakfast with him also?"

"No. I do not take meals with the family."

"Who was at breakfast?"

"Mrs. Fortescue. Miss Fortescue. Mrs. Val Fortescue. Mr. Percival Fortescue, of course, was away."

"And Mrs. and Miss Fortescue ate the same things for breakfast?"

"Mrs. Fortescue has only coffee, orange juice and toast, Mrs. Val and Miss Fortescue always eat a hearty breakfast. Besides eating scrambled eggs and cold ham, they would probably have a cereal as well. Mrs. Val drinks tea, not coffee."

Inspector Neele reflected for a moment. The opportunities seemed at least to be narrowing down. Three people and three people only had had breakfast with the deceased, his wife, his daughter and his daughter-in-law. Either of them might have seized an opportunity to add taxine to his cup of coffee. The bitterness of the coffee would have masked the bitter taste of the taxine. There was the early morning tea, of course, but Bernsdorff had intimated that the taste would be noticeable in tea. But perhaps, first thing in the morning, before the senses were alert . . . He looked up to find Mary Dove watching him.

"Your questions about tonic and medicines seem to me rather odd, Inspector," she said. "It seems to imply that either there was something wrong with a medicine, or that something had been added to it. Surely neither of those processes could be described as food poisoning."

Neele eyed her steadily.

"I did not say—definitely—that Mr. Fortescue died of food poisoning. But some kind of poisoning. In fact—just poisoning."

She repeated softly: "Poisoning. . . ."

She appeared neither startled nor dismayed, merely interested. Her attitude was of one sampling a new experience.

In fact she said as much, remarking after a moment's reflection: "I have never had anything to do with a poisoning case before."

"It's not very pleasant," Neele informed her dryly.

"No—I suppose not. . . ."

She thought about it for a moment and then looked up at him with a sudden smile.

"I didn't do it," she said. "But I suppose everybody will tell you that!"

"Have you any idea who did do it, Miss Dove?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Frankly, he was an odious man. Anybody might have done it."

"But people aren't poisoned just for being 'odious,' Miss Dove. There usually has to be a pretty solid motive."

"Yes, of course."

She was thoughtful.

"Do you care to tell me something about the household here?"

She looked up at him. He was a little startled to find her eyes cool and amused.

"This isn't exactly a statement you're asking me to make, is it? No, it couldn't be, because your sergeant is busy upsetting the domestic staff. I shouldn't like to have what I say read out in court—but all the same I should rather like to say it—unofficially. Off the record, so to speak?"

"Go ahead then, Miss Dove. I've no witness, as you've already observed."

She leaned back, swinging one slim foot and narrowing her eyes.

"Let me start by saying that I've no feeling of loyalty to my employers. I work for them because it's a job that pays well and I insist that it should pay well."

"I was a little surprised to find you doing this type of job. It struck me that with your brains and education—"

"I ought to be confined in an office? Or compiling files in a Ministry? My dear Inspector Neele, this is the perfect racket. People will pay anything—*anything*—to be spared domestic worries. To find

and engage a staff is a thoroughly tedious job. Writing to agencies, putting in advertisements, interviewing people, making arrangements for interviews, and finally keeping the whole thing running smoothly—it takes a certain capacity which most of these people haven't got."

"And suppose your staff, when you've assembled it, runs out on you? I've heard of such things."

Mary smiled.

"If necessary, I can make the beds, dust the rooms, cook a meal *and* serve it without anyone noticing the difference. Of course I don't advertise that fact. It might give rise to ideas. But I can always be sure of tiding over any little gap. But there aren't often gaps. I work only for the extremely rich who will pay anything to be comfortable. I pay top prices and so I get the best of what's going."

"Such as the butler?"

She threw him an amused, appreciative glance.

"There's always that trouble with a couple. Crump stays because of Mrs. Crump, who is one of the best cooks I've ever come across. She's a jewel and one would put up with a good deal to keep her. Our Mr. Fortescue likes his food—liked, I should say. In this household nobody has any scruples and they have plenty of money. Butter, eggs, cream, Mrs. Crump can command what she likes. As for Crump, he just makes the grade. His silver's all right, and his waiting at table is not too bad. I keep the key of the wine cellar and a sharp eye on the whisky, and gin, and supervise his valeting."

Inspector Neele raised his eyebrows.

"The admirable Miss Crichton."

"I find one must *know* how to do everything oneself. Then—one need never do it. But you wanted to know my impressions of the family."

"If you don't mind."

"They are really all quite odious. The late Mr. Fortescue was the kind of crook who is always careful to play safe. He boasted a great deal of his various smart dealings. He was rude and overbearing in manner and was a definite bully. Mrs. Fortescue, Adele—was his second wife and about thirty years younger than he was. He came

across her at Brighton. She was a manicurist on the look out for big money. She is very good-looking—a real sexy piece, if you know what I mean.”

Inspector Neele was shocked but managed not to show it. A girl like Mary Dove ought not to say such things, he felt.

The young lady was continuing composedly:

“Adele married him for his money, of course, and his son, Percival, and his daughter, Elaine, were simply livid about it. They’re as nasty as they can be to her, but very wisely she doesn’t care or even notice. She knows she’s got the old man where she wants him. Oh dear, the wrong tense again. I haven’t really grasped yet that he’s dead. . . .”

“Let’s hear about the son.”

“Dear Percival? Val, as his wife calls him. Percival is a mealy-mouthed hypocrite. He’s prim and sly and cunning. He’s terrified of his father and has always let himself be bullied, but he’s quite clever at getting his own way. Unlike his father he’s mean about money. Economy is one of his passions. That’s why he’s been so long about finding a house of his own. Having a suite of rooms here saved his pocket.”

“And his wife?”

“Jennifer’s meek and seems very stupid. But I’m not so sure. She was a hospital nurse before her marriage—nursed Percival through pneumonia to a romantic conclusion. The old man was disappointed by the marriage. He was a snob and wanted Percival to make what he called a ‘good marriage.’ He despised poor Mrs. Val and snubbed her. She dislikes—disliked him a good deal, I think. Her principal interests are shopping and the cinema; her principal grievance is that her husband keeps her short of money.”

“What about the daughter?”

“Elaine? I’m rather sorry for Elaine. She’s not a bad sort. One of those great schoolgirls who never grow up. She plays games quite well, and runs Guides and Brownies and all that sort of thing. There was some sort of affair not long ago with a disgruntled young schoolmaster, but Father discovered the young man had

communistic ideas and came down on the romance like a ton of bricks."

"She hadn't got the spirit to stand up to him?"

"*She* had. It was the young man who ratted. A question of money yet again, I fancy. Elaine is not particularly attractive, poor dear."

"And the other son?"

"I've never seen him. He's attractive, by all accounts, and a thoroughly bad lot. Some little matter of a forged cheque in the past. He lives in East Africa."

"And was estranged from his father."

"Yes, Mr. Fortescue couldn't cut him off with a shilling because he'd already made him a junior partner in the firm, but he held no communication with him for years, and in fact if Lance was ever mentioned, he used to say: 'Don't talk to me of that rascal. He's no son of mine.' All the same—"

"Yes, Miss Dove?"

Mary said slowly: "All the same, I shouldn't be surprised if old Fortescue hadn't been planning to get him back here."

"What makes you think that?"

"Because, about a month ago, old Fortescue had a terrific row with Percival—he found out something that Percival had been doing behind his back—I don't know what it was—and he was absolutely furious. Percival suddenly stopped being the white-headed boy. He's been quite different lately, too."

"Mr. Fortescue was quite different?"

"No. I meant Percival. He's gone about looking worried to death."

"Now what about servants? You've already described the Crumps. Who else is there?"

"Gladys Martin is the parlourmaid or waitress, as they like to call themselves nowadays. She does the downstairs rooms, lays the table, clears away and helps Crump wait at table. Quite a decent sort of girl but very nearly half-witted. The adenoidal type."

Neele nodded.

"The housemaid is Ellen Curtis. Elderly, very crabbed, and very cross, but has been in good service and is a first-class housemaid. The rest is outside help—odd women who come in."

"And those are the only people living here?"

"There's old Miss Ramsbottom."

"Who is she?"

"Mr. Fortescue's sister-in-law—his first wife's sister. His wife was a good deal older than he was and her sister again was a good deal older than her—which makes her well over seventy. She has a room of her own on the second floor—does her own cooking and all that, with just a woman coming in to clean. She's rather eccentric and she never liked her brother-in-law, but she came here while her sister was alive and stayed on when she died. Mr. Fortescue never bothered about her much. She's quite a character, though, is Aunt Effie."

"And that is all."

"That's all."

"So we come to you, Miss Dove."

"You want particulars? I'm an orphan. I took a secretarial course at the St. Alfred's Secretarial College. I took a job as shorthand typist, left it and took another, decided I was in the wrong racket, and started on my present career. I have been with three different employers. After about a year or eighteen months I get tired of a particular place and move on. I have been at Yewtree Lodge just over a year. I will type out the names and addresses of my various employers and give them, with a copy of my references to Sergeant—Hay, is it? Will that be satisfactory?"

"Perfectly, Miss Dove." Neele was silent for a moment, enjoying a mental image of Miss Dove tampering with Mr. Fortescue's breakfast. His mind went back farther, and he saw her methodically gathering yew berries in a little basket. With a sigh he returned to the present and reality. "Now, I would like to see the girl—er Gladys—and then the housemaid, Ellen." He added as he rose: "By the way, Miss Dove, can you give me any idea why Mr. Fortescue would be carrying loose grain in his pocket?"

"Grain?" she stared at him with what appeared to be genuine surprise.

"Yes—grain. Does that suggest something to you, Miss Dove?"

"Nothing at all."

"Who looked after his clothes?"

"Crump."

"I see. Did Mr. Fortescue and Mrs. Fortescue occupy the same bedroom?"

"Yes. He had a dressing room and bath, of course, and so did she . . ." Mary glanced down at her wristwatch. "I really think that she ought to be back very soon now."

The inspector had risen. He said in a pleasant voice:

"Do you know one thing, Miss Dove? It strikes me as very odd that even though there are three golf courses in the immediate neighbourhood, it has yet not been possible to find Mrs. Fortescue on one of them before now?"

"It would not be so odd, Inspector, if she did not actually happen to be playing golf at all."

Mary's voice was dry. The inspector said sharply:

"I was distinctly informed that she was playing golf."

"She took her golf clubs and announced her intention of doing so. She was driving her own car, of course."

He looked at her steadily, perceiving the inference.

"Who was she playing with? Do you know?"

"I think it possible that it might be Mr. Vivian Dubois."

Neele contented himself by saying: "I see."

"I'll send Gladys in to you. She'll probably be scared to death." Mary paused for a moment by the door, then she said:

"I should hardly advise you to go too much by all I've told you. I'm a malicious creature."

She went out. Inspector Neele looked at the closed door and wondered. Whether actuated by malice or not, what she had told him could not fail to be suggestive. If Rex Fortescue had been deliberately poisoned, and it seemed almost certain that that was the case, then the setup at Yewtree Lodge seemed highly promising. Motives appeared to be lying thick on the ground.

Chapter Five

The girl who entered the room with obvious unwillingness was an unattractive, frightened-looking girl, who managed to look faintly slutish in spite of being tall and smartly dressed in a claret-coloured uniform.

She said at once, fixing imploring eyes upon him:

"I didn't do anything. I didn't really. I don't know anything about it."

"That's all right," said Neele heartily. His voice had changed slightly. It sounded more cheerful and a good deal commoner in intonation. He wanted to put the frightened rabbit Gladys at her ease.

"Sit down here," he went on. "I just want to know about breakfast this morning."

"I didn't do anything at all."

"Well, you laid the breakfast, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did that." Even that admission came unwillingly. She looked both guilty and terrified, but Inspector Neele was used to witnesses who looked like that. He went on cheerfully, trying to put her at her ease, asking questions: who had come down first? And who next?

Elaine Fortescue had been the first down to breakfast. She'd come in just as Crump was bringing in the coffee pot. Mrs. Fortescue was down next, and then Mrs. Val, and the master last. They waited on themselves. The tea and coffee and the hot dishes were all on hot plates on the sideboard.

He learnt little of importance from her that he did not know already. The food and drink was as Mary Dove had described it. The master and Mrs. Fortescue and Miss Elaine took coffee and Mrs. Val took tea. Everything had been quite as usual.

Neele questioned her about herself and here she answered more readily. She'd been in private service first and after that in various cafés. Then she thought she'd like to go back to private service and had come to Yewtree Lodge last September. She'd been there two months.

"And you like it?"

"Well, it's all right, I suppose." She added: "It's not so hard on your feet—but you don't get so much freedom. . . ."

"Tell me about Mr. Fortescue's clothes—his suits. Who looked after them? Brushed them and all that?"

Gladys looked faintly resentful.

"Mr. Crump's supposed to. But half the time he makes me do it."

"Who brushed and pressed the suit Mr. Fortescue had on today?"

"I don't remember which one he wore. He's got ever so many."

"Have you ever found grain in the pocket of one of his suits?"

"Grain?" She looked puzzled.

"Rye, to be exact."

"Rye? That's bread, isn't it? A sort of black bread—got a nasty taste, I always think."

"That's bread made from rye. Rye is the grain itself. There was some found in the pocket of your master's coat."

"In his coat pocket?"

"Yes. Do you know how it got there?"

"I couldn't say I'm sure. I never saw any."

He could get no more from her. For a moment or two he wondered if she knew more about the matter than she was willing to admit. She certainly seemed embarrassed and on the defensive—but on the whole he put it down to a natural fear of the police.

When he finally dismissed her, she asked:

"It's really true, is it. He's dead?"

"Yes, he's dead."

"Very sudden, wasn't it? They said when they rang up from the office that he'd had a kind of fit."

"Yes—it was a kind of fit."

Gladys said: "A girl I used to know had fits. Come on anytime, they did. Used to scare me."

For the moment this reminiscence seemed to overcome her suspicions.

Inspector Neele made his way to the kitchen.

His reception was immediate and alarming. A woman of vast proportions, with a red face armed with a rolling pin stepped towards him in a menacing fashion.

"Police, indeed," she said. "Coming here and saying things like that! Nothing of the kind, I'd have you know. Anything I've sent in the dining room has been just what it should be. Coming here and saying I poisoned the master. I'll have the law on you, police or no police. No bad food's ever been served in this house."

It was sometime before Inspector Neele could appease the irate artist. Sergeant Hay looked in grinning from the pantry and Inspector Neele gathered that he had already run the gauntlet of Mrs. Crump's wrath.

The scene was terminated by the ringing of the telephone.

Neele went out into the hall to find Mary Dove taking the call. She was writing down a message on a pad. Turning her head over her shoulder she said: "It's a telegram."

The call concluded, she replaced the receiver and handed the pad on which she had been writing to the inspector. The place of origin was Paris and the message ran as follows:

Fortescue Yewtree Lodge Baydon Heath Surrey. Sorry your letter delayed. Will be with you tomorrow about teatime. Shall expect roast veal for dinner. Lance.

Inspector Neele raised his eyebrows.

"So the Prodigal Son had been summoned home," he said.

Chapter Six

At the moment when Rex Fortescue had been drinking his last cup of tea, Lance Fortescue and his wife had been sitting under the trees on the Champs Elysées watching the people walking past.

"It's all very well to say 'describe him,' Pat. I'm a rotten hand at descriptions. What do you want to know? The Guvnor's a bit of an old crook, you know. But you won't mind that? You must be used to that more or less."

"Oh, yes," said Pat. "Yes—as you say—I'm acclimatized."

She tried to keep a certain forlornness out of her voice. Perhaps, she reflected, the whole world was really crooked—or was it just that she herself had been unfortunate?

She was a tall, long-legged girl, not beautiful but with a charm that was made-up of vitality and a warm-hearted personality. She moved well, and had lovely gleaming chestnut brown hair. Perhaps from a long association with horses, she had acquired the look of a thoroughbred filly.

Crookedness in the racing world she knew about—now, it seemed, she was to encounter crookedness in the financial world. Though for all that, it seemed that her father-in-law, whom she had not yet met, was, as far as the law was concerned, a pillar of rectitude. All these people who went about boasting of "smart work" were the same—technically they always managed to be within the law. Yet it seemed to her that her Lance, whom she loved, and who had admittedly strayed outside the ringed fence in earlier days, had an honesty that these successful practitioners of the crooked lacked.

"I don't mean," said Lance, "that he's a swindler—not anything like that. But he knows how to put over a fast one."

"Sometimes," said Pat, "I feel I hate people who put over fast ones." She added: "You're fond of him." It was a statement, not a question.

Lance considered it for a moment, and then said in a surprised kind of voice:

"Do you know, darling, I believe I am."

Pat laughed. He turned his head to look at her. His eyes narrowed. What a darling she was! He loved her. The whole thing was worth it for her sake.

"In a way, you know," he said, "it's hell going back. City life. Home on the 5:18. It's not my kind of life. I'm far more at home among the down and outs. But one's got to settle down sometime, I suppose. And with you to hold my hand the process may even be quite a pleasant one. And since the old boy has come round, one ought to take advantage of it. I must say I was surprised when I got his letter . . . Percival, of all people, blotting his copybook. Percival, the good little boy. Mind you, Percy was always sly. Yes, he was always sly."

"I don't think," said Patricia Fortescue, "that I'm going to like your brother Percival."

"Don't let me put you against him. Percy and I never got on—that's all there is to it. I blued my pocket money, he saved his. I had disreputable but entertaining friends, Percy made what's called 'worthwhile contacts.' Poles apart we were, he and I. I always thought him a poor fish, and he—sometimes, you know, I think he almost hated me. I don't know why exactly. . . ."

"I think I can see why."

"Can you, darling? You're so brainy. You know I've always wondered—it's a fantastic thing to say—but—"

"Well? Say it."

"I've wondered if it wasn't Percival who was behind that cheque business—you know, when the old man kicked me out—and was he mad that he'd given me a share in the firm and so he couldn't disinherit me! Because the queer thing was that I never forged that

cheque—though of course nobody would believe that after that time I swiped funds out of the till and put it on a horse. I was dead sure I could put it back, and anyway it was my own cash in a manner of speaking. But that cheque business—no. I don't know why I've got the ridiculous idea that Percival did that—but I have, somehow."

"But it wouldn't have done *him* any good? It was paid into your account."

"I know. So it doesn't make sense, does it?"

Pat turned sharply towards him.

"You mean—he did it to get you chucked out of the firm?"

"I wondered. Oh well—it's a rotten thing to say. Forget it. I wonder what old Percy will say when he sees the Prodigal returned. Those pale, boiled-gooseberry eyes of his will pop right out of his head!"

"Does he know you are coming?"

"I shouldn't be surprised if he didn't know a damned thing! The old man's got rather a funny sense of humour, you know."

"But what has your brother *done* to upset your father so much?"

"That's what *I'd* like to know. Something must have made the old man livid. Writing off to me the way he did."

"When was it you got his first letter?"

"Must be four—no five months ago. A cagey letter, but a distinct holding out of the olive branch. 'Your elder brother has proved himself unsatisfactory in many ways.' 'You seem to have sown your wild oats and settled down.' 'I can promise you that it will be well worth your while financially.' 'Shall welcome you and your wife.' You know, darling, I think my marrying you had a lot to do with it. The old boy was impressed that I'd married into a class above me."

Pat laughed.

"What? Into the aristocratic riff-raff?"

He grinned. "That's right. But riff-raff didn't register and aristocracy did. You should see Percival's wife. She's the kind who says 'Pass the preserves, please' and talks about a postage stamp."

Pat did not laugh. She was considering the women of the family into which she had married. It was a point of view which Lance had not taken into account.

"And your sister?" she asked.

"Elaine—? Oh she's all right. She was pretty young when I left home. Sort of an earnest girl—but probably she's grown out of that. Very intense over things."

It did not sound very reassuring. Pat said:

"She never wrote to you—after you went away?"

"I didn't leave an address. But she wouldn't have, anyway. We're not a devoted family."

"No."

He shot a quick look at her.

"Got the wind up? About my family? You needn't. We're not going to live with them, or anything like that. We'll have our own little place, somewhere. Horses, dogs, anything you like."

"But there will still be the 5:18."

"For me, yes. To and fro to the city, all toggled up. But don't worry, sweet—there are rural pockets, even round London. And lately I've felt the sap of financial affairs rising in me. After all, it's in my blood—from both sides of the family."

"You hardly remember your mother, do you?"

"She always seemed to me incredibly old. She was old, of course. Nearly fifty when Elaine was born. She wore lots of clinking things and lay on a sofa and used to read me stories about knights and ladies which bored me stiff. Tennyson's 'Idylls of the King.' I suppose I was fond of her . . . She was very—colourless, you know. I realize that, looking back."

"You don't seem to have been particularly fond of anybody," said Pat disapprovingly.

Lance grasped and squeezed her arm.

"I'm fond of you," he said.

Chapter Seven

Inspector Neele was still holding the telegraph message in his hand when he heard a car drive up to the front door and stop with a careless scrunching of brakes.

Mary Dove, "That will be Mrs. Fortescue now."

Inspector Neele moved forwards to the front door. Out of the tail of his eye, he saw Mary Dove melt unobtrusively into the background and disappear. Clearly she intended to take no part in the forthcoming scene. A remarkable display of tact and discretion—and also a rather remarkable lack of curiosity. Most women, Inspector Neele decided, would have remained. . . .

As he reached the front door he was aware of the butler, Crump, coming forward from the back of the hall. So he had heard the car.

The car was a Rolls Bentley sports model coupé. Two people got out of it and came towards the house. As they reached the door, it opened. Surprised, Adele Fortescue stared at Inspector Neele.

He realized at once that she was a very beautiful woman, and he realized too the force of Mary Dove's comment which had so shocked him at the time. Adele Fortescue *was* a sexy piece. In figure and type she resembled the blonde Miss Grosvenor, but whereas Miss Grosvenor was all glamour without and all respectability within, Adele Fortescue was glamour all through. Her appeal was obvious, not subtle. It said simply to every man "Here am I. I'm a woman." She spoke and moved and breathed sex—and yet, within it all, her eyes had a shrewd appraising quality. Adele Fortescue, he thought, liked men—but she would always like money even better.

His eyes went on to the figure behind her who carried her golf clubs. He knew the type very well. It was the type that specialized in the young wives of rich and elderly men. Mr. Vivian Dubois, if this was he, had that rather forced masculinity which is, in reality, nothing of the kind. He was the type of man who "understands" women.

"Mrs. Fortescue?"

"Yes." It was a wide blue-eyed gaze. "But I don't know—"

"I am Inspector Neele. I'm afraid I have bad news for you."

"Do you mean—a burglary—something of that kind?"

"No, nothing of that kind. It is about your husband. He was taken seriously ill this morning."

"Rex? Ill?"

"We have been trying to get in touch with you since half past eleven this morning."

"Where is he? Here? Or in hospital?"

"He was taken to St. Jude's Hospital. I'm afraid you must prepare yourself for a shock."

"You don't mean—he isn't—*dead*."

She lurched forward a little and clutched his arm. Gravely feeling like someone playing a part in a stage performance, the inspector supported her into the hall. Crump was hovering eagerly.

"Brandy she'll be needing," he said.

The deep voice of Mr. Dubois said:

"That's right, Crump. Get the brandy." To the inspector he said: "In here."

He opened a door on the left. The procession filed in. The inspector and Adele Fortescue, Vivian Dubois, and Crump with a decanter and two glasses.

Adele Fortescue sank onto an easy chair, her eyes covered with her hand. She accepted the glass that the inspector offered and took a tiny sip, then pushed it away.

"I don't want it," she said. "I'm all right. But tell me, what was it? A stroke, I suppose? Poor Rex."

"It wasn't a stroke, Mrs. Fortescue."

"Did you say you were an inspector?" It was Mr. Dubois who made the inquiry.

Neele turned to him. "That's right," he said pleasantly. "Inspector Neele of the CID."

He saw the alarm grow in the dark eyes. Mr. Dubois did not like the appearance of an inspector of the CID. He didn't like it at all.

"What's up?" he said. "Something wrong—eh?"

Quite unconsciously he backed away a little towards the door. Inspector Neele noted the movement.

"I'm afraid," he said to Mrs. Fortescue, "that there will have to be an inquest."

"An inquest? Do you mean—what *do* you mean?"

"I'm afraid this is all very distressing for you, Mrs. Fortescue." The words came smoothly. "It seemed advisable to find out as soon as possible exactly what Mr. Fortescue had to eat or drink before leaving for the office this morning."

"Do you mean he might have been *poisoned*?"

"Well, yes, it would seem so."

"I can't believe it. Oh—you mean *food* poisoning."

Her voice dropped half an octave on the last words. His face wooden, his voice still smooth, Inspector Neele said:

"Madam? What did you think I meant?"

She ignored that question, hurrying on.

"But we've been all right—all of us."

"You can speak for all the members of the family?"

"Well—no—of course—I can't really."

Dubois said with a great show of consulting his watch:

"I'll have to push off, Adele. Dreadfully sorry. You'll be all right, won't you? I mean, there are the maids, and the little Dove and all that—"

"Oh, Vivian, don't. Don't go."

It was quite a wail, and it affected Mr. Dubois adversely. His retreat quickened.

"Awfully sorry, old girl. Important engagement. I'm putting up at the Dormy House, by the way, Inspector. If you—er—want me for anything."

Inspector Neele nodded. He had no wish to detain Mr. Dubois. But he recognized Mr. Dubois's departure for what it was. Mr. Dubois was running away from trouble.

Adele Fortescue said, in an attempt to carry off the situation:

"It's such a shock, to come back and find the *police* in the house."

"I'm sure it must be. But you see, it was necessary to act promptly in order to obtain the necessary specimens of foodstuffs, coffee, tea, etc."

"Tea and coffee? But they're not poisonous? I expect it's the awful bacon we sometimes get. It's quite uneatable sometimes."

"We shall find out, Mrs. Fortescue. Don't worry. You'd be surprised at some of the things that can happen. We once had a case of digitalis poisoning. It turned out that foxglove leaves had been picked in mistake for horseradish."

"You think something like that could happen here?"

"We shall know better after the autopsy, Mrs. Fortescue."

"The autop—oh I see." She shivered.

The inspector went on: "You've got a lot of yew round the house, haven't you, madam. There's no possibility, I suppose, of the berries or leaves having got—mixed-up in anything?"

He was watching her closely. She stared at him.

"Yew berries? Are they poisonous?"

The wonder seemed a little too wide-eyed and innocent.

"Children have been known to eat them with unfortunate results."

Adele clasped her hands to her head.

"I can't bear to talk about it anymore. Must I? I want to go and lie down. I can't stand anymore. Mr. Percival Fortescue will arrange everything—I can't—I can't—it isn't fair to ask me."

"We are getting in touch with Mr. Percival Fortescue as soon as possible. Unfortunately he is away in the North of England."

"Oh yes, I forgot."

"There's just one thing, Mrs. Fortescue. There was a small quantity of grain in your husband's pocket. Could you give me some explanation of that?"

She shook her head. She appeared quite bewildered.

"Would anyone have slipped it in there as a joke?"

"I don't see why it would be a joke?"

Inspector Neele did not see either. He said:

"I won't trouble you any further at present, Mrs. Fortescue. Shall I send one of the maids to you? Or Miss Dove?"

"What?" The word came abstractedly. He wondered what she had been thinking about.

She fumbled with her bag and pulled out a handkerchief. Her voice trembled.

"It's so awful," she said unsteadily. "I'm only just beginning to take it in. I've really been *numbed* up to now. Poor Rex. Poor dear Rex."

She sobbed in a manner that was almost convincing.

Inspector Neele watched her respectfully for a moment or two.

"It's been very sudden, I know," he said. "I'll send someone to you."

He went towards the door, opened it and passed through. He paused for a moment before looking back into the room.

Adele Fortescue still held the handkerchief to her eyes. The ends of it hung down but did not quite obscure her mouth. On her lips was a very faint smile.

Chapter Eight

I

"I've got what I could, sir." So Sergeant Hay reported. "The marmalade, bit of the ham. Samples of tea, coffee and sugar, for what they're worth. Actual brews have been thrown out by now, of course, but there's one point. There was a good lot of coffee left over and they had it in the servants' hall at elevenses—that's important, I should say."

"Yes, that's important. Shows that if he took it in his coffee, it must have been slipped into the actual cup."

"By one of those present. Exactly. I've inquired, cautious like, about the yew stuff—berries or leaves—there's been none of it seen about the house. Nobody seems to know anything about the cereal in his pocket, either . . . It just seems daft to them. Seems daft to me, too. He doesn't seem to have been one of those food faddists who'll eat any mortal thing so long as it isn't cooked. My sister's husband's like that. Raw carrots, raw peas, raw turnips. But even he doesn't eat raw grain. Why, I should say it would swell up in your inside something awful."

The telephone rang and, on a nod from the inspector, Sergeant Hay sprinted off to answer it. Following him, Neele found that it was headquarters on the line. Contact had been made with Mr. Percival Fortescue, who was returning to London immediately.

As the inspector replaced the telephone, a car drew up at the front door. Crump went to the door and opened it. The woman who stood there had her arms full of parcels. Crump took them from her.

"Thanks, Crump. Pay the taxi, will you? I'll have tea now. Is Mrs. Fortescue or Miss Elaine in?"

The butler hesitated, looking back over his shoulder.

"We've had bad news, ma'am," he said. "About the master."

"About Mr. Fortescue?"

Neele came forward. Crump said: "This is Mrs. Percival, sir."

"What is it? What's happened? An accident?"

The inspector looked her over as he replied. Mrs. Percival Fortescue was a plump woman with a discontented mouth. Her age he judged to be about thirty. Her questions came with a kind of eagerness. The thought flashed across his mind that she must be very bored.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you that Mr. Fortescue was taken to St. Jude's Hospital this morning seriously ill and has since died."

"Died? You mean he's dead?" The news was clearly even more sensational than she had hoped for. "Dear me—this is a surprise. My husband's away. You'll have to get in touch with him. He's in the North somewhere. I dare say they'll know at the office. He'll have to see to everything. Things always happen at the most awkward moment, don't they?"

She paused for a moment, turning things over in her mind.

"It all depends, I suppose," she said, "where they'll have the funeral. Down here, I suppose. Or will it be in London?"

"That will be for the family to say."

"Of course. I only just wondered." For the first time she took direct cognisance of the man who was speaking to her.

"Are you from the office?" she asked. "You're not a doctor, are you?"

"I'm a police officer. Mr. Fortescue's death was very sudden and —"

She interrupted him.

"Do you mean he was *murdered*?"

It was the first time that word had been spoken. Neele surveyed her eager questioning face carefully.

"Now why should you think that, madam?"

"Well, people are sometimes. You said sudden. And you're police. Have you seen her about it? What did she say?"

"I don't quite understand to whom you are referring?"

"Adele, of course. I always told Val his father was crazy to go marrying a woman years younger than himself. There's no fool like an old fool. Besotted about that awful creature, he was. And now look what comes of it . . . A nice mess we're all in. Pictures in the paper and reporters coming round."

She paused, obviously visualizing the future in a series of crude highly coloured pictures. He thought that the prospect was still not wholly unpleasing. She turned back to him.

"What was it? Arsenic?"

In a repressive voice Inspector Neele said:

"The cause of death has yet to be ascertained. There will be an autopsy and an inquest."

"But you know already, don't you? Or you wouldn't come down here."

There was a sudden shrewdness in her plump rather foolish face.

"You've been asking about what he ate and drank, I suppose? Dinner last night. Breakfast this morning. And all the drinks, of course."

He could see her mind ranging vividly over all the possibilities. He said, with caution:

"It seems possible that Mr. Fortescue's illness resulted from something he ate at breakfast."

"Breakfast?" She seemed surprised. "That's difficult. I don't see how. . . ."

She paused and shook her head.

"I don't see how she could have done it, then . . . unless she slipped something into the coffee—when Elaine and I weren't looking. . . ."

A quiet voice spoke softly beside them:

"Your tea is all ready in the library, Mrs. Val."

Mrs. Val jumped.

"Oh thank you, Miss Dove. Yes, I could do with a cup of tea. Really, I feel quite bowled over. What about you, Mr.—Inspector—"

"Thank you, not just now."

The plump figure hesitated and then went slowly away.

As she disappeared through a doorway, Mary Dove murmured softly:

"I don't think she's ever heard of the term slander."

Inspector Neele did not reply.

Mary Dove went on:

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Where can I find the housemaid, Ellen?"

"I will take you to her. She's just gone upstairs."

II

Ellen proved to be grim but unafraid. Her sour old face looked triumphantly at the inspector.

"It's a shocking business, sir. And I never thought I'd live to find myself in a house where that sort of thing has been going on. But in a way I can't say that it surprises me. I ought to have given my notice in long ago and that's a fact. I don't like the language that's used in this house, and I don't like the amount of drink that's taken, and I don't approve of the goings on there've been. I've nothing against Mrs. Crump, but Crump and that girl Gladys just don't know what proper service is. But it's the goings on that I mind about most."

"What goings on do you mean exactly?"

"You'll soon hear about them if you don't know already. It's common talk all over the place. They've been seen here, there and everywhere. All this pretending to play golf—or tennis—And I've seen things—with my own eyes—in this house. The library door was open and there they were, kissing and canoodling."

The venom of the spinster was deadly. Neele really felt it unnecessary to say "Whom do you mean?" but he said it nevertheless.

"Who should I mean? The mistress—and that man. No shame about it, they hadn't. But if you ask me, the master had got wise to it. Put someone on to watch them, he had. Divorce, that's what it would have come to. Instead, it's come to *this*."

"When you say this, you mean—"

"You've been asking questions, sir, about what the master ate and drank and who gave it to him. They're in it together, sir, that's what I'd say. He got the stuff from somewhere and she gave it to the master, that was the way of it, I've no doubt."

"Have you ever seen any yew berries in the house—or thrown away anywhere?"

The small eyes glinted curiously.

"Yew? Nasty poisonous stuff. Never you touch those berries, my mother said to me when I was a child. Was *that* what was used, sir?"

"We don't know yet what was used."

"I've never seen her fiddling about with yew." Ellen sounded disappointed. "No, I can't say I've seen anything of that kind."

Neele questioned her about the grain found in Fortescue's pocket but here again he drew a blank.

"No, sir. I know nothing about that."

He went on to further questions, but with no gainful result. Finally he asked if he could see Miss Ramsbottom.

Ellen looked doubtful.

"I could ask her, but it's not everyone she'll see. She's a very old lady, you know, and she's a bit odd."

The inspector pressed his demand, and rather unwillingly Ellen led him along a passage and up a short flight of stairs to what he thought had probably been designed as a nursery suite.

He glanced out of a passage window as he followed her and saw Sergeant Hay standing by the yew tree talking to a man who was evidently a gardener.

Ellen tapped on a door, and when she received an answer, opened it and said:

"There's a police gentleman here who would like to speak to you, miss."

The answer was apparently in the affirmative for she drew back and motioned Neele to go in.

The room he entered was almost fantastically overfurnished. The inspector felt rather as though he had taken a step backward into not merely Edwardian but Victorian times. At a table drawn up to a gas fire an old lady was sitting laying out a patience. She wore a maroon-coloured dress and her sparse grey hair was slicked down each side of her face.

Without looking up or discontinuing her game she said impatiently:

"Well, come in, come in. Sit down if you like."

The invitation was not easy to accept as every chair appeared to be covered with tracts or publications of a religious nature.

As he moved them slightly aside on the sofa Miss Ramsbottom asked sharply:

"Interested in mission work?"

"Well, I'm afraid I'm not very, ma'am."

"Wrong. You should be. That's where the Christian spirit is nowadays. Darkest Africa. Had a young clergyman here last week. Black as your hat. But a true Christian."

Inspector Neele found it a little difficult to know what to say.

The old lady further disconcerted him by snapping:

"I haven't got a wireless."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh, I thought perhaps you came about a wireless licence. Or one of these silly forms. Well, man, what is it?"

"I'm sorry to have to tell you, Miss Ramsbottom, that your brother-in-law, Mr. Fortescue, was taken suddenly ill and died this morning."

Miss Ramsbottom continued with her patience without any sign of perturbation, merely remarking in a conversational way:

"Struck down at last in his arrogance and sinful pride. Well, it had to come."

"I hope it's not a shock to you?"

It obviously wasn't but the inspector wanted to hear what she would say.

Miss Ramsbottom gave him a sharp glance over the top of her spectacles and said:

"If you mean I am not distressed, that is quite right. Rex Fortescue was always a sinful man and I never liked him."

"His death was very sudden—"

"As befits the ungodly," said the old lady with satisfaction.

"It seems possible that he may have been poisoned—"

The inspector paused to observe the effect he had made.

He did not seem to have made any. Miss Ramsbottom merely murmured: "Red seven on black eight. Now I can move up the King."

Struck apparently by the inspector's silence, she stopped with a card poised in her hand and said sharply:

"Well, what did you expect me to say? I didn't poison him if that's what you want to know."

"Have you any idea who might have done so?"

"That's a very improper question," said the old lady sharply. "Living in this house are two of my dead sister's children. I decline to believe that anybody with Ramsbottom blood in them could be guilty of murder. Because it's murder you're meaning, isn't it?"

"I didn't say so, madam."

"Of course it's murder. Plenty of people have wanted to murder Rex in their time. A very unscrupulous man. And old sins have long shadows, as the saying goes."

"Have you anyone in particular in mind?"

Miss Ramsbottom swept up the cards and rose to her feet. She was a tall woman.

"I think you'd better go now," she said.

She spoke without anger but with a kind of cold finality.

"If you want my opinion," she went on, "it was probably one of the servants. The butler looks to me a bit of a rascal, and that parlourmaid is definitely subnormal. Good evening."

Inspector Neele found himself meekly walking out. Certainly a remarkable old lady. Nothing to be got out of her.

He came down the stairs into the square hall to find himself suddenly face to face with a tall dark girl. She was wearing a damp mackintosh and she stared into his face with a curious blankness.

"I've just come back," she said. "And they told me—about Father—that he's dead."

"I'm afraid that's true."

She pushed out a hand behind her as though blindly seeking for support. She touched an oak chest and slowly, stiffly, she sat down on it.

"Oh no," she said. "No. . . ."

Slowly two tears ran down her cheeks.

"It's awful," she said. "I didn't think that I even liked him . . . I thought I hated him . . . But that can't be so, or I wouldn't mind. I do mind."

She sat there, staring in front of her, and again tears forced themselves from her eyes and down her cheeks.

Presently she spoke again, rather breathlessly:

"The awful thing is that it makes everything come right. I mean, Gerald and I can get married now. I can do everything that I want to do. But I hate it happening this way. I don't want Father to be dead . . . Oh I don't. Oh Daddy—Daddy. . . ."

For the first time since he had come to Yewtree Lodge, Inspector Neele was startled by what seemed to be genuine grief for the dead man.

Chapter Nine

"Sounds like the wife to me," said the assistant commissioner. He had been listening attentively to Inspector Neele's report.

It had been an admirable précis of the case. Short, but with no relevant detail left out.

"Yes," said the AC. "It looks like the wife. What do you think yourself, Neele, eh?"

Inspector Neele said that it looked like the wife to him too. He reflected cynically that it usually was the wife—or the husband as the case might be.

"She had the opportunity all right. And motive?" The AC paused. "There *is* motive?"

"Oh, I think so, sir. This Mr. Dubois, you know."

"Think he was in it, too?"

"No, I shouldn't say that, sir." Inspector Neele weighed the idea. "A bit too fond of his own skin for that. He may have guessed what was in her mind, but I shouldn't imagine that he instigated it."

"No, too careful."

"Much too careful."

"Well, we mustn't jump to conclusions, but it seems a good working hypothesis. What about the other two who had opportunity?"

"That's the daughter and the daughter-in-law. The daughter was mixed-up with a young man whom her father didn't want her to marry. And he definitely wasn't marrying her unless she had the money. That gives *her* a motive. As to the daughter-in-law, I

wouldn't like to say. Don't know enough about her yet. But any of the three of them *could* have poisoned him, and I don't see how anyone else could have done so. The parlourmaid, the butler, the cook, they all handled the breakfast or brought it in, but I don't see how any of them could have been sure of Fortescue himself getting the taxine and nobody else. That is, if it *was* taxine."

The AC said: "It was taxine all right. I've just got the preliminary report."

"That settles that, then," said Inspector Neele. "We can go ahead."

"Servants seem all right?"

"The butler and the parlourmaid both seem nervous. There's nothing uncommon about that. Often happens. The cook's fighting mad and the housemaid was grimly pleased. In fact all quite natural and normal."

"There's nobody else whom you consider suspicious in any way?"

"No, I don't think so, sir." Involuntarily, Inspector Neele's mind went back to Mary Dove and her enigmatic smile. There had surely been a faint yet definite look of antagonism. Aloud he said, "Now that we know it's taxine, there ought to be some evidence to be got as to how it was obtained or prepared."

"Just so. Well, go ahead, Neele. By the way, Mr. Percival Fortescue is here now. I've had a word or two with him and he's waiting to see you. We've located the other son, too. He's in Paris at the Bristol, leaving today. You'll have him met at the airport, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. That was my idea. . . ."

"Well, you'd better see Percival Fortescue now." The AC chuckled. "Percy Prim, that's what he is."

Mr. Percival Fortescue was a neat fair man of thirty odd, with pale hair and eyelashes and a slightly pedantic way of speech.

"This has been a terrible shock to me, Inspector Neele, as you can well imagine."

"It must have been, Mr. Fortescue," said Inspector Neele.

"I can only say that my father was perfectly well when I left home the day before yesterday. This food poisoning, or whatever it was, must have been very sudden?"

"It was very sudden, yes. But it wasn't food poisoning, Mr. Fortescue."

Percival stared and frowned.

"No? So that's why—" he broke off.

"Your father," said Inspector Neele, "was poisoned by the administration of taxine."

"Taxine? I've never heard of it."

"Very few people have, I should imagine. It is a poison that takes effect very suddenly and drastically."

The frown deepened.

"Are you telling me, Inspector, that my father was deliberately poisoned by someone?"

"It would seem so, yes, sir."

"That's terrible!"

"Yes indeed, Mr. Fortescue."

Percival murmured: "I understand now their attitude in the hospital—their referring me here." He broke off. After a pause he went on, "The funeral?" He spoke interrogatively.

"The inquest is fixed for tomorrow after the postmortem. The proceedings at the inquest will be purely formal and the inquest will be adjourned."

"I understand. That is usually the case?"

"Yes, sir. Nowadays."

"May I ask, have you formed any ideas, any suspicions of who could—Really, I—" again he broke off.

"It's rather early days for that, Mr. Fortescue," murmured Neele.

"Yes, I suppose so."

"All the same it would be helpful to us, Mr. Fortescue, if you could give us some idea of your father's testamentary dispositions. Or perhaps you could put me in touch with his solicitor."

"His solicitors are Billingsby, Horsethorpe & Walters of Bedford Square. As far as his will goes, I think I can more or less tell you its main dispositions."

"If you will be kind enough to do so, Mr. Fortescue. It's a routine that has to be gone through, I'm afraid."

"My father made a new will on the occasion of his marriage two years ago," said Percival precisely. "My father left the sum of £100,000 to his wife absolutely and £50,000 to my sister, Elaine. I am his residuary legatee. I am already, of course, a partner in the firm."

"There was no bequest to your brother, Lancelot Fortescue?"

"No, there is an estrangement of long standing between my father and my brother."

Neele threw a sharp glance at him—but Percival seemed quite sure of his statement.

"So as the will stands," said Inspector Neele, "the three people who stand to gain are Mrs. Fortescue, Miss Elaine Fortescue and yourself?"

"I don't think I shall be much of a gainer," Percival sighed. "There are death duties, you know, Inspector. And of late my father has been—well, all I can say is, highly injudicious in some of his financial dealings."

"You and your father have not seen eye to eye lately about the conduct of the business?" Inspector Neele threw out the question in a genial manner.

"I put my point of view to him, but alas—" Percival shrugged his shoulders.

"Put it rather forcibly, didn't you?" Neele inquired. "In fact, not to put too fine a point on it, there was quite a row about it, wasn't there?"

"I should hardly say that, Inspector." A red flush of annoyance mounted to Percival's forehead.

"Perhaps the dispute you had was about some other matter then, Mr. Fortescue?"

"There was no dispute, Inspector."

"Quite sure of that, Mr. Fortescue? Well, no matter. Did I understand that your father and brother are still estranged?"

"That is so."

"Then perhaps you can tell me what this means?"

Neele handed him the telephone message Mary Dove had jotted down.

Percival read it and uttered an exclamation of surprise and annoyance. He seemed both incredulous and angry.

"I can't understand it, I really can't. I can hardly believe it."

"It seems to be true, though, Mr. Fortescue. Your brother is arriving from Paris today."

"But it's extraordinary, quite extraordinary. No, I really *can't* understand it."

"Your father said nothing to you about it?"

"He certainly did *not*. How outrageous of him. To go behind my back and send for Lance."

"You've no idea, I suppose, *why* he did such a thing?"

"Of course I haven't. It's all on a par with his behaviour lately—Crazy! Unaccountable. It's got to be stopped—I—"

Percival came to an abrupt stop. The colour ebbed away again from his pale face.

"I'd forgotten—" he said. "For the moment I'd forgotten that my father was dead—"

Inspector Neele shook his head sympathetically.

Percival Fortescue prepared to take his departure—as he picked up his hat he said:

"Call upon me if there is anything I can do. But I suppose—" he paused—"you will be coming down to Yewtree Lodge?"

"Yes, Mr. Fortescue—I've got a man in charge there now."

Percival shuddered in a fastidious way.

"It will all be most unpleasant. To think such a thing should happen to us—"

He sighed and moved towards the door.

"I shall be at the office most of the day. There is a lot to be seen to here. But I shall get down to Yewtree Lodge this evening."

"Quite so, sir."

Percival Fortescue went out.

"Percy Prim," murmured Neele.

Sergeant Hay who was sitting unobtrusively by the wall looked up and said "Sir?" interrogatively.

Then as Neele did not reply, he asked, "What do you make of it all, sir?"

"I don't know," said Neele. He quoted softly, " 'They're all very unpleasant people.' "

Sergeant Hay looked somewhat puzzled.

"Alice in Wonderland," said Neele. "Don't you know your Alice, Hay?"

"It's a classic, isn't it, sir?" said Hay. "Third Programme stuff. I don't listen to the Third Programme."

Chapter Ten

I

It was about five minutes after leaving Le Bourget that Lance Fortescue opened his copy of the continental *Daily Mail*. A minute or two later he uttered a startled exclamation. Pat, in the seat beside him, turned her head inquiringly.

"It's the old man," said Lance. "He's dead."

"Dead! Your father?"

"Yes, he seems to have been taken suddenly ill at the office, was taken to St. Jude's Hospital and died there soon after arrival."

"Darling, I'm so sorry. What was it, a stroke?"

"I suppose so. Sounds like it."

"Had he ever had a stroke before?"

"No. Not that I know of."

"I thought people never died from a first one."

"Poor old boy," said Lance. "I never thought I was particularly fond of him, but somehow, now that he's dead. . . ."

"Of course you were fond of him."

"We haven't all got your nice nature, Pat. Oh well, it looks as though my luck's out again, doesn't it."

"Yes. It's odd that it should happen now. Just when you were on the point of coming home."

He turned his head sharply towards her.

"Odd? What do you mean by odd, Pat?"

She looked at him with slight surprise.

"Well, a sort of coincidence."

"You mean that whatever I set out to do goes wrong?"

"No, darling, I didn't mean that. But there is such a thing as a run of bad luck."

"Yes, I suppose there is."

Pat said again: "I'm so sorry."

When they arrived at Heathrow and were waiting to disembark from the plane, an official of the air company called out in a clear voice:

"Is Mr. Lancelot Fortescue abroad?"

"Here," said Lance.

"Would you just step this way, Mr. Fortescue."

Lance and Pat followed him out of the plane, preceding the other passengers. As they passed a couple in the last seat, they heard the man whisper to his wife:

"Well-known smugglers, I expect. Caught in the act."

II

"It's fantastic," said Lance. "Quite fantastic." He stared across the table at Detective Inspector Neele.

Inspector Neele nodded his head sympathetically.

"Taxine—yewberries—the whole thing seems like some kind of melodrama. I dare say this sort of thing seems ordinary enough to you, Inspector. All in the day's work. But poisoning, in our family, seems wildly far-fetched."

"You've no idea then at all," asked Inspector Neele, "who might have poisoned your father?"

"Good lord, no. I expect the old man's made a lot of enemies in business, lots of people who'd like to skin him alive, do him down financially—all that sort of thing. But poisoning? Anyway I wouldn't be in the know. I've been abroad for a good many years and have known very little of what's going on at home."

"That's really what I wanted to ask you about, Mr. Fortescue. I understand from your brother that there was an estrangement between you and your father which had lasted for many years. Would you like to tell me the circumstances that led to your coming home at this time?"

"Certainly, Inspector. I heard from my father, let me see it must be about—yes, six months ago now. It was soon after my marriage. My father wrote and hinted that he would like to let bygones be bygones. He suggested that I should come home and enter the firm. He was rather vague in his terms and I wasn't really sure that I wanted to do what he asked. Anyway, the upshot was that I came over to England last—yes, last August, just about three months ago. I went down to see him at Yewtree Lodge and he made me, I must say, a very advantageous offer. I told him that I'd have to think about it and I'd have to consult my wife. He quite understood that. I flew back to East Africa, talked it over with Pat. The upshot was that I decided to accept the old boy's offer. I had to wind up my affairs there, but I agreed to do so before the end of last month. I told him I would wire to him the date of my actual arrival in England."

Inspector Neele coughed.

"Your arrival back seems to have caused your brother some surprise."

Lance gave a sudden grin. His rather attractive face lit up with the spirit of pure mischief.

"Don't believe old Percy knew a thing about it," he said. "He was away on his holiday in Norway at the time. If you ask me, the old man picked that particular time on purpose. He was going behind Percy's back. In fact I've a very shrewd suspicion that my father's offer to me was actuated by the fact that he had a blazing row with poor old Percy—or Val as he prefers to be called. Val, I think, had been more or less trying to run the old man. Well, the old man would never stand for anything of that kind. What the exact row was about I don't know, but he was furious. And I think he thought it a jolly good idea to get me there and thereby spike poor old Val's guns. For one thing he never liked Percy's wife much and he was rather pleased, in a snobbish way, with my marriage. It would be

just his idea of a good joke to get me home and suddenly confront Percy with the accomplished fact."

"How long were you at Yewtree Lodge on this occasion?"

"Oh, not more than an hour or two. He didn't ask me to stay the night. The whole idea, I'm sure, was a kind of secret offensive behind Percy's back. I don't think he even wanted the servants to report upon it. As I say, things were left that I'd think it over, talk about it to Pat and then write him my decision, which I did. I wrote giving him the approximate date of my arrival, and I finally sent him a telegram yesterday from Paris."

Inspector Neele nodded.

"A telegram which surprised your brother very much."

"I bet it did. However, as usual, Percy wins. I've arrived too late."

"Yes," said Inspector Neele thoughtfully, "you've arrived too late." He went on briskly: "On the occasion of your visit last August, did you meet any other members of the family?"

"My stepmother was there at tea."

"You had not met her previously?"

"No." He grinned suddenly. "The old boy certainly knew how to pick them. She must be thirty years younger than him at least."

"You will excuse my asking, but did you resent your father's remarriage, or did your brother do so?"

Lance looked surprised.

"I certainly didn't, and I shouldn't think Percy did either. After all, our own mother died when we were about—oh, ten, twelve years old. What I'm really surprised at is that the old man didn't marry again before."

Inspector Neele murmured:

"It may be considered taking rather a risk to marry a woman very much younger than yourself."

"Did my dear brother say that to you? It sounds rather like him. Percy is a great master of the art of insinuation. Is that the setup, Inspector? Is my stepmother suspected of poisoning my father?"

Inspector Neele's face became blank.

"It's early days to have any definite ideas about anything, Mr. Fortescue," he said pleasantly. "Now, may I ask you what your plans

are?"

"Plans?" Lance considered. "I shall have to make new plans, I suppose. Where is the family? All down at Yewtree Lodge?"

"Yes."

"I'd better go down there straight away." He turned to his wife. "You'd better go to an hotel, Pat."

She protested quickly. "No, no, Lance, I'll come with you."

"No, darling."

"But I want to."

"Really, I'd rather you didn't. Go and stay at the—oh it's so long since I stayed in London—Barnes's. Barnes's Hotel used to be a nice, quiet sort of place. That's still going, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Fortescue."

"Right, Pat. I'll settle you in there if they've got a room, then I'll go on down to Yewtree Lodge."

"But why can't I come with you, Lance?"

Lance's face took suddenly a rather grim line.

"Frankly, Pat, I'm not sure of my welcome. It was Father who invited me there, but Father's dead. I don't know who the place belongs to now. Percy, I suppose, or perhaps Adele. Anyway, I'd like to see what reception I get before I bring you there. Besides—"

"Besides what?"

"I don't want to take you to a house where there's a poisoner at large."

"Oh, what nonsense."

Lance said firmly:

"Where you're concerned, Pat, I'm taking no risks."

Chapter Eleven

I

Mr. Dubois was annoyed. He tore Adele Fortescue's letter angrily across and threw it into the wastepaper basket. Then, with a sudden caution, he fished out the various pieces, struck a match and watched them burn to ashes. He muttered under his breath:

"Why have women got to be such damned fools? Surely common prudence . . ." But then, Mr. Dubois reflected gloomily, women never had any prudence. Though he had profited by this lack many a time, it annoyed him now. He himself had taken every precaution. If Mrs. Fortescue rang up they had instructions to say that he was out. Already Adele Fortescue had rung him up three times, and now she had written. On the whole, writing was far worse. He reflected for a moment or two, then he went to the telephone.

"Can I speak to Mrs. Fortescue, please? Yes, Mr. Dubois." A minute or two later he heard her voice.

"Vivian, at last!"

"Yes, yes, Adele, but be careful. Where are you speaking from?"

"From the library."

"Sure nobody's listening in, in the hall?"

"Why should they?"

"Well, you never know. Are the police still about the house?"

"No, they've gone for the moment, anyhow. Oh, Vivian dear, it's been *awful*."

"Yes, yes, it must have I'm sure. But look here, Adele, we've got to be careful."

"Oh, of course, darling."

"Don't call me darling through the phone. It isn't safe."

"Aren't you being a little bit panicky, Vivian? After all, everybody says darling nowadays."

"Yes, yes, that's true enough. But listen. *Don't telephone to me and don't write.*"

"But Vivian—"

"It's just for the present, you understand. *We must be careful.*"

"Oh. All right." Her voice sounded offended.

"Adele, listen. My letters to you. You did burn them, didn't you?"

There was a momentary hesitation before Adele Fortescue said:

"Of course. I told you I was going to do so."

"That's all right then. Well I'll ring off now. Don't phone and don't write. You'll hear from me in good time."

He put the receiver back in its hook. He stroked his cheek thoughtfully. He didn't like that moment's hesitation. Had Adele burnt his letters? Women were all the same. They promised to burn things and then didn't.

Letters, Mr. Dubois thought to himself. Women always wanted you to write them letters. He himself tried to be careful but sometimes one could not get out of it. What had he said exactly in the few letters he had written to Adele Fortescue? "It was the usual sort of gup," he thought, gloomily. But were there any special words—special phrases that the police could twist to make them say what they wanted them to say. He remembered the Edith Thompson case. His letters were innocent enough, he thought, but he could not be sure. His uneasiness grew. Even if Adele had not already burnt his letters, would she have the sense to burn them now? Or had the police already got hold of them? Where did she keep them, he wondered. Probably in that sitting room of hers upstairs. That gimcrack little desk, probably sham antique Louis XIV. She had said something to him once about there being a secret drawer in it. Secret drawer! That would not fool the police long. But there were

no police about the house now. She had said so. They had been there that morning, and now they had all gone away.

Up to now they had probably been busy looking for possible sources of poison in the food. They would not, he hoped, have got round to a room by room search of the house. Perhaps they would have to ask permission or get a search warrant to do that. It was possible that if he acted now, at once—

He visualized the house clearly in his mind's eye. It would be getting towards dusk. Tea would be brought in, either into the library or into the drawing room. Everyone would be assembled downstairs and the servants would be having tea in the servants' hall. There would be no one upstairs on the first floor. Easy to walk up through the garden, skirting the yew hedges that provided such admirable cover. Then there was the little door at the side onto the terrace. That was never locked until just before bedtime. One could slip through there and, choosing one's moment, slip upstairs.

Vivian Dubois considered very carefully what it behove him to do next. If Fortescue's death had been put down to a seizure or to a stroke as surely it ought to have been, the position would be very different. As it was—Dubois murmured under his breath: "Better be safe than sorry."

II

Mary Dove came slowly down the big staircase. She paused a moment at the window on the half landing, from which she had seen Inspector Neele arrive on the preceding day. Now, as she looked out in the fading light, she noticed a man's figure just disappearing round the yew hedge. She wondered if it was Lancelot Fortescue, the prodigal son. He had, perhaps, dismissed his car at the gate and was wandering round the garden recollecting old times there before tackling a possibly hostile family. Mary Dove felt rather sympathetic towards Lance. A faint smile on her lips, she went on downstairs. In

the hall she encountered Gladys, who jumped nervously at the sight of her.

"Was that the telephone I heard just now?" Mary asked. "Who was it?"

"Oh, that was a wrong number. Thought we were the laundry." Gladys sounded breathless and rather hurried. "And before that, it was Mr. Dubois. He wanted to speak to the mistress."

"I see."

Mary went on across the hall. Turning her head, she said: "It's teatime, I think. Haven't you brought it in yet?"

Gladys said: "I don't think it's half past four yet, is it, miss?"

"It's twenty minutes to five. Bring it in now, will you?"

Mary Dove went on into the library where Adele Fortescue, sitting on the sofa, was staring at the fire, picking with her fingers at a small lace handkerchief. Adele said fretfully:

"Where's tea?"

Mary Dove said: "It's just coming in."

A log had fallen out of the fireplace and Mary Dove knelt down at the grate and replaced it with the tongs, adding another piece of wood and a little coal.

Gladys went out into the kitchen, where Mrs. Crump raised a red and wrathful face from the kitchen table where she was mixing pastry in a large bowl.

"The library bell's been ringing and ringing. Time you took in the tea, my girl."

"All right, all right, Mrs. Crump."

"What I'll say to Crump tonight," muttered Mrs. Crump. "I'll tell him off."

Gladys went on into the pantry. She had not cut any sandwiches. Well, she jolly well wasn't going to cut sandwiches. They'd got plenty to eat without that, hadn't they? Two cakes, biscuits and scones and honey. Fresh black-market farm butter. Plenty without her bothering to cut tomato or fois gras sandwiches. She'd got other things to think about. Fair temper Mrs. Crump was in, all because Mr. Crump had gone out this afternoon. Well, it was his day out, wasn't it?

Quite right of him, Gladys thought. Mrs. Crump called out from the kitchen:

"The kettle's boiling its head off. Aren't you ever going to make that tea?"

"Coming."

She jerked some tea without measuring it into the big silver pot, carried it into the kitchen and poured the boiling water on it. She added the teapot and the kettle to the big silver tray and carried the whole thing through to the library where she set it on the small table near the sofa. She went back hurriedly for the other tray with the eatables on it. She carried the latter as far as the hall when the sudden jarring noise of the grandfather clock preparing itself to strike made her jump.

In the library, Adele Fortescue said querulously, to Mary Dove:

"Where *is* everybody this afternoon?"

"I really don't know, Mrs. Fortescue. Miss Fortescue came in sometime ago. I think Mrs. Percival's writing letters in her room."

Adele said pettishly: "Writing letters, writing letters. That woman never stops writing letters. She's like all people of her class. She takes an absolute delight in death and misfortune. Ghoulish, that's what I call it. Absolutely ghoulish."

Mary murmured tactfully: "I'll tell her that tea is ready."

Going towards the door she drew back a little in the doorway as Elaine Fortescue came into the room. Elaine said:

"It's cold," and dropped down by the fireplace, rubbing her hands before the blaze.

Mary stood for a moment in the hall. A large tray with cakes on it was standing on one of the hall chests. Since it was getting dark in the hall, Mary switched on the light. As she did so she thought she heard Jennifer Fortescue walking along the passage upstairs. Nobody, however, came down the stairs and Mary went up the staircase and along the corridor.

Percival Fortescue and his wife occupied a self-contained suite in one wing of the house. Mary tapped on the sitting room door. Mrs. Percival liked you to tap on doors, a fact which always roused Crump's scorn of her. Her voice said briskly:

"Come in."

Mary opened the door and murmured:

"Tea is just coming in, Mrs. Percival."

She was rather surprised to see Jennifer Fortescue with her outdoor clothes on. She was just divesting herself of a long camel-hair coat.

"I didn't know you'd been out," said Mary.

Mrs. Percival sounded slightly out of breath.

"Oh, I was just in the garden, that's all. Just getting a little air. Really, though, it was too cold. I shall be glad to get down to the fire. The central heating here isn't as good as it might be. Somebody must speak to the gardeners about it, Miss Dove."

"I'll do so," Mary promised.

Jennifer Fortescue dropped her coat on a chair and followed Mary out of the room. She went down the stairs ahead of Mary, who drew back a little to give her precedence. In the hall, rather to Mary's surprise, she noticed the tray of eatables was still there. She was about to go out to the pantry and call to Gladys when Adele Fortescue appeared in the door of the library, saying in an irritable voice:

"Aren't we ever going to have anything to eat for tea?"

Quickly Mary picked up the tray and took it into the library, disposing the various things on low tables near the fireplace. She was carrying the empty tray out to the hall again when the front-door bell rang. Setting down the tray, Mary went to the door herself. If this was the prodigal son at last she was rather curious to see him. "How unlike the rest of the Fortescues," Mary thought, as she opened the door and looked up into the dark lean face and the faint quizzical twist of the mouth. She said quietly:

"Mr. Lancelot Fortescue?"

"Himself."

Mary peered beyond him.

"Your luggage?"

"I've paid off the taxi. This is all I've got."

He picked up a medium-sized zip bag. Some faint feeling of surprise in her mind, Mary said:

"Oh, you did come in a taxi. I thought perhaps you'd walked up. And your wife?"

His face set in a rather grim line, Lance said:

"My wife won't be coming. At least, not just yet."

"I see. Come this way, will you, Mr. Fortescue. Everyone is in the library, having tea."

She took him to the library door and left him there. She thought to herself that Lancelot Fortescue was a very attractive person. A second thought followed the first. Probably a great many other women thought so, too.

III

"Lance!"

Elaine came hurrying forward towards him. She flung her arms round his neck and hugged him with a schoolgirl abandon that Lance found quite surprising.

"Hallo. Here I am."

He disengaged himself gently.

"This is Jennifer?"

Jennifer Fortescue looked at him with eager curiosity.

"I'm afraid Val's been detained in town," she said. "There's so much to see to, you know. All the arrangements to make and everything. Of course it all comes on Val. He has to see to *everything*. You can really have no idea what we're all going through."

"It must be terrible for you," said Lance gravely.

He turned to the woman on the sofa, who was sitting with a piece of scone and honey in her hand, quietly appraising him.

"Of course," cried Jennifer, "you don't know Adele, do you?"

Lance murmured, "Oh yes, I do," as he took Adele Fortescue's hand in his. As he looked down at her, her eyelids fluttered. She set down the scone she was eating with her left hand and just touched the arrangement of her hair. It was a feminine gesture. It marked

her recognition of the entry to the room of a personable man. She said in her thick, soft voice:

"Sit down here on the sofa beside me, Lance." She poured out a cup of tea for him. "I'm so glad you've come," she went on. "We badly need another man in the house."

Lance said:

"You must let me do everything I can to help."

"You know—but perhaps you don't know—we've had the police here. They think—they think—" she broke off and cried out passionately: "Oh, it's awful! Awful!"

"I know." Lance was grave and sympathetic. "As a matter of fact they met me at London Airport."

"The police met you?"

"Yes."

"What did they say?"

"Well," Lance was deprecating. "They told me what had happened."

"He was poisoned," said Adele, "that's what they think, what they say. Not food poisoning. Real poisoning, by someone. I believe, I really do believe they think it's one of *us*."

Lance gave her a sudden quick smile.

"That's their pigeon," he said consolingly. "It's no good our worrying. What a scrumptious tea! It's a long time since I've seen a good English tea."

The others fell in with his mood soon enough. Adele said suddenly:

"But your wife—haven't you got a wife, Lance?"

"I've got a wife, yes. She's in London."

"But aren't you—hadn't you better bring her down here?"

"Plenty of time to make plans," said Lance. "Pat—oh, Pat's quite all right where she is."

Elaine said sharply:

"You don't mean—you don't think—"

Lance said quickly:

"What a wonderful-looking chocolate cake. I must have some."

Cutting himself a slice, he asked:

"Is Aunt Effie alive still?"

"Oh, yes, Lance. She won't come down and have meals with us or anything, but she's quite well. Only she's getting very peculiar."

"She always was peculiar," said Lance. "I must go up and see her after tea."

Jennifer Fortescue murmured:

"At her age one does really feel that she ought to be in some kind of a home. I mean somewhere where she will be properly looked after."

"Heaven help any old ladies' home that got Aunt Effie in their midst," said Lance. He added, "Who's the demure piece of goods who let me in?"

Adele looked surprised.

"Didn't Crump let you in? The butler? Oh no, I forgot. It's his day out today. But surely Gladys—"

Lance gave a description. "Blue eyes, hair parted in the middle, soft voice, butter wouldn't melt in the mouth. What goes on behind it all, I wouldn't like to say."

"That," said Jennifer, "would be Mary Dove."

Elaine said:

"She sort of runs things for us."

"Does she, now?"

Adele said:

"She's really very useful."

"Yes," said Lance thoughtfully, "I should think she might be."

"But what is so nice is," said Jennifer, "that she knows her place. She never presumes, if you know what I mean."

"Clever Mary Dove," said Lance, and helped himself to another piece of chocolate cake.

Chapter Twelve

I

"So you've turned up again like a bad penny," said Miss Ramsbottom.

Lance grinned at her. "Just as you say, Aunt Effie."

"Humph!" Miss Ramsbottom sniffed disapprovingly. "You've chosen a nice time to do it. Your father got himself murdered yesterday, the house is full of police poking about everywhere, grubbing in the dustbins, even. I've seen them out of the window." She paused, sniffed again, and asked: "Got your wife with you?"

"No. I left Pat in London."

"That shows some sense. I shouldn't bring her *here* if I were you. You never know what might happen."

"To her? To Pat?"

"To anybody," said Miss Ramsbottom.

Lance Fortescue looked at her thoughtfully.

"Got any ideas about it all, Aunt Effie?" he asked.

Miss Ramsbottom did not reply directly. "I had an inspector here yesterday asking me questions. He didn't get much change out of me. But he wasn't such a fool as he looked, not by a long way." She added with some indignation: "What your grandfather would feel if he knew we had the police in the house—it's enough to make him turn in his grave. A strict Plymouth Brother he was all his life. The fuss there was when he found out I'd been attending Church of

England services in the evening! And I'm sure *that* was harmless enough compared to murder."

Normally Lance would have smiled at this, but his long, dark face remained serious. He said:

"D'you know, I'm quite in the dark after having been away so long. What's been going on here of late?"

Miss Ramsbottom raised her eyes to heaven.

"Godless doings," she said firmly.

"Yes, yes, Aunt Effie, you would say that anyway. But what gives the police the idea that Dad was killed here, in this house?"

"Adultery is one thing and murder is another," said Miss Ramsbottom. "I shouldn't like to think it of her, I shouldn't indeed."

Lance looked alert. "Adele?" he asked.

"My lips are sealed," said Miss Ramsbottom.

"Come on, old dear," said Lance. "It's a lovely phrase, but it doesn't mean a thing. Adele had a boyfriend? Adele and the boyfriend fed him henbane in the morning tea. Is that the setup?"

"I'll trouble you not to joke about it."

"I wasn't really joking, you know."

"I'll tell you one thing," said Miss Ramsbottom suddenly. "I believe that girl knows something about it."

"Which girl?" Lance looked surprised.

"The one that sniffs," said Miss Ramsbottom. "The one that ought to have brought me up my tea this afternoon, but didn't. Gone out without leave, so they say. I shouldn't wonder if she had gone to the police. Who let you in?"

"Someone called Mary Dove, I understand. Very meek and mild—but not really. Is she the one who's gone to the police?"

"*She* wouldn't go to the police," said Miss Ramsbottom. "No—I mean that silly little parlourmaid. She's been twitching and jumping like a rabbit all day. 'What's the matter with you?' I said. 'Have you got a guilty conscience?' She said: '*I* never did anything—I wouldn't do a thing like that.' 'I hope you wouldn't,' I said to her, 'but there's something worrying you now, isn't there?' Then she began to sniff and said she didn't want to get anybody into trouble, she was sure it must be all a mistake. I said to her, I said: 'Now, my girl, you speak

the truth and shame the devil.' That's what I said. 'You go to the police,' I said, 'and tell them anything you know, because no good ever came,' I said, 'of hushing up the truth, however unpleasant it is.' Then she talked a lot of nonsense about she couldn't go to the police, they'd never believe her and what on earth should she say? She ended up by saying anyway she didn't know anything at all."

"You don't think," Lance hesitated, "that she was just making herself important?"

"No, I don't. I think she was scared. I think she saw something or heard something that's given her some idea about the whole thing. It may be important, or it mayn't be of the least consequence."

"You don't think she herself could've had a grudge against Father and—" Lance hesitated.

Miss Ramsbottom was shaking her head decidedly.

"She's not the kind of girl your father would have taken the least notice of. No man ever will take much notice of her, poor girl. Ah, well, it's all the better for her soul, that I dare say."

Lance took no interest in Glady's soul. He asked:

"You think she may have run along to the police station?"

Aunt Effie nodded vigorously.

"Yes. I think she mayn't like to've said anything to them in this house in case somebody overheard her."

Lance asked: "Do you think she may have seen someone tampering with the food?"

Aunt Effie threw him a sharp glance.

"It's possible, isn't it?" she said.

"Yes, I suppose so." Then he added apologetically: "The whole thing still seems so wildly improbable. Like a detective story."

"Percival's wife is a hospital nurse," said Miss Ramsbottom.

The remark seemed so unconnected with what had gone before that Lance looked at her in a puzzled fashion.

"Hospital nurses are used to handling drugs," said Miss Ramsbottom.

Lance looked doubtful.

"This stuff—taxine—is it ever used in medicine?"

"They get it from yewberries, I gather. Children eat yewberries sometimes," said Miss Ramsbottom. "Makes them very ill, too. I remember a case when I was a child. It made a great impression on me. I never forgot it. Things you remember come in useful sometimes."

Lance raised his head sharply and stared at her.

"Natural affection is one thing," said Miss Ramsbottom, "and I hope I've got as much of it as anyone. But I won't stand for wickedness. Wickedness has to be destroyed."

II

"Went off without a word to me," said Mrs. Crump, raising her red, wrathful face from the pastry she was now rolling out on the board. "Slipped out without a word to anybody. Sly, that's what it is. Sly! Afraid she'd be stopped, and I *would* have stopped her if I'd caught her! The idea! There's the master dead, Mr. Lance coming home that hasn't been home for years and I said to Crump, I said: 'Day out or no day out, I know my duty. There's not going to be cold supper tonight as is usual on a Thursday, but a proper dinner. A gentleman coming home from abroad with his wife, what was formerly married in the aristocracy, things must be properly done.' You know me, miss, you know I take a pride in my work."

Mary Dove, the recipient of these confidences, nodded her head gently.

"And what does Crump say?" Mrs. Crump's voice rose angrily. "'It's my day off and I'm goin' off,' that's what he says. 'And a fig for the aristocracy,' he says. No pride in his work, Crump hasn't. So off he goes and I tell Gladys she'll have to manage alone tonight. She just says: 'All right, Mrs. Crump,' then, when my back's turned out *she* sneaks. It wasn't *her* day out, anyway. Friday's *her* day. How we're going to manage now, I don't know! Thank goodness Mr. Lance hasn't brought his wife here with him today."

"We shall manage, Mrs. Crump," Mary's voice was both soothing and authoritative, "if we just simplify the menu a little." She outlined a few suggestions. Mrs. Crump nodded unwilling acquiescence. "I shall be able to serve that quite easily," Mary concluded.

"You mean you'll wait at table yourself, miss?" Mrs. Crump sounded doubtful.

"If Gladys doesn't come back in time."

"*She* won't come back," said Mrs. Crump. "Gallivanting off, wasting her money somewhere in the shops. She's got a young man, you know, miss, though you wouldn't think it to look at her. Albert his name is. Going to get married next spring, so she tells me. Don't know what the married state's like, these girls don't. What I've been through with Crump." She sighed, then said in an ordinary voice: "What about tea, miss. Who's going to clear it away and wash it up?"

"I'll do that," said Mary. "I'll go and do it now."

The lights had not been turned on in the drawing room though Adele Fortescue was still sitting on the sofa behind the tea tray.

"Shall I switch the lights on, Mrs. Fortescue?" Mary asked. Adele did not answer.

Mary switched on the lights and went across to the window, where she pulled the curtains across. It was only then that she turned her head and saw the face of the woman who had sagged back against the cushions. A half-eaten scone spread with honey was beside her and her tea cup was still half full. Death had come to Adele Fortescue suddenly and swiftly.

III

"Well?" demanded Inspector Neele impatiently.

The doctor said promptly:

"Cyanide—potassium cyanide probably—in the tea."

"Cyanide," muttered Neele.

The doctor looked at him with slight curiosity.

"You're taking this hard—any special reason—"

"She was cast as a murderess," said Neele.

"And she turns out to be a victim. Hm. You'll have to think again, won't you?"

Neele nodded. His face was bitter and his jaw was grimly set.

Poisoned! Right under his nose. Taxine in Rex Fortescue's breakfast coffee, cyanide in Adele Fortescue's tea. Still an intimate family affair. Or so it seemed.

Adele Fortescue, Jennifer Fortescue, Elaine Fortescue and the newly arrived Lance Fortescue had had tea together in the library. Lance had gone up to see Miss Ramsbottom, Jennifer had gone to her own sitting room to write letters, Elaine had been the last to leave the library. According to her Adele had then been in perfect health and had just been pouring herself out a last cup of tea.

A last cup of tea! Yes, it *had* indeed been her last cup of tea.

And after that a blank twenty minutes, perhaps, until Mary Dove had come into the room and discovered the body.

And during that twenty minutes—

Inspector Neele swore to himself and went out into the kitchen.

Sitting in a chair by the kitchen table, the vast figure of Mrs. Crump, her belligerence pricked like a balloon, hardly stirred as he came in.

"Where's that girl? Has she come back yet?"

"Gladys? No—she's not back—Won't be, I suspect, until eleven o'clock."

"She made the tea, you say, and took it in."

"I didn't touch it, sir, as God's my witness. And what's more I don't believe Gladys did anything she shouldn't. She wouldn't do a thing like that—not Gladys. She's a good enough girl, sir—a bit foolish like, that's all—not wicked."

No, Neele did not think that Gladys was wicked. He did not think that Gladys was a poisoner. And in any case the cyanide had not been in the teapot.

"But what made her go off suddenly—like this? It wasn't her day out, you say."

"No, sir, tomorrow's her day out."

"Does Crump—"

Mrs. Crump's belligerence suddenly revived. Her voice rose wrathfully.

"Don't you go fastening anything on Crump. Crump's out of it. He went off at three o'clock—and thankful I am now that he did. He's as much out of it as Mr. Percival himself."

Percival Fortescue had only just returned from London—to be greeted by the astounding news of this second tragedy.

"I wasn't accusing Crump," said Neele mildly. "I just wondered if he knew anything about Gladys's plans."

"She had her best nylons on," said Mrs. Crump. "She was up to something. Don't tell me! Didn't cut any sandwiches for tea, either. Oh yes, she was up to something. *I'll* give her a piece of my mind when she comes back."

When she comes back—

A faint uneasiness possessed Neele. To shake it off he went upstairs to Adele Fortescue's bedroom. A lavish apartment—all rose brocade hanging and a vast gilt bed. On one side of the room was a door into a mirror-lined bathroom with a sunk orchid-pink porcelain bath. Beyond the bathroom, reached by a communicating door, was Rex Fortescue's dressing room. Neele went back into Adele's bedroom, and through the door on the farther side of the room into her sitting room.

The room was furnished in Empire style with a rose pile carpet. Neele only gave it a cursory glance for that particular room had had his close attention on the preceding day—with special attention paid to the small elegant desk.

Now, however, he stiffened to sudden attention. On the centre of the rose pile carpet was a small piece of caked mud.

Neele went over to it and picked it up. The mud was still damp.

He looked round—there were no footprints visible—only this one isolated fragment of wet earth.

IV

Inspector Neele looked round the bedroom that belonged to Gladys Martin. It was past eleven o'clock—Crump had come in half an hour ago—but there was still no sign of Gladys. Inspector Neele looked round him. Whatever Gladys's training had been, her own natural instincts were slovenly. The bed, Inspector Neele judged, was seldom made, the windows seldom opened. Gladys's personal habits, however, were not his immediate concern. Instead, he went carefully through her possessions.

They consisted for the most part of cheap and rather pathetic finery. There was little that was durable or of good quality. The elderly Ellen, whom he had called upon to assist him, had not been helpful. She didn't know what clothes Gladys had or hadn't. She couldn't say what, if anything, was missing. He turned from the clothes and the underclothes to the contents of the chest of drawers. There Gladys kept her treasures. There were picture postcards and newspaper cuttings, knitting patterns, hints on beauty culture, dressmaking and fashion advice.

Inspector Neele sorted them neatly into various categories. The picture postcards consisted mainly of views of various places where he presumed Gladys had spent her holidays. Amongst them were three picture postcards signed "Bert." Bert, he took to be the "young man" referred to by Mrs. Crump. The first postcard said—in an illiterate hand: "All the best. Missing you a lot. Yours ever, Bert." The second said: "Lots of nice-looking girls here but not one that's a patch on you. Be seeing you soon. Don't forget our date. And remember after that—it's thumbs up and living happy ever after." The third said merely: "Don't forget. I'm trusting you. Love, B."

Next, Neele looked through the newspaper cuttings and sorted them into three piles. There were the dressmaking and beauty hints, there were items about cinema stars to which Gladys had appeared greatly addicted and she had also, it appeared, been attracted by the latest marvels of science. There were cuttings about flying saucers, about secret weapons, about truth drugs used by Russians, and claims for fantastic drugs discovered by American doctors. All the witchcraft, so Neele thought, of our twentieth century. But in all the contents of the room there was nothing to give him a clue to her

disappearance. She had kept no diary, not that he had expected that. It was a remote possibility. There was no unfinished letter, no record at all of anything she might have seen in the house which could have had a bearing on Rex Fortescue's death. Whatever Gladys had seen, whatever Gladys had known, there was no record of it. It would still have to be guesswork why the second tea tray had been left in the hall, and Gladys herself had so suddenly vanished.

Sighing, Neele left the room, shutting the door behind him.

As he prepared to descend the small winding stairs he heard a noise of running feet coming along the landing below.

The agitated face of Sergeant Hay looked up at him from the bottom of the stairs. Sergeant Hay was panting a little.

"Sir," he said urgently. "Sir! We've found her—"

"Found her?"

"It was the housemaid, sir—Ellen—remembered as she hadn't brought the clothes in from where they were hanging on the line—just round the corner from the back door. So she went out with a torch to take them in and she almost fell over the body—the girl's body—strangled, she was, with a stocking round her throat—been dead for hours, I'd say. And, sir, it's a wicked kind of joke—there was a *clothes-peg clipped on her nose—*"

Chapter Thirteen

An elderly lady travelling by train had bought three morning papers, and each of them as she finished it, folded it and laid it aside, showed the same headline. It was no longer a question now of a small paragraph hidden away in the corner of the papers. There were headlines with flaring announcements of Triple Tragedy at Yewtree Lodge.

The old lady sat very upright, looking out of the window of the train, her lips pursed together, an expression of distress and disapproval on her pink and white wrinkled face. Miss Marple had left St. Mary Mead by the early train, changing at the junction and going on to London, where she took a Circle train to another London terminus and thence on to Baydon Heath.

At the station she signalled a taxi and asked to be taken to Yewtree Lodge. So charming, so innocent, such a fluffy and pink and white old lady was Miss Marple that she gained admittance to what was now practically a fortress in a state of siege far more easily than could have been believed possible. Though an army of reporters and photographers were being kept at bay by the police, Miss Marple was allowed to drive in without question, so impossible would it have been to believe that she was anyone but an elderly relative of the family.

Miss Marple paid off the taxi in a careful assortment of small change, and rang the front doorbell. Crump opened it and Miss Marple summed him up with an experienced glance. "A shifty eye," she said to herself. "Scared to death, too."

Crump saw a tall, elderly lady wearing an old-fashioned tweed coat and skirt, a couple of scarves and a small felt hat with a bird's wing. The old lady carried a capacious handbag and an aged but good-quality suitcase reposed by her feet. Crump recognized a lady when he saw one and said:

"Yes, madam?" in his best and most respectful voice.

"Could I see the mistress of the house, please?" said Miss Marple.

Crump drew back to let her in. He picked up the suitcase and put it carefully down in the hall.

"Well, madam," he said rather dubiously, "I don't know who exactly—"

Miss Marple helped him out.

"I have come," she said, "to speak about the poor girl who was killed. Gladys Martin."

"Oh, I see, madam. Well in that case—" he broke off, and looked towards the library door from which a tall young woman had just emerged. "This is Mrs. Lance Fortescue, madam," he said.

Pat came forward and she and Miss Marple looked at each other. Miss Marple was aware of a faint feeling of surprise. She had not expected to see someone like Patricia Fortescue in this particular house. Its interior was much as she had pictured it, but Pat did not somehow match with that interior.

"It's about Gladys, madam," said Crump helpfully.

Pat said rather hesitatingly:

"Will you come in here? We shall be quite alone."

She led the way into the library and Miss Marple followed her.

"There wasn't anyone specially you wanted to see, was there?" said Pat, "because perhaps I shan't be much good. You see my husband and I only came back from Africa a few days ago. We don't really know anything much about the household. But I can fetch my sister-in-law or my brother-in-law's wife."

Miss Marple looked at the girl and liked her. She liked her gravity and her simplicity. For some strange reason she felt sorry for her. A background of shabby chintz and horses and dogs, Miss Marple felt vaguely, would have been much more suitable than this richly furnished interior décor. At the pony show and gymkhanas held

locally round St. Mary Mead, Miss Marple had met many Pats and knew them well. She felt at home with this rather unhappy-looking girl.

"It's very simple, really," said Miss Marple, taking off her gloves carefully and smoothing out the fingers of them. "I read in the paper, you see, about Gladys Martin having been killed. And of course I know all about her. She comes from my part of the country. I trained her, in fact, for domestic service. And since this terrible thing has happened to her, I felt—well, I felt that I ought to come and see if there was anything I could do about it."

"Yes," said Pat. "Of course. I see."

And she did see. Miss Marple's action appeared to her natural and inevitable.

"I think it's a very good thing you have come," said Pat. "Nobody seems to know very much about her. I mean relations and all that."

"No," said Miss Marple, "of course not. She hadn't got any relations. She came to me from the orphanage. St. Faith's. A very well-run place though sadly short of funds. We do our best for the girls there, try to give them a good training and all that. Gladys came to me when she was seventeen and I taught her how to wait at table and keep the silver and everything like that. Of course she didn't stay long. They never do. As soon as she got a little experience, she went and took a job in a café. The girls nearly always want to do that. They think it's freer, you know, and a gayer life. Perhaps it may be. I really don't know."

"I never even saw her," said Pat. "Was she a pretty girl?"

"Oh, no," said Miss Marple, "not at all. Adenoids, and a good many spots. She was rather pathetically stupid, too. I don't suppose," went on Miss Marple thoughtfully, "that she ever made many friends anywhere. She was very keen on men, poor girl. But men didn't take much notice of her and other girls rather made use of her."

"It sounds rather cruel," said Pat.

"Yes, my dear," said Miss Marple, "life is cruel, I'm afraid. One doesn't really know what to do with the Gladyses. They enjoy going to the pictures and all that, but they're always thinking of impossible

things that can't possibly happen to them. Perhaps that's happiness of a kind. But they get disappointed. I think Gladys was disappointed in café and restaurant life. Nothing very glamorous or interesting happened to her and it was just hard on the feet. Probably that's why she came back into private service. Do you know how long she'd been here?"

Pat shook her head.

"Not very long, I should think. Only a month or two." Pat paused and then went on, "It seems so horrible and futile that she should have been caught up in this thing. I suppose she'd seen something or noticed something."

"It was the clothes-peg that really worried me," said Miss Marple in her gentle voice.

"The clothes-peg?"

"Yes. I read about it in the papers. I suppose it is true? That when she was found there was a clothes-peg clipped onto her nose."

Pat nodded. The colour rose to Miss Marple's pink cheeks.

"That's what made me so very angry, if you can understand, my dear. It was such a cruel, contemptuous gesture. It gave me a kind of picture of the murderer. To do a thing like that! It's very wicked, you know, to affront human dignity. Particularly if you've already killed."

Pat said slowly:

"I think I see what you mean." She got up. "I think you'd better come and see Inspector Neele. He's in charge of the case and he's here now. You'll like him, I think. He's a very human person." She gave a sudden, quick shiver. "The whole thing is such a horrible nightmare. Pointless. Mad. Without rhyme or reason in it."

"I wouldn't say that, you know," said Miss Marple. "No, I wouldn't say that."

Inspector Neele was looking tired and haggard. Three deaths and the press of the whole country whooping down the trail. A case that seemed to be shaping in well-known fashion had gone suddenly haywire. Adele Fortescue, that appropriate suspect, was now the second victim of an incomprehensible murder case. At the close of

that fatal day the assistant commissioner had sent for Neele and the two men had talked far into the night.

In spite of his dismay, or rather behind it, Inspector Neele had felt a faint inward satisfaction. That pattern of the wife and the lover. It had been too slick, too easy. He had always mistrusted it. And now that mistrust of his was justified.

"The whole thing takes on an entirely different aspect," the AC had said, striding up and down his room and frowning. "It looks to me, Neele, as though we've got someone mentally unhinged to deal with. First the husband, then the wife. But the very circumstances of the case seem to show that it's an inside job. It's all there, in the family. Someone who sat down to breakfast with Fortescue put taxine in his coffee or on his food, someone who had tea with the family that day put potassium cyanide in Adele Fortescue's cup of tea. Someone trusted, unnoticed, one of the family. Which of 'em, Neele?"

Neele said dryly:

"Percival wasn't there, so that lets him out again. That lets him out again," Inspector Neele repeated.

The AC looked at him sharply. Something in the repetition had attracted his attention.

"What's the idea, Neele? Out with it, man."

Inspector Neele looked stolid.

"Nothing, sir. Not so much as an idea. All I say is it was very convenient for him."

"A bit too convenient, eh?" The AC reflected and shook his head. "You think he might have managed it somehow? Can't see how, Neele. No, I can't see how."

He added: "And he's a cautious type, too."

"But quite intelligent, sir."

"You don't fancy the women. Is that it? Yet the women are indicated. Elaine Fortescue and Percival's wife. They were at breakfast and they were at tea that day. Either of them could have done it. No signs of anything abnormal about them? Well, it doesn't always show. There might be something in their past medical record."

Inspector Neele did not answer. He was thinking of Mary Dove. He had no definite reason for suspecting her, but that was the way his thoughts lay. There was something unexplained about her, unsatisfactory. A faint, amused antagonism. That had been her attitude after the death of Rex Fortescue. What was her attitude now? Her behaviour and manner were, as always, exemplary. There was no longer, he thought, amusement. Perhaps not even antagonism, but he wondered whether, once or twice, he had not seen a trace of fear. He had been to blame, culpably to blame, in the matter of Gladys Martin. That guilty confusion of hers he had put down to no more than a natural nervousness of the police. He had come across that guilty nervousness so often. In this case it had been something more. Gladys had seen or heard something which had aroused her suspicions. It was probably, he thought, some quite small thing, something so vague and indefinite that she had hardly liked to speak about it. And now, poor little rabbit, she would never speak.

Inspector Neele looked with some interest at the mild, earnest face of the old lady who confronted him now at Yewtree Lodge. He had been in two minds at first how to treat her, but he quickly made-up his mind. Miss Marple would be useful to him. She was upright, of unimpeachable rectitude and she had, like most old ladies, time on her hands and an old maid's nose for scenting bits of gossip. She'd get things out of servants, and out of the women of the Fortescue family perhaps, that he and his policemen would never get. Talk, conjecture, reminiscences, repetitions of things said and done, out of it all she would pick the salient facts. So Inspector Neele was gracious.

"It's uncommonly good of you to have come here, Miss Marple," he said.

"It was my duty, Inspector Neele. The girl had lived in my house. I feel, in a sense, responsible for her. She was a very silly girl, you know."

Inspector Neele looked at her appreciatively.

"Yes," he said, "just so."

She had gone, he felt, to the heart of the matter.

"She wouldn't know," said Miss Marple, "what she ought to do. If, I mean, something came up. Oh, dear, I'm expressing myself very badly."

Inspector Neele said that he understood.

"She hadn't got good judgement as to what was important or not, that's what you mean, isn't it?"

"Oh yes, exactly, Inspector."

"When you say that she was silly—" Inspector Neele broke off.

Miss Marple took up the theme.

"She was the credulous type. She was the sort of girl who would have given her savings to a swindler, if she'd had any savings. Of course, she never did have any savings because she always spent her money on most unsuitable clothes."

"What about men?" asked the inspector.

"She wanted a young man badly," said Miss Marple. "In fact that's really, I think, why she left St. Mary Mead. The competition there is very keen. So few men. She did have hopes of the young man who delivered the fish. Young Fred had a pleasant word for all the girls, but of course he didn't mean anything by it. That upset poor Gladys quite a lot. Still, I gather she did get herself a young man in the end?"

Inspector Neele nodded.

"It seems so. Albert Evans, I gather, his name was. She seems to have met him at some holiday camp. He didn't give her a ring or anything so maybe she made it all up. He was a mining engineer, so she told the cook."

"That seems *most* unlikely," said Miss Marple, "but I dare say it's what he *told* her. As I say, she'd believe anything. You don't connect *him* with this business at all?"

Inspector Neele shook his head.

"No. I don't think there are any complications of that kind. He never seems to have visited her. He sent her a postcard from time to time, usually from a seaport—probably 4th Engineer on a boat on the Baltic run."

"Well," said Miss Marple, "I'm glad she had her little romance. Since her life has been cut short in this way—" She tightened her

lips. "You know, Inspector, it makes me very, very angry." And she added, as she had said to Pat Fortescue, "Especially the clothes-peg. That, Inspector, was really wicked."

Inspector Neele looked at her with interest.

"I know just what you mean, Miss Marple," he said.

Miss Marple coughed apologetically.

"I wonder—I suppose it would be great presumption on my part—if only I could assist you in my very humble and, I'm afraid, very *feminine* way. This is a wicked murderer, Inspector Neele, and the wicked should not go unpunished."

"That's an unfashionable belief nowadays, Miss Marple," Inspector Neele said rather grimly. "Not that I don't agree with you."

"There is an hotel near the station, or there's the Golf Hotel," said Miss Marple tentatively, "and I believe there's a Miss Ramsbottom in this house who is interested in foreign missions."

Inspector Neele looked at Miss Marple appraisingly.

"Yes," he said. "You've got something there, maybe. I can't say that I've had great success with the lady."

"It's really very kind of you, Inspector Neele," said Miss Marple. "I'm so glad you don't think I'm just a sensation hunter."

Inspector Neele gave a sudden, rather unexpected smile. He was thinking to himself that Miss Marple was very unlike the popular idea of an avenging fury. And yet, he thought that was perhaps exactly what she was.

"Newspapers," said Miss Marple, "are often so sensational in their accounts. But hardly, I fear, as accurate as one might wish." She looked inquiringly at Inspector Neele. "If one could be sure of having just the sober facts."

"They're not particularly sober," said Neele. "Shorn of undue sensation, they're as follows. Mr. Fortescue died in his office as a result of taxine poisoning. Taxine is obtained from the berries and leaves of yew trees."

"Very convenient," Miss Marple said.

"Possibly," said Inspector Neele, "but we've no evidence as to that. As yet, that is." He stressed the point because it was here that he thought Miss Marple might be useful. If any brew or concoction of

yewberries had been made in the house, Miss Marple was quite likely to come upon traces of it. She was the sort of old pussy who would make homemade liqueurs, cordials and herb teas herself. She would know methods of making and methods of disposal.

"And Mrs. Fortescue?"

"Mrs. Fortescue had tea with the family in the library. The last person to leave the room and the tea table was Miss Elaine Fortescue, her stepdaughter. She states that as she left the room Mrs. Fortescue was pouring herself out another cup of tea. Some twenty minutes or half hour later Miss Dove, who acts as housekeeper, went in to remove the tea tray. Mrs. Fortescue was still sitting on the sofa, dead. Beside her was a tea cup a quarter full and in the dregs of it was potassium cyanide."

"Which is almost immediate in its action, I believe," said Miss Marple.

"Exactly."

"Such dangerous stuff," murmured Miss Marple. "One has it to take wasps' nests but I'm always very, very careful."

"You're quite right," said Inspector Neele. "There was a packet of it in the gardener's shed here."

"Again very convenient," said Miss Marple. She added, "Was Mrs. Fortescue eating anything?"

"Oh, yes. They'd had quite a sumptuous tea."

"Cake, I suppose? Bread and butter? Scones, perhaps? Jam? Honey?"

"Yes, there was honey and scones, chocolate cake and swiss roll and various other plates of things." He looked at her curiously. "The potassium cyanide was in the tea, Miss Marple."

"Oh, yes, yes. I quite understand that. I was just getting the whole picture, so to speak. Rather significant, don't you think?"

He looked at her in a slightly puzzled fashion. Her cheeks were pink, her eyes were bright.

"And the third death, Inspector Neele?"

"Well, the facts there seem clear enough, too. The girl, Gladys, took in the tea tray, then she brought the next tray into the hall, but left it there. She'd been rather absentminded all the day, apparently.

After that no one saw her. The cook, Mrs. Crump, jumped to the conclusion that the girl had gone out for the evening without telling anybody. She based her belief, I think, on the fact that the girl was wearing a good pair of nylon stockings and her best shoes. There, however, she was proved quite wrong. The girl had obviously remembered suddenly that she had not taken in some clothes that were drying outside on the clothesline. She ran out to fetch them in, had taken down half of them apparently, when somebody took her unawares by slipping a stocking round her neck and—well, that was that."

"Someone from outside?" said Miss Marple.

"Perhaps," said Inspector Neele. "But perhaps someone from inside. Someone who'd been waiting his or her opportunity to get the girl alone. The girl was upset, nervous, when we first questioned her, but I'm afraid we didn't quite appreciate the importance of that."

"Oh, but how could you," cried Miss Marple, "because people so often do look guilty and embarrassed when they are questioned by the police."

"That's just it. But this time, Miss Marple, it was rather more than that. I think the girl Gladys had seen someone performing some action that seemed to her needed explanation. It can't, I think, have been anything very definite. Otherwise she *would* have spoken out. But I think she did betray the fact to the person in question. That person realized that Gladys was a danger."

"And so Gladys was strangled and a clothes-peg clipped on her nose," murmured Miss Marple to herself.

"Yes, that's a nasty touch. A nasty, sneering sort of touch. Just a nasty bit of unnecessary bravado."

Miss Marple shook her head.

"Hardly *unnecessary*. It does all make a pattern, doesn't it?"

Inspector Neele looked at her curiously.

"I don't quite follow you, Miss Marple. What do you mean by a pattern?"

Miss Marple immediately became flustered.

"Well, I mean it does seem—I mean, regarded as a sequence, if you understand—well, one can't get away from facts, can one?"

"I don't think I quite understand."

"Well, I mean—first we have Mr. Fortescue. *Rex Fortescue*. Killed in his office in the city. And then we have Mrs. Fortescue, sitting here in the library and having tea. There were scones and *honey*. And then poor Gladys with the clothes-peg on her nose. Just to *point* the whole thing. That very charming Mrs. Lance Fortescue said to me that there didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason in it, but I couldn't agree with her, because it's the rhyme that strikes one, isn't it?"

Inspector Neele said slowly: "I don't think—"

Miss Marple went on quickly:

"I expect you're about thirty-five or thirty-six, aren't you, Inspector Neele? I think there was rather a reaction just then, when you were a little boy, I mean, against nursery rhymes. But if one has been brought up on Mother Goose—I mean it is really highly significant, isn't it? What I wondered was," Miss Marple paused, then appearing to take her courage in her hands went on bravely: "Of course it is great impertinence I know, on my part, saying this sort of thing to you."

"Please say anything you like, Miss Marple."

"Well, that's very kind of you. I shall. Though, as I say, I do it with the utmost diffidence because I know I am very old and rather muddleheaded, and I dare say my idea is of no value at all. But what I mean to say is have you gone into the question of blackbirds?"

Chapter Fourteen

I

For about ten seconds Inspector Neele stared at Miss Marple with the utmost bewilderment. His first idea was that the old lady had gone off her head.

"Blackbirds?" he repeated.

Miss Marple nodded her head vigorously.

"Yes," she said, and forthwith recited:

*" 'Sing a song of sixpence, a pocketful of rye,
Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie.
When the pie was opened the birds began to sing.
Wasn't that a dainty dish to set before the king?*

*" 'The king was in his counting house, counting out his money,
The queen was in the parlour eating bread and honey,
The maid was in the garden hanging out the clothes,
When there came a little dicky bird and nipped off her nose.' "*

"Good Lord," Inspector Neele said.

"I mean, it does fit," said Miss Marple. "It *was* rye in his pocket, wasn't it? One newspaper said so. The others just said cereal, which might mean anything. Farmer's Glory or Cornflakes—or even maize—but it *was* rye?"

Inspector Neele nodded.

"There you are," said Miss Marple, triumphantly. "Rex Fortescue. Rex means *King*. In his *Counting House*. And Mrs. Fortescue the Queen in the parlour, eating bread and honey. And so, of course, the murderer had to put that clothes-peg on poor Gladys's nose."

Inspector Neele said:

"You mean the whole setup is crazy?"

"Well, one mustn't jump to conclusions—but it is certainly very *odd*. But you really must make inquiries about blackbirds. Because there must *be* blackbirds!"

It was at this point that Sergeant Hay came into the room saying urgently, "Sir."

He broke off at sight of Miss Marple. Inspector Neele, recovering himself, said:

"Thank you, Miss Marple. I'll look into the matter. Since you are interested in the girl, perhaps you would care to look over the things from her room. Sergeant Hay will show you them presently."

Miss Marple, accepting her dismissal, twittered her way out.

"Blackbirds!" murmured Inspector Neele to himself.

Sergeant Hay stared.

"Yes, Hay, what is it?"

"Sir," said Sergeant Hay, urgently again. "Look at this."

He produced an article wrapped in a somewhat grubby handkerchief.

"Found it in the shrubbery," said Sergeant Hay. "Could have been chucked there from one of the back windows."

He tipped the object down on the desk in front of the inspector, who leaned forward and inspected it with rising excitement. The exhibit was a nearly full pot of marmalade.

The inspector stared at it without speech. His face assumed a peculiarly wooden and stupid appearance. In actual fact this meant that Inspector Neele's mind was racing once more round an imaginary track. A moving picture was enacting itself before the eyes of his mind. He saw a new pot of marmalade, he saw hands carefully removing its cover, he saw a small quantity of marmalade removed, mixed with a preparation of taxine and replaced in the pot, the top

smoothed over and the lid carefully replaced. He broke off at this point to ask Sergeant Hay:

"They don't take marmalade out of the pot and put it into fancy pots?"

"No, sir. Got into the way of serving it in its own pot during the war when things were scarce, and it's gone on like that ever since."

Neele murmured:

"That made it easier, of course."

"What's more," said Sergeant Hay, "Mr. Fortescue was the only one that took marmalade for breakfast (and Mr. Percival when he was at home). The others had jam or honey."

Neele nodded.

"Yes," he said. "That made it very simple, didn't it?"

After a slight gap the moving picture went on in his mind. It was the breakfast table now. Rex Fortescue stretching out his hand for the marmalade pot, taking out a spoonful of marmalade and spreading it on his toast and butter. Easier, far easier that way than the risk and difficulty of insinuating it into his coffee cup. A foolproof method of administering the poison! And afterwards? Another gap and a picture that was not quite so clear. The replacing of that pot of marmalade by another with exactly the same amount taken from it. And then an open window. A hand and an arm flinging out that pot into the shrubbery. Whose hand and arm?

Inspector Neele said in a businesslike voice:

"Well, we'll have of course to get this analysed. See if there are any traces of taxine. We can't jump to conclusions."

"No, sir. There may be fingerprints too."

"Probably not the ones we want," said Inspector Neele gloomily. "There'll be Gladys's, of course, and Crump's and Fortescue's own. Then probably Mrs. Crump's, the grocer's assistant and a few others! If anyone put taxine in here they'd take care not to go playing about with their own fingers all over the pot. Anyway, as I say, we mustn't jump to conclusions. How do they order marmalade and where is it kept?"

The industrious Sergeant Hay had his answer pat for all these questions.

"Marmalade and jams comes in in batches of six at a time. A new pot would be taken into the pantry when the old one was getting low."

"That means," said Neele, "that it could have been tampered with several days before it was actually brought onto the breakfast table. And anyone who was in the house or had access to the house could have tampered with it."

The term "access to the house" puzzled Sergeant Hay slightly. He did not see in what way his superior's mind was working.

But Neele was postulating what seemed to him a logical assumption.

If the marmalade had been tampered with *beforehand*—then surely that ruled out *those persons who were actually at the breakfast table on the fatal morning*.

Which opened up some interesting new possibilities.

He planned in his mind interviews with various people—this time with rather a different angle of approach.

He'd keep an open mind. . . .

He'd even consider seriously that old Miss Whatshername's suggestions about the nursery rhyme. Because there was no doubt that that nursery rhyme fitted in a rather startling way. It fitted with a point that had worried him from the beginning. The pocketful of rye.

"Blackbirds?" murmured Inspector Neele to himself.

Sergeant Hay stared.

"It's not blackberry jelly, sir," he said. "It's *marmalade*."

II

Inspector Neele went in search of Mary Dove.

He found her in one of the bedrooms on the first floor superintending Ellen, who was denuding the bed of what seemed to be clean sheets. A little pile of clean towels lay on a chair.

Inspector Neele looked puzzled.

"Somebody coming to stay?" he asked.

Mary Dove smiled at him. In contrast to Ellen, who looked grim and truculent, Mary was her usual imperturbable self.

"Actually," she said, "the opposite is the case."

Neele looked inquiringly at her.

"This is the guest room we had prepared for Mr. Gerald Wright."

"Gerald Wright? Who is he?"

"He's a friend of Miss Elaine Fortescue's." Mary's voice was carefully devoid of inflection.

"He was coming here—when?"

"I believe he arrived at the Golf Hotel the day after Mr. Fortescue's death."

"The day *after*."

"So Miss Fortescue said." Mary's voice was still impersonal: "She told me she wanted him to come and stay in the house—so I had a room prepared. Now—after these other two—tragedies—it seems more suitable that he should remain at the hotel."

"The Golf Hotel?"

"Yes."

"Quite," said Inspector Neele.

Ellen gathered up the sheets and towels and went out of the room.

Mary Dove looked inquiringly at Neele.

"You wanted to see me about something?"

Neele said pleasantly:

"It's becoming important to get exact times very clearly stated. Members of the family all seem a little vague about time—perhaps understandably. You, on the other hand, Miss Dove, I have found extremely accurate in your statements as to times."

"Again understandably!"

"Yes—perhaps—I must certainly congratulate you on the way you have kept this house going in spite of the—well, panic—these last deaths must have caused." He paused and then asked curiously: "How did you do it?"

He had realized, astutely, that the one chink in the armour of Mary Dove's inscrutability was her pleasure in her own efficiency.

She unbent slightly now as she answered.

"The Crumps wanted to leave at once, of course."

"We couldn't have allowed that."

"I know. But I also told them that Mr. Percival Fortescue would be more likely to be—well—generous—to those who had spared him inconvenience."

"And Ellen?"

"Ellen does not wish to leave."

"Ellen does not wish to leave," Neele repeated. "She has good nerves."

"She enjoys disasters," said Mary Dove. "Like Mrs. Percival, she finds in disaster a kind of pleasurable drama."

"Interesting. Do you think Mrs. Percival has—enjoyed the tragedies?"

"No—of course not. That is going too far. I would merely say that it has enabled her to—well—stand up to them—"

"And how have you yourself been affected, Miss Dove?"

Mary Dove shrugged her shoulders.

"It has not been a pleasant experience," she said dryly.

Inspector Neele felt again a longing to break down this cool young woman's defences—to find out what was really going on behind the careful and efficient understatement of her whole attitude.

He merely said brusquely:

"Now—to recapitulate times and places: the last time you saw Gladys Martin was in the hall before tea, and that was at twenty minutes to five?"

"Yes—I told her to bring in tea."

"You yourself were coming from where?"

"From upstairs—I thought I had heard the telephone a few minutes before."

"Gladys, presumably, had answered the telephone?"

"Yes. It was a wrong number. Someone who wanted the Baydon Heath Laundry."

"And that was the last time you saw her?"

"She brought the tea tray into the library about ten minutes or so later."

"After that Miss Elaine Fortescue came in?"

"Yes, about three or four minutes later. Then I went up to tell Mrs. Percival tea was ready."

"Did you usually do that?"

"Oh no—people came in to tea when they pleased—but Mrs. Fortescue asked where everybody was. I thought I heard Mrs. Percival coming—but that was a mistake—"

Neele interrupted. Here was something new.

"You mean you heard someone upstairs moving about?"

"Yes—at the head of the stairs, I thought. But no one came down so I went up. Mrs. Percival was in her bedroom. She had just come in. She had been out for a walk—"

"Out for a walk—I see. The time being then—"

"Oh—nearly five o'clock, I think—"

"And Mr. Lancelot Fortescue arrived—when?"

"A few minutes after I came downstairs again—I thought he had arrived earlier—but—"

Inspector Neele interrupted:

"Why did you think he had arrived earlier?"

"Because I thought I had caught sight of him through the landing window."

"In the garden, you mean?"

"Yes—I caught a glimpse of someone through the yew hedge—and I thought it would probably be him."

"This was when you were coming down after telling Mrs. Percival Fortescue tea was ready?"

Mary corrected him.

"No—not then—it was earlier—when I came down the first time."

Inspector Neele stared.

"Are you sure about that, Miss Dove?"

"Yes, I'm perfectly sure. That's why I was surprised to see him—when he actually did ring the bell."

Inspector Neele shook his head. He kept his inner excitement out of his voice as he said:

"It couldn't have been Lancelot Fortescue you saw in the garden. His train—which was due at 4:28, was nine minutes late. He arrived at Baydon Heath Station at 4:37. He had to wait a few minutes for a taxi—that train is always very full. It was actually nearly a quarter to five (five minutes *after* you had seen the man in the garden) when he left the station and it is a ten-minute drive. He paid off the taxi at the gate here at about five minutes to five at the earliest. No—it wasn't Lancelot Fortescue you saw."

"I'm sure I did see someone."

"Yes, you saw someone. It was getting dark. You couldn't have seen the man clearly?"

"Oh no—I couldn't see his face or anything like that—just his build—tall and slender. We were expecting Lancelot Fortescue—so I jumped to the conclusion that that's who it was."

"He was going—which way?"

"Along behind the yew hedge towards the east side of the house."

"There is a side door there. Is it kept locked?"

"Not until the house is locked up for the night."

"Anyone could have come in by that side door without being observed by any of the household."

Mary Dove considered.

"I think so. Yes." She added quickly: "You mean—the person I heard later upstairs could have come in that way? Could have been hiding—upstairs?"

"Something of the kind."

"But who—?"

"That remains to be seen. Thank you, Miss Dove."

As she turned to go away Inspector Neele said in a casual voice: "By the way, you can't tell me anything about *blackbirds*, I suppose?"

For the first time, so it seemed, Mary Dove was taken aback. She turned back sharply.

"I—what did you say?"

"I was just asking you about blackbirds."

"Do you mean—"

"Blackbirds," said Inspector Neele.

He had on his most stupid expression.

"You mean that silly business last summer? But surely that can't . . ." She broke off.

Inspector Neele said pleasantly:

"There's been a bit of talk about it, but I was sure I'd get a clear account from you."

Mary Dove was her calm, practical self again.

"It must, I think, have been some silly, spiteful joke," she said. "Four dead blackbirds were on Mr. Fortescue's desk in his study here. It was summer and the windows were open, and we rather thought it must have been the gardener's boy, though he insisted he'd never done anything of the kind. But they were actually blackbirds the gardener had shot which had been hanging up by the fruit bushes."

"And somebody had cut them down and put them on Mr. Fortescue's desk?"

"Yes."

"Any sort of reason behind it—any association with blackbirds?"

Mary shook her head.

"I don't think so."

"How did Mr. Fortescue take it? Was he annoyed?"

"Naturally he was annoyed."

"But not upset in any way?"

"I really can't remember."

"I see," said Inspector Neele.

He said no more. Mary Dove once more turned away, but this time, he thought, she went rather unwillingly as though she would have liked to know more of what was in his mind. Ungratefully, all that Inspector Neele felt was annoyance with Miss Marple. She had suggested to him that there would be blackbirds and, sure enough, there the blackbirds were! Not four and twenty of them, that was true. What might be called a token consignment.

That had been as long ago as last summer and where it fitted in Inspector Neele could not imagine. He was not going to let this blackbird bogey divert him from the logical and sober investigation of murder by a sane murderer for a sane reason, but he would be

forced from now on to keep the crazier possibilities of the case in mind.

Chapter Fifteen

I

"I'm sorry, Miss Fortescue, to bother you again, but I want to be quite, quite clear about this. As far as we know you were the last person—or rather the last person but one—to see Mrs. Fortescue alive. It was about twenty past five when you left the drawing room?"

"About then," said Elaine, "I can't say exactly." She added defensively: "One doesn't look at clocks the whole time."

"No, of course not. During the time that you were alone with Mrs. Fortescue after the others had left, what did you talk about?"

"Does it matter what we talked about?"

"Probably not," said Inspector Neele, "but it might give me some clue as to what was in Mrs. Fortescue's mind."

"You mean—you think she might have done it herself?"

Inspector Neele noticed the brightening on her face. It would certainly be a very convenient solution as far as the family was concerned. Inspector Neele did not think it was true for a moment. Adele Fortescue was not to his mind a suicidal type. Even if she had poisoned her husband and was convinced the crime was about to be brought home to her, she would not, he thought, have ever thought of killing herself. She would have been sure optimistically that even if she were tried for murder she would be sure to be acquitted. He was

not, however, averse to Elaine Fortescue's entertaining the hypothesis. He said, therefore, quite truthfully:

"There's a possibility of it at least, Miss Fortescue. Now perhaps you'll tell me just what your conversation was about?"

"Well, it was really about my affairs." Elaine hesitated.

"Your affairs being . . . ? " he paused questioningly with a genial expression.

"I—a friend of mine had just arrived in the neighbourhood, and I was asking Adele if she would have any objection to—to my asking him to stay here at the house."

"Ah. And who is this friend?"

"It's a Mr. Gerald Wright. He's a schoolmaster. He—he's staying at the Golf Hotel."

"A very close friend, perhaps?"

Inspector Neele gave an avuncular beam which added at least fifteen years to his age.

"We may expect an interesting announcement shortly, perhaps?"

He felt almost compunction as he saw the awkward gesture of the girl's hand and the flush on her face. She was in love with the fellow all right.

"We—we're not actually engaged and of course we couldn't have it announced just now, but—well, yes I think we do—I mean we are going to get married."

"Congratulations," said Inspector Neele pleasantly. "Mr. Wright is staying at the Golf Hotel, you say? How long has he been there?"

"I wired him when Father died."

"And he came at once. *I see*," said Inspector Neele.

He used this favourite phrase of his in a friendly and reassuring way.

"What did Mrs. Fortescue say when you asked her about his coming here?"

"Oh, she said, all right, I could have anybody I pleased."

"She was nice about it then?"

"Not exactly nice. I mean, she said—"

"Yes, what else did she say?"

Again Elaine flushed.

"Oh, something stupid about my being able to do a lot better for myself now. It was the sort of thing Adele would say."

"Ah, well," said Inspector Neele soothingly, "relations say these sort of things."

"Yes, yes, they do. But people often find it difficult to—to appreciate Gerald properly. He's an intellectual, you see, and he's got a lot of unconventional and progressive ideas that people don't like."

"That's why he didn't get on with your father?"

Elaine flushed hotly.

"Father was very prejudiced and unjust. He hurt Gerald's feelings. In fact, Gerald was so upset by my father's attitude that he went off and I didn't hear from him for weeks."

And probably wouldn't have heard from him now if your father hadn't died and left you a packet of money, Inspector Neele thought. Aloud he said:

"Was there any more conversation between you and Mrs. Fortescue?"

"No. No, I don't think so."

"And that was about twenty-five past five and Mrs. Fortescue was found dead at five minutes to six. You didn't return to the room during that half hour?"

"No."

"What were you doing?"

"I—I went out for a short walk."

"To the Golf Hotel?"

"I—well, yes, but Gerald wasn't in."

Inspector Neele said "I see" again, but this time with a rather dismissive effect. Elaine Fortescue got up and said:

"Is that all?"

"That's all, thank you, Miss Fortescue."

As she got up to go, Neele said casually:

"You can't tell me anything about blackbirds, can you?"

She stared at him.

"Blackbirds? You mean the ones in the pie?"

They *would* be in the pie, the inspector thought to himself. He merely said, "When was this?"

"Oh! Three or four months ago—and there were some on Father's desk, too. He was furious—"

"Furious, was he? Did he ask a lot of questions?"

"Yes—of course—but we couldn't find out who put them there."

"Have you any idea why he was so angry?"

"Well—it was rather a horrid thing to do, wasn't it?"

Neele looked thoughtfully at her—but he did not see any signs of evasion in her face. He said:

"Oh, just one more thing, Miss Fortescue. Do you know if your stepmother made a will at any time?"

"I've no idea—I—suppose so. People usually do, don't they?"

"They should do—but it doesn't always follow. Have you made a will yourself, Miss Fortescue?"

"No—no—I haven't—up to now I haven't had anything to leave—now, of course—"

He saw the realization of the changed position come into her eyes.

"Yes," he said. "Fifty thousand pounds is quite a responsibility—it changes a lot of things, Miss Fortescue."

II

For some minutes after Elaine Fortescue left the room, Inspector Neele sat staring in front of him thoughtfully. He had, indeed, new food for thought. Mary Dove's statement that she had seen a man in the garden at approximately 4:35 opened up certain new possibilities. That is, of course, if Mary Dove was speaking the truth. It was never Inspector Neele's habit to assume that *anyone* was speaking the truth. But, examine her statement as he might, he could see no real reason why she should have lied. He was inclined to think that Mary Dove was speaking the truth when she spoke of having seen a man in the garden. It was quite clear that that man could not have been Lancelot Fortescue, although her reason for assuming that it was he was quite natural under the circumstances.

It had not been Lancelot Fortescue, but it had been a man about the height and build of Lancelot Fortescue, and if there had been a man in the garden at that particular time, moreover a man moving furtively, as it seemed, to judge from the way he had crept behind the yew hedges, then that certainly opened up a line of thought.

Added to this statement of hers, there had been the further statement that she had heard someone moving about upstairs. That, in its turn, tied up with something else. The small piece of mud he had found on the floor of Adele Fortescue's boudoir. Inspector Neele's mind dwelt on the small dainty desk in that room. Pretty little sham antique with a rather obvious secret drawer in it. There had been three letters in that drawer, letters written by Vivian Dubois to Adele Fortescue. A great many love letters of one kind or another had passed through Inspector Neele's hands in the course of his career. He was acquainted with passionate letters, foolish letters, sentimental letters and nagging letters. There had also been cautious letters. Inspector Neele was inclined to classify these three as of the latter kind. Even if read in the divorce court, they could pass as inspired by a merely platonic friendship. Though in this case: "Platonic friendship my foot!" thought the inspector inelegantly. Neele, when he had found the letters, had sent them up at once to the Yard since at that time the main question was whether the Public Prosecutor's office thought that there was sufficient evidence to proceed with the case against Adele Fortescue or Adele Fortescue and Vivian Dubois together. Everything had pointed towards Rex Fortescue having been poisoned by his wife with or without her lover's connivance. These letters, though cautious, made it fairly clear that Vivian Dubois was her lover, but there had not been in the wording, so far as Inspector Neele could see, any signs of incitement to crime. There might have been incitement of a spoken kind, but Vivian Dubois would be far too cautious to put anything of that kind down on paper.

Inspector Neele surmised accurately that Vivian Dubois had asked Adele Fortescue to destroy his letters and that Adele Fortescue had told him she had done so.

Well, now they had two more deaths on their hands. And that meant, or should mean, that Adele Fortescue had not killed her husband.

Unless, that is—Inspector Neele considered a new hypothesis—Adele Fortescue had wanted to marry Vivian Dubois and Vivian Dubois had wanted, not Adele Fortescue, but Adele Fortescue's hundred thousand pounds which would come to her on the death of her husband. He had assumed, perhaps, that Rex Fortescue's death would be put down to natural causes. Some kind of seizure or stroke. After all, everybody seemed to be worried over Rex Fortescue's health during the last year. (Parenthetically, Inspector Neele said to himself that he must look into that question. He had a subconscious feeling that it might be important in some way.) To continue, Rex Fortescue's death had not gone according to plan. It had been diagnosed without loss of time as poisoning, and the correct poison named.

Supposing that Adele Fortescue and Vivian Dubois had been guilty, what state would they be in then? Vivian Dubois would have been scared and Adele Fortescue would have lost her head. She might have done or said foolish things. She might have rung up Dubois on the telephone, talking indiscreetly in a way that he would have realized might have been overheard in Yewtree Lodge. What would Vivian Dubois have done next?

It was early as yet to try and answer that question, but Inspector Neele proposed very shortly to make inquiries at the Golf Hotel as to whether Dubois had been in or out of the hotel between the hours of 4:15 and 6 o'clock. Vivian Dubois was tall and dark like Lance Fortescue. He might have slipped through the garden to the side door, made his way upstairs and then what? Looked for the letters and found them gone? Waited there, perhaps, till the coast was clear, then come down into the library when tea was over and Adele Fortescue was alone?

But all this was going too fast—

Neele had questioned Mary Dove and Elaine Fortescue; he must see now what Percival Fortescue's wife had to say.

Chapter Sixteen

I

Inspector Neele found Mrs. Percival in her own sitting room upstairs, writing letters. She got up rather nervously when he came in.

"Is there anything—what—are there—"

"Please sit down, Mrs. Fortescue. There are only just a few more questions I would like to ask you."

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course, Inspector. It's all so dreadful, isn't it? So very dreadful."

She sat down rather nervously in an armchair. Inspector Neele sat down in the small, straight chair near her. He studied her rather more carefully than he had done heretofore. In someways a mediocre type of woman, he thought—and thought also that she was not very happy. Restless, unsatisfied, limited in mental outlook, yet he thought she might have been efficient and skilled in her own profession of hospital nurse. Though she had achieved leisure by her marriage with a well-to-do man, leisure had not satisfied her. She bought clothes, read novels and ate sweets, but he remembered her avid excitement on the night of Rex Fortescue's death, and he saw in it not so much a ghoulish satisfaction but rather a revelation of the arid deserts of boredom which encompassed her life. Her eyelids fluttered and fell before his searching glance. They gave her the

appearance of being both nervous and guilty, but he could not be sure that that was really the case.

"I'm afraid," he said soothingly, "we have to ask people questions again and again. It must be very tiresome for you all. I do appreciate that, but so much hangs, you understand, on the exact *timing* of events. You came down to tea rather late, I understand? In fact, Miss Dove came up and fetched you."

"Yes. Yes, she did. She came and said tea was in. I had no idea it was so late. I'd been writing letters."

Inspector Neele just glanced over at the writing desk.

"I see," he said. "Somehow or other, I thought you'd been out for a walk."

"Did she say so? Yes—now I believe you're right. I had been writing letters; then it was so stuffy and my head ached so I went out and—er—went for a walk. Only round the garden."

"I see. You didn't meet anyone?"

"Meet anyone?" She stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I just wondered if you'd seen anybody or anybody had seen you during this walk of yours."

"I saw the gardener in the distance, that's all." She was looking at him suspiciously.

"Then you came in, came up here to your room and you were just taking your things off when Miss Dove came to tell you that tea was ready?"

"Yes. Yes, and so I came down."

"And who was there?"

"Adele and Elaine, and a minute or two later Lance arrived. My brother-in-law, you know. The one who's come back from Kenya."

"And then you all had tea?"

"Yes, we had tea. Then Lance went up to see Aunt Effie and I came up here to finish my letters. I left Elaine there with Adele."

He nodded reassuringly.

"Yes. Miss Fortescue seems to have been with Mrs. Fortescue for quite five or ten minutes after you left. Your husband hadn't come home yet?"

"Oh no. Percy—Val—didn't get home until about half past six or seven. He'd been kept up in town."

"He came back by train?"

"Yes. He took a taxi from the station."

"Was it unusual for him to come back by train?"

"He does sometimes. Not very often. I think he'd been to places in the city where it's rather difficult to park the car. It was easier for him to take a train home from Cannon Street."

"I see," said Inspector Neele. He went on: "I asked your husband if Mrs. Fortescue had made a will before she died. He said he thought not. I suppose you don't happen to have any idea?"

To his surprise Jennifer Fortescue nodded vigorously.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Adele made a will. She told me so."

"Indeed! When was this?"

"Oh, it wasn't very long ago. About a month ago, I think."

"That's very interesting," said Inspector Neele.

Mrs. Percival leant forward eagerly. Her face now was all animation. She clearly enjoyed exhibiting her superior knowledge.

"Val didn't know about it," she said. "Nobody knew. It just happened that I found out about it. I was in the street. I had just come out of the stationer's, then I saw Adele coming out of the solicitor's office. Ansell and Worrall's, you know. In the High Street."

"Ah," said Neele, "the local solicitors?"

"Yes. And I said to Adele: 'Whatever have you been doing there?' I said. And she laughed and said: 'Wouldn't you like to know?' And then as we walked along together she said: 'I'll tell you, Jennifer. I've been making my will.' 'Well,' I said, 'why are you doing that, Adele, you're not ill or anything, are you?' And she said no, of course she wasn't ill. She'd never felt better. But everyone ought to make a will. She said she wasn't going to those stuck-up family solicitors in London, Mr. Billingsley. She said the old sneak would go round and tell the family. 'No,' she said, 'my will's my own business, Jennifer, and I'll make it my own way and nobody's going to know about it.' 'Well, Adele,' I said, 'I shan't tell anybody.' She said: 'It doesn't matter if you do. You won't know what's in it.' But I didn't tell

anyone. No, not even Percy. I do think women ought to stick together, don't you, Inspector Neele?"

"I'm sure that's a very nice feeling on your part, Mrs. Fortescue," said Inspector Neele diplomatically.

"I'm sure I'm never ill-natured," said Jennifer. "I didn't particularly care for Adele, if you know what I mean. I always thought she was the kind of woman who would stick at nothing in order to get what she wanted. Now she's dead, perhaps I misjudged her, poor soul."

"Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Fortescue, for being so helpful to me."

"You're welcome, I'm sure. I'm only too glad to do anything I can. It's all so very terrible, isn't it? Who is the old lady who's arrived this morning?"

"She's a Miss Marple. She very kindly came here to give us what information she could about the girl Gladys. It seems Gladys Martin was once in service with her."

"Really? How interesting."

"There's one other thing, Mrs. Percival. Do you know anything about blackbirds?"

Jennifer Fortescue started violently. She dropped her handbag on the floor and bent to pick it up.

"Blackbirds, Inspector? Blackbirds? What kind of blackbirds?"

Her voice was rather breathless. Smiling a little, Inspector, Neele said:

"Just blackbirds. Alive or dead or even, shall we say, symbolical?"

Jennifer Fortescue said sharply:

"I don't know what you mean. I don't know what you're talking about."

"You don't know anything about blackbirds, then, Mrs. Fortescue?"

She said slowly:

"I suppose you mean the ones last summer in the pie. All very silly."

"There were some left on the library table, too, weren't there?"

"It was all a very silly practical joke. I don't know who's been talking to you about it. Mr. Fortescue, my father-in-law, was very

much annoyed by it."

"Just annoyed? Nothing more?"

"Oh. I see what you mean. Yes, I suppose—yes, it's true. He asked us if there were any strangers about the place."

"Strangers!" Inspector Neele raised his eyebrows.

"Well, that's what he said," said Mrs. Percival defensively.

"Strangers," repeated Inspector Neele thoughtfully. Then he asked: "Did he seem afraid in any way?"

"Afraid? I don't know what you mean."

"Nervous. About strangers, I mean."

"Yes. Yes, he did, rather. Of course I don't remember very well. It was several months ago, you know. I don't think it was anything except a silly practical joke. Crump perhaps. I really do think that Crump is a very unbalanced man, and I'm perfectly certain that he drinks. He's really very insolent in his manner sometimes. I've sometimes wondered if he could have had a grudge against Mr. Fortescue. Do you think that's possible, Inspector?"

"Anything's possible," said Inspector Neele and went away.

II

Percival Fortescue was in London, but Inspector Neele found Lancelot sitting with his wife in the library. They were playing chess together.

"I don't want to interrupt you," said Neele, apologetically.

"We're only killing time, Inspector, aren't we, Pat?"

Pat nodded.

"I expect you'll think it's rather a foolish question I'm asking you," said Neele. "Do you know anything about blackbirds, Mr. Fortescue?"

"Blackbirds?" Lance looked amused. "What kind of blackbirds? Do you mean genuine birds, or the slave trade?"

Inspector Neele said with a sudden, disarming smile:

"I'm not sure what I mean, Mr. Fortescue. It's just that a mention of blackbirds has turned up."

"Good Lord." Lancelot looked suddenly alert. "Not the old Blackbird Mine, I suppose?"

Inspector Neele said sharply:

"The Blackbird Mine? What was that?"

Lance frowned in a puzzled fashion.

"The trouble is, Inspector, that I can't really remember much myself. I just have a vague idea about some shady transaction in my papa's past. Something on the West Coast of Africa. Aunt Effie, I believe, once threw it in his teeth, but I can't remember anything definite about it."

"Aunt Effie? That will be Miss Ramsbottom, won't it?"

"Yes."

"I'll go and ask her about it," said Inspector Neele. He added ruefully: "She's rather a formidable old lady, Mr. Fortescue. Always makes me feel quite nervous."

Lance laughed.

"Yes. Aunt Effie is certainly a character, but she may be helpful to you, Inspector, if you get on the right side of her. Especially if you're delving into the past. She's got an excellent memory, she takes a positive pleasure in remembering anything that's detrimental in any way." He added thoughtfully: "There's something else. I went up to see her, you know, soon after I got back here. Immediately after tea that day, as a matter of fact. And she was talking about Gladys. The maid who got killed. Not that we knew she was dead then, of course. But Aunt Effie was saying she was quite convinced that Gladys knew something that she hadn't told the police."

"That seems fairly certain," said Inspector Neele. "She'll never tell it now, poor girl."

"No. It seems Aunt Effie had given her good advice as to spilling anything she knew. Pity the girl didn't take it."

Inspector Neele nodded. Bracing himself for the encounter he penetrated to Miss Ramsbottom's fortress. Rather to his surprise, he found Miss Marple there. The two ladies appeared to be discussing foreign missions.

"I'll go away, Inspector." Miss Marple rose hurriedly to her feet.

"No need, madam," said Inspector Neele.

"I've asked Miss Marple to come and stay in the house," said Miss Ramsbottom. "No sense in spending money in that ridiculous Golf Hotel. A wicked nest of profiteers, that is. Drinking and card playing all the evening. She'd better come and stay in a decent Christian household. There's a room next door to mine. Dr. Mary Peters, the missionary, had it last."

"It's very, very kind of you," said Miss Marple, "but I really think I mustn't intrude in a house of mourning."

"Mourning? Fiddlesticks," said Miss Ramsbottom. "Who'll weep for Rex in this house? Or Adele either? Or is it the police you're worried about? Any objections, Inspector?"

"None from me, madam."

"There you are," said Miss Ramsbottom.

"It's very kind of you," said Miss Marple gratefully. "I'll go and telephone to the hotel to cancel my booking." She left the room and Miss Ramsbottom said sharply to the inspector:

"Well, and what do *you* want?"

"I wondered if you could tell me anything about the Blackbird Mine, ma'am."

Miss Ramsbottom uttered a sudden, shrill cackle of laughter.

"Ha. You've got on to *that*, have you! Took the hint I gave you the other day. Well, what do you want to know about it?"

"Anything you can tell me, madam."

"I can't tell you much. It's a long time ago now—oh, twenty to twenty-five years maybe. Some concession or other in East Africa. My brother-in-law went into it with a man called MacKenzie. They went out there to investigate the mine together and MacKenzie died out there of fever. Rex came home and said the claim or the concession or whatever you call it was worthless. That's all *I* know."

"I think you know a little more than that, ma'am," said Neele persuasively.

"Anything else is hearsay. You don't like hearsay in the law, so I've been told."

"We're not in court yet, ma'am."

"Well, *I* can't tell you anything. The MacKenzies kicked up a fuss. That's all I know. They insisted that Rex had swindled MacKenzie. I

daresay he did. He was a clever, unscrupulous fellow, but I've no doubt whatever he did it was all legal. They couldn't prove anything. Mrs. MacKenzie was an unbalanced sort of woman. She came here and made a lot of threats of revenge. Said Rex had murdered her husband. Silly, melodramatic fuss! I think she was a bit off her head—in fact, I believe she went into an asylum not long after. Came here dragging along a couple of young children who looked scared to death. Said she'd bring up her children to have revenge. Something like that. Tomfoolery, all of it. Well, that's all I can tell you. And mind you, the Blackbird Mine wasn't the only swindle that Rex put over in his lifetime. You'll find a good many more if you look for them. What put you on to the Blackbird? Did you come across some trail leading to the MacKenzies?"

"You don't know what became of the family, ma'am?"

"No idea," said Miss Ramsbottom. "Mind you, I don't think Rex would have actually murdered MacKenzie, but he might have left him to die. The same thing before the Lord, but not the same thing before the law. If he did, retribution's caught up with him. The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly small—you'd better go away now, I can't tell you anymore and it's no good your asking."

"Thank you very much for what you have told me," said Inspector Neele.

"Send that Marple woman back," Miss Ramsbottom called after him. "She's frivolous, like all Church of England people, but she knows how to run a charity in a sensible way."

Inspector Neele made a couple of telephone calls, the first to Ansell and Worrall and the second to the Golf Hotel, then he summoned Sergeant Hay and told him that he was leaving the house for a short period.

"I've a call to pay at a solicitor's office—after that, you can get me at the Golf Hotel if anything urgent turns up."

"Yes, sir."

"And find out anything you can about blackbirds," added Neele over his shoulder.

"Blackbirds, sir?" Sergeant Hay repeated, thoroughly mystified.

"That's what I said—not blackberry jelly—blackbirds."

"Very good, sir," said Sergeant Hay bewilderedly.

Chapter Seventeen

I

Inspector Neele found Mr. Ansell the type of solicitor who was more easily intimidated than intimidating. A member of a small and not very prosperous firm, he was anxious not to stand upon his rights but instead to assist the police in every way possible.

Yes, he said, he had made a will for the late Mrs. Adele Fortescue. She had called at his office about five weeks previously. It had seemed to him rather a peculiar business but naturally he had not said anything. Peculiar things did happen in a solicitor's business, and of course the inspector would understand that discretion, etc., etc. The inspector nodded to show he understood. He had already discovered Mr. Ansell had not transacted any legal business previously for Mrs. Fortescue or for any of the Fortescue family.

"Naturally," said Mr. Ansell, "she didn't want to go to her husband's firm of lawyers about this."

Shorn of verbiage, the facts were simple. Adele Fortescue had made a will leaving everything of which she died possessed to Vivian Dubois.

"But I gathered," said Mr. Ansell, looking at Neele in an interrogating manner, "that she hadn't actually much to leave."

Inspector Neele nodded. At the time Adele Fortescue made her will that was true enough. But since then Rex Fortescue had died,

and Adele Fortescue had inherited £100,000 and presumably that £100,000 (less death duties) now belonged to Vivian Edward Dubois.

II

At the Golf Hotel, Inspector Neele found Vivian Dubois nervously awaiting his arrival. Dubois had been on the point of leaving, indeed his bags were packed, when he had received over the telephone a civil request from Inspector Neele to remain. Inspector Neele had been very pleasant about it, quite apologetic. But behind the conventional words the request had been an order. Vivian Dubois had demurred, but not too much.

He said now:

"I do hope you realize, Inspector Neele, that it is very inconvenient for me to have to stay on. I really have urgent business that needs attending to."

"I didn't know you were in business, Mr. Dubois," said Inspector Neele, genially.

"I'm afraid none of us can be as leisured as we would like to appear to be nowadays."

"Mrs. Fortescue's death must have been a great shock to you, Mr. Dubois. You were great friends, were you not?"

"Yes," said Dubois, "she was a charming woman. We played golf quite often together."

"I expect you'll miss her very much."

"Yes, indeed." Dubois sighed. "The whole thing is really quite, quite terrible."

"You actually telephoned her, I believe, on the afternoon of her death?"

"Did I? I really cannot remember now."

"About four o'clock, I understand."

"Yes, I believe I did."

"Don't you remember what your conversation was about, Mr. Dubois?"

"It wasn't of any significance. I think I asked her how she was feeling and if there was any further news about her husband's death—a more or less conventional inquiry."

"*I see,*" said Inspector Neele. He added: "And then you went out for a walk?"

"Er—yes—yes, I—I did, I think. At least, not a walk, I played a few holes of golf."

Inspector Neele said gently:

"I think not, Mr. Dubois . . . Not that particular day . . . The porter here noticed you walking down the road towards Yewtree Lodge."

Dubois's eyes met his, then shied away again nervously.

"I'm afraid I can't remember, Inspector."

"Perhaps you actually went to call upon Mrs. Fortescue?"

Dubois said sharply:

"No. No, I didn't do that. I never went near the house."

"Where did you go, then?"

"Oh, I—went on down the road, down as far as the Three Pigeons and then I turned around and came back by the links."

"You're quite sure you didn't go to Yewtree Lodge?"

"Quite sure, Inspector."

The inspector shook his head.

"Come, now, Mr. Dubois," he said, "it's much better to be frank with us, you know. You may have had some quite innocent reason for going there."

"I tell you I never went to see Mrs. Fortescue that day."

The inspector stood up.

"You know, Mr. Dubois," he said pleasantly, "I think we'll have to ask you for a statement and you'll be well-advised and quite within your rights in having a solicitor present when you are making that statement."

The colour fled from Mr. Dubois's face, leaving it a sickly greenish colour.

"You're threatening me," he said. "You're threatening me."

"No, no, nothing of the kind." Inspector Neele spoke in a shocked voice. "We're not allowed to do anything of that sort. Quite the

contrary. I'm actually pointing out to you that you have certain rights."

"I had nothing to do with it at all, I tell you! Nothing to do with it."

"Come now, Mr. Dubois, you were at Yewtree Lodge round about half past four on that day. Somebody looked out of the window, you know, and saw you."

"I was only in the garden. I didn't go into the house."

"Didn't you?" said Inspector Neele. "Are you sure? Didn't you go in by the side door and up the stairs to Mrs. Fortescue's sitting room on the first floor? You were looking for something, weren't you, in the desk there?"

"*You've* got them, I suppose," said Dubois sullenly. "That fool Adele kept them, then—she swore she burnt them—But they don't mean what you think they mean."

"You're not denying, are you, Mr. Dubois, that you were a very *close* friend of Mrs. Fortescue's?"

"No, of course I'm not. How can I when you've got the letters? All I say is, there's no need to go reading any sinister meaning into them. Don't think for a moment that we—that she—ever thought of getting rid of Rex Fortescue. Good God, I'm not *that* kind of man!"

"But perhaps she was that kind of woman?"

"Nonsense," cried Vivian Dubois, "wasn't she killed too?"

"Oh yes, yes."

"Well, isn't it natural to believe that the same person who killed her husband killed her?"

"It might be. It certainly might be. But there are other solutions. For instance—(this is quite a hypothetical case, Mr. Dubois) it's possible that Mrs. Fortescue got rid of her husband, and that after his death she became somewhat of a danger to someone else. Someone who had, perhaps, not helped her in what she had done but who had at least encouraged her and provided, shall we say, the *motive* for the deed. She might be, you know, a danger to that particular person."

Dubois stammered:

"You c-c-can't build up a case against me. You can't."

"She made a will, you know," said Inspector Neele. "She left all her money to you. Everything she possessed."

"I don't want the money. I don't want a penny of it."

"Of course, it isn't very much really," said Inspector Neele. "There's jewellery and some furs, but I imagine very little actual cash."

Dubois stared at him, his jaw dropping.

"But I thought her husband—"

He stopped dead.

"Did you, Mr. Dubois?" said Inspector Neele, and there was steel now in his voice. "That's very interesting. I wondered if you knew the terms of Rex Fortescue's will—"

III

Inspector Neele's second interview at the Golf Hotel was with Mr. Gerald Wright. Mr. Gerald Wright was a thin, intellectual and very superior young man. He was, Inspector Neele noted, not unlike Vivian Dubois in build.

"What can I do for you, Inspector Neele?" he asked.

"I thought you might be able to help us with a little information, Mr. Wright."

"Information? Really? It seems very unlikely."

"It's in connection with the recent events at Yewtree Lodge. You've heard of them, of course?"

Inspector Neele put a little irony into the question. Mr. Wright smiled patronisingly.

"Heard of them," he said, "is hardly the right word. The newspapers appear to be full of nothing else. How incredibly bloodthirsty our public press is! What an age we live in! On one side the manufacture of atom bombs, on the other our newspapers delight in reporting brutal murders! But you said you had some questions to ask. Really, I cannot see what they can be. I know

nothing about this Yewtree Lodge affair. I was actually in the Isle of Man when Mr. Rex Fortescue was killed."

"You arrived here very shortly afterwards, didn't you, Mr. Wright? You had a telegram, I believe, from Miss Elaine Fortescue."

"Our police know everything, do they not? Yes, Elaine sent for me. I came, of course, at once."

"And you are, I understand, shortly to be married?"

"Quite right, Inspector Neele. You have no objections, I hope."

"It is entirely Miss Fortescue's business. I understand the attachment between you dates from sometime back? Six or seven months ago, in fact?"

"Quite correct."

"You and Miss Fortescue became engaged to be married. Mr. Fortescue refused to give his consent, informed you that if his daughter married against his wishes he did not propose to give her an income of any kind. Whereupon, I understand, you broke off the engagement and departed."

Gerald Wright smiled rather pityingly.

"A very crude way of putting things, Inspector Neele. Actually, I was victimized for my political opinions. Rex Fortescue was the worst type of capitalist. Naturally I could not sacrifice my political beliefs and convictions for money."

"But you have no objections to marrying a wife who has just inherited £50,000?"

Gerald Wright gave a thin satisfied smile.

"Not at all, Inspector Neele. The money will be used for the benefit of the community. But surely you did not come here to discuss with me either my financial circumstances—or my political convictions?"

"No, Mr. Wright. I wanted to talk to you about a simple question of fact. As you are aware, Mrs. Adele Fortescue died as a result of cyanide poisoning on the afternoon of November the 5th.

"Since you were in the neighbourhood of Yewtree Lodge on that afternoon I thought it possible that you might have seen or heard something that had a bearing on the case."

"And what leads you to believe that I was, as you call it, in the neighbourhood of Yewtree Lodge at the time?"

"You left this hotel at a quarter past four on that particular afternoon, Mr. Wright. On leaving the hotel you walked down the road in the direction of Yewtree Lodge. It seems natural to suppose that you were going there."

"I thought of it," said Gerald Wright, "but I considered that it would be a rather pointless thing to do. I already had an arrangement to meet Miss Fortescue—Elaine—at the hotel at six o'clock. I went for a walk along a lane that branches off from the main road and returned to the Golf Hotel just before six o'clock. Elaine did not keep her appointment. Quite naturally, under the circumstances."

"Anybody see you on this walk of yours, Mr. Wright?"

"A few cars passed me, I think, on the road. I did not see anyone I knew, if that's what you mean. The lane was little more than a cart-track and too muddy for cars."

"So between the time you left the hotel at a quarter past four until six o'clock when you arrived back again, I've only your word for it as to where you were?"

Gerald Wright continued to smile in a superior fashion.

"Very distressing for us both, Inspector, but there it is."

Inspector Neele said softly:

"Then if someone said they looked out of a landing window and saw you in the garden of Yewtree Lodge at about 4:35—" he paused and left the sentence unfinished.

Gerald Wright raised his eyebrows and shook his head.

"Visibility must have been very bad by then," he said. "I think it would be difficult for anyone to be sure."

"Are you acquainted with Mr. Vivian Dubois, who is also staying here?"

"Dubois. Dubois? No, I don't think so. Is that the tall, dark man with a pretty taste in suede shoes?"

"Yes. He also was out for a walk that afternoon, and he also left the hotel and walked past Yewtree Lodge. You did not notice him in the road by any chance?"

"No. No. I can't say I did."

Gerald Wright looked for the first time faintly worried. Inspector Neele said thoughtfully:

"It wasn't really a very nice afternoon for walking, especially after dark in a muddy lane. Curious how energetic everyone seems to have felt."

IV

On Inspector Neele's return to the house he was greeted by Sergeant Hay with an air of satisfaction.

"I've found out about the blackbirds for you, sir," he said.

"You have, have you?"

"Yes, sir, in a pie they were. Cold pie was left out for Sunday night's supper. Somebody got at that pie in the larder or somewhere. They'd taken off the crust and they'd taken out the veal and 'am what was inside it, and what d'you think they put in instead? Some stinkin' blackbirds they got out of the gardener's shed. Nasty sort of trick to play, wasn't it?"

" *'Wasn't that a dainty dish to set before the king?'* " said Inspector Neele.

He left Sergeant Hay staring after him.

Chapter Eighteen

I

"Just wait a minute," said Miss Ramsbottom. "This patience is going to come out."

She transferred a king and his various impedimenta into an empty space, put a red seven on a black eight, built up the four, five and six of spades on her foundation heap, made a few more rapid transfers of cards and then leaned back with a sign of satisfaction.

"That's the Double Jester," she said. "It doesn't often come out."

She leaned back in a satisfied fashion, then raised her eyes at the girl standing by the fireplace.

"So you're Lance's wife," she said.

Pat, who had been summoned upstairs to Miss Ramsbottom's presence, nodded her head.

"Yes," she said.

"You're a tall girl," said Miss Ramsbottom, "and you look healthy."

"I'm very healthy."

Miss Ramsbottom nodded in a satisfied manner.

"Percival's wife is pasty," she said. "Eats too many sweets and doesn't take enough exercise. Well, sit down, child, sit down. Where did you meet my nephew?"

"I met him out in Kenya when I was staying there with some friends."

"You've been married before, I understand."

"Yes. Twice."

Miss Ramsbottom gave a profound sniff.

"Divorce, I suppose."

"No," said Pat. Her voice trembled a little. "They both—died. My first husband was a fighter pilot. He was killed in the war."

"And your second husband? Let me see—somebody told me. Shot himself, didn't he?"

Pat nodded.

"Your fault?"

"No," said Pat. "It wasn't my fault."

"Racing man, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"I've never been on a race course in my life," said Miss Ramsbottom. "Betting and card playing—all devices of the devil!"

Pat did not reply.

"I wouldn't go inside a theatre or a cinema," said Miss Ramsbottom. "Ah, well, it's a wicked world nowadays. A lot of wickedness was going on in this house, but the Lord struck them down."

Pat still found it difficult to say anything. She wondered if Lance's Aunt Effie was really quite all there. She was, however, a trifle disconcerted by the old lady's shrewd glance at her.

"How much," demanded Aunt Effie, "do you know about the family you've married into?"

"I suppose," said Pat, "as much as one ever knows of the family one marries into."

"H'm, something in that, something in that. Well, I'll tell you this. My sister was a fool, my brother-in-law was a rogue, Percival is a sneak, and your Lance was always the bad boy of the family."

"I think that's all nonsense," said Pat robustly.

"Maybe you're right," said Miss Ramsbottom, unexpectedly. "You can't just stick labels on people. But don't underestimate Percival. There's a tendency to believe that those who are labelled good are also stupid. Percival isn't the least bit stupid. He's quite clever in a sanctimonious kind of way. I've never cared for him. Mind you, I don't *trust* Lance and I don't *approve* of him, but I can't help being

fond of him . . . He's a reckless sort of fellow—always has been. You've got to look after him and see he doesn't go too far. Tell him not to underestimate Percival, my dear. Tell him not to believe everything that Percival says. They're all liars in this house." The old lady added with satisfaction: "Fire and brimstone shall be their portion."

II

Inspector Neele was finishing a telephone conversation with Scotland Yard.

The assistant commissioner at the other end said:

"We ought to be able to get that information for you—by circularizing the various private sanatoriums. Of course she *may* be dead."

"Probably is. It's a long time ago."

Old sins cast long shadows. Miss Ramsbottom had said that—said it with a significance, too—as though she was giving him a hint.

"It's a fantastic theory," said the AC.

"Don't I know it, sir. But I don't feel we can ignore it altogether. Too much fits in—"

"Yes—yes—rye—blackbirds—the man's Christian name—"

Neele said:

"I'm concentrating on the other lines too—Dubois is a possibility—so is Wright—the girl Gladys could have caught sight of either of them outside the side door—she could have left the tea tray in the hall and gone out to see who it was and what they were doing—whoever it was could have strangled her then and there and then carried her body round to the clothesline and put the peg on her nose—"

"A crazy thing to do in all conscience! A nasty one too."

"Yes, sir. That's what upset the old lady—Miss Marple, I mean. Nice old lady—and very shrewd. She's moved into the house—to be

near old Miss Ramsbottom—and I've no doubt she'll get to hear anything that's going."

"What's your next move, Neele?"

"I've an appointment with the London solicitors. I want to find out a little more about Rex Fortescue's affairs. And though it's old history, I want to hear a little more about the Blackbird Mine."

III

Mr. Billingsley, of Billingsley, Horsethorpe & Walters, was an urbane man whose discretion was concealed habitually by a misleadingly forthcoming manner. It was the second interview that Inspector Neele had had with him, and on this occasion Mr. Billingsley's discretion was less noticeable than it had been on the former one. The triple tragedy at Yewtree Lodge had shaken Mr. Billingsley out of his professional reserve. He was now only too anxious to put all the facts he could before the police.

"Most extraordinary business, this whole thing," he said. "A most extraordinary business. I don't remember anything like it in all my professional career."

"Frankly, Mr. Billingsley," said Inspector Neele, "we need all the help we can get."

"You can count on me, my dear sir. I shall be only too happy to assist you in every way I can."

"First let me ask you how well you knew the late Mr. Fortescue, and how well do you know the affairs of his firm?"

"I knew Rex Fortescue fairly well. That is to say I've known him for a period of, well, sixteen years I should say. Mind you, we are not the only firm of solicitors he employed, not by a long way."

Inspector Neele nodded. He knew that. Billingsley, Horsethorpe & Walters were what one might describe as Rex Fortescue's reputable solicitors. For his less reputable dealings he had employed several different and slightly less scrupulous firms.

"Now what do you want to know?" continued Mr. Billingsley. "I've told you about his will. Percival Fortescue is the residuary legatee."

"I'm interested now," said Inspector Neele, "in the will of his widow. On Mr. Fortescue's death she came into the sum of one hundred thousand pounds, I understand?"

Billingsley nodded his head.

"A considerable sum of money," he said, "and I may tell you in confidence, Inspector, that it is one the firm could ill have afforded to pay out."

"The firm, then, is not prosperous?"

"Frankly," said Mr. Billingsley, "and strictly between ourselves, it's drifting onto the rocks and has been for the last year and a half."

"For any particular reason?"

"Why yes. I should say the reason was Rex Fortescue himself. For the last year Rex Fortescue's been acting like a madman. Selling good stock here, buying speculative stuff there, talking big about it all the time in the most extraordinary way. Wouldn't listen to advice. Percival—the son, you know—he came here urging me to use my influence with his father. *He'd* tried, apparently and been swept aside. Well, I did what I could, but Fortescue wouldn't listen to reason. Really, he seems to have been a changed man."

"But not, I gather, a depressed man," said Inspector Neele.

"No, no. Quite the contrary. Flamboyant, bombastic."

Inspector Neele nodded. An idea which had already taken form in his mind was strengthened. He thought he was beginning to understand some of the causes of friction between Percival and his father. Mr. Billingsley was continuing:

"But it's no good asking me about the wife's will. *I* didn't make any will for her."

"No. I know that," said Neele. "I'm merely verifying that she had something to leave. In short, a hundred thousand pounds."

Mr. Billingsley was shaking his head violently.

"No, no, my dear sir. You're wrong there."

"Do you mean the hundred thousand pounds was only left to her for her lifetime?"

"No—no—it was left to her outright. But there was a clause in the will governing that bequest. That is to say, Fortescue's wife did not inherit the sum unless she survived him for one month. That, I may say, is a clause fairly common nowadays. It has come into operation owing to the uncertainties of air travel. If two people are killed in an air accident, it becomes exceedingly difficult to say who was the survivor and a lot of very curious problems arise."

Inspector Neele was staring at him.

"Then Adele Fortescue had not got a hundred thousand pounds to leave. What happens to that money?"

"It goes back into the firm. Or rather, I should say, it goes to the residuary legatee."

"And the residuary legatee is Mr. Percival Fortescue."

"That's right," said Billingsley, "it goes to Percival Fortescue. And with the state the firm's affairs are in," he added unguardedly, "I should say that he'll need it!"

IV

"The things you policemen want to know," said Inspector Neele's doctor friend.

"Come on, Bob, spill it."

"Well, as we're alone together you can't quote me, fortunately! But I should say, you know, that your idea's dead right. GPI by the sound of it all. The family suspected it and wanted to get him to see a doctor. He wouldn't. It acts just in the way you describe. Loss of judgment, megalomania, violent fits of irritation and anger—boastfulness—delusions of grandeur—of being a great financial genius. Anyone suffering from that would soon put a solvent firm on the rocks—unless he could be restrained—and that's not so easy to do—especially if the man himself has an idea of what you're after. Yes—I should say it was a bit of luck for your friends that he died."

"They're no friends of mine," said Neele. He repeated what he had once said before:

"They're all very unpleasant people. . . ."

Chapter Nineteen

In the drawing room at Yewtree Lodge, the whole Fortescue family was assembled. Percival Fortescue, leaning against the mantelpiece, was addressing the meeting.

"It's all very well," said Percival. "But the whole position is most unsatisfactory. The police come and go and don't tell us anything. One supposes they're pursuing some line of research. In the meantime everything's at a standstill. One can't make plans, one can't arrange things for the future."

"It's all so inconsiderate," said Jennifer. "And so stupid."

"There still seems to be this ban against anyone leaving the house," went on Percival. "Still, I think among ourselves we might discuss future plans. What about you, Elaine? I gather you're going to marry—what's-his-name—Gerald Wright? Have you any idea when?"

"As soon as possible," said Elaine.

Percival frowned.

"You mean, in about six months' time?"

"No, I don't. Why should we wait six months?"

"I think it would be more decent," said Percival.

"Rubbish," said Elaine. "A month. That's the longest we'll wait."

"Well, it's for you to say," said Percival. "And what are your plans when you are married, if you have any?"

"We're thinking of starting a school."

Percival shook his head.

"That's a very risky speculation in these times. What with the shortage of domestic labour, the difficulty of getting an adequate teaching staff—really, Elaine, it sounds all right. But I should think twice about it if I were you."

"We have thought. Gerald feels that the whole future of this country lies in right education."

"I am seeing Mr. Billingsley the day after tomorrow," said Percival. "We've got to go into various questions of finance. He was suggesting that you might like to make this money that's been left to you by Father into a trust for yourself and your children. It's a very sound thing to do nowadays."

"I don't want to do that," said Elaine. "We shall need the money to start up our school. There's a very suitable house we've heard of for sale. It's in Cornwall. Beautiful grounds and quite a good house. It would have to be built onto a good deal—several wings added."

"You mean—you mean you're going to take all your money out of the business? Really, Elaine, I *don't* think you're wise."

"Much wiser to take it out than leave it in, I should say," said Elaine. "Businesses are going phut all over the place. You said yourself, Val, before Father died, that things were getting into a pretty bad state."

"One says that sort of thing," said Percival vaguely, "but I must say, Elaine, to take out all your capital and sink it in the buying, equipping and running of a school is crazy. If it's not a success, look what happens? You're left without a penny."

"It *will* be a success," said Elaine, doggedly.

"I'm with you." Lance, lying sprawled out in a chair, spoke up encouragingly. "Have a crack at it, Elaine. In my opinion it'll be a damned odd sort of school, but it's what you want to do—you and Gerald. If you do lose your money you'll at any rate have had the satisfaction of doing what you wanted to do."

"Just what one might have expected you to say, Lance," said Percival, acidly.

"I know, I know," said Lance. "I'm the spendthrift prodigal son. But I still think I've had more fun out of life than you have, Percy, old boy."

"It depends on what you call fun," said Percival coldly. "Which brings us to your own plans, Lance. I suppose you'll be off again back to Kenya—or Canada—or climbing Mount Everest or something fairly fantastic?"

"Now what makes you think that?" said Lance.

"Well, you've never had much use for a stay-at-home life in England, have you?"

"One changes as one gets older," said Lance. "One settles down. D'you know, Percy my boy, I'm quite looking forward to having a crack at being a sober business man."

"Do you mean. . . ."

"I mean I'm coming into the firm with you, old boy." Lance grinned. "Oh, you're the senior partner, of course. You've got the lion's share. I'm only a very junior partner. But I *have* got a holding in it that gives me the right to be in on things, doesn't it?"

"Well—yes—of course, if you put it that way. But I can assure you, my dear boy, you'll be very, very bored."

"I wonder now. I don't believe I shall be bored."

Percival frowned.

"You don't seriously mean, Lance, that you're coming into the business?"

"Having a finger in the pie? Yes, that's exactly what I am doing."

Percival shook his head.

"Things are in a very bad way, you know. You'll find that out. It's going to be about all we can do to pay out Elaine her share, if she insists on having it paid out."

"There you are, Elaine," said Lance. "You see how wise you were to insist on grabbing your money while it's still there to grab."

"Really, Lance," Percival spoke angrily, "these jokes of yours are in bad taste."

"I do think, Lance, you might be more careful what you say," said Jennifer.

Sitting a little way away near the window, Pat studied them one by one. If this was what Lance had meant by twisting Percival's tail, she could see that he was achieving his object. Percival's neat impassivity was quite ruffled. He snapped again, angrily:

"Are you serious, Lance?"

"Dead serious."

"It won't work, you know. You'll soon get fed up."

"Not me. Think what a lovely change it'll be for me. A city office, typists coming and going. I shall have a blonde secretary like Miss Grosvenor—is it Grosvenor? I suppose you've snaffled her. But I shall get one just like her. 'Yes, Mr. Lancelot; no, Mr. Lancelot. Your tea, Mr. Lancelot.' "

"Oh, don't play the fool," snapped Percival.

"Why are you so angry, my dear brother? Don't you look forward to having me sharing your city cares?"

"You haven't the least conception of the mess everything's in."

"No. You'll have to put me wise to all that."

"First you've got to understand that for the last six months—no, more, a year, Father's not been himself. He's done the most incredibly foolish things, financially. Sold out good stock, acquired various wildcat holdings. Sometimes he's really thrown away money hand over fist. Just, one might say, for the fun of spending it."

"In fact," said Lance, "it's just as well for the family that he had taxine in his tea."

"That's a very ugly way of putting it, but in essence you're quite right. It's about the only thing that saved us from bankruptcy. But we shall have to be extremely conservative and go very cautiously for a bit."

Lance shook his head.

"I don't agree with you. Caution never does anyone any good. You must take a few risks, strike out. You must go for something big."

"I don't agree," said Percy. "Caution and economy. Those are our watchwords."

"Not mine," said Lance.

"You're only the junior partner, remember," said Percival.

"All right, all right. But I've got a little say-so all the same."

Percival walked up and down the room agitatedly.

"It's no good, Lance. I'm fond of you and all that—"

"Are you?" Lance interpolated. Percival did not appear to hear him.

". . . but I really don't think we're going to pull together at all. Our outlooks are totally different."

"That may be an advantage," said Lance.

"The only sensible thing," said Percival, "is to dissolve the partnership."

"You're going to buy me out—is that the idea?"

"My dear boy, it's the only sensible thing to do, with our ideas so different."

"If you find it hard to pay Elaine out her legacy, how are you going to manage to pay me my share?"

"Well, I didn't mean in cash," said Percival. "We could—er—divide up the holdings."

"With you keeping the gilt-edged and me taking the worst of the speculative off you, I suppose?"

"They seem to be what you prefer," said Percival.

Lance grinned suddenly.

"You're right in a way, Percy, old boy. But I can't indulge my own taste entirely. I've got Pat here to think of."

Both men looked towards her. Pat opened her mouth, then shut it again. Whatever game Lance was playing, it was best that she should not interfere. That Lance was driving at something special, she was quite sure, but she was still a little uncertain as to what his actual object was.

"Line 'em up, Percy," said Lance, laughing. "Bogus Diamond Mines, Inaccessible Rubies, the Oil Concessions where no oil is. Do you think I'm quite as big a fool as I look?"

Percival said:

"Of course, some of these holdings are highly speculative, but remember, they *may* turn out immensely valuable."

"Changed your tune, haven't you?" said Lance, grinning. "Going to offer me father's latest wildcat acquisition as well as the old Blackbird Mine and things of that kind. By the way, has the inspector been asking you about this Blackbird Mine?"

Percival frowned.

"Yes, he did. I can't imagine what he wanted to know about it. I couldn't tell him much. You and I were children at the time. I just remember vaguely that Father went out there and came back saying the whole thing was no good."

"What was it—a gold mine?"

"I believe so. Father came back pretty certain that there was no gold there. And, mind you, he wasn't the sort of man to be mistaken."

"Who got him into it? A man called MacKenzie, wasn't it?"

"Yes. MacKenzie died out there."

"MacKenzie died out there," said Lance thoughtfully. "Wasn't there a terrific scene? I seem to remember . . . Mrs. MacKenzie, wasn't it? Came here. Ranted and stormed at Father. Hurling down curses on his head. She accused him, if I remember rightly, of murdering her husband."

"Really," said Percival repressively. "I can't recollect anything of the kind."

"I remember it, though," said Lance. "I was a good bit younger than you, of course. Perhaps that's why it appealed to me. As a child it struck me as full of drama. Where was Blackbird? West Africa wasn't it?"

"Yes, I think so."

"I must look up the concession sometime," said Lance, "when I'm at the office."

"You can be quite sure," said Percival, "that Father made no mistake. If he came back saying there was no gold, there was no gold."

"You're probably right there," said Lance. "Poor Mrs. MacKenzie. I wonder what happened to her and to those two kids she brought along. Funny—they must be grown-up by now."

Chapter Twenty

At the Pinewood Private Sanatorium, Inspector Neele, sitting in the visitors' parlour, was facing a grey-haired, elderly lady. Helen MacKenzie was sixty-three, though she looked younger. She had pale blue, rather vacant-looking eyes, and a weak, indeterminate chin. She had a long upper lip which occasionally twitched. She held a large book in her lap and was looking down at it as Inspector Neele talked to her. In Inspector Neele's mind was the conversation he had just had with Dr. Crosbie, the head of the establishment.

"She's a voluntary patient, of course," said Dr. Crosbie, "not certified."

"She's not dangerous, then?"

"Oh, no. Most of the time she's as sane to talk to as you or me. It's one of her good periods now so that you'll be able to have a perfectly normal conversation with her."

Bearing this in mind, Inspector Neele started his first conversational essay.

"It's very kind of you to see me, madam," he said. "My name is Neele. I've come to see you about a Mr. Fortescue who has recently died. A Mr. Rex Fortescue. I expect you know the name."

Mrs. MacKenzie's eyes were fixed on her book. She said:

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Mr. Fortescue, madam. Mr. Rex Fortescue."

"No," said Mrs. MacKenzie. "No. Certainly not."

Inspector Neele was slightly taken aback. He wondered whether this was what Dr. Crosbie called being completely normal.

"I think, Mrs. MacKenzie, you knew him a good many years ago."

"Not really," said Mrs. MacKenzie. "It was yesterday."

"I see," said Inspector Neele, falling back upon this formula rather uncertainly. "I believe," he went on, "that you paid him a visit many years ago at his residence, Yewtree Lodge."

"A very ostentatious house," said Mrs. MacKenzie.

"Yes. Yes, you might call it that. He had been connected with your husband, I believe, over a certain mine in Africa. The Blackbird Mine, I believe it was called."

"I have to read my book," said Mrs. MacKenzie. "There's not much time and I have to read my book."

"Yes, madam. Yes, I quite see that." There was a pause, then Inspector Neele went on, "Mr. MacKenzie and Mr. Fortescue went out together to Africa to survey the mine."

"It was my husband's mine," said Mrs. MacKenzie. "He found it and staked a claim to it. He wanted money to capitalize it. He went to Rex Fortescue. If I'd been wiser, if I'd known more, I wouldn't have let him do it."

"No, I see that. As it was, they went out together to Africa, and there your husband died of fever."

"I must read my book," said Mrs. MacKenzie.

"Do you think Mr. Fortescue swindled your husband over the Blackbird Mine, Mrs. MacKenzie?"

Without raising her eyes from the book, Mrs. MacKenzie said:

"How stupid you are."

"Yes, yes, I dare say . . . But you see it's all a long time ago and making inquiries about a thing that is over a long time ago is rather difficult."

"Who said it was over?"

"I see. You don't think it is over?"

"*No question is ever settled until it is settled right.* Kipling said that. Nobody reads Kipling nowadays, but he was a great man."

"Do you think the question will be settled right one of these days?"

"Rex Fortescue is dead, isn't he? You said so."

"He was poisoned," said Inspector Neele.

Rather disconcertingly, Mrs. MacKenzie laughed.

"What nonsense," she said, "he died of fever."

"I'm talking about Mr. Rex Fortescue."

"So am I." She looked up suddenly and her pale blue eyes fixed his. "Come now," she said, "he died in his bed, didn't he? He died in his bed?"

"He died in St. Jude's Hospital," said Inspector Neele.

"Nobody knows where my husband died," said Mrs. MacKenzie. "Nobody knows how he died or where he was buried . . . All anyone knows is what Rex Fortescue *said*. And Rex Fortescue was a liar!"

"Do you think there may have been foul play?"

"Foul play, foul play, fowls lay eggs, don't they?"

"You think that Rex Fortescue was responsible for your husband's death?"

"I had an egg for breakfast this morning," said Mrs. MacKenzie. "Quite fresh, too. Surprising, isn't it, when one thinks that it was thirty years ago?"

Neele drew a deep breath. It seemed unlikely that he was ever going to get anywhere at this rate, but he persevered.

"Somebody put dead blackbirds on Rex Fortescue's desk about a month or two before he died."

"That's interesting. That's very, very interesting."

"Have you any idea, madam, who might have done that?"

"Ideas aren't any help to one. One has to have action. I brought them up for that, you know, to take action."

"You're talking about your children?"

She nodded her head rapidly.

"Yes. Donald and Ruby. They were nine and seven and left without a father. I told them. I told them every day. I made them swear it every night."

Inspector Neele leant forward.

"What did you make them swear?"

"That they'd kill him, of course."

"I see."

Inspector Neele spoke as though it was the most reasonable remark in the world.

"Did they?"

"Donald went to Dunkirk. He never came back. They sent me a wire saying he was dead: 'Deeply regret killed in action.' Action, you see, the wrong kind of action."

"I'm sorry to hear that, madam. What about your daughter?"

"I haven't got a daughter," said Mrs. MacKenzie.

"You spoke of her just now," said Neele. "Your daughter, Ruby."

"Ruby. Yes, Ruby." She leaned forward. "Do you know what I've done to Ruby?"

"No, madam. What have you done to her?"

She whispered suddenly:

"Look here at the Book."

He saw then that what she was holding in her lap was a Bible. It was a very old Bible and as she opened it, on the front page, Inspector Neele saw that various names had been written. It was obviously a family Bible in which the old-fashioned custom had been continued of entering each new birth. Mrs. MacKenzie's thin forefinger pointed to the two last names. "Donald MacKenzie" with the date of his birth, and "Ruby MacKenzie" with the date of hers. But a thick line was drawn through Ruby MacKenzie's name.

"You see?" said Mrs. MacKenzie. "I struck her out of the Book. I cut her off forever! The Recording Angel won't find her name there."

"You cut her name out of the book? Now, why, madam?"

Mrs. MacKenzie looked at him cunningly.

"You know why," she said.

"But I don't. Really, madam, I don't."

"She didn't keep faith. You know she didn't keep faith."

"Where is your daughter now, madam?"

"I've told you. I have no daughter. There isn't such a person as Ruby MacKenzie any longer."

"You mean she's dead?"

"Dead?" The woman laughed suddenly. "It would be better for her if she were dead. Much better. Much, much better." She sighed and turned restlessly in her seat. Then her manner reverting to a kind of formal courtesy, she said: "I'm so sorry, but really I'm afraid I

can't talk to you any longer. You see, the time is getting very short, and I *must* read my book."

To Inspector Neele's further remarks Mrs. MacKenzie returned no reply. She merely made a faint gesture of annoyance and continued to read her Bible with her finger following the line of the verse she was reading.

Neele got up and left. He had another brief interview with the superintendent.

"Do any of her relations come to see her?" he asked. "A daughter, for instance?"

"I believe a daughter did come to see her in my predecessor's time, but her visit agitated the patient so much that he advised her not to come again. Since then everything is arranged through solicitors."

"And you've no idea where this Ruby MacKenzie is now?"

The superintendent shook his head.

"No idea whatsoever."

"You've no idea whether she's married, for instance?"

"I don't know, all I can do is to give you the address of the solicitors who deal with us."

Inspector Neele had already tracked down those solicitors. They were unable, or said they were unable, to tell him anything. A trust fund had been established for Mrs. MacKenzie which they managed. These arrangements had been made some years previously and they had not seen Miss MacKenzie since.

Inspector Neele tried to get a description of Ruby MacKenzie but the results were not encouraging. So many relations came to visit patients that after a lapse of years they were bound to be remembered dimly, with the appearance of one mixed-up with the appearance of another. The matron who had been there for many years seemed to remember that Miss MacKenzie was small and dark. The only other nurse who had been there for any length of time recalled that she was heavily built and fair.

"So there we are, sir," said Inspector Neele as he reported to the assistant commissioner. "There's a whole crazy setup and it fits together. It *must* mean something."

The AC nodded thoughtfully.

"The blackbirds in the pie tying up with the Blackbird Mine, rye in the dead man's pocket, bread and honey with Adele Fortescue's tea—(not that that is conclusive. After all, anyone might have had bread and honey for tea!) The third murder, that girl strangled with a stocking and a clothes-peg nipped onto her nose. Yes, crazy as the setup is, it certainly can't be ignored."

"Half a minute, sir," said Inspector Neele.

"What is it?"

Neele was frowning.

"You know, what you've just said. It didn't ring true. It was wrong somewhere." He shook his head and sighed. "No. I can't place it."

Chapter Twenty-One

I

Lance and Pat wandered round the well-kept grounds surrounding Yewtree Lodge.

"I hope I'm not hurting your feelings, Lance," Pat murmured, "if I say this is quite the nastiest garden I've ever been in."

"It won't hurt my feelings," said Lance. "Is it? Really I don't know. It seems to have three gardeners working on it very industriously."

Pat said:

"Probably that's what's wrong with it. No expense spared, no signs of an individual taste. All the right rhododendrons and all the right bedding out done in the proper season, I expect."

"Well, what would *you* put in an English garden, Pat, if you had one?"

"My garden," said Pat, "would have hollyhocks, larkspurs and Canterbury bells, no bedding out and none of these horrible yews."

She glanced up at the dark yew hedges, disparagingly.

"Association of ideas," said Lance easily.

"There's something awfully frightening about a poisoner," said Pat. "I mean it must be a horrid, brooding revengeful mind."

"So that's how you see it? Funny! I just think of it as businesslike and cold-blooded."

"I suppose one could look at it that way." She resumed, with a slight shiver, "All the same, to do *three* murders . . . Whoever did it

must be mad."

"Yes," said Lance, in a low voice. "I'm afraid so." Then breaking out sharply, he said: "For God's sake, Pat, do go away from here. Go back to London. Go down to Devonshire or up to the Lakes. Go to Stratford-on-Avon or go and look at the Norfolk Broads. The police wouldn't mind your going—you had nothing to do with all this. You were in Paris when the old man was killed and in London when the other two died. I tell you it worries me to death to have you here."

Pat paused a moment before saying quietly:

"You know who it is, don't you?"

"No, I don't."

"But you *think* you know . . . That's why you're frightened for me . . . I wish you'd tell me."

"I can't tell you. I don't know anything. But I wish to God you'd go away from here."

"Darling," said Pat. "I'm not going. I'm staying here. For better, for worse. That's how I feel about it." She added, with a sudden catch in her voice: "Only with me it's always for worse."

"What on earth do you mean, Pat?"

"I bring bad luck. That's what I mean. I bring bad luck to anybody I come in contact with."

"My dear adorable nitwit, you haven't brought bad luck to me. Look how after I married you the old man sent for me to come home and make friends with him."

"Yes, and what happened when you did come home? I tell you, I'm unlucky to people."

"Look here, my sweet, you've got a thing about all this. It's superstition, pure and simple."

"I can't help it. Some people do bring bad luck. I'm one of them."

Lance took her by the shoulders and shook her violently. "You're my Pat and to be married to you is the greatest luck in the world. So get that into your silly head." Then, calming down, he said in a more sober voice: "But, seriously, Pat, do be very careful. If there *is* someone unhinged round here, I don't want you to be the one who stops the bullet or drinks the henbane."

"Or drinks the henbane as you say."

"When I'm not around, stick to that old lady. What's-her-name Marple. Why do you think Aunt Effie asked her to stay here?"

"Goodness knows why Aunt Effie does anything. Lance, how long are *we* going to stay here?"

Lance shrugged his shoulders.

"Difficult to say."

"I don't think," said Pat, "that we're really awfully welcome." She hesitated as she spoke the words. "The house belongs to your brother now, I suppose? He doesn't really want us here, does he?"

Lance chuckled suddenly.

"Not he, but he's got to stick us for the present at any rate."

"And afterwards? What are we going to do, Lance? Are we going back to East Africa or what?"

"Is that what you'd like to do, Pat?"

She nodded vigorously.

"That's lucky," said Lance, "because it's what I'd like to do, too. I don't take much to this country nowadays."

Pat's face brightened.

"How lovely. From what you said the other day, I was afraid you might want to stop here."

A devilish glint appeared in Lance's eyes.

"You're to hold your tongue about our plans, Pat," he said. "I have it in my mind to twist dear brother Percival's tail a bit."

"Oh, Lance, do be careful."

"I'll be careful, my sweet, but I don't see why old Percy should get away with everything."

II

With her head a little on one side looking like an amiable cockatoo, Miss Marple sat in the large drawing room listening to Mrs. Percival Fortescue. Miss Marple looked particularly incongruous in the drawing room. Her light spare figure was alien to the vast brocaded sofa in which she sat with its many-hued cushions strewn around

her. Miss Marple sat very upright because she had been taught to use a backboard as a girl, and not to loll. In a large armchair beside her, dressed in elaborate black, was Mrs. Percival, talking away volubly at nineteen to the dozen. "Exactly," thought Miss Marple, "like poor Mrs. Emmett, the bank manager's wife." She remembered how one day Mrs. Emmett had come to call and talk about the selling arrangements for Poppy Day, and how after the preliminary business had been settled, Mrs. Emmett had suddenly begun to talk and talk and talk. Mrs. Emmett occupied rather a difficult position in St. Mary Mead. She did not belong to the old guard of ladies in reduced circumstances who lived in neat houses around the church, and who knew intimately all the ramifications of the county families even though they might not be strictly county themselves. Mr. Emmett, the bank manager, had undeniably married beneath him and the result was that his wife was in a position of great loneliness since she could not, of course, associate with the wives of the trades people. Snobbery here raised its hideous head and marooned Mrs. Emmett on a permanent island of loneliness.

The necessity to talk grew upon Mrs. Emmett, and on that particular day it had burst its bounds, and Miss Marple had received the full flood of the torrent. She had been sorry for Mrs. Emmett then, and today she was rather sorry for Mrs. Percival Fortescue.

Mrs. Percival had had a lot of grievances to bear and the relief of airing them to a more or less total stranger was enormous.

"Of course I never want to complain," said Mrs. Percival. "I've never been of the complaining kind. What I always say is that one must put up with things. What can't be cured must be endured and I'm sure I've never said a word to *anyone*. It's really difficult to know who I *could* have spoken to. In someways one is very isolated here—very isolated. It's very convenient, of course, and a great saving of expense to have our own set of rooms in this house. But of course it's not at all like having a place of your own. I'm sure you agree."

Miss Marple said she agreed.

"Fortunately our new house is almost ready to move into. It is a question really of getting the painters and decorators out. These

men are so slow. My husband, of course, has been quite satisfied living here. But then it's different for a man. Don't you agree?"

Miss Marple agreed that it was very different for a man. She could say this without a qualm as it was what she really believed. "The gentlemen" were, in Miss Marple's mind, in a totally different category to her own sex. They required two eggs plus bacon for breakfast, three good nourishing meals a day and were never to be contradicted or argued with before dinner. Mrs. Percival went on.

"My husband, you see, is away all day in the city. When he comes home he's just tired and wants to sit down and read. But I, on the contrary, am alone here all day with no congenial company *at all*. I've been perfectly comfortable and all that. Excellent food. But what I do feel one needs is a really pleasant social circle. The people round here are really not my kind. Part of them are what I call a flashy, bridge-playing lot. Not *nice* bridge. I like a hand at bridge myself as well as anyone, but of course, they're all very rich down here. They play for enormously high stakes, and there's a great deal of drinking. In fact, the sort of life that I call really fast society. Then, of course, there's a sprinkling of—well, you can only call them *old pussies* who love to potter round with a trowel and do gardening."

Miss Marple looked slightly guilty since she was herself an inveterate gardener.

"I don't want to say anything against the dead," resumed Mrs. Percy rapidly, "but there's no doubt about it, Mr. Fortescue, my father-in-law, I mean, made a very foolish second marriage. My—well I can't call her my mother-in-law, she was the same age as I am. The real truth of it is she was man-mad. Absolutely man-mad. And the way she spent money! My father-in-law was an absolute fool about her. Didn't care what bills she ran up. It vexed Percy very much, very much indeed. Percy is always so careful about money matters. He hates waste. And then what with Mr. Fortescue being so peculiar and so bad tempered, flashing out in these terrible rages, spending money like water backing wildcat schemes. Well—it wasn't at all nice."

Miss Marple ventured upon making a remark.

"That must have worried your husband, too?"

"Oh, yes, it did. For the last year Percy's been very worried indeed. It's really made him quite different. His manner, you know, changed even towards me. Sometimes when I talked to him he used not to answer." Mrs. Percy sighed, then went on: "Then Elaine, my sister-in-law, you know, she's a *very* odd sort of girl. Very out of doors and all that. Not exactly unfriendly, but not sympathetic, you know. She never wanted to go to London and shop, or go to a *matinée* or anything of that kind. She wasn't even interested in clothes." Mrs. Percival sighed again and murmured: "But of course I don't want to complain in any way." A qualm of compunction came over her. She said, hurriedly: "You must think it most odd, talking to you like this when you are a comparative stranger. But really, what with all the strain and shock—I think really it's the shock that matters most. Delayed shock. I feel so nervous, you know, that I really—well, I really must speak to *someone*. You remind me so much of a dear old lady, Miss Trefusis James. She fractured her femur when she was seventy-five. It was a very long business nursing her and we became great friends. She gave me a fox fur cape when I left and I did think it was kind of her."

"I know just how you feel," said Miss Marple.

And this again was true. Mrs. Percival's husband was obviously bored by her and paid very little attention to her, and the poor woman had managed to make no local friends. Running up to London and shopping, *matinées* and a luxurious house to live in did not make up for the lack of humanity in her relations with her husband's family.

"I hope it's not rude of me to say so," said Miss Marple in a gentle old lady's voice, "but I really feel that the late Mr. Fortescue cannot have been a very nice man."

"He wasn't," said his daughter-in-law. "Quite frankly my dear, between you and me, he was a detestable old man. I don't wonder—I really don't—that someone put him out of the way."

"You've no idea at all who—" began Miss Marple and broke off. "Oh dear, perhaps this is a question I should not ask—not even an idea who—who—well, who it might have been?"

"Oh, I think it was that horrible man Crump," said Mrs. Percival. "I've always disliked him very much. He's got a manner, not really rude, you know, but yet it *is* rude. Impertinent, that's more it."

"Still, there would have to be a motive, I suppose."

"I really don't know that that sort of person requires much motive. I dare say Mr. Fortescue ticked him off about something, and I rather suspect that sometimes he drinks too much. But what I really think is that he's a bit unbalanced, you know. Like that footman, or butler, whoever it was, who went round the house shooting everybody. Of course, to be quite honest with you, I *did* suspect that it was *Adele* who poisoned Mr. Fortescue. But now, of course, one can't suspect that since she's been poisoned herself. She may have accused Crump, you know. And then he lost his head and perhaps managed to put something in the sandwiches and Gladys saw him do it and so he killed her too—I think it's really dangerous having him in the house at all. Oh dear, I wish I could get away, but I suppose these horrible policemen won't let one do anything of the kind." She leant forward impulsively and put a plump hand on Miss Marple's arm. "Sometimes I feel I must get away—that if it doesn't all stop soon I shall—I shall actually *run away*."

She leant back studying Miss Marple's face.

"But perhaps—that wouldn't be wise?"

"No—I don't think it would be very wise—the police could soon find you, you know."

"Could they? Could they really? You think they're clever enough for that?"

"It is very foolish to underestimate the police. Inspector Neele strikes me as a particularly intelligent man."

"Oh! I thought he was rather stupid."

Miss Marple shook her head.

"I can't help feeling"—Jennifer Fortescue hesitated—"that it's dangerous to stay here."

"Dangerous for you, you mean?"

"Ye-es—well, yes—"

"Because of something you—know?"

Mrs. Percival seemed to take breath.

"Oh no—of course I don't know anything. What should I know? It's just—just that I'm nervous. That man Crump—"

But it was not, Miss Marple thought, of Crump that Mrs. Percival Fortescue was thinking—watching the clenching and unclenching of Jennifer's hands. Miss Marple thought that for some reason Jennifer Fortescue was very badly frightened indeed.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It was growing dark. Miss Marple had taken her knitting over to the window in the library. Looking out of the glass pane she saw Pat Fortescue walking up and down the terrace outside. Miss Marple unlatched the window and called through it.

"Come in, my dear. Do come in. I'm sure it's much too cold and damp for you to be out there without a coat on."

Pat obeyed the summons. She came in and shut the window and turned on two of the lamps.

"Yes," she said, "it's not a very nice afternoon." She sat down on the sofa by Miss Marple. "What are you knitting?"

"Oh, just a little *matinée* coat, dear. For a baby, you know. I always say young mothers can't have too many *matinée* coats for their babies. It's the second size. I always knit the second size. Babies so soon grow out of the first size."

Pat stretched out long legs towards the fire.

"It's nice in here today," she said. "With the fire and the lamps and you knitting things for babies. It all seems cosy and homely and like England ought to be."

"It's like England is," said Miss Marple. "There are not so many Yewtree Lodges, my dear."

"I think that's a good thing," said Pat. "I don't believe this was ever a happy house. I don't believe anybody was ever happy in it, in spite of all the money they spent and the things they had."

"No," Miss Marple agreed. "I shouldn't say it had been a happy house."

"I suppose Adele may have been happy," said Pat. "I never met her, of course, so I don't know, but Jennifer is pretty miserable and Elaine's been eating her heart out over a young man whom she probably knows in her heart of hearts doesn't care for her. Oh, *how* I want to get away from here!" She looked at Miss Marple and smiled suddenly. "D'you know," she said, "that Lance told me to stick as close to you as I could. He seemed to think I should be safe that way."

"Your husband's no fool," said Miss Marple.

"No. Lance isn't a fool. At least, he is in someways. But I wish he'd tell me exactly what he's afraid of. One thing seems clear enough. Somebody in this house is mad, and madness is always frightening because you don't know how mad people's minds will work. You don't know what they'll do next."

"My poor child," said Miss Marple.

"Oh, I'm all right, really. I ought to be tough enough by now."

Miss Marple said gently:

"You've had a good deal of unhappiness, haven't you, my dear?"

"Oh, I've had some very good times, too. I had a lovely childhood in Ireland, riding, hunting, and a great big, bare, draughty house with lots and lots of sun in it. If you've had a happy childhood, nobody can take that away from you, can they? It was afterwards—when I grew up—that things seemed always to go wrong. To begin with, I suppose, it was the war."

"Your husband was a fighter pilot, wasn't he?"

"Yes. We'd only been married about a month when Don was shot down." She stared ahead of her into the fire. "I thought at first I wanted to die too. It seemed so unfair, so cruel. And yet—in the end—I almost began to see that it had been the best thing. Don was wonderful in the war. Brave and reckless and gay. He had all the qualities that are needed, wanted in a war. But I don't believe, somehow, peace would have suited him. He had a kind of—oh, how shall I put it?—arrogant insubordination. He wouldn't have fitted in or settled down. He'd have fought against things. He was—well, antisocial in a way. No, he wouldn't have fitted in."

"It's wise of you to see that, my dear." Miss Marple bent over her knitting, picked up a stitch, counted under her breath, "Three plain, two purl, slip one, knit two together," and then said aloud: "And your second husband, my dear?"

"Freddy? Freddy shot himself."

"Oh dear. How very sad. What a tragedy."

"We were very happy together," said Pat. "I began to realize, about two years after we were married, that Freddy wasn't—well, wasn't always straight. I began to find out the sort of things that were going on. But it didn't seem to matter, between us two, that is. Because, you see, Freddy loved me and I loved him. I tried not to know what was going on. That was cowardly of me, I suppose, but I couldn't have changed him you know. You can't change people."

"No," said Miss Marple, "you can't change people."

"I'd taken him and loved him and married him for what he was, and I sort of felt that I just had to—put up with it. Then things went wrong and he couldn't face it, and he shot himself. After he died I went out to Kenya to stay with some friends there. I couldn't stop on in England and go on meeting all—all the old crowd that knew about it all. And out in Kenya I met Lance." Her face changed and softened. She went on looking into the fire, and Miss Marple looked at her. Presently Pat turned her head and said: "Tell me, Miss Marple, what do you really think of Percival?"

"Well, I've not seen very much of him. Just at breakfast usually. That's all. I don't think he very much likes my being here."

Pat laughed suddenly.

"He's mean, you know. Terribly mean about money. Lance says he always was. Jennifer complains of it, too. Goes over the housekeeping accounts with Miss Dove. Complaining of every item. But Miss Dove manages to hold her own. She's really rather a wonderful person. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, indeed. She reminds me of Mrs. Latimer in my own village, St. Mary Mead. She ran the WVS, you know, and the Girl Guides, and indeed, she ran practically everything there. It wasn't for quite five years that we discovered that—oh, but I mustn't gossip. Nothing is more boring than people talking to you about places and people

whom you've never seen and know nothing about. You must forgive me, my dear."

"Is St. Mary Mead a very nice village?"

"Well, I don't know what you would call a nice village, my dear. It's quite a *pretty* village. There are some nice people living in it and some extremely unpleasant people as well. Very curious things go on there just as in any other village. Human nature is much the same everywhere, is it not?"

"You go up and see Miss Ramsbottom a good deal, don't you?" said Pat. "Now she *really* frightens me."

"Frightens you? Why?"

"Because I think she's crazy. I think she's got religious mania. You don't think she could be—really—*mad*, do you?"

"In what way, mad?"

"Oh, you know what I mean, Miss Marple, well enough. She sits up there and never goes out, and broods about sin. Well, she might have felt in the end that it was her mission in life to execute judgment."

"Is that what your husband thinks?"

"I don't know what Lance thinks. He won't tell me. But I'm quite sure of one thing—that he believes that it's someone who's mad, and it's someone in the family. Well, Percival's sane enough, I should say. Jennifer's just stupid and rather pathetic. She's a bit nervy but that's all, and Elaine is one of those queer, tempestuous, tense girls. She's desperately in love with this young man of hers and she'll never admit to herself for a moment that he's marrying her for money?"

"You think he is marrying her for money?"

"Yes, I do. Don't you think so?"

"I should say quite certainly," said Miss Marple. "Like young Ellis who married Marion Bates, the rich ironmonger's daughter. She was a very plain girl and absolutely besotted about him. However, it turned out quite well. People like young Ellis and this Gerald Wright are only really disagreeable when they've married a poor girl for love. They are so annoyed with themselves for doing it that they

take it out on the girl. But if they marry a rich girl they continue to respect her."

"I don't see," went on Pat, frowning, "how it can be anybody from outside. And so—and so that accounts for the atmosphere that is here. Everyone watching everybody else. Only something's got to happen soon—"

"There won't be anymore deaths," said Miss Marple. "At least, I shouldn't think so."

"You can't be sure of that."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I am fairly sure. The murderer's accomplished his purpose, you see."

"His?"

"Well, his or her. One says his for convenience."

"You say his or her purpose. What sort of purpose?"

Miss Marple shook her head—she was not yet quite sure herself.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I

Once again Miss Somers had just made tea in the typists' room, and once again the kettle had not been boiling when Miss Somers poured the water onto the tea. History repeats itself. Miss Griffith, accepting her cup, thought to herself: "I really *must* speak to Mr. Percival about Somers. I'm sure we can do better. But with all this terrible business going on, one doesn't like to bother him over office details."

As so often before Miss Griffith said sharply:

"Water not boiling *again*, Somers," and Miss Somers, going pink, replied in her usual formula:

"Oh, dear, I was sure it was boiling *this* time."

Further developments on the same line were interrupted by the entrance of Lance Fortescue. He looked round him somewhat vaguely, and Miss Griffith jumped up, came forward to meet him.

"Mr. Lance," she exclaimed.

He swung round towards her and his face lit up in a smile.

"Hallo. Why, it's Miss Griffith."

Miss Griffith was delighted. Eleven years since he had seen her and he knew her name. She said in a confused voice:

"Fancy your remembering."

And Lance said easily, with all his charm to the fore:

"Of course I remember."

A flicker of excitement was running round the typists' room. Miss Somers's troubles over the tea were forgotten. She was gaping at Lance with her mouth slightly open. Miss Bell gazed eagerly over the top of her typewriter and Miss Chase unobtrusively drew out her compact and powdered her nose. Lance Fortescue looked round him.

"So everything's still going on just the same here," he said.

"Not many changes, Mr. Lance. How brown you look and how well! I suppose you must have had a very interesting life abroad."

"You could call it that," said Lance, "but perhaps I am now going to try and have an interesting life in London."

"You're coming back here to the office?"

"Maybe."

"Oh, but how delightful."

"You'll find me very rusty," said Lance. "You'll have to show me all the ropes, Miss Griffith."

Miss Griffith laughed delightedly.

"It will be very nice to have you back, Mr. Lance. Very nice indeed."

Lance threw her an appreciative glance.

"That's sweet of you," he said, "that's very sweet of you."

"We never believed—none of us thought . . ." Miss Griffith broke off and flushed.

Lance patted her on the arm.

"You didn't believe the devil was as black as he was painted? Well, perhaps he wasn't. But that's all old history now. There's no good going back over it. The future's the thing." He added, "Is my brother here?"

"He's in the inner office, I think."

Lance nodded easily and passed on. In the anteroom to the inner sanctum a hard-faced woman of middle age rose behind a desk and said forbiddingly:

"Your name and business, please?"

Lance looked at her doubtfully.

"Are you—Miss Grosvenor?" he asked.

Miss Grosvenor had been described to him as a glamorous blonde. She had indeed appeared so in the pictures that had

appeared in the newspapers reporting the inquest on Rex Fortescue. This, surely, could not be Miss Grosvenor.

"Miss Grosvenor left last week. I am Mrs. Hardcastle, Mr. Percival Fortescue's personal secretary."

"How like old Percy," thought Lance. "To get rid of a glamorous blonde and take on a Gordon instead. I wonder why? Was it safety or was it because this one comes cheaper?" Aloud he said easily:

"I'm Lancelot Fortescue. You haven't met me yet."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Mr. Lancelot," Mrs. Hardcastle apologized, "this is the first time, I think, you've been to the office?"

"The first time but not the last," said Lance, smiling.

He crossed the room and opened the door of what had been his father's private office. Somewhat to his surprise it was not Percival who was sitting behind the desk there, but Inspector Neele. Inspector Neele looked up from a large wad of papers which he was sorting, and nodded his head.

"Good morning, Mr. Fortescue, you've come to take up your duties, I suppose."

"So you've heard I decided to come into the firm?"

"Your brother told me so."

"He did, did he? With enthusiasm?"

Inspector Neele endeavoured to conceal a smile.

"The enthusiasm was not marked," he said gravely.

"Poor Percy," commented Lance.

Inspector Neele looked at him curiously.

"Are you really going to become a City man?"

"You don't think it's likely, Inspector Neele?"

"It doesn't seem quite in character, Mr. Fortescue."

"Why not? I'm my father's son."

"And your mother's."

Lance shook his head.

"You haven't got anything there, Inspector. My mother was a Victorian romantic. Her favourite reading was the *Idylls of the King*, as indeed you may have deduced from our curious Christian names. She was an invalid and always, I should imagine, out of touch with

reality. I'm not like that at all. I have no sentiment, very little sense of romance and I'm a realist first and last."

"People aren't always what they think themselves to be," Inspector Neele pointed out.

"No, I suppose that's true," said Lance.

He sat down in a chair and stretched his long legs out in his own characteristic fashion. He was smiling to himself. Then he said unexpectedly:

"You're shrewder than my brother, Inspector."

"In what way, Mr. Fortescue?"

"I've put the wind up Percy all right. He thinks I'm all set for the City life. He thinks he's going to have my fingers fiddling about his pie. He thinks I'll launch out and spend the firm's money and try and embroil him in wildcat schemes. It would be almost worth doing just for the fun of it! Almost, but not quite. I couldn't really stand an office life, Inspector. I like the open air and some possibilities of adventure. I'd stifle in a place like this." He added quickly: "This is off the record, mind. Don't give me away to Percy, will you?"

"I don't suppose the subject will arise, Mr. Fortescue."

"I must have my bit of fun with Percy," said Lance. "I want to make him sweat a bit. I've got to get a bit of my own back."

"That's rather a curious phrase, Mr. Fortescue," said Neele. "Your own back—for what?"

Lance shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, it's old history now. Not worth going back over."

"There was a little matter of a cheque, I understand, in the past. Would that be what you're referring to?"

"How much you know, Inspector!"

"There was no question of prosecution, I understand," said Neele. "Your father wouldn't have done that."

"No. He just kicked me out, that's all."

Inspector Neele eyed him speculatively, but it was not Lance Fortescue of whom he was thinking, but of Percival. The honest, industrious, parsimonious Percival. It seemed to him that wherever he got in the case he was always coming up against the enigma of Percival Fortescue, a man of whom everybody knew the outer

aspects, but whose inner personality was much harder to gauge. One would have said from observing him a somewhat colourless and insignificant character, a man who had been very much under his father's thumb. Percy Prim in fact, as the AC had once said. Neele was trying now, through Lance, to get at a closer appreciation of Percival's personality. He murmured in a tentative manner:

"Your brother seems always to have been very much—well, how shall I put it—under your father's thumb."

"I wonder." Lance seemed definitely to be considering the point. "I wonder. Yes, that would be the effect, I think, given. But I'm not sure that it was really the truth. It's astonishing, you know, when I look back through life, to see how Percy always got his own way without seeming to do so, if you know what I mean."

Yes, Inspector Neele thought, it was indeed astonishing. He sorted through the papers in front of him, fished out a letter and shoved it across the desk towards Lance.

"This is a letter you wrote last August, isn't it, Mr. Fortescue?"

Lance took it, glanced at it and returned it.

"Yes," he said, "I wrote it after I got back to Kenya last summer. Dad kept it, did he? Where was it—here in the office?"

"No, Mr. Fortescue, it was among your father's papers in Yewtree Lodge."

The inspector considered it speculatively as it lay on the desk in front of him. It was not a long letter.

Dear Dad,

I've talked things over with Pat and I agree to your proposition. It will take me a little time to get things fixed up here, say about the end of October or beginning of November. I'll let you know nearer the time. I hope we'll pull together better than we used to do. Anyway, I'll do my best. I can't say more. Look after yourself.

Yours, Lance.

"Where did you address this letter, Mr. Fortescue. To the office or Yewtree Lodge?"

Lance frowned in an effort of recollection.

"It's difficult. I can't remember. You see it's almost three months now. The office, I think. Yes, I'm almost sure. Here to the office." He paused a moment before asking with frank curiosity: "Why?"

"I wondered," said Inspector Neele. "Your father did not put it on the file here among his private papers. He took it back with him to Yewtree Lodge, and I found it in his desk there. I wondered why he should have done that."

Lance laughed.

"To keep it out of Percy's way, I suppose."

"Yes," said Inspector Neele, "it would seem so. Your brother, then, had access to your father's private papers here?"

"Well," Lance hesitated and frowned, "not exactly. I mean, I suppose he could have looked through them at any time if he liked, but he wouldn't be. . . ."

Inspector Neele finished the sentence for him.

"Wouldn't be supposed to do so?"

Lance grinned broadly. "That's right. Frankly, it would have been snooping. But Percy, I should imagine, always did snoop."

Inspector Neele nodded. He also thought it probable that Percival Fortescue snooped. It would be in keeping with what the inspector was beginning to learn of his character.

"And talk of the devil," murmured Lance, as at that moment the door opened and Percival Fortescue came in. About to speak to the inspector he stopped, frowning, as he saw Lance.

"Hallo," he said. "You here? You didn't tell me you were coming here today."

"I felt a kind of zeal for work coming over me," said Lance, "so here I am ready to make myself useful. What do you want me to do?"

Percival said testily:

"Nothing at present. Nothing at all. We shall have to come to some kind of arrangement as to what side of the business you're going to look after. We shall have to arrange for an office for you."

Lance inquired with a grin:

"By the way, why did you get rid of glamorous Grosvenor, old boy, and replace her by Horsefaced Hetty out there?"

"Really, Lance," Percival protested sharply.

"Definitely a change for the worse," said Lance. "I've been looking forward to the glamorous Grosvenor. Why did you sack her? Thought she knew a bit too much?"

"Of course not. What an ideal!" Percy spoke angrily, a flush mounting his pale face. He turned to the inspector. "You mustn't pay any attention to my brother," he said coldly. "He has a rather peculiar sense of humour." He added: "I never had a very high opinion of Miss Grosvenor's intelligence. Mrs. Hardcastle has excellent references and is most capable besides being very moderate in her terms."

"Very moderate in her terms," murmured Lance, casting his eyes towards the ceiling. "You know, Percy, I don't really approve of skimping over the office personnel. By the way, considering how loyalty the staff has stood by us during these last tragic weeks, don't you think we ought to raise their salaries all round?"

"Certainly not," snapped Percival Fortescue. "Quite uncalled for and unnecessary."

Inspector Neele noticed the gleam of devilry in Lance's eyes. Percival, however, was far too much upset to notice it.

"You always had the most extraordinary extravagant ideas," he stuttered. "In the state in which this firm has been left, economy is our only hope."

Inspector Neele coughed apologetically.

"That's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about, Mr. Fortescue," he said to Percival.

"Yes, Inspector?" Percival switched his attention to Neele.

"I want to put certain suggestions before you, Mr. Fortescue. I understand that for the past six months or longer, possibly a year, your father's general behaviour and conduct has been a source of increasing anxiety to you."

"He wasn't well," said Percival, with finality. "He certainly wasn't at all well."

"You tried to induce him to see a doctor but you failed. He refused categorically?"

"That is so."

"May I ask you if you suspected that your father was suffering from what is familiarly referred to as GPI, General Paralysis of the Insane, a condition with signs of megalomania and irritability which terminates sooner or later in hopeless insanity?"

Percival looked surprised. "It is remarkably astute of you, Inspector. That is exactly what I did fear. That is why I was so anxious for my father to submit to medical treatment."

Neele went on:

"In the meantime, until you could persuade your father to do that, he was capable of causing a great deal of havoc to the business?"

"He certainly was," Percival agreed.

"A very unfortunate state of affairs," said the inspector.

"Quite terrible. No one knows the anxiety I have been through."

Neele said gently:

"From the business point of view, your father's death was an extremely fortunate circumstance."

Percival said sharply:

"You can hardly think I would regard my father's death in that light."

"It is not a question of how you regard it, Mr. Fortescue. I'm speaking merely of a question of fact. Your father died before his finances were completely on the rocks."

Percival said impatiently:

"Yes, yes. As a matter of actual fact, you are right."

"It was a fortunate occurrence for your whole family, since they are dependent on this business."

"Yes. But really, Inspector, I don't see what you're driving at . . ."

Percival broke off.

"Oh, I'm not driving at anything, Mr. Fortescue," said Neele. "I just like getting my facts straight. Now there's another thing. I understood you to say that you'd had no communication of any kind with your brother here since he left England many years ago."

"Quite so," said Percival.

"Yes, but it isn't quite so, is it, Mr. Fortescue? I mean that last spring when you were so worried about your father's health, you actually wrote to your brother in Africa, told him of your anxiety about your father's behaviour. You wanted, I think, your brother to combine with you in getting your father medically examined and put under restraint, if necessary."

"I—I—really, I don't see . . ." Percival was badly shaken.

"That is so, isn't it, Mr. Fortescue?"

"Well, actually, I thought it only right. After all, Lancelot *was* a junior partner."

Inspector Neele transferred his gaze to Lance. Lance was grinning.

"You received that letter?" Inspector Neele asked.

Lance Fortescue nodded.

"What did you reply to it?"

Lance's grin widened.

"I told Percy to go and boil his head and to let the old man alone. I said the old man probably knew what he was doing quite well."

Inspector Neele's gaze went back again to Percival.

"Were those the terms of your brother's answer?"

"I—I—well, I suppose roughly, yes. Far more offensively couched, however."

"I thought the inspector had better have a bowdlerized version," said Lance. He went on, "Frankly, Inspector Neele, that is one of the reasons why, when I got a letter from my father, I came home to see for myself what I thought. In the short interview I had with my father, frankly I couldn't see anything much wrong with him. He was slightly excitable, that was all. He appeared to me perfectly capable of managing his own affairs. Anyway, after I got back to Africa and had talked things over with Pat, I decided that I'd come home and—what shall we say—see fair play."

He shot a glance at Percival as he spoke.

"I object," said Percival Fortescue. "I object strongly to what you are suggesting. I was not intending to victimize my father, I was

concerned for his health. I admit that I was also concerned . . ." he paused.

Lance filled the pause quickly.

"You were also concerned for your pocket, eh? For Percy's little pocket." He got up and all of a sudden his manner changed. "All right, Percy, I'm through. I was going to string you along a bit by pretending to work here. I wasn't going to let you have things all your own sweet way, but I'm damned if I'm going on with it. Frankly, it makes me sick to be in the same room with you. You've always been a dirty, mean little skunk all your life. Prying and snooping and lying and making trouble. I'll tell you another thing. I can't prove it, but I've always believed it was you who forged that cheque there was all the row about, that got me shot out of here. For one thing it was a damn bad forgery, a forgery that drew attention to itself in letters a foot high. My record was too bad for me to be able to protest effectively, but I often wondered that the old boy didn't realize that if I *had* forged his name I could have made a much better job of it than that."

Lance swept on, his voice rising. "Well, Percy, I'm not going on with this silly game. I'm sick of this country, and of the City. I'm sick of little men like you with their pinstripe trousers and their black coats and their mincing voices and their mean, shoddy financial deals. We'll share out as you suggested, and I'll get back with Pat to a different country—a country where there's room to breathe and move about. You can make your own division of securities. Keep the gilt-edged and the conservative ones, keep the safe two percent and three percent and three and a half percent. Give me father's latest wildcat speculations as you call them. Most of them are probably duds. But I'll bet that one or two of them will pay better in the end than all your playing safe with three percent Trustee Stocks will do. Father was a shrewd old devil. He took chances, plenty of them. Some of those chances paid five and six and seven hundred percent. I'll back his judgment and his luck. As for you, you little worm. . . ."

Lance advanced towards his brother, who retreated rapidly, round the end of the desk towards Inspector Neele.

"All right," said Lance, "I'm not going to touch you. You wanted me out of here, you're getting me out of here. You ought to be satisfied."

He added as he strode towards the door:

"You can throw in the old Blackbird Mine concession too, if you like. If we've got the murdering MacKenzies on our trail, I'll draw them off to Africa."

He added as he swung through the doorway:

"Revenge—after all these years—scarcely seems credible. But Inspector Neele seems to take it seriously, don't you, Inspector?"

"Nonsense," said Percival. "Such a thing is impossible!"

"Ask him," said Lance. "Ask him why he's making all these inquiries into blackbirds and rye in father's pocket."

Gently stroking his upper lip, Inspector Neele said:

"You remember the blackbirds last summer, Mr. Fortescue. There *are* certain grounds for inquiry."

"Nonsense," said Percival again. "Nobody's heard of the MacKenzies for years."

"And yet," said Lance, "I'd almost dare to swear that there's a MacKenzie in our midst. I rather imagine the inspector thinks so, too."

II

Inspector Neele caught up Lancelot Fortescue as the latter emerged into the street below.

Lance grinned at him rather sheepishly.

"I didn't mean to do that," he said. "But I suddenly lost my temper. Oh! well—it would have come to the same before long. I'm meeting Pat at the Savoy—are you coming my way, Inspector?"

"No, I'm returning to Baydon Heath. But there's just something I'd like to ask you, Mr. Fortescue."

"Yes!"

"When you came into the inner office and saw me there—you were surprised. Why?"

"Because I didn't expect to see you, I suppose. I thought I'd find Percy there."

"You weren't told that he'd gone out?"

Lance looked at him curiously.

"No. They said he was in his office."

"I see—nobody knew he'd gone out. There's no second door out of the inner office—but there is a door leading straight into the corridor from the little antechamber—I suppose your brother went out that way—but I'm surprised Mrs. Hardcastle didn't tell you so."

Lance laughed.

"She'd probably been to collect her cup of tea."

"Yes—yes—quite so."

Lance looked at him.

"What's the idea, Inspector?"

"Just puzzling over a few little things, that's all, Mr. Fortescue—"

Chapter Twenty-Four

I

In the train on the way down to Baydon Heath, Inspector Neele had singularly little success doing *The Times* crossword. His mind was distracted by various possibilities. In the same way he read the news with only half his brain taking it in. He read of an earthquake in Japan, of the discovery of uranium deposits in Tanganyika, of the body of a merchant seaman washed up near Southampton, and of the imminent strike among the dockers. He read of the latest victims of the cough and of a new drug that had achieved wonders in advanced cases of tuberculosis.

All these items made a queer kind of pattern in the back of his mind. Presently he returned to the crossword puzzle and was able to put down three clues in rapid succession.

When he reached Yewtree Lodge he had come to a certain decision. He said to Sergeant Hay:

"Where's that old lady? Is she still there?"

"Miss Marple? Oh, yes, she's here still. Great buddies with the old lady upstairs."

"I see." Neele paused for a moment and then said: "Where is she now? I'd like to see her."

Miss Marple arrived in a few minutes' time, looking rather flushed and breathing fast.

"You want to see me, Inspector Neele? I do hope I haven't kept you waiting. Sergeant Hay couldn't find me at first. I was in the kitchen, talking to Mrs. Crump. I was congratulating her on her pastry and how light her hand is, and telling her how delicious the soufflé was last night. I always think, you know, it's better to approach a subject gradually, don't you? At least, I suppose it isn't so easy for you. You more or less have to come almost straight away to the questions you want to ask. But of course for an old lady like me who has all the time in the world, as you might say, it's really *expected* of her that there should be a great deal of unnecessary talk. And the way to a cook's heart, as they say, is through her pastry."

"What you really wanted to talk to her about," said Inspector Neele, "was Gladys Martin?"

Miss Marple nodded.

"Yes. Gladys. You see, Mrs. Crump could really tell me a lot about the girl. Not in connection with the murder. I don't mean that. But about her spirits lately and the odd things she said. I don't mean odd in the sense of peculiar. I mean just the odds and ends of conversation."

"Did you find it helpful?" asked Inspector Neele.

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "I found it very helpful indeed. I really think, you know, that things are becoming very much clearer, don't you?"

"I do and I don't," said Inspector Neele.

Sergeant Hay, he noticed, had left the room. He was glad of it because what he was about to do now was, to say the least of it, slightly unorthodox.

"Look here, Miss Marple," he said, "I want to talk to you seriously."

"Yes, Inspector Neele?"

"In a way," said Inspector Neele, "you and I represent different points of view. I admit, Miss Marple, that I've heard something about you at the Yard." He smiled: "It seems you're fairly well-known there."

"I don't know how it is," fluttered Miss Marple, "but I so often seem to get mixed-up in the things that are really *no* concern of mine. Crimes, I mean, and peculiar happenings."

"You've got a reputation," said Inspector Neele.

"Sir Henry Clithering, of course," said Miss Marple, "is a *very* old friend of mine."

"As I said before," Neele went on, "you and I represent opposite points of view. One might almost call them sanity and insanity."

Miss Marple put her head a little on one side.

"Now what exactly do you mean by that, I wonder, Inspector?"

"Well, Miss Marple, there's a sane way of looking at things. This murder benefits certain people. One person, I may say, in particular. The second murder benefits the same person. The third murder one might call a murder for safety."

"But which do you call the third murder?" Miss Marple asked.

Her eyes, a very bright china blue, looked shrewdly at the inspector. He nodded.

"Yes. You've got something there perhaps. You know, the other day when the AC was speaking to me of these murders, something that he said seemed to me to be wrong. That was it. I was thinking, of course, of the nursery rhyme. The King in his counting-house, the Queen in the parlour and the maid hanging out the clothes."

"Exactly," said Miss Marple. "A sequence in that order, but actually Gladys must have been murdered *before* Mrs. Fortescue, mustn't she?"

"I think so," said Neele. "I take it it's quite certainly so. Her body wasn't discovered till late that night, and of course it was difficult then to say exactly how long she'd been dead. But I think myself that she must almost certainly have been murdered round about five o'clock, because otherwise. . . ."

Miss Marple cut in. "Because otherwise she would certainly have taken the second tray into the drawing room?"

"Quite so. She took one tray in with the tea on it, she brought the second tray into the hall, and then *something happened*. She saw something or heard something. The question is what that something was. It *might* have been Dubois coming down the stairs from Mrs.

Fortescue's room. It *might* have been Elaine Fortescue's young man, Gerald Wright, coming in at the side door. Whoever it was lured her away from the tea tray and out into the garden. And once that had happened I don't see any possibility of her death being long delayed. It was cold out and she was only wearing her thin uniform."

"Of course you're quite right," said Miss Marple. "I mean it was never a case of 'the maid was in the garden hanging up the clothes.' She wouldn't be hanging up clothes at that time of the evening and she wouldn't go out to the clothesline without putting a coat on. That was all camouflage, like the clothes-peg, to make the thing fit in with the rhyme."

"Exactly," said Inspector Neele, "crazy. That's where I can't yet see eye to eye with you. I can't—I simply can't swallow this nursery rhyme business."

"But it *fits*, Inspector. You must agree it fits."

"It fits," said Neele heavily, "but all the same the sequence is wrong. I mean the rhyme definitely suggests that the maid was the third murder. But we know that the Queen was the third murder. Adele Fortescue was not killed until between twenty-five past five and five minutes to six. By then Gladys must already have been dead."

"And that's all wrong, isn't it?" said Miss Marple. "All wrong for the nursery rhyme—that's very significant, isn't it?"

Inspector Neele shrugged his shoulders.

"It's probably splitting hairs. The deaths fulfil the conditions of the rhyme, and I suppose that's all that was needed. But I'm talking now as though I were on your side. I'm going to outline *my* side of the case now, Miss Marple. I'm washing out the blackbirds and the rye and all the rest of it. I'm going by sober facts and common sense and the reasons for which sane people do murders. First, the death of Rex Fortescue, and *who benefits by his death*. Well, it benefits quite a lot of people, but most of all it benefits his son, Percival. His son Percival wasn't at Yewtree Lodge that morning. He couldn't have put poison in his father's coffee or in anything that he ate for breakfast. Or that's what we thought at first."

"Ah," Miss Marple's eyes brightened. "So there *was* a method, was there? I've been thinking about it, you know, a good deal, and I've had several ideas. But of course no evidence or proof."

"There's no harm in my letting you know," said Inspector Neele. "Taxine was added to a new jar of marmalade. That jar of marmalade was placed on the breakfast table and the top layer of it was eaten by Mr. Fortescue at breakfast. Later that jar of marmalade was thrown out into the bushes and a similar jar with a similar amount taken out of it was placed in the pantry. The jar in the bushes was found and I've just had the result of the analysis. It shows definite evidence of taxine."

"So that was it," murmured Miss Marple. "So simple and easy to do."

"Consolidated Investments," Neele went on, "was in a bad way. If the firm had had to pay out a hundred thousand pounds to Adele Fortescue under her husband's will, it would, I think, have crashed. If Mrs. Fortescue had survived her husband for a month that money would have *had* to be paid out to her. *She* would have had no feeling for the firm or its difficulties. But she didn't survive her husband for a month. She died, and as a result of her death the gainer was the residuary legatee of Rex Fortescue's will. In other words, Percival Fortescue again.

"Always Percival Fortescue," the inspector continued bitterly. "And though he *could* have tampered with the marmalade, he couldn't have poisoned his stepmother or strangled Gladys. According to his secretary he was in his city office at five o'clock that afternoon, and he didn't arrive back here until nearly seven."

"That makes it *very* difficult, doesn't it?" said Miss Marple.

"It makes it impossible," said Inspector Neele gloomily. "In other words, Percival is *out*." Abandoning restraint and prudence, he spoke with some bitterness, almost unaware of his listener. "Wherever I go, wherever I turn, I always come up against the same person. Percival Fortescue! Yet it *can't* be Percival Fortescue." Calming himself a little he said: "Oh, there are other possibilities, other people who had a perfectly good motive."

"Mr. Dubois, of course," said Miss Marple sharply. "And that young Mr. Wright. I do so agree with you, Inspector. Wherever there is a question of *gain*, one has to be *very suspicious*. The great thing to avoid is having in any way a trustful mind."

In spite of himself, Neele smiled.

"Always think the worst, eh?" he asked.

It seemed a curious doctrine to be proceeding from this charming and fragile-looking old lady.

"Oh yes," said Miss Marple fervently. "I always believe the worst. What is so sad is that one is usually justified in doing so."

"All right," said Neele, "let's think the worst. Dubois could have done it, Gerald Wright could have done it (that is to say if he'd been acting in collusion with Elaine Fortescue and she tampered with the marmalade), Mrs. Percival could have done it, I suppose. She was on the spot. But none of the people I have mentioned tie up with the crazy angle. They don't tie up with blackbirds and pockets full of rye. That's *your* theory and it may be that you're right. If so, it boils down to one person, doesn't it? Mrs. MacKenzie's in a mental home and has been for a good number of years. She hasn't been messing about with marmalade pots or putting cyanide in the drawing room afternoon tea. Her son Donald was killed at Dunkirk. That leaves the daughter, Ruby MacKenzie. And if your theory is correct, if this whole series of murders arises out of the old Blackbird Mine business, then Ruby MacKenzie must be here in this house, and there's only one person that Ruby MacKenzie could be."

"I think, you know," said Miss Marple, "that you're being a little too dogmatic."

Inspector Neele paid no attention.

"Just one person," he said grimly.

He got up and went out of the room.

II

Mary Dove was in her sitting room. It was a small, rather austere furnished room, but comfortable. That is to say Miss Dove herself had made it comfortable. When Inspector Neele tapped at the door Mary Dove raised her head, which had been bent over a pile of tradesmen's books, and said in her clear voice:

"Come in."

The inspector entered.

"Do sit down, Inspector." Miss Dove indicated a chair. "Could you wait just one moment? The total of the fishmonger's account does not seem to be correct and I must check it."

Inspector Neele sat in silence watching her as she totted up the column. How wonderfully calm and self-possessed the girl was, he thought. He was intrigued, as so often before, by the personality that underlay that self-assured manner. He tried to trace in her features any resemblance to those of the woman he had talked to at the Pinewood Sanatorium. The colouring was not unlike, but he could detect no real facial resemblance. Presently Mary Dove raised her head from her accounts and said:

"Yes, Inspector? What can I do for you?"

Inspector Neele said quietly:

"You know, Miss Dove, there are certain very peculiar features about this case."

"Yes?"

"To begin with there is the odd circumstance of the rye found in Mr. Fortescue's pocket."

"That was very extraordinary," Mary Dove agreed. "You know I really cannot think of any explanation for that."

"Then there is the curious circumstance of the blackbirds. Those four blackbirds on Mr. Fortescue's desk last summer, and also the incident of the blackbirds being substituted for the veal and ham in the pie. You were here, I think, Miss Dove, at the time of both those occurrences?"

"Yes, I was. I remember now. It was most upsetting. It seemed such a very purposeless, spiteful thing to do, especially at the time."

"Perhaps not entirely purposeless. What do you know, Miss Dove, about the Blackbird Mine?"

"I don't think I've ever heard of the Blackbird Mine."

"Your name, you told me, is Mary Dove. Is that your real name, Miss Dove?"

Mary raised her eyebrows. Inspector Neele was almost sure that a wary expression had come into her blue eyes.

"What an extraordinary question, Inspector. Are you suggesting that my name is *not* Mary Dove?"

"That is exactly what I am suggesting. I'm suggesting," said Neele pleasantly, "that your name is Ruby MacKenzie."

She stared at him. For a moment her face was entirely blank with neither protest on it nor surprise. There was, Inspector Neele thought, a very definite effect of calculation. After a minute or two she said in a quiet, colourless voice:

"What do you expect me to say?"

"Please answer me. Is your name Ruby MacKenzie?"

"I have told you my name is Mary Dove."

"Yes, but have you proof of that, Miss Dove?"

"What do you want to see? My birth certificate?"

"That might be helpful or it might not. You might, I mean, be in possession of the birth certificate of *a* Mary Dove. That Mary Dove might be a friend of yours or might be someone who had died."

"Yes, there are a lot of possibilities, aren't there?" Amusement had crept back into Mary Dove's voice. "It's really quite a dilemma for you, isn't it, Inspector?"

"They might possibly be able to recognize you at Pinewood Sanatorium," said Neele.

"Pinewood Sanatorium!" Mary raised her eyebrow. "What or where is Pinewood Sanatorium?"

"I think you know very well, Miss Dove."

"I assure you I am quite in the dark."

"And you deny categorically that you are Ruby MacKenzie?"

"I shouldn't really like to deny *anything*. I think, you know, Inspector, that it's up to you to prove I *am* this Ruby MacKenzie, whoever she is." There was a definite amusement now in her blue eyes, amusement and challenge. Looking him straight in the eyes,

Mary Dove said, "Yes, it's up to you, Inspector. Prove that I'm Ruby MacKenzie if you can."

Chapter Twenty-Five

I

"The old tabby's looking for you, sir," said Sergeant Hay in a conspiratorial whisper, as Inspector Neele descended the stairs. "It appears as how she's got a lot more to say to you."

"Hell and damnation," said Inspector Neele.

"Yes, sir," said Sergeant Hay, not a muscle of his face moving.

He was about to move away when Neele called him back.

"Go over those notes given us by Miss Dove, Hay, notes as to her former employment and situations. Check up on them—and, yes, there are just one or two other things that I would like to know. Put these inquiries in hand, will you?"

He jotted down a few lines on a sheet of paper and gave them to Sergeant Hay, who said:

"I'll get onto it at once, sir."

Hearing a murmur of voices in the library as he passed, Inspector Neele looked in. Whether Miss Marple had been looking for him or not, she was now fully engaged talking to Mrs. Percival Fortescue while her knitting needles clicked busily. The middle of the sentence which Inspector Neele caught was:

". . . I have really always thought it was a vocation you needed for nursing. It certainly is very noble work."

Inspector Neele withdrew quietly. Miss Marple had noticed him, he thought, but she had taken no notice of his presence.

She went on in her gentle, soft voice:

"I had such a charming nurse looking after me when I once broke my wrist. She went on from me to nurse Mrs. Sparrow's son, a very nice young naval officer. Quite a romance, really, because they became engaged. So romantic I thought it. They were married and were very happy and had two dear little children." Miss Marple sighed sentimentally. "It was pneumonia, you know. So much depends on nursing in pneumonia, does it not?"

"Oh, yes," said Jennifer Fortescue, "nursing is nearly everything in pneumonia, though of course nowadays M and B works wonders, and it's not the long, protracted battle it used to be."

"I'm sure you must have been an excellent nurse, my dear," said Miss Marple. "That was the beginning of *your* romance, was it not? I mean you came here to nurse Mr. Percival Fortescue, did you not?"

"Yes," said Jennifer. "Yes, yes—that's how it did happen."

Her voice was not encouraging, but Miss Marple seemed to take no notice.

"I understand. One should not listen to servants' gossip, of course, but I'm afraid an old lady like myself is always interested to hear about the people in the house. Now what was I saying? Oh, yes. There was another nurse at first, was there not, and she got sent away—something like that. Carelessness, I believe."

"I don't think it was carelessness," said Jennifer. "I believe her father or something was desperately ill, and so I came to replace her."

"I see," said Miss Marple. "And you fell in love and that was that. Yes, very nice indeed, very nice."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Jennifer Fortescue. "I often wish"—her voice trembled—"I often wish I was back in the wards again."

"Yes, yes, I understand. You were keen on your profession."

"I wasn't so much at the time, but now when I think of it—life's so monotonous, you know. Day after day with nothing to do, and Val so absorbed in business."

Miss Marple shook her head.

"Gentlemen have to work so hard nowadays," she said. "There really doesn't seem any leisure, no matter how much money there

is."

"Yes, it makes it very lonely and dull for a wife sometimes. I often wish I'd never come here," said Jennifer. "Oh, well, I dare say it serves me right. I ought never to have done it."

"Ought never to have done what, my dear?"

"I ought never to have married Val. Oh, well—" she sighed abruptly. "Don't let's talk of it anymore."

Obligingly Miss Marple began to talk about the new skirts that were being worn in Paris.

II

"So kind of you not to interrupt just now," said Miss Marple when, having tapped at the door of the study, Inspector Neele had told her to come in. "There were just one or two little points, you know, that I wanted to verify." She added reproachfully: "We didn't really finish our talk just now."

"I'm so sorry, Miss Marple." Inspector Neele summoned up a charming smile. "I'm afraid I was rather rude. I summoned you to a consultation and did all the talking myself."

"Oh, that's quite all right," said Miss Marple immediately, "because, you see, I wasn't really quite ready then to put all *my* cards on the table. I mean I wouldn't like to make any accusation unless I was absolutely sure about it. Sure, that is, in *my own mind*. And I *am* sure, now."

"You're sure about what, Miss Marple?"

"Well, certainly about who killed Mr. Fortescue. What you told me about the marmalade, I mean, just clinches the matter. Showing *how*, I mean, as well as *who*, and well within the mental capacity."

Inspector Neele blinked a little.

"I'm so sorry," said Miss Marple, perceiving this reaction on his part, "I'm afraid I find it difficult sometimes to make myself perfectly clear."

"I'm not quite sure yet, Miss Marple, what we're talking about."

"Well, perhaps," said Miss Marple, "we'd better begin all over again. I mean if you could spare the time. I would rather like to put my own point of view before you. You see, I've talked a good deal to people, to old Miss Ramsbottom and to Mrs. Crump and to her husband. He, of course, is a liar, but that doesn't really matter because, if you know liars are liars, it comes to the same thing. But I did want to get the telephone calls clear and the nylon stockings and all that."

Inspector Neele blinked again and wondered what he had let himself in for and why he had ever thought that Miss Marple might be a desirable and clearheaded colleague. Still, he thought to himself, however muddleheaded she was, she might have picked up some useful bits of information. All Inspector Neele's success in his profession had come from listening well. He was prepared to listen now.

"Please tell me all about it, Miss Marple," he said, "but start at the beginning, won't you?"

"Yes, of course," said Miss Marple, "and the beginning is Gladys. I mean I came here because of Gladys. And you very kindly let me look through all her things. And what with that and the nylon stockings and the telephone calls and one thing and another, it did come out perfectly clear. I mean about Mr. Fortescue and the taxine."

"You have a theory?" asked Inspector Neele, "as to who put the taxine into Mr. Fortescue's marmalade?"

"It isn't a theory," said Miss Marple. "I know."

For the third time Inspector Neele blinked.

"It was Gladys, of course," said Miss Marple.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Inspector Neele stared at Miss Marple and slowly shook his head.

"Are you saying," he said incredulously, "that Gladys Martin deliberately murdered Rex Fortescue? I'm sorry, Miss Marple, but I simply don't believe it."

"No, of course she didn't *mean* to murder him," said Miss Marple, "but she did it all the same! You said yourself that she was nervous and upset when you questioned her. And that she looked guilty."

"Yes, but not guilty of *murder*."

"Oh, no, I agree. As I say, she didn't *mean* to murder anybody, but she put the taxine in the marmalade. She didn't think it was poison, of course."

"What *did* she think it was?" Inspector Neele's voice still sounded incredulous.

"I rather imagine she thought it was a truth drug," said Miss Marple. "It's very interesting, you know, and very instructive—the things these girls cut out of papers and keep. It's always been the same, you know, all through the ages. Recipes for beauty, for attracting the man you love. And witchcraft and charms and marvellous happenings. Nowadays they're mostly lumped together under the heading of Science. Nobody believes in magicians anymore, nobody believes that anyone can come along and wave a wand and turn you into a frog. But if you read in the paper that by injecting certain glands scientists can alter your vital tissues and you'll develop froglike characteristics, well, everybody would believe that. And having read in the papers about truth drugs, of course

Gladys would believe it absolutely when he told her that that's what it was."

"When who told her?" said Inspector Neele.

"Albert Evans," said Miss Marple. "Not of course that that is *really* his name. But anyway he met her last summer at a holiday camp, and he flattered her up and made love to her, and I should imagine told her some story of injustice or persecution, or something like that. Anyway, the point was that Rex Fortescue had to be made to confess what he had done and make restitution. I don't *know* this, of course, Inspector Neele, but I'm pretty sure about it. He got her to take a post here, and it's really very easy nowadays with the shortage of domestic staff, to obtain a post where you want one. Staffs are changing the whole time. They then arranged a date together. You remember on that last postcard he said: 'Remember our date.' That was to be the great day they were working for. Gladys would put the drug that he gave her into the top of the marmalade, so that Mr. Fortescue would eat it at breakfast and she would also put the rye in his pocket. I don't know what story he told her to account for the rye, but as I told you from the beginning, Inspector Neele, Gladys Martin was a *very* credulous girl. In fact, there's hardly anything she wouldn't believe if a personable young man put it to her the right way."

"Go on," said Inspector Neele in a dazed voice.

"The idea probably was," continued Miss Marple, "that Albert was going to call upon him at the office that day, and that by that time the truth drug would have worked, and that Mr. Fortescue would have confessed everything and so on and so on. You can imagine the poor girl's feelings when she heard that Mr. Fortescue was dead."

"But, surely," Inspector Neele objected, "she would have told?"

Miss Marple asked sharply:

"What was the first thing she said to you when you questioned her?"

"She said: 'I didn't do it,' " Inspector Neele said.

"Exactly," said Miss Marple, triumphantly. "Don't you see that's exactly what she *would* say? If she broke an ornament, you know, Gladys would always say: 'I didn't do it, Miss Marple. I can't think

how it happened.' They can't help it, poor dears. They're very upset at what they've done and their great idea is to avoid blame. You don't think that a nervous young woman who had murdered someone when she didn't mean to murder him is going to admit it, do you? That would have been *quite* out of character."

"Yes," Neele said, "I suppose it would."

He ran his mind back over his interview with Gladys. Nervous, upset, guilty, shifty-eyed, all those things. They might have had a small significance, or a big one. He could not really blame himself for having failed to come to the right conclusion.

"Her first idea, as I say," went on Miss Marple, "would be to deny it all. Then in a confused way she would try to sort it all out in her mind. Perhaps Albert hadn't known how strong the stuff was, or he'd made a mistake and given her too much of it. She'd think of excuses for him and explanations. She'd hope he'd get in touch with her, which, of course, he did. By telephone."

"Do you know that?" asked Neele sharply.

Miss Marple shook her head.

"No. I admit I'm assuming it. But there were unexplained calls that day. That is to say, people rang up and, when Crump or Mrs. Crump answered, the phone was hung up. That's what he'd do, you know. Ring up and wait until Gladys answered the phone, and then he'd make an appointment with her to meet him."

"I see," said Neele. "You mean she had an appointment to meet him on the day she died."

Miss Marple nodded vigorously.

"Yes, that was indicated. Mrs. Crump was right about one thing. The girl had on her best nylon stockings and her good shoes. She was going to meet someone. Only she wasn't going *out* to meet him. He was coming to Yewtree Lodge. That's why she was on the look out that day and flustered and late with tea. Then, as she brought the second tray into the hall, I think she looked along the passage to the side door, and saw him there, beckoning to her. She put the tray down and went out to meet him."

"And then he strangled her," said Neele.

Miss Marple pursed her lips together. "It would only take a minute," she said, "but he couldn't risk her talking. She had to die, poor, silly, credulous girl. And then—he put a clothes-peg on her nose!" Stern anger vibrated the old lady's voice. 'To make it fit in with the rhyme. The rye, the blackbirds, the countinghouse, the bread and honey, and the clothes-peg—the nearest he could get to a little dickey bird that nipped off her nose—"

"And I suppose at the end of it all he'll go to Broadmoor and we shan't be able to hang him because he's crazy!" said Neele slowly.

"I think you'll hang him all right," said Miss Marple. "And he's not crazy, Inspector, not for a moment!"

Inspector Neele looked hard at her.

"Now see here, Miss Marple, you've outlined a theory to me. Yes—yes—although you say you *know*, it's only a *theory*. You're saying that a man is responsible for these crimes, who called himself Albert Evans, who picked up the girl Gladys at a holiday camp and used her for his own purposes. This Albert Evans was someone who wanted revenge for the old Blackbird Mine business. You're suggesting, aren't you, that Mrs. MacKenzie's son, Don MacKenzie, didn't die at Dunkirk. That he's still alive, that he's behind all this?"

But to Inspector Neele's surprise, Miss Marple was shaking her head violently.

"Oh no!" she said, "oh *no*! I'm not suggesting that *at all*. Don't you see, Inspector Neele, all this blackbird business is really a complete *fake*. It was *used*, that was all, used by somebody who heard about the blackbirds—the ones in the library and in the pie. The blackbirds were genuine enough. They were put there by someone who knew about the old business, who wanted revenge for it. But only the revenge of trying to frighten Mr. Fortescue or to make him uncomfortable. I don't believe, you know, Inspector Neele, that children can really be brought up and taught to wait and brood and carry out revenge. Children, after all, have got a lot of *sense*. But anyone whose father had been swindled and perhaps left to die might be willing to play a malicious trick on the person who was supposed to have done it. That's what happened, I think. And the killer used it."

"The killer," said Inspector Neele. "Come now, Miss Marple, let's have your ideas about the killer. Who was he?"

"You won't be surprised," said Miss Marple. "Not really. Because you'll see, as soon as I tell you who he is, or rather who I think he is, for one must be accurate must one not?—you'll see that he's just the type of person who *would* commit these murders. He's sane, brilliant and quite unscrupulous. And he did it, of course, for money, probably for a good deal of money."

"Percival Fortescue?" Inspector Neele spoke almost imploringly, but he knew as he spoke that he was wrong. The picture of the man that Miss Marple had built up for him had no resemblance to Percival Fortescue.

"Oh, no," said Miss Marple. "Not Percival. Lance."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I

"It's impossible," said Inspector Neele.

He leaned back in his chair and watched Miss Marple with fascinated eyes. As Miss Marple had said, he was not surprised. His words were a denial, not of probability, but of possibility. Lance Fortescue fitted the description: Miss Marple had outlined it well enough. But Inspector Neele simply could not see how Lance could be the answer.

Miss Marple leaned forward in her chair and gently, persuasively, and rather in the manner of someone explaining the simple facts of arithmetic to a small child, outlined her theory.

"He's always been like that, you see. I mean, he's always been *bad*. Bad all through, although with it he's always been *attractive*. Especially attractive to *women*. He's got a brilliant mind and he'll take risks. He's always taken risks and because of his charm people have always believed the best and not the worst about him. He came home in the summer to see his father. I don't believe for a moment that his father wrote to him or sent for him—unless, of course, you've got actual evidence to that effect." She paused inquiringly.

Neele shook his head. "No," he said, "I've no evidence of his father sending for him. I've got a letter that Lance is supposed to have written to him after being here. But Lance could quite easily

have slipped that among his father's papers in the study here the day he arrived."

"Sharp of him," said Miss Marple, nodding her head. "Well, as I say, he probably flew over here and attempted a reconciliation with his father, but Mr. Fortescue wouldn't have it. You see, Lance had recently got married and the small pittance he was living on, and which he had doubtless been supplementing in various dishonest ways, was not enough for him anymore. He was very much in love with Pat (who is a dear, sweet girl) and he wanted a respectable, settled life with her—nothing shifty. And that, from his point of view, meant having a lot of money. When he was at Yewtree Lodge he must have heard about these blackbirds. Perhaps his father mentioned them. Perhaps Adele did. He jumped to the conclusion that MacKenzie's daughter was established in the house and it occurred to him that she would make a very good scapegoat for murder. Because, you see, when he realized that he couldn't get his father to do what he wanted, he must have cold-bloodedly decided that murder it would have to be. He may have realized that his father wasn't—er, very well—and have feared that by the time his father died there would have been a complete crash."

"He knew about his father's health all right," said the inspector.

"Ah—that explains a good deal. Perhaps the coincidence of his father's Christian name being *Rex* together with the blackbird incident suggested the idea of the nursery rhyme. Make a crazy business of the whole thing—and tie it up with that old revenge threat of the MacKenzies. Then, you see, he could dispose of Adele, too, and that hundred thousand pounds going out of the firm. But there would have to be a third character, the 'maid in the garden hanging up the clothes'—and I suppose that suggested the whole wicked plan to him. An innocent accomplice whom he could silence before she could talk. And that would give him what he wanted—a genuine alibi for the first murder. The rest was easy. He arrived here from the station just before five o'clock, which was the time when Gladys brought the second tray into the hall. He came to the side door, saw her and beckoned to her. Strangling her and carrying her body round the house to where the clotheslines were would only

have taken three or four minutes. Then he rang the front doorbell, was admitted to the house, and joined the family for tea. After tea he went up to see Miss Ramsbottom. When he came down, he slipped into the drawing room, found Adele alone there drinking a last cup of tea and sat down by her on the sofa, and while he was talking to her, he managed to slip the cyanide into her tea. It wouldn't be difficult, you know. A little piece of white stuff, like sugar. He might have stretched out his hand to the sugar basin and taken a lump and apparently dropped it into her cup. He'd laugh and say: 'Look, I've dropped more sugar into your tea.' She'd say she didn't mind, stir it and drink it. It would be as easy and audacious as that. Yes, he's an audacious fellow."

Inspector Neele said slowly:

"It's actually possible—yes. But I cannot see—really, Miss Marple, I cannot see—what he stood to gain by it. Granted that unless old Fortescue died the business would soon be on the rocks, is Lance's share big enough to cause him to plan three murders? I don't think so. I really don't think so."

"That *is* a little difficult," admitted Miss Marple. "Yes, I agree with you. That does present difficulties. I suppose . . ." She hesitated, looking at the inspector. "I suppose—I am so very ignorant in financial matters—but I suppose it is really true that the Blackbird Mine *is* worthless?"

Neele reflected. Various scraps fitted together in his mind. Lance's willingness to take the various speculative or worthless shares off Percival's hands. His parting words today in London that Percival had better get rid of the Blackbird and its hoodoo. A gold mine. A worthless gold mine. But perhaps the mine had *not* been worthless. And yet, somehow, that seemed unlikely. Old Rex Fortescue was hardly likely to have made a mistake on that point, although of course there might have been soundings recently. Where *was* the mine? West Africa, Lance had said. Yes but somebody else—was it Miss Ramsbottom—had said it was in *East* Africa. Had Lance been deliberately misleading when he said West instead of East? Miss Ramsbottom was old and forgetful, and yet *she* might have been

right and not Lance. East Africa. Lance had just come from East Africa. Had he perhaps some recent knowledge?

Suddenly with a click another piece fitted into the inspector's puzzle. Sitting in the train, reading *The Times*. *Uranium deposits found in Tanganyika*. Supposing that the uranium deposits were on the site of the old Blackbird? That would explain everything. Lance had come to have knowledge of that, being on the spot, and with uranium deposits there, there was a fortune to be grasped. An enormous fortune! He sighed. He looked at Miss Marple.

"How do you think," he asked reproachfully, "that I'm ever going to be able to prove all this?"

Miss Marple nodded at him encouragingly, as an aunt might have encouraged a bright nephew who was going in for a scholarship exam.

"You'll prove it," she said. "You're a very, very clever man, Inspector Neele. I've seen that from the first. Now you know who it is you ought to be able to get the evidence. At that holiday camp, for instance, they'll recognize his photograph. He'll find it hard to explain why he stayed there for a week calling himself Albert Evans."

Yes, Inspector Neele thought, Lance Fortescue was brilliant and unscrupulous—but he was foolhardy, too. The risks he took were just a little too great.

Neele thought to himself, "I'll get him!" Then, doubt sweeping over him, he looked at Miss Marple.

"It's all pure assumption, you know," he said.

"Yes—but you are sure, aren't you?"

"I suppose so. After all, I've known his kind before."

The old lady nodded.

"Yes—that matters so much—that's really why *I'm* sure."

Neele looked at her playfully.

"Because of your knowledge of criminals."

"Oh no—of course not. Because of Pat—a dear girl—and the kind that always marries a bad lot—that's really what drew my attention to him at the start—"

"I may be sure—in my own mind," said the inspector, "but there's a lot that needs explaining—the Ruby MacKenzie business for

instance. I could swear that—”

Miss Marple interrupted:

“And you’re quite right. But you’ve been thinking of the wrong person. Go and talk to Mrs. Percy.”

II

“Mrs. Fortescue,” said Inspector Neele, “do you mind telling me your name before you were married.”

“Oh!” Jennifer gasped. She looked frightened.

“You needn’t be nervous, madam,” said Inspector Neele, “but it’s much better to come out with the truth. I’m right, I think, in saying that your name before you were married was Ruby MacKenzie?”

“My—well, oh well—oh dear—well, why shouldn’t it be?” said Mrs. Percival Fortescue.

“No reason at all,” said Inspector Neele gently, and added: “I was talking to your mother a few days ago at Pinewood Sanatorium.”

“She’s very angry with me,” said Jennifer. “I never go and see her now because it only upsets her. Poor Mumsy, she was so devoted to Dad, you know.”

“And she brought you up to have very melodramatic ideas of revenge?”

“Yes,” said Jennifer. “She kept making us swear on the Bible that we’d never forget and that we’d kill him one day. Of course, once I’d gone into hospital and started my training, I began to realize that her mental balance wasn’t what it should be.”

“You yourself must have felt revengeful though, Mrs. Fortescue?”

“Well, of course I did. Rex Fortescue practically murdered my father! I don’t mean he actually shot him, or knifed him or anything like that. But I’m quite certain that he *did* leave Father to die. That’s the same thing, isn’t it?”

“It’s the same thing morally—yes.”

“So I did want to pay him back,” said Jennifer. “When a friend of mine came to nurse his son I got her to leave and to propose my

replacing her. I don't know exactly what I meant to do . . . I didn't, really I didn't, Inspector, I never meant to *kill* Mr. Fortescue. I had some idea, I think, of nursing his son so badly that the son would die. But of course, if you *are* a nurse by profession you can't do that sort of thing. Actually I had quite a job pulling Val through. And then he got fond of me and asked me to marry him and I thought, 'Well, really that's a far more sensible revenge than anything else.' I mean, to marry Mr. Fortescue's eldest son and get the money he swindled Father out of back that way. I think it was a far more sensible way."

"Yes, indeed," said Inspector Neele, "far more sensible." He added, "It was you, I suppose, who put the blackbirds on the desk and in the pie?"

Mrs. Percival flushed.

"Yes. I suppose it was silly of me really . . . But Mr. Fortescue had been talking about suckers one day and boasting of how he'd swindled people—got the best of them. Oh, in quite a *legal* way. And I thought I'd just like to give him—well, a kind of fright. And it *did* give him a fright! He was awfully upset." She added anxiously, "But I didn't do anything *else*! I didn't really, Inspector. You don't—you don't honestly think I would *murder* anyone, do you?"

Inspector Neele smiled.

"No," he said, "I don't." He added: "By the way, have you given Miss Dove any money lately?"

Jennifer's jaw dropped.

"How did you know?"

"We know a lot of things," said Inspector Neele and added to himself: "And guess a good many, too."

Jennifer continued, speaking rapidly:

"She came to me and said that you'd accused her of being Ruby MacKenzie. She said if I'd get hold of five hundred pounds she'd let you go on thinking so. She said if you knew that I was Ruby MacKenzie, I'd be suspected of murdering Mr. Fortescue and my stepmother. I had an awful job getting the money, because of course I couldn't tell Percival. He doesn't know about me. I had to sell my diamond engagement ring and a very beautiful necklace Mr. Fortescue gave me."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Percival," said Inspector Neele, "I think we can get your money back for you."

III

It was on the following day that Inspector Neele had another interview with Miss Mary Dove.

"I wonder, Miss Dove," he said, "if you'd give me a cheque for five hundred pounds payable to Mrs. Percival Fortescue."

He had the pleasure of seeing Mary Dove lose countenance for once.

"The silly fool told you, I suppose," she said.

"Yes. Blackmail, Miss Dove, is rather a serious charge."

"It wasn't exactly blackmail, Inspector. I think you'd find it hard to make out a case of blackmail against me. I was just doing Mrs. Percival a special service to oblige her."

"Well, if you'll give me that cheque, Miss Dove, we'll leave it like that."

Mary Dove got her cheque book and took out her fountain pen.

"It's very annoying," she said with a sigh. "I'm particularly hard up at the moment."

"You'll be looking for another job soon, I suppose?"

"Yes. This one hasn't turned out quite according to plan. It's all been very unfortunate from my point of view."

Inspector Neele agreed.

"Yes, it put you in rather a difficult position, didn't it? I mean, it was quite likely that at any moment we might have to look into your antecedents."

Mary Dove, cool once more, allowed her eyebrows to rise.

"Really, Inspector, my past is quite blameless, I assure you."

"Yes, it is," Inspector Neele agreed, cheerfully. "We've nothing against you at all, Miss Dove. It's a curious coincidence, though, that in the last three places which you have filled so admirably, there have happened to be robberies about three months after you left."

The thieves have seemed remarkably well-informed as to where mink coats, jewels, etc., were kept. Curious coincidence, isn't it?"

"Coincidences do happen, Inspector."

"Oh, yes," said Neele. "They happen. But they mustn't happen too often, Miss Dove. I dare say," he added, "that we may meet again in the future."

"I hope"—said Mary Dove—"I don't mean to be rude, Inspector Neele—but I hope we don't."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I

Miss Marple smoothed over the top of her suitcase, tucked in an end of woolly shawl and shut the lid down. She looked round her bedroom. No, she had left nothing behind. Crump came in to fetch down her luggage. Miss Marple went into the next room to say goodbye to Miss Ramsbottom.

"I'm afraid," said Miss Marple, "that I've made a very poor return for your hospitality. I hope you will be able to forgive me someday."

"Hah," said Miss Ramsbottom.

She was as usual playing patience.

"Black knave, red queen," she observed, then she darted a shrewd, sideways glance at Miss Marple. "You found out what you wanted to, I suppose," she said.

"Yes."

"And I suppose you've told that police inspector all about it? Will he be able to prove a case?"

"I'm almost sure he will," said Miss Marple. "It may take a little time."

"I'm not asking you any questions," said Miss Ramsbottom. "You're a shrewd woman. I knew that as soon as I saw you. I don't blame you for what you've done. Wickedness is wickedness and has got to be punished. There's a bad streak in this family. It didn't come

from our side, I'm thankful to say. Elvira, my sister, was a fool. Nothing worse.

"Black knave," repeated Miss Ramsbottom, fingering the card. "Handsome, but a black heart. Yes, I was afraid of it. Ah, well, you can't always help loving a sinner. The boy always had a way with him. Even got round me . . . Told a lie about the time he left me that day. I didn't contradict him, but I wondered . . . I've wondered ever since. But he was Elvira's boy—I couldn't bring myself to say anything. Ah well, you're a righteous woman, Jane Marple, and right must prevail. I'm sorry for his wife, though."

"So am I," said Miss Marple.

In the hall Pat Fortescue was waiting to say good-bye.

"I wish you weren't going," she said. "I shall miss you."

"It's time for me to go," said Miss Marple. "I've finished what I came here to do. It hasn't been—altogether pleasant. But it's important, you know, that wickedness shouldn't triumph."

Pat looked puzzled.

"I don't understand."

"No, my dear. But perhaps you will, someday. If I might venture to advise, if anything ever—goes wrong in your life—I think the happiest thing for you would be to go back to where you were happy as a child. Go back to Ireland, my dear. Horses and dogs. All that."

Pat nodded.

"Sometimes I wish I'd done just that when Freddy died. But if I had"—her voice changed and softened—"I'd never have met Lance."

Miss Marple sighed.

"We're not staying here, you know," said Pat. "We're going back to East Africa as soon as everything's cleared up. I'm so glad."

"God bless you, dear child," said Miss Marple. "One needs a great deal of courage to get through life. I think you have it."

She patted the girl's hand and, releasing it, went through the front door to the waiting taxi.

II

Miss Marple reached home late that evening.

Kitty—the latest graduate from St. Faith's Home—let her in and greeted her with a beaming face.

"I've got a herring for your supper, miss. I'm so glad to see you home—you'll find everything very nice in the house. Regular spring cleaning I've had."

"That's very nice, Kitty—I'm glad to be home."

Six spider's webs on the cornice, Miss Marple noted. These girls never raised their heads! She was none the less too kind to say so.

"Your letters is on the hall table, miss. And there's one as went to Daisymead by mistake. Always doing that, aren't they? Does look a bit alike, Dane and Daisy, and the writing's so bad I don't wonder this time. They've been away there and the house shut up, they only got back and sent it round today. Said as how they hoped it wasn't important."

Miss Marple picked up her correspondence. The letter to which Kitty had referred was on top of the others. A faint chord of remembrance stirred in Miss Marple's mind at the sight of the blotted scrawled handwriting. She tore it open.

Dear Madam,

I hope as you'll forgive me writing this but I really don't know what to do indeed I don't and I never meant no harm. Dear madam, you'll have seen the newspapers it was murder they say but it wasn't me that did it, not really, because I would never do anything wicked like that and I know as how he wouldn't either. Albert, I mean. I'm telling this badly, but you see we met last summer and was going to be married only Bert hadn't got his rights, he'd been done out of them, swindled by this Mr. Fortescue who's dead. And Mr. Fortescue he just denied everything and of course everybody believed him and not Bert because he was rich and Bert was poor. But Bert had a friend who works in a place where they make these new drugs and there's what they call a truth drug you've read about it perhaps in the paper and it makes people speak the truth whether they want to

*or not. Bert was going to see Mr. Fortescue in his office on Nov. 5th and taking a lawyer with him and I was to be sure to give him the drug at breakfast that morning and then it would work just right for when they came and he'd admit as all what Bert said was quite true. Well, madam, I put it in the marmalade but now he's dead and I think as how it must have been too strong but it wasn't Bert's fault because Bert would never do a thing like that but I can't tell the police because maybe they'd think Bert did it on purpose which I know he didn't. Oh, madam, I don't know what to do or what to say and the police are here in the house and it's awful and they ask you questions and look at you so stern and I don't know what to do and I haven't heard from Bert. Oh, madam, I don't like to ask it of you but if you could only come here and help me they'd listen to you and you were always so kind to me, and I didn't mean anything wrong and Bert didn't either. If you could only help us. Yours respectfully,
Gladys Martin.*

P. S.—I'm enclosing a snap of Bert and me. One of the boys took it at the camp and give it me. Bert doesn't know I've got it—he hates being snapped. But you can see, madam, what a nice boy he is.

Miss Marple, her lips pursed together, stared down at the photograph. The pair pictured there were looking at each other. Miss Marple's eyes went from Gladys's pathetic adoring face, the mouth slightly open, to the other face—the dark handsome smiling face of Lance Fortescue.

The last words of the pathetic letter echoed in her mind:
You can see what a nice boy he is.

The tear rose in Miss Marple's eyes. Succeeding pity, there came anger—anger against a heartless killer.

And then, displacing both these emotions, there came a surge of triumph—the triumph some specialist might feel who has

successfully reconstructed an extinct animal from a fragment of jawbone and a couple of teeth.

Credits

Cover illustration and design by Sara Wood

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MARPLE

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha Christie



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A Miss Marple Mystery

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One

Mrs. McGillicuddy panted along the platform in the wake of the porter carrying her suitcase. Mrs. McGillicuddy was short and stout, the porter was tall and free-striding. In addition, Mrs. McGillicuddy was burdened with a large quantity of parcels; the result of a day's Christmas shopping. The race was, therefore, an uneven one, and the porter turned the corner at the end of the platform whilst Mrs. McGillicuddy was still coming up the straight.

No. 1 Platform was not at the moment unduly crowded, since a train had just gone out, but in the no-man's-land beyond, a milling crowd was rushing in several directions at once, to and from undergrounds, left-luggage offices, tea rooms, inquiry offices, indicator boards, and the two outlets, Arrival and Departure, to the outside world.

Mrs. McGillicuddy and her parcels were buffeted to and fro, but she arrived eventually at the entrance to No. 3 Platform, and deposited one parcel at her feet whilst she searched her bag for the ticket that would enable her to pass the stern uniformed guardian at the gate.

At that moment, a Voice, raucous yet refined, burst into speech over her head.

"The train standing at Platform 3," the Voice told her, "is the 4:50 for Brackhampton, Milchester, Waverton, Carvil Junction, Roxeter and stations to Chadmouth. Passengers for Brackhampton and Milchester travel at the rear of the train. Passengers for Vanequay change at Roxeter." The Voice shut itself off with a click, and then reopened

conversation by announcing the arrival at Platform 9 of the 4:35 from Birmingham and Wolverhampton.

Mrs. McGillicuddy found her ticket and presented it. The man clipped it, murmured: "On the right—rear portion."

Mrs. McGillicuddy padded up the platform and found her porter, looking bored and staring into space, outside the door of a third-class carriage.

"Here you are, lady."

"I'm travelling first-class," said Mrs. McGillicuddy.

"You didn't say so," grumbled the porter. His eye swept her masculine-looking pepper-and-salt tweed coat disparagingly.

Mrs. McGillicuddy, who *had* said so, did not argue the point. She was sadly out of breath.

The porter retrieved the suitcase and marched with it to the adjoining coach where Mrs. McGillicuddy was installed in solitary splendour. The 4:50 was not much patronized, the first-class clientele preferring either the faster morning express, or the 6:40 with dining car. Mrs. McGillicuddy handed the porter his tip which he received with disappointment, clearly considering it more applicable to third-class than to first-class travel. Mrs. McGillicuddy, though prepared to spend money on comfortable travel after a night journey from the North and a day's feverish shopping, was at no time an extravagant tipper.

She settled herself back on the plush cushions with a sigh and opened her magazine. Five minutes later, whistles blew, and the train started. The magazine slipped from Mrs. McGillicuddy's hand, her head dropped sideways, three minutes later she was asleep. She slept for thirty-five minutes and awoke refreshed. Resettling her hat which had slipped askew she sat up and looked out of the window at what she could see of the flying countryside. It was quite dark now, a dreary misty December day—Christmas was only five days ahead. London had been dark and dreary; the country was no less so, though occasionally rendered cheerful with its constant clusters of lights as the train flashed through towns and stations.

"Serving last tea now," said an attendant, whisking open the corridor door like a jinn. Mrs. McGillicuddy had already partaken of

tea at a large department store. She was for the moment amply nourished. The attendant went on down the corridor uttering his monotonous cry. Mrs. McGillicuddy looked up at the rack where her various parcels reposed, with a pleased expression. The face towels had been excellent value and just what Margaret wanted, the space gun for Robby and the rabbit for Jean were highly satisfactory, and that evening coatee was just the thing she herself needed, warm but dressy. The pullover for Hector, too...her mind dwelt with approval on the soundness of her purchases.

Her satisfied gaze returned to the window, a train travelling in the opposite direction rushed by with a screech, making the windows rattle and causing her to start. The train clattered over points and passed through a station.

Then it began suddenly to slow down, presumably in obedience to a signal. For some minutes it crawled along, then stopped, presently it began to move forward again. Another up-train passed them, though with less vehemence than the first one. The train gathered speed again. At that moment another train, also on a down-line, swerved inwards towards them, for a moment with almost alarming effect. For a time the two trains ran parallel, now one gaining a little, now the other. Mrs. McGillicuddy looked from her window through the windows of the parallel carriages. Most of the blinds were down, but occasionally the occupants of the carriages were visible. The other train was not very full and there were many empty carriages.

At the moment when the two trains gave the illusion of being stationary, a blind in one of the carriages flew up with a snap. Mrs. McGillicuddy looked into the lighted first-class carriage that was only a few feet away.

Then she drew her breath in with a gasp and half-rose to her feet.

Standing with his back to the window and to her was a man. His hands were round the throat of a woman who faced him, and he was slowly, remorselessly, strangling her. Her eyes were starting from their sockets, her face was purple and congested. As Mrs.

McGillicuddy watched fascinated, the end came; the body went limp and crumpled in the man's hands.

At the same moment, Mrs. McGillicuddy's train slowed down again and the other began to gain speed. It passed forward and a moment or two later it had vanished from sight.

Almost automatically Mrs. McGillicuddy's hand went up to the communication cord, then paused, irresolute. After all, what use would it be ringing the cord of the train in which *she* was travelling? The horror of what she had seen at such close quarters, and the unusual circumstances, made her feel paralysed. *Some* immediate action was necessary—but what?

The door of her compartment was drawn back and a ticket collector said, "Ticket, please."

Mrs. McGillicuddy turned to him with vehemence.

"A woman has been strangled," she said. "In a train that has just passed. I saw it."

The ticket collector looked at her doubtfully.

"I beg your pardon, madam?"

"A man strangled a woman! In a train. I saw it—through there." She pointed to the window.

The ticket collector looked extremely doubtful.

"Strangled?" he said disbelievingly.

"Yes, *strangled!* I saw it, I tell you. You must *do* something at once!"

The ticket collector coughed apologetically.

"You don't think, madam, that you may have had a little nap and—er—" he broke off tactfully.

"I have had a nap, but if you think this was a dream, you're quite wrong. I *saw* it, I tell you."

The ticket collector's eyes dropped to the open magazine lying on the seat. On the exposed page was a girl being strangled whilst a man with a revolver threatened the pair from an open doorway.

He said persuasively: "Now don't you think, madam, that you'd been reading an exciting story, and that you just dropped off, and awaking a little confused—"

Mrs. McGillicuddy interrupted him.

"*I saw it,*" she said. "I was as wide awake as you are. And I looked out of the window into the window of the train alongside, and a man was strangling a woman. And what I want to know is, what are you going to do about it?"

"Well—madam—"

"You're going to do *something*, I suppose?"

The ticket collector sighed reluctantly and glanced at his watch.

"We shall be in Brackhampton in exactly seven minutes. I'll report what you've told me. In what direction was the train you mention going?"

"This direction, of course. You don't suppose I'd have been able to see this if a train had flashed past going in the other direction?"

The ticket collector looked as though he thought Mrs. McGillicuddy was quite capable of seeing anything anywhere as the fancy took her. But he remained polite.

"You can rely on me, madam," he said. "I will report your statement. Perhaps I might have your name and address—just in case...."

Mrs. McGillicuddy gave him the address where she would be staying for the next few days and her permanent address in Scotland, and he wrote them down. Then he withdrew with the air of a man who has done his duty and dealt successfully with a tiresome member of the travelling public.

Mrs. McGillicuddy remained frowning and vaguely unsatisfied. Would the ticket collector report her statement? Or had he just been soothing her down? There were, she supposed vaguely, a lot of elderly women travelling around, fully convinced that they had unmasked communist plots, were in danger of being murdered, saw flying saucers and secret space ships, and reported murders that had never taken place. If the man dismissed her as one of those....

The train was slowing down now, passing over points and running through the bright lights of a large town.

Mrs. McGillicuddy opened her handbag, pulled out a receipted bill which was all she could find, wrote a rapid note on the back of it with her ball-pen, put it into a spare envelope that she fortunately happened to have, stuck the envelope down and wrote on it.

The train drew slowly into a crowded platform. The usual ubiquitous Voice was intoning:

"The train now arriving at Platform 1 is the 5:38 for Milchester, Waverton, Roxeter, and stations to Chadmouth. Passengers for Market Basing take the train now waiting at No. 3 platform. No. 1 bay for stopping train to Carbury."

Mrs. McGillicuddy looked anxiously along the platform. So many passengers and so few porters. Ah, there was one! She hailed him authoritatively.

"Porter! Please take this at once to the Stationmaster's office."

She handed him the envelope, and with it a shilling.

Then, with a sigh, she leaned back. Well, she had done what she could. Her mind lingered with an instant's regret on the shilling... Sixpence would really have been enough....

Her mind went back to the scene she had witnessed. Horrible, quite horrible... She was a strong-nerved woman, but she shivered. What a strange—what a fantastic thing to happen to her, Elspeth McGillicuddy! If the blind of the carriage had not happened to fly up... But that, of course, was Providence.

Providence had willed that she, Elspeth McGillicuddy, should be a witness of the crime. Her lips set grimly.

Voices shouted, whistles blew, doors were banged shut. The 5:38 drew slowly out of Brackhampton station. An hour and five minutes later it stopped at Milchester.

Mrs. McGillicuddy collected her parcels and her suitcase and got out. She peered up and down the platform. Her mind reiterated its former judgment: Not enough porters. Such porters as there were seemed to be engaged with mail bags and luggage vans. Passengers nowadays seemed always expected to carry their own cases. Well, she couldn't carry her suitcase and her umbrella and all her parcels. She would have to wait. In due course she secured a porter.

"Taxi?"

"There will be something to meet me, I expect."

Outside Milchester station, a taxi-driver who had been watching the exit came forward. He spoke in a soft local voice.

"Is it Mrs. McGillicuddy? For St. Mary Mead?"

Mrs. McGillicuddy acknowledged her identity. The porter was recompensed, adequately if not handsomely. The car, with Mrs. McGillicuddy, her suitcase, and her parcels drove off into the night. It was a nine-mile drive. Sitting bolt upright in the car, Mrs. McGillicuddy was unable to relax. Her feelings yearned for expression. At last the taxi drove along the familiar village street and finally drew up at its destination; Mrs. McGillicuddy got out and walked up the brick path to the door. The driver deposited the cases inside as the door was opened by an elderly maid. Mrs. McGillicuddy passed straight through the hall to where, at the open sitting room door, her hostess awaited her; an elderly frail old lady.

"Elsbeth!"

"Jane!"

They kissed and, without preamble or circumlocution, Mrs. McGillicuddy burst into speech.

"Oh, Jane!" she wailed. "I've just seen a *murder!*"

Two

TTrue to the precepts handed down to her by her mother and grandmother—to wit: that a true lady can neither be shocked nor surprised—Miss Marple merely raised her eyebrows and shook her head, as she said:

“*Most* distressing for you, Elspeth, and surely *most* unusual. I think you had better tell me about it *at once*.”

That was exactly what Mrs. McGillicuddy wanted to do. Allowing her hostess to draw her nearer to the fire, she sat down, pulled off her gloves and plunged into a vivid narrative.

Miss Marple listened with close attention. When Mrs. McGillicuddy at last paused for breath, Miss Marple spoke with decision.

“The best thing, I think, my dear, is for you to go upstairs and take off your hat and have a wash. Then we will have supper—during which we will not discuss this *at all*. After supper we can go into the matter thoroughly and discuss it from every aspect.”

Mrs. McGillicuddy concurred with this suggestion. The two ladies had supper, discussing, as they ate, various aspects of life as lived in the village of St. Mary Mead. Miss Marple commented on the general distrust of the new organist, related the recent scandal about the chemist’s wife, and touched on the hostility between the schoolmistress and the village institute. They then discussed Miss Marple’s and Mrs. McGillicuddy’s gardens.

“Paeonies,” said Miss Marple as she rose from table, “are most unaccountable. Either they do—or they don’t do. But if they *do*

establish themselves, they are with you for life, so to speak, and really most beautiful varieties nowadays."

They settled themselves by the fire again, and Miss Marple brought out two old Waterford glasses from a corner cupboard, and from another cupboard produced a bottle.

"No coffee tonight for you, Elspeth," she said. "You are already overexcited (and no wonder!) and probably would not sleep. I prescribe a glass of my cowslip wine, and later, perhaps, a cup of camo-mile tea."

Mrs. McGillicuddy acquiescing in these arrangements, Miss Marple poured out the wine.

"Jane," said Mrs. McGillicuddy, as she took an appreciative sip, "*you* don't think, do you, that I dreamt it, or imagined it?"

"Certainly not," said Miss Marple with warmth.

Mrs. McGillicuddy heaved a sigh of relief.

"That ticket collector," she said, "*he* thought so. Quite polite, but all the same—"

"I think, Elspeth, that that was quite natural under the circumstances. It sounded—and indeed was—a most unlikely story. And you were a complete stranger to him. No, I have no doubt at all that you saw what you've told me you saw. It's very extraordinary—but not at all impossible. I recollect myself being interested when a train ran parallel to one on which I was travelling, to notice what a vivid and intimate picture one got of what was going on in one or two of the carriages. A little girl, I remember once, playing with a teddy bear, and suddenly she threw it deliberately at a fat man who was asleep in the corner and he bounced up and looked most indignant, and the other passengers looked *so* amused. I saw them all quite vividly. I could have described afterwards exactly what they looked like and what they had on."

Mrs. McGillicuddy nodded gratefully.

"That's just how it was."

"The man had his back to you, you say. So you didn't see his face?"

"No."

"And the woman, you can describe her? Young, old?"

"Youngish. Between thirty and thirty-five, I should think. I couldn't say closer than that."

"Good-looking?"

"That again, I couldn't say. Her face, you see, was all contorted and—"

Miss Marple said quickly:

"Yes, yes, I quite understand. How was she dressed?"

"She had on a fur coat of some kind, a palish fur. No hat. Her hair was blonde."

"And there was nothing distinctive that you can remember about the man?"

Mrs. McGillicuddy took a little time to think carefully before she replied.

"He was tallish—and dark, I think. He had a heavy coat on so that I couldn't judge his build very well." She added despondently, "It's not really very much to go on."

"It's something," said Miss Marple. She paused before saying: "You feel quite sure, in your own mind, that the girl *was*—dead?"

"She was dead, I'm sure of it. Her tongue came out and—I'd rather not talk about it..."

"Of course not. Of course not," said Miss Marple quickly. "We shall know more, I expect, in the morning."

"In the morning?"

"I should imagine it will be in the morning papers. After this man had attacked and killed her, he would have a body on his hands. What would he do? Presumably he would leave the train quickly at the first station—by the way, can you remember if it was a corridor carriage?"

"No, it was not."

"That seems to point to a train that was not going far afield. It would almost certainly stop at Brackhampton. Let us say he leaves the train at Brackhampton, perhaps arranging the body in a corner seat, with her face hidden by the fur collar to delay discovery. Yes—I think that that is what he would do. But of course it will be discovered before very long—and I should imagine that the news of

a murdered woman discovered on a train would be almost certain to be in the morning papers—we shall see.”

II

But it was not in the morning papers.

Miss Marple and Mrs. McGillicuddy, after making sure of this, finished their breakfast in silence. Both were reflecting.

After breakfast, they took a turn round the garden. But this, usually an absorbing pastime, was today somewhat halfhearted. Miss Marple did indeed call attention to some new and rare species she had acquired for her rock-garden but did so in an almost absentminded manner. And Mrs. McGillicuddy did not, as was customary, counter-attack with a list of her own recent acquisitions.

“The garden is not looking at all as it should,” said Miss Marple, but still speaking absentmindedly. “Doctor Haydock has absolutely forbidden me to do any stooping or kneeling—and really, what can you do if you *don’t* stoop or kneel? There’s old Edwards, of course—but *so* opinionated. And all this jobbing gets them into bad habits, lots of cups of tea and so much pottering—not any real *work*.”

“Oh, I know,” said Mrs. McGillicuddy. “Of course, there’s no question of my being *forbidden* to stoop, but really, especially after meals—and having put on weight”—she looked down at her ample proportions—“it does bring on heartburn.”

There was a silence and then Mrs. McGillicuddy planted her feet sturdily, stood still, and turned on her friend.

“*Well?*” she said.

It was a small insignificant word, but it acquired full significance from Mrs. McGillicuddy’s tone, and Miss Marple understood its meaning perfectly.

“I know,” she said.

The two ladies looked at each other.

“I think,” said Miss Marple, “we might walk down to the police station and talk to Sergeant Cornish. He’s intelligent and patient, and

I know him very well, and he knows me. I think he'll listen—and pass the information on to the proper quarter.”

Accordingly, some three-quarters of an hour later, Miss Marple and Mrs. McGillicuddy were talking to a fresh-faced grave man between thirty and forty who listened attentively to what they had to say.

Frank Cornish received Miss Marple with cordiality and even deference. He set chairs for the two ladies, and said: “Now what can we do for you, Miss Marple?”

Miss Marple said: “I would like you, please, to listen to my friend Mrs. McGillicuddy’s story.”

And Sergeant Cornish had listened. At the close of the recital he remained silent for a moment or two.

Then he said:

“That’s a very extraordinary story.” His eyes, without seeming to do so, had sized Mrs. McGillicuddy up whilst she was telling it.

On the whole, he was favourably impressed. A sensible woman, able to tell a story clearly; not, so far as he could judge, an over-imaginative or a hysterical woman. Moreover, Miss Marple, so it seemed, believed in the accuracy of her friend’s story and he knew all about Miss Marple. Everybody in St. Mary Mead knew Miss Marple; fluffy and dithery in appearance, but inwardly as sharp and as shrewd as they make them.

He cleared his throat and spoke.

“Of course,” he said, “you may have been mistaken—I’m not saying you *were*, mind—but you *may* have been. There’s a lot of horse-play goes on—it mayn’t have been serious or fatal.”

“I know what I saw,” said Mrs. McGillicuddy grimly.

“And you won’t budge from it,” thought Frank Cornish, “and I’d say that, likely or unlikely, you may be right.”

Aloud he said: “You reported it to the railway officials, and you’ve come and reported it to me. That’s the proper procedure and you may rely on me to have inquiries instituted.”

He stopped. Miss Marple nodded her head gently, satisfied. Mrs. McGillicuddy was not quite so satisfied, but she did not say anything. Sergeant Cornish addressed Miss Marple, not so much because he

wanted her ideas, as because he wanted to hear what she would say.

"Granted the facts are as reported," he said, "what do you think has happened to the body?"

"There seems to be only two possibilities," said Miss Marple without hesitation. "The most *likely* one, of course, is that the body was left in the train, but that seems improbable now, for it would have been found some time last night, by another traveller, or by the railway staff at the train's ultimate destination."

Frank Cornish nodded.

"The only other course open to the murderer would be to push the body out of the train on to the line. It must, I suppose, be still on the track somewhere as yet undiscovered—though that does seem a little unlikely. But there would be, as far as I can see, no other way of dealing with it."

"You read about bodies being put in trunks," said Mrs. McGillicuddy, "but no-one travels with trunks nowadays, only suitcases, and you couldn't get a body into a suitcase."

"Yes," said Cornish. "I agree with you both. The body, if there is a body, ought to have been discovered by now, or will be very soon. I'll let you know any developments there are—though I dare say you'll read about them in the papers. There's the possibility, of course, that the woman, though savagely attacked, was not actually dead. She may have been able to leave the train on her own feet."

"Hardly without assistance," said Miss Marple. "And if so, it will have been noticed. A man, supporting a woman whom he says is ill."

"Yes, it will have been noticed," said Cornish. "Or if a woman was found unconscious or ill in a carriage and was removed to hospital, that, too, will be on record. I think you may rest assured that you'll hear about it all in a very short time."

But that day passed and the next day. On that evening Miss Marple received a note from Sergeant Cornish.

In regard to the matter on which you consulted me, full inquiries have been made, with no result. No woman's body has been found. No hospital has administered treatment to a

woman such as you describe, and no case of a woman suffering from shock or taken ill, or leaving a station supported by a man has been observed. You may take it that the fullest inquiries have been made. I suggest that your friend may have witnessed a scene such as she described but that it was much less serious than she supposed.

Three

“**L**ess serious? Fiddlesticks!” said Mrs. McGillicuddy. “It was murder!”

She looked defiantly at Miss Marple and Miss Marple looked back at her.

“Go on, Jane,” said Mrs. McGillicuddy. “Say it was all a mistake! Say I imagined the whole thing! That’s what you think now, isn’t it?”

“Anyone *can be* mistaken,” Miss Marple pointed out gently. “Anybody, Elspeth—even you. I think we must bear that in mind. But I still think, you know, that you were most probably *not* mistaken... You use glasses for reading, but you’ve got very good far sight—and what you saw impressed you very powerfully. You were definitely suffering from shock when you arrived here.”

“It’s a thing I shall never forget,” said Mrs. McGillicuddy with a shudder. “The trouble is, I don’t see what I can do about it!”

“I don’t think,” said Miss Marple thoughtfully, “that there’s anything more you can do about it.” (If Mrs. McGillicuddy had been alert to the tones of her friend’s voice, she might have noticed a very faint stress laid on the *you*.) “You’ve reported what you saw—to the railway people and to the police. No, there’s nothing more you can do.”

“That’s a relief, in a way,” said Mrs. McGillicuddy, “because as you know, I’m going out to Ceylon immediately after Christmas—to stay with Roderick, and I certainly do not want to put that visit off—I’ve been looking forward to it so much. Though of course I *would* put it off if I thought it was my duty,” she added conscientiously.

"I'm sure you would, Elspeth, but as I say, I consider you've done everything you possibly could do."

"It's up to the police," said Mrs. McGillicuddy. "And if the police choose to be stupid—"

Miss Marple shook her head decisively.

"Oh, no," she said, "the police aren't stupid. And that makes it interesting, doesn't it?"

Mrs. McGillicuddy looked at her without comprehension and Miss Marple reaffirmed her judgment of her friend as a woman of excellent principles and no imagination.

"One wants to know," said Miss Marple, "what really happened."

"She was killed."

"Yes, but *who* killed her, and *why*, and what happened to her body? Where is it now?"

"That's the business of the police to find out."

"Exactly—and they *haven't* found out. That means, doesn't it, that the man was clever—very clever. I can't imagine, you know," said Miss Marple, knitting her brows, "*how* he disposed of it... You kill a woman in a fit of passion—it must have been unpremeditated, you'd never choose to kill a woman in such circumstances just a few minutes before running into a big station. No, it must have been a quarrel—jealousy—something of that kind. You strangle her—and there you are, as I say, with a dead body on your hands and on the point of running into a station. What *could* you do except as I said at first, prop the body up in a corner as though asleep, hiding the face, and then yourself leave the train as quickly as possible. I don't see any other possibility—and yet there must have been one...."

Miss Marple lost herself in thought.

Mrs. McGillicuddy spoke to her twice before Miss Marple answered.

"You're getting deaf, Jane."

"Just a little, perhaps. People do not seem to me to enunciate their words as clearly as they used to do. But it wasn't that I did not hear you. I'm afraid I wasn't paying attention."

"I just asked about the trains to London tomorrow. Would the afternoon be all right? I'm going to Margaret's and she isn't

expecting me before teatime."

"I wonder, Elspeth, if you would mind going up by the 12:15? We could have an early lunch."

"Of course and—" Miss Marple went on, drowning her friend's words:

"And I wonder, too, if Margaret would mind if you didn't arrive for tea—if you arrived about seven, perhaps?"

Mrs. McGillicuddy looked at her friend curiously.

"What's on your mind, Jane?"

"I suggest, Elspeth, that I should travel up to London with you, and that we should travel down again as far as Brackhampton in the train you travelled by the other day. You would then return to London from Brackhampton and I would come on here as you did. *I*, of course, would pay the *fares*," Miss Marple stressed this point firmly.

Mrs. McGillicuddy ignored the financial aspect.

"What on earth do you expect, Jane?" she asked. "Another murder?"

"Certainly not," said Miss Marple shocked. "But I confess I should like to see for myself, under your guidance, the—the—really it is most difficult to find the correct term—the *terrain* of the crime."

So accordingly on the following day Miss Marple and Mrs. McGillicuddy found themselves in two opposite corners of a first-class carriage speeding out of London by the 4:50 from Paddington. Paddington had been even more crowded than on the preceding Friday—as there were now only two days to go before Christmas, but the 4:50 was comparatively peaceful—at any rate, in the rear portion.

On this occasion no train drew level with them, or they with another train. At intervals trains flashed past them towards London. On two occasions trains flashed past them the other way going at high speed. At intervals Mrs. McGillicuddy consulted her watch doubtfully.

"It's hard to tell just when—we'd passed through a station I know..." But they were continually passing through stations.

"We're due in Brackhampton in five minutes," said Miss Marple.

A ticket collector appeared in the doorway. Miss Marple raised her eyes interrogatively. Mrs. McGillicuddy shook her head. It was not the same ticket collector. He clipped their tickets, and passed on staggering just a little as the train swung round a long curve. It slackened speed as it did so.

"I expect we're coming into Brackhampton," said Mrs. McGillicuddy.

"We're getting into the outskirts, I think," said Miss Marple.

There were lights flashing past outside, buildings, an occasional glimpse of streets and trams. Their speed slackened further. They began crossing points.

"We'll be there in a minute," said Mrs. McGillicuddy, "and I can't really see this journey has been any good *at all*. Has it suggested anything to you, Jane?"

"I'm afraid not," said Miss Marple in a rather doubtful voice.

"A sad waste of good money," said Mrs. McGillicuddy, but with less disapproval than she would have used had she been paying for herself. Miss Marple had been quite adamant on that point.

"All the same," said Miss Marple, "one likes to see with one's own eyes where a thing happened. This train's just a few minutes late. Was yours on time on Friday?"

"I think so. I didn't really notice."

The train drew slowly into the busy length of Brackhampton station. The loudspeaker announced hoarsely, doors opened and shut, people got in and out, milled up and down the platform. It was a busy crowded scene.

Easy, thought Miss Marple, for a murderer to merge into that crowd, to leave the station in the midst of that pressing mass of people, or even to select another carriage and go on in the train wherever its ultimate destination might be. Easy to be one male passenger amongst many. But not so easy to make a body vanish into thin air. That body must be *somewhere*.

Mrs. McGillicuddy had descended. She spoke now from the platform, through the open window.

"Now take care of yourself, Jane," she said. "Don't catch a chill. It's a nasty treacherous time of year, and you're not so young as you

were."

"I know," said Miss Marple.

"And don't let's worry ourselves anymore over all this. We've done what we could."

Miss Marple nodded, and said:

"Don't stand about in the cold, Elspeth. Or you'll be the one to catch a chill. Go and get yourself a good hot cup of tea in the Restaurant Room. You've got time, twelve minutes before your train back to town."

"I think perhaps I will. Good-bye, Jane."

"Good-bye, Elspeth. A happy Christmas to you. I hope you find Margaret well. Enjoy yourself in Ceylon, and give my love to dear Roderick—if he remembers me at all, which I doubt."

"Of course he remembers you—very well. You helped him in some way when he was at school—something to do with money that was disappearing from a locker—he's never forgotten it."

"Oh, *that!*" said Miss Marple.

Mrs. McGillicuddy turned away, a whistle blew, the train began to move. Miss Marple watched the sturdy thickset body of her friend recede. Elspeth could go to Ceylon with a clear conscience—she had done her duty and was freed from further obligation.

Miss Marple did not lean back as the train gathered speed. Instead she sat upright and devoted herself seriously to thought. Though in speech Miss Marple was woolly and diffuse, in mind she was clear and sharp. She had a problem to solve, the problem of her own future conduct; and, perhaps strangely, it presented itself to her as it had to Mrs. McGillicuddy, as a question of duty.

Mrs. McGillicuddy had said that they had both done all that they could do. It was true of Mrs. McGillicuddy but about herself Miss Marple did not feel so sure.

It was a question, sometimes, of using one's special gifts... But perhaps that was conceited... After all, what *could* she do? Her friend's words came back to her, "You're not so young as you were...."

Dispassionately, like a general planning a campaign, or an accountant assessing a business, Miss Marple weighed up and set

down in her mind the facts of and against further enterprise. On the credit side were the following:

- 1. My long experience of life and human nature.*
- 2. Sir Henry Clithering and his godson (now at Scotland Yard, I believe), who was so very nice in the Little Paddocks case.*
- 3. My nephew Raymond's second boy, David, who is, I am almost sure, in British Railways.*
- 4. Griselda's boy Leonard who is so very knowledgeable about maps.*

Miss Marple reviewed these assets and approved them. They were all very necessary, to reinforce the weaknesses on the debit side—in particular her own bodily weakness.

"It is not," thought Miss Marple, "as though I could go here, there and everywhere, making inquiries and finding out things."

Yes, that was the chief objection, her own age and weakness. Although, for her age, her health was good, yet she *was* old. And if Dr. Haydock had strictly forbidden her to do practical gardening he would hardly approve of her starting out to track down a murderer. For that, in effect, was what she was planning to do—and it was there that her loophole lay. For if heretofore murder had, so to speak, been forced upon her, in this case it would be that she herself set out deliberately to seek it. And she was not sure that she wanted to do so... She was old—old and tired. She felt at this moment, at the end of a tiring day, a great reluctance to enter upon any project at all. She wanted nothing at all but to march home and sit by the fire with a nice tray of supper, and go to bed, and potter about the next day just snipping off a few things in the garden, tidying up in a very mild way, without stooping, without exerting herself....

"I'm too old for anymore adventures," said Miss Marple to herself, watching absently out of the window the curving line of an embankment....

A curve....

Very faintly something stirred in her mind... Just after the ticket collector had clipped their tickets....

It suggested an idea. Only an idea. An entirely different idea....

A little pink flush came into Miss Marple's face. Suddenly she did not feel tired at all!

"I'll write to David tomorrow morning," she said to herself.

And at the same time another valuable asset flashed through her mind.

"Of course. My faithful Florence!"

II

Miss Marple set about her plan of campaign methodically and making due allowance for the Christmas season which was a definitely retarding factor.

She wrote to her great-nephew, David West, combining Christmas wishes with an urgent request for information.

Fortunately she was invited, as on previous years, to the vicarage for Christmas dinner, and here she was able to tackle young Leonard, home for the Christmas season, about maps.

Maps of all kinds were Leonard's passion. The reason for the old lady's inquiry about a large-scale map of a particular area did not rouse his curiosity. He discoursed on maps generally with fluency, and wrote down for her exactly what would suit her purpose best. In fact, he did better. He actually found that he had such a map amongst his collection and he lent it to her, Miss Marple promising to take great care of it and return it in due course.

III

"Maps," said his mother, Griselda, who still, although she had a grown-up son, looked strangely young and blooming to be inhabiting the shabby old vicarage. "What does she want with maps? I mean, what does she want them *for*?"

"I don't know," said young Leonard, "I don't think she said exactly."

"I wonder now..." said Griselda. "It seems very fishy to me... At her age the old pet ought to give up that sort of thing."

Leonard asked what sort of thing, and Griselda said elusively:

"Oh, poking her nose into things. Why *maps*, I wonder?"

In due course Miss Marple received a letter from her great-nephew David West. It ran affectionately:

Dear Aunt Jane,— Now what are you up to? I've got the information you wanted. There are only two trains that can possibly apply—the 4:33 and the 5 o'clock. The former is a slow train and stops at Haling Broadway, Barwell Heath, Brackhampton and then stations to Market Basing. The 5 o'clock is the Welsh express for Cardiff, Newport and Swansea. The former might be overtaken somewhere by the 4:50, although it is due in Brackhampton five minutes earlier and the latter passes the 4:50 just before Brackhampton.

In all this do I smell some village scandal of a fruity character? Did you, returning from a shopping spree in town by the 4:50, observe in a passing train the mayor's wife being embraced by the Sanitary Inspector? But why does it matter which train it was? A weekend at Porthcawl perhaps? Thank you for the pullover. Just what I wanted. How's the garden? Not very active this time of year, I should imagine.

Yours ever,

David

Miss Marple smiled a little, then considered the information thus presented to her. Mrs. McGillicuddy had said definitely that the carriage had not been a corridor one. Therefore—not the Swansea express. The 4:33 was indicated.

Also some more travelling seemed unavoidable. Miss Marple sighed, but made her plans.

She went up to London as before on the 12:15, but this time returned not by the 4:50, but by the 4:33 as far as Brackhampton. The journey was uneventful, but she registered certain details. The

train was not crowded—4:33 was before the evening rush hour. Of the first-class carriages only one had an occupant—a very old gentleman reading the *New Statesman*. Miss Marple travelled in an empty compartment and at the two stops, Haling Broadway and Barwell Heath, leaned out of the window to observe passengers entering and leaving the train. A small number of third-class passengers got in at Haling Broadway. At Barwell Heath several third-class passengers got out. Nobody entered or left a first-class carriage except the old gentleman carrying his *New Statesman*.

As the train neared Brackhampton, sweeping around a curve of line, Miss Marple rose to her feet and stood experimentally with her back to the window over which she had drawn down the blind.

Yes, she decided, the impetus of the sudden curving of the line and the slackening of speed did throw one off one's balance back against the window and the blind might, in consequence, very easily fly up. She peered out into the night. It was lighter than it had been when Mrs. McGillicuddy had made the same journey—only just dark, but there was little to see. For observation she must make a daylight journey.

On the next day she went up by the early morning train, purchased four linen pillow-cases (tut-tutting at the price!) so as to combine investigation with the provision of household necessities, and returned by a train leaving Paddington at twelve fifteen. Again she was alone in a first-class carriage. "This taxation," thought Miss Marple, "that's what it is. No one can afford to travel first class except business men in the rush hours. I suppose because they can charge it to expenses."

About a quarter of an hour before the train was due at Brackhampton, Miss Marple got out the map with which Leonard had supplied her and began to observe the country-side. She had studied the map very carefully beforehand, and after noting the name of a station they passed through, she was soon able to identify where she was just as the train began to slacken for a curve. It was a very considerable curve indeed. Miss Marple, her nose glued to the window, studied the ground beneath her (the train was running on a fairly high embankment) with close attention. She divided her

attention between the country outside and the map until the train finally ran into Brackhampton.

That night she wrote and posted a letter addressed to Miss Florence Hill, 4 Madison Road, Brackhampton... On the following morning, going to the County library, she studied a Brackhampton directory and gazetteer, and a County history.

Nothing so far had contradicted the very faint and sketchy idea that had come to her. What she had imagined was possible. She would go no further than that.

But the next step involved action—a good deal of action—the kind of action for which she, herself, was physically unfit. If her theory were to be definitely proved or disproved, she must at this point have help from some other source. The question was—who? Miss Marple reviewed various names and possibilities rejecting them all with a vexed shake of the head. The intelligent people on whose intelligence she could rely were all far too busy. Not only had they all got jobs of varying importance, their leisure hours were usually apportioned long beforehand. The unintelligent who had time on their hands were simply, Miss Marple decided, no good.

She pondered in growing vexation and perplexity.

Then suddenly her forehead cleared. She ejaculated aloud a name.

“Of course!” said Miss Marple. “*Lucy Eyelesbarrow!*”

Four

The name of Lucy Eyelesbarrow had already made itself felt in certain circles.

Lucy Eyelesbarrow was thirty-two. She had taken a First in Mathematics at Oxford, was acknowledged to have a brilliant mind and was confidently expected to take up a distinguished academic career.

But Lucy Eyelesbarrow, in addition to scholarly brilliance, had a core of good sound common sense. She could not fail to observe that a life of academic distinction was singularly ill rewarded. She had no desire whatever to teach and she took pleasure in contacts with minds much less brilliant than her own. In short, she had a taste for people, all sorts of people—and not the same people the whole time. She also, quite frankly, liked money. To gain money one must exploit shortage.

Lucy Eyelesbarrow hit at once upon a very serious shortage—the shortage of any kind of skilled domestic labour. To the amazement of her friends and fellow-scholars, Lucy Eyelesbarrow entered the field of domestic labour.

Her success was immediate and assured. By now, after a lapse of some years, she was known all over the British Isles. It was quite customary for wives to say joyfully to husbands, "It will be all right. I *can* go with you to the States. *I've got Lucy Eyelesbarrow!*" The point of Lucy Eyelesbarrow was that once she came into a house, all worry, anxiety and hard work went out of it. Lucy Eyelesbarrow did everything, saw to everything, arranged everything. She was

unbelievably competent in every conceivable sphere. She looked after elderly parents, accepted the care of young children, nursed the sickly, cooked divinely, got on well with any old crusted servants there might happen to be (there usually weren't), was tactful with impossible people, soothed habitual drunkards, was wonderful with dogs. Best of all she never minded *what* she did. She scrubbed the kitchen floor, dug in the garden, cleaned up dog messes, and carried coals!

One of her rules was never to accept an engagement for any long length of time. A fortnight was her usual period—a month at most under exceptional circumstances. For that fortnight you had to pay the earth! *But*, during that fortnight, your life was heaven. You could relax completely, go abroad, stay at home, do as you pleased, secure that all was going well on the home front in Lucy Eyelesbarrow's capable hands.

Naturally the demand for her services was enormous. She could have booked herself up if she chose for about three years ahead. She had been offered enormous sums to go as a permanency. But Lucy had no intention of being a permanency, nor would she book herself for more than six months ahead. And within that period, unknown to her clamouring clients, she always kept certain free periods which enabled her either to take a short luxurious holiday (since she spent nothing otherwise and was handsomely paid and kept) or to accept any position at short notice that happened to take her fancy, either by reason of its character, or because she "liked the people." Since she was now at liberty to pick and choose amongst the vociferous claimants for her services, she went very largely by personal liking. Mere riches would not buy you the services of Lucy Eyelesbarrow. She could pick and choose and she did pick and choose. She enjoyed her life very much and found in it a continual source of entertainment.

Lucy Eyelesbarrow read and reread the letter from Miss Marple. She had made Miss Marple's acquaintance two years ago when her services had been retained by Raymond West, the novelist, to go and look after his old aunt who was recovering from pneumonia. Lucy had accepted the job and had gone down to St. Mary Mead.

She had liked Miss Marple very much. As for Miss Marple, once she had caught a glimpse out of her bedroom window of Lucy Eyelesbarrow really trenching for sweet peas in the proper way, she had leaned back on her pillows with a sigh of relief, eaten the tempting little meals that Lucy Eyelesbarrow brought to her, and listened, agreeably surprised, to the tales told by her elderly irascible maidservant of how "I taught that Miss Eyelesbarrow a crochet pattern what she'd never heard of! Proper grateful, she was." And had surprised her doctor by the rapidity of her convalescence.

Miss Marple wrote asking if Miss Eyelesbarrow could undertake a certain task for her—rather an unusual one. Perhaps Miss Eyelesbarrow could arrange a meeting at which they could discuss the matter.

Lucy Eyelesbarrow frowned for a moment or two as she considered. She was in reality fully booked up. But the word *unusual*, and her recollection of Miss Marple's personality, carried the day and she rang up Miss Marple straight away explaining that she could not come down to St. Mary Mead as she was at the moment working, but that she was free from 2 to 4 on the following afternoon and could meet Miss Marple anywhere in London. She suggested her own club, a rather nondescript establishment which had the advantage of having several small dark writing rooms which were usually empty.

Miss Marple accepted the suggestion and on the following day the meeting took place.

Greetings were exchanged; Lucy Eyelesbarrow led her guest to the gloomiest of the writing rooms, and said: "I'm afraid I'm rather booked up just at present, but perhaps you'll tell me what it is you want me to undertake?"

"It's very simple, really," said Miss Marple. "Unusual, but simple. I want you to find a body."

For a moment the suspicion crossed Lucy's mind that Miss Marple was mentally unhinged, but she rejected the idea. Miss Marple was eminently sane. She meant exactly what she had said.

"What kind of a body?" asked Lucy Eyelesbarrow with admirable composure.

"A woman's body," said Miss Marple. "The body of a woman who was murdered—strangled actually—in a train."

Lucy's eyebrows rose slightly.

"Well, that's certainly unusual. Tell me about it."

Miss Marple told her. Lucy Eyelesbarrow listened attentively, without interrupting. At the end she said:

"It all depends on what your friend saw—or thought she saw—?"

She left the sentence unfinished with a question in it.

"Elspeth McGillicuddy doesn't imagine things," said Miss Marple. "That's why I'm relying on what she said. If it had been Dorothy Cartwright, now—it would have been *quite* a different matter. Dorothy always has a good story, and quite often believes it herself, and there is usually a kind of *basis* of truth but certainly no more. But Elspeth is the kind of woman who finds it very hard to make herself believe that anything at all extraordinary or out of the way *could* happen. She's almost unsuggestible, rather like granite."

"I see," said Lucy thoughtfully. "Well, let's accept it all. Where do I come in?"

"I was very much impressed by you," said Miss Marple, "and you see, I haven't got the physical strength nowadays to get about and do things."

"You want me to make inquiries? That sort of thing? But won't the police have done all that? Or do you think they have been just slack?"

"Oh, no," said Miss Marple. "They haven't been slack. It's just that I've got a theory about the woman's body. It's got to be *somewhere*. If it wasn't found in the train, then it must have been pushed or thrown out of the train—but it hasn't been discovered anywhere on the line. So I travelled down the same way to see if there was anywhere where the body could have been thrown off the train and yet wouldn't have been found on the line—and there was. The railway line makes a big curve before getting into Brackhampton, on the edge of a high embankment. If a body were thrown out there, when the train was leaning at an angle, I *think* it would pitch right down the embankment."

"But surely it would still be found—even there?"

"Oh, yes. It would have to be taken away... But we'll come to that presently. Here's the place—on this map?"

Lucy bent to study where Miss Marple's finger pointed.

"It is right in the outskirts of Brackhampton now," said Miss Marple, "but originally it was a country house with extensive park and grounds and it's still there, untouched—ringed round with building estates and small suburban houses. It's called Rutherford Hall. It was built by a man called Crackenthorpe, a very rich manufacturer, in 1884. The original Crackenthorpe's son, an elderly man, is living there still with, I understand, a daughter. The railway encircles quite half of the property."

"And you want me to do—what?"

Miss Marple replied promptly.

"I want you to get a post there. Everyone is crying out for efficient domestic help— I should not imagine it would be difficult."

"No, I don't suppose it would be difficult."

"I understand that Mr. Crackenthorpe is said locally to be somewhat of a miser. If you accept a low salary, I will make it up to the proper figure which should, I think, be rather more than the current rate."

"Because of the difficulty?"

"Not the difficulty so much as the danger. It might, you know, be *dangerous*. It's only right to warn you of that."

"I don't know," said Lucy pensively, "that the idea of danger would deter me."

"I didn't think it would," said Miss Marple. "You're not that kind of person."

"I dare say you thought it might even attract me? I've encountered very little danger in my life. But do you really believe it might be dangerous?"

"Somebody," Miss Marple pointed out, "has committed a very successful crime. There has been no hue-and-cry, no real suspicion. Two elderly ladies have told a rather improbable story, the police have investigated it and found nothing in it. So everything is nice and quiet. I don't think that this somebody, whoever he may be, will

care about the matter being raked up—especially if you are successful.”

“What do I look for exactly?”

“Any signs along the embankment, a scrap of clothing, broken bushes—that kind of thing.”

Lucy nodded.

“And then?”

“I shall be quite close at hand,” said Miss Marple. “An old maidservant of mine, my faithful Florence, lives in Brackhampton. She has looked after her old parents for years. They are now both dead, and she takes in lodgers—all most respectable people. She has arranged for me to have rooms with her. She will look after me most devotedly, and I feel I should like to be close at hand. I would suggest that you mention you have an elderly aunt living in the neighbourhood, and that you want a post within easy distance of her, and also that you stipulate for a reasonable amount of spare time so that you can go and see her often.”

Again Lucy nodded.

“I *was* going to Taormina the day after tomorrow,” she said. “The holiday can wait. But I can only promise three weeks. After that, I am booked up.”

“Three weeks should be ample,” said Miss Marple. “If we can’t find out anything in three weeks, we might as well give up the whole thing as a mare’s nest.”

Miss Marple departed, and Lucy, after a moment’s reflection, rang up a Registry Office in Brackhampton, the manageress of which she knew very well. She explained her desire for a post in the neighbourhood so as to be near her “aunt.” After turning down, with a little difficulty and a good deal of ingenuity, several more desirable places, Rutherford Hall was mentioned.

“That sounds exactly what I want,” said Lucy firmly.

The Registry Office rang up Miss Crackenthorpe, Miss Crackenthorpe rang up Lucy.

Two days later Lucy left London en route for Rutherford Hall.

II

Driving her own small car, Lucy Eyelesbarrow drove through an imposing pair of vast iron gates. Just inside them was what had originally been a small lodge which now seemed completely derelict, whether through war damage, or merely through neglect, it was difficult to be sure. A long winding drive led through large gloomy clumps of rhododendrons up to the house. Lucy caught her breath in a slight gasp when she saw the house which was a kind of miniature Windsor Castle. The stone steps in front of the door could have done with attention and the gravel sweep was green with neglected weeds.

She pulled an old-fashioned wrought-iron bell, and its clamour sounded echoing away inside. A slatternly woman, wiping her hands on her apron, opened the door and looked at her suspiciously.

"Expected, aren't you?" she said. "Miss Somethingbarrow, she told me."

"Quite right," said Lucy.

The house was desperately cold inside. Her guide led her along a dark hall and opened a door on the right. Rather to Lucy's surprise, it was quite a pleasant sitting room, with books and chintz-covered chairs.

"I'll tell her," said the woman, and went away shutting the door after having given Lucy a look of profound disfavour.

After a few minutes the door opened again. From the first moment Lucy decided that she liked Emma Crackenthorpe.

She was a middle-aged woman with no very outstanding characteristics, neither good-looking nor plain, sensibly dressed in tweeds and pullover, with dark hair swept back from her forehead, steady hazel eyes and a very pleasant voice.

She said: "Miss Eyelesbarrow?" and held out her hand.

Then she looked doubtful.

"I wonder," she said, "if this post is really what you're looking for? I don't want a housekeeper, you know, to supervise things. I want someone to do the work."

Lucy said that that was what most people needed.

Emma Crackenthorpe said apologetically:

"So many people, you know, seem to think that just a little light dusting will answer the case—but I can do all the light dusting myself."

"I quite understand," said Lucy. "You want cooking and washing-up, and housework and stoking the boiler. That's all right. That's what I do. I'm not at all afraid of work."

"It's a big house, I'm afraid, and inconvenient. Of course we only live in a portion of it—my father and myself, that is. He is rather an invalid. We live quite quietly, and there is an Aga stove. I have several brothers, but they are not here very often. Two women come in, a Mrs. Kidder in the morning, and Mrs. Hart three days a week to do brasses and things like that. You have your own car?"

"Yes. It can stand out in the open if there's nowhere to put it. It's used to it."

"Oh, there are any amount of old stables. There's no trouble about that." She frowned a moment, then said, "Eyelesbarrow—rather an unusual name. Some friends of mine were telling me about a Lucy Eyelesbarrow—the Kennedys?"

"Yes. I was with them in North Devon when Mrs. Kennedy was having a baby."

Emma Crackenthorpe smiled.

"I know they said they'd never had such a wonderful time as when you were there seeing to everything. But I had the idea that you were terribly expensive. The sum I mentioned—"

"That's quite all right," said Lucy. "I want particularly, you see, to be near Brackhampton. I have an elderly aunt in a critical state of health and I want to be within easy distance of her. That's why the salary is a secondary consideration. I can't afford to do nothing. If I could be sure of having some time off most days?"

"Oh, of course. Every afternoon, till six, if you like?"

"That seems perfect."

Miss Crackenthorpe hesitated a moment before saying: "My father is elderly and a little—difficult sometimes. He is very keen on economy, and he says things sometimes that upset people. I wouldn't like—"

Lucy broke in quickly:

"I'm quite used to elderly people, of all kinds," she said. "I always manage to get on well with them." Emma Crackenthorpe looked relieved.

"Trouble with father!" diagnosed Lucy. "I bet he's an old tartar."

She was apportioned a large gloomy bedroom which a small electric heater did its inadequate best to warm, and was shown round the house, a vast uncomfortable mansion. As they passed a door in the hall a voice roared out:

"That you, Emma? Got the new girl there? Bring her in. I want to look at her."

Emma flushed, glanced at Lucy apologetically.

The two women entered the room. It was richly upholstered in dark velvet, the narrow windows let in very little light, and it was full of heavy mahogany Victorian furniture.

Old Mr. Crackenthorpe was stretched out in an invalid chair, a silver-headed stick by his side.

He was a big gaunt man, his flesh hanging in loose folds. He had a face rather like a bulldog, with a pugnacious chin. He had thick dark hair flecked with grey, and small suspicious eyes.

"Let's have a look at you, young lady."

Lucy advanced, composed and smiling.

"There's just one thing you'd better understand straight away. Just because we live in a big house doesn't mean we're rich. We're *not* rich. We live simply—do you hear?—*simply*! No good coming here with a lot of high-falutin ideas. Cod's as good a fish as turbot any day, and don't you forget it. I don't stand for waste. I live here because my father built the house and I like it. After I'm dead they can sell it up if they want to—and I expect they will want to. No sense of family. This house is well built—it's solid, and we've got our own land around us. Keeps us private. It would bring in a lot if sold for building land but not while *I*'m alive. You won't get me out of here until you take me out feet first."

He glared at Lucy.

"Your home is your castle," said Lucy.

"Laughing at me?"

"Of course not. I think it's very exciting to have a real country place all surrounded by town."

"Quite so. Can't see another house from here, can you? Fields with cows in them—right in the middle of Brackhampton. You hear the traffic a bit when the wind's that way—but otherwise it's still country."

He added, without pause or change of tone, to his daughter:

"Ring up that damn' fool of a doctor. Tell him that last medicine's no good at all."

Lucy and Emma retired. He shouted after them:

"And don't let that damned woman who sniffs dust in here. She's disarranged all my books."

Lucy asked:

"Has Mr. Crackenthorpe been an invalid long?"

Emma said, rather evasively:

"Oh, for years now... This is the kitchen."

The kitchen was enormous. A vast kitchen range stood cold and neglected. An Aga stood demurely beside it.

Lucy asked times of meals and inspected the larder. Then she said cheerfully to Emma Crackenthorpe:

"I know everything now. Don't bother. Leave it all to me."

Emma Crackenthorpe heaved a sigh of relief as she went up to bed that night.

"The Kennedys were quite right," she said. "She's wonderful."

Lucy rose at six the next morning. She did the house, prepared vegetables, assembled, cooked and served breakfast. With Mrs. Kidder she made the beds and at eleven o'clock they sat down to strong tea and biscuits in the kitchen. Mollified by the fact that Lucy "had no airs about her," and also by the strength and sweetness of the tea, Mrs. Kidder relaxed into gossip. She was a small spare woman with a sharp eye and tight lips.

"Regular old skinflint *he* is. What she has to put up with! All the same, she's not what I call down-trodden. Can hold her own all right when she has to. When the gentlemen come down she sees to it there's something decent to eat."

"The gentlemen?"

"Yes. Big family it was. The eldest, Mr. Edmund, he was killed in the war. Then there's Mr. Cedric, he lives abroad somewhere. He's not married. Paints pictures in foreign parts. Mr. Harold's in the City, lives in London—married an earl's daughter. Then there's Mr. Alfred, he's got a nice way with him, but he's a bit of a black-sheep, been in trouble once or twice—and there's Miss Edith's husband, Mr. Bryan, ever so nice, he is—she died some years ago, but he's always stayed one of the family, and there's Master Alexander, Miss Edith's little boy. He's at school, comes here for part of the holidays always; Miss Emma's terribly set on him."

Lucy digested all this information, continuing to press tea on her informant. Finally, reluctantly, Mrs. Kidder rose to her feet.

"Seem to have got along a treat, we do, this morning," she said wonderingly. "Want me to give you a hand with the potatoes, dear?"

"They're all done ready."

"Well, you are a one for getting on with things! I might as well be getting along myself as there doesn't seem anything else to do."

Mrs. Kidder departed and Lucy, with time on her hands, scrubbed the kitchen table which she had been longing to do, but which she had put off so as not to offend Mrs. Kidder whose job it properly was. Then she cleaned the silver till it shone radiantly. She cooked lunch, cleared it away, washed it up, and at two-thirty was ready to start exploration. She had set out the tea things ready on a tray, with sandwiches and bread and butter covered with a damp napkin to keep them moist.

She strolled round the gardens which would be the normal thing to do. The kitchen garden was sketchily cultivated with a few vegetables. The hot-houses were in ruins. The paths everywhere were overgrown with weeds. A herbaceous border near the house was the only thing that showed free of weeds and in good condition and Lucy suspected that that had been Emma's hand. The gardener was a very old man, somewhat deaf, who was only making a show of working. Lucy spoke to him pleasantly. He lived in a cottage adjacent to the big stableyard.

Leading out of the stableyard a back drive led through the park which was fenced off on either side of it, and under a railway arch

into a small back lane.

Every few minutes a train thundered along the main line over the railway arch. Lucy watched the trains as they slackened speed going round the sharp curve that encircled the Crackenthorpe property. She passed under the railway arch and out into the lane. It seemed a little-used track. On the one side was the railway embankment, on the other was a high wall which enclosed some tall factory buildings. Lucy followed the lane until it came out into a street of small houses. She could hear a short distance away the busy hum of main road traffic. She glanced at her watch. A woman came out of a house nearby and Lucy stopped her.

"Excuse me, can you tell me if there is a public telephone near here?"

"Post office just at the corner of the road."

Lucy thanked her and walked along until she came to the Post Office which was a combination shop and post office. There was a telephone box at one side. Lucy went into it and made a call. She asked to speak to Miss Marple. A woman's voice spoke in a sharp bark.

"She's resting. And I'm not going to disturb her!! She needs her rest—she's an old lady. Who shall I say called?"

"Miss Eyelesbarrow. There's no need to disturb her. Just tell her that I've arrived and everything is going on well and that I'll let her know when I've any news."

She replaced the receiver and made her way back to Rutherford Hall.

Five

"I suppose it will be all right if I just practise a few iron shots in the park?" asked Lucy.

"Oh, yes, certainly. Are you fond of golf?"

"I'm not much good, but I like to keep in practice. It's a more agreeable form of exercise than just going for a walk."

"Nowhere to walk outside this place," growled Mr. Crackenthorpe. "Nothing but pavements and miserable little band boxes of houses. Like to get hold of my land and build more of them. But they won't until I'm dead. And I'm not going to die to oblige anybody. I can tell you that! Not to oblige *anybody!*"

Emma Crackenthorpe said mildly:

"Now, Father."

"I know what they think—and what they're waiting for. All of 'em. Cedric, and that sly fox Harold with his smug face. As for Alfred, I wonder he hasn't had a shot at bumping me off himself. Not sure he didn't, at Christmas-time. That was a very odd turn I had. Puzzled old Quimper. He asked me a lot of discreet questions."

"Everyone gets these digestive upsets now and again, Father."

"All right, all right, say straight out that I ate too much! That's what you mean. And *why* did I eat too much? Because there was too much food on the table, far too much. Wasteful and extravagant. And that reminds me—you, young woman. Five potatoes you sent in for lunch—good-sized ones too. Two potatoes are enough for anybody. So don't send in more than four in future. The extra one was wasted today."

"It wasn't wasted, Mr. Crackenthorpe. I've planned to use it in a Spanish omelette tonight."

"Urgh!" As Lucy went out of the room carrying the coffee tray she heard him say, "Slick young woman, that, always got all the answers. Cooks well, though—and she's a handsome kind of girl."

Lucy Eyelesbarrow took a light iron out of the set of golf clubs she had had the forethought to bring with her, and strolled out into the park, climbing over the fence.

She began playing a series of shots. After five minutes or so, a ball, apparently sliced, pitched on the side of the railway embankment. Lucy went up and began to hunt about for it. She looked back towards the house. It was a long way away and nobody was in the least interested in what she was doing. She continued to hunt for the ball. Now and then she played shots from the embankment down into the grass. During the afternoon she searched about a third of the embankment. Nothing. She played her ball back towards the house.

Then, on the next day, she came upon something. A thorn bush growing about halfway up the bank had been snapped off. Bits of it lay scattered about. Lucy examined the tree itself. Impaled on one of the thorns was a torn scrap of fur. It was almost the same colour as the wood, a pale brownish colour. Lucy looked at it for a moment, then she took a pair of scissors out of her pocket and snipped it carefully in half. The half she had snipped off she put in an envelope which she had in her pocket. She came down the steep slope searching about for anything else. She looked carefully at the rough grass of the field. She thought she could distinguish a kind of track which someone had made walking through the long grass. But it was very faint—not nearly so clear as her own tracks were. It must have been made some time ago and it was too sketchy for her to be sure that it was not merely imagination on her part.

She began to hunt carefully down in the grass at the foot of the embankment just below the broken thorn bush. Presently her search was rewarded. She found a powder compact, a small cheap enamelled affair. She wrapped it in her handkerchief and put it in her pocket. She searched on but did not find anything more.

On the following afternoon, she got into her car and went to see her invalid aunt. Emma Crackenthorpe said kindly, "Don't hurry back. We shan't want you until dinner-time."

"Thank you, but I shall be back by six at the latest."

No. 4 Madison Road was a small drab house in a small drab street. It had very clean Nottingham lace curtains, a shining white doorstep and a well-polished brass door handle. The door was opened by a tall, grim-looking woman, dressed in black with a large knob of iron-grey hair.

She eyed Lucy in suspicious appraisal as she showed her in to Miss Marple.

Miss Marple was occupying the back sitting room which looked out on to a small tidy square of garden. It was aggressively clean with a lot of mats and doilies, a great many china ornaments, a rather big Jacobean suite and two ferns in pots. Miss Marple was sitting in a big chair by the fire busily engaged in crocheting.

Lucy came in and shut the door. She sat down in the chair facing Miss Marple.

"Well!" she said. "It looks as though you were right."

She produced her finds and gave details of their finding.

A faint flush of achievement came into Miss Marple's cheeks.

"Perhaps one ought not to feel so," she said, "but it *is* rather gratifying to form a theory and get proof that it is correct!"

She fingered the small tuft of fur. "Elspeth said the woman was wearing a light-coloured fur coat. I suppose the compact was in the pocket of the coat and fell out as the body rolled down the slope. It doesn't seem distinctive in any way, but it may help. You didn't take all the fur?"

"No, I left half of it on the thorn bush."

Miss Marple nodded approval.

"Quite right. You are very intelligent, my dear. The police will want to check exactly."

"You are going to the police—with these things?"

"Well—not quite yet..." Miss Marple considered: "It would be better, I think, to find the body first. Don't you?"

"Yes, but isn't that rather a tall order? I mean, granting that your estimate is correct. The murderer pushed the body out of the train, then presumably got out himself at Brackhampton and at some time—probably that same night—came along and removed the body. But what happened after that? He may have taken it *anywhere*."

"Not *anywhere*," said Miss Marple. "I don't think you've followed the thing to its logical conclusion, my dear Miss Eyelesbarrow."

"Do call me Lucy. Why not anywhere?"

"Because, if so, he might much more easily have killed the girl in some lonely spot and driven the body away from there. You haven't appreciated—"

Lucy interrupted.

"Are you saying—do you mean—that this was a premeditated crime?"

"I didn't think so at first," said Miss Marple. "One wouldn't—naturally. It seemed like a quarrel and a man losing control and strangling the girl and then being faced with the problem which he had to solve within a few minutes. But it really is too much of a coincidence that he should kill the girl in a fit of passion, and then look out of the window and find the train was going round a curve exactly at a spot where he could tip the body out, *and* where he could be sure of finding his way later and removing it! If he'd just thrown her out there by chance, he'd have done no more about it, and the body would, long before now, have been found."

She paused. Lucy stared at her.

"You know," said Miss Marple thoughtfully, "it's really quite a clever way to have planned a crime—and I think it was very carefully planned. There's something so anonymous about a train. If he'd killed her in the place where she lived, or was staying, somebody might have noticed him come or go. Or if he'd driven her out in the country somewhere, someone might have noticed the car and its number and make. But a train is full of strangers coming and going. In a non-corridor carriage, alone with her, it was quite easy—especially if you realize that he knew exactly what he was going to do next. He knew—he *must* have known—all about Rutherford Hall—"

its geographical position, I mean, its queer isolation—an island bounded by railway lines.”

“It is exactly like that,” said Lucy. “It’s an anachronism out of the past. Bustling urban life goes on all around it, but doesn’t touch it. The tradespeople deliver in the mornings and that’s all.”

“So we assume, as you said, that the murderer comes to Rutherford Hall that night. It is already dark when the body falls and no one is likely to discover it before the next day.”

“No, indeed.”

“The murderer would come—how? In a car? Which way?”

Lucy considered.

“There’s a rough lane, alongside a factory wall. He’d probably come that way, turn in under the railway arch and along the back drive. Then he could climb the fence, go along at the foot of the embankment, find the body, and carry it back to the car.”

“And then,” continued Miss Marple, “he took it to some place he had already chosen beforehand. This was all thought out, you know. And I don’t think, as I say, that he would take it away from Rutherford Hall, or if so, not very far. The obvious thing, I suppose, would be to bury it somewhere?” She looked inquiringly at Lucy.

“I suppose so,” said Lucy considering. “But it wouldn’t be quite as easy as it sounds.”

Miss Marple agreed.

“He couldn’t bury it in the park. Too hard work and very noticeable. Somewhere where the earth was turned already?”

“The kitchen garden, perhaps, but that’s very close to the gardener’s cottage. He’s old and deaf—but still it might be risky.”

“Is there a dog?”

“No.”

“Then in a shed, perhaps, or an outhouse?”

“That would be simpler and quicker... There are a lot of unused old buildings; broken down pigsties, harness rooms, workshops that nobody ever goes near. Or he might perhaps thrust it into a clump of rhododendrons or shrubs somewhere.”

Miss Marple nodded.

“Yes, I think that’s *much* more probable.”

There was a knock on the door and the grim Florence came in with a tray.

"Nice for you to have a visitor," she said to Miss Marple, "I've made you my special scones you used to like."

"Florence always made the most delicious tea cakes," said Miss Marple.

Florence, gratified, creased her features into a totally unexpected smile and left the room.

"I think, my dear," said Miss Marple, "we won't talk anymore about murder during tea. Such an *unpleasant* subject!"

II

After tea, Lucy rose.

"I'll be getting back," she said. "As I've already told you, there's no one actually living at Rutherford Hall who could be the man we're looking for. There's only an old man and a middle-aged woman, and an old deaf gardener."

"I didn't say he was actually *living* there," said Miss Marple. "All I mean is, that he's someone who knows Rutherford Hall very well. But we can go into that after you've found the body."

"You seem to assume quite confidently that I *shall* find it," said Lucy. "I don't feel nearly so optimistic."

"I'm sure you will succeed, my dear Lucy. You are such an efficient person."

"In some ways, but I haven't had any experience in looking for bodies."

"I'm sure all it needs is a little common sense," said Miss Marple encouragingly.

Lucy looked at her, then laughed. Miss Marple smiled back at her.

Lucy set to work systematically the next afternoon.

She poked round outhouses, prodded the briars which wreathed the old pigsties, and was peering into the boiler room under the greenhouse when she heard a dry cough and turned to find old Hillman, the gardener, looking at her disapprovingly.

"You be careful you don't get a nasty fall, miss," he warned her. "Them steps isn't safe, and you was up in the loft just now and the floor there ain't safe neither."

Lucy was careful to display no embarrassment.

"I expect you think I'm very nosy," she said cheerfully. "I was just wondering if something couldn't be made out of this place—growing mushrooms for the market, that sort of thing. Everything seems to have been let go terribly."

"That's the master, that is. Won't spend a penny. Ought to have two men and a boy here, I ought, to keep the place proper, but won't hear of it, he won't. Had all I could do to make him get a motor mower. Wanted me to mow all that front grass by hand, he did."

"But if the place could be made to pay—with some repairs?"

"Won't get a place like this to pay—too far gone. And he wouldn't care about that, anyway. Only cares about saving. Knows well enough what'll happen after he's gone—the young gentlemen'll sell up as fast as they can. Only waiting for him to pop off, they are. Going to come into a tidy lot of money when he dies, so I've heard."

"I suppose he's a very rich man?" said Lucy.

"Crackenthorpe's Fancies, that's what they are. The old gentleman started it, Mr. Crackenthorpe's father. A sharp one he was, by all accounts. Made his fortune, and built this place. Hard as nails, they say, and never forgot an injury. But with all that, *he* was open-handed. Nothing of the miser about him. Disappointed in both his sons, so the story goes. Give 'em an education and brought 'em up to be gentlemen—Oxford and all. But they were too much of gentlemen to want to go into the business. The younger one married an actress and then smashed himself up in a car accident when he'd been drinking. The elder one, our one here, his father never fancied so much. Abroad a lot, he was, bought a lot of heathen statues and had them sent home. Wasn't so close with his money when he was young—come on him more in middle age, it did. No, they never did hit it off, him and his father, so I've heard."

Lucy digested this information with an air of polite interest. The old man leant against the wall and prepared to go on with his saga.

He much preferred talking to doing any work.

"Died before the war, the old gentleman did. Terrible temper he had. Didn't do to give him any cause, he wouldn't stand for it."

"And after he died, this Mr. Crackenthorpe came and lived here?"

"Him and his family, yes. Nigh grown up they was by then."

"But surely... Oh, I see, you mean the 1914 war."

"No, I don't. Died in 1928, that's what I mean."

Lucy supposed that 1928 qualified as "before the war" though it was not the way she would have described it herself.

She said: "Well, I expect you'll be wanting to go on with your work. You mustn't let me keep you."

"Ar," said old Hillman without enthusiasm, "not much you can do this time of day. Light's too bad."

Lucy went back to the house, pausing to investigate a likely-looking copse of birch and azalea on her way.

She found Emma Crackenthorpe standing in the hall reading a letter. The afternoon post had just been delivered.

"My nephew will be here tomorrow—with a school-friend. Alexander's room is the one over the porch. The one next to it will do for James Stoddart-West. They'll use the bathroom just opposite."

"Yes, Miss Crackenthorpe. I'll see the rooms are prepared."

"They'll arrive in the morning before lunch." She hesitated. "I expect they'll be hungry."

"I bet they will," said Lucy. "Roast beef, do you think? And perhaps treacle tart?"

"Alexander's very fond of treacle tart."

The two boys arrived on the following morning. They both had well-brushed hair, suspiciously angelic faces, and perfect manners. Alexander Eastley had fair hair and blue eyes, Stoddart-West was dark and spectacled.

They discoursed gravely during lunch on events in the sporting world, with occasional references to the latest space fiction. Their manner was that of elderly professors discussing palaeolithic implements. In comparison with them, Lucy felt quite young.

The sirloin of beef vanished in no time and every crumb of treacle tart was consumed.

Mr. Crackenthorpe grumbled: "You two will eat me out of house and home."

Alexander gave him a blue-eyed reproving glance.

"We'll have bread and cheese if you can't afford meat, Grandfather."

"Afford it? I can *afford* it. I don't like waste."

"We haven't wasted any, sir," said Stoddart-West, looking down at his place which bore clear testimony of that fact.

"You boys both eat twice as much as I do."

"We're at the body-building stage," Alexander explained. "We need a big intake of proteins."

The old man grunted.

As the two boys left the table, Lucy heard Alexander say apologetically to his friend:

"You mustn't pay any attention to my grandfather. He's on a diet or something and that makes him rather peculiar. He's terribly mean, too. I think it must be a complex of some kind."

Stoddart-West said comprehendingly:

"I had an aunt who kept thinking she was going bankrupt. Really, she had oodles of money. Pathological, the doctor said. Have you got that football, Alex?"

After she had cleared away and washed up lunch, Lucy went out. She could hear the boys calling out in the distance on the lawn. She herself went in the opposite direction, down the front drive and from there she struck across to some clumped masses of rhododendron bushes. She began to hunt carefully, holding back the leaves and peering inside. She moved from clump to clump systematically, and was raking inside with a golf club when the polite voice of Alexander Eastley made her start.

"Are you looking for something, Miss Eyelesbarrow?"

"A golf ball," said Lucy promptly. "Several golf balls in fact. I've been practising golf shots most afternoons and I've lost quite a lot of balls. I thought that today I really must find some of them."

"We'll help you," said Alexander obligingly.

"That's very kind of you. I thought you were playing football."

"One can't go *on* playing footer," explained Stoddart-West. "One gets too hot. Do you play a lot of golf?"

"I'm quite fond of it. I don't get much opportunity."

"I suppose you don't. You do the cooking here, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Did you cook the lunch today?"

"Yes. Was it all right?"

"Simply wizard," said Alexander. "We get awful meat at school, all dried up. I love beef that's pink and juicy inside. That treacle tart was pretty smashing, too."

"You must tell me what things you like best."

"Could we have apple meringue one day? It's my favourite thing."

"Of course."

Alexander sighed happily.

"There's a clock golf set under the stairs," he said. "We could fix it up on the lawn and do some putting. What about it, Stodders?"

"Good-oh!" said Stoddart-West.

"He isn't really Australian," explained Alexander courteously. "But he's practising talking that way in case his people take him out to see the Test Match next year."

Encouraged by Lucy, they went off to get the clock golf set. Later, as she returned to the house, she found them setting it out on the lawn and arguing about the position of the numbers.

"We don't want it like a clock," said Stoddart-West. "That's kid's stuff. We want to make a course of it. Long holes and short ones. It's a pity the numbers are so rusty. You can hardly see them."

"They need a lick of white paint," said Lucy. "You might get some tomorrow and paint them."

"Good idea." Alexander's face lit up. "I say, I believe there are some old pots of paint in the Long Barn—left there by the painters last hols. Shall we see?"

"What's the Long Barn?" asked Lucy.

Alexander pointed to a long stone building a little way from the house near the back drive.

"It's quite old," he said. "Grandfather calls it a Leak Barn and says its Elizabethan, but that's just swank. It belonged to the farm that

was here originally. My great-grandfather pulled it down and built this awful house instead."

He added: "A lot of grandfather's collection is in the barn. Things he had sent home from abroad when he was a young man. Most of them are pretty awful, too. The Long Barn is used sometimes for whist drives and things like that. Women's Institute stuff. And Conservative Sales of Work. Come and see it."

Lucy accompanied them willingly.

There was a big nail-studded oak door to the barn. Alexander raised his hand and detached a key on a nail just under some ivy to the right hand of the top of the door. He turned it in the lock, pushed the door open and they went in.

At a first glance Lucy felt that she was in a singularly bad museum. The heads of two Roman emperors in marble glared at her out of bulging eyeballs, there was a huge sarcophagus of a decadent Greco-Roman period, a simpering Venus stood on a pedestal clutching her falling draperies. Besides these works of art, there were a couple of trestle tables, some stacked-up chairs, and sundry oddments such as a rusted hand mower, two buckets, a couple of motheaten car seats, and a green painted iron garden seat that had lost a leg.

"I think I saw the paint over here," said Alexander vaguely. He went to a corner and pulled aside a tattered curtain that shut it off.

They found a couple of paint pots and brushes, the latter dry and stiff.

"You really need some turps," said Lucy.

They could not, however, find any turpentine. The boys suggested bicycling off to get some, and Lucy urged them to do so. Painting the clock golf numbers would keep them amused for some time, she thought.

The boys went off, leaving her in the barn.

"This really could do with a clear up," she had murmured.

"I shouldn't bother," Alexander advised her. "It gets cleaned up if it's going to be used for anything, but it's practically never used this time of year."

"Do I hang the key up outside the door again? Is that where it's kept?"

"Yes. There's nothing to pinch here, you see. Nobody would want those awful marble things and, anyway, they weigh a ton."

Lucy agreed with him. She could hardly admire old Mr. Crackenthorpe's taste in art. He seemed to have an unerring instinct for selecting the worst specimen of any period.

She stood looking round her after the boys had gone. Her eyes came to rest on the sarcophagus and stayed there.

That sarcophagus....

The air in the barn was faintly musty as though unaired for a long time. She went over to the sarcophagus. It had a heavy close-fitting lid. Lucy looked at it speculatively.

Then she left the barn, went to the kitchen, found a heavy crowbar, and returned.

It was not an easy task, but Lucy toiled doggedly.

Slowly the lid began to rise, prised up by the crowbar.

It rose sufficiently for Lucy to see what was inside....

Six

I

A few minutes later Lucy, rather pale, left the barn, locked the door and put the key back on the nail.

She went rapidly to the stables, got out her car and drove down the back drive. She stopped at the post office at the end of the road. She went into the telephone box, put in the money and dialled.

"I want to speak to Miss Marple."

"She's resting, miss. It's Miss Eyelesbarrow, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I'm not going to disturb her and that's that, miss. She's an old lady and she needs her rest."

"You must disturb her. It's urgent."

"I'm not—"

"Please do what I say at once."

When she chose, Lucy's voice could be as incisive as steel. Florence knew authority when she heard it.

Presently Miss Marple's voice spoke.

"Yes, Lucy?"

Lucy drew a deep breath.

"You were quite right," she said. "I've found it."

"A woman's body?"

"Yes. A woman in a fur coat. It's a stone sarcophagus in a kind of barn-cum-museum near the house. What do you want me to do? I ought to inform the police, I think."

"Yes. You must inform the police. At once."

"But what about the rest of it? About you? The first thing they'll want to know is *why* I was prying up a lid that weighs tons for apparently no reason. Do you want me to invent a reason? I can."

"No. I think, you know," said Miss Marple in her gentle serious voice, "that the only thing to do is to tell the exact truth."

"About you?"

"About everything."

A sudden grin split the whiteness of Lucy's face.

"That will be quite simple for me," she said. "But I imagine they'll find it quite hard to believe!"

She rang off, waited a moment, and then rang and got the police station.

"I have just discovered a dead body in a sarcophagus in the Long Barn at Rutherford Hall."

"What's that?"

Lucy repeated her statement and anticipating the next question gave her name.

She drove back, put the car away and entered the house.

She paused in the hall for a moment, thinking.

Then she gave a brief sharp nod of the head and went to the library where Miss Crackenthorpe was sitting helping her father to do *The Times* crossword.

"Can I speak to you a moment Miss Crackenthorpe?"

Emma looked up, a shade of apprehension on her face. The apprehension was, Lucy thought, purely domestic. In such words do useful household staff announce their imminent departure.

"Well, speak up, girl, speak up," said old Mr. Crackenthorpe irritably.

Lucy said to Emma:

"I'd like to speak to you alone, please."

"Nonsense," said Mr. Crackenthorpe. "You say straight out here what you've got to say."

"Just a moment, Father." Emma rose and went towards the door.

"All nonsense. It can wait," said the old man angrily.

"I'm afraid it can't wait," said Lucy.

Mr. Crackenthorpe said, "What impertinence!"

Emma came out into the hall. Lucy followed her and shut the door behind them.

"Yes?" said Emma. "What is it? If you think there's too much to do with the boys here, I can help you and—"

"It's not that at all," said Lucy. "I didn't want to speak before your father because I understand he is an invalid and it might give him a shock. You see, I've just discovered the body of a murdered woman in that big sarcophagus in the Long Barn."

Emma Crackenthorpe stared at her.

"In the sarcophagus? A murdered woman? It's impossible!"

"I'm afraid it's quite true. I've rung up the police. They will be here at any minute."

A slight flush came into Emma's cheeks.

"You should have told me first—before notifying the police."

"I'm sorry," said Lucy.

"I didn't hear you ring up—" Emma's glance went to the telephone on the hall table.

"I rang up from the post office just down the road."

"But how extraordinary. Why not from here?"

Lucy thought quickly.

"I was afraid the boys might be about—might hear—if I rang up from the hall here."

"I see... Yes... I see... They are coming—the police, I mean?"

"They're here now," said Lucy, as with a squeal of brakes a car drew up at the front door and the front doorbell pealed through the house.

II

"I'm sorry, very sorry—to have asked this of you," said Inspector Bacon.

His hand under her arm, he led Emma Crackenthorpe out of the barn. Emma's face was very pale, she looked sick, but she walked firmly erect.

"I'm quite sure that I've never seen the woman before in my life."

"We're very grateful to you, Miss Crackenthorpe. That's all I wanted to know. Perhaps you'd like to lie down?"

"I must go to my father. I telephoned Dr. Quimper as soon as I heard about this and the doctor is with him now."

Dr. Quimper came out of the library as they crossed the hall. He was a tall genial man, with a casual offhand cynical manner that his patients found very stimulating.

He and the inspector nodded to each other.

"Miss Crackenthorpe has performed an unpleasant task very bravely," said Bacon.

"Well done, Emma," said the doctor, patting her on the shoulder. "You can take things. I've always known that. Your father's all right. Just go in and have a word with him, and then go into the dining room and get yourself a glass of brandy. That's a prescription."

Emma smiled at him gratefully and went into the library.

"That woman's the salt of the earth," said the doctor, looking after her. "A thousand pities she's never married. The penalty of being the only female in a family of men. The other sister got clear, married at seventeen, I believe. This one's quite a handsome woman really. She'd have been a success as a wife and mother."

"Too devoted to her father, I suppose," said Inspector Bacon.

"She's not really as devoted as all that—but she's got the instinct some women have to make their menfolk happy. She sees that her father likes being an invalid, so she lets him be an invalid. She's the same with her brothers. Cedric feels he's a good painter, what's his name—Harold—knows how much she relies on his sound judgment—she lets Alfred shock her with his stories of his clever deals. Oh, yes, she's a clever woman—no fool. Well, do you want me for anything? Want me to have a look at your corpse now Johnstone has done with it" (Johnstone was the police surgeon) "and see if it happens to be one of my medical mistakes?"

"I'd like you to have a look, yes, Doctor. We want to get her identified. I suppose it's impossible for old Mr. Crackenthorpe? Too much of a strain?"

"Strain? Fiddlesticks. He'd never forgive you or me if you didn't let him have a peep. He's all agog. Most exciting thing that's happened to him for fifteen years or so—and it won't cost him anything!"

"There's nothing really much wrong with him then?"

"He's seventy-two," said the doctor. "That's all, really, that's the matter with him. He has odd rheumatic twinges—who doesn't? So he calls it arthritis. He has palpitations after meals—as well he may—he puts them down to 'heart.' But he can always do anything he wants to do! I've plenty of patients like that. The ones who are really ill usually insist desperately that they're perfectly well. Come on, let's go and see this body of yours. Unpleasant, I suppose?"

"Johnstone estimates she's been dead between a fortnight and three weeks."

"Quite unpleasant, then."

The doctor stood by the sarcophagus and looked down with frank curiosity, professionally unmoved by what he had named the "unpleasantness."

"Never seen her before. No patient of mine. I don't remember ever seeing her about in Brackhampton. She must have been quite good-looking once—hm—*somebody* had it in for her all right."

They went out again into the air. Doctor Quimper glanced up at the building.

"Found in the what—what do they call it?—the Long Barn—in a sarcophagus! Fantastic! Who found her?"

"Miss Lucy Eyelesbarrow."

"Oh, the latest lady help? What was *she* doing, poking about in sarcophagi?"

"That," said Inspector Bacon grimly, "is just what I am going to ask her. Now, about Mr. Crackenthorpe. Will you—?"

"I'll bring him along."

Mr. Crackenthorpe, muffled in scarves, came walking at a brisk pace, the doctor beside him.

"Disgraceful," he said. "Absolutely disgraceful! I brought back that sarcophagus from Florence in—let me see—it must have been in 1908—or was it 1909?"

"Steady now," the doctor warned him. "This isn't going to be nice, you know."

"No matter how ill I am, I've got to do my duty, haven't I?"

A very brief visit inside the Long Barn was, however, quite long enough. Mr. Crackenthorpe shuffled out into the air again with remarkable speed.

"Never saw her before in my life!" he said. "What's it mean? Absolutely disgraceful. It wasn't Florence—I remember now—it was Naples. A very fine specimen. And some fool of a woman has to come and get herself killed in it!"

He clutched at the folds of his overcoat on the left side.

"Too much for me... My heart... Where's Emma? Doctor..."

Doctor Quimper took his arm.

"You'll be all right," he said. "I prescribe a little stimulant. Brandy."

They went back together towards the house.

"Sir. Please, sir."

Inspector Bacon turned. Two boys had arrived, breathless, on bicycles. Their faces were full of eager pleading.

"Please, sir, can we see the body?"

"No, you can't," said Inspector Bacon.

"Oh, sir, *please*, sir. You never know. We might know who she was. Oh, please, sir, do be a sport. It's not fair. Here's a murder, right in our own barn. It's the sort of chance that might never happen again. Do be a sport, sir."

"Who are you two?"

"I'm Alexander Eastley, and this is my friend James Stoddart-West."

"Have you ever seen a blonde woman wearing a light-coloured dyed squirrel coat anywhere about the place?"

"Well, I can't remember exactly," said Alexander astutely. "If I were to have a look—"

"Take 'em in, Sanders," said Inspector Bacon to the constable who was standing by the barn door. "One's only young once!"

"Oh, sir, thank you, sir." Both boys were vociferous. "It's *very* kind of you, sir."

Bacon turned away towards the house.

"And now," he said to himself grimly, "for Miss Lucy Eyelesbarrow!"

III

After leading the police to the Long Barn, and giving a brief account of her actions, Lucy had retired into the background, but she was under no illusion that the police had finished with her.

She had just finished preparing potatoes for chips that evening when word was brought to her that Inspector Bacon required her presence. Putting aside the large bowl of cold water and salt in which the chips were reposing, Lucy followed the policeman to where the inspector awaited her. She sat down and awaited his questions composedly.

She gave her name—and her address in London, and added of her own accord:

"I will give you some names and addresses of references if you want to know all about me."

The names were very good ones. An Admiral of the Fleet, the Provost of an Oxford College, and a Dame of the British Empire. In spite of himself Inspector Bacon was impressed.

"Now, Miss Eyelesbarrow, you went into the Long Barn to find some paint. Is that right? And after having found the paint you got a crowbar, forced up the lid of this sarcophagus and found the body. What were you looking for in the sarcophagus?"

"I was looking for a body," said Lucy.

"You were looking for a body—and you found one! Doesn't that seem to you a very extraordinary story?"

"Oh, yes, it is an extraordinary story. Perhaps you will let me explain it to you."

"I certainly think you had better do so."

Lucy gave him a precise recital of the events which had led up to her sensational discovery.

The inspector summed it up in an outraged voice.

"You were engaged by an elderly lady to obtain a post here and to search the house and grounds for *a dead body*? Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Who is this elderly lady?"

"Miss Jane Marple. She is at present living at 4 Madison Road."

The inspector wrote it down.

"You expect me to believe this story?"

Lucy said gently:

"Not, perhaps, until after you have interviewed Miss Marple and got her confirmation of it."

"I shall interview her all right. She must be cracked."

Lucy forbore to point out that to be proved right is not really a proof of mental incapacity. Instead she said:

"What are you proposing to tell Miss Crackenthorpe? About *me*, I mean?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, as far as Miss Marple is concerned I've *done* my job, I've found the body she wanted found. But I'm still engaged by Miss Crackenthorpe, and there are two hungry boys in the house and probably some more of the family will soon be coming down after all this upset. She needs domestic help. If you go and tell her that I only took this post in order to hunt for dead bodies she'll probably throw me out. Otherwise I can get on with my job and be useful."

The inspector looked hard at her.

"I'm not saying anything to *anyone* at present," he said. "I haven't verified your statement yet. For all I know you may be making the whole thing up."

Lucy rose.

"Thank you. Then I'll go back to the kitchen and get on with things."

Seven

I

“We’d better have the Yard in on it, is that what you think, Bacon?”

The Chief Constable looked inquiringly at Inspector Bacon. The inspector was a big stolid man—his expression was that of one utterly disgusted with humanity.

“The woman wasn’t a local, sir,” he said. “There’s some reason to believe—from her underclothing—that she might have been a foreigner. Of course,” added Inspector Bacon hastily, “I’m not letting on about that yet awhile. We’re keeping it up our sleeves until after the inquest.”

The Chief Constable nodded.

“The inquest will be purely formal, I suppose?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve seen the Coroner.”

“And it’s fixed for—when?”

“Tomorrow. I understand the other members of the Crackenthorpe family will be here for it. There’s just a chance *one* of them might be able to identify her. They’ll all be here.”

He consulted a list he held in his hand.

“Harold Crackenthorpe, he’s something in the City—quite an important figure, I understand. Alfred—don’t quite know what he does. Cedric—that’s the one who lives abroad. Paints!” The inspector invested the word with its full quota of sinister significance. The Chief Constable smiled into his moustache.

"No reason, is there, to believe the Crackenthorpe family are connected with the crime in any way?" he asked.

"Not apart from the fact that the body was found on the premises," said Inspector Bacon. "And of course it's just possible that this artist member of the family might be able to identify her. What beats me is this extraordinary rigmarole about the train."

"Ah, yes. You've been to see this old lady, this—er—" (he glanced at the memorandum lying on his desk) "Miss Marple?"

"Yes, sir. And she's quite set and definite about the whole thing. Whether she's barmy or not, I don't know, but she sticks to her story—about what her friend saw and all the rest of it. As far as all that goes, I dare say it's just make-believe—sort of thing old ladies do make up, like seeing flying saucers at the bottom of the garden, and Russian agents in the lending library. But it seems quite clear that she *did* engage this young woman, the lady help, and told her to look for a body—which the girl did."

"*And found one,*" observed the Chief Constable. "Well, it's all a very remarkable story. Marple, Miss Jane Marple—the name seems familiar somehow... Anyway, I'll get on to the Yard. I think you're right about its not being a local case—though we won't advertise the fact just yet. For the moment we'll tell the Press as little as possible."

II

The inquest was a purely formal affair. No one came forward to identify the dead woman. Lucy was called to give evidence of finding the body and medical evidence was given as to the cause of death—strangulation. The proceedings were then adjourned.

It was a cold blustery day when the Crackenthorpe family came out of the hall where the inquest had been held. There were five of them all told, Emma, Cedric, Harold, Alfred, and Bryan Eastley, the husband of the dead daughter Edith. There was also Mr. Wimborne, the senior partner of the firm of solicitors who dealt with the Crackenthorpes' legal affairs. He had come down specially from London at great inconvenience to attend the inquest. They all stood

for a moment on the pavement, shivering. Quite a crowd had assembled; the piquant details of the "Body in the Sarcophagus" had been fully reported in both the London and the local Press.

A murmur went round: "That's them...."

Emma said sharply: "Let's get away."

The big hired Daimler drew up to the kerb. Emma got in and motioned to Lucy. Mr. Wimborne, Cedric and Harold followed. Bryan Eastley said: "I'll take Alfred with me in my little bus." The chauffeur shut the door and the Daimler prepared to roll away.

"Oh, stop!" cried Emma. "There are the boys!"

The boys, in spite of aggrieved protests, had been left behind at Rutherford Hall, but they now appeared grinning from ear to ear.

"We came on our bicycles," said Stoddart-West. "The policeman was very kind and let us in at the back of the hall. I hope you don't mind, Miss Crackenthorpe," he added politely.

"She doesn't mind," said Cedric, answering for his sister. "You're only young once. Your first inquest, I expect?"

"It was rather disappointing," said Alexander. "All over so soon."

"We can't stay here talking," said Harold irritably. "There's quite a crowd. And all those men with cameras."

At a sign from him, the chauffeur pulled away from the kerb. The boys waved cheerfully.

"All over so soon!" said Cedric. "That's what *they* think, the young innocents! It's just beginning."

"It's all very unfortunate. *Most* unfortunate," said Harold. "I suppose—"

He looked at Mr. Wimborne who compressed his thin lips and shook his head with distaste.

"I hope," he said sententiously, "that the whole matter will soon be cleared up satisfactorily. The police were very efficient. However, the whole thing, as Harold says, has been most unfortunate."

He looked, as he spoke, at Lucy, and there was distinct disapproval in his glance. "If it had not been for this young woman," his eyes seemed to say, "poking about where she had no business to be—none of this would have happened."

This statement, or one closely resembling it, was voiced by Harold Crackenthorpe.

"By the way—er—Miss—er—er Eyelesbarrow, just what *made* you go looking in that sarcophagus?"

Lucy had already wondered just when this thought would occur to one of the family. She had known that the police would ask it first thing; what surprised her was that it seemed to have occurred to no one else until this moment.

Cedric, Emma, Harold and Mr. Wimborne all looked at her.

Her reply, for what it was worth, had naturally been prepared for some time.

"Really," she said in a hesitating voice. "I hardly know... I *did* feel that the whole place needed a thorough clearing out and cleaning. And there was"—she hesitated—"a very peculiar and disagreeable smell...."

She had counted accurately on the immediate shrinking of everyone from the unpleasantness of this idea....

Mr. Wimborne murmured: "Yes, yes, of course...about three weeks the police surgeon said... I think, you know, we must all try and not let our minds *dwell* on this thing." He smiled encouragingly at Emma who had turned very pale. "Remember," he said, "this wretched young woman was nothing to do with any of *us*."

"Ah, but you can't be so sure of that, can you?" said Cedric.

Lucy Eyelesbarrow looked at him with some interest. She had already been intrigued by the rather startling differences between the three brothers. Cedric was a big man with a weather-beaten rugged face, unkempt dark hair and a jocund manner. He had arrived from the airport unshaven, and though he had shaved in preparation for the inquest, he was still wearing the clothes in which he had arrived and which seemed to be the only ones he had; old grey flannel trousers, and a patched and rather threadbare baggy jacket. He looked the stage Bohemian to the life and proud of it.

His brother Harold, on the contrary, was the perfect picture of a City gentleman and a director of important companies. He was tall with a neat erect carriage, had dark hair going slightly bald on the temples, a small black moustache, and was impeccably dressed in a

dark well-cut suit and a pearl-grey tie. He looked what he was, a shrewd and successful business man.

He now said stiffly:

"Really, Cedric, that seems a *most* uncalled-for remark."

"Don't see why? She was in our barn after all. What did she come there for?"

Mr. Wimborne coughed, and said:

"Possibly some—er—assignment. I understand that it was a matter of local knowledge that the key was kept outside on a nail."

His tone indicated outrage at the carelessness of such procedure. So clearly marked was this that Emma spoke apologetically.

"It started during the war. For the A.R.P. wardens. There was a little spirit stove and they made themselves hot cocoa. And afterwards, since there was really nothing there anybody could have wanted to take, we went on leaving the key hanging up. It was convenient for the Women's Institute people. If we'd kept it in the house it might have been awkward—when there was no one at home to give it them when they wanted it to get the place ready. With only daily women and no resident servants...."

Her voice trailed away. She had spoken mechanically, giving a wordy explanation without interest, as though her mind was elsewhere.

Cedric gave her a quick puzzled glance.

"You're worried, sis. What's up?"

Harold spoke with exasperation:

"Really, Cedric, can you ask?"

"Yes, I do ask. Granted a strange young woman has got herself killed in the barn at Rutherford Hall (sounds like a Victorian melodrama) and granted it gave Emma a shock at the time—but Emma's always been a sensible girl—I don't see why she goes on being worried *now*. Dash it, one gets used to everything."

"Murder takes a little more getting used to by some people than it may in your case," said Harold acidly. "I dare say murders are two a penny in Majorca and—"

"Ibiza, not Majorca."

"It's the same thing."

"Not at all—it's quite a different island."

Harold went on talking:

"My point is that though murder may be an everyday commonplace to *you*, living amongst hot-blooded Latin people, nevertheless in England we take such things seriously." He added with increasing irritation, "And really, Cedric, to appear at a public inquest in those clothes—"

"What's wrong with my clothes? They're comfortable."

"They're unsuitable."

"Well, anyway, they're the only clothes I've got with me. I didn't pack my wardrobe trunk when I came rushing home to stand in with the family over this business. I'm a painter and painters like to be comfortable in their clothes."

"So you're still trying to paint?"

"Look here, Harold, when you say trying to paint—"

Mr. Wimborne cleared his throat in an authoritative manner.

"This discussion is unprofitable," he said reprovingly. "I hope, my dear Emma, that you will tell me if there is any further way in which I can be of service to you before I return to town?"

The reproof had its effect. Emma Crackenthorpe said quickly:

"It was most kind of you to come down."

"Not at all. It was advisable that someone should be at the inquest to watch the proceedings on behalf of the family. I have arranged for an interview with the inspector at the house. I have no doubt that, distressing as all this has been, the situation will soon be clarified. In my own mind, there seems little doubt as to what occurred. As Emma has told us, the key to the Long Barn was known locally to hang outside the door. It seems highly probable that the place was used in the winter months as a place of assignation by local couples. No doubt there was a quarrel and some young man lost control of himself. Horrified at what he had done, his eye lit on the sarcophagus and he realized that it would make an excellent place of concealment."

Lucy thought to herself, "Yes, it sounds most plausible. That's just what one might think."

Cedric said, "You say a local couple—but nobody's been able to identify the girl locally."

"It's early days yet. No doubt we shall get an identification before long. And it is possible, of course, that the *man* in question was a local resident, but that the girl came from elsewhere, perhaps from some other part of Brackhampton. Brackhampton's a big place—it's grown enormously in the last twenty years."

"If I were a girl coming to meet my young man, I'd not stand for being taken to a freezing cold barn miles from anywhere," Cedric objected. "I'd stand out for a nice bit of cuddle in the cinema, wouldn't you, Miss Eyelesbarrow?"

"Do we need to go into all this?" Harold demanded plaintively.

And with the voicing of the question the car drew up before the front door of Rutherford Hall and they all got out.

Eight

I

On entering the library Mr. Wimborne blinked a little as his shrewd old eyes went past Inspector Bacon whom he had already met, to the fair-haired, good-looking man beyond him.

Inspector Bacon performed introductions.

"This is Detective-Inspector Craddock of New Scotland Yard," he said.

"New Scotland Yard—hm." Mr. Wimborne's eyebrows rose.

Dermot Craddock, who had a pleasant manner, went easily into speech.

"We have been called in on the case, Mr. Wimborne," he said. "As you are representing the Crackenthorpe family, I feel it is only fair that we should give you a little confidential information."

Nobody could make a better show of presenting a very small portion of the truth and implying that it was the whole truth than Inspector Craddock.

"Inspector Bacon will agree, I am sure," he added, glancing at his colleague.

Inspector Bacon agreed with all due solemnity and not at all as though the whole matter were prearranged.

"It's like this," said Craddock. "We have reason to believe, from information that has come into our possession, that the dead woman is not a native of these parts, that she travelled down here from

London and that she had recently come from abroad. Probably (though we are not sure of that) from France."

Mr. Wimborne again raised his eyebrows.

"Indeed," he said. "Indeed?"

"That being the case," explained Inspector Bacon, "the Chief Constable felt that the Yard was better fitted to investigate the matter."

"I can only hope," said Mr. Wimborne, "that the case will be solved quickly. As you can no doubt appreciate, the whole business has been a source of much distress to the family. Although not *personally* concerned in any way, they are—"

He paused for a bare second, but Inspector Craddock filled the gap quickly.

"It's not a pleasant thing to find a murdered woman on your property? I couldn't agree with you more. Now I should like to have a brief interview with the various members of the family—"

"I really cannot see—"

"What they can tell me? Probably nothing of interest—but one never knows. I dare say I can get most of the information I want from you, sir. Information about this house and the family."

"And what can that possibly have to do with an unknown young woman coming from abroad and getting herself killed here?"

"Well, that's rather the point," said Craddock. "*Why* did she come here? Had she once had some connection with this house? >Had she been, for instance, a servant here at one time? A lady's maid, perhaps. Or did she come here to meet a former occupant of Rutherford Hall?"

Mr. Wimborne said coldly that Rutherford Hall had been occupied by the Crackenthorpes ever since Josiah Crackenthorpe built it in 1884.

"That's interesting in itself," said Craddock. "If you'd just give me a brief outline of the family history—"

Mr. Wimborne shrugged his shoulders.

"There is very little to tell. Josiah Crackenthorpe was a manufacturer of sweet and savoury biscuits, relishes, pickles, etc. He

accumulated a vast fortune. He built this house. Luther Crackenthorpe, his eldest son, lives here now."

"Any other sons?"

"One other son, Henry, who was killed in a motor accident in 1911."

"And the present Mr. Crackenthorpe has never thought of selling the house?"

"He is unable to do so," said the lawyer dryly. "By the terms of his father's will."

"Perhaps you'll tell me about the will?"

"Why should I?"

Inspector Craddock smiled.

"Because I can look it up myself if I want to, at Somerset House."

Against his will, Mr. Wimborne gave a crabbed little smile.

"Quite right, Inspector. I was merely protesting that the information you ask for is quite irrelevant. As to Josiah Crackenthorpe's will, there is no mystery about it. He left his very considerable fortune in trust, the income from it to be paid to his son Luther for life, and after Luther's death the capital to be divided equally between Luther's children, Edmund, Cedric, Harold, Alfred, Emma and Edith. Edmund was killed in the war, and Edith died four years ago, so that on Luther Crackenthorpe's decease the money will be divided between Cedric, Harold, Alfred, Emma and Edith's son Alexander Eastley."

"And the house?"

"That will go to Luther Crackenthorpe's eldest surviving son or his issue."

"Was Edmund Crackenthorpe married?"

"No."

"So the property will actually go—?"

"To the next son— Cedric."

"Mr. Luther Crackenthorpe himself cannot dispose of it?"

"No."

"And he has no control of the capital."

"No."

"Isn't that rather unusual? I suppose," said Inspector Craddock shrewdly, "that his father didn't like him."

"You suppose correctly," said Mr. Wimborne. "Old Josiah was disappointed that his eldest son showed no interest in the family business—or indeed in business of any kind. Luther spent his time travelling abroad and collecting *objets d'art*. Old Josiah was very unsympathetic to that kind of thing. So he left his money in trust for the next generation."

"But in the meantime the next generation have no income except what they make or what their father allows them, and their father has a considerable income but no power of disposal of the capital."

"Exactly. And what all this has to do with the murder of an unknown young woman of foreign origin I cannot imagine!"

"It doesn't seem to have anything to do with it," Inspector Craddock agreed promptly, "I just wanted to ascertain all the facts."

Mr. Wimborne looked at him sharply, then, seemingly satisfied with the result of his scrutiny, rose to his feet.

"I am proposing now to return to London," he said. "Unless there is anything further you wish to know?"

He looked from one man to the other.

"No, thank you, sir."

The sound of the gong rose fortissimo from the hall outside.

"Dear me," said Mr. Wimborne. "One of the boys, I think, must have been performing."

Inspector Craddock raised his voice, to be heard above the clamour, as he said:

"We'll leave the family to have lunch in peace, but Inspector Bacon and I would like to return after it—say at two fifteen—and have a short interview with every member of the family."

"You think that is necessary?"

"Well..." Craddock shrugged his shoulders. "It's just an off chance. *Somebody* might remember something that would give us a clue to the woman's identity."

"I doubt it, Inspector. I doubt it very much. But I wish you good luck. As I said just now, the sooner this distasteful business is cleared up, the better for everybody."

Shaking his head, he went slowly out of the room.

II

Lucy had gone straight to the kitchen on getting back from the inquest, and was busy with preparations for lunch when Bryan Eastley put his head in.

"Can I give you a hand in any way?" he asked. "I'm handy about the house."

Lucy gave him a quick, slightly preoccupied glance. Bryan had arrived at the inquest direct in his small M.G. car, and she had not as yet had much time to size him up.

What she saw was likeable enough. Eastley was an amiable-looking young man of thirty-odd with brown hair, rather plaintive blue eyes and an enormous fair moustache.

"The boys aren't back yet," he said, coming in and sitting on the end of the kitchen table. "It will take 'em another twenty minutes on their bikes."

Lucy smiled.

"They were certainly determined not to miss anything."

"Can't blame them. I mean to say—first inquest in their young lives and right in the family so to speak."

"Do you mind getting off the table, Mr. Eastley? I want to put the baking dish down there."

Bryan obeyed.

"I say, that fat's corking hot. What are you going to put in it?"

"Yorkshire pudding."

"Good old Yorkshire. Roast beef of old England, is that the menu for today?"

"Yes."

"The funeral baked meats, in fact. Smells good." He sniffed appreciatively. "Do you mind my gassing away?"

"If you came in to help I'd rather you helped." She drew another pan from the oven. "Here—turn all these potatoes over so that they brown on the other side...."

Bryan obeyed with alacrity.

"Have all these things been fizzling away in here while we've been at the inquest? Supposing they'd been all burnt up."

"Most improbable. There's a regulating number on the oven."

"Kind of electric brain, eh, what? Is that right?"

Lucy threw a swift look in his direction.

"Quite right. Now put the pan in the oven. Here, take the cloth. On the second shelf—I want the top for the Yorkshire pudding."

Bryan obeyed, but not without uttering a shrill yelp.

"Burnt yourself?"

"Just a bit. It doesn't matter. What a dangerous game cooking is!"

"I suppose you never do your own cooking?"

"As a matter of fact I do—quite often. But not this sort of thing. I can boil an egg—if I don't forget to look at the clock. And I can do eggs and bacon. And I can put a steak under the grill or open a tin of soup. I've got one of those little electric whatnots in my flat."

"You live in London?"

"If you call it living—yes."

His tone was despondent. He watched Lucy shoot in the dish with the Yorkshire pudding mixture.

"This is awfully jolly," he said and sighed.

Her immediate preoccupations over, Lucy looked at him with more attention.

"What is—this kitchen?"

"Yes. Reminds me of our kitchen at home—when I was a boy."

It struck Lucy that there was something strangely forlorn about Bryan Eastley. Looking closely at him, she realized that he was older than she had at first thought. He must be close on forty. It seemed difficult to think of him as Alexander's father. He reminded her of innumerable young pilots she had known during the war when she had been at the impressionable age of fourteen. She had gone on and grown up into a post-war world—but she felt as though Bryan had not gone on, but had been passed by in the passage of years. His next words confirmed this. He had subsided on to the kitchen table again.

"It's a difficult sort of world," he said, "isn't it? To get your bearings in, I mean. You see, one hasn't been trained for it."

Lucy recalled what she had heard from Emma.

"You were a fighter pilot, weren't you?" she said. "You've got a D.F.C."

"That's the sort of thing that puts you wrong. You've got a gong and so people try to make it easy for you. Give you a job and all that. Very decent of them. But they're all admin. jobs, and one simply isn't any good at that sort of thing. Sitting at a desk getting tangled up in figures. I've had ideas of my own, you know, tried out a wheeze or two. But you can't get the backing. Can't get the chaps to come in and put down the money. If I had a bit of capital—"

He brooded.

"You didn't know Edie, did you? My wife. No, of course you didn't. She was quite different from all this lot. Younger, for one thing. She was in the W.A.A.F. She always said her old man was crackers. He is, you know. Mean as hell over money. And it's not as though he could take it with him. It's got to be divided up when he dies. Edie's share will go to Alexander, of course. He won't be able to touch the capital until he's twenty-one, though."

"I'm sorry, but will you get off the table again? I want to dish up and make gravy."

At that moment Alexander and Stoddart-West arrived with rosy faces and very much out of breath.

"Hallo, Bryan," said Alexander kindly to his father. "So this is where you've got to. I say, what a smashing piece of beef. Is there Yorkshire pudding?"

"Yes, there is."

"We have awful Yorkshire pudding at school—all damp and limp."

"Get out of my way," said Lucy. "I want to make the gravy."

"Make lots of gravy. Can we have two sauce-boats full?"

"Yes."

"Good-oh!" said Stoddart-West, pronouncing the word carefully.

"I don't like it pale," said Alexander anxiously.

"It won't be pale."

"She's a smashing cook," said Alexander to his father.

Lucy had a momentary impression that their roles were reversed. Alexander spoke like a kindly father to his son.

"Can we help you, Miss Eyelesbarrow?" asked Stoddart-West politely.

"Yes, you can. Alexander, go and sound the gong. James, will you carry this tray into the dining room? And will you take the joint in, Mr. Eastley? I'll bring the potatoes and the Yorkshire pudding."

"There's a Scotland Yard man here," said Alexander. "Do you think he will have lunch with us?"

"That depends on what your aunt arranged."

"I don't suppose Aunt Emma would mind... She's very hospitable. But I suppose Uncle Harold wouldn't like it. He's being very sticky over this murder." Alexander went out through the door with the tray, adding a little additional information over his shoulder. "Mr. Wimborne's in the library with the Scotland Yard man now. But he isn't staying to lunch. He said he had to get back to London. Come on, Stoddars. Oh, he's gone to do the gong."

At that moment the gong took charge. Stoddart-West was an artist. He gave it everything he had, and all further conversation was inhibited.

Bryan carried in the joint, Lucy followed with vegetables—returning to the kitchen to get the two brimming sauce-boats of gravy.

Mr. Wimborne was standing in the hall putting on his gloves as Emma came quickly down the stairs.

"Are you really sure you won't stop for lunch, Mr. Wimborne? It's all ready."

"No, I've an important appointment in London. There is a restaurant car on the train."

"It was very good of you to come down," said Emma gratefully.

The two police officers emerged from the library.

Mr. Wimborne took Emma's hand in his.

"There's nothing to worry about, my dear," he said. "This is Detective-Inspector Craddock from New Scotland Yard who has come to take charge of the case. He is coming back at two-fifteen to ask you for any facts that may assist him in his inquiry. But, as I say,

you have nothing to worry about." He looked towards Craddock. "I may repeat to Miss Crackenthorpe what you have told me?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Inspector Craddock has just told me that this almost certainly was not a local crime. The murdered woman is thought to have come from London and was probably a foreigner."

Emma Crackenthorpe said sharply:

"A foreigner. Was she French?"

Mr. Wimborne had clearly meant his statement to be consoling. He looked slightly taken aback. Dermot Craddock's glance went quickly from him to Emma's face.

He wondered why she had leaped to the conclusion that the murdered woman was French, and why that thought disturbed her so much?

Nine

I

The only people who really did justice to Lucy's excellent lunch were the two boys and Cedric Crackenthorpe who appeared completely unaffected by the circumstances which had caused him to return to England. He seemed, indeed, to regard the whole thing as a rather good joke of a macabre nature.

This attitude, Lucy noted, was most unpalatable to his brother Harold. Harold seemed to take the murder as a kind of personal insult to the Crackenthorpe family and so great was his sense of outrage that he ate hardly any lunch. Emma looked worried and unhappy and also ate very little. Alfred seemed lost in a train of thought of his own and spoke very little. He was quite a good-looking man with a thin dark face and eyes set rather too close together.

After lunch the police officers returned and politely asked if they could have a few words with Mr. Cedric Crackenthorpe.

Inspector Craddock was very pleasant and friendly.

"Sit down, Mr. Crackenthorpe. I understand you have just come back from the Balearics? You live out there?"

"Have done for the past six years. In Ibiza. Suits me better than this dreary country."

"You get a good deal more sunshine than we do, I expect," said Inspector Craddock agreeably. "You were home not so very long ago, I understand—for Christmas, to be exact. What made it necessary for you to come back again so soon?"

Cedric grinned.

"Got a wire from Emma—my sister. We've never had a murder on the premises before. Didn't want to miss anything—so along I came."

"You are interested in criminology?"

"Oh, we needn't put it in such highbrow terms! I just like murders—Whodunnits and all that! With a Whodunnit parked right on the family doorstep, it seemed the chance of a lifetime. Besides, I thought poor Em might need a spot of help—managing the old man and the police and all the rest of it."

"I see. It appealed to your sporting instincts and also to your family feelings. I've no doubt your sister will be very grateful to you—although her two other brothers have also come to be with her."

"But not to cheer and comfort," Cedric told him. "Harold is terrifically put out. It's not at all the thing for a City magnate to be mixed up with the murder of a questionable female."

Craddock's eyebrows rose gently.

"Was she—a questionable female?"

"Well, you're the authority on that point. Going by the facts, it seemed to me likely."

"I thought perhaps you might have been able to make a guess at who she was?"

"Come now, Inspector, you already know—or your colleagues will tell you, that I haven't been able to identify her."

"I said a guess, Mr. Crackenthorpe. You might never have *seen* the woman before—but you might have been able to make a guess at who she was—or who she might have been?"

Cedric shook his head.

"You're barking up the wrong tree. I've absolutely no idea. You're suggesting, I suppose, that she may have come to the Long Barn to keep an assignation with one of us? But we none of us live here. The only people in the house were a woman and an old man. You don't seriously believe that she came here to keep a date with my revered Pop?"

"Our point is—Inspector Bacon agrees with me—that the woman may once have had some association with this house. It may have

been a considerable number of years ago. Cast your mind back, Mr. Crackenthorpe."

Cedric thought a moment or two, then shook his head.

"We've had foreign help from time to time, like most people, but I can't think of any likely possibility. Better ask the others—they'd know more than I would."

"We shall do that, of course."

Craddock leaned back in his chair and went on:

"As you have heard at the inquest, the medical evidence cannot fix the time of death very accurately. Longer than two weeks, less than four—which brings it somewhere around Christmas-time. You have told me you came home for Christmas. When did you arrive in England and when did you leave?"

Cedric reflected.

"Let me see... I flew. Got here on the Saturday before Christmas—that would be the 21st."

"You flew straight from Majorca?"

"Yes. Left at five in the morning and got here midday."

"And you left?"

"I flew back on the following Friday, the 27th."

"Thank you."

Cedric grinned.

"Leaves me well within the limit, unfortunately. But really, Inspector, strangling young women is *not* my favourite form of Christmas fun."

"I hope not, Mr. Crackenthorpe."

Inspector Bacon merely looked disapproving.

"There would be a remarkable absence of peace and good will about such an action, don't you agree?"

Cedric addressed this question to Inspector Bacon who merely grunted. Inspector Craddock said politely:

"Well, thank you, Mr. Crackenthorpe. That will be all."

"And what do you think of him?" Craddock asked as Cedric shut the door behind him.

Bacon grunted again.

"Cocky enough for anything," he said. "I don't care for the type myself. A loose-living lot, these artists, and very likely to be mixed up with a disreputable class of woman."

Craddock smiled.

"I don't like the way he dresses, either," went on Bacon. "No respect—going to an inquest like that. Dirtiest pair of trousers I've seen in a long while. And did you see his tie? Looked as though it was made of coloured string. If you ask me, he's the kind that would easily strangle a woman and make no bones about it."

"Well, he didn't strangle this one—if he didn't leave Majorca until the 21st. And that's a thing we can verify easily enough."

Bacon threw him a sharp glance.

"I notice that you're not tipping your hand yet about the actual date of the crime."

"No, we'll keep that dark for the present. I always like to have something up my sleeve in the early stages."

Bacon nodded in full agreement.

"Spring it on 'em when the time comes," he said. "That's the best plan."

"And now," said Craddock, "we'll see what our correct City gentleman has to say about it all."

Harold Crackenthorpe, thin-lipped, had very little to say about it. It was most distasteful—a very unfortunate incident. The newspapers, he was afraid... Reporters, he understood, had already been asking for interviews... All that sort of thing... Most regrettable....

Harold's staccato unfinished sentences ended. He leaned back in his chair with the expression of a man confronted with a very bad smell.

The inspector's probing produced no result. No, he had no idea who the woman was or could be. Yes, he had been at Rutherford Hall for Christmas. He had been unable to come down until Christmas Eve—but had stayed on over the following weekend.

"That's that, then," said Inspector Craddock, without pressing his questions further. He had already made up his mind that Harold Crackenthorpe was not going to be helpful.

He passed on to Alfred, who came into the room with a nonchalance that seemed just a trifle overdone.

Craddock looked at Alfred Crackenthorpe with a faint feeling of recognition. Surely he had seen this particular member of the family somewhere before? Or had it been his picture in the paper? There was something discreditable attached to the memory. He asked Alfred his occupation and Alfred's answer was vague.

"I'm in insurance at the moment. Until recently I've been interested in putting a new type of talking machine on the market. Quite revolutionary. I did very well out of that as a matter of fact."

Inspector Craddock looked appreciative—and no one could have had the least idea that he was noticing the superficially smart appearance of Alfred's suit and gauging correctly the low price it had cost. Cedric's clothes had been disreputable, almost threadbare, but they had been originally of good cut and excellent material. Here there was a cheap smartness that told its own tale. Craddock passed pleasantly on to his routine questions. Alfred seemed interested—even slightly amused.

"It's quite an idea, that the woman might once have had a job here. Not as a lady's maid; I doubt if my sister has ever had such a thing. I don't think anyone has nowadays. But, of course, there is a good deal of foreign domestic labour floating about. We've had Poles—and a temperamental German or two. As Emma definitely didn't recognize the woman, I think that washes your idea out, Inspector, Emma's got a very good memory for a face. No, if the woman came from London... What gives you the idea she came from London, by the way?"

He slipped the question in quite casually, but his eyes were sharp and interested.

Inspector Craddock smiled and shook his head.

Alfred looked at him keenly.

"Not telling, eh? Return ticket in her coat pocket, perhaps, is that it?"

"It could be, Mr. Crackenthorpe."

"Well, granting she came from London, perhaps the chap she came to meet had the idea that the Long Barn would be a nice place

to do a quiet murder. He knows the setup here, evidently. I should go looking for *him* if I were you, Inspector."

"We are," said Inspector Craddock, and made the two little words sound quiet and confident.

He thanked Alfred and dismissed him.

"You know," he said to Bacon, "I've seen that chap somewhere before...."

Inspector Bacon gave his verdict.

"Sharp customer," he said. "So sharp that he cuts himself sometimes."

II

"I don't suppose you want to see me," said Bryan Eastley apologetically, coming into the room and hesitating by the door. "I don't exactly belong to the family—"

"Let me see, you are Mr. Bryan Eastley, the husband of Miss Edith Crackenthorpe, who died five years ago?"

"That's right."

"Well, it's very kind of you, Mr. Eastley, especially if you know something that you think could assist us in some way?"

"But I don't. Wish I did. Whole thing seems so ruddy peculiar, doesn't it? Coming along and meeting some fellow in that draughty old barn, in the middle of winter. Wouldn't be my cup of tea!"

"It is certainly very perplexing," Inspector Craddock agreed.

"Is it true that she was a foreigner? Word seems to have got round to that effect."

"Does that fact suggest anything to you?" The inspector looked at him sharply, but Bryan seemed amiably vacuous.

"No, it doesn't, as a matter of fact."

"Maybe she was French," said Inspector Bacon, with dark suspicion.

Bryan was roused to slight animation. A look of interest came into his blue eyes, and he tugged at his big fair moustache.

"Really? Gay Paree?" He shook his head. "On the whole it seems to make it even more unlikely, doesn't it? Messing about in the barn, I mean. You haven't had any other sarcophagus murders, have you? One of these fellows with an urge—or a complex? Thinks he's Caligula or someone like that?"

Inspector Craddock did not even trouble to reject this speculation. Instead he asked in a casual manner:

"Nobody in the family got any French connections, or—or—relationships that you know of?"

Bryan said that the Crackenthorpes weren't a very gay lot.

"Harold's respectably married," he said. "Fish-faced woman, some impoverished peer's daughter. Don't think Alfred cares about women much—spends his life going in for shady deals which usually go wrong in the end. I dare say Cedric's got a few Spanish señoritas jumping through hoops for him in Ibiza. Women rather fall for Cedric. Doesn't always shave and looks as though he never washes. Don't see why that should be attractive to women, but apparently it is—I say, I'm not being very helpful, am I?"

He grinned at them.

"Better get young Alexander on the job. He and James Stoddart-West are out hunting for clues in a big way. Bet you they turn up something."

Inspector Craddock said he hoped they would. Then he thanked Bryan Eastley and said he would like to speak to Miss Emma Crackenthorpe.

III

Inspector Craddock looked with more attention at Emma Crackenthorpe than he had done previously. He was still wondering about the expression that he had surprised on her face before lunch.

A quiet woman. Not stupid. Not brilliant either. One of those comfortable pleasant women whom men were inclined to take for granted, and who had the art of making a house into a home, giving

it an atmosphere of restfulness and quiet harmony. Such, he thought, was Emma Crackenthorpe.

Women such as this were often underrated. Behind their quiet exterior they had force of character, they were to be reckoned with. Perhaps, Craddock thought, the clue to the mystery of the dead woman in the sarcophagus was hidden away in the recesses of Emma's mind.

Whilst these thoughts were passing through his head, Craddock was asking various unimportant questions.

"I don't suppose there is much that you haven't already told Inspector Bacon," he said. "So I needn't worry you with many questions."

"Please ask me anything you like."

"As Mr. Wimborne told you, we have reached the conclusion that the dead woman was not a native of these parts. That may be a relief to you—Mr. Wimborne seemed to think it would be—but it makes it really more difficult for us. She's less easily identified."

"But didn't she have anything—a handbag? Papers?"

Craddock shook his head.

"No handbag, nothing in her pockets."

"You've no idea of her name—of where she came from—anything at all?"

Craddock thought to himself: She wants to know—she's very anxious to know—who the woman is. Has she felt like that all along, I wonder? Bacon didn't give me that impression—and he's a shrewd man....

"We know nothing about her," he said. "That's why we hoped one of you could help us. Are you sure you can't? Even if you didn't recognize her—can you think of anyone she might be?"

He thought, but perhaps he imagined it, that there was a very slight pause before she answered.

"I've absolutely no idea," she said.

Imperceptibly, Inspector Craddock's manner changed. It was hardly noticeable except as a slight hardness in his voice.

"When Mr. Wimborne told you that the woman was a foreigner, why did you assume that she was French?"

Emma was not disconcerted. Her eyebrows rose slightly.

"Did I? Yes, I believe I did. I don't really know why—except that one always tends to think foreigners *are* French until one finds out what nationality they really are. Most foreigners in this country are French, aren't they?"

"Oh, I really wouldn't say that was so, Miss Crackenthorpe. Not nowadays. We have so many nationalities over here, Italians, Germans, Austrians, all the Scandinavian countries—"

"Yes, I suppose you're right."

"You don't have some special reason for thinking that this woman was likely to be French?"

She didn't hurry to deny it. She just thought a moment and then shook her head almost regretfully.

"No," she said. "I really don't think so."

Her glance met his placidly, without flinching. Craddock looked towards Inspector Bacon. The latter leaned forward and presented a small enamel powder compact.

"Do you recognize this, Miss Crackenthorpe?"

She took it and examined it.

"No. It's certainly not mine."

"You've no idea to whom it belonged?"

"No."

"Then I don't think we need worry you anymore—for the present."

"Thank you."

She smiled briefly at them, got up, and left the room. Again he may have imagined it, but Craddock thought she moved rather quickly, as though a certain relief hurried her.

"Think she knows anything?" asked Bacon.

Inspector Craddock said ruefully:

"At a certain stage one is inclined to think everyone knows a little more than they are willing to tell you."

"They usually do, too," said Bacon out of the depth of his experience. "Only," he added, "it quite often isn't anything to do with the business in hand. It's some family peccadillo or some silly scrape that people are afraid is going to be dragged into the open."

"Yes, I know. Well, at least—"

But whatever Inspector Craddock had been about to say never got said, for the door was flung open and old Mr. Crackenthorpe shuffled in in a high state of indignation.

"A pretty pass, when Scotland Yard comes down and doesn't have the courtesy to talk to the head of the family first! Who's the master of this house, I'd like to know? Answer me that? Who's the master here?"

"You are, of course, Mr. Crackenthorpe," said Craddock soothingly and rising as he spoke. "But we understood that you had already told Inspector Bacon all you know, and that, your health not being good, we must not make too many demands upon it. Dr. Quimper said—"

"I dare say—I dare say. I'm not a strong man... As for Dr. Quimper, he's a regular old woman—perfectly good doctor, understands my case—but inclined to wrap me up in cotton-wool. Got a bee in his bonnet about food. Went on at me Christmas-time when I had a bit of a turn—what did I eat? When? Who cooked it? Who served it? Fuss, fuss, fuss! But though I may have indifferent health, I'm well enough to give you all the help that's in my power. Murder in my own house—or at any rate in my own barn! Interesting building, that. Elizabethan. Local architect says not—but fellow doesn't know what he's talking about. Not a day later than 1580—but that's not what we're talking about. What do you want to know? What's your present theory?"

"It's a little too early for theories, Mr. Crackenthorpe. We are still trying to find out who the woman was."

"Foreigner, you say?"

"We think so."

"Enemy agent?"

"Unlikely, I should say."

"You'd say—you'd say! They're everywhere, these people. Infiltrating! Why the Home Office lets them in beats me. Spying on industrial secrets, I'd bet. That's what she was doing."

"In Brackhampton?"

"Factories everywhere. One outside my own back gate."

Craddock shot an inquiring glance at Bacon who responded.

"Metal Boxes."

"How do you know that's what they're really making? Can't swallow all these fellows tell you. All right, if she wasn't a spy, who do you think she was? Think she was mixed up with one of my precious sons? It would be Alfred, if so. Not Harold, he's too careful. And Cedric doesn't condescend to live in this country. All right, then, she was Alfred's bit of skirt. And some violent fellow followed her down here, thinking she was coming to meet him and did her in. How's that?"

Inspector Craddock said diplomatically that it was certainly a theory. But Mr. Alfred Crackenthorpe, he said, had not recognized her.

"Pah! Afraid, that's all! Alfred always was a coward. But he's a liar, remember, always was! Lie himself black in the face. None of my sons are any good. Crowd of vultures, waiting for me to die, that's their real occupation in life," he chuckled. "*And* they can wait. I won't die to oblige *them*! Well, if that's all I can do for you... I'm tired. Got to rest."

He shuffled out again.

"Alfred's bit of skirt?" said Bacon questioningly. "In my opinion the old man just made that up," he paused, hesitated. "I think, personally, Alfred's quite all right—perhaps a shifty customer in some ways—but not our present cup of tea. Mind you—I did just wonder about that Air Force chap."

"Bryan Eastley?"

"Yes. I've run into one or two of his type. They're what you might call adrift in the world—had danger and death and excitement too early in life. Now they find life tame. Tame and unsatisfactory. In a way, we've given them a raw deal. Though I don't really know what we could do about it. But there they are, all past and no future, so to speak. And they're the kind that don't mind taking chances—the ordinary fellow plays safe by instinct, it's not so much morality as prudence. But these fellows aren't afraid—playing safe isn't really in their vocabulary. If Eastley were mixed up with a woman and wanted to kill her..." He stopped, threw out a hand hopelessly. "But

why should he want to kill her? And if you do kill a woman, why plant her in your father-in-law's sarcophagus? No, if you ask me, none of this lot had anything to do with the murder. If they had, they wouldn't have gone to all the trouble of planting the body on their own back door step, so to speak."

Craddock agreed that that hardly made sense.

"Anything more you want to do here?"

Craddock said there wasn't.

Bacon suggested coming back to Brackhampton and having a cup of tea—but Inspector Craddock said that he was going to call on an old acquaintance.

Ten

I

Miss Marple, sitting erect against a background of china dogs and presents from Margate, smiled approvingly at Inspector Dermot Craddock.

"I'm so glad," she said, "that you have been assigned to the case. I hoped you would be."

"When I got your letter," said Craddock, "I took it straight to the A.C. As it happened he had just heard from the Brackhampton people calling us in. They seemed to think it wasn't a local crime. The A.C. was very interested in what I had to tell him about you. He'd heard about you, I gather, from my godfather."

"Dear Sir Henry," murmured Miss Marple affectionately.

"He got me to tell him all about the Little Paddocks business. Do you want to hear what he said next?"

"Please tell me if it is not a breach of confidence."

"He said, 'Well, as this seems a completely cockeyed business, all thought up by a couple of old ladies who've turned out, against all probability, to be right, and since you already know one of these old ladies, I'm sending you down on the case.' So here I am! And now, my dear Miss Marple, where do we go from here? This is not, as you probably appreciate, an official visit. I haven't got my henchmen with me. I thought you and I might take down our back hair together first."

Miss Marple smiled at him.

"I'm sure," she said, "that no one who only knows you officially would ever guess that you could be so human, and better-looking than ever—don't blush... Now, what, exactly, have you been told so far?"

"I've got everything, I think. Your friend, Mrs. McGillicuddy's original statement to the police at St. Mary Mead, confirmation of her statement by the ticket collector, and also the note to the stationmaster at Brackhampton. I may say that all the proper inquiries were made by the people concerned—the railway people and the police. But there's no doubt that you outsmarted them all by a most fantastic process of guesswork."

"*Not* guesswork," said Miss Marple. "And I had a great advantage. I *knew* Elspeth McGillicuddy. Nobody else did. There was no obvious confirmation of her story, and if there was no question of any woman being reported missing, then quite naturally they would think it was just an elderly lady imagining things—as elderly ladies often do—but not Elspeth McGillicuddy."

"Not Elspeth McGillicuddy," agreed the inspector. "I'm looking forward to meeting her, you know. I wish she hadn't gone to Ceylon. We're arranging for her to be interviewed there, by the way."

"My own process of reasoning was not really original," said Miss Marple. "It's all in Mark Twain. The boy who found the horse. He just imagined where he would go if he were a horse and he went there and there was the horse."

"You imagined what you'd do if you were a cruel and cold-blooded murderer?" said Craddock looking thoughtfully at Miss Marple's pink and white elderly fragility. "Really, your mind—"

"Like a sink, my nephew Raymond used to say," Miss Marple agreed, nodding her head briskly. "But as I always told him, sinks are necessary domestic equipment and actually very hygienic."

"Can you go a little further still, put yourself in the murderer's place, and tell me just where he is now?"

Miss Marple sighed.

"I wish I could. I've no idea—no idea at all. But he must be someone who has lived in, or knows all about, Rutherford Hall."

"I agree. But that opens up a very wide field. Quite a succession of daily women have worked there. There's the Women's Institute—and the A.R.P. Wardens before them. They all know the Long Barn and the sarcophagus and where the key was kept. The whole setup there is widely known locally. *Anybody* living round about might hit on it as a good spot for his purpose."

"Yes, indeed. I *quite* understand your difficulties."

Craddock said: "We'll never get anywhere until we identify the body."

"And that, too, may be difficult?"

"Oh, we'll get there—in the end. We're checking up on all the reported disappearances of a woman of that age and appearance. There's no one outstanding who fits the bill. The M.O. puts her down as about thirty-five, healthy, probably a married woman, has had at least one child. Her fur coat is a cheap one purchased at a London store. Hundreds of such coats were sold in the last three months, about sixty per cent of them to blonde women. No sales girl can recognize the photograph of the dead woman, or is likely to if the purchase were made just before Christmas. Her other clothes seem mainly of foreign manufacture mostly purchased in Paris. There are no English laundry marks. We've communicated with Paris and they are checking up there for us. Sooner or later, of course, someone will come forward with a missing relative or lodger. It's just a matter of time."

"The compact wasn't any help?"

"Unfortunately, no. It's a type sold by the hundred in the Rue de Rivoli, quite cheap. By the way, you ought to have turned that over to the police at once, you know—or rather Miss Eyelesbarrow should have done so."

Miss Marple shook her head.

"But at that moment there wasn't any question of a crime having been committed," she pointed out. "If a young lady, practising golf shots, picks up an old compact of no particular value in the long grass, surely she doesn't rush straight off to the police with it?" Miss Marple paused, and then added firmly: "I thought it *much* wiser to find the body first."

Inspector Craddock was tickled.

"You don't seem ever to have had any doubts but that it would be found?"

"I was sure it would. Lucy Eyelesbarrow is a most efficient and intelligent person."

"I'll say she is! She scares the life out of me, she's so devastatingly efficient! No man will ever dare marry that girl."

"Now you know, I wouldn't say *that*... It would have to be a special type of man, of course." Miss Marple brooded on this thought a moment. "How is she getting on at Rutherford Hall?"

"They're completely dependent on her as far as I can see. Eating out of her hand—literally as you might say. By the way, they know nothing about her connection with you. We've kept that dark."

"She has no connection *now* with me. She has done what I asked her to do."

"So she could hand in her notice and go if she wanted to?"

"Yes."

"But she stops on. Why?"

"She has not mentioned her reasons to me. She is a very intelligent girl. I suspect that she has become interested."

"In the problem? Or in the family?"

"It may be," said Miss Marple, "that it is rather difficult to separate the two."

Craddock looked hard at her.

"Oh, no—oh, dear me, no."

"Have you got anything particular in mind?"

"I think you have."

Miss Marple shook her head.

Dermot Craddock sighed. "So all I can do is to 'prosecute my inquiries'—to put it in jargon. A policeman's life is a dull one!"

"You'll get results, I'm sure."

"Any ideas for me? More inspired guesswork?"

"I was thinking of things like theatrical companies," said Miss Marple rather vaguely. "Touring from place to place and perhaps not many home ties. One of those young women would be much less likely to be missed."

"Yes. Perhaps you've got something there. We'll pay special attention to that angle." He added, "What are you smiling about?"

"I was just thinking," said Miss Marple, "of Elspeth McGillicuddy's face when she hears we've found the body!"

II

"Well!" said Mrs. McGillicuddy. "*Well!*"

Words failed her. She looked across at the nicely spoken pleasant young man who had called upon her with official credentials and then down at the photograph that he handed her.

"That's her all right," she said. "Yes, that's her. Poor soul. Well, I must say I'm glad you've found her body. Nobody believed a word I said! The police, or the railway people or anyone else. It's very galling not to be believed. At any rate, nobody could say I didn't do all I possibly could."

The nice young man made sympathetic and appreciative noises.

"Where did you say the body was found?"

"In a barn at a house called Rutherford Hall, just outside Brackhampton."

"Never heard of it. How did it get there, I wonder?"

The young man didn't reply.

"Jane Marple found it, I suppose. Trust Jane."

"The body," said the young man, referring to some notes, "was found by a Miss Lucy Eyelesbarrow."

"Never heard of her either," said Mrs. McGillicuddy. "I still think Jane Marple had something to do with it."

"Anyway, Mrs. McGillicuddy, you definitely identify this picture as that of the woman whom you saw in a train?"

"Being strangled by a man. Yes, I do."

"Now, can you describe this man?"

"He was a tall man," said Mrs. McGillicuddy.

"Yes?"

"And dark."

"Yes?"

"That's all I can tell you," said Mrs. McGillicuddy. "He had his back to me. I didn't see his face."

"Would you be able to recognize him if you saw him?"

"Of course I shouldn't! He had his back to me. I never saw his face."

"You've no idea at all as to his age?"

Mrs. McGillicuddy considered.

"No—not really. I mean, I don't *know*... He wasn't, I'm almost sure—very young. His shoulders looked—well, set, if you know what I mean." The young man nodded. "Thirty and upward, I can't get closer than that. I wasn't really looking at him, you see. It was *her*—with those hands round her throat and her face—all blue... You know, sometimes I dream of it even now..."

"It must have been a distressing experience," said the young man sympathetically.

He closed his notebook and said:

"When are you returning to England?"

"Not for another three weeks. It isn't necessary, is it, for me?"

He quickly reassured her.

"Oh, no. There's nothing you could do at present. Of course, if we make an arrest—"

It was left like that.

The mail brought a letter from Miss Marple to her friend. The writing was spiky and spidery and heavily underlined. Long practice made it easy for Mrs. McGillicuddy to decipher. Miss Marple wrote a very full account to her friend who devoured every word with great satisfaction.

She and Jane had shown them all right!

Eleven

I

"I simply can't make you out," said Cedric Crackenthorpe.

He eased himself down on the decaying wall of a long derelict pigsty and stared at Lucy Eyelesbarrow.

"What can't you make out?"

"What you're doing here?"

"I'm earning my living."

"As a skivvy?" he spoke disparagingly.

"You're out of date," said Lucy. "Skivvy, indeed! I'm a Household Help, a Professional Domestician, or an Answer to Prayer, mainly the latter."

"You can't like all the things you have to do—cooking and making beds and whirring about with a hoopla or whatever you call it, and sinking your arms up to the elbows in greasy water."

Lucy laughed.

"Not the details, perhaps, but cooking satisfies my creative instincts, and there's something in me that really revels in clearing up mess."

"I live in a permanent mess," said Cedric. "I like it," he added defiantly.

"You look as though you did."

"My cottage in Ibiza is run on simple straightforward lines. Three plates, two cups and saucers, a bed, a table and a couple of chairs. There's dust everywhere and smears of paint and chips of stone—I

sculpt as well as paint—and nobody's allowed to touch a thing. I won't have a woman near the place."

"Not in any capacity?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I was assuming that a man of such artistic tastes presumably had some kind of love life."

"My love life, as you call it, is my own business," said Cedric with dignity. "What I won't have is woman in her tidying-up interfering *bossing* capacity."

"How I'd love to have a go at your cottage," said Lucy. "It would be a challenge!"

"You won't get the opportunity."

"I suppose not."

Some bricks fell out of the pigsty. Cedric turned his head and looked into its nettle-ridden depths.

"Dear old Madge," he said. "I remember her well. A sow of most endearing disposition and prolific mother. Seventeen in the last litter, I remember. We used to come here on fine afternoons and scratch Madge's back with a stick. She loved it."

"Why has this whole place been allowed to get into the state it's in? It can't only be the war?"

"You'd like to tidy this up, too, I suppose? What an interfering female you are. I quite see now why you *would* be the person to discover a body! You couldn't even leave a Greco-Roman sarcophagus alone." He paused and then went on. "No, it's not only the war. It's my father. What do you think of him, by the way?"

"I haven't had much time for thinking."

"Don't evade the issue. He's as mean as hell, and in my opinion a bit crazy as well. Of course he hates all of us—except perhaps Emma. That's because of my grandfather's will."

Lucy looked inquiring.

"My grandfather was the man who madea-da-monitch. With the Crunchies and the Cracker Jacks and the Cosy Crisps. All the afternoon tea delicacies and then, being far-sighted, he switched on very early to Cheesies and Canapés so that now we cash in on cocktail parties in a big way. Well, the time came when father

intimated that he had a soul above Crunchies. He travelled in Italy and the Balkans and Greece and dabbled in art. My grandfather was peeved. He decided my father was no man of business and a rather poor judge of art (quite right in both cases), so left all his money in trust for his grandchildren. Father had the income for life, but he couldn't touch the capital. Do you know what he did? He stopped spending money. He came here and began to save. I'd say that by now he's accumulated nearly as big a fortune as my grandfather left. And in the meantime all of us, Harold, myself, Alfred and Emma haven't got a penny of grandfather's money. I'm a stony-broke painter. Harold went into business and is now a prominent man in the City—he's the one with the money-making touch, though I've heard rumours that he's in Queer Street lately. Alfred—well, Alfred is usually known in the privacy of the family as Flash Alf—

"Why?"

"What a lot of things you want to know! The answer is that Alf is the black sheep of the family. He's not actually been to prison yet, but he's been very near it. He was in the Ministry of Supply during the war, but left it rather abruptly under questionable circumstances. And after that there were some dubious deals in tinned fruits—and trouble over eggs. Nothing in a big way—just a few doubtful deals on the side."

"Isn't it rather unwise to tell strangers all these things?"

"Why? Are you a police spy?"

"I might be."

"I don't think so. You were here slaving away before the police began to take an interest in us. I should say—"

He broke off as his sister Emma came through the door of the kitchen garden.

"Hallo, Em? You're looking very perturbed about something?"

"I am. I want to talk to you, Cedric."

"I must get back to the house," said Lucy, tactfully.

"Don't go," said Cedric. "Murder has made you practically one of the family."

"I've got a lot to do," said Lucy. "I only came out to get some parsley."

She beat a rapid retreat to the kitchen garden. Cedric's eyes followed her.

"Good-looking girl," he said. "Who is she really?"

"Oh, she's quite well known," said Emma. "She's made a speciality of this kind of thing. But never mind Lucy Eyelesbarrow, Cedric, I'm terribly worried. Apparently the police think that the dead woman was a foreigner, perhaps French. Cedric, you don't think that she could possibly be— *Martine*?"

II

For a moment or two Cedric stared at her as though uncomprehending.

"Martine? But who on earth—oh, you mean *Martine*?"

"Yes. Do you think—"

"Why on earth should it be *Martine*?"

"Well, her sending that telegram was odd when you come to think of it. It must have been roughly about the same time... Do you think that she may, after all, have come down here and—"

"Nonsense. Why should Martine come down here and find her way into the Long Barn? What for? It seems wildly unlikely to me."

"You don't think, perhaps, that I ought to tell Inspector Bacon—or the other one?"

"Tell him what?"

"Well—about Martine. About her letter."

"Now don't you go complicating things, sis, by bringing up a lot of irrelevant stuff that has nothing to do with all this. I was never very convinced about that letter from Martine, anyway."

"I was."

"You've always been good at believing impossible things before breakfast, old girl. My advice to you is, sit tight, and keep your mouth shut. It's up to the police to identify their precious corpse. And I bet Harold would say the same."

"Oh, I know Harold would. And Alfred, also. But I'm worried, Cedric, I really *am* worried. I don't know what I ought to do."

"Nothing," said Cedric promptly. "You keep your mouth shut, Emma. Never go halfway to meet trouble, that's my motto."

Emma Crackenthorpe sighed. She went slowly back to the house uneasy in her mind.

As she came into the drive, Doctor Quimper emerged from the house and opened the door of his battered Austin car. He paused when he saw her, then leaving the car he came towards her.

"Well, Emma," he said. "Your father's in splendid shape. Murder suits him. It's given him an interest in life. I must recommend it for more of my patients."

Emma smiled mechanically. Dr. Quimper was always quick to notice reactions.

"Anything particular the matter?" he asked.

Emma looked up at him. She had come to rely a lot on the kindness and sympathy of the doctor. He had become a friend on whom to lean, not only a medical attendant. His calculated brusqueness did not deceive her—she knew the kindness that lay behind it.

"I am worried, yes," she admitted.

"Care to tell me? Don't if you don't want to."

"I'd like to tell you. Some of it you know already. The point is I don't know what to do."

"I should say your judgment was usually most reliable. What's the trouble?"

"You remember—or perhaps you don't—what I once told you about my brother—the one who was killed in the war?"

"You mean about his having married—or wanting to marry—a French girl? Something of that kind?"

"Yes. Almost immediately after I got that letter, he was killed. We never heard anything of or about the girl. All we knew, actually, was her christian name. We always expected her to write or to turn up, but she didn't. We never heard *anything*—until about a month ago, just before Christmas."

"I remember. You got a letter, didn't you?"

"Yes. Saying she was in England and would like to come and see us. It was all arranged and then, at the last minute, she sent a wire

that she had to return unexpectedly to France."

"Well?"

"The police think that this woman who was killed—was French."

"They do, do they? She looked more of an English type to me, but one can't really judge. What's worrying you then, is that just possibly the dead woman might be your brother's girl?"

"Yes."

"I think it's most unlikely," said Dr. Quimper, adding: "But all the same, I understand what you feel."

"I'm wondering if I ought not to tell the police about—about it all. Cedric and the others say it's quite unnecessary. What do you think?"

"Hm." Dr. Quimper pursed his lips. He was silent for a moment or two, deep in thought. Then he said, almost unwillingly, "It's much *simpler*, of course, if you say nothing. I can understand what your brothers feel about it. All the same—"

"Yes?"

Quimper looked at her. His eyes had an affectionate twinkle in them.

"I'd go ahead and tell 'em," he said. "You'll go on worrying if you don't. I know you."

Emma flushed a little.

"Perhaps I'm foolish."

"You do what you want to do, my dear—and let the rest of the family go hang! I'd back your judgment against the lot of them any day."

Twelve

I

"Girl! You, girl! Come in here."

Lucy turned her head, surprised. Old Mr. Crackenthorpe was beckoning to her fiercely from just inside a door.

"You want me, Mr. Crackenthorpe?"

"Don't talk so much. Come in here."

Lucy obeyed the imperative finger. Old Mr. Crackenthorpe took hold of her arm and pulled her inside the door and shut it.

"Want to show you something," he said.

Lucy looked round her. They were in a small room evidently designed to be used as a study, but equally evidently not used as such for a very long time. There were piles of dusty papers on the desk and cobwebs festooned from the corners of the ceiling. The air smelt damp and musty.

"Do you want me to clean this room?" she asked.

Old Mr. Crackenthorpe shook his head fiercely.

"No, you don't! I keep this room locked up. Emma would like to fiddle about in here, but I don't let her. It's *my* room. See these stones? They're geological specimens."

Lucy looked at a collection of twelve or fourteen lumps of rock, some polished and some rough.

"Lovely," she said kindly. "Most interesting."

"You're quite right. They are interesting. You're an intelligent girl. I don't show them to everybody. I'll show you some more things."

"It's very kind of you, but I ought really to get on with what I was doing. With six people in the house—"

"Eating me out of house and home... That's all they do when they come down here! *Eat*. They don't offer to pay for what they eat, either. Leeches! All waiting for me to die. Well, I'm not going to die just yet—I'm not going to die to please *them*. I'm a lot stronger than even Emma knows."

"I'm sure you are."

"I'm not so old, either. She makes out I'm an old man, treats me as an old man. You don't think I'm old, do you?"

"Of course not," said Lucy.

"Sensible girl. Take a look at this."

He indicated a large faded chart which hung on the wall. It was, Lucy saw, a genealogical tree; some of it done so finely that one would have to have a magnifying glass to read the names. The remote forebears, however, were written in large proud capitals with crowns over the names.

"Descended from Kings," said Mr. Crackenthorpe. "My mother's family tree, that is—not my father's. He was a vulgarian! Common old man! Didn't like me. I was a cut above him always. Took after my mother's side. Had a natural feeling for art and classical sculpture—he couldn't see anything in it—silly old fool. Don't remember my mother—died when I was two. Last of her family. They were sold up and she married my father. But you look there—Edward the Confessor—Ethelred the Unready—whole lot of them. And that was before the Normans came. *Before the Normans*—that's something isn't it?"

"It is indeed."

"Now I'll show you something else." He guided her across the room to an enormous piece of dark oak furniture. Lucy was rather uneasily conscious of the strength of the fingers clutching her arm. There certainly seemed nothing feeble about old Mr. Crackenthorpe today. "See this? Came out of Lushington—that was my mother's people's place. Elizabethan, this is. Takes four men to move it. You don't know what I keep inside it, do you? Like me to show you?"

"Do show me," said Lucy politely.

"Curious, aren't you? All women are curious." He took a key from his pocket and unlocked the door of the lower cupboard. From this he took out a surprisingly new-looking cash box. This, again, he unlocked.

"Take a look here, my dear. Know what these are?"

He lifted out a small paper-wrapped cylinder and pulled away the paper from one end. Gold coins trickled out into his palm.

"Look at these, young lady. Look at 'em, hold 'em, touch 'em. Know what they are? Bet you don't! You're too young. Sovereigns—that's what they are. Good golden sovereigns. What we used before all these dirty bits of paper came into fashion. Worth a lot more than silly pieces of paper. Collected them a long time back. I've got other things in this box, too. Lots of things put away in here. All ready for the future. Emma doesn't know—nobody knows. It's our secret, see, girl? D'you know why I'm telling you and showing you?"

"Why?"

"Because I don't want you to think I'm a played-out sick old man. Lots of life in the old dog yet. My wife's been dead a long time. Always objecting to everything, she was. Didn't like the names I gave the children—good Saxon names—no interest in that family tree. I never paid any attention to what she said, though—and she was a poor-spirited creature—always gave in. Now you're a spirited filly—a very nice filly indeed. I'll give you some advice. Don't throw yourself away on a young man. Young men are fools! You want to take care of your future. You *wait*..." His fingers pressed into Lucy's arm. He leaned to her ear. "I don't say more than that. *Wait*. Those silly fools think I'm going to die soon. I'm not. Shouldn't be surprised if I outlived the lot of them. And then we'll see! Oh, yes, then we'll see. Harold's got no children. Cedric and Alfred aren't married. Emma—Emma will never marry now. She's a bit sweet on Quimper—but Quimper will never think of marrying Emma. There's Alexander, of course. Yes, there's Alexander... But, you know, I'm fond of Alexander... Yes, that's awkward. I'm fond of Alexander."

He paused for a moment, frowning, then said:

"Well, girl, what about it? What about it, eh?"

"Miss Eyelesbarrow...."

Emma's voice came faintly through the closed study door. Lucy seized gratefully at the opportunity.

"Miss Crackenthorpe's calling me. I must go. Thank you so much for all you have shown me...."

"Don't forget...our secret...."

"I won't forget," said Lucy, and hurried out into the hall not quite certain as to whether she had or had not just received a conditional proposal of marriage.

II

Dermot Craddock sat at his desk in his room at New Scotland Yard. He was slumped sideways in an easy attitude, and was talking into the telephone receiver which he held with one elbow propped up on the table. He was speaking in French, a language in which he was tolerably proficient.

"It was only an idea, you understand," he said.

"But decidedly it is an idea," said the voice at the other end, from the Prefecture in Paris. "Already I have set inquiries in motion in those circles. My agent reports that he has two or three promising lines of inquiry. Unless there is some family life—or a lover, these women drop out of circulation very easily and no one troubles about them. They have gone on tour, or there is some new man—it is no one's business to ask. It is a pity that the photograph you sent me is so difficult for anyone to recognize. Strangulation it does not improve the appearance. Still, that cannot be helped. I go now to study the latest reports of my agents on this matter. There will be, perhaps, something. *Au revoir, mon cher.*"

As Craddock reiterated the farewell politely, a slip of paper was placed before him on the desk. It read:

Miss Emma Crackenthorpe.

To see Detective-Inspector Craddock.

Rutherford Hall case.

He replaced the receiver and said to the police constable:

"Bring Miss Crackenthorpe up."

As he waited, he leaned back in his chair, thinking.

So he had not been mistaken—there was something that Emma Crackenthorpe knew—not much, perhaps, but something. And she had decided to tell him.

He rose to his feet as she was shown in, shook hands, settled her in a chair and offered her a cigarette which she refused. Then there was a momentary pause. She was trying, he decided, to find just the words she wanted. He leaned forward.

"You have come to tell me something, Miss Crackenthorpe? Can I help you? You've been worried about something, haven't you? Some little thing, perhaps, that you feel probably has nothing to do with the case, but on the other hand, just might be related to it. You've come here to tell me about it, haven't you? It's to do, perhaps, with the identity of the dead woman. You think you know who she was?"

"No, no, not quite that. I think really it's most unlikely. But—"

"But there is some possibility that worries you. You'd better tell me about it—because we may be able to set your mind at rest."

Emma took a moment or two before speaking. Then she said:

"You have seen three of my brothers. I had another brother, Edmund, who was killed in the war. Shortly before he was killed, he wrote to me from France."

She opened her handbag and took out a worn and faded letter. She read from it:

"I hope this won't be a shock to you, Emmie, but I'm getting married—to a French girl. It's all been very sudden—but I know you'll be fond of Martine—and look after her if anything happens to me. Will write you all the details in my next—by which time I shall be a married man. Break it gently to the old man, won't you? He'll probably go up in smoke."

Inspector Craddock held out a hand. Emma hesitated, then put the letter into it. She went on, speaking rapidly.

"Two days after receiving this letter, we had a telegram saying Edmund was *Missing, believed killed*. Later he was definitely reported killed. It was just before Dunkirk—and a time of great confusion. There was no Army record, as far as I could find out, of

his having been married—but as I say, it was a confused time. I never heard anything from the girl. I tried, after the war, to make some inquiries, but I only knew her Christian name and that part of France had been occupied by the Germans and it was difficult to find out anything, without knowing the girl's surname and more about her. In the end I assumed that the marriage had never taken place and that the girl had probably married someone else before the end of the war, or might possibly herself have been killed."

Inspector Craddock nodded. Emma went on.

"Imagine my surprise to receive a letter just about a month ago, signed *Martine Crackenthorpe*."

"You have it?"

Emma took it from her bag and handed it to him. Craddock read it with interest. It was written in a slanting French hand—an educated hand.

Dear Mademoiselle,

I hope it will not be a shock to you to get this letter. I do not even know if your brother Edmund told you that we were married.

He said he was going to do so. He was killed only a few days after our marriage and at the same time the Germans occupied our village. After the war ended, I decided that I would not write to you or approach you, though Edmund had told me to do so. But by then I had made a new life for myself, and it was not necessary.

But now things have changed. For my son's sake I write this letter.

He is your brother's son, you see, and I— I can no longer give him the advantages he ought to have. I am coming to England early next week. Will you let me know if I can come and see you? My address for letters is 126 Elvers Crescent, N.10. I hope again this will not be the great shock to you.

*I remain with assurance of my excellent sentiments,
Martine Crackenthorpe*

Craddock was silent for a moment or two. He reread the letter carefully before handing it back.

"What did you do on receipt of this letter, Miss Crackenthorpe?"

"My brother-in-law, Bryan Eastley, happened to be staying with me at the time and I talked to him about it. Then I rang up my brother Harold in London and consulted him about it. Harold was rather sceptical about the whole thing and advised extreme caution. We must, he said, go carefully into this woman's credentials."

Emma paused and then went on:

"That, of course, was only common sense and I quite agreed. But if this girl—woman—was really the Martine about whom Edmund had written to me, I felt that we must make her welcome. I wrote to the address she gave in her letters, inviting her to come down to Rutherford Hall and meet us. A few days later I received a telegram from London: *Very sorry forced to return to France unexpectedly. Martine.* There was no further letter or news of any kind."

"All this took place—when?"

Emma frowned.

"It was shortly before Christmas. I know, because I wanted to suggest her spending Christmas with us—but my father would not hear of it—so I suggested she could come down the weekend after Christmas while the family would still be there. I think the wire saying she was returning to France came actually a few days before Christmas."

"And you believe that this woman whose body was found in the sarcophagus might be this Martine?"

"No, of course I don't. But when you said she was probably a foreigner—well, I couldn't help wondering...if perhaps...."

Her voice died away.

Craddock spoke quickly and reassuringly.

"You did quite right to tell me about this. We'll look into it. I should say there is probably little doubt that the woman who wrote to you actually *did* go back to France and is there now alive and well. On the other hand, there *is* a certain coincidence of dates, as you yourself have been clever enough to realize. As you heard at the inquest, the woman's death according to the police surgeon's

evidence must have occurred about three to four weeks ago. Now don't worry, Miss Crackenthorpe, just leave it to us." He added casually, "You consulted Mr. Harold Crackenthorpe. What about your father and your other brothers?"

"I had to tell my father, of course. He got very worked up," she smiled faintly. "He was convinced it was a put up thing to get money out of us. My father gets very excited about money. He believes, or pretends to believe, that he is a very poor man, and that he must save every penny he can. I believe elderly people do get obsessions of that kind sometimes. It's not true, of course, he has a very large income and doesn't actually spend a quarter of it—or used not to until these days of high income tax. Certainly he has a large amount of savings put by." She paused and then went on. "I told my other two brothers also. Alfred seemed to consider it rather a joke, though he, too, thought it was almost certainly an imposture. Cedric just wasn't interested—he's inclined to be self-centred. Our idea was that the family would receive Martine, and that our lawyer, Mr. Wimborne, should also be asked to be present."

"What did Mr. Wimborne think about the letter?"

"We hadn't got as far as discussing the matter with him. We were on the point of doing so when Martine's telegram arrived."

"You have taken no further steps?"

"Yes. I wrote to the address in London with *Please forward* on the envelope, but I have had no reply of any kind."

"Rather a curious business... Hm...."

He looked at her sharply.

"What do you yourself think about it?"

"I don't know what to think."

"What were your reactions at the time? Did you think the letter was genuine—or did you agree with your father and brothers? What about your brother-in-law, by the way, what did he think?"

"Oh, Bryan thought that the letter was genuine."

"And you?"

"I—wasn't sure."

"And what were your feelings about it—supposing that this girl really *was* your brother Edmund's widow?"

Emma's face softened.

"I was very fond of Edmund. He was my favourite brother. The letter seemed to me exactly the sort of letter that a girl like Martine would write under the circumstances. The course of events she described was entirely natural. I assumed that by the time the war ended she had either married again or was with some man who was protecting her and the child. Then perhaps, this man had died, or left her, and it then seemed right to her to apply to Edmund's family—as he himself had wanted her to do. The letter seemed genuine and natural to me—but, of course, Harold pointed out that if it was written by an imposter, it would be written by some woman who had known Martine and who was in possession of all the facts, and so would write a thoroughly plausible letter. I had to admit the justice of that—but all the same...."

She stopped.

"You wanted it to be true?" said Craddock gently.

She looked at him gratefully.

"Yes, I wanted it to be true. I would be so glad if Edmund had left a son."

Craddock nodded.

"As you say, the letter, on the face of it, sounds genuine enough. What *is* surprising is the sequel; Martine Crackenthorpe's abrupt departure for Paris and the fact that you have never heard from her since. You had replied kindly to her, were prepared to welcome her. Why, even if she had to return to France, did she not write again? That is, presuming her to be the genuine article. If she were an imposter, of course, it's easier to explain. I thought perhaps that you might have consulted Mr. Wimborne, and that he might have instituted inquiries which alarmed the woman. That, you tell me, is not so. But it's still possible that one or other of your brothers may have done something of the kind. It's possible that this Martine may have had a background that would not stand investigation. She may have assumed that she would be dealing only with Edmund's affectionate sister, not with hard-headed suspicious business men. She may have hoped to get sums of money out of you for the child (hardly a child now—a boy presumably of fifteen or sixteen) without

many questions being asked. But instead she found she was going to run up against something quite different. After all, I should imagine that serious legal aspects would arise. If Edmund Crackenthorpe left a son, born in wedlock, he would be one of the heirs to your grandfather's estate?"

Emma nodded.

"Moreover, from what I have been told, he would in due course inherit Rutherford Hall and the land round it—very valuable building land, probably, by now."

Emma looked slightly startled.

"Yes, I hadn't thought of that."

"Well, I shouldn't worry," said Inspector Craddock. "You did quite right to come and tell me. I shall make enquiries, but it seems to me highly probable that there is no connection between the woman who wrote the letter (and who was probably trying to cash in on a swindle) and the woman whose body was found in the sarcophagus."

Emma rose with a sigh of relief.

"I'm so glad I've told you. You've been very kind."

Craddock accompanied her to the door.

Then he rang for Detective-Sergeant Wetherall.

"Bob, I've got a job for you. Go to 126 Elvers Crescent, N.10. Take photographs of the Rutherford Hall woman with you. See what you can find out about a woman calling herself Mrs. Crackenthorpe—Mrs. Martine Crackenthorpe, who was either living there, or calling for letters there, between the dates of, say, 15th to the end of December."

"Right, sir."

Craddock busied himself with various other matters that were waiting attention on his desk. In the afternoon he went to see a theatrical agent who was a friend of his. His inquiries were not fruitful.

Later in the day when he returned to his office he found a wire from Paris on his desk.

Particulars given by you might apply to Anna Stravinska of Ballet Maritski. Suggest you come over. Dessin, Prefecture.

Craddock heaved a big sigh of relief, and his brow cleared.

At last! So much, he thought, for the Martine Crackenthorne here... He decided to take the night ferry to Paris.

Thirteen

I

"It's so very kind of you to have asked me to take tea with you," said Miss Marple to Emma Crackenthorpe.

Miss Marple was looking particularly woolly and fluffy—a picture of a sweet old lady. She beamed as she looked round her—at Harold Crackenthorpe in his well-cut dark suit, at Alfred handing her sandwiches with a charming smile, at Cedric standing by the mantelpiece in a ragged tweed jacket scowling at the rest of his family.

"We are very pleased that you could come," said Emma politely.

There was no hint of the scene which had taken place after lunch that day when Emma had exclaimed: "Dear me, I quite forgot. I told Miss Eyelesbarrow that she could bring her old aunt to tea today."

"Put her off," said Harold brusquely. "We've still got a lot to talk about. We don't want strangers here."

"Let her have tea in the kitchen or somewhere with the girl," said Alfred.

"Oh, no, I couldn't do that," said Emma firmly. "That would be very rude."

"Oh, let her come," said Cedric. "We can draw her out a little about the wonderful Lucy. I should like to know more about that girl, I must say. I'm not sure that I trust her. Too smart by half."

"She's very well connected and quite genuine," said Harold. "I've made it my business to find out. One wanted to be sure. Poking

about and finding the body the way she did."

"If we only knew who this damned woman was," said Alfred.

Harold added angrily:

"I must say, Emma, that I think you were out of your senses, going and suggesting to the police that the dead woman might be Edmund's French girl friend. It will make them convinced that she came here, and that probably one or other of *us* killed her."

"Oh, no, Harold. Don't exaggerate."

"Harold's quite right," said Alfred. "Whatever possessed you, I don't know. I've a feeling I'm being followed everywhere I go by plainclothesmen."

"I told her not to do it," said Cedric. "Then Quimper backed her up."

"It's no business of his," said Harold angrily. "Let him stick to pills and powders and National Health."

"Oh, do stop quarrelling," said Emma wearily. "I'm really glad this old Miss Whatshername is coming to tea. It will do us all good to have a stranger here and be prevented from going over and over the same things again and again. I must go and tidy myself up a little."

She left the room.

"This Lucy Eyelesbarrow," said Harold, and stopped. "As Cedric says, it *is* odd that she should nose about in the barn and go opening up a sarcophagus—really a Herculean task. Perhaps we ought to take steps. Her attitude, I thought, was rather antagonistic at lunch—"

"Leave her to me," said Alfred. "I'll soon find out if she's up to anything."

"I mean, *why* open up that sarcophagus?"

"Perhaps she isn't really Lucy Eyelesbarrow at all," suggested Cedric.

"But what would be the point—?" Harold looked thoroughly upset. "Oh, damn!"

They looked at each other with worried faces.

"And here's this pestilential old woman coming to tea. Just when we want to *think*."

"We'll talk things over this evening," said Alfred. "In the meantime, we'll pump the old aunt about Lucy."

So Miss Marple had duly been fetched by Lucy and installed by the fire and she was now smiling up at Alfred as he handed her sandwiches with the approval she always showed towards a good-looking man.

"Thank you so much...may I ask...? Oh, egg and sardine, yes, that will be very nice. I'm afraid I'm always rather greedy over my tea. As one gets on, you know... And, of course, at night only a very light meal... I have to be careful." She turned to her hostess once more. "What a beautiful house you have. And so many beautiful things in it. Those bronzes, now, they remind me of some my father bought—at the Paris Exhibition. Really, your grandfather did? In the classical style, aren't they? Very handsome. How delightful for you having your brothers with you? So often families are scattered—India, though I suppose that is all done with now—and Africa—the west coast, such a bad climate."

"Two of my brothers live in London."

"That is very nice for you."

"But my brother Cedric is a painter and lives in Ibiza, one of the Balearic Islands."

"Painters are so fond of islands, are they not?" said Miss Marple. "Chopin—that was Majorca, was it not? But he was a musician. It is Gauguin I am thinking of. A sad life—misspent, one feels. I myself never really care for paintings of native women—and although I know he is very much admired—I have never cared for that lurid mustard colour. One really feels quite bilious looking at his pictures."

She eyed Cedric with a slightly disapproving air.

"Tell us about Lucy as a child, Miss Marple," said Cedric.

She smiled up at him delightedly.

"Lucy was always so clever," she said. "Yes, you were, dear—now don't interrupt. Quite remarkable at arithmetic. Why, I remember when the butcher overcharged me for top side of beef..."

Miss Marple launched full steam ahead into reminiscences of Lucy's childhood and from there to experiences of her own in village life.

The stream of reminiscence was interrupted by the entry of Bryan and the boys rather wet and dirty as a result of an enthusiastic search for clues. Tea was brought in and with it came Dr. Quimper who raised his eyebrows slightly as he looked round after acknowledging his introduction to the old lady.

"Hope your father's not under the weather, Emma?"

"Oh, no—that is, he was just a little tired this afternoon—"

"Avoiding visitors, I expect," said Miss Marple with a roguish smile. "How well I remember my own dear father. 'Got a lot of old pussies coming?' he would say to my mother. 'Send my tea into the study.' Very naughty about it, he was."

"Please don't think—" began Emma, but Cedric cut in.

"It's always tea in the study when his dear sons come down. Psychologically to be expected, eh, Doctor?"

Dr. Quimper, who was devouring sandwiches and coffee cake with the frank appreciation of a man who has usually too little time to spend on his meals, said:

"Psychology's all right if it's left to the psychologists. Trouble is, everyone is an amateur psychologist nowadays. My patients tell *me* exactly what complexes and neuroses they're suffering from, without giving me a chance to tell them. Thanks, Emma, I will have another cup. No time for lunch today."

"A doctor's life, I always think, is so noble and self-sacrificing," said Miss Marple.

"You can't know many doctors," said Dr. Quimper. "Leeches they used to be called, and leeches they often are! At any rate, we do get paid nowadays, the State sees to that. No sending in of bills that you know won't ever be met. Trouble is that all one's patients are determined to get everything they can 'out of the Government,' and as a result, if little Jenny coughs twice in the night, or little Tommy eats a couple of green apples, out the poor doctor has to come in the middle of the night. Oh, well! Glorious cake, Emma. What a cook you are!"

"Not mine. Miss Eyelesbarrow's."

"You make 'em just as good," said Quimper loyally.

"Will you come and see Father?"

She rose and the doctor followed her. Miss Marple watched them leave the room.

"Miss Crackenthorpe is a very devoted daughter, I see," she said.

"Can't imagine how she sticks the old man myself," said the outspoken Cedric.

"She has a very comfortable home here, and father is very much attached to her," said Harold quickly.

"Em's all right," said Cedric. "Born to be an old maid."

There was a faint twinkle in Miss Marple's eye as she said:

"Oh, do you think so?"

Harold said quickly:

"My brother didn't use the term old maid in any derogatory sense, Miss Marple."

"Oh, I wasn't offended," said Miss Marple. "I just wondered if he was right. I shouldn't say myself that Miss Crackenthorpe would be an old maid. She's the type, I think, that's quite likely to marry late in life—and make a success of it."

"Not very likely living here," said Cedric. "Never sees anybody she could marry."

Miss Marple's twinkle became more pronounced than ever.

"There are always clergymen—and doctors."

Her eyes, gentle and mischievous, went from one to another.

It was clear that she had suggested to them something that they had never thought of and which they did not find overpleasing.

Miss Marple rose to her feet, dropping as she did so, several little woolly scarves and her bag.

The three brothers were most attentive picking things up.

"So kind of you," fluted Miss Marple. "Oh, yes, and my little blue muffler. Yes—as I say—so kind to ask me here. I've been picturing, you know, just what your home was like—so that I can visualize dear Lucy working here."

"Perfect home conditions—with murder thrown in," said Cedric.

"Cedric!" Harold's voice was angry.

Miss Marple smiled up at Cedric.

"Do you know who you remind me of? Young Thomas Eade, our bank manager's son. Always out to shock people. It didn't do in

banking circles, of course, so he went to the West Indies... He came home when his father died and inherited quite a lot of money. So nice for him. He was always better at spending money than making it."

II

Lucy took Miss Marple home. On her way back a figure stepped out of the darkness and stood in the glare of the headlights just as she was about to turn into the back lane. He held up his hand and Lucy recognized Alfred Crackenthorpe.

"That's better," he observed, as he got in. "Brr, it's cold! I fancied I'd like a nice bracing walk. I didn't. Taken the old lady home all right?"

"Yes. She enjoyed herself very much."

"One could see that. Funny what a taste old ladies have for any kind of society, however dull. And, really, nothing could be duller than Rutherford Hall. Two days here is about as much as I can stand. How do you manage to stick it out, Lucy? Don't mind if I call you Lucy, do you?"

"Not at all. I don't find it dull. Of course with me it's not a permanency."

"I've been watching you—you're a smart girl, Lucy. Too smart to waste yourself cooking and cleaning."

"Thank you, but I prefer cooking and cleaning to the office desk."

"So would I. But there are other ways of living. You could be a freelance."

"I am."

"Not this way. I mean, working for yourself, pitting your wits against—"

"Against what?"

"The powers that be! All the silly pettifogging rules and regulations that hamper us all nowadays. The interesting thing is there's always a way round them if you're smart enough to find it. And you're smart. Come now, does the idea appeal to you?"

"Possibly."

Lucy manoeuvred the car into the stableyard.

"Not going to commit yourself?"

"I'd have to hear more."

"Frankly, my dear girl, I could use you. You've got the sort of manner that's invaluable—creates confidence."

"Do you want me to help you sell gold bricks?"

"Nothing so risky. Just a little by-passing of the law—no more." His hand slipped up her arm. "You're a damned attractive girl, Lucy. I'd like you as a partner."

"I'm flattered."

"Meaning nothing doing? Think about it. Think of the fun. The pleasure you'd get out of outwitting all the sober-sides. The trouble is, one needs capital."

"I'm afraid I haven't got any."

"Oh, it wasn't a touch! I'll be laying my hands on some before long. My revered Papa can't live forever, mean old brute. When he pops off, I lay my hands on some real money. What about it, Lucy?"

"What are the terms?"

"Marriage if you fancy it. Women seem to, no matter how advanced and self-supporting they are. Besides, married women can't be made to give evidence against their husbands."

"Not so flattering!"

"Come off it, Lucy. Don't you realize I've fallen for you?"

Rather to her surprise Lucy was aware of a queer fascination. There was a quality of charm about Alfred, perhaps due to sheer animal magnetism. She laughed and slipped from his encircling arm.

"This is no time for dalliance. There's dinner to think about."

"So there is, Lucy, and you're a lovely cook. What's for dinner?"

"Wait and see! You're as bad as the boys!"

They entered the house and Lucy hurried to the kitchen. She was rather surprised to be interrupted in her preparations by Harold Crackenthorpe.

"Miss Eyelesbarrow, can I speak to you about something?"

"Would later do, Mr. Crackenthorpe? I'm rather behind hand."

"Certainly. Certainly. After dinner?"

"Yes, that will do."

Dinner was duly served and appreciated. Lucy finished washing up and came out into the hall to find Harold Crackenthorpe waiting for her.

"Yes, Mr. Crackenthorpe?"

"Shall we come in here?" He opened the door of the drawing room and led the way. He shut the door behind her.

"I shall be leaving early in the morning," he explained, "but I want to tell you how struck I have been by your ability."

"Thank you," said Lucy, feeling a little surprised.

"I feel that your talents are wasted here—definitely wasted."

"Do you? I don't."

At any rate, *he* can't ask me to marry him, thought Lucy. He's got a wife already.

"I suggest that having very kindly seen us through this lamentable crisis, you call upon me in London. If you will ring up and make an appointment, I will leave instructions with my secretary. The truth is that we could use someone of your outstanding ability in the firm. We could discuss fully in what field your talents would be most ably employed. I can offer you, Miss Eyelesbarrow, a very good salary indeed with brilliant prospects. I think you will be agreeably surprised."

His smile was magnanimous.

Lucy said demurely:

"Thank you, Mr. Crackenthorpe, I'll think about it."

"Don't wait too long. These opportunities should not be missed by a young woman anxious to make her way in the world."

Again his teeth flashed.

"Good night, Miss Eyelesbarrow, sleep well."

"Well," said Lucy to herself, "well...this is all very interesting...."

On her way up to bed, Lucy encountered Cedric on the stairs.

"Look here, Lucy, there's something I want to say to you."

"Do you want me to marry you and come to Ibiza and look after you?"

Cedric looked very much taken aback, and slightly alarmed.

"I never thought of such a thing."

"Sorry. My mistake."

"I just wanted to know if you've a timetable in the house?"

"Is that all? There's one on the hall table."

"You know," said Cedric, reprovingly, "you shouldn't go about thinking everyone wants to marry you. You're quite a good-looking girl but not as good-looking as all that. There's a name for that sort of thing—it grows on you and you get worse. Actually, you're the last girl in the world I should care to marry. The last girl."

"Indeed?" said Lucy. "You needn't rub it in. Perhaps you'd prefer me as a stepmother?"

"What's that?" Cedric stared at her stupefied.

"You heard me," said Lucy, and went into her room and shut the door.

Fourteen

I

Dermot Craddock was fraternizing with Armand Dessin of the Paris Prefecture. The two men had met on one or two occasions and got on well together. Since Craddock spoke French fluently, most of their conversation was conducted in that language.

"It is an idea only," Dessin warned him, "I have a picture here of the corps de ballet—that is she, the fourth from the left—it says anything to you, yes?"

Inspector Craddock said that actually it didn't. A strangled young woman is not easy to recognize, and in this picture all the young women concerned were heavily made up and were wearing extravagant bird headdresses.

"It *could* be," he said. "I can't go further than that. Who was she? What do you know about her?"

"Almost less than nothing," said the other cheerfully. "She was not important, you see. And the Ballet Maritski—it is not important, either. It plays in suburban theatres and goes on tour—it has no real names, no stars, no famous ballerinas. But I will take you to see Madame Joilet who runs it."

Madame Joilet was a brisk business-like Frenchwoman with a shrewd eye, a small moustache, and a good deal of adipose tissue.

"Me, I do not like the police!" She scowled at them, without camouflaging her dislike of the visit. "Always, if they can, they make me embarrassments."

"No, no, Madame, you must not say that," said Dessin, who was a tall thin melancholy-looking man. "When have I ever caused you embarrassments?"

"Over that little fool who drank the carbolic acid," said Madame Joilet promptly. "And all because she has fallen in love with the chef d'orchestre—who does not care for women and has other tastes. Over that you made the big brouhaha! Which is not good for my beautiful ballet."

"On the contrary, big box office business," said Dessin. "And that was three years ago. You should not bear malice. Now about this girl, Anna Stravinska."

"Well, what about her?" said Madame cautiously.

"Is she Russian?" asked Inspector Craddock.

"No, indeed. You mean, because of her name? But they all call themselves names like that, these girls. She was not important, she did not dance well, she was not particularly good-looking. *Elle était assez bien, c'est tout*. She danced well enough for the corps de ballet—but no solos."

"Was she French?"

"Perhaps. She had a French passport. But she told me once that she had an English husband."

"She told you that she had an English husband? Alive—or dead?"

Madame Joilet shrugged her shoulders.

"Dead, or he had left her. How should I know which? These girls—there is always some trouble with men—"

"When did you last see her?"

"I take my company to London for six weeks. We play at Torquay, at Bournemouth, at Eastbourne, at somewhere else I forget and at Hammersmith. Then we come back to France, but Anna—she does not come. She sends a message only that she leaves the company, that she goes to live with her husband's family—some nonsense of that kind. I did not think it is true, myself. I think it more likely that she has met a man, you understand."

Inspector Craddock nodded. He perceived that that was what Madame Joilet would invariably think.

"And it is no loss to me. I do not care. I can get girls just as good and better to come and dance, so I shrug the shoulders and do not think of it anymore. Why should I? They are all the same, these girls, mad about men."

"What date was this?"

"When we return to France? It was—yes—the Sunday before Christmas. And Anna she leaves two—or is it three—days before that? I cannot remember exactly... But the end of the week at Hammersmith we have to dance without her—and it means rearranging things... It was very naughty of her—but these girls—the moment they meet a man they are all the same. Only I say to everybody. 'Zut, I do not take her back, that one!'"

"Very annoying for you."

"Ah! Me—I do not care. No doubt she passes the Christmas holiday with some man she has picked up. It is not my affair. I can find other girls—girls who will leap at the chance of dancing in the Ballet Maritski and who can dance as well—or better than Anna."

Madame Joilet paused and then asked with a sudden gleam of interest:

"Why do you want to find her? Has she come into money?"

"On the contrary," said Inspector Craddock politely. "We think she may have been murdered."

Madame Joilet relapsed into indifference.

"*Ca se peut!* It happens. Ah, well! She was a good Catholic. She went to Mass on Sundays, and no doubt to confession."

"Did she ever speak to you, Madame, of a son?"

"A son? Do you mean she had a child? That, now, I should consider most unlikely. These girls, all—*all* of them know a useful address to which to go. M. Dessin knows that as well as I do."

"She may have had a child before she adopted a stage life," said Craddock. "During the war, for instance."

"Ah! *dans la guerre*. That is always possible. But if so, I know nothing about it."

"Who amongst the other girls were her closest friends?"

"I can give you two or three names—but she was not very intimate with anyone."

They could get nothing else useful from Madame Joilet.

Shown the compact, she said Anna had one of that kind, but so had most of the other girls. Anna had perhaps bought a fur coat in London—she did not know. “Me, I occupy myself with the rehearsals, with the stage lighting, with all the difficulties of my business. I have not time to notice what my artists wear.”

After Madame Joilet, they interviewed the girls whose names she had given them. One or two of them had known Anna fairly well, but they all said that she had not been one to talk much about herself, and that when she did, it was, so one girl said, mostly lies.

“She liked to pretend things—stories about having been the mistress of a Grand Duke—or of a great English financier—or how she worked for the Resistance in the war. Even a story about being a film star in Hollywood.”

Another girl said:

“I think that really she had had a very tame bourgeois existence. She liked to be in ballet because she thought it was romantic, but she was not a good dancer. You understand that if she were to say, ‘My father was a draper in Amiens,’ that would not be romantic! So instead she made up things.”

“Even in London,” said the first girl, “she threw out hints about a very rich man who was going to take her on a cruise round the world, because she reminded him of his dead daughter who had died in a car accident. *Quelle blague!*”

“She told *me* she was going to stay with a rich lord in Scotland,” said the second girl. “She said she would shoot the deer there.”

None of this was helpful. All that seemed to emerge from it was that Anna Stravinska was a proficient liar. She was certainly not shooting deer with a peer in Scotland, and it seemed equally unlikely that she was on the sun deck of a liner cruising round the world. But neither was there any real reason to believe that her body had been found in a sarcophagus at Rutherford Hall. The identification by the girls and Madame Joilet was very uncertain and hesitating. It looked something like Anna, they all agreed. But really! All swollen up—it might be anybody!

The only fact that was established was that on the 19th of December Anna Stravinska had decided not to return to France, and that on the 20th December a woman resembling her in appearance had travelled to Brackhampton by the 4:33 train and had been strangled.

If the woman in the sarcophagus was *not* Anna Stravinska, where was Anna now?

To that, Madame Joilet's answer was simple and inevitable.

"With a man!"

And it was probably the correct answer, Craddock reflected ruefully.

One other possibility had to be considered—raised by the casual remark that Anna had once referred to having an English husband.

Had that husband been Edmund Crackenthorpe?

It seemed unlikely, considering the word picture of Anna that had been given him by those who knew her. What was much more probable was that Anna had at one time known the girl Martine sufficiently intimately to be acquainted with the necessary details. It *might* have been Anna who wrote that letter to Emma Crackenthorpe and, if so, Anna would have been quite likely to have taken fright at any question of an investigation. Perhaps she had even thought it prudent to sever her connection with the Ballet Maritski. Again, where was she now?

And again, inevitably, Madame Joilet's answer seemed the most likely.

With a man....

II

Before leaving Paris, Craddock discussed with Dessin the question of the woman named Martine. Dessin was inclined to agree with his English colleague that the matter had probably no connection with the woman found in the sarcophagus. All the same, he agreed, the matter ought to be investigated.

He assured Craddock that the Sûreté would do their best to discover if there actually was any record of a marriage between Lieutenant Edmund Crackenthorpe of the 4th Southshire Regiment and a French girl whose Christian name was Martine. Time—just prior to the fall of Dunkirk.

He warned Craddock, however, that a definite answer was doubtful. The area in question had not only been occupied by the Germans at almost exactly that time, but subsequently that part of France had suffered severe war damage at the time of the invasion. Many buildings and records had been destroyed.

"But rest assured, my dear colleague, we shall do our best."

With this, he and Craddock took leave of each other.

III

On Craddock's return Sergeant Wetherall was waiting to report with gloomy relish:

"Accommodation address, sir—that's what 126 Elvers Crescent is. Quite respectable and all that."

"Any identifications?"

"No, nobody could recognize the photograph as that of a woman who had called for letters, but I don't think they would anyway—it's a month ago, very near, and a good many people use the place. It's actually a boarding-house for students."

"She might have stayed there under another name."

"If so, they didn't recognize her as the original of the photograph."

He added:

"We circularized the hotels—nobody registering as Martine Crackenthorpe anywhere. On receipt of your call from Paris, we checked up on Anna Stravinska. She was registered with other members of the company in a cheap hotel off Brook Green. Mostly theatricals there. She cleared out on the night of Thursday 19th after the show. No further record."

Craddock nodded. He suggested a line of further inquiries—though he had little hope of success from them.

After some thought, he rang up Wimborne, Henderson and Carstairs and asked for an appointment with Mr. Wimborne.

In due course, he was ushered into a particularly airless room where Mr. Wimborne was sitting behind a large old-fashioned desk covered with bundles of dusty-looking papers. Various deed boxes labelled *Sir John ffouldes, dec., Lady Derrin, George Rowbottom, Esq.*, ornamented the walls; whether as relics of a bygone era or as part of present-day legal affairs, the inspector did not know.

Mr. Wimborne eyed his visitor with the polite wariness characteristic of a family lawyer towards the police.

"What can I do for you, Inspector?"

"This letter..." Craddock pushed Martine's letter across the table. Mr. Wimborne touched it with a distasteful finger but did not pick it up. His colour rose very slightly and his lips tightened.

"Quite so," he said; "*quite* so! I received a letter from Miss Emma Crackenthorpe yesterday morning, informing me of her visit to Scotland Yard and of—ah—all the circumstances. I may say that I am at a loss to understand—quite at a loss—why I was not consulted about this letter at the time of its arrival! *Most extraordinary!* I should have been informed immediately..."

Inspector Craddock repeated soothingly such platitudes as seemed best calculated to reduce Mr. Wimborne to an amenable frame of mind.

"I'd no idea that there was ever any question of Edmund's having married," said Mr. Wimborne in an injured voice.

Inspector Craddock said that he supposed—in war time—and left it to trail away vaguely.

"War time!" snapped Mr. Wimborne with waspish acerbity. "Yes, indeed, we were in Lincoln's Inn Fields at the outbreak of war and there was a direct hit on the house next door, and a great number of our records were destroyed. Not the really important documents, of course; they had been removed to the country for safety. But it caused a great deal of confusion. Of course, the Crackenthorpe business was in my father's hands at that time. He died six years

ago. I dare say *he* may have been told about this so-called marriage of Edmund's—but on the face of it, it looks as though that marriage, even if contemplated, never took place, and so, no doubt, my father did not consider the story of any importance. I must say, all this sounds very fishy to me. This coming forward, after all these years, and claiming a marriage and a legitimate son. Very fishy indeed. What proofs had she got, I'd like to know?"

"Just so," said Craddock. "What would her position, or her son's position be?"

"The idea was, I suppose, that she would get the Crackenthorpes to provide for her and for the boy."

"Yes, but I meant, what would she and the son be entitled to, legally speaking—if she could prove her claim?"

"Oh, I see." Mr. Wimborne picked up his spectacles which he had laid aside in his irritation, and put them on, staring through them at Inspector Craddock with shrewd attention. "Well, at the moment, nothing. But if she could prove that the boy was the son of Edmund Crackenthorpe, born in lawful wedlock, then the boy would be entitled to his share of Josiah Crackenthorpe's trust on the death of Luther Crackenthorpe. More than that, he'd inherit Rutherford Hall, since he's the son of the eldest son."

"Would anyone want to inherit the house?"

"To live in? I should say, certainly not. But that estate, my dear Inspector, is worth a considerable amount of money. Very considerable. Land for industrial and building purposes. Land which is now in the heart of Brackhampton. Oh, yes, a very considerable inheritance."

"If Luther Crackenthorpe dies, I believe you told me that Cedric gets it?"

"He inherits the real estate—yes, as the eldest living son."

"Cedric Crackenthorpe, I have been given to understand, is not interested in money?"

Mr. Wimborne gave Craddock a cold stare.

"Indeed? I am inclined, myself, to take statements of such a nature with what I might term a grain of salt. There are doubtless

certain unworldly people who are indifferent to money. I myself have never met one."

Mr. Wimborne obviously derived a certain satisfaction from this remark.

Inspector Craddock hastened to take advantage of this ray of sunshine.

"Harold and Alfred Crackenthorpe," he ventured, "seem to have been a good deal upset by the arrival of this letter?"

"Well they might be," said Mr. Wimborne. "Well they might be."

"It would reduce their eventual inheritance?"

"Certainly. Edmund Crackenthorpe's son—always presuming there is a son—would be entitled to a fifth share of the trust money."

"That doesn't really seem a very serious loss?"

Mr. Wimborne gave him a shrewd glance.

"It is a totally inadequate motive for murder, if that is what you mean."

"But I suppose they're both pretty hard up," Craddock murmured.

He sustained Mr. Wimborne's sharp glance with perfect impassivity.

"Oh! So the police have been making inquiries? Yes, Alfred is almost incessantly in low water. Occasionally he is very flush of money for a short time—but it soon goes. Harold, as you seem to have discovered, is at present somewhat precariously situated."

"In spite of his appearance of financial prosperity?"

"Façade. All façade! Half these city concerns don't even know if they're solvent or not. Balance sheets can be made to look all right to the inexperienced eye. But when the assets that are listed aren't really assets—when those assets are trembling on the brink of a crash—where are you?"

"Where, presumably, Harold Crackenthorpe is, in bad need of money."

"Well, he wouldn't have got it by strangling his late brother's widow," said Mr. Wimborne. "And nobody's murdered Luther Crackenthorpe which is the only murder that would do the family any good. So, really, Inspector, I don't quite see where your ideas are leading you?"

The worst of it was, Inspector Craddock thought, that he wasn't very sure himself.

Fifteen

I

Inspector Craddock had made an appointment with Harold Crackenthorpe at his office, and he and Sergeant Wetherall arrived there punctually. The office was on the fourth floor of a big block of City offices. Inside everything showed prosperity and the acme of modern business taste.

A neat young woman took his name, spoke in a discreet murmur through a telephone, and then, rising, showed them into Harold Crackenthorpe's own private office.

Harold was sitting behind a large leather-topped desk and was looking as impeccable and self-confident as ever. If, as the inspector's private knowledge led him to surmise, he was close upon Queer Street, no trace of it showed.

He looked up with a frank welcoming interest.

"Good morning, Inspector Craddock. I hope this means that you have some definite news for us at last?"

"Hardly that, I am afraid, Mr. Crackenthorpe. It's just a few more questions I'd like to ask."

"More questions? Surely by now we have answered everything imaginable."

"I dare say it feels like that to you, Mr. Crackenthorpe, but it's just a question of our regular routine."

"Well, what is it this time?" He spoke impatiently.

"I should be glad if you could tell me exactly what you were doing on the afternoon and evening of 20th December last—say between the hours of 3 p.m. and midnight."

Harold Crackenthorpe went an angry shade of plum red.

"That seems to be a most extraordinary question to ask me. What does it mean, I should like to know?"

Craddock smiled gently.

"It just means that I should like to know where you were between the hours of 3 p.m. and midnight on Friday, 20th December."

"Why?"

"It would help to narrow things down."

"Narrow them down? You have extra information, then?"

"We hope that we're getting a little closer, sir."

"I'm not at all sure that I ought to answer your question. Not, that is, without having my solicitor present."

"That, of course, is entirely up to you," said Craddock. "You are not bound to answer any questions, and you have a perfect right to have a solicitor present before you do so."

"You are not—let me be quite clear—er—warning me in any way?"

"Oh, no, sir." Inspector Craddock looked properly shocked. "Nothing of that kind. The questions I am asking you, I am asking several other people as well. There's nothing directly personal about this. It's just a matter of necessary eliminations."

"Well, of course— I'm anxious to assist in any way I can. Let me see now. Such a thing isn't easy to answer off hand, but we're very systematic here. Miss Ellis, I expect, can help."

He spoke briefly into one of the telephones on his desk and almost immediately a streamlined young woman in a well-cut black suit entered with a notebook.

"My secretary, Miss Ellis, Inspector Craddock. Now, Miss Ellis, the inspector would like to know what I was doing on the afternoon and evening of—what was the date?"

"Friday, 20th December."

"Friday, 20th December. I expect you will have some record."

"Oh, yes." Miss Ellis left the room, returned with an office memorandum calendar and turned the pages.

"You were in the office on the morning of 20th December. You had a conference with Mr. Goldie about the Cromartie merger, you lunched with Lord Forthville at the Berkeley—"

"Ah, it was that day, yes."

"You returned to the office about 3 o'clock and dictated half a dozen letters. You then left to attend Sotheby's sale rooms where you were interested in some rare manuscripts which were coming up for sale that day. You did not return to the office again, but I have a note to remind you that you were attending the Catering Club dinner that evening." She looked up interrogatively.

"Thank you, Miss Ellis."

Miss Ellis glided from the room.

"That is all quite clear in my mind," said Harold. "I went to Sotheby's that afternoon but the items I wanted there went for too high a price. I had tea in a small place in Jermyn Street—Russell's, I think, it was called. I dropped into a News Theatre for about half an hour or so, then went home—I live at 43 Cardigan Gardens. The Catering Club dinner took place at seven-thirty at Caterer's Hall, and after it I returned home to bed. I think that should answer your questions."

"That's all very clear, Mr. Crackenthorpe. What time was it when you returned home to dress?"

"I don't think I can remember exactly. Soon after six, I should think."

"And after your dinner?"

"It was, I think, half past eleven when I got home."

"Did your manservant let you in? Or perhaps Lady Alice Crackenthorpe—"

"My wife, Lady Alice, is abroad in the South of France and has been since early December. I let myself in with my latch key."

"So there is no one who can vouch for your returning home when you say you did?"

Harold gave him a cold stare.

"I dare say the servants heard me come in. I have a man and wife. But, really, Inspector—"

"Please, Mr. Crackenthorpe, I know these kind of questions are annoying, but I have nearly finished. Do you own a car?"

"Yes, a Humber Hawk."

"You drive it yourself?"

"Yes. I don't use it much except at weekends. Driving in London is quite impossible nowadays."

"I presume you use it when you go down to see your father and sister in Brackhampton?"

"Not unless I am going to stay there for some length of time. If I just go down for the night—as, for instance, to the inquest the other day—I always go by train. There is an excellent train service and it is far quicker than going by car. The car my sister hires meets me at the station."

"Where do you keep your car?"

"I rent a garage in the mews behind Cardigan Gardens. Any more questions?"

"I think that's all for now," said Inspector Craddock, smiling and rising. "I'm very sorry for having to bother you."

When they were outside, Sergeant Wetherall, a man who lived in a state of dark suspicions of all and sundry, remarked meaningly:

"He didn't *like* those questions—didn't like them at all. Put out, he was."

"If you have not committed a murder, it naturally annoys you if it seems someone thinks that you have," said Inspector Craddock mildly. "It would particularly annoy an ultra respectable man like Harold Crackenthorpe. There's nothing in that. What we've got to find out now is if anyone actually saw Harold Crackenthorpe at the sale that afternoon, and the same applies to the tea shop place. He could easily have travelled by the 4:33, pushed the woman out of the train and caught a train back to London in time to appear at the dinner. In the same way he could have driven his car down that night, moved the body to the sarcophagus and driven back again. Make inquiries in the mews."

"Yes, sir. Do you think that's what he did do?"

"How do I know?" asked Inspector Craddock. "He's a tall dark man. He *could* have been on that train and he's got a connection with Rutherford Hall. He's a possible suspect in this case. Now for Brother Alfred."

II

Alfred Crackenthorpe had a flat in West Hampstead, in a big modern building of slightly jerry-built type with a large courtyard in which the owners of flats parked their cars with a certain lack of consideration for others.

The flat was the modern built-in type, evidently rented furnished. It had a long plywood table that led down from the wall, a divan bed, and various chairs of improbable proportions.

Alfred Crackenthorpe met them with engaging friendliness but was, the inspector thought, nervous.

"I'm intrigued," he said. "Can I offer you a drink, Inspector Craddock?" He held up various bottles invitingly.

"No, thank you, Mr. Crackenthorpe."

"As bad as that?" He laughed at his own little joke, then asked what it was all about.

Inspector Craddock said his little piece.

"What was I doing on the afternoon and evening of 20th December. How should I know? Why, that's—what—over three weeks ago."

"Your brother Harold has been able to tell us very exactly."

"Brother Harold, perhaps. Not Brother Alfred." He added with a touch of something—envious malice possibly: "Harold is the successful member of the family—busy, useful, fully employed—a time for everything, and everything at that time. Even if he were to commit a—murder, shall we say?—it would be carefully timed and exact."

"Any particular reason for using that example?"

"Oh, no. It just came into my mind—as a supreme absurdity."

"Now about yourself."

Alfred spread out his hands.

"It's as I tell you—I've no memory for times or places. If you were to say Christmas Day now—then I *should* be able to answer you—there's a peg to hang it on. I know where I was Christmas Day. We spend that with my father at Brackhampton. I really don't know why. He grumbles at the expense of having us—and would grumble that we never came near him if we didn't come. We really do it to please my sister."

"And you did it this year?"

"Yes."

"But unfortunately your father was taken ill, was he not?"

Craddock was pursuing a sideline deliberately, led by the kind of instinct that often came to him in his profession.

"He was taken ill. Living like a sparrow in that glorious cause of economy, sudden full eating and drinking had its effect."

"That was all it was, was it?"

"Of course. What else?"

"I gathered that his doctor was—worried."

"Ah, that old fool Quimper," Alfred spoke quickly and scornfully. "It's no use listening to *him*, Inspector. He's an alarmist of the worst kind."

"Indeed? He seemed a rather sensible kind of man to me."

"He's a complete fool. Father's not really an invalid, there's nothing wrong with his heart, but he takes in Quimper completely. Naturally, when father really felt ill, he made a terrific fuss, and had Quimper going and coming, asking questions, going into everything he'd eaten and drunk. The whole thing was ridiculous!" Alfred spoke with unusual heat.

Craddock was silent for a moment or two, rather effectively. Alfred fidgeted, shot him a quick glance, and then said petulantly:

"Well, what *is* all this? Why do you want to know where I was on a particular Friday, three or four weeks ago?"

"So you do remember that it was a Friday?"

"I thought you said so."

"Perhaps I did," said Inspector Craddock. "At any rate, Friday 20th is the day I am asking about."

"Why?"

"A routine inquiry."

"That's nonsense. Have you found out something more about this woman? About where she came from?"

"Our information is not yet complete."

Alfred gave him a sharp glance.

"I hope you're not being led aside by this wild theory of Emma's that she might have been my brother Edmund's widow. That's complete nonsense."

"This— Martine, did not at any rate apply to you?"

"To me? Good lord, no! That would have been a laugh."

"She would be more likely, you think, to go to your brother Harold?"

"Much more likely. His name's frequently in the papers. He's well off. Trying a touch there wouldn't surprise me. Not that she'd have got anything. Harold's as tight-fisted as the old man himself. Emma, of course, is the soft-hearted one of the family, and she was Edmund's favourite sister. All the same, Emma isn't credulous. She was quite alive to the possibility of this woman being phoney. She had it all laid on for the entire family to be there—and a hard-headed solicitor as well."

"Very wise," said Craddock. "Was there a definite date fixed for this meeting?"

"It was to be soon after Christmas—the weekend of the 27th..." he stopped.

"Ah," said Craddock pleasantly. "So I see some dates have a meaning to you."

"I've told you—no definite date was fixed."

"But you talked about it—when?"

"I really can't remember."

"And you can't tell me what you yourself were doing on Friday, 20th December?"

"Sorry—my mind's an absolute blank."

"You don't keep an engagement book?"

"Can't stand the things."

"The Friday before Christmas—it shouldn't be too difficult."

"I played golf one day with a likely prospect." Alfred shook his head. "No, that was the week before. I probably just mooched around. I spend a lot of my time doing that. I find one's business gets done in bars more than anywhere else."

"Perhaps the people here, or some of your friends, may be able to help?"

"Maybe. I'll ask them. Do what I can."

Alfred seemed more sure of himself now.

"I can't tell you what I was doing that day," he said; "but I can tell you what I *wasn't* doing. I wasn't murdering anyone in the Long Barn."

"Why should you say that, Mr. Crackenthorpe?"

"Come now, my dear Inspector. You're investigating this murder, aren't you? And when you begin to ask 'Where were you on such and such a day at such and such a time?' you're narrowing down things. I'd very much like to know why you've hit on Friday the 20th between—what? Lunchtime and midnight? It couldn't be medical evidence, not after all this time. Did somebody see the deceased sneaking into the barn that afternoon? She went in and she never came out, etc.? Is that it?"

The sharp black eyes were watching him narrowly, but Inspector Craddock was far too old a hand to react to that sort of thing.

"I'm afraid we'll have to let you guess about that," he said pleasantly.

"The police are so secretive."

"Not only the police. I think, Mr. Crackenthorpe, you *could* remember what you were doing on that Friday if you tried. Of course you may have reasons for not wishing to remember—"

"You won't catch me that way, Inspector. It's very suspicious, of course, very suspicious, indeed, that I can't remember—but there it is! Wait a minute now—I went to Leeds that week—stayed at a hotel close to the Town Hall—can't remember its name—but you'd find it easy enough. That *might* have been on the Friday."

"We'll check up," said the inspector unemotionally.

He rose. "I'm sorry you couldn't have been more cooperative, Mr. Crackenthorpe."

"Most unfortunate for *me!* There's Cedric with a safe alibi in Ibiza, and Harold, no doubt, checked with business appointments and public dinners every hour—and here am I with no alibi at all. Very sad. And all so silly. I've already told you I don't murder people. And why should I murder an unknown woman, anyway? What for? Even if the corpse *is* the corpse of Edmund's widow, why should any of us wish to do away with her? Now if she'd been married to *Harold* in the war, and had suddenly reappeared—then it might have been awkward for the respectable Harold—bigamy and all that. But Edmund! Why we'd all have *enjoyed* making Father stump up a bit to give her an allowance and send the boy to a decent school. Father would have been wild, but he couldn't in decency refuse to do something. Won't you have a drink before you go, Inspector? Sure? Too bad I haven't been able to help you."

III

"Sir, listen, do you know what?"

Inspector Craddock looked at his excited sergeant.

"Yes, Wetherall, what is it?"

"I've placed him, sir. That chap. All the time I was trying to fix it and suddenly it came. He was mixed up in that tinned food business with Dicky Rogers. Never got anything on him—too cagey for that. And he's been in with one or more of the Soho lot. Watches and that Italian sovereign business."

Of course! Craddock realized now why Alfred's face had seemed vaguely familiar from the first. It had all been small-time stuff—never anything that could be proved. Alfred had always been on the outskirts of the racket with a plausible innocent reason for having been mixed up in it at all. But the police had been quite sure that a small steady profit came his way.

"That throws rather a light on things," Craddock said.

"Think he did it?"

"I shouldn't have said he was the type to do murder. But it explains other things—the reason why he couldn't come up with an

alibi."

"Yes, that looked bad for him."

"Not really," said Craddock. "It's quite a clever line—just to say firmly you can't remember. Lots of people can't remember what they did and where they were even a week ago. It's especially useful if you don't particularly want to call attention to the way you spend your time—interesting rendezvous at lorry pull-ups with the Dicky Rogers crowd, for instance."

"So you think he's all right?"

"I'm not prepared to think anyone's all right just yet," said Inspector Craddock. "You've got to work on it, Wetherall."

Back at his desk, Craddock sat frowning, and making little notes on the pad in front of him.

*Murderer (he wrote)... A tall dark man!!!
Victim?... Could have been Martine, Edmund
Crackenthorpe's girlfriend or widow.*

Or

Could have been Anna Stravinska. Went out of circulation at appropriate time, right age and appearance, clothing, etc. No connections with Rutherford Hall as far as is known. Could be Harold's first wife! Bigamy!

" " first mistress. Blackmail!

If connection with Alfred, might be blackmail. Had knowledge that could have sent him to gaol? If Cedric—might have had connections with him abroad— Paris? Balearics?

Or

Victim could be Anna S. posing as Martine

or

Victim is unknown woman killed by unknown murderer!

"And most probably the latter," said Craddock aloud.

He reflected gloomily on the situation. You couldn't get far with a case until you had the motive. All the motives suggested so far seemed either inadequate or far fetched.

Now if only it had been the murder of old Mr. Crackenthorpe... Plenty of motive there....

Something stirred in his memory....

He made further notes on his pad.

Ask Dr. Q. about Christmas illness.

Cedric—alibi.

Consult Miss M. for the latest gossip.

Sixteen

When Craddock got to 4 Madison Road he found Lucy Eyelesbarrow with Miss Marple.

He hesitated for a moment in his plan of campaign and then decided that Lucy Eyelesbarrow might prove a valuable ally.

After greetings, he solemnly drew out his notecase, extracting three pound notes, added three shillings and pushed them across the table to Miss Marple.

"What's this, Inspector?"

"Consultation fee. You're a consultant—on murder! Pulse, temperature, local reactions, possible deepseated cause of said murder. I'm just the poor harassed local G.P."

Miss Marple looked at him and twinkled. He grinned at her. Lucy Eyelesbarrow gave a faint gasp and then laughed.

"Why, Inspector Craddock—you're human after all."

"Oh, well, I'm not strictly on duty this afternoon."

"I told you we had met before," said Miss Marple to Lucy. "Sir Henry Clithering is his godfather—a very old friend of mine."

"Would you like to hear, Miss Eyelesbarrow, what my godfather said about her—the first time we met? He described her as just the finest detective God ever made—natural genius cultivated in a suitable soil. He told me never to despise the"—Dermot Craddock paused for a moment to seek for a synonym for "old pussies"—"—er elderly ladies. He said they could usually tell you what *might* have happened, what ought to have happened, and even what actually *did* happen! And," he said, "they can tell you *why* it happened. He

added that this particular—er—elderly lady—was at the top of the class.”

“Well!” said Lucy. “That seems to be a testimonial all right.”

Miss Marple was pink and confused and looked unusually dithery.

“Dear Sir Henry,” she murmured. “Always so kind. Really I’m not at all clever—just perhaps, a *slight* knowledge of human nature—living, you know, in a *village*—”

She added, with more composure:

“Of course, I am somewhat handicapped, by not actually being on the spot. It is so helpful, I always feel, when people remind you of other people—because types are alike everywhere and that is such a valuable guide.”

Lucy looked a little puzzled, but Craddock nodded comprehendingly.

“But you’ve been to tea there, haven’t you?” he said.

“Yes, indeed. Most pleasant. I was a little disappointed that I didn’t see old Mr. Crackenthorpe—but one can’t have everything.”

“Do you feel that if you saw the person who had done the murder, you’d know?” asked Lucy.

“Oh, I wouldn’t say *that*, dear. One is always inclined to guess—and guessing would be very wrong when it is a question of anything as serious as murder. All one can do is to observe the people concerned—or who might have been concerned—and see of whom they remind you.”

“Like Cedric and the bank manager?”

Miss Marple corrected her.

“The bank manager’s *son*, dear. Mr. Eade himself was far more like Mr. Harold—a very conservative man—but perhaps a little too fond of money—the sort of man, too, who could go a long way to avoid scandal.”

Craddock smiled, and said:

“And Alfred?”

“Jenkins at the garage,” Miss Marple replied promptly. “He didn’t exactly appropriate tools?—but he used to exchange a broken or inferior jack for a good one. And I believe he wasn’t very honest over batteries—though I don’t understand these things very well. I

know Raymond left off dealing with him and went to the garage on the Milchester road. As for Emma," continued Miss Marple thoughtfully, "she reminds me very much of Geraldine Webb—always very quiet, almost dowdy—and bullied a good deal by her elderly mother. Quite a surprise to everybody when the mother died unexpectedly and Geraldine came into a nice sum of money and went and had her hair cut and permed, and went off on a cruise, and came back married to a very nice barrister. They had two children."

The parallel was clear enough. Lucy said, rather uneasily: "Do you think you ought to have said what you did about Emma marrying? It seemed to upset the brothers."

Miss Marple nodded.

"Yes," she said. "So like men—quite unable to see what's going on under their eyes. I don't believe you noticed yourself."

"No," admitted Lucy. "I never thought of anything of that kind. They both seemed to me—"

"So old?" said Miss Marple smiling a little. "But Dr. Quimper isn't much over forty, I should say, though he's going grey on the temples, and it's obvious that he's longing for some kind of home life; and Emma Crackenthorpe is under forty—not too old to marry and have a family. The doctor's wife died quite young having a baby, so I have heard."

"I believe she did. Emma said something about it one day."

"He must be lonely," said Miss Marple. "A busy hard-working doctor needs a wife—someone sympathetic—not too young."

"Listen, darling," said Lucy. "Are we investigating crime, or are we match-making?"

Miss Marple twinkled.

"I'm afraid I *am* rather romantic. Because I am an old maid, perhaps. You know, dear Lucy, that, as far as I am concerned, you have fulfilled your contract. If you really want a holiday abroad before taking up your next engagement, you would have time still for a short trip."

"And leave Rutherford Hall? Never! I'm the complete sleuth by now. Almost as bad as the boys. They spend their entire time

looking for clues. They looked all through the dustbins yesterday. Most unsavoury—and they haven't really the faintest idea what they were looking for. If they come to you in triumph, Inspector Craddock, bearing a torn scrap of paper with *Martine—if you value your life keep away from the Long Barn!* on it, you'll know that I've taken pity on them and concealed it in the pigsty!"

"Why the pigsty, dear?" asked Miss Marple with interest. "Do they keep pigs?"

"Oh, no, not nowadays. It's just— I go there sometimes."

For some reason Lucy blushed. Miss Marple looked at her with increased interest.

"Who's at the house now?" asked Craddock.

"Cedric's there, and Bryan's down for the weekend. Harold and Alfred are coming down tomorrow. They rang up this morning. I somehow got the impression that you had been putting the cat among the pigeons, Inspector Craddock."

Craddock smiled.

"I shook them up a little. Asked them to account for their movements on Friday, 20th December."

"And could they?"

"Harold could. Alfred couldn't—or wouldn't."

"I think alibis must be terribly difficult," said Lucy. "Times and places and dates. They must be hard to check up on, too."

"It takes time and patience—but we manage." He glanced at his watch. "I'll be coming to Rutherford Hall presently to have a word with Cedric, but I want to get hold of Dr. Quimper first."

"You'll be just about right. He has his surgery at six and he's usually finished about half past. I must get back and deal with dinner."

"I'd like your opinion on one thing, Miss Eyelesbarrow. What's the family view about this Martine business—amongst themselves?"

Lucy replied promptly.

"They're all furious with Emma for going to you about it—and with Dr. Quimper who, it seemed, encouraged her to do so. Harold and Alfred think it was a try on and not genuine. Emma isn't sure. Cedric thinks it was phoney, too, but he doesn't take it as seriously

as the other two. Bryan, on the other hand, seems quite sure that it's genuine."

"Why, I wonder?"

"Well, Bryan's rather like that. Just accepts things at their face value. He thinks it was Edmund's wife—or rather widow—and that she had suddenly to go back to France, but that they'll hear from her again sometime. The fact that she hasn't written, or anything, up to now, seems to him to be quite natural because he never writes letters himself. Bryan's rather sweet. Just like a dog that wants to be taken for a walk."

"And do you take him for a walk, dear?" asked Miss Marple. "To the pigsties, perhaps?"

Lucy shot a keen glance at her.

"So many gentlemen in the house, coming and going," mused Miss Marple.

When Miss Marple uttered the word "gentlemen" she always gave it its full Victorian flavour—an echo from an era actually before her own time. You were conscious at once of dashing full-blooded (and probably whiskered) males, sometimes wicked, but always gallant.

"You're such a handsome girl," pursued Miss Marple, appraising Lucy. "I expect they pay you a good deal of attention, don't they?"

Lucy flushed slightly. Scrappy remembrances passed across her mind. Cedric, leaning against the pigsty wall. Bryan sitting disconsolately on the kitchen table. Alfred's fingers touching hers as he helped her collect the coffee cups.

"Gentlemen," said Miss Marple, in the tone of one speaking of some alien and dangerous species, "are all very much alike in some ways—even if they are quite *old*...."

"Darling," cried Lucy. "A hundred years ago you would certainly have been burned as a witch!"

And she told her story of old Mr. Crackenthorpe's conditional proposal of marriage.

"In fact," said Lucy, "they've all made what you might call advances to me in a way. Harold's was very correct—an advantageous financial position in the City. I don't think it's my attractive appearance—they must think I know something."

She laughed.

But Inspector Craddock did not laugh.

"Be careful," he said. "They might murder you instead of making advances to you."

"I suppose it might be simpler," Lucy agreed.

Then she gave a slight shiver.

"One forgets," she said. "The boys have been having such fun that one almost thought of it all as a game. But it's not a game."

"No," said Miss Marple. "Murder isn't a game."

She was silent for a moment or two before she said:

"Don't the boys go back to school soon?"

"Yes, next week. They go tomorrow to James Stoddart-West's home for the last few days of the holidays."

"I'm glad of that," said Miss Marple gravely. "I shouldn't like anything to happen while they're there."

"You mean to old Mr. Crackenthorpe. Do you think *he's* going to be murdered next?"

"Oh, no," said Miss Marple. "*He'll* be all right. I meant to the boys."

"Well, to Alexander."

"But surely—"

"Hunting about, you know—looking for clues. Boys love that sort of thing—but it might be very dangerous."

Craddock looked at her thoughtfully.

"You're not prepared to believe, are you, Miss Marple, that it's a case of an unknown woman murdered by an unknown man? You tie it up definitely with Rutherford Hall?"

"I think there's a definite connection, yes."

"All we know about the murderer is that he's a tall dark man. That's what your friend says and all she can say. There are three tall dark men at Rutherford Hall. On the day of the inquest, you know, I came out to see the three brothers standing waiting on the pavement for the car to draw up. They had their backs to me and it was astonishing how, in their heavy overcoats, they looked all alike. *Three tall dark men*. And yet, actually, they're all three quite different types." He sighed. "It makes it very difficult."

"I wonder," murmured Miss Marple. "I have been wondering—whether it might perhaps be all much *simpler* than we suppose. Murders so often are quite simple—with an obvious rather sordid motive...."

"Do you believe in the mysterious Martine, Miss Marple?"

"I'm quite ready to believe that Edmund Crackenthorpe either married, or meant to marry, a girl called Martine. Emma Crackenthorpe showed you his letter, I understand, and from what I've seen of her and from what Lucy tells me, I should say Emma Crackenthorpe is quite incapable of making up a thing of that kind—indeed, why should she?"

"So granted Martine," said Craddock thoughtfully, "there *is* a motive of a kind. Martine's reappearance with a son would diminish the Crackenthorpe inheritance—though hardly to a point, one would think, to activate murder. They're all very hard up—"

"Even Harold?" Lucy demanded incredulously.

"Even the prosperous-looking Harold Crackenthorpe is not the sober and conservative financier he appears to be. He's been plunging heavily and mixing himself up in some rather undesirable ventures. A large sum of money, soon, might avoid a crash."

"But if so—" said Lucy, and stopped.

"Yes, Miss Eyelesbarrow—"

"I know, dear," said Miss Marple. "The wrong murder, that's what you mean."

"Yes. Martine's death wouldn't do Harold—or any of the others—any good. Not until—"

"Not until Luther Crackenthorpe died. Exactly. That occurred to me. And Mr. Crackenthorpe, senior, I gather from his doctor, is a much better life than any outsider would imagine."

"He'll last for years," said Lucy. Then she frowned.

"Yes?" Craddock spoke encouragingly.

"He was rather ill at Christmas-time," said Lucy. "He said the doctor made a lot of fuss about it—'Anyone would have thought I'd been poisoned by the fuss he made.' That's what he said."

She looked inquiringly at Craddock.

"Yes," said Craddock. "That's really what I want to ask Dr. Quimper about."

"Well, I must go," said Lucy. "Heavens, it's late."

Miss Marple put down her knitting and picked up *The Times* with a half-done crossword puzzle.

"I wish I had a dictionary here," she murmured. "Tontine and Tokay— I always mix those two words up. One, I believe, is a Hungarian wine."

"That's Tokay," said Lucy, looking back from the door. "But one's a five-letter word and one's a seven. What's the clue?"

"Oh, it wasn't in the crossword," said Miss Marple vaguely. "It was in my head."

Inspector Craddock looked at her very hard. Then he said goodbye and went.

Seventeen

I

Craddock had to wait a few minutes whilst Quimper finished his evening surgery, and then the doctor came to him. He looked tired and depressed.

He offered Craddock a drink and when the latter accepted he mixed one for himself as well.

"Poor devils," he said as he sank down in a worn easy-chair. "So scared and so stupid—no sense. Had a painful case this evening. Woman who ought to have come to me a year ago. If she'd come then, she might have been operated on successfully. Now it's too late. Makes me mad. The truth is people are an extraordinary mixture of heroism and cowardice. She's suffering agony, and borne it without a word, just because she was too scared to come and find out that what she feared might be true. At the other end of the scale are the people who come and waste my time because they've got a dangerous swelling causing them agony on their little finger which they think may be cancer and which turns out to be a common or garden chilblain! Well, don't mind me. I've blown off steam now. What did you want to see me about?"

"First, I've got you to thank, I believe, for advising Miss Crackenthorpe to come to me with the letter that purported to be from her brother's widow."

"Oh, that? Anything in it? I didn't exactly advise her to come. She wanted to. She was worried. All the dear little brothers were trying

to hold her back, of course."

"Why should they?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"Afraid the lady might be proved genuine, I suppose."

"Do you think the letter was genuine?"

"No idea. Never actually saw it. I should say it was someone who knew the facts, just trying to make a touch. Hoping to work on Emma's feelings. They were dead wrong, there. Emma's no fool. She wouldn't take an unknown sister-in-law to her bosom without asking a few practical questions first."

He added with some curiosity:

"But why ask *my* views? I've got nothing to do with it?"

"I really came to ask you something quite different—but I don't quite know how to put it."

Dr. Quimper looked interested.

"I understand that not long ago—at Christmas-time, I think it was—Mr. Crackenthorpe had rather a bad turn of illness."

He saw a change at once in the doctor's face. It hardened.

"Yes."

"I gather a gastric disturbance of some kind?"

"Yes."

"This is difficult... Mr. Crackenthorpe was boasting of his health, saying he intended to outlive most of his family. He referred to you—you'll excuse me, Doctor..."

"Oh, don't mind me. I'm not sensitive as to what my patients say about me!"

"He spoke of you as an old fuss-pot." Quimper smiled. "He said you had asked him all sorts of questions, not only as to what he had eaten, but as to who prepared it and served it."

The doctor was not smiling now. His face was hard again.

"Go on."

"He used some such phrase as—'Talked as though he believed someone had poisoned me.'"

There was a pause.

"Had you—any suspicion of that kind?"

Quimper did not answer at once. He got up and walked up and down. Finally, he wheeled round on Craddock.

"What the devil do you expect me to say? Do you think a doctor can go about flinging accusations of poisoning here and there without any real evidence?"

"I'd just like to know, off the record, if—that idea—did enter your head?"

Dr. Quimper said evasively:

"Old Crackenthorpe leads a fairly frugal life. When the family comes down, Emma steps up the food. Result—a nasty attack of gastro-enteritis. The symptoms were consistent with that diagnosis."

Craddock persisted.

"I see. You were quite satisfied? You were not at all—shall we say—puzzled?"

"All right. All right. Yes, I was Yours Truly Puzzled! Does that please you?"

"It interests me," said Craddock. "What actually did you suspect—or fear?"

"Gastric cases vary, of course, but there were certain indications that would have been, shall we say, more consistent with arsenic poisoning than with plain gastro-enteritis. Mind you, the two things are very much alike. Better men than myself have failed to recognize arsenic poisoning—and have given a certificate in all good faith."

"And what was the result of your inquiries?"

"It seemed that what I suspected could not possibly be true. Mr. Crackenthorpe assured me that he had similar attacks before I attended him—and from the same cause, he said. They had always taken place when there was too much rich food about."

"Which was when the house was full? With the family? Or guests?"

"Yes. That seemed reasonable enough. But frankly, Craddock, I wasn't happy. I went so far as to write to old Dr. Morris. He was my senior partner and retired soon after I joined him. Crackenthorpe was his patient originally. I asked about these earlier attacks that the old man had had."

"And what response did you get?"

Quimper grinned.

"I got a flea in the ear. I was more or less told not to be a damned fool. Well"—he shrugged his shoulders—"presumably I *was* a damned fool."

"I wonder," Craddock was thoughtful.

Then he decided to speak frankly.

"Throwing discretion aside, Doctor, there are people who stand to benefit pretty considerably from Luther Crackenthorpe's death." The doctor nodded. "He's an old man—and a hale and hearty one. He may live to be ninety odd?"

"Easily. He spends his life taking care of himself, and his constitution is sound."

"And his sons—and daughter—are all getting on, and they are all feeling the pinch?"

"You leave Emma out of it. She's no poisoner. These attacks only happen when the others are there—not when she and he are alone."

"An elementary precaution—if she's the one," the inspector thought, but was careful not to say aloud.

He paused, choosing his words carefully.

"Surely—I'm ignorant on these matters—but supposing just as a hypothesis that arsenic *was* administered—hasn't Crackenthorpe been very lucky not to succumb?"

"Now there," said the doctor, "you *have* got something odd. It is exactly that fact that leads me to believe that I have been, as old Morris puts it, a damned fool. You see, it's obviously not a case of small doses of arsenic administered regularly—which is what you might call the classic method of arsenic poisoning. Crackenthorpe has never had any chronic gastric trouble. In a way, that's what makes these sudden violent attacks seem unlikely. So, assuming they are not due to natural causes, it looks as though the poisoner is muffing it every time—which hardly makes sense."

"Giving an inadequate dose, you mean?"

"Yes. On the other hand, Crackenthorpe's got a strong constitution and what might do in another man, doesn't do him in. There's always personal idiosyncrasy to be reckoned with. But you'd

think that by now the poisoner—unless he's unusually timid—would have stepped up the dose. Why hasn't he?

"That is," he added, "if there *is* a poisoner which there probably isn't! Probably all my ruddy imagination from start to finish."

"It's an odd problem," the inspector agreed. "It doesn't seem to make sense."

II

"Inspector Craddock!"

The eager whisper made the inspector jump.

He had been just on the point of ringing the front doorbell. Alexander and his friend Stoddart-West emerged cautiously from the shadows.

"We heard your car, and we wanted to get hold of you."

"Well, let's come inside." Craddock's hand went out to the door bell again, but Alexander pulled at his coat with the eagerness of a pawing dog.

"We've found a clue," he breathed.

"Yes, we've found a clue," Stoddart-West echoed.

"Damn that girl," thought Craddock unamiably.

"Splendid," he said in a perfunctory manner. "Let's go inside the house and look at it."

"No," Alexander was insistent. "Someone's sure to interrupt. Come to the harness room. We'll guide you."

Somewhat unwillingly, Craddock allowed himself to be guided round the corner of the house and along to the stableyard. Stoddart-West pushed open a heavy door, stretched up, and turned on a rather feeble electric light. The harness room, once the acme of Victorian spit and polish, was now the sad repository of everything that no one wanted. Broken garden chairs, rusted old garden implements, a vast decrepit mowing-machine, rusted spring mattresses, hammocks, and disintegrated tennis nets.

"We come here a good deal," said Alexander. "One can really be private here."

There were certain tokens of occupancy about. The decayed mattresses had been piled up to make a kind of divan, there was an old rusted table on which reposed a large tin of chocolate biscuits, there was a hoard of apples, a tin of toffees, and a jig-saw puzzle.

"It really *is* a clue, sir," said Stoddart-West eagerly, his eyes gleaming behind his spectacles. "We found it this afternoon."

"We've been hunting for days. In the bushes—"

"And inside hollow trees—"

"And we went through the ash bins—"

"There were some jolly interesting things there, as a matter of fact—"

"And then we went into the boiler house—"

"Old Hillman keeps a great galvanized tub there full of waste paper—"

"For when the boiler goes out and he wants to start it again—"

"Any odd paper that's blowing about. He picks it up and shoves it in there—"

"And that's where we found it—"

"Found WHAT?" Craddock interrupted the duet.

"*The clue*. Careful, Stodders, get your gloves on."

Importantly, Stoddart-West, in the best detective story tradition, drew on a pair of rather dirty gloves and took from his pocket a Kodak photographic folder. From this he extracted in his gloved fingers with the utmost care a soiled and crumpled envelope which he handed importantly to the inspector.

Both boys held their breath in excitement.

Craddock took it with due solemnity. He liked the boys and he was ready to enter into the spirit of the thing.

The letter had been through the post, there was no enclosure inside, it was just a torn envelope—addressed to Mrs. Martine Crackenthorne, 126 Elvers Crescent, N.10.

"You see?" said Alexander breathlessly. "It shows she *was* here—Uncle Edmund's French wife, I mean—the one there's all the fuss about. She must have actually been here and dropped out somewhere. So it looks, doesn't it—"

Stoddart-West broke in:

"It looks as though *she* was the one who got murdered— I mean, don't you think, sir, that it simply *must* have been her in the sarcophagus?"

They waited anxiously.

Craddock played up.

"Possible, very possible," he said.

"This *is* important, isn't it?"

"You'll test it for fingerprints, won't you, sir?"

"Of course," said Craddock.

Stoddart-West gave a deep sigh.

"Smashing luck for us, wasn't it?" he said. "On our last day, too."

"Last day?"

"Yes," said Alexander. "I'm going to Stodders' place tomorrow for the last few days of the holidays. Stodders' people have got a smashing house— Queen Anne, isn't it?"

"William and Mary," said Stoddart-West.

"I thought your mother said—"

"Mum's French. She doesn't really know about English architecture."

"But your father said it was built—"

Craddock was examining the envelope.

Clever of Lucy Eyelesbarrow. How had she managed to fake the post mark? He peered closely, but the light was too feeble. Great fun for the boys, of course, but rather awkward for him. Lucy, drat her, hadn't considered that angle. If this were genuine, it would enforce a course of action. There....

Beside him a learned architectural argument was being hotly pursued. He was deaf to it.

"Come on, boys," he said, "we'll go into the house. You've been very helpful."

Eighteen

I

Craddock was escorted by the boys through the back door into the house. This was, it seemed, their common mode of entrance. The kitchen was bright and cheerful. Lucy, in a large white apron, was rolling out pastry. Leaning against the dresser, watching her with a kind of dog-like attention, was Bryan Eastley. With one hand he tugged at his large fair moustache.

"Hallo, Dad," said Alexander kindly. "You out here again?"

"I like it out here," said Bryan, and added: "Miss Eyelesbarrow doesn't mind."

"Oh, I don't mind," said Lucy. "Good evening, Inspector Craddock."

"Coming to detect in the kitchen?" asked Bryan with interest.

"Not exactly. Mr. Cedric Crackenthorpe is still here, isn't he?"

"Oh, yes, Cedric's here. Do you want him?"

"I'd like a word with him—yes, please."

"I'll go and see if he's in," said Bryan. "He may have gone round to the local."

He unpropped himself from the dresser.

"Thank you so much," said Lucy to him. "My hands are all over flour or I'd go."

"What are you making?" asked Stoddart-West anxiously.

"Peach flan."

"Good-oh," said Stoddart-West.

"Is it nearly suppertime?" asked Alexander.

"No."

"Gosh! I'm terribly hungry."

"There's the end of the ginger cake in the larder."

The boys made a concerted rush and collided in the door.

"They're just like locusts," said Lucy.

"My congratulations to you," said Craddock.

"What on—exactly?"

"Your ingenuity—over this!"

"Over what!"

Craddock indicated the folder containing the letter.

"Very nicely done," he said.

"What *are* you talking about?"

"This, my dear girl—this." He half-drew it out.

She stared at him uncomprehendingly.

Craddock felt suddenly dizzy.

"Didn't you fake this clue—and put it in the boiler room, for the boys to find? Quick—tell me."

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about," said Lucy.

"Do you mean that—?"

Craddock slipped the folder quickly back in his pocket as Bryan returned.

"Cedric's in the library," he said. "Go on in."

He resumed his place on the dresser. Inspector Craddock went to the library.

II

Cedric Crackenthorpe seemed delighted to see the inspector.

"Doing a spot more sleuthing down here?" he asked. "Got any further?"

"I think I can say we are a little further on, Mr. Crackenthorpe."

"Found out who the corpse was?"

"We've not got a definite identification, but we have a fairly shrewd idea."

"Good for you."

"Arising out of our latest information, we want to get a few statements. I'm starting with you, Mr. Crackenthorpe, as you're on the spot."

"I shan't be much longer. I'm going back to Ibiza in a day or two."

"Then I seem to be just in time."

"Go ahead."

"I should like a detailed account, please, of exactly where you were and what you were doing on Friday, 20th December."

Cedric shot a quick glance at him. Then he leaned back, yawned, assumed an air of great nonchalance, and appeared to be lost in the effort of remembrance.

"Well, as I've already told you, I was in Ibiza. Trouble is, one day there is so like another. Painting in the morning, siesta from three p.m. to five. Perhaps a spot of sketching if the light's suitable. Then an apéritif, sometimes with the mayor, sometimes with the doctor, at the café in the Piazza. After that some kind of a scratch meal. Most of the evening in Scotty's Bar with some of my lower-class friends. Will that do you?"

"I'd rather have the truth, Mr. Crackenthorpe."

Cedric sat up.

"That's a most offensive remark, Inspector."

"Do you think so? You told me, Mr. Crackenthorpe, that you left Ibiza on 21st December and arrived in England that same day?"

"So I did. Em! Hi, Em?"

Emma Crackenthorpe came through the adjoining door from the small morning room. She looked inquiringly from Cedric to the inspector.

"Look here, Em. I arrived here for Christmas on the Saturday before, didn't I? Came straight from the airport?"

"Yes," said Emma wonderingly. "You got here about lunchtime."

"There you are," said Cedric to the inspector.

"You must think us very foolish, Mr. Crackenthorpe," said Craddock pleasantly. "We can check on these things, you know. I think, if you'll show me your passport—"

He paused expectantly.

"Can't find the damned thing," said Cedric. "Was looking for it this morning. Wanted to send it to Cook's."

"I think you could find it, Mr. Crackenthorpe. But it's not really necessary. The records show that you actually entered this country on the evening of 19th December. Perhaps you will now account to me for your movements between that time until lunchtime on 21st December when you arrived here."

Cedric looked very cross indeed.

"That's the hell of life nowadays," he said angrily. "All this red tape and form-filling. That's what comes of a bureaucratic state. Can't go where you like and do as you please anymore! Somebody's always asking questions. What's all this fuss about the 20th, anyway? What's special about the 20th?"

"It happens to be the day we believe the murder was committed. You can refuse to answer, of course, but—"

"Who says I refuse to answer? Give a chap time. And you were vague enough about the date of the murder at the inquest. What's turned up new since then?"

Craddock did not reply.

Cedric said, with a sidelong glance at Emma:

"Shall we go into the other room?"

Emma said quickly: "I'll leave you." At the door, she paused and turned.

"This is serious, you know, Cedric. If the 20th *was* the day of murder, then you must tell Inspector Craddock exactly what you were doing."

She went through into the next room and closed the door behind her.

"Good old Em," said Cedric. "Well, here goes. Yes, I left Ibiza on the 19th all right. Planned to break the journey in Paris, and spend a couple of days routing up some old friends on the Left Bank. But, as a matter of fact, there was a very attractive woman on the plane... Quite a dish. To put it plainly, she and I got off together. She was on her way to the States, had to spend a couple of nights in London to see about some business or other. We got to London on the 19th. We stayed at the Kingsway Palace in case your spies haven't found

that out yet! Called myself John Brown—never does to use your own name on these occasions.”

“And on the 20th?”

Cedric made a grimace.

“Morning pretty well occupied by a terrific hangover.”

“And the afternoon. From three o’clock onwards?”

“Let me see. Well, I mooned about, as you might say. Went into the National Galley—that’s respectable enough. Saw a film. *Rowenna of the Range*. I’ve always had a passion for Westerns. This was a corker... Then a drink or two in the bar and a bit of a sleep in my room, and out about ten o’clock with the girl-friend and a round of various hot spots—can’t even remember most of their names—Jumping Frog was one, I think. She knew ‘em all. Got pretty well plastered and to tell the truth, don’t remember much more till I woke up the next morning—with an even worse hangover. Girlfriend hopped off to catch her plane and I poured cold water over my head, got a chemist to give me a devils’ brew, and then started off for this place, pretending I’d just arrived at Heathrow. No need to upset Emma, I thought. You know what women are—always hurt if you don’t come straight home. I had to borrow money from her to pay the taxi. I was completely cleaned out. No use asking the old man. He’d never cough up. Mean old brute. Well, Inspector, satisfied?”

“Can any of this be substantiated, Mr. Crackenthorpe? Say between 3 p.m. and 7 p.m.”

“Most unlikely, I should think,” said Cedric cheerfully. “National Gallery where the attendants look at you with lack-lustre eyes and a crowded picture show. No, not likely.”

Emma reentered. She held a small engagement book in her hand.

“You want to know what everyone was doing on 20th December, is that right, Inspector Craddock?”

“Well—er—yes, Miss Crackenthorpe.”

“I have just been looking in my engagement book. On the 20th I went into Brackhampton to attend a meeting of the Church Restoration Fund. That finished about a quarter to one and I lunched with Lady Adington and Miss Bartlett who were also on the

committee, at the Cadena Café. After lunch I did some shopping, stores for Christmas, and also Christmas presents. I went to Greenford's and Lyall and Swift's, Boots', and probably several other shops. I had tea about a quarter to five in the Shamrock Tea Rooms and then went to the station to meet Bryan who was coming by train. I got home about six o'clock and found my father in a very bad temper. I had left lunch ready for him, but Mrs. Hart who was to come in in the afternoon and give him his tea had not arrived. He was so angry that he had shut himself in his room and would not let me in or speak to me. He does not like my going out in the afternoon, but I make a point of doing so now and then."

"You're probably wise. Thank you, Miss Crackenthorpe."

He could hardly tell her that as she was a woman, height five foot seven, her movements that afternoon were of no great importance. Instead he said:

"Your other two brothers came down later, I understand?"

"Alfred came down late on Saturday evening. He tells me he tried to ring me on the telephone that afternoon I was out—but my father, if he is upset, will never answer the telephone. My brother Harold did not come down until Christmas Eve."

"Thank you, Miss Crackenthorpe."

"I suppose I mustn't ask"—she hesitated—"what has come up new that prompts these inquiries?"

Craddock took the folder from his pocket. Using the tips of his fingers, he extracted the envelope.

"Don't touch it, please, but do you recognize this?"

"But..." Emma stared at him, bewildered. "That's my handwriting. That's the letter I wrote to Martine."

"I thought it might be."

"But how did you get it? Did she—? Have you found her?"

"It would seem possible that we have—found her. This empty envelope was found *here*."

"In the house?"

"In the grounds."

"Then—she *did* come here! She... You mean—it was Martine there—in the sarcophagus?"

"It would seem very likely, Miss Crackenthorpe," said Craddock gently.

It seemed even more likely when he got back to town. A message was awaiting him from Armand Dessin.

"One of the girl-friends has had a postcard from Anna Stravinska.

Apparently the cruise story was true! She has reached Jamaica and is having, in your phrase, a wonderful time!"

Craddock crumpled up the message and threw it into the wastepaper basket.

III

"I must say," said Alexander, sitting up in bed, thoughtfully consuming a chocolate bar, "that this has been the most smashing day ever. Actually finding a real *clue!*"

His voice was awed.

"In fact the whole holidays have been smashing," he added happily. "I don't suppose such a thing will ever happen again."

"I hope it won't happen again to me," said Lucy who was on her knees packing Alexander's clothes into a suitcase. "Do you want *all* this space fiction with you?"

"Not those two top ones. I've read them. The football and my football boots, and the gum-boots can go separately."

"What difficult things you boys do travel with."

"It won't matter. They're sending the Rolls for us. They've got a smashing Rolls. They've got one of the new Mercedes- Benzes too."

"They must be rich."

"Rolling! Jolly nice, too. All the same, I rather wish we weren't leaving here. Another body might turn up."

"I sincerely hope not."

"Well, it often does in books. I mean somebody who's seen something or heard something gets done in, too. It might be you," he added, unrolling a second chocolate bar.

"Thank you!"

"I don't want it to be you," Alexander assured her. "I like you very much and so does Stodders. We think you're out of this world as a cook. Absolutely lovely grub. You're very sensible, too."

This last was clearly an expression of high approval. Lucy took it as such, and said: "Thank you. But I don't intend to get killed just to please you."

"Well, you'd better be careful, then," Alexander told her.

He paused to consume more nourishment and then said in a slightly offhand voice:

"If Dad turns up from time to time, you'll look after him, won't you?"

"Yes, of course," said Lucy, a little surprised.

"The trouble with Dad is," Alexander informed her, "that London life doesn't suit him. He gets in, you know, with quite the wrong type of women." He shook his head in a worried manner.

"I'm very fond of him," he added; "but he needs someone to look after him. He drifts about and gets in with the wrong people. It's a great pity Mum died when she did. Bryan needs a proper home life."

He looked solemnly at Lucy and reached out for another chocolate bar.

"Not a fourth one, Alexander," Lucy pleaded. "You'll be sick."

"Oh, I don't think so. I ate six running once and I wasn't. I'm not the bilious type." He paused and then said:

"Bryan likes you, you know."

"That's very nice of him."

"He's a bit of an ass in some ways," said Bryan's son; "but he was a jolly good fighter pilot. He's awfully brave. And he's awfully good-natured."

He paused. Then, averting his eyes to the ceiling, he said rather self-consciously:

"I think, really, you know, it would be a good thing if he married again... Somebody decent... I shouldn't, myself, mind at all having a

stepmother...not, I mean, if she was a decent sort...."

With a sense of shock Lucy realized that there was a definite point in Alexander's conversation.

"All this stepmother bosh," went on Alexander, still addressing the ceiling, "is really quite out of date. Lots of chaps Stodders and I know have stepmothers—divorce and all that—and they get on quite well together. Depends on the stepmother, of course. And of course, it does make a bit of confusion taking you out and on Sports Day, and all that. I mean if there are two sets of parents. Though again it helps if you want to cash in!" He paused, confronted with the problems of modern life. "It's nicest to have your own home and your own parents—but if your mother's dead—well, you see what I mean? If she's a decent sort," said Alexander for the third time.

Lucy felt touched.

"I think *you're* very sensible, Alexander," she said. "We must try and find a nice wife for your father."

"Yes," said Alexander noncommittally.

He added in an offhand manner:

"I thought I'd just mention it. Bryan likes you very much. He told me so...."

"Really," thought Lucy to herself. "There's too much match-making round here. First Miss Marple and now Alexander!"

For some reason or other, pigsties came into her mind.

She stood up.

"Good night, Alexander. There will be only your washing things and pyjamas to put in in the morning. Good night."

"Good night," said Alexander. He slid down in bed, laid his head on the pillow, closed his eyes, giving a perfect picture of a sleeping angel; and was immediately asleep.

Nineteen

I

"Not what you'd call conclusive," said Sergeant Wetherall with his usual gloom.

Craddock was reading through the report on Harold Crackenthorpe's alibi for 20th December.

He had been noticed at Sotheby's about three-thirty, but was thought to have left shortly after that. His photograph had not been recognized at Russell's tea shop, but as they did a busy trade there at teatime, and he was not an *habitué*, that was hardly surprising. His manservant confirmed that he had returned to Cardigan Gardens to dress for his dinner-party at a quarter to seven—rather late, since the dinner was at seven-thirty, and Mr. Crackenthorpe had been somewhat irritable in consequence. Did not remember hearing him come in that evening, but, as it was some time ago, could not remember accurately and, in any case, he frequently did not hear Mr. Crackenthorpe come in. He and his wife liked to retire early whenever they could. The garage in the mews where Harold kept his car was a private lockup that he rented and there was no one to notice who came and went or any reason to remember one evening in particular.

"All negative," said Craddock, with a sigh.

"He was at the Caterers' Dinner all right, but left rather early before the end of the speeches."

"What about the railway stations?"

But there was nothing there, either at Brackhampton or at Paddington. It was nearly four weeks ago, and it was highly unlikely that anything would have been remembered.

Craddock sighed, and stretched out his hand for the data on Cedric. That again was negative, though a taxi-driver had made a doubtful recognition of having taken a fare to Paddington that day some time in the afternoon "what looked something like that bloke. Dirty trousers and a shock of hair. Cussed and swore a bit because fares had gone up since he was last in England." He identified the day because a horse called Crawler had won the two-thirty and he'd had a tidy bit on. Just after dropping the gent, he'd heard it on the radio in his cab and had gone home forthwith to celebrate.

"Thank God for racing!" said Craddock, and put the report aside.

"And here's Alfred," said Sergeant Wetherall.

Some nuance in his voice made Craddock look up sharply. Wetherall had the pleased appearance of a man who has kept a titbit until the end.

In the main the check was unsatisfactory. Alfred lived alone in his flat and came and went at unspecified times. His neighbours were not the inquisitive kind and were in any case office workers who were out all day. But towards the end of the report, Wetherall's large finger indicated the final paragraph.

Sergeant Leake, assigned to a case of thefts from lorries, had been at the Load of Bricks, a lorry pull-up on the Waddington-Brackhampton Road, keeping certain lorry drivers under observation. He had noticed at an adjoining table, Chick Evans, one of the Dicky Rogers mob. With him had been Alfred Crackenthorpe whom he knew by sight, having seen him give evidence in the Dicky Rogers case. He'd wondered what they were cooking up together. Time, 9:30 p.m., Friday, 20th December. Alfred Crackenthorpe had boarded a bus a few minutes later, going in the direction of Brackhampton. William Baker, ticket collector at Brackhampton station, had clipped ticket of gentleman whom he recognized by sight as one of Miss Crackenthorpe's brothers, just before departure of eleven-fifty-five train for Paddington. Remembers day as there had been story of

some batty old lady who swore she had seen somebody murdered in a train that afternoon.

"Alfred?" said Craddock as he laid the report down. "Alfred? I wonder."

"Puts him right on the spot, there," Wetherall pointed out.

Craddock nodded. Yes, Alfred could have travelled down by the 4:33 to Brackhampton committing murder on the way. Then he could have gone out by bus to the Load of Bricks. He could have left there at nine-thirty and would have had plenty of time to go to Rutherford Hall, move the body from the embankment to the sarcophagus, and get into Brackhampton in time to catch the 11:55 back to London. One of the Dicky Rogers gang might even have helped move the body, though Craddock doubted this. An unpleasant lot, but not killers.

"Alfred?" he repeated speculatively.

II

At Rutherford Hall there had been a gathering of the Crackenthorpe family. Harold and Alfred had come down from London and very soon voices were raised and tempers were running high.

On her own initiative, Lucy mixed cocktails in a jug with ice and then took them towards the library. The voices sounded clearly in the hall, and indicated that a good deal of acrimony was being directed towards Emma.

"Entirely *your* fault, Emma," Harold's bass voice rang out angrily. "How you could be so shortsighted and foolish beats me. If you hadn't taken that letter to Scotland Yard—and started all this—"

Alfred's high-pitched voice said: "You must have been out of your senses!"

"Now don't bully her," said Cedric. "What's done is done. Much more fishy if they'd identified the woman as the missing Martine and we'd all kept mum about having heard from her."

"It's all very well for you, Cedric," said Harold angrily. "You were out of the country on the 20th which seems to be the day they are

inquiring about. But it's very embarrassing for Alfred and myself. Fortunately, *I* can remember where I was that afternoon and what I was doing."

"I bet you can," said Alfred. "If you'd arranged a murder, Harold, you'd arrange your alibi very carefully, I'm sure."

"I gather you are not so fortunate," said Harold coldly.

"That depends," said Alfred. "Anything's better than presenting a cast-iron alibi to the police if it isn't really cast-iron. They're so clever at breaking these things down."

"If you are insinuating that I killed the woman—"

"Oh, do stop, all of you," cried Emma. "Of course none of you killed the woman."

"And just for your information, I *wasn't* out of England on the 20th," said Cedric. "*And* the police are wise to it! So we're all under suspicion."

"If it hadn't been for Emma—"

"Oh, don't begin again, Harold," cried Emma.

Dr. Quimper came out of the study where he had been closeted with old Mr. Crackenthorpe. His eye fell on the jug in Lucy's hand.

"What's this? A celebration?"

"More in the nature of oil on troubled waters. They're at it hammer and tongs in there."

"Recriminations?"

"Mostly abusing Emma."

Dr. Quimper's eyebrows rose.

"Indeed?" He took the jug from Lucy's hand, opened the library door and went in.

"Good evening."

"Ah, Dr. Quimper, I should like a word with you." It was Harold's voice, raised and irritable. "I should like to know what you meant by interfering in a private and family matter, and telling my sister to go to Scotland Yard about it."

Dr. Quimper said calmly:

"Miss Crackenthorpe asked my advice. I gave it to her. In my opinion she did perfectly right."

"You dare to say—"

"Girl!"

It was old Mr. Crackenthorpe's familiar salutation. He was peering out of the study door just behind Lucy.

Lucy turned rather reluctantly.

"Yes, Mr. Crackenthorpe?"

"What are you giving us for dinner tonight? I want curry. You make a very good curry. It's ages since we've had curry."

"The boys don't care much for curry, you see."

"The boys—the boys. What do the boys matter? I'm the one who matters. And, anyway, the boys have gone—good riddance. I want a nice hot curry, do you hear?"

"All right, Mr. Crackenthorpe, you shall have it."

"That's right. You're a good girl, Lucy. You look after me and I'll look after you."

Lucy went back to the kitchen. Abandoning the fricassée of chicken which she had planned, she began to assemble the preparations for curry. The front door banged and from the window she saw Dr. Quimper stride angrily from the house to his car and drive away.

Lucy sighed. She missed the boys. And in a way she missed Bryan, too.

Oh, well. She sat down and began to peel mushrooms.

At any rate she'd give the family a rattling good dinner.

Feed the brutes!

III

It was 3 a.m. when Dr. Quimper drove his car into the garage, closed the doors and came in pulling the front door behind him rather wearily. Well, Mrs. Josh Simpkins had a fine healthy pair of twins to add to her present family of eight. Mr. Simpkins had expressed no elation over the arrival. "Twins," he had said gloomily. "What's the good of they? Quads now, they're good for something. All sorts of things you get sent, and the Press comes round and there's pictures in the paper, and they do say as Her Majesty sends

you a telegram. But what's twins except two mouths to feed instead of one? Never been twins in our family, nor in the missus's either. Don't seem fair, somehow."

Dr. Quimper walked upstairs to his bedroom and started throwing off his clothes. He glanced at his watch. Five minutes past three. It had proved an unexpectedly tricky business bringing those twins into the world, but all had gone well. He yawned. He was tired—very tired. He looked appreciatively at his bed.

Then the telephone rang.

Dr. Quimper swore, and picked up the receiver.

"Dr. Quimper?"

"Speaking."

"This is Lucy Eyelesbarrow from Rutherford Hall. I think you'd better come over. Everybody seems to have taken ill."

"Taken ill? How? What symptoms?"

Lucy detailed them.

"I'll be over straight away. In the meantime..." He gave her short sharp instructions.

Then he quickly resumed his clothes, flung a few extra things into his emergency bag, and hurried down to his car.

IV

It was some three hours later when the doctor and Lucy, both of them somewhat exhausted, sat down by the kitchen table to drink large cups of black coffee.

"Ha," Dr. Quimper drained his cup, set it down with a clatter on the saucer. "I needed that. Now, Miss Eyelesbarrow, let's get down to brass tacks."

Lucy looked at him. The lines of fatigue showed clearly on his face making him look older than his forty-four years, the dark hair on his temples was flecked with grey, and there were lines under his eyes.

"As far as I can judge," said the doctor, "they'll be all right now. But how come? That's what I want to know. Who cooked the

dinner?"

"I did," said Lucy.

"And what was it? In detail."

"Mushroom soup. Curried chicken and rice. Syllabubs. A savoury of chicken livers and bacon."

"*Canapés Diane*," said Dr. Quimper unexpectedly.

Lucy smiled faintly.

"Yes, *Canapés Diane*."

"All right—let's go through it. Mushroom soup—out of a tin, I suppose?"

"Certainly not. I made it."

"You made it. Out of what?"

"Half a pound of mushrooms, chicken stock, milk, a roux of butter and flour, and lemon juice."

"Ah. And one's supposed to say 'It must have been the mushrooms.'"

"It wasn't the mushrooms. I had some of the soup myself and I'm quite all right."

"Yes, *you're* quite all right. I hadn't forgotten that."

Lucy flushed.

"If you mean—"

"I don't mean. You're a highly intelligent girl. You'd be groaning upstairs, too, if I'd meant what you thought I meant. Anyway, I know all about you. I've taken the trouble to find out."

"Why on earth did you do that?"

Dr. Quimper's lips were set in a grim line.

"Because I'm making it my business to find out about the people who come here and settle themselves in. You're a *bona fide* young woman who does this particular job for a livelihood *and* you seem never to have had any contact with the Crackenthorpe family previous to coming here. So you're not a girl-friend of either Cedric, Harold or Alfred—helping them to do a bit of dirty work."

"Do you really think—?"

"I think quite a lot of things," said Quimper. "But I have to be careful. That's the worst of being a doctor. Now let's get on. Curried chicken. Did you have some of that?"

"No. When you've cooked a curry, you've dined off the smell, I find. I tasted it, of course. I had soup and some syllabub."

"How did you serve the syllabub?"

"In individual glasses."

"Now, then, how much of all this is cleared up?"

"If you mean washing up, everything was washed up and put away."

Dr. Quimper groaned.

"There's such a thing as being overzealous," he said.

"Yes, I can see that, as things have turned out, but there it is, I'm afraid."

"What *do* you have still?"

"There's some of the curry left—in a bowl in the larder. I was planning to use it as a basis for mulligatawny soup this evening. There's some mushroom soup left, too. No syllabub and none of the savoury."

"I'll take the curry and the soup. What about chutney? Did they have chutney with it?"

"Yes. In one of those stone jars."

"I'll have some of that, too."

He rose. "I'll go up and have a look at them again. After that, can you hold the fort until morning? Keep an eye on them all? I can have a nurse round, with full instructions, by eight o'clock."

"I wish you'd tell me straight out. Do you think it's food poisoning—or—or—well, poisoning."

"I've told you already. Doctors can't think—they have to be sure. If there's a positive result from these food specimens I can go ahead. Otherwise—"

"Otherwise?" Lucy repeated.

Dr. Quimper laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Look after two people in particular," he said. "Look after Emma. I'm not going to have anything happen to Emma...."

There was emotion in his voice that could not be disguised. "She's not even begun to live yet," he said. "And you know, people like Emma Crackenthorpe are the salt of the earth... Emma—well, Emma

means a lot to me. I've never told her so, but I shall. Look after Emma."

"You bet I will," said Lucy.

"And look after the old man. I can't say that he's ever been my favourite patient, but he *is my* patient, and I'm damned if I'm going to let him be hustled out of the world because one or other of his unpleasant sons—or all three of them, maybe—want him out of the way so that they can handle his money."

He threw her a sudden quizzical glance.

"There," he said. "I've opened my mouth too wide. But keep your eyes skinned, there's a good girl, and incidentally keep your mouth shut."

V

Inspector Bacon was looking upset.

"Arsenic?" he said. "Arsenic?"

"Yes. It was in the curry. Here's the rest of the curry—for your fellow to have a go at. I've only done a very rough test on a little of it, but the result was quite definite."

"So there's a poisoner at work?"

"It would seem so," said Dr. Quimper dryly.

"And they're all affected, you say—except that Miss Eyelesbarrow."

"Except Miss Eyelesbarrow."

"Looks a bit fishy for her..."

"What motive could she possibly have?"

"Might be barmy," suggested Bacon. "Seem all right, they do, sometimes, and yet all the time they're right off their rocker, so to speak."

"Miss Eyelesbarrow isn't off her rocker. Speaking as a medical man, Miss Eyelesbarrow is as sane as you or I are. If Miss Eyelesbarrow is feeding the family arsenic in their curry, she's doing it for a reason. Moreover, being a highly intelligent young woman, she'd be careful *not* to be the only one unaffected. What she'd do,

what any intelligent poisoner would do, would be to eat a very little of the poisoned curry, and then exaggerate the symptoms."

"And then you wouldn't be able to tell?"

"That she'd had less than the others? Probably not. People don't all react alike to poisons anyway—the same amount will upset some people more than others. Of course," added Dr. Quimper cheerfully, "once the patient's dead, you can estimate fairly closely how much was taken."

"Then it might be..." Inspector Bacon paused to consolidate his idea. "It might be that there's one of the family now who's making more fuss than he need—someone who you might say is mucking in with the rest so as to avoid causing suspicion? How's that?"

"The idea has already occurred to me. That's why I'm reporting to you. It's in your hands now. I've got a nurse on the job that I can trust, but she can't be everywhere at once. In my opinion, nobody's had enough to cause death."

"Made a mistake, the poisoner did?"

"No. It seems to me more likely that the idea was to put enough in the curry to cause signs of food poisoning—for which probably the mushrooms would be blamed. People are always obsessed with the idea of mushroom poisoning. Then one person would probably take a turn for the worse and die."

"Because he'd been given a second dose?"

The doctor nodded.

"That's why I'm reporting to you at once, and why I've put a special nurse on the job."

"She knows about the arsenic?"

"Of course. She knows and so does Miss Eyelesbarrow. You know your own job best, of course, but if I were you, I'd get out there and make it quite clear to them all that they're suffering from arsenic poisoning. That will probably put the fear of the Lord into our murderer and he won't dare to carry out his plan. He's probably been banking on the food-poisoning theory."

The telephone rang on the inspector's desk. He picked it up and said:

"OK. Put her through." He said to Quimper, "It's your nurse on the phone. Yes, hallo—speaking... What's that? Serious relapse... Yes... Dr. Quimper's with me now... If you'd like a word with him...."

He handed the receiver to the doctor.

"Quimper speaking... I see... Yes... Quite right... Yes, carry on with that. We'll be along."

He put the receiver down and turned to Bacon.

"Who is it?"

"It's Alfred," said Dr. Quimper. "And he's dead."

Twenty

I

Over the telephone, Craddock's voice came in sharp disbelief.

"Alfred?" he said. "*Alfred?*"

Inspector Bacon, shifting the telephone receiver a little, said: "You didn't expect that?"

"No, indeed. As a matter of fact, I'd just got him taped for the murderer!"

"I heard about him being spotted by the ticket collector. Looked bad for him all right. Yes, looked as though we'd got our man."

"Well," said Craddock flatly, "we were wrong."

There was a moment's silence. Then Craddock asked:

"There was a nurse in charge. How did she come to slip up?"

"Can't blame her. Miss Eyelesbarrow was all in and went to get a bit of sleep. The nurse had five patients on her hands, the old man, Emma, Cedric, Harold and Alfred. She couldn't be everywhere at once. It seems old Mr. Crackenthorpe started creating in a big way. Said he was dying. She went in, got him soothed down, came back again and took Alfred in some tea with glucose. He drank it and that was that."

"Arsenic again?"

"Seems so. Of course it could have been a relapse, but Quimper doesn't think so and Johnstone agrees."

"I suppose," said Craddock, doubtfully, "that Alfred was *meant* to be the victim?"

Bacon sounded interested. "You mean that whereas Alfred's death wouldn't do anyone a penn'orth of good, the old man's death would benefit the lot of them? I suppose it *might* have been a mistake—somebody *might* have thought the tea was intended for the old man."

"Are they sure that that's the way the stuff was administered?"

"No, of course they aren't sure. The nurse, like a good nurse, washed up the whole contraption. Cups, spoons, teapot—everything. But it seems the only feasible method."

"Meaning," said Craddock thoughtfully, "that one of the patients wasn't as ill as the others? Saw his chance and doped the cup?"

"Well, there won't be anymore funny business," said Inspector Bacon grimly. "We've got two nurses on the job now, to say nothing of Miss Eyelesbarrow, and I've got a couple of men there too. You coming down?"

"As fast as I can make it!"

II

Lucy Eyelesbarrow came across the hall to meet Inspector Craddock. She looked pale and drawn.

"You've been having a bad time of it," said Craddock.

"It's been like one long ghastly nightmare," said Lucy. "I really thought last night that they were *all* dying."

"About this curry—"

"It was the curry?"

"Yes, very nicely laced with arsenic—quite the Borgia touch."

"If that's true," said Lucy. "It must—it's got to be—one of the family."

"No other possibility?"

"No, you see I only started making that damned curry quite late—after six o'clock—because Mr. Crackenthorpe specially asked for curry. And I had to open a new tin of curry powder—so *that* couldn't have been tampered with. I suppose curry would disguise the taste?"

"Arsenic hasn't any taste," said Craddock absently. "Now, opportunity. Which of them had the chance to tamper with the curry while it was cooking?"

Lucy considered.

"Actually," she said, "anyone could have sneaked into the kitchen whilst I was laying the table in the dining room."

"I see. Now, who was here in the house? Old Mr. Crackenthorpe, Emma, Cedric—"

"Harold and Alfred. They'd come down from London in the afternoon. Oh, and Bryan—Bryan Eastley. But he left just before dinner. He had to meet a man in Brackhampton."

Craddock said thoughtfully, "It ties up with the old man's illness at Christmas. Quimper suspected that that was arsenic. Did they all seem equally ill last night?"

Lucy considered. "I think old Mr. Crackenthorpe seemed the worst. Dr. Quimper had to work like a maniac on him. He's a jolly good doctor, I will say. Cedric made by far the most fuss. Of course, strong healthy people always do."

"What about Emma?"

"She has been pretty bad."

"Why Alfred, I wonder?" said Craddock.

"I know," said Lucy. "I suppose it was *meant* to be Alfred?"

"Funny— I asked that too!"

"It seems, somehow, so pointless."

"If I could only get at the motive for all this business," said Craddock. "It doesn't seem to tie up. The strangled woman in the sarcophagus was Edmund Crackenthorpe's widow, Martine. Let's assume that. It's pretty well proved by now. There *must* be a connection between that and the deliberate poisoning of Alfred. It's all here, in the family somewhere. Even saying one of them's mad doesn't help."

"Not really," Lucy agreed.

"Well, look after yourself," said Craddock warningly. "There's a poisoner in this house, remember, and one of your patients upstairs probably isn't as ill as he pretends to be."

Lucy went upstairs again slowly after Craddock's departure. An imperious voice, somewhat weakened by illness, called to her as she passed old Mr. Crackenthorpe's room.

"Girl—girl—is that you? Come here."

Lucy entered the room. Mr. Crackenthorpe was lying in bed well propped up with pillows. For a sick man he was looking Lucy thought, remarkably cheerful.

"The house is full of damned hospital nurses," complained Mr. Crackenthorpe. "Rustling about, making themselves important, taking my temperature, not giving me what I want to eat—a pretty penny all that must be costing. Tell Emma to send 'em away. You could look after me quite well."

"Everybody's been taken ill, Mr. Crackenthorpe," said Lucy. "I can't look after everybody, you know."

"Mushrooms," said Mr. Crackenthorpe. "Damned dangerous things, mushrooms. It was that soup we had last night. You made it," he added accusingly.

"The mushrooms were quite all right, Mr. Crackenthorpe."

"I'm not blaming you, girl, I'm not blaming you. It's happened before. One blasted fungus slips in and does it. Nobody can tell. I know you're a good girl. You wouldn't do it on purpose. How's Emma?"

"Feeling rather better this afternoon."

"Ah, and Harold?"

"He's better too."

"What's this about Alfred having kicked the bucket?"

"Nobody's supposed to have told you that, Mr. Crackenthorpe."

Mr. Crackenthorpe laughed, a high, whinnying laugh of intense amusement. "I hear things," he said. "Can't keep things from the old man. They try to. So Alfred's dead, is he? *He* won't sponge on me anymore, and he won't get any of the money either. They've all been waiting for *me* to die, you know—Alfred in particular. Now *he's* dead. I call that rather a good joke."

"That's not very kind of you, Mr. Crackenthorpe," said Lucy severely.

Mr. Crackenthorpe laughed again. "I'll outlive them all," he crowed. "You see if I don't, my girl. You see if I don't."

Lucy went to her room, she took out her dictionary and looked up the word "tontine." She closed the book thoughtfully and stared ahead of her.

III

"Don't see why you want to come to me," said Dr. Morris, irritably.

"You've known the Crackenthorpe family a long time," said Inspector Craddock.

"Yes, yes, I knew all the Crackenthorpes. I remember old Josiah Crackenthorpe. He was a hard nut—shrewd man, though. Made a lot of money," he shifted his aged form in his chair and peered under bushy eyebrows at Inspector Craddock. "So you've been listening to that young fool, Quimper," he said. "These zealous young doctors! Always getting ideas in their heads. Got it into *his* head that somebody was trying to poison Luther Crackenthorpe. Nonsense! Melodrama! Of course, he had gastric attacks. I treated him for them. Didn't happen very often—nothing peculiar about them."

"Dr. Quimper," said Craddock, "seemed to think there was."

"Doesn't do for a doctor to go thinking. After all, I should hope I could recognize arsenical poisoning when I saw it."

"Quite a lot of well-known doctors haven't noticed it," Craddock pointed out. "There was"—he drew upon his memory—"the Greenbarrow case, Mrs. Teney, Charles Leeds, three people in the Westbury family, all buried nicely and tidily without the doctors who attended them having the least suspicion. Those doctors were all good, reputable men."

"All right, all right," said Doctor Morris, "you're saying that I could have made a mistake. Well, *I* don't think I did." He paused a minute and then said, "Who did Quimper think was doing it—if it was being done?"

"He didn't know," said Craddock. "He was worried. After all, you know," he added, "there's a great deal of money there."

"Yes, yes, I know, which they'll get when Luther Crackenthorpe dies. And they want it pretty badly. That is true enough, but it doesn't follow that they'd kill the old man to get it."

"Not necessarily," agreed Inspector Craddock.

"Anyway," said Dr. Morris, "my principle is not to go about suspecting things without due cause. Due cause," he repeated. "I'll admit that what you've just told me has shaken me up a bit. Arsenic on a big scale, apparently—but I still don't see why you come to *me*. All I can tell you is that *I* didn't suspect it. Maybe I should have. Maybe I should have taken those gastric attacks of Luther Crackenthorpe's much more seriously. But you've got a long way beyond that now."

Craddock agreed. "What I really need," he said, "is to know a little more about the Crackenthorpe family. Is there any queer mental strain in them—a kink of any kind?"

The eyes under the bushy eyebrows looked at him sharply. "Yes, I can see your thoughts might run that way. Well, old Josiah was sane enough. Hard as nails, very much all there. His wife was neurotic, had a tendency to melancholia. Came of an inbred family. She died soon after her second son was born. I'd say, you know, that Luther inherited a certain—well, instability, from her. He was commonplace enough as a young man, but he was always at loggerheads with his father. His father was disappointed in him and I think he resented that and brooded on it, and in the end got a kind of obsession about it. He carried that on into his married life. You'll notice, if you talk to him at all, that he's got a hearty dislike for all his own sons. His daughters he was fond of. Both Emma and Edie—the one who died."

"Why does he dislike the sons so much?" asked Craddock.

"You'll have to go to one of these new-fashioned psychiatrists to find that out. I'd just say that Luther has never felt very adequate as a man himself, and that he bitterly resents his financial position. He has possession of an income but no power of appointment of capital. If he had the power to disinherit his sons he probably wouldn't dislike them as much. Being powerless in that respect gives him a feeling of humiliation."

"That's why he's so pleased at the idea of outliving them all?" said Inspector Craddock.

"Possibly. It is the root, too, of his parsimony, I think. I should say that he's managed to save a considerable sum out of his large income—mostly, of course, before taxation rose to its present giddy heights."

A new idea struck Inspector Craddock. "I suppose he's left his savings by will to someone? That he *can* do."

"Oh, yes, though God knows who he has left it to. Maybe to Emma, but I should rather doubt it. She'll get her share of the old man's property. Maybe to Alexander, the grandson."

"He's fond of him, is he?" said Craddock.

"Used to be. Of course he was his daughter's child, not a son's child. That may have made a difference. And he had quite an affection for Bryan Eastley, Edie's husband. Of course I don't know Bryan well, it's some years since I've seen any of the family. But it struck me that he was going to be very much at a loose end after the war. He's got those qualities that you need in wartime; courage, dash, and a tendency to let the future take care of itself. But I don't think he's got any *stability*. He'll probably turn into a drifter."

"As far as you know there's no peculiar kink in any of the younger generation?"

"Cedric's an eccentric type, one of those natural rebels. I wouldn't say he was perfectly normal, but you might say, who is? Harold's fairly orthodox, not what I call a very pleasant character, coldhearted, eye to the main chance. Alfred's got a touch of the delinquent about him. He's a wrong 'un, always was. Saw him taking money out of a missionary box once that they used to keep in the hall. That type of thing. Ah, well, the poor fellow's dead, I suppose I shouldn't be talking against him."

"What about..." Craddock hesitated. "Emma Crackenthorne?"

"Nice girl, quiet, one doesn't always know what she's thinking. Has her own plans and her own ideas, but she keeps them to herself. She's more character than you might think from her general appearance."

"You knew Edmund, I suppose, the son who was killed in France?"

"Yes. He was the best of the bunch I'd say. Goodhearted, gay, a nice boy."

"Did you ever hear that he was going to marry, or had married, a French girl just before he was killed?"

Dr. Morris frowned. "It seems as though I remember something about it," he said, "but it's a long time ago."

"Quite early on in the war, wasn't it?"

"Yes. Ah, well, I dare say he'd have lived to regret it if he had married a foreign wife."

"There's some reason to believe that he did do just that," said Craddock.

In a few brief sentences he gave an account of recent happenings.

"I remember seeing something in the papers about a woman found in a sarcophagus. So it was at Rutherford Hall."

"And there's reason to believe that the woman was Edmund Crackenthorpe's widow."

"Well, well, that seems extraordinary. More like a novel than real life. But who'd want to kill the poor thing—I mean, how does it tie up with arsenical poisoning in the Crackenthorpe family?"

"In one of two ways," said Craddock; "but they are both very farfetched. Somebody perhaps is greedy and wants the whole of Josiah Crackenthorpe's fortune."

"Damn fool if he does," said Dr. Morris. "He'll only have to pay the most stupendous taxes on the income from it."

Twenty-one

"Nasty things, mushrooms," said Mrs. Kidder.

Mrs. Kidder had made the same remark about ten times in the last few days. Lucy did not reply.

"Never touch 'em myself," said Mrs. Kidder, "much too dangerous. It's a merciful Providence as there's only been one death. The whole lot might have gone, and you, too, miss. A wonderful escape, you've had."

"It wasn't the mushrooms," said Lucy. "They were perfectly all right."

"Don't you believe it," said Mrs. Kidder. "Dangerous they are, mushrooms. One toadstool in among the lot and you've had it."

"Funny," went on Mrs. Kidder, among the rattle of plates and dishes in the sink, "how things seem to come all together, as it were. My sister's eldest had measles and our Ernie fell down and broke 'is arm, and my 'usband came out all over with boils. All in the same week! You'd hardly believe it, would you? It's been the same thing here," went on Mrs. Kidder, "first that nasty murder and now Mr. Alfred dead with mushroom-poisoning. Who'll be the next, I'd like to know?"

Lucy felt rather uncomfortably that she would like to know too.

"My husband, he doesn't like me coming here now," said Mrs. Kidder, "thinks it's unlucky, but what I say is I've known Miss Crackenthorpe a long time now and she's a nice lady and she depends on me. And I couldn't leave poor Miss Eyelesbarrow, I said,

not to do everything herself in the house. Pretty hard it is on you, miss, all these trays."

Lucy was forced to agree that life did seem to consist very largely of trays at the moment. She was at the moment arranging trays to take to the various invalids.

"As for them nurses, they never do a hand's turn," said Mrs. Kidder. "All they want is pots and pots of tea made strong. And meals prepared. Wore out, that's what I am." She spoke in a tone of great satisfaction, though actually she had done very little more than her normal morning's work.

Lucy said solemnly, "You never spare yourself, Mrs. Kidder."

Mrs. Kidder looked pleased. Lucy picked up the first of the trays and started off up the stairs.

"What's *this*?" said Mr. Crackenthorpe disapprovingly.

"Beef tea and baked custard," said Lucy.

"Take it away," said Mr. Crackenthorpe. "I won't touch that stuff. I told that nurse I wanted a beef steak."

"Dr. Quimper thinks you ought not to have beef steak just yet," said Lucy.

Mr. Crackenthorpe snorted. "I'm practically well again. I'm getting up tomorrow. How are the others?"

"Mr. Harold's much better," said Lucy. "He's going back to London tomorrow."

"Good riddance," said Mr. Crackenthorpe. "What about Cedric—any hope that he's going back to his island tomorrow?"

"He won't be going just yet."

"Pity. What's Emma doing? Why doesn't she come and see me?"

"She's still in bed, Mr. Crackenthorpe."

"Women always coddle themselves," said Mr. Crackenthorpe. "But you're a good strong girl," he added approvingly. "Run about all day, don't you?"

"I get plenty of exercise," said Lucy.

Old Mr. Crackenthorpe nodded his head approvingly. "You're a good strong girl," he said, "and don't think I've forgotten what I talked to you about before. One of these days you'll see what you'll see. Emma isn't always going to have things her own way. And don't

listen to the others when they tell you I'm a mean old man. I'm careful of my money. I've got a nice little packet put by and I know who I'm going to spend it on when the time comes." He leered at her affectionately.

Lucy went rather quickly out of the room, avoiding his clutching hand.

The next tray was taken in to Emma.

"Oh, thank you, Lucy. I'm really feeling quite myself again by now. I'm hungry, and that's a good sign, isn't it? My dear," went on Emma as Lucy settled the tray on her knees, "I'm really feeling very upset about your aunt. You haven't had any time to go and see her, I suppose?"

"No, I haven't, as a matter of fact."

"I'm afraid she must be missing you."

"Oh, don't worry, Miss Crackenthorpe. She understands what a terrible time we've been through."

"Have you rung her up?"

"No, I haven't just lately."

"Well, do. Ring her up every day. It makes such a difference to old people to get news."

"You're very kind," said Lucy. Her conscience smote her a little as she went down to fetch the next tray. The complications of illness in a house had kept her thoroughly absorbed and she had had no time to think of anything else. She decided that she would ring Miss Marple up as soon as she had taken Cedric his meal.

There was only one nurse in the house now and she passed Lucy on the landing, exchanging greetings.

Cedric, looking incredibly tidied up and neat, was sitting up in bed writing busily on sheets of paper.

"Hallo, Lucy," he said, "what hell brew have you got for me today? I wish you'd get rid of that god-awful nurse, she's simply too arch for words. Calls me 'we' for some reason. 'And how are we this morning? Have we slept well? Oh, dear, we're very naughty, throwing off the bedclothes like that.'" He imitated the refined accents of the nurse in a high falsetto voice.

"You seem very cheerful," said Lucy. "What are you busy with?"

"Plans," said Cedric. "Plans for what to do with this place when the old man pops off. It's a jolly good bit of land here, you know. I can't make up my mind whether I'd like to develop some of it myself, or whether I'll sell it in lots all in one go. Very valuable for industrial purposes. The house will do for a nursing home or a school. I'm not sure I shan't sell half the land and use the money to do something rather outrageous with the other half. What do you think?"

"You haven't got it yet," said Lucy, dryly.

"I shall have it, though," said Cedric. "It's not divided up like the other stuff. *I* get it outright. And if I sell it for a good fat price the money will be capital, not income, so I shan't have to pay taxes on it. Money to burn. Think of it."

"I always understood you rather despised money," said Lucy.

"Of course I despise money when I haven't got any," said Cedric. "It's the only dignified thing to do. What a lovely girl you are, Lucy, or do I just think so because I haven't seen any good-looking women for such a long time?"

"I expect that's it," said Lucy.

"Still busy tidying everyone and everything up?"

"Somebody seems to have been tidying you up," said Lucy, looking at him.

"That's that damned nurse," said Cedric with feeling. "Have you had the inquest on Alfred yet? What happened?"

"It was adjourned," said Lucy.

"Police being cagey. This mass poisoning does give one a bit of a turn, doesn't it? Mentally, I mean. I'm not referring to more obvious aspects." He added: "Better look after yourself, my girl."

"I do," said Lucy.

"Has young Alexander gone back to school yet?"

"I think he's still with the Stoddart-Wests. I think it's the day after tomorrow that school begins."

Before getting her own lunch Lucy went to the telephone and rang up Miss Marple.

"I'm so terribly sorry I haven't been able to come over, but I've been really very busy."

"Of course, my dear, of course. Besides, there's nothing that can be done just now. We just have to wait."

"Yes, but what are we waiting for?"

"Elsbeth McGillicuddy ought to be home very soon now," said Miss Marple. "I wrote to her to fly home at once. I said it was her duty. So don't worry too much, my dear." Her voice was kindly and reassuring.

"You don't think..." Lucy began, but stopped.

"That there will be anymore deaths? Oh, I hope not, my dear. But one never knows, does one? When anyone is really wicked, I mean. And I think there is great wickedness here."

"Or madness," said Lucy.

"Of course I know that is the modern way of looking at things. I don't agree myself."

Lucy rang off, went into the kitchen and picked up her tray of lunch. Mrs. Kidder had divested herself of her apron and was about to leave.

"You'll be all right, miss, I hope?" she asked solicitously.

"Of course I shall be all right," snapped Lucy.

She took her tray not into the big, gloomy dining room but into the small study. She was just finishing her meal when the door opened and Bryan Eastley came in.

"Hallo," said Lucy, "this is very unexpected."

"I suppose it is," said Bryan. "How is everybody?"

"Oh, much better. Harold's going back to London tomorrow."

"What do you think about it all? Was it really arsenic?"

"It was arsenic all right," said Lucy.

"It hasn't been in the papers yet."

"No, I think the police are keeping it up their sleeves for the moment."

"Somebody must have a pretty good down on the family," said Bryan. "Who's likely to have sneaked in and tampered with the food?"

"I suppose I'm the most likely person really," said Lucy.

Bryan looked at her anxiously. "But you didn't, did you?" he asked. He sounded slightly shocked.

"No. I didn't," said Lucy.

Nobody could have tampered with the curry. She had made it—alone in the kitchen, and brought it to table, and the only person who could have tampered with it was one of the five people who sat down to the meal.

"I mean—why should you?" said Bryan. "They're nothing to you, are they? I say," he added, "I hope you don't mind my coming back here like this?"

"No, no, of course I don't. Have you come to stay?"

"Well, I'd like to, if it wouldn't be an awful bore to you."

"No. No, we can manage."

"You see, I'm out of a job at the moment and I—well, I get rather fed up. Are you really sure you don't mind?"

"Oh, I'm not the person to mind, anyway. It's Emma."

"Oh, Emma's all right," said Bryan. "Emma's always been very nice to me. In her own way, you know. She keeps things to herself a lot, in fact, she's rather a dark horse, old Emma. This living here and looking after the old man would get most people down. Pity she never married. Too late now, I suppose."

"I don't think it's too late, at all," said Lucy.

"Well..." Bryan considered. "A clergyman perhaps," he said hopefully. "She'd be useful in the parish and tactful with the Mothers' Union. I do mean the Mothers' Union, don't I? Not that I know what it really is, but you come across it sometimes in books. And she'd wear a hat in church on Sundays," he added.

"Doesn't sound much of a prospect to me," said Lucy, rising and picking up the tray.

"I'll do that," said Bryan, taking the tray from her. They went into the kitchen together. "Shall I help you wash up? I do like this kitchen," he added. "In fact, I know it isn't the sort of thing that people do like nowadays, but I like this whole house. Shocking taste, I suppose, but there it is. You could land a plane quite easily in the park," he added with enthusiasm.

He picked up a glass-cloth and began to wipe the spoons and forks.

"Seems a waste, its coming to Cedric," he remarked. "First thing he'll do is to sell the whole thing and go breaking off abroad again. Can't see, myself, why England isn't good enough for anybody. Harold wouldn't want this house either, and of course it's much too big for Emma. Now, if only it came to Alexander, he and I would be as happy together here as a couple of sand boys. Of course it would be nice to have a woman about the house." He looked thoughtfully at Lucy. "Oh, well, what's the good of talking? If Alexander were to get this place it would mean the whole lot of them would have to die first, and that's not really likely, is it? Though from what I've seen of the old boy he might easily live to be a hundred, just to annoy them all. I don't suppose he was much cut up by Alfred's death, was he?"

Lucy said shortly, "No, he wasn't."

"Cantankerous old devil," said Bryan Eastley cheerfully.

Twenty-two

"Dreadful, the things people go about saying," said Mrs. Kidder. "I don't listen, mind you, more than I can help. But you'd hardly believe it." She waited hopefully.

"Yes, I suppose so," said Lucy.

"About that body that was found in the Long Barn," went on Mrs. Kidder, moving crablike backwards on her hands and knees, as she scrubbed the kitchen floor, "saying as how she'd been Mr. Edmund's fancy piece during the war, and how she come over here and a jealous husband followed her, and did her in. It is a likely thing as a foreigner would do, but it wouldn't be likely after all these years, would it?"

"It sounds most unlikely to me."

"But there's worse things than that, they say," said Mrs. Kidder. "Say anything, people will. You'd be surprised. There's those that say Mr. Harold married somewhere abroad and that she come over and found out that he's committed bigamy with that lady Alice, and that she was going to bring 'im to court and that he met her down here and did her in, and hid her body in the sarcoffus. Did you ever!"

"Shocking," said Lucy vaguely, her mind elsewhere.

"Of course I didn't listen," said Mrs. Kidder virtuously, "I wouldn't put no stock in such tales myself. It beats me how people think up such things, let alone say them. All I hope is none of it gets to Miss Emma's ears. It might upset her and I wouldn't like that. She's a very nice lady, Miss Emma is, and I've not heard a word against her, not a word. And of course Mr. Alfred being dead nobody says

anything against him now. Not even that it's a judgment, which they well might do. But it's awful, miss, isn't it, the wicked talk there is."

Mrs. Kidder spoke with immense enjoyment.

"It must be quite painful for you to listen to it," said Lucy.

"Oh, it is," said Mrs. Kidder. "It is indeed. I says to my husband, I says, however can they?"

The bell rang.

"There's the doctor, miss. Will you let 'im in, or shall I?"

"I'll go," said Lucy.

But it was not the doctor. On the doorstep stood a tall, elegant woman in a mink coat. Drawn up to the gravel sweep was a purring Rolls with a chauffeur at the wheel.

"Can I see Miss Emma Crackenthorpe, please?"

It was an attractive voice, the R's slightly blurred. The woman was attractive too. About thirty-five, with dark hair and expensively and beautifully made up.

"I'm sorry," said Lucy, "Miss Crackenthorpe is ill in bed and can't see anyone."

"I know she has been ill, yes; but it is very important that I should see her."

"I'm afraid," Lucy began.

The visitor interrupted her. "I think you are Miss Eyelesbarrow, are you not?" She smiled, an attractive smile. "My son has spoken of you, so I know. I am Lady Stoddart-West and Alexander is staying with me now."

"Oh, I see," said Lucy.

"And it is really important that I should see Miss Crackenthorpe," continued the other. "I know all about her illness and I assure you this is not just a social call. It is because of something that the boys have said to me—that my son has said to me. It is, I think, a matter of grave importance and I would like to speak to Miss Crackenthorpe about it. Please, will you ask her?"

"Come in." Lucy ushered her visitor into the hall and into the drawing room. Then she said, "I'll go up and ask Miss Crackenthorpe."

She went upstairs, knocked on Emma's door and entered.

"Lady Stoddart-West is here," she said. "She wants to see you very particularly."

"Lady Stoddart-West?" Emma looked surprised. A look of alarm came into her face. "There's nothing wrong, is there, with the boys—with Alexander?"

"No, no," Lucy reassured her. "I'm sure the boys are all right. It seemed to be something the boys have told her or said to her."

"Oh. Well..." Emma hesitated. "Perhaps I ought to see her. Do I look all right, Lucy?"

"You look very nice," said Lucy.

Emma was sitting up in bed, a soft pink shawl was round her shoulders and brought out the faint rose-pink of her cheeks. Her dark hair had been neatly brushed and combed by Nurse. Lucy had placed a bowl of autumn leaves on the dressing table the day before. Her room looked attractive and quite unlike a sick room.

"I'm really quite well enough to get up," said Emma. "Dr. Quimper said I could tomorrow."

"You look really quite like yourself again," said Lucy. "Shall I bring Lady Stoddart-West up?"

"Yes, do."

Lucy went downstairs again. "Will you come up to Miss Crackenthorpe's room?"

She escorted the visitor upstairs, opened the door for her to pass in and then shut it. Lady Stoddart-West approached the bed with outstretched hand.

"Miss Crackenthorpe? I really do apologize for breaking in on you like this. I have seen you, I think, at the sports at the school."

"Yes," said Emma, "I remember you quite well. Do sit down."

In the chair conveniently placed by the bed Lady Stoddart-West sat down. She said in a quiet low voice:

"You must think it very strange of me coming here like this, but I have reason. I think it is an important reason. You see, the boys have been telling me things. You can understand that they were very excited about the murder that happened here. I confess I did not like it at the time. I was nervous. I wanted to bring James home at once. But my husband laughed. He said that obviously it was a

murder that had nothing to do with the house and the family, and he said that from what he remembered from his boyhood, and from James's letters, both he and Alexander were enjoying themselves so wildly that it would be sheer cruelty to bring them back. So I gave in and agreed that they should stay on until the time arranged for James to bring Alexander back with him."

Emma said: "You think we ought to have sent your son home earlier?"

"No, no, that is not what I mean at all. Oh, it is difficult for me, this! But what I have to say must be said. You see, they have picked up a good deal, the boys. They told me that this woman—the murdered woman—that the police have an idea that she may be a French girl whom your eldest brother—who was killed in the war—knew in France. That is so?"

"It is a possibility," said Emma, her voice breaking slightly, "that we are forced to consider. It may have been so."

"There is some reason for believing that the body is that of this girl, this Martine?"

"I have told you, it is a possibility."

"But why—why should they think that she was Martine? Did she have letters on her—papers?"

"No. Nothing of that kind. But you see, I had had a letter, from this Martine."

"You had had a letter—from *Martine*?"

"Yes. A letter telling me she was in England and would like to come and see me. I invited her down here, but got a telegram saying she was going back to France. Perhaps she did go back to France. We do not know. But since then an envelope was found here addressed to her. That seems to show that she had come down here. But I really don't see..." She broke off.

Lady Stoddart-West broke in quickly:

"You really do not see what concern it is of mine? That is very true. I should not in your place. But when I heard this—or rather, a garbled account of this—I had to come to make sure it was really so because, if it is—"

"Yes?" said Emma.

"Then I must tell you something that I had never intended to tell you. You see, *I am Martine Dubois.*"

Emma stared at her guest as though she could hardly take in the sense of her words.

"You!" she said. "You are Martine?"

The other nodded vigorously. "But, yes. It surprises you, I am sure, but it is true. I met your brother Edmund in the first days of the war. He was indeed billeted at our house. Well, you know the rest. We fell in love. We intended to be married, and then there was the retreat to Dunkirk, Edmund was reported missing. Later he was reported killed. I will not speak to you of that time. It was long ago and it is over. But I will say to you that I loved your brother very much....

"Then came the grim realities of war. The Germans occupied France. I became a worker for the Resistance. I was one of those who was assigned to pass Englishmen through France to England. It was in that way that I met my present husband. He was an Air Force officer, parachuted into France to do special work. When the war ended we were married. I considered once or twice whether I should write to you or come and see you, but I decided against it. It could do no good, I thought, to take up old memories. I had a new life and I had no wish to recall the old." She paused and then said: "But it gave me, I will tell you, a strange pleasure when I found that my son James's greatest friend at his school was a boy whom I found to be Edmund's nephew. Alexander, I may say, is very like Edmund, as I dare say you yourself appreciate. It seemed to me a very happy state of affairs that James and Alexander should be such friends."

She leaned forward and placed her hand on Emma's arm. "But you see, dear Emma, do you not, that when I heard this story about the murder, about this dead woman being suspected to be the Martine that Edmund had known, that I had to come and tell you the truth. Either you or I must inform the police of the fact. Whoever the dead woman is, she is not Martine."

"I can hardly take it in," said Emma, "that you, *you* should be the Martine that dear Edmund wrote to me about." She sighed, shaking

her head, then she frowned perplexedly. "But I don't understand. Was it you, then, who wrote to me?"

Lady Stoddart-West shook a vigorous head. "No, no, of course I did not write to you."

"Then..." Emma stopped.

"Then there was someone pretending to be Martine who wanted perhaps to get money out of you? That is what it must have been. But who can it be?"

Emma said slowly: "I suppose there were people at the time, who knew?"

The other shrugged her shoulders. "Probably, yes. But there was no one intimate with me, no one very close to me. I have never spoken of it since I came to England. And why wait all this time? It is curious, very curious."

Emma said: "I don't understand it. We will have to see what Inspector Craddock has to say." She looked with suddenly softened eyes at her visitor. "I'm so glad to know you at last, my dear."

"And I you... Edmund spoke of you very often. He was very fond of you. I am happy in my new life, but all the same, I don't quite forget."

Emma leaned back and heaved a sigh. "It's a terrible relief," she said. "As long as we feared that the dead woman might be Martine—it seemed to be tied up with the family. But now—oh, it's an absolute load off my back. I don't know who the poor soul was but she can't have had anything to do with *us*!"

Twenty-three

The streamlined secretary brought Harold Crackenthorpe his usual afternoon cup of tea.

"Thanks, Miss Ellis, I shall be going home early today."

"I'm sure you ought really not to have come at all, Mr. Crackenthorpe," said Miss Ellis. "You look quite pulled down still."

"I'm all right," said Harold Crackenthorpe, but he did feel pulled down. No doubt about it, he'd had a very nasty turn. Ah, well, that was over.

Extraordinary, he thought broodingly, that Alfred should have succumbed and the old man should have come through. After all, what was he—seventy-three—seventy-four? Been an invalid for years. If there was one person you'd have thought would have been taken off, it would have been the old man. But no. It had to be Alfred. Alfred who, as far as Harold knew, was a healthy wiry sort of chap. Nothing much the matter with him.

He leaned back in his chair sighing. That girl was right. He didn't feel up to things yet, but he had wanted to come down to the office. Wanted to get the hang of how affairs were going. Touch and go. All this—he looked round him—the richly appointed office, the pale gleaming wood, the expensive modern chairs, it all looked prosperous enough, and a good thing too! That's where Alfred had always gone wrong. If you looked prosperous, people thought you were prosperous. There were no rumours going around as yet about his financial stability. All the same, the crash couldn't be delayed very long. Now, if only his father had passed out instead of Alfred,

as surely, surely he ought to have done. Practically seemed to thrive on arsenic! Yes, if his father had succumbed—well, there wouldn't have been anything to worry about.

Still, the great thing was not to seem worried. A prosperous appearance. Not like poor old Alfred who always looked seedy and shiftless, who looked in fact exactly what he was. One of those small-time speculators, never going all out boldly for the big money. In with a shady crowd here, doing a doubtful deal there, never quite rendering himself liable to prosecution but going very near the edge. And where had it got him? Short periods of affluence and then back to seediness and shabbiness, once more. No broad outlook about Alfred. Taken all in all, you couldn't say Alfred was much loss. He'd never been particularly fond of Alfred and with Alfred out of the way the money that was coming to him from that old curmudgeon, his grandfather, would be sensibly increased, divided not into five shares but into four shares. Very much better.

Harold's face brightened a little. He rose, took his hat and coat and left the office. Better take it easy for a day or two. He wasn't feeling too strong yet. His car was waiting below and very soon he was weaving through London traffic to his house.

Darwin, his manservant, opened the door.

"Her ladyship has just arrived, sir," he said.

For a moment Harold stared at him. Alice! Good heavens, was it today that Alice was coming home? He'd forgotten all about it. Good thing Darwin had warned him. It wouldn't have looked so good if he'd gone upstairs and looked too astonished at seeing her. Not that it really mattered, he supposed. Neither Alice nor he had any illusions about the feeling they had for each other. Perhaps Alice was fond of him—he didn't know.

All in all, Alice was a great disappointment to him. He hadn't been in love with her, of course, but though a plain woman she was quite a pleasant one. And her family and connections had undoubtedly been useful. Not perhaps as useful as they might have been, because in marrying Alice he had been considering the position of hypothetical children. Nice relations for his boys to have. But there hadn't been any boys, or girls either, and all that had remained had

been he and Alice growing older together without much to say to each other and with no particular pleasure in each other's company.

She stayed away a good deal with relations and usually went to the Riviera in the winter. It suited her and it didn't worry him.

He went upstairs now into the drawing room and greeted her punctiliously.

"So you're back, my dear. Sorry I couldn't meet you, but I was held up in the City. I got back as early as I could. How was San Raphael?"

Alice told him how San Raphael was. She was a thin woman with sandy-coloured hair, a well-arched nose and vague, hazel eyes. She talked in a well-bred, monotonous and rather depressing voice. It had been a good journey back, the Channel a little rough. The Customs, as usual, very trying at Dover.

"You should come by air," said Harold, as he always did. "So much simpler."

"I dare say, but I don't really like air travel. I never have. Makes me nervous."

"Saves a lot of time," said Harold.

Lady Alice Crackenthorpe did not answer. It was possible that her problem in life was not to save time but to occupy it. She inquired politely after her husband's health.

"Emma's telegram quite alarmed me," she said. "You were all taken ill, I understand."

"Yes, yes," said Harold.

"I read in the paper the other day," said Alice, "of forty people in a hotel going down with food poisoning at the same time. All this refrigeration is dangerous, I think. People keep things too long in them."

"Possibly," said Harold. Should he, or should he not mention arsenic? Somehow, looking at Alice, he felt himself quite unable to do so. In Alice's world, he felt, there was no place for poisoning by arsenic. It was a thing you read about in the papers. It didn't happen to you or your own family. But it had happened in the Crackenthorpe family....

He went up to his room and lay down for an hour or two before dressing for dinner. At dinner, tête-à-tête with his wife, the conversation ran on much the same lines. Desultory, polite. The mention of acquaintances and friends at San Raphael.

"There's a parcel for you on the hall table, a small one," Alice said.

"Is there? I didn't notice it."

"It's an extraordinary thing but somebody was telling me about a murdered woman having been found in a barn, or something like that. She said it was at Rutherford Hall. I suppose it must be some other Rutherford Hall."

"No," said Harold, "no, it isn't. It was in our barn, as a matter of fact."

"Really, Harold! A murdered woman in the barn at Rutherford Hall—and you never told me anything about it."

"Well, there hasn't been much time, really," said Harold, "and it was all rather unpleasant. Nothing to do with us, of course. The Press milled around a good deal. Of course we had to deal with the police and all that sort of thing."

"Very unpleasant," said Alice. "Did they find out who did it?" she added, with rather perfunctory interest.

"Not yet," said Harold.

"What sort of woman was she?"

"Nobody knows. French, apparently."

"Oh, *French*," said Alice, and allowing for the difference in class, her tone was not unlike that of Inspector Bacon. "Very annoying for you all," she agreed.

They went out from the dining room and crossed into the small study where they usually sat when they were alone. Harold was feeling quite exhausted by now. "I'll go up to bed early," he thought.

He picked up the small parcel from the hall table, about which his wife had spoken to him. It was a small neatly waxed parcel, done up with meticulous exactness. Harold ripped it open as he came to sit down in his usual chair by the fire.

Inside was a small tablet box bearing the label, "Two to be taken nightly." With it was a small piece of paper with the chemist's

heading in Brackhampton. "Sent by request of Doctor Quimper" was written on it.

Harold Crackenthorpe frowned. He opened the box and looked at the tablets. Yes, they seemed to be the same tablets he had been having. But surely, surely Quimper had said that he needn't take anymore? "You won't want them, now." That's what Quimper had said.

"What is it, dear?" said Alice. "You look worried."

"Oh, it's just—some tablets. I've been taking them at night. But I rather thought the doctor said don't take anymore."

His wife said placidly: "He probably said don't forget to take them."

"He may have done, I suppose," said Harold doubtfully.

He looked across at her. She was watching him. Just for a moment or two he wondered—he didn't often wonder about Alice—exactly what she was thinking. That mild gaze of hers told him nothing. Her eyes were like windows in an empty house. What did Alice think about him, feel about him? Had she been in love with him once? He supposed she had. Or did she marry him because she thought he was doing well in the City, and she was tired of her own impecunious existence? Well, on the whole, she'd done quite well out of it. She'd got a car and a house in London, she could travel abroad when she felt like it and get herself expensive clothes, though goodness knows they never looked like anything on Alice. Yes, on the whole she'd done pretty well. He wondered if she thought so. She wasn't really fond of him, of course, but then he wasn't really fond of her. They had nothing in common, nothing to talk about, no memories to share. If there had been children—but there hadn't been any children—odd that there were no children in the family except young Edie's boy. Young Edie. She'd been a silly girl, making that foolish, hasty war-time marriage. Well, he'd given her good advice.

He'd said: "It's all very well, these dashing young pilots, glamour, courage, all that, but he'll be no good in peace time, you know. Probably be barely able to support you."

And Edie had said, what did it matter? She loved Bryan and Bryan loved her, and he'd probably be killed quite soon. Why shouldn't they have some happiness? What was the good of looking to the future when they might well be bombed any minute. And after all, Edie had said, the future doesn't really matter because some day there'll be all grandfather's money.

Harold squirmed uneasily in his chair. Really, that will of his grandfather's had been iniquitous! Keeping them all dangling on a string. The will hadn't pleased anybody. It didn't please the grandchildren and it made their father quite livid. The old boy was absolutely determined not to die. That's what made him take so much care of himself. But he'd have to die soon. Surely, surely he'd have to die soon. Otherwise—all Harold's worries swept over him once more making him feel sick and tired and giddy.

Alice was still watching him, he noticed. Those pale, thoughtful eyes, they made him uneasy somehow.

"I think I shall go to bed," he said. "It's been my first day out in the City."

"Yes," said Alice, "I think that's a good idea. I'm sure the doctor told you to take things easily at first."

"Doctors always tell you that," said Harold.

"And don't forget to take your tablets, dear," said Alice. She picked up the box and handed it to him.

He said good night and went upstairs. Yes, he needed the tablets. It would have been a mistake to leave them off too soon. He took two of them and swallowed them with a glass of water.

Twenty-four

"Nobody could have made more of a muck of it than I seem to have done," said Dermot Craddock gloomily.

He sat, his long legs stretched out, looking somehow incongruous in faithful Florence's somewhat overfurnished parlour. He was thoroughly tired, upset and dispirited.

Miss Marple made soft, soothing noises of dissent. "No, no, you've done very good work, my dear boy. Very good work indeed."

"I've done very good work, have I? I've let a whole family be poisoned. Alfred Crackenthorpe's dead and now Harold's dead too. What the hell's going on here. That's what I should like to know."

"Poisoned tablets," said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

"Yes. Devilishly cunning, really. They looked just like the tablets that he'd been having. There was a printed slip sent in with them 'by Doctor Quimper's instructions.' Well, Quimper never ordered them. There were chemist's labels used. The chemist knew nothing about it, either. No. That box of tablets came from Rutherford Hall."

"Do you actually *know* it came from Rutherford Hall?"

"Yes. We've had a thorough check up. Actually, it's the box that held the sedative tablets prescribed for Emma."

"Oh, I see. For Emma...."

"Yes. It's got her fingerprints on it and the fingerprints of both the nurses and the fingerprint of the chemist who made it up. Nobody else's, naturally. The person who sent them was careful."

"And the sedative tablets were removed and something else substituted?"

"Yes. That of course is the devil with tablets. One tablet looks exactly like another."

"You are so right," agreed Miss Marple. "I remember so very well in my young days, the *black* mixture and the *brown* mixture (the cough mixture that was) and the *white* mixture, and Doctor So-and-So's *pink* mixture. People didn't mix those up nearly as much. In fact, you know, in my village of St. Mary Mead we still like that kind of medicine. It's a bottle they always want, not tablets. What were the tablets?" she asked.

"Aconite. They were the kind of tablets that are usually kept in a poison bottle, diluted one in a hundred for outside application."

"And so Harold took them, and died," Miss Marple said thoughtfully. Dermot Craddock uttered something like a groan.

"You mustn't mind my letting off steam to you," he said. "Tell it all to Aunt Jane; that's how I feel!"

"That's very, very nice of you," said Miss Marple, "and I do appreciate it. I feel towards you, as Sir Henry's godson, quite differently from the way I feel to any ordinary detective-inspector."

Dermot Craddock gave her a fleeting grin. "But the fact remains that I've made the most ghastly mess of things all along the line," he said. "The Chief Constable down here calls in Scotland Yard, and what do they get? They get me making a prize ass of myself!"

"No, no," said Miss Marple.

"Yes, yes. I don't know who poisoned Alfred, I don't know who poisoned Harold, and, to cap it all, I haven't the least idea who the original murdered woman was! This Martine business seemed a perfectly safe bet. The whole thing seemed to tie up. And now what happens? The real Martine shows up and turns out, most improbably, to be the wife of Sir Robert Stoddart-West. So, who's the woman in the barn now? Goodness knows. First I go all out on the idea she's Anna Stravinska, and then *she's* out of it—"

He was arrested by Miss Marple giving one of her small peculiarly significant coughs.

"But is she?" she murmured.

Craddock stared at her. "Well, that postcard from Jamaica—"

"Yes," said Miss Marple; "but that isn't really evidence, is it? I mean, anyone can get a postcard sent from almost anywhere, I suppose. I remember Mrs. Brierly, such a very bad nervous breakdown. Finally, they said she ought to go to the mental hospital for observation, and she was so worried about the children knowing about it and so she wrote fourteen postcards and arranged that they should be posted from different places abroad, and told them that Mummy was going abroad on a holiday." She added, looking at Dermot Craddock, "You see what I mean."

"Yes, of course," said Craddock, staring at her. "Naturally we'd have checked that postcard if it hadn't been for the Martine business fitting the bill so well."

"So convenient," murmured Miss Marple.

"It tied up," said Craddock. "After all, there's the letter Emma received signed Martine Crackenthorpe. Lady Stoddart-West didn't send that, but *somebody* did. Somebody who was going to pretend to be Martine, and who was going to cash in, if possible, on being Martine. You can't deny *that*."

"No, no."

"And then, the envelope of the letter Emma wrote to her with the London address on it. Found at Rutherford Hall, showing she'd actually been there."

"But the murdered woman *hadn't* been there!" Miss Marple pointed out. "Not in the sense *you* mean. *She* only came to Rutherford Hall *after she was dead*. Pushed out of a train on to the railway embankment."

"Oh, yes."

"What the envelope really proves is that the *murderer* was there. Presumably he took that envelope off her with her other papers and things, and then dropped it by mistake—or—I wonder now, was it a mistake? Surely Inspector Bacon, and your men too, made a thorough search of the place, didn't they, and didn't find it. It only turned up later in the boiler house."

"That's understandable," said Craddock. "The old gardener chap used to spear up any odd stuff that was blowing about and shove it in there."

"Where it was very convenient for the boys to find," said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

"You think we were meant to find it?"

"Well, I just wonder. After all, it would be fairly easy to know where the boys were going to look next, or even to suggest to them... Yes, I do wonder. It stopped you thinking about Anna Stravinska anymore, didn't it?"

Craddock said: "And you think it really may be her all the time?"

"I think *someone* may have got alarmed when you started making inquiries about her, that's all... I think somebody didn't want those inquiries made."

"Let's hold on to the basic fact that someone was going to impersonate Martine," said Craddock. "And then for some reason—didn't. Why?"

"That's a very interesting question," said Miss Marple.

"Somebody sent a note saying Martine was going back to France, then arranged to travel down with the girl and kill her on the way. You agree so far?"

"Not exactly," said Miss Marple. "I don't think, really, you're making it simple enough."

"Simple!" exclaimed Craddock. "You're mixing me up," he complained.

Miss Marple said in a distressed voice that she wouldn't think of doing anything like *that*.

"Come, tell me," said Craddock, "do you or do you not think you know who the murdered woman was?" Miss Marple sighed. "It's so difficult," she said, "to put it the right way. I mean, I don't know *who* she was, but at the same time I'm fairly sure who she *was*, if you know what I mean."

Craddock threw up his head. "Know what you mean? I haven't the faintest idea." He looked out through the window. "There's your Lucy Eyelesbarrow coming to see you," he said. "Well, I'll be off. My *amour propre* is very low this afternoon and having a young woman coming in, radiant with efficiency and success, is more than I can bear."

Twenty-five

"I looked up tontine in the dictionary," said Lucy.

The first greetings were over and now Lucy was wandering rather aimlessly round the room, touching a china dog here, an antimacassar there, the plastic work-box in the window.

"I thought you probably would," said Miss Marple equably.

Lucy spoke slowly, quoting the words. "Lorenzo Tonti, Italian banker, originator, 1653, of a form of annuity in which the shares of subscribers who die are added to the profit shares of the survivors." She paused. "That's it, isn't it? That fits well enough, and you were thinking of it even *then* before the last two deaths."

She took up once more her restless, almost aimless prowl round the room. Miss Marple sat watching her. This was a very different Lucy Eyelesbarrow from the one she knew.

"I suppose it was asking for it really," said Lucy. "A will of that kind, ending so that if there was only one survivor left he'd get the lot. And yet—there was quite a lot of money, wasn't there? You'd think it would be enough shared out..." She paused, the words trailing off.

"The trouble is," said Miss Marple, "that people are greedy. Some people. That's so often, you know, how things start. You don't start with murder, with wanting to do murder, or even thinking of it. You just start by being greedy, by wanting more than you're going to have." She laid her knitting down on her knee and stared ahead of her into space. "That's how I came across Inspector Craddock first, you know. A case in the country. Near Medenham Spa. That began

the same way, just a weak amiable character who wanted a great deal of money. Money that that person wasn't entitled to, but there seemed an easy way to get it. Not murder then. Just something so easy and simple that it hadn't seemed wrong. That's how things begin... But it ended with three murders."

"Just like this," said Lucy. "We've had three murders now. The woman who impersonated Martine and who would have been able to claim a share for her son, and then Alfred, and then Harold. And now it only leaves two, doesn't it?"

"You mean," said Miss Marple, "there are only Cedric and Emma left?"

"Not Emma. Emma isn't a tall dark man. No. I mean Cedric and Bryan Eastley. I never thought of Bryan because he's fair. He's got a fair moustache and blue eyes, but you see—the other day..." She paused.

"Yes, go on," said Miss Marple. "Tell me. Something has upset you very badly, hasn't it?"

"It was when Lady Stoddart-West was going away. She had said good-bye and then suddenly turned to me just as she was getting into the car and asked: 'Who was that tall dark man who was standing on the terrace as I came in?'

"I couldn't imagine who she meant at first, because Cedric was still laid up. So I said, rather puzzled, 'You don't mean Bryan Eastley?' and she said, 'Of course, that's who it was, Squadron Leader Eastley. He was hidden in our loft once in France during the Resistance. I remembered the way he stood, and the set of his shoulders,' and she said, 'I should like to meet him again,' but we couldn't find him."

Miss Marple said nothing, just waited.

"And then," said Lucy, "later I looked at him... He was standing with his back to me and I saw what I ought to have seen before. That even when a man's fair his hair looks dark because he plasters it down with stuff. Bryan's hair is a sort of medium brown, I suppose, but it can *look* dark. So you see, it might have been *Bryan* that your friend saw in the train. It might...."

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "I had thought of that."

"I suppose you think of everything!" said Lucy bitterly.

"Well, dear, one has to really."

"But I can't see what Bryan would get out of it. I mean the money would come to Alexander, not to him. I suppose it would make an easier life, they could have a bit more luxury, but he wouldn't be able to tap the capital for his schemes, or anything like that."

"But if anything happened to Alexander before he was twenty-one, then Bryan would get the money as his father and next of kin," Miss Marple pointed out.

Lucy cast a look of horror at her.

"He'd never do *that*. No father would ever do that just—just to get the money."

Miss Marple sighed. "People do, my dear. It's very sad and very terrible, but they do."

"People do very terrible things," went on Miss Marple. "I know a woman who poisoned three of her children just for a little bit of insurance money. And then there was an old woman, quite a nice old woman apparently, who poisoned her son when he came home on leave. Then there was that old Mrs. Stanwich. That case was in the papers. I dare say you read about it. Her daughter died and her son, and then she said she was poisoned herself. There *was* poison in the gruel, but it came out, you know, that she'd put it there herself. She was just planning to poison the last daughter. That wasn't exactly for money. She was jealous of them for being younger than she was and alive, and she was afraid—it's a terrible thing to say but it's true—they would enjoy themselves after she was gone. She'd always kept a very tight hold on the purse strings. Yes, of course she was a little peculiar, as they say, but I never see myself that *that's* any real excuse. I mean you can be a little peculiar in so many different ways. Sometimes you just go about giving all your possessions away and writing cheques on bank accounts that don't exist, just so as to benefit people. It shows, you see, that behind being peculiar you have quite a nice disposition. But of course if you're peculiar and behind it you have a bad disposition—well, there you are. Now, does that help you at all, my dear Lucy?"

"Does what help me?" asked Lucy, bewildered.

"What I've been telling you," said Miss Marple. She added gently, "You mustn't worry, you know. You really mustn't worry. Elspeth McGillicuddy will be here any day now."

"I don't see what that has to do with it."

"No, dear, perhaps not. But *I* think it's important myself."

"I can't help worrying," said Lucy. "You see, I've got interested in the family."

"I know, dear, it's very difficult for you because you are quite strongly attracted to both of them, aren't you, in very different ways."

"What do you mean?" said Lucy. Her tone was sharp.

"I was talking about the two sons of the house," said Miss Marple. "Or rather the son and the son-in-law. It's unfortunate that the two more unpleasant members of the family have died and the two more attractive ones are left. I can see that Cedric Crackenthorpe *is* very attractive. He is inclined to make himself out worse than he is and has a provocative way with him."

"He makes me fighting mad sometimes," said Lucy.

"Yes," said Miss Marple, "and you enjoy that, don't you? You're a girl with a lot of spirit and you enjoy a battle. Yes, I can see where that attraction lies. And then Mr. Eastley is a rather plaintive type, rather like an unhappy little boy. That, of course, is attractive, too."

"And one of them's a murderer," said Lucy bitterly, "and it may be either of them. There's nothing to choose between them really. There's Cedric, not caring a bit about his brother Alfred's death or about Harold's. He just sits back looking thoroughly pleased making plans for what he'll do with Rutherford Hall, and he keeps saying that it'll need a lot of money to develop it in the way he wants to do. Of course I know he's the sort of person who exaggerates his own callousness and all that. But that could be a cover, too. I mean everyone says that you're more callous than you really are. But you mightn't be. You might be even more callous than you seem!"

"Dear, dear Lucy, I'm so sorry about all this."

"And then Bryan," went on Lucy. "It's extraordinary, but Bryan really seems to want to live there. He thinks he and Alexander could

find it awfully jolly and he's full of schemes."

"He's always full of schemes of one kind or another, isn't he?"

"Yes, I think he is. They all *sound* rather wonderful—but I've got an uneasy feeling that they'd never really work. I mean, they're not practical. The *idea* sounds all right—but I don't think he ever considers the actual working difficulties."

"They are up in the air, so to speak?"

"Yes, in more ways than one. I mean they are usually literally up in the air. They are all air schemes. Perhaps a really good fighter pilot never does quite come down to earth again...."

She added: "And he likes Rutherford Hall so much because it reminds him of the big rambling Victorian house he lived in when he was a child."

"I see," said Miss Marple thoughtfully. "Yes, I see...."

Then, with a quick sideways glance at Lucy, she said with a kind of verbal pounce, "But that isn't all of it, is it, dear? There's something else."

"Oh, yes, there's something else. Just something that I didn't realize until just a couple of days ago. Bryan could actually have been on that train."

"On the 4:33 from Paddington?"

"Yes. You see Emma thought she was required to account for *her* movements on 20th December and she went over it all very carefully—a committee meeting in the morning, and then shopping in the afternoon and tea at the Green Shamrock, and then, she said, *she went to meet Bryan at the station*. The train she met was the 4:50 from Paddington, but he could have been on the earlier train and pretended to come by the later one. He told me quite casually that his car had had a biff and was being repaired and so he had to come down by train—an awful bore, he said, he hates trains. He seemed quite natural about it all... It may be quite all right—but I wish, somehow, he hadn't come down by train."

"Actually on the train," said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

"It doesn't really prove anything. The awful thing is all this suspicion. Not to *know*. And perhaps we never shall know!"

“Of course we shall know, dear,” said Miss Marple briskly. “I mean—all this isn’t going to stop just at this point. The one thing I *do* know about murderers is that they can never let well alone. Or perhaps one should say—ill alone. At any rate,” said Miss Marple with finality, “they can’t once they’ve done a second murder. Now don’t get too upset, Lucy. The police are doing all they can, and looking after everybody—and the great thing is that Elspeth McGillicuddy will be here very soon now!”

Twenty-six

I

"Now, Elspeth, you're quite clear as to what I want you to do?"

"I'm clear enough," said Mrs. McGillicuddy, "but what I say to you is, Jane, that it seems very *odd*."

"It's not odd at all," said Miss Marple.

"Well, I think so. To arrive at the house and to ask almost immediately whether I can—er—go upstairs."

"It's very cold weather," Miss Marple pointed out, "and after all, you might have eaten something that disagreed with you and—er—have to ask to go upstairs. I mean, these things happen. I remember poor Louisa Felby came to see me once and she had to ask to go upstairs five times during one little half hour. That," added Miss Marple parenthetically, "was a bad Cornish pasty."

"If you'd just tell me what you're driving at, Jane," said Mrs. McGillicuddy.

"That's just what I don't want to do," said Miss Marple.

"How irritating you are, Jane. First you make me come all the way back to England before I need—"

"I'm sorry about that," said Miss Marple; "but I couldn't do anything else. Someone, you see, may be killed at any moment. Oh, I know they're all on their guard and the police are taking all the precautions they can, but there's always the outside chance that the murderer might be too clever for them. So you see, Elspeth, it was

your duty to come back. After all, you and I were brought up to do our duty, weren't we?"

"We certainly were," said Mrs. McGillicuddy, "no laxness in our young days."

"So that's quite all right," said Miss Marple, "and that's the taxi now," she added, as a faint hoot was heard outside the house.

Mrs. McGillicuddy donned her heavy pepper-and-salt coat and Miss Marple wrapped herself up with a good many shawls and scarves. Then the two ladies got into the taxi and were driven to Rutherford Hall.

II

"Who can this be driving up?" Emma asked, looking out of the window, as the taxi swept past it. "I do believe it's Lucy's old aunt."

"What a bore," said Cedric.

He was lying back in a long chair looking at *Country Life* with his feet reposing on the side of the mantelpiece.

"Tell her you're not at home."

"When you say tell her I'm not at home, do you mean that I should go out and say so? Or that I should tell Lucy to tell her aunt so?"

"Hadn't thought of that," said Cedric. "I suppose I was thinking of our butler and footman days, if we ever had them. I seem to remember a footman before the war. He had an affair with the kitchen maid and there was a terrific rumpus about it. Isn't there one of those old hags about the place cleaning?"

But at that moment the door was opened by Mrs. Hart, whose afternoon it was for cleaning the brasses, and Miss Marple came in, very fluttery, in a whirl of shawls and scarves, with an uncompromising figure behind her.

"I do hope," said Miss Marple, taking Emma's hand, "that we are not intruding. But you see, I'm going home the day after tomorrow, and I couldn't bear not to come over and see you and say good-bye,

and thank you again for your goodness to Lucy. Oh, I forgot. May I introduce my friend, Mrs. McGillicuddy, who is staying with me?"

"How d'you do," said Mrs. McGillicuddy, looking at Emma with complete attention and then shifting her gaze to Cedric, who had now risen to his feet. Lucy entered the room at this moment.

"Aunt Jane, I had no idea...."

"I had to come and say good-bye to Miss Crackenthorpe," said Miss Marple, turning to her, "who has been so very, very kind to you, Lucy."

"It's Lucy who's been very kind to us," said Emma.

"Yes, indeed," said Cedric. "We've worked her like a galley slave. Waiting on the sick room, running up and down the stairs, cooking little invalid messes...."

Miss Marple broke in. "I was so very, very sorry to hear of your illness. I do hope you're quite recovered now, Miss Crackenthorpe?"

"Oh, we're quite well again now," said Emma.

"Lucy told me you were all very ill. So dangerous, isn't it, food poisoning? Mushrooms, I understand."

"The cause remains rather mysterious," said Emma.

"Don't you believe it," said Cedric. "I bet you've heard the rumours that are flying round, Miss—er—"

"Marple," said Miss Marple.

"Well, as I say, I bet you've heard the rumours that are flying round. Nothing like arsenic for raising a little flutter in the neighbourhood."

"Cedric," said Emma, "I wish you wouldn't. You know Inspector Craddock said...."

"Bah," said Cedric, "everybody knows. Even you've heard something, haven't you?" he turned to Miss Marple and Mrs. McGillicuddy.

"I myself," said Mrs. McGillicuddy, "have only just returned from abroad—the day before yesterday," she added.

"Ah, well, you're not up on our local scandal then," said Cedric. "Arsenic in the curry, that's what it was. Lucy's aunt knows all about it, I bet."

"Well," said Miss Marple, "I did just hear—I mean, it was just a *hint*, but of course I didn't want to embarrass you in any way, Miss Crackenthorpe."

"You must pay no attention to my brother," said Emma. "He just likes making people uncomfortable." She gave him an affectionate smile as she spoke.

The door opened and Mr. Crackenthorpe came in, tapping angrily with his stick.

"Where's tea?" he said, "why isn't tea ready? You! Girl!" he addressed Lucy, "why haven't you brought tea in?"

"It's just ready, Mr. Crackenthorpe. I'm bringing it in now. I was just setting the table ready."

Lucy went out of the room again and Mr. Crackenthorpe was introduced to Miss Marple and Mrs. McGillicuddy.

"Like my meals on time," said Mr. Crackenthorpe. "Punctuality and economy. Those are my watchwords."

"Very necessary, I'm sure," said Miss Marple, "especially in these times with taxation and everything."

Mr. Crackenthorpe snorted. "Taxation! Don't talk to me of those robbers. A miserable pauper—that's what I am. And it's going to get worse, not better. You wait, my boy," he addressed Cedric, "when you get this place ten to one the Socialists will have it off you and turn it into a Welfare Centre or something. *And* take all your income to keep it up with!"

Lucy reappeared with a tea tray, Bryan Eastley followed her carrying a tray of sandwiches, bread and butter and cake.

"What's this? What's this?" Mr. Crackenthorpe inspected the tray. "Frosted cake? We having a party today? Nobody told me about it."

A faint flush came into Emma's face.

"Dr. Quimper's coming to tea, Father. It's his birthday today and —"

"Birthday?" snorted the old man. "What's he doing with a birthday? Birthdays are only for children. I never count my birthdays and I won't let anyone else celebrate them either."

"Much cheaper," agreed Cedric. "You save the price of candles on your cake."

"That's enough from you, boy," said Mr. Crackenthorpe.

Miss Marple was shaking hands with Bryan Eastley. "I've heard about you, of course," she said, "from Lucy. Dear me, you remind me *so* of someone I used to know at St. Mary Mead. That's the village where I've lived for so many years, you know. Ronnie Wells, the solicitor's son. Couldn't seem to settle somehow when he went into his father's business. He went out to East Africa and started a series of cargo boats on the lake out there. Victoria Nyanza, or is it Albert, I mean? Anyway, I'm sorry to say that it wasn't a success, and he lost *all* his capital. Most unfortunate! Not any relation of yours, I suppose? The likeness is so great."

"No," said Bryan, "I don't think I've any relations called Wells."

"He was engaged to a very nice girl," said Miss Marple. "Very sensible. She tried to dissuade him, but he wouldn't listen to her. He was wrong of course. Women have a lot of sense, you know, when it comes to money matters. Not high finance, of course. No woman can hope to understand *that*, my dear father said. But everyday L.s.d.—that sort of thing. What a delightful view you have from this window," she added, making her way across and looking out.

Emma joined her.

"Such an expanse of parkland! How picturesque the cattle look against the trees. One would never dream that one was in the middle of a town."

"We're rather an anachronism, I think," said Emma. "If the windows were open now you'd hear far off the noise of the traffic."

"Oh, of course," said Miss Marple, "there's noise everywhere, isn't there? Even in St. Mary Mead. We're now quite close to an airfield, you know, and really the way those jet planes fly over! Most frightening. Two panes in my little greenhouse broken the other day. Going through the sound barrier, or so I understand, though what it means I never have known."

"It's quite simple, really," said Bryan, approaching amiably. "You see, it's like this."

Miss Marple dropped her handbag and Bryan politely picked it up. At the same moment Mrs. McGillicuddy approached Emma and murmured, in an anguished voice—the anguish was quite genuine

since Mrs. McGillicuddy deeply disliked the task which she was now performing:

"I wonder—could I go upstairs for a moment?"

"Of course," said Emma.

"I'll take you," said Lucy.

Lucy and Mrs. McGillicuddy left the room together.

"Very cold, driving today," said Miss Marple in a vaguely explanatory manner.

"About the sound barrier," said Bryan, "you see it's like this... Oh, hallo, there's Quimper."

The doctor drove up in his car. He came in rubbing his hands and looking very cold.

"Going to snow," he said, "that's my guess. Hallo, Emma, how are you? Good lord, what's all this?"

"We made you a birthday cake," said Emma. "D'you remember? You told me today was your birthday."

"I didn't expect all this," said Quimper. "You know it's years—why, it must be—yes sixteen years since anyone's remembered my birthday." He looked almost uncomfortably touched.

"Do you know Miss Marple?" Emma introduced him.

"Oh, yes," said Miss Marple, "I met Dr. Quimper here before and he came and saw me when I had a very nasty chill the other day and he was most kind."

"All right again now, I hope?" said the doctor.

Miss Marple assured him that she was quite all right now.

"You haven't been to see *me* lately, Quimper," said Mr. Crackenthorpe. "I might be dying for all the notice you take of me!"

"I don't see you dying yet awhile," said Dr. Quimper.

"I don't mean to," said Mr. Crackenthorpe. "Come on, let's have tea. What're we waiting for?"

"Oh, please," said Miss Marple, "don't wait for my friend. She would be most upset if you did."

They sat down and started tea. Miss Marple accepted a piece of bread and butter first, and then went on to a sandwich.

"Are they—?" she hesitated.

"Fish," said Bryan. "I helped make 'em."

Mr. Crackenthorpe gave a cackle of laughter.

"Poisoned fishpaste," he said. "That's what they are. Eat 'em at your peril."

"Please, Father!"

"You've got to be careful what you eat in this house," said Mr. Crackenthorpe to Miss Marple. "Two of my sons have been murdered like flies. Who's doing it—that's what I want to know."

"Don't let him put you off," said Cedric, handing the plate once more to Miss Marple. "A touch of arsenic improves the complexion, they say, so long as you don't have too much."

"Eat one yourself, boy," said old Mr. Crackenthorpe.

"Want me to be official taster?" said Cedric. "Here goes."

He took a sandwich and put it whole into his mouth. Miss Marple gave a gentle, ladylike little laugh and took a sandwich. She took a bite, and said:

"I do think it's so brave of you all to make these jokes. Yes, really, I think it's very brave indeed. I do admire bravery so much."

She gave a sudden gasp and began to choke. "A fish bone," she gasped out, "in my throat."

Quimper rose quickly. He went across to her, moved her backwards towards the window and told her to open her mouth. He pulled out a case from his pocket, selecting some forceps from it. With quick professional skill he peered down the old lady's throat. At that moment the door opened and Mrs. McGillicuddy, followed by Lucy, came in. Mrs. McGillicuddy gave a sudden gasp as her eyes fell on the tableau in front of her, Miss Marple leaning back and the doctor holding her throat and tilting up her head.

"But that's *him*," cried Mrs. McGillicuddy. "That's the man in the train...."

With incredible swiftness Miss Marple slipped from the doctor's grasp and came towards her friend.

"I *thought* you'd recognize him, Elspeth!" she said. "No. Don't say another word." She turned triumphantly round to Dr. Quimper. "You didn't know, did you, Doctor, when you strangled that woman in the train, that somebody *actually saw you do it*? It was my friend here. Mrs. McGillicuddy. She *saw* you. Do you understand? *Saw you with*

her own eyes. She was in another train that was running parallel with yours."

"What the hell?" Dr. Quimper made a quick step towards Mrs. McGillicuddy but again, swiftly, Miss Marple was between him and her.

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "She saw you, and *she recognizes you*, and she'll swear to it in court. It's not often, I believe," went on Miss Marple in her gentle plaintive voice, "that anyone actually sees a murder committed. It's usually circumstantial evidence of course. But in this case the conditions were very unusual. There was actually *an eyewitness to murder.*"

"You devilish old hag," said Dr. Quimper. He lunged forward at Miss Marple but this time it was Cedric who caught him by the shoulder.

"So *you're* the murdering devil, are you?" said Cedric as he swung him round. "I never liked you and I always thought you were a wrong 'un, but lord knows, I never suspected you."

Bryan Eastley came quickly to Cedric's assistance. Inspector Craddock and Inspector Bacon entered the room from the farther door.

"Dr. Quimper," said Bacon, "I must caution you that..."

"You can take your caution to hell," said Dr. Quimper. "Do you think anyone's going to believe what a couple of old women say? Who's ever heard of all this rigmarole about a train!"

Miss Marple said: "Elsbeth McGillicuddy reported the murder to the police at once on the 20th December and gave a description of the man."

Dr. Quimper gave a sudden heave of the shoulders. "If ever a man had the devil's own luck," said Dr. Quimper.

"But—" said Mrs. McGillicuddy.

"Be quiet, Elspeth," said Miss Marple.

"Why should I want to murder a perfectly strange woman?" said Dr. Quimper.

"She wasn't a strange woman," said Inspector Craddock. "*She was your wife.*"

Twenty-seven

"So you see," said Miss Marple, "it really turned out to be, as I began to suspect, very, very simple. The simplest kind of crime. So many men seem to murder their wives."

Mrs. McGillicuddy looked at Miss Marple and Inspector Craddock. "I'd be obliged," she said, "if you'd put me a little more up to date."

"He saw a chance, you see," said Miss Marple, "of marrying a rich wife, Emma Crackenthorpe. Only he couldn't marry her because he had a wife already. They'd been separated for years but she wouldn't divorce him. That fitted in very well with what Inspector Craddock told me of this girl who called herself Anna Stravinska. *She* had an English husband, so she told one of her friends, and it was also said she was a very devout Catholic. Dr. Quimper couldn't risk marrying Emma bigamously, so he decided, being a very ruthless and cold-blooded man, that he would get rid of his wife. The idea of murdering her in the train and later putting her body in the sarcophagus in the barn was really rather a clever one. He meant it to tie up, you see, with the Crackenthorpe family. Before that he'd written a letter to Emma which purported to be from the girl Martine whom Edmund Crackenthorpe had talked of marrying. Emma had told Dr. Quimper all about her brother, you see. Then, when the moment arose he encouraged her to go to the police with her story. He wanted the dead woman identified as Martine. I think he may have heard that inquiries were being made by the Paris police about Anna Stravinska, and so he arranged to have a postcard come from her from Jamaica.

"It was easy for him to arrange to meet his wife in London, to tell her that he hoped to be reconciled with her and that he would like her to come down and 'meet his family.' We won't talk about the next part of it, which is very unpleasant to think about. Of course he was a greedy man. When he thought about taxation, and how much it cuts into income, he began thinking that it would be nice to have a good deal more capital. Perhaps he'd already thought of that before he decided to murder his wife. Anyway, he started spreading rumours that someone was trying to poison old Mr. Crackenthorpe so as to get the ground prepared, and then he ended by administering arsenic to the family. Not too much, of course, for he didn't want old Mr. Crackenthorpe to die."

"But I still don't see how he managed," said Craddock. "He wasn't in the house when the curry was being prepared."

"Oh, but there wasn't any arsenic in the curry *then*," said Miss Marple. "He added it to the curry afterwards when he took it away to be tested. He probably put the arsenic in the cocktail jug earlier. Then, of course, it was quite easy for him, in his role of medical attendant, to poison off Alfred Crackenthorpe and also to send the tablets to Harold in London, having safeguarded himself by telling Harold that he wouldn't need anymore tablets. Everything he did was bold and audacious and cruel and greedy, and I am really very, very sorry," finished Miss Marple, looking as fierce as a fluffy old lady can look, "that they have abolished capital punishment because I do feel that if there is anyone who ought to hang, it's Dr. Quimper."

"Hear, hear," said Inspector Craddock.

"It occurred to me, you know," continued Miss Marple, "that even if you only see anybody from the back view, so to speak, nevertheless a back view *is* characteristic. I thought that if Elspeth were to see Dr. Quimper in exactly the same position as she'd seen him in the train in, that is, with his back to her, bent over a woman whom he was holding by the throat, then I was almost sure she would recognize him, or would make some kind of startled exclamation. That is why I had to lay my little plan with Lucy's kind assistance."

"I must say," said Mrs. McGillicuddy, "it gave me quite a turn. I said, 'That's him' before I could stop myself. And yet, you know, I hadn't actually seen the man's face and—"

"I was terribly afraid that you were going to say so, Elspeth," said Miss Marple.

"I was," said Mrs. McGillicuddy. "I was going to say that of course I hadn't seen his *face*."

"That," said Miss Marple, "would have been quite fatal. You see, dear, he thought you really *did* recognize him. I mean, *he* couldn't know that you hadn't seen his face."

"A good thing I held my tongue then," said Mrs. McGillicuddy.

"I wasn't going to let you say another word," said Miss Marple.

Craddock laughed suddenly. "You two!" he said. "You're a marvellous pair. What next, Miss Marple? What's the happy ending? What happens to poor Emma Crackenthorpe, for instance?"

"She'll get over the doctor, of course," said Miss Marple, "and I dare say if her father were to die—and I don't think he's quite so robust as he thinks he is—that she'd go on a cruise or perhaps to stay abroad like Geraldine Webb, and I dare say something might come of it. A *nicer* man than Dr. Quimper, I hope."

"What about Lucy Eyelesbarrow? Wedding bells there too?"

"Perhaps," said Miss Marple, "I shouldn't wonder."

"Which of 'em is she going to choose?" said Dermot Craddock.

"Don't you know?" said Miss Marple.

"No, I don't," said Craddock. "Do you?"

"Oh, yes, I think so," said Miss Marple.

And she twinkled at him.

Credits

Cover illustration and design by Sara Wood

MISS
MARPLE

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha
Christie

THE MIRROR
CRACK'D FROM
SIDE TO SIDE

A Miss Marple Mystery

Agatha Christie

The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side

A Miss Marple Mystery

HARPER

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*To
Margaret Rutherford in admiration*

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*Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side;
"The curse is come upon me," cried
The Lady of Shalott*

Alfred Tennyson

One

I

Miss Jane Marple was sitting by her window. The window looked over her garden, once a source of pride to her. That was no longer so. Nowadays she looked out of the window and winced. Active gardening had been forbidden her for some time now. No stooping, no digging, no planting—at most a little light pruning. Old Laycock who came three times a week, did his best, no doubt. But his best, such as it was (which was not much) was only the best according to *his* lights, and not according to those of his employer. Miss Marple knew exactly what she wanted done, and when she wanted it done, and instructed him duly. Old Laycock then displayed his particular genius which was that of enthusiastic agreement and subsequent lack of performance.

“That’s right, missus. We’ll have them mecosoapies there and the Canterburys along the wall and as you say it ought to be got on with first thing next week.”

Laycock’s excuses were always reasonable, and strongly resembled those of Captain George’s in *Three Men in a Boat* for avoiding going to sea. In the captain’s case the wind was always wrong, either blowing off shore or in shore, or coming from the unreliable west, or the even more treacherous east. Laycock’s was the weather. Too dry—too wet—waterlogged—a nip of frost in the air. Or else something of great importance had to come first (usually to do with cabbages or brussels sprouts of which he liked to grow

inordinate quantities). Laycock's own principles of gardening were simple and no employer, however knowledgeable, could wean him from them.

They consisted of a great many cups of tea, sweet and strong, as an encouragement to effort, a good deal of sweeping up of leaves in the autumn, and a certain amount of bedding out of his own favourite plants, mainly asters and salvias—to "make a nice show," as he put it, in summer. He was all in favour of syringeing roses for green-fly, but was slow to get around to it, and a demand for deep trenching for sweet peas was usually countered by the remark that you ought to see his own sweet peas! A proper treat last year, and no fancy stuff done beforehand.

To be fair, he was attached to his employers, humoured their fancies in horticulture (so far as no actual hard work was involved) but vegetables he knew to be the real stuff of life; a nice Savoy, or a bit of curly kale; flowers were fancy stuff such as ladies liked to go in for, having nothing better to do with their time. He showed his affection by producing presents of the aforementioned asters, salvias, lobelia edging, and summer chrysanthemums.

"Been doing some work at them new houses over at the Development. Want their gardens laid out nice, they do. More plants than they needed so I brought along a few, and I've put 'em in where them old-fashioned roses ain't looking so well."

Thinking of these things, Miss Marple averted her eyes from the garden, and picked up her knitting.

One had to face the fact: St. Mary Mead was *not* the place it had been. In a sense, of course, nothing was what it had been. You could blame the war (both the wars) or the younger generation, or women going out to work, or the atom bomb, or just the Government—but what one really meant was the simple fact that one was growing old. Miss Marple, who was a very sensible lady, knew that quite well. It was just that, in a queer way, she felt it more in St. Mary Mead, because it had been her home for so long.

St. Mary Mead, the old world core of it, was still there. The Blue Boar was there, and the church and the vicarage and the little nest of Queen Anne and Georgian houses, of which hers was one. Miss

Hartnell's house was still there, and also Miss Hartnell, fighting progress to the last gasp. Miss Wetherby had passed on and her house was now inhabited by the bank manager and his family, having been given a face-lift by the painting of doors and windows a bright royal blue. There were new people in most of the other old houses, but the houses themselves were little changed in appearances since the people who had bought them had done so because they liked what the house agent called "old world charm." They just added another bathroom, and spent a good deal of money on plumbing, electric cookers, and dishwashers.

But though the houses looked much as before, the same could hardly be said of the village street. When shops changed hands there, it was with a view to immediate and intemperate modernization. The fishmonger was unrecognizable with new super windows behind which the refrigerated fish gleamed. The butcher had remained conservative—good meat is good meat, if you have the money to pay for it. If not, you take the cheaper cuts and the tough joints and like it! Barnes, the grocer, was still there, unchanged, for which Miss Hartnell and Miss Marple and others daily thanked Heaven. So *obliging*, comfortable chairs to sit in by the counter, and cosy discussions as to cuts of bacon, and varieties of cheese. At the end of the street, however, where Mr. Toms had once had his basket shop stood a glittering new supermarket—anathema to the elderly ladies of St. Mary Mead.

"Packets of things one's never even *heard* of," exclaimed Miss Hartnell. "All these great packets of breakfast cereal instead of cooking a child a proper breakfast of bacon and eggs. *And* you're expected to take a basket *yourself* and go round looking for things—it takes a quarter of an hour sometimes to find all one wants—and usually made up in inconvenient sizes, too much or too little. And then a long queue waiting to pay as you go out. Most tiring. Of course it's all very well for the people from the Development—"

At this point she stopped.

Because, as was now usual, the sentence came to an end there. The Development, Period, as they would say in modern terms. It had an entity of its own, and a capital letter.

II

Miss Marple uttered a sharp exclamation of annoyance. She'd dropped a stitch again. Not only that, she must have dropped it some time ago. Not until now, when she had to decrease for the neck and count the stitches, had she realized the fact. She took up a spare pin, held the knitting sideways to the light and peered anxiously. Even her new spectacles didn't seem to do any good. And that, she reflected, was because obviously there came a time when oculists, in spite of their luxurious waiting rooms, the up-to-date instruments, the bright lights they flashed into your eyes, and the very high fees they charged, couldn't do anything much more for you. Miss Marple reflected with some nostalgia on how good her eyesight had been a few (well, not perhaps a *few*) years ago. From the vantage point of her garden, so admirably placed to see all that was going on in St. Mary Mead, how little had escaped her noticing eye! And with the help of her bird glasses—(an interest in birds was *so* useful!)—she had been able to see—She broke off there and let her thoughts run back over the past. Ann Protheroe in her summer frock going along to the Vicarage garden. And Colonel Protheroe—poor man—a very tiresome and unpleasant man, to be sure—but to be murdered like that—She shook her head and went on to thoughts of Griselda, the vicar's pretty young wife. Dear Griselda—such a faithful friend—a Christmas card every year. That attractive baby of hers was a strapping young man now, and with a very good job. Engineering, was it? He always *had* enjoyed taking his mechanical trains to pieces. Beyond the Vicarage, there had been the stile and the field path with Farmer Giles's cattle beyond in the meadows where now—now....

The Development.

And why not? Miss Marple asked herself sternly. These things had to be. The houses were necessary, and they were very well built, or so she had been told. "Planning," or whatever they called it. Though why everything had to be called a Close she couldn't imagine. Aubrey Close and Longwood Close, and Grandison Close and all the rest of them. Not really Closes at all. Miss Marple knew what a Close

was perfectly. Her uncle had been a Canon of Chichester Cathedral. As a child she had gone to stay with him in the Close.

It was like Cherry Baker who always called Miss Marple's oldworld overcrowded drawing room the "lounge." Miss Marple corrected her gently, "It's the drawing room, Cherry." And Cherry, because she was young and kind, endeavoured to remember, though it was obvious to her "drawing room" was a very funny word to use—and "lounge" came slipping out. She had of late, however, compromised on "living-room." Miss Marple liked Cherry very much. Her name was Mrs. Baker and she came from the Development. She was one of the detachment of young wives who shopped at the supermarket and wheeled prams about the quiet streets of St. Mary Mead. They were all smart and well turned out. Their hair was crisp and curled. They laughed and talked and called to one another. They were like a happy flock of birds. Owing to the insidious snares of Hire Purchase, they were always in need of ready money, though their husbands all earned good wages; and so they came and did housework or cooking. Cherry was a quick and efficient cook, she was an intelligent girl, took telephone calls correctly and was quick to spot inaccuracies in the tradesmen's books. She was not much given to turning mattresses, and as far as washing up went Miss Marple always now passed the pantry door with her head turned away so as not to observe Cherry's method which was that of thrusting everything into the sink together and letting loose a snowstorm of detergent on it. Miss Marple had quietly removed her old Worcester tea set from daily circulation and put it in the corner cabinet whence it only emerged on special occasions. Instead she had purchased a modern service with a pattern of pale grey on white and no gilt on it whatsoever to be washed away in the sink.

How different it had been in the past... Faithful Florence, for instance, that grenadier of a parlourmaid—and there had been Amy and Clara and Alice, those "nice little maids"—arriving from St. Faith's Orphanage, to be "trained," and then going on to betterpaid jobs elsewhere. Rather simple, some of them had been, and frequently adenoidal, and Amy distinctly moronic. They had gossiped and chattered with the other maids in the village and walked out

with the fishmonger's assistant, or the undergardener at the Hall, or one of Mr. Barnes the grocer's numerous assistants. Miss Marple's mind went back over them affectionately thinking of all the little woolly coats she had knitted for their subsequent offspring. They had not been very good with the telephone, and no good at all at arithmetic. On the other hand, they knew how to wash up, and how to make a bed. They had had skills, rather than education. It was odd that nowadays it should be the educated girls who went in for all the domestic chores. Students from abroad, girls *au pair*, university students in the vacation, young married women like Cherry Baker, who lived in spurious Closes on new building developments.

There were still, of course, people like Miss Knight. This last thought came suddenly as Miss Knight's tread overhead made the lustres on the mantelpiece tinkle warningly. Miss Knight had obviously had her afternoon rest and would now go out for her afternoon walk. In a moment she would come to ask Miss Marple if she could get her anything in the town. The thought of Miss Knight brought the usual reaction to Miss Marple's mind. Of course, it was very generous of dear Raymond (her nephew) and nobody could be kinder than Miss Knight, and of course that attack of bronchitis *had* left her very weak, and Dr. Haydock had said very firmly that she must not go on sleeping alone in the house with only someone coming in daily, but—She stopped there. Because it was no use going on with the thought which was "If only it could have been someone other than Miss Knight." But there wasn't much choice for elderly ladies nowadays. Devoted maidservants had gone out of fashion. In real illness you could have a proper hospital nurse, at vast expense and procured with difficulty, or you could go to hospital. But after the critical phase of illness had passed, you were down to the Miss Knights.

There wasn't, Miss Marple reflected, anything wrong about the Miss Knights other than the fact that they were madly irritating. They were full of kindness, ready to feel affection towards their charges, to humour them, to be bright and cheerful with them and in general to treat them as slightly mentally afflicted children.

"But I," said Miss Marple to herself, "although I may be old, am *not* a mentally retarded child."

At this moment, breathing rather heavily, as was her custom, Miss Knight bounced brightly into the room. She was a big, rather flabby woman of fifty-six with yellowing grey hair very elaborately arranged, glasses, a long thin nose, and below it a good-natured mouth and a weak chin.

"Here we are!" she exclaimed with a kind of beaming boisterousness, meant to cheer and enliven the sad twilight of the aged. "I hope *we've* had our little snooze?"

"*I* have been knitting," Miss Marple replied, putting some emphasis on the pronoun, "and," she went on, confessing her weakness with distaste and shame, "I've dropped a stitch."

"Oh dear, dear," said Miss Knight. "Well, we'll soon put that right, won't we?"

"*You* will," said Miss Marple. "*I*, alas, am unable to do so."

The slight acerbity of her tone passed quite unnoticed. Miss Knight, as always, was eager to help.

"There," she said after a few moments. "There you are, dear. Quite all right now."

Though Miss Marple was perfectly agreeable to be called "dear" (and even "ducks") by the woman at the greengrocer or the girl at the paper shop, it annoyed her intensely to be called "dear" by Miss Knight. Another of those things that elderly ladies have to bear. She thanked Miss Knight politely.

"And now I'm just going out for my wee toddle," said Miss Knight humorously. "Shan't be long."

"Please don't dream of hurrying back," said Miss Marple politely and sincerely.

"Well, I don't like to leave you too long on your own, dear, in case you get moped."

"I assure you I am quite happy," said Miss Marple. "I probably shall have" (she closed her eyes) "a little nap."

"That's right, dear. Anything I can get you?"

Miss Marple opened her eyes and considered.

"You might go into Longdon's and see if the curtains are ready. And perhaps another skein of the blue wool from Mrs. Wisley. And a box of black currant lozenges at the chemist's. And change my book at the library—but don't let them give you anything that isn't on my list. This last one was too terrible. I couldn't read it." She held out *The Spring Awakens*.

"Oh dear dear! Didn't you like it? I thought you'd love it. Such a pretty story."

"And if it isn't too far for you, perhaps you wouldn't mind going as far as Halletts and see if they have one of those up-and-down egg whisks—*not* the turn-the-handle kind."

(She knew very well they had nothing of the kind, but Halletts was the farthest shop possible.)

"If all this isn't too much—" she murmured.

But Miss Knight replied with obvious sincerity.

"Not at all. I shall be delighted."

Miss Knight loved shopping. It was the breath of life to her. One met acquaintances, and had the chance of a chat, one gossiped with the assistants, and had the opportunity of examining various articles in the various shops. And one could spend quite a long time engaged in these pleasant occupations without any guilty feeling that it was one's duty to hurry back.

So Miss Knight started off happily, after a last glance at the frail old lady resting so peacefully by the window.

After waiting a few minutes in case Miss Knight should return for a shopping bag, or her purse, or a handkerchief (she was a great forgetter and returner), and also to recover from the slight mental fatigue induced by thinking of so many unwanted things to ask Miss Knight to get, Miss Marple rose briskly to her feet, cast aside her knitting and strode purposefully across the room and into the hall. She took down her summer coat from its peg, a stick from the hall stand and exchanged her bedroom slippers for a pair of stout walking shoes. Then she left the house by the side door.

"It will take her at least an hour and a half," Miss Marple estimated to herself. "Quite that—with all the people from the Development doing their shopping."

Miss Marple visualized Miss Knight at Longdon's making abortive inquiries re curtains. Her surmises were remarkably accurate. At this moment Miss Knight was exclaiming, "Of course, I felt quite sure in my own mind they wouldn't be ready yet. But of course I said I'd come along and see when the old lady spoke about it. Poor old dears, they've got so little to look forward to. One must humour them. And she's a sweet old lady. Failing a little now, it's only to be expected—their faculties get dimmed. Now that's a pretty material you've got there. Do you have it in any other colours?"

A pleasant twenty minutes passed. When Miss Knight had finally departed, the senior assistant remarked with a sniff, "Failing, is she? I'll believe that when I see it for myself. Old Miss Marple has always been as sharp as a needle, and I'd say she still is." She then gave her attention to a young woman in tight trousers and a sailcloth jersey who wanted plastic material with crabs on it for bathroom curtains.

"Emily Waters, that's who she reminds me of," Miss Marple was saying to herself, with the satisfaction it always gave her to match up a human personality with one known in the past. "Just the same bird brain. Let me see, what happened to Emily?"

Nothing much, was her conclusion. She had once nearly got engaged to a curate, but after an understanding of several years the affair had fizzled out. Miss Marple dismissed her nurse attendant from her mind and gave her attention to her surroundings. She had traversed the garden rapidly only observing as it were from the corner of her eye that Laycock had cut down the old-fashioned roses in a way more suitable to hybrid teas, but she did not allow this to distress her, or distract her from the delicious pleasure of having escaped for an outing entirely on her own. She had a happy feeling of adventure. She turned to the right, entered the Vicarage gate, took the path through the Vicarage garden and came out on the right of way. Where the stile had been there was now an iron swing gate giving on to a tarred asphalt path. This led to a neat little bridge over the stream and on the other side of the stream where once there had been meadows with cows, there was the Development.

Two

With the feeling of Columbus setting out to discover a new world, Miss Marple passed over the bridge, continued on to the path and within four minutes was actually in Aubrey Close.

Of course Miss Marple had seen the Development from the Market Basing Road, that is, had seen from afar its Closes and rows of neat well-built houses, with their television masts and their blue and pink and yellow and green painted doors and windows. But until now it had only had the reality of a map, as it were. She had not been in it and of it. But now she was here, observing the brave new world that was springing up, the world that by all accounts was foreign to all she had known. It was like a neat model built with child's bricks. It hardly seemed real to Miss Marple.

The people, too, looked unreal. The trousered young women, the rather sinister-looking young men and boys, the exuberant bosoms of the fifteen-year-old girls. Miss Marple couldn't help thinking that it all looked terribly depraved. Nobody noticed her much as she trudged along. She turned out of Aubrey Close and was presently in Darlington Close. She went slowly and as she went she listened avidly to the snippets of conversation between mothers wheeling prams, to the girls addressing young men, to the sinister-looking Teds (she supposed they were Teds) exchanging dark remarks with each other. Mothers came out on doorsteps calling to their children who, as usual, were busy doing all the things they had been told not to do. Children, Miss Marple reflected gratefully, never changed. And

presently she began to smile, and noted down in her mind her usual series of recognitions.

That woman is just like Carry Edwards—and the dark one is just like that Hooper girl—she'll make a mess of her marriage just like Mary Hooper did. Those boys—the dark one is just like Edward Leeke, a lot of wild talk but no harm in him—a nice boy really—the fair one is Mrs. Bedwell's Josh all over again. Nice boys, both of them. The one like Gregory Binns won't do very well, I'm afraid. I expect he's got the same sort of mother...

She turned a corner into Walsingham Close and her spirits rose every moment.

The new world was the same as the old. The houses were different, the streets were called Closes, the clothes were different, the voices were different, but the human beings were the same as they always had been. And though using slightly different phraseology, the subjects of conversation were the same.

By dint of turning corners in her exploration, Miss Marple had rather lost her sense of direction and had arrived at the edge of the housing estate again. She was now in Carrisbrook Close, half of which was still "under construction." At the first floor window of a nearly finished house a young couple were standing. Their voices floated down as they discussed the amenities.

"You must admit it's a nice position, Harry."

"Other one was just as good."

"This one's got two more rooms."

"And you've got to pay for them."

"Well, I *like* this one."

"You would!"

"Ow, don't be such a spoilsport. You know what Mum said."

"Your Mum never stops saying."

"Don't you say nothing against Mum. Where'd I have been without her? And she might have cut up nastier than she did. She could have taken you to court."

"Oh, come off it, Lily."

"It's a good view of the hills. You can almost see—" She leaned far out, twisting her body to the left. "You can almost see the

reservoir—”

She leant farther still, not realizing that she was resting her weight on loose boards that had been laid across the sill. They slipped under the pressure of her body, sliding outwards, carrying her with them. She screamed, trying to regain her balance.

“Harry—”

The young man stood motionless—a foot or two behind her. He took one step backwards—

Desperately, clawing at the wall, the girl righted herself. “Oo!” She let out a frightened breath. “I near as nothing fell out. Why didn’t you get hold of me?”

“It was all so quick. Anyway you’re all right.”

“That’s all you know about it. I nearly went, I tell you. And look at the front of my jumper, it’s all mussed.”

Miss Marple went on a little way, then on impulse, she turned back.

Lily was outside in the road waiting for the young man to lock up the house.

Miss Marple went up to her and spoke rapidly in a low voice.

“If I were you, my dear, I shouldn’t marry that young man. You want someone whom you can rely upon if you’re in danger. You must excuse me for saying this to you—but I feel you ought to be warned.”

She turned away and Lily stared after her.

“Well, of all the—”

Her young man approached.

“What was she saying to you, Lil?”

Lily opened her mouth—then shut it again.

“Giving me the gipsy’s warning if you want to know.”

She eyed him in a thoughtful manner.

Miss Marple in her anxiety to get away quickly, turned a corner, stumbled over some loose stones and fell.

A woman came running out of one of the houses.

“Oh dear, what a nasty spill! I hope you haven’t hurt yourself?”

With almost excessive goodwill she put her arms round Miss Marple and tugged her to her feet.

"No bones broken, I hope? There we are. I expect you feel rather shaken."

Her voice was loud and friendly. She was a plump squarely built woman of about forty, brown hair just turning grey, blue eyes, and a big generous mouth that seemed to Miss Marple's rather shaken gaze to be far too full of white shining teeth.

"You'd better come inside and sit down and rest a bit. I'll make you a cup of tea."

Miss Marple thanked her. She allowed herself to be led through the blue-painted door and into a small room full of bright cretonne-covered chairs and sofas.

"There you are," said her rescuer, establishing her on a cushioned armchair. "You sit quiet and I'll put the kettle on."

She hurried out of the room which seemed rather restfully quiet after her departure. Miss Marple took a deep breath. She was not really hurt, but the fall had shaken her. Falls at her age were not to be encouraged. With luck, however, she thought guiltily, Miss Knight need never know. She moved her arms and legs gingerly. Nothing broken. If she could only get home all right. Perhaps, after a cup of tea—

The cup of tea arrived almost as the thought came to her. Brought on a tray with four sweet biscuits on a little plate.

"There you are." It was placed on a small table in front of her. "Shall I pour it out for you? Better have plenty of sugar."

"No sugar, thank you."

"You must have sugar. Shock, you know. I was abroad with ambulances during the war. Sugar's wonderful for shock." She put four lumps in the cup and stirred vigorously. "Now you get that down, and you'll feel as right as rain."

Miss Marple accepted the dictum.

"A kind woman," she thought. "She reminds me of someone—now who is it?"

"You've been very kind to me," she said, smiling.

"Oh, that's nothing. The little ministering angel, that's me. I love helping people." She looked out of the window as the latch of the

outer gate clicked. "Here's my husband home. Arthur—we've got a visitor."

She went out into the hall and returned with Arthur who looked rather bewildered. He was a thin pale man, rather slow in speech.

"This lady fell down—right outside our gate, so of course I brought her in."

"Your wife is very kind, Mr.—"

"Badcock's the name."

"Mr. Badcock, I'm afraid I've given her a lot of trouble."

"Oh, no trouble to Heather. Heather enjoys doing things for people." He looked at her curiously. "Were you on your way anywhere in particular?"

"No, I was just taking a walk. I live in St. Mary Mead, the house beyond the Vicarage. My name is Marple."

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Heather. "So *you're* Miss Marple. I've heard about you. You're the one who does all the murders."

"Heather! What *do* you—"

"Oh, you know what I mean. Not actually *do* murders—find out about them. That's right, isn't it?"

Miss Marple murmured modestly that she *had* been mixed-up in murders once or twice.

"I heard there have been murders here, in this village. They were talking about it the other night at the Bingo Club. There was one at Gossington Hall. I wouldn't buy a place where there'd been a murder. I'd be sure it was haunted."

"The murder wasn't committed in Gossington Hall. A dead body was brought there."

"Found in the library on the hearthrug, that's what they said?"

Miss Marple nodded.

"Did you ever? Perhaps they're going to make a film of it. Perhaps that's why Marina Gregg has bought Gossington Hall."

"Marina Gregg?"

"Yes. She and her husband. I forget his name—he's a producer, I think, or a director—Jason something. But Marina Gregg, she's lovely, isn't she? Of course she hasn't been in so many pictures of late years—she was ill for a long time. But I still think there's never

anybody like her. Did you see her in *Carmenella*. And *The Price of Love*, and *Mary of Scotland*? She's not so young anymore, but she'll always be a wonderful actress. I've always been a terrific fan of hers. When I was a teenager I used to dream about her. The big thrill of my life was when there was a big show in aid of the St. John Ambulance in Bermuda, and Marina Gregg came to open it. I was mad with excitement, and then on the very day I went down with a temperature and the doctor said I couldn't go. But I wasn't going to be beaten. I didn't actually feel too bad. So I got up and put a lot of makeup on my face and went along. I was introduced to her and she talked to me for quite three minutes and gave me her autograph. It was wonderful. I've never forgotten that day."

Miss Marple stared at her. "I hope there were no—unfortunate aftereffects?" she said anxiously.

Heather Badcock laughed.

"None at all. Never felt better. What I say is, if you want a thing you've got to take risks. I always do."

She laughed again, a happy strident laugh.

Arthur Badcock said admiringly. "There's never any holding Heather. She always gets away with things."

"Alison Wilde," murmured Miss Marple, with a nod of satisfaction.

"Pardon?" said Mr. Badcock.

"Nothing. Just someone I used to know."

Heather looked at her inquiringly.

"You reminded me of her, that is all."

"Did I? I hope she was nice."

"She was very nice indeed," said Miss Marple slowly. "Kind, healthy, full of life."

"But she had her faults, I suppose?" laughed Heather. "I have."

"Well, Alison always saw her own point of view so clearly that she didn't always see how things might appear to, or affect, other people."

"Like the time you took in that evacuated family from a condemned cottage and they went off with all our teaspoons," Arthur said.

"But Arthur!—I couldn't have turned them away. It wouldn't have been kind."

"They were family spoons," said Mr. Badcock sadly. "Georgian. Belonged to my mother's grandmother."

"Oh, do forget those old spoons, Arthur. You do harp so."

"I'm not very good at forgetting, I'm afraid."

Miss Marple looked at him thoughtfully.

"What's your friend doing now?" asked Heather of Miss Marple with kindly interest.

Miss Marple paused a moment before answering.

"Alison Wilde? Oh—she died."

Three

I

"I'm glad to be back," said Mrs. Bantry. "Although, of course, I've had a wonderful time."

Miss Marple nodded appreciatively, and accepted a cup of tea from her friend's hand.

When her husband, Colonel Bantry, had died some years ago, Mrs. Bantry had sold Gossington Hall and the considerable amount of land attached to it, retaining for herself what had been the East Lodge, a charming porticoed little building replete with inconvenience, where even a gardener had refused to live. Mrs. Bantry had added to it the essentials of modern life, a built-on kitchen of the latest type, a new water supply from the main, electricity, and a bathroom. This had all cost her a great deal, but not nearly so much as an attempt to live at Gossington Hall would have done. She had also retained the essentials of privacy, about three quarters of an acre of garden nicely ringed with trees, so that, as she explained. "Whatever they do with Gossington I shan't really see it or worry."

For the last few years she had spent a good deal of the year travelling about, visiting children and grandchildren in various parts of the globe, and coming back from time to time to enjoy the privacies of her own home. Gossington Hall itself had changed hands once or twice. It had been run as a guest house, failed, and been bought by four people who had shared it as four roughly divided

flats and subsequently quarrelled. Finally the Ministry of Health had bought it for some obscure purpose for which they eventually did not want it. The Ministry had now resold it—and it was this sale which the two friends were discussing.

"I have heard rumours, of course," said Miss Marple.

"Naturally," said Mrs. Bantry. "It was even said that Charlie Chaplin and all his children were coming to live here. That would have been wonderful fun; unfortunately there isn't a word of truth in it. No, it's definitely Marina Gregg."

"How very lovely she was," said Miss Marple with a sigh. "I always remember those early films of hers. *Bird of Passage* with that handsome Joel Roberts. And the Mary, Queen of Scots film. And of course it was very sentimental, but I *did* enjoy *Comin' thru the Rye*. Oh dear, that was a long time ago."

"Yes," said Mrs. Bantry. "She must be—what do you think? Forty-five? Fifty?"

Miss Marple thought nearer fifty.

"Has she been in anything lately? Of course I don't go very often to the cinema nowadays."

"Only small parts, I think," said Mrs. Bantry. "She hasn't been a star for quite a long time. She had that bad nervous breakdown. After one of her divorces."

"Such a lot of husbands they all have," said Miss Marple. "It must really be quite tiring."

"It wouldn't suit *me*," said Mrs. Bantry. "After you've fallen in love with a man and married him and got used to his ways and settled down comfortably—to go and throw it all up and start again! It seems to me madness."

"I can't presume to speak," said Miss Marple with a little spinsterish cough, "never having married. But it seems, you know, a *pity*."

"I suppose they can't help it really," said Mrs. Bantry vaguely. "With the kind of lives they have to live. So public, you know. I met her," she added. "Marina Gregg, I mean, when I was in California."

"What was she like?" Miss Marple asked with interest.

"Charming," said Mrs. Bantry. "So natural and unspoiled." She added thoughtfully, "It's like a kind of livery really."

"What is?"

"Being unspoiled and natural. You learn how to do it, and then you have to go on being it all the time. Just think of the hell of it—never to be able to chuck something, and say, 'Oh, for the Lord's sake stop bothering me.' I dare say that in sheer self-defence you have to have drunken parties or orgies."

"She's had five husbands, hasn't she?" Miss Marple asked.

"At least. An early one that didn't count, and then a foreign Prince or Count, and then another film star, Robert Truscott, wasn't it? That was built up as a great romance. But it only lasted four years. And then Isidore Wright, the playwright. That was rather serious and quiet, and she had a baby—apparently she'd always longed to have a child—she's even half-adopted a few strays—anyway this was the real thing. Very much built up. Motherhood with a capital M. And then, I believe, it was an imbecile, or queer or something—and it was after that, that she had this breakdown and started to take drugs and all that, and threw up her parts."

"You seem to know a lot about her," said Miss Marple.

"Well, naturally," said Mrs. Bantry. "When she bought Gossington I was interested. She married the present man about two years ago, and they say she's quite all right again now. He's a producer—or do I mean a director? I always get mixed. He was in love with her when they were quite young, but he didn't amount to very much in those days. But now, I believe, he's got quite famous. What's his name now? Jason—Jason something—Jason Hudd, no Rudd, that's it. They've bought Gossington because it's handy for"—she hesitated—"Elstree?" she hazarded.

Miss Marple shook her head.

"I don't think so," she said. "Elstree's in North London."

"It's the fairly new studios. Hellingforth—that's it. Sounds so Finnish, I always think. About six miles from Market Basing. She's going to do a film on Elizabeth of Austria, I believe."

"What a lot you know," said Miss Marple. "About the private lives of film stars. Did you learn it all in California?"

"Not really," said Mrs. Bantry. "Actually I get it from the extraordinary magazines I read at my hairdresser's. Most of the stars I don't even know by name, but as I said because Marina Gregg and her husband have bought Gossington, I was interested. Really the things those magazines say! I don't suppose half of it is true—probably not a quarter. I *don't* believe Marina Gregg is a nymphomaniac, I *don't* think she drinks, probably she doesn't even take drugs, and quite likely she just went away to have a nice rest and didn't have a nervous breakdown at all!—but it's true that she is coming here to live."

"Next week, I heard," said Miss Marple.

"As soon as that? I know she's lending Gossington for a big fête on the twenty-third in aid of the St. John Ambulance Corps. I suppose they've done a lot to the house?"

"Practically everything," said Miss Marple. "Really it would have been much simpler, and probably cheaper, to have pulled it down and built a new house."

"Bathrooms, I suppose?"

"Six new ones, I hear. And a palm court. And a pool. And what I believe they call picture windows, and they've knocked your husband's study and the library into one to make a music room."

"Arthur will turn in his grave. You know how he hated music. Tone deaf, poor dear. His face, when some kind friend took us to the opera! He'll probably come back and haunt them." She stopped and then said abruptly, "Does anyone ever hint that Gossington might be haunted?"

Miss Marple shook her head.

"It isn't," she said with certainty.

"That wouldn't prevent people saying it was," Mrs. Bantry pointed out.

"Nobody ever has said so." Miss Marple paused and then said, "People aren't really foolish, you know. Not in villages."

Mrs. Bantry shot her a quick look. "You've always stuck to that, Jane. And I won't say that you're not right."

She suddenly smiled.

"Marina Gregg asked me, very sweetly and delicately, if I wouldn't find it very painful to see my old home occupied by strangers. I assured her that it wouldn't hurt me at all. I don't think she quite believed me. But after all, as you know, Jane, Gossington wasn't our home. We weren't brought up there as children—that's what really counts. It was just a house with a nice bit of shooting and fishing attached, that we bought when Arthur retired. We thought of it, I remember, as a house that would be nice and easy to run! How we can ever have thought that, I can't imagine! All those staircases and passages. Only four servants! *Only!* Those were the days, ha ha!" She added suddenly: "What's all this about your falling down? That Knight woman ought not to let you go out by yourself."

"It wasn't poor Miss Knight's fault. I gave her a lot of shopping to do and then I—"

"Deliberately gave her the slip? I see. Well, you shouldn't do it, Jane. Not at your age."

"How did you hear about it?"

Mrs. Bantry grinned.

"You can't keep any secrets in St. Mary Mead. You've often told me so. Mrs. Meavy told me."

"Mrs. Meavy?" Miss Marple looked at sea.

"She comes in daily. She's from the Development."

"Oh, the Development." The usual pause happened.

"What were you doing in the Development?" asked Mrs. Bantry, curiously.

"I just wanted to see it. To see what the people were like."

"And what did you think they were like?"

"Just the same as everyone else. I don't quite know if that was disappointing or reassuring."

"Disappointing, I should think."

"No. I think it's reassuring. It makes you—well—recognize certain types—so that when anything occurs—one will understand quite well why and for what reason."

"Murder, do you mean?"

Miss Marple looked shocked.

"I don't know why you should assume that I think of murder *all* the time."

"Nonsense, Jane. Why don't you come out boldly and call yourself a criminologist and have done with it?"

"Because I am nothing of the sort," said Miss Marple with spirit. "It is simply that I have a certain knowledge of human nature—that is only natural after having lived in a small village all my life."

"You probably have something there," said Mrs. Bantry thoughtfully, "though most people wouldn't agree, of course. Your nephew Raymond always used to say this place was a complete backwater."

"Dear Raymond," said Miss Marple indulgently. She added: "He's always been so kind. He's paying for Miss Knight, you know."

The thought of Miss Knight induced a new train of thought and she arose and said: "I'd better be going back now, I suppose."

"You didn't walk all the way here, did you?"

"Of course not. I came in Inch."

This somewhat enigmatic pronouncement was received with complete understanding. In days very long past, Mr. Inch had been the proprietor of two cabs, which met trains at the local station and which were also hired by the local ladies to take them "calling," out to tea parties, and occasionally, with their daughters, to such frivolous entertainments as dances. In the fulness of time Inch, a cheery red-faced man of seventy odd, gave place to his son—known as "young Inch" (he was then aged forty-five) though old Inch still continued to drive such elderly ladies as considered his son too young and irresponsible. To keep up with the times, young Inch abandoned horse vehicles for motor cars. He was not very good with machinery and in due course a certain Mr. Bardwell took over from him. The name Inch persisted. Mr. Bardwell in due course sold out to Mr. Roberts, but in the telephone book *Inch's Taxi Service* was still the official name, and the older ladies of the community continued to refer to their journeys as going somewhere "in Inch," as though they were Jonah and Inch was a whale.

II

"Dr. Haydock called," said Miss Knight reproachfully. "I told him you'd gone to tea with Mrs. Bantry. He said he'd call in again tomorrow."

She helped Miss Marple off with her wraps.

"And now, I expect, we're tired out," she said accusingly.

"*You* may be," said Miss Marple. "*I* am not."

"You come and sit cosy by the fire," said Miss Knight, as usual paying no attention. ("You don't need to take much notice of what the old dears say. I just humour them.") "And how would we fancy a nice cup of Ovaltine? Or Horlicks for a change?"

Miss Marple thanked her and said she would like a small glass of dry sherry. Miss Knight looked disapproving.

"I don't know what the doctor would say to that, I'm sure," she said, when she returned with the glass.

"We will make a point of asking him tomorrow morning," said Miss Marple.

On the following morning Miss Knight met Dr. Haydock in the hall, and did some agitated whispering.

The elderly doctor came into the room rubbing his hands, for it was a chilly morning.

"Here's our doctor to see us," said Miss Knight gaily. "Can I take your gloves, Doctor?"

"They'll be all right here," said Haydock, casting them carelessly on a table. "Quite a nippy morning."

"A little glass of sherry perhaps?" suggested Miss Marple.

"I heard you were taking to drink. Well, you should never drink alone."

The decanter and the glasses were already on a small table by Miss Marple. Miss Knight left the room.

Dr. Haydock was a very old friend. He had semiretired, but came to attend certain of his old patients.

"I hear you've been falling about," he said as he finished his glass. "It won't do, you know, not at your age. I'm warning you. And I hear you didn't want to send for Sandford."

Sandford was Haydock's partner.

"That Miss Knight of yours sent for him anyway—and she was quite right."

"I was only bruised and shaken a little. Dr. Sandford said so. I could have waited quite well until you were back."

"Now look here, my dear. I can't go on forever. And Sandford, let me tell you, has better qualifications than I have. He's a first class man."

"The young doctors are all the same," said Miss Marple. "They take your blood pressure, and whatever's the matter with you, you get some kind of mass produced variety of new pills. Pink ones, yellow ones, brown ones. Medicine nowadays is just like a supermarket—all packaged up."

"Serve you right if I prescribed leeches, and black draught, and rubbed your chest with camphorated oil."

"I do that myself when I've got a cough," said Miss Marple with spirit, "and very comforting it is."

"We don't like getting old, that's what it is," said Haydock gently. "I hate it."

"You're quite a young man compared to me," said Miss Marple. "And I don't really mind getting old—not that in itself. It's the lesser indignities."

"I think I know what you mean."

"Never being alone! The difficulty of getting out for a few minutes by oneself. And even my knitting—such a comfort that has always been, and I really am a good knitter. Now I drop stitches all the time—and quite often I don't even know I've dropped them."

Haydock looked at her thoughtfully.

Then his eyes twinkled.

"There's always the opposite."

"Now what do you mean by that?"

"If you can't knit, what about unravelling for a change? Penelope did."

"I'm hardly in her position."

"But unravelling's rather in your line, isn't it?"

He rose to his feet.

"I must be getting along. What I'd prescribe for you is a nice juicy murder."

"That's an outrageous thing to say!"

"Isn't it? However, you can always make do with the depth the parsley sank into the butter on a summer's day. I always wondered about that. Good old Holmes. A period piece, nowadays, I suppose. But he'll never be forgotten."

Miss Knight bustled in after the doctor had gone.

"There," she said, "we look *much* more cheerful. Did the doctor recommend a tonic?"

"He recommended me to take an interest in murder."

"A nice detective story?"

"No," said Miss Marple. "Real life."

"Goodness," exclaimed Miss Knight. "But there's not likely to be a murder in this quiet spot."

"Murders," said Miss Marple, "can happen anywhere. And do."

"At the Development, perhaps?" mused Miss Knight. "A lot of those Teddy-looking boys carry knives."

But the murder, when it came, was not at the Development.

Four

Mrs. Bantry stepped back a foot or two, surveyed herself in the glass, made a slight adjustment to her hat (she was not used to wearing hats), drew on a pair of good quality leather gloves and left the lodge, closing the door carefully behind her. She had the most pleasurable anticipations of what lay in front of her. Some three weeks had passed since her talk with Miss Marple. Marina Gregg and her husband had arrived at Gossington Hall and were now more or less installed there.

There was to be a meeting there this afternoon of the main persons involved in the arrangements for the fête in aid of the St. John Ambulance. Mrs. Bantry was not among those on the committee, but she had received a note from Marina Gregg asking her to come and have tea beforehand. It had recalled their meeting in California and had been signed, "Cordially, Marina Gregg." It had been handwritten, not typewritten. There is no denying that Mrs. Bantry was both pleased and flattered. After all, a celebrated film star is a celebrated film star and elderly ladies, though they may be of local importance, are aware of their complete unimportance in the world of celebrities. So Mrs. Bantry had the pleased feeling of a child for whom a special treat had been arranged.

As she walked up the drive Mrs. Bantry's keen eyes went from side to side registering her impressions. The place had been smartened up since the days when it had passed from hand to hand. "No expense spared," said Mrs. Bantry to herself, nodding in satisfaction. The drive afforded no view of the flower garden and for

that Mrs. Bantry was just as pleased. The flower garden and its special herbaceous border had been her own particular delight in the far-off days when she had lived at Gossington Hall. She permitted regretful and nostalgic memories of her irises. The best iris garden of any in the country, she told herself with a fierce pride.

Faced by a new front door in a blaze of new paint she pressed the bell. The door was opened with gratifying promptness by what was undeniably an Italian butler. She was ushered by him straight to the room which had been Colonel Bantry's library. This, as she had already heard, had been thrown into one with the study. The result was impressive. The walls were panelled, the floor was parquet. At one end was a grand piano and halfway along the wall was a superb record player. At the other end of the room was a small island, as it were, which comprised Persian rugs, a tea table and some chairs. By the tea table sat Marina Gregg, and leaning against the mantelpiece was what Mrs. Bantry at first thought to be the ugliest man she had ever seen.

Just a few moments previously when Mrs. Bantry's hand had been advanced to press the bell, Marina Gregg had been saying in a soft, enthusiastic voice, to her husband:

"This place is right for me, Jinks, just right. It's what I've always wanted. *Quiet*. English quiet and the English countryside. I can see myself living here, living here all my life if need be. And we'll adopt the English way of life. We'll have afternoon tea every afternoon with China tea and my lovely Georgian tea service. And we'll look out of the window on those lawns and that English herbaceous border. I've come *home* at last, that's what I feel. I feel that I can settle down here, that I can be quiet and happy. It's going to be home, this place. That's what I feel. *Home*."

And Jason Rudd (known to his wife as Jinks) had smiled at her. It was an acquiescent smile, indulgent, but it held its reserve because, after all, he had heard it very often before. Perhaps this time it would be true. Perhaps this *was* the place that Marina Gregg might feel at home. But he knew her early enthusiasms so well. She was always so sure that at last she had found exactly what she wanted. He said in his deep voice:

"That's grand, honey. That's just grand. I'm glad you like it."

"Like it? I adore it. Don't you adore it too?"

"Sure," said Jason Rudd. "Sure."

It wasn't too bad, he reflected to himself. Good, solidly built, rather ugly Victorian. It had, he admitted, a feeling of solidity and security. Now that the worst of its fantastic inconveniences had been ironed out, it would be quite reasonably comfortable to live in. Not a bad place to come back to from time to time. With luck, he thought, Marina wouldn't start taking a dislike to it for perhaps two years to two years and a half. It all depended.

Marina said, sighing softly:

"It's so wonderful to feel well again. Well and strong. Able to cope with things."

And he said again: "Sure, honey, sure."

And it was at that moment that the door opened and the Italian butler had ushered in Mrs. Bantry.

Marina Gregg's welcome was all that was charming. She came forward, hands outstretched, saying how delightful it was to meet Mrs. Bantry again. And what a coincidence that they should have met that time in San Francisco and that two years later she and Jinks should actually buy the house that had once belonged to Mrs. Bantry. And she did hope, she really did hope that Mrs. Bantry wouldn't mind terribly the way they'd pulled the house about and done things to it and she hoped she wouldn't feel that they were terrible intruders living here.

"Your coming to live here is one of the most exciting things that has ever happened to this place," said Mrs. Bantry cheerfully and she looked towards the mantelpiece. Whereupon, almost as an afterthought, Marina Gregg said:

"You don't know my husband, do you? Jason, this is Mrs. Bantry."

Mrs. Bantry looked at Jason Rudd with some interest. Her first impression that this was one of the ugliest men she had ever seen became qualified. He had interesting eyes. They were, she thought, more deeply sunk in his head than any eyes she had seen. Deep quiet pools, said Mrs. Bantry to herself, and felt like a romantic lady novelist. The rest of his face was distinctly craggy, almost ludicrously

out of proportion. His nose jutted upwards and a little red paint would have transformed it into the nose of a clown very easily. He had, too, a clown's big sad mouth. Whether he was at this moment in a furious temper or whether he always looked as though he were in a furious temper she did not quite know. His voice when he spoke was unexpectedly pleasant. Deep and slow.

"A husband," he said, "is always an afterthought. But let me say with my wife that we're very glad to welcome you here. I hope you don't feel that it ought to be the other way about."

"You must get it out of your head," said Mrs. Bantry, "that I've been driven forth from my old home. It never *was* my old home. I've been congratulating myself ever since I sold it. It was a most inconvenient house to run. I liked the garden but the house became more and more of a worry. I've had a perfectly splendid time ever since travelling abroad and going and seeing my married daughters and my grandchildren and my friends in all different parts of the world."

"Daughters," said Marina Gregg, "you have daughters and sons?"

"Two sons and two daughters," said Mrs. Bantry, "and pretty widely spaced. One in Kenya, one in South Africa. One near Texas and the other, thank goodness, in London."

"Four," said Marina Gregg. "Four—and grandchildren?"

"Nine up-to-date," said Mrs. Bantry. "It's great fun being a grandmother. You don't have any of the worry of parental responsibility. You can spoil them in the most unbridled way—"

Jason Rudd interrupted her. "I'm afraid the sun catches your eyes," he said, and went to a window to adjust the blind. "You must tell us all about this delightful village," he said as he came back.

He handed her a cup of tea.

"Will you have a hot scone or a sandwich, or this cake? We have an Italian cook and she makes quite good pastry and cakes. You see we have quite taken to your English afternoon tea."

"Delicious tea too," said Mrs. Bantry, sipping the fragrant beverage.

Marina Gregg smiled and looked pleased. The sudden nervous movement of her fingers which Jason Rudd's eyes had noticed a

minute or two previously, was stilled again. Mrs. Bantry looked at her hostess with great admiration. Marina Gregg's heyday had been before the rise to supreme importance of vital statistics. She could not have been described as Sex Incarnate, or "The Bust" or "The Torso." She had been long and slim and willowy. The bones of her face and head had had some of the beauty associated with those of Garbo. She had brought personality to her pictures rather than mere sex. The sudden turn of her head, the opening of the deep lovely eyes, the faint quiver of her mouth, all these were what brought to one suddenly that feeling of breathtaking loveliness that comes not from regularity of feature but from sudden magic of the flesh that catches the onlooker unawares. She still had this quality though it was not now so easily apparent. Like many film and stage actresses she had what seemed to be a habit of turning off personality at will. She could retire into herself, be quiet, gentle, aloof, disappointing to an eager fan. And then suddenly the turn of the head, the movement of the hands, the sudden smile and the magic was there.

One of her greatest pictures had been *Mary, Queen of Scots*, and it was of her performance in that picture that Mrs. Bantry was reminded now as she watched her. Mrs. Bantry's eye switched to the husband. He too was watching Marina. Off guard for a moment, his face expressed clearly his feelings. "Good Lord," said Mrs. Bantry to herself, "the man adores her."

She didn't know why she should feel so surprised. Perhaps because film stars and their love affairs and their devotion were so written up in the Press that one never expected to see the real thing with one's own eyes. On an impulse she said:

"I do hope you'll enjoy it here and that you'll be able to stay here some time. Do you expect to have the house for long?"

Marina opened wide surprised eyes as she turned her head. "I want to stay here always," she said. "Oh, I don't mean that I shan't have to go away a lot. I shall, of course. There's a possibility of making a film in North Africa next year although nothing's settled yet. No, but this will be my home. I shall come back here. I shall always be able to come back here." She sighed. "That's what's so wonderful. To have found a *home* at last."

"I see," said Mrs. Bantry, but at the same time she thought to herself, "All the same I don't believe for a moment that it *will* be like that. I don't believe you're the kind that can ever settle down."

Again she shot a quick surreptitious glance at Jason Rudd. He was not scowling now. Instead he was smiling, a sudden very sweet and unexpected smile, but it was a sad smile. "He knows it too," thought Mrs. Bantry.

The door opened and a woman came in. "Bartletts want you on the telephone, Jason," she said.

"Tell them to call back."

"They said it was urgent."

He sighed and rose. "Let me introduce you to Mrs. Bantry," he said. "Ella Zielinsky, my secretary."

"Have a cup of tea, Ella," said Marina as Ella Zielinsky acknowledged the introduction with a smiling "Pleased to meet you."

"I'll have a sandwich," said Ella. "I don't go for China tea."

Ella Zielinsky was at a guess thirty-five. She wore a well cut suit, a ruffled blouse and appeared to breathe self-confidence. She had short-cut black hair and a wide forehead.

"You used to live here, so they tell me," she said to Mrs. Bantry.

"It's a good many years ago now," said Mrs. Bantry. "After my husband's death I sold it and it's passed through several hands since then."

"Mrs. Bantry really says she doesn't hate the things we've done to it," said Marina.

"I should be frightfully disappointed if you hadn't," said Mrs. Bantry. "I came up here all agog. I can tell you the most splendid rumours have been going around the village."

"Never knew how difficult it was to get hold of plumbers in this country," said Miss Zielinsky, champing a sandwich in a businesslike way. "Not that that's been really my job," she went on.

"Everything is your job," said Marina, "and you know it is, Ella. The domestic staff and the plumbing and arguing with the builders."

"They don't seem ever to have heard of a picture window in this country."

Ella looked towards the window. "It's a nice view, I must admit."

"A lovely old-fashioned rural English scene," said Marina. "This house has got *atmosphere*."

"It wouldn't look so rural if it wasn't for the trees," said Ella Zielinsky. "That housing estate down there grows while you look at it."

"That's new since my time," said Mrs. Bantry.

"You mean there was nothing but the village when you lived here?"

Mrs. Bantry nodded.

"It must have been hard to do your shopping."

"I don't think so," said Mrs. Bantry. "I think it was frightfully easy."

"I understand having a flower garden," said Ella Zielinsky, "but you folk over here seem to grow all your vegetables as well. Wouldn't it be much easier to buy them—there's a supermarket?"

"It's probably coming to that," said Mrs. Bantry, with a sigh. "They don't taste the same, though."

"Don't spoil the atmosphere, Ella," said Marina.

The door opened and Jason looked in. "Darling," he said to Marina, "I hate to bother you but would you mind? They just want your private view about this."

Marina sighed and rose. She trailed languidly towards the door. "Always something," she murmured. "I'm so sorry, Mrs. Bantry. I don't really think that this will take longer than a minute or two."

"Atmosphere," said Ella Zielinsky, as Marina went out and closed the door. "Do you think the house has got atmosphere?"

"I can't say I ever thought of it that way," said Mrs. Bantry. "It was just a house. Rather inconvenient in some ways and very nice and cosy in other ways."

"That's what I should have thought," said Ella Zielinsky. She cast a quick direct look at Mrs. Bantry. "Talking of atmosphere, when did the murder take place here?"

"No murder ever took place here," said Mrs. Bantry.

"Oh come now. The stories I've heard. There are always stories, Mrs. Bantry. On the hearthrug, right there, wasn't it?" said Miss Zielinsky nodding towards the fireplace.

"Yes," said Mrs. Bantry. "That was the place."

"So there *was* a murder?"

Mrs. Bantry shook her head. "The murder didn't take place here. The girl who had been killed was brought here and planted in this room. She'd nothing to do with us."

Miss Zielinsky looked interested.

"Possibly you had a bit of difficulty making people believe that?" she remarked.

"You're quite right there," said Mrs. Bantry.

"When did you find it?"

"The housemaid came in in the morning," said Mrs. Bantry, "with early morning tea. We had housemaids then, you know."

"I know," said Miss Zielinsky, "wearing print dresses that rustled."

"I'm not sure about the print dress," said Mrs. Bantry, "it may have been overalls by then. At any rate, she burst in and said there was a body in the library. I said 'nonsense,' then I woke up my husband and we came down to see."

"And there it was," said Miss Zielinsky. "My, the way things happen." She turned her head sharply towards the door and then back again. "Don't talk about it to Miss Gregg, if you don't mind," she said. "It's not good for her, that sort of thing."

"Of course. I won't say a word," said Mrs. Bantry. "I never do talk about it, as a matter of fact. It all happened so long ago. But won't she—Miss Gregg I mean—won't she hear it anyway?"

"She doesn't come very much in contact with reality," said Ella Zielinsky. "Film stars can lead a fairly insulated life, you know. In fact very often one has to take care that they do. Things upset them. Things upset *her*. She's been seriously ill the last year or two, you know. She only started making a comeback a year ago."

"She seems to like the house," said Mrs. Bantry, "and to feel she will be happy here."

"I expect it'll last a year or two," said Ella Zielinsky.

"Not longer than that?"

"Well, I rather doubt it. Marina is one of those people, you know, who are always thinking they've found their heart's desire. But life isn't as easy as that, is it?"

"No," said Mrs. Bantry forcefully, "it isn't."

"It'll mean a lot to him if she's happy here," said Miss Zielinsky. She ate two more sandwiches in an absorbed, rather gobbling fashion in the manner of one who crams food into themselves as though they had an important train to catch. "He's a genius, you know," she went on. "Have you seen any of the pictures he's directed?"

Mrs. Bantry felt slightly embarrassed. She was of the type of woman who when she went to the cinema went entirely for the picture. The long lists of casts, directors, producers, photography and the rest of it passed her by. Very frequently, indeed, she did not even notice the names of the stars. She was not, however, anxious to call attention to this failing on her part.

"I get mixed-up," she said.

"Of course he's got a lot to contend with," said Ella Zielinsky. "He's got her as well as everything else and she's not easy. You've got to keep her happy, you see; and it's not really easy, I suppose, to keep people happy. Unless—that is—they—they are—" she hesitated.

"Unless they're the happy kind," suggested Mrs. Bantry. "Some people," she added thoughtfully, "enjoy being miserable."

"Oh, Marina isn't like that," said Ella Zielinsky, shaking her head. "It's more that her ups and downs are so violent. You know—far too happy one moment, far too pleased with everything and delighted with everything and how wonderful she feels. Then of course some little thing happens and down she goes to the opposite extreme."

"I suppose that's temperament," said Mrs. Bantry vaguely.

"That's right," said Ella Zielinsky. "Temperament. They've all got it, more or less, but Marina Gregg has got it more than most people. Don't we know it! The stories I could tell you!" She ate the last sandwich. "Thank God I'm only the social secretary."

Five

The throwing open of the grounds of Gossington Hall for the benefit of the St. John Ambulance Association was attended by a quite unprecedented number of people. Shilling admission fees mounted up in a highly satisfactory fashion. For one thing, the weather was good, a clear sunny day. But the preponderant attraction was undoubtedly the enormous local curiosity to know exactly what these "film people" had done to Gossington Hall. The most extravagant assumptions were entertained. The swimming pool in particular caused immense satisfaction. Most people's ideas of Hollywood stars were of sunbathing by a pool in exotic surroundings and in exotic company. That the climate of Hollywood might be more suited to swimming pools than that of St. Mary Mead failed to be considered. After all, England always has one fine hot week in the summer and there is always one day that the Sunday papers publish articles on How to Keep Cool, How to Have Cool Suppers and How to Make Cool Drinks. The pool was almost exactly what everyone had imagined it might be. It was large, its waters were blue, it had a kind of exotic pavilion for changing and was surrounded with a highly artificial plantation of hedges and shrubs. The reactions of the multitude were exactly as might have been expected and hovered over a wide range of remarks.

"O-oh, isn't it lovely!"

"Two penn'orth of splash here, all right!"

"Reminds me of that holiday camp I went to."

"Wicked luxury *I* call it. It oughtn't to be allowed."

"Look at all that fancy marble. It must have cost the earth!"

"Don't see why these people think they can come over here and spend all the money they like."

"Perhaps this'll be on the telly sometime. That'll be fun."

Even Mr. Sampson, the oldest man in St. Mary Mead, boasting proudly of being ninety-six though his relations insisted firmly that he was only eighty-six, had staggered along supporting his rheumatic legs with a stick, to see this excitement. He gave it his highest praise: "Ah, there'll be a lot of wickedness here, I don't doubt. Naked men and women drinking and smoking what they call in the papers them reefers. There'll be all that, I expect. Ah yes," said Mr. Sampson with enormous pleasure, "there'll be a lot of wickedness."

It was felt that the final seal of approval had been set on the afternoon's entertainment. For an extra shilling people were allowed to go into the house, and study the new music room, the drawing room, the completely unrecognizable dining room, now done in dark oak and Spanish leather, and a few other joys.

"Never think this was Gossington Hall, would you, now?" said Mr. Sampson's daughter-in-law.

Mrs. Bantry strolled up fairly late and observed with pleasure that the money was coming in well and that the attendance was phenomenal.

The large marquee in which tea was being served was jammed with people. Mrs. Bantry hoped the buns were going to go round. There seemed some very competent women, however, in charge. She herself made a beeline for the herbaceous border and regarded it with a jealous eye. No expense had been spared on the herbaceous border, she was glad to note, and it was a proper herbaceous border, well planned and arranged and expensively stocked. No personal labours had gone into it, she was sure of that. Some good gardening firm had been given the contract, no doubt. But aided by *carte blanche* and the weather, they had turned out a very good job.

Looking round her, she felt there was a faint flavour of a Buckingham Palace garden party about the scene. Everybody was craning to see all they could see, and from time to time a chosen

few were led into one of the more secret recesses of the house. She herself was presently approached by a willowy young man with long wavy hair.

"Mrs. Bantry? You *are* Mrs. Bantry?"

"I'm Mrs. Bantry, yes."

"Hailey Preston." He shook hands with her. "I work for Mr. Rudd. Will you come up to the second floor? Mr. and Mrs. Rudd are asking a few special friends up there."

Duly honoured Mrs. Bantry followed him. They went in through what had been called in her time the garden door. A red cord cordoned off the bottom of the main stairs. Hailey Preston unhooked it and she passed through. Just in front of her Mrs. Bantry observed Councillor and Mrs. Allcock. The latter who was stout was breathing heavily.

"Wonderful what they've done, isn't it, Mrs. Bantry?" panted Mrs. Allcock. "I'd like to have a look at the bathrooms, I must say, but I suppose I shan't get the chance." Her voice was wistful.

At the top of the stairs Marina Gregg and Jason Rudd were receiving this specially chosen élite. What had once been a spare bedroom had been thrown into the landing so as to make a wide lounge-like effect. Giuseppe the butler was officiating with drinks.

A stout man in livery was announcing guests.

"Councillor and Mrs. Allcock," he boomed.

Marina Gregg was being, as Mrs. Bantry had described her to Miss Marple, completely natural and charming. She could already hear Mrs. Allcock saying later: "—and so *unspoiled*, you know, in spite of being so famous."

How very nice of Mrs. Allcock to come, *and* the Councillor, and she did hope they'd enjoy their afternoon. "Jason please look after Mrs. Allcock."

Councillor and Mrs. Allcock were passed on to Jason and drinks.

"Oh, Mrs. Bantry, it *is* nice of you to come."

"I wouldn't have *missed* it for the world," said Mrs. Bantry and moved on purposefully towards the Martinis.

The young man called Hailey Preston ministered to her in a tender manner and then made off, consulting a little list in his hand,

to fetch, no doubt, more of the Chosen to the Presence. It was all being managed very well, Mrs. Bantry thought, turning, Martini in hand, to watch the next arrivals. The vicar, a lean, ascetic man, was looking vague and slightly bewildered. He said earnestly to Marina Gregg:

"Very nice of you to ask me. I'm afraid, you know, I haven't got a television set myself, but of course I—er—I—well, of course my young people keep me up to the mark."

Nobody knew what he meant. Miss Zielinsky, who was also on duty, administered a lemonade to him with a kindly smile. Mr. and Mrs. Badcock were next up the stairs. Heather Badcock, flushed and triumphant, came a little ahead of her husband.

"Mr. and Mrs. Badcock," boomed the man in livery.

"Mrs. Badcock," said the vicar, turning back, lemonade in his hand, "the indefatigable secretary of the association. She's one of our hardest workers. In fact I don't know what the St. John would do without her."

"I'm sure you've been wonderful," said Marina.

"You don't remember me?" said Heather, in an arch manner. "How should you, with all the hundreds of people you meet. And anyway, it was years ago. In Bermuda of all places in the world. I was there with one of our ambulance units. Oh, it's a long time ago now."

"Of course," said Marina Gregg, once more all charm and smiles.

"I remember it all so well," said Mrs. Badcock. "I was thrilled, you know, absolutely thrilled. I was only a girl at the time. To think there was a chance of seeing Marina Gregg in the flesh—oh! I was a mad fan of yours always."

"It's too kind of you, really too kind of you," said Marina sweetly, her eyes beginning to hover faintly over Heather's shoulder towards the next arrivals.

"I'm not going to detain you," said Heather—"but I must—"

"Poor Marina Gregg," said Mrs. Bantry to herself. "I suppose this kind of thing is always happening to her! The patience they need!"

Heather was continuing in a determined manner with her story.

Mrs. Allcock breathed heavily at Mrs. Bantry's shoulder.

"The changes they've made here! You wouldn't believe till you saw for yourself. What it must have *cost*..."

"I—didn't feel really ill—and I thought I just must—"

"This is vodka," Mrs. Allcock regarded her glass suspiciously. "Mr. Rudd asked if I'd like to try it. Sounds very Russian. I don't think I like it very much...."

"—I said to myself: I won't be beaten! I put a lot of makeup on my face—"

"I suppose it would be rude if I just put it down somewhere." Mrs. Allcock sounded desperate.

Mrs. Bantry reassured her gently.

"Not at all. Vodka ought really to be thrown straight down the throat"—Mrs. Allcock looked startled—"but that needs practice. Put it down on the table and get yourself a Martini from that tray the butler's carrying."

She turned back to hear Heather Badcock's triumphant peroration.

"I've never forgotten how wonderful you were that day. It was a hundred times worth it."

Marina's response was this time not so automatic. Her eyes which had wavered over Heather Badcock's shoulder, now seemed to be fixed on the wall midway up the stairs. She was staring and there was something so ghastly in her expression that Mrs. Bantry half took a step forward. Was the woman going to faint? What on earth could she be seeing that gave her that basilisk look? But before she could reach Marina's side the latter had recovered herself. Her eyes, vague and unfocussed, returned to Heather and the charm of manner was turned on once more, albeit a shade mechanically.

"What a nice little story. Now, what will you have to drink? Jason! A cocktail?"

"Well, really I usually have a lemonade or orange juice."

"You must have something better than that," said Marina. "This is a feast day, remember."

"Let me persuade you to an American daiquiri," said Jason, appearing with a couple in his hand. "They're Marina's favourites, too."

He handed one to his wife.

"I shouldn't drink anymore," said Marina, "I've had three already." But she accepted the glass.

Heather took her drink from Jason. Marina turned away to meet the next person who was arriving.

Mrs. Bantry said to Mrs. Allcock, "Let's go and see the bathrooms."

"Oh, do you think we can? Wouldn't it look rather rude?"

"I'm sure it wouldn't," said Mrs. Bantry. She spoke to Jason Rudd. "We want to explore your wonderful new bathrooms, Mr. Rudd. May we satisfy this purely domestic curiosity?"

"Sure," said Jason, grinning. "Go and enjoy yourselves, girls. Draw yourselves baths if you like."

Mrs. Allcock followed Mrs. Bantry along the passage.

"That was ever so kind of you, Mrs. Bantry. I must say I wouldn't have dared myself."

"One has to dare if one wants to get anywhere," said Mrs. Bantry.

They went along the passage, opening various doors. Presently "Ahs" and "Ohs" began to escape Mrs. Allcock and two other women who had joined the party.

"I do like the pink one," said Mrs. Allcock. "Oh, I like the pink one a lot."

"I like the one with the dolphin tiles," said one of the other women.

Mrs. Bantry acted the part of hostess with complete enjoyment. For a moment she had really forgotten that the house no longer belonged to her.

"All those showers!" said Mrs. Allcock with awe. "Not that I really *like* showers. I never know how you keep your head dry."

"It'd be nice to have a peep into the bedrooms," said one of the other women, wistfully, "but I suppose it'd be a bit *too* nosy. What do *you* think?"

"Oh, I don't think we could do *that*," said Mrs. Allcock. They both looked hopefully at Mrs. Bantry.

"Well," said Mrs. Bantry, "no, I suppose we oughtn't to—" then she took pity on them, "but—I don't think anyone would know if we

have one peep." She put her hand on a door handle.

But that had been attended to. The bedrooms were locked. Everyone was very disappointed.

"I suppose they've got to have some privacy," said Mrs. Bantry kindly.

They retraced their steps along the corridors. Mrs. Bantry looked out of one of the landing windows. She noted below her Mrs. Meavy (from the Development) looking incredibly smart in a ruffled organdie dress. With Mrs. Meavy, she noticed, was Miss Marple's Cherry, whose last name for the moment Mrs. Bantry could not remember. They seemed to be enjoying themselves and were laughing and talking.

Suddenly the house felt to Mrs. Bantry old, worn-out and highly artificial. In spite of its new gleaming paint, its alterations, it was in essence a tired old Victorian mansion. "I was wise to go," thought Mrs. Bantry. "Houses are like everything else. There comes a time when they've just had their day. This has had its day. It's been given a face-lift, but I don't really think it's done it any good."

Suddenly a slight rise in the hum of voices reached her. The two women with her started forward.

"What's happening?" said one. "It sounds as though something's happening."

They stepped back along the corridor towards the stairs. Ella Zielinsky came rapidly along and passed them. She tried a bedroom door and said quickly, "Oh, damn. Of course they've locked them all."

"Is anything the matter?" asked Mrs. Bantry.

"Someone's taken ill," said Miss Zielinsky shortly.

"Oh dear, I'm sorry. Can I do anything?"

"I suppose there's a doctor here somewhere?"

"I haven't seen any of our local doctors," said Mrs. Bantry, "but there's almost sure to be one here."

"Jason's telephoning," said Ella Zielinsky, "but she seems pretty bad."

"Who is it?" asked Mrs. Bantry.

"A Mrs. Badcock, I think."

"Heather Badcock? But she looked so well just now."

Ella Zielinsky said impatiently, "She's had a seizure, or a fit, or something. Do you know if there's anything wrong with her heart or anything like that?"

"I don't really know anything about her," said Mrs. Bantry. "She's new since my day. She comes from the Development."

"The Development? Oh, you mean that housing estate. I don't even know where her husband is or what he looks like."

"Middle-aged, fair, unobtrusive," said Mrs. Bantry. "He came with her so he must be about somewhere."

Ella Zielinsky went into a bathroom. "I don't know really what to give her," she said. "Sal volatile, do you think, something like that?"

"Is she faint?" said Mrs. Bantry.

"It's more than that," said Ella Zielinsky.

"I'll see if there's anything I can do," said Mrs. Bantry. She turned away and walked rapidly back towards the head of the stairs. Turning a corner she cannoned into Jason Rudd.

"Have you seen Ella?" he said. "Ella Zielinsky?"

"She went along there into one of the bathrooms. She was looking for something. Sal volatile—something like that."

"She needn't bother," said Jason Rudd.

Something in his tone struck Mrs. Bantry. She looked up sharply. "Is it bad?" she said, "really bad?"

"You could call it that," said Jason Rudd. "The poor woman's dead."

"Dead!" Mrs. Bantry was really shocked. She said, as she had said before, "But she looked so well just now."

"I know. I know," said Jason. He stood there, scowling. "What a thing to happen!"

Six

I

"Here we are," said Miss Knight, settling a breakfast tray on the bed table beside Miss Marple. "And how are we this morning? I see we've got our curtains pulled back," she added with a slight note of disapproval in her voice.

"I wake early," said Miss Marple. "You probably will, when you're my age," she added.

"Mrs. Bantry rang up," said Miss Knight, "about half an hour ago. She wanted to talk to you but I said she'd better ring up again after you'd had your breakfast. I wasn't going to disturb you at that hour, before you'd even had a cup of tea or anything to eat."

"When my friends ring up," said Miss Marple, "I prefer to be told."

"I'm sorry, I'm sure," said Miss Knight, "but it seemed to me very inconsiderate. When you've had your nice tea and your boiled egg and your toast and butter, we'll see."

"Half an hour ago," said Miss Marple, thoughtfully, "that would have been—let me see—eight o'clock."

"Much too early," reiterated Miss Knight.

"I don't believe Mrs. Bantry would have rung me up then unless it was for some particular reason," said Miss Marple thoughtfully. "She doesn't usually ring up in the early morning."

"Oh well, dear, don't fuss your head about it," said Miss Knight soothingly. "I expect she'll be ringing up again very shortly. Or would you like me to get her for you?"

"No, thank you," said Miss Marple. "I prefer to eat my breakfast while it's hot."

"Hope I haven't forgotten anything," said Miss Knight, cheerfully.

But nothing had been forgotten. The tea had been properly made with boiling water, the egg had been boiled exactly three and three-quarter minutes, the toast was evenly browned, the butter was arranged in a nice little pat and the small jar of honey stood beside it. In many ways undeniably Miss Knight was a treasure. Miss Marple ate her breakfast and enjoyed it. Presently the whirr of a vacuum cleaner began below. Cherry had arrived.

Competing with the whirr of the vacuum cleaner was a fresh tuneful voice singing one of the latest popular tunes of the day. Miss Knight, coming in for the breakfast tray, shook her head.

"I really wish that young woman wouldn't go singing all over the house," she said. "It's not what I call respectful."

Miss Marple smiled a little. "It would never enter Cherry's head that she would have to be respectful," she remarked. "Why should she?"

Miss Knight sniffed and said, "Very different to what things used to be."

"Naturally," said Miss Marple. "Times change. That is a thing which has to be accepted." She added, "Perhaps you'll ring up Mrs. Bantry now and find out what it was she wanted."

Miss Knight bustled away. A minute or two later there was a rap on the door and Cherry entered. She was looking bright and excited and extremely pretty. A plastic overall rakishly patterned with sailors and naval emblems was tied round her dark blue dress.

"Your hair looks nice," said Miss Marple.

"Went for a perm yesterday," said Cherry. "A bit stiff still, but it's going to be all right. I came up to see if you'd heard the news."

"What news?" said Miss Marple.

"About what happened at Gossington Hall yesterday. You know there was a big do there for the St. John Ambulance?"

Miss Marple nodded. "What happened?" she asked.

"Somebody died in the middle of it. A Mrs. Badcock. Lives round the corner from us. I don't suppose you'd know her."

"Mrs. Badcock?" Miss Marple sounded alert. "But I do know her. I think—yes, that was the name—she came out and picked me up when I fell down the other day. She was very kind."

"Oh, Heather Badcock's kind all right," said Cherry. "Overkind, some people say. They call it interfering. Well, anyway, she up and died. Just like that."

"Died! But what of?"

"Search me," said Cherry. "She'd been taken into the house because of her being the secretary of the St. John Ambulance, I suppose. She and the mayor and a lot of others. As far as I heard, she had a glass of something and about five minutes later she was took bad and died before you could snap your fingers."

"What a shocking occurrence," said Miss Marple. "Did she suffer from heart trouble?"

"Sound as a bell, so they say," Cherry said. "Of course, you never know, do you? I suppose you can have something wrong with your heart and nobody knowing about it. Anyway, I can tell you this. They've not sent her home."

Miss Marple looked puzzled. "What do you mean, not sent her home?"

"The body," said Cherry, her cheerfulness unimpaired. "The doctor said there'd have to be an autopsy. Postmortem—whatever you call it. He said he hadn't attended her for anything and there was nothing to show the cause of death. Looks funny to me," she added.

"Now what do you mean by funny?" said Miss Marple.

"Well." Cherry considered. "Funny. As though there was something behind it."

"Is her husband terribly upset?"

"Looks as white as a sheet. Never saw a man as badly hit, to look at—that is to say."

Miss Marple's ears, long attuned to delicate nuances, led her to cock her head slightly on one side like an inquisitive bird.

"Was he so very devoted to her?"

"He did what she told him and gave her her own way," said Cherry, "but that doesn't always mean you're devoted, does it? It may mean you haven't got the courage to stick up for yourself."

"You didn't like her?" asked Miss Marple.

"I hardly know her really," said Cherry. "Knew her, I mean. I don't—didn't—dislike her. But she's just not my type. Too interfering."

"You mean inquisitive, nosy?"

"No, I don't," said Cherry. "I don't mean that at all. She was a very kind woman and she was always doing things for people. And she was always quite sure she knew the best thing to do. What they thought about it wouldn't have mattered. I had an aunt like that. Very fond of seed cake herself and she used to bake seed cakes for people and take them to them, and she never troubled to find out whether they liked seed cake or not. There are people can't bear it, just can't stand the flavour of caraway. Well, Heather Badcock was a bit like that."

"Yes," said Miss Marple thoughtfully, "yes, she would have been. I knew someone a little like that. Such people," she added, "live dangerously—though they don't know it themselves."

Cherry stared at her. "That's a funny thing to say. I don't quite get what you mean."

Miss Knight bustled in. "Mrs. Bantry seems to have gone out," she said. "She didn't say where she was going."

"I can guess where she's going," said Miss Marple. "She's coming here. I shall get up now," she added.

II

Miss Marple had just ensconced herself in her favourite chair by the window when Mrs. Bantry arrived. She was slightly out of breath.

"I've got plenty to tell you, Jane," she said.

"About the fête?" asked Miss Knight. "You went to the fête yesterday, didn't you? I was there myself for a short time early in the afternoon. The tea tent was very crowded. An astonishing lot of people seemed to be there. I didn't catch a glimpse of Marina Gregg, though, which was rather disappointing."

She flicked a little dust off a table and said brightly, "Now I'm sure you two want to have a nice little chat together," and went out of the

room.

"She doesn't seem to know anything about it," said Mrs. Bantry. She fixed her friend with a keen glance. "Jane, I believe you *do* know."

"You mean about the death yesterday?"

"You always know everything," said Mrs. Bantry. "I cannot think how."

"Well, really dear," said Miss Marple, "in the same way one always has known everything. My daily helper, Cherry Baker, brought the news. I expect the butcher will be telling Miss Knight presently."

"And what do you think of it?" said Mrs. Bantry.

"What do I think of what?" said Miss Marple.

"Now don't be aggravating, Jane, you know perfectly what I mean. There's this woman—whatever her name is—"

"Heather Badcock," said Miss Marple.

"She arrives full of life and spirit. I was there when she came. And about a quarter of an hour later she sits down in a chair, says she doesn't feel well, gasps a bit and dies. What do you think of *that*?"

"One mustn't jump to conclusions," said Miss Marple. "The point is, of course, what did a medical man think of it?"

Mrs. Bantry nodded. "There's to be an inquest and a postmortem," she said. "That shows what they think of it, doesn't it?"

"Not necessarily," said Miss Marple. "Anyone may be taken ill and die suddenly and they have to have a postmortem to find out the cause."

"It's more than that," said Mrs. Bantry.

"How do you know?" said Miss Marple.

"Dr. Sandford went home and rang up the police."

"Who told you that?" said Miss Marple, with great interest.

"Old Briggs," said Mrs. Bantry. "At least, he didn't tell me. You know he goes down after hours in the evening to see to Dr. Sandford's garden, and he was clipping something quite close to the study and he heard the doctor ringing up the police station in Much

Benham. Briggs told his daughter and his daughter mentioned it to the postwoman and she told me," said Mrs. Bantry.

Miss Marple smiled. "I see," she said, "that St. Mary Mead has not changed very much from what it used to be."

"The grapevine is much the same," agreed Mrs. Bantry. "Well, now, Jane, tell me what you think."

"One thinks, of course, of the husband," said Miss Marple reflectively. "Was he there?"

"Yes, he was there. You don't think it would be suicide," said Mrs. Bantry.

"Certainly not suicide," said Miss Marple decisively. "She wasn't the type."

"How did you come across her, Jane?"

"It was the day I went for a walk to the Development, and fell down near her house. She was kindness itself. She was a very kind woman."

"Did you see the husband? Did he look as though he'd like to poison her?"

"You know what I mean," Mrs. Bantry went on as Miss Marple showed some slight signs of protesting. "Did he remind you of Major Smith or Bertie Jones or someone you've known years ago who did poison a wife, or tried to?"

"No," said Miss Marple, "he didn't remind me of anyone I know." She added, "But she did."

"Who—Mrs. Badcock?"

"Yes," said Miss Marple, "she reminded me of someone called Alison Wilde."

"And what was Alison Wilde like?"

"She didn't know at all," said Miss Marple slowly, "what the world was like. She didn't know what people were like. She'd never thought about them. And so, you see, she couldn't guard against things happening to her."

"I don't really think I understand a word of what you're saying," said Mrs. Bantry.

"It's very difficult to explain exactly," said Miss Marple, apologetically. "It comes really from being self-centred, and I don't

mean selfish by that," she added. "You can be kind and unselfish and even thoughtful. But if you're like Alison Wilde, you never really know what you may be doing. And so you never know what may happen to you."

"Can't you make that a little clearer?" said Mrs. Bantry.

"Well, I suppose I could give you a sort of figurative example. This isn't anything that actually happened, it's just something I'm inventing."

"Go on," said Mrs. Bantry.

"Well, supposing you went into a shop, say, and you knew the proprietress had a son who was the spivvy young juvenile delinquent type. He was there listening while you told his mother about some money you had in the house, or some silver or a piece of jewellery. It was something you were excited and pleased about and you wanted to talk about it. And you also perhaps mention an evening that you were going out. You even say that you never lock the house. You're interested in what you're saying, what you're telling her, because it's so very much in your mind. And then, say, on that particular evening you come home because you've forgotten something and there's this bad lot of a boy in the house, caught in the act, and he turns round and coshes you."

"That might happen to almost anybody nowadays," said Mrs. Bantry.

"Not quite," said Miss Marple, "most people have a sense of protection. They realise when it's unwise to say or do something because of the person or persons who are taking in what you say, and because of the kind of character that those people have. But as I say, Alison Wilde never thought of anybody else but herself— She was the sort of person who tells you what they've done and what they've seen and what they've felt and what they've heard. They never mention what any other people said or did. Life is a kind of one-way track—just their own progress through it. Other people seem to them just like—like wallpaper in a room." She paused and then said, "I think Heather Badcock was that kind of person."

Mrs. Bantry said, "You think she was the sort of person who might have butted into something without knowing what she was

doing?"

"And without realising that it was a dangerous thing to do," said Miss Marple. She added, "It's the only reason I can possibly think of why she should have been killed. If of course," added Miss Marple, "we are right in assuming that murder *has* been committed."

"You don't think she was blackmailing someone?" Mrs. Bantry suggested.

"Oh, no," Miss Marple assured her. "She was a kind, good woman. She'd never have done anything of *that* kind." She added vexedly, "The whole thing seems to me very unlikely. I suppose it can't have been—"

"Well?" Mrs. Bantry urged her.

"I just wondered if it might have been the wrong murder," said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

The door opened and Dr. Haydock breezed in, Miss Knight twittering behind him.

"Ah, at it already, I see," said Dr. Haydock, looking at the two ladies. "I came in to see how your health was," he said to Miss Marple, "but I needn't ask. I see you've begun to adopt the treatment that I suggested."

"Treatment, Doctor?"

Dr. Haydock pointed a finger at the knitting that lay on the table beside her. "Unravelling," he said. "I'm right, aren't I?"

Miss Marple twinkled very slightly in a discreet, old-fashioned kind of way.

"You will have your joke, Doctor Haydock," she said.

"You can't pull the wool over my eyes, my dear lady. I've known you too many years. Sudden death at Gossington Hall and all the tongues of St. Mary Mead are wagging. Isn't that so? Murder suggested long before anybody even knows the result of the inquest."

"When is the inquest to be held?" asked Miss Marple.

"The day after tomorrow," said Dr. Haydock, "and by that time," he said, "you ladies will have reviewed the whole story, decided on the verdict and decided on a good many other points too, I expect. Well," he added, "I shan't waste my time here. It's no good wasting

time on a patient that doesn't need my ministrations. Your cheeks are pink, your eyes are bright, you've begun to enjoy yourself. Nothing like having an interest in life. I'll be on my way." He stomped out again.

"I'd rather have him than Sandford any day," said Mrs. Bantry.

"So would I," said Miss Marple. "He's a good friend, too," she added thoughtfully. "He came, I think, to give me the go-ahead sign."

"Then it *was* murder," said Mrs. Bantry. They looked at each other. "At any rate, the doctors think so."

Miss Knight brought in cups of coffee. For once in their lives, both ladies were too impatient to welcome this interruption. When Miss Knight had gone Miss Marple started immediately.

"Now then, Dolly, you were there—"

"I practically saw it happen," said Mrs. Bantry, with modest pride.

"Splendid," said Miss Marple. "I mean—well, you know what I mean. So you can tell me just exactly what happened from the moment she arrived."

"I'd been taken into the house," said Mrs. Bantry. "Snob status."

"Who took you in?"

"Oh, a willowy-looking young man. I think he's Marina Gregg's secretary or something like that. He took me in, up the staircase. They were having a kind of reunion reception committee at the top of the stairs."

"On the landing?" said Miss Marple, surprised.

"Oh, they've altered all that. They've knocked the dressing room and bedroom down so that you've got a big sort of alcove, practically a room. It's very attractive looking."

"I see. And who was there?"

"Marina Gregg, being natural and charming, looking lovely in a sort of willowy grey-green dress. And the husband, of course, and that woman Ella Zielinsky I told you about. She's their social secretary. And there were about—oh, eight or ten people I should think. Some of them I knew, some of them I didn't. Some I think were from the studios—the ones I didn't know. There was the vicar and Doctor Sandford's wife. He wasn't there himself until later, and

Colonel and Mrs. Clittering and the High Sheriff. And I think there was someone from the press there. And a young woman with a big camera taking photographs."

Miss Marple nodded.

"Go on."

"Heather Badcock and her husband arrived just after me. Marina Gregg said nice things to me, then to somebody else, oh yes,—the vicar—and then Heather Badcock and her husband came. She's the secretary, you know, of the St. John Ambulance. Somebody said something about that and how hard she worked and how valuable she was. And Marina Gregg said some pretty things. Then Mrs. Badcock, who struck me, I must say, Jane, as rather a tiresome sort of woman, began some long rigmarole of how years before she'd met Marina Gregg somewhere. She wasn't awfully tactful about it since she urged exactly how long ago and the year it was and everything like that. I'm sure that actresses and film stars and people don't really like being reminded of the exact age they are. Still, she wouldn't think of that I suppose."

"No," said Miss Marple, "she wasn't the kind of woman who would have thought of that. Well?"

"Well, there was nothing particular in that except for the fact that Marina Gregg didn't do her usual stuff."

"You mean she was annoyed?"

"No, no, I don't mean that. As a matter of fact I'm not at all sure that she heard a word of it. She was staring, you know, over Mrs. Badcock's shoulder and when Mrs. Badcock had finished her rather silly story of how she got out of a bed of sickness and sneaked out of the house to go and meet Marina and get her autograph, there was a sort of odd silence. Then I saw her face."

"Whose face? Mrs. Badcock's?"

"No. Marina Gregg's. It was as though she hadn't heard a word the Badcock woman was saying. She was staring over her shoulder right at the wall opposite. Staring with—I can't explain it to you—"

"But do try, Dolly," said Miss Marple, "because I think perhaps that this might be important."

"She had a kind of frozen look," said Mrs. Bantry, struggling with words, "as though she'd seen something that—oh dear me, how hard it is to describe things. Do you remember the Lady of Shalott? *The mirror crack'd from side to side: 'The doom has come upon me,' cried the Lady of Shalott.* Well, that's what she looked like. People laugh at Tennyson nowadays, but the Lady of Shalott always thrilled me when I was young and it still does."

"She had a frozen look," repeated Miss Marple thoughtfully. "And she was looking *over* Mrs. Badcock's shoulder at the wall. What was on the wall?"

"Oh! A picture of some kind, I think," said Mrs. Bantry. "You know, Italian. I think it was a copy of a Bellini Madonna, but I'm not sure. A picture where the Virgin is holding up a laughing child."

Miss Marple frowned. "I can't see that a *picture* could give her that expression."

"Especially as she must see it every day," agreed Mrs. Bantry.

"There were people coming up the stairs still, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, there were."

"Who were they, do you remember?"

"You mean she might have been looking at one of the people coming up the stairs?"

"Well, it's possible, isn't it?" said Miss Marple.

"Yes—of course—now let me see. There was the mayor, all dressed up too with his chains and all, and his wife, and there was a man with long hair and one of those funny beards they wear nowadays. Quite a young man. And there was the girl with the camera. She'd taken her position on the stairs so as to get photos of people coming up and having their hands shaken by Marina, and—let me see, two people I didn't know. Studio people, I think, and the Grices from Lower Farm. There may have been others, but that's all I can remember now."

"Doesn't sound very promising," said Miss Marple. "What happened next?"

"I think Jason Rudd nudged her or something because all of a sudden she seemed to pull herself together and she smiled at Mrs.

Badcock, and she began to say all the usual things. You know, sweet, unspoilt, natural, charming, the usual bag of tricks."

"And then?"

"And then Jason Rudd gave them drinks."

"What kind of drinks?"

"Daiquiris, I think. He said they were his wife's favourites. He gave one to her and one to the Badcock woman."

"That's very interesting," said Miss Marple. "Very interesting indeed. And what happened after that?"

"I don't know, because I took a gaggle of women to look at the bathrooms. The next thing I knew was when the secretary woman came rushing along and said someone had been taken ill."

Seven

The inquest, when it was held, was short and disappointing. Evidence of identification was given by the husband, and the only other evidence was medical. Heather Badcock had died as a result of four grains of hy-ethyl-dexyl-barbo-quinde-lorytate, or, let us be frank, some such name. There was no evidence to show how the drug was administered.

The inquest was adjourned for a fortnight.

After it was concluded, Detective-Inspector Frank Cornish joined Arthur Badcock.

"Could I have a word with you, Mr. Badcock?"

"Of course, of course."

Arthur Badcock looked more like a chewed-out bit of string than ever. "I can't understand it," he muttered. "I simply can't understand it."

"I've got a car here," said Cornish. "We'll drive back to your house, shall we? Nicer and more private there."

"Thank you, sir. Yes, yes, I'm sure that would be much better."

They drew up at the neat little blue-painted gate of No. 3 Arlington Close. Arthur Badcock led the way and the inspector followed him. He drew out his latchkey but before he had inserted it into the door, it was opened from inside. The woman who opened it stood back looking slightly embarrassed. Arthur Badcock looked startled.

"Mary," he said.

"I was just getting you ready some tea, Arthur. I thought you'd need it when you came back from the inquest."

"That's very kind of you, I'm sure," said Arthur Badcock gratefully. "Er—" he hesitated. "This is Inspector Cornish, Mrs. Bain. She's a neighbour of mine."

"I see," said Inspector Cornish.

"I'll get another cup," said Mrs. Bain.

She disappeared and rather doubtfully Arthur Badcock showed the inspector into the bright cretonne-covered sitting room to the right of the hall.

"She's very kind," said Arthur Badcock. "Very kind always."

"You've known her a long time?"

"Oh, no. Only since we came here."

"You've been here two years, I believe, or is it three?"

"Just about three now," said Arthur. "Mrs. Bain only got here six months ago," he explained. "Her son works near here and so, after her husband's death, she came down to live here and he boards with her."

Mrs. Bain appeared at this point bringing the tray from the kitchen. She was a dark, rather intense-looking woman of about forty years of age. She had gipsy colouring that went with her dark hair and eyes. There was something a little odd about her eyes. They had a watchful look. She put down the tray on the table and Inspector Cornish said something pleasant and noncommittal. Something in him, some professional instinct, was on the alert. The watchful look in the woman's eyes, the slight start she had given when Arthur introduced him had not passed unnoticed. He was familiar with that slight uneasiness in the presence of the kind of natural alarm and distrust as of those who might have offended unwittingly against the majesty of the law, but there was a second kind. And it was the second kind that he felt sure was present here. Mrs. Bain, he thought, had had at some time some connection with the police, something that had left her wary and ill at ease. He made a mental note to find out a little more about Mary Bain. Having set down the tea tray, and refused to partake herself saying she had to get home, she departed.

"Seems a nice woman," said Inspector Cornish.

"Yes, indeed. She's very kind, a very good neighbour, a very sympathetic woman," said Arthur Badcock.

"Was she a great friend of your wife?"

"No. No, I wouldn't say that. They were neighbourly and on pleasant terms. Nothing special about it though."

"I see. Now, Mr. Badcock, we want as much information as we can from you. The findings of the inquest have been a shock to you, I expect?"

"Oh, they have, Inspector. Of course I realized that you must think something was wrong and I almost thought so myself because Heather has always been such a healthy woman. Practically never a day's illness. I said to myself, 'There must be something wrong.' But it seems so incredible, if you understand what I mean, Inspector. Really quite incredible. What is this stuff—this Bi-ethyl-hex—" He came to a stop.

"There is an easier name for it," said the inspector. "It's sold under a trade name, the trade name of Calmo. Ever come across it?"

Arthur Badcock shook his head, perplexed.

"It's more used in America than here," said the inspector. "They prescribe it very freely over there, I understand."

"What's it for?"

"It induces, or so I understand, a happy and tranquil state of mind," said Cornish. "It's prescribed for those under strain; suffering anxiety, depression, melancholy, sleeplessness and a good many other things. The properly prescribed dose is not dangerous, but overdoses are not to be advised. It would seem that your wife took something like six times the ordinary dose."

Badcock stared. "Heather never took anything like that in her life," he said. "I'm sure of it. She wasn't one for taking medicines anyway. She was never depressed or worried. She was one of the most cheerful women you could possibly imagine."

The inspector nodded. "I see. And no doctor had prescribed anything of this kind for her?"

"No. Certainly not. I'm sure of that."

"Who was her doctor?"

"She was on Dr. Sim's panel, but I don't think she's been to him once since we've been here."

Inspector Cornish said thoughtfully, "So she doesn't seem the kind of woman to have been likely to need such a thing, or to have taken it?"

"She didn't, Inspector, I'm sure she didn't. She must have taken it by a mistake of some kind."

"It's a very difficult mistake to imagine," said Inspector Cornish. "What did she have to eat and drink that afternoon?"

"Well, let me see. For lunch—"

"You needn't go back as far as lunch," said Cornish. "Given in such quantity the drug would act quickly and suddenly. Tea. Go back to tea."

"Well, we went into the marquee in the grounds. It was a terrible scrum in there, but we managed in the end to get a bun each and a cup of tea. We finished it as quickly as possible because it was very hot in the marquee and we came out again."

"And that's all she had, a bun and a cup of tea there?"

"That's right, sir."

"And after that you went into the house. Is that right?"

"Yes. The young lady came and said that Miss Marina Gregg would be very pleased to see my wife if she would like to come into the house. Of course my wife was delighted. She had been talking about Marina Gregg for days. Everybody was excited. Oh well, you know that, Inspector, as well as anyone does."

"Yes, indeed," said Cornish. "My wife was excited, too. Why, from all around people were paying their shilling to go in and see Gossington Hall and what had been done there, and hoped to catch a glimpse of Marina Gregg herself."

"The young lady took us into the house," said Arthur Badcock, "and up the stairs. That's where the party was. On the landing up there. But it looked quite different from what it used to look like, so I understand. It was more like a room, a sort of big hollowed out place with chairs and tables with drinks on them. There were about ten or twelve people there, I suppose."

Inspector Cornish nodded. "And you were received there—by whom?"

"By Miss Marina Gregg herself. Her husband was with her. I've forgotten his name now."

"Jason Rudd," said Inspector Cornish.

"Oh, yes, not that I noticed him at first. Well, anyway, Miss Gregg greeted Heather very nicely and seemed very pleased to see her, and Heather was talking and telling a story of how she'd once met Miss Gregg years ago in the West Indies and everything seemed as right as rain."

"Everything seemed as right as rain," echoed the inspector. "And then?"

"And then Miss Gregg said what would we have? And Miss Gregg's husband, Mr. Rudd, got Heather a kind of cocktail, a dickery or something like that."

"A daiquiri."

"That's right, sir. He brought two. One for her and one for Miss Gregg."

"And you, what did you have?"

"I had a sherry."

"I see. And you three stood there drinking together?"

"Well, not quite like that. You see there were more people coming up the stairs. There was the mayor, for one, and some other people—an American gentleman and lady, I think—so we moved off a bit."

"And your wife drank her daiquiri then?"

"Well, no, not then, she didn't."

"Well, if she didn't drink it then, when did she drink it?"

Arthur Badcock stood frowning in remembrance. "I think—she set it down on one of the tables. She saw some friends there. I think it was someone to do with the St. John Ambulance who'd driven over there from Much Benham or somewhere like that. Anyway they got to talking together."

"And when did she drink her drink?"

Arthur Badcock again frowned. "It was a little after that," he said. "It was getting rather more crowded by then. Somebody jogged Heather's elbow and her glass got spilt."

"What's that?" Inspector Cornish looked up sharply. "Her glass was spilt?"

"Yes, that's how I remember it... She'd picked it up and I think she took a little sip and made rather a face. She didn't really like cocktails, you know, but all the same she wasn't going to be downed by that. Anyway, as she stood there, somebody jogged her elbow and the glass spilled over. It went down her dress and I think it went on Miss Gregg's dress too. Miss Gregg couldn't have been nicer. She said it didn't matter at all and it would make no stain and she gave Heather her handkerchief to wipe up Heather's dress, and then she passed over the drink she was holding and said, 'Have this, I haven't touched it yet.'"

"She handed over her own drink, did she?" said the inspector. "You're quite sure of that?"

Arthur Badcock paused a moment while he thought. "Yes, I'm quite sure of that," he said.

"And your wife took the drink?"

"Well, she didn't want to at first, sir. She said 'Oh no, I couldn't do that' and Miss Gregg laughed and said, 'I've had far too much to drink already.'"

"And so your wife took that glass and did what with it?"

"She turned away a little and drank it, rather quickly, I think. And then we walked a little way along the corridor looking at some of the pictures and the curtains. Lovely curtain stuff it was, like nothing we'd seen before. Then I met a pal of mine, Councillor Allcock, and I was just passing the time of day with him when I looked round and saw Heather was sitting on a chair looking rather odd, so I came to her and said, 'What's the matter?' She said she felt a little queer."

"What kind of queerness?"

"I don't know, sir. I didn't have time. Her voice sounded very queer and thick and her head was rolling a little. All of a sudden she made a great half gasp and her head fell forward. She was dead, sir, dead."

Eight

I

"St. Mary Mead, you say?" Chief-Inspector Craddock looked up sharply.

The assistant commissioner was a little surprised.

"Yes," he said, "St. Mary Mead. Why? Does it—"

"Nothing really," said Dermot Craddock.

"It's quite a small place, I understand," went on the other. "Though of course there's a great deal of building development going on there now. Practically all the way from St. Mary Mead to Much Benham, I understand. Hellingforth Studios," he added, "are on the other side of St. Mary Mead, towards Market Basing." He was still looking slightly inquiring. Dermot Craddock felt that he should perhaps explain.

"I know someone living there," he said. "At St. Mary Mead. An old lady. A very old lady by now. Perhaps she's dead, I don't know. But if not—"

The assistant commissioner took his subordinate's point, or at any rate he thought he did.

"Yes," he said, "it would give you an 'in' in a way. One needs a bit of local gossip. The whole thing is a curious business."

"The County have called us in?" Dermot asked.

"Yes. I've got the chief constable's letter here. They don't seem to feel that it's necessarily a local affair. The largest house in the neighbourhood, Gossington Hall, was recently sold as a residence for

Marina Gregg, the film star, and her husband. They're shooting a film at their new studios, at Hellingforth, in which she is starring. A fête was held in the grounds in aid of the St. John Ambulance. The dead woman—her name is Mrs. Heather Badcock—was the local secretary of this and had done most of the administrative work for the fête. She seems to have been a competent, sensible person, well liked locally."

"One of those bossy women?" suggested Craddock.

"Very possibly," said the assistant commissioner. "Still in my experience, bossy women seldom get themselves murdered. I can't think why not. When you come to think of it, it's rather a pity. There was a record attendance at the fête, it seems, good weather, everything running to plan. Marina Gregg and her husband held a kind of small private reception in Gossington Hall. About thirty or forty people attended this. The local notables, various people connected with the St. John Ambulance Association, several friends of Marina Gregg herself, and a few people connected with the studios. All very peaceful, nice and happy. But, fantastically and improbably, Heather Badcock was poisoned there."

Dermot Craddock said thoughtfully, "An odd place to choose."

"That's the chief constable's point of view. If anyone wanted to poison Heather Badcock, why choose that particular afternoon and circumstances? Hundreds of much simpler ways of doing it. A risky business anyway, you know, to slip a dose of deadly poison into a cocktail in the middle of twenty or thirty people milling about. Somebody ought to have seen something."

"It definitely was in the drink?"

"Yes, it was definitely in the drink. We have the particulars here. One of those inexplicable names that doctors delight in, but actually a fairly common prescription in America."

"In America. I see."

"Oh, this country too. But these things are handed out much more freely on the other side of the Atlantic. Taken in small doses, beneficial."

"Supplied on prescription or can it be bought freely?"

"No. You have to have a prescription."

"Yes, it's odd," said Dermot. "Heather Badcock have any connection with these film people?"

"None whatever."

"Any member of her own family at this do?"

"Her husband."

"Her husband," said Dermot thoughtfully.

"Yes, one always thinks that way," agreed his superior officer, "but the local man—Cornish, I think his name is—doesn't seem to think there's anything in that, although he does report that Badcock seemed ill at ease and nervous, but he agrees that respectable people often are like that when interviewed by the police. They appear to have been quite a devoted couple."

"In other words, the police there don't think it's their pigeon. Well, it ought to be interesting. I take it I'm going down there, sir?"

"Yes. Better get there as soon as possible, Dermot. Who do you want with you?"

Dermot considered for a moment or two.

"Tiddler, I think," he said thoughtfully. "He's a good man and, what's more, he's a film star. That might come in useful."

The assistant commissioner nodded. "Good luck to you," he said.

II

"Well!" exclaimed Miss Marple, going pink with pleasure and surprise. "This *is* a surprise. How are you, my dear boy—though you're hardly a boy now. What are you—a Chief-Inspector or this new thing they call a Commander?"

Dermot explained his present rank.

"I suppose I need hardly ask what you are doing down here," said Miss Marple. "Our local murder is considered worthy of the attention of Scotland Yard."

"They handed it over to us," said Dermot, "and so, naturally, as soon as I got down here I came to headquarters."

"Do you mean—" Miss Marple fluttered a little.

"Yes, Auntie," said Dermot disrespectfully. "I mean you."

"I'm afraid," said Miss Marple regretfully, "I'm very much out of things nowadays. I don't get out much."

"You get out enough to fall down and be picked up by a woman who's going to be murdered ten days later," said Dermot Craddock.

Miss Marple made the kind of noise that would once have been written down as "tut-tut."

"I don't know where you hear these things," she said.

"You should know," said Dermot Craddock. "You told me yourself that in a village everybody knows everything."

"And just off the record," he added, "did you think she was going to be murdered as soon as you looked at her?"

"Of course not, of course not," exclaimed Miss Marple. "What an idea!"

"You didn't see that look in her husband's eye that reminded you of Harry Simpson or David Jones or somebody you've known years ago, and subsequently pushed his wife off a precipice."

"No, I did *not*!" said Miss Marple. "I'm sure Mr. Badcock would never do a wicked thing of that kind. At least," she added thoughtfully, "I'm nearly sure."

"But human nature being what it is—" murmured Craddock, wickedly.

"Exactly," said Miss Marple. She added, "I daresay, after the first natural grief, he won't miss her very much...."

"Why? Did she bully him?"

"Oh no," said Miss Marple, "but I don't think that she—well, she wasn't a considerate woman. Kind, yes. Considerate—no. She would be fond of him and look after him when he was ill and see to his meals and be a good housekeeper, but I don't think she would ever—well, that she would ever even know what he might be feeling or thinking. That makes rather a lonely life for a man."

"Ah," said Dermot, "and is his life less likely to be lonely in future?"

"I expect he'll marry again," said Miss Marple. "Perhaps quite soon. And probably, which is such a pity, a woman of much the same type. I mean he'll marry someone with a stronger personality than his own."

"Anyone in view?" asked Dermot.

"Not that I know of," said Miss Marple. She added regretfully, "But I know so little."

"Well, what do you *think*?" urged Dermot Craddock. "You've never been backward in thinking things."

"I think," said Miss Marple, unexpectedly, "that you ought to go and see Mrs. Bantry."

"Mrs. Bantry? Who is she? One of the film lot?"

"No," said Miss Marple, "she lives in the East Lodge at Gossington. She was at the party that day. She used to own Gossington at one time. She and her husband, Colonel Bantry."

"She was at the party. And she saw something?"

"I think she must tell you herself what it was she saw. You mayn't think it has any bearing on the matter, but I think it might be—just might be—suggestive. Tell her I sent you to her and—ah yes, perhaps you'd better just mention the Lady of Shalott."

Dermot Craddock looked at her with his head just slightly on one side.

"The Lady of Shalott," he said. "Those are the code words, are they?"

"I don't know that I should put it that way," said Miss Marple, "but it will remind her of what I mean."

Dermot Craddock got up. "I shall be back," he warned her.

"That is very nice of you," said Miss Marple. "Perhaps if you have time, you would come and have tea with me one day. If you still drink tea," she added rather wistfully. "I know that so many young people nowadays only go out to drinks and things. They think that afternoon tea is a very outmoded affair."

"I'm not as young as all that," said Dermot Craddock. "Yes, I'll come and have tea with you one day. We'll have tea and gossip and talk about the village. Do you know any of the film stars, by the way, or any of the studio lot?"

"Not a thing," said Miss Marple, "except what I hear," she added.

"Well, you usually hear a good deal," said Dermot Craddock. "Goodbye. It's been very nice to see you."

III

"Oh, how do you do?" said Mrs. Bantry, looking slightly taken aback when Dermot Craddock had introduced himself and explained who he was. "How very exciting to see you. Don't you always have sergeants with you?"

"I've got a sergeant down here, yes," said Craddock. "But he's busy."

"On routine inquiries?" asked Mrs. Bantry, hopefully.

"Something of the kind," said Dermot gravely.

"And Jane Marple sent you to me," said Mrs. Bantry, as she ushered him into her small sitting room. "I was just arranging some flowers," she explained. "It's one of those days when flowers won't do anything you want them to. They fall out, or stick up where they shouldn't stick up or won't lie down where you want them to lie down. So I'm thankful to have a distraction, and especially such an exciting one. So it really was murder, was it?"

"Did you think it was murder?"

"Well, it could have been an accident, I suppose," said Mrs. Bantry. "Nobody's said anything definite, officially, that is. Just that rather silly piece about no evidence to show by whom or in what way the poison was administered. But, of course, we all talk about it as murder."

"And about who did it?"

"That's the odd part of it," said Mrs. Bantry. "We don't. Because I really don't see who *can* have done it."

"You mean as a matter of definite physical fact you don't see who could have done it?"

"Well, no, not that. I suppose it would have been difficult but not impossible. No, I mean, I don't see who could have *wanted* to do it."

"Nobody, you think, could have wanted to kill Heather Badcock?"

"Well, frankly," said Mrs. Bantry, "I can't imagine *anybody* wanting to kill Heather Badcock. I've seen her quite a few times, on local things, you know. Girl guides and the St. John Ambulance, and various parish things. I found her a rather trying sort of woman. Very enthusiastic about everything and a bit given to over-

statement, and just a little bit of a gusher. But you don't want to murder people for that. She was the kind of woman who in the old days if you'd seen her approaching the front door, you'd have hurried out to say to your parlourmaid—which was an institution we had in those days, and very useful too—and told her to say 'not at home' or 'not at home to visitors,' if she had conscientious scruples about the truth."

"You mean that one might take pains to avoid Mrs. Badcock, but one would have no urge to remove her permanently."

"Very well put," said Mrs. Bantry, nodding approval.

"She had no money to speak of," mused Dermot, "so nobody stood to gain by her death. Nobody seems to have disliked her to the point of hatred. I don't suppose she was blackmailing anybody?"

"She wouldn't have dreamed of doing such a thing, I'm sure," said Mrs. Bantry. "She was the conscientious and high-principled kind."

"And her husband wasn't having an affair with someone else?"

"I shouldn't think so," said Mrs. Bantry. "I only saw him at the party. He looked like a bit of chewed string. Nice but wet."

"Doesn't leave much, does it?" said Dermot Craddock. "One falls back on the assumption she knew something."

"Knew something?"

"To the detriment of somebody else."

Mrs. Bantry shook her head again. "I doubt it," she said. "I doubt it very much. She struck me as the kind of woman who if she had known anything about anyone, couldn't have helped talking about it."

"Well, that washes that out," said Dermot Craddock, "so we'll come, if we may, to my reasons for coming to see you. Miss Marple, for whom I have the greatest admiration and respect, told me that I was to say to you the Lady of Shalott."

"Oh, *that!*" said Mrs. Bantry.

"Yes," said Craddock. "*That!* Whatever it is."

"People don't read much Tennyson nowadays," said Mrs. Bantry.

"A few echoes come back to me," said Dermot Craddock. "She looked out to Camelot, didn't she?"

*Out flew the web and floated wide;
The Mirror crack'd from side to side;
'The curse has come upon me,' cried
The Lady of Shalott."*

"Exactly. She did," said Mrs. Bantry.

"I beg your pardon. Who did? Did what?"

"Looked like that," said Mrs. Bantry.

"Who looked like what?"

"Marina Gregg."

"Ah, Marina Gregg. When was this?"

"Didn't Jane Marple tell you?"

"She didn't tell me anything. She sent me to you."

"That's tiresome of her," said Mrs. Bantry, "because she can always tell things better than I can. My husband always used to say that I was so abrupt that he didn't know what I was talking about. Anyway, it may have been only my fancy. But when you see anyone looking like that you can't help remembering it."

"Please tell me," said Dermot Craddock.

"Well, it was at the party. I call it a party because what can one call things? But it was just a sort of reception up at the top of the stairs where they've made a kind of recess. Marina Gregg was there and her husband. They fetched some of us in. They fetched me, I suppose, because I once owned the house, and they fetched Heather Badcock and her husband because she'd done all the running of the fête, and the arrangements. And we happened to go up the stairs at about the same time, so I was standing there, you see, when I noticed it."

"Quite. When you noticed what?"

"Well, Mrs. Badcock went into a long spiel as people do when they meet celebrities. You know, how wonderful it was, and what a thrill and they'd always hoped to see them. And she went into a long story of how she'd once met her years ago and how exciting it had been. And I thought, in my own mind, you know, what a bore it must be for these poor celebrities to have to say all the right things.

And then I noticed that Marina Gregg wasn't saying the right things. She was just staring."

"Staring—at Mrs. Badcock?"

"No—no, it looked as though she'd forgotten Mrs. Badcock altogether. I mean, I don't believe she'd even heard what Mrs. Badcock was saying. She was just staring with what I call this Lady of Shalott look, as though she'd seen something awful. Something frightening, something that she could hardly believe she saw and couldn't bear to see."

"The curse has come upon me?" suggested Dermot Craddock.

"Yes, just that. That's why I call it the Lady of Shalott look."

"But what was she looking *at*, Mrs. Bantry?"

"Well, I wish I knew," said Mrs. Bantry.

"She was at the top of the stairs, you say?"

"She was looking over Mrs. Badcock's head—no, more over one shoulder, I think."

"Straight at the middle of the staircase?"

"It might have been a little to one side."

"And there were people coming up the staircase?"

"Oh yes, I should think about five or six people."

"Was she looking at one of these people in particular?"

"I can't possibly tell," said Mrs. Bantry. "You see, I wasn't facing that way. I was looking at *her*. My back was to the stairs. I thought perhaps she was looking at one of the pictures."

"But she must know the pictures quite well if she's living in the house."

"Yes, yes, of course. No, I suppose she must have been looking at one of the people. I wonder which."

"We have to try and find out," said Dermot Craddock. "Can you remember at all who the people were?"

"Well, I know the mayor was one of them with his wife. There was someone who I think was a reporter, with red hair, because I was introduced to him later, but I can't remember his name. I never hear names. Galbraith—something like that. Then there was a big black man. I don't mean a negro—I just mean very dark, forceful looking. And an actress with him. A bit over-blonde and the minky

kind. And old General Barnstaple from Much Benham. He's practically ga-ga now, poor old boy. I don't think *he* could have been anybody's doom. Oh! and the Grices from the farm."

"Those are all the people you can remember?"

"Well, there may have been others. But you see I wasn't—well, I mean I wasn't noticing particularly. I know that the mayor and General Barnstaple and the Americans did arrive about that time. And there were people taking photographs. One I think was a local man, and there was a girl from London, an arty-looking girl with long hair and a rather large camera."

"And you think it was one of those people who brought that look to Marina Gregg's face?"

"I didn't really think anything," said Mrs. Bantry with complete frankness. "I just wondered what on earth made her look like that and then I didn't think of it anymore. But afterwards one remembers about these things. But of course," added Mrs. Bantry with honesty, "I *may* have imagined it. After all, she may have had a sudden toothache or a safety pin run into her or a sudden violent colic. The sort of thing where you try to go on as usual and not to show anything, but your face can't help looking awful."

Dermot Craddock laughed. "I'm glad to see you're a realist, Mrs. Bantry," he said. "As you say, it may have been something of that kind. But it's certainly just one interesting little fact that might be a pointer."

He shook his head and departed to present his official credentials in Much Benham.

Nine

I

"So locally you've drawn a blank?" said Craddock, offering his cigarette case to Frank Cornish.

"Completely," said Cornish. "No enemies, no quarrels, on good terms with her husband."

"No question of another woman or another man?"

The other shook his head. "Nothing of that kind. No hint of scandal anywhere. She wasn't what you'd call the sexy kind. She was on a lot of committees and things like that and there were some small local rivalries, but nothing beyond that."

"There wasn't anyone else the husband wanted to marry? No one in the office where he worked?"

"He's in Biddle & Russell, the estate agents and valuers. There's Florrie West with adenoids, and Miss Grundle, who is at least fifty and as plain as a haystack—nothing much there to excite a man. Though for all that I shouldn't be surprised if he *did* marry again soon."

Craddock looked interested.

"A neighbour," explained Cornish. "A widow. When I went back with him from the inquest she'd gone in and was making him tea and looking after him generally. He seemed surprised and grateful. If you ask me, she's made up her mind to marry him, but he doesn't know it yet, poor chap."

"What sort of a woman is she?"

"Good looking," admitted the other. "Not young but handsome in a gipsyish sort of way. High colour. Dark eyes."

"What's her name?"

"Bain. Mrs. Mary Bain. Mary Bain. She's a widow."

"What'd her husband do?"

"No idea. She's got a son working near here who lives with her. She seems a quiet, respectable woman. All the same, I've a feeling I've seen her before." He looked at his watch. "Ten to twelve. I've made an appointment for you at Gossington Hall at twelve o'clock. We'd best be going."

II

Dermot Craddock's eyes, which always looked gently inattentive, were in actuality making a close mental note of the features of Gossington Hall. Inspector Cornish had taken him there, had delivered him over to a young man called Hailey Preston, and had then taken a tactful leave. Since then, Dermot Craddock had been gently nodding at Mr. Preston. Hailey Preston, he gathered, was a kind of public relations or personal assistant, or private secretary, or more likely, a mixture of all three, to Jason Rudd. He talked. He talked freely and at length without much modulation and managing miraculously not to repeat himself too often. He was a pleasant young man, anxious that his own views, reminiscent of those of Dr. Pangloss that all was for the best in the best of all possible worlds, should be shared by anyone in whose company he happened to be. He said several times and in different ways what a terrible shame this had been, how worried everyone had been, how Marina was absolutely prostrated, how Mr. Rudd was more upset than he could possibly say, how it absolutely beat anything that a thing like that should happen, didn't it? Possibly there might have been some kind of allergy to some particular kind of substance? He just put that forward as an idea—allergies were extraordinary things. Chief-Inspector Craddock was to count on every possible co-operation that Hellingforth Studios or any of their staff could give. He was to ask

any questions he wanted, go anywhere he liked. If they could help in anyway they would do so. They all had had the greatest respect for Mrs. Badcock and appreciated her strong social sense and the valuable work she had done for the St. John Ambulance Association.

He then started again, not in the same words but using the same motifs. No one could have been more eagerly co-operative. At the same time he endeavoured to convey how very far this was from the cellophane world of studios; and Mr. Jason Rudd and Miss Marina Gregg, or any of the people in the house who surely were going to do their utmost to help in anyway they possibly could. Then he nodded gently some forty-four times. Dermot Craddock took advantage of the pause to say:

"Thank you very much."

It was said quietly but with a kind of finality that brought Mr. Hailey Preston up with a jerk. He said:

"Well—" and paused inquiringly.

"You said I might ask questions?"

"Sure. Sure. Fire ahead."

"Is this the place where she died?"

"Mrs. Badcock?"

"Mrs. Badcock. Is this the place?"

"Yes, sure. Right here. At least, well actually I can show you the chair."

They were standing on the landing recess. Hailey Preston walked a short way along the corridor and pointed out a rather phony-looking oak armchair.

"She was sitting right there," he said. "She said she didn't feel well. Someone went to get her something, and then she just died, right there."

"I see."

"I don't know if she'd seen a physician lately. If she'd been warned that she had anything wrong with her heart—"

"She had nothing wrong with her heart," said Dermot Craddock. "She was a healthy woman. She died of six times the maximum dose of a substance whose official name I will not try to pronounce but which I understand is generally known as Calmo."

"I know, I know," said Hailey Preston. "I take it myself sometimes."

"Indeed? That's very interesting. You find it has a good effect?"

"Marvellous. Marvellous. It bucks you up *and* it soothes you down, if you understand what I mean. Naturally," he added, "you would have to take it in the proper dosage."

"Would there be supplies of this substance in the house?"

He knew the answer to the question, but he put it as though he did not. Hailey Preston's answer was frankness itself.

"Loads of it, I should say. There'll be a bottle of it in most of the bathroom cupboards here."

"Which doesn't make our task easier."

"Of course," said Hailey Preston, "she might have used the stuff herself and taken a dose, and as I say, had an allergy."

Craddock looked unconvinced—Hailey Preston sighed and said:

"You're quite definite about the dosage?"

"Oh yes. It was a lethal dose and Mrs. Badcock did not take any such things herself. As far as we can make out the only things she ever took were bicarbonate of soda or aspirin."

Hailey Preston shook his head and said, "That sure gives us a problem. Yes, it sure does."

"Where did Mr. Rudd and Miss Gregg receive their guests?"

"Right here." Hailey Preston went to the spot at the top of the stairs.

Chief-Inspector Craddock stood beside him. He looked at the wall opposite him. In the centre was an Italian Madonna and child. A good copy, he presumed, of some well-known picture. The blue-robed Madonna held aloft the infant Jesus and both child and mother were laughing. Little groups of people stood on either side, their eyes upraised to the child. One of the more pleasing Madonnas, Dermot Craddock thought. To the right and left of this picture were two narrow windows. The whole effect was very charming but it seemed to him that there was emphatically nothing there that would cause a woman to look like the Lady of Shalott whose doom had come upon her.

"People, of course, were coming up the stairs?" he asked.

"Yes. They came in driblets, you know. Not too many at once. I shepherded up some, Ella Zielinsky, that's Mr. Rudd's secretary, brought some of the others. We wanted to make it all pleasant and informal."

"Were you here yourself at the time Mrs. Badcock came up?"

"I'm ashamed to tell you, Chief-Inspector Craddock, that I just can't remember. I had a list of names, I went out and I shepherded people in. I introduced them, saw to drinks, then I'd go out and come up with the next batch. At the time I didn't know this Mrs. Badcock by sight, and she wasn't one of the ones on my list to bring up."

"What about a Mrs. Bantry?"

"Ah yes, she's the former owner of this place, isn't she? I believe she, and Mrs. Badcock and her husband, *did* come up about the same time." He paused. "And the mayor came just about them. He had a big chain on and a wife with yellow hair, wearing royal blue with frills. I remember all of them. I didn't pour drinks for any of them because I had to go down and bring up the next lot."

"Who did pour drinks for them?"

"Why, I can't exactly say. There were three or four of us on duty. I know I went down the stairs just as the mayor was coming up."

"Who else was on the stairs as you went down, if you can remember?"

"Jim Galbraith, one of the newspaper boys who was covering this, three or four others whom I didn't know. There were a couple of photographers, one of the locals, I don't remember his name, and an arty girl from London, who rather specialises in queer angle shots. Her camera was set right up in that corner so that she could get a view of Miss Gregg receiving. Ah, now let me think, I rather fancy that that was when Ardwyck Fenn arrived."

"And who is Ardwyck Fenn?"

Hailey Preston looked shocked. "He's a big shot, Chief-Inspector. A very big shot in the television and moving picture world. We didn't even know he was in this country."

"His turning up was a surprise?"

"I'll say it was," said Preston. "Nice of him to come and quite unexpected."

"Was he an old friend of Miss Gregg's and Mr. Rudd's?"

"He was an old friend of Marina's a good many years ago when she was married to her second husband. I don't know how well Jason knew him."

"Anyway, it was a pleasant surprise when he arrived?"

"Sure it was. We were all delighted."

Craddock nodded and passed from that to other subjects. He made meticulous inquiries about the drinks, their ingredients, how they were served, who served them, what servants and hired servants were on duty. The answers seemed to be, as Inspector Cornish had already hinted was the case that, although anyone of thirty people *could* have poisoned Heather Badcock with the utmost ease, yet at the same time anyone of the thirty might have been seen doing so! It was, Craddock reflected, a big chance to take.

"Thank you," he said at last. "Now I would like, if I may, to speak to Miss Marina Gregg."

Hailey Preston shook his head.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I really am sorry but that's right out of the question."

Craddock's eyebrows rose.

"Surely!"

"She's prostrated. She's absolutely prostrated. She's got her own physician here looking after her. He wrote out a certificate. I've got it here. I'll show it to you."

Craddock took it and read it.

"I see," he said. He asked, "Does Marina Gregg always have a physician in attendance?"

"They're very high strung, all these actors and actresses. It's a big strain, this life. It's usually considered desirable in the case of the big shots that they should have a physician who understands their constitution and their nerves. Maurice Gilchrist has a very big reputation. He's looked after Miss Gregg for many years now. She's had a great deal of illness, as you may have read, in the last four

years. She was hospitalized for a very long time. It's only about a year ago that she got her strength and health back."

"I see."

Hailey Preston seemed relieved that Craddock was not making anymore protests.

"You'll want to see Mr. Rudd?" he suggested. "He'll be—" he looked at his watch, "—he'll be back from the studios in about ten minutes if that's all right for you."

"That'll do admirably," said Craddock. "In the meantime is Dr. Gilchrist in the house?"

"He is."

"Then I'd like to talk to him."

"Why, certainly. I'll fetch him right away."

The young man bustled away. Dermot Craddock stood thoughtfully at the top of the stairs. Of course this frozen look that Mrs. Bantry had described might have been entirely Mrs. Bantry's imagination. She was, he thought, a woman who would jump to conclusions. At the same time he thought it quite likely that the conclusion to which she had jumped was a just one. Without going so far as to look like the Lady of Shalott seeing doom coming down upon her, Marina Gregg might have seen something that vexed or annoyed her. Something that had caused her to have been negligent to a guest to whom she was talking. Somebody had come up those stairs, perhaps, who could be described as an unexpected guest—an unwelcome guest?

He turned at the sound of footsteps. Hailey Preston was back and with him was Dr. Maurice Gilchrist. Dr. Gilchrist was not at all as Dermot Craddock had imagined him. He had no suave bedside manner, neither was he theatrical in appearance. He seemed on the face of it a blunt, hearty, matter-of-fact man. He was dressed in tweeds, slightly florid tweeds to the English idea. He had a thatch of brown hair and observant, keen dark eyes.

"Doctor Gilchrist? I am Chief-Inspector Dermot Craddock. May I have a word or two with you in private?"

The doctor nodded. He turned along the corridor and went along it almost to the end, then he pushed the door open and invited

Craddock to enter.

"No one will disturb us here," he said.

It was obviously the doctor's own bedroom, a very comfortably appointed one. Dr. Gilchrist indicated a chair and then sat down himself.

"I understand," said Craddock, "that Miss Marina Gregg, according to you, is unable to be interviewed. What's the matter with her, Doctor?"

Gilchrist shrugged his shoulders very slightly.

"Nerves," he said. "If you were to ask her questions now she'd be in a state bordering on hysteria within ten minutes. I can't permit that. If you like to send your police doctor to see me, I'd be willing to give him my views. She was unable to be present at the inquest for the same reason."

"How long," asked Craddock, "is such a state of things likely to continue?"

Dr. Gilchrist looked at him and smiled. It was a likeable smile.

"If you want my opinion," he said, "a human opinion, that is, not a medical one, anytime within the next forty-eight hours, and she'll be not only willing, but asking to see you! She'll be wanting to ask questions. She'll be wanting to answer your questions. They're like that!" He leaned forward. "I'd like to try and make you understand if I can, Chief-Inspector, a little bit what makes these people act the way they do. The motion picture life is a life of continuous strain, and the more successful you are, the greater the strain. You live always, all day, in the public eye. When you're on location, when you're working, it's hard monotonous work with long hours. You're there in the morning, you sit and you wait. You do your small bit, the bit that's being shot over and over again. If you're rehearsing on the stage you'd be rehearsing as likely as not a whole act, or at any rate a part of an act. The thing would be in sequence, it would be more or less human and credible. But when you're shooting a picture everything's taken out of sequence. It's a monotonous, grinding business. It's exhausting. You live in luxury, of course, you have soothing drugs, you have baths and creams and powders and medical attention, you have relaxations and parties and people, but

you're always in the public eye. You can't enjoy yourself quietly. You can't really—*ever relax*."

"I can understand that," said Dermot. "Yes, I can understand."

"And there's another thing," went on Gilchrist. "If you adopt this career, and especially if you're any good at it, you are a certain kind of person. You're a person—or so I've found in my experience—with a skin too few—a person who is plagued the whole time with diffidence. A terrible feeling of inadequacy, of apprehension that you can't do what's required of you. People say that actors and actresses are vain. That isn't true. They're not *conceited* about themselves; they're *obsessed* with themselves, yes, but they need reassurance the whole time. They *must* be continually reassured. Ask Jason Rudd. He'll tell you the same. You have to make them feel they can do it, to assure them they can do it, take them over and over again over the same thing encouraging them the whole time until you get the effect you want. But they are always doubtful of themselves. And that makes them, in an ordinary human, unprofessional word: nervy. Damned nervy! A mass of nerves. And the worse their nerves are the better they are at the job."

"That's interesting," said Craddock. "Very interesting." He paused, adding: "Though I don't see quite why you—"

"I'm trying to make you understand Marina Gregg," said Maurice Gilchrist. "You've seen her pictures, no doubt."

"She's a wonderful actress," said Dermot, "wonderful. She has a personality, a beauty, a sympathy."

"Yes," said Gilchrist, "she has all those, and she's had to work like the devil to produce the effects that she has produced. In the process her nerves get shot to pieces, and she's not actually a strong woman physically. Not as strong as you need to be. She's got one of those temperaments that swing to and fro between despair and rapture. She can't help it. She's made that way. She's suffered a great deal in her life. A large part of the suffering has been her own fault, but some of it hasn't. None of her marriages has been happy, except, I'd say, this last one. She's married to a man now who loves her dearly and who's loved her for years. She's sheltering in that love and she's happy in it. At least, at the moment she's happy in it. One

can't say how long all that will last. The trouble with her is that either she thinks that at last she's got to that spot or place or that moment in her life where everything's like a fairy tale come true, that nothing can go wrong, that she'll never be unhappy again; or else she's down in the dumps, a woman whose life is ruined, who's never known love and happiness and who never will again." He added dryly, "If she could only stop halfway between the two it'd be wonderful for her; and the world would lose a fine actress."

He paused, but Dermot Craddock did not speak. He was wondering why Maurice Gilchrist was saying what he did. Why this close detailed analysis of Marina Gregg? Gilchrist was looking at him. It was as though he was urging Dermot to ask one particular question. Dermot wondered very much what the question was that he ought to ask. He said at last slowly, with the air of one feeling his way:

"She's been very much upset by this tragedy happening here?"

"Yes," said Gilchrist, "she has."

"Almost unnaturally so?"

"That depends," said Dr. Gilchrist.

"On what does it depend?"

"On her reason for being so upset."

"I suppose," said Dermot, feeling his way, "that it was a shock, a sudden death happening like that in the midst of a party."

He saw very little response in the face opposite him "Or might it," he said, "be something more than that?"

"You can't tell, of course," said Dr. Gilchrist, "how people are going to react. You can't tell however well you know them. They can always surprise you. Marina might have taken this in her stride. She's a soft-hearted creature. She might say, 'Oh, poor, poor woman, how tragic. I wonder how it could have happened.' She could have been sympathetic without really caring. After all deaths do occasionally occur at studio parties. Or she might, if there wasn't anything very interesting going on, choose—choose unconsciously, mind you—to dramatize herself over it. She might decide to throw a scene. Or there might be some quite different reason."

Dermot decided to take the bull by the horns. "I wish," he said, "you would tell me what you really think?"

"I don't know," said Dr. Gilchrist. "I can't be sure." He paused and then said, "There's professional etiquette, you know. There's the relationship between doctor and patient."

"She has told you something?"

"I don't think I could go as far as that."

"Did Marina Gregg know this woman, Heather Badcock? Had she met her before?"

"I don't think she knew her from Adam," said Dr. Gilchrist. "No. That's not the trouble. If you ask me it's nothing to do with Heather Badcock."

Dermot said, "This stuff, this Calmo. Does Marina Gregg ever use it herself?"

"Lives on it, pretty well," said Dr. Gilchrist. "So does everyone else around here," he added. "Ella Zielinsky takes it, Hailey Preston takes it, half the boiling takes it—it's the fashion at this moment. They're all much the same, these things. People get tired of one and they try a new one that comes out and they think it's wonderful, and that it makes all the difference."

"And does it make all the difference?"

"Well," said Gilchrist, "it makes *a* difference. It does its work. It calms you or it peps you up, makes you feel you could do things which otherwise you might fancy that you couldn't. I don't prescribe them more than I can help, but they're not dangerous taken properly. They help people who can't help themselves."

"I wish I knew," said Dermot Craddock, "what it is that you are trying to tell me."

"I'm trying to decide," said Gilchrist, "what is my duty. There are two duties. There's the duty of a doctor to his patient. What his patient says to him is confidential and must be kept so. But there's another point of view. You can fancy that there is a danger to a patient. You have to take steps to avoid that danger."

He stopped. Craddock looked at him and waited.

"Yes," said Dr. Gilchrist. "I think I know what I must do. I must ask you, Chief-Inspector Craddock, to keep what I am telling you

confidential. Not from your colleagues, of course. But as far as regards the outer world, particularly in the house here. Do you agree?"

"I can't bind myself," said Craddock. "I don't know what will arise. In general terms, yes, I agree. That is to say, I imagine that any piece of information you gave me I should prefer to keep to myself and my colleagues."

"Now listen," said Gilchrist, "this mayn't mean anything at all. Women say anything when they're in the state of nerves Marina Gregg is now. I'm telling you something which she said to me. There may be nothing in it at all."

"What did she say?" asked Craddock.

"She broke down after this thing happened. She sent for me. I gave her a sedative. I stayed there beside her, holding her hand, telling her to calm down, telling her things were going to be all right. Then, just before she went off into unconsciousness she said, 'It was meant for *me*, Doctor.'"

Craddock stared. "She said that, did she? And afterwards—the next day?"

"She never alluded to it again. I raised the point once. She evaded it. She said, 'Oh, you must have made a mistake. I'm sure I never said anything like that. I expect I was half doped at the time.'"

"But you think she meant it?"

"She meant it all right," said Gilchrist. "That's not to say that it is so," he added warningly. "Whether someone meant to poison her or meant to poison Heather Badcock I don't know. You'd probably know better than I would. All I do say is that Marina Gregg definitely thought and believed that that dose was meant for her."

Craddock was silent for some moments. Then he said, "Thank you, Doctor Gilchrist. I appreciate what you have told me and I realize your motive. If what Marina Gregg said to you was founded on fact it may mean, may it not, that there is still danger to her?"

"That's the point," said Gilchrist. "That's the whole point."

"Have you any reason to believe that that might be so?"

"No, I haven't."

"No idea what her reason for thinking so was?"

"No."

"Thank you."

Craddock got up. "Just one thing more, Doctor. Do you know if she said the same thing to her husband?"

Slowly Gilchrist shook his head. "No," he said, "I'm quite sure of that. She didn't tell her husband."

His eyes met Dermot's for a few moments then he gave a brief nod of his head and said, "You don't want me anymore? All right. I'll go back and have a look at the patient. You shall talk to her as soon as it's possible."

He left the room and Craddock remained, pursing his lips up and whistling very softly beneath his breath.

Ten

"Jason's back now," said Hailey Preston. "Will you come with me, Chief-Inspector, I'll take you to his room."

The room which Jason Rudd used partly for office and partly for a sitting room, was on the first floor. It was comfortably but not luxuriously furnished. It was a room which had little personality and no indication of the private tastes or predilection of its user. Jason Rudd rose from the desk at which he was sitting, and came forward to meet Dermot. It was wholly unnecessary, Dermot thought, for the room to have a personality; the user of it had so much. Hailey Preston had been an efficient and voluble gasbag. Gilchrist had force and magnetism. But here was a man whom, as Dermot immediately admitted to himself, it would not be easy to read. In the course of his career, Craddock had met and summed up many people. By now he was fully adept in realizing the potentialities and very often reading the thoughts of most of the people with whom he came in contact. But he felt at once that one would be able to gauge only as much of Jason Rudd's thoughts as Jason Rudd himself permitted. The eyes, deepset and thoughtful, perceived but would not easily reveal. The ugly, rugged head spoke of an excellent intellect. The clown's face could repel you or attract you. Here, thought Dermot Craddock to himself, is where I sit and listen and take very careful notes.

"Sorry, Chief-Inspector, if you've had to wait for me. I was held up by some small complication over at the Studios. Can I offer you a drink?"

"Not just now, thank you, Mr. Rudd."

The clown's face suddenly crinkled into a kind of ironic amusement.

"Not the house to take a drink in, is that what you're thinking?"

"As a matter of fact it wasn't what I was thinking."

"No, no I suppose not. Well, Chief-Inspector, what do you want to know? What can I tell you?"

"Mr. Preston has answered very adequately all the questions I have put to him."

"And that has been helpful to you?"

"Not as helpful as I could wish."

Jason Rudd looked inquiring.

"I've also seen Dr. Gilchrist. He informs me that your wife is not yet strong enough to be asked questions."

"Marina," said Jason Rudd, "is very sensitive. She's subject, frankly, to nervous storms. And murder at such close quarters is, as you will admit, likely to produce a nerve storm."

"It is not a pleasant experience," Dermot Craddock agreed, dryly.

"In any case I doubt if there is anything my wife could tell you that you could not learn equally well from me. I was standing beside her when the thing happened, and frankly I would say that I am a better observer than my wife."

"The first question I would like to ask," said Dermot, "(and it is a question that you have probably answered already but for all that I would like to ask again), had you or your wife any previous acquaintance with Heather Badcock?"

Jason Rudd shook his head.

"None whatever. I certainly have never seen the woman before in my life. I had two letters from her on behalf of the St. John Ambulance Association, but I had not met her personally until about five minutes before her death."

"But she claimed to have met your wife?"

Jason Rudd nodded.

"Yes, some twelve or thirteen years ago, I gather. In Bermuda. Some big garden party in aid of ambulances, which Marina opened for them, I think, and Mrs. Badcock, as soon as she was introduced,

burst into some long rigmarole of how although she was in bed with flu, she had got up and had managed to come to this affair and had asked for and got my wife's autograph."

Again the ironical smile crinkled his face.

"That, I may say, is a very common occurrence, Chief-Inspector. Large mobs of people are usually lined up to obtain my wife's autograph and it is a moment that they treasure and remember. Quite understandably, it is an event in their lives. Equally naturally it is not likely that my wife would remember one out of a thousand or so autograph hunters. She had, quite frankly, no recollection of ever having seen Mrs. Badcock before."

"That I can well understand," said Craddock. "Now I have been told, Mr. Rudd, by an onlooker that your wife was slightly *distracte* during the few moments that Heather Badcock was speaking to her. Would you agree that such was the case?"

"Very possibly," said Jason Rudd. "Marina is not particularly strong. She was, of course, used to what I may describe as her public social work, and could carry out her duties in that line almost automatically. But towards the end of a long day she was inclined occasionally to flag. This may have been such a moment. I did not, I may say, observe anything of the kind myself. No, wait a minute, that is not quite true. I do remember that she was a little slow in making her reply to Mrs. Badcock. In fact I think I nudged her very gently in the ribs."

"Something had perhaps distracted her attention?" said Dermot.

"Possibly, but it may have been just a momentary lapse through fatigue."

Dermot Craddock was silent for a few minutes. He looked out of the window where the view was the somewhat sombre one over the woods surrounding Gossington Hall. He looked at the pictures on the walls, and finally he looked at Jason Rudd. Jason Rudd's face was attentive but nothing more. There was no guide to his feelings. He appeared courteous and completely at ease, but he might, Craddock thought, be actually nothing of the kind. This was a man of very high mental calibre. One would not, Dermot thought, get anything

out of him that he was not prepared to say unless one put one's cards on the table. Dermot took his decision. He would do just that.

"Has it occurred to you, Mr. Rudd, that the poisoning of Heather Badcock may have been entirely accidental? That the real intended victim was your wife?"

There was a silence. Jason Rudd's face did not change its expression. Dermot waited. Finally Jason Rudd gave a deep sigh and appeared to relax.

"Yes," he said quietly, "you're quite right, Chief-Inspector. I have been sure of it all along."

"But you have said nothing to that effect, not to Inspector Cornish, not at the inquest?"

"No."

"Why not, Mr. Rudd?"

"I could answer you very adequately by saying that it was merely a belief on my part unsupported by any kind of evidence. The facts that led me to deduce it, were facts equally accessible to the law which was probably better qualified to decide than I was. I knew nothing about Mrs. Badcock personally. She might have enemies, someone might have decided to administer a fatal dose to her on this particular occasion, though it would seem a very curious and far-fetched decision. But it might have been chosen conceivably for the reason that at a public occasion of this kind the issues would be more confused, the number of strangers present would be considerable and just for that reason it would be more difficult to bring home to the person in question the commission of such a crime. All that is true, but I am going to be frank with you, Chief-Inspector. That was *not* my reason for keeping silent. I will tell you what the reason was. I didn't want my wife to suspect for one moment that it was she who had narrowly escaped dying by poison."

"Thank you for your frankness," said Dermot. "Not that I quite understand your motive in keeping silent."

"No? Perhaps it is a little difficult to explain. You would have to know Marina to understand. She is a person who badly needs happiness and security. Her life has been highly successful in the material sense. She has won renown artistically but her personal life

has been one of deep unhappiness. Again and again she has thought that she has found happiness and was wildly and unduly elated thereby, and has had her hopes dashed to the ground. She is incapable, Mr. Craddock, of taking a rational, prudent view of life. In her previous marriages she has expected, like a child reading a fairy story, to live happy ever afterwards."

Again the ironic smile changed the ugliness of the clown's face into a strange, sudden sweetness.

"But marriage is not like that, Chief-Inspector. There can be no rapture continued indefinitely. We are fortunate indeed if we can achieve a life of quiet content, affection, and serene and sober happiness." He added. "Perhaps you are married, Chief-Inspector?"

Dermot Craddock shook his head.

"I have not so far that good, or bad fortune," he murmured.

"In our world, the moving picture world, marriage is a fully occupational hazard. Film stars marry often. Sometimes happily, sometimes disastrously, but seldom permanently. In that respect I should not say that Marina has had any undue cause to complain, but to one of her temperament things of that kind matter very deeply. She imbued herself with the idea that she was unlucky, that nothing would ever go right for her. She has always been looking desperately for the same things, love, happiness, affection, security. She was wildly anxious to have children. According to some medical opinion, the very strength of that anxiety frustrated its object. One very celebrated physician advised the adoption of a child. He said it is often the case that when an intense desire for maternity is assuaged by having adopted a baby, a child is born naturally shortly afterwards. Marina adopted no less than three children. For a time she got a certain amount of happiness and serenity, but it was not the real thing. You can imagine her delight when eleven years ago she found she was going to have a child. Her pleasure and delight were quite indescribable. She was in good health and the doctors assured her that there was every reason to believe that everything would go well. As you may or may not know, the result was tragedy. The child, a boy, was born mentally deficient, imbecile. The result was disastrous. Marina had a complete breakdown and was severely

ill for years, confined to a sanatorium. Though her recovery was slow she did recover. Shortly after that we married and she began once more to take an interest in life and to feel that perhaps she could be happy. It was difficult at first for her to get a worthwhile contract for a picture. Everyone was inclined to doubt whether her health would stand the strain. I had to battle for that." Jason Rudd's lips set firmly together. "Well, the battle was successful. We have started shooting the picture. In the meantime we bought this house and set about altering it. Only about a fortnight ago Marina was saying to me how happy she was, and how she felt at last she was going to be able to settle down to a happy home life, her troubles behind her. I was a little nervous because, as usual, her expectations were too optimistic. But there was no doubt that she was happy. Her nervous symptoms disappeared, there was a calmness and a quietness about her that I had never seen before. Everything was going well until—" He paused. His voice became suddenly bitter. "Until this happened! That woman had to die—*here!* That in itself was shock enough. I couldn't risk—I was determined not to risk—Marina's knowing that an attempt had been made on *her* life. That would have been a second, perhaps fatal, shock. It might have precipitated another mental collapse."

He looked directly at Dermot.

"Do you understand—now?"

"I see your point of view," said Craddock, "but forgive me, isn't there one aspect that you are neglecting? You give me your conviction that an attempt was made to poison your wife. Doesn't that danger still remain? If a poisoner does not succeed, isn't it likely that the attempt may be repeated?"

"Naturally I've considered that," said Jason Rudd, "but I am confident that, being forewarned so to speak, I can take all reasonable precautions for my wife's safety. I shall watch over her and arrange that others shall watch over her. The great thing, I feel, is that she herself should not know that any danger threatened her."

"And you think," said Dermot cautiously, "that she does *not* know?"

"Of course not. She has no idea."

"You're sure of that?"

"Certain. Such an idea would never occur to her."

"But it occurred to you," Dermot pointed out.

"That's very different," said Jason Rudd. "Logically it was the only solution. But my wife isn't logical, and to begin with she could not possibly imagine that anyone would want to do away with her. Such a possibility would simply not occur to her mind."

"You may be right," said Dermot slowly, "but that leaves us now with several other questions. Again, let me put this bluntly. Whom do you suspect?"

"I can't tell you."

"Excuse me, Mr. Rudd, do you mean by that you can't or that you won't?"

Jason Rudd spoke quickly. "Can't. Can't every time. It seems to me just as impossible as it would seem to her that anyone would dislike her enough—should have a sufficient grudge against her—to do such a thing. On the other hand, on the sheer, downright evidence of the facts, that is exactly what must have occurred."

"Will you outline the facts to me as you see them?"

"If you like. The circumstances are quite clear. I poured out two daiquiri cocktails from an already prepared jug. I took them to Marina and Mrs. Badcock. What Mrs. Badcock did I do not know. She moved on, I presume, to speak to someone she knew. My wife had her drink in her hand. At that moment the mayor and his wife were approaching. She put down her glass, as yet untouched, and greeted them. Then there were more greetings. An old friend we'd not seen for years, some other locals and one or two people from the studios. During that time the glass containing the cocktail stood on the table which was situated at that time behind us since we had both moved forward a little to the top of the stairs. One or two photographs were taken of my wife talking to the mayor, which we hoped would please the local population, at the special request of the representatives of the local newspaper. While this was being done I brought some fresh drinks to a few of the last arrivals. During that time my wife's glass must have been poisoned. Don't ask me *how* it was done, it cannot have been easy to do. On the other hand, it is startling, if anyone

has the nerve to do an action openly and unconcernedly, how little people are likely to notice it! You ask me if I have suspicions; all I can say is that at least one of about twenty people *might* have done it. People, you see, were moving about in little groups, talking, occasionally going off to have a look at the alterations which had been done to the house. There was movement, continual movement. I've thought and I've thought, I've racked my brains but there is nothing, absolutely *nothing* to direct my suspicions to any particular person."

He paused and gave an exasperated sigh.

"I understand," said Dermot. "Go on, please."

"I dare say you've heard the next part before."

"I should like to hear it again from you."

"Well, I had come back towards the head of the stairs. My wife had turned towards the table and was just picking up her glass. There was a slight exclamation from Mrs. Badcock. Somebody must have jogged her arm and the glass slipped out of her fingers and was broken on the floor. Marina did the natural hostess's act. Her own skirt had been slightly touched with the liquid. She insisted no harm was done, used her own handkerchief to wipe Mrs. Badcock's skirt and insisted on her having her own drink. If I remember she said 'I've had far too much already.' So that was that. But I can assure you of this. The fatal dose could not have been added *after* that for Mrs. Badcock immediately began to drink from the glass. As you know, four or five minutes later she was dead. I wonder—how I wonder—what the poisoner must have felt when he realised how badly his scheme had failed...."

"All this occurred to you at the time?"

"Of course not. At the time I concluded, naturally enough, this woman had had some kind of a seizure. Perhaps heart, coronary thrombosis, something of that sort. It never occurred to me that *poisoning* was involved. Would it occur to you—would it occur to anybody?"

"Probably not," said Dermot. "Well your account is clear enough and you seem sure of your facts. You say you have no suspicion of any particular person. I can't quite accept that, you know."

"I assure you it's the truth."

"Let us approach it from another angle. Who is there who could wish to harm your wife? It all sounds melodramatic if you put it this way, but what enemies had she got?"

Jason Rudd made an expressive gesture.

"Enemies? Enemies? It's so hard to define what one means by an enemy. There's plenty of envy and jealousy in the world my wife and I occupy. There are always people who say malicious things, who'll start a whispering campaign, who will do someone they are jealous of a bad turn if the opportunity occurs. But that doesn't mean that any of those people is a murderer, or indeed even a likely murderer. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, I agree. There must be something beyond petty dislikes or envies. Is there anyone whom your wife has injured, say, in the past?"

Jason Rudd did not rebut this easily. Instead he frowned.

"Honestly, I don't think so," he said at last, "and I may say I've given a lot of thought to that point."

"Anything in the nature of a love affair, an association with some man?"

"There have of course been affairs of that kind. It may be considered, I suppose, that Marina has occasionally treated some man badly. But there is nothing to cause any lasting ill will. I'm sure of it."

"What about women? Any woman who has had a lasting grudge against Miss Gregg?"

"Well," said Jason Rudd, "you can never tell with women. I can't think of any particular one offhand."

"Who'd benefit financially by your wife's death?"

"Her will benefits various people but not to any large extent. I suppose the people who'd benefit, as you put it, financially, would be myself as her husband, from another angle, possibly the star who might replace her in this film. Though, of course, the film might be abandoned altogether. These things are very uncertain."

"Well, we need not go into all that now," said Dermot.

"And I have your assurance that Marina will not be told that she is in possible danger?"

"We shall have to go into that matter," said Dermot. "I want to impress upon you that you are taking quite a considerable risk there. However, the matter will not arise for some days since your wife is still under medical care. Now there is one more thing I would like you to do. I would like you to write down for me as accurately as you can every single person who was in that recess at the top of the stairs, or whom you saw coming up the stairs at the time of the murder."

"I'll do my best, but I'm rather doubtful. You'd do far better to consult my secretary, Ella Zielinsky. She has a most accurate memory and also lists of the local lads who were there. If you'd like to see her now—"

"I would like to talk to Miss Ella Zielinsky very much," said Dermot.

Eleven

I

Surveying Dermot Craddock unemotionally through her large horn-rimmed spectacles, Ella Zielinsky seemed to him almost too good to be true. With quiet businesslike alacrity she whipped out of a drawer a typewritten sheet and passed it across to him.

"I think I can be fairly sure that there are no omissions," she said. "But it is just possible that I may have included one or two names—local names they will be—who were not actually there. That is to say who may have left earlier or who may not have been found and brought up. Actually, I'm pretty sure that it is correct."

"A very efficient piece of work if I may say so," said Dermot.

"Thank you."

"I suppose—I am quite an ignoramus in such things—that you have to attain a high standard of efficiency in your job?"

"One has to have things pretty well taped, yes."

"What else does your job comprise? Are you a kind of liaison officer, so to speak, between the studios and Gossington Hall?"

"No. I've nothing to do with the studios, actually, though of course I naturally take messages from there on the telephone or send them. My job is to look after Miss Gregg's social life, her public and private engagements, and to supervise in some degree the running of the house."

"You like the job?"

"It's extremely well paid and I find it reasonably interesting. I didn't however bargain for murder," she added dryly.

"Did it seem very incredible to you?"

"So much so that I am going to ask you if you are really sure it *is* murder?"

"Six times the dose of di-ethyl-mexine etc. etc., could hardly be anything else."

"It might have been an accident of some kind."

"And how would you suggest such an accident could have occurred?"

"More easily than you'd imagine, since you don't know the setup. This house is simply full of drugs of all kinds. I don't mean dope when I say drugs. I mean properly prescribed remedies, but, like most of these things, what they call, I understand, the lethal dose is not very far removed from the therapeutic dose."

Dermot nodded.

"These theatrical and picture people have the most curious lapses in their intelligence. Sometimes it seems to me that the more of an artistic genius you are, the less common sense you have in everyday life."

"That may well be."

"What with all the bottles, cachets, powders, capsules, and little boxes that they carry about with them; what with popping in a tranquillizer here and a tonic there and a pep pill somewhere else, don't you think it would be easy enough that the whole thing might get mixed-up?"

"I don't see how it could apply in this case."

"Well, I think it could. Somebody, one of the guests, may have wanted a sedative, or a reviver, and whipped out his or her little container which they carry around and possibly because they hadn't remembered the dose because they hadn't had one for some time, might have put too much in a glass. Then their mind was distracted and they went off somewhere, and let's say this Mrs. What's-her-name comes along, thinks it's her glass, picks it up and drinks it. That's surely a more feasible idea than anything else?"

"You don't think that all those possibilities haven't been gone into, do you?"

"No, I suppose not. But there were a lot of people there and a lot of glasses standing about with drinks in them. It happens often enough, you know, that you pick up the wrong glass and drink out of it."

"Then you don't think that Heather Badcock was deliberately poisoned? You think that she drank out of somebody else's glass?"

"I can't imagine anything more likely to happen."

"In that case," said Dermot speaking carefully, "it would have had to be Marina Gregg's glass. You realise that? Marina handed her her own glass."

"Or what she thought was her own glass," Ella Zielinsky corrected him. "You haven't talked to Marina yet, have you? She's extremely vague. She'd pick up any glass that looked as though it were hers, and drink it. I've seen her do it again and again."

"She takes Calmo?"

"Oh yes, we all do."

"You too, Miss Zielinsky?"

"I'm driven to it sometimes," said Ella Zielinsky. "These things are rather imitative, you know."

"I shall be glad," said Dermot, "when I am able to talk to Miss Gregg. She—er—seems to be prostrated for a very long time."

"That's just throwing a temperament," said Ella Zielinsky. "She just dramatizes herself a good deal, you know. She'd never take murder in her stride."

"As you manage to do, Miss Zielinsky?"

"When everybody about you is in a continual state of agitation," said Ella dryly, "it develops in you a desire to go to the opposite extreme."

"You learn to take a pride in not turning a hair when some shocking tragedy occurs?"

She considered. "It's not a really nice trait, perhaps. But I think if you didn't develop that sense you'd probably go round the bend yourself."

"Was Miss Gregg—is Miss Gregg a difficult person to work for?"

It was something of a personal question but Dermot Craddock regarded it as a kind of test. If Ella Zielinsky raised her eyebrows and tacitly demanded what this had to do with the murder of Mrs. Badcock, he would be forced to admit that it had nothing to do with it. But he wondered if Ella Zielinsky might perhaps enjoy telling him what she thought of Marina Gregg.

"She's a great artist. She's got a personal magnetism that comes over on the screen in the most extraordinary way. Because of that one feels it's rather a privilege to work with her. Taken purely personally, of course, she's hell!"

"Ah," said Dermot.

"She's no kind of moderation, you see. She's up in the air or down in the dumps and everything is always terrifically exaggerated, and she changes her mind and there are an enormous lot of things that one must never mention or allude to because they upset her."

"Such as?"

"Well, naturally, mental breakdown, or sanatoriums for mental cases. I think it is quite to be understood that she should be sensitive about that. And anything to do with children."

"Children? In what way?"

"Well, it upsets her to see children, or to hear of people being happy with children. If she hears someone is going to have a baby or has just had a baby, it throws her into a state of misery at once. She can never have another child herself, you see, and the only one she did have is batty. I don't know if you knew that?"

"I had heard it, yes. It's all very sad and unfortunate. But after a good many years you'd think she'd forget about it a little."

"She doesn't. It's an obsession with her. She broods on it."

"What does Mr. Rudd feel about it?"

"Oh, it wasn't his child. It was her last husband's, Isidore Wright's."

"Ah yes, her last husband. Where is he now?"

"He married again and lives in Florida," said Ella Zielinsky promptly.

"Would you say that Marina Gregg had made many enemies in her life?"

"Not unduly so. Not more than most, that is to say. There are always rows over other women or other men or over contracts or jealousy—all of those things."

"She wasn't as far as you know afraid of anyone?"

"Marina? *Afraid* of anyone? I don't think so. Why? Should she be?"

"I don't know," said Dermot. He picked up the list of names. "Thank you very much, Miss Zielinsky. If there's anything else I want to know I'll come back. May I?"

"Certainly. I'm only too anxious—we're all only too anxious—to do anything we can to help."

II

"Well, Tom, what have you got for me?"

Detective-Sergeant Tiddler grinned appreciatively. His name was not Tom, it was William, but the combination of Tom Tiddler had always been too much for his colleagues.

"What gold and silver have you picked up for me?" continued Dermot Craddock.

The two were staying at the Blue Boar and Tiddler had just come back from a day spent at the studios.

"The proportion of gold is very small," said Tiddler. "Not much gossip. No startling rumours. One or two suggestions of suicide."

"Why suicide?"

"They thought she might have had a row with her husband and be trying to make him sorry. That line of country. But that she didn't really mean to go so far as doing herself in."

"I can't see that that's a very helpful line," said Dermot.

"No, of course it isn't. They know nothing about it, you see. They don't know anything except what they're busy on. It's all highly technical and there's an atmosphere of 'the show must go on,' or as I suppose one ought to say the picture must go on, or the shooting must go on. I don't know any of the right terms. All they're concerned about is when Marina Gregg will get back to the set. She's

mucked up a picture once or twice before by staging a nervous breakdown."

"Do they like her on the whole?"

"I should say they consider her the devil of a nuisance but for all that they can't help being fascinated by her when she's in the mood to fascinate them. Her husband's besotted about her, by the way."

"What do they think of him?"

"They think he's the finest director or producer or whatever it is that there's ever been."

"No rumours of his being mixed-up with some other star or some woman of some kind?"

Tom Tiddler stared. "No," he said, "no. Not a hint of such a thing. Why, do you think there might be?"

"I wondered," said Dermot. "Marina Gregg is convinced that that lethal dose was meant for her."

"Is she now? Is she right?"

"Almost certainly, I should say," Dermot replied. "But that's not the point. The point is that she hasn't told her husband so, only her doctor."

"Do you think she would have told him if—"

"I just wondered," said Craddock, "whether she might have had at the back of her mind an idea that her husband had been responsible. The doctor's manner was a little peculiar. I may have imagined it but I don't think I did."

"Well, there were no such rumours going about at the studios," said Tom. "You hear that sort of thing soon enough."

"She herself is not embroiled with any other man?"

"No, she seems to be devoted to Rudd."

"No interesting snippets about her past?"

Tiddler grinned. "Nothing to what you can read in a film magazine any day of the week."

"I think I'll have to read a few," said Dermot, "to get the atmosphere."

"The things they say and hint!" said Tiddler.

"I wonder," said Dermot thoughtfully, "if my Miss Marple reads film magazines."

"Is that the old lady who lives in the house by the church?"

"That's right."

"They say she's sharp," said Tiddler. "They say there's nothing goes on here that Miss Marple doesn't hear about. She may not know much about the film people, but she ought to be able to give you the lowdown on the Badcocks all right."

"It's not as simple as it used to be," said Dermot. "There's a new social life springing up here. A housing estate, big building development. The Badcocks are fairly new and come from there."

"I didn't hear much about the locals, of course," said Tiddler. "I concentrated on the sex life of film stars and such things."

"You haven't brought back very much," grumbled Dermot. "What about Marina Gregg's past, anything about that?"

"Done a bit of marrying in her time but not more than most. Her first husband didn't like getting the chuck, so they said, but he was a very ordinary sort of bloke. He was a realtor or something like that. What is a realtor, by the way?"

"I think it means in the real estate business."

"Oh well, anyway, he didn't line up as very glamorous so she got rid of him and married a foreign count or prince. That lasted hardly anytime at all but there don't seem to be any bones broken. She just shook him off and teamed up with number three. Film star Robert Truscott. That was said to be a passionate love match. His wife didn't much like letting go of him, but she had to take it in the end. Big alimony. As far as I can make out everybody's hard up because they've got to pay so much alimony to all their ex-wives."

"But it went wrong?"

"Yes. She was the broken-hearted one, I gather. But another big romance came along a year or two later. Isidore Somebody—a playwright."

"It's an exotic life," said Dermot. "Well, we'll call it a day now. Tomorrow we've got to get down to a bit of hard work."

"Such as?"

"Such as checking a list I've got here. Out of twenty-odd names we ought to be able to do *some* elimination and out of what's left we'll have to look for X."

"Any idea who X is?"

"Not in the least. If it isn't Jason Rudd, that is." He added with a wry and ironic smile, "I shall have to go to Miss Marple and get briefed on local matters."

Twelve

Miss Marple was pursuing her own methods of research.

"It's very kind, Mrs. Jameson, very kind of you indeed. I can't tell you how grateful I am."

"Oh, don't mention it, Miss Marple. I'm sure I'm glad to oblige you. I suppose you'll want the latest ones?"

"No, no, not particularly," said Miss Marple. "In fact I think I'd rather have some of the old numbers."

"Well, here you are then," said Mrs. Jameson, "there's a nice armful and I can assure you we shan't miss them. Keep them as long as you like. Now it's too heavy for you to carry. Jenny, how's your perm doing?"

"She's all right, Mrs. Jameson. She's had her rinse and now she's having a good dry-out."

"In that case, dear, you might just run along with Miss Marple here, and carry these magazines for her. No, really, Miss Marple, it's no trouble at all. Always pleased to do anything we can for you."

How kind people were, Miss Marple thought, especially when they'd known you practically all their lives. Mrs. Jameson, after long years of running a hairdressing parlour had steeled herself to going as far in the cause of progress as to repaint her sign and call herself

"DIANE. *Hair Stylist.*"

Otherwise the shop remained much as before and catered in much the same way to the needs of its clients. It turned you out with a

nice firm perm: it accepted the task of shaping and cutting for the younger generation and the resultant mess was accepted without too much recrimination. But the bulk of Mrs. Jameson's clientele was a bunch of solid, stick in the mud middle-aged ladies who found it extremely hard to get their hair done the way they wanted it anywhere else.

"Well, I never," said Cherry the next morning, as she prepared to run a virulent Hoover round the lounge as she still called it in her mind. "What's all this?"

"I am trying," said Miss Marple, "to instruct myself a little in the moving picture world."

She laid aside *Movie News* and picked up *Amongst the Stars*.

"It's really very interesting. It reminds one so much of so many things."

"Fantastic lives they must lead," said Cherry.

"Specialized lives," said Miss Marple. "Highly specialized. It reminds me very much of the things a friend of mine used to tell me. She was a hospital nurse. The same simplicity of outlook and all the gossip and the rumours. And good-looking doctors causing any amount of havoc."

"Rather sudden, isn't it, this interest of yours?" said Cherry.

"I'm finding it difficult to knit nowadays," said Miss Marple. "Of course the print of these *is* rather small, but I can always use a magnifying glass."

Cherry looked on curiously.

"You're always surprising me," she said. "The things you take an interest in."

"I take an interest in everything," said Miss Marple.

"I mean taking up new subjects at your age."

Miss Marple shook her head.

"They aren't really new subjects. It's human nature I'm interested in, you know, and human nature is much the same whether it's film stars or hospital nurses or people in St. Mary Mead or," she added thoughtfully, "people who live in the Development."

"Can't see much likeness between me and a film star," said Cherry laughing, "more's the pity. I suppose it's Marina Gregg and her

husband coming to live at Gossington Hall that set you off on this."

"That and the very sad event that occurred there," said Miss Marple.

"Mrs. Badcock, you mean? It was bad luck that."

"What do you think of it in the—" Miss Marple paused with the "D" hovering on her lips. "What do you and your friends think about it?" she amended the question.

"It's a queer do," said Cherry. "Looks as though it were murder, doesn't it, though of course the police are too cagey to say so outright. Still, that's what it looks like."

"I don't see what else it could be," said Miss Marple.

"It couldn't be suicide," agreed Cherry, "not with Heather Badcock."

"Did you know her well?"

"No, not really. Hardly at all. She was a bit of a nosy parker you know. Always wanting you to join this, join that, turn up for meetings at so-and-so. Too much energy. Her husband got a bit sick of it sometimes, I think."

"She doesn't seem to have had any real enemies."

"People used to get a bit fed up with her sometimes. The point is, I don't see who could have murdered her unless it was her husband. And he's a very meek type. Still, the worm will turn, or so they say. I've always heard that Crippen was ever so nice a man and that man, Haigh, who pickled them all in acid—they say he couldn't have been more charming! So one never knows, does one?"

"Poor Mr. Badcock," said Miss Marple.

"And people say he was upset and nervy at the fête that day—before it happened, I mean—but people always say that kind of thing afterwards. If you ask me, he's looking better now than he's looked for years. Seems to have got a bit more spirit and go in him."

"Indeed?" said Miss Marple.

"Nobody *really* thinks he did it," said Cherry. "Only if he didn't, who did? I can't help thinking myself it must have been an accident of some kind. Accidents do happen. You think you know all about mushrooms and go out and pick some. One fungus gets in among

them and there you are, rolling about in agony and lucky if the doctor gets to you in time."

"Cocktails and glasses of sherry don't seem to lend themselves to accident," said Miss Marple.

"Oh, I don't know," said Cherry. "A bottle of something or other could have got in by mistake. Somebody I knew took a dose of concentrated DDT once. Horribly ill they were."

"Accident," said Miss Marple thoughtfully. "Yes, it certainly seems the best solution. I must say I can't believe that in the case of Heather Badcock it *could* have been deliberate murder. I won't say it's impossible. Nothing is impossible, but it doesn't seem like it. No, I think the truth lies somewhere here." She rustled her magazines and picked up another one.

"You mean you're looking for some special story about someone?"

"No," said Miss Marple. "I'm just looking for odd mentions of people and a way of life and something—some little something that might help." She returned to her perusal of the magazines and Cherry removed her vacuum cleaner to the upper floor. Miss Marple's face was pink and interested, and being slightly deaf now, she did not hear the footsteps that came along the garden path towards the drawing room window. It was only when a slight shadow fell on the page that she looked up. Dermot Craddock was standing smiling at her.

"Doing your homework, I see," he remarked.

"Inspector Craddock, how very nice to see you. And how kind to spare time to come and see me. Would you like a cup of coffee, or possibly a glass of sherry?"

"A glass of sherry would be splendid," said Dermot. "Don't you move," he added. "I'll ask for it as I come in."

He went round by the side door and presently joined Miss Marple.

"Well," he said, "is that bump giving you ideas?"

"Rather too many ideas," said Miss Marple. "I'm not often shocked, you know, but this does shock me a little."

"What, the private lives of film stars?"

"Oh no," said Miss Marple, "not *that!* That all seems to be *most* natural, given the circumstances and the money involved and the

opportunities for propinquity. Oh, no, that's natural enough. I mean the way they're written about. I'm rather old-fashioned, you know, and I feel that that really shouldn't be allowed."

"It's news," said Dermot Craddock, "and some pretty nasty things can be said in the way of fair comment."

"I know," said Miss Marple. "It makes me sometimes very angry. I expect you think it's silly of me reading all these. But one does so badly want to be *in* things and of course sitting here in the house I can't really know as much about things as I would like to."

"That's just what I thought," said Dermot Craddock, "and that's why I've come to tell you about them."

"But, my dear boy, excuse me, would your superiors really approve of that?"

"I don't see why not," said Dermot. "Here," he added, "I have a list. A list of people who were there on that landing during the short time of Heather Badcock's arrival until her death. We've eliminated a lot of people, perhaps precipitately, but I don't think so. We've eliminated the mayor and his wife and Alderman somebody and his wife and a great many of the locals, though we've kept in the husband. If I remember rightly you were always very suspicious of husbands."

"They are often the obvious suspects," said Miss Marple, apologetically, "and the obvious is so often right."

"I couldn't agree with you more," said Craddock.

"But which husband, my dear boy, are you referring to?"

"Which one do you think?" asked Dermot. He eyed her sharply.

Miss Marple looked at him.

"Jason Rudd?" she asked.

"Ah!" said Craddock. "Your mind works just as mine does. I don't think it was Arthur Badcock, because you see, I don't think that Heather Badcock was meant to be killed. I think the intended victim was Marina Gregg."

"That would seem almost certain, wouldn't it?" said Miss Marple.

"And so," said Craddock, "as we both agree on that, the field widens. To tell you who was there on that day, what they saw or said they saw, and where they were or said they were, is only a

thing you could have observed for yourself if you'd been there. So my superiors, as you call them, couldn't possibly object to my discussing that with you, could they?"

"That's very nicely put, my dear boy," said Miss Marple.

"I'll give you a little précis of what I was told and then we'll come to the list."

He gave a brief résumé of what he had heard, and then he produced his list.

"It must be one of these," he said. "My godfather, Sir Henry Clithering, told me that you once had a club here. You called it the Tuesday Night Club. You all dined with each other in turn and then someone would tell a story—a story of some real life happening which had ended in mystery. A mystery of which only the teller of the tale knew the answer. And every time, so my godfather told me, you guessed right. So I thought I'd come along and see if you'd do a bit of guessing for me this morning."

"I think that is rather a frivolous way of putting it," said Miss Marple, reproving, "but there is one question I should like to ask."

"Yes?"

"What about the children?"

"The children? There's only one. An imbecile child in a sanatorium in America. Is that what you mean?"

"No," said Miss Marple, "that's not what I mean. It's very sad of course. One of those tragedies that seem to happen and there's no one to blame for it. No, I meant the children that I've seen mentioned in some article here." She tapped the papers in front of her. "Children that Marina Gregg adopted. Two boys, I think, and a girl. In one case a mother with a lot of children and very little money to bring them up in this country, wrote to her, and asked if she couldn't take a child. There was a lot of very silly false sentiment written about that. About the mother's unselfishness and the wonderful home and education and future the child was going to have. I can't find out much about the other two. One I think was a foreign refugee and the other was some American child. Marina Gregg adopted them at different times. I'd like to know what's happened to them."

Dermot Craddock looked at her curiously. "It's odd that you should think of that," he said. "I did just vaguely wonder about those children myself. But how do you connect them up?"

"Well," said Miss Marple, "as far as I can hear or find out, they're not living with her now, are they?"

"I expect they were provided for," said Craddock. "In fact, I think that the adoption laws would insist on that. There was probably money settled on them in trust."

"So when she got—tired of them," said Miss Marple with a very faint pause before the word "tired," "they were dismissed! After being brought up in luxury with every advantage. Is that it?"

"Probably," said Craddock. "I don't know exactly." He continued to look at her curiously.

"Children feel things, you know," said Miss Marple, nodding her head. "They feel things more than the people around them ever imagine. The sense of hurt, of being rejected, of not belonging. It's a thing that you don't get over just because of advantages. Education is no substitute for it, or comfortable living, or an assured income, or a start in a profession. It's the sort of thing that might rankle."

"Yes. But all the same, isn't it rather far-fetched to think that—well, what exactly do you think?"

"I haven't got as far as that," said Miss Marple. "I just wondered where they were now and how old they would be now? Grown-up, I should imagine, from what I've read here."

"I could find out, I suppose," said Dermot Craddock slowly.

"Oh, I don't want to bother you in anyway, or even to suggest that my little idea's worthwhile at all."

"There's no harm," said Dermot Craddock, "in having that checked up on." He made a note in his little book. "Now do you want to look at my little list?"

"I don't really think I should be able to do anything useful about that. You see, I wouldn't know who the people were."

"Oh, I could give you a running commentary," said Craddock. "Here we are. *Jason Rudd, husband*, (husbands always highly

suspicious). Everyone says that Jason Rudd adores her. That is suspicious in itself, don't you think?"

"Not necessarily," said Miss Marple with dignity.

"He's been very active in trying to conceal the fact that his wife was the object of attack. He hasn't hinted any suspicion of such a thing to the police. I don't know why he thinks we're such asses as not to think of it for ourselves. We've considered it from the first. But anyway, that's his story. He was afraid that knowledge of that fact might get to his wife's ears and that she'd go into a panic about it."

"Is she the sort of woman who goes into panics?"

"Yes, she's neurasthenic, throws temperaments, has nervous breakdowns, gets in states."

"That might not mean any lack of courage," Miss Marple objected.

"On the other hand," said Craddock, "if she knows quite well that she was the object of attack, it's also possible that she may know who did it."

"You mean she knows who did it—but does not want to disclose the fact?"

"I just say it's a possibility, and if so, one rather wonders why not? It looks as though the motive, the root of the matter, was something she didn't want to come to her husband's ear."

"That is certainly an interesting thought," said Miss Marple.

"Here are a few more names. The secretary, Ella Zielinsky. An extremely competent and efficient young woman."

"In love with the husband, do you think?" asked Miss Marple.

"I should think definitely," answered Craddock, "but why should you think so?"

"Well, it so often happens," said Miss Marple. "And therefore not very fond of poor Marina Gregg, I expect?"

"Therefore possible motive for murder," said Craddock.

"A lot of secretaries and employees are in love with their employers' husbands," said Miss Marple, "but very, very few of them try to poison them."

"Well, we must allow for exceptions," said Craddock. "Then there were two local and one London photographer, and two members of the Press. None of them seems likely but we will follow them up."

There was the woman who was formerly married to Marina Gregg's second or third husband. She didn't like it when Marina Gregg took her husband away. Still, that's about eleven or twelve years ago. It seems unlikely that she'd make a visit here at this juncture on purpose to poison Marina because of that. Then there's a man called Ardwyck Fenn. He was once a very close friend of Marina Gregg's. He hasn't seen her for years. He was not known to be in this part of the world and it was a great surprise when he turned up on this occasion."

"She would be startled then when she saw him?"

"Presumably yes."

"Startled—and possibly frightened."

"*"The doom has come upon me,"*" said Craddock. "That's the idea. Then there was young Hailey Preston dodging about that day, doing his stuff. Talks a good deal but definitely heard nothing, saw nothing and knew nothing. Almost too anxious to say so. Does anything there ring a bell?"

"Not exactly," said Miss Marple. "Plenty of interesting possibilities. But I'd still like to know a little more about the children."

He looked at her curiously. "You've got quite a bee in your bonnet about that, haven't you?" he said. "All right, I'll find out."

Thirteen

I

"I suppose it couldn't possibly have been the mayor?" said Inspector Cornish wistfully.

He tapped the paper with the list of names on it with his pencil. Dermot Craddock grinned.

"Wishful thinking?" he asked.

"You could certainly call it that," said Cornish. "Pompous, canting old hypocrite!" he went on. "Everybody's got it in for him. Throws his weight about, ultra sanctimonious, *and* neck deep in graft for years past!"

"Can't you ever bring it home to him?"

"No," said Cornish. "He's too slick for that. He's always just on the right side of the law."

"It's tempting, I agree," said Dermot Craddock, "but I think you'll have to banish that rosy picture from your mind, Frank."

"I know, I know," said Cornish. "He's a possible, but a wildly improbable. Who else have we got?"

Both men studied the list again. There were still eight names on it.

"We're pretty well agreed," said Craddock, "that there's nobody missed out from here?" There was a faint question in his voice. Cornish answered it.

"I think you can be pretty sure that's the lot. After Mrs. Bantry came the vicar, and after that the Badcocks. There were then eight

people on the stairs. The mayor and his wife, Joshua Grice and wife from Lower Farm. Donald McNeil of the Much Benham *Herald & Argus*. Ardwyck Fenn, USA, Miss Lola Brewster, USA, Moving Picture Star. There you are. In addition there was an arty photographer from London with a camera set up on the angle of the stairs. If, as you suggest, this Mrs. Bantry's story of Marina Gregg having a 'frozen look' was occasioned by someone she saw on the stairs, you've got to take your pick among that lot. Mayor regretfully out. Grices out—never been away from St. Mary Mead I should say. That leaves four. Local journalist unlikely, photographer girl had been there for half an hour already, so why should Marina react so late in the day? What does that leave?"

"Sinister strangers from America," said Craddock with a faint smile.

"You've said it."

"They're our best suspects by far, I agree," said Craddock. "They turned up unexpectedly. Ardwyck Fenn was an old flame of Marina's whom she had not seen for years. Lola Brewster was once married to Marina Gregg's third husband, who got a divorce from her in order to marry Marina. It was not, I gather, a very amicable divorce."

"I'd put her down as Suspect Number One," said Cornish.

"Would you, Frank? After a lapse of about fifteen years or so, and having remarried twice herself since then?"

Cornish said that you never knew with women. Dermot accepted that as a general dictum, but remarked that it seemed odd to him to say the least of it.

"But you agree that it lies between them?"

"Possibly. But I don't like it very much. What about the hired help who were serving the drinks?"

"Discounting the 'frozen look' we've heard so much about? Well, we've checked up in a general way. Local catering firm from Market Basing had the job—for the fête, I mean. Actually in the house, there was the butler, Giuseppe, in charge; and two local girls from the studios canteen. I know both of them. Not over bright, but harmless."

"Pushing it back at me, are you? I'll go and have a word with the reporter chap. He might have seen something helpful. Then to London. Ardwyck Fenn, Lola Brewster—and the photographer girl—what's her name?—Margot Bence. She also might have seen something."

Cornish nodded. "Lola Brewster is my best bet," he said. He looked curiously at Craddock. "You don't seem as sold on her as I am."

"I'm thinking of the difficulties," said Dermot slowly.

"Difficulties?"

"Of putting poison into Marina's glass without anybody seeing her."

"Well, that's the same for everybody, isn't it? It was a mad thing to do."

"Agreed it was a mad thing to do, but it would be a madder thing for someone like Lola Brewster than for anybody else."

"Why?" asked Cornish.

"Because she was a guest of importance. She's a somebody, a big name. Everyone would be looking at her."

"True enough," Cornish admitted.

"The locals would nudge each other and whisper and stare, and after Marina Gregg and Jason Rudd greeted her she'd have been passed on for the secretaries to look after. It wouldn't be easy, Frank. However adroit you were, you couldn't be sure *someone* wouldn't see you. That's the snag there, and it's a big snag."

"As I say, isn't that snag the same for everybody?"

"No," said Craddock. "Oh no. Far from it. Take the butler now, Giuseppe. He's busy with the drinks and glasses, with pouring things out, with handing them. He could put a pinch or a tablet or two of Calmo in a glass easily enough."

"Giuseppe?" Frank Cornish reflected. "Do you think he did?"

"No reason to believe so," said Craddock, "but we might find a reason. A nice solid bit of motive, that is to say. Yes, he could have done it. Or one of the catering staff could have done it—unfortunately they weren't on the spot—a pity."

"Someone might have managed to get himself or herself deliberately planted in the firm for the purpose."

"You mean it might have been as premeditated as all that?"

"We don't know anything about it yet," said Craddock, vexedly. "We absolutely don't know the first thing about it. Not until we can prise what we want to know out of Marina Gregg, or out of her husband. They *must* know or suspect—but they're not telling. And we don't know yet *why* they're not telling. We've a long way to go."

He paused and then resumed: "Discounting the 'frozen look' which may have been pure coincidence, there are other people who could have done it fairly easily. The secretary woman, Ella Zielinsky. She was also busy with glasses, with handing things to people. Nobody would be watching *her* with any particular interest. The same applies to that willow wand of a young man—I've forgotten his name. Hailey—Hailey Preston? That's right. There would have been a good opportunity for either of them. In fact if either of them *had* wanted to do away with Marina Gregg it would have been far safer to do so on a public occasion."

"Anyone else?"

"Well, there's always the husband," said Craddock.

"Back to the husbands again," said Cornish, with a faint smile. "We thought it was that poor devil, Badcock, before we realised that Marina was the intended victim. Now we've transferred our suspicions to Jason Rudd. He seems devoted enough though, I must say."

"He has the reputation of being so," said Craddock, "but one never knows."

"If he wanted to get rid of her, wouldn't divorce be much easier?"

"It would be far more usual," agreed Dermot, "but there may be a lot of ins and outs to this business that we don't know yet."

The telephone rang. Cornish took up the receiver.

"What? Yes? Put them through. Yes, he's here." He listened for a moment then put his hand over the receiver and looked at Dermot. "Miss Marina Gregg," he said, "is feeling very much better. She is quite ready to be interviewed."

"I'd better hurry along," said Dermot Craddock, "before she changes her mind."

II

At Gossington Hall Dermot Craddock was received by Ella Zielinsky. She was, as usual, brisk and efficient.

"Miss Gregg is waiting for you, Mr. Craddock," she said.

Dermot looked at her with some interest. From the beginning he had found Ella Zielinsky an intriguing personality. He had said to himself, "A poker face if I ever saw one." She had answered any questions he had asked with the utmost readiness. She had shown no signs of keeping anything back, but what she really thought or felt or even knew about the business, he still had no idea. There seemed to be no chink in the armour of her bright efficiency. She might know more than she said she did; she might know a good deal. The only thing he was sure of—and he had to admit to himself that he had no reasons to adduce for that surety—was that she was in love with Jason Rudd. It was, as he had said, an occupational disease of secretaries. It probably meant nothing. But the fact did at least suggest a motive and he was sure, quite sure, that she was concealing something. It might be love, it might be hate. It might, quite simply, be guilt. She might have taken her opportunity that afternoon, or she might have deliberately planned what she was going to do. He could see her in the part quite easily, as far as the execution of it went. Her swift but unhurried movements, moving here and there, looking after guests, handing glasses to one or another, taking glasses away, her eyes marking the spot where Marina had put her glass down on the table. And then, perhaps at the very moment when Marina had been greeting the arrivals from the States, with surprise and joyous cries and everybody's eyes turned towards their meeting, she could have quietly and unobtrusively dropped the fatal dose into that glass. It would require audacity, nerve, swiftness. She would have had all those. Whatever she had done, she would not have looked guilty whilst she was

doing it. It would have been a simple, brilliant crime, a crime that could hardly fail to be successful. But chance had ruled otherwise. In the rather crowded floorspace someone had joggled Heather Badcock's arm. Her drink had been spilt, and Marina, with her natural impulsive grace, had quickly proffered her own glass, standing there untouched. And so the wrong woman had died.

A lot of pure theory, and probably hooey at that, said Dermot Craddock to himself at the same time as he was making polite remarks to Ella Zielinsky.

"One thing I wanted to ask you, Miss Zielinsky. The catering was done by a Market Basing firm, I understand?"

"Yes."

"Why was that particular firm chosen?"

"I really don't know," said Ella. "That doesn't lie amongst my duties. I know Mr. Rudd thought it would be more tactful to employ somebody local rather than to employ a firm from London. The whole thing was really quite a small affair from our point of view."

"Quite." He watched her as she stood frowning a little and looking down. A good forehead, a determined chin, a figure which could look quite voluptuous if it was allowed to do so, a hard mouth, an acquisitive mouth. The eyes? He looked at them in surprise. The lids were reddened. He wondered. Had she been crying? It looked like it. And yet he could have sworn she was not the type of young woman to cry. She looked up at him, and as though she read his thoughts, she took out her handkerchief and blew her nose heartily.

"You've got a cold," he said.

"Not a cold. Hay fever. It's an allergy of some kind, really. I always get at it this time of year."

There was a low buzz. There were two phones in the room, one on the table and one on another table in the corner. It was the latter one that was beginning to buzz. Ella Zielinsky went over to it and picked up the receiver.

"Yes," she said, "he's here. I'll bring him up at once." She put the receiver down again. "Marina's ready for you," she said.

III

Marina Gregg received Craddock in a room on the first floor, which was obviously her own private sitting room opening out of her bedroom. After the accounts of her prostration and her nervous state, Dermot Craddock had expected to find a fluttering invalid. But although Marina was half reclining on a sofa her voice was vigorous and her eyes were bright. She had very little makeup on, but in spite of this she did not look her age, and he was struck very forcibly by the subdued radiance of her beauty. It was the exquisite line of cheek and jawbone, the way the hair fell loosely and naturally to frame her face. The long sea-green eyes, the pencilled eyebrows, owing something to art but more to nature, and the warmth and sweetness of her smile, all had a subtle magic. She said:

"Chief-Inspector Craddock? I've been behaving disgracefully. I do apologize. I just let myself go to pieces after this awful thing. I could have snapped out of it but I didn't. I'm ashamed of myself." The smile came, rueful, sweet, turning up the corners of the mouth. She extended a hand and he took it.

"It was only natural," he said, "that you should feel upset."

"Well, everyone was upset," said Marina. "I'd no business to make out it was worse for me than anyone else."

"Hadn't you?"

She looked at him for a minute and then nodded. "Yes," she said, "you're very perceptive. Yes, I had." She looked down and with one long forefinger gently stroked the arm of the sofa. It was a gesture he had noticed in one of her films. It was a meaningless gesture, yet it seemed fraught with significance. It had a kind of musing gentleness.

"I'm a coward," she said, her eyes still cast down. "Somebody wanted to kill me and I didn't want to die."

"Why do you think someone wanted to kill you?"

Her eyes opened wide. "Because it was my glass—*my* drink—that had been tampered with. It was just a mistake that that poor stupid woman got it. That's what's so horrible and so tragic. Besides—"

"Yes, Miss Gregg?"

She seemed a little uncertain about saying more.

"You had other reasons perhaps for believing that you were the intended victim?"

She nodded.

"What reasons, Miss Gregg?"

She paused a minute longer before saying, "Jason says I must tell you all about it."

"You've confided in him then?"

"Yes... I didn't want to at first—but Dr. Gilchrist put it to me that I must. And then I found that he thought so too. He'd thought it all along but—it's rather funny really"—rueful smile curled her lips again—"he didn't want to alarm me by telling me. Really!" Marina sat up with a sudden vigorous movement. "Darling Jinks! Does he think I'm a complete fool?"

"You haven't told me yet, Miss Gregg, why you should think anyone wanted to kill you."

She was silent for a moment and then with a sudden brusque gesture, she stretched out for her handbag, opened it, took out a piece of paper and thrust it into his hand. He read it. Typed on it was one line of writing.

Don't think you'll escape next time.

Craddock said sharply, "When did you get this?" "It was on my dressing table when I came back from the bath."

"So someone in the house—"

"Not necessarily. Someone could have climbed up the balcony outside my window and pushed it through there. I think they meant it to frighten me still more, but actually it didn't. I just felt furiously angry and sent word to you to come and see me."

Dermot Craddock smiled. "Possibly a rather unexpected result for whoever sent it. Is this the first kind of message like that you've had?"

Again Marina hesitated. Then she said, "No, it isn't."

"Will you tell me about any other?"

"It was three weeks ago, when we first came here. It came to the studio, not here. It was quite ridiculous. It was just a message. Not typewritten that time. In capital letters. It said, '*Prepare to die.*'" She laughed. There was perhaps a very faint tinge of hysteria in the laugh. The mirth was genuine enough. "It was so silly," she said. "Of course one often gets crank messages, threats, things like that. I thought it was probably religious you know. Someone who didn't approve of film actresses. I just tore it up and threw it into the wastepaper basket."

"Did you tell anyone about it, Miss Gregg?"

Marina shook her head. "No, I never said a word to anyone. As a matter of fact, we were having a bit of worry at the moment about the scene we were shooting. I just couldn't have thought of anything but that at the moment. Anyway, as I say, I thought it was either a silly joke or one of those religious cranks who write and disapprove of playacting and things like that."

"And after that, was there another?"

"Yes. On the day of the fête. One of the gardeners brought it to me, I think. He said someone had left a note for me and was there any answer? I thought perhaps it had to do with the arrangements. I just tore it open. It said '*Today will be your last day on earth.*' I just crumpled it up and said, '*No answer.*' Then I called the man back and asked him who gave it to him. He said it was a man with spectacles on a bicycle. Well, I mean, what could you think about that? I thought it was more silliness. I didn't think—I didn't think for a moment, it was a real genuine threat."

"Where's that note now, Miss Gregg?"

"I've no idea. I was wearing one of those coloured Italian silk coats and I think, as far as I remember, that I crumpled it up and shoved it into the pocket of it. But it's not there now. It probably fell out."

"And you've no idea who wrote these silly notes, Miss Gregg? Who inspired them? Not even now?"

Her eyes opened widely. There was a kind of innocent wonder in them that he took note of. He admired it, but he did not believe in it.

"How can I tell? How can I possibly tell?"

"I think you might have quite a good idea, Miss Gregg."

"I haven't. I assure you I haven't."

"You're a very famous person," said Dermot. "You've had great successes. Successes in your profession, and personal successes, too. Men have fallen in love with you, wanted to marry you, have married you. Women have been jealous and envied you. Men have been in love with you and been rebuffed by you. It's a pretty wild field, I agree, but I should think you must have *some* idea who could have written these notes."

"It could have been anybody."

"No, Miss Gregg, it couldn't have been *anybody*. It could possibly have been one of quite a lot of people. It could be someone quite humble, a dresser, an electrician, a servant; or it could be someone among the ranks of your friends, or so-called friends. But you must have some idea. Some name, more than one name, perhaps, to suggest."

The door opened and Jason Rudd came in. Marina turned to him. She swept out an arm appealingly.

"Jinks, darling, Mr. Craddock is insisting that I must know who wrote those horrid notes. And I don't. You know I don't. Neither of us knows. We haven't got the least idea."

"Very urgent about that," thought Craddock. "Very urgent. Is Marina Gregg afraid of what her husband might say?"

Jason Rudd, his eyes dark with fatigue and the scowl on his face deeper than usual, came over to join them. He took Marina's hand in his.

"I know it sounds unbelievable to you, Inspector," he said, "but honestly neither Marina nor I have any idea about this business."

"So you're in the happy position of having no enemies, is that it?" The irony was manifest in Dermot's voice.

Jason Rudd flushed a little. "Enemies? That's a very biblical word, Inspector. In that sense, I can assure you I can think of no enemies. People who dislike one, would like to get the better of one, would do a mean turn to one if they could, in malice and uncharitableness, yes. But it's a long step from that to putting an overdose of poison in a drink."

"Just now, in speaking to your wife, I asked her who could have written or inspired those letters. She said she didn't know. But when we come to the actual action, it narrows it down. *Somebody actually put the poison in that glass.* And that's a fairly limited field, you know."

"I saw nothing," said Jason Rudd.

"I certainly didn't," said Marina. "Well, I mean—if I had seen anyone putting anything in my glass, I wouldn't have drunk the stuff, would I?"

"I can't help believing, you know," said Dermot Craddock gently, "that you do know a little more than you're telling me."

"It's not *true*," said Marina. "Tell him that that isn't true, Jason."

"I assure you," said Jason Rudd, "that I am completely and absolutely at a loss. The whole thing's fantastic. I might believe it was a joke—a joke that had somehow gone wrong—that had proved dangerous, done by a person who never dreamt that it would be dangerous...."

There was a slight question in his voice, then he shook his head. "No. I see that idea doesn't appeal to you."

"There's one more thing I should like to ask you," said Dermot Craddock. "You remember Mr. and Mrs. Badcock's arrival, of course. They came immediately after the vicar. You greeted them, I understand, Miss Gregg, in the same charming way as you had received all your guests. But I am told by an eyewitness that immediately after greeting them you looked over Mrs. Badcock's shoulder and that you saw something which seemed to alarm you. Is that true, and if so, what was it?"

Marina said quickly, "Of course it isn't true. Alarm me—what should have alarmed me?"

"That's what we want to know," said Dermot Craddock patiently. "My witness is very insistent on the point, you know."

"Who was your witness? What did he or she say she saw?"

"You were looking at the staircase," said Dermot Craddock. "There were people coming up the staircase. There was a journalist, there was Mr. Grice and his wife, elderly residents in this place, there was Mr. Ardwyck Fenn who had just arrived from the States and there

was Miss Lola Brewster. Was it the sight of one of those people that upset you, Miss Gregg?"

"I tell you I wasn't upset." She almost barked the words.

"And yet your attention wavered from greeting Mrs. Badcock. She had said something to you which you left unanswered because you were staring past her at something else."

Marina Gregg took hold on herself. She spoke quickly and convincingly.

"I can explain, I really can. If you knew anything about acting you'd be able to understand quite easily. There comes a moment, even when you know a part well—in fact it usually happens when you *do* know a part well—when you go on with it mechanically. Smiling, making the proper movements and gestures, saying the words with the usual inflexions. But your mind isn't on it. And quite suddenly there's a horrible blank moment when you don't know where you are, where you've got to in the play, what your next lines are! Drying up, that's what we call it. Well, that's what happened to me. I'm not terribly strong, as my husband will tell you. I've had rather a strenuous time, and a good deal of nervous apprehension about this film. I wanted to make a success of this fête and to be nice and pleasant and welcoming to everybody. But one does say the same things over and over again, mechanically, to the people who are always saying the same things to you. You know, how they've always wanted to meet you. How they once saw you outside a theatre in San Francisco—or travelled in a plane with you. Something silly really, but one has to be nice about it and say things. Well, as I'm telling you, one does that automatically. One doesn't need to think what to say because one's said it so often before. Suddenly, I think, a wave of tiredness came over me. My brain went blank. Then I realized that Mrs. Badcock had been telling me a long story which I hadn't really heard at all, and was now looking at me in an eager sort of way and that I hadn't answered her or said any of the proper things. It was just tiredness."

"Just tiredness," said Dermot Craddock slowly. "You insist on that, Miss Gregg?"

"Yes, I do. I can't see why you don't believe me."

Dermot Craddock turned towards Jason Rudd. "Mr. Rudd," he said, "I think you're more likely to understand my meaning than your wife is. I am concerned, very much concerned, for your wife's safety. There has been an attempt on her life, there have been threatening letters. That means, doesn't it, that there is someone who was here on the day of the fête and possibly is still here, someone in very close touch with this house and what goes on in it. That person, whoever it is, may be slightly insane. It's not just a question of threats. Threatened men live long, as they say. The same goes for women. But whoever it was didn't stop at threats. A deliberate attempt was made to poison Miss Gregg. Don't you see in the whole nature of things, that the attempt is bound to be repeated? There's only one way to achieve safety. That is to give me all the clues you possibly can. I don't say that you *know* who that person is, but I think that you must be able to give a guess or to have a vague idea. Won't you tell me the truth? Or if, which is possible, you yourself do not know the truth, won't you urge your wife to do so. It's in the interests of her own safety that I'm asking you."

Jason Rudd turned his head slowly. "You hear what Inspector Craddock says, Marina," he said. "It's possible, as he says, that you may know something that I do not. If so, for God's sake, don't be foolish about it. If you've the least suspicion of *anyone*, tell it to us now."

"But I haven't." Her voice rose in a wail. "You must believe me."

"Who were you afraid of that day?" asked Dermot.

"I wasn't afraid of anyone."

"Listen, Miss Gregg, of the people on the stairs or coming up it, there were two friends whom you were surprised to see, whom you had not seen for a long time and whom you did not expect to see that day. Mr. Ardwyck Fenn and Miss Brewster. Had you any special emotions when you suddenly saw them coming up the stairs? You didn't know they were coming, did you?"

"No, we'd no idea they were even in England," said Jason Rudd.

"I was delighted," said Marina, "absolutely delighted!"

"Delighted to see Miss Brewster?"

"Well—" She shot him a quick, faintly suspicious glance.

Craddock said, "Lola Brewster was, I believe, originally married to your third husband Robert Truscott?"

"Yes, that's so."

"He divorced her in order to marry you."

"Oh, everyone knows about that," said Marina Gregg impatiently. "You needn't think it's anything you've found out. There was a bit of a rumpus at the time, but there wasn't any bad feeling about it in the end."

"Did she make threats against you?"

"Well—in a way, yes. But, oh dear, I wish I could explain. No one takes those sort of threats *seriously*. It was at a party, she'd had a lot of drink. She might have taken a pot-shot at me with a pistol if she'd had one. But luckily she didn't. All that was *years* ago! None of these things last, these emotions! They don't, really they don't. That's true, isn't it, Jason?"

"I'd say it was true enough," said Jason Rudd, "and I can assure you, Mr. Craddock, that Lola Brewster had no opportunity on the day of the fête of poisoning my wife's drink. I was close beside her most of the time. The idea that Lola would suddenly, after a long period of friendliness, come to England, and arrive at our house all prepared to poison my wife's drink—why the whole idea's absurd."

"I appreciate your point of view," said Craddock.

"It's not only that, it's a matter of *fact* as well. She was nowhere near Marina's glass."

"And your other visitor—Ardwyck Fenn?"

There was, he thought, a very slight pause before Jason Rudd spoke.

"He's a very old friend of ours," he said. "We haven't seen him for a good many years now, though we occasionally correspond. He's quite a big figure in American television."

"Was he an old friend of yours too?" Dermot Craddock asked Marina.

Her breath came rather quickly as she replied. "Yes, oh yes. He—he was quite a friend of mine always, but I've rather lost sight of him of late years." Then with a sudden quick rush of words, she went on, "If you think that I looked up and saw Ardwyck and was frightened

of him, it's nonsense. It's absolute *nonsense*. Why should I be frightened of him, what reason would I have to be frightened of him? We were great friends. I was just very, very pleased when I suddenly saw him. It was a delightful surprise, as I told you. Yes, a delightful surprise." She raised her head, looking at him, her face vivid and defiant.

"Thank you, Miss Gregg," said Craddock quietly. "If you should feel inclined at any moment to take me a little further into your confidence I should strongly advise you to do so."

Fourteen

I

Mrs. Bantry was on her knees. A good day for hoeing. Nice dry soil. But hoeing wouldn't do everything. Thistles now, and dandelions. She dealt vigorously with these pests.

She rose to her feet, breathless but triumphant, and looked out over the hedge on to the road. She was faintly surprised to see the dark-haired secretary whose name she couldn't remember coming out of the public call box that was situated near the bus stop on the other side of the road.

What was her name now. It began with a B—or was it an R? No, *Zielinsky*, that was it. Mrs. Bantry remembered just in time, as Ella crossed the road into the drive past the Lodge.

"Good morning, Miss Zielinsky," she called in a friendly tone.

Ella Zielinsky jumped. It was not so much a jump, as a shy—the shy of a frightened horse. It surprised Mrs. Bantry.

"Good morning," said Ella, and added quickly: "I came down to telephone. There's something wrong with our line today."

Mrs. Bantry felt more surprise. She wondered why Ella Zielinsky bothered to explain her action. She responded civilly. "How annoying for you. Do come in and telephone anytime you want to."

"Oh—thank you very much..." Ella was interrupted by a fit of sneezing.

"You've got hay fever," said Mrs. Bantry with immediate diagnosis. "Try weak bicarbonate of soda and water."

"Oh, that's all right. I have some very good patent stuff in an atomizer. Thank you all the same."

She sneezed again as she moved away, walking briskly up the drive.

Mrs. Bantry looked after her. Then her eyes returned to her garden. She looked at it in a dissatisfied fashion. Not a weed to be seen anywhere.

"Othello's occupation's gone," Mrs. Bantry murmured to herself confusedly. "I dare say I'm a nosy old woman but I would like to know if—"

A moment of irresolution and then Mrs. Bantry yielded to temptation. She was going to be a nosy old woman and the hell with it! She strode indoors to the telephone, lifted the receiver and dialled it. A brisk transatlantic voice spoke.

"Gossington Hall."

"This is Mrs. Bantry, at the East Lodge."

"Oh, good morning, Mrs. Bantry. This is Hailey Preston. I met you on the day of the fête. What can I do for you?"

"I thought perhaps I could do something for you. If your telephone's out of order—"

His astonished voice interrupted her.

"Our telephone out of order? There's been nothing wrong with it. Why did you think so?"

"I must have made a mistake," said Mrs. Bantry. "I don't always hear very well," she explained unblushingly.

She put the receiver back, waited a minute, then dialled once more.

"Jane? Dolly here."

"Yes, Dolly. What is it?"

"Well, it seems rather *odd*. The secretary woman was dialling from the public call box in the road. She took the trouble to explain to me quite unnecessarily that she was doing so because the line at Gossington Hall was out of order. But I've rung up there, and it *isn't*..."

She paused, and waited for intelligence to pronounce.

"Indeed," said Miss Marple thoughtfully. "Interesting."

"For what reason, do you think?"

"Well, clearly, she didn't want to be overheard—"

"Exactly."

"And there might be quite a number of reasons for that."

"Yes."

"Interesting," said Miss Marple again.

II

Nobody could have been more ready to talk than Donald McNeil. He was an amiable red-headed young man. He greeted Dermot Craddock with pleasure and curiosity.

"How are you getting along," he asked cheerfully, "got any little special titbit for me?"

"Not as yet. Later perhaps."

"Stalling as usual. You're all the same. Affable oysters! Haven't you come to the stage yet of inviting someone to come and 'assist you in your inquiries'?"

"I've come to you," said Dermot Craddock with a grin.

"Is there a nasty double entendre in that remark? Are you really suspicious that I murdered Heather Badcock and do you think I did it in mistake for Marina Gregg or that I meant to murder Heather Badcock and do you think I did it in mistake for Marina Gregg or that I meant to murder Heather Badcock all the time?"

"I haven't suggested anything," said Craddock.

"No, no, you wouldn't do that, would you? You'd be very correct. All right. Let's go into it. I was there. I had opportunity but had I any motive? Ah, that's what you'd like to know. What was my motive?"

"I haven't been able to find one so far," said Craddock.

"That's very gratifying. I feel safer."

"I'm just interested in what you may have seen that day."

"You've had that already. The local police had that straight away. It's humiliating. There I was on the scene of a murder. I practically *saw* the murder committed, must have done, and yet I've no idea who did it. I'm ashamed to confess that the first *I* knew about it was

seeing the poor, dear woman sitting on a chair gasping for breath and then pegging out. Of course it made a very good eyewitness account. It was a good scoop for me—and all that. But I'll confess to you that I feel humiliated that I don't know more. I ought to know more. And you can't kid me that the dose was meant for Heather Badcock. She was a nice woman who talked too much, but nobody gets murdered for that—unless of course they give away secrets. But I don't think anybody would ever have told Heather Badcock a secret. She wasn't the kind of woman who'd have been interested in other people's secrets. My view of her is of a woman who invariably talked about *herself*."

"That seems to be the generally accepted view," agreed Craddock.

"So we come to the famous Marina Gregg. I'm sure there are lots of wonderful motives for murdering Marina. Envy and jealousy and love tangles—all the stuff of drama. But who did it? Someone with a screw loose, I presume. There! You've had my valuable opinion. Is that what you wanted?"

"Not that alone. I understand that you arrived and came up the stairs about the same time as the vicar and the mayor."

"Quite correct. But that wasn't the first time I'd arrived. I'd been there earlier."

"I didn't know that."

"Yes. I was on a kind of roving commission, you know, going here and there. I had a photographer with me. I'd gone down to take a few local shots of the mayor arriving and throwing a hoopla and putting in a peg for buried treasure and that kind of thing. Then I went back up again, not so much on the job as to get a drink or two. The drink was good."

"I see. Now can you remember who else was on the staircase when you went up?"

"Margot Bence from London was there with her camera."

"You know her well?"

"Oh I just run against her quite often. She's a clever girl, who makes a success of her stuff. She takes all the fashionable things—First Nights, Gala Performances—specializes in photographs from

unusual angles. Arty! She was in a corner of the half landing very well placed for taking anyone who came up and for taking the greetings going on at the top. Lola Brewster was just ahead of me on the stairs. Didn't know her at first. She's got a new rust-red hairdo. The very latest Fiji Islander type. Last time I saw her it was lank waves falling round her face and chin in a nice shade of auburn. There was a big dark man with her, American. I don't know who he was but he looked important."

"Did you look at Marina Gregg herself at all as you were coming up?"

"Yes, of course I did."

"She didn't look upset or as though she'd had a shock or was frightened?"

"It's odd you should say that. I *did* think for a moment or two she was going to faint."

"I see," said Craddock thoughtfully. "Thanks. There's nothing else you'd like to tell me?"

McNeil gave him a wide innocent stare.

"What could there be?"

"I don't trust you," said Craddock.

"But you seem quite sure I didn't do it. Disappointing. Suppose I turn out to be her first husband. Nobody knows who he was except that he was so insignificant that even his name's been forgotten."

Dermot grinned.

"Married from your prep school?" he asked. "Or possibly in rompers! I must hurry. I've got a train to catch."

III

There was a neatly docketed pile of papers on Craddock's desk at New Scotland Yard. He gave a perfunctory glance through them, then threw a question over his shoulder.

"Where's Lola Brewster staying?"

"At the Savoy, sir. Suite 1800. She's expecting you."

"And Ardwyck Fenn?"

"He's at the Dorchester. First floor, 190."

"Good."

He picked up some cablegrams and read through them again before shoving them into his pocket. He smiled a moment to himself over the last one. "Don't say I don't do my stuff, Aunt Jane," he murmured under his breath.

He went out and made his way to the Savoy.

In Lola Brewster's suite Lola went out of her way to welcome him effusively. With the report he had just read in his mind, he studied her carefully. Quite a beauty still, he thought, in a lush kind of way, what you might call a trifle overblown, perhaps, but they still liked them that way. A completely different type, of course, from Marina Gregg. The amenities over, Lola pushed back her Fiji Islander hair, drew her generous lipsticked mouth into a provocative pout, and flickering blue eyelids over wide brown eyes, said:

"Have you come to ask me a lot more horrible questions? Like that local inspector did."

"I hope they won't be too horrible, Miss Brewster."

"Oh, but I'm sure they will be, and I'm sure the whole thing must have been some terrible mistake."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes. It's all such nonsense. Do you really mean that someone tried to poison Marina? Who on earth would poison Marina? She's an absolute sweetie, you know. Everybody loves her."

"Including you?"

"I've always been devoted to Marina."

"Oh come now, Miss Brewster, wasn't there a little trouble about eleven or twelve years ago?"

"Oh that." Lola waved it away. "I was terribly nervy and distraught, and Rob and I had been having the most frightful quarrels. We were neither of us normal at the moment. Marina just fell wildly in love with him and rushed him off his feet, the poor pet."

"And you minded very much?"

"Well, I thought I did, Inspector. Of course I see now it was one of the best things that ever happened for me. I was really worried about the *children*, you know. Breaking up our home. I'm afraid I'd

already realized that Rob and I were incompatible. I expect you know I got married to Eddie Groves as soon as the divorce went through? I think really I'd been in love with him for a long time, but of course I didn't want to break up my marriage, because of the children. It's so important, isn't it, that children should have a *home*?"

"Yet people say that actually you were terribly upset."

"Oh, people always say things," said Lola vaguely.

"You said quite a lot, didn't you, Miss Brewster? You went about threatening to shoot Marina Gregg, or so I understand."

"I've told you one *says* things. One's *supposed* to say things like that. Of course I wouldn't really shoot *anyone*."

"In spite of taking a pot-shot at Eddie Groves some few years later?"

"Oh, that was because we'd had an argument," said Lola. "I lost my temper."

"I have it on very good authority, Miss Brewster, that you said—and these are your exact words or so I'm told," (he read from a notebook)—"That bitch needn't think she'll get away with it. If I don't shoot her now I'll wait and get her in some other way. I don't care how long I wait, years if need be, but I'll get even with her in the end."

"Oh, I'm sure I never said anything of the kind," Lola laughed.

"I'm sure, Miss Brewster, that you did."

"People exaggerate so." A charming smile broke over her face. "I was just mad at the moment, you know," she murmured confidentially. "One says all sorts of things when one's mad with people. But you don't really think I'd wait fourteen years and come across to England, and look up Marina and drop some deadly poison into her cocktail glass within three minutes of seeing her again?"

Dermot Craddock didn't really think so. It seemed to him wildly improbable. He merely said:

"I'm only pointing out to you, Miss Brewster, that there had been threats in the past and that Marina Gregg was certainly startled and frightened to see someone who came up the stairs that day. Naturally one feels that that someone must have been you."

"But darling Marina was delighted to see me! She kissed me and exclaimed how wonderful it was. Oh really, Inspector, I do think you're being very, very silly."

"In fact, you were all one big happy family?"

"Well, that's really much more true than all the things you've been thinking."

"And you've no ideas that could help us in anyway? No ideas who might have killed her?"

"I tell you nobody would have wanted to kill Marina. She's a very silly woman anyway. Always making terrible fusses about her health, and changing her mind and wanting this, that and the other, and when she's got it being dissatisfied with it! I can't think why people are as fond of her as they are. Jason's always been absolutely mad about her. What that man has to put up with! But there it is. Everybody puts up with Marina, puts themselves out for her. Then she gives them a sad, sweet smile and thanks them! And apparently that makes them feel that all the trouble is worthwhile. I really don't know how she does it. You'd better put the idea that somebody wanted to kill her right out of your head."

"I should like to," said Dermot Craddock. "Unfortunately I can't put it out of my head because, you see, it happened."

"What do you mean, *it happened*, nobody has killed Marina, have they?"

"No. But the attempt was made."

"I don't believe it for a moment! I expect whoever it was meant to kill the other woman all the time—the one who *was* killed. I expect someone comes into money when she dies."

"She hadn't any money, Miss Brewster."

"Oh well, there was some other reason. Anyway, I shouldn't worry about Marina if I were you. Marina is *always* all right!"

"Is she? She doesn't look a very happy woman to me."

"Oh, that's because she makes such a song and dance about everything. Unhappy love affairs. Not being able to have any children."

"She adopted some children, didn't she?" said Dermot with a lively remembrance of Miss Marple's urgent voice.

"I believe she did once. It wasn't a great success I believe. She does these impulsive things and then wishes she hadn't."

"What happened to the children she adopted?"

"I've no idea. They just sort of vanished after a bit. She got tired of them, I suppose, like everything else."

"I see," said Dermot Craddock.

IV

Next—the Dorchester. Suite 190.

"Well, Chief-Inspector—" Ardwyck Fenn looked down at the card in his hand.

"Craddock."

"What can I do for you?"

"I hope you won't mind if I ask you a few questions."

"Not at all. It's this business at Much Benham. No—what's the actual name, St. Mary Mead?"

"Yes. That's right. Gossington Hall."

"Can't think what Jason Rudd wanted to buy a place like that for. Plenty of good Georgian houses in England—or even Queen Anne. Gossington Hall is a purely Victorian mansion. Where's the attraction in that, I wonder?"

"Oh, there's some attraction—for some people, that is, in Victorian stability."

"Stability? Well, perhaps you've got something there. Marina, I suppose, had a feeling for stability. It's a thing she never had herself, poor girl, so I suppose that's why she always covets it. Perhaps this place will satisfy her for a bit."

"You know her well, Mr. Fenn?"

Ardwyck Fenn shrugged his shoulders.

"Well? I don't know that I'd say that. I've known her over a long period of years. Known her off and on, that is to say."

Craddock looked at him appraisingly. A dark man, heavily built, shrewd eyes behind thick glasses, heavy jowl and chin, Ardwyck Fenn went on:

"The idea is, I gather, from what I read in the newspapers, that this Mrs. Whatever-her-name-was, was poisoned by mistake. That the dose was intended for Marina. Is that right?"

"Yes. That's it. The dose was in Marina Gregg's cocktail. Mrs. Badcock spilt hers and Marina handed over her drink to her."

"Well that seems pretty conclusive. I really can't think, though, who would want to poison Marina. Especially as Lynette Brown wasn't there."

"Lynette Brown?" Craddock looked slightly at sea.

Ardwyck Fenn smiled. "If Marina breaks this contract, throws up the part—Lynette will get it and it would mean a good deal to Lynette to get it. But for all that, I don't imagine she'd send some emissary along with poison. Much too melodramatic an idea."

"It seems a little far-fetched," said Dermot dryly.

"Ah, you'd be surprised what women will do when they're ambitious," said Ardwyck Fenn. "Mind you, death mayn't have been intended. It may have been just to give her a fright—Enough to knock her out but not to finish her."

Craddock shook his head. "It wasn't a borderline dose," he said.

"People make mistakes in doses, quite big ones."

"Is this really your theory?"

"Oh no, it isn't. It was only a suggestion. I've no theory. I was only an innocent bystander."

"Was Marina Gregg very surprised to see you?"

"Yes, it was a complete surprise to her." He laughed amusedly. "Just couldn't believe her eyes when she saw me coming up the stairs. She gave me a very nice welcome, I must say."

"You hadn't seen her for a long time?"

"Not for four or five years, I should say."

"And some years before that there was a time when you and she were very close friends, I believe?"

"Are you insinuating anything in particular by that remark, Inspector Craddock?"

There was very little change in the voice but there was something there that had not been there before. A hint of steel, of menace.

Dermot felt suddenly that this man would be a very ruthless opponent.

"It would be as well, I think," said Ardwyck Fenn, "that you said exactly what you do mean."

"I'm quite prepared to do so, Mr. Fenn. I have to inquire into the past relations of everyone who was there on that day with Marina Gregg. It seems to have been a matter of common gossip that at the time I have just referred to, you were wildly in love with Marina Gregg."

Ardwyck Fenn shrugged his shoulders.

"One has these infatuations, Inspector. Fortunately, they pass."

"It is said that she encouraged you and that later she turned you down and that you resented the fact."

"It is said—it is said! I suppose you read all that in *Confidential*?"

"It has been told me by quite well-informed and sensible people."

Ardwyck Fenn threw back his head, showing the bull-like line of his neck.

"I had a yen for her at one time, yes," he admitted. "She was a beautiful and attractive woman and still is. To say that I ever threatened her is going a little too far. I'm never pleased to be thwarted, Chief-Inspector, and most people who thwart me tend to be sorry that they have done so. But that principle applies mainly in my business life."

"You did, I believe, use your influence to have her dropped from a picture that she was making?"

Fenn shrugged his shoulders.

"She was unsuitable for the role. There was conflict between her and the director. I had money in that picture and I had no intention of jeopardizing it. It was, I assure you, purely a business transaction."

"But perhaps Marina Gregg did not think so?"

"Oh, naturally she did not think so. She would always think that anything like that was personal."

"She actually told certain friends of hers that she was afraid of you, I believe?"

"Did she? How childish. I expect she enjoyed the sensation."

"You think there was no need for her to be afraid of you?"

"Of course not. Whatever personal disappointment I might have had, I soon put it behind me. I've always gone on the principle that where women are concerned there are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it."

"A very satisfactory way to go through life, Mr. Fenn."

"Yes, I think it is."

"You have a wide knowledge of the moving picture world?"

"I have financial interests in it."

"And therefore you are bound to know a lot about it?"

"Perhaps."

"You are a man whose judgement would be worth listening to. Can you suggest to me any person who is likely to have such a deep grudge against Marina Gregg that they would be willing to do away with her?"

"Probably a dozen," said Ardwyck Fenn, "that is to say, if they hadn't got to do anything about it personally. If it was a mere matter of pressing a button in a wall, I dare say there'd be a lot of willing fingers."

"You were there that day. You saw her and talked to her. Do you think that amongst any of the people who were around you in that brief space of time—from when you arrived to the moment when Heather Badcock died—do you think that amongst them you can suggest—only suggest, mind you, I'm asking you for nothing more than a guess—anyone who might poison Marina Gregg?"

"I wouldn't like to say," said Ardwyck Fenn.

"That means that you have some idea?"

"It means that I have nothing to say on that subject. And that, Chief-Inspector Craddock, is all you'll get out of me."

Fifteen

Dermot Craddock looked down at the last name and address he had written down in his notebook. The telephone number had been rung twice for him but there had been no response. He tried it now once more. He shrugged his shoulders, got up and decided to go and see for himself.

Margot Bence's studio was in a cul-de-sac off the Tottenham Court Road. Beyond the name on a plate on the side of a door, there was little to identify it, and certainly no form of advertising. Craddock groped his way to the first floor. There was a large notice here painted in black on a white board. "Margot Bence, Personality Photographer. Please enter."

Craddock entered. There was a small waiting room but nobody in charge of it. He stood there hesitating, then cleared his throat in a loud and theatrical manner. Since that drew no attention he raised his voice.

"Anybody here?"

He heard a flap of slippers behind a velvet curtain, the curtain was pushed aside and a young man with exuberant hair and a pink and white face, peered round it.

"Terribly sorry, my dear," he said. "I didn't hear you. I had an absolutely new idea and I was just trying it out."

He pushed the velvet curtain farther aside and Craddock followed him into an inner room. This proved to be unexpectedly large. It was clearly the working studio. There were cameras, lights, arc-lights, piles of drapery, screens on wheels.

"Such a mess," said the young man, who was almost as willowy as Hailey Preston. "But one finds it very hard to work, I think, unless one *does* get into a mess. Now what were you wanting to see us about?"

"I wanted to see Miss Margot Bence."

"Ah, Margot. Now what a pity. If you'd been half an hour earlier you'd have found her here. She's gone off to produce some photographs of models for *Fashion Dream*. You should have rung up, you know, to make an appointment. Margot's terribly busy these days."

"I did ring up. There was no reply."

"Of course," said the young man. "We took the receiver off. I remember now. It disturbed us." He smoothed down a kind of lilac smock that he was wearing. "Can I do anything for you? Make an appointment? I do a lot of Margot's business arrangements for her. You wanted to arrange for some photography somewhere? Private or business?"

"From that point of view, neither," said Dermot Craddock. He handed his card to the young man.

"How perfectly rapturous," said the young man. "CID! I believe, you know, I've seen pictures of you. Are you one of the Big Four or the Big Five, or is it perhaps the Big Six nowadays? There's so much crime about, they'd have to increase the numbers, wouldn't they? Oh dear, is that disrespectful? I'm afraid it is. I didn't mean to be disrespectful at all. Now, what do you want Margot for—not to arrest her, I hope."

"I just wanted to ask her one or two questions."

"She doesn't do indecent photographs or anything like that," said the young man anxiously. "I hope nobody's been telling you any stories of that kind because it isn't true. Margot's very artistic. She does a lot of stage work and studio work. But her studies are terribly, terribly pure—almost prudish, I'd say."

"I can tell you quite simply why I want to speak to Miss Bence," said Dermot. "She was recently an eyewitness of a crime that took place near Much Benham, at a village called St. Mary Mead."

"Oh, my dear, of *course!* I know about *that*. Margot came back and told me all about it. Hemlock in the cocktails, wasn't it? Something of that kind. So *bleak* it sounded! But all mixed-up with the St. John Ambulance which doesn't seem so bleak, does it? But haven't you already asked Margot questions about that—or was it somebody else?"

"One always finds there are more questions, as the case goes on," said Dermot.

"You mean it develops. Yes, I can quite see that. Murder develops. Yes, like a photograph, isn't it?"

"It's very much like photography really," said Dermot. "Quite a good comparison of yours."

"Well, it's very nice of you to say so, I'm sure. Now about Margot. Would you like to get hold of her right away?"

"If you can help me to do so, yes."

"Well, at the moment," said the young man, consulting his watch, "at the moment she'll be outside Keats' house at Hampstead Heath. My car's outside. Shall I run you up there?"

"That would be very kind of you, Mr—"

"Jethroe," said the young man, "Johnny Jethroe."

As they went down the stairs Dermot asked:

"Why Keats' house?"

"Well, you know we don't pose fashion photographs in the studio anymore. We like them to seem natural, blown about by the wind. And if possible some rather unlikely background. You know, an Ascot frock against Wandsworth Prison, or a frivolous suit outside a poet's house."

Mr. Jethroe drove rapidly but skilfully up Tottenham Court Road, through Camden Town and finally to the neighbourhood of Hampstead Heath. On the pavement near Keats' house a pretty little scene was being enacted. A slim girl, wearing diaphanous organdie, was standing clutching an immense black hat. On her knees, a little way behind her, a second girl was holding the first girl's skirt well pulled back so that it clung around her knees and legs. In a deep hoarse voice a girl with a camera was directing operations.

"For goodness' sake, Jane, get your *behind* down. It's showing behind her right knee. Get down *flatter*. That's it. No, more to the left. That's right. Now you're masked by the bush. That'll do. Hold it. We'll have one more. Both hands on the back of the hat this time. Head up. Good—now turn round, Elsie. Bend over. More. Bend! *Bend*, you've got to pick up that cigarette case. That's right. That's *heaven!* Got it! Now move over to the left. Same pose, only just turn your head over your shoulder. So."

"I can't see what you want to go taking photographs of my behind for," said the girl called Elsie rather sulkily.

"It's a lovely behind, dear. It looks smashing," said the photographer. "And when you turn your head your chin comes up like the rising moon over a mountain. I don't think we need bother with anymore."

"Hi— Margot," said Mr. Jethroe.

She turned her head. "Oh, it's you. What are you doing here?"

"I brought someone along to see you. Chief-Inspector Craddock, CID."

The girl's eyes turned swiftly on to Dermot. He thought they had a wary, searching look but that, as he well knew, was nothing extraordinary. It was a fairly common reaction to detective-inspectors. She was a thin girl, all elbows and angles, but was an interesting shape for all that. A heavy curtain of black hair fell down either side of her face. She looked dirty as well as sallow and not particularly prepossessing, to his eyes. But he acknowledged that there was character there. She raised her eyebrows which were slightly raised by art already and remarked:

"And what can I do for you, Detective-Inspector Craddock?"

"How do you do, Miss Bence. I wanted to ask you if you would be so kind as to answer a few questions about that very unfortunate business at Gossington Hall, near Much Benham. You went there, if I remember, to take some photographs."

The girl nodded. "Of course. I remember quite well." She shot him a quick searching look. "I didn't see you there. Surely it was somebody else. Inspector—Inspector—"

"Inspector Cornish?" said Dermot.

"That's right."

"We were called in later."

"You're from Scotland Yard?"

"Yes."

"You butted in and took over from the local people. Is that it?"

"Well, it isn't quite a question of butting in, you know. It's up to the Chief Constable of the County to decide whether he wants to keep it in his own hands or whether he thinks it'll be better handled by us."

"What makes him decide?"

"It very often turns on whether the case has a local background or whether it's a more—universal one. Sometimes, perhaps, an international one."

"And he decided, did he, that this was an international one?"

"Transatlantic, perhaps, would be a better word."

"They've been hinting that in the papers, haven't they? Hinting that the killer, whoever he was, was out to get Marina Gregg and got some wretched local woman by mistake. Is that true or is it a bit of publicity for their film?"

"I'm afraid there isn't much doubt about it, Miss Bence."

"What do you want to ask me? Have I got to come to Scotland Yard?"

He shook his head. "Not unless you like. We'll go back to your studio if you prefer."

"All right, let's do that. My car's just up the street."

She walked rapidly along the footpath. Dermot went with her. Jethroe called after them.

"So long darling, I won't butt in. I'm sure you and the Inspector are going to talk big secrets." He joined the two models on the pavement and began an animated discussion with them.

Margot got into the car, unlocked the door on the other side, and Dermot Craddock got in beside her. She said nothing at all during the drive back to Tottenham Court Road. She turned down the cul-de-sac and at the bottom of it drove through an open doorway.

"Got my own parking place here," she remarked. "It's a furniture depository place really, but they rent me a bit of space. Parking a car

is one of the big headaches in London, as you probably know only too well, though I don't suppose you deal with traffic, do you?"

"No, that's not one of my troubles."

"I should think murder would be infinitely preferable," said Margot Bence.

She led the way back to the studio, motioned him to a chair, offered him a cigarette and sank down on the large pouffe opposite him. From behind the curtain of dark hair she looked at him in a sombre questioning way.

"Shoot, stranger," she said.

"You were taking photographs on the occasion of this death, I understand."

"Yes."

"You'd been engaged professionally?"

"Yes. They wanted someone to do a few specialized shots. I do quite a lot of that stuff. I do some work for film studios sometimes, but this time I was just taking photographs of the fête, and afterwards a few shots of special people being greeted by Marina Gregg and Jason Rudd. Local notabilities or other personalities. That sort of thing."

"Yes. I understand that. You had your camera on the stairs, I understand?"

"A part of the time, yes. I got a very good angle from there. You get people coming up the stairs below you and you could swivel round and get Marina shaking hands with them. You could get a lot of different angles without having to move much."

"I know, of course, that you answered some questions at the time as to whether you'd seen anything unusual, anything that might be helpful. They were general questions."

"Have you got more specialized ones?"

"A little more specialized, I think. You had a good view of Marina Gregg from where you were standing?"

She nodded. "Excellent."

"And of Jason Rudd?"

"Occasionally. But he was moving about more. Drinks and things and introducing people to one another. The locals to the celebrities.

That kind of thing, I should imagine. I didn't see this Mrs. Baddeley —"

"Badcock."

"Sorry, Badcock. I didn't see her drink the fatal draught or anything like that. In fact I don't think I really know which she was."

"Do you remember the arrival of the mayor?"

"Oh, yes. I remember the mayor all right. He had on his chain and his robes of office. I got one of him coming up the stairs—a close-up—rather a cruel profile, and then I got him shaking hands with Marina."

"Then you can fix that time at least in your mind. Mrs. Badcock and her husband came up the stairs to Marina Gregg immediately in front of him."

She shook her head. "Sorry. I still don't remember her."

"That doesn't matter so much. I presume that you had a pretty good view of Marina Gregg and that you had your eyes on her and were pointing the camera at her fairly often."

"Quite right. Most of the time. I'd wait till I got just the right moment."

"Do you know a man called Ardwyck Fenn by sight?"

"Oh yes. I know him well enough. Television network—films too."

"Did you take a photograph of him?"

"Yes. I got him coming up with Lola Brewster."

"That would be just after the mayor?"

She thought a minute then agreed. "Yes, about then."

"Did you notice that about that time Marina Gregg seemed to feel suddenly ill? Did you notice any unusual expression on her face?"

Margot Bence leant forward, opened a cigarette box and took out a cigarette. She lit it. Although she had not answered Dermot did not press her. He waited, wondering what it was she was turning over in her mind. She said at last, abruptly:

"Why do you ask me that?"

"Because it's a question to which I am very anxious to have an answer—a reliable answer."

"Do you think my answer's likely to be reliable?"

"Yes I do, as a matter of fact. You must have the habit of watching people's faces very closely, waiting for certain expressions, certain propitious moments."

She nodded her head.

"Did you see anything of that kind?"

"Somebody else saw it too, did they?"

"Yes. More than one person, but it's been described rather differently."

"How did the other people describe it?"

"One person has told me that she was taken faint."

Margot Bence shook her head slowly.

"Someone else said that she was startled." He paused a moment then went on, "And somebody else describes her as having a frozen look on her face."

"Frozen," said Margot Bence thoughtfully.

"Do you agree to that last statement?"

"I don't know. Perhaps."

"It was put rather more fancifully still," said Dermot. "In the words of the late poet, Tennyson. 'The mirror crack'd from side to side; 'The doom has come upon me,' cried the Lady of Shalott.'"

"There wasn't any mirror," said Margot Bence, "but if there had been it might have cracked." She got up abruptly. "Wait," she said. "I'll do something better than describe it to you. I'll show you."

She pushed aside the curtain at the far end and disappeared for some moments. He could hear her uttering impatient mutterings under her breath.

"What hell it is," she said as she emerged again, "one never can find things when one wants them. I've got it now though."

She came across to him and put a glossy print into his hand. He looked down at it. It was a very good photograph of Marina Gregg. Her hand was clasped in the hand of a woman standing in front of her, and therefore with her back to the camera. But Marina Gregg was not looking at the woman. Her eyes stared not quite into the camera but slightly obliquely to the left. The interesting thing to Dermot Craddock was that the face expressed nothing whatever. There was no fear on it, no pain. The woman portrayed there was

staring at *something*, something she saw, and the emotion it aroused in her was so great that she was physically unable to express it by any kind of facial expression. Dermot Craddock had seen such a look once on a man's face, a man who a second later had been shot dead....

"Satisfied?" asked Margot Bence.

Craddock gave a deep sigh. "Yes, thank you. It's hard, you know, to make up one's mind if witnesses are exaggerating, if they are imagining they see things. But that's not so in this case. There *was* something to see and she saw it." He asked, "Can I keep this picture?"

"Oh, yes you can have the print. I've got the negative."

"You didn't send it to the Press?"

Margot Bence shook her head.

"I rather wonder why you didn't. After all, it's rather a dramatic photograph. Some paper might have paid a good price for it."

"I wouldn't care to do that," said Margot Bence. "If you look into somebody's soul by accident, you feel a bit embarrassed about cashing in."

"Did you know Marina Gregg at all?"

"No."

"You come from the States, don't you?"

"I was born in England. I was trained in America though. I came over here, oh, about three years ago."

Dermot Craddock nodded. He had known the answers to his questions. They had been waiting for him among the other lists of information on his office table. The girl seemed straightforward enough. He asked:

"Where did you train?"

"Reingarden Studios. I was with Andrew Quilp for a time. He taught me a lot."

"Reingarden Studios and Andrew Quilp." Dermot Craddock was suddenly alert. The names struck a chord of remembrance.

"You lived in Seven Springs, didn't you?"

She looked amused.

"You seem to know a lot about me. Have you been checking up?"

"You're a very well-known photographer, Miss Bence. There have been articles written about you, you know. Why did you come to England?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, I like a change. Besides, as I tell you, I was born in England although I went to the States as a child."

"Quite a young child, I think."

"Five years old if you're interested."

"I am interested. I think, Miss Bence, you could tell me a little more than you have done."

Her face hardened. She stared at him.

"What do you mean by that?"

Dermot Craddock looked at her and risked it. It wasn't much to go on. Reingarden Studios and Andrew Quilp and the name of one town. But he felt rather as if old Miss Marple were at his shoulder egging him on.

"I think you knew Marina Gregg better than you say."

She laughed. "Prove it. You're imagining things."

"Am I? I don't think I am. And it *could* be proved, you know, with a little time and care. Come now, Miss Bence, hadn't you better admit the truth? Admit that Marina Gregg adopted you as a child and that you lived with her for four years."

She drew her breath in sharply with a hiss.

"You nosy bastard!" she said.

It startled him a little, it was such a contrast to her former manner. She got up, shaking her black head of hair.

"All right, all right, it's true enough! Yes Marina Gregg took me over to America with her. My mother had eight kids. She lived in a slum somewhere. She was one of hundreds of people, I suppose, who wrote to any film actress that they happen to see or hear about, spilling a hard-luck story, begging her to adopt the child a mother couldn't give advantages to. Oh, it's such a sickening business, all of it."

"There were three of you," said Dermot. "Three children adopted at different times from different places."

"That's right. Me and Rod and Angus. Angus was older than I was, Rod was practically a baby. We had a wonderful life. Oh, a wonderful life! All the advantages!" Her voice rose mockingly. "Clothes and cars and a wonderful house to live in and people to look after us, good schooling and teaching, and delicious food. Everything piled on! And she herself, our 'Mom.' 'Mom' in inverted commas, playing her part, crooning over us, being photographed with us! Ah, such a pretty sentimental picture."

"But she really wanted children," said Dermot Craddock. "That was real enough, wasn't it? It wasn't just a publicity stunt."

"Oh, perhaps. Yes, I think that was true. She wanted children. But she didn't want *us*! Not really. It was just a glorious bit of playacting. '*My family.*' '*So lovely to have a family of my own.*' And Izzy let her do it. He ought to have known better."

"Izzy was Isidore Wright?"

"Yes, her third husband or her fourth, I forget which. He was a wonderful man really. He understood her, I think, and he was worried sometimes about us. He was kind to us, but he didn't pretend to be a father. He didn't feel like a father. He only cared really about his own writing. I've read some of his things since. They're sordid and rather cruel, but they're powerful. I think people will call him a great writer one day."

"And this went on until when?"

Margot Bence's smile curved suddenly. "Until she got sick of that particular bit of playacting. No, that's not quite true... She found she was going to have a child of her own."

She laughed with sudden bitterness. "Then we'd had it! We weren't wanted anymore. We'd done very well as little stopgaps, but she didn't care a damn about us really, not a damn. Oh, she pensioned us off very prettily. With a home and a foster-mother and money for our education and a nice little sum to start us off in the world. Nobody can say that she didn't behave correctly and handsomely. But she'd never wanted *us*—all she wanted was a child of her own."

"You can't blame her for that," said Dermot gently.

"I don't blame her for wanting a child of her own, no! But what about us? She took us away from our own parents, from the place where we belonged. My mother sold me for a mess of pottage, if you like, but she didn't sell me for advantage to herself. She sold me because she was a damn' silly woman who thought I'd get 'advantages' and 'education' and have a wonderful life. She thought she was doing the best for me. Best for me? If she only knew."

"You're still very bitter, I see."

"No, I'm not bitter now. I've got over that. I'm bitter because I'm remembering, because I've gone back to those days. We were all pretty bitter."

"All of you?"

"Well, not Rod. Rod never cared about anything. Besides he was rather small. But Angus felt like I did, only I think he was more revengeful. He said that when he was grown-up he would go and kill that baby she was going to have."

"You knew about the baby?"

"Oh, of course I knew. And everyone knows what happened. She went crazy with rapture about having it and then when it was born it was an idiot! Serve her right. Idiot or no idiot, she didn't want *us* back again."

"You hate her very much."

"Why shouldn't I hate her? She did the worst thing to me that anyone can do to anyone else. Let them believe that they're loved and wanted and then show them that it's all a sham."

"What happened to your two—I'll call them brothers, for the sake of convenience."

"Oh, we all drifted apart later. Rod's farming somewhere in the Middle West. He's got a happy nature, and always had. Angus? I don't know. I lost sight of him."

"Did he continue to feel regretful?"

"I shouldn't think so," said Margot. "It's not the sort of thing you can go on feeling. The last time I saw him, he said he was going on the stage. I don't know whether he did."

"*You've* remembered, though," said Dermot.

"Yes. I've remembered," said Margot Bence.

"Was Marina Gregg surprised to see you on that day or did she make the arrangements for your photography on purpose to please you?"

"She?" The girl smiled scornfully. "She knew nothing about the arrangements. I was curious to see her, so I did a bit of lobbying to get the job. As I say I've got some influence with studio people. I wanted to see what she looked like nowadays." She stroked the surface of the table. "She didn't even recognize me. What do you think of that? I was with her for four years. From five years old to nine and she didn't recognize me."

"Children change," said Dermot Craddock, "they change so much that you'd hardly know them. I have a niece I met the other day and I assure you I'd have passed her in the street."

"Are you saying that to make me feel better? I don't care really. Oh, what the hell, let's be honest. I do care. I did. She had a magic, you know. Marina! A wonderful calamitous magic that took hold of you. You can hate a person and still mind."

"You didn't tell her who you were?"

She shook her head. "No, I didn't tell her. That's the last thing I'd do."

"Did you try and poison her, Miss Bence?"

Her mood changed. She got up and laughed.

"What ridiculous questions you do ask! But I suppose you have to. It's part of your job. No. I can assure you I didn't kill her."

"That isn't what I asked you, Miss Bence."

She looked at him, frowning, puzzled.

"Marina Gregg," he said, "is still alive."

"For how long?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Don't you think it's likely, Inspector, that someone will try again, and this time—this time, perhaps—they'll succeed?"

"Precautions will be taken."

"Oh, I'm sure they will. The adoring husband will look after her, won't he, and make sure that no harm comes to her?"

He was listening carefully to the mockery in her voice.

"What did you mean when you said you didn't ask me that?" she said, harking back suddenly.

"I asked you if you tried to kill her. You replied that you didn't kill her. That's true enough, but *someone* died, *someone* was killed."

"You mean I tried to kill Marina and instead I killed Mrs. What's-her-name. If you'd like me to make it quite clear, I *didn't* try to poison Marina and I *didn't* poison Mrs. Badcock."

"But you know perhaps who did?"

"I don't know anything, Inspector, I assure you."

"But you have some idea?"

"Oh, one always has ideas." She smiled at him, a mocking smile. "Among so many people it might be, mightn't it, the black-haired robot of a secretary, the elegant Hailey Preston, servants, maids, a masseur, the hairdresser, someone at the studios, so many people—*and one of them mightn't be what he or she pretended to be.*"

Then as he took an unconscious step towards her she shook her head vehemently.

"Relax, Inspector," she said. "I'm only teasing you. *Somebody's* out for Marina's blood, but who it is I've no idea. Really. I've no idea at all."

Sixteen

I

At No. 16 Aubrey Close, young Mrs. Baker was talking to her husband. Jim Baker, a big good-looking blond giant of a man, was intent on assembling a model construction unit.

"Neighbours!" said Cherry. She gave a toss of her black curly head. "Neighbours!" she said with venom.

She carefully lifted the frying pan from the stove, then neatly shot its contents onto two plates, one rather fuller than the other. She placed the fuller one before her husband.

"Mixed grill," she announced.

Jim looked up and sniffed appreciatively.

"That's something like," he said. "What is today? My birthday?"

"You have to be well nourished," said Cherry.

She was looking very pretty in a cerise and white striped apron with little frills on it. Jim Baker shifted the component parts of a strato-cruiser to make room for his meal. He grinned at his wife and asked:

"Who says so?"

"My Miss Marple for one!" said Cherry. "And if it comes to that," she added, sitting down opposite Jim and pulling her plate towards her, "I should say *she* could do with a bit more solid nourishment herself. That old cat of a White Knight of hers, gives her nothing but carbohydrates. It's all she can think of! A 'nice custard,' a 'nice bread and butter pudding,' a 'nice macaroni cheese.' Squashy puddings

with pink sauce. And gas, gas, gas, all day. Talks her head off she does."

"Oh well," said Jim vaguely, "it's invalid diet, I suppose."

"Invalid diet!" said Cherry and snorted. "Miss Marple isn't an invalid—she's just *old*. Always interfering, too."

"Who, Miss Marple?"

"No. That Miss Knight. Telling me how to do things! She even tries to tell me how to cook! I know a lot more about cooking than she does."

"You're tops for cooking, Cherry," said Jim appreciatively.

"There's something *to* cooking," said Cherry, "something you can get your teeth into."

Jim laughed. "I'm getting my teeth into this all right. Why did your Miss Marple say that I needed nourishing? Did she think I looked run-down, the other day when I came in to fix the bathroom shelf?"

Cherry laughed. "I'll tell you what she said to me. She said, 'You've got a handsome husband, my dear. A *very* handsome husband.' Sounds like one of those period books they read aloud on the telly."

"I hope you agreed with her?" said Jim with a grin.

"I said you were all right."

"All right indeed! That's a nice lukewarm way of talking."

"And then she said 'You must take care of your husband, my dear. Be sure you *feed* him properly. Men need plenty of good meat meals, well cooked.'"

"Hear, hear!"

"And she told me to be sure and prepare fresh food for you and not to buy ready-made pies and things and slip them in the oven to warm up. Not that I do that often," added Cherry virtuously.

"You can't do it too seldom for me," said Jim. "They don't taste a bit the same."

"So long as you notice what you eat," said Cherry, "and aren't so taken up with those strato-cruisers and things you're always building. And don't tell me you bought that set as a Christmas

present for your nephew Michael. You bought it so that you could play with it yourself."

"He's not quite old enough for it yet," said Jim apologetically.

"And I suppose you're going on dithering about with it all the evening. What about some music? Did you get that new record you were talking about?"

"Yes, I did. Tchaikovski 1812."

"That's the loud one with the battle, isn't it?" said Cherry. She made a face. "Our Mrs. Hartwell won't half like that! Neighbours! I'm fed up with neighbours. Always grouching and complaining. I don't know which is the worst. The Hartwells or the Barnabys. The Hartwells start rapping on the wall as early as twenty to eleven sometimes. It's a bit thick! After all even the telly and the BBC go on later than that. Why *shouldn't* we have a bit of music if we like? And always asking us to turn it down low."

"You can't turn these things down low," said Jim with authority. "You don't get the *tone* unless you've got the volume. Everyone knows that. It's absolutely recognized in musical circles. And what about their cat—always coming over into our garden, digging up the beds, just when I've got it nice."

"I tell you what, Jim. I'm fed up with this place."

"You didn't mind your neighbours up in Huddersfield," remarked Jim.

"It wasn't the same there," said Cherry. "I mean, you're all independent there. If you're in trouble, somebody'd give you a hand and you'd give a hand to them. But you don't interfere. There's something about a new estate like this that makes people look sideways at their neighbours. Because we're all new I suppose. The amount of backbiting and tale-telling and writing to the council and one thing and another round here beats me! People in real towns are too busy for it."

"You may have something there, my girl."

"D'you like it here, Jim?"

"The job's all right. And after all, this is a brand new house. I wish there was a bit more room in it so that I could spread myself a bit more. It would be fine if I could have a workshop."

"I thought it was lovely at first," said Cherry, "but now I'm not so sure. The house is all right and I love the blue paint and the bathroom's nice, but I don't like the people and the *feeling* round here. Did I tell you that Lily Price and that Harry of hers have broken off? It was a funny business that day in that house they went to look over. You know when she more or less fell out of the window. She said Harry just stood there like a stuck pig."

"I'm glad she's broken off with him. He's a no-good if I ever saw one," said Jim.

"No good marrying a chap just because a baby's on the way," said Cherry. "He didn't want to marry her, you know. He's not a very nice fellow. Miss Marple said he wasn't," she added thoughtfully. "She spoke to Lily about him. Lily thought she was crackers."

"Miss Marple? I didn't know she'd ever seen him?"

"Oh yes, she was round here walking the day she fell down and Mrs. Badcock picked her up and took her into her house. Do you think Arthur and Mrs. Bain will make a match of it?"

Jim frowned as he picked up a bit of strato-cruiser and consulted the instructional diagram.

"I do wish you'd listen when I'm talking," said Cherry.

"What did you say?"

"Arthur Badcock and Mary Bain."

"For the Lord's sake, Cherry, his wife's only just dead! You women! I've heard he's in a terrible state of nerves still—jumps if you speak to him."

"I wonder why... I shouldn't have thought he'd take it that way, would you?"

"Can you clear off this end of the table a bit?" said Jim, relinquishing even a passing interest in the affairs of his neighbours. "Just so that I can spread some of these pieces out a bit."

Cherry heaved an exasperated sigh.

"To get any attention round here, you have to be a super jet, or a turbo prop," she said bitterly. "You and your construction models!"

She piled the tray with the remains of supper and carried it over to the sink. She decided not to wash up, a necessity of daily life she always put off as long as possible. Instead, she piled everything into

the sink, haphazard, slipped on a corduroy jacket and went out of the house, pausing to call over her shoulder:

"I'm just going to slip along to see Gladys Dixon. I want to borrow one of her *Vogue* patterns."

"All right, old girl." Jim bent over his model.

Casting a venomous look at her next-door neighbour's front door as she passed, Cherry went round the corner into Blenheim Close and stopped at No. 16. The door was open and Cherry tapped on it and went into the hall calling out:

"Is Gladdy about?"

"Is that you, Cherry?" Mrs. Dixon looked out of the kitchen. "She's upstairs in her room, dressmaking."

"Right. I'll go up."

Cherry went upstairs to a small bedroom in which Gladys, a plump girl with a plain face, was kneeling on the floor, her cheeks flushed, and several pins in her mouth, tacking up a paper pattern.

"Hallo, Cherry. Look, I got a lovely bit of stuff at Harper's sale at Much Benham. I'm going to do that crossover pattern with frills again, the one I did in Terylene before."

"That'll be nice," said Cherry.

Gladys rose to her feet, panting a little.

"Got indigestion now," she said.

"You oughtn't to do dressmaking right after supper," said Cherry, "bending over like that."

"I suppose I ought to slim a bit," said Gladys. She sat down on the bed.

"Any news from the studios?" asked Cherry, always avid for film news.

"Nothing much. There's a lot of talk still. Marina Gregg came back on the set yesterday—and she created something frightful."

"What about?"

"She didn't like the taste of her coffee. You know, they have coffee in the middle of the morning. She took one sip and said there was something wrong with it. Which was nonsense, of course. There couldn't have been. It comes in a jug straight from the canteen. Of course I always put hers in a special china cup, rather posh—

different from the others—but it's the same coffee. So there couldn't have been anything wrong with it, could there?"

"Nerves, I suppose," said Cherry. "What happened?"

"Oh, nothing. Mr. Rudd just calmed everyone down. He's wonderful that way. He took the coffee from her and poured it down the sink."

"That seems to be rather stupid," said Cherry slowly.

"Why—what do you mean?"

"Well, if there *was* anything wrong with it—now nobody will ever know."

"Do you think there really might have been?" asked Gladys looking alarmed.

"Well—" Cherry shrugged her shoulders, "—there was something wrong with her cocktail the day of the fête, wasn't there, so why not the coffee? If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again."

Gladys shivered.

"I don't half like it, Cherry," she said. "Somebody's got it in for her all right. She's had more letters, you know, threatening her—and there was that bust business the other day."

"What bust business?"

"A marble bust. On the set. It's a corner of a room in some Austrian palace or other. Funny name like Shotbrown. Pictures and china and marble busts. This one was up on a bracket—suppose it hadn't been pushed back enough. Anyway, a heavy lorry went past out in the road and jarred it off—right onto the chair where Marina sits for her big scene with Count Somebody-or-other. Smashed to smithereens! Lucky they weren't shooting at the time. Mr. Rudd, he said not to say a word to her, and he put another chair there, and when she came yesterday and asked why the chair had been changed, he said the other chair was the wrong period, and this gave a better angle for the camera. But he didn't half like it—I can tell you that."

The two girls looked at each other.

"It's exciting in a way," said Cherry slowly. "And yet—it isn't...."

"I think I'm going to give up working in the canteen at the studios," said Gladys.

"Why? Nobody wants to poison you or drop marble busts on your head!"

"No. But it's not always the person who's meant to get done in who gets done in. It may be someone else. Like Heather Badcock that day."

"True enough," said Cherry.

"You know," said Gladys, "I've been thinking. I was at the Hall that day, helping. I was quite close to them at the time."

"When Heather died?"

"No, when she spilt the cocktail. All down her dress. A lovely dress it was, too, royal blue nylon taffeta. She'd got it quite new for the occasion. And it was funny."

"What was funny?"

"I didn't think anything of it at the time. But it does seem funny when I think it over."

Cherry looked at her expectantly. She accepted the adjective "funny" in the sense that it was meant. It was not intended humorously.

"For goodness' sake, what was funny?" she demanded.

"I'm almost sure she did it on purpose."

"Spilt the cocktail on purpose?"

"Yes. And I do think that was funny, don't you?"

"On a brand-new dress? I don't believe it."

"I wonder now," said Gladys, "what Arthur Badcock will do with all Heather's clothes. That dress would clean all right. Or I could take out half a breadth, it's a lovely full skirt. Do you think Arthur Badcock would think it very awful of me if I wanted to buy it off him? It would need hardly any alteration—and it's lovely stuff."

"You wouldn't—" Cherry hesitated "—mind?"

"Mind what?"

"Well—having a dress that a woman had died in—I mean died that way...."

Gladys stared at her.

"I hadn't thought of that," she admitted. She considered for a moment or two. Then she cheered up.

"I can't see that it really matters," she said. "After all, every time you buy something secondhand, somebody's usually worn it who has died, haven't they?"

"Yes. But it's not quite the same."

"I think you're being fanciful," said Gladys. "It's a lovely bright shade of blue, and really expensive stuff. About that funny business," she continued thoughtfully, "I think I'll go up to the hall tomorrow morning on my way to work and have a word with Mr. Giuseppe about it."

"Is he the Italian butler?"

"Yes. He's awfully handsome. Flashing eyes. He's got a terrible temper. When we go and help there, he chivvies us girls something terrible." She giggled. "But none of us really mind. He can be awfully nice sometimes... Anyway, I might just tell him about it, and ask him what I ought to do."

"I don't see that you've got anything to tell," said Cherry.

"Well, it was funny," said Gladys, defiantly clinging to her favourite adjective.

"I think," said Cherry, "that you just want an excuse to go and talk to Mr. Giuseppe—and you'd better be careful, my girl. You know what these wops are like! Affiliation orders all over the place. Hot-blooded and passionate, that's what these Italians are."

Gladys sighed ecstatically.

Cherry looked at her friend's fat slightly spotted face and decided that her warnings were unnecessary. Mr. Giuseppe, she thought, would have better fish to fry elsewhere.

II

"Aha!" said Dr. Haydock, "unravelling, I see."

He looked from Miss Marple to a pile of fluffy white fleecy wool.

"You advised me to try unravelling if I couldn't knit," said Miss Marple.

"You seem to have been very thorough about it."

"I made a mistake in the pattern right at the beginning. That made the whole thing go out of proportion, so I've had to unravel it all. It's a very elaborate pattern, you see."

"What are elaborate patterns to you? Nothing at all."

"I ought really, I suppose, with my bad eyesight, to stick to plain knitting."

"You'd find that very boring. Well, I'm flattered that you took my advice."

"Don't I always take your advice, Doctor Haydock?"

"You do when it suits you," said Dr. Haydock.

"Tell me, Doctor, was it really knitting you had in mind when you gave me that advice?"

He met the twinkle in her eyes and twinkled back at her.

"How are you getting on with unravelling the murder?" he asked.

"I'm afraid my faculties aren't quite what they were," said Miss Marple, shaking her head with a sigh.

"Nonsense," said Dr. Haydock. "Don't tell me you haven't formed *some* conclusions."

"Of course I have formed conclusions. Very definite ones."

"Such as?" asked Haydock inquiringly.

"If the cocktail glass was tampered with that day—and I don't see quite how that could have been done—"

"Might have had the stuff ready in an eyedropper," suggested Haydock.

"You are so professional," said Miss Marple admiringly. "But even then it seems to me so very peculiar that nobody saw it happen."

"Murder should not only be done, but be *seen* done! Is that it?"

"You know exactly what I mean," said Miss Marple.

"That was a chance the murderer had to take," said Haydock.

"Oh quite so. I'm not disputing *that* for a moment. But there were, I have found by inquiry and adding up the persons, at least eighteen to twenty people on the spot. It seems to me that amongst twenty people *somebody* must have seen that action occur."

Haydock nodded. "One would think so, certainly. But obviously no one did."

"I wonder," said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

"What have you got in mind exactly?"

"Well, there are three possibilities. I'm assuming that at least one person *would* have seen something. One out of twenty. I think it's only reasonable to assume that."

"I think you're begging the question," said Haydock, "and I can see looming ahead one of those terrible exercises in probability where six men have white hats and six men have black and you have to work it out by mathematics how likely it is that the hats will get mixed-up and in what proportion. If you start thinking about things like that you would go round the bend. Let me assure you of that!"

"I wasn't thinking of anything like that," said Miss Marple. "I was just thinking of what is likely—"

"Yes," said Haydock thoughtfully, "you're very good at that. You always have been."

"It *is* likely, you know," said Miss Marple, "that out of twenty people one at least should be an observant one."

"I give in," said Haydock. "Let's have the three possibilities."

"I'm afraid I'll have to put them in rather sketchily," said Miss Marple. "I haven't quite thought it out. Inspector Craddock, and probably Frank Cornish before him, will have questioned everybody who was there so the natural thing would be that whoever saw anything of the kind would have said so at once."

"Is that one of the possibilities?"

"No, of course it isn't," said Miss Marple, "because it hasn't happened. What you have to account for is if one person *did* see something why didn't that person say so?"

"I'm listening."

"Possibility One," said Miss Marple, her cheeks going pink with animation. "The person who saw it didn't realise what they had seen. That would mean, of course, that it would have to be rather a stupid person. Someone, let us say, who can use their eyes but not their brain. The sort of person who, if you asked them. 'Did you see anyone put anything in Marina Gregg's glass?' would answer, 'Oh, no,' but if you said 'Did you see anyone put their hand over the top of Marina Gregg's glass?' would say 'Oh, yes, of course I did.'"

Haydock laughed. "I admit," he said, "that one never quite allows for the moron in our midst. All right, I grant you Possibility One. The moron saw it, the moron didn't grasp what the action meant. And the second possibility?"

"This one's far-fetched, but I do think it *is* just a possibility. It might have been a person whose action in putting something in a glass was natural."

"Wait, wait, explain that a little more clearly."

"It seems to me nowadays," said Miss Marple, "that people are always adding things to what they eat and drink. In my young days it was considered to be very bad manners to take medicines with one's meals. It was on a par with blowing your nose at the dinner table. It just wasn't *done*. If you *had* to take pills or capsules, or a spoonful of something, you went out of the room to do so. That's not the case now. When staying with my nephew Raymond, I observed some of his guests seemed to arrive with quite a quantity of little bottles of pills and tablets. They take them with food, or before food, or after food. They keep aspirins and such things in their handbags and take them the whole time—with cups of tea or with their after-dinner coffee. You understand what I mean?"

"Oh, yes," said Dr. Haydock, "I've got your meaning now and it's interesting. You mean that someone—" He stopped. "Let's have it in your own words."

"I meant," said Miss Marple, "that it would be quite possible, audacious but possible, for someone to pick up that glass which as soon as it was in his or her hand, of course, would be assumed to be his or her own drink and to add whatever was added quite *openly*. In that case, you see, people wouldn't think twice of it."

"He—or she—couldn't be sure of that, though," Haydock pointed out.

"No," agreed Miss Marple, "it would be a gamble, a risk—but it *could* happen. And then," she went on, "there's the third possibility."

"Possibility One, a moron," said the doctor. "Possibility Two, a gambler—what's Possibility Three?"

"Somebody saw what happened, and has held their tongue deliberately."

Haydock frowned. "For what reason?" he asked. "Are you suggesting blackmail? If so—"

"If so," said Miss Marple, "it's a very dangerous thing to do."

"Yes, indeed." He looked sharply at the placid old lady with the white fleecy garment on her lap. "Is the third possibility the one you consider the most probable one?"

"No," said Miss Marple, "I wouldn't go so far as that. I have, at the moment, insufficient grounds. Unless," she added carefully, "someone else gets killed."

"Do you think someone else is going to get killed?"

"I hope not," said Miss Marple. "I trust and pray not. But it so often happens, Doctor Haydock. That's the sad and frightening thing. It so often happens."

Seventeen

Ella put down the telephone receiver, smiled to herself and came out of the public telephone box. She was pleased with herself.

"Chief-Inspector God Almighty Craddock!" she said to herself. "I'm twice as good as he is at the job. Variations on the theme of: 'Fly, all is discovered!'"

She pictured to herself with a good deal of pleasure the reactions recently suffered by the person at the other end of the line. That faint menacing whisper coming through the receiver. "*I saw you....*"

She laughed silently, the corners of her mouth curving up in a feline cruel line. A student of psychology might have watched her with some interest. Never until the last few days had she had this feeling of power. She was hardly aware herself of how much the heady intoxication of it affected her....

"Damn that old woman," thought Ella. She could feel Mrs. Bantry's eyes following her as she walked up the drive.

A phrase came into her head for no particular reason.

The pitcher goes to the well once too often....

Nonsense. Nobody could suspect that it was she who had whispered those menacing words....

She sneezed.

"Damn this hay fever," said Ella Zielinsky.

When she came into her office, Jason Rudd was standing by the window.

He wheeled round.

"I couldn't think where you were."

"I had to go and speak to the gardener. There were—" she broke off as she caught sight of his face.

She asked sharply: "What is it?"

His eyes seemed set deeper in his face than ever. All the gaiety of the clown was gone. This was a man under strain. She had seen him under strain before but never looking like this.

She said again: "What is it?"

He held a sheet of paper out to her. "It's the analysis of that coffee. The coffee that Marina complained about and wouldn't drink."

"You sent it to be analysed?" She was startled. "But you poured it away down the sink. I saw you."

His wide mouth curled up in a smile. "I'm pretty good at sleight of hand, Ella," he said. "You didn't know that, did you? Yes, I poured most of it away but I kept a little and I took it along to be analysed."

She looked down at the paper in her hand.

"*Arsenic.*" She sounded incredulous.

"Yes, arsenic."

"So Marina was right about it tasting bitter?"

"She wasn't right about that. Arsenic has no taste. But her instinct was quite right."

"And we thought she was just being hysterical!"

"She is hysterical! Who wouldn't be? She has a woman drop dead at her feet practically. She gets threatening notes—one after another—there's not been anything today, has there?"

Ella shook her head.

"Who plants the damned things? Oh well, I suppose it's easy enough—all these open windows. Anyone could slip in."

"You mean we ought to keep the house barred and locked? But it's such hot weather. There's a man posted in the grounds, after all."

"Yes, and I don't want to frighten her more than she's frightened already. Threatening notes don't matter two hoots. But arsenic, Ella, arsenic's different...."

"Nobody could tamper with food here in the house."

"Couldn't they, Ella? Couldn't they?"

"Not without being seen. No unauthorized person—"

He interrupted.

"People will do things for money, Ella."

"Hardly murder!"

"Even that. And they mightn't realize it *was* murder... The servants...."

"I'm sure the servants are all right."

"Giuseppe now. I doubt if I'd trust Giuseppe very far if it came to the question of money... He's been with us some time, of course, but —"

"Must you torture yourself like this, Jason?"

He flung himself down in the chair. He leaned forward, his long arms hanging down between his knees.

"What to do?" he said slowly and softly. "My God, what to do?"

Ella did not speak. She sat there watching him.

"She was happy here," said Jason. He was speaking more to himself than to Ella. He stared down between his knees at the carpet. If he had looked up, the expression on her face might perhaps have surprised him.

"She was happy," he said again. "She hoped to be happy and she *was* happy. She was saying so that day, the day Mrs. What's-her-name—"

"Bantry?"

"Yes. The day Mrs. Bantry came to tea. She said it was 'so peaceful.' She said that at last she'd found a place where she could settle down and be happy and feel secure. My goodness, secure!"

"Happy ever after?" Ella's voice held a slight tone of irony. "Yes, put like that, it sounds just like a fairy story."

"At any rate she believed it."

"But you didn't," said Ella. "You never thought it *would* be like that?"

Jason Rudd smiled. "No. I didn't go the whole hog. But I did think for a while, a year—two years—there might be a period of calm and content. It might have made a new woman of her. It might have given her confidence in herself. She can be happy, you know. When she is happy she's like a child. Just like a child. And now—*this* had to happen to her."

Ella moved restlessly. "Things have to happen to all of us," she said brusquely. "That's the way life is. You just have to take it. Some of us can, some of us can't. She's the kind that can't."

She sneezed.

"Your hay fever bad again?"

"Yes. By the way, Giuseppe's gone to London."

Jason looked faintly surprised.

"To London? Why?"

"Some kind of family trouble. He's got relations in Soho, and one of them's desperately ill. He went to Marina about it and she said it was all right, so I gave him the day off. He'll be back sometime tonight. You don't mind do you?"

"No," said Jason, "I don't mind...."

He got up and walked up and down.

"If I could take her away...now...at once."

"Scrap the picture? But just think."

His voice rose.

"I can't think of anything but Marina. Don't you understand? She's in danger. That's all I can think about."

She opened her mouth impulsively, then closed it.

She gave another muffled sneeze and rose.

"I'd better get my atomizer."

She left the room and went to her bedroom, a word echoing in her mind.

Marina... Marina... Marina... Always Marina....

Fury rose up in her. She stilled it. She went into the bathroom and picked up the spray she used.

She inserted the nozzle into one nostril and squeezed.

The warning came a second too late... Her brain recognized the unfamiliar odour of bitter almonds...but not in time to paralyse the squeezing fingers.

Eighteen

I

Frank Cornish replaced the receiver.

"Miss Brewster is out of London for the day," he announced.

"Is she now?" said Craddock.

"Do you think she—"

"I don't know. I shouldn't think so, but I don't know. Ardwyck Fenn?"

"Out. I left word for him to ring you. And Margot Bence, Personality Photographer, has got an assignment somewhere in the country. Her pansy partner didn't know where—or said he didn't. And the butler's hooked it to London."

"I wonder," said Craddock thoughtfully, "if the butler has hooked it for good. I always suspect dying relatives. Why was he suddenly anxious to go to London today?"

"He could have put the cyanide in the atomizer easily enough before he left."

"Anybody could."

"But I think he's indicated. It could hardly be someone from outside."

"Oh, yes, it could. You'd have to judge your moment. You could leave a car in one of the side drives, wait until everyone is in the dining room, say, and slip in through a window and upstairs. The shrubberies come close up to the house."

"Damn' risky."

"This murderer doesn't mind taking risks, you know. That's been apparent all along."

"We've had a man on duty in the grounds."

"I know. One man wasn't enough. So long as it was a question of these anonymous letters I didn't feel so much urgency. Marina Gregg herself is being well guarded. It never occurred to me that anyone else was in danger. I—"

The telephone rang. Cornish took the call.

"It's the Dorchester. Mr. Ardwyck Fenn is on the line."

He proffered the receiver to Craddock who took it.

"Mr. Fenn? This is Craddock here."

"Ah, yes. I heard you had rung me. I have been out all day."

"I am sorry to tell you, Mr. Fenn, that Miss Zielinsky died this morning—of cyanide poisoning."

"Indeed? I am shocked to hear it. An accident? Or not an accident?"

"Not an accident. Prussic acid had been put in an atomizer she was in the habit of using."

"I see. Yes, I see..." There was a short pause. "And why, may I ask, should you ring me about this distressing occurrence?"

"You knew Miss Zielinsky, Mr. Fenn?"

"Certainly I knew her. I have known her for some years. But she was not an intimate friend."

"We hoped that you could, perhaps, assist us?"

"In what way?"

"We wondered if you could suggest any motive for her death. She is a stranger in this country. We know very little about her friends and associates and the circumstances of her life."

"I would suggest that Jason Rudd is the person to question about that."

"Naturally. We have done so. But there might be an off-chance that you might know something about her that he does not."

"I'm afraid that is not so. I know next to nothing about Ella Zielinsky except that she was a most capable young woman, and first-class at her job. About her private life I know nothing at all."

"So you have no suggestions to make?"

Craddock was ready for the decisive negative, but to his surprise it did not come. Instead there was a pause. He could hear Ardwyck Fenn breathing rather heavily at the other end.

"Are you still there, Chief-Inspector?"

"Yes, Mr. Fenn. I'm here."

"I have decided to tell you something that may be of assistance to you. When you hear what it is, you will realize that I have every reason to keep it to myself. But I judge that in the end that might be unwise. The facts are these. A couple of days ago I received a telephone call. A voice spoke to me in a whisper. It said—I am quoting now—*I saw you... I saw you put the tablets in the glass... You didn't know there had been an eyewitness, did you? That's all for now—very soon you will be told what you have to do.*"

Craddock uttered an ejaculation of astonishment.

"Surprising, was it not, Mr. Craddock? I will assure you categorically that the accusation was entirely unfounded. I did *not* put tablets in anybody's glass. I defy anyone to prove that I did. The suggestion is utterly absurd. But it would seem, would it not, that Miss Zielinsky was embarking on blackmail."

"You recognized her voice?"

"You cannot recognize a whisper. But it was Ella Zielinsky all right."

"How do you know?"

"The whisperer sneezed heavily before ringing off. I knew that Miss Zielinsky suffered from hay fever."

"And you think—what?"

"I think that Miss Zielinsky got hold of the wrong person at her first attempt. It seems to me possible that she was more successful later. Blackmail can be a dangerous game."

Craddock pulled himself together.

"I must thank you for your statement, Mr. Fenn. As a matter of form, I shall have to check upon your movements today."

"Naturally. My chauffeur will be able to give you precise information."

Craddock rang off and repeated what Fenn had said. Cornish whistled.

"Either that lets him out completely. Or else—"

"Or else it's a magnificent piece of bluff. It could be. He's the kind of man who has the nerve for it. If there's the least chance that Ella Zielinsky left a record of her suspicions, then this taking of the bull by the horns is a magnificent bluff."

"And his alibi?"

"We've come across some very good faked alibis in our time," said Craddock. "He could afford to pay a good sum for one."

II

It was past midnight when Giuseppe returned to Gossington. He took a taxi from Much Benham, as the last train on the branch line to St. Mary Mead had gone.

He was in very good spirits. He paid off the taxi at the gate, and took a short cut through the shrubbery. He opened the back door with his key. The house was dark and silent. Giuseppe shut and bolted the door. As he turned to the stair which led to his own comfortable suite of bed and bath, he noticed that there was a draught. A window open somewhere, perhaps. He decided not to bother. He went upstairs smiling and fitted a key into his door. He always kept his suite locked. As he turned the key and pushed the door open, he felt the pressure of a hard round ring in his back. A voice said, "Put your hands up and don't scream."

Giuseppe threw his hands up quickly. He was taking no chances. Actually there was no chance to take.

The trigger was pressed—once—twice.

Giuseppe fell forward....

III

Bianca lifted her head from her pillow.

Was that a shot... She was almost sure she had heard a shot... She waited some minutes. Then she decided she had been mistaken and lay down again.

Nineteen

I

"It's too dreadful," said Miss Knight. She put down her parcels and gasped for breath.

"Something has happened?" asked Miss Marple.

"I really don't like to tell you about it, dear, I really don't. It might be a shock to you."

"If you don't tell me," said Miss Marple, "somebody else will."

"Dear, dear, that's true enough," said Miss Knight. "Yes, that's terribly true. Everybody talks too much, they say. And I'm sure there's a lot in that. I never repeat anything myself. Very careful I am."

"You were saying," said Miss Marple, "that something rather terrible had happened?"

"It really quite bowled me over," said Miss Knight. "Are you sure you don't feel the draught from that window, dear?"

"I like a little fresh air," said Miss Marple.

"Ah, but we mustn't catch cold, must we?" said Miss Knight archly. "I'll tell you what. I'll just pop out and make you a nice eggnog. We'd like that, wouldn't we?"

"I don't know whether *you* would like it," said Miss Marple. "I should be delighted for you to have it if you would like it."

"Now, now," said Miss Knight, shaking her finger, "so fond of our joke, aren't we?"

"But you were going to tell me something," said Miss Marple.

"Well, you mustn't worry about it," said Miss Knight, "and you mustn't let it make you nervous in anyway, because I'm sure it's nothing to do with *us*. But with all these American gangsters and things like that, well I suppose it's nothing to be surprised about."

"Somebody else has been killed," said Miss Marple, "is that it?"

"Oh, that's very sharp of you, dear. I don't know what should put such a thing into your head."

"As a matter of fact," said Miss Marple thoughtfully, "I've been expecting it."

"Oh, really!" exclaimed Miss Knight.

"Somebody always sees something," said Miss Marple, "only sometimes it takes a little while for them to realize what it is they have seen. Who is it who's dead?"

"The Italian butler. He was shot last night."

"I see," said Miss Marple thoughtfully. "Yes, very likely, of course, but I should have thought that he'd have realized before now the importance of what he saw—"

"Really!" exclaimed Miss Knight. "You talk as though you knew all about it. Why should he have been killed?"

"I expect," said Miss Marple, thoughtfully, "that he tried to blackmail somebody."

"He went to London yesterday, they say."

"Did he now," said Miss Marple, "that's very interesting, and suggestive too, I think."

Miss Knight departed to the kitchen intent on the concoction of nourishing beverages. Miss Marple remained sitting thoughtfully till disturbed by the loud aggressive humming of the vacuum cleaner, assisted by Cherry's voice singing the latest favourite ditty of the moment, "I Said to You and You Said to Me."

Miss Knight popped her head round the kitchen door.

"Not quite so much noise, please, Cherry," she said. "You don't want to disturb Miss Marple, do you? You mustn't be thoughtless, you know."

She shut the kitchen door again as Cherry remarked, either to herself or the world at large, "And who said you could call me Cherry, you old jelly-bag?" The vacuum continued to whine while

Cherry sang in a more subdued voice. Miss Marple called in a high clear voice:

"Cherry, come here a minute."

Cherry switched off the vacuum and opened the drawing room door.

"I didn't mean to disturb you by singing, Miss Marple."

"Your singing is much pleasanter than the horrid noise that vacuum makes," said Miss Marple, "but I know one has to go with the times. It would be no use on earth asking any of you young people to use the dustpan and brush in the old-fashioned way."

"What, get down on my knees with a dustpan and brush?" Cherry registered alarm and surprise.

"Quite unheard of, I know," said Miss Marple. "Come in and shut the door. I called you because I wanted to talk to you."

Cherry obeyed and came towards Miss Marple looking inquiringly at her.

"We've not much time," said Miss Marple. "That old— Miss Knight I mean—will come in any moment with an egg drink of some kind."

"Good for you, I expect. It'll pep you up," said Cherry encouragingly.

"Had you heard," asked Miss Marple, "that the butler at Gossington Hall was shot last night?"

"What, the wop?" demanded Cherry.

"Yes. His name is Giuseppe, I understand."

"No," said Cherry, "I hadn't heard *that*. I heard that Mr. Rudd's secretary had a heart attack yesterday, and somebody said she was actually dead—but I suspect that was just a rumour. Who told you about the butler?"

"Miss Knight came back and told me."

"Of course I haven't seen anyone to speak to this morning," said Cherry, "not before coming along here. I expect the news has only just got round. Was he bumped off?" she demanded.

"That seems to be assumed," said Miss Marple, "whether rightly or wrongly I don't quite know."

"This is a wonderful place for talk," said Cherry. "I wonder if Gladys got to see him or not," she added thoughtfully.

"Gladys?"

"Oh, a sort of friend of mine. She lives a few doors away. Works in the canteen at the studios."

"And she talked to you about Giuseppe?"

"Well, there was something that struck her as a bit funny and she was going to ask him what he thought about it. But if you ask me it was just an excuse—she's a bit sweet on him. Of course he's quite handsome and Italians do have a way with them— I told her to be careful about him, though. You know what Italians are."

"He went to London yesterday," said Miss Marple, "and only returned in the evening I understand."

"I wonder if she managed to get to see him before he went."

"Why did she want to see him, Cherry?"

"It was just something which she felt was a bit funny," said Cherry.

Miss Marple looked at her inquiringly. She was able to take the word "funny" at the valuation it usually had for the Gladyses of the neighbourhood.

"She was one of the girls who helped at the party there," explained Cherry. "The day of the fête. You know, when Mrs. Badcock got hers."

"Yes?" Miss Marple was looking more alert than ever, much as a fox terrier might look at a waiting rat hole.

"And there was something that she saw that struck her as a bit funny."

"Why didn't she go to the police about it?"

"Well, she didn't really think it meant anything, you see," explained Cherry. "Anyway she thought she'd better ask Mr. Giuseppe first."

"What was it that she saw that day?"

"Frankly," said Cherry, "what she told me seemed nonsense! I've wondered, perhaps, if she was just putting me off—and what she was going to see Mr. Giuseppe about was something quite different."

"What *did* she say?" Miss Marple was patient and pursuing.

Cherry frowned. "She was talking about Mrs. Badcock and the cocktail and she said she was quite near her at the time. And she

said she did it herself."

"Did what herself?"

"Spilt her cocktail all down her dress, and ruined it."

"You mean it was clumsiness?"

"No, not clumsiness. Gladys said she did it on *purpose*—that she *meant* to do it. Well, I mean, that doesn't make sense, does it, however you look at it?"

Miss Marple shook her head, perplexed. "No," she said. "Certainly not—no, I can't see any sense in that."

"She'd got on a new dress too," said Cherry. "That's how the subject came up. Gladys wondered whether she'd be able to buy it. Said it ought to clean all right but she didn't like to go and ask Mr. Badcock herself. She's very good at dressmaking, Gladys is, and she said it was lovely stuff. Royal blue artificial taffeta; and she said even if the stuff *was* ruined where the cocktail stained it, she could take out a seam—half a breadth say—because it was one of those full skirts."

Miss Marple considered this dressmaking problem for a moment and then set it aside.

"But you think your friend Gladys might have been keeping something back?"

"Well, I just wondered because I don't see if that's all she saw—Heather Badcock deliberately spilling her cocktail over herself—I don't see that there'd be anything to ask Mr. Giuseppe *about*, do you?"

"No, I don't," said Miss Marple. She sighed. "But it's always interesting when one doesn't see," she added. "If you don't see what a thing means you must be looking at it wrong way round, unless of course you haven't got full information. Which is probably the case here." She sighed. "It's a pity she didn't go straight to the police."

The door opened and Miss Knight bustled in holding a tall tumbler with a delicious pale yellow froth on top.

"Now here you are, dear," she said, "a nice little treat. We're going to enjoy this."

She pulled forward a little table and placed it beside her employer. Then she turned a glance on Cherry. "The vacuum cleaner," she said

coldly, "is left in a most difficult position in the hall. I nearly fell over it. *Anyone* might have an accident."

"Right-ho," said Cherry. "I'd better get on with things."

She left the room.

"Really," said Miss Knight, "that Mrs. Baker! I'm continually having to speak to her about something or other. Leaving vacuum cleaners all over the place and coming in here chattering to you when you want to be quiet."

"I called her in," said Miss Marple. "I wanted to speak to her."

"Well, I hope you mentioned the way the beds are made," said Miss Knight. "I was quite shocked when I came to turn down your bed last night. I had to make it all over again."

"That was very kind of you," said Miss Marple.

"Oh, I never grudge being helpful," said Miss Knight. "That's why I'm here, isn't it. To make a certain person we know as comfortable and happy as possible. Oh dear, dear," she added, "you've pulled out a lot of your knitting again."

Miss Marple leaned back and closed her eyes. "I'm going to have a little rest," she said. "Put the glass here—thank you. And please don't come in and disturb me for at least three-quarters of an hour."

"Indeed I won't, dear," said Miss Knight. "And I'll tell that Mrs. Baker to be very quiet."

She bustled out purposefully.

II

The good-looking young American glanced round him in a puzzled way.

The ramifications of the housing estate perplexed him.

He addressed himself politely to an old lady with white hair and pink cheeks who seemed to be the only human being in sight.

"Excuse me, ma'am, but could you tell me where to find Blenheim Close?"

The old lady considered him for a moment. He had just begun to wonder if she was deaf, and had prepared himself to repeat his

demand in a louder voice, when she spoke.

"Along here to the right, then turn left, second to the right again, and straight on. What number do you want?"

"No. 16." He consulted a small piece of paper. "Gladys Dixon."

"That's right," said the old lady. "But I believe she works at the Hellingforth Studios. In the canteen. You'll find her there if you want her."

"She didn't turn up this morning," explained the young man. "I want to get hold of her to come up to Gossington Hall. We're very short-handed there today."

"Of course," said the old lady. "The butler was shot last night, wasn't he?"

The young man was slightly staggered by this reply.

"I guess news gets round pretty quickly in these parts," he said.

"It does indeed," said the old lady. "Mr. Rudd's secretary died of some kind of seizure yesterday, too, I understand." She shook her head. "Terrible. Quite terrible. What are we coming to?"

Twenty

I

A little later in the day yet another visitor found his way to 16 Blenheim Close. Detective-Sergeant William (Tom) Tiddler.

In reply to his sharp knock on the smart yellow painted door, it was opened to him by a girl of about fifteen. She had long straggly fair hair and was wearing tight black pants and an orange sweater.

"Miss Gladys Dixon live here?"

"You want Gladys? You're unlucky. She isn't here."

"Where is she? Out for the evening?"

"No. She's gone away. Bit of a holiday like."

"Where's she gone to?"

"That's telling," said the girl.

Tom Tiddler smiled at her in his most ingratiating manner. "May I come in? Is your mother at home?"

"Mum's out at work. She won't be in until half past seven. But she can't tell you anymore than I can. Gladys has gone off for a holiday."

"Oh, I see. When did she go?"

"This morning. All of a sudden like. Said she'd got the chance of a free trip."

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind giving me her address."

The fair-haired girl shook her head. "Haven't got an address," she said. "Gladys said she'd send us her address as soon as she knew where she was going to stay. As like as not she won't though," she added. "Last summer she went to Newquay and never sent us as

much as a postcard. She's slack that way and besides, she says, why do mothers have to bother all the time?"

"Did somebody stand her this holiday?"

"Must have," said the girl. "She's pretty hard up at the moment. Went to the sales last week."

"And you've no idea at all who gave her this trip or—er—paid for her going there?"

The fair girl bristled suddenly.

"Now don't get any wrong ideas. Our Gladys isn't that sort. She and her boyfriend may like to go to the same place for holidays in August, but there's nothing wrong about it. She pays for herself. So don't you get ideas, mister."

Tiddler said meekly that he wouldn't get ideas but he would like the address if Gladys Dixon should send a postcard.

He returned to the station with the result of his various inquiries. From the studios, he had learnt that Gladys Dixon had rung up that day and said she wouldn't be able to come to work for about a week. He had also learned some other things.

"No end of a shemozzle there's been there lately," he said. "Marina Gregg's been having hysterics most days. Said some coffee she was given was poisoned. Said it tasted bitter. Awful state of nerves she was in. Her husband took it and threw it down the sink and told her not to make so much fuss."

"Yes?" said Craddock. It seemed plain there was more to come.

"But word went round as Mr. Rudd didn't throw it all away. He kept some and had it analysed and it *was* poison."

"It sounds to me," said Craddock, "very unlikely. I'll have to ask him about that."

II

Jason Rudd was nervous, irritable.

"Surely, Inspector Craddock," he said, "I was only doing what I had a perfect right to do."

"If you suspected anything was wrong with that coffee, Mr. Rudd, it would have been much better if you'd turned it over to us."

"The truth of it is that I didn't suspect for a moment that anything was wrong with it."

"In spite of your wife saying that it tasted odd?"

"Oh, that!" A faintly rueful smile came to Rudd's face. "Ever since the date of the fête everything that my wife has eaten or drunk has tasted odd. What with that and the threatening notes that have been coming—"

"There have been more of them?"

"Two more. One through the window down there. The other one was slipped in the letter box. Here they are if you would like to see them."

Craddock looked. They were printed, as the first one had been. One ran:

It won't be long now. Prepare yourself.

The other had a rough drawing of a skull and crossbones and below it was written: *This means you, Marina.*

Craddock's eyebrows rose.

"Very childish," he said.

"Meaning you discount them as dangerous?"

"Not at all," said Craddock. "A murderer's mind usually is childish. You've really no idea at all, Mr. Rudd, who sent these?"

"Not the least," said Jason. "I can't help feeling it's more like a macabre joke than anything else. It seemed to me perhaps—" he hesitated.

"Yes, Mr. Rudd?"

"It could be somebody local, perhaps, who—who had been excited by the poisoning on the day of the fête. Someone perhaps, who has a grudge against the acting profession. There are rural pockets where acting is considered to be one of the devil's weapons."

"Meaning that you think Miss Gregg is not actually threatened? But what about this business of the coffee?"

"I don't even know how you got to hear about that," said Rudd with some annoyance.

Craddock shook his head.

"Everyone's talked about that. It always comes to one's ears sooner or later. But you should have come to us. Even when you got the result of the analysis you didn't let us know, did you?"

"No," said Jason. "No, I didn't. But I had other things to think about. Poor Ella's death for one thing. And now this business of Giuseppe. Inspector Craddock, when can I get my wife away from here? She's half frantic."

"I can understand that. But there will be the inquests to attend."

"You do realize that her life is still in danger?"

"I hope not. Every precaution will be taken—"

"Every precaution! I've heard that before, I think... I must get her away from here, Craddock. I *must*."

III

Marina was lying on the chaise longue in her bedroom, her eyes closed. She looked grey with strain and fatigue.

Her husband stood there for a moment looking at her. Her eyes opened.

"Was that that Craddock man?"

"Yes."

"What did he come about? Ella?"

"Ella—and Giuseppe."

Marina frowned.

"Giuseppe? Have they found out who shot him?"

"Not yet."

"It's all a nightmare... Did he say we could go away?"

"He said—not yet."

"Why not? We must. Didn't you make him see that I can't go on waiting day after day for someone to kill me. It's fantastic."

"Every precaution will be taken."

"They said that before. Did it stop Ella being killed? Or Giuseppe? Don't you see, they'll get me in the end... There was something in my coffee that day at the studio. I'm sure there was...if only you

hadn't poured it away! If we'd kept it, we could have had it analysed or whatever you call it. We'd have known for sure...."

"Would it have made you happier to know for sure?"

She stared at him, the pupils of her eyes widely dilated.

"I don't see what you mean. If they'd known for sure that someone was trying to poison me, they'd have let us leave here, they'd have let us get away."

"Not necessarily."

"But I can't go on like this! I can't... I can't... You must help me, Jason. You must do *something*. I'm frightened. I'm so terribly frightened... There's an enemy here. And I don't know who it is... It might be anyone—anyone. At the studios—or here in the house. Someone who hates me—but why?... Why?... Someone who wants me dead... But who is it? Who is it? I thought—I was almost sure—it was Ella. But now—"

"You thought it was Ella?" Jason sounded astonished. "But why?"

"Because she hated me—oh yes she did. Don't men ever see these things? She was madly in love with you. I don't believe you had the least idea of it. But it can't be Ella, because Ella's dead. Oh, Jinks, Jinks—do help me—get me away from here—let me go somewhere safe...safe...."

She sprang up and walked rapidly up and down, turning and twisting her hands.

The director in Jason was full of admiration for those passionate, tortured movements. I must remember them, he thought. For Hedda Gabler, perhaps? Then, with a shock, he remembered that it was his wife he was watching.

"It's all right, Marina—all right. I'll look after you."

"We must go away from this hateful house—at once. I hate this house—hate it."

"Listen, we can't go away immediately."

"Why not? Why *not*?"

"Because," said Rudd, "deaths cause complications...and there's something else to consider. Will running away do any good?"

"Of course it will. We'll get away from this person who hates me."

"If there's anyone who hates you that much, they could follow you easily enough."

"You mean—you mean—I shall *never* get away? I shall never be safe again?"

"Darling—it will be all right. I'll look after you. I'll keep you safe."

She clung to him.

"Will you, Jinks? Will you see that nothing happens to me?"

She sagged against him, and he laid her down gently on the chaise longue.

"Oh, I'm a coward," she murmured, "a coward...if I knew *who* it was—and why?... Get me my pills—the yellow ones—not the brown. I must have something to calm me."

"Don't take too many, for God's sake, Marina."

"All right—all right... Sometimes they don't have any effect anymore..." She looked up in his face.

She smiled, a tender exquisite smile.

"You'll take care of me, Jinks? Swear you'll take care of me...."

"Always," said Jason Rudd. "To the bitter end."

Her eyes opened wide.

"You looked so—so odd when you said that."

"Did I? How did I look?"

"I can't explain. Like—like a clown laughing at something terribly sad, that no one else has seen...."

Twenty-one

I

It was a tired and depressed Inspector Craddock who came to see Miss Marple the following day.

"Sit down and be comfortable," she said. "I can see you've had a very hard time."

"I don't like to be defeated," said Inspector Craddock. "Two murders within twenty-four hours. Ah well, I'm poorer at my job than I thought I was. Give me a nice cup of tea, Aunt Jane, with some thin bread and butter and soothe me with your earliest remembrances of St. Mary Mead."

Miss Marple clicked with her tongue in a sympathetic manner.

"Now it's no good talking like that, my dear boy, and I don't think bread and butter is *at all* what you want. Gentlemen, when they've had a disappointment, want something stronger than tea."

As usual, Miss Marple said the word "gentlemen" in the way of someone describing a foreign species.

"I should advise a good stiff whisky and soda," she said.

"Would you really, Aunt Jane? Well, I won't say no."

"And I shall get it for you myself," said Miss Marple, rising to her feet.

"Oh, no, don't do that. Let me. Or what about Miss What's-her-name?"

"We don't want Miss Knight fussing about in here," said Miss Marple. "She won't be bringing my tea for another twenty minutes

so that gives us a little peace and quiet. Clever of you to come to the window and not through the front door. Now we can have a nice quiet little time by ourselves."

She went to a corner cupboard, opened it and produced a bottle, a syphon of soda and a glass.

"You are full of surprises," said Dermot Craddock. "I'd no idea that's what you kept in your corner cupboard. Are you quite sure you're not a secret drinker, Aunt Jane?"

"Now, now," Miss Marple admonished him. "I have never been an advocate of teetotalism. A little strong drink is always advisable on the premises in case there is a shock or an accident. Invaluable at such times. Or, of course, if a gentleman should arrive suddenly. There!" said Miss Marple, handing him her remedy with an air of quiet triumph. "And you don't need to joke anymore. Just sit quietly there and relax."

"Wonderful wives there must have been in your young days," said Dermot Craddock.

"I'm sure, my dear boy, you would find the young lady of the type you refer to as a very inadequate helpmeet nowadays. Young ladies were not encouraged to be intellectual and very few of them had university degrees or any kind of academic distinction."

"There are things that are preferable to academic distinctions," said Dermot. "One of them is knowing when a man wants whisky and soda and giving it to him."

Miss Marple smiled at him affectionately.

"Come," she said, "tell me all about it. Or as much as you are allowed to tell me."

"I think you probably know as much as I do. And very likely you have something up your sleeve. How about your dogsbody, your dear Miss Knight? What about her having committed the crime?"

"Now why should Miss Knight have done such a thing?" demanded Miss Marple, surprised.

"Because she's the most unlikely person," said Dermot. "It so often seems to hold good when you produce your answer."

"Not at all," said Miss Marple with spirit. "I have said over and over again, not only to you, my dear Dermot—if I may call you so—

that it is always the *obvious* person who has done the crime. One thinks so often of the wife or the husband and so very often it *is* the wife or the husband."

"Meaning Jason Rudd?" He shook his head. "That man adores Marina Gregg."

"I was speaking generally," said Miss Marple, with dignity. "First we had Mrs. Badcock apparently murdered. One asked oneself who could have done such a thing and the first answer would naturally be the husband. So one had to examine that possibility. Then we decided that the real object of the crime was Marina Gregg and there again we have to look for the person most intimately connected with Marina Gregg, starting as I say with the husband. Because there is no doubt about it that husbands do, very frequently, want to make away with their wives, though sometimes, of course, they only *wish* to make away with their wives and do not actually do so. But I agree with you, my dear boy, that Jason Rudd really cares with all his heart for Marina Gregg. It *might* be very clever acting, though I can hardly believe that. And one certainly cannot see a motive of any kind for his doing away with her. If he wanted to marry somebody else there could, I should say, be nothing more simple. Divorce, if I may say so, seems second nature to film stars. A practical advantage does not seem to arise either. He is not a poor man by any means. He has his own career, and is, I understand, most successful in it. So we must go farther afield. But it certainly is difficult. Yes, very difficult."

"Yes," said Craddock, "it must hold particular difficulties for you because of course this film world is entirely new to you. You don't know the local scandals and all the rest of it."

"I know a little more than you may think," said Miss Marple. "I have studied very closely various numbers of *Confidential*, *Film Life*, *Film Talk* and *Film Topics*."

Dermot Craddock laughed. He couldn't help it.

"I must say," he said, "it tickles me to see you sitting there and telling me what your course of literature has been."

"I found it very interesting," said Miss Marple. "They're not particularly well written, if I may say so. But it really is disappointing

in a way that it is all so much the same as it used to be in my young days. *Modern Society* and *Tit Bits* and all the rest of them. A lot of gossip. A lot of scandal. A great preoccupation with who is in love with whom, and all the rest of it. Really, you know, practically exactly the same sort of thing goes on in St. Mary Mead. And in the Development too. Human nature, I mean, is just the same everywhere. One comes back, I think, to the question of who could have been likely to want to kill Marina Gregg, to want to so much that having failed once they sent threatening letters and made repeated attempts to do so. Someone perhaps a little—" very gently she tapped her forehead.

"Yes," said Craddock, "that certainly seems indicated. And of course it doesn't always show."

"Oh, I know," agreed Miss Marple, fervently. "Old Mrs. Pike's second boy, Alfred, *seemed* perfectly rational and normal. Almost painfully prosaic, if you know what I mean, but actually, it seems, he had the most abnormal psychology, or so I understand. Really positively dangerous. He seems quite happy and contented, so Mrs. Pike told me, now that he is in Fairways Mental Home. They understand him there, and the doctors think him a most interesting case. That of course pleases him very much. Yes, it all ended quite happily, but she had one or two very near escapes."

Craddock revolved in his mind the possibility of a parallel between someone in Marina Gregg's entourage and Mrs. Pike's second son.

"The Italian butler," continued Miss Marple, "the one who was killed. He went to London, I understand, on the day of his death. Does anyone know what he did there—if you are allowed to tell me, that is," she added conscientiously.

"He arrived in London at eleven-thirty in the morning," said Craddock, "and what he did in London nobody knows until a quarter to two he visited his bank and made a deposit of five hundred pounds in cash. I may say that there was no confirmation of his story that he went to London to visit an ill relative or a relative who had got into trouble. None of his relatives there had seen him."

Miss Marple nodded her head appreciatively.

"Five hundred pounds," she said. "Yes, that's quite an interesting sum, isn't it? I should imagine it would be the first instalment of a good many other sums, wouldn't you?"

"It looks that way," said Craddock.

"It was probably all the ready money the person he was threatening could raise. He may even have pretended to be satisfied with that or he may have accepted it as a down payment and the victim may have promised to raise further sums in the immediate future. It seems to knock out the idea that Marina Gregg's killer could have been someone in humble circumstances who had a private vendetta against her. It would also knock out, I should say, the idea of someone who'd obtained work as a studio helper or attendant or a servant or a gardener. Unless"—Miss Marple pointed out—"such a person may have been the active agent whereas the employing agent may not have been in the neighbourhood. Hence the visit to London."

"Exactly. We have in London Ardwyck Fenn, Lola Brewster and Margot Bence. All three were present at the party. All three of them could have met Giuseppe at an arranged meeting place somewhere in London between the hours of eleven and a quarter to two. Ardwyck Fenn was out of his office during those hours. Lola Brewster had left her suite to go shopping. Margot Bence was not in her studio. By the way—"

"Yes?" said Miss Marple. "Have you something to tell me?"

"You asked me," said Dermot, "about the children. The children that Marina Gregg adopted before she knew she could have a child of her own."

"Yes I did."

Craddock told her what he had learned.

"Margot Bence," said Miss Marple softly. "I had a feeling, you know, that it had something to do with children...."

"I can't believe that after all these years—"

"I know, I know. One never can. But do you really, my dear Dermot, know very much about children? Think back to your own childhood. Can't you remember some incident, some happening that caused you grief, or a passion quite incommensurate with its real

importance? Some sorrow or passionate resentment that has really never been equalled since? There was such a book, you know, written by that brilliant writer. Mr. Richard Hughes. I forget the name of it but it was about some children who had been through a hurricane. Oh yes—the hurricane in Jamaica. What made a vivid impression on them was their cat rushing madly through the house. It was the only thing they remembered. But the whole of the horror and excitement and fear that they had experienced was bound up in that one incident.”

“It’s odd you should say that,” said Craddock thoughtfully.

“Why, has it made you remember something?”

“I was thinking of when my mother died. I was five I think. Five or six. I was having dinner in the nursery, jam roll pudding. I was very fond of jam roll pudding. One of the servants came in and said to my nursery governess, ‘Isn’t it awful? There’s been an accident and Mrs. Craddock has been killed.’... Whenever I think of my mother’s death, d’you know what I see?”

“What?”

“A plate with jam roll pudding on it, and I’m staring at it. Staring at it and I can see as well now as then, how the jam oozed out of it at one side. I didn’t cry or say anything. I remember just sitting there as though I’d been frozen stiff, staring at the pudding. And d’you know, even now if I see in a shop or a restaurant or in anyone’s house a portion of jam roll pudding, a whole wave of horror and misery and despair comes over me. Sometimes for a moment I don’t remember *why*. Does that seem very crazy to you?”

“No,” said Miss Marple, “it seems entirely natural. It’s very interesting, that. It’s given me a sort of idea....”

II

The door opened and Miss Knight appeared bearing the tea tray.

“Dear, dear,” she exclaimed, “and so we’ve got a visitor, have we? How very nice. How do you do, Inspector Craddock. I’ll just fetch another cup.”

"Don't bother," Dermot called after her. "I've had a drink instead."
Miss Knight popped her head back round the door.

"I wonder—could you just come here a minute, Mr. Craddock?"

Dermot joined her in the hall. She went to the dining room and shut the door.

"You will be careful, won't you?" she said.

"Careful? In what way, Miss Knight?"

"Our old dear in there. You know, she's so interested in everything but it's not very good for her to get excited over murders and nasty things like that. We don't want her to brood and have bad dreams. She's very old and frail, and she really must lead a very sheltered life. She always has, you know. I'm sure all this talk of murders and gangsters and things like that is very, very bad for her."

Dermot looked at her with faint amusement.

"I don't think," he said gently, "that anything that you or I could say about murders is likely unduly to excite or shock Miss Marple. I can assure you, my dear Miss Knight, that Miss Marple can contemplate murder and sudden death and indeed crime of all kinds with the utmost equanimity."

He went back to the drawing room, and Miss Knight, clucking a little in an indignant manner, followed him. She talked briskly during tea with an emphasis on political news in the paper and the most cheerful subjects she could think of. When she finally removed the tea tray and shut the door behind her, Miss Marple drew a deep breath.

"At last we've got some peace," she said. "I hope I shan't murder that woman some day. Now listen, Dermot, there are some things I want to know."

"Yes? What are they?"

"I want to go over very carefully what happened on the day of the fête. Mrs. Bantry has arrived, and the vicar shortly after her. Then come Mr. and Mrs. Badcock, and on the stairs at that time were the mayor and his wife, this man Ardwyck Fenn, Lola Brewster, a reporter from the *Herald & Argus* of Much Benham, and this photographer girl, Margot Bence. Margot Bence, you said, had her

camera at an angle on the stairs, and was taking photographs of the proceedings. Have you seen any of those photographs?"

"Actually I brought one to show you."

He took from his pocket an unmounted print. Miss Marple looked at it steadfastly. Marina Gregg with Jason Rudd a little behind her to one side, Arthur Badcock, his hand to his face, looking slightly embarrassed, was standing back, whilst his wife had Marina Gregg's hand in hers and was looking up at her and talking. Marina was not looking at Mrs. Badcock. She was staring over her head looking, it seemed, full into the camera, or possibly just slightly to the left of it.

"Very interesting," said Miss Marple. "I've had descriptions, you know, of what this look was on her face. A frozen look. Yes, that describes it quite well. A look of doom. I'm not really so sure about that. It's more a kind of paralysis of feeling rather than apprehension of doom. Don't you think so? I wouldn't say it was actually fear, would you, although fear of course might take you that way. It might paralyse you. But I don't think it was fear. I think rather that it was *shock*. Dermot, my dear boy, I want you to tell me, if you've got notes of it, what exactly Heather Badcock said to Marina Gregg on that occasion. I know roughly the gist of it, of course, but how near can you get to the actual *words*. I suppose you had accounts of it from different people."

Dermot nodded.

"Yes. Let me see. Your friend, Mrs. Bantry, then Jason Rudd and I think Arthur Badcock. As you say they varied a little in wording, but the gist of them was the same."

"I know. It's the variations that I want. I think it might help us."

"I don't see how," said Dermot, "though perhaps you do. Your friend, Mrs. Bantry, was probably the most definite on the point. As far as I remember—wait—I carry a good many of my jottings around with me."

He took out a small notebook from his pocket, looked through it to refresh his memory.

"I haven't got the exact words here," he said, "but I made a rough note. Apparently Mrs. Badcock was very cheerful, rather arch, and delighted with herself. She said something like 'I can't tell you

how wonderful this is for me. You won't remember but years ago in Bermuda—I got up from bed when I had chicken pox and came along to see you and you gave me an autograph and it's one of the proudest days of my life which I have never forgotten."

"I see," said Miss Marple, "she mentioned the place but not the date, did she?"

"Yes."

"And what did Rudd say?"

"Jason Rudd? He said that Mrs. Badcock told his wife that she'd got up from bed when she had the flu and had come to meet Marina and she still had her autograph. It was a shorter account than your friend's but the gist of it was the same."

"Did he mention the time and place?"

"No. I don't think he did. I think he said roughly that it was some ten or twelve years ago."

"I see. And what about Mr. Badcock?"

"Mr. Badcock said that Heather was extremely excited and anxious to meet Marina Gregg, that she was a great fan of Marina Gregg's and that she'd told him that once when she was ill as a girl she managed to get up and meet Miss Gregg and get her autograph. He didn't go into any close particulars, as it was evidently in the days before he was married to his wife. He impressed me as not thinking the incident of much importance."

"I see," said Miss Marple. "Yes, I see...."

"And what do you see?" asked Craddock.

"Not quite as much as I'd like to yet," said Miss Marple, honestly, "but I have a sort of feeling if I only knew why she'd ruined her new dress—"

"Who—Mrs. Badcock?"

"Yes. It seems to me such a very odd thing—such an inexplicable one unless—of course—Dear me, I think I must be *very* stupid!"

Miss Knight opened the door and entered, switching the light on as she did so.

"I think we want a little light in here," she said brightly.

"Yes," said Miss Marple, "you are so right, Miss Knight. That is exactly what we did want. A little light. I think, you know, that at last

we've got it."

The tête-à-tête seemed ended and Craddock rose to his feet.

"There only remains one thing," he said, "and that is for you to tell me just what particular memory from your own past is agitating your mind now."

"Everyone always teases me about that," said Miss Marple, "but I must say that I was reminded just for a moment of the Lauristons' parlourmaid."

"The Lauristons' parlourmaid?" Craddock looked completely mystified.

"She had, of course, to take messages on the telephone," said Miss Marple, "and she wasn't very good at it. She used to get the general *sense* right, if you know what I mean, but the way she wrote it down used to make quite nonsense of it sometimes. I suppose really, because her grammar was so bad. The result was that some very unfortunate incidents occurred. I remember one in particular. A Mr. Burroughs, I think it was, rang up and said he had been to see Mr. Elvaston about the fence being broken down but he said that the fence wasn't his business at all to repair. It was on the other side of the property and he said he would like to know if that was really the case before proceeding further as it would depend on whether he was liable or not and it was important for him to know the proper lie of the land before instructing solicitors. A very obscure message, as you see. It confused rather than enlightened."

"If you're talking about parlourmaids," said Miss Knight with a little laugh, "that must have been a *very* long time ago. I've never heard of a parlourmaid for many years now."

"It was a good many years ago," said Miss Marple, "but nevertheless human nature was very much the same then as it is now. Mistakes were made for very much the same reasons. Oh dear," she added, "I *am* thankful that that girl is safely in Bournemouth."

"The girl? What girl?" asked Dermot.

"That girl who did dressmaking and went up to see Giuseppe that day. What was her name— Gladys something."

"Gladys Dixon?"

"Yes, that's the name."

"She's in *Bournemouth*, do you say? How on earth do you know that?"

"I know," said Miss Marple, "because I sent her there."

"What?" Dermot stared at her. "You? Why?"

"I went out to see her," said Miss Marple, "and I gave her some money and told her to take a holiday and not to write home."

"Why on earth did you do that?"

"Because I didn't want her to be killed, of course," said Miss Marple, and blinked at him placidly.

Twenty-two

"Such a sweet letter from Lady Conway," Miss Knight said two days later as she deposited Miss Marple's breakfast tray. "You remember my telling you about her? Just a little, you know—" she tapped her forehead—"wanders sometimes. And her memory's bad. Can't recognize her relations always and tells them to go away."

"That might be shrewdness really," said Miss Marple, "rather than a loss of memory."

"Now, now," said Miss Knight, "aren't we being naughty to make suggestions like that? She's spending the winter at the Belgrave Hotel at Llandudno. *Such* a nice residential hotel. Splendid grounds and a very nice glassed-in terrace. She's most anxious for me to come and join her there." She sighed.

Miss Marple sat herself upright in bed.

"But please," she said, "if you are wanted—if you are needed there and would like to go—"

"No, no, I couldn't hear of it," cried Miss Knight. "Oh, no, I never meant anything like that. Why, what would Mr. Raymond West say? He explained to me that being here might turn out to be a permanency. I should *never* dream of not fulfilling my obligations. I was only just mentioning the fact in passing, so don't worry, dear," she added, patting Miss Marple on the shoulder. "We're not going to be deserted! No, no, indeed we're not! We're going to be looked after and cosseted and made very happy and comfortable always."

She went out of the room. Miss Marple sat with an air of determination, staring at her tray and failing to eat anything. Finally

she picked up the receiver of the telephone and dialled with vigour.

"Dr. Haydock?"

"Yes?"

"Jane Marple here."

"And what's the matter with you? In need of my professional services?"

"No," said Miss Marple. "But I want to see you as soon as possible."

When Dr. Haydock came, he found Miss Marple still in bed waiting for him.

"You look the picture of health," he complained.

"That is why I wanted to see you," said Miss Marple. "To tell you that I am perfectly well."

"An unusual reason for sending for the doctor."

"I'm quite strong, I'm quite fit, and it's absurd to have anybody living in the house. So long as someone comes every day and does the cleaning and all that I don't see any need at all for having someone living here permanently."

"I dare say you don't, but I do," said Dr. Haydock.

"It seems to me you're turning into a regular old fussbudget," said Miss Marple unkindly.

"And don't call me names!" said Dr. Haydock. "You're a very healthy woman for your age; you were pulled down a bit by bronchitis which isn't good for the elderly. But to stay alone in a house at your age is a risk. Supposing you fall down the stairs one evening or fall out of bed or slip in the bath. There you'd lie and nobody'd know about it."

"One can imagine anything," said Miss Marple. "Miss Knight might fall down the stairs and I'd fall over her rushing out to see what had happened."

"It's no good your bullying me," said Dr. Haydock. "You're an old lady and you've got to be looked after in a proper manner. If you don't like this woman you've got, change her and get somebody else."

"That's not always so easy," said Miss Marple.

"Find some old servant of yours, someone that you like, and who's lived with you before. I can see this old hen irritates you. She'd irritate me. There must be some old servant somewhere. That nephew of yours is one of the best-selling authors of the day. He'd make it worth her while if you found the right person."

"Of course dear Raymond would do anything of that kind. He is most generous," said Miss Marple. "But it's not so easy to find the right person. Young people have their own lives to live, and so many of my faithful old servants, I am sorry to say, are dead."

"Well, you're not dead," said Dr. Haydock, "and you'll live a good deal longer if you take proper care of yourself."

He rose to his feet.

"Well," he said. "No good my stopping here. You look as fit as a fiddle. I shan't waste time taking your blood pressure or feeling your pulse or asking you questions. You're thriving on all this local excitement, even if you can't get about to poke your nose in as much as you'd like to do. Goodbye, I've got to go now and do some real doctoring. Eight to ten cases of German measles, half a dozen whooping coughs, and a suspected scarlet fever as well as my regulars!"

Dr. Haydock went out breezily—but Miss Marple was frowning... Something that he had said...what was it? Patients to see...the usual village ailments...village ailments? Miss Marple pushed her breakfast tray farther away with a purposeful gesture. Then she rang up Mrs. Bantry.

"Dolly? Jane here. I want to ask you something. Now pay attention. Is it true that you told Inspector Craddock that Heather Badcock told Marina Gregg a long pointless story about how she had chicken pox and got up in spite of it to go and meet Marina and get her autograph?"

"That was it more or less."

"*Chicken pox?*"

"Well, something like that. Mrs. Allcock was talking to me about vodka at the time, so I wasn't really listening closely."

"You're sure," Miss Marple took a breath, "that she didn't say whooping cough?"

"Whooping cough?" Mrs. Bantry sounded astounded. "Of course not. She wouldn't have had to powder her face and do it up for whooping cough."

"I see—that's what you went by—her special mention of makeup?"

"Well, she laid stress on it—she wasn't the makingup kind. But I think you're right, it wasn't chicken pox... Nettlerash, perhaps."

"You only say that," said Miss Marple coldly, "because you once had nettlerash yourself and couldn't go to a wedding. You're hopeless, Dolly, quite hopeless."

She put the receiver down with a bang, cutting off Mrs. Bantry's astonished protest of "Really, Jane."

Miss Marple made a ladylike noise of vexation like a cat sneezing to indicate profound disgust. Her mind reverted to the problem of her own domestic comfort. Faithful Florence? Could faithful Florence, that grenadier of a former parlourmaid be persuaded to leave her comfortable small house and come back to St. Mary Mead to look after her erstwhile mistress? Faithful Florence had always been very devoted to her. But faithful Florence was very attached to her own little house. Miss Marple shook her head vexedly. A gay rat-tat-tat sounded at the door. On Miss Marple's calling "Come in" Cherry entered.

"Come for your tray," she said. "Has anything happened? You're looking rather upset, aren't you?"

"I feel so helpless," said Miss Marple. "Old and helpless."

"Don't worry," said Cherry, picking up the tray. "You're very far from helpless. You don't know the things I hear about you in this place! Why practically everybody in the Development knows about you now. All sorts of extraordinary things you've done. *They* don't think of you as the old and helpless kind. It's *she* puts it into your head."

"She?"

Cherry gave a vigorous nod of her head backwards towards the door behind her.

"Pussy, pussy," she said. "Your Miss Knight. Don't you let her get you down."

"She's very kind," said Miss Marple, "really *very* kind," she added, in the tone of one who convinces herself.

"Care killed the cat, they say," said Cherry. "You don't want kindness rubbed into your skin, so to speak, do you?"

"Oh, well," said Miss Marple sighing, "I suppose we all have our troubles."

"I should say we do," said Cherry. "I oughtn't to complain but I feel sometimes that if I live next door to Mrs. Hartwell any longer there's going to be a regrettable incident. Sour-faced old cat, always gossiping and complaining. Jim's pretty fed up too. He had a first-class row with her last night. Just because we had *The Messiah* on a bit loud! You can't object to *The Messiah*, can you? I mean, it's religious."

"Did she object?"

"She created something terrible," said Cherry. "Banged on the wall and shouted and one thing and another."

"Do you have to have your music turned on so loud?" asked Miss Marple.

"Jim likes it that way," said Cherry. "He says you don't get the tone unless you have full volume."

"It might," suggested Miss Marple, "be a *little* trying for anyone if they *weren't* musical."

"It's these houses being semi-detached," said Cherry. "Thin as anything, the walls. I'm not so keen really on all this new building, when you come to think of it. It looks all very prissy and nice but you can't express your personality without somebody being down on you like a ton of bricks."

Miss Marple smiled at her.

"You've got a lot of personality to express, Cherry," she said.

"D'you think so?" Cherry was pleased and she laughed. "I wonder," she began. Suddenly she looked embarrassed. She put down the tray and came back to the bed.

"I wonder if you'd think it cheek if I asked you something? I mean—you've only got to say 'out of the question' and that's that."

"Something you want me to do?"

"Not quite. It's those rooms over the kitchen. They're never used nowadays, are they?"

"No."

"Used to be a gardener and wife there once, so I heard. But that's old stuff. What I wondered—what Jim and I wondered—is if we could have them. Come and live here, I mean."

Miss Marple stared at her in astonishment.

"But your beautiful new house in the Development?"

"We're both fed up with it. We like gadgets, but you can have gadgets anywhere—get them on HP and there would be a nice lot of room here, especially if Jim could have the room over the stables. He'd fix it up like new, and he could have all his construction models there, and wouldn't have to clear them away all the time. And if we had our stereogram there too, you'd hardly hear it."

"Are you really serious about this, Cherry?"

"Yes, I am. Jim and I, we've talked about it a lot. Jim could fix things for you anytime—you know, plumbing or a bit of carpentry, and I'd look after you every bit as well as your Miss Knight does. I know you think I'm a bit slap-dash—but I'd try and take trouble with the beds and the washing-up—and I'm getting quite a dab hand at cooking. Did Beef Stroganoff last night, it's quite easy, really."

Miss Marple contemplated her.

Cherry was looking like an eager kitten—vitality and joy of life radiated from her. Miss Marple thought once more of faithful Florence. Faithful Florence would, of course, keep the house far better. (Miss Marple put no faith in Cherry's promise.) But she was at least sixty-five—perhaps more. And would she really want to be uprooted? She might accept that out of very real devotion for Miss Marple. But did Miss Marple really want sacrifices made for her? Wasn't she already suffering from Miss Knight's conscientious devotion to duty?

Cherry, however inadequate her housework, *wanted* to come. And she had qualities that to Miss Marple at this moment seemed of supreme importance.

Warmheartedness, vitality, and a deep interest in everything that was going on.

"I don't want, of course," said Cherry, "to go behind Miss Knight's back in anyway."

"Never mind about Miss Knight," said Miss Marple, coming to a decision. "She'll go off to someone called Lady Conway at a hotel in Llandudno—and enjoy herself thoroughly. We'll have to settle a lot of details, Cherry, and I shall want to talk to your husband—but if you really think you'd be happy...."

"It'd suit us down to the ground," said Cherry. "And you really can rely on me doing things properly. I'll even use the dustpan and brush if you like."

Miss Marple laughed at this supreme offer.

Cherry picked up the breakfast tray again.

"I must get cracking. I got here late this morning—hearing about poor Arthur Badcock."

"Arthur Badcock? What happened to him?"

"Haven't you heard? He's up at the police station now," said Cherry. "They asked him if he'd come and 'assist them with their inquiries' and you know what that always means."

"When did this happen?" demanded Miss Marple.

"This morning," said Cherry. "I suppose," she added, "that it got out about his once having been married to Marina Gregg."

"What!" Miss Marple sat up again. "Arthur Badcock was once married to Marina Gregg?"

"That's the story," said Cherry. "Nobody had any idea of it. It was Mr. Upshaw put it about. He's been to the States once or twice on business for his firm and so he knows a lot of gossip from over there. It was a long time ago, you know. Really before she'd begun her career. They were only married a year or two and then she won a film award and of course he wasn't good enough for her then, so they had one of these easy American divorces and he just faded out, as you might say. He's the fading out kind, Arthur Badcock. He wouldn't make a fuss. He changed his name and came back to England. It's all ever so long ago. You wouldn't think anything like that mattered nowadays, would you? Still, there it is. It's enough for the police to go on, I suppose."

"Oh, no," said Miss Marple. "Oh *no*. This mustn't happen. If I could only think what to do—Now, let me see." She made a gesture to Cherry. "Take the tray away, Cherry, and send Miss Knight up to me. I'm going to get up."

Cherry obeyed. Miss Marple dressed herself with fingers that fumbled slightly. It irritated her when she found excitement of any kind affecting her. She was just hooking up her dress when Miss Knight entered.

"Did you want me? Cherry said—"

Miss Marple broke in incisively.

"Get Inch," she said.

"I beg your pardon," said Miss Knight, startled.

"Inch," said Miss Marple, "get Inch. Telephone for him to come at once."

"Oh, oh I see. You mean the taxi people. But his name's Roberts, isn't it?"

"To me," said Miss Marple, "he is Inch and always will be. But anyway get him. He's to come here at once."

"You want to go for a little drive?"

"Just get him, can you?" said Miss Marple. "And hurry, please."

Miss Knight looked at her doubtfully and proceeded to do as she was told.

"We are feeling all right, dear, aren't we?" she said anxiously.

"We are both feeling very well," said Miss Marple, "and I am feeling *particularly* well. Inertia does not suit me, and never has. A practical course of action, that is what I have been wanting for a long time."

"Has that Mrs. Baker been saying something that has upset you?"

"Nothing has upset me," said Miss Marple. "I feel particularly well. I am annoyed with myself for being stupid. But really, until I got a hint from Dr. Haydock this morning—now I wonder if I remember rightly. Where is that medical book of mine?" She gestured Miss Knight aside and walked firmly down the stairs. She found the book she wanted on a shelf in the drawing room. Taking it out she looked up the index, murmured, "Page 210," turned to the page in question, read for a few moments then nodded her head, satisfied.

"Most remarkable," she said, "most curious. I don't suppose anybody would ever have thought of it. I didn't myself, until the two things came together, so to speak."

Then she shook her head, and a little line appeared between her eyes. If only there was *someone*....

She went over in her mind the various accounts she had been given of that particular scene....

Her eyes widened in thought. There was someone—but would he, she wondered, be any good? One never knew with the vicar. He was quite unpredictable.

Nevertheless she went to the telephone and dialled.

"Good morning, Vicar, this is Miss Marple."

"Oh, yes, Miss Marple—anything I can do for you?"

"I wonder if you could help me on a small point. It concerns the day of the fête when poor Mrs. Badcock died. I believe you were standing quite near Miss Gregg when Mr. and Mrs. Badcock arrived."

"Yes—yes— I was just before them, I think. Such a tragic day."

"Yes, indeed. And I believe that Mrs. Badcock was recalling to Miss Gregg that they had met before in Bermuda. She had been ill in bed and had got up specially."

"Yes, yes, I do remember."

"And do you remember if Mrs. Badcock mentioned the illness she was suffering from?"

"I think now—let me see—yes, it was measles—at least not real measles—German measles—a much less serious disease. Some people hardly feel ill at all with it. I remember my cousin Caroline...."

Miss Marple cut off reminiscences of Cousin Caroline by saying firmly: "Thank you so much, Vicar," and replacing the receiver.

There was an awed expression on her face. One of the great mysteries of St. Mary Mead was what made the vicar remember certain things—only outstripped by the greater mystery of what the vicar could manage to forget!

"The taxi's here, dear," said Miss Knight, bustling in. "It's a very old one, and not too clean I should say. I don't really like you driving in a thing like that. You might pick up some germ or other."

"Nonsense," said Miss Marple. Setting her hat firmly on her head and buttoning up her summer coat, she went out to the waiting taxi.

"Good morning, Roberts," she said.

"Good morning, Miss Marple. You're early this morning. Where do you want to go?"

"Gossington Hall, please," said Miss Marple.

"I'd better come with you, hadn't I, dear?" said Miss Knight. "It won't take a minute just to slip on outdoor shoes."

"No, thank you," said Miss Marple, firmly. "I'm going by myself. Drive on, Inch. I mean Roberts."

Mr. Roberts drove on, merely remarking:

"Ah, Gossington Hall. Great changes there and everywhere nowadays. All that development. Never thought anything like that'd come to St. Mary Mead."

Upon arrival at Gossington Hall Miss Marple rang the bell and asked to see Mr. Jason Rudd.

Giuseppe's successor, a rather shaky-looking elderly man, conveyed doubt.

"Mr. Rudd," he said, "does not see anybody without an appointment, madam. And today especially—"

"I have no appointment," said Miss Marple, "but I will wait," she added.

She stepped briskly past him into the hall and sat down on a hall chair.

"I'm afraid it will be quite impossible this morning, madam."

"In that case," said Miss Marple, "I shall wait until this afternoon."

Baffled, the new butler retired. Presently a young man came to Miss Marple. He had a pleasant manner and a cheerful, slightly American voice.

"I've seen you before," said Miss Marple. "In the Development. You asked me the way to Blenheim Close."

Hailey Preston smiled good-naturedly. "I guess you did your best, but you misdirected me badly."

"Dear me, did I?" said Miss Marple. "So many Closes, aren't there? Can I see Mr. Rudd?"

"Why, now, that's too bad," said Hailey Preston. "Mr. Rudd's a busy man and he's—er—fully occupied this morning and really can't be disturbed."

"I'm sure he's very busy," said Miss Marple. "I came here quite prepared to wait."

"Why, I'd suggest now," said Hailey Preston, "that you should tell me what it is you want. I deal with all these things for Mr. Rudd, you see. Everyone has to see me first."

"I'm afraid," said Miss Marple, "that I want to see Mr. Rudd himself. And," she added, "I shall wait here until I do."

She settled herself more firmly in the large oak chair.

Hailey Preston hesitated, started to speak, finally turned away and went upstairs.

He returned with a large man in tweeds.

"This is Dr. Gilchrist. Miss—er—"

"Miss Marple."

"So you're Miss Marple," said Dr. Gilchrist. He looked at her with a good deal of interest.

Hailey Preston slipped away with celerity.

"I've heard about you," said Dr. Gilchrist. "From Dr. Haydock."

"Dr. Haydock is a very old friend of mine."

"He certainly is. Now you want to see Mr. Jason Rudd? Why?"

"It is necessary that I should," said Miss Marple.

Dr. Gilchrist's eyes appraised her.

"And you're camping here until you do?" he asked.

"Exactly."

"You would, too," said Dr. Gilchrist. "In that case I will give you a perfectly good reason why you cannot see Mr. Rudd. His wife died last night in her sleep."

"Dead!" exclaimed Miss Marple. "How?"

"An overdose of sleeping stuff. We don't want the news to leak out to the Press for a few hours. So I'll ask you to keep this knowledge to yourself for the moment."

"Of course. Was it an accident?"

"That is definitely my view," said Gilchrist.

"But it could be suicide."

"It could—but most unlikely."

"Or someone could have given it to her?"

Gilchrist shrugged his shoulders.

"A most remote contingency. And a thing," he added firmly, "that would be quite impossible to prove."

"I see," said Miss Marple. She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, but it's more necessary than ever that I should see Mr. Rudd."

Gilchrist looked at her.

"Wait here," he said.

Twenty-three

Jason Rudd looked up as Gilchrist entered.

"There's an old dame downstairs," said the doctor; "looks about a hundred. Wants to see you. Won't take no and says she'll wait. She'll wait till this afternoon, I gather, or she'll wait till this evening and she's quite capable, I should say, of spending the night here. She's got something she badly wants to say to you. I'd see her if I were you."

Jason Rudd looked up from his desk. His face was white and strained.

"Is she mad?"

"No. Not in the least."

"I don't see why I—Oh, all right—send her up. What does it matter?"

Gilchrist nodded, went out of the room and called to Hailey Preston.

"Mr. Rudd can spare you a few minutes now, Miss Marple," said Hailey Preston, appearing again by her side.

"Thank you. That's very kind of him," said Miss Marple as she rose to her feet. "Have you been with Mr. Rudd long?" she asked.

"Why, I've worked with Mr. Rudd for the last two and a half years. My job is public relations generally."

"I see." Miss Marple looked at him thoughtfully. "You remind me very much," she said, "of someone I knew called Gerald French."

"Indeed? What did Gerald French do?"

"Not very much," said Miss Marple, "but he was a very good talker." She sighed. "He had had an unfortunate past."

"You don't say," said Hailey Preston, slightly ill at ease. "What kind of a past?"

"I won't repeat it," said Miss Marple. "He didn't like it talked about."

Jason Rudd rose from his desk and looked with some surprise at the slender elderly lady who was advancing towards him.

"You wanted to see me?" he said. "What can I do for you?"

"I am very sorry about your wife's death," said Miss Marple. "I can see it has been a great grief to you and I want you to believe that I should not intrude upon you now or offer you sympathy unless it was absolutely necessary. But there are things that need badly to be cleared up unless an innocent man is going to suffer."

"An innocent man? I don't understand you."

"Arthur Badcock," said Miss Marple. "He is with the police now, being questioned."

"Questioned in connection with my wife's death? But that's absurd, absolutely absurd. He's never been near the place. He didn't even know her."

"I think he knew her," said Miss Marple. "He was married to her once."

"Arthur *Badcock*? But—he was—he was Heather Badcock's husband. Aren't you perhaps—" he spoke kindly and apologetically—"Making a little mistake?"

"He was married to both of them," said Miss Marple. "He was married to your wife when she was very young, before she went into pictures."

Jason Rudd shook his head.

"My wife was first married to a man called Alfred Beadle. He was in real estate. They were not suited and they parted almost immediately."

"Then Alfred Beadle changed his name to Badcock," said Miss Marple. "He's in a real estate firm here. It's odd how some people never seem to like to change their job and want to go on doing the

same thing. I expect really that's why Marina Gregg felt that he was no use to her. He couldn't have kept up with her."

"What you've told me is most surprising."

"I can assure you that I am not romancing or imagining things. What I am telling you is sober fact. These things get round very quickly in a village, you know, though they take a little longer," she added, "in reaching the Hall."

"Well," Jason Rudd stalled, uncertain what to say, then he accepted the position, "and what do you want me to do for you, Miss Marple?" he asked.

"I want, if I may, to stand on the stairs at the spot where you and your wife received guests on the day of the fête."

He shot a quick doubtful glance at her. Was this, after all, just another sensation-seeker? But Miss Marple's face was grave and composed.

"Why certainly," he said, "if you want to do so. Come with me."

He led her to the staircase head and paused in the hollowed-out bay at the top of it.

"You've made a good many changes in the house since the Bantrys were here," said Miss Marple. "I like this. Now, let me see. The tables would be about here, I suppose, and you and your wife would be standing—"

"My wife stood here." Jason showed her the place. "People came up the stairs, she shook hands with them and passed them on to me."

"She stood here," said Miss Marple.

She moved over and took her place where Marina Gregg had stood. She remained there quite quietly without moving. Jason Rudd watched her. He was perplexed but interested. She raised her right hand slightly as though shaking, looked down the stairs as though to see people coming up it. Then she looked straight ahead of her. On the wall halfway up the stairs was a large picture, a copy of an Italian Old Master. On either side of it were narrow windows, one giving out on the garden and the other giving on to the end of the stables and the weathercock. But Miss Marple looked at neither of these. Her eyes were fixed on the picture itself.

"Of course you always hear a thing right the first time," she said. "Mrs. Bantry told me that your wife stared at the picture and her face 'froze,' as she put it." She looked at the rich red and blue robes of the Madonna, a Madonna with her head slightly back, laughing up at the Holy Child that she was holding up in her arms. "Giacomo Bellini's 'Laughing Madonna,'" she said. "A religious picture, but also a painting of a happy mother with her child. Isn't that so Mr. Rudd?"

"I would say so, yes."

"I understand now," said Miss Marple. "I understand quite well. The whole thing is really very simple, isn't it?" She looked at Jason Rudd.

"Simple?"

"I think you know how simple it is," said Miss Marple. There was a peal on the bell below.

"I don't think," said Jason Rudd, "I quite understand." He looked down the stairway. There was a sound of voices.

"I know that voice," said Miss Marple. "It's Inspector Craddock's voice, isn't it?"

"Yes, it seems to be Inspector Craddock."

"He wants to see you, too. Would you mind very much if he joined us?"

"Not at all as far as I am concerned. Whether he will agree—"

"I think he will agree," said Miss Marple. "There's really not much time now to be lost is there? We've got to the moment when we've got to understand just how everything happened."

"I thought you said it was simple," said Jason Rudd.

"It was so simple," said Miss Marple, "that one just couldn't see it."

The decayed butler arrived at this moment up the stairs.

"Inspector Craddock is here, sir," he said.

"Ask him to join us here, please," said Jason Rudd.

The butler disappeared again and a moment or two later Dermot Craddock came up the stairs.

"You!" he said to Miss Marple, "how did you get here?"

"I came in Inch," said Miss Marple, producing the usual confused effect that that remark always caused.

From slightly behind her Jason Rudd rapped his forehead interrogatively. Dermot Craddock shook his head.

"I was saying to Mr. Rudd," said Miss Marple, "—has the butler gone away—"

Dermot Craddock cast a look down the stairs.

"Oh, yes," he said, "he's not listening. Sergeant Tiddler will see to that."

"Then that is all right," said Miss Marple. "We could of course have gone into a room to talk, but I prefer it like this. Here we are on the spot where the thing happened, which makes it so much easier to understand."

"You are talking," said Jason Rudd, "of the day of the fête here, the day when Heather Badcock was poisoned."

"Yes," said Miss Marple, "and I'm saying that it is all very simple if one only looks at it in the proper way. It all began, you see, with Heather Badcock being the kind of person she was. It was inevitable, really, that something of that kind should happen some day to Heather."

"I don't understand what you mean," said Jason Rudd. "I don't understand at all."

"No, it has to be explained a little. You see, when my friend, Mrs. Bantry who was here, described the scene to me, she quoted a poem that was a great favourite in my youth, a poem of dear Lord Tennyson's. 'The Lady of Shalott.'" She raised her voice a little.

*"The mirror crack'd from side to side;
'The Curse is come upon me,' cried
The Lady of Shalott.*

That's what Mrs. Bantry saw, or thought she saw, though actually she misquoted and said doom instead of curse—perhaps a better word in the circumstances. She saw your wife speaking to Heather Badcock and heard Heather Badcock speaking to your wife and she saw this look of doom on your wife's face."

"Haven't we been over that a great many times?" said Jason Rudd.

"Yes, but we shall have to go over it once more," said Miss Marple. "There was that expression on your wife's face and she was looking not at Heather Badcock but at that picture. At a picture of a laughing, happy mother holding up a happy child. The mistake was that though there *was* doom foreshadowed in Marina Gregg's face, it was not on *her* the doom would come. The doom was to come upon Heather. Heather was doomed from the first moment that she began talking and boasting of an incident in the past."

"Could you make yourself a little clearer?" said Dermot Craddock.

Miss Marple turned to him.

"Of course I will. This is something that you know nothing about. You couldn't know about it, because nobody has told you what it was Heather Badcock actually said."

"But they have," protested Dermot. "They've told me over and over again. Several people have told me."

"Yes," said Miss Marple, "but you don't know because, you see, Heather Badcock didn't tell it to *you*."

"She hardly could tell it to me seeing she was dead when I arrived here," said Dermot.

"Quite so," said Miss Marple. "All you know is that she was ill but she got up from bed and came along to a celebration of some kind where she met Marina Gregg and spoke to her and asked for an autograph and was given one."

"I know," said Craddock with slight impatience. "I've heard all that."

"But you didn't hear the one operative phrase, because no one thought it was important," said Miss Marple. "Heather Badcock was ill in bed—with *German measles*."

"German measles? What on earth has that got to do with it?"

"It's a very slight illness, really," said Miss Marple. "It hardly makes you feel ill at all. You have a rash which is easy to cover up with powder, and you have a little fever, but not very much. You feel quite well enough to go out and see people if you want to. And of course in repeating all this the fact that it was German measles

didn't strike people particularly. Mrs. Bantry, for instance, just said that Heather had been ill in bed and mentioned chicken pox and nettlerash. Mr. Rudd here said that it was "flu, but of course he did that on purpose. But I think myself that what Heather Badcock said to Marina Gregg was that she had had German measles and got up from bed and went off to meet Marina. And that's really the answer to the whole thing, because, you see, German measles is extremely infectious. People catch it very easily. And there's one thing about it which you've got to remember. If a woman contracts it in the first four months of—" Miss Marple spoke the next word with a slight Victorian modesty "—of—er—pregnancy, it may have a terribly serious effect. It may cause an unborn child to be born blind or to be born mentally affected."

She turned to Jason Rudd.

"I think I am correct in saying, Mr. Rudd, that your wife had a child who was born mentally afflicted and that she has never really recovered from the shock. She had always wanted a child and when at last the child came, this was the tragedy that happened. A tragedy she has never forgotten, that she has not allowed herself to forget and which ate into her as a kind of deep sore, an obsession."

"It's quite true," said Jason Rudd. "Marina developed German measles early on in her pregnancy and was told by the doctor that the mental affliction of her child was due to that cause. It was not a case of inherited insanity or anything of that kind. He was trying to be helpful but I don't think it helped her much. She never knew how, or when or from whom she had contracted the disease."

"Quite so," said Miss Marple, "she never knew until one afternoon here when a perfectly strange woman came up those stairs and told her the fact—told her, what was more—with a great deal of pleasure! With an air of being proud of what she'd done! *She* thought she'd been resourceful and brave and shown a lot of spirit in getting up from her bed, covering her face with makeup, and going along to meet the actress on whom she had such a crush and obtaining her autograph. It's a thing she has boasted of all through her life. Heather Badcock meant no harm. She never did mean harm but there is no doubt that people like Heather Badcock (and like my old

friend Alison Wilde), are capable of doing a lot of harm because they lack—not kindness, they have kindness—but any real consideration for the way their actions may affect other people. She thought always of what an action meant to *her*, never sparing a thought to what it might mean to somebody else.”

Miss Marple nodded her head gently.

“So she died, you see, for a simple reason out of her own past. You must imagine what that moment meant to Marina Gregg. I think Mr. Rudd understands it very well. I think she had nursed all those years a kind of hatred for the unknown person who had been the cause of her tragedy. And here suddenly she meets that person face to face. And a person who is gay, jolly and pleased with herself. It was too much for her. If she had had time to think, to calm down, to be persuaded to relax—but she gave herself no time. Here was this woman who had destroyed her happiness and destroyed the sanity and health of her child. She wanted to punish her. She wanted to kill her. And unfortunately the means were to hand. She carried with her that well-known specific, Calmo. A somewhat dangerous drug because you had to be careful of the exact dosage. It was very easy to do. She put the stuff into her own glass. If by any chance anyone noticed what she was doing they were probably so used to her peppering herself up or soothing herself down in any handy liquid that they’d hardly notice it. It’s possible that one person did see her, but I rather doubt it. I think that Miss Zielinsky did no more than guess. Marina Gregg put her glass down on the table and presently she managed to jog Heather Badcock’s arm so that Heather Badcock spilt her own drink all down her new dress. And that’s where the element of puzzle has come into the matter, owing to the fact that people cannot remember to use their pronouns properly.

“It reminds me so much of that parlourmaid I was telling you about,” she added to Dermot. “I only had the account, you see, of what Gladys Dixon said to Cherry which simply was that she was worried about the ruin of Heather Badcock’s dress with the cocktail spilt down it. What seemed so funny, she said, was that she did it on purpose. But the ‘she’ that Gladys referred to was not Heather Badcock, it was Marina Gregg. As Gladys said: She did it on purpose!

She jogged Heather's arm. Not by accident but because she *meant* to do so. We do know that she must have been standing very close to Heather because we have heard that she mopped up both Heather's dress and her own before pressing her cocktail on Heather. It was really," said Miss Marple meditatively, "a very perfect murder; because, you see, it was committed on the spur of the moment without pausing to think or reflect. She wanted Heather Badcock dead and a few minutes later Heather Badcock *was* dead. She didn't realize, perhaps, the seriousness of what she'd done and certainly not the danger of it until afterwards. But she realized it then. She was afraid, horribly afraid. Afraid that someone had seen her dope her own glass, that someone had seen her deliberately jog Heather's elbow, afraid that someone would accuse her of having poisoned Heather. She could see only one way out. To insist that the murder had been aimed at *her*, that *she* was the prospective victim. She tried that idea first on her doctor. She refused to let him tell her husband because I think she knew that her husband would not be deceived. She did fantastic things. She wrote notes to herself and arranged to find them in extraordinary places and at extraordinary moments. She doctored her own coffee at the studios one day. She did things that could really have been seen through fairly easily if one had happened to be thinking that way. They were seen through by one person."

She looked at Jason Rudd.

"This is only a theory of yours," said Jason Rudd.

"You can put it that way, if you like," said Miss Marple, "but you know quite well, don't you, Mr. Rudd, that I'm speaking the truth. You know, because you knew from the first. You knew because you heard that mention of German measles. You knew and you were frantic to protect her. But you didn't realize how much you would have to protect her from. You didn't realize that it was not only a question of hushing up one death, the death of a woman whom you might say quite fairly had brought her death on herself. But there were other deaths—the death of Giuseppe, a blackmailer, it is true, but a human being. And the death of Ella Zielinsky of whom I expect you were fond. You were frantic to protect Marina and also to

prevent her from doing more harm. All you wanted was to get her safely away somewhere. You tried to watch her all the time, to make sure that nothing more should happen."

She paused, and then coming nearer to Jason Rudd, she laid a gentle hand on his arm.

"I am very sorry for you," she said, "very sorry. I do realize the agony you've been through. You cared for her so much, didn't you?"

Jason Rudd turned slightly away.

"That," he said, "is, I believe, common knowledge."

"She was such a beautiful creature," said Miss Marple gently. "She had such a wonderful gift. She had a great power of love and hate but no stability. That's what's so sad for anyone, to be born with no stability. She couldn't let the past go and she could never see the future as it really was, only as she imagined it to be. She was a great actress and a beautiful and very unhappy woman. What a wonderful Mary, Queen of Scots she was! I shall never forget her."

Sergeant Tiddler appeared suddenly on the stairs.

"Sir," he said, "can I speak to you a moment?"

Craddock turned.

"I'll be back," he said to Jason Rudd, then he went towards the stairs.

"Remember," Miss Marple called after him, "poor Arthur Badcock had nothing to do with this. He came to the fête because he wanted to have a glimpse of the girl he had married long ago. I should say she didn't even recognize him. Did she?" she asked Jason Rudd.

Jason Rudd shook his head.

"I don't think so. She certainly never said anything to me. I don't think," he added thoughtfully, "she would recognize him."

"Probably not," said Miss Marple. "Anyway," she added, "he's quite innocent of wanting to kill her or anything of that kind. Remember that," she added to Dermot Craddock as he went down the stairs.

"He's not been in any real danger, I can assure you," said Craddock, "but of course when we found out that he had actually been Miss Marina Gregg's first husband we naturally had to question him on the point. Don't worry about him, Aunt Jane," he added in a low murmur, then he hurried down the stairs.

Miss Marple turned to Jason Rudd. He was standing there like a man in a daze, his eyes faraway.

"Would you allow me to see her?" said Miss Marple.

He considered her for a moment or two, then he nodded.

"Yes, you can see her. You seem to—understand her very well."

He turned and Miss Marple followed him. He preceded her into the big bedroom and drew the curtains slightly aside.

Marina Gregg lay in the great white shell of the bed—her eyes closed, her hands folded.

So, Miss Marple thought, might the Lady of Shalott have lain in the boat that carried her down to Camelot. And there, standing musing, was a man with a rugged, ugly face, who might pass as a Lancelot of a later day.

Miss Marple said gently, "It's very fortunate for her that she—took an overdose. Death was really the only way of escape left to her. Yes—very fortunate she took that overdose—or—*was given it?*"

His eyes met hers, but he did not speak.

He said brokenly, "She was—so lovely—and she had suffered so much."

Miss Marple looked back against the still figure.

She quoted softly the last lines of the poem:

*"He said: 'She has a lovely face;
God in His mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shalott.'"*

MISS
MARPLE

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha
Christie



A CARIBBEAN
MYSTERY

A Miss Marple Mystery

Agatha Christie

A Caribbean Mystery

A Miss Marple Mystery

HARPER

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

*To my old friend John Cruickshank Rose with happy memories of my
visit to the West Indies*

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One

MAJOR PALGRAVE TELLS A STORY

“Take all this business about Kenya,” said Major Palgrave.

“Lots of chaps gabbing away who know nothing about the place! Now *I* spent fourteen years of my life there. Some of the best years of my life, too—”

Old Miss Marple inclined her head.

It was a gentle gesture of courtesy. Whilst Major Palgrave proceeded with the somewhat uninteresting recollections of a lifetime, Miss Marple peacefully pursued her own thoughts. It was a routine with which she was well acquainted. The locale varied. In the past, it had been predominantly India. Majors, Colonels, Lieutenant-Generals—and a familiar series of words: *Simla. Bearers. Tigers. Chota Hazri—Tiffin. Khitmagars*, and so on. With Major Palgrave the terms were slightly different. *Safari. Kikuyu. Elephants. Swahili*. But the pattern was essentially the same. An elderly man who needed a listener so that he could, in memory, relive days in which he had been happy. Days when his back had been straight, his eyesight keen, his hearing acute. Some of these talkers had been handsome soldierly old boys, some again had been regrettably unattractive; and Major Palgrave, purple of face, with a glass eye, and the general appearance of a stuffed frog, belonged in the latter category.

Miss Marple had bestowed on all of them the same gentle charity. She had sat attentively, inclining her head from time to time in gentle agreement, thinking her own thoughts and enjoying what there was to enjoy: in this case the deep blue of a Caribbean Sea.

So kind of dear Raymond—she was thinking gratefully, so really and truly kind ... Why he should take so much trouble about his old aunt, she really did not know. Conscience, perhaps; family feeling? Or possibly he was truly fond of her....

She thought, on the whole, that he *was* fond of her—he always had been—in a slightly exasperated and contemptuous way! Always trying to bring her up to date. Sending her books to read. Modern novels. So difficult—all about such unpleasant people, doing such very odd things and not, apparently, even enjoying them. “Sex” as a word had not been mentioned in Miss Marple’s young days; but there had been plenty of it—not talked about so much—but enjoyed far more than nowadays, or so it seemed to her. Though usually labelled Sin, she couldn’t help feeling that that was preferable to what it seemed to be nowadays—a kind of Duty.

Her glance strayed for a moment to the book on her lap lying open at page twenty-three which was as far as she had got (and indeed as far as she felt like getting!).

“Do you mean that you’ve had no sexual experience at ALL?” demanded the young man incredulously. ‘At *nineteen*? But you *must*. It’s vital.’

“The girl hung her head unhappily, her straight greasy hair fell forward over her face.

“‘I know,’ she muttered, ‘I know.’

“He looked at her, stained old jersey, the bare feet, the dirty toe nails, the smell of rancid fat ... He wondered why he found her so maddeningly attractive.”

Miss Marple wondered too! And really! To have sex experience urged on you exactly as though it was an iron tonic! Poor young things....

"My dear Aunt Jane, why must you bury your head in the sand like a very delightful ostrich? All bound up in this idyllic rural life of yours. REAL LIFE—that's what matters."

Thus Raymond—and his Aunt Jane—had looked properly abashed—and said "Yes," she was afraid she *was* rather old-fashioned.

Though really rural life was far from idyllic. People like Raymond were so ignorant. In the course of her duties in a country parish, Jane Marple had acquired quite a comprehensive knowledge of the facts of rural life. She had no urge to *talk* about them, far less to *write* about them—but she knew them. Plenty of sex, natural and unnatural. Rape, incest, perversion of all kinds. (Some kinds, indeed, that even the clever young men from Oxford who wrote books didn't seem to have heard about.)

Miss Marple came back to the Caribbean and took up the thread of what Major Palgrave was saying....

"A very unusual experience," she said encouragingly. "*Most* interesting."

"I could tell you a lot more. Some of the things, of course, not fit for a lady's ears—"

With the ease of long practice, Miss Marple dropped her eyelids in a fluttery fashion, and Major Palgrave continued his bowdlerized version of tribal customs whilst Miss Marple resumed her thoughts of her affectionate nephew.

Raymond West was a very successful novelist and made a large income, and he conscientiously and kindly did all he could to alleviate the life of his elderly aunt. The preceding winter she had had a bad go of pneumonia, and medical opinion had advised sunshine. In lordly fashion Raymond had suggested a trip to the West Indies. Miss Marple had demurred—at the expense, the distance, the difficulties of travel, and at abandoning her house in St. Mary Mead. Raymond had dealt with everything. A friend who was writing a book wanted a quiet place in the country. "He'll look after the house all right. He's very house proud. He's a queer. I mean—"

He had paused, slightly embarrassed—but surely even dear old Aunt Jane must have heard of queers.

He went on to deal with the next points. Travel was nothing nowadays. She would go by air—another friend, Diana Horrocks, was going out to Trinidad and would see Aunt Jane was all right as far as there, and at St. Honoré she would stay at the Golden Palm Hotel which was run by the Sandersons. Nicest couple in the world. They'd see she was all right. He'd write to them straight away.

As it happened the Sandersons had returned to England. But their successors, the Kendals, had been very nice and friendly and had assured Raymond that he need have no qualms about his aunt. There was a very good doctor on the island in case of emergency and they themselves would keep an eye on her and see to her comfort.

They had been as good as their word, too. Molly Kendal was an ingenuous blonde of twenty odd, always apparently in good spirits. She had greeted the old lady warmly and did everything to make her comfortable. Tim Kendal, her husband, lean, dark and in his thirties, had also been kindness itself.

So there she was, thought Miss Marple, far from the rigours of the English climate, with a nice bungalow of her own, with friendly smiling West Indian girls to wait on her, Tim Kendal to meet her in the dining room and crack a joke as he advised her about the day's menu, and an easy path from her bungalow to the sea front and the bathing beach where she could sit in a comfortable basket chair and watch the bathing. There were even a few elderly guests for company. Old Mr. Rafiel, Dr. Graham, Canon Prescott and his sister, and her present cavalier Major Palgrave.

What more could an elderly lady want?

It is deeply to be regretted, and Miss Marple felt guilty even admitting it to herself, but she was not as satisfied as she ought to be.

Lovely and warm, yes—and *so* good for her rheumatism—and beautiful scenery, though perhaps—a trifle monotonous? So *many* palm trees. Everything the same every day—never anything *happening*. Not like St. Mary Mead where something was always happening. Her nephew had once compared life in St. Mary Mead to scum on a pond, and she had indignantly pointed out that smeared

on a slide under the microscope there would be plenty of life to be observed. Yes, indeed, in St. Mary Mead, there was always something going on. Incident after incident flashed through Miss Marple's mind, the mistake in old Mrs. Linnett's cough mixture—that very odd behaviour of young Polegate—the time when Georgy Wood's mother had come down to see him—(but *was* she his mother —?) the real cause of the quarrel between Joe Arden and his wife. So many interesting human problems—giving rise to endless pleasurable hours of speculation. If only there were something here that she could—well—get her teeth into.

With a start she realized that Major Palgrave had abandoned Kenya for the North West Frontier and was relating his experiences as a subaltern. Unfortunately he was asking her with great earnestness: "Now don't you agree?"

Long practice had made Miss Marple quite an adept at dealing with that one.

"I don't really feel that I've got sufficient experience to judge. I'm afraid I've led rather a sheltered life."

"And so you should, dear lady, so you should," cried Major Palgrave gallantly.

"You've had such a very varied life," went on Miss Marple, determined to make amends for her former pleasurable inattention.

"Not bad," said Major Palgrave, complacently. "Not bad at all." He looked round him appreciatively. "Lovely place, this."

"Yes, indeed," said Miss Marple and was then unable to stop herself going on: "Does anything ever happen here, I wonder?"

Major Palgrave stared.

"Oh rather. Plenty of scandals—eh what? Why, I could tell you—"

But it wasn't really scandals Miss Marple wanted. Nothing to get your teeth into in scandals nowadays. Just men and women changing partners, and calling attention to it, instead of trying decently to hush it up and be properly ashamed of themselves.

"There was even a murder here a couple of years ago. Man called Harry Western. Made a big splash in the papers. Dare say you remember it."

Miss Marple nodded without enthusiasm. It had not been her kind of murder. It had made a big splash mainly because everyone concerned had been very rich. It had seemed likely enough that Harry Western had shot the Count de Ferrari, his wife's lover, and equally likely that his well-arranged alibi had been bought and paid for. Everyone seemed to have been drunk, and there was a fine scattering of dope addicts. Not really interesting people, thought Miss Marple—although no doubt very spectacular and attractive to *look* at. But definitely not *her* cup of tea.

"And if you ask me, that wasn't the only murder about that time." He nodded and winked. "I had my suspicions—oh!—well—"

Miss Marple dropped her ball of wool, and the Major stooped and picked it up for her.

"Talking of murder," he went on. "I once came across a very curious case—not exactly personally."

Miss Marple smiled encouragingly.

"Lot of chaps talking at the club one day, you know, and a chap began telling a story. Medical man he was. One of his cases. Young fellow came and knocked him up in the middle of the night. His wife had hanged herself. They hadn't got a telephone, so after the chap had cut her down and done what he could, he'd got out his car and hared off looking for a doctor. Well, she wasn't dead but pretty far gone. Anyway, she pulled through. Young fellow seemed devoted to her. Cried like a child. He'd noticed that she'd been odd for some time, fits of depression and all that. Well, that was that. Everything seemed all right. But actually, about a month later, the wife took an overdose of sleeping stuff and passed out. Sad case."

Major Palgrave paused, and nodded his head several times. Since there was obviously more to come Miss Marple waited.

"And that's that, you might say. Nothing there. Neurotic woman, nothing out of the usual. But about a year later, this medical chap was swapping yarns with a fellow medico, and the other chap told him about a woman who'd tried to drown herself, husband got her out, got a doctor, they pulled her round—and then a few weeks later she gassed herself.

"Well, a bit of a coincidence—eh? Same sort of story. My chap said—'I had a case rather like that. Name of Jones (or whatever the name was)—What was your man's name?' 'Can't remember. Robinson I think. Certainly not Jones.'

"Well, the chaps looked at each other and said it was pretty odd. And then my chap pulled out a snapshot. He showed it to the second chap. 'That's the fellow,' he said—'I'd gone along the next day to check up on the particulars, and I noticed a magnificent species of hibiscus just by the front door, a variety I'd never seen before in this country. My camera was in the car and I took a photo. Just as I snapped the shutter the husband came out of the front door so I got him as well. Don't think he realized it. I asked him about the hibiscus but he couldn't tell me its name.' Second medico looked at the snap. He said: 'It's a bit out of focus—But I could swear—at any rate I'm almost sure—*it's the same man.*'

"Don't know if they followed it up. But if so they didn't get anywhere. Expect Mr. Jones or Robinson covered his tracks too well. But queer story, isn't it? Wouldn't think things like that could happen."

"Oh, yes, I would," said Miss Marple placidly. "Practically every day."

"Oh, come, come. That's a bit fantastic."

"If a man gets a formula that works—he won't stop. He'll go on."

"Brides in the bath—eh?"

"That kind of thing, yes."

"Doctor let me have that snap just as a curiosity—"

Major Palgrave began fumbling through an overstuffed wallet murmuring to himself: "Lots of things in here—don't know why I keep all these things..."

Miss Marple thought she did know. They were part of the Major's stock-in-trade. They illustrated his repertoire of stories. The story he had just told, or so she suspected, had not been originally like that—it had been worked up a good deal in repeated telling.

The Major was still shuffling and muttering—"Forgotten all about *that* business. Good-looking woman *she* was, you'd never suspect—

now *where*—Ah—that takes my mind back—what tusks! I must show you—”

He stopped—sorted out a small photographic print and peered down at it.

“Like to see the picture of a murderer?”

He was about to pass it to her when his movement was suddenly arrested. Looking more like a stuffed frog than ever, Major Palgrave appeared to be staring fixedly over her right shoulder—from whence came the sound of approaching footsteps and voices.

“Well, I’m damned—I mean—” He stuffed everything back into his wallet and crammed it into his pocket.

His face went an even deeper shade of purplish red—He exclaimed in a loud, artificial voice:

“As I was saying—I’d like to have shown you those elephant tusks—Biggest elephant I’ve ever shot—Ah, hallo!” His voice took on a somewhat spurious hearty note.

“Look who’s here! The great quartette—Flora and Fauna—What luck have you had today—Eh?”

The approaching footsteps resolved themselves into four of the hotel guests whom Miss Marple already knew by sight. They consisted of two married couples and though Miss Marple was not as yet acquainted with their surnames, she knew that the big man with the upstanding bush of thick grey hair was addressed as “Greg,” that the golden blonde woman, his wife, was known as Lucky—and that the other married couple, the dark lean man and the handsome but rather weather-beaten woman, were Edward and Evelyn. They were botanists, she understood, and also interested in birds.

“No luck at all,” said Greg—“At least no luck in getting what we were after.”

“Don’t know if you know Miss Marple? Colonel and Mrs. Hillingdon and Greg and Lucky Dyson.”

They greeted her pleasantly and Lucky said loudly that she’d die if she didn’t have a drink at once or sooner.

Greg hailed Tim Kendal who was sitting a little way away with his wife poring over account books.

"Hi, Tim. Get us some drinks." He addressed the others. "Planters Punch?"

They agreed.

"Same for you, Miss Marple?"

Miss Marple said Thank you, but she would prefer fresh lime.

"Fresh lime it is," said Tim Kendal, "and five Planters Punches."

"Join us, Tim?"

"Wish I could. But I've got to fix up these accounts. Can't leave Molly to cope with everything. Steel band tonight, by the way."

"Good," cried Lucky. "Damn it," she winced, "I'm all over thorns. Ouch! Edward deliberately rammed me into a thorn bush!"

"Lovely pink flowers," said Hillingdon.

"And lovely long thorns. Sadistic brute, aren't you, Edward?"

"Not like me," said Greg, grinning. "Full of the milk of human kindness."

Evelyn Hillingdon sat down by Miss Marple and started talking to her in an easy pleasant way.

Miss Marple put her knitting down on her lap. Slowly and with some difficulty, owing to rheumatism in the neck, she turned her head over her right shoulder to look behind her. At some little distance there was the large bungalow occupied by the rich Mr. Rafiel. But it showed no sign of life.

She replied suitably to Evelyn's remarks (really, how kind people were to her!) but her eyes scanned thoughtfully the faces of the two men.

Edward Hillingdon looked a nice man. Quiet but with a lot of charm ... And Greg—big, boisterous, happy-looking. He and Lucky were Canadian or American, she thought.

She looked at Major Palgrave, still acting a *bonhomie* a little larger than life.

Interesting....

Two

MISS MARPLE MAKES COMPARISONS

I

It was very gay that evening at the Golden Palm Hotel.

Seated at her little corner table, Miss Marple looked round her in an interested fashion. The dining room was a large room open on three sides to the soft warm scented air of the West Indies. There were small table lamps, all softly coloured. Most of the women were in evening dress: light cotton prints out of which bronzed shoulders and arms emerged. Miss Marple herself had been urged by her nephew's wife, Joan, in the sweetest way possible, to accept "a small cheque."

"Because, Aunt Jane, it will be rather hot out there, and I don't expect you have any very thin clothes."

Jane Marple had thanked her and had accepted the cheque. She came of the age when it was natural for the old to support and finance the young, but also for the middle-aged to look after the old. She could not, however, force herself to buy anything very *thin*! At her age she seldom felt more than pleasantly warm even in the hottest weather, and the temperature of St. Honoré was not really what is referred to as "tropical heat." This evening she was attired in the best traditions of the provincial gentlewoman of England—grey lace.

Not that she was the only elderly person present. There were representatives of all ages in the room. There were elderly tycoons with young third or fourth wives. There were middle-aged couples from the North of England. There was a gay family from Caracas complete with children. The various countries of South America were well represented, all chattering loudly in Spanish or Portuguese. There was a solid English background of two clergymen, one doctor and one retired judge. There was even a family of Chinese. The dining room service was mainly done by women, tall black girls of proud carriage, dressed in crisp white; but there was an experienced Italian head waiter in charge, and a French wine waiter, and there was the attentive eye of Tim Kendal watching over everything, pausing here and there to have a social word with people at their tables. His wife seconded him ably. She was a good-looking girl. Her hair was a natural golden blonde and she had a wide generous mouth that laughed easily. It was very seldom that Molly Kendal was out of temper. Her staff worked for her enthusiastically, and she adapted her manner carefully to suit her different guests. With the elderly men she laughed and flirted; she congratulated the younger women on their clothes.

"Oh, what a smashing dress you've got on tonight, Mrs. Dyson. I'm so jealous I could tear it off your back." But she looked very well in her own dress, or so Miss Marple thought: a white sheath, with a pale green embroidered silk shawl thrown over her shoulders. Lucky was fingering the shawl. "Lovely colour! I'd like one like it." "You can get them at the shop here," Molly told her and passed on. She did not pause by Miss Marple's table. Elderly ladies she usually left to her husband. "The old dears like a man much better," she used to say.

Tim Kendal came and bent over Miss Marple.

"Nothing special you want, is there?" he asked. "Because you've only got to tell me—and I could get it specially cooked for you. Hotel food, and semi-tropical at that, isn't quite what you're used to at home, I expect?"

Miss Marple smiled and said that that was one of the pleasures of coming abroad.

"That's all right, then. But if there *is* anything—"

"Such as?"

"Well—" Tim Kendal looked a little doubtful—"Bread and butter pudding?" he hazarded.

Miss Marple smiled and said that she thought she could do without bread and butter pudding very nicely for the present.

She picked up her spoon and began to eat her passion fruit sundae with cheerful appreciation.

Then the steel band began to play. The steel bands were one of the main attractions of the islands. Truth to tell, Miss Marple could have done very well without them. She considered that they made a hideous noise, unnecessarily loud. The pleasure that everyone else took in them was undeniable, however, and Miss Marple, in the true spirit of her youth, decided that as they had to be, she must manage somehow to learn to like them. She could hardly request Tim Kendal to conjure up from somewhere the muted strains of the "Blue Danube." (So graceful—waltzing.) Most peculiar, the way people danced nowadays. Flinging themselves about, seeming quite *contorted*. Oh well, young people must enjoy—Her thoughts were arrested. Because, now she came to think of it, very few of these people *were* young. Dancing, lights, the music of a band (even a steel band), all that surely was for *youth*. But where was youth? Studying, she supposed, at universities, or doing a job—with a fortnight's holiday a year. A place like this was too far away and too expensive. This gay and carefree life was all for the thirties and the forties—and the old men who were trying to live up (or down) to their young wives. It seemed, somehow, a *pity*.

Miss Marple sighed for youth. There was Mrs. Kendal, of course. She wasn't more than twenty-two or three, probably, and she seemed to be enjoying herself—but even so, it was a *job* she was doing.

At a table nearby Canon Prescott and his sister were sitting. They motioned to Miss Marple to join them for coffee and she did so. Miss Prescott was a thin severe-looking woman, the Canon was a round, rubicund man, breathing geniality.

Coffee was brought, and chairs were pushed a little way away from the tables. Miss Prescott opened a work bag and took out some frankly hideous table mats that she was hemming. She told Miss Marple all about the day's events. They had visited a new Girls' School in the morning. After an afternoon's rest, they had walked through a cane plantation to have tea at a *pension* where some friends of theirs were staying.

Since the Prescotts had been at the Golden Palm longer than Miss Marple, they were able to enlighten her as to some of her fellow guests.

That very old man, Mr. Rafiel. He came every year. Fantastically rich! Owned an enormous chain of supermarkets in the North of England. The young woman with him was his secretary, Esther Walters—a widow. (Quite all *right*, of course. Nothing improper. After all, he was nearly eighty!)

Miss Marple accepted the propriety of the relationship with an understanding nod and the Canon remarked:

"A very nice young woman; her mother, I understand, is a widow and lives in Chichester."

"Mr. Rafiel has a valet with him, too. Or rather a kind of Nurse Attendant—he's a qualified masseur, I believe. Jackson, his name is. Poor Mr. Rafiel is practically paralysed. So sad—with all that money, too."

"A generous and cheerful giver," said Canon Prescott approvingly.

People were regrouping themselves round about, some going farther from the steel band, others crowding up to it. Major Palgrave had joined the Hillingdon-Dyson quartette.

"Now those people—" said Miss Prescott, lowering her voice quite unnecessarily since the steel band easily drowned it.

"Yes, I was going to ask you about them."

"They were here last year. They spend three months every year in the West Indies, going round the different islands. The tall thin man is Colonel Hillingdon and the dark woman is his wife—they are botanists. The other two, Mr. and Mrs. Gregory Dyson—they're American. He writes on butterflies, I believe. And all of them are interested in birds."

"So nice for people to have open-air hobbies," said Canon Prescott genially.

"I don't think they'd like to hear you call it hobbies, Jeremy," said his sister. "They have articles printed in the *National Geographic* and in the *Royal Horticultural Journal*. They take themselves very seriously."

A loud outburst of laughter came from the table they had been observing. It was loud enough to overcome the steel band. Gregory Dyson was leaning back in his chair and thumping the table, his wife was protesting, and Major Palgrave emptied his glass and seemed to be applauding.

They hardly qualified for the moment as people who took themselves seriously.

"Major Palgrave should not drink so much," said Miss Prescott acidly. "He has blood pressure."

A fresh supply of Planters Punches was brought to the table.

"It's so nice to get people sorted out," said Miss Marple. "When I met them this afternoon I wasn't sure which was married to which."

There was a slight pause. Miss Prescott coughed a small dry cough, and said—"Well, as to that—"

"Joan," said the Canon in an admonitory voice. "Perhaps it would be wise to say no more."

"Really, Jeremy, I wasn't going to say *anything*. Only that last year, for some reason or other—I really don't know *why*—we got the idea that Mrs. Dyson was Mrs. Hillingdon until someone told us she wasn't."

"It's odd how one gets impressions, isn't it?" said Miss Marple innocently. Her eyes met Miss Prescott's for a moment. A flash of womanly understanding passed between them.

A more sensitive man than Canon Prescott might have felt that he was *de trop*.

Another signal passed between the women. It said as clearly as if the words had been spoken: "*Some other time....*"

"Mr. Dyson calls his wife 'Lucky.' Is that her real name or a nickname?" asked Miss Marple.

"It can hardly be her real name, I should think."

"I happened to ask him," said the Canon. "He said he called her Lucky because she was his good-luck piece. If he lost her, he said, he'd lose his luck. Very nicely put, I thought."

"He's very fond of joking," said Miss Prescott.

The Canon looked at his sister doubtfully.

The steel band outdid itself with a wild burst of cacophony and a troupe of dancers came racing on to the floor.

Miss Marple and the others turned their chairs to watch. Miss Marple enjoyed the dancing better than the music; she liked the shuffling feet and the rhythmic sway of the bodies. It seemed, she thought, very *real*. It had a kind of power of understatement.

Tonight, for the first time, she began to feel slightly at home in her new environment ... Up to now, she had missed what she usually found so easy, points of resemblance in the people she met, to various people known to her personally. She had, possibly, been dazzled by the gay clothes and the exotic colouring; but soon, she felt, she would be able to make some interesting comparisons.

Molly Kendal, for instance, was like that nice girl whose name she couldn't remember, but who was a conductress on the Market Basing bus. Helped you in, and never rang the bus on until she was sure you'd sat down safely. Tim Kendal was just a little like the head waiter at the Royal George in Medchester. Self-confident, and yet, at the same time, worried. (He had had an ulcer, she remembered.) As for Major Palgrave, he was undistinguishable from General Leroy, Captain Flemming, Admiral Wicklow and Commander Richardson. She went on to someone more interesting. Greg for instance? Greg was difficult because he was American. A dash of Sir George Trollope, perhaps, always so full of jokes at the Civil Defence meetings—or perhaps Mr. Murdoch the butcher. Mr. Murdoch had had rather a bad reputation, but some people said it was just gossip, and that Mr. Murdoch himself liked to encourage the rumours! "Lucky" now? Well, that was easy—Marleen at the Three Crowns. Evelyn Hillingdon? She couldn't fit Evelyn in precisely. In appearance she fitted many roles—tall thin weather-beaten Englishwomen were plentiful. Lady Caroline Wolfe, Peter Wolfe's first wife, who had committed suicide? Or there was Leslie James—that quiet woman

who seldom showed what she felt and who had sold up her house and left without ever telling anyone she was going. Colonel Hillingdon? No immediate clue there. She'd have to get to know him a little first. One of those quiet men with good manners. You never knew what they were thinking about. Sometimes they surprised you. Major Harper, she remembered, had quietly cut his throat one day. Nobody had ever known why. Miss Marple thought that she did know—but she'd never been quite sure....

Her eyes strayed to Mr. Rafiel's table. The principal thing known about Mr. Rafiel was that he was incredibly rich, he came every year to the West Indies, he was semi-paralysed and looked like a wrinkled old bird of prey. His clothes hung loosely on his shrunken form. He might have been seventy or eighty, or even ninety. His eyes were shrewd and he was frequently rude, but people seldom took offence, partly because he was so rich, and partly because of his overwhelming personality which hypnotized you into feeling that somehow, Mr. Rafiel had the right to be rude if he wanted to.

With him sat his secretary, Mrs. Walters. She had corn-coloured hair, and a pleasant face. Mr. Rafiel was frequently very rude to her, but she never seemed to notice it—She was not so much subservient, as oblivious. She behaved like a well-trained hospital nurse. Possibly, thought Miss Marple, she had been a hospital nurse.

A young man, tall and good-looking, in a white jacket, came to stand by Mr. Rafiel's chair. The old man looked up at him, nodded, then motioned him to a chair. The young man sat down as bidden. "Mr. Jackson, I presume," said Miss Marple to herself—"His valet-attendant."

She studied Mr. Jackson with some attention.

II

In the bar, Molly Kendal stretched her back, and slipped off her high-heeled shoes. Tim came in from the terrace to join her. They had the bar to themselves for the moment.

"Tired, darling?" he asked.

"Just a bit. I seem to be feeling my feet tonight."

"Not too much for you, is it? All this? I know it's hard work." He looked at her anxiously.

She laughed. "Oh, Tim, don't be ridiculous. I love it here. It's gorgeous. The kind of dream I've always had, come true."

"Yes, it would be all right—if one was just a guest. But running the show—that's work."

"Well, you can't have anything for nothing, can you?" said Molly Kendal reasonably.

Tim Kendal frowned.

"You think it's going all right? A success? We're making a go of it?"

"Of course we are."

"You don't think people are saying, 'It's not the same as when the Sandersons were here.'"

"Of course *someone* will be saying that—they always do! But only some old stick-in-the-mud. I'm sure that we're far better at the job than they were. We're more glamorous. You charm the old pussies and manage to look as though you'd like to make love to the desperate forties and fifties, and I ogle the old gentlemen and make them feel sexy dogs—or play the sweet little daughter the sentimental ones would love to have had. Oh, we've got it all taped splendidly."

Tim's frown vanished.

"As long as *you* think so. I get scared. We've risked everything on making a job of this. I chucked my job—"

"And quite right to do so," Molly put in quickly. "It was soul-destroying."

He laughed and kissed the tip of her nose.

"I tell you we've got it taped," she repeated. "Why do you always worry?"

"Made that way, I suppose. I'm always thinking—suppose something should go wrong."

"What sort of thing—"

"Oh, I don't know. Somebody might get drowned."

"Not they. It's one of the safest of all the beaches. And we've got that hulking Swede always on guard."

“I’m a fool,” said Tim Kendal. He hesitated—and then said, “You—haven’t had any more of those dreams, have you?”

“That was shellfish,” said Molly, and laughed.

Three

A DEATH IN THE HOTEL

Miss Marple had her breakfast brought to her in bed as usual. Tea, a boiled egg, and a slice of pawpaw.

The fruit on the island, thought Miss Marple, was rather disappointing. It seemed always to be pawpaw. If she could have a nice apple now—but apples seemed to be unknown.

Now that she had been here a week, Miss Marple had cured herself of the impulse to ask what the weather was like. The weather was always the same—fine. No interesting variations.

"The many-splendoured weather of an English day," she murmured to herself and wondered if it was a quotation, or whether she had made it up.

There were, of course, hurricanes, or so she understood. But hurricanes were not weather in Miss Marple's sense of the word. They were more in the nature of an Act of God. There was rain, short violent rainfall that lasted five minutes and stopped abruptly. Everything and everyone was wringing wet, but in another five minutes they were dry again.

The black West Indian girl smiled and said Good Morning as she placed the tray on Miss Marple's knees. Such lovely white teeth and so happy and smiling. Nice natures, all these girls, and a pity they were so averse to getting married. It worried Canon Prescott a good

deal. Plenty of christenings, he said, trying to console himself, but no weddings.

Miss Marple ate her breakfast and decided how she would spend her day. It didn't really take much deciding. She would get up at her leisure, moving slowly because it was rather hot and her fingers weren't as nimble as they used to be. Then she would rest for ten minutes or so, and she would take her knitting and walk slowly along towards the hotel and decide where she would settle herself. On the terrace overlooking the sea? Or should she go on to the bathing beach to watch the bathers and the children? Usually it was the latter. In the afternoon, after her rest, she might take a drive. It really didn't matter very much.

Today would be a day like any other day, she said to herself.

Only, of course, it wasn't.

Miss Marple carried out her programme as planned and was slowly making her way along the path towards the hotel when she met Molly Kendal. For once that sunny young woman was not smiling. Her air of distress was so unlike her that Miss Marple said immediately:

"My dear, is anything wrong?"

Molly nodded. She hesitated and then said: "Well, you'll have to know—everyone will have to know. It's Major Palgrave. He's dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes. He died in the night."

"Oh, dear, I *am* sorry."

"Yes, it's horrid having a death here. It makes everyone depressed. Of course—he *was* quite old."

"He seemed quite well and cheerful yesterday," said Miss Marple, slightly resenting this calm assumption that everyone of advanced years was liable to die at any minute.

"He seemed quite healthy," she added.

"He had high blood pressure," said Molly.

"But surely there are things one takes nowadays—some kind of pill. Science is so wonderful."

"Oh yes, but perhaps he forgot to take his pills, or took too many of them. Like insulin, you know."

Miss Marple did not think that diabetes and high blood pressure were at all the same kind of thing. She asked:

"What does the doctor say?"

"Oh, Dr. Graham, who's practically retired now, and lives in the hotel, took a look at him, and the local people came officially, of course, to give a death certificate, but it all seems quite straightforward. This kind of thing is quite liable to happen when you have high blood pressure, especially if you overdo the alcohol, and Major Palgrave was really very naughty that way. Last night, for instance."

"Yes, I noticed," said Miss Marple.

"He probably forgot to take his pills. It is bad luck for the old boy—but people can't live for ever, can they? But it's terribly worrying—for me and Tim, I mean. People might suggest it was something in the food."

"But surely the symptoms of food poisoning and of blood pressure are *quite* different?"

"Yes. But people do *say* things so easily. And if people decided the food was bad—and left—or told their friends—"

"I really don't think you need worry," said Miss Marple kindly. "As you say, an elderly man like Major Palgrave—he must have been over seventy—is quite liable to die. To most people it will seem quite an ordinary occurrence—sad, but not out of the way at all."

"If only," said Molly unhappily, "it hadn't been so *sudden*."

Yes, it had been very sudden, Miss Marple thought as she walked slowly on. There he had been last night, laughing and talking in the best of spirits with the Hillingdons and the Dysons.

The Hillingdons and the Dysons ... Miss Marple walked more slowly still ... Finally she stopped abruptly. Instead of going to the bathing beach she settled herself in a shady corner of the terrace. She took out her knitting and the needles clicked rapidly as though they were trying to match the speed of her thoughts. *She didn't like it—no, she didn't like it. It came so pat.*

She went over the occurrences of yesterday in her mind.

Major Palgrave and his stories....

That was all as usual and one didn't need to listen very closely ... Perhaps, though, it would have been better if she had.

Kenya—he had talked about Kenya and then India—the North West Frontier—and then—for some reason they had got on to murder—And even *then* she hadn't really been listening....

Some famous case that had taken place out here—that had been in the newspapers—

It was after that—when he picked up her ball of wool—that he had begun telling her about a snapshot—*A snapshot of a murderer*—that is what he had said.

Miss Marple closed her eyes and tried to remember just exactly how that story had gone.

It had been rather a confused story—told to the Major in his club—or in somebody else's club—told him by a doctor—who had heard it from another doctor—and one doctor had taken a snapshot of someone coming through a front door—someone who was a murderer—

Yes, that was it—the various details were coming back to her now —

And he had offered to show her that snapshot—He had got out his wallet and begun hunting through its contents—talking all the time....

And then still talking, he had looked up—had looked—not at her—but at something behind her—behind her right shoulder to be accurate. And he had stopped talking, his face had gone purple—and he had started stuffing back everything into his wallet with slightly shaky hands and had begun talking in a loud unnatural voice about elephant tusks!

A moment or two later the Hillingdons and the Dysons had joined them....

It was then that she had turned her head over her right shoulder to look ... But there had been nothing and nobody to see. To her left, some distance away, in the direction of the hotel, there had been Tim Kendal and his wife; and beyond them a family group of Venezuelans. But Major Palgrave had not been looking in that direction....

Miss Marple meditated until lunch time.

After lunch she did not go for a drive.

Instead she sent a message to say that she was not feeling very well and to ask if Dr. Graham would be kind enough to come and see her.

Four

MISS MARPLE SEEKS MEDICAL ATTENTION

Dr. Graham was a kindly elderly man of about sixty-five. He had practised in the West Indies for many years, but was now semi-retired, and left most of his work to his West Indian partners. He greeted Miss Marple pleasantly and asked her what the trouble was. Fortunately at Miss Marple's age, there was always some ailment that could be discussed with slight exaggerations on the patient's part. Miss Marple hesitated between "her shoulder" and "her knee," but finally decided upon the knee. Miss Marple's knee, as she would have put it to herself, was always with her.

Dr. Graham was exceedingly kindly but he refrained from putting into words the fact that at her time of life such troubles were only to be expected. He prescribed for her one of the brands of useful little pills that form the basis of a doctor's prescriptions. Since he knew by experience that many elderly people could be lonely when they first came to St. Honoré, he remained for a while gently chatting.

"A very nice man," thought Miss Marple to herself, "and I really feel rather ashamed of having to tell him lies. But I don't quite see what else I can do."

Miss Marple had been brought up to have a proper regard for truth and was indeed by nature a very truthful person. But on

certain occasions, when she considered it her duty so to do, she could tell lies with a really astonishing verisimilitude.

She cleared her throat, uttered an apologetic little cough, and said, in an old ladyish and slightly twittering manner:

"There is something, Dr. Graham, I would like to ask you. I don't really like mentioning it—but I don't quite see what else I am to do—although of course it's *quite* unimportant really. But you see, it's important to *me*. And I hope you will understand and not think what I am asking is tiresome or—or unpardonable in any way."

To this opening Dr. Graham replied kindly: "Something is worrying you? Do let me help."

"It's connected with Major Palgrave. *So* sad about his dying. It was quite a shock when I heard it this morning."

"Yes," said Dr. Graham, "it was very sudden, I'm afraid. He seemed in such good spirits yesterday." He spoke kindly, but conventionally. To him, clearly, Major Palgrave's death was nothing out of the way. Miss Marple wondered whether she was really making something out of nothing. Was this suspicious habit of mind growing on her? Perhaps she could no longer trust her own judgment. Not that it was judgment really, only suspicion. Anyway she was in for it now! She must go ahead.

"We were sitting talking together yesterday afternoon," she said. "He was telling me about his very varied and interesting life. So many strange parts of the globe."

"Yes indeed," said Dr. Graham, who had been bored many times by the Major's reminiscences.

"And then he spoke of his family, boyhood rather, and I told him a little about my own nephews and nieces and he listened very sympathetically. And I showed him a snapshot I had with me of one of my nephews. Such a dear boy—at least not exactly a boy now, but always a boy to *me* if you understand."

"Quite so," said Dr. Graham, wondering how long it would be before the old lady was going to come to the point.

"I had handed it to him and he was examining it when quite suddenly those people—those very nice people—who collect wild

flowers and butterflies, Colonel and Mrs. Hillingdon I think the name is—"

"Oh yes? The Hillingdons and the Dysons."

"Yes, that's right. They came suddenly along laughing and talking. They sat down and ordered drinks and we all talked together. Very pleasant it was. But without thinking, Major Palgrave must have put back my snapshot into his wallet and returned it to his pocket. I wasn't paying very much attention at the time but I remembered afterward and I said to myself—'I mustn't forget to ask the Major to give me back my picture of Denzil.' I *did* think of it last night while the dancing and the band was going on, but I didn't like to interrupt him just then, because they were having such a merry party together and I thought 'I will remember to ask him for it in the morning.' Only this morning—" Miss Marple paused—out of breath.

"Yes, yes," said Dr. Graham, "I quite understand. And you—well, naturally you want the snapshot back. Is that it?"

Miss Marple nodded her head in eager agreement.

"Yes. That's it. You see, it is the only one I have got and I haven't got the negative. And I would hate to lose that snapshot, because poor Denzil died some five or six years ago and he was my favourite nephew. This is the only picture I have to remind me of him. I wondered—I hoped—it is rather tiresome of me to ask—whether you could possibly manage to get hold of it for me? I don't really know who else to ask, you see. I don't know who'll attend to all his belongings and things like that. It is all so difficult. They would think it such a nuisance of me. You see, they don't understand. Nobody could quite understand what this snapshot means to me."

"Of course, of course," said Dr. Graham. "I quite understand. A most natural feeling on your part. Actually, I am meeting the local authorities shortly—the funeral is tomorrow—and someone will be coming from the Administrator's office to look over his papers and effects before communicating with the next of kin—all that sort of thing—If you could describe this snapshot."

"It was just the front of a house," said Miss Marple. "And someone—Denzil, I mean—was just coming out of the front door. As I say it was taken by one of my other nephews who is very keen on

flower shows—and he was photographing a hibiscus, I think, or one of those beautiful—something like antipasto—lilies. Denzil just happened to come out of the front door at that time. It wasn't a very good photograph of him—just a trifle blurred—But I liked it and have always kept it."

"Well," said Dr. Graham, "that seems clear enough. I think we'll have no difficulty in getting back your picture for you, Miss Marple."

He rose from his chair. Miss Marple smiled up at him.

"You are very kind, Dr. Graham, very kind *indeed*. You do understand, don't you?"

"Of course I do, of course I do," said Dr. Graham, shaking her warmly by the hand. "Now don't you worry. Exercise that knee every day gently but not too much, and I'll send you round these tablets. Take one three times a day."

Five

MISS MARPLE MAKES A DECISION

The funeral service was said over the body of the late Major Palgrave on the following day. Miss Marple attended in company with Miss Prescott. The Canon read the service—after that life went on as usual.

Major Palgrave's death was already only an incident, a slightly unpleasant incident, but one that was soon forgotten. Life here was sunshine, sea, and social pleasures. A grim visitor had interrupted these activities, casting a momentary shadow, but the shadow was now gone. After all, nobody had known the deceased very well. He had been rather a garrulous elderly man of the club-bore type, always telling you personal reminiscences that you had no particular desire to hear. He had had little to anchor himself to any particular part of the world. His wife had died many years ago. He had had a lonely life and a lonely death. But it had been the kind of loneliness that spends itself in living amongst people, and in passing the time that way not unpleasantly. Major Palgrave might have been a lonely man, he had also been quite a cheerful one. He had enjoyed himself in his own particular way. And now he was dead, buried, and nobody cared very much, and in another week's time nobody would even remember him or spare him a passing thought.

The only person who could possibly be said to miss him was Miss Marple. Not indeed out of any personal affection, but he represented a kind of life that she knew. As one grew older, so she reflected to herself, one got more and more into the habit of listening; listening possibly without any great interest, but there had been between her and the Major the gentle give and take of two old people. It had had a cheerful, human quality. She did not actually mourn Major Palgrave but she missed him.

On the afternoon of the funeral, as she was sitting knitting in her favourite spot, Dr. Graham came and joined her. She put her needles down and greeted him. He said at once, rather apologetically:

"I am afraid I have rather disappointing news, Miss Marple."

"Indeed? About my—"

"Yes. We haven't found that precious snapshot of yours. I'm afraid that will be a disappointment to you."

"Yes. Yes it is. But of course it does not *really* matter. It was a sentimentality. I do realize that now. It wasn't in Major Palgrave's wallet?"

"No. Nor anywhere else among his things. There were a few letters and newspaper clippings and odds and ends, and a few old photographs, but no sign of a snapshot such as you mentioned."

"Oh dear," said Miss Marple. "Well, it can't be helped ... Thank you very much, Dr. Graham, for the trouble you've taken."

"Oh it was no trouble, indeed. But I know quite well from my own experience how much family trifles mean to one, especially as one is getting older."

The old lady was really taking it very well, he thought. Major Palgrave, he presumed, had probably come across the snapshot when taking something out of his wallet, and not even realizing how it had come there, had torn it up as something of no importance. But of course it was of great importance to this old lady. Still, she seemed quite cheerful and philosophical about it.

Internally, however, Miss Marple was far from being either cheerful or philosophical. She wanted a little time in which to think things out, but she was also determined to use her present opportunities to the fullest effect.

She engaged Dr. Graham in conversation with an eagerness which she did not attempt to conceal. That kindly man, putting down her flow of talk to the natural loneliness of an old lady, exerted himself to divert her mind from the loss of the snapshot, by conversing easily and pleasantly about life in St. Honoré, and the various interesting places perhaps Miss Marple might like to visit. He hardly knew himself how the conversation drifted back to Major Palgrave's decease.

"It seems so sad," said Miss Marple. "To think of anyone dying like this away from home. Though I gather, from what he himself told me, that he had no immediate family. It seems he lived by himself in London."

"He travelled a fair amount, I believe," said Dr. Graham. "At any rate in the winters. He didn't care for our English winters. Can't say I blame him."

"No, indeed," said Miss Marple. "And perhaps he had some special reason like a weakness of the lungs or something which made it necessary for him to winter abroad?"

"Oh no, I don't think so."

"He had high blood pressure, I believe. So sad nowadays. One hears so much of it."

"He spoke about it to you, did he?"

"Oh no. No, *he* never mentioned it. It was somebody else who told me."

"Ah, really."

"I suppose," went on Miss Marple, "that death was to be expected under those circumstances."

"Not necessarily," said Dr. Graham. "There are methods of controlling blood pressure nowadays."

"His death *seemed* very sudden—but I suppose *you* weren't surprised."

"Well I wasn't particularly surprised in a man of that age. But I certainly didn't expect it. Frankly, he always seemed to me in very good form, but I hadn't ever attended him professionally. I'd never taken his blood pressure or anything like that."

"Does one know—I mean, does a doctor know—when a man has high blood pressure just by looking at him?" Miss Marple inquired with a kind of dewy innocence.

"Not just by looking," said the doctor, smiling. "One has to do a bit of testing."

"Oh I see. That dreadful thing when you put a rubber band round somebody's arm and blow it up—I dislike it so much. But my doctor said that my blood pressure was really very good for my age."

"Well that's good hearing," said Dr. Graham.

"Of course, the Major *was* rather fond of Planters Punch," said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

"Yes. Not the best thing with blood pressure—alcohol."

"One takes tablets, doesn't one, or so I have heard?"

"Yes. There are several on the market. There was a bottle of one of them in his room—Serenite."

"How wonderful science is nowadays," said Miss Marple. "Doctors can do so much, can't they?"

"We all have one great competitor," said Dr. Graham. "Nature, you know. And some of the good old-fashioned home remedies come back from time to time."

"Like putting cobwebs on a cut?" said Miss Marple. "We always used to do that when I was a child."

"Very sensible," said Dr. Graham.

"And a linseed poultice on the chest and rubbing in camphorated oil for a bad cough."

"I see you know it all!" said Dr. Graham laughing. He got up. "How's the knee? Not been too troublesome?"

"No, it seems much, much better."

"Well, we won't say whether that's Nature or my pills," said Dr. Graham. "Sorry I couldn't have been of more help to you."

"But you have been most kind—I am really ashamed of taking up your time—Did you say that there were no photographs in the Major's wallet?"

"Oh yes—a very old one of the Major himself as quite a young man on a polo pony—and one of a dead tiger—He was standing with his foot on it. Snaps of that sort—memories of his younger days—

But I looked very carefully, I assure you, and the one you describe of your nephew was definitely not there—”

“Oh I’m sure you looked carefully—I didn’t mean that—I was just interested—We all tend to keep such very odd things—”

“Treasures from the past,” said the doctor smiling.

He said goodbye and departed.

Miss Marple remained looking thoughtfully at the palm trees and the sea. She did not pick up her knitting again for some minutes. She had a fact now. She had to think about that fact and what it meant. The snapshot that the Major had brought out of his wallet and replaced so hurriedly was *not there after he died*. It was not the sort of thing the Major would throw away. He had replaced it in his wallet and it ought to have been in his wallet after his death. Money might have been stolen, but no one would want to steal a snapshot. Unless, that is, they had a special reason for so doing....

Miss Marple’s face was grave. She had to take a decision. Was she, or was she not, going to allow Major Palgrave to remain quietly in his grave? Might it not be better to do just that? She quoted under her breath. “Duncan is dead. After Life’s fitful fever he sleeps well!” Nothing could hurt Major Palgrave now. He had gone where danger could not touch him. Was it just a coincidence that he should have died on that particular night? Or was it just possibly *not* a coincidence? Doctors accepted the deaths of elderly men so easily. Especially since in his room there had been a bottle of the tablets that people with high blood pressure had to take every day of their lives. But if someone had taken the snapshot from the Major’s wallet, that same person could have put that bottle of tablets in the Major’s room. She herself never remembered *seeing* the Major take tablets; he had never spoken about his blood pressure to her. The only thing he had ever said about his health was the admission —“Not as young as I was.” He had been occasionally a little short of breath, a trifle asthmatic, nothing else. But someone had mentioned that Major Palgrave had high blood pressure—Molly? Miss Prescott? She couldn’t remember.

Miss Marple sighed, then admonished herself in words, though she did not speak those words aloud.

"Now, Jane, what are you suggesting or thinking? Are you, perhaps, just making the whole thing up? Have you *really* got anything to build on?"

She went over, step by step, as nearly as she could, the conversation between herself and the Major on the subject of murder and murderers.

"Oh dear," said Miss Marple. "Even if—really, I *don't* see how I *can* do anything about it—"

But she knew that she meant to try.

Six

IN THE SMALL HOURS

I

Miss Marple woke early. Like many old people she slept lightly and had periods of wakefulness which she used for the planning of some action or actions to be carried out on the next or following days. Usually, of course, these were of a wholly private or domestic nature, of little interest to anybody but herself. But this morning Miss Marple lay thinking soberly and constructively of murder, and what, if her suspicions were correct, she could do about it. It wasn't going to be easy. She had one weapon and one weapon only, and that was conversation.

Old ladies were given to a good deal of rambling conversation. People were bored by this, but certainly did not suspect them of ulterior motives. It would not be a case of asking direct questions. (Indeed, she would have found it difficult to know what questions to ask!) It would be a question of finding out a little more about certain people. She reviewed these certain people in her mind.

She could find out, possibly, a little more about Major Palgrave, but would that really help her? She doubted if it would. If Major Palgrave had been killed it was not because of secrets in his life or to inherit his money or for revenge upon him. In fact, although he was the victim, it was one of those rare cases where a greater knowledge

of the victim does not help you or lead you in any way to his murderer. The point, it seemed to her, and the sole point, was that Major Palgrave talked too much!

She had learnt one rather interesting fact from Dr. Graham. He had had in his wallet various photographs: one of himself in company with a polo pony, one of a dead tiger, also one or two other shots of the same nature. Now why did Major Palgrave carry these about with him? Obviously, thought Miss Marple, with long experience of old admirals, brigadier-generals and mere majors behind her, because he had certain stories which he enjoyed telling to people. Starting off with "Curious thing happened once when I was out tiger shooting in India...." Or a reminiscence of himself and a polo pony. Therefore this story about a suspected murderer would in due course be illustrated by the production of the snapshot from his wallet.

He had been following that pattern in his conversation with her. The subject of murder having come up, and to focus interest on his story, he had done what he no doubt usually did, produced his snapshot and said something in the nature of "Wouldn't think this chap was a murderer, would you?"

The point was that it had been a *habit* of his. This murderer story was one of his regular repertoire. If any reference to murder came up, then away went the Major, full steam ahead.

In that case, reflected Miss Marple, he might *already* have told his story to someone else here. Or to more than one person—If that were so, then she herself might learn from that person what the further details of the story had been, possibly what the person in the snapshot had looked like.

She nodded her head in satisfaction—That would be a beginning.

And, of course, there were the people she called in her mind the "Four Suspects." Though really, since Major Palgrave had been talking about a *man*—there were only two. Colonel Hillingdon or Mr. Dyson, very unlikely-looking murderers, but then murderers so often *were* unlikely. Could there have been anyone else? She had seen no one when she turned her head to look. There was the bungalow of course. Mr. Rafiel's bungalow. Could somebody have come out of the

bungalow and gone in again before she had had time to turn her head? If so, it could only have been the valet-attendant. What was his name? Oh yes, Jackson. Could it have been *Jackson* who had come out of the door? That would have been the same pose as the photograph. *A man coming out of a door*. Recognition might have struck suddenly. Up till then, Major Palgrave would not have looked at Arthur Jackson, valet-attendant, with any interest. His roving and curious eye was essentially a snobbish eye—Arthur Jackson was not a *pukka sahib*—Major Palgrave would not have glanced at him twice.

Until, perhaps, he had had the snapshot in his hand, and had looked over Miss Marple's right shoulder and had seen a man coming out of a door ...?

Miss Marple turned over on her pillow—Programme for tomorrow—or rather for today—Further investigation of the Hillingdons, the Dysons and Arthur Jackson, valet-attendant.

II

Dr. Graham also woke early. Usually he turned over and went to sleep again. But today he was uneasy and sleep failed to come. This anxiety that made it so difficult to go to sleep again was a thing he had not suffered from for a long time. What was causing this anxiety? Really, he couldn't make it out. He lay there thinking it over. Something to do with—something to do with—yes, Major Palgrave. Major Palgrave's death? He didn't see, though, what there could be to make him uneasy there. Was it something that that twittery old lady had said? Bad luck for her about her snapshot. She'd taken it very well. But now what was it she had said, what chance word of hers had it been, that had given him this funny feeling of uneasiness? After all, there was nothing *odd* about the Major's death. Nothing at all. At least he supposed there was nothing at all.

It was quite clear that in the Major's state of health—a faint check came in his thought process. Did he really know much *about* Major Palgrave's state of health? Everybody *said* that he'd suffered from high blood pressure. But he himself had never had any conversation with the Major about it. But then he'd never had much conversation

with Major Palgrave anyway. Palgrave was an old bore and he avoided old bores. Why on earth should he have this idea that perhaps everything *mighn't* be all right? Was it that old woman? But after all she hadn't *said* anything. Anyway, it was none of his business. The local authorities were quite satisfied. There had been that bottle of Serenite tablets, and the old boy had apparently talked to people about his blood pressure quite freely.

Dr. Graham turned over in bed and soon went to sleep again.

III

Outside the hotel grounds, in one of a row of shanty cabins beside a creek, the girl Victoria Johnson rolled over and sat up in bed. The St. Honoré girl was a magnificent creature with a torso of black marble such as a sculptor would have enjoyed. She ran her fingers through her dark, tightly curling hair. With her foot she nudged her sleeping companion in the ribs.

"Wake up, man."

The man grunted and turned.

"What you want? It's not morning."

"Wake up, man. I want to talk to you."

The man sat up, stretched, showed a wide mouth and beautiful teeth.

"What's worrying you, woman?"

"That Major man who died. Something I don't like. Something wrong about it."

"Ah, what d'you want to worry about that? He was old. He died."

"Listen, man. It's them pills. Them pills the doctor asked me about."

"Well, what about them? He took too many maybe."

"No. It's not that. Listen." She leant towards him, talking vehemently. He yawned and lay down again.

"There's nothing in that. What're you talking about?"

"All the same, I'll speak to Mrs. Kendal about it in the morning. I think there's something wrong there somewhere."

“Shouldn’t bother,” said the man who, without benefit of ceremony, she considered as her present husband. “Don’t let’s look for trouble,” he said and rolled over on his side yawning.

Seven

MORNING ON THE BEACH

I

It was mid-morning on the beach below the hotel.

Evelyn Hillingdon came out of the water and dropped on the warm golden sand. She took off her bathing cap and shook her dark head vigorously. The beach was not a very big one. People tended to congregate there in the mornings and about 11:30 there was always something of a social reunion. To Evelyn's left in one of the exotic-looking modern basket chairs lay Señora de Caspearo, a handsome woman from Venezuela. Next to her was old Mr. Rafiel who was by now the doyen of the Golden Palm Hotel and held the sway that only an elderly invalid of great wealth could attain. Esther Walters was in attendance on him. She usually had her shorthand notebook and pencil with her in case Mr. Rafiel should suddenly think of urgent business cables which must be got off at once. Mr. Rafiel in beach attire was incredibly desiccated, his bones draped with festoons of dry skin. Though looking like a man on the point of death, he had looked exactly the same for at least the last eight years—or so it was said in the islands. Sharp blue eyes peered out of his wrinkled cheeks, and his principal pleasure in life was denying robustly anything that anyone else said.

Miss Marple was also present. As usual she sat and knitted and listened to what went on, and very occasionally joined in the conversation. When she did so, everyone was surprised because they had usually forgotten that she was there! Evelyn Hillingdon looked at her indulgently, and thought that she was a nice old pussy.

Señora de Caspearo rubbed some more oil on her long beautiful legs and hummed to herself. She was not a woman who spoke much. She looked discontentedly at the flask of sun oil.

"This is not so good as Frangipanio," she said, sadly. "One cannot get it here. A pity." Her eyelids drooped again.

"Are you going in for your dip now, Mr. Rafiel?" asked Esther Walters.

"I'll go in when I'm ready," said Mr. Rafiel, snappishly.

"It's half past eleven," said Mrs. Walters.

"What of it?" said Mr. Rafiel. "Think I'm the kind of man to be tied by the clock? Do this at the hour, do this at twenty minutes past, do that at twenty to—bah!"

Mrs. Walters had been in attendance on Mr. Rafiel long enough to have adopted her own formula for dealing with him. She knew that he liked a good space of time in which to recover from the exertion of bathing and she had therefore reminded him of the time, allowing a good ten minutes for him to rebut her suggestion and then be able to adopt it without seeming to do so.

"I don't like these espadrilles," said Mr. Rafiel raising a foot and looking at it. "I told that fool Jackson so. The man never pays attention to a word I say."

"I'll fetch you some others, shall I, Mr. Rafiel?"

"No, you won't, you'll sit here and keep quiet. I hate people rushing about like clucking hens."

Evelyn shifted slightly in the warm sand, stretching out her arms.

Miss Marple, intent on her knitting—or so it seemed—stretched out a foot, then hastily she apologized.

"I'm so sorry, so very sorry, Mrs. Hillingdon. I'm afraid I kicked you."

"Oh, it's quite all right," said Evelyn. "This beach gets rather crowded."

"Oh, please don't move. Please. I'll move my chair a little back so that I won't do it again."

As Miss Marple resettled herself, she went on talking in a childish and garrulous manner.

"It still seems so wonderful to be *here!* I've never been to the West Indies before, you know. I thought it was the kind of place I never should come to and here I am. All by the kindness of my dear nephew. I suppose you know this part of the world very well, don't you, Mrs. Hillingdon?"

"I have been in this island once or twice before and of course in most of the others."

"Oh yes. Butterflies isn't it, and wild flowers? You and your—your friends—or are they relations?"

"Friends. Nothing more."

"And I suppose you go about together a great deal because of your interests being the same?"

"Yes. We've travelled together for some years now."

"I suppose you must have had some rather exciting adventures sometimes?"

"I don't think so," said Evelyn. Her voice was unaccentuated, slightly bored. "Adventures always seem to happen to other people." She yawned.

"No dangerous encounters with snakes or with wild animals or with natives gone berserk?"

("What a fool I sound," thought Miss Marple.)

"Nothing worse than insect bites," Evelyn assured her.

"Poor Major Palgrave, you know, was bitten by a snake once," said Miss Marple, making a purely fictitious statement.

"Was he?"

"Did he never tell you about it?"

"Perhaps. I don't remember."

"I suppose you knew him quite well, didn't you?"

"Major Palgrave? No, hardly at all."

"He always had so many interesting stories to tell."

"Ghastly old bore," said Mr. Rafiel. "Silly fool, too. He needn't have died if he'd looked after himself properly."

"Oh come now, Mr. Rafiel," said Mrs. Walters.

"I know what I'm talking about. If you look after your health properly you're all right anywhere. Look at me. The doctors gave *me* up years ago. All right, I said, I've got my own rules of health and I shall keep to them. And here I am."

He looked round proudly.

It did indeed seem rather a mistake that he should be there.

"Poor Major Palgrave had high blood pressure," said Mrs. Walters.

"Nonsense," said Mr. Rafiel.

"Oh, but he did," said Evelyn Hillingdon. She spoke with sudden, unexpected authority.

"Who says so?" said Mr. Rafiel. "Did he tell you so?"

"Somebody said so."

"He looked very red in the face," Miss Marple contributed.

"Can't go by that," said Mr. Rafiel. "And anyway he *didn't* have high blood pressure because he told me so."

"What do you mean, he told you so?" said Mrs. Walters. "I mean, you can't exactly tell people you *haven't* got a thing."

"Yes you can. I said to him once when he was downing all those Planters Punches, and eating too much, I said, 'You ought to watch your diet and your drink. You've got to think of your blood pressure at your age.' And he said he'd nothing to look out for in that line, that his blood pressure was very good for his age."

"But he took some stuff for it, I believe," said Miss Marple, entering the conversation once more. "Some stuff called—oh, something like—was it Serenite?"

"If you ask me," said Evelyn Hillingdon, "I don't think he ever liked to admit that there could be anything the matter with him or that he could be ill. I think he was one of those people who are afraid of illness and therefore deny there's ever anything wrong with them."

It was a long speech for her. Miss Marple looked thoughtfully down at the top of her dark head.

"The trouble is," said Mr. Rafiel dictatorially, "everybody's too fond of knowing other people's ailments. They think everybody over fifty is going to die of hypertension or coronary thrombosis or one of

those things—poppycock! If a man says there's nothing much wrong with him I don't suppose there is. A man ought to know about his own health. What's the time? Quarter to twelve? I ought to have had my dip long ago. Why can't you remind me about these things, Esther?"

Mrs. Walters made no protest. She rose to her feet and with some deftness assisted Mr. Rafiel to his. Together they went down the beach, she supporting him carefully. Together they stepped into the sea.

Señora de Caspearo opened her eyes and murmured: "How ugly are old men! Oh how they are ugly! They should all be put to death at forty, or perhaps thirty-five would be better. Yes?"

Edward Hillingdon and Gregory Dyson came crunching down the beach.

"What's the water like, Evelyn?"

"Just the same as always."

"Never much variation, is there? Where's Lucky?"

"I don't know," said Evelyn.

Again Miss Marple looked down thoughtfully at the dark head.

"Well, now I give my imitation of a whale," said Gregory. He threw off his gaily patterned Bermuda shirt and tore down the beach, flinging himself, puffing and panting, into the sea, doing a fast crawl. Edward Hillingdon sat down on the beach by his wife. Presently he asked, "Coming in again?"

She smiled—put on her cap—and they went down the beach together in a much less spectacular manner.

Señora de Caspearo opened her eyes again.

"I think at first those two they are on their honeymoon, he is so charming to her, but I hear they have been married eight—nine years. It is incredible, is it not?"

"I wonder where Mrs. Dyson is?" said Miss Marple.

"That Lucky? She is with some man."

"You—you think so?"

"It is certain," said Señora de Caspearo. "She is that type. But she is not so young any longer—Her husband—already his eyes go elsewhere—He makes passes—here, there, all the time. I know."

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "I expect you would know."

Señora de Caspearo shot a surprised glance at her. It was clearly not what she had expected from that quarter.

Miss Marple, however, was looking at the waves with an air of gentle innocence.

II

"May I speak to you, ma'am, Mrs. Kendal?"

"Yes, of course," said Molly. She was sitting at her desk in the office.

Victoria Johnson, tall and buoyant in her crisp white uniform, came in farther and shut the door behind her with a somewhat mysterious air.

"I like to tell you something, please, Mrs. Kendal."

"Yes, what is it? Is anything wrong?"

"I don't know that. Not for sure. It's the old gentleman who died. The Major gentleman. He die in his sleep."

"Yes, yes. What about it?"

"There was a bottle of pills in his room. Doctor, he asked me about them."

"Yes?"

"The doctor said—'Let me see what he has here on the bathroom shelf,' and he looked, you see. He see there was tooth powder and indigestion pills and aspirin and cascara pills, and then these pills in a bottle called Serenite."

"Yes," repeated Molly yet again.

"And the doctor looked at them. He seemed quite satisfied, and nodded his head. But I get to thinking afterwards. Those pills weren't there before. I've not seen them in his bathroom before. The others, yes. The tooth powder and the aspirin and the aftershave lotion and all the rest. But those pills, those Serenite pills, I never noticed them before."

"So you think—" Molly looked puzzled.

"I don't know what to think," said Victoria. "I just think it's not right, so I think I better tell you about it. Perhaps you tell doctor?"

Perhaps it means something. Perhaps *someone* put those pills there so he take them and he died."

"Oh, I don't think that's likely at all," said Molly.

Victoria shook her dark head. "You never know. People do bad things."

Molly glanced out of the window. The place looked like an earthly paradise. With its sunshine, its sea, its coral reef, its music, its dancing, it seemed a Garden of Eden. But even in the Garden of Eden, there had been a shadow—the shadow of the Serpent—*Bad things*—how hateful to hear those words.

"I'll make inquiries, Victoria," she said sharply. "Don't worry. And above all don't go starting a lot of silly rumours."

Tim Kendal came in, just as Victoria was, somewhat unwillingly, leaving.

"Anything wrong, Molly?"

She hesitated—but Victoria might go to him—She told him what the girl had said.

"I don't see what all this rigmarole—what *were* these pills anyway?"

"Well, I don't really know, Tim. Dr. Robertson when he came said they—were something to do with blood pressure, I think."

"Well, that would be all right, wouldn't it? I mean, he *had* high blood pressure, and he *would* be taking things for it, wouldn't he? People do. I've seen them, lots of times."

"Yes," Molly hesitated, "but Victoria seemed to think that he might have taken one of these pills and it would have killed him."

"Oh darling, that is a bit *too* melodramatic! You mean that somebody might have changed his blood pressure pills for something else, and that they poisoned him?"

"It does sound absurd," said Molly apologetically, "when you say it like that. But that seemed to be what Victoria thought!"

"Silly girl! We *could* go and ask Dr. Graham about it, I suppose he'd know. But really it's such nonsense that it's not worth bothering him."

"That's what I think."

"What on earth made the girl think anybody would have changed the pills? You mean, put different pills into the same bottle?"

"I didn't quite gather," said Molly, looking rather helpless. "Victoria seemed to think that was the first time that Serenite bottle had been there."

"Oh but that's nonsense," said Tim Kendal. "He had to take those pills all the time to keep his blood pressure down." And he went off cheerfully to consult with Fernando the *maître d'hôtel*.

But Molly could not dismiss the matter so lightly. After the stress of lunch was over she said to her husband:

"Tim—I've been thinking—If Victoria is going around talking about this perhaps we ought just to ask someone about it?"

"My dear girl! Robertson and all the rest of them came and looked at everything and asked all the questions they wanted at the time."

"Yes, but you know how they work themselves up, these girls—"

"Oh, all right! I'll tell you what—we'll go and ask Graham—he'll know."

Dr. Graham was sitting on his loggia with a book. The young couple came in and Molly plunged into her recital. It was a little incoherent and Tim took over.

"Sounds rather idiotic," he said apologetically, "but as far as I can make out, this girl has got it into her head that someone put some poison tablets in the—what's the name of the stuff—Sera—something bottle."

"But why should she get this idea into her head?" asked Dr. Graham. "Did she see anything or hear anything or—I mean, why should she think so?"

"I don't know," said Tim rather helplessly. "Was it a different bottle? Was that it, Molly?"

"No," said Molly. "I think what she said was that there was a bottle there labelled—Seven—Seren—"

"Serenite," said the doctor. "That's quite right. A well-known preparation. He'd been taking it regularly."

"Victoria said she'd never seen it in his room before."

"Never seen it in his room before?" said Graham sharply. "What does she mean by that?"

"Well, that's what she *said*. She said there were all sorts of things on the bathroom shelf. You know, tooth powder, aspirin and aftershave and—oh—she rattled them off gaily. I suppose she's always cleaning them and so she knows them all off by heart. But this one—the Serenite—she hadn't seen it there until the day after he died."

"That's very odd," said Dr. Graham, rather sharply. "Is she sure?"

The unusual sharpness of his tone made both of the Kendals look up at him. They had not expected Dr. Graham to take up quite this attitude.

"She sounded sure," said Molly slowly.

"Perhaps she just wanted to be sensational," suggested Tim.

"I think perhaps," said Dr. Graham, "I'd better have a few words with the girl myself."

Victoria displayed a distinct pleasure at being allowed to tell her story.

"I don't want to get in no trouble," she said. "I didn't put that bottle there and I don't know who did."

"But you think it *was* put there?" asked Graham.

"Well, you see, Doctor, it *must* have been put there if it wasn't there before."

"Major Palgrave could have kept it in a drawer—or a dispatch-case, something like that."

Victoria shook her head shrewdly.

"Wouldn't do that if he was taking it all the time, would he?"

"No," said Graham reluctantly. "No, it was stuff he would have to take several times a day. You never saw him taking it or anything of that kind?"

"He didn't have it there before. I just thought—word got round as that stuff had something to do with his death, poisoned his blood or something, and I thought maybe he had an enemy put it there so as to kill him."

"Nonsense, my girl," said the doctor robustly. "Sheer nonsense." Victoria looked shaken.

"You say as this stuff was medicine, good medicine?" she asked doubtfully.

"Good medicine, and what is more, *necessary* medicine," said Dr. Graham. "So you needn't worry, Victoria. I can assure you there was nothing wrong with that medicine. It was the proper thing for a man to take who had his complaint."

"Surely you've taken a load off my mind," said Victoria. She showed white teeth at him in a cheerful smile.

But the load was not taken off Dr. Graham's mind. That uneasiness of his that had been so nebulous was now becoming tangible.

Eight

A TALK WITH ESTHER WALTERS

"This place isn't what it used to be," said Mr. Rafiel, irritably, as he observed Miss Marple approaching the spot where he and his secretary were sitting. "Can't move a step without some old hen getting under your feet. What do old ladies want to come to the West Indies for?"

"Where do you suggest they should go?" asked Esther Walters.

"To Cheltenham," said Mr. Rafiel promptly. "Or Bournemouth," he offered, "or Torquay or Llandrindod Wells. Plenty of choice. They like it there—they're quite happy."

"They can't often afford to come to the West Indies, I suppose," said Esther. "It isn't everyone who is as lucky as you are."

"That's right," said Mr. Rafiel. "Rub it in. Here am I, a mass of aches and pains and disjoints. You grudge me any alleviation! And you don't do any work—Why haven't you typed out those letters yet?"

"I haven't had time."

"Well, get on with it, can't you? I bring you out here to do a bit of work, not to sit about sunning yourself and showing off your figure."

Some people would have considered Mr. Rafiel's remarks quite insupportable but Esther Walters had worked for him for some years and she knew well enough that Mr. Rafiel's bark was a great deal

worse than his bite. He was a man who suffered almost continual pain, and making disagreeable remarks was one of his ways of letting off steam. No matter what he said she remained quite imperturbable.

"Such a lovely evening, isn't it?" said Miss Marple, pausing beside them.

"Why not?" said Mr. Rafiel. "That's what we're here for, isn't it?"

Miss Marple gave a tinkly little laugh.

"You're so severe—of course the weather *is* a very English subject of conversation—one forgets—Oh dear—this is the wrong coloured wool." She deposited her knitting bag on the garden table and trotted towards her own bungalow.

"Jackson!" yelled Mr. Rafiel.

Jackson appeared.

"Take me back inside," said Mr. Rafiel. "I'll have my massage now before that chattering hen comes back. Not that massage does me a bit of good," he added. Having said which, he allowed himself to be deftly helped to his feet and went off with the masseur beside him into his bungalow.

Esther Walters looked after them and then turned her head as Miss Marple came back with a ball of wool to sit down near her.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you?" said Miss Marple.

"Of course not," said Esther Walters, "I've got to go off and do some typing in a minute, but I'm going to enjoy another ten minutes of the sunset first."

Miss Marple sat down and in a gentle voice began to talk. As she talked, she summed up Esther Walters. Not at all glamorous, but could be attractive-looking if she tried. Miss Marple wondered why she didn't try. It could be, of course, because Mr. Rafiel would not have liked it, but Miss Marple didn't think Mr. Rafiel would really mind in the least. He was so completely taken up with himself that so long as he was not personally neglected, his secretary might have got herself up like a *houri* in Paradise without his objecting. Besides, he usually went to bed early and in the evening hours of steel bands and dancing, Esther Walters might easily have—Miss Marple paused to select a word in her mind, at the same time conversing cheerfully

about her visit to Jamestown—Ah yes, *blossomed*. Esther Walters might have blossomed in the evening hours.

She led the conversation gently in the direction of Jackson.

On the subject of Jackson Esther Walters was rather vague.

"He's very competent," she said. "A fully trained masseur."

"I suppose he's been with Mr. Rafiel a long time?"

"Oh no—about nine months, I think—"

"Is he married?" Miss Marple hazarded.

"Married? I don't think so," said Esther slightly surprised. "He's never mentioned it if so—"

"No," she added. "Definitely *not* married, I should say." And she showed amusement.

Miss Marple interpreted that by adding to it in her own mind the following sentence—"At any rate he doesn't behave as though he were married."

But then, how many married men there were who behaved as though they weren't married! Miss Marple could think of a dozen examples!

"He's quite good-looking," she said thoughtfully.

"Yes—I suppose he is," said Esther without interest.

Miss Marple considered her thoughtfully. Uninterested in men? The kind of woman, perhaps, who was only interested in one man—A widow, they had said.

She asked—"Have you worked for Mr. Rafiel long?"

"Four or five years. After my husband died, I had to take a job again. I've got a daughter at school and my husband left me very badly off."

"Mr. Rafiel must be a difficult man to work for?" Miss Marple hazarded.

"Not really, when you get to know him. He flies into rages and is very contradictory. I think the real trouble is he gets tired of people. He's had five different valet-attendants in two years. He likes having someone new to bully. But he and I have always got on very well."

"Mr. Jackson seems a very obliging young man?"

"He's very tactful and resourceful," said Esther. "Of course, he's sometimes a little—" She broke off.

Miss Marple considered. "Rather a difficult position sometimes?" she suggested.

"Well, yes. Neither one thing nor the other. However—" she smiled—"I think he manages to have quite a good time."

Miss Marple considered this also. It didn't help her much. She continued her twittering conversation and soon she was hearing a good deal about that nature-loving quartet, the Dysons and the Hillingdons.

"The Hillingdons have been here for the last three or four years at least," said Esther, "but Gregory Dyson has been here much longer than that. He knows the West Indies very well. He came here, originally, I believe, with his first wife. She was delicate and had to go abroad in the winters, or go somewhere warm, at any rate."

"And she died? Or was it divorce?"

"No. She died. Out here, I believe. I don't mean this particular island but one of the West Indies islands. There was some sort of trouble, I believe, some kind of scandal or other. He never talks about her. Somebody else told me about it. They didn't, I gather, get on very well together."

"And then he married this wife. 'Lucky.'" Miss Marple said the word with faint dissatisfaction as if to say "Really, a most incredible name!"

"I believe she was a relation of his first wife."

"Have they known the Hillingdons a great many years?"

"Oh, I think only since the Hillingdons came out here. Three or four years, not more."

"The Hillingdons seem very pleasant," said Miss Marple. "Quiet, of course."

"Yes. They're both quiet."

"Everyone says they're very devoted to each other," said Miss Marple. The tone of her voice was quite noncommittal but Esther Walters looked at her sharply.

"But you don't think they are?" she said.

"You don't really think so yourself, do you, my dear?"

"Well, I've wondered sometimes...."

"Quiet men, like Colonel Hillingdon," said Miss Marple, "are often attracted to flamboyant types." And she added, after a significant pause, "Lucky—such a curious name. Do you think Mr. Dyson has any idea of—of what might be going on?"

"Old scandal-monger," thought Esther Walters. "Really, these old women!"

She said rather coldly, "I've no idea."

Miss Marple shifted to another subject. "It's very sad about poor Major Palgrave isn't it?" she said.

Esther Walters agreed, though in a somewhat perfunctory fashion.

"The people I'm really sorry for are the Kendals," she said.

"Yes, I suppose it is really rather unfortunate when something of that kind happens in a hotel."

"People come here, you see, to enjoy themselves, don't they?" said Esther. "To forget about illnesses and deaths and income tax and frozen pipes and all the rest of it. They don't like—" she went on, with a sudden flash of an entirely different manner—"any reminders of mortality."

Miss Marple laid down her knitting. "Now that is very well put, my dear," she said, "very well put indeed. Yes, it is as you say."

"And you see they're quite a young couple," went on Esther Walters. "They only just took over from the Sandersons six months ago and they're terribly worried about whether they're going to succeed or not, because they haven't had much experience."

"And you think this might be really disadvantageous to them?"

"Well, no, I don't, frankly," said Esther Walters. "I don't think people remember anything for more than a day or two, not in this atmosphere of 'we've-all-come-out-here-to-enjoy-ourselves-let's-get-on-with-it.' I think a death just gives them a jolt for about twenty-four hours or so and then they don't think of it again once the funeral is over. Not unless they're reminded of it, that is. I've told Molly so, but of course she is a worrier."

"Mrs. Kendal is a worrier? She always seems so carefree."

"I think a lot of that is put on," said Esther slowly. "Actually, I think she's one of those anxious sort of people who can't help

worrying all the time that things *may* go wrong."

"I should have thought *he* worried more than she did."

"No, I don't think so. I think she's the worrier and he worries because she worries if you know what I mean."

"That is interesting," said Miss Marple.

"I think Molly wants desperately to try and appear very gay and to be enjoying herself. She works at it very hard but the effort exhausts her. Then she has these odd fits of depression. She's not—well, not really well-balanced."

"Poor child," said Miss Marple. "There certainly are people like that, and very often outsiders don't suspect it."

"No, they put on such a good show, don't they? However," Esther added, "I don't think Molly has really anything to worry about in this case. I mean, people are dying of coronary thrombosis or cerebral hæmorrhage or things of that kind all the time nowadays. Far more than they used to, as far as I can see. It's only food poisoning or typhoid or something like that, that makes people get het up."

"Major Palgrave never mentioned to *me* that he had high blood pressure," said Miss Marple. "Did he to you?"

"He said so to somebody—I don't know who—it may have been to Mr. Rafiel. I know Mr. Rafiel says just the opposite—but then he's like that! Certainly Jackson mentioned it to me once. He said the Major ought to be more careful over the alcohol he took."

"I see," said Miss Marple, thoughtfully. She went on: "I expect you found him rather a boring old man? He told a lot of stories and I expect repeated himself a good deal."

"That's the worst of it," said Esther. "You do hear the same story again and again unless you can manage to be quick enough to fend it off."

"Of course *I* didn't mind so much," said Miss Marple, "because I'm used to that sort of thing. If I get stories told to me rather often, I don't really mind hearing them again because I've usually forgotten them."

"There is that," said Esther and laughed cheerfully.

"There was one story he was very fond of telling," said Miss Marple, "about a murder. I expect he told you that, didn't he?"

Esther Walters opened her handbag and started searching through it. She drew out her lipstick saying, "I thought I'd lost it." Then she asked, "I beg your pardon, what did you say?"

"I asked if Major Palgrave told you his favourite murder story?"

"I believe he did, now I come to think of it. Something about someone who gassed themselves, wasn't it? Only really it was the *wife* who gassed him. I mean she'd given him a sedative of some kind and then stuck his head in the gas oven. Was that it?"

"I don't think that was exactly it," said Miss Marple. She looked at Esther Walters thoughtfully.

"He told such a lot of stories," said Esther Walters, apologetically, "and as I said, one didn't always listen."

"He had a snapshot," said Miss Marple, "that he used to show people."

"I believe he did ... I can't remember what it was now. Did he show it to you?"

"No," said Miss Marple. "He didn't show it to me. We were interrupted—"

Nine

MISS PRESCOTT AND OTHERS

"**T**he story *I* heard," began Miss Prescott, lowering her voice, and looking carefully around.

Miss Marple drew her chair a little closer. It had been some time before she had been able to get together with Miss Prescott for a heart-to-heart chat. This was owing to the fact that clergymen are very strong family men so that Miss Prescott was nearly always accompanied by her brother, and there was no doubt that Miss Marple and Miss Prescott found it less easy to take their back hair down in a good gossip when the jovial Canon was of their company.

"It seems," said Miss Prescott, "though of course I don't want to talk any scandal and I really know *nothing* about it—"

"Oh, I *quite* understand," said Miss Marple.

"It seems there was some scandal when his first wife was still alive! Apparently this woman, Lucky—such a name!—who I think was a cousin of his first wife, came out here and joined them and I think did some work with him on flowers or butterflies or whatever it was. And people talked a lot because they got on so well together—if you know what I mean."

"People do *notice* things so much, don't they?" said Miss Marple.

"And then of course, when his wife died rather suddenly—"

"She died here, on this island?"

"No. No, I think they were in Martinique or Tobago at the time."

"I see."

"But I gathered from some other people who were there at the time, and who came on here and talked about things, that the doctor wasn't very satisfied."

"Indeed," said Miss Marple, with interest.

"It was only *gossip*," of course, "but—well, Mr. Dyson certainly married again *very quickly*." She lowered her voice again. "Only a *month* I believe."

"Only a month," said Miss Marple.

The two women looked at each other. "It seemed—unfeeling," said Miss Prescott.

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "It certainly did." She added delicately, "Was there—any money?"

"I don't really know. He makes his little joke—perhaps you've heard him—about his wife being his 'lucky piece'—"

"Yes, I've heard him," said Miss Marple.

"And some people think that means that he was lucky to marry a rich wife. Though, of course," said Miss Prescott with the air of one being entirely fair, "she's very good-looking too, if you care for that type. And I think myself that it was the *first* wife who had the money."

"Are the Hillingdons well off?"

"Well, I think they're *well off*. I don't mean fabulously rich, I just mean well off. They have two boys at public school and a very nice place in England, I believe, and they travel most of the winter."

The Canon appearing at this moment to suggest a brisk walk, Miss Prescott rose to join her brother. Miss Marple remained sitting there.

A few minutes later Gregory Dyson passed her striding along towards the hotel. He waved a cheerful hand as he passed.

"Penny for your thoughts," he called out.

Miss Marple smiled gently, wondering how he would have reacted if she had replied:

"I was wondering if you were a murderer."

It really seemed most probable that he was. It all fitted in so nicely—This story about the death of the first Mrs. Dyson—Major Palgrave had certainly been talking about a wife killer—with special reference to the “Brides in the Bath Case.”

Yes—it fitted—the only objection was that it fitted almost too well. But Miss Marple reproved herself for this thought—who was she to demand Murders Made to Measure?

A voice made her jump—a somewhat raucous one.

“Seen Greg any place, Miss—er—”

Lucky, Miss Marple thought, was not in a good temper.

“He passed by just now—going towards the hotel.”

“I’ll bet!” Lucky uttered an irritated ejaculation and hurried on.

“Forty, if she’s a day, and looks it this morning,” thought Miss Marple.

Pity invaded her—pity for the Luckys of the world—who were so vulnerable to Time—

At the sound of a noise behind her, she turned her chair round—

Mr. Rafiel, supported by Jackson, was making his morning appearance and coming out of his bungalow—

Jackson settled his employer in his wheelchair and fussed round him. Mr. Rafiel waved his attendant away impatiently and Jackson went off in the direction of the hotel.

Miss Marple lost no time—Mr. Rafiel was never left alone for long—Probably Esther Walters would come and join him. Miss Marple wanted a word alone with Mr. Rafiel and now, she thought, was her chance. She would have to be quick about what she wanted to say. There could be no leading up to things. Mr. Rafiel was not a man who cared for the idle twittering conversation of old ladies. He would probably retreat again into his bungalow, definitely regarding himself the victim of persecution. Miss Marple decided to plump for downrightess.

She made her way to where he was sitting, drew up a chair, sat down, and said:

“I want to ask you something, Mr. Rafiel.”

“All right, all right,” said Mr. Rafiel, “let’s have it. What do you want—a subscription, I suppose? Missions in Africa or repairing a

church, something of that kind?"

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "I am interested in several objects of that nature, and I shall be delighted if you will give me a subscription for them. But that wasn't actually what I was going to ask you. What I was going to ask you was if Major Palgrave ever told you a story about a murder."

"Oho," said Mr. Rafiel. "So he told it to you too, did he? And I suppose you fell for it, hook, line and sinker."

"I didn't really know what to think," said Miss Marple. "What exactly did he tell you?"

"He prattled on," said Mr. Rafiel, "about a lovely creature, Lucrezia Borgia reincarnated. Beautiful, young, golden-haired, everything."

"Oh," said Miss Marple slightly taken aback, "and who did she murder?"

"Her husband, of course," said Mr. Rafiel, "who do you think?"

"Poison?"

"No, I think she gave him a sleeping draught and then stuck him in a gas oven. Resourceful female. Then she said it was suicide. She got off quite lightly. Diminished responsibility or something. That's what it's called nowadays if you're a good-looking woman, or some miserable young hooligan whose mother's been too fond of him. Bah!"

"Did the Major show you a snapshot?"

"What—a snapshot of the woman? No. Why should he?"

"Oh—" said Miss Marple.

She sat there, rather taken aback. Apparently Major Palgrave spent his life telling people not only about tigers he had shot and elephants he had hunted but also about murderers he had met. Perhaps he had a whole repertoire of murder stories. One had to face it—She was startled by Mr. Rafiel suddenly giving a roar of "Jackson!" There was no response.

"Shall I find him for you?" said Miss Marple rising.

"You won't find him. Tom-catting somewhere, that's what he does. No good, that fellow. Bad character. But he suits me all right."

"I'll go and look for him," said Miss Marple.

Miss Marple found Jackson sitting on the far side of the hotel terrace having a drink with Tim Kendal.

"Mr. Rafiel is asking for you," she said.

Jackson made an expressive grimace, drained his glass, and rose to his feet.

"Here we go again," he said. "No peace for the wicked—Two telephone calls and a special diet order—I thought that might give me a quarter of an hour's alibi—Apparently not! Thank you, Miss Marple. Thanks for the drink, Mr. Kendal."

He strode away.

"I feel sorry for that chap," said Tim. "I have to stand him a drink now and then, just to cheer him up—Can I offer you something, Miss Marple—How about fresh lime? I know you're fond of that."

"Not just now, thank you—I suppose looking after someone like Mr. Rafiel must always be rather exacting. Invalids are frequently difficult—"

"I didn't mean only that—It's very well paid and you expect to put up with a good deal of crotchiness—old Rafiel's not really a bad sort. I mean more that—" he hesitated.

Miss Marple looked inquiring.

"Well—how shall I put it—it's difficult for him socially. People are so damned snobbish—there's no one here of his class. He's better than a servant—and below the average visitor—or they think he is. Rather like the Victorian governess. Even the secretary woman, Mrs. Walters—feels she's a cut above him. Makes things difficult." Tim paused, then said with feeling: "It's really awful the amount of social problems there are in a place like this."

Dr. Graham passed them—he had a book in his hand. He went and sat at a table overlooking the sea.

"Dr. Graham looks rather worried," remarked Miss Marple.

"Oh! We're all worried."

"You too? Because of Major Palgrave's death?"

"I've left off worrying about that. People seem to have forgotten it—taken it in their stride. No—it's my wife—Molly—Do you know anything about dreams?"

"Dreams?" Miss Marple was surprised.

"Yes—bad dreams—nightmares, I suppose. Oh, we all get that sort of thing sometimes. But Molly—she seems to have them nearly all the time. They frighten her. Is there anything one can do about them? Take for them? She's got some sleeping pills, but she says they make it worse—she struggles to wake up and can't."

"What are the dreams about?"

"Oh, something or someone chasing her—Or watching her and spying on her—she can't shake off the feeling even when she's awake."

"Surely a doctor—"

"She's got a thing against doctors. Won't hear of it—Oh well—I dare say it will all pass off—But we were so happy. It was all such fun—And now, just lately—Perhaps old Palgrave's death upset her. She seems like a different person since...."

He got up.

"Must get on with the daily chores—are you sure you won't have that fresh lime?"

Miss Marple shook her head.

She sat there, thinking. Her face was grave and anxious.

She glanced over at Dr. Graham.

Presently she came to a decision.

She rose and went across to his table.

"I have got to apologize to you, Dr. Graham," she said.

"Indeed?" The doctor looked at her in kindly surprise. He pulled forward a chair and she sat down.

"I am afraid I have done the most disgraceful thing," said Miss Marple. "I told you, Dr. Graham, a deliberate lie."

She looked at him apprehensively.

Dr. Graham did not look at all shattered, but he did look a little surprised.

"Really?" he said. "Ah well, you mustn't let that worry you too much."

What had the dear old thing been telling lies about, he wondered; her age? Though as far as he could remember she hadn't mentioned her age. "Well, let's hear about it," he said, since she clearly wished to confess.

"You remember my speaking to you about a snapshot of my nephew, one that I showed to Major Palgrave, and that he didn't give back to me?"

"Yes, yes, of course I remember. Sorry we couldn't find it for you."

"There wasn't any such thing," said Miss Marple, in a small frightened voice.

"I beg your pardon?"

"There wasn't any such thing. I made up that story, I'm afraid."

"You made it up?" Dr. Graham looked slightly annoyed. "Why?"

Miss Marple told him. She told him quite clearly, without twittering. She told him about Major Palgrave's murder story and how he'd been about to show her this particular snapshot and his sudden confusion and then she went on to her own anxiety and to her final decision to try somehow to obtain a view of it.

"And really, I couldn't see any way of doing so without telling you something that was quite untrue," she said, "I do hope you will forgive me."

"You thought that what he had been about to show you was a picture of a murderer?"

"That's what he said it was," said Miss Marple. "At least he said it was given him by this acquaintance who had told him the story about a man who was a murderer."

"Yes, yes. And—excuse me—you believed him?"

"I don't know if I really believed him or not at the time," said Miss Marple. "But then, you see, the next day he died."

"Yes," said Dr. Graham, struck suddenly by the clarity of that one sentence. *The next day he died...*

"And the snapshot had disappeared."

Dr. Graham looked at her. He didn't know quite what to say.

"Excuse me, Miss Marple," he said at last, "but is what you're telling me now—is it really true this time?"

"I don't wonder your doubting me," said Miss Marple. "I should, in your place. Yes, it is true what I am telling you now, but I quite realize that you have only my word for it. Still, even if you don't believe me, I thought I ought to tell you."

"Why?"

"I realized that you ought to have the fullest information possible—in case—"

"In case what?"

"In case you decided to take any steps about it."

Ten

A DECISION IN JAMESTOWN

Dr. Graham was in Jamestown, in the Administrator's office, sitting at a table opposite his friend Daventry, a grave young man of thirty-five.

"You sounded rather mysterious on the phone, Graham," said Daventry. "Anything special the matter?"

"I don't know," said Dr. Graham, "but I'm worried."

Daventry looked at the other's face, then he nodded as drinks were brought in. He spoke lightly of a fishing expedition he had made lately. Then when the servant had gone away, he sat back in his chair and looked at the other man.

"Now then," he said, "let's have it."

Dr. Graham recounted the facts that had worried him. Daventry gave a slow long whistle.

"I see. You think maybe there's something funny about old Palgrave's death? You're no longer sure that it was just natural causes? Who certified the death? Robertson, I suppose. He didn't have any doubts, did he?"

"No, but I think he may have been influenced in giving the certificate by the fact of the Serenite tablets in the bathroom. He asked me if Palgrave had mentioned that he suffered from hypertension, and I said No, I'd never had any medical conversation

with him myself, but apparently he had talked about it to other people in the hotel. The whole thing—the bottle of tablets, and what Palgrave had said to people—it all fitted in—no earthly reason to suspect anything else. It was a perfectly natural inference to make—but I think now it may not have been correct. If it had been my business to give the certificate, I'd have given it without a second thought. The appearances are quite consistent with his having died from that cause. I'd never have thought about it since if it hadn't been for the odd disappearance of that snapshot...."

"But look here, Graham," said Daventry, "if you will allow me to say so, aren't you relying a little too much on a rather fanciful story told you by an elderly lady? You know what these elderly ladies are like. They magnify some small detail and work the whole thing up."

"Yes, I know," said Dr. Graham, unhappily. "I know that. I've said to myself that it may be so, that it probably *is* so. But I can't quite convince myself. She was so very clear and detailed in her statement."

"The whole thing seems wildly improbable to me," said Daventry. "Some old lady tells a story about a snapshot that ought not to be there—no, I'm getting mixed myself—I mean the other way about, don't I?—but the only thing you've really got to go on is that a chambermaid says that a bottle of pills which the authorities had relied on for evidence, wasn't in the Major's room the day before his death. But there are a hundred explanations for that. He might always have carried those pills about in his pocket."

"It's possible, I suppose, yes."

"Or the chambermaid may have made a mistake and she simply hadn't noticed them before—"

"That's possible, too."

"Well, then."

Graham said slowly:

"The girl was very positive."

"Well, the St. Honoré people are very excitable. You know. Emotional. Work themselves up easily. Are you thinking that she knows—a little more than she has said?"

"I think it might be so," said Dr. Graham slowly.

"You'd better try and get it out of her, if so. We don't want to make an unnecessary fuss—unless we've something definite to go on. If he didn't die of blood pressure, what do you think it was?"

"There are too many things it might be nowadays," said Dr. Graham.

"You mean things that don't leave recognizable traces?"

"Not everyone," said Dr. Graham dryly, "is so considerate as to use arsenic."

"Now let's get things quite clear—what's the suggestion? That a bottle of pills was substituted for the real ones? And that Major Palgrave was poisoned in that way?"

"No—it's not like that. That's what the girl—Victoria Something thinks—But she's got it all wrong—If it was decided to get rid of the Major—quickly—he would have been given something—most likely in a drink of some kind. Then to make it appear a natural death, a bottle of the tablets prescribed to relieve blood pressure was put in his room. And the rumour was put about that he suffered from high blood pressure."

"Who put the rumour about?"

"I've tried to find out—with no success—It's been too cleverly done. A says 'I *think* B told me'—B, asked, says 'No, I didn't say so but I do remember C mentioning it one day.' C says 'Several people talked about it—one of them, I think, was A.' And there we are, back again."

"Someone was clever?"

"Yes. As soon as the death was discovered, everybody seemed to be talking about the Major's high blood pressure and repeating round what other people had said."

"Wouldn't it have been simpler just to poison him and let it go at that?"

"No. That might have meant an inquiry—possibly an autopsy—This way, a doctor would accept the death and give a certificate—as he did."

"What do you want me to do? Go to the CID? Suggest they dig the chap up? It'd make a lot of stink—"

"It could be kept quite quiet."

"Could it? In St. Honoré? Think again! The grapevine would be on to it before it had happened. All the same," Daventry sighed—"I suppose we'll have to do something. But if you ask me, it's all a mare's nest!"

"I devoutly hope it is," said Dr. Graham.

Eleven

EVENING AT THE GOLDEN PALM

I

Molly rearranged a few of the table decorations in the dining room, removed an extra knife, straightened a fork, reset a glass or two, stood back to look at the effect and then walked out on to the terrace outside. There was no one about just at present and she strolled to the far corner and stood by the balustrade. Soon another evening would begin. Chattering, talking, drinking, all so gay and carefree, the sort of life she had longed for and, up to a few days ago, had enjoyed so much. Now even Tim seemed anxious and worried. Natural, perhaps, that he should worry a little. It was important that this venture of theirs should turn out all right. After all, he had sunk all he had in it.

But that, thought Molly, is not *really* what's worrying him. It's *me*. But I don't see, said Molly to herself, why he should worry about *me*. Because he did worry about her. That she was quite sure of. The questions he put, the quick nervous glance he shot at her from time to time. "But why?" thought Molly. "I've been very careful." She summed up things in her mind. She didn't understand it really herself. She couldn't remember when it had begun. She wasn't even very sure what it was. She'd begun to be frightened of people. She

didn't know why. What could they do to her? What should they want to do to her?

She nodded her head, then started violently as a hand touched her arm. She spun round to find Gregory Dyson, slightly taken aback, looking apologetic.

"Ever so sorry. Did I startle you, little girl?"

Molly hated being called "little girl." She said quickly and brightly: "I didn't hear you coming, Mr. Dyson, so it made me jump."

"Mr. Dyson? We're very formal tonight. Aren't we all one great happy family here? Ed and me and Lucky and Evelyn and you and Tim and Esther Walters and old Rafiel. All the lot of us one happy family."

"He's had plenty to drink already," thought Molly. She smiled at him pleasantly.

"Oh! I come over the heavy hostess sometimes," she said, lightly. "Tim and I think it's more polite not to be too handy with Christian names."

"Aw! we don't want any of that stuffed-shirt business. Now then, Molly my lovely, have a drink with me."

"Ask me later," said Molly. "I have a few things to get on with."

"Now don't run away." His arm fastened round her arm. "You're a lovely girl, Molly. I hope Tim appreciates his good luck."

"Oh, I see to it that he does," said Molly cheerfully.

"I could go for you, you know, in a big way." He leered at her—"though I wouldn't let my wife hear me say so."

"Did you have a good trip this afternoon?"

"I suppose so. Between you and me I get a bit fed up sometimes. You can get tired of the birds and butterflies. What say you and I go for a little picnic on our own one day?"

"We'll have to see about that," said Molly gaily. "I'll be looking forward to it."

With a light laugh she escaped, and went back into the bar.

"Hallo, Molly," said Tim, "you seem in a hurry. Who's that you've been with out there?"

He peered out.

"Gregory Dyson."

"What does he want?"

"Wanted to make a pass at me," said Molly.

"Blast him," said Tim.

"Don't worry," said Molly, "I can do all the blasting necessary."

Tim started to answer her, caught sight of Fernando and went over to him shouting out some directions. Molly slipped away through the kitchen door and down the steps to the beach.

Gregory Dyson swore under his breath. Then he walked slowly back in the direction of his bungalow. He had nearly got there when a voice spoke to him from the shadow of one of the bushes. He turned his head, startled. In the gathering dusk he thought for a moment that it was a ghostly figure that stood there. Then he laughed. It had looked like a faceless apparition but that was because, though the dress was white, the face was black.

Victoria stepped out of the bushes on to the path.

"Mr. Dyson, please?"

"Yes. What is it?"

Ashamed of being startled, he spoke with a touch of impatience.

"I brought you this, sir." She held out her hand. In it was a bottle of tablets. "This belongs to you, doesn't it? Yes?"

"Oh, my bottle of Serenite tablets. Yes, of course. Where did you find it?"

"I found it where it had been put. In the gentleman's room."

"What do you mean—in the gentleman's room?"

"The gentleman who is dead," she added gravely. "I do not think he sleeps very well in his grave."

"Why the devil not?" asked Dyson.

Victoria stood looking at him.

"I still don't know what you're talking about. You mean you found this bottle of tablets in Major Palgrave's bungalow?"

"That's right, yes. After the doctor and the Jamestown people go away, they give me all the things in his bathroom to throw away. The toothpaste and the lotions, and all the other things—including this."

"Well, why didn't you throw it away?"

"Because these are yours. You missed them. You remember, you asked about them?"

"Yes—well—yes, I did. I—I thought I'd just mislaid them."

"No, you did not mislay them. They were taken from your bungalow and put in Major Palgrave's bungalow."

"How do you know?" He spoke roughly.

"I know. I saw." She smiled at him in a sudden flash of white teeth. "Someone put them in the dead gentleman's room. Now I give them back to you."

"Here—wait. What do you mean? What—who did you see?"

She hurried away, back into the darkness of the bushes. Greg made as to move after her and then stopped. He stood stroking his chin.

"What's the matter, Greg? Seen a ghost?" asked Mrs. Dyson, as she came along the path from their bungalow.

"Thought I had for a minute or two."

"Who was that you were talking to?"

"The coloured girl who does our place. Victoria, her name is, isn't it?"

"What did she want? Making a pass at you?"

"Don't be stupid, Lucky. That girl's got some idiotic idea into her head."

"Idea about what?"

"You remember I couldn't find my Serenite the other day?"

"You said you couldn't."

"What do you mean 'I said I couldn't?'"

"Oh, for heck's sake, have you got to take me up on everything?"

"I'm sorry," said Greg. "Everybody goes about being so damn' mysterious." He held out his hand with the bottle in it. "That girl brought them back to me."

"Had she pinched them?"

"No. She—found them somewhere I think."

"Well, what of it? What's the mystery about?"

"Oh, nothing," said Greg. "She just riled me, that's all."

"Look here, Greg, what is this stuff all about? Come along and have a drink before dinner."

II

Molly had gone down to the beach. She pulled out one of the old basket chairs, one of the more rickety ones that were seldom used. She sat in it for a while looking at the sea, then suddenly she dropped her head in her hands and burst into tears. She sat there sobbing unrestrainedly for some time. Then she heard a rustle close by her and glanced up sharply to see Mrs. Hillingdon looking down at her.

"Hallo, Evelyn, I didn't hear you. I—I'm sorry."

"What's the matter, child?" said Evelyn. "Something gone wrong?" She pulled another chair forward and sat down. "Tell me."

"There's nothing wrong," said Molly. "Nothing at all."

"Of course there is. You wouldn't sit and cry here for nothing. Can't you tell me? Is it—some trouble between you and Tim?"

"Oh *no*."

"I'm glad of that. You always look so happy together."

"Not more than you do," said Molly. "Tim and I always think how wonderful it is that you and Edward should seem so happy together after being married so many years."

"Oh, that," said Evelyn. Her voice was sharp as she spoke but Molly hardly noticed.

"People bicker so," she said, "and have such rows. Even if they're quite fond of each other they still seem to have rows and not to mind a bit whether they have them in public or not."

"Some people like living that way," said Evelyn. "It doesn't really mean anything."

"Well, I think it's horrid," said Molly.

"So do I, really," said Evelyn.

"But to see you and Edward—"

"Oh it's no good, Molly. I can't let you go on thinking things of that kind. Edward and I—" she paused. "If you want to know the truth, we've hardly said a word to each other in private for the last three years."

"What!" Molly stared at her, appalled. "I—I can't believe it."

"Oh, we both put up quite a good show," said Evelyn. "We're neither of us the kind that like having rows in public. And anyway there's nothing really to have a row about."

"But what went wrong?" asked Molly.

"Just the usual."

"What do you mean by the usual? Another—"

"Yes, another woman in the case, and I don't suppose it will be difficult for you to guess who the woman is."

"Do you mean Mrs. Dyson—Lucky?"

Evelyn nodded.

"I know they always flirt together a lot," said Molly, "but I thought that was just...."

"Just high spirits?" said Evelyn. "Nothing behind it?"

"But why—" Molly paused and tried again. "But didn't you—oh I mean, well I suppose I oughtn't to ask."

"Ask anything you like," said Evelyn. "I'm tired of never saying a word, tired of being a well-bred happy wife. Edward just lost his head completely about Lucky. He was stupid enough to come and tell me about it. It made him feel better I suppose. Truthful. Honourable. All that sort of stuff. It didn't occur to him to think that it wouldn't make *me* feel better."

"Did he want to leave you?"

Evelyn shook her head. "We've got two children, you know," she said. "Children whom we're both very fond of. They're at school in England. We didn't want to break up the home. And then of course, Lucky didn't want a divorce either. Greg's a very rich man. His first wife left a lot of money. So we agreed to live and let live—Edward and Lucky in happy immorality, Greg in blissful ignorance, and Edward and I just good friends." She spoke with scalding bitterness.

"How—how can you bear it?"

"One gets used to anything. But sometimes—"

"Yes?" said Molly.

"Sometimes I'd like to kill that woman."

The passion behind her voice startled Molly.

"Don't let's talk any more about me," said Evelyn. "Let's talk about you. I want to know what's the matter."

Molly was silent for some moments and then she said, "It's only—it's only that I think there's something wrong about me."

"Wrong? What do you mean?"

Molly shook her head unhappily. "I'm frightened," she said. "I'm terribly frightened."

"Frightened of what?"

"Everything," said Molly. "It's—growing on me. Voices in the bushes, footsteps—or things that people say. As though someone were watching me all the time, spying on me. Somebody hates me. That's what I keep feeling. Somebody hates me."

"My dear child." Evelyn was shocked and startled. "How long has this been going on?"

"I don't know. It came—it started by degrees. And there have been other things too."

"What sort of things?"

"There are times," said Molly slowly, "that I can't account for, that I can't remember."

"Do you mean you have blackouts—that sort of thing?"

"I suppose so. I mean sometimes it's—oh, say it's five o'clock—and I can't remember anything since about half past one or two."

"Oh my dear, but that's just that you've been asleep. Had a doze."

"No," said Molly, "it's not like that at all. Because you see, at the end of the time it's not as though I'd just dozed off. I'm in a different *place*. Sometimes I'm wearing different clothes and sometimes I seem to have been doing things—even saying things to people, talked to someone, and not remembering that I've done so."

Evelyn looked shocked. "But Molly, my dear, if this is so, then you ought to see a doctor."

"I won't see a doctor! I don't want to. I wouldn't go *near* a doctor."

Evelyn looked sharply down into her face, then she took the girl's hand in hers.

"You may be frightening yourself for nothing, Molly. You know there are all kinds of nervous disorders that aren't really serious at all. A doctor would soon reassure you."

"He mightn't. He might say that there was something really wrong with me."

"Why should there be anything wrong with you?"

"Because—" Molly spoke and then was silent "—no reason, I suppose," she said.

"Couldn't your family—haven't you any family, any mother or sisters or someone who could come out here?"

"I don't get on with my mother. I never have. I've got sisters. They're married but I suppose—I suppose they could come if I wanted them. But I don't want them. I don't want anyone—anyone except Tim."

"Does Tim know about this? Have you told him?"

"Not really," said Molly. "But he's anxious about me and he watches me. It's as though he were trying to—to help me or to shield me. But if he does that it means I want shielding, doesn't it?"

"I think a lot of it may be imagination but I still think you ought to see a doctor."

"Old Dr. Graham? He wouldn't be any good."

"There are other doctors on the island."

"It's all right, really," said Molly. "I just—mustn't think of it. I expect, as you say, it's all imagination. Good gracious, it's getting frightfully late. I ought to be on duty now in the dining room. I—I must go back."

She looked sharply and almost offensively at Evelyn Hillingdon, and then hurried off. Evelyn stared after her.

Twelve

OLD SINS CAST LONG SHADOWS

I

"I think as I am on to something, man."

"What's that you say, Victoria?"

"I think I'm on to something. It may mean money. Big money."

"Now look, girl, you be careful, you'll not tangle yourself up in something. Maybe I'd better tackle what it is."

Victoria laughed, a deep rich chuckle.

"You wait and see," she said. "I know how to play this hand. It's money, man, it's big money. Something I see, and something I guess. I think I guess right."

And again the soft rich chuckle rolled out on the night.

II

"Evelyn...."

"Yes?"

Evelyn Hillingdon spoke mechanically, without interest. She did not look at her husband.

"Evelyn, would you mind if we chucked all this and went home to England?"

She had been combing her short dark hair. Now her hands came down from her head sharply. She turned towards him.

"You mean—but we've only just come. We've not been out here in the islands for more than three weeks."

"I know. But—would you mind?"

Her eyes searched him incredulously.

"You really want to go back to England? Back home?"

"Yes."

"Leaving—Lucky?"

He winced.

"You've known all the time, I suppose, that—that it was going on?"

"Pretty well. Yes."

"You've never said anything."

"Why should I? We had the whole thing out years ago. Neither of us wanted to make a break. So we agreed to go our separate ways—but keep up the show in public." Then she added before he could speak, "But why are you so set on going back to England *now*?"

"Because I'm at breaking point. I can't stick it any longer, Evelyn. I can't." The quiet Edward Hillington was transformed. His hands shook, he swallowed, his calm unemotional face seemed distorted by pain.

"For God's sake, Edward, what's the *matter*?"

"Nothing's the matter except that I want to get out of here—"

"You fell wildly in love with Lucky. And now you've got over it. Is that what you're telling me?"

"Yes. I don't suppose you'll ever feel the same."

"Oh let's not go into that now! I want to understand what's upsetting you so much, Edward."

"I'm not particularly upset."

"But you are. Why?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"No, it isn't," said Evelyn. "Let's put it in plain concrete terms. You've had an affair with a woman. That happens often enough. And now it's over. Or isn't it over? Perhaps it isn't over on *her* side. Is that it? Does Greg know about it? I've often wondered."

"I don't know," said Edward. "He's never said anything. He always seems friendly enough."

"Men can be extraordinarily obtuse," said Evelyn thoughtfully. "Or else—Perhaps Greg has got an outside interest of his own!"

"He's made passes at you, hasn't he?" said Edward. "Answer me—I know he has—"

"Oh yes," said Evelyn, carelessly, "but he makes passes at everyone. That's just Greg. It doesn't ever really mean much, I imagine. It's just part of the Greg he-man act."

"Do you care for him, Evelyn? I'd rather know the truth."

"Greg? I'm quite fond of him—he amuses me. He's a good friend."

"And that's all? I wish I could believe you."

"I can't really see how it can possibly matter to you," said Evelyn dryly.

"I suppose I deserve that."

Evelyn walked to the window, looked out across the veranda and came back again.

"I wish you would tell me what's *really* upsetting you, Edward."

"I've told you."

"I wonder."

"You can't understand, I suppose, how extraordinary a temporary madness of this kind can seem to you after you've got over it."

"I can try, I suppose. But what's worrying me now is that Lucky seems to have got some kind of stranglehold upon you. She's not just a discarded mistress. She's a tigress with claws. You *must* tell me the truth, Edward. It's the only way if you want me to stand by you."

Edward said in a low voice: "If I don't get away from her soon—I shall kill her."

"Kill Lucky? Why?"

"Because of what she made me do...."

"What did she make you do?"

"I helped her to commit a murder—"

The words were out—There was silence—Evelyn stared at him.

"Do you know what you are saying?"

"Yes. I didn't know I was doing it. There were things she asked me to get for her—at the chemist's. I didn't know—I hadn't the least idea what she wanted them for—She got me to copy out a prescription she had...."

"When was this?"

"Four years ago. When we were in Martinique. When—when Greg's wife—"

"You mean Greg's first wife—Gail? You mean Lucky poisoned her?"

"Yes—and I helped her. When I realized—"

Evelyn interrupted him.

"When you realized what had happened, Lucky pointed out to you that *you* had written out the prescription, that *you* had got the drugs, that you and she were in it together? Is that right?"

"Yes. She said she had done it out of pity—that Gail was suffering—that she had begged Lucky to get something that would end it all."

"A mercy killing! I see. And you believed *that*?"

Edward Hillingdon was silent a moment—then he said:

"No—I didn't really—not deep down—I accepted it because I *wanted* to believe it—because I was infatuated with Lucky."

"And afterwards—when she married Greg—did you still believe it?"

"I'd made myself believe it by then."

"And Greg—how much did he know about it all?"

"Nothing at all."

"That I find hard to believe!"

Edward Hillingdon broke out—

"Evelyn, I've *got* to get free of it all! That woman taunts me still with what I did. She knows I don't care for her any longer. Care for her?—I've come to hate her—But she makes me feel I'm tied to her—by the thing we did together—"

Evelyn walked up and down the room—then she stopped and faced him.

"The entire trouble with you, Edward, is that you are ridiculously sensitive—and also incredibly suggestible. That devil of a woman has got you just where she wants you by playing on your sense of guilt—"

And I'll tell you this in plain Bible terms, the guilt that weighs on you is the guilt of adultery—not murder—you were guilt-stricken about your affair with Lucky—and then she made a cat's-paw of you for her murder scheme, and managed to make you feel you shared her guilt. You *don't*."

"Evelyn...." He stepped towards her—

She stepped back a minute—and looked at him searchingly.

"Is this all true, Edward—*Is* it? Or are you making it up?"

"Evelyn! Why on earth should I do such a thing?"

"I don't know," said Evelyn Hillingdon slowly—"It's just perhaps—because I find it hard to trust—anybody. And because—Oh! I don't know—I've got, I suppose, so that I don't know the truth when I hear it."

"Let's chuck all this—Go back home to England."

"Yes—We will—But not now."

"Why not?"

"We must carry on as usual—just for the present. It's important. Do you understand, Edward? Don't let Lucky have an inkling of what we're up to—"

Thirteen

EXIT VICTORIA JOHNSON

The evening was drawing to a close. The steel band was at last relaxing its efforts. Tim stood by the dining room looking over the terrace. He extinguished a few lights on tables that had been vacated.

A voice spoke behind him. "Tim, can I speak to you a moment?"

Tim Kendal started.

"Hallo, Evelyn, is there anything I can do for you?"

Evelyn looked round.

"Come to this table here, and let's sit down a minute."

She led the way to a table at the extreme end of the terrace. There were no other people near them.

"Tim, you must forgive me talking to you, but I'm worried about Molly."

His face changed at once.

"What about Molly?" he said stiffly.

"I don't think she's awfully well. She seems upset."

"Things do seem to upset her rather easily just lately."

"She ought to see a doctor, I think."

"Yes, I know, but she doesn't want to. She'd hate it."

"Why?"

"Eh? What d'you mean?"

"I said why? Why should she hate seeing a doctor?"

"Well," said Tim rather vaguely, "people do sometimes, you know. It's—well, it sort of makes them feel frightened about themselves."

"You're worried about her yourself, aren't you, Tim?"

"Yes. Yes, I am rather."

"Isn't there anyone of her family who could come out here to be with her?"

"No. That'd make things worse, far worse."

"What *is* the trouble—with her family, I mean?"

"Oh, just one of those things. I suppose she's just highly strung and—she didn't get on with them—particularly her mother. She never has. They're—they're rather an odd family in some ways and she cut loose from them. Good thing she did, I think."

Evelyn said hesitantly—"She seems to have had blackouts, from what she told me, and to be frightened of people. Almost like persecution mania."

"Don't say that," said Tim angrily. "Persecution mania! People always say that about people. Just because she—well—maybe she's a bit nervy. Coming out here to the West Indies. All the dark faces. You know, people are rather queer, sometimes, about the West Indies and coloured people."

"Surely not girls like Molly?"

"Oh, how does one know the things people are frightened of? There are people who can't be in the room with cats. And other people who faint if a caterpillar drops on them."

"I hate suggesting it—but don't you think perhaps she ought to see a—well, a psychiatrist?"

"*No!*" said Tim explosively. "I won't have people like that monkeying about with her. I don't believe in them. They make people worse. If her mother had left psychiatrists alone...."

"So there *was* trouble of that kind in her family—was there? I mean a history of—" she chose the word carefully—"instability."

"I don't want to talk about it—I took her away from it all and she was all right, quite all right. She has just got into a nervous state ... But these things aren't hereditary. Everybody knows that nowadays."

It's an exploded idea. Molly's perfectly sane. It's just that—oh! I believe it was that wretched old Palgrave dying that started it all off."

"I see," said Evelyn thoughtfully. "But there was nothing really to worry anyone in Major Palgrave's death, was there?"

"No, of course there wasn't. But it's a kind of shock when somebody dies suddenly."

He looked so desperate and defeated that Evelyn's heart smote her. She put her hand on his arm.

"Well, I hope you know what you're doing, Tim, but if I could help in any way—I mean if I could go with Molly to New York—I could fly with her there or Miami or somewhere where she could get really first-class medical advice."

"It's very good of you, Evelyn, but Molly's all right. She's getting over it, anyway."

Evelyn shook her head in doubt. She turned away slowly and looked along the line of the terrace. Most people had gone by now to their bungalows. Evelyn was walking towards her table to see if she'd left anything behind there, when she heard Tim give an exclamation. She looked up sharply. He was staring towards the steps at the end of the terrace and she followed his gaze. Then she too caught her breath.

Molly was coming up the steps from the beach. She was breathless with deep, sobbing breaths, her body swayed to and fro as she came, in a curious directionless run. Tim cried:

"*Molly!* What's the matter?"

He ran towards her and Evelyn followed him. Molly was at the top of the steps now and she stood there, both hands behind her back. She said in sobbing breaths:

"I found her ... She's there in the bushes ... There in the bushes ... And look at my hands—look at my *hands*." She held them out and Evelyn caught her breath as she saw the queer dark stains. They looked dark in the subdued lighting but she knew well enough that their real colour was red.

"What's happened, Molly?" cried Tim.

"Down there," said Molly. She swayed on her feet. "In the bushes..."

Tim hesitated, looked at Evelyn, then shoved Molly a little towards Evelyn and ran down the steps. Evelyn put her arm round the girl.

"Come. Sit down, Molly. Here. You'd better have something to drink."

Molly collapsed in a chair and leaned forward on the table, her forehead on her crossed arm. Evelyn did not question her any more. She thought it better to leave her time to recover.

"It'll be all right, you know," said Evelyn gently. "It'll be all right."

"I don't know," said Molly. "I don't know what happened. I don't know anything. I can't remember. I—" she raised her head suddenly. "What's the matter with me? What's the *matter* with me?"

"It's all right, child. It's all right."

Tim was coming slowly up the steps. His face was ghastly. Evelyn looked up at him, raising her eyebrows in a query.

"It's one of our girls," he said. "What's-her-name—Victoria. Somebody's put a knife in her."

Fourteen

INQUIRY

I

Molly lay on her bed. Dr. Graham and Dr. Robertson, the West Indian police doctor, stood on one side—Tim on the other. Robertson had his hand on Molly's pulse—He nodded to the man at the foot of the bed, a slender dark man in police uniform, Inspector Weston of the St. Honoré Police Force.

"A bare statement—no more," the doctor said.

The other nodded.

"Now, Mrs. Kendal—just tell us how you came to find this girl."

For a moment or two it was as though the figure on the bed had not heard. Then she spoke in a faint, faraway voice.

"In the bushes—white...."

"You saw something white—and you looked to see what it was? Is that it?"

"Yes—white—lying there—I tried—tried to lift—she it—blood—blood all over my hands."

She began to tremble.

Dr. Graham shook his head at them. Robertson whispered—"She can't stand much more."

"What were you doing on the beach path, Mrs. Kendal?"

"Warm—nice—by the sea—"

"You knew who the girl was?"

"Victoria—nice—nice girl—laughs—she used to laugh—oh! and now she won't—She won't ever laugh again. I'll never forget it—I'll never forget it—" Her voice rose hysterically.

"Molly—don't." It was Tim.

"Quiet—Quiet—" Dr. Robertson spoke with a soothing authority—"Just relax—relax—Now just a small prick—" He withdrew the hypodermic.

"She'll be in no fit condition to be questioned for at least twenty-four hours," he said—"I'll let you know when."

II

The big handsome negro looked from one to the other of the men sitting at the table.

"Ah declare to God," he said. "That's all Ah know. Ah don't know nothing but what Ah've told you."

The perspiration stood out on his forehead. Daventry sighed. The man presiding at the table, Inspector Weston of the St. Honoré CID, made a gesture of dismissal. Big Jim Ellis shuffled out of the room.

"It's not all he knows, of course," Weston said. He had the soft Island voice. "But it's all we shall learn from him."

"You think he's in the clear himself?" asked Daventry.

"Yes. They seem to have been on good terms together."

"They weren't married?"

A faint smile appeared on Lieutenant Weston's lips. "No," he said, "they weren't married. We don't have so many marriages on the Island. They christen the children, though. He's had two children by Victoria."

"Do you think he was in it, whatever it was, with her?"

"Probably not. I think he'd have been nervous of anything of that kind. And I'd say, too, that what she did know wasn't very much."

"But enough for blackmail?"

"I don't know that I'd even call it that. I doubt if the girl would even understand that word. Payment for being discreet isn't thought of as blackmail. You see, some of the people who stay here are the

rich playboy lot and their morals won't bear much investigation." His voice was slightly scathing.

"We get all kinds, I agree," said Daventry. "A woman, maybe, doesn't want it known that she's sleeping around, so she gives a present to the girl who waits on her. It's tacitly understood that the payment's for discretion."

"Exactly."

"But this," objected Daventry, "wasn't anything of *that* kind. It was murder."

"I should doubt, though, if the girl knew it was serious. She saw something, some puzzling incident, something to do presumably with this bottle of pills. It belonged to Mr. Dyson, I understand. We'd better see him next."

Gregory came in with his usual hearty air.

"Here I am," he said, "what can I do to help? Too bad about this girl. She was a nice girl. We both liked her. I suppose it was some sort of quarrel or other with a man, but she seemed quite happy and no signs of being in trouble about anything. I was kidding her only last night."

"I believe you take a preparation, Mr. Dyson, called Serenite?"

"Quite right. Little pink tablets."

"You have them on prescription from a physician?"

"Yes. I can show it to you if you like. Suffer a bit from high blood pressure, like so many people do nowadays."

"Very few people seem to be aware of that fact."

"Well, I don't go talking about it. I—well, I've always been well and hearty and I never like people who talk about their ailments all the time."

"How many of the pills do you take?"

"Two, three times a day."

"Do you have a fairly large stock with you?"

"Yes. I've got about half a dozen bottles. But they're locked up, you know, in a suitcase. I only keep out one, the one that's in current use."

"And you missed this bottle a short time ago, so I hear?"

"Quite right."

"And you asked this girl, Victoria Johnson, whether she'd seen it?"

"Yes, I did."

"And what did she say?"

"She said the last time she'd seen it was on the shelf in our bathroom. She said she'd looked around."

"And after that?"

"She came and returned the bottle to me some time later. She said was this the bottle that was missing?"

"And you said?"

"I said 'That's it, all right, where did you find it?' and she said it was in old Major Palgrave's room. I said 'How on earth did it get there?'"

"And what did she answer to that?"

"She said she didn't know, but—" he hesitated.

"Yes, Mr. Dyson?"

"Well, she gave me the feeling that she did know a little more than she was saying, but I didn't pay much attention. After all, it wasn't very important. As I say, I've got other bottles of the pills with me. I thought perhaps I'd left it around in the restaurant or somewhere and old Palgrave picked it up for some reason. Perhaps he put it in his pocket meaning to return it to me, then forgot."

"And that's all you know about it, Mr. Dyson?"

"That's all I know. Sorry to be so unhelpful. Is it important? Why?"

Weston shrugged his shoulders. "As things are, anything may be important."

"I don't see where pills come in. I thought you'd want to know about what my movements were when this wretched girl was stabbed. I've written them all down as carefully as I can."

Weston looked at him thoughtfully.

"Indeed? That was very helpful of you, Mr. Dyson."

"Save everybody trouble, I thought," said Greg. He shoved a piece of paper across the table.

Weston studied it and Daventry drew his chair a little closer and looked over his shoulder.

"That seems very clear," said Weston, after a moment or two. "You and your wife were together changing for dinner in your bungalow until ten minutes to nine. You then went along to the terrace where you had drinks with Señora de Caspearo. At quarter past nine Colonel and Mrs. Hillingdon joined you and you went in to dine. As far as you can remember, you went off to bed at about half past eleven."

"Of course," said Greg, "I don't know what time the girl was actually killed—?"

There was a faint semblance of a question in the words. Lieutenant Weston, however, did not appear to notice it.

"Mrs. Kendal found her, I understand? Must have been a very nasty shock for her."

"Yes. Dr. Robertson had to give her a sedative."

"This was quite late, wasn't it, when most people had trundled off to bed?"

"Yes."

"Had she been dead long? When Mrs. Kendal found her, I mean?"

"We're not quite certain of the exact time yet," said Weston smoothly.

"Poor little Molly. It must have been a nasty shock for her. Matter of fact, I didn't notice *her* about last night. Thought she might have had a headache or something and was lying down."

"When was the last time you *did* see Mrs. Kendal?"

"Oh, quite early, before I went to change. She was playing about with some of the table decorations and things. Rearranging the knives."

"I see."

"She was quite cheerful then," said Greg. "Kidding and all that. She's a great girl. We're all very fond of her. Tim's a lucky fellow."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Dyson. You can't remember anything more than you've told us about what the girl Victoria said when she returned the tablets?"

"No ... It was just as I say. Asked me were these the tablets I'd been asking for. Said she'd found them in old Palgrave's room."

"She'd no idea who put them there?"

"Don't think so—can't remember, really."

"Thank you, Mr. Dyson."

Gregory went out.

"Very thoughtful of him," said Weston, gently tapping the paper with his fingernail, "to be so anxious to want us to know for sure exactly where he was last night."

"A little over-anxious do you think?" asked Daventry.

"That's very difficult to tell. There are people, you know, who are naturally nervous about their own safety, about being mixed up with anything. It isn't necessarily because they have any guilty knowledge. On the other hand it might be just that."

"What about opportunity? Nobody's really got much of an alibi, what with the band and the dancing and the coming and going. People are getting up, leaving their tables, coming back. Women go to powder their noses. Men take a stroll. Dyson could have slipped away. Anybody could have slipped away. But he does seem rather anxious to prove that *he* didn't." He looked thoughtfully down at the paper. "So Mrs. Kendal was rearranging knives on the table," he said. "I rather wonder if he dragged that in on purpose."

"Did it sound like it to you?"

The other considered. "I think it's possible."

Outside the room where the two men were sitting, a noise had arisen. A high voice was demanding admittance shrilly.

"I've got something to tell. I've got something to tell. You take me in to where the gentlemen are. You take me in to where the policeman is."

A uniformed policeman pushed open the door.

"It's one of the cooks here," he said, "very anxious to see you. Says he's got something you ought to know."

A frightened dark man in a cook's cap pushed past him and came into the room. It was one of the minor cooks. A Cuban, not a native of St. Honoré.

"I tell you something. I tell you," he said. "She come through my kitchen, she did, and she had a knife with her. A knife, I tell you. She had a knife in her hand. She come through my kitchen and out the door. Out into the garden. I saw her."

"Now calm down," said Daventry, "calm down. Who are you talking about?"

"I tell you who I'm talking about. I'm talking about the boss's wife. Mrs. Kendal. I'm talking about her. She have a knife in her hand and she go out into the dark. Before dinner that was—and *she didn't come back.*"

Fifteen

INQUIRY CONTINUED

I

"Can we have a word with you, Mr. Kendal?"

"Of course." Tim looked up from his desk. He pushed some papers aside and indicated chairs. His face was drawn and miserable. "How are you getting on? Got any forwarder? There seems to be a doom in this place. People are wanting to leave, you know, asking about air passages. Just when it seemed everything was being a success. Oh Lord, you don't know what it means, this place, to me and to Molly. We staked everything on it."

"It's very hard on you, I know," said Inspector Weston. "Don't think that we don't sympathize."

"If it all could be cleared up quickly," said Tim. "This wretched girl Victoria—Oh! I oughtn't to talk about her like that. She was quite a good sort, Victoria was. But—but there must be some quite simple reason, some—kind of intrigue, or love affair she had. Perhaps her husband—"

"Jim Ellis wasn't her husband, and they seemed a settled sort of couple."

"If it could only be cleared up *quickly*," said Tim again. "I'm sorry. You wanted to talk to me about something, ask me something."

"Yes. It was about last night. According to medical evidence Victoria was killed some time between 10:30 pm and midnight. Alibis under the circumstances that prevail here are not very easy to prove. People are moving about, dancing, walking away from the terrace, coming back. It's all very difficult."

"I suppose so. But does that mean that you definitely consider Victoria was killed by one of the guests here?"

"Well, we have to examine that possibility, Mr. Kendal. What I want to ask you particularly about, is a statement made by one of your cooks."

"Oh? Which one? What does he say?"

"He's a Cuban, I understand."

"We've got two Cubans and a Puerto Rican."

"This man Enrico states that your wife passed through the kitchen on her way from the dining room, and went out into the garden and that she was carrying a knife."

Tim stared at him.

"Molly, carrying a knife? Well, why shouldn't she? I mean—why—you don't think—what are you trying to suggest?"

"I am talking of the time before people had come into the dining room. It would be, I suppose, some time about 8:30. You yourself were in the dining room talking to the head waiter, Fernando, I believe."

"Yes." Tim cast his mind back. "Yes, I remember."

"And your wife came in from the terrace?"

"Yes, she did," Tim agreed. "She always went out to look over the tables. Sometimes the boys set things wrong, forgot some of the cutlery, things like that. Very likely that's what it was. She may have been rearranging cutlery or something. She might have had a spare knife or a spoon, something like that in her hand."

"And she came from the terrace into the dining room. Did she speak to you?"

"Yes, we had a word or two together."

"What did she say? Can you remember?"

"I think I asked her who she'd been talking to. I heard her voice out there."

"And who did she say she'd been talking to?"

"Gregory Dyson."

"Ah. Yes. That is what *he* said."

Tim went on, "He'd been making a pass at her, I understand. He was a bit given to that kind of thing. It annoyed me and I said 'Blast him' and Molly laughed and said she could do all the blasting that needed to be done. Molly's a very clever girl that way. It's not always an easy position, you know. You can't offend guests, and so an attractive girl like Molly has to pass things off with a laugh and a shrug. Gregory Dyson finds it difficult to keep his hands off any good-looking woman."

"Had there been an altercation between them?"

"No, I don't think so. I think, as I say, she just laughed it off as usual."

"You can't say definitely whether she had a knife in her hand or not?"

"I can't remember—I'm almost sure she didn't—in fact quite sure she didn't."

"But you said just now..."

"Look here, what I meant was that if she was in the dining room or in the kitchen it's quite likely she might have picked up a knife or had one in her hand. Matter of fact I can remember quite well, she came in from the dining room and she had *nothing* in her hand. Nothing at all. That's definite."

"I see," said Weston.

Tim looked at him uneasily.

"What on earth is this you're getting at? What did that damn' fool Enrico—Manuel—whoever it was—say?"

"He said your wife came out into the kitchen, that she looked upset, that she had a knife in her hand."

"He's just dramatizing."

"Did you have any further conversation with your wife during dinner or after?"

"No, I don't think I did really. Matter of fact I was rather busy."

"Was your wife there in the dining room during the meal?"

"I—oh—yes, we always move about among the guests and things like that. See how things are going on."

"Did you speak to her at all?"

"No, I don't think I did ... We're usually fairly busy. We don't always notice what the other one's doing and we certainly haven't got time to talk to each other."

"Actually you don't remember speaking to her until she came up the steps three hours later, after finding the body?"

"It was an awful shock for her. It upset her terribly."

"I know. A very unpleasant experience. How did she come to be walking along the beach path?"

"After the stress of dinner being served, she often does go for a turn. You know, get away from the guests for a minute or two, get a breather."

"When she came back, I understand you were talking to Mrs. Hillingdon."

"Yes. Practically everyone else had gone to bed."

"What was the subject of your conversation with Mrs. Hillingdon?"

"Nothing particular. Why? What's she been saying?"

"So far she hasn't said anything. We haven't asked her."

"We were just talking of this and that. Molly, and hotel running, and one thing and another."

"And then—your wife came up the steps of the terrace and told you what had happened?"

"Yes."

"There was blood on her hands?"

"Of course there was! She'd been over the girl, tried to lift her, couldn't understand what had happened, what was the matter with her. Of course there was blood on her hands! Look here, what the hell are you suggesting? You *are* suggesting something?"

"Please calm down," said Daventry. "It's all a great strain on you I know, Tim, but we have to get the facts clear. I understand your wife hasn't been feeling very well lately?"

"Nonsense—she's all right. Major Palgrave's death upset her a bit. Naturally. She's a sensitive girl."

"We shall have to ask her a few questions as soon as she's fit enough," said Weston.

"Well, you can't now. The doctor gave her a sedative and said she wasn't to be disturbed. I won't have her upset and brow-beaten, d'you hear?"

"We're not going to do any brow-beating," said Weston. "We've just got to get the facts clear. We won't disturb her at present, but as soon as the doctor allows us, we'll have to see her." His voice was gentle—inflexible.

Tim looked at him, opened his mouth, but said nothing.

II

Evelyn Hillingdon, calm and composed as usual, sat down in the chair indicated. She considered the few questions asked her, taking her time over it. Her dark, intelligent eyes looked at Weston thoughtfully.

"Yes," she said, "I was talking to Mr. Kendal on the terrace when his wife came up the steps and told us about the murder."

"Your husband wasn't there?"

"No, he had gone to bed."

"Had you any special reason for your conversation with Mr. Kendal?"

Evelyn raised her finely pencilled eyebrows—It was a definite rebuke.

She said coldly:

"What a very odd question. No—there was nothing special about our conversation."

"Did you discuss the matter of his wife's health?"

Again Evelyn took her time.

"I really can't remember," she said at last.

"Are you sure of that?"

"Sure that I can't remember? What a curious way of putting it—one talks about so many things at different times."

"Mrs. Kendal has not been in good health lately, I understand."

"She looked quite all right—a little tired perhaps. Of course running a place like this means a lot of worries, and she is quite inexperienced. Naturally, she gets flustered now and then."

"Flustered." Weston repeated the word. "That was the way you would describe it?"

"It's an old-fashioned word, perhaps, but just as good as the modern jargon we use for everything—A 'virus infection' for a bilious attack—an 'anxiety neurosis' for the minor bothers of daily life—"

Her smile made Weston feel slightly ridiculous. He thought to himself that Evelyn Hillingdon was a clever woman. He looked at Daventry, whose face remained unmoved, and wondered what he thought.

"Thank you, Mrs. Hillingdon," said Weston.

III

"We don't want to worry you, Mrs. Kendal, but we have to have your account of just how you came to find this girl. Dr. Graham says you are sufficiently recovered to talk about it now."

"Oh yes," said Molly, "I'm really quite all right again." She gave them a small nervous smile. "It was just the shock—It *was* rather awful, you know."

"Yes, indeed it must have been—I understand you went for a walk after dinner."

"Yes—I often do."

Her eyes shifted, Daventry noticed, and the fingers of her hands twined and untwined about each other.

"What time would that have been, Mrs. Kendal?" asked Weston.

"Well, I don't really know—we don't go much by the time."

"The steel band was still playing?"

"Yes—at least—I think so—I can't really remember."

"And you walked—which way?"

"Oh, along the beach path."

"To the left or the right?"

"Oh! First one way—and then the other—I—I—really didn't notice."

"Why didn't you notice, Mrs. Kendal?"

She frowned.

"I suppose I was—well—thinking of things."

"Thinking of anything particular?"

"No—No—Nothing particular—Just things that had to be done—seen to—in the hotel." Again that nervous twining and untwining of fingers. "And then—I noticed something white—in a clump of hibiscus bushes—and I wondered what it was. I stopped and—and pulled—" She swallowed convulsively—"And it was her—Victoria—all huddled up—and I tried to raise her head up and I got—blood—on my hands."

She looked at them and repeated wonderingly as though recalling something impossible:

"Blood—on my hands."

"Yes—Yes—A very dreadful experience. There is no need for you to tell us more about that part of it—How long had you been walking, do you think, when you found her—"

"I don't know—I have no idea."

"An hour? Half an hour? Or more than an hour—"

"I don't know," Molly repeated.

Daventry asked in a quiet everyday voice:

"Did you take a knife with you on your—walk?"

"A knife?" Molly sounded surprised. "Why should I take a knife?"

"I only ask because one of the kitchen staff mentioned that you had a knife in your hand when you went out of the kitchen into the garden."

Molly frowned.

"But I didn't go out of the kitchen—oh you mean earlier—before dinner—I—I don't *think* so—"

"You had been rearranging the cutlery on the tables, perhaps."

"I have to, sometimes. They lay things wrong—not enough knives—or too many. The wrong number of forks and spoons—that sort of thing."

"So you may have gone out of the kitchen that evening carrying a knife in your hand?"

"I don't think I did—I'm sure I didn't—" She added—"Tim was there—he would know. Ask him."

"Did you like this girl—Victoria—was she good at her work?" asked Weston.

"Yes—she was a very nice girl."

"You had no dispute with her?"

"Dispute? No."

"She had never threatened you—in any way?"

"Threatened me? What do you mean?"

"It doesn't matter—You have no idea of who could have killed her? No idea at all?"

"None." She spoke positively.

"Well, thank you, Mrs. Kendal." He smiled. "It wasn't so terrible, was it?"

"That's all?"

"That's all for now."

Daventry got up, opened the door for her, and watched her go out.

"Tim would know," he quoted as he returned to his chair. "And Tim says definitely that she *didn't* have a knife."

Weston said gravely:

"I think that that is what any husband would feel called upon to say."

"A table knife seems a very poor type of knife to use for murder."

"But it was a *steak* knife, Mr. Daventry. Steaks were on the menu that evening. Steak knives are kept sharp."

"I really can't bring myself to believe that that girl we've just been talking to is a red-handed murderess, Weston."

"It is not necessary to believe it yet. It could be that Mrs. Kendal went out into the garden before dinner, clasp ing a knife she had taken off one of the tables because it was superfluous—she might not even have noticed she was holding it, and she could have put it down somewhere—or dropped it—It could have been found and used by someone else—I, too, think her an unlikely murderess."

"All the same," said Daventry thoughtfully, "I'm pretty sure she is not telling all she knows. Her vagueness over time is odd—where

was she—what was she doing out there? Nobody, so far, seems to have noticed her in the dining room that evening.”

“The husband was about as usual—but not the wife—”

“You think she went to meet someone—Victoria Johnson?”

“Perhaps—or perhaps she saw whoever it was who did go to meet Victoria.”

“You’re thinking of Gregory Dyson?”

“We know he was talking to Victoria earlier—He may have arranged to meet her again later—everyone moved around freely on the terrace, remember—dancing, drinking—in and out of the bar.”

“No alibi like a steel band,” said Daventry wryly.

Sixteen

MISS MARPLE SEEKS ASSISTANCE

If anybody had been there to observe the gentle-looking elderly lady who stood meditatively on the loggia outside her bungalow, they would have thought she had nothing more on her mind than deliberation on how to arrange her time that day—An expedition, perhaps, to Castle Cliff—a visit to Jamestown—a nice drive and lunch at Pelican Point—or just a quiet morning on the beach—

But the gentle old lady was deliberating quite other matters—she was in militant mood.

"Something has got to be done," said Miss Marple to herself.

Moreover, she was convinced that there was no time to be lost—There was urgency.

But who was there that she could convince of that fact? Given time, she thought she could find out the truth by herself.

She had found out a good deal. But not enough—not nearly enough. And time was short.

She realized, bitterly, that here on this Paradise of an island, she had none of her usual allies.

She thought regretfully of her friends in England—Sir Henry Clithering—always willing to listen indulgently—his godson Dermot, who in spite of his increased status at Scotland Yard was still ready

to believe that when Miss Marple voiced an opinion there was usually something behind it.

But would that soft-voiced native police officer pay any attention to an old lady's urgency? Dr. Graham? But Dr. Graham was not what she needed—too gentle and hesitant, certainly not a man of quick decisions and rapid actions.

Miss Marple, feeling rather like a humble deputy of the Almighty, almost cried aloud her need in Biblical phrasing.

Who will go for me?

Whom shall I send?

The sound that reached her ears a moment later was not instantly recognized by her as an answer to prayer—far from it—At the back of her mind it registered only as a man possibly calling his dog.

"Hi!"

Miss Marple, lost in perplexity, paid no attention.

"Hi!" The volume thus increased, Miss Marple looked vaguely round.

"HI!" called Mr. Rafiel impatiently. He added—"You there—"

Miss Marple had not at first realized that Mr. Rafiel's "Hi You" was addressed to her. It was not a method that anyone had ever used before to summon her. It was certainly not a gentlemanly mode of address. Miss Marple did not resent it, because people seldom did resent Mr. Rafiel's somewhat arbitrary method of doing things. He was a law unto himself and people accepted him as such. Miss Marple looked across the intervening space between her bungalow and his. Mr. Rafiel was sitting outside on his loggia and he beckoned her.

"You were calling me?" she asked.

"Of course I was calling you," said Mr. Rafiel. "Who did you think I was calling—a cat? Come over here."

Miss Marple looked round for her handbag, picked it up, and crossed the intervening space.

"I can't come to you unless someone helps me," explained Mr. Rafiel, "so you've got to come to me."

"Oh yes," said Miss Marple, "I quite understand *that*."

Mr. Rafiel pointed to an adjacent chair. "Sit down," he said, "I want to talk to you. Something damned odd is going on in this island."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Miss Marple, taking the chair as indicated. By sheer habit she drew her knitting out of her bag.

"Don't start knitting again," said Mr. Rafiel, "I can't stand it. I hate women knitting. It irritates me."

Miss Marple returned her knitting to her bag. She did this with no undue air of meekness, rather with the air of one who makes allowances for a fractious patient.

"There's a lot of chit-chat going on," said Mr. Rafiel, "and I bet you're in the forefront of it. You and the parson and his sister."

"It is, perhaps, only natural that there should be chit-chat," said Miss Marple with spirit, "given the circumstances."

"This Island girl gets herself knifed. Found in the bushes. *Might* be ordinary enough. That chap she was living with might have got jealous of another man—or he'd got himself another girl and she got jealous and they had a row. Sex in the tropics. That sort of stuff. What do you say?"

"No," said Miss Marple, shaking her head.

"The authorities don't think so, either."

"They would say more to you," pointed out Miss Marple, "than they would say to me."

"All the same, I bet you know more about it than I do. You've listened to the tittle-tattle."

"Certainly I have," said Miss Marple.

"Nothing much else to do, have you, except listen to tittle-tattle?"

"It is often informative and useful."

"D'you know," said Mr. Rafiel, studying her attentively. "I made a mistake about you. I don't often make mistakes about people. There's a lot more to you than I thought there was. All these rumours about Major Palgrave and the stories he told. You think he was bumped off, don't you?"

"I very much fear so," said Miss Marple.

"Well, he was," said Mr. Rafiel.

Miss Marple drew a deep breath. "That is definite, is it?" she asked.

"Yes, it's definite enough. I had it from Daventry. I'm not breaking a confidence because the facts of the autopsy will have to come out. You told Graham something, he went to Daventry, Daventry went to the Administrator, the CID were informed, and between them they agreed that things looked fishy, so they dug up old Palgrave and had a look."

"And they found?" Miss Marple paused interrogatively.

"They found he'd had a lethal dose of something that only a doctor could pronounce properly. As far as I remember it sounds vaguely like di-flor, hexagonal-ethylcarbenzol. That's not the right name. But that's roughly what it *sounds* like. The police doctor put it that way so that nobody should know, I suppose, what it really *was*. The stuff's probably got some quite simple nice easy name like Evipan or Veronal or Easton's Syrup or something of that kind. This is its official name to baffle laymen with. Anyway, a sizeable dose of it, I gather, would produce death, and the signs would be much the same as those of high blood pressure aggravated by over-indulgence in alcohol on a gay evening. In fact, it all looked perfectly natural and nobody questioned it for a moment. Just said 'poor old chap' and buried him quick. Now they wonder if he ever had high blood pressure at all. Did he ever say he had to you?"

"No."

"Exactly! And yet everyone seems to have taken it as a fact."

"Apparently he told people he had."

"It's like seeing ghosts," said Mr. Rafiel. "You never meet the chap who's seen the ghost himself. It's always the second cousin of his aunt, or a friend, or a friend of a friend. But leave that for a moment. They thought he had blood pressure, because there was a bottle of tablets controlling blood pressure found in his room but—and now we're coming to the point—I gather that this girl who was killed went about saying that that bottle was put there by somebody else, and that *actually* it belonged to that fellow Greg."

"Mr. Dyson *has* got blood pressure. His wife mentioned it," said Miss Marple.

"So it was put in Palgrave's room to suggest that he suffered from blood pressure and to make his death seem natural."

"Exactly," said Miss Marple. "And the story was put about, very cleverly, that he had frequently mentioned to people that he had high blood pressure. But you know, it's very easy to put about a story. Very easy. I've seen a lot of it in my time."

"I bet you have," said Mr. Rafiel.

"It only needs a murmur here and there," said Miss Marple. "You don't say it of your own knowledge, you just say that Mrs. B. told you that Colonel C. told her. It's always at second hand or third hand or fourth hand and it's very difficult to find out who was the original whisperer. Oh yes, it can be done. And the people you say it to go on and repeat it to others as if they know it of their own knowledge."

"Somebody's been clever," said Mr. Rafiel thoughtfully.

"Yes," said Miss Marple, "I think somebody's been quite clever."

"This girl saw something, or knew something and tried blackmail, I suppose," said Mr. Rafiel.

"She mayn't have thought of it as blackmail," said Miss Marple. "In these large hotels, there are often things the maids know that some people would rather not have repeated. And so they hand out a larger tip or a little present of money. The girl possibly didn't realize at first the importance of what she knew."

"Still, she got a knife in her back all right," said Mr. Rafiel brutally.

"Yes. Evidently someone couldn't afford to let her talk."

"Well? Let's hear what you think about it all."

Miss Marple looked at him thoughtfully.

"Why should you think I know any more than you do, Mr. Rafiel?"

"Probably you don't," said Mr. Rafiel, "but I'm interested to hear your ideas about what you do know."

"But why?"

"There's not very much to do out here," said Mr. Rafiel, "except make money."

Miss Marple looked slightly surprised.

"Make money? Out here?"

"You can send out half a dozen cables in code every day if you like," said Mr. Rafiel. "That's how I amuse myself."

"Take-over bids?" Miss Marple asked doubtfully, in the tone of one who speaks a foreign language.

"That kind of thing," agreed Mr. Rafiel. "Pitting your wits against other people's wits. The trouble is it doesn't occupy enough time, so I've got interested in this business. It's aroused my curiosity. Palgrave spent a good deal of his time talking to you. Nobody else would be bothered with him, I expect. What did he say?"

"He told me a good many stories," said Miss Marple.

"I know he did. Damn' boring, most of them. And you hadn't only got to hear them once. If you got anywhere within range you heard them three or four times over."

"I know," said Miss Marple. "I'm afraid that does happen when gentlemen get older."

Mr. Rafiel looked at her very sharply.

"I don't tell stories," he said. "Go on. It started with one of Palgrave's stories, did it?"

"He said he knew a murderer," said Miss Marple. "There's nothing really special about that," she added in her gentle voice, "because I suppose it happens to nearly everybody."

"I don't follow you," said Mr. Rafiel.

"I don't mean specifically," said Miss Marple, "but surely, Mr. Rafiel, if you cast over in your mind your recollections of various events in your life, hasn't there nearly always been an occasion when somebody has made some careless reference such as 'Oh yes I knew the So-and-So's quite well—he died very suddenly and they always say his wife did him in, but I dare say that's just gossip.' You've heard people say something like that, haven't you?"

"Well, I suppose so—yes, something of the kind. But not—well, not seriously."

"Exactly," said Miss Marple, "but Major Palgrave was a very serious man. I think he enjoyed telling this story. He said he had a snapshot of the murderer. He was going to show it to me but—actually—he didn't."

"Why?"

"Because he saw something," said Miss Marple. "Saw someone, I suspect. His face got very red and he shoved back the snapshot into

his wallet and began talking on another subject."

"Who did he see?"

"I've thought about that a good deal," said Miss Marple. "I was sitting outside my bungalow, and he was sitting nearly opposite me and—whatever he saw, he saw over my right shoulder."

"Someone coming along the path then from behind you on the right, the path from the creek and the car park—"

"Yes."

"*Was* anyone coming along the path?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Dyson and Colonel and Mrs. Hillingdon."

"Anybody else?"

"Not that I can find out. Of course, your bungalow would also be in his line of vision...."

"Ah. Then we include—shall we say—Esther Walters and my chap, Jackson. Is that right? Either of them, I suppose, *might* have come out of the bungalow and gone back inside again without your seeing them."

"They might have," said Miss Marple, "I didn't turn my head at once."

"The Dysons, the Hillingdons, Esther, Jackson. One of them's a murderer. Or, of course, myself," he added; obviously as an afterthought.

Miss Marple smiled faintly.

"And he spoke of the murderer as a *man*?"

"Yes."

"Right. That cuts out Evelyn Hillingdon, Lucky and Esther Walters. So your murderer, allowing that all this far-fetched nonsense is true, your murderer is Dyson, Hillingdon or my smooth-tongued Jackson."

"Or yourself," said Miss Marple.

Mr. Rafiel ignored this last point.

"Don't say things to irritate me," he said. "I'll tell you the first thing that strikes me, and which you don't seem to have thought of. *If* it's one of those three, why the devil didn't old Palgrave recognize him before? Dash it all, they've all been sitting round looking at each other for the last two weeks. That doesn't seem to make sense."

"I think it could," said Miss Marple.

"Well, tell me how."

"You see, in Major Palgrave's story he hadn't seen this man *himself* at any time. It was a story told to him by a doctor. The doctor gave him the snapshot as a curiosity. Major Palgrave may have looked at the snapshot fairly closely at the time but after that he'd just stick it away in his wallet and keep it as a souvenir. Occasionally, perhaps, he'd take it out and show it to someone he was telling the story to. And another thing, Mr. Rafiel, we don't know how long ago this happened. He didn't give me any indication of that when he was telling the story. I mean this may have been a story he's been telling to people for *years*. Five years—ten years—longer still perhaps. Some of his tiger stories go back about twenty years."

"They would!" said Mr. Rafiel.

"So I don't suppose for a moment that Major Palgrave would recognize the face in the snapshot if he came across the man casually. What I think happened, what I'm almost sure *must* have happened, is that as he told his story he fumbled for the snapshot, took it out, looked down at it studying the face and then looked up to see *the same face*, or one with a strong resemblance, coming towards him from a distance of about ten or twelve feet away."

"Yes," said Mr. Rafiel consideringly, "yes, that's possible."

"He was taken aback," said Miss Marple, "and he shoved it back in his wallet and began to talk loudly about something else."

"He couldn't have been sure," said Mr. Rafiel, shrewdly.

"No," said Miss Marple, "he couldn't have been sure. But of course afterwards he would have studied the snapshot very carefully and would have looked at the man and tried to make up his mind whether it was just a likeness or whether it could actually be the same person."

Mr. Rafiel reflected a moment or two, then he shook his head.

"There's something wrong here. The motive's inadequate. Absolutely inadequate. He was speaking to you loudly, was he?"

"Yes," said Miss Marple, "quite loudly. He always did."

"True enough. Yes, he did shout. So whoever was approaching would hear what he said?"

"I should imagine you could hear it for quite a good radius round."

Mr. Rafiel shook his head again. He said, "It's fantastic, too fantastic. Anybody would laugh at such a story. Here's an old booby telling a story about another story somebody told him, and showing a snapshot, and all of it centring round a murder which had taken place years ago! Or at any rate, a year or two. How on earth can *that* worry the man in question? No evidence, just a bit of hearsay, a story at third hand. He could even admit a likeness, he could say: 'Yes, I *do* look rather like that fellow, don't I! Ha, ha!' Nobody's going to take old Palgrave's identification seriously. Don't tell me so, because I won't believe it. No, the chap, if it *was* the chap, had nothing to fear—nothing whatever. It's the kind of accusation he can just laugh off. Why on earth should he proceed to murder old Palgrave? It's absolutely unnecessary. You must see that."

"Oh I do see that," said Miss Marple. "I couldn't agree with you more. That's what makes me uneasy. So very uneasy that I really couldn't sleep last night."

Mr. Rafiel stared at her. "Let's hear what's on your mind," he said quietly.

"I may be entirely wrong," said Miss Marple hesitantly.

"Probably you are," said Mr. Rafiel with his usual lack of courtesy, "but at any rate let's hear what you've thought up in the small hours."

"There could be a very powerful motive if—"

"If what?"

"If there was going to be—quite soon—*another murder*."

Mr. Rafiel stared at her. He tried to pull himself up a little in his chair.

"Let's get this clear," he said.

"I am so bad at explaining." Miss Marple spoke rapidly and rather incoherently. A pink flush rose to her cheeks. "Supposing there was a murder planned. If you remember, the story Major Palgrave told me concerned a man whose wife died under suspicious circumstances. Then, after a certain lapse of time, there was another murder under exactly the same circumstances. A man of a different

name had a wife who died in much the same way and the doctor who was telling it recognized him as the same man, although he'd changed his name. Well, it does look, doesn't it, as though this murderer might be the kind of murderer who made a habit of the thing?"

"You mean like Smith, Brides in the Bath, that kind of thing. Yes."

"As far as I can make out," said Miss Marple, "and from what I have heard and read, a man who does a wicked thing like this and gets away with it the first time, is, alas, *encouraged*. He thinks it's easy, he thinks he's clever. And so he repeats it. And in the end, as you say, like Smith and the Brides in the Bath, it becomes a *habit*. Each time in a different place and each time the man changes his name. But the crimes themselves are all very much alike. So it seems to me, although I may be quite wrong—"

"But you don't think you are wrong, do you?" Mr. Rafiel put in shrewdly.

Miss Marple went on without answering. "—that if that *were* so and if this—this person had got things all lined up for a murder out here, for getting rid of *another* wife, say, and if this is crime three or four, well then, the Major's story *would* matter because the murderer couldn't afford to have any similarity pointed out. If you remember, that was exactly the way Smith got caught. The circumstances of a crime attracted the attention of somebody who compared it with a newspaper clipping of some other case. So you do see, don't you, that if this wicked person has got a crime planned, arranged, and shortly about to take place, he couldn't afford to let Major Palgrave go about telling this story and showing that snapshot."

She stopped and looked appealingly at Mr. Rafiel.

"So you see he had to do something very quickly, as quickly as possible."

Mr. Rafiel spoke. "In fact, that very same night, eh?"

"Yes," said Miss Marple.

"Quick work," said Mr. Rafiel, "but it could be done. Put the tablets in old Palgrave's room, spread the blood pressure rumour about and add a little of our fourteen-syllable drug to a Planters Punch. Is that it?"

"Yes—But that's all over—we needn't worry about it. It's the *future*. It's now. With Major Palgrave out of the way and the snapshot destroyed, *this man will go on with his murder as planned.*"

Mr. Rafiel whistled.

"You've got it all worked out, haven't you?"

Miss Marple nodded. She said in a most unaccustomed voice, firm and almost dictatorial, "And we've got to stop it. *You've* got to stop it, Mr. Rafiel."

"Me?" said Mr. Rafiel, astonished, "Why me?"

"Because you're rich and important," said Miss Marple, simply. "People will take notice of what you say or suggest. They wouldn't listen to me for a moment. They would say that I was an old lady imagining things."

"They might at that," said Mr. Rafiel. "More fools if they did. I must say, though, that nobody would think you had any brains in your head to hear your usual line of talk. Actually, you've got a logical mind. Very few women have." He shifted himself uncomfortably in his chair. "Where the hell's Esther or Jackson?" he said. "I need resettling. No, it's no good your doing it. You're not strong enough. I don't know what they mean, leaving me alone like this."

"I'll go and find them."

"No, you won't. You'll stay here—and thrash this out. Which of them is it? The egregious Greg? The quiet Edward Hillingdon or my fellow Jackson? It's got to be one of the three, hasn't it?"

Seventeen

MR. RAFIEL TAKES CHARGE

"I don't know," said Miss Marple.

"What do you mean? What have we been talking about for the last twenty minutes?"

"It has occurred to me that I may have been wrong."

Mr. Rafiel stared at her.

"Scatty after all!" he said disgustedly. "And you sounded so sure of yourself."

"Oh, I am sure—about the *murder*. It's the *murderer* I'm not sure about. You see I've found out that Major Palgrave had more than one murder story—you told me yourself he'd told you one about a kind of Lucrezia Borgia—"

"So he did—at that. But that was quite a different kind of story."

"I know. And Mrs. Walters said he had one about someone being gassed in a gas oven—"

"But the story he told you—"

Miss Marple allowed herself to interrupt—a thing that did not often happen to Mr. Rafiel.

She spoke with desperate earnestness and only moderate incoherence.

"Don't you see—it's so difficult to be *sure*. The whole point is that—so often—one doesn't *listen*. Ask Mrs. Walters—she said the same

thing—you listen to begin with—and then your attention flags—your mind wanders—and suddenly you find you’ve missed a bit. I just wonder if possibly there may have been a gap—a very small one—between the story he was telling me—about a *man*—and the moment when he was getting out his wallet and saying—‘Like to see a picture of a murderer.’”

“But you thought it was a picture of the man he had been talking about?”

“I thought so—yes. It never occurred to me that it mightn’t have been. But now—how can I be *sure*?”

Mr. Rafiel looked at her very thoughtfully....

“The trouble with you is,” he said, “that you’re too conscientious. Great mistake—Make up your mind and don’t shilly shally. You didn’t shilly shally to begin with. If you ask me, in all this chit-chat you’ve been having with the parson’s sister and the rest of them, you’ve got hold of something that’s unsettled you.”

“Perhaps you’re right.”

“Well, cut it out for the moment. Let’s go ahead with what you had to begin with. Because, nine times out of ten, one’s original judgments are right—or so I’ve found. We’ve got three suspects. Let’s take ‘em out and have a good look at them. Any preference?”

“I really haven’t,” said Miss Marple, “all three of them seem so very unlikely.”

“We’ll take Greg first,” said Mr. Rafiel. “Can’t stand the fellow. Doesn’t make him a murderer, though. Still, there *are* one or two points against him. Those blood pressure tablets belonged to him. Nice and handy to make use of.”

“That would be a little obvious, wouldn’t it?” Miss Marple objected.

“I don’t know that it would,” said Mr. Rafiel. “After all, the main thing was to do something *quickly*, and he’d got the tablets. Hadn’t much time to go looking round for tablets that somebody else might have. Let’s say it’s Greg. All right. *If* he wanted to put his dear wife Lucky out of the way—(Good job, too, I’d say. In fact I’m in sympathy with him.) I can’t actually see his motive. From all accounts he’s rich. Inherited money from his first wife who had pots

of it. He qualifies on that as a possible wife murderer all right. But that's over and done with. He got away with it. But Lucky was his first wife's poor relation. No money there, so if he wants to put *her* out of the way it must be in order to marry somebody else. Any gossip going around about that?"

Miss Marple shook her head.

"Not that I have heard. He—er—has a very gallant manner with *all* the ladies."

"Well, that's a nice, old-fashioned way of putting it," said Mr. Rafiel. "All right, he's a stoat. He makes passes. Not enough! We want more than that. Let's go on to Edward Hillingdon. Now there's a dark horse, if ever there was one."

"He is not, I think, a happy man," offered Miss Marple.

Mr. Rafiel looked at her thoughtfully.

"Do you think a murderer ought to be a happy man?"

Miss Marple coughed.

"Well, they usually have been in my experience."

"I don't suppose your experience has gone very far," said Mr. Rafiel.

In this assumption, as Miss Marple could have told him, he was wrong. But she forbore to contest his statement. Gentlemen, she knew, did not like to be put right in their facts.

"I rather fancy Hillingdon myself," said Mr. Rafiel. "I've an idea that there is something a bit odd going on between him and his wife. You noticed it at all?"

"Oh yes," said Miss Marple, "I have noticed it. Their behaviour is perfect in public, of course, but that one would expect."

"You probably know more about those sort of people than I would," said Mr. Rafiel. "Very well, then, everything is in perfectly good taste but it's a probability that, in a gentlemanly way, Edward Hillingdon is contemplating doing away with Evelyn Hillingdon. Do you agree?"

"If so," said Miss Marple, "there must be another woman."

Miss Marple shook her head in a dissatisfied manner.

"I can't help feeling—I really can't—that it's not all quite as simple as that."

"Well, who shall we consider next—Jackson? We leave me out of it."

Miss Marple smiled for the first time.

"And why do we leave you out of it, Mr. Rafiel?"

"Because if you want to discuss the possibilities of my being a murderer you'd have to do it with somebody else. Waste of time talking about it to me. And anyway, I ask you, am I cut out for the part? Helpless, hauled out of bed like a dummy, dressed, wheeled about in a chair, shuffled along for a walk. What earthly chance have *I* of going and murdering anyone?"

"Probably as good a chance as anyone else," said Miss Marple vigorously.

"And how do you make that out?"

"Well, you would agree yourself, I think, that you have brains?"

"Of course I've got brains," declared Mr. Rafiel. "A good deal more than anybody else in this community, I'd say."

"And having brains," went on Miss Marple, "would enable you to overcome the physical difficulties of being a murderer."

"It would take some doing!"

"Yes," said Miss Marple, "it would take some doing. But then, I think, Mr. Rafiel, you would enjoy that."

Mr. Rafiel stared at her for a long time and then he suddenly laughed.

"You've got a nerve!" he said. "Not quite the gentle fluffy old lady you look, are you? So you really think I'm a murderer?"

"No," said Miss Marple, "I do not."

"And why?"

"Well, really, I think just *because* you have got brains. Having brains, you can get most things you want without having recourse to murder. Murder is stupid."

"And anyway who the devil should I want to murder?"

"That would be a very interesting question," said Miss Marple. "I have not yet had the pleasure of sufficient conversation with you to evolve a theory as to that."

Mr. Rafiel's smile broadened.

"Conversations with you might be dangerous," he said.

"Conversations are always dangerous, if you have something to hide," said Miss Marple.

"You may be right. Let's get on to Jackson. What do you think of Jackson?"

"It is difficult for me to say. I have not had the opportunity really of *any* conversation with him."

"So you've no views on the subject?"

"He reminds me a little," said Miss Marple reflectively, "of a young man in the Town Clerk's office near where I live, Jonas Parry."

"And?" Mr. Rafiel asked and paused.

"He was not," said Miss Marple, "very satisfactory."

"Jackson's not wholly satisfactory either. He suits me all right. He's first class at his job, and he doesn't mind being sworn at. He knows he's damn' well paid and so he puts up with things. I wouldn't employ him in a position of trust, but I don't have to trust him. Maybe his past is blameless, maybe it isn't. His references were all right but I discern—shall I say—a note of reserve. Fortunately, I'm not a man who has any guilty secrets, so I'm not a subject for blackmail."

"No secrets?" said Miss Marple, thoughtfully. "Surely, Mr. Rafiel, you have business secrets?"

"Not where Jackson can get at them. No. Jackson is a smooth article, one might say, but I really don't see him as a murderer. I'd say that wasn't his line at all."

He paused a minute and then said suddenly, "Do you know, if one stands back and takes a good look at all this fantastic business, Major Palgrave and his ridiculous stories and all the rest of it, the *emphasis* is entirely wrong. *I'm* the person who ought to be murdered."

Miss Marple looked at him in some surprise.

"Proper type casting," explained Mr. Rafiel. "Who's the victim in murder stories? Elderly men with lots of money."

"And lots of people with a good reason for wishing him out of the way, so as to get that money," said Miss Marple. "Is that true also?"

"Well—" Mr. Rafiel considered. "I can count up to five or six men in London who wouldn't burst into tears if they read my obituary in

The Times. But they wouldn't go so far as to do anything to bring about my demise. After all, why should they? I'm expected to die any day. In fact the bug—blighters are astonished that I've lasted so long. The doctors are surprised too."

"You have, of course, a great will to live," said Miss Marple.

"You think that's odd, I suppose," said Mr. Rafiel.

Miss Marple shook her head.

"Oh no," she said, "I think it's quite natural. Life is more worth living, more full of interest when you are likely to lose it. It shouldn't be, perhaps, but it is. When you're young and strong and healthy, and life stretches ahead of you, living isn't really important at all. It's young people who commit suicide easily, out of despair from love, sometimes from sheer anxiety and worry. But old people know how valuable life is and how interesting."

"Hah!" said Mr. Rafiel, snorting. "Listen to a couple of old crocks."

"Well, what I said is true, isn't it?" demanded Miss Marple.

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Rafiel, "it's true enough. But don't you think I'm right when I say that I ought to be cast as the victim?"

"It depends on who has reason to gain by your death," said Miss Marple.

"Nobody, really," said Mr. Rafiel. "Apart, as I've said, from my competitors in the business world who, as I have also said, can count comfortably on my being out of it before very long. I'm not such a fool as to leave a lot of money divided up among my relations. Precious little they'd get of it after the Government had taken practically the lot. Oh, no, I've attended to all that years ago. Settlements, trusts and all the rest of it."

"Jackson, for instance, wouldn't profit by your death?"

"He wouldn't get a penny," said Mr. Rafiel cheerfully. "I pay him double the salary that he'd get from anyone else. That's because he has to put up with my bad temper; and he knows quite well that he will be the loser when I die."

"And Mrs. Walters?"

"The same goes for Esther. She's a good girl. First-class secretary, intelligent, good-tempered, understands my ways, doesn't turn a hair if I fly off the handle, couldn't care less if I insult her. Behaves

like a nice nursery governess in charge of an outrageous and obstreperous child. She irritates me a bit sometimes, but who doesn't? There's nothing outstanding about her. She's rather a commonplace young woman in many ways, but I couldn't have anyone who suited me better. She's had a lot of trouble in her life. Married a man who wasn't much good. I'd say she never had much judgment when it came to men. Some women haven't. They fall for anyone who tells them a hard-luck story. Always convinced that all the man needs is proper female understanding. That, once married to her, he'll pull up his socks and make a go of life! But of course that type of man never does. Anyway, fortunately her unsatisfactory husband died; drank too much at a party one night and stepped in front of a bus. Esther had a daughter to support and she went back to her secretarial job. She's been with me five years. I made it quite clear to her from the start that she need have no expectations from me in the event of my death. I paid her from the start a very large salary, and that salary I've augmented by as much as a quarter as much again each year. However decent and honest people are, one should never trust *anybody*—that's why I told Esther quite clearly that she'd nothing to hope for from my death. Every year I live she'll get a bigger salary. If she puts most of that aside every year—and that's what I think she has done—she'll be quite a well-to-do woman by the time I kick the bucket. I've made myself responsible for her daughter's schooling and I've put a sum in trust for the daughter which she'll get when she comes of age. So Mrs. Esther Walters is very comfortably placed. My death, let me tell you, would mean a serious financial loss to her." He looked very hard at Miss Marple. "She fully realizes all that. She's very sensible, Esther is."

"Do she and Jackson get on?" asked Miss Marple.

Mr. Rafiel shot a quick glance at her.

"Noticed something, have you?" he said. "Yes, I think Jackson's done a bit of tom-cattling around, with an eye in her direction, especially lately. He's a good-looking chap, of course, but he hasn't cut any ice in that direction. For one thing, there's class distinction. She's just a cut above him. Not very much. If she was *really* a cut above him it wouldn't matter, but the lower middle class—they're

very particular. Her mother was a school teacher and her father a bank clerk. No, she won't make a fool of herself about Jackson. Dare say he's after her little nest egg, but he won't get it."

"Hush—she's coming now!" said Miss Marple.

They both looked at Esther Walters as she came along the hotel path towards them.

"She's quite a good-looking girl, you know," said Mr. Rafiel, "but not an atom of glamour. I don't know why, she's quite nicely turned out."

Miss Marple sighed, a sigh that any woman will give however old at what might be considered wasted opportunities. What was lacking in Esther had been called by so many names during Miss Marple's span of existence. "Not really attractive to me." "No SA." "Lacks Come-hither in her eye." Fair hair, good complexion, hazel eyes, quite a good figure, pleasant smile, but lacking that something that makes a man's head turn when he passes a woman in the street.

"She ought to get married again," said Miss Marple, lowering her voice.

"Of course she ought. She'd make a man a good wife."

Esther Walters joined them and Mr. Rafiel said, in a slightly artificial voice:

"So there you are at last! What's been keeping you?"

"Everyone seemed to be sending cables this morning," said Esther. "What with that, and people trying to check out—"

"Trying to check out, are they? A result of this murder business?"

"I suppose so. Poor Tim Kendal is worried to death."

"And well he might be. Bad luck for that young couple, I must say."

"I know. I gather it was rather a big undertaking for them to take on this place. They've been worried about making a success of it. They were doing very well, too."

"They were doing a good job," agreed Mr. Rafiel. "He's very capable and a damned hard worker. She's a very nice girl—attractive too. They've both worked like blacks, though that's an odd term to use out here, for blacks don't work themselves to death at all, so far as I can see. Was looking at a fellow shinning up a coconut tree to

get his breakfast, then he goes to sleep for the rest of the day. Nice life."

He added, "We've been discussing the murder here."

Esther Walters looked slightly startled. She turned her head towards Miss Marple.

"I've been wrong about her," said Mr. Rafiel, with characteristic frankness. "Never been much of a one for the old pussies. All knitting wool and tittle-tattle. But this one's got something. Eyes and ears, and she uses them."

Esther Walters looked apologetically at Miss Marple, but Miss Marple did not appear to take offence.

"That's really meant to be a compliment, you know," Esther explained.

"I quite realize that," said Miss Marple. "I realize, too, that Mr. Rafiel is privileged, or thinks he is."

"What do you mean—privileged?" asked Mr. Rafiel.

"To be rude if you want to be rude," said Miss Marple.

"Have I been rude?" said Mr. Rafiel, surprised. "I'm sorry if I've offended you."

"You haven't offended me," said Miss Marple, "I make allowances."

"Now, don't be nasty. Esther, get a chair and bring it here. Maybe you can help."

Esther walked a few steps to the balcony of the bungalow and brought over a light basket chair.

"We'll go on with our consultation," said Mr. Rafiel. "We started with old Palgrave, deceased, and his eternal stories."

"Oh, dear," sighed Esther. "I'm afraid I used to escape from him whenever I could."

"Miss Marple was more patient," said Mr. Rafiel. "Tell me, Esther, did he ever tell you a story about a murderer?"

"Oh yes," said Esther. "Several times."

"What was it exactly? Let's have *your* recollection."

"Well—" Esther paused to think. "The trouble is," she said apologetically, "I didn't really listen very closely. You see, it was

rather like that terrible story about the lion in Rhodesia which used to go on and on. One did get rather in the habit of not listening."

"Well, tell us what you *do* remember."

"I think it arose out of some murder case that had been in the papers. Major Palgrave said that he'd had an experience not every person had had. He'd actually met a murderer face to face."

"Met?" Mr. Rafiel exclaimed. "Did he actually use the word 'met?'"

Esther looked confused.

"I think so." She was doubtful. "Or he may have said, 'I can point you out a murderer.'"

"Well, which was it? There's a difference."

"I can't really be sure ... I *think* he said he'd show me a picture of someone."

"That's better."

"And then he talked a lot about Lucrezia Borgia."

"Never mind Lucrezia Borgia. We know all about her."

"He talked about poisoners and that Lucrezia was very beautiful and had red hair. He said there were probably far more women poisoners going about the world than anyone knew."

"That I fear is *quite* likely," said Miss Marple.

"And he talked about poison being a woman's weapon."

"Seems to have been wandering from the point a bit," said Mr. Rafiel.

"Well, of course, he always did wander from the point in his stories. And then one used to stop listening and just say 'Yes' and 'Really?' And 'You don't say so.'"

"What about this picture he was going to show you?"

"I don't remember. It may have been something he'd seen in the paper—"

"He didn't actually show you a snapshot?"

"A snapshot? No." She shook her head. "I'm quite sure of that. He did say that she was a good-looking woman, and you'd never think she was a murderer to look at her."

"She?"

"There you are," exclaimed Miss Marple. "It makes it all so confusing."

"He was talking about a woman?" Mr. Rafiel asked.

"Oh, yes."

"The snapshot was a snapshot of a woman?"

"Yes."

"It can't have been!"

"But it was," Esther persisted. "He said 'She's here in this island. I'll point her out to you, and then I'll tell you the whole story.'"

Mr. Rafiel swore. In saying what he thought of the late Major Palgrave he did not mince his words.

"The probabilities are," he finished, "that not a word of anything he said was true!"

"One does begin to wonder," Miss Marple murmured.

"So there we are," said Mr. Rafiel. "The old booby started telling you hunting tales. Pig sticking, tiger shooting, elephant hunting, narrow escapes from lions. One or two of them might have been fact. Several of them were fiction, and others had happened to somebody else! Then he gets on to the subject of murder and he tells one murder story to cap another murder story. And what's more he tells them all as if they'd happened to *him*. Ten to one most of them were a hash-up of what he'd read in the paper, or seen on TV."

He turned accusingly on Esther. "You admit that you weren't listening closely. Perhaps you misunderstood what he was saying."

"I'm certain he was talking about a woman," said Esther obstinately, "because of course I wondered who it was."

"Who do you think it was?" asked Miss Marple.

Esther flushed and looked slightly embarrassed.

"Oh, I didn't really—I mean, I wouldn't like to—"

Miss Marple did not insist. The presence of Mr. Rafiel, she thought, was inimical to her finding out exactly what suppositions Esther Walters had made. That could only be cosily brought out in a tête-à-tête between two women. And there was, of course, the possibility that Esther Walters was lying. Naturally, Miss Marple did not suggest this aloud. She registered it as a possibility but she was not inclined to believe in it. For one thing she did not think that Esther Walters was a liar (though one never knew) and for another, she could see no point in such a lie.

"But *you* say," Mr. Rafiel was now turning upon Miss Marple, "*you* say that he told you this yarn about a murderer and that he then said he had a picture of him which he was going to show you."

"I thought so, yes."

"You thought so? You were sure enough to begin with!"

Miss Marple retorted with spirit.

"It is never easy to repeat a conversation and be entirely accurate in what the other party to it has said. One is always inclined to jump at what you think they *meant*. Then, afterwards, you put actual words into their mouths. Major Palgrave told me this story, yes. He told me that the man who told it to him, this doctor, had shown him a snapshot of the murderer; but if I am to be quite honest I must admit that what he actually said to me was 'Would you like to see a snapshot of a murderer?' and naturally I assumed that it was the same snapshot he had been talking about. That it was the snapshot of that particular murderer. But I have to admit that it is possible—only remotely possible, but still possible—that by an association of ideas in his mind he leaped from the snapshot he had been shown in the past, to a snapshot he had taken recently of someone here who he was convinced was a murderer."

"Women!" snorted Mr. Rafiel in exasperation. "You're all the same, the whole blinking lot of you! Can't be accurate. You're never exactly *sure* of what a thing was. And now," he added irritably, "where does *that* leave us?" He snorted. "Evelyn Hillingdon, or Greg's wife, Lucky? The whole thing is a mess."

There was a slight apologetic cough. Arthur Jackson was standing at Mr. Rafiel's elbow. He had come so noiselessly that nobody had noticed him.

"Time for your massage, sir," he said.

Mr. Rafiel displayed immediate temper.

"What do you mean by sneaking up on me in that way and making me jump? I never heard you."

"Very sorry, sir."

"I don't think I'll have any massage today. It never does me a damn' bit of good."

"Oh, come sir, you mustn't say that." Jackson was full of professional cheerfulness. "You'd soon notice if you left it off."

He wheeled the chair deftly round.

Miss Marple rose to her feet, smiled at Esther and went down to the beach.

Eighteen

WITHOUT BENEFIT OF CLERGY

I

The beach was rather empty this morning. Greg was splashing in the water in his usual noisy style, Lucky was lying on her face on the beach with a sun-tanned back well oiled and her blonde hair splayed over her shoulders. The Hillingdons were not there. Señora de Caspearo, with an assorted bag of gentlemen in attendance, was lying face upwards and talking deep-throated, happy Spanish. Some French and Italian children were playing at the water's edge and laughing. Canon and Miss Prescott were sitting in beach chairs observing the scene. The Canon had his hat tilted forward over his eyes and seemed half asleep. There was a convenient chair next to Miss Prescott and Miss Marple made for it and sat down.

"Oh dear," she said with a deep sigh.

"I know," said Miss Prescott.

It was their joint tribute to violent death.

"That poor girl," said Miss Marple.

"Very sad," said the Canon. "Most deplorable."

"For a moment or two," said Miss Prescott, "we really thought of leaving, Jeremy and I. But then we decided against it. It would not really be fair, I felt, on the Kendals. After all, it's not *their* fault—it might have happened anywhere."

"In the midst of life we are in death," said the Canon solemnly.

"It's very important, you know," said Miss Prescott, "that they should make a go of this place. They have sunk all their capital in it."

"A very sweet girl," said Miss Marple, "but not looking at all well lately."

"Very nervy," agreed Miss Prescott. "Of course her family—" she shook her head.

"I really think, Joan," said the Canon in mild reproof, "that there are some things—"

"Everybody knows about it," said Miss Prescott. "Her family live in our part of the world. A great-aunt—most peculiar—and one of her uncles took off all his clothes in one of the tube stations. Green Park, I believe it was."

"Joan, that is a thing that should *not* be repeated."

"Very sad," said Miss Marple, shaking her head, "though I believe not an uncommon form of madness. I know when we were working for the Armenian relief, a most respectable elderly clergyman was afflicted the same way. They telephoned his wife and she came along at once and took him home in a cab, wrapped in a blanket."

"Of course, Molly's immediate family's all right," said Miss Prescott. "She never got on very well with her mother, but then so few girls seem to get on with their mothers nowadays."

"Such a pity," said Miss Marple, shaking her head, "because really a young girl needs her mother's knowledge of the world and experience."

"Exactly," said Miss Prescott with emphasis. "Molly, you know, took up with some man—*quite* unsuitable, I understand."

"It so often happens," said Miss Marple.

"Her family disapproved, naturally. *She* didn't tell them about it. They heard about it from a complete outsider. Of course her mother said she must bring him along so that they met him properly. This, I understand, the girl refused to do. She said it was humiliating to him. Most insulting to be made to come and meet her family and be looked over. Just as though you were a horse, she said."

Miss Marple sighed. "One does need so much *tact* when dealing with the young," she murmured.

"Anyway, there it was! They forbade her to see him."

"But you can't *do* that nowadays," said Miss Marple. "Girls have jobs and they meet people whether anyone forbids them or not."

"But then, very fortunately," went on Miss Prescott, "she met Tim Kendal, and the other man sort of faded out of the picture. I can't *tell* you how relieved the family was."

"I hope they didn't show it too plainly," said Miss Marple. "That so often puts girls off from forming suitable attachments."

"Yes, indeed."

"One remembers oneself—" murmured Miss Marple, her mind going back to the past. A young man she had met at a croquet party. He had seemed so nice—rather gay, almost *Bohemian* in his views. And then he had been unexpectedly warmly welcomed by her father. He had been suitable, eligible; he had been asked freely to the house more than once, and Miss Marple had found that, after all, he was *dull*. Very dull.

The Canon seemed safely comatose and Miss Marple advanced tentatively to the subject she was anxious to pursue.

"Of course you know so much about this place," she murmured. "You have been here several years running, have you not?"

"Well, last year and two years before that. We like St. Honoré very much. Always such nice people here. Not the flashy, ultra-rich set."

"So I suppose you know the Hillingdons and the Dysons well?"

"Yes, fairly well."

Miss Marple coughed and lowered her voice slightly.

"Major Palgrave told me such an interesting story," she said.

"He had a great repertoire of stories, hadn't he? Of course he had travelled very widely. Africa, India, even China I believe."

"Yes indeed," said Miss Marple. "But I didn't mean one of *those* stories. This was a story concerned with—well, with one of the people I have just mentioned."

"Oh!" said Miss Prescott. Her voice held meaning.

"Yes. Now I wonder—" Miss Marple allowed her eyes to travel gently round the beach to where Lucky lay sunning her back. "Very beautifully tanned, isn't she," remarked Miss Marple. "And her hair.

Most attractive. Practically the same colour as Molly Kendal's, isn't it?"

"The only difference," said Miss Prescott, "is that Molly's is natural and Lucky's comes out of a bottle!"

"Really, Joan," the Canon protested, unexpectedly awake again. "Don't you think that is *rather* an uncharitable thing to say?"

"It's not uncharitable," said Miss Prescott, acidly. "Merely a *fact*."

"It looks very nice to *me*," said the Canon.

"Of course. That's why she does it. But I assure you, my dear Jeremy, it wouldn't deceive any *woman* for a moment. Would it?" She appealed to Miss Marple.

"Well, I'm afraid—" said Miss Marple, "of course I haven't the experience that you have—but I'm afraid—yes I should say definitely *not natural*. The appearance at the roots every fifth or sixth day—" She looked at Miss Prescott and they both nodded with quiet female assurance.

The Canon appeared to be dropping off again.

"Major Palgrave told me a really extraordinary story," murmured Miss Marple, "about—well I couldn't quite make out. I am a little deaf sometimes. He appeared to be saying or hinting—" she paused.

"I know what you mean. There was a great deal of talk at the time—"

"You mean at the time that—"

"When the first Mrs. Dyson died. Her death was quite unexpected. In fact, everybody thought she was a *malade imaginaire*—a hypochondriac. So when she had the attack and died so unexpectedly, well, of course, people did talk."

"There wasn't—any—trouble at the time?"

"The doctor was puzzled. He was quite a young man and he hadn't had much experience. He was what I call one of those antibiotics-for-all men. You know, the kind that doesn't bother to look at the patient much, or worry what's the matter with him. They just give them some kind of pill out of a bottle and if they don't get better, then they try a different pill. Yes, I believe he *was* puzzled, but it seemed she had had gastric trouble before. At least her

husband said so, and there seemed no reason for believing anything was *wrong*."

"But you yourself think—"

"Well, I always try to keep an open mind, but one does wonder, you know. And what with various things people said—"

"Joan!" The Canon sat up. He looked belligerent. "I don't like—I really don't like to hear this kind of ill-natured gossip being repeated. We've always set our faces against that kind of thing. See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil—and what is more, *think* no evil! That should be the motto of every Christian man and woman."

The two women sat in silence. They were rebuked, and in deference to their training they deferred to the criticism of a man. But inwardly they were frustrated, irritated and quite unrepentant. Miss Prescott threw a frank glance of irritation towards her brother. Miss Marple took out her knitting and looked at it. Fortunately for them Chance was on their side.

"*Mon père*," said a small shrill voice. It was one of the French children who had been playing at the water's edge. She had come up unnoticed, and was standing by Canon Prescott's chair.

"*Mon père*," she fluted.

"Eh? Yes, my dear? *Oui, qu'est-ce qu'il y a, ma petite?*"

The child explained. There had been a dispute about who should have the water-wings next and also other matters of seaside etiquette. Canon Prescott was extremely fond of children, especially small girls. He was always delighted to be summoned to act as arbiter in their disputes. He rose willingly now and accompanied the child to the water's edge. Miss Marple and Miss Prescott breathed deep sighs and turned avidly towards each other.

II

"Jeremy, of course rightly, is very against ill-natured gossip," said Miss Prescott, "but one cannot really ignore what people are saying. And there was, as I say, a great deal of talk at the time."

"Yes?" Miss Marple's tone urged her forward.

"This young woman, you see, Miss Greateorex I think her name was then, I can't remember now, was a kind of cousin and she looked after Mrs. Dyson. Gave her all her medicines and things like that." There was a short, meaningless pause. "And of course there had, I understand"—Miss Prescott's voice was lowered—"been goings-on between Mr. Dyson and Miss Greateorex. A lot of people had noticed them. I mean things like that are quickly observed in a place like this. Then there was some curious story about some stuff that Edward Hillingdon got for her at a chemist."

"Oh, Edward Hillingdon came into it?"

"Oh yes, he was very much attracted. People noticed it. And Lucky—Miss Greateorex—played them off against each other. Gregory Dyson and Edward Hillingdon. One has to face it, she has always been an attractive woman."

"Though not as young as she was," Miss Marple replied.

"Exactly. But she was always very well turned out and made up. Of course not so flamboyant when she was just the poor relation. She always *seemed* very devoted to the invalid. But, well, you see how it was."

"What was this story about the chemist—how did that get known?"

"Well, it wasn't in Jamestown, I think it was when they were in Martinique. The French, I believe, are more lax than we are in the matter of drugs—This chemist talked to someone, and the story got around—Well, you know how these things happen."

Miss Marple did. None better.

"He said something about Colonel Hillingdon asking for something and not seeming to know what it was he was asking for. Consulting a piece of paper, you know, on which it was written down. Anyway, as I say, there was *talk*."

"But I don't see quite why Colonel Hillingdon—" Miss Marple frowned in perplexity.

"I suppose he was just being used as a *cat's-paw*. Anyway, Gregory Dyson married again in an almost indecently short time. Barely a month later, I understand."

They looked at each other.

"But there was no *real* suspicion?" Miss Marple asked.

"Oh no, it was just—well, *talk*. Of course there may have been absolutely nothing in it."

"Major Palgrave thought there was."

"Did he say so to you?"

"I wasn't really listening very closely," confessed Miss Marple. "I just wondered if—er—well, if he'd said the same thing to you?"

"He did point her out to me one day," said Miss Prescott.

"Really? He actually pointed her out?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I thought at first it was Mrs. Hillingdon he was pointing out. He wheezed and chuckled a bit and said, 'Look at that woman over there. In my opinion that's a woman who's done murder and got away with it.' I was very shocked, of course. I said, 'Surely you're joking, Major Palgrave,' and he said, 'Yes, yes, dear lady, let's call it joking.' The Dysons and the Hillingdons were sitting at a table quite near to us, and I was afraid they'd overhear. He chuckled and said 'Wouldn't care to go to a drinks party and have a certain person mix me a cocktail. Too much like supper with the Borgias.'"

"How *very* interesting," said Miss Marple. "Did he mention—a—a photograph?"

"I don't remember ... Was it some newspaper cutting?"

Miss Marple, about to speak, shut her lips. The sun was momentarily obscured by a shadow. Evelyn Hillingdon paused beside them.

"Good morning," she said.

"I was wondering where you were," said Miss Prescott, looking up brightly.

"I've been to Jamestown, shopping."

"Oh, I see."

Miss Prescott looked round vaguely and Evelyn Hillingdon said:

"Oh, I didn't take Edward with me. Men hate shopping."

"Did you find anything of interest?"

"It wasn't that sort of shopping. I just had to go to the chemist."

With a smile and a slight nod she went on down the beach.

"Such nice people, the Hillingdons," said Miss Prescott, "though she's not really very easy to know, is she? I mean, she's always very pleasant and all that, but one never seems to get to know her any better."

Miss Marple agreed thoughtfully.

"One never knows what she is thinking," said Miss Prescott.

"Perhaps that is just as well," said Miss Marple.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Oh nothing really, only that I've always had the feeling that perhaps her thoughts might be rather disconcerting."

"Oh," said Miss Prescott, looking puzzled. "I see what you mean." She went on with a slight change of subject. "I believe they have a very charming place in Hampshire, and a boy—or is it two boys—who have just gone—or one of them—to Winchester."

"Do you know Hampshire well?"

"No. Hardly at all. I believe their house is somewhere near Alton."

"I see." Miss Marple paused and then said, "And where do the Dysons live?"

"California," said Miss Prescott. "When they are at home, that is. They are great travellers."

"One really knows so little about the people one meets when one is travelling," said Miss Marple. "I mean—how shall I put it—one only knows, doesn't one, what they choose to tell you about themselves. For instance, you don't *really* know that the Dysons live in California."

Miss Prescott looked startled.

"I'm sure Mr. Dyson mentioned it."

"Yes. Yes, exactly. That's what I mean. And the same thing perhaps with the Hillingdons. I mean when you say that they live in Hampshire, you're really repeating what *they* told *you*, aren't you?"

Miss Prescott looked slightly alarmed. "Do you mean that they don't live in Hampshire?" she asked.

"No, no, not for one moment," said Miss Marple, quickly apologetic. "I was only using them as an instance as to what one knows or doesn't know about people." She added, "I have told you that I live at St. Mary Mead, which is a place, no doubt, of which you

have never heard. But you don't, if I may say so, know it of your *own* knowledge, do you?"

Miss Prescott forbore from saying that she really couldn't care less *where* Miss Marple lived. It was somewhere in the country and in the South of England and that is all she knew. "Oh, I do see what you mean," she agreed hastily, "and I know that one can't possibly be too careful when one is abroad."

"I didn't exactly mean *that*," said Miss Marple.

There were some odd thoughts going through Miss Marple's mind. Did she really know, she was asking herself, that Canon Prescott and Miss Prescott were really Canon Prescott and Miss Prescott? They said so. There was no evidence to contradict them. It would really be easy, would it not, to put on a dog-collar, to wear the appropriate clothes, to make the appropriate conversation. If there was a motive....

Miss Marple was fairly knowledgeable about the clergy in her part of the world, but the Prescotts came from the north. Durham, wasn't it? She had no doubt they were the Prescotts, but still, it came back to the same thing—one believed what people said to one.

Perhaps one ought to be on one's guard against that. Perhaps ... She shook her head thoughtfully.

Nineteen

USES OF A SHOE

Canon Prescott came back from the water's edge slightly short of breath (playing with children is always exhausting).

Presently he and his sister went back to the hotel, finding the beach a little too hot.

"But," said Señora de Caspearo scornfully as they walked away—"how can a beach be too hot? It is nonsense that—And look what she wears—her arms and her neck are all covered up. Perhaps it is as well, that. Her skin it is hideous, like a plucked chicken!"

Miss Marple drew a deep breath. Now or never was the time for conversation with Señora de Caspearo. Unfortunately she did not know what to say. There seemed to be no common ground on which they could meet.

"You have children, Señora?" she inquired.

"I have three angels," said Señora de Caspearo, kissing her fingertips.

Miss Marple was rather uncertain as to whether this meant that Señora de Caspearo's offspring were in Heaven or whether it merely referred to their characters.

One of the gentlemen in attendance made a remark in Spanish and Señora de Caspearo flung back her head appreciatively and laughed loudly and melodiously.

"You understand what he said?" she inquired of Miss Marple.

"I'm afraid not," said Miss Marple apologetically.

"It is just as well. He is a wicked man."

A rapid and spirited interchange of Spanish badinage followed.

"It is infamous—infamous," said Señora de Caspearo, reverting to English with sudden gravity, "that the police do not let us go from this island. I storm, I scream, I stamp my foot—but all they say is No—No. You know how it will end—we shall all be killed."

Her bodyguard attempted to reassure her.

"But yes—I tell you it is unlucky here. I knew it from the first—That old Major, the ugly one—he had the Evil Eye—you remember? His eyes they crossed—It is bad, that! I make the Sign of the Horns every time when he looks my way." She made it in illustration. "Though since he is cross-eyed I am not always sure when he does look my way—"

"He had a glass eye," said Miss Marple in an explanatory voice. "An accident, I understand, when he was quite young. It was not his fault."

"I tell you he brought bad luck—I say it is the Evil Eye he had."

Her hand shot out again in the well-known Latin gesture—the first finger and the little finger sticking out, the two middle ones doubled in. "Anyway," she said cheerfully, "he is dead—I do not have to look at him any more. I do not like to look at things that are ugly."

It was, Miss Marple thought, a somewhat cruel epitaph on Major Palgrave.

Farther down the beach Gregory Dyson had come out of the sea. Lucky had turned herself over on the sand. Evelyn Hillingdon was looking at Lucky, and her expression, for some reason, made Miss Marple shiver.

"Surely I can't be cold—in this hot sun," she thought.

What was the old phrase—"A *goose walking over your grave*—"

She got up and went slowly back to her bungalow.

On the way she passed Mr. Rafiel and Esther Walters coming down the beach. Mr. Rafiel winked at her. Miss Marple did not wink back. She looked disapproving.

She went into her bungalow and lay down on her bed. She felt old and tired and worried.

She was quite certain that there was no time to be lost—no time—to—be lost ... It was getting late ... The sun was going to set—the sun—one must always look at the sun through smoked glass—Where was that piece of smoked glass that someone had given her?...

No, she wouldn't need it after all. A shadow had come over the sun blotting it out. A shadow. Evelyn Hillingdon's shadow—No, not Evelyn Hillingdon—The Shadow (what were the words?) the *Shadow of the Valley of Death*. That was it. She must—what was it? Make the Sign of the Horns—to avert the Evil Eye—Major Palgrave's Evil Eye.

Her eyelids flickered open—she had been asleep. But there *was* a shadow—someone peering in at her window.

The shadow moved away—and Miss Marple saw who it was—It was Jackson.

"Impertinence—peering in like that," she thought—and added parenthetically, "Just like Jonas Parry."

The comparison reflected no credit on Jackson.

Then she wondered *why* Jackson had been peering into her bedroom. To see if she was there? Or to note that she was there, but was asleep.

She got up, went into the bathroom and peered cautiously through the window.

Arthur Jackson was standing by the door of the bungalow next door. Mr. Rafiel's bungalow. She saw him give a rapid glance round and then slip quickly inside. Interesting, thought Miss Marple. Why did he have to look round in that furtive manner? Nothing in the world could have been more natural than his going into Mr. Rafiel's bungalow since he himself had a room at the back of it. He was always going in and out of it on some errand or other. So why that quick, guilty glance round? "Only one reason," said Miss Marple answering her own question, "he wanted to be sure that nobody was observing him enter at this particular moment because of something he was going to do in there."

Everybody, of course, was on the beach at this moment except those who had gone for expeditions. In about twenty minutes or so, Jackson himself would arrive on the beach in the course of his duties to aid Mr. Rafiel to take his sea dip. If he wanted to do anything in the bungalow unobserved, now was a very good time. He had satisfied himself that Miss Marple was asleep on her bed, he had satisfied himself that there was nobody near at hand to observe his movements. Well, she must do her best to do exactly that.

Sitting down on her bed, Miss Marple removed her neat sandal shoes and replaced them with a pair of plimsolls. Then she shook her head, removed the plimsolls, burrowed in her suitcase and took out a pair of shoes the heel of one of which she had recently caught on a hook by the door. It was now in a slightly precarious state and Miss Marple adroitly rendered it even more precarious by attention with a nail file. Then she emerged with due precaution from her door walking in stockinged feet. With all the care of a Big Game Hunter approaching up-wind of a herd of antelope, Miss Marple gently circumnavigated Mr. Rafiel's bungalow. Cautiously she manoeuvred her way around the corner of the house. She put on one of the shoes she was carrying, gave a final wrench to the heel of the other, sank gently to her knees and lay prone under the window. If Jackson heard anything, if he came to the window to look out, an old lady would have had a fall owing to the heel coming off her shoe. But evidently Jackson had heard nothing.

Very, very gently Miss Marple raised her head. The windows of the bungalow were low. Shielding herself slightly with a festoon of creeper she peered inside....

Jackson was on his knees before a suitcase. The lid of the suitcase was up and Miss Marple could see that it was a specially fitted affair containing compartments filled with various kinds of papers. Jackson was looking through the papers, occasionally drawing documents out of long envelopes. Miss Marple did not remain at her observation post for long. All she wanted was to know what Jackson was doing. She knew now. Jackson was snooping. Whether he was looking for something in particular, or whether he was just indulging his natural instincts, she had no means of

judging. But it confirmed her in her belief that Arthur Jackson and Jonas Parry had strong affinities in other things than facial resemblance.

Her problem was now to withdraw. Very carefully she dropped down again and crept along the flowerbed until she was clear of the window. She returned to her bungalow and carefully put away the shoe and the heel that she had detached from it. She looked at them with affection. A good device which she could use on another day if necessary. She resumed her own sandal shoes, and went thoughtfully down to the beach again.

Choosing a moment when Esther Walters was in the water, Miss Marple moved into the chair Esther had vacated.

Greg and Lucky were laughing and talking with Señora de Caspearo and making a good deal of noise.

Miss Marple spoke very quietly, almost under her breath, without looking at Mr. Rafiel.

"Do you know that Jackson snoops?"

"Doesn't surprise me," said Mr. Rafiel. "Caught him at it, did you?"

"I managed to observe him through a window. He had one of your suitcases open and was looking through your papers."

"Must have managed to get hold of a key to it. Resourceful fellow. He'll be disappointed though. Nothing he gets hold of in that way will do him a mite of good."

"He's coming down now," said Miss Marple, glancing up towards the hotel.

"Time for that idiotic sea dip of mine."

He spoke again—very quietly.

"As for you—don't be too enterprising. We don't want to be attending *your* funeral next. Remember your age, and be careful. There's somebody about who isn't too scrupulous, remember."

Twenty

NIGHT ALARM

I

Evening came—The lights came up on the terrace—People dined and talked and laughed, albeit less loudly and merrily than they had a day or two ago—The steel band played.

But the dancing ended early. People yawned—went off to bed—The lights went out—There was darkness and stillness—The Golden Palm Tree slept....

"Evelyn. Evelyn!" The whisper came sharp and urgent.

Evelyn Hillingdon stirred and turned on her pillow.

"*Evelyn*. Please wake up."

Evelyn Hillingdon sat up abruptly. Tim Kendal was standing in the doorway. She stared at him in surprise.

"Evelyn, *please*, could you come? It's—Molly. She's ill. I don't know what's the matter with her. I think she must have taken something."

Evelyn was quick, decisive.

"All right, Tim. I'll come. You go back to her. I'll be with you in a moment."

Tim Kendal disappeared. Evelyn slipped out of bed, threw on a dressing gown and looked across at the other bed. Her husband, it seemed, had not been awakened. He lay there, his head turned

away, breathing quietly. Evelyn hesitated for a moment, then decided not to disturb him. She went out of the door and walked rapidly to the main building and beyond it to the Kendals' bungalow. She caught up with Tim in the doorway.

Molly lay in bed. Her eyes were closed and her breathing was clearly not natural. Evelyn bent over her, rolled up an eyelid, felt her pulse and then looked at the bedside table. There was a glass there which had been used. Beside it was an empty phial of tablets. She picked it up.

"They were her sleeping pills," said Tim, "but that bottle was half full yesterday or the day before. I think she must have taken the lot."

"Go and get Dr. Graham," said Evelyn, "and on the way knock them up and tell them to make strong coffee. Strong as possible. Hurry."

Tim dashed off. Just outside the doorway he collided with Edward Hillingdon.

"Oh, sorry, Edward."

"What's happening here?" demanded Hillingdon. "What's going on?"

"It's Molly. Evelyn's with her. I must get hold of the doctor. I suppose I ought to have gone to him first but I—I wasn't sure and I thought Evelyn would know. Molly would have hated it if I'd fetched a doctor when it wasn't necessary."

He went off, running. Edward Hillingdon looked after him for a moment and then he walked into the bedroom.

"What's happening?" he said. "Is it serious?"

"Oh, there you are, Edward. I wondered if you'd woken up. This silly child has been taking things."

"Is it bad?"

"One can't tell without knowing how much she's taken. I shouldn't think it was too bad if we get going in time. I've sent for coffee. If we can get some of that down her—"

"But why should she do such a thing? You don't think—" He stopped.

"What don't I think?" said Evelyn.

"You don't think it's because of the inquiry—the police—all that?"

"It's possible, of course. That sort of thing could be very alarming to a nervous type."

"Molly never used to seem a nervous type."

"One can't really tell," said Evelyn. "It's the most unlikely people sometimes who lose their nerve."

"Yes, I remember..." Again he stopped.

"The truth is," said Evelyn, "that one doesn't really know anything about anybody." She added, "Not even the people who are nearest to you..."

"Isn't that going a little too far, Evelyn—exaggerating too much?"

"I don't think it is. When you think of people, it is in the image you have made of them for yourself."

"I know you," said Edward Hillingdon quietly.

"You think you do."

"No. I'm sure." He added, "And you're sure of me."

Evelyn looked at him then turned back to the bed. She took Molly by the shoulders and shook her.

"We ought to be doing something, but I suppose it's better to wait until Dr. Graham comes—Oh, I think I hear them."

II

"She'll do now." Dr. Graham stepped back, wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and breathed a sigh of relief.

"You think she'll be all right, sir?" Tim demanded anxiously.

"Yes, yes. We got to her in good time. Anyway, she probably didn't take enough to kill her. A couple of days and she'll be as right as rain but she'll have a rather nasty day or two first." He picked up the empty bottle. "Who gave her these things anyway?"

"A doctor in New York. She wasn't sleeping well."

"Well, well. I know all we medicos hand these things out freely nowadays. Nobody tells young women who can't sleep to count sheep, or get up and eat a biscuit, or write a couple of letters and then go back to bed. Instant remedies, that's what people demand nowadays. Sometimes I think it's a pity we give them to them."

You've got to learn to put up with things in life. All very well to stuff a comforter into a baby's mouth to stop it crying. Can't go on doing that all a person's life." He gave a small chuckle. "I bet you, if you asked Miss Marple what she does if she can't sleep, she'd tell you she counted sheep going under a gate." He turned back to the bed where Molly was stirring. Her eyes were open now. She looked at them without interest or recognition. Dr. Graham took her hand.

"Well, well, my dear, and what have you been doing to yourself?"

She blinked but did not reply.

"Why did you do it, Molly, why? Tell me why?" Tim took her other hand.

Still her eyes did not move. If they rested on anyone it was on Evelyn Hillingdon. There might have been even a faint question in them but it was hard to tell. Evelyn spoke as though there had been the question.

"Tim came and fetched me," she said.

Her eyes went to Tim, then shifted to Dr. Graham.

"You're going to be all right now," said Dr. Graham, "but don't do it again."

"She didn't mean to do it," said Tim quietly. "I'm sure she didn't mean to do it. She just wanted a good night's rest. Perhaps the pills didn't work at first and so she took more of them. Is that it, Molly?"

Her head moved very faintly in a negative motion.

"You mean—you took them on purpose?" said Tim.

Molly spoke then. "Yes," she said.

"But why, Molly, why?"

The eyelids faltered. "Afraid." The word was just heard.

"Afraid? Of what?"

But her eyelids closed down.

"Better let her be," said Dr. Graham. Tim spoke impetuously.

"Afraid of what? The police? Because they've been hounding you, asking you questions? I don't wonder. Anyone might feel frightened. But it's just their way, that's all. Nobody thinks for one moment—" he broke off.

Dr. Graham made him a decisive gesture.

"I want to go to sleep," said Molly.

"The best thing for you," said Dr. Graham.

He moved to the door and the others followed him.

"She'll sleep all right," said Graham.

"Is there anything I ought to do?" asked Tim. He had the usual, slightly apprehensive attitude of a man in illness.

"I'll stay if you like," said Evelyn kindly.

"Oh no. No, that's quite all right," said Tim.

Evelyn went back towards the bed. "Shall I stay with you, Molly?"

Molly's eyes opened again. She said, "No," and then after a pause, "just Tim."

Tim came back and sat down by the bed.

"I'm here, Molly," he said and took her hand. "Just go to sleep. I won't leave you."

She sighed faintly and her eyes closed.

The doctor paused outside the bungalow and the Hillingdons stood with him.

"You're sure there's nothing more I can do?" asked Evelyn.

"I don't think so, thank you, Mrs. Hillingdon. She'll be better with her husband now. But possibly tomorrow—after all, he's got this hotel to run—I think someone should be with her."

"D'you think she might—try again?" asked Hillingdon.

Graham rubbed his forehead irritably.

"One never knows in these cases. Actually, it's most unlikely. As you've seen for yourselves, the restorative treatment is extremely unpleasant. But of course one can never be absolutely certain. She may have more of this stuff hidden away somewhere."

"I should never have thought of suicide in connection with a girl like Molly," said Hillingdon.

Graham said dryly, "It's not the people who are always talking of killing themselves, threatening to do so, who do it. They dramatize themselves that way and let off steam."

"Molly always seemed such a happy girl. I think perhaps"—Evelyn hesitated—"I ought to tell you, Dr. Graham." She told him then about her interview with Molly on the beach the night that Victoria had been killed. Graham's face was very grave when she had finished.

"I'm glad you've told me, Mrs. Hillingdon. There are very definite indications there of some kind of deep-rooted trouble. Yes. I'll have a word with her husband in the morning."

III

"I want to talk to you seriously, Kendal, about your wife."

They were sitting in Tim's office. Evelyn Hillingdon had taken his place by Molly's bedside and Lucky had promised to come and, as she expressed it, "spell her" later. Miss Marple had also offered her services. Poor Tim was torn between his hotel commitments and his wife's condition.

"I can't understand it," said Tim, "I can't understand Molly any longer. She's changed. Changed out of all seeming."

"I understand she's been having bad dreams?"

"Yes. Yes, she complained about them a good deal."

"For how long?"

"Oh, I don't know. About—oh, I suppose a month—perhaps longer. She—we—thought they were just—well, nightmares, you know."

"Yes, yes, I quite understand. But what's a much more serious sign is the fact that she seems to have felt afraid of someone. Did she complain about that to you?"

"Well, yes. She said once or twice that—oh, people were following her."

"Ah! Spying on her?"

"Yes, she did use that term once. She said they were her enemies and they'd followed her here."

"Did she have enemies, Mr. Kendal?"

"No. Of course she didn't."

"No incident in England, anything you know about before you were married?"

"Oh no, nothing of that kind. She didn't get on with her family very well, that was all. Her mother was rather an eccentric woman, difficult to live with perhaps, but...."

"Any signs of mental instability in her family?"

Tim opened his mouth impulsively, then shut it again. He pushed a fountain pen about on the desk in front of him.

The doctor said:

"I must stress the fact that it would be better to tell me, Tim, if that is the case."

"Well, yes, I believe so. Nothing serious, but I believe there was an aunt or something who was a bit batty. But that's nothing. I mean—well you get that in almost any family."

"Oh yes, yes, that's quite true. I'm not trying to alarm you about that, but it just might show a tendency to—well, to break down or imagine things if any stress arose."

"I don't really know very much," said Tim. "After all, people don't pour out all their family histories to you, do they?"

"No, no. Quite so. She had no former friend—she was not engaged to anyone, anyone who might have threatened her or made jealous threats? That sort of thing?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. Molly *was* engaged to some other man before I came along. Her parents were very against it, I understand, and I think she really stuck to the chap more out of opposition and defiance than anything else." He gave a sudden half-grin. "You know what it is when you're young. If people cut up a fuss it makes you much keener on whoever it is."

Dr. Graham smiled too. "Ah yes, one often sees that. One should never take exception to one's children's objectionable friends. Usually they grow out of them naturally. This man, whoever he was, didn't make threats of any kind against Molly?"

"No, I'm sure he didn't. She would have told me. She said herself she just had a silly adolescent craze on him, mainly because he had such a bad reputation."

"Yes, yes. Well, that doesn't sound serious. Now there's another thing. Apparently your wife has had what she describes as blackouts. Brief passages of time during which she can't account for her actions. Did you know about that, Tim?"

"No," said Tim slowly. "No. I didn't. She never told me. I did notice, you know, now you mention it, that she seemed rather vague sometimes and ..." He paused, thinking. "Yes, that explains it. I

couldn't understand how she seemed to have forgotten the simplest things, or sometimes not to seem to know what time of day it was. I just thought she was absent-minded, I suppose."

"What it amounts to, Tim, is just this. I advise you most strongly to take your wife to see a good specialist."

Tim flushed angrily.

"You mean a mental specialist, I suppose?"

"Now, now, don't be upset by labels. A neurologist, a psychologist, someone who specializes in what the layman calls nervous breakdowns. There's a good man in Kingston. Or there's New York of course. There is something that is causing these nervous terrors of your wife's. Something perhaps for which she hardly knows the reason herself. Get advice about her, Tim. Get advice as soon as possible."

He clapped his hand on the young man's shoulder and got up.

"There's no immediate worry. Your wife has good friends and we'll all be keeping an eye on her."

"She won't—you don't think she'll try it again?"

"I think it most unlikely," said Dr. Graham.

"You can't be sure," said Tim.

"One can never be sure," said Dr. Graham, "that's one of the first things you learn in my profession." Again he laid a hand on Tim's shoulder. "Don't worry too much."

"That's easy to say," said Tim as the doctor went out of the door. "Don't worry, indeed! What does he think I'm made of?"

Twenty-one

JACKSON ON COSMETICS

"You're sure you don't mind, Miss Marple?" said Evelyn Hillingdon.

"No, indeed, my dear," said Miss Marple. "I'm only too delighted to be of use in any way. At my age, you know, one feels very useless in the world. Especially when I am in a place like this, just enjoying myself. No duties of any kind. No, I'll be delighted to sit with Molly. You go along on your expedition. Pelican Point, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Evelyn. "Both Edward and I love it. I never get tired of seeing the birds diving down, catching up the fish. Tim's with Molly now. But he's got things to do and he doesn't seem to like her being left alone."

"He's quite right," said Miss Marple. "I wouldn't in his place. One never knows, does one? When anyone has attempted anything of that kind—Well, go along, my dear."

Evelyn went off to join a little group that was waiting for her. Her husband, the Dysons and three or four other people. Miss Marple checked her knitting requirements, saw that she had all she wanted with her, and walked over towards the Kendals' bungalow.

As she came up on to the loggia she heard Tim's voice through the half-open french window.

"If you'd only tell me *why* you did it, Molly. What made you? Was it anything I did? There must be some reason. If you'd only tell me."

Miss Marple paused. There was a little pause inside before Molly spoke. Her voice was flat and tired.

"I don't know, Tim, I really don't know. I suppose—something came over me."

Miss Marple tapped on the window and walked in.

"Oh, there you are, Miss Marple. It is very good of you."

"Not at all," said Miss Marple. "I'm delighted to be of any help. Shall I sit here in this chair? You're looking much better, Molly. I'm so glad."

"I'm all right," said Molly. "Quite all right. Just—oh, just sleepy."

"I shan't talk," said Miss Marple. "You just lie quiet and rest. I'll get on with my knitting."

Tim Kendal threw her a grateful glance and went out. Miss Marple established herself in her chair.

Molly was lying on her left side. She had a half-stupefied, exhausted look. She said in a voice that was almost a whisper:

"It's very kind of you, Miss Marple. I—I think I'll go to sleep."

She half turned away on her pillows and closed her eyes. Her breathing grew more regular though it was still far from normal. Long experience of nursing made Miss Marple almost automatically straighten the sheet and tuck it under the mattress on her side of the bed. As she did so her hand encountered something hard and rectangular under the mattress. Rather surprised she took hold of this and pulled it out. It was a book. Miss Marple threw a quick glance at the girl in the bed, but she lay there utterly quiescent. She was evidently asleep. Miss Marple opened the book. It was, she saw, a current work on nervous diseases. It came open naturally at a certain place which gave a description of the onset of persecution mania and various other manifestations of schizophrenia and allied complaints.

It was not a highly technical book, but one that could be easily understood by a layman. Miss Marple's face grew very grave as she read. After a minute or two she closed the book and stayed thinking. Then she bent forward and with care replaced the book where she had found it, under the mattress.

She shook her head in some perplexity. Noiselessly she rose from her chair. She walked the few steps towards the window, then turned her head sharply over her shoulder. Molly's eyes were open but even as Miss Marple turned the eyes shut again. For a minute or two Miss Marple was not quite certain whether she might not have imagined that quick, sharp glance. Was Molly then only pretending to be asleep? That might be natural enough. She might feel that Miss Marple would start talking to her if she showed herself awake. Yes, that could be all it was.

Was she reading into that glance of Molly's a kind of slyness that was somehow innately disagreeable? One doesn't know, Miss Marple thought to herself, one really doesn't know.

She decided that she would try to manage a little talk with Dr. Graham as soon as it could be managed. She came back to her chair by the bed. She decided after about five minutes or so that Molly was really asleep. No one could have lain so still, could have breathed so evenly. Miss Marple got up again. She was wearing her plimsolls today. Not perhaps very elegant, but admirably suited to this climate and comfortable and roomy for the feet.

She moved gently round the bedroom, pausing at both of the windows, which gave out in two different directions.

The hotel grounds seemed quiet and deserted. Miss Marple came back and was standing a little uncertainly before regaining her seat, when she thought she heard a faint sound outside. Like the scrape of a shoe on the loggia? She hesitated a moment then she went to the window, pushed it a little farther open, stepped out and turned her head back into the room as she spoke.

"I shall be gone only a very short time, dear," she said, "just back to my bungalow, to see where I could possibly have put that pattern. I was so sure I had brought it with me. You'll be quite all right till I come back, won't you?" Then turning her head back, she nodded to herself. "Asleep, poor child. A good thing."

She went quietly along the loggia, down the steps and turned sharp right to the path there. Passing along between the screen of some hibiscus bushes an observer might have been curious to see that Miss Marple veered sharply on to the flower bed, passed round

to the back of the bungalow and entered it again through the second door there. This led directly into a small room that Tim sometimes used as an unofficial office and from that into the sitting room.

Here there were wide curtains semi-drawn to keep the room cool. Miss Marple slipped behind one of them. Then she waited. From the window here she had a good view of anyone who approached Molly's bedroom. It was some few minutes, four or five, before she saw anything.

The neat figure of Jackson in his white uniform went up the steps of the loggia. He paused for a minute at the balcony there, and then appeared to be giving a tiny discreet tap on the door of the window that was ajar. There was no response that Miss Marple could hear. Jackson looked around him, a quick furtive glance, then he slipped inside the open doors. Miss Marple moved to the door which led into the adjoining bathroom. Miss Marple's eyebrows rose in slight surprise. She reflected a minute or two, then walked out into the passageway and into the bathroom by the other door.

Jackson spun round from examining the shelf over the washbasin. He looked taken aback, which was not surprising.

"Oh," he said, "I—I didn't..."

"Mr. Jackson," said Miss Marple, in great surprise.

"I thought you'd be here somewhere," said Jackson.

"Did you want anything?" inquired Miss Marple.

"Actually," said Jackson, "I was just looking at Mrs. Kendal's brand of face cream."

Miss Marple appreciated the fact that as Jackson was standing with a jar of face cream in his hand he had been adroit in mentioning the fact at once.

"Nice smell," he said, wrinkling up his nose. "Fairly good stuff, as these preparations go. The cheaper brands don't suit every skin. Bring it out in a rash as likely as not. The same thing with face powders sometimes."

"You seem to be very knowledgeable on the subject," said Miss Marple.

"Worked in the pharmaceutical line for a bit," said Jackson. "One learns to know a good deal about cosmetics there. Put stuff in a fancy jar, package it expensively, and it's astonishing what you could rook women for."

"Is that what you—?" Miss Marple broke off deliberately.

"Well no, I didn't come in here to talk about cosmetics," Jackson agreed.

"You've not had much time to think up a lie," thought Miss Marple to herself. "Let's see what you'll come out with."

"Matter of fact," said Jackson, "Mrs. Walters lent her lipstick to Mrs. Kendal the other day. I came in to get it back for her. I tapped on the window and then I saw Mrs. Kendal was fast asleep, so I thought it would be quite all right if I just walked across into the bathroom and looked for it."

"I see," said Miss Marple. "And did you find it?"

Jackson shook his head. "Probably in one of her handbags," he said lightly. "I won't bother. Mrs. Walters didn't make a point of it. She only just mentioned it casually." He went on, surveying the toilet preparations: "Doesn't have very much, does she? Ah well, doesn't need it at her age. Good natural skin."

"You must look at women with quite a different eye from ordinary men," said Miss Marple, smiling pleasantly.

"Yes. I suppose various jobs do alter one's angle."

"You know a good deal about drugs?"

"Oh yes. Good working acquaintance with them. If you ask me, there are too many of them about nowadays. Too many tranquillizers and pep pills and miracle drugs and all the rest of it. All right if they're given on prescription, but there are too many of them you can get without prescription. Some of them can be dangerous."

"I suppose so," said Miss Marple. "Yes, I suppose so."

"They have a great effect, you know, on behaviour. A lot of this teenage hysteria you get from time to time. It's not natural causes. The kids've been taking things. Oh, there's nothing new about it. It's been known for ages. Out in the East—not that I've ever been there—all sorts of funny things used to happen. You'd be surprised at some of the things women gave their husbands. In India, for

example, in the bad old days, a young wife who married an old husband. Didn't want to get rid of him, I suppose, because she'd have been burnt on the funeral pyre, or if she wasn't burnt she'd have been treated as an outcast by the family. No catch to have been a widow in India in those days. But she could keep an elderly husband under drugs, make him semi-imbecile, give him hallucinations, drive him more or less off his head." He shook his head. "Yes, lot of dirty work."

He went on: "And witches, you know. There's a lot of interesting things known now about witches. Why did they always confess, why did they admit so readily that they *were* witches, that they had flown on broomsticks to the Witches' Sabbath?"

"Torture," said Miss Marple.

"Not always," said Jackson. "Oh yes, torture accounted for a lot of it, but they came out with some of those confessions almost before torture was mentioned. They didn't so much confess as boast about it. Well, they rubbed themselves with ointment, you know. Anointing they used to call it. Some of the preparations, belladonna, atropine, all that sort of thing; if you rub them on the skin they give you hallucinations of levitation, of flying through the air. They thought it all was genuine, poor devils. And look at the Assassins—medieval people, out in Syria, the Lebanon, somewhere like that. They fed them Indian hemp, gave them hallucinations of Paradise and houris, and endless time. They were told that that was what would happen to them after death, but to attain it they had to go and do a ritual killing. Oh, I'm not putting it in fancy language, but that's what it came to."

"What it came to," said Miss Marple, "is in essence the fact that people are highly credulous."

"Well yes, I suppose you could put it like that."

"They believe what they are told," said Miss Marple. "Yes indeed, we're all inclined to do that," she added. Then she said sharply, "Who told you these stories about India, about the doping of husbands with datura," and she added sharply, before he could answer, "Was it Major Palgrave?"

Jackson looked slightly surprised. "Well—yes, as a matter of fact, it was. He told me a lot of stories like that. Of course most of it must have been before his time, but he seemed to know all about it."

"Major Palgrave was under the impression that he knew a lot about everything," said Miss Marple. "He was often inaccurate in what he told people." She shook her head thoughtfully. "Major Palgrave," she said, "has a lot to answer for."

There was a slight sound from the adjoining bedroom. Miss Marple turned her head sharply. She went quickly out of the bathroom into the bedroom. Lucky Dyson was standing just inside the window.

"I—oh! I didn't think you were here, Miss Marple."

"I just stepped into the bathroom for a moment," said Miss Marple, with dignity and a faint air of Victorian reserve.

In the bathroom, Jackson grinned broadly. Victorian modesty always amused him.

"I just wondered if you'd like me to sit with Molly for a bit," said Lucky. She looked over towards the bed. "She's asleep, isn't she?"

"I think so," said Miss Marple. "But it's really quite all right. You go and amuse yourself, my dear. I thought you'd gone on that expedition?"

"I was going," said Lucky, "but I had such a filthy headache that at the last moment I cried off. So I thought I might as well make myself useful."

"That was very nice of you," said Miss Marple. She reseated herself by the bed and resumed her knitting, "but I'm *quite* happy here."

Lucky hesitated for a moment or two and then turned away and went out. Miss Marple waited a moment then tiptoed back into the bathroom, but Jackson had departed, no doubt through the other door. Miss Marple picked up the jar of face cream he had been holding, and slipped it into her pocket.

Twenty-two

A MAN IN HER LIFE?

Getting a little chat in a natural manner with Dr. Graham was not so easy as Miss Marple had hoped. She was particularly anxious not to approach him directly since she did not want to lend undue importance to the questions that she was going to ask him.

Tim was back, looking after Molly, and Miss Marple had arranged that she should relieve him there during the time that dinner was served and he was needed in the dining room. He had assured her that Mrs. Dyson was quite willing to take that on, or even Mrs. Hillingdon, but Miss Marple said firmly that they were both young women who liked enjoying themselves and that she herself preferred a light meal early and so that would suit everybody. Tim once again thanked her warmly. Hovering rather uncertainly round the hotel and on the pathway which connected with various bungalows, among them Dr. Graham's, Miss Marple tried to plan what she was going to do next.

She had a lot of confused and contradictory ideas in her head and if there was one thing that Miss Marple did not like, it was to have confused and contradictory ideas. This whole business had started out clearly enough. Major Palgrave with his regrettable capacity for telling stories, his indiscretion that had obviously been overheard

and the corollary, his death within twenty-four hours. Nothing difficult about *that*, thought Miss Marple.

But afterwards, she was forced to admit, there was nothing *but* difficulty. Everything pointed in too many different directions at once. Once admit that you didn't believe a word that anybody had said to you, that nobody could be trusted, and that many of the persons with whom she had conversed here had regrettable resemblances to certain persons at St. Mary Mead, and where did that lead you?

Her mind was increasingly focused on the victim. Someone was going to be killed and she had the increasing feeling that she ought to know quite well who that someone was. There had been *something*. Something she had heard? Noticed? Seen?

Something someone had told her that had a bearing on the case. Joan Prescott? Joan Prescott had said a lot of things about a lot of people. Scandal? Gossip? What exactly *had* Joan Prescott said?

Gregory Dyson, Lucky—Miss Marple's mind hovered over Lucky. Lucky, she was convinced with a certainty born of her natural suspicions, had been actively concerned in the death of Gregory Dyson's first wife. Everything pointed to it. Could it be that the predestined victim over whom she was worrying was Gregory Dyson? That Lucky intended to try her luck again with another husband, and for that reason wanted not only freedom but the handsome inheritance that she would get as Gregory Dyson's widow?

"But really," said Miss Marple to herself, "this is all pure conjecture. I'm being stupid. I know I'm being stupid. The truth must be quite plain, if one could just clear away the litter. Too much litter, that's what's the matter."

"Talking to yourself?" said Mr. Rafiel.

Miss Marple jumped. She had not noticed his approach. Esther Walters was supporting him and he was coming slowly down from his bungalow to the terrace.

"I really didn't notice you, Mr. Rafiel."

"Your lips were moving. What's become of all this urgency of yours?"

"It's still urgent," said Miss Marple, "only I can't just see what must be perfectly plain—"

"I'm glad it's as simple as that—Well, if you want any help, count on me."

He turned his head as Jackson approached them along the path.

"So there you are, Jackson. Where the devil have you been? Never about when I want you."

"Sorry, Mr. Rafiel."

Dexterously he slipped his shoulder under Mr. Rafiel's. "Down to the terrace, sir?"

"You can take me to the bar," said Mr. Rafiel. "All right, Esther, you can go now and change into your evening togs. Meet me on the terrace in half an hour."

He and Jackson went off together. Mrs. Walters dropped into the chair by Miss Marple. She rubbed her arm gently.

"He *seems* a very light weight," she observed, "but at the moment my arm feels quite numb. I haven't seen you this afternoon at all, Miss Marple."

"No, I've been sitting with Molly Kendal," Miss Marple explained. "She seems really very much better."

"If you ask me there was never very much wrong with her," said Esther Walters.

Miss Marple raised her eyebrows. Esther Walters's tone had been decidedly dry.

"You mean—you think her suicide attempt...."

"I don't think there *was* any suicide attempt," said Esther Walters. "I don't believe for a moment she took a real overdose and I think Dr. Graham knows that perfectly well."

"Now you interest me very much," said Miss Marple. "I wonder why you say that?"

"Because I'm almost certain that it's the case. Oh, it's a thing that happens very often. It's a way, I suppose, of calling attention to oneself," went on Esther Walters.

"You'll be sorry when I'm dead?" quoted Miss Marple.

"That sort of thing," agreed Esther Walters, "though I don't think that was the motive in this particular instance. That's the sort of

thing you feel like when your husband's playing you up and you're terribly fond of him."

"You don't think Molly Kendal is fond of her husband?"

"Well," said Esther Walters, "do you?"

Miss Marple considered. "I have," she said, "more or less assumed it." She paused a moment before adding, "Perhaps wrongly."

Esther was smiling her rather wry smile.

"I've heard a little about her, you know. About the whole business."

"From Miss Prescott?"

"Oh," said Esther, "from one or two people. There's a man in the case. Someone she was keen on. Her people were dead against him."

"Yes," said Miss Marple, "I did hear that."

"And then she married Tim. Perhaps she was fond of him in a way. But the other man didn't give up. I've wondered once or twice if he didn't actually follow her out here."

"Indeed. But—who?"

"I've no idea who," said Esther, "and I should imagine that they've been very careful."

"You think she cares for this other man?"

Esther shrugged her shoulders. "I dare say he's a bad lot," she said, "but that's very often the kind who knows how to get under a woman's skin and stay there."

"You never heard what kind of a man—what he did—anything like that?"

Esther shook her head. "No. People hazard guesses, but you can't go by that type of thing. He may have been a married man. That may have been why her people disliked it, or he may have been a real bad lot. Perhaps he drank. Perhaps he tangled with the law—I don't know. But she cares for him still. That I know positively."

"You've seen something, heard something?" Miss Marple hazarded.

"I know what I'm talking about," said Esther. Her voice was harsh and unfriendly.

"These murders—" began Miss Marple.

"Can't you forget murders?" said Esther. "You've got Mr. Rafiel now all tangled up in them. Can't you just—let them be? You'll never find out any more, I'm sure of that."

Miss Marple looked at her.

"You think you know, don't you?" she said.

"I think I do, yes. I'm fairly sure."

"Then oughtn't you to tell what you know—do something about it?"

"Why should I? What good would it do? I couldn't prove anything. What would happen anyway? People get let off nowadays so easily. They call it diminished responsibility and things like that. A few years in prison and you're out again, as right as rain."

"Supposing, because you don't tell what you know, somebody else gets killed—another victim?"

Esther shook her head with confidence. "That won't happen," she said.

"You can't be sure of it."

"I am sure. And in any case I don't see who—" She frowned. "Anyway," she added, almost inconsequently, "perhaps it *is*—diminished responsibility. Perhaps you can't help it—not if you are really mentally unbalanced. Oh, I don't know. By far the best thing would be if she went off with whoever it is, then we could all forget about things."

She glanced at her watch, gave an exclamation of dismay and got up.

"I must go and change."

Miss Marple sat looking after her. Pronouns, she thought, were always puzzling and women like Esther Walters were particularly prone to strew them about haphazard. Was Esther Walters for some reason convinced that a *woman* had been responsible for the deaths of Major Palgrave and Victoria? It sounded like it. Miss Marple considered.

"Ah, Miss Marple, sitting here all alone—and not even knitting?"

It was Dr. Graham for whom she had sought so long and so unsuccessfully. And here he was prepared of his own accord to sit down for a few minutes' chat. He wouldn't stay long, Miss Marple

thought, because he too was bent on changing for dinner, and he usually dined fairly early. She explained that she had been sitting by Molly Kendal's bedside that afternoon.

"One can hardly believe she has made such a good recovery so quickly," she said.

"Oh well," said Dr. Graham, "it's not very surprising. She didn't take a very heavy overdose, you know."

"Oh, I understood she'd taken quite a half-bottle full of tablets."

Dr. Graham was smiling indulgently.

"No," he said, "I don't think she took that amount. I dare say she meant to take them, then probably at the last moment she threw half of them away. People, even when they think they want to commit suicide, often don't *really* want to do it. They manage not to take a full overdose. It's not always deliberate deceit, it's just the subconscious looking after itself."

"Or, I suppose it might be deliberate. I mean, wanting it to appear that..." Miss Marple paused.

"It's possible," said Dr. Graham.

"If she and Tim had had a row, for instance?"

"They don't have rows, you know. They seem very fond of each other. Still, I suppose it can always happen once. No, I don't think there's very much wrong with her now. She could really get up and go about as usual. Still, it's safer to keep her where she is for a day or two—"

He got up, nodded cheerfully and went off towards the hotel. Miss Marple sat where she was a little while longer.

Various thoughts passed through her mind—The book under Molly's mattress—The way Molly had feigned sleep—

Things Joan Prescott and, later, Esther Walters, had said....

And then she went back to the beginning of it all—to Major Palgrave—

Something struggled in her mind. Something about Major Palgrave—

Something that if she could only remember—

Twenty-three

THE LAST DAY

I

"A*nd the evening and the morning were the last day,*" said Miss Marple to herself.

Then, slightly confused, she sat upright again in her chair. She had dozed off, an incredible thing to do because the steel band was playing and anyone who could doze off during the steel band—Well, it showed, thought Miss Marple, that she was getting used to this place! What was it she had been saying? Some quotation that she'd got wrong. Last day? *First* day. That's what it ought to be. This wasn't the first day. Presumably it wasn't the last day either.

She sat upright again. The fact was that she was extremely tired. All this anxiety, this feeling of having been shamefully inadequate in some way ... She remembered unpleasantly once more that queer sly look that Molly had given her from under her half-closed eyelids. What had been going on in that girl's head? How different, thought Miss Marple, everything had seemed at first. Tim Kendal and Molly, such a natural happy young couple. The Hillingdons so pleasant, so well-bred, such what is called "nice" people. The gay hearty extrovert, Greg Dyson, and the gay strident Lucky, talking nineteen to the dozen, pleased with herself and the world ... A quartet of people getting on so well together. Canon Prescott, that genial kindly

man. Joan Prescott, an acid streak in her, but a very nice woman, and nice women had to have their gossipy distractions. They have to know what is going on, to know when two and two make four, and when it is possible to stretch them to five! There was no harm in such women. Their tongues wagged but they were kind if you were in misfortune. Mr. Rafiel, a personality, a man of character, a man that you would never by any chance forget. But Miss Marple thought she knew something else about Mr. Rafiel.

The doctors had often given him up, so he had said, but this time, she thought, they had been more certain in their pronouncements. Mr. Rafiel knew that his days were numbered.

Knowing this with certainty, was there any action he might have been likely to take?

Miss Marple considered the question.

It might, she thought, be important.

What was it exactly he had said, his voice a little too loud, a little too sure? Miss Marple was very skilful in tones of voice. She had done so much listening in her life.

Mr. Rafiel had been telling her something that wasn't true.

Miss Marple looked round her. The night air, the soft fragrance of flowers, the tables with their little lights, the women with their pretty dresses, Evelyn in a dark indigo and white print, Lucky in a white sheath, her golden hair shining. Everybody seemed gay and full of life tonight. Even Tim Kendal was smiling. He passed her table and said:

"Can't thank you enough for all you've done. Molly's practically herself again. The doc says she can get up tomorrow."

Miss Marple smiled at him and said that that was good hearing. She found it, however, quite an effort to smile. Decidedly, she was tired....

She got up and walked slowly back to her bungalow. She would have liked to go on thinking, puzzling, trying to remember, trying to assemble various facts and words and glances. But she wasn't able to do it. The tired mind rebelled. It said "Sleep! You've got to go to sleep!"

Miss Marple undressed, got into bed, read a few verses of the Thomas à Kempis which she kept by her bed, then she turned out the light. In the darkness she sent up a prayer. One couldn't do everything oneself. One had to have help. "Nothing will happen tonight," she murmured hopefully.

II

Miss Marple woke suddenly and sat up in bed. Her heart was beating. She switched on the light and looked at the little clock by her bedside. Two am. Two am and outside activity of some kind was going on. She got up, put on her dressing gown and slippers, and a woollen scarf round her head and went out to reconnoitre. There were people moving about with torches. Among them she saw Canon Prescott and went to him.

"What's happening?"

"Oh, Miss Marple? It's Mrs. Kendal. Her husband woke up, found she'd slipped out of bed and gone out. We're looking for her."

He hurried on. Miss Marple walked more slowly after him. Where had Molly gone? Why? Had she planned this deliberately, planned to slip away as soon as the guard on her was relaxed, and while her husband was deep in sleep? Miss Marple thought it was probable. But why? What was the reason? Was there, as Esther Walters had so strongly hinted, some other man? If so, who could that man be? Or was there some more sinister reason?

Miss Marple walked on, looking around her, peering under bushes. Then suddenly she heard a faint call:

"Here ... This way...."

The cry had come from some little distance beyond the hotel grounds. It must be, thought Miss Marple, near the creek of water that ran down to the sea. She went in that direction as briskly as she could.

There were not really so many searchers as it had seemed to her at first. Most people must still be asleep in their bungalows. She saw a place on the creek bank where there were people standing. Someone pushed past her, almost knocking her down, running in

that direction. It was Tim Kendal. A minute or two later she heard his voice cry out:

"Molly! My God, Molly!"

It was a minute or two before Miss Marple was able to join the little group. It consisted of one of the Cuban waiters, Evelyn Hillingdon, and two of the native girls. They had parted to let Tim through. Miss Marple arrived as he was bending over to look.

"Molly ..." He slowly dropped on to his knees. Miss Marple saw the girl's body clearly, lying there in the creek, her face below the level of the water, her golden hair spread over the pale green embroidered shawl that covered her shoulders. With the leaves and rushes of the creek, it seemed almost like a scene from *Hamlet* with Molly as the dead Ophelia....

As Tim stretched out a hand to touch her, the quiet, commonsense Miss Marple took charge and spoke sharply and authoritatively.

"Don't move her, Mr. Kendal," she said. "She mustn't be moved."

Tim turned a dazed face up to her.

"But—I must—it's Molly. I must...."

Evelyn Hillingdon touched his shoulder.

"She's dead, Tim. I didn't move her, but I did feel her pulse."

"Dead?" said Tim unbelievably. "Dead? You mean she's—*drowned* herself?"

"I'm afraid so. It looks like it."

"But *why?*" A great cry burst from the young man. "*Why?* She was so happy this morning. Talking about what we'd do tomorrow. Why should this terrible death wish come over her again? Why should she steal away as she did—rush out into the night, come down here and drown herself? What despair did she have—what misery—why couldn't she *tell* me anything?"

"I don't know, my dear," said Evelyn gently. "I don't know."

Miss Marple said:

"Somebody had better get Dr. Graham. And someone will have to telephone the police."

"The police?" Tim uttered a bitter laugh. "What good will they be?"

"The police have to be notified in a case of suicide," said Miss Marple.

Tim rose slowly to his feet.

"I'll get Graham," he said heavily. "Perhaps—even now—he could—do something."

He stumbled away in the direction of the hotel.

Evelyn Hillingdon and Miss Marple stood side by side looking down at the dead girl.

Evelyn shook her head. "It's too late. She's quite cold. She must have been dead at least an hour—perhaps more. What a tragedy it all is. Those two always seemed so happy. I suppose she was always unbalanced."

"No," said Miss Marple. "I don't think she was unbalanced."

Evelyn looked at her curiously. "What do you mean?"

The moon had been behind a cloud, but now it came out into the open. It shone with a luminous silvery brightness on Molly's outspread hair....

Miss Marple gave a sudden ejaculation. She bent down, peering, then stretched out her hand and touched the golden head. She spoke to Evelyn Hillingdon, and her voice sounded quite different.

"I think," she said, "that we had better make sure."

Evelyn Hillingdon stared at her in astonishment.

"But you yourself told Tim we mustn't touch anything?"

"I know. But the moon wasn't out. I hadn't seen—"

Her finger pointed. Then, very gently, she touched the blonde hair and parted it so that the roots were exposed....

Evelyn gave a sharp ejaculation.

"*Lucky!*"

And then after a moment she repeated:

"Not Molly ... Lucky."

Miss Marple nodded. "Their hair was of much the same colour—but hers, of course, was dark at the roots because it was dyed."

"But she's wearing Molly's shawl?"

"She admired it. I heard her say she was going to get one like it. Evidently she did."

"So that's why we were—deceived...."

Evelyn broke off as she met Miss Marple's eyes watching her.

"Someone," said Miss Marple, "will have to tell her husband."

There was a moment's pause, then Evelyn said:

"All right. I'll do it."

She turned and walked away through the palm trees.

Miss Marple remained for a moment motionless, then she turned her head very slightly, and said:

"Yes, Colonel Hillingdon?"

Edward Hillingdon came from the trees behind her to stand by her side.

"You knew I was there?"

"You cast a shadow," said Miss Marple.

They stood a moment in silence.

He said, more as though he were speaking to himself:

"So, in the end, she played her luck too far..."

"You are, I think, glad that she is dead?"

"And that shocks you? Well, I will not deny it. I am glad she is dead."

"Death is often a solution to problems."

Edward Hillingdon turned his head slowly. Miss Marple met his eyes calmly and steadfastly.

"If you think—" he took a sharp step towards her.

There was a sudden menace in his tone.

Miss Marple said quietly:

"Your wife will be back with Mr. Dyson in a moment. Or Mr. Kendal will be here with Dr. Graham."

Edward Hillingdon relaxed. He turned back to look down at the dead woman.

Miss Marple slipped away quietly. Presently her pace quickened.

Just before reaching her own bungalow, she paused. It was here that she had sat that day talking to Major Palgrave. It was here that he had fumbled in his wallet looking for the snapshot of a murderer...

She remembered how he had looked up, and how his face had gone purple and red.... "So ugly," as Señora de Caspearo had said. "He has the Evil Eye."

The Evil Eye ... Eye ...*Eye*....

Twenty-four

NEMESIS

I

Whatever the alarms and excursions of the night, Mr. Rafiel had not heard them.

He was fast asleep in bed, a faint thin snore coming from his nostrils, when he was taken by the shoulders and shaken violently.

"Eh—what—what the devil's this?"

"It's me," said Miss Marple, for once ungrammatical, "though I should put it a little more strongly than that. The Greeks, I believe, had a word for it. Nemesis, if I am not wrong."

Mr. Rafiel raised himself on his pillows as far as he could. He stared at her. Miss Marple, standing there in the moonlight, her head encased in a fluffy scarf of pale pink wool, looked as unlike a figure of Nemesis as it was possible to imagine.

"So you're Nemesis, are you?" said Mr. Rafiel after a momentary pause.

"I hope to be—with your help."

"Do you mind telling me quite plainly what you're talking about like this in the middle of the night?"

"I think we may have to act quickly. Very quickly. I have been foolish. Extremely foolish. I ought to have known from the very beginning what all this was about. It was so simple."

"What was simple, and what are you talking about?"

"You slept through a good deal," said Miss Marple. "A body was found. We thought at first it was the body of Molly Kendal. It wasn't, it was Lucky Dyson. Drowned in the creek."

"Lucky, eh?" said Mr. Rafiel. "And drowned? In the creek. Did she drown herself or did somebody drown her?"

"Somebody drowned her," said Miss Marple.

"I see. At least I think I see. That's what you mean by saying it's so simple, is it? Greg Dyson was always the first possibility, and he's the right one. Is that it? Is that what you're thinking? And what you're afraid of is that he may get away with it."

Miss Marple took a deep breath.

"Mr. Rafiel, will you trust me? We have got to stop a murder being committed."

"I thought you said it *had* been committed."

"That murder was committed in error. Another murder may be committed any moment now. There's no time to lose. We must prevent it happening. We must go at once."

"It's all very well to talk like that," said Mr. Rafiel. "*We*, you say? What do you think *I* can do about it? I can't even walk without help. How can you and I set about preventing a murder? You're about a hundred and I'm a broken-up old crock."

"I was thinking of Jackson," said Miss Marple. "Jackson will do what you tell him, won't he?"

"He will indeed," said Mr. Rafiel, "especially if I add that I'll make it worth his while. Is that what you want?"

"Yes. Tell him to come with me and tell him to obey any orders I give him."

Mr. Rafiel looked at her for about six seconds. Then he said:

"Done. I expect I'm taking the biggest risk of my life. Well, it won't be the first one." He raised his voice. "Jackson." At the same time he picked up the electric bell that lay beside his hand and pressed the button.

Hardly thirty seconds passed before Jackson appeared through the connecting door to the adjoining room.

"You called and rang, sir? Anything wrong?" He broke off, staring at Miss Marple.

"Now, Jackson, do as I tell you. You will go with this lady, Miss Marple. You'll go where she takes you and you'll do exactly as she says. You'll obey every order she gives you. Is that understood?"

"I—"

"Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"And for doing that," said Mr. Rafiel, "you won't be the loser. I'll make it worth your while."

"Thank you, sir."

"Come along, Mr. Jackson," said Miss Marple. She spoke over her shoulder to Mr. Rafiel. "We'll tell Mrs. Walters to come to you on your way. Get her to get you out of bed and bring you along."

"Bring me along where?"

"To the Kendals' bungalow," said Miss Marple. "I think Molly will be coming back there."

II

Molly came up the path from the sea. Her eyes stared fixedly ahead of her. Occasionally, under her breath, she gave a little whimper...

She went up the steps of the loggia, paused a moment, then pushed open the window and walked into the bedroom. The lights were on, but the room itself was empty. Molly went across to the bed and sat down. She sat for some minutes, now and again passing her hand over her forehead and frowning. Then, after a quick surreptitious glance round, she slipped her hand under the mattress and brought out the book that was hidden there. She bent over it, turning the pages to find what she wanted.

Then she raised her head as a sound of running footsteps came from outside. With a quick guilty movement she pushed the book behind her back.

Tim Kendal, panting and out of breath, came in, and uttered a great sigh of relief at the sight of her.

"Thank God. Where have you been, Molly? I've been searching everywhere for you."

"I went to the creek."

"You went—" he stopped.

"Yes. I went to the creek. But I couldn't wait there. I couldn't. There was someone in the water—and she was dead."

"You mean—Do you know I thought it was *you*. I've only just found out it was Lucky."

"I didn't kill her. Really, Tim, I didn't kill her. I'm sure I didn't. I mean—I'd remember if I did, wouldn't I?"

Tim sank slowly down on the end of the bed.

"You didn't—Are you sure that—? No. No, of course you didn't!" He fairly shouted the words. "Don't start thinking like that, Molly. Lucky drowned herself. Of course she drowned herself. Hillingdon was through with her. She went and lay down with her face in the water—"

"Lucky wouldn't do that. She'd never do that. But *I* didn't kill her. I swear I didn't."

"Darling, of course you didn't!" He put his arms round her but she pulled herself away.

"I hate this place. It ought to be all sunlight. It seemed to be all sunlight. But it isn't. Instead there's a shadow—a big black shadow ... And I'm in it—and I can't get out—"

Her voice had risen to a shout.

"Hush, Molly. For God's sake, hush!" He went into the bathroom, came back with a glass.

"Look. Drink this. It'll steady you."

"I—I can't drink anything. My teeth are chattering so."

"Yes you can, darling. Sit down. Here, on the bed." He put his arm round her. He approached the glass to her lips. "There you are now. Drink it."

A voice spoke from the window.

"Jackson," said Miss Marple clearly. "Go over. Take that glass from him and hold it tightly. Be careful. He's strong and he may be pretty desperate."

There were certain points about Jackson. He was a man with a great love for money, and money had been promised him by his employer, that employer being a man of stature and authority. He was also a man of extreme muscular development heightened by his training. His not to reason why, his but to do.

Swift as a flash he had crossed the room. His hand went over the glass that Tim was holding to Molly's lips, his other arm had fastened round Tim. A quick flick of the wrist and he had the glass. Tim turned on him wildly, but Jackson held him firmly.

"What the devil—let go of me. Let go of me. Have you gone mad? What are you doing?"

Tim struggled violently.

"Hold him, Jackson," said Miss Marple.

"What's going on? What's the matter here?"

Supported by Esther Walters, Mr. Rafiel came through the window.

"You ask what's the matter?" shouted Tim. "Your man's gone mad, stark, staring mad, that's what's the matter. Tell him to let go of me."

"No," said Miss Marple.

Mr. Rafiel turned to her.

"Speak up, Nemesis," he said. "We've got to have chapter and verse of some kind."

"I've been stupid and a fool," said Miss Marple, "but I'm not being a fool now. When the contents of that glass that he was trying to make his wife drink have been analysed, I'll wager—yes, I'll wager my immortal soul that you'll find it's got a lethal dose of narcotic in it. It's the same pattern, you see, the same pattern as in Major Palgrave's story. A wife in a depressed state, and she tries to do away with herself, husband saves her in time. Then the second time she succeeds. Yes, it's the right pattern. Major Palgrave told me the story and he took out a snapshot and then he looked up and saw—"

"Over your right shoulder—" continued Mr. Rafiel.

"No," said Miss Marple, shaking her head. "*He didn't see anything over my right shoulder.*"

"What are you talking about? You told me...."

"I told you wrong. I was completely wrong. I was stupid beyond belief. Major Palgrave *appeared* to me to be looking over my right shoulder, glaring, in fact, at something—But he couldn't have *seen* anything, because he was looking through his left eye and his left eye was his glass eye."

"I remember—he *had* a glass eye," said Mr. Rafiel. "I'd forgotten—or I took it for granted. You mean he couldn't see anything?"

"Of course he could *see*," said Miss Marple. "He could *see* all right, but he could only see with one eye. The eye he *could* see with was his *right* eye. And so, you see, he must have been looking at something or someone not to the right of me but to the *left* of me."

"Was there anyone on the left of you?"

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "Tim Kendal and his wife were sitting not far off. Sitting at a table just by a big hibiscus bush. They were doing accounts there. So you see the Major looked up. His glass left eye was glaring over my shoulder, but what he *saw* with his other eye was a man sitting by a hibiscus bush and the face was the same, only rather older, as the face in the snapshot. Also by a hibiscus bush. Tim Kendal had heard the story the Major had been telling and he saw that the Major had recognized him. So, of course, he had to kill him. Later, he had to kill the girl, Victoria, because she'd seen him putting a bottle of tablets in the Major's room. She didn't think anything of it at first because of course it was quite natural on various occasions for Tim Kendal to go into the guests' bungalows. He might have just been returning something to it that had been left on a restaurant table. But she thought about it and then she asked him questions and so he had to get rid of her. But this is the real murder, the murder he's been planning all along. He's a wife-killer, you see."

"What damned nonsense, what—" Tim Kendal shouted.

There was a sudden cry, a wild angry cry. Esther Walters detached herself from Mr. Rafiel, almost flinging him down, and rushed across the room. She pulled vainly at Jackson.

"Let go of him—let go of him. It's not true. Not a word of it's true. Tim—Tim darling, it's not true. You could never kill anyone, I know you couldn't. I know you wouldn't. It's that horrible girl you married.

She's been telling lies about you. They're not true. None of them are true. I believe in you. I love you and trust in you. I'll never believe a word anyone says. I'll—"

Then Tim Kendal lost control of himself.

"For God's sake, you damned bitch," he said, "shut up, can't you? D'you want to get me hanged? Shut up, I tell you. Shut that big, ugly mouth of yours."

"Poor silly creature," said Mr. Rafiel softly. "So that's what's been going on, is it?"

Twenty-five

MISS MARPLE USES HER IMAGINATION

"So that's what had been going on?" said Mr. Rafiel.

He and Miss Marple were sitting together in a confidential manner.

"She'd been having an affair with Tim Kendal, had she?"

"Hardly an affair, I imagine," said Miss Marple, primly. "It was, I think, a romantic attachment with the prospect of marriage in the future."

"What—after his wife was dead?"

"I don't think poor Esther Walters knew that Molly was going to die," said Miss Marple. "I just think she believed the story Tim Kendal told her about Molly having been in love with another man, and the man having followed her here, and I think she counted on Tim's getting a divorce. I think it was all quite proper and respectable. But she was very much in love with him."

"Well, that's easily understood. He was an attractive chap. But what made *him* go for her—d'you know that too?"

"*You* know, don't you?" said Miss Marple.

"I dare say I've got a pretty fair idea, but I don't know how you should know about it. As far as that goes, I don't see how Tim Kendal could know about it."

"Well, I really think I could explain all that with a little imagination, though it would be simpler if you told me."

"I'm not going to tell you," said Mr. Rafiel. "You tell me, since you're being so clever."

"Well, it seems to me possible," said Miss Marple, "that as I have already hinted to you, your man Jackson was in the habit of taking a good snoop through your various papers from time to time."

"Perfectly possible," said Mr. Rafiel, "but I shouldn't have said there was anything there that could do him much good. I took care of that."

"I imagine," said Miss Marple, "he read your will."

"Oh I see. Yes, yes, I did have a copy of my will along."

"You told me," said Miss Marple, "you told me—(as Humpty Dumpty said—very loud and clear) that you had *not* left anything to Esther Walters in your will. You had impressed that fact upon her, and also upon Jackson. It was true in Jackson's case, I should imagine. You have not left *him* anything, but you *had* left Esther Walters money, though you weren't going to let her have any inkling of the fact. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, it's quite right, but I don't know how *you* knew."

"Well, it's the way you insisted on the point," said Miss Marple. "I have a certain experience of the way people tell lies."

"I give in," said Mr. Rafiel. "All right. I left Esther £50,000. It would come as a nice surprise to her when I died. I suppose that, knowing this, Tim Kendal decided to exterminate his present wife with a nice dose of something or other and marry £50,000 and Esther Walters. Possibly to dispose of her also in good time. But how did *he* know she was going to have £50,000?"

"Jackson told him, of course," said Miss Marple. "They were very friendly, those two. Tim Kendal was nice to Jackson and, quite, I should imagine, without ulterior motive. But amongst the bits of gossip that Jackson let slip I think Jackson told him that unbeknownst to herself, Esther Walters was going to inherit a fat lot of money, and he may have said that he himself hoped to induce Esther Walters to marry him though he hadn't had much success so far in taking her fancy. Yes, I think that's how it happened."

"The things you imagine always seem perfectly plausible," said Mr. Rafiel.

"But I was stupid," said Miss Marple, "very stupid. Everything fitted in really, you see. Tim Kendal was a very clever man as well as being a very wicked one. He was particularly good at putting about rumours. Half the things I've been told here came from him originally, I imagine. There were stories going around about Molly wanting to marry an undesirable young man, but I rather fancy that the undesirable young man was actually Tim Kendal himself, though that wasn't the name he was using then. Her people had heard something, perhaps that his background was fishy. So he put on a high indignation act, refused to be taken by Molly to be 'shown off' to her people and then he brewed up a little scheme with her which they both thought great fun. She pretended to sulk and pine for him. Then a Mr. Tim Kendal turned up, primed with the names of various old friends of Molly's people, and they welcomed him with open arms as being the sort of young man who would put the former delinquent one out of Molly's head. I am afraid Molly and he must have laughed over it a good deal. Anyway, he married her, and with her money he bought out the people who ran this place and they came out here. I should imagine that he ran through her money at a pretty fair rate. Then he came across Esther Walters and he saw a nice prospect of more money."

"Why didn't he bump me off?" said Mr. Rafiel.

Miss Marple coughed.

"I expect he wanted to be fairly sure of Mrs. Walters first. Besides—I mean ..." She stopped, a little confused.

"Besides, he realized he wouldn't have to wait long," said Mr. Rafiel, "and it would clearly be better for me to die a natural death. Being so rich. Deaths of millionaires are scrutinized rather carefully, aren't they, unlike mere wives?"

"Yes, you're quite right. Such a lot of lies as he told," said Miss Marple. "Look at the lies he got Molly herself to believe—putting that book on mental disorders in her way. Giving her drugs which would give her dreams and hallucinations. You know, your Jackson was rather clever over that. I think he recognized certain of Molly's

symptoms as being the result of drugs. And he came into the bungalow that day to potter about a bit in the bathroom. That face cream he examined. He might have got some idea from the old tales of witches rubbing themselves with ointments that had belladonna in them. Belladonna in face cream could have produced just that result. Molly would have blackouts. Times she couldn't account for, dreams of flying through the air. No wonder she got frightened about herself. She had all the signs of mental illness, Jackson was on the right track. Maybe he got the idea from Major Palgrave's stories about the use of datura by Indian women on their husbands."

"Major Palgrave!" said Mr. Rafiel. "Really, that man!"

"He brought about his own murder," said Miss Marple, "and that poor girl Victoria's murder, and he nearly brought about Molly's murder. But he recognized a murderer all right."

"What made you suddenly remember about his glass eye?" asked Mr. Rafiel curiously.

"Something that Señora de Caspearo said. She talked some nonsense about his being ugly, and having the Evil Eye; and I said it was only a glass eye, and he couldn't help that, poor man, and she said his eyes looked different ways, they were cross-eyes—which, of course, they were. And she said it brought bad luck. I knew—I *knew* that I had heard something that day that was important. Last night, just after Lucky's death, it came to me what it was! And then I realized there was no time to waste...."

"How did Tim Kendal come to kill the wrong woman?"

"Sheer chance. I think his plan was this: Having convinced everybody—and that included Molly herself—that she was mentally unbalanced, and after giving her a sizeable dose of the drug he was using, he told her that between them they were going to clear up all these murder puzzles. But she had got to help him. After everyone was asleep, they would go separately and meet at an agreed spot by the creek.

"He said he had a very good idea who the murderer was, and they would trap him. Molly went off obediently—but she was confused and stupefied with the drug she had been given, and it slowed her up. Tim arrived there first and saw what he thought was

Molly. Golden hair and pale green shawl. He came up behind her, put his hand over her mouth, and forced her down into the water and held her there."

"Nice fellow! But wouldn't it have been easier just to give her an overdose of narcotic?"

"Much easier, of course. But that *might* have given rise to suspicion. All narcotics and sedatives have been very carefully removed from Molly's reach, remember. And if she *had* got hold of a fresh supply, who more likely to have supplied it than her husband? But if, in a fit of despair, she went out and drowned herself whilst her innocent husband slept, the whole thing would be a romantic tragedy, and no one would be likely to suggest that she had been drowned deliberately. Besides," added Miss Marple, "murderers always find it difficult to keep things simple. They can't keep themselves from elaborating."

"You seem convinced you know all there is to be known about murderers! So you believe Tim didn't know he had killed the wrong woman?"

Miss Marple shook her head.

"He didn't even look at her face, just hurried off as quickly as he could, let an hour elapse, then started to organize a search for her, playing the part of a distracted husband."

"But what the devil was Lucky doing hanging about the creek in the middle of the night?"

Miss Marple gave an embarrassed little cough.

"It is possible, I think, that she was—er—waiting to meet someone."

"Edward Hillingdon?"

"Oh *no*," said Miss Marple. "That's all over, I wondered whether—just possibly—she might have been waiting for Jackson."

"Waiting for *Jackson*?"

"I've noticed her—look at him once or twice," murmured Miss Marple, averting her eyes.

Mr. Rafiel whistled.

"My Tom Cat Jackson! I wouldn't put it past him! Tim must have had a shock later when he found he'd killed the wrong woman."

"Yes, indeed. He must have felt quite desperate. Here was Molly alive and wandering about. And the story he'd circulated so carefully about her mental condition wouldn't stand up for a moment once she got into the hands of competent mental specialists. And once she told her damning story of his having asked her to meet him at the creek, where would Tim Kendal be? He'd only one hope—to finish off Molly as quickly as possible. Then there was a very good chance that everyone would believe that Molly, in a fit of mania, had drowned Lucky, and had then, horrified by what she had done, taken her own life."

"And it was then," said Mr. Rafiel, "that you decided to play Nemesis, eh?"

He leaned back suddenly and roared with laughter. "It's a damned good joke," he said. "If you knew what you looked like that night with that fluffy pink wool all round your head, standing there and saying you were Nemesis! I'll never forget it!"

Epilogue

The time had come and Miss Marple was waiting at the airport for her plane. Quite a lot of people had come to see her off. The Hillingdons had left already. Gregory Dyson had flown to one of the other islands and the rumour had come that he was devoting himself to an Argentinian widow. Señora de Caspearo had returned to South America.

Molly had come to see Miss Marple off. She was pale and thin but she had weathered the shock of her discovery bravely and with the help of one of Mr. Rafiel's nominees whom he had wired for to England, she was carrying on with the running of the hotel.

"Do you good to be busy," Mr. Rafiel observed. "Keep you from thinking. Got a good thing here."

"You don't think the murders—"

"People love murders when they're all cleared up," Mr. Rafiel had assured her. "You carry on, girl, and keep your heart up. Don't distrust all men because you've met one bad lot."

"You sound like Miss Marple," Molly had said, "she's always telling me Mr. Right will come along one day."

Mr. Rafiel grinned at this sentiment. So Molly was there and the two Prescotts and Mr. Rafiel, of course, and Esther—an Esther who looked older and sadder and to whom Mr. Rafiel was quite often unexpectedly kind. Jackson also was very much to the fore, pretending to be looking after Miss Marple's baggage. He was all smiles these days and let it be known that he had come into money.

There was a hum in the sky. The plane was arriving. Things were somewhat informal here. There was no "taking your place by Channel 8" or Channel 9. You just walked out from the little flower-covered pavilion on to the tarmac.

"Goodbye, darling Miss Marple." Molly kissed her.

"Goodbye. Do try and come and visit us." Miss Prescott shook her warmly by the hand.

"It has been a great pleasure to know you," said the Canon. "I second my sister's invitation most warmly."

"All the best, Madam," said Jackson, "and remember any time you want any massage free, just you send me a line and we'll make an appointment."

Only Esther Walters turned slightly away when the time came for goodbyes. Miss Marple did not force one upon her. Mr. Rafiel came last. He took her hand.

"*Ave Caesar, nos morituri te salutamus,*" he said.

"I'm afraid," said Miss Marple, "I don't know very much Latin."

"But you understand that?"

"Yes." She said no more. She knew quite well what he was telling her.

"It has been a great pleasure to know you," she said.

Then she walked across the tarmac and got into the plane.

MISS
MARPLE

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha
Christie

AT



BERTRAM'S



HOTEL

A Miss Marple Mystery

Agatha Christie

At Bertram's Hotel

A Miss Marple Mystery

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*For Harry Smith
because I appreciate the scientific way
he reads my books*

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Credits

Chapter One

In the heart of the West End, there are many quiet pockets, unknown to almost all but taxi drivers who traverse them with expert knowledge, and arrive triumphantly thereby at Park Lane, Berkeley Square or South Audley Street.

If you turn off on an unpretentious street from the Park, and turn left and right once or twice, you will find yourself in a quiet street with Bertram's Hotel on the right-hand side. Bertram's Hotel has been there a long time. During the war, houses were demolished on the right of it, and a little farther down on the left of it, but Bertram's itself remained unscathed. Naturally it could not escape being, as house agents would say, scratched, bruised and marked, but by the expenditure of only a reasonable amount of money it was restored to its original condition. By 1955 it looked precisely as it had looked in 1939—dignified, unostentatious, and quietly expensive.

Such was Bertram's, patronized over a long stretch of years by the higher *échelons* of the clergy, dowager ladies of the aristocracy up from the country, girls on their way home for the holidays from expensive finishing schools. ("So few places where a girl can stay alone in London but of course it is *quite* all right at Bertram's. We have stayed there for *years*.")

There had, of course, been many other hotels on the model of Bertram's. Some still existed, but nearly all had felt the wind of change. They had had necessarily to modernize themselves, to cater for a different clientele. Bertram's, too, had had to change, but it had

been done so cleverly that it was not at all apparent at the first casual glance.

Outside the steps that led up to the big swing doors stood what at first sight appeared to be no less than a Field Marshal. Gold braid and medal ribbons adorned a broad and manly chest. His deportment was perfect. He received you with tender concern as you emerged with rheumatic difficulty from a taxi or a car, guided you carefully up the steps and piloted you through the silently swinging doorway.

Inside, if this was the first time you had visited Bertram's, you felt, almost with alarm, that you had reentered a vanished world. Time had gone back. You were in Edwardian England once more.

There was, of course, central heating, but it was not apparent. As there had always been, in the big central lounge, there were two magnificent coal fires; beside them big brass coal scuttles shone in the way they used to shine when Edwardian housemaids polished them, and they were filled with exactly the rightsized lumps of coal. There was a general appearance of rich red velvet and plushy cosiness. The armchairs were not of this time and age. They were well above the level of the floor, so that rheumatic old ladies had not to struggle in an undignified manner in order to get to their feet. The seats of the chairs did not, as in so many modern high-priced armchairs, stop halfway between the thigh and the knee, thereby inflicting agony on those suffering from arthritis and sciatica; and they were not all of a pattern. There were straight backs and reclining backs, different widths to accommodate the slender and the obese. People of almost any dimension could find a comfortable chair at Bertram's.

Since it was now the tea hour, the lounge hall was full. Not that the lounge hall was the only place where you could have tea. There was a drawing room (chintz), a smoking room (by some hidden influence reserved for gentlemen only), where the vast chairs were of fine leather, two writing rooms, where you could take a special friend and have a cosy little gossip in a quiet corner—and even write a letter as well if you wanted to. Besides these amenities of the Edwardian age, there were other retreats, not in anyway publicized,

but known to those who wanted them. There was a double bar, with two bar attendants, an American barman to make the Americans feel at home and to provide them with bourbon, rye, and every kind of cocktail, and an English one to deal with sherries and Pimm's No. 1, and to talk knowledgeably about the runners at Ascot and Newbury to the middle-aged men who stayed at Bertram's for the more serious race meetings. There was also, tucked down a passage, in a secretive way, a television room for those who asked for it.

But the big entrance lounge was the favourite place for the afternoon tea drinking. The elderly ladies enjoyed seeing who came in and out, recognizing old friends, and commenting unfavourably on how these had aged. There were also American visitors fascinated by seeing the titled English really getting down to their traditional afternoon tea. For afternoon tea was quite a feature of Bertram's.

It was nothing less than splendid. Presiding over the ritual was Henry, a large and magnificent figure, a ripe fifty, avuncular, sympathetic, and with the courtly manners of that long vanished species: the perfect butler. Slim youths performed the actual work under Henry's austere direction. There were large crested silver trays, and Georgian silver teapots. The china, if not actually Rockingham and Davenport, looked like it. The Blind Earl services were particular favourites. The tea was the best Indian, Ceylon, Darjeeling, Lapsang, etc. As for eatables, you could ask for anything you liked—and get it!

On this particular day, November the 17th, Lady Selina Hazy, sixty-five, up from Leicestershire, was eating delicious well-buttered muffins with all an elderly lady's relish.

Her absorption with muffins, however, was not so great that she failed to look up sharply every time the inner pair of swing doors opened to admit a newcomer.

So it was that she smiled and nodded to welcome Colonel Luscombe—erect, soldierly, race glasses hanging round his neck. Like the old autocrat that she was, she beckoned imperiously and, in a minute or two, Luscombe came over to her.

"Hallo, Selina, what brings you up to Town?"

"Dentist," said Lady Selina, rather indistinctly, owing to muffin. "And I thought as I *was* up, I might as well go and see that man in Harley Street about my arthritis. You know who I mean."

Although Harley Street contained several hundreds of fashionable practitioners for all and every ailment, Luscombe did know whom she meant.

"Do you any good?" he asked.

"I rather think he did," said Lady Selina grudgingly. "Extraordinary fellow. Took me by the neck when I wasn't expecting it, and wrung it like a chicken." She moved her neck gingerly.

"Hurt you?"

"It must have done, twisting it like that, but really I hadn't time to know." She continued to move her neck gingerly. "Feels all right. Can look over my right shoulder for the first time in years."

She put this to a practical test and exclaimed, "Why I do believe that's old Jane Marple. Thought she was dead years ago. Looks a hundred."

Colonel Luscombe threw a glance in the direction of Jane Marple thus resurrected, but without much interest: Bertram's always had a sprinkling of what he called fluffy old pussies.

Lady Selina was continuing.

"Only place in London you can still get muffins. Real muffins. Do you know when I went to America last year they had something *called* muffins on the breakfast menu. Not real muffins at all. Kind of teacake with raisins in them. I mean, why call them muffins?"

She pushed in the last buttery morsel and looked round vaguely. Henry materialized immediately. Not quickly or hurriedly. It seemed that, just suddenly, he was there.

"Anything further I can get you, my lady? Cake of any kind?"

"Cake?" Lady Selina thought about it, was doubtful.

"We are serving very good seed cake, my lady. I can recommend it."

"Seed cake? I haven't eaten seed cake for *years*. It is *real* seed cake?"

"Oh, yes, my lady. The cook has had the recipe for years. You'll enjoy it, I'm sure."

Henry gave a glance at one of his retinue, and the lad departed in search of seed cake.

"I suppose you've been at Newbury, Derek?"

"Yes. Darned cold, I didn't wait for the last two races. Disastrous day. That filly of Harry's was no good at all."

"Didn't think she would be. What about Swanhilda?"

"Finished fourth." Luscombe rose. "Got to see about my room."

He walked across the lounge to the reception desk. As he went he noted the tables and their occupants. Astonishing number of people having tea here. Quite like old days. Tea as a meal had rather gone out of fashion since the war. But evidently not at Bertram's. Who *were* all these people? Two Canons and the Dean of Chislehampton. Yes, and another pair of gaitered legs over in the corner, a Bishop, no less! Mere Vicars were scarce. "Have to be at least a Canon to afford Bertram's," he thought. The rank and file of the clergy certainly couldn't, poor devils. As far as that went, he wondered how on earth people like old Selina Hazy could. She'd only got twopence or so a year to bless herself with. And there was old Lady Berry, and Mrs. Posselthwaite from Somerset, and Sybil Kerr—all poor as church mice.

Still thinking about this he arrived at the desk and was pleasantly greeted by Miss Gorringer the receptionist. Miss Gorringer was an old friend. She knew every one of the clientele and, like Royalty, never forgot a face. She looked frumpy but respectable. Frizzled yellowish hair (old-fashioned tongs, it suggested), black silk dress, a high bosom on which reposed a large gold locket and a cameo brooch.

"Number fourteen," said Miss Gorringer. "I think you had fourteen last time, Colonel Luscombe, and liked it. It's quiet."

"How you always manage to remember these things, I can't imagine, Miss Gorringer."

"We like to make our old friends comfortable."

"Takes me back a long way, coming in here. Nothing seems to have changed."

He broke off as Mr. Humfries came out from an inner sanctum to greet him.

Mr. Humfries was often taken by the uninitiated to be Mr. Bertram in person. Who the actual Mr. Bertram was, or indeed, if there ever *had* been a Mr. Bertram was now lost in the mists of antiquity. Bertram's had existed since about 1840, but nobody had taken any interest in tracing its past history. It was just there, solid, in fact. When addressed as Mr. Bertram, Mr. Humfries never corrected the impression. If they wanted him to be Mr. Bertram he would be Mr. Bertram. Colonel Luscombe knew his name, though he didn't know if Humfries was the manager or the owner. He rather fancied the latter.

Mr. Humfries was a man of about fifty. He had very good manners, and the presence of a Junior Minister. He could, at any moment, be all things to all people. He could talk racing shop, cricket, foreign politics, tell anecdotes of Royalty, give Motor Show information, knew the most interesting plays on at present—advise on places Americans ought really to see in England however short their stay. He had knowledgeable information about where it would suit persons of all incomes and tastes to dine. With all this, he did not make himself too cheap. He was not on tap all the time. Miss Gorrington had all the same facts at her fingertips and could retail them efficiently. At brief intervals Mr. Humfries, like the sun, made his appearance above the horizon and flattered someone by his personal attention.

This time it was Colonel Luscombe who was so honoured. They exchanged a few racing platitudes, but Colonel Luscombe was absorbed by his problem. And here was the man who could give him the answer.

"Tell me, Humfries, how do all these old dears manage to come and stay here?"

"Oh you've been wondering about that?" Mr. Humfries seemed amused. "Well, the answer's simple. They couldn't afford it. Unless —"

He paused.

"Unless you make special prices for them? Is that it?"

"More or less. They don't know, usually, that they *are* special prices, or if they do realize it, they think it's because they're old customers."

"And it isn't just that?"

"Well, Colonel Luscombe, I *am* running a hotel. I couldn't afford actually to lose money."

"But how can that pay you?"

"It's a question of atmosphere...Strangers coming to this country (Americans, in particular, because they are the ones who have the money) have their own rather queer ideas of what England is like. I'm not talking, you understand, of the rich business tycoons who are always crossing the Atlantic. They usually go to the Savoy or the Dorchester. They want modern décor, American food, all the things that will make them feel at home. But there are a lot of people who come abroad at rare intervals and who expect this country to be—well, I won't go back as far as Dickens, but they've read *Cranford* and Henry James, and they don't want to find this country just the same as their own! So they go back home afterwards and say: 'There's a wonderful place in London; Bertram's Hotel, it's called. It's just like stepping back a hundred years. It just *is* old England! And the people who stay there! People you'd never come across anywhere else. Wonderful old Duchesses. They serve all the old English dishes, there's a marvellous old-fashioned beefsteak pudding! You've never tasted anything like it; and great sirloins of beef and saddles of mutton, and an old-fashioned English tea and a wonderful English breakfast. And of course all the usual things as well. And it's wonderfully comfortable. *And* warm. Great log fires.'"

Mr. Humfries ceased his impersonation and permitted himself something nearly approaching a grin.

"I see," said Luscombe thoughtfully. "These people; decayed aristocrats, impoverished members of the old County families, they are all so much *mise en scène*?"

Mr. Humfries nodded agreement.

"I really wonder no one else has thought of it. Of course I found Bertram's ready-made, so to speak. All it needed was some rather expensive restoration. All the people who come here think it's something that they've discovered for themselves, that no one else knows about."

"I suppose," said Luscombe, "that the restoration *was* quite expensive?"

"Oh yes. The place has got to *look* Edwardian, but it's got to have the modern comforts that we take for granted in these days. Our old dears—if you will forgive me referring to them as that—have got to feel that nothing has changed since the turn of the century, and our travelling clients have got to feel they can have period surroundings, and still have what they are used to having at home, and can't really live without!"

"Bit difficult sometimes?" suggested Luscombe.

"Not really. Take central heating for instance. Americans require—need, I should say—at least ten degrees Fahrenheit higher than English people do. We actually have two quite different sets of bedrooms. The English we put in one lot, the Americans in the other. The rooms all look alike, but they are full of actual differences—electric razors, and showers as well as tubs in some of the bathrooms, and if you want an American breakfast, it's there—cereals and iced orange juice and all—or if you prefer you can have the English breakfast."

"Eggs and bacon?"

"As you say—but a good deal more than that if you want it. Kippers, kidneys and bacon, cold grouse, York ham. Oxford marmalade."

"I must remember all that tomorrow morning. Don't get that sort of thing anymore at home."

Humfries smiled.

"Most gentlemen only ask for eggs and bacon. They've—well, they've got out of the way of thinking about the things there used to be."

"Yes, yes...I remember when I was a child...Sideboards groaning with hot dishes. Yes, it was a luxurious way of life."

"We endeavour to give people anything they ask for."

"Including seed cake and muffins—yes, I see. To each according to his need—I see...Quite Marxian."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Just a thought, Humfries. Extremes meet."

Colonel Luscombe turned away, taking the key Miss Gorringe offered him. A page boy sprang to attention and conducted him to the lift. He saw in passing that Lady Selina Hazy was now sitting with her friend Jane Something or other.

Chapter Two

"**A**nd I suppose you're still living at that dear St. Mary Mead?" Lady Selina was asking. "Such a sweet unspoilt village. I often think about it. Just the same as ever, I suppose?"

"Well, not quite." Miss Marple reflected on certain aspects of her place of residence. The new Building Estate. The additions to the Village Hall, the altered appearance of the High Street with its up-to-date shop fronts—She sighed. "One has to accept change, I suppose."

"Progress," said Lady Selina vaguely. "Though it often seems to me that it isn't progress. All these smart plumbing fixtures they have nowadays. Every shade of colour and superb what they call 'finish'—but do any of them really *pull*? Or *push*, when they're that kind. Every time you go to a friend's house, you find some kind of a notice in the loo—'Press sharply and release,' 'Pull to the *left*,' 'Release *quickly*.' But in the old days, one just pulled up a handle *any* kind of way, and cataracts of water came *at once*—There's the dear Bishop of Medmenham," Lady Selina broke off to say, as a handsome, elderly cleric passed by. "Practically quite blind, I believe. But such a splendid *militant* priest."

A little clerical talk was indulged in, interspersed by lady Selina's recognition of various friends and acquaintances, many of whom were not the people she thought they were. She and Miss Marple talked a little of "old days," though Miss Marple's upbringing, of course, had been quite different from Lady Selina's, and their reminiscences were mainly confined to the few years when Lady

Selina, a recent widow of severely straitened means, had taken a small house in the village of St. Mary Mead during the time her second son had been stationed at an airfield nearby.

"Do you always stay here when you come up, Jane? Odd I haven't seen you here before."

"Oh no, indeed. I couldn't afford to, and anyway, I hardly ever leave home these days. No, it was a very kind niece of mine who thought it would be a treat for me to have a short visit to London. Joan is a very kind girl—at least perhaps hardly a girl." Miss Marple reflected with a qualm that Joan must now be close on fifty. "She is a painter, you know. Quite a well-known painter. Joan West. She had an exhibition not long ago."

Lady Selina had little interest in painters, or indeed in anything artistic. She regarded writers, artists and musicians as a species of clever performing animal; she was prepared to feel indulgent towards them, but to wonder privately why they wanted to do what they did.

"This modern stuff, I suppose," she said, her eyes wandering. "There's Cicely Longhurst—dyed her hair again, I see."

"I'm afraid dear Joan *is* rather modern."

Here Miss Marple was quite wrong. Joan West had been modern about twenty years ago, but was now regarded by the young *arriviste* artists as completely old-fashioned.

Casting a brief glance at Cicely Longhurst's hair, Miss Marple relapsed into a pleasant remembrance of how kind Joan had been. Joan had actually said to her husband, "I wish we could do something for poor old Aunt Jane. She never gets away from home. Do you think she'd like to go to Bournemouth for a week or two?"

"Good idea," said Raymond West. His last book was doing very well indeed, and he felt in a generous mood.

"She enjoyed her trip to the West Indies, I think, though it was a pity she had to get mixed-up in a murder case. Quite the wrong thing at her age."

"That sort of thing seems to happen to her."

Raymond was very fond of his old aunt and was constantly devising treats for her, and sending her books that he thought might

interest her. He was surprised when she often politely declined the treats, and though she always said the books were "so interesting" he sometimes suspected that she had not read them. But then, of course, her eyes were failing.

In this last he was wrong. Miss Marple had remarkable eyesight for her age, and was at this moment taking in everything that was going on round her with keen interest and pleasure.

To Joan's proffer of a week or two at one of Bournemouth's best hotels, she had hesitated, murmured, "It's very, very kind of you, my dear, but I really don't think—"

"But it's *good* for you, Aunt Jane. Good to get away from home sometimes. It gives you new ideas, and new things to think about."

"Oh yes, you are quite right there, and I *would* like a little visit somewhere for a change. Not, perhaps, Bournemouth."

Joan was slightly surprised. She had thought Bournemouth would have been Aunt Jane's Mecca.

"Eastbourne? Or Torquay?"

"What I would really like—" Miss Marple hesitated.

"Yes?"

"I dare say you will think it rather silly of me."

"No, I'm sure I shan't." (Where *did* the old dear want to go?)

"I would really like to go to Bertram's Hotel—in London."

"Bertram's Hotel?" The name was vaguely familiar.

Words came from Miss Marple in a rush.

"I stayed there once—when I was fourteen. With my uncle and aunt, Uncle Thomas, that was, he was Canon of Ely. And I've never forgotten it. If I could stay there—a week would be quite enough—two weeks might be too expensive."

"Oh, that's all right. Of course you shall go. I ought to have thought that you might want to go to London—the shops and everything. We'll fix it up—if Bertram's Hotel still exists. So many hotels have vanished, sometimes bombed in the war and sometimes just given up."

"No, I happen to know Bertram's Hotel is still going. I had a letter from there—from my American friend Amy McAllister of Boston. She and her husband were staying there."

"Good, then I'll go ahead and fix it up." She added gently, "I'm afraid you may find it's changed a good deal from the days when you knew it. So don't be disappointed."

But Bertram's Hotel had not changed. It was just as it had always been. Quite miraculously so, in Miss Marple's opinion. In fact, she wondered....

It really seemed too good to be true. She knew quite well, with her usual clear-eyed common sense, that what she wanted was simply to refurbish her memories of the past in their old original colours. Much of her life had, perforce, to be spent recalling past pleasures. If you could find someone to remember them with, that was indeed happiness. Nowadays that was not easy to do; she had outlived most of her contemporaries. But she still sat and remembered. In a queer way, it made her come to life again—Jane Marple, that pink and white eager young girl...Such a silly girl in many ways...now who was that very unsuitable young man whose name—oh dear, she couldn't even remember it now! How wise her mother had been to nip that friendship so firmly in the bud. She had come across him years later—and really he was quite dreadful! At the time she had cried herself to sleep for at least a week!

Nowadays, of course—she considered nowadays...These poor young things. Some of them had mothers, but never mothers who seemed to be any good—mothers who were quite incapable of protecting their daughters from silly affairs, illegitimate babies, and early and unfortunate marriages. It was all very sad.

Her friend's voice interrupted these meditations.

"Well, I never. It is—yes, it is—Bess Sedgwick over there! Of all the unlikely places—"

Miss Marple had been listening with only half an ear to Lady Selina's comments on her surroundings. She and Miss Marple moved in entirely different circles, so that Miss Marple had been unable to exchange scandalous titbits about the various friends or acquaintances that Lady Selina recognized or thought she recognized.

But Bess Sedgwick was different. Bess Sedgwick was a name that almost everyone in England knew. For over thirty years now, Bess

Sedgwick had been reported by the Press as doing this or that outrageous or extraordinary thing. For a good part of the war she had been a member of the French Resistance, and was said to have six notches on her gun representing dead Germans. She had flown solo across the Atlantic years ago, had ridden on horseback across Europe and fetched up at Lake Van. She had driven racing cars, had once saved two children from a burning house, had several marriages to her credit and discredit and was said to be the second best-dressed woman in Europe. It was also said that she had successfully smuggled herself aboard a nuclear submarine on its test voyage.

It was therefore with the most intense interest that Miss Marple sat up and indulged in a frankly avid stare.

Whatever she had expected of Bertram's Hotel, it was not to find Bess Sedgwick there. An expensive night club, or a lorry drivers' pull up—either of those would be quite in keeping with Bess Sedgwick's wide range of interests. But this highly respectable and old world hostelry seemed strangely alien.

Still there she was—no doubt of it. Hardly a month passed without Bess Sedgwick's face appearing in the fashion magazines or the popular press. Here she was in the flesh, smoking a cigarette in a quick impatient manner and looking in a surprised way at the large tea tray in front of her as though she had never seen one before. She had ordered—Miss Marple screwed up her eyes and peered—it was rather far away—yes, *doughnuts*. Very interesting.

As she watched, Bess Sedgwick stubbed out her cigarette in her saucer, lifted a doughnut and took an immense bite. Rich red real strawberry jam gushed out over her chin. Bess threw back her head and laughed, one of the loudest and gayest sounds to have been heard in the lounge of Bertram's Hotel for some time.

Henry was immediately beside her, a small delicate napkin proffered. She took it, scrubbed her chin with the vigour of a schoolboy, exclaiming: "That's what I call a *real* doughnut. Gorgeous."

She dropped the napkin on the tray and stood up. As usual every eye was on her. She was used to that. Perhaps she liked it, perhaps

she no longer noticed it. She was worth looking at—a striking woman rather than a beautiful one. The palest of platinum hair fell sleek and smooth to her shoulders. The bones of her head and face were exquisite. Her nose was faintly aquiline, her eyes deep set and a real grey in colour. She had the wide mouth of a natural comedian. Her dress was of such simplicity that it puzzled most men. It looked like the coarsest kind of sacking, had no ornamentation of any kind, and no apparent fastening or seams. But women knew better. Even the provincial old dears in Bertram's knew, quite certainly, that it had cost the earth!

Striding across the lounge towards the lift, she passed quite close to Lady Selina and Miss Marple, and she nodded to the former.

"Hello, Lady Selina. Haven't seen you since Crufts. How are the Borzois?"

"What on earth are you doing here, Bess?"

"Just staying here. I've just driven up from Land's End. Four hours and three-quarters. Not bad."

"You'll kill yourself one of these days. Or someone else."

"Oh I hope not."

"But why are you staying *here*?"

Bess Sedgwick threw a swift glance round. She seemed to see the point and acknowledge it with an ironic smile.

"Someone told me I ought to try it. I think they're right. I've just had the most marvellous doughnut."

"My dear, they have *real* muffins too."

"Muffins," said Lady Sedgwick thoughtfully. "Yes..." She seemed to concede the point. "Muffins!"

She nodded and went on towards the lift.

"Extraordinary girl," said Lady Selina. To her, like to Miss Marple, every woman under sixty was a girl. "Known her ever since she was a child. Nobody could do anything with her. Ran away with an Irish groom when she was sixteen. They managed to get her back in time—or perhaps not in time. Anyway they bought him off and got her safely married to old Coniston—thirty years older than she was, awful old rip, quite dotty about her. *That* didn't last long. She went off with Johnnie Sedgwick. That *might* have stuck if he hadn't

broken his neck steeplechasing. After that she married Ridgway Becker, the American yacht owner. He divorced her three years ago and I hear she's taken up with some Racing Motor Driver—a Pole or something. I don't know whether she's actually married or not. After the American divorce she went back to calling herself Sedgwick. She goes about with *the* most extraordinary people. They *say* she takes drugs...I don't know, I'm sure."

"One wonders if she is happy," said Miss Marple.

Lady Selina, who had clearly never wondered anything of the kind, looked rather startled.

"She's got packets of money, I suppose," she said doubtfully. "Alimony and all that. Of course that isn't everything..."

"No, indeed."

"And she's usually got a man—or several men—in tow."

"Yes?"

"Of course when some women get to that age, that's all they want...But somehow—"

She paused.

"No," said Miss Marple. "*I* don't think so either."

There were people who would have smiled in gentle derision at this pronouncement on the part of an old-fashioned old lady who could hardly be expected to be an authority on nymphomania, and indeed it was not a word that Miss Marple would have used—her own phrase would have been "always too fond of men." But Lady Selina accepted her opinion as a confirmation of her own.

"There have been a lot of men in her life," she pointed out.

"Oh yes, but I should say, wouldn't you, that men were an adventure to her, not a need?"

And would any woman, Miss Marple wondered, come to Bertram's Hotel for an assignation with a man? Bertram's was very definitely not that sort of place. But possibly that could be, to someone of Bess Sedgwick's disposition, the very reason for choosing it.

She sighed, looked up at the handsome grandfather clock decorously ticking in the corner, and rose with the careful effort of the rheumatic to her feet. She walked slowly towards the lift. Lady

Selina cast a glance around her and pounced upon an elderly gentleman of military appearance who was reading the *Spectator*.

"How nice to see you again. Er—it is General Arlington, isn't it?"

But with great courtesy the old gentleman declined being General Arlington. Lady Selina apologized, but was not unduly discomposed. She combined short sight with optimism and since the thing she enjoyed most was meeting old friends and acquaintances, she was always making this kind of mistake. Many other people did the same, since the lights were pleasantly dim and heavily shaded. But nobody ever took offence—usually indeed it seemed to give them pleasure.

Miss Marple smiled to herself as she waited for the lift to come down. So like Selina! Always convinced that she knew everybody. She herself could not compete. Her solitary achievement in that line had been the handsome and well-gaitered Bishop of Westchester whom she had addressed affectionately as "dear Robbie" and who had responded with equal affection and with memories of himself as a child in a Hampshire vicarage calling out lustily "Be a crocodile now, Auntie Janie. Be a crocodile and eat me."

The lift came down, the uniformed middle-aged man threw open the door. Rather to Miss Marple's surprise the alighting passenger was Bess Sedgwick whom she had seen go up only a minute or two before.

And then, one foot poised, Bess Sedgwick stopped dead, with a suddenness that surprised Miss Marple and made her own forward step falter. Bess Sedgwick was staring over Miss Marple's shoulder with such concentration that the old lady turned her own head.

The commissionaire had just pushed open the two swing doors of the entrance and was holding them to let two women pass through into the lounge. One of them was a fussy looking middle-aged lady wearing a rather unfortunate flowered violet hat, the other was a tall, simply but smartly dressed, girl of perhaps seventeen or eighteen with long straight flaxen hair.

Bess Sedgwick pulled herself together, wheeled round abruptly and reentered the lift. As Miss Marple followed her in, she turned to her and apologized.

"I'm so sorry. I nearly ran into you." She had a warm friendly voice. "I just remembered I'd forgotten something—which sounds nonsense but isn't really."

"Second floor?" said the operator. Miss Marple smiled and nodded in acknowledgment of the apology, got out and walked slowly along to her room, pleasurably turning over sundry little unimportant problems in her mind as was so often her custom.

For instance what Lady Sedgwick had said wasn't true. She had only just gone up to her room, and it must have been then that she "remembered she had forgotten something" (if there had been any truth in that statement at all) and had come down to find it. Or had she perhaps come down to meet someone or look for someone? But if so, what she had seen as the lift door opened had startled and upset her, and she had immediately swung into the lift again and gone up so as *not* to meet whoever it was she had seen.

It must have been the two newcomers. The middle-aged woman and the girl. Mother and daughter? No, Miss Marple thought, *not* mother and daughter.

Even at Bertram's, thought Miss Marple, happily, interesting things could happen....

Chapter Three

"Er—is Colonel Luscombe—?"

The woman in the violet hat was at the desk. Miss Gorringer smiled in a welcoming manner and a page, who had been standing at the ready, was immediately dispatched but had no need to fulfil his errand, as Colonel Luscombe himself entered the lounge at that moment and came quickly across to the desk.

"How do you do, Mrs. Carpenter." He shook hands politely, then turned to the girl. "My dear Elvira." He took both hands affectionately in his. "Well, well, this *is* nice. Splendid—splendid. Come and let's sit down." He led them to chairs, established them. "Well, well," he repeated, "this is nice."

The effort he made was somewhat palpable as was his lack of ease. He could hardly go on saying how nice this was. The two ladies were not very helpful. Elvira smiled very sweetly. Mrs. Carpenter gave a meaningless little laugh, and smoothed her gloves.

"A good journey, eh?"

"Yes, thank you," said Elvira.

"No fog. Nothing like that?"

"Oh no."

"Our flight was five minutes ahead of time," said Mrs. Carpenter.

"Yes, yes. Good, very good." He took a pull upon himself. "I hope this place will be all right for you?"

"Oh, I'm sure it's *very* nice," said Mrs. Carpenter warmly, glancing round her. "Very comfortable."

"Rather old-fashioned, I'm afraid," said the Colonel apologetically. "Rather a lot of old fogies. No—er—dancing, anything like that."

"No, I suppose not," agreed Elvira.

She glanced round in an expressionless manner. It certainly seemed impossible to connect Bertram's with dancing.

"Lot of old fogies here, I'm afraid," said Colonel Luscombe, repeating himself. "Ought, perhaps, to have taken you somewhere more modern. Not very well up in these things, you see."

"This is very nice," said Elvira politely.

"It's only for a couple of nights," went on Colonel Luscombe. "I thought we'd go to a show this evening. A musical—" he said the word rather doubtfully, as though not sure he was using the right term. "*Let Down Your Hair Girls*. I hope that will be all right?"

"How delightful," exclaimed Mrs. Carpenter. "That will be a treat, won't it, Elvira?"

"Lovely," said Elvira, tonelessly.

"And then supper afterwards? At the Savoy?"

Fresh exclamations from Mrs. Carpenter. Colonel Luscombe, stealing a glance at Elvira, cheered up a little. He thought that Elvira was pleased, though quite determined to express nothing more than polite approval in front of Mrs. Carpenter. "And I don't blame her," he said to himself.

He said to Mrs. Carpenter:

"Perhaps you'd like to see your rooms—see they're all right and all that—"

"Oh, I'm sure they will be."

"Well, if there's anything you don't like about them, we'll make them change it. They know me here very well."

Miss Gorringer, in charge at the desk, was pleasantly welcoming. Nos 28 and 29 on the second floor with an adjoining bathroom.

"I'll go up and get things unpacked," said Mrs. Carpenter. "Perhaps, Elvira, you and Colonel Luscombe would like to have a little gossip."

Tact, thought Colonel Luscombe. A bit obvious, perhaps, but anyway it would get rid of her for a bit. Though what he was going to gossip about to Elvira, he really didn't know. A very nice-

mannered girl, but he wasn't used to girls. His wife had died in childbirth and the baby, a boy, had been brought up by his wife's family whilst an elder sister had come to keep house for him. His son had married and gone to live in Kenya, and his grandchildren were eleven, five and two and a half and had been entertained on their last visit by football and space science talk, electric trains, and a ride on his foot. Easy! But young girls!

He asked Elvira if she would like a drink. He was about to propose a bitter lemon, ginger ale, or orangeade, but Elvira forestalled him.

"Thank you. I should like a gin and vermouth."

Colonel Luscombe looked at her rather doubtfully. He supposed girls of—what was she? sixteen? seventeen?—did drink gin and vermouth. But he reassured himself that Elvira knew, so to speak, correct Greenwich social time. He ordered a gin and vermouth and a dry sherry.

He cleared his throat and asked:

"How was Italy?"

"Very nice, thank you."

"And that place you were at, the Contessa what's-her-name? Not too grim?"

"She is rather strict. But I didn't let that worry me."

He looked at her, not quite sure whether the reply was not slightly ambiguous.

He said, stammering a little, but with a more natural manner than he had been able to manage before:

"I'm afraid we don't know each other as well as we ought to, seeing I'm your guardian as well as your godfather. Difficult for me, you know—difficult for a man who's an old buffer like me—to know what a girl wants—at least—I mean to know what a girl ought to have. Schools and then after school—what they used to call finishing in my day. But now, I suppose it's all more serious. Careers eh? Jobs? All that? We'll have to have a talk about all that sometime. Anything in particular you want to do?"

"I suppose I shall take a secretarial course," said Elvira without enthusiasm.

"Oh. You want to be a secretary?"

"Not particularly—"

"Oh—well, then—"

"It's just what you start with," Elvira explained.

Colonel Luscombe had an odd feeling of being relegated to his place.

"These cousins of mine, the Melfords. You think you'll like living with them? If not—"

"Oh I think so. I like Nancy quite well. And Cousin Mildred is rather a dear."

"That's all right then?"

"Quite, for the present."

Luscombe did not know what to say to that. Whilst he was considering what next to say, Elvira spoke. Her words were simple and direct.

"Have I any money?"

Again he took his time before answering, studying her thoughtfully. Then he said:

"Yes. You've got quite a lot of money. That is to say, you will have when you are twenty-one."

"Who has got it now?"

He smiled. "It's held in trust for you; a certain amount is deducted each year from the income to pay for your maintenance and education."

"And you are the trustee?"

"One of them. There are three."

"What happens if I die?"

"Come, come, Elvira, you're not going to die. What nonsense!"

"I hope not—but one never knows, does one? An airliner crashed only last week and everyone was killed."

"Well, it's not going to happen to you," said Luscombe firmly.

"You can't really know that," said Elvira. "I was just wondering who would get my money if I died?"

"I haven't the least idea," said the Colonel irritably. "Why do you ask?"

"It might be interesting," said Elvira thoughtfully. "I wondered if it would be worth anyone's while to kill me."

"Really, Elvira! This is a most unprofitable conversation. I can't understand why your mind dwells on such things."

"Oh. Just ideas. One wants to know what the facts really are."

"You're not thinking of the *Mafia*—or something like that?"

"Oh no. That would be silly. Who would get my money if I was married?"

"Your husband, I suppose. But really—"

"Are you sure of that?"

"No, I'm not in the least sure. It depends on the wording of the Trust. But you're not married, so why worry?"

Elvira did not reply. She seemed lost in thought. Finally she came out of her trance and asked:

"Do you ever see my mother?"

"Sometimes. Not very often."

"Where is she now?"

"Oh—abroad."

"Where abroad?"

"France—Portugal. I don't really know."

"Does she ever want to see me?"

Her limpid gaze met his. He didn't know what to reply. Was this a moment for truth? Or for vagueness? Or for a good thumping lie? What could you say to a girl who asked a question of such simplicity, when the answer was of great complexity? He said unhappily:

"I don't know."

Her eyes searched him gravely. Luscombe felt thoroughly ill at ease. He was making a mess of this. The girl must wonder—clearly was wondering. Any girl would.

He said, "You mustn't think—I mean it's difficult to explain. Your mother is, well, rather different from—" Elvira was nodding energetically.

"I know. I'm always reading about her in the papers. She's something rather special, isn't she? In fact, she's rather a wonderful person."

"Yes," agreed the Colonel. "That's exactly right. She's a wonderful person." He paused and then went on. "But a wonderful person is very often—" He stopped and started again—"it's not always a happy

thing to have a wonderful person for a mother. You can take that from me because it's the truth."

"You don't like speaking the truth very much, do you? But I think what you've just said *is* the truth."

They both sat staring towards the big brass-bound swing doors that led to the world outside.

Suddenly the doors were pushed open with violence—a violence quite unusual in Bertram's Hotel—and a young man strode in and went straight across to the desk. He wore a black leather jacket. His vitality was such that Bertram's Hotel took on the atmosphere of a museum by way of contrast. The people were the dust-encrusted relics of a past age. He bent towards Miss Gorringer and asked:

"Is Lady Sedgwick staying here?"

Miss Gorringer on this occasion had no welcoming smile. Her eyes were flinty. She said:

"Yes." Then, with definite unwillingness, she stretched out her hand towards the telephone. "Do you want to—?"

"No," said the young man. "I just wanted to leave a note for her."

He produced it from a pocket of his leather coat and slid it across the mahogany counter.

"I only wanted to be sure this was the right hotel."

There might have been some slight incredulity in his voice as he looked round him, then turned back towards the entrance. His eyes passed indifferently over the people sitting round him. They passed over Luscombe and Elvira in the same way, and Luscombe felt a sudden unsuspected anger. "Dammit all," he thought to himself, "Elvira's a pretty girl. When I was a young chap I'd have noticed a pretty girl, especially among all these fossils." But the young man seemed to have no interested eyes to spare for pretty girls. He turned back to the desk and asked, raising his voice slightly as though to call Miss Gorringer's attention:

"What's the telephone number here? 1129 isn't it?"

"No," said Miss Gorringer, "3925."

"Regent?"

"No. Mayfair."

He nodded. Then swiftly he strode across to the door and passed out, swinging the doors behind him with something of the same explosive quality he had shown on entering.

Everybody seemed to draw a deep breath; to find difficulty in resuming their interrupted conversations.

"Well," said Colonel Luscombe, rather inadequately, as if at a loss for words. "Well, really! These young fellows nowadays..."

Elvira was smiling.

"You recognized him, didn't you?" she said. "You know who he is?" She spoke in a slightly awed voice. She proceeded to enlighten him. "Ladislaus Malinowski."

"Oh, that chap." The name was indeed faintly familiar to Colonel Luscombe. "Racing driver."

"Yes. He was world champion two years running. He had a bad crash a year ago. Broke lots of things. But I believe he's driving again now." She raised her head to listen. "That's a racing car he's driving now."

The roar of the engine had penetrated through to Bertram's Hotel from the street outside. Colonel Luscombe perceived that Ladislaus Malinowski was one of Elvira's heroes. "Well," he thought to himself, "better that than one of those pop singers or crooners or long-haired Beatles or whatever they call themselves." Luscombe was old-fashioned in his views of young men.

The swing doors opened again. Both Elvira and Colonel Luscombe looked at them expectantly but Bertram's Hotel had reverted to normal. It was merely a white-haired elderly cleric who came in. He stood for a moment looking round him with a slightly puzzled air as of one who fails to understand where he was or how he had come there. Such an experience was no novelty to Canon Pennyfather. It came to him in trains when he did not remember where he had come from, where he was going, or why! It came to him when he was walking along the street, it came to him when he found himself sitting on a committee. It had come to him before now when he was in his cathedral stall, and did not know whether he had already preached his sermon or was about to do so.

"I believe I know that old boy," said Luscombe, peering at him. "Who is he now? Stays here fairly often, I believe. Abercrombie? Archdeacon Abercrombie—no, it's not Abercrombie, though he's rather like Abercrombie."

Elvira glanced round at Canon Pennyfather without interest. Compared with a racing driver he had no appeal at all. She was not interested in ecclesiastics of any kind although, since being in Italy, she admitted to a mild admiration for Cardinals whom she considered as at any rate properly picturesque.

Canon Pennyfather's face cleared and he nodded his head appreciatively. He had recognized where he was. In Bertram's Hotel, of course; where he was going to spend the night on his way to—now where was he on his way to? Chadminster? No, no, he had just *come* from Chadminster. He was going to—of course—to the Congress at Lucerne. He stepped forward, beaming, to the reception desk and was greeted warmly by Miss Gorringe.

"So glad to see you, Canon Pennyfather. How well you are looking."

"Thank you—thank you—I had a severe cold last week but I've got over it now. You have a room for me. I *did* write?"

Miss Gorringe reassured him.

"Oh yes, Canon Pennyfather, we got your letter. We've reserved No. 19 for you, the room you had last time."

"Thank you—thank you. For—let me see—I shall want it for four days. Actually I am going to Lucerne and I shall be away for one night, but please keep the room. I shall leave most of my things here and only take a small bag to Switzerland. There won't be any difficulty over that?"

Again Miss Gorringe reassured him.

"Everything's going to be quite all right. You explained very clearly in your letter."

Other people might not have used the word "clearly." "Fully" would have been better, since he had certainly written at length.

All anxieties set at rest, Canon Pennyfather breathed a sigh of relief and was conveyed, together with his baggage, to Room 19.

In Room 28 Mrs. Carpenter had removed her crown of violets from her head and was carefully adjusting her nightdress on the pillow of her bed. She looked up as Elvira entered.

"Ah, there you are, my dear. Would you like me to help you with your unpacking?"

"No, thank you," said Elvira politely. "I shan't unpack very much, you know."

"Which of the bedrooms would you like to have? The bathroom is between them. I told them to put your luggage in the far one. I thought this room might be a little noisy."

"That was very kind of you," said Elvira in her expressionless voice.

"You're sure you wouldn't like me to help you?"

"No, thanks, really I wouldn't. I think I might perhaps have a bath."

"Yes, I think that's a very good idea. Would you like to have the first bath? I'd rather finish putting my things away."

Elvira nodded. She went into the adjoining bathroom, shut the door behind her and pushed the bolts across. She went into her own room, opened her suitcase and flung a few things on the bed. Then she undressed, put on a dressing gown, went into the bathroom and turned the taps on. She went back into her own room and sat down on the bed by the telephone. She listened a moment or two in case of interruption, then lifted the receiver.

"This is Room 29. Can you give me Regent 1129 please?"

Chapter Four

Within the confines of Scotland Yard a conference was in progress. It was by way of being an informal conference. Six or seven men were sitting easily around a table and each of those six men was a man of some importance in his own line. The subject that occupied the attention of these guardians of the law was a subject that had grown terrifically in importance during the last two or three years. It concerned a branch of crime whose success had been overwhelmingly disquieting. Robbery on a big scale was increasing. Bank holdups, snatches of payrolls, thefts of consignments of jewels sent through the mail, train robberies. Hardly a month passed but some daring and stupendous coup was attempted and brought off successfully.

Sir Ronald Graves, Assistant Commissioner of Scotland Yard, was presiding at the head of the table. According to his usual custom he did more listening than talking. No formal reports were being presented on this occasion. All that belonged to the ordinary routine of CID work. This was a high level consultation, a general pooling of ideas between men looking at affairs from slightly different points of view. Sir Ronald Graves' eyes went slowly round his little group, then he nodded his head to a man at the end of the table.

"Well, Father," he said, "let's hear a few homely wisecracks from you."

The man addressed as "Father" was Chief-Inspector Fred Davy. His retirement lay not long ahead and he appeared to be even more elderly than he was. Hence his nickname of "Father." He had a

comfortable spreading presence, and such a benign and kindly manner that many criminals had been disagreeably surprised to find him a less genial and gullible man than he had seemed to be.

"Yes, Father, let's hear your views," said another Chief-Inspector.

"It's big," said Chief-Inspector Davy with a deep sigh. "Yes, it's big. Maybe it's growing."

"When you say big, do you mean numerically?"

"Yes, I do."

Another man, Comstock, with a sharp, foxy face and alert eyes, broke in to say:

"Would you say that was an advantage to them?"

"Yes and no," said Father. "It *could* be a disaster. But so far, devil take it, they've got it all well under control."

Superintendent Andrews, a fair, slight, dreamy-looking man said, thoughtfully:

"I've always thought there's a lot more to size than people realize. Take a little one-man business. If that's well run and if it's the right size, it's a sure and certain winner. Branch out, make it bigger, increase personnel, and perhaps you'll get it suddenly to the *wrong* size and down the hill it goes. The same way with a great big chain of stores. An empire in industry. If that's *big* enough it will succeed. If it's *not* big enough it just won't manage it. Everything has got its right size. When it is its right size and well run it's the tops."

"How big do you think this show is?" Sir Ronald barked.

"Bigger than we thought at first," said Comstock.

A tough-looking man, Inspector McNeill, said:

"It's growing, I'd say. Father's right. Growing all the time."

"That may be a good thing," said Davy. "It may grow a bit *too* fast, and then it'll get out of hand."

"The question is, Sir Ronald," said McNeill, "who we pull in and when?"

"There's a round dozen or so we could pull in," said Comstock. "The Harris lot are mixed-up in it, we know that. There's a nice little pocket down Luton way. There's a garage at Epsom, there's a pub near Maidenhead, and there's a farm on the Great North Road."

"Any of them worth pulling in?"

"I don't think so. Small-fry all of them. Links. Just links here and there in the chain. A spot where cars are converted, and turned over quickly; a respectable pub where messages get passed; a secondhand clothes shop where appearance can be altered, a theatrical costumier in the East End, also very useful. They're paid, these people. Quite well paid but they don't really *know* anything!"

The dreamy Superintendent Andrews said again:

"We're up against some good brains. We haven't got near them yet. We know some of their affiliations and that's all. As I say, the Harris crowd are in it and Marks is in on the financial end. The foreign contacts are in touch with Weber but he's only an agent. We've nothing actually *on* any of these people. We know that they all have ways of maintaining contact with each other, and with the different branches of the concern, but we don't know exactly how they do it. We watch them and follow them, and they know we're watching them. *Somewhere* there's a great central exchange. What we want to get at is the planners."

Comstock said:

"It's like a giant network. I agree that there must be an operational headquarters somewhere. A place where each operation is planned and detailed and dovetailed completely. Somewhere, someone plots it all, and produces a working blueprint of Operation Mailbag or Operation Payroll. Those are the people we're out to get."

"Possibly they are not even in this country," said Father quietly.

"No, I dare say that's true. Perhaps they're in an igloo somewhere, or in a tent in Morocco or in a chalet in Switzerland."

"I don't believe in these masterminds," said McNeill, shaking his head: "they sound all right in a story. There's got to *be* a head, of course, but I don't believe in a Master Criminal. I'd say there was a very clever little Board of Directors behind this. Centrally planned, with a Chairman. They've got on to something good, and they're improving their technique all the time. All the same—"

"Yes?" said Sir Ronald encouragingly.

"Even in a right tight little team, there are probably expendables. What I call the Russian Sledge principle. From time to time, if they

think we might be getting hot on the scent, they throw off one of them, the one they think they can best afford."

"Would they dare to do that? Wouldn't it be rather risky?"

"I'd say it could be done in such a way that whoever it was wouldn't even know he *had* been pushed off the sledge. He'd just think he'd fallen off. He'd keep quiet because he'd think it was worth his while to keep quiet. So it would be, of course. They've got plenty of money to play with, and they can afford to be generous. Family looked after, if he's got one, whilst he's in prison. Possibly an escape engineered."

"There's been too much of that," said Comstock.

"I think, you know," said Sir Ronald, "that it's not much good going over and over our speculations again. We always say much the same thing."

McNeill laughed.

"What is it you really wanted us for, sir?"

"Well—" Sir Ronald thought a moment, "we're all agreed on the main things," he said slowly. "We're agreed on our main policy, on what we're trying to do. I think it *might* be profitable to have a look around for some of the small things, the things that don't matter much, that are just a bit out of the usual run. It's hard to explain what I mean, but like that business some years ago in the Culver case. An ink stain. Do you remember? An ink stain round a mouse hole. Now why on earth should a man empty a bottle of ink into a mouse hole? It didn't seem important. It was hard to get at the answer. But when we did hit on the answer, it led somewhere. That's—roughly—the sort of thing I was thinking about. Odd things. Don't mind saying if you come across something that strikes you as a bit out of the usual. Petty if you like, but irritating, because it doesn't quite fit in. I see Father's nodding his head."

"Couldn't agree with you more," said Chief-Inspector Davy. "Come on, boys, try to come up with something. Even if it's only a man wearing a funny hat."

There was no immediate response. Everyone looked a little uncertain and doubtful.

"Come on," said Father. "I'll stick my neck out first. It's just a funny story, really, but you might as well have it for what it's worth. The London and Metropolitan Bank holdup. Carmolly Street Branch. Remember it? A whole list of car numbers and car colours and makes. We appealed to people to come forward and they responded—how they responded! About a hundred and fifty pieces of misleading information! Got it sorted out in the end to about seven cars that had been seen in the neighbourhood, anyone of which *might* have been concerned in the robbery."

"Yes," said Sir Ronald, "go on."

"There were one or two we couldn't get tags on. Looked as though the numbers might have been changed. Nothing out of the way in that. It's often done. Most of them got tracked down in the end. I'll just bring up one instance. Morris Oxford, black saloon, number CMG 265, reported by a probation officer. He said it was being driven by Mr. Justice Ludgrove."

He looked round. They were listening to him, but without any manifest interest.

"I know," he said, "wrong as usual. Mr. Justice Ludgrove is a rather noticeable old boy, ugly as sin for one thing. Well, it wasn't Mr. Justice Ludgrove because at that exact time he was actually in Court. He *has* got a Morris Oxford, but its number isn't CMG 256." He looked round. "All right. All right. So there's no point in it, you'll say. But do you know what the number *was*? CMG 265. Near enough, eh? Just the sort of mistake one does make when you're trying to remember a car number."

"I'm sorry," said Sir Ronald, "I don't quite see—"

"No," said Chief-Inspector Davy, "there's nothing *to* see really, is there? Only—it was very like the actual car number, wasn't it? 265—256 CMG. Really rather a coincidence that there should be a Morris Oxford car of the right colour with the number just one digit wrong, and with a man in it closely resembling the owner of the car."

"Do you mean—?"

"Just one little digit difference. Today's 'deliberate mistake.' It almost seems like that."

"Sorry, Davy. I still don't get it."

"Oh, I don't suppose there's anything *to* get. There's a Morris Oxford car, CMG 265, proceeding along the street two and a half minutes after the bank snatch. In it, the probation officer recognizes Mr. Justice Ludgrove."

"Are you suggesting it really *was* Mr. Justice Ludgrove? Come now, Davy."

"No, I'm not suggesting that it was Mr. Justice Ludgrove and that he was mixed-up in a bank robbery. He was staying at Bertram's Hotel in Pond Street, and he was at the Law Courts at that exact time. All proved up to the hilt. I'm saying the car number and make and the identification by a probation officer who knows old Ludgrove quite well by sight is the kind of coincidence that *ought* to mean something. Apparently it doesn't. Too bad."

Comstock stirred uneasily.

"There was another case like that in connection with the jewellery business at Brighton. Some old Admiral or other. I've forgotten his name now. Some woman identified him most positively as having been on the scene."

"And he wasn't?"

"No, he'd been in London that night. Went up for some Naval dinner or other, I think."

"Staying at his club?"

"No, he was staying at a hotel—I believe it was that one you mentioned just now, Father, Bertram's, isn't it? Quiet place. A lot of old service geezers go there, I believe."

"Bertram's Hotel," said Chief-Inspector Davy, thoughtfully.

Chapter Five

I

Miss Marple awoke early because she always woke early. She was appreciative of her bed. Most comfortable.

She pattered across to the window and pulled the curtains, admitting a little pallid London daylight. As yet, however, she did not try to dispense with the electric light. A very nice bedroom they had given her, again quite in the tradition of Bertram's. A rose-flowered wallpaper, a large well-polished mahogany chest of drawers—a dressing table to correspond. Two upright chairs, one easy chair of a reasonable height from the ground. A connecting door led to a bathroom which was modern but which had a tiled wallpaper of roses and so avoided any suggestion of over-frigid hygiene.

Miss Marple got back into bed, plumped her pillows up, glanced at her clock, half past seven, picked up the small devotional book that always accompanied her, and read as usual the page and a half allotted to the day. Then she picked up her knitting and began to knit, slowly at first, since her fingers were stiff and rheumatic when she first awoke, but very soon her pace grew faster, and her fingers lost their painful stiffness.

"Another day," said Miss Marple to herself, greeting the fact with her usual gentle pleasure. Another day—and who knew what it might bring forth?

She relaxed, and abandoning her knitting, let thoughts pass in an idle stream through her head...Selina Hazy...what a pretty cottage

she had had in St. Mary Mead—and now someone had put on that ugly green roof...Muffins...very wasteful in butter...but very good... And fancy serving old-fashioned seed cake! She had never expected, not for a moment, that things would be as much like they used to be...because, after all, Time didn't stand still...And to have made it stand still in this way must really have cost a lot of money...Not a bit of plastic in the place!...It must pay them, she supposed. The out-of-date returns in due course as the picturesque...Look how people wanted old-fashioned roses now, and scorned hybrid teas!...None of this place seemed real at all...Well, why should it?...It was fifty—no, nearer sixty years since she had stayed here. And it didn't seem real to her because she was now acclimatized in this present year of Our Lord—Really, the whole thing opened up a very interesting set of problems...The atmosphere and the *people*...Miss Marple's fingers pushed her knitting farther away from her.

"Pockets," she said aloud..."Pockets, I suppose...And quite difficult to find..."

Would that account for that curious feeling of uneasiness she had had last night? That feeling that something was wrong....

All those elderly people—really very much like those she remembered when she had stayed here fifty years ago. They had been natural then—but they weren't very natural now. Elderly people nowadays weren't like elderly people then—they had that worried harried look of domestic anxieties with which they are too tired to cope, or they rushed around to committees and tried to appear bustling and competent, or they dyed their hair gentian blue, or wore wigs, and their hands were not the hands she remembered, tapering, delicate hands—they were harsh from washing up and detergents....

And so—well, so these people didn't look real. But the point was that they *were* real. Selina Hazy was real. And that rather handsome old military man in the corner was real—she had met him once, although she did not recall his name—and the Bishop (dear Robbie!) was dead.

Miss Marple glanced at her little clock. It was eight thirty. Time for her breakfast.

She examined the instructions given by the hotel—splendid big print so that it wasn't necessary to put one's spectacles on.

Meals could be ordered through the telephone by asking for Room Service, or you could press the bell labelled Chambermaid.

Miss Marple did the latter. Talking to Room Service always flustered her.

The result was excellent. In no time at all there was a tap on the door and a highly satisfactory chambermaid appeared. A real chambermaid looking unreal, wearing a striped lavender print dress and actually a *cap*, a freshly laundered cap. A smiling, rosy, positively *countrified* face. (Where did they *find* these people?)

Miss Marple ordered her breakfast. Tea, poached eggs, fresh rolls. So adept was the chambermaid that she did not even mention cereals or orange juice.

Five minutes later breakfast came. A comfortable tray with a big potbellied teapot, creamy-looking milk, a silver hot water jug. Two beautifully poached eggs on toast, poached the proper way, not little round hard bullets shaped in tin cups, a good-sized round of butter stamped with a thistle. Marmalade, honey and strawberry jam. Delicious-looking rolls, not the hard kind with papery interiors—they *smelt* of fresh bread (the most delicious smell in the world!). There was also an apple, a pear and a banana.

Miss Marple inserted a knife gingerly but with confidence. She was not disappointed. Rich deep yellow yolk oozed out, thick and creamy. *Proper* eggs!

Everything's piping hot. A *real* breakfast. She could have cooked it herself but she hadn't had to! It was brought to her as if—no, not as though she were a queen—as though she were a middle-aged lady staying in a good but not unduly expensive hotel. In fact—back to 1909. Miss Marple expressed appreciation to the chambermaid who replied smiling,

"Oh, yes, Madam, the Chef is very particular about his breakfasts."

Miss Marple studied her appraisingly. Bertram's Hotel could certainly produce marvels. A *real* housemaid. She pinched her left arm surreptitiously.

"Have you been here long?" she asked.

"Just over three years, Madam."

"And before that?"

"I was in a hotel at Eastbourne. Very modern and up-to-date—but I prefer an old-fashioned place like this."

Miss Marple took a sip of tea. She found herself humming in a vague way—words fitting themselves to a long-forgotten song.

"Oh where have you been all my life...."

The chambermaid was looking slightly startled.

"I was just remembering an old song," twittered Miss Marple apologetically. "Very popular at one time."

Again she sang softly. "Oh where have you been all my life...."

"Perhaps you know it?" she asked.

"Well—" The chambermaid looked rather apologetic.

"Too long ago for you," said Miss Marple. "Ah well, one gets to remembering things—in a place like this."

"Yes, Madam, a lot of the ladies who stay here feel like that, I think."

"It's partly why they come, I expect," said Miss Marple.

The chambermaid went out. She was obviously used to old ladies who twittered and reminisced.

Miss Marple finished her breakfast, and got up in a pleasant leisurely fashion. She had a plan ready-made for a delightful morning of shopping. Not too much—to overtire herself. Oxford Street today, perhaps. And tomorrow Knightsbridge. She planned ahead happily.

It was about ten o'clock when she emerged from her room fully equipped: hat, gloves, umbrella—just in case, though it looked fine—handbag—her smartest shopping bag—

The door next but one on the corridor opened sharply and someone looked out. It was Bess Sedgwick. She withdrew back into the room and closed the door sharply.

Miss Marple wondered as she went down the stairs. She preferred the stairs to the lift first thing in the morning. It limbered her up. Her

steps grew slower and slower...she stopped.

II

As Colonel Luscombe strode along the passage from his room, a door at the top of the stairs opened sharply and Lady Sedgwick spoke to him.

"There you are at last! I've been on the look out for you—waiting to pounce. Where can we go and talk? That is to say without falling over some old pussy every second."

"Well, really, Bess, I'm not quite sure—I think on the mezzanine floor there's a sort of writing room."

"You'd better come in here. Quick now, before the chambermaid gets peculiar ideas about us."

Rather unwillingly, Colonel Luscombe stepped across the threshold and had the door shut firmly behind him.

"I'd no idea you would be staying here, Bess, I hadn't the faintest idea of it."

"I don't suppose you had."

"I mean—I would never have brought Elvira here. I *have* got Elvira here, you know?"

"Yes, I saw her with you last night."

"But I really didn't know that you were here. It seemed such an unlikely place for you."

"I don't see why," said Bess Sedgwick, coldly. "It's far and away the most comfortable hotel in London. Why shouldn't I stay here?"

"You must understand that I hadn't any idea of...I mean—"

She looked at him and laughed. She was dressed ready to go out in a well cut dark suit and a shirt of bright emerald green. She looked gay and very much alive. Beside her, Colonel Luscombe looked rather old and faded.

"Darling Derek, don't look so worried. I'm not accusing you of trying to stage a mother and daughter sentimental meeting. It's just one of those things that happen; where people meet each other in unsuspected places. But you *must* get Elvira out of here, Derek. You must get her out of it at once—today."

"Oh, she's going. I mean, I only brought her here just for a couple of nights. Do a show—that sort of thing. She's going down to the Melfords' tomorrow."

"Poor girl, that'll be boring for her."

Luscombe looked at her with concern. "Do you think she will be very bored?"

Bess took pity on him.

"Probably not after duress in Italy. She might even think it wildly thrilling."

Luscombe took his courage in both hands.

"Look here, Bess, I was startled to find you here, but don't you think it—well, you know, it might be *meant* in a way. I mean that it might be an opportunity—I don't think you really know how—well, how the girl might feel."

"What are you trying to say, Derek?"

"Well, you *are* her mother, you know."

"I'm course I'm her mother. She's my daughter. And what good has that fact ever been to either of us, or ever will be?"

"You can't be sure. I think—I think she feels it."

"What gives you that idea?" said Bess Sedgwick sharply.

"Something she said yesterday. She asked where you were, what you were doing."

Bess Sedgwick walked across the room to the window. She stood there a moment tapping on the pane.

"You're so nice, Derek," she said. "You have such nice ideas. But they don't work, my poor angel. That's what you've got to say to yourself. They don't work and they might be dangerous."

"Oh come now, Bess. Dangerous?"

"Yes, yes, yes. Dangerous. *I'm* dangerous. I've always been dangerous."

"When I think of some of the things you've done," said Colonel Luscombe.

"That's my own business," said Bess Sedgwick. "Running into danger has become a kind of habit with me. No, I wouldn't say habit. More an addiction. Like a drug. Like that nice little dollop of heroin addicts have to have every so often to make life seem bright

coloured and worth living. Well, that's all right. That's my funeral—or not—as the case may be. I've never taken drugs—never needed them—Danger has been my drug. But people who live as I do can be a source of harm to others. Now don't be an obstinate old fool, Derek. You keep that girl well away from me. I can do her no good. Only harm. If possible, don't even let her know I was staying in the same hotel. Ring up the Melfords and take her down there *today*. Make some excuse about a sudden emergency—"

Colonel Luscombe hesitated, pulling his moustaches.

"I think you're making a mistake, Bess." He sighed. "She asked where you were. I told her you were abroad."

"Well, I shall be in another twelve hours, so that all fits very nicely."

She came up to him, kissed him on the point of his chin, turned him smartly around as though they were about to play Blind Man's Buff, opened the door, gave him a gentle little propelling shove out of it. As the door shut behind him, Colonel Luscombe noticed an old lady turning the corner from the stairs. She was muttering to herself as she looked into her handbag. "Dear, dear me. I suppose I must have left it in my room. Oh dear."

She passed Colonel Luscombe without paying much attention to him apparently, but as he went on down the stairs Miss Marple paused by her room door and directed a piercing glance after him. Then she looked towards Bess Sedgwick's door. "So that's who she was waiting for," said Miss Marple to herself. "I wonder why."

III

Canon Pennyfather, fortified by breakfast, wandered across the lounge, remembered to leave his key at the desk, pushed his way through the swinging doors, and was neatly inserted into a taxi by the Irish commissionaire who existed for this purpose.

"Where to, sir?"

"Oh dear," said Canon Pennyfather in sudden dismay. "Now let me see—where *was* I going?"

The traffic in Pond Street was held up for some minutes whilst Canon Pennyfather and the commissionaire debated this knotty point.

Finally Canon Pennyfather had a brainwave and the taxi was directed to go to the British Museum.

The commissionaire was left on the pavement with a broad grin on his face, and since no other exits seemed to be taking place, he strolled a little way along the façade of the hotel whistling an old tune in a muted manner.

One of the windows on the ground floor of Bertram's was flung up—but the commissionaire did not even turn his head until a voice spoke unexpectedly through the open window.

"So this is where you've landed up, Micky. What on earth brought you to this place?"

He swung round, startled—and stared.

Lady Sedgwick thrust her head through the open window.

"Don't you know me?" she demanded.

A sudden gleam of recognition came across the man's face.

"Why, if it isn't little Bessie now! Fancy that! After all these years. Little Bessie."

"Nobody but you ever called me Bessie. It's a revolting name. What have you been doing all these years?"

"This and that," said Micky with some reserve. "I've not been in the news like you have. I've read of your doings in the paper time and again."

Bess Sedgwick laughed. "Anyway, I've worn better than you have," she said. "You drink too much. You always did."

"You've worn well because you've always been in the money."

"Money wouldn't have done you any good. You'd have drunk even more and gone to the dogs completely. Oh yes, you would! What brought you *here*? That's what I want to know. How did you ever get taken on at this place?"

"I wanted a job. I had these—" his hand flicked over the row of medals.

"Yes, I see." She was thoughtful. "All genuine too, aren't they?"

"Sure they're genuine. Why shouldn't they be?"

"Oh I believe you. You always had courage. You've always been a good fighter. Yes, the army suited you. I'm sure of that."

"The army's all right in time of war, but it's no good in peacetime."

"So you took to this stuff. I hadn't the least idea—" she stopped.

"You hadn't the least idea what, Bessie?"

"Nothing. It's queer seeing you again after all these years."

"I haven't forgotten," said the man. "I've never forgotten you, little Bessie. Ah! A lovely girl you were! A lovely slip of a girl."

"A damn' fool of a girl, that's what I was," said Lady Sedgwick.

"That's true now. You hadn't much sense. If you had, you wouldn't have taken up with me. What hands you had for a horse. Do you remember that mare—what was her name now?—Molly O'Flynn. Ah, she was a wicked devil, that one was."

"You were the only one that could ride her," said Lady Sedgwick.

"She'd have had me off if she could! When she found she couldn't, she gave in. Ah, she was a beauty, now. But talking of sitting a horse, there wasn't one lady in those parts better than you. A lovely seat you had, lovely hands. Never any fear in you, not for a minute! And it's been the same ever since, so I judge. Aeroplanes, racing cars."

Bess Sedgwick laughed.

"I must get on with my letters."

She drew back from the window.

Micky leaned over the railing. "I've not forgotten Ballygowlan," he said with meaning. "Sometimes I've thought of writing to you—"

Bess Sedgwick's voice came out harshly.

"And what do you mean by that, Mick Gorman?"

"I was just saying as I haven't forgotten—anything. I was just—reminding you like."

Bess Sedgwick's voice still held its harsh note.

"If you mean what I think you mean, I'll give you a piece of advice. Any trouble from you, and I'd shoot you as easily as I'd shoot a rat. I've shot men before—"

"In foreign parts, maybe—"

"Foreign parts or here—it's all the same to me."

"Ah, good Lord, now, and I believe you would do just that!" His voice held admiration. "In Ballygowlan—"

"In Ballygowlan," she cut in, "they paid you to keep your mouth shut and paid you well. You took the money. You'll get no more from me so don't think it."

"It would be a nice romantic story for the Sunday papers...."

"You heard what I said."

"Ah," he laughed, "I'm not serious, I was just joking. I'd never do anything to hurt my little Bessie. I'll keep my mouth shut."

"Mind you do," said Lady Sedgwick.

She shut down the window. Staring down at the desk in front of her she looked at her unfinished letter on the blotting paper. She picked it up, looked at it, crumpled it into a ball and slung it into the wastepaper basket. Then abruptly she got up from her seat and walked out of the room. She did not even cast a glance around her before she went.

The smaller writing rooms at Bertram's often had an appearance of being empty even when they were not. Two well-appointed desks stood in the windows, there was a table on the right that held a few magazines, on the left were two very high-backed armchairs turned towards the fire. These were favourite spots in the afternoon for elderly military or naval gentlemen to ensconce themselves and fall happily asleep until teatime. Anyone coming in to write a letter did not usually even notice them. The chairs were not so much in demand during the morning.

As it happened, however, they were on this particular morning both occupied. An old lady was in one and a young girl in the other. The young girl rose to her feet. She stood a moment looking uncertainly towards the door through which Lady Sedgwick had passed out, then she moved slowly towards it. Elvira Blake's face was deadly pale.

It was another five minutes before the old lady moved. Then Miss Marple decided that the little rest which she always took after dressing and coming downstairs had lasted quite long enough. It was time to go out and enjoy the pleasures of London. She might walk as far as Piccadilly, and take a No. 9 bus to High Street,

Kensington, or she might walk along to Bond Street and take a 25 bus to Marshall & Snelgrove's, or she might take a 25 the other way which as far as she remembered would land her up at the Army & Navy Stores. Passing through the swing doors she was still savouring these delights in her mind. The Irish commissioner, back on duty, made up her mind for her.

"You'll be wanting a taxi, Ma'am," he said with firmness.

"I don't think I do," said Miss Marple. "I think there's a 25 bus I could take quite near here—or a 2 from Park Lane."

"You'll not be wanting a bus," said the commissioner firmly. "It's very dangerous springing on a bus when you're getting on in life. The way they start and stop and go on again. Jerk you off your feet, they do. No heart at all, these fellows, nowadays. I'll whistle you along a taxi and you'll go to wherever you want to like a queen."

Miss Marple considered and fell.

"Very well then," she said, "perhaps I *had* better have a taxi."

The commissioner had no need even to whistle. He merely clicked his thumb and a taxi appeared like magic. Miss Marple was helped into it with every possible care and decided on the spur of the moment to go to Robinson & Cleaver's and look at their splendid offer of real linen sheets. She sat happily in her taxi feeling indeed as the commissioner had promised her, just like a queen. Her mind was filled with pleasurable anticipation of linen sheets, linen pillowcases and proper glass and kitchen cloths without pictures of bananas, figs or performing dogs and other pictorial distractions to annoy you when you were washing up.

IV

Lady Sedgwick came up to the Reception desk.

"Mr. Humfries in his office?"

"Yes, Lady Sedgwick." Miss Gorrington looked startled.

Lady Sedgwick passed behind the desk, tapped on the door and went in without waiting for any response.

Mr. Humfries looked up startled.

"What—"

"Who engaged the man Michael Gorman?"

Mr. Humfries spluttered a little.

"Parfitt left—he had a car accident a month ago. We had to replace him quickly. This man seemed all right. References OK—ex-Army—quite good record—not very bright perhaps—but that's all the better sometimes—you don't know anything against him, do you?"

"Enough not to want him here."

"If you insist," Humfries said slowly, "we'll give him his notice—"

"No," said Lady Sedgwick slowly. "No—it's too late for that—Never mind."

Chapter Six

I

"Elvira."

"Hallo, Bridget."

The Hon. Elvira Blake pushed her way through the front door of 180 Onslow Square, which her friend Bridget had rushed down to open for her, having been watching through the window.

"Let's go upstairs," said Elvira.

"Yes, we'd better. Otherwise we'll get entangled by Mummy."

The two girls rushed up the stairs, thereby circumventing Bridget's mother, who came out onto the landing from her own bedroom just too late.

"You really are lucky not to have a mother," said Bridget, rather breathlessly as she took her friend into her bedroom and shut the door firmly. "I mean, Mummy's quite a pet and all that, but the *questions* she asks! Morning, noon and night. Where are you going, and who have you met? And are they cousins of somebody else of the same name in Yorkshire? I mean, the *futility* of it all."

"I suppose they have nothing else to think about," said Elvira vaguely. "Look here, Bridget, there's something terribly important I've got to do, and you've got to help me."

"Well, I will if I can. What is it—a man?"

"No, it isn't, as a matter of fact." Bridget looked disappointed. "I've got to get away to Ireland for twenty-four hours or perhaps longer, and you've got to cover up for me."

"To Ireland? Why?"

"I can't tell you all about it now. There's no time. I've got to meet my guardian, Colonel Luscombe, at Prunier's for lunch at half past one."

"What have you done with the Carpenter?"

"Gave her the slip in Debenham's."

Bridget giggled.

"And after lunch they're taking me down to the Melfords. I'm going to live with them until I'm twenty-one."

"How ghastly!"

"I expect I shall manage. Cousin Mildred is fearfully easy to deceive. It's arranged I'm to come up for classes and things. There's a place called World of Today. They take you to lectures and to Museums and to Picture Galleries and the House of Lords, and all that. The whole point is that nobody will know whether you're where you ought to be or not! We'll manage lots of things."

"I expect we will." Bridget giggled. "We managed in Italy, didn't we? Old Macaroni thought she was so strict. Little did she know what we got up to when we tried."

Both girls laughed in the pleasant consciousness of successful wickedness.

"Still, it did need a lot of planning," said Elvira.

"And some splendid lying," said Bridget. "Have you heard from Guido?"

"Oh yes, he wrote me a long letter signed Ginevra as though he was a girlfriend. But I do wish you'd stop talking so much, Bridget. We've got a lot to do and only about an hour and a half to do it in. Now first of all just *listen*. I'm coming up tomorrow for an appointment with the dentist. That's easy, I can put it off by telephone—or you can from here. Then, about midday, you can ring up the Melfords pretending to be your mother and explain that the dentist wants to see me again the next day and so I'm staying over with you here."

"That ought to go down all right. They'll say how very kind and gush. But supposing you're *not* back the next day?"

"Then you'll have to do some more ringing up."

Bridget looked doubtful.

"We'll have lots of time to think up something before then," said Elvira impatiently. "What's worrying me now is *money*. You haven't got any, I suppose?" Elvira spoke without much hope.

"Only about two pounds."

"That's no good. I've got to buy my air ticket. I've looked up the flights. It only takes about two hours. A lot depends upon how long it takes me when I get there."

"Can't you tell me what you're going to do?"

"No, I can't. But it's terribly, terribly important."

Elvira's voice was so different that Bridget looked at her in some surprise.

"Is anything really the matter, Elvira?"

"Yes, it is."

"Is it something nobody's got to know about?"

"Yes, that's the sort of thing. It's frightfully, frightfully secret. I've got to find out if something is really true or not. It's a bore about the money. What's maddening is that I'm really quite rich. My guardian told me so. But all they give me is a measly dress allowance. And that seems to go as soon as I get it."

"Wouldn't your guardian—Colonel Thingummybob—lend you some money?"

"That wouldn't do at all. He'd ask a lot of questions and want to know what I wanted it for."

"Oh, dear, I suppose he would. I can't think why everybody wants to ask so many questions. Do you know that if somebody rings me up, Mummy has to ask *who it is*? When it really is *no* business of hers!"

Elvira agreed, but her mind was on another tack.

"Have you ever pawned anything, Bridget?"

"Never. I don't think I'd know how to."

"It's quite easy, I believe," said Elvira. "You go to the sort of jeweller who has three balls over the door, isn't that right?"

"I don't think I've got anything that would be any good taking to a pawnbroker," said Bridget.

"Hasn't your mother got some jewellery somewhere?"

"I don't think we'd better ask her to help."

"No, perhaps not—But we could pinch something perhaps."

"Oh, I don't think we could do that," said Bridget, shocked.

"No? Well, perhaps you're right. But I bet she wouldn't notice. We could get it back before she missed it. *I* know. We'll go to Mr. Bollard."

"Who's Mr. Bollard?"

"Oh, he's a sort of family jeweller. I take my watch there always to have it mended. He's known me ever since I was six. Come on, Bridget, we'll go there right away. We'll just have time."

"We'd better go out the back way," said Bridget, "and then Mummy won't ask us where we're going."

Outside the old established business of Bollard and Whitley in Bond Street the two girls made their final arrangements.

"Are you sure you understand, Bridget?"

"I think so," said Bridget in a far from happy voice.

"First," said Elvira, "we synchronize our watches."

Bridget brightened up a little. This familiar literary phrase had a heartening effect. They solemnly synchronized their watches, Bridget adjusting hers by one minute.

"Zero hour will be twenty-five past exactly," said Elvira.

"That will give me plenty of time. Perhaps even more than I need, but it's better that way about."

"But supposing—" began Bridget.

"Supposing what?" asked Elvira.

"Well, I mean, supposing I *really* got run over?"

"Of course you won't get run over," said Elvira. "You know how nippy you are on your feet, and all London traffic is used to pulling up suddenly. It'll be all right."

Bridget looked far from convinced.

"You won't let me down, Bridget, will you?"

"All right," said Bridget, "I won't let you down."

"Good," said Elvira.

Bridget crossed to the other side of Bond Street and Elvira pushed open the doors of Messrs. Bollard and Whitley, old established jewellers and watchmakers. Inside there was a beautiful and hushed

atmosphere. A frock-coated nobleman came forward and asked Elvira what he could do for her.

"Could I see Mr. Bollard?"

"Mr. Bollard. What name shall I say?"

"Miss Elvira Blake."

The nobleman disappeared and Elvira drifted to a counter where, below plate glass, brooches, rings and bracelets showed off their jewelled proportions against suitable shades of velvet. In a very few moments Mr. Bollard made his appearance. He was the senior partner of the firm, an elderly man of sixty odd. He greeted Elvira with warm friendliness.

"Ah, Miss Blake, so you are in London. It's a great pleasure to see you. Now what can I do for you?"

Elvira produced a dainty little evening wristwatch.

"This watch doesn't go properly," said Elvira. "Could you do something to it?"

"Oh yes, of course. There's no difficulty about *that*," Mr. Bollard took it from her. "What address shall I send it to?"

Elvira gave the address.

"And there's another thing," she said. "My guardian—Colonel Luscombe you know—"

"Yes, yes, of course."

"He asked me what I'd like for a Christmas present," said Elvira. "He suggested I should come in here and look at some different things. He said would I like him to come with me, and I said I'd rather come along first—because I always think it's rather embarrassing, don't you? I mean, prices and all that."

"Well, that's certainly one aspect," said Mr. Bollard, beaming in an avuncular manner. "Now what had you in mind, Miss Blake? A brooch, bracelet—a ring?"

"I think really brooches are more useful," said Elvira. "But I wonder—could I look at a *lot* of things?" She looked up at him appealingly. He smiled sympathetically.

"Of course, of course. No pleasure at all if one has to make up one's mind too quickly, is it?"

The next five minutes were spent very agreeably. Nothing was too much trouble for Mr. Bollard. He fetched things from one case and another, brooches and bracelets piled up on the piece of velvet spread in front of Elvira. Occasionally she turned aside to look at herself in a mirror, trying the effect of a brooch or a pendant. Finally, rather uncertainly, a pretty little bangle, a small diamond wristwatch and two brooches were laid aside.

"We'll make a note of these," said Mr. Bollard, "and then when Colonel Luscombe is in London next, perhaps he'll come in and see what he decides himself he'd like to give you."

"I think that way will be very nice," said Elvira. "Then he'll feel more that he's chosen my present himself, won't he?" Her limpid blue gaze was raised to the jeweller's face. That same blue gaze had registered a moment earlier that the time was now exactly twenty-five minutes past the hour.

Outside there was the squealing of brakes and a girl's loud scream. Inevitably the eyes of everyone in the shop turned towards the windows of the shop giving on Bond Street. The movement of Elvira's hand on the counter in front of her and then to the pocket of her neat tailor-made coat and skirt was so rapid and unobtrusive as to be almost unnoticeable, even if anybody had been looking.

"Tcha, tcha," said Mr. Bollard, turning back from where he had been peering out into the street. "Very nearly an accident. Silly girl! Rushing across the road like that."

Elvira was already moving towards the door. She looked at her wristwatch and uttered an exclamation.

"Oh dear, I've been far too long in here. I shall miss my train back to the country. Thank you so much, Mr. Bollard, and you won't forget which the four things are, will you?"

In another minute, she was out of the door. Turning rapidly to the left and then to the left again, she stopped in the arcade of a shoe shop until Bridget, rather breathless, rejoined her.

"Oh," said Bridget, "I was terrified. I thought I was going to be killed. And I've torn a hole in my stocking, too."

"Never mind," said Elvira and walked her friend rapidly along the street and round yet another corner to the right. "Come on."

"Is it—was it—all right?"

Elvira's hand slipped into her pocket and out again showing the diamond and sapphire bracelet in her palm.

"Oh, Elvira, how you dared!"

"Now, Bridget, you've got to get along to that pawnshop we marked down. Go in and see how much you can get for this. Ask for a hundred."

"Do you think—supposing they say—I mean—I mean, it might be on a list of stolen things—"

"Don't be silly. How could it be on a list so soon? They haven't even noticed it's gone yet."

"But Elvira, when they *do* notice it's gone, they'll think—perhaps they'll know—that you must have taken it."

"They *might* think so—if they discover it soon."

"Well, then they'll go to the police and—"

She stopped as Elvira shook her head slowly, her pale yellow hair swinging to and fro and a faint enigmatic smile curving up the corners of her mouth.

"They won't go to the police, Bridget. Certainly not if they think *I* took it."

"Why—you mean—?"

"As I told you, I'm going to have a lot of money when I'm twenty-one. I shall be able to buy lots of jewels from them. *They* won't make a scandal. Go on and get the money quick. Then go to Aer Lingus and book the ticket—I must take a taxi to Prunier's. I'm already ten minutes late. I'll be with you tomorrow morning by half past ten."

"Oh, Elvira, I wish you wouldn't take such frightful risks," moaned Bridget.

But Elvira had hailed a taxi.

II

Miss Marple had a very enjoyable time at Robinson & Cleaver's. Besides purchasing expensive but delicious sheets—she loved linen sheets with their texture and their coolness—she also indulged in a

purchase of good quality red-bordered glass cloths. Really the difficulty in getting proper glass cloths nowadays! Instead, you were offered things that might as well have been ornamental tablecloths, decorated with radishes or lobsters or the *Tour Eiffel* or Trafalgar Square, or else littered with lemons and oranges. Having given her address in St. Mary Mead, Miss Marple found a convenient bus which took her to the Army & Navy Stores.

The Army & Navy Stores had been a haunt of Miss Marple's aunt in days long gone. It was not, of course, quite the same nowadays. Miss Marple cast her thoughts back to Aunt Helen seeking out her own special man in the grocery department, settling herself comfortably in a chair, wearing a bonnet and what she always called her "black poplin" mantle. Then there would ensue a long hour with nobody in a hurry and Aunt Helen thinking of every conceivable grocery that could be purchased and stored up for future use. Christmas was provided for, and there was even a far-off look towards Easter. The young Jane had fidgeted somewhat, and had been told to go and look at the glass department by way of amusement.

Having finished her purchases, Aunt Helen would then proceed to lengthy inquiries about her chosen shop-assistant's mother, wife, second boy and crippled sister-in-law. Having had a thoroughly pleasant morning, Aunt Helen would say in the playful manner of those times, "And how would a little girl feel about some luncheon?" Whereupon they went up in the lift to the fourth floor and had luncheon which always finished with a strawberry ice. After that, they bought half a pound of coffee chocolate creams and went to a matinée in a four wheeler.

Of course, the Army & Navy Stores had had a good many face lifts since those days. In fact, it was now quite unrecognizable from the old times. It was gayer and much brighter. Miss Marple, though throwing a kindly and indulgent smile at the past, did not object to the amenities of the present. There was still a restaurant, and there she repaired to order her lunch.

As she was looking carefully down the menu and deciding what to have, she looked across the room and her eyebrows went up a little.

How extraordinary coincidence was! Here was a woman she had never seen till the day before, though she had seen plenty of newspaper photographs of her—at race meetings, in Bermuda, or standing by her own plane or car. Yesterday, for the first time, she had seen her in the flesh. And now, as was so often the case, there was the coincidence of running into her again in a most unlikely place. For somehow she did not connect lunch at the Army & Navy Stores with Bess Sedgwick. She would not have been surprised to see Bess Sedgwick emerging from a den in Soho, or stepping out of Covent Garden Opera House in evening dress with a diamond tiara on her head. But somehow, not in the Army & Navy Stores which in Miss Marple's mind was, and always would be, connected with the armed forces, their wives, daughters, aunts and grandmothers. Still, there Bess Sedgwick was, looking as usual very smart, in her dark suit and her emerald shirt, lunching at a table with a man. A young man with a lean hawklike face, wearing a black leather jacket. They were leaning forward talking earnestly together, forking in mouthfuls of food as though they were quite unaware what they were eating.

An assignation, perhaps? Yes, probably an assignation. The man must be fifteen or twenty years younger than she was—but Bess Sedgwick was a magnetically attractive woman.

Miss Marple looked at the young man consideringly and decided that he was what she called a "handsome fellow." She also decided that she didn't like him very much. "Just like Harry Russell," said Miss Marple to herself, dredging up a prototype as usual from the past. "Never up to any good. Never did any woman who had anything to do with him any good either.

"She wouldn't take advice from me," thought Miss Marple, "but I could give her some." However, other people's love affairs were no concern of hers, and Bess Sedgwick, by all accounts, could take care of herself very well when it came to love affairs.

Miss Marple sighed, ate her lunch, and meditated a visit to the stationery department.

Curiosity, or what she preferred herself to call "taking an interest" in other people's affairs, was undoubtedly one of Miss Marple's characteristics.

Deliberately leaving her gloves on the table, she rose and crossed the floor to the cash desk, taking a route that passed close to Lady Sedgwick's table. Having paid her bill she "discovered" the absence of her gloves and returned to get them—unfortunately dropping her handbag on the return route. It came open and spilled various oddments. A waitress rushed to assist her in picking them up, and Miss Marple was forced to show a great shakiness and dropped coppers and keys a second time.

She did not get very much by these subterfuges but they were not entirely in vain—and it was interesting that neither of the two objects of her curiosity spared as much as a glance for the dithery old lady who kept dropping things.

As Miss Marple waited for the lift down she memorized such scraps as she had heard.

"What about the weather forecast?"

"OK. No fog."

"All set for Lucerne?"

"Yes. Plane leaves 9:40."

That was all she had got the first time. On the way back it had lasted a little longer.

Bess Sedgwick had been speaking angrily.

"What possessed you to come to Bertram's yesterday—you shouldn't have come near the place."

"It's all right. I asked if you were staying there and everyone knows we're close friends—"

"That's not the point. Bertram's is all right for me—Not for you. You stick out like a sore thumb. Everyone stares at you."

"Let them!"

"You really are an idiot. Why—why? What reasons did you have? You had a reason—I know you...."

"Calm down, Bess."

"You're such a liar!"

That was all she had been able to hear. She found it interesting.

Chapter Seven

On the evening of 19th November Canon Pennyfather had finished an early dinner at the Athenaeum, he had nodded to one or two friends, had had a pleasant acrimonious discussion on some crucial points of the dating of the Dead Sea Scrolls and now, glancing at his watch, saw that it was time to leave to catch his plane to Lucerne. As he passed through the hall he was greeted by one more friend: Dr. Whittaker of the SOAS, who said cheerfully:

"How are you, Pennyfather? Haven't seen you for a long time. How did you get on at the Congress? Any points of interest come up?"

"I am sure there will be."

"Just come back from it, haven't you?"

"No, no, I am on my way there. I'm catching a plane this evening."

"Oh I see." Whittaker looked slightly puzzled. "Somehow or other I thought the Congress was today."

"No, no. Tomorrow, the 19th."

Canon Pennyfather passed out through the door while his friend, looking after him, was just saying:

"But my dear chap, *today* is the 19th, isn't it?"

Canon Pennyfather, however, had gone beyond earshot. He picked up a taxi in Pall Mall, and was driven to the air terminal in Kensington. There was quite a fair crowd this evening. Presenting himself at the desk it at last came to his turn. He managed to produce ticket and passport and other necessities for the journey.

The girl behind the desk, about to stamp these credentials, paused abruptly.

"I beg your pardon, sir, this seems to be the wrong ticket."

"The wrong ticket? No, no, that is quite right. Flight one hundred and—well, I can't really read without my glasses—one hundred and something to Lucerne."

"It's the date, sir. This is dated Wednesday the 18th."

"No, no, surely. At least—I mean—today is Wednesday the 18th."

"I'm sorry, sir. Today is the 19th."

"The 19th!" The Canon was dismayed. He fished out a small diary, turning the pages eagerly. In the end he had to be convinced. Today *was* the 19th. The plane he had meant to catch had gone yesterday.

"Then that means—that means—dear me, it means the Congress at Lucerne has taken place *today*."

He stared in deep dismay across the counter; but there were many others travelling; the Canon and his perplexities were elbowed aside. He stood sadly, holding the useless ticket in his hand. His mind ranged over various possibilities. Perhaps his ticket could be changed? But that would be no use—no indeed—what time was it now? Going on for 9 o'clock? The conference had actually taken place; starting at 10 o'clock this morning. Of course, that was what Whittaker had meant at the Athenaeum. He thought Canon Pennyfather had already *been* to the Congress.

"Oh dear, oh dear," said Canon Pennyfather, to himself. "What a muddle I have made of it all!" He wandered sadly and silently into the Cromwell Road, not at its best a very cheerful place.

He walked slowly along the street carrying his bag and revolving perplexities in his mind. When at last he had worked out to his satisfaction the various reasons for which he had made a mistake in the day, he shook his head sadly.

"Now, I suppose," he said to himself, "I suppose—let me see, it's after nine o'clock, yes, I suppose I had better have something to eat."

It was curious, he thought, that he did not feel hungry.

Wandering disconsolately along the Cromwell Road he finally settled upon a small restaurant which served Indian curries. It

seemed to him that though he was not quite as hungry as he ought to be, he had better keep his spirits up by having a meal, and after that he must find a hotel and—but no, there was no need to do *that*. He had a hotel! Of course. He was staying at Bertram's; and had reserved his room for four days. What a piece of luck! What a splendid piece of luck! So his room was there, waiting for him. He had only to ask for his key at the desk and—here another reminiscence assailed him. Something heavy in his pocket?

He dipped his hand in and brought out one of those large and solid keys with which hotels try and discourage their vaguer guests from taking them away in their pockets. It had not prevented the Canon from doing so!

"No. 19," said the Canon, in happy recognition. "That's right. It's very fortunate that I haven't got to go and find a room in a hotel. They say they're very crowded just now. Yes, Edmunds was saying so at the Athenaeum this evening. He had a terrible job finding a room."

Somewhat pleased with himself and the care he had taken over his travelling arrangements by booking a hotel beforehand, the Canon abandoned his curry, remembered to pay for it, and strode out once more into the Cromwell Road.

It seemed a little tame to go home just like this when he ought to have been dining in Lucerne and talking about all sorts of interesting and fascinating problems. His eye was caught by a cinema.

Walls of Jericho.

It seemed an eminently suitable title. It would be interesting to see if biblical accuracy had been preserved.

He bought himself a seat and stumbled into the darkness. He enjoyed the film, though it seemed to him to have no relationship to the biblical story whatsoever. Even Joshua seemed to have been left out. The walls of Jericho seemed to be a symbolical way of referring to a certain lady's marriage vows. When they had tumbled down several times, the beautiful star met the dour and uncouth hero whom she had secretly loved all along and between them they

proposed to build up the walls in a way that would stand the test of time better. It was not a film destined particularly to appeal to an elderly clergyman; but Canon Pennyfather enjoyed it very much. It was not the sort of film he often saw and he felt it was enlarging his knowledge of life. The film ended, the lights went up, the National Anthem was played and Canon Pennyfather stumbled out into the lights of London, slightly consoled for the sad events of earlier in the evening.

It was a fine night and he walked home to Bertram's Hotel after first getting into a bus which took him in the opposite direction. It was midnight when he got in and Bertram's Hotel at midnight usually preserved a decorous appearance of everyone having gone to bed. The lift was on a higher floor so the Canon walked up the stairs. He came to his room, inserted the key in the lock, threw the door open and entered!

Good gracious, was he seeing things? But who—how—he saw the upraised arm too late....

Stars exploded in a kind of Guy Fawkes' display within his head....

Chapter Eight

I

The Irish Mail rushed through the night. Or, more correctly, through the darkness of the early morning hours.

At intervals the diesel engine gave its weird banshee warning cry. It was travelling at well over eighty miles an hour. It was on time.

Then, with some suddenness, the pace slackened as the brakes came on. The wheels screamed as they gripped the metals. Slower... slower...The guard put his head out of the window noting the red signal ahead as the train came to a final halt. Some of the passengers woke up. Most did not.

One elderly lady, alarmed by the suddenness of the deceleration, opened the door and looked out along the corridor. A little way along one of the doors to the line was open. An elderly cleric with a thatch of thick white hair was climbing up from the permanent way. She presumed he had previously climbed down to the line to investigate. The morning air was distinctly chilly. Someone at the end of the corridor said: "Only a signal." The elderly lady withdrew into her compartment and tried to go to sleep again.

Farther up the line, a man waving a lantern was running towards the train from a signal box. The fireman climbed down from the engine. The guard who had descended from the train came along to join him. The man with the lantern arrived, rather short of breath and spoke in a series of gasps.

"Bad crash ahead...Goods train derailed...."

The engine driver looked out of his cab, then climbed down also to join the others.

At the rear of the train, six men who had just climbed up the embankment boarded the train through a door left open for them in the last coach. Six passengers from different coaches met them. With well-rehearsed speed, they proceeded to take charge of the postal van, isolating it from the rest of the train. Two men in Balaclava helmets at front and rear of the compartment stood on guard, coshes in hand.

A man in railway uniform went forward along the corridor of the stationary train, uttering explanations to such as demanded them.

"Block on the line ahead. Ten minutes' delay, maybe, not much more...." It sounded friendly and reassuring.

By the engine, the driver and the fireman lay neatly gagged and trussed up. The man with the lantern called out:

"Everything OK here."

The guard lay by the embankment, similarly gagged and tied.

The expert cracksmen in the postal van had done their work. Two more neatly trussed bodies lay on the floor. The special mailbags sailed out to where other men on the embankment awaited them.

In their compartments, passengers grumbled to each other that the railways were not what they used to be.

Then, as they settled themselves to sleep again, there came through the darkness the roar of an exhaust.

"Goodness," murmured a woman. "Is that a jet plane?"

"Racing car, I should say."

The roar died away....

II

On the Bedhampton Motorway, nine miles away, a steady stream of night lorries was grinding its way north. A big white racing car flashed past them.

Ten minutes later, it turned off the motorway.

The garage on the corner of the B road bore the sign CLOSED. But the big doors swung open and the white car was driven straight in,

the doors closing again behind it. Three men worked at lightning speed. A fresh set of number plates were attached. The driver changed his coat and cap. He had worn white sheepskin before. Now he wore black leather. He drove out again. Three minutes after his departure, an old Morris Oxford, driven by a clergyman, chugged out onto the road and proceeded to take a route through various turning and twisting country lanes.

A station wagon, driven along a country road, slowed up as it came upon an old Morris Oxford stationary by the hedge, with an elderly man standing over it.

The driver of the station wagon put out a head.

"Having trouble? Can I help?"

"Very good of you. It's my lights."

The two drivers approached each other—listened. "All clear."

Various expensive American-style cases were transferred from the Morris Oxford to the station wagon.

A mile or two farther on, the station wagon turned off on what looked like a rough track but which presently turned out to be the back way to a large and opulent mansion. In what had been a stableyard, a big white Mercedes car was standing. The driver of the station wagon opened its boot with a key, transferred the cases to the boot, and drove away again in the station wagon.

In a nearby farmyard a cock crowed noisily.

Chapter Nine

I

Elvira Blake looked up at the sky, noted that it was a fine morning and went into a telephone box. She dialled Bridget's number in Onslow Square. Satisfied by the response, she said:

"Hallo? Bridget?"

"Oh Elvira, is that you?" Bridget's voice sounded agitated.

"Yes. Has everything been all right?"

"Oh no. It's been *awful*. Your cousin, Mrs. Melford, rang up Mummy yesterday afternoon."

"What, about me?"

"Yes. I thought I'd done it so well when I rang her up at lunchtime. But it seems she got worried about your teeth. Thought there might be something really wrong with them. Abscesses or something. So she rang up the dentist herself and found, of course, that you'd never been there at all. So then she rang up Mummy and unfortunately Mummy was right there by the telephone. So I couldn't get there first. And naturally Mummy said *she* didn't know anything about it, and that you certainly weren't staying *here*. I didn't know *what* to do."

"What *did* you do?"

"Pretended I knew nothing about it. I did say that I thought you'd said something about going to see some friends at Wimbledon."

"Why Wimbledon?"

"It was the first place came into my head."

Elvira sighed. "Oh well, I suppose I'll have to cook up something. An old governess, perhaps, who lives at Wimbledon. All this fussing does make things so *complicated*. I hope Cousin Mildred doesn't make a real fool of herself and ring up the police or something like that."

"Are you going down there now?"

"Not till this evening. I've got a lot to do first."

"You got to Ireland. Was it—all right?"

"I found out what I wanted to know."

"You sound—sort of grim."

"I'm feeling grim."

"Can't I help you, Elvira? Do anything?"

"Nobody can help me really...It's a thing I have to do myself. I hoped something wasn't true, but it *is* true. I don't know quite what to do about it."

"Are you in danger, Elvira?"

"Don't be melodramatic, Bridget. I'll have to be careful, that's all. I'll have to be very careful."

"Then you *are* in danger."

Elvira said after a moment's pause, "I expect I'm just imagining things, that's all."

"Elvira, what are you going to do about that bracelet?"

"Oh, that's all right. I've arranged to get some money from someone, so I can go and—what's the word—redeem it. Then just take it back to Bollards."

"D'you think they'll be all right about it?—No, Mummy, it's just the laundry. They say we never sent that sheet. Yes, Mummy, yes, I'll tell the manageress. All right then."

At the other end of the line Elvira grinned and put down the receiver. She opened her purse, sorted through her money, counted out the coins she needed and arranged them in front of her and proceeded to put through a call. When she got the number she wanted she put in the necessary coins, pressed Button A and spoke in a small rather breathless voice.

"Hallo, Cousin Mildred. Yes, it's me...I'm terribly sorry...Yes, I know...well I was going to...yes it was dear old Maddy, you know our

old Mademoiselle...yes I wrote a postcard, then I forgot to post it. It's still in my pocket now...well, you see she was ill and there was no one to look after her and so I just stopped to see she was all right. Yes, I *was* going to Bridget's but this changed things...I don't understand about the message you got. Someone must have jumbled it up...Yes, I'll explain it all to you when I get back...yes, this afternoon. No, I shall just wait and see the nurse who's coming to look after old Maddy—well, not really a nurse. You know one of those—er—practical aid nurses or something like that. No, she would hate to go to hospital...But I *am* sorry, Cousin Mildred, I really am very, very sorry." She put down the receiver and sighed in an exasperated manner. "If only," she murmured to herself, "one didn't have to tell so many lies to everybody."

She came out of the telephone box, noting as she did so the big newspaper placards—BIG TRAIN ROBBERY. IRISH MAIL ATTACKED BY BANDITS.

II

Mr. Bollard was serving a customer when the shop door opened. He looked up to see the Honourable Elvira Blake entering.

"No," she said to an assistant who came forward to her. "I'd rather wait until Mr. Bollard is free."

Presently Mr. Bollard's customer's business was concluded and Elvira moved into the vacant place.

"Good morning, Mr. Bollard," she said.

"I'm afraid your watch isn't done quite as soon as this, Miss Elvira," said Mr. Bollard.

"Oh, it's not the watch," said Elvira. "I've come to apologize. A dreadful thing happened." She opened her bag and took out a small box. From it she extracted the sapphire and diamond bracelet. "You will remember when I came in with my watch to be repaired that I was looking at things for a Christmas present and there was an accident outside in the street. Somebody was run over I think, or nearly run over. I suppose I must have had the bracelet in my hand and put it into the pocket of my suit without thinking, although I only found it this morning. So I rushed along *at once* to bring it

back. I'm so terribly sorry, Mr. Bollard, I don't know how I came to do such an idiotic thing."

"Why, that's quite all right, Miss Elvira," said Mr. Bollard, slowly.

"I suppose you thought someone had stolen it," said Elvira.

Her limpid blue eyes met him.

"We *had* discovered its loss," said Mr. Bollard. "Thank you very much, Miss Elvira, for bringing it back so promptly."

"I felt simply awful about it when I found it," said Elvira. "Well, thank you very much, Mr. Bollard, for being so nice about it."

"A lot of strange mistakes do occur," said Mr. Bollard. He smiled at her in an avuncular manner. "We won't think of it anymore. But don't do it again, though." He laughed with the air of one making a genial little joke.

"Oh no," said Elvira, "I shall be terribly careful in future."

She smiled at him, turned and left the shop.

"Now I wonder," said Mr. Bollard to himself, "I really do wonder..."

One of his partners, who had been standing near, moved nearer to him.

"So she *did* take it?" he said.

"Yes. She took it all right," said Mr. Bollard.

"But she brought it back," his partner pointed out.

"She brought it back," agreed Mr. Bollard. "I didn't actually expect that."

"You mean you didn't expect her to bring it back?"

"No, not if it was she who'd taken it."

"Do you think her story is true?" his partner inquired curiously. "I mean, that she slipped it into her pocket by accident?"

"I suppose it's possible," said Bollard, thoughtfully.

"Or it *could* be kleptomania, I suppose."

"Or it could be kleptomania," agreed Bollard. "It's more likely that she took it on purpose...But if so, why did she bring it back so soon? It's curious—"

"Just as well we didn't notify the police. I admit *I* wanted to."

"I know, I know. You haven't got as much experience as I have. In this case, it was definitely better not." He added softly to himself, "The thing's interesting, though. Quite interesting. I wonder how old

she is? Seventeen or eighteen I suppose. She might have got herself in a jam of some kind."

"I thought you said she was rolling in money."

"You may be an heiress and rolling in money," said Bollard, "but at seventeen you can't always get your hands on it. The funny thing is, you know, they keep heiresses much shorter of cash than they keep the more impecunious. It's not always a good idea. Well, I don't suppose we shall ever know the truth of it."

He put the bracelet back in its place in the display case and shut down the lid.

Chapter Ten

The offices of Egerton, Forbes & Wilborough were in Bloomsbury, in one of those imposing and dignified squares which have as yet not felt the wind of change. Their brass plate was suitably worn down to illegibility. The firm had been going for over a hundred years and a good proportion of the landed gentry of England were their clients. There was no Forbes in the firm anymore and no Wilboroughs. Instead there were Atkinsons, father and son, and a Welsh Lloyd and a Scottish McAllister. There was, however, still an Egerton, descendant of the original Egerton. This particular Egerton was a man of fifty-two and he was adviser to several families which had in their day been advised by his grandfather, his uncle, and his father.

At this moment he was sitting behind a large mahogany desk in his handsome room on the first floor, speaking kindly but firmly to a dejected looking client. Richard Egerton was a handsome man, tall, dark with a touch of grey at the temples and very shrewd grey eyes. His advice was always good advice, but he seldom minced his words.

"Quite frankly you haven't got a leg to stand upon, Freddie," he was saying. "Not with those letters you've written."

"You don't think—" Freddie murmured dejectedly.

"No, I don't," said Egerton. "The only hope is to settle out of court. It might even be held that you've rendered yourself liable to criminal prosecution."

"Oh, look here, Richard, that's carrying things a bit far."

There was a small discreet buzz on Egerton's desk. He picked up the telephone receiver with a frown.

"I thought I said I wasn't to be disturbed."

There was a murmur at the other end. Egerton said, "Oh. Yes—Yes, I see. Ask her to wait, will you."

He replaced the receiver and turned once more to his unhappy looking client.

"Look here, Freddie," he said, "I know the law and you don't. You're in a nasty jam. I'll do my best to get you out of it, but it's going to cost you a bit. I doubt if they'd settle for less than twelve thousand."

"Twelve thousand!" The unfortunate Freddie was aghast. "Oh, I say! I haven't got it, Richard."

"Well, you'll have to raise it then. There are always ways and means. If she'll settle for twelve thousand, you'll be lucky, and if you fight the case it'll cost you a lot more."

"You lawyers!" said Freddie. "Sharks, all of you!"

He rose to his feet. "Well," he said, "do your bloody best for me, Richard old boy."

He took his departure, shaking his head sadly. Richard Egerton put Freddie and his affairs out of his mind, and thought about his next client. He said softly to himself, "The Honourable Elvira Blake. I wonder what she's like..." He lifted his receiver. "Lord Frederick's gone. Send up Miss Blake, will you."

As he waited he made little calculations on his desk pad. How many years since—? She must be fifteen—seventeen—perhaps even more than that. Time went so fast. "Coniston's daughter," he thought, "and Bess's daughter. I wonder which of them she takes after?"

The door opened, the clerk announced Miss Elvira Blake and the girl walked into the room. Egerton rose from his chair and came towards her. In appearance, he thought, she did not resemble either of her parents. Tall, slim, very fair, Bess's colouring but none of Bess's vitality, with an old-fashioned air about her; though that was difficult to be sure of, since the fashion in dress happened at the moment to be ruffles and baby bodices.

"Well, well," he said, as he shook hands with her. "This is a surprise. Last time I saw you, you were eleven years old. Come and

sit here." He pulled forward a chair and she sat down.

"I suppose," said Elvira, a little uncertainly, "that I ought to have written first. Written and made an appointment. Something like that, but I really made up my mind very suddenly and it seemed an opportunity, since I was in London."

"And what are you doing in London?"

"Having my teeth seen to."

"Beastly things, teeth," said Egerton. "Give us trouble from the cradle to the grave. But I am grateful for the teeth, if it gives me an opportunity of seeing you. Let me see now; you've been in Italy, haven't you, finishing your education there at one of these places all girls go to nowadays?"

"Yes," said Elvira, "the Contessa Martinelli. But I've left there now for good. I'm living with the Melfords in Kent until I make up my mind if there's anything I'd like to do."

"Well, I hope you'll find something satisfactory. You're not thinking of a university or anything like that?"

"No," said Elvira, "I don't think I'd be clever enough for that." She paused before saying, "I suppose *you'd* have to agree to anything if I did want to do it?"

Egerton's keen eyes focused sharply.

"I am one of your guardians, and a trustee under your father's will, yes," he said. "Therefore, you have a perfect right to approach me at anytime."

Elvira said, "Thank you," politely. Egerton asked:

"Is there anything worrying you?"

"No. Not really. But you see, I don't *know* anything. Nobody's ever told me things. One doesn't always like to ask."

He looked at her attentively.

"You mean things about yourself?"

"Yes," said Elvira. "It's kind of you to understand. Uncle Derek—" she hesitated.

"Derek Luscombe, you mean?"

"Yes. I've always called him uncle."

"I see."

"He's very kind," said Elvira, "but he's not the sort of person who ever tells you anything. He just arranges things, and looks a little worried in case they mightn't be what I'd like. Of course he listens to a lot of people—women, I mean—who tell him things. Like Contessa Martinelli. He arranges for me to go to schools or to finishing places."

"And they haven't been where you wanted to go?"

"No, I didn't mean that. They've been quite all right. I mean they've been more or less where everyone else goes."

"I see."

"But I don't know anything about *myself*, I mean what money I've got, and how much, and what I could do with it if I wanted."

"In fact," said Egerton, with his attractive smile, "you want to talk business. Is that it? Well, I think you're quite right. Let's see. How old are you? Sixteen—seventeen?"

"I'm nearly twenty."

"Oh dear. I'd no idea."

"You see," explained Elvira, "I feel all the time that I'm being shielded and sheltered. It's nice in a way, but it can get very irritating."

"It's an attitude that's gone out of date," agreed Egerton, "but I can quite see that it would appeal to Derek Luscombe."

"He's a dear," said Elvira, "but very difficult, somehow, to talk to seriously."

"Yes, I can see that that might be so. Well, how much *do* you know about yourself, Elvira? About your family circumstances?"

"I know that my father died when I was five and that my mother had run away from him with someone when I was about two, I don't remember her at all. I barely remember my father. He was very old and had his leg up on a chair. He used to swear. I was rather scared of him. After he died I lived first with an aunt or a cousin or something of my father's, until *she* died, and then I lived with Uncle Derek and his sister. But then she died and I went to Italy. Uncle Derek has arranged for me, now, to live with the Melfords who are his cousins and very kind and nice and have two daughters about my age."

"You're happy there?"

"I don't know yet. I've barely got there. They're all very dull. I really wanted to know how much money I've got."

"So it's financial information you really want?"

"Yes," said Elvira. "I've got *some* money. Is it a lot?"

Egerton was serious now.

"Yes," he said. "You've got a lot of money. Your father was a very rich man. You were his only child. When he died, the title and the estate went to a cousin. He didn't like the cousin, so he left all his personal property, which was considerable, to his daughter—to you, Elvira. You're a very rich woman, or will be, when you are twenty-one."

"You mean I am not rich *now*?"

"Yes," said Egerton, "you're rich now, but the money is not yours to dispose of until you are twenty-one or marry. Until that time it is in the hands of your Trustees. Luscombe, myself and another." He smiled at her. "We haven't embezzled it or anything like that. It's still there. In fact, we've increased your capital considerably by investments."

"How much will I have?"

"At the age of twenty-one or upon your marriage, you will come into a sum which at a rough estimate would amount to six or seven hundred thousand pounds."

"That *is* a lot," said Elvira, impressed.

"Yes, it is a lot. Probably it is because it is such a lot that nobody has ever talked to you about it much."

He watched her as she reflected upon this. Quite an interesting girl, he thought. Looked an unbelievably milk-and-water Miss, but she was more than that. A good deal more. He said, with a faintly ironic smile:

"Does that satisfy you?"

She gave him a sudden smile.

"It ought to, oughtn't it?"

"Rather better than winning the pools," he suggested.

She nodded, but her mind was elsewhere. Then she came out abruptly with a question.

"Who gets it if I die?"

"As things stand now, it would go to your next of kin."

"I mean—I couldn't make a will now, could I? Not until I was twenty-one. That's what someone told me."

"They were quite right."

"That's really rather annoying. If I was married and died I suppose my husband would get the money?"

"Yes."

"And if I wasn't married my mother would be my next of kin and get it. I really seem to have very few relations—I don't even know my mother. What is she like?"

"She's a very remarkable woman," said Egerton shortly. "Everybody would agree to that."

"Didn't she ever *want* to see me?"

"She may have done...I think it's very possible that she did. But having made in—certain ways—rather a mess of her own life, she may have thought that it was better for you that you should be brought up quite apart from her."

"Do you actually *know* that she thinks that?"

"No. I don't really know anything about it."

Elvira got up.

"Thank you," she said. "It's very kind of you to tell me all this."

"I think perhaps you ought to have been told more about things before," said Egerton.

"It's humiliating *not* to know things," said Elvira. "Uncle Derek, of course, thinks I'm just a *child*."

"Well, he's not a very young man himself. He and I, you know, are well advanced in years. You must make allowances for us when we look at things from the point of view of our advanced age."

Elvira stood looking at him for a moment or two.

"But *you* don't think I'm really a child, do you?" she said shrewdly, and added, "I expect you know rather more about girls than Uncle Derek does. He just lived with his sister." Then she stretched out her hand and said, very prettily, "Thank you so much. I hope I haven't interrupted some important work you had to do," and went out.

Egerton stood looking at the door that had closed behind her. He pursed up his lips, whistled a moment, shook his head and sat down

again, picked up a pen and tapped thoughtfully on his desk. He drew some papers towards him, then thrust them back and picked up his telephone.

"Miss Cordell, get me Colonel Luscombe, will you? Try his club first. And then the Shropshire address."

He put back the receiver. Again he drew his papers towards him and started reading them but his mind was not on what he was doing. Presently his buzzer went.

"Colonel Luscombe is on the wire now, Mr. Egerton."

"Right. Put him through. Hallo, Derek. Richard Egerton here. How are you? I've just been having a visit from someone you know. A visit from your ward."

"From Elvira?" Derek Luscombe sounded very surprised.

"Yes."

"But why—what on earth—what did she come to you for? Not in any trouble?"

"No, I wouldn't say so. On the contrary, she seemed rather—well, pleased with herself. She wanted to know all about her financial position."

"You didn't tell her, I hope?" said Colonel Luscombe, in alarm.

"Why not? What's the point of secrecy?"

"Well, I can't help feeling it's a little unwise for a girl to know that she is going to come into such a large amount of money."

"Somebody else will tell her that, if we don't. She's got to be prepared, you know. Money is a responsibility."

"Yes, but she's so much of a child still."

"Are you sure of that?"

"What do you mean? Of course she's a child."

"I wouldn't describe her as such. Who's the boyfriend?"

"I beg your pardon."

"I said who's the boyfriend? There *is* a boyfriend in the offing, isn't there?"

"No, indeed. Nothing of the sort. What on earth makes you think that?"

"Nothing that she actually said. But I've got some experience, you know. I think you'll find there *is* a boyfriend."

"Well, I can assure you you're quite wrong. I mean, she's been most carefully brought up, she's been at very strict schools, she's been in a very select finishing establishment in Italy. I should know if there was anything of that kind going on. I dare say she's met one or two pleasant young fellows and all that, but I'm sure there's been nothing of the kind you suggest."

"Well, my diagnosis is a boyfriend—and probably an undesirable one."

"But why, Richard, why? What do *you* know about young girls?"

"Quite a lot," said Egerton dryly. "I've had three clients in the last year, two of whom were made wards of court and the third one managed to bully her parents into agreeing to an almost certainly disastrous marriage. Girls don't get looked after the way they used to be. Conditions are such that it's very difficult to look after them at all—"

"But I assure you Elvira has been most carefully looked after."

"The ingenuity of the young female of the species is beyond anything you could conjecture! You keep an eye on her, Derek. Make a few inquiries as to what she's been up to."

"Nonsense. She's just a sweet simple girl."

"What you don't know about sweet simple girls would fill an album! Her mother ran away and caused a scandal—remember?—when she was younger than Elvira is today. As for old Coniston, he was one of the worst rips in England."

"You upset me, Richard. You upset me very much."

"You might as well be warned. What I didn't quite like was one of her other questions. Why is she so anxious to know who'd inherit her money if she dies?"

"It's queer your saying that, because she asked me that same question."

"Did she now? Why should her mind run on early death? She asked me about her mother, by the way."

Colonel Luscombe's voice sounded worried as he said: "I wish Bess would get in touch with the girl."

"Have you been talking to her on the subject—to Bess, I mean?"

"Well, yes...Yes I did. I ran across her by chance. We were staying in the same hotel, as a matter of fact. I urged Bess to make some arrangements to see the girl."

"What did she say?" asked Egerton curiously.

"Refused point-blank. She more or less said that she wasn't a safe person for the girl to know."

"Looked at from one point of view I don't suppose she is," said Egerton. "She's mixed-up with that racing fellow, isn't she?"

"I've heard rumours."

"Yes, I've heard them too. I don't know if there's much in it really. There might be, I suppose. That could be why she feels as she does. Bess's friends are strong meat from time to time! But what a woman she is, eh Derek? What a woman."

"Always been her own worst enemy," said Derek Luscombe, gruffly.

"A really nice conventional remark," said Egerton. "Well, sorry I bothered you, Derek, but keep a look out for undesirables in the background. Don't say you haven't been warned."

He replaced the receiver and drew the pages on his desk towards him once more. This time he was able to put his whole attention on what he was doing.

Chapter Eleven

Mrs. McCrae, Canon Pennyfather's housekeeper, had ordered a Dover sole for the evening of his return. The advantages attached to a good Dover sole were manifold. It need not be introduced to the grill or frying pan until the Canon was safely in the house. It could be kept until the next day if necessary. Canon Pennyfather was fond of Dover sole; and, if a telephone call or telegram arrived saying that the Canon would after all be elsewhere on this particular evening, Mrs. McCrae was fond of a good Dover sole herself. All therefore was in good trim for the Canon's return. The Dover sole would be followed by pancakes. The sole sat on the kitchen table, the batter for the pancakes was ready in a bowl. All was in readiness. The brass shone, the silver sparkled, not a minuscule of dust showed anywhere. There was only one thing lacking. The Canon himself.

The Canon was scheduled to return on the train arriving at 6:30 from London.

At 7 o'clock he had not returned. No doubt the train was late. At 7:30 he still had not returned. Mrs. McCrae gave a sigh of vexation. She suspected that this was going to be another of these things. Eight o'clock came and no Canon. Mrs. McCrae gave a long, exasperated sigh. Soon, no doubt, she would get a telephone call, though it was quite within the bounds of possibility that there would not be even a telephone call. He might have written to her. No doubt he had written, but he had probably omitted to post the letter.

"Dear, dear!" said Mrs. McCrae.

At 9 o'clock she made herself three pancakes with the pancake batter. The sole she put carefully away in the Frigidaire. "I wonder where the good man's got to now," she said to herself. She knew by experience that he might be anywhere. The odds were that he would discover his mistake in time to telegraph her or telephone her before she retired to bed. "I shall sit up until 11 o'clock but no longer," said Mrs. McCrae. Ten thirty was her bedtime, an extension to eleven she considered her duty, but if at eleven there was nothing, no word from the Canon, then Mrs. McCrae would duly lock up the house and betake herself to bed.

It cannot be said that she was worried. This sort of thing had happened before. There was nothing to be done but wait for news of some kind. The possibilities were numerous. Canon Pennyfather might have got on the wrong train and failed to discover his mistake until he was at Land's End or John o' Groats, or he might still be in London having made some mistake in the date, and was therefore convinced he was not returning until tomorrow. He might have met a friend or friends at this foreign conference he was going to and been induced to stay out there perhaps over the weekend. He would have meant to let her know but had entirely forgotten to do so. So, as has been already said, she was not worried. The day after tomorrow his old friend, Archdeacon Simmons, was coming to stay. That was the sort of thing the Canon *did* remember, so no doubt he himself or a telegram from him would arrive tomorrow and at latest he would be home on the day after, or there would be a letter.

The morning of the day after, however, arrived without a word from him. For the first time Mrs. McCrae began to be uneasy. Between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. she eyed the telephone in a doubtful manner. Mrs. McCrae had her own fixed views about the telephone. She used it and recognized its convenience but she was not fond of the telephone. Some of her household shopping was done by telephone, though she much preferred to do it in person owing to a fixed belief that if you did not see what you were being given, a shopkeeper was sure to try and cheat you. Still, telephones were useful for domestic matters. She occasionally, though rarely, telephoned her friends or relations in the near neighbourhood. To

make a call of any distance, or a London call, upset her severely. It was a shameful waste of money. Nevertheless, she began to meditate facing that problem.

Finally, when yet another day dawned without any news of him, she decided to act. She knew where the Canon was staying in London. Bertram's Hotel. A nice old-fashioned place. It might be as well, perhaps, if she rang up and made certain inquiries. They would probably know where the Canon was. It was not an ordinary hotel. She would asked to be put through to Miss Gorringer. Miss Gorringer was always efficient and thoughtful. The Canon might, of course, return by the twelve thirty. If so he would be here any minute now.

But the minutes passed and there was no Canon. Mrs. McCrae took a deep breath, nerved herself and asked for a call to London. She waited, biting her lips and holding the receiver clamped firmly to her ear.

"Bertram's Hotel, at your service," said a voice.

"I would like, if you please, to speak to Miss Gorringer," said Mrs. McCrae.

"Just a moment. What name shall I say?"

"It's Canon Pennyfather's housekeeper. Mrs. McCrae."

"Just a moment please."

Presently the calm and efficient voice of Miss Gorringer came through.

"Miss Gorringer here. Did you say Canon Pennyfather's housekeeper?"

"That's right. Mrs. McCrae."

"Oh yes. Of course. What can I do for you, Mrs. McCrae?"

"Is Canon Pennyfather staying at the hotel still?"

"I'm glad you've rung up," said Miss Gorringer. "We have been rather worried as to what exactly to do."

"Do you mean something's happened to Canon Pennyfather? Has he had an accident?"

"No, no, nothing of that kind. But we expected him back from Lucerne on Friday or Saturday."

"Eh—that'd be right."

"But he didn't arrive. Well, of course that wasn't really surprising. He had booked his room on—booked it, that is, until yesterday. He didn't come back yesterday or send any word and his things are still here. The major part of his baggage. We hadn't been quite sure what to do about it. Of course," Miss Gorringer went on hastily, "we know the Canon is, well—somewhat forgetful sometimes."

"You may well say that!"

"It makes it a little difficult for us. We are so fully booked up. His room is actually booked for another guest." She added: "You have no idea where he is?"

With bitterness Mrs. McCrae said:

"The man might be anywhere!" She pulled herself together. "Well, thank you, Miss Gorringer."

"Anything I can do—" Miss Gorringer suggested helpfully.

"I dare say I'll hear soon enough," said Mrs. McCrae. She thanked Miss Gorringer again and rang off.

She sat by the telephone, looking upset. She did not fear for the Canon's personal safety. If he had had an accident she would by now have been notified. She felt sure of that. On the whole the Canon was not what one could call accident prone. He was what Mrs. McCrae called to herself "one of the scatty ones," and the scatty ones seemed always to be looked after by a special providence. Whilst taking no care or thought, they could still survive even a Panda crossing. No, she did not visualize Canon Pennyfather as lying groaning in a hospital. He was *somewhere*, no doubt innocently and happily prattling with some friend or other. Maybe he was abroad still. The difficulty was that Archdeacon Simmons was arriving this evening and Archdeacon Simmons would expect to find a host to receive him. She couldn't put Archdeacon Simmons off because she didn't know where he was. It was all very difficult, but it had, like most difficulties, its bright spot. Its bright spot was Archdeacon Simmons. Archdeacon Simmons would know what to do. She would place the matter in his hands.

Archdeacon Simmons was a complete contrast to her employer. He knew where he was going, and what he was doing, and was always cheerfully sure of knowing the right thing to be done and

doing it. A confident cleric. Archdeacon Simmons, when he arrived, to be met by Mrs. McCrae's explanations, apologies and perturbation, was a tower of strength. He, too, was not alarmed.

"Now don't you worry, Mrs. McCrae," he said in his genial fashion, as he sat down to the meal she had prepared for his arrival. "We'll hunt the absentminded fellow down. Ever heard that story about Chesterton? G. K. Chesterton, you know, the writer. Wired to his wife when he'd gone on a lecture tour 'Am at Crewe Station. Where ought I to be?'"

He laughed. Mrs. McCrae smiled dutifully. She did not think it was very funny because it was so exactly the sort of thing that Canon Pennyfather might have done.

"Ah," said Archdeacon Simmons, with appreciation, "one of your excellent veal cutlets! You're a marvellous cook, Mrs. McCrae. I hope my old friend appreciates you."

Veal cutlets having been succeeded by some small castle puddings with a blackberry sauce which Mrs. McCrae had remembered was one of the Archdeacon's favourite sweets, the good man applied himself in earnest to the tracking down of his missing friend. He addressed himself to the telephone with vigour and a complete disregard for expense, which made Mrs. McCrae purse her lips anxiously, although not really disapproving, because definitely her master had got to be tracked down.

Having first dutifully tried the Canon's sister who took little notice of her brother's goings and comings and as usual had not the faintest idea where he was or might be, the Archdeacon spread his net farther afield. He addressed himself once more to Bertram's Hotel and got details as precisely as possible. The Canon had definitely left there on the early evening of the 19th. he had with him a small BEA handbag, but his other luggage had remained behind in his room, which he had duly retained. He had mentioned that he was going to a conference of some kind at Lucerne. He had not gone direct to the airport from the hotel. The commissionaire, who knew him well by sight, had put him into a taxi and had directed it as told by the Canon, to the Athenaeum Club. That was the last time that anyone at Bertram's Hotel had seen Canon

Pennyfather. Oh yes, a small detail—he had omitted to leave his key behind but had taken it with him. It was not the first time that that had happened.

Archdeacon Simmons paused for a few minutes' consideration before the next call. He could ring up the air station in London. That would no doubt take some time. There might be a short cut. He rang up Dr. Weissgarten, a learned Hebrew scholar who was almost certain to have been at the conference.

Dr. Weissgarten was at his home. As soon as he heard who was speaking to him he launched out into a torrent of verbiage consisting mostly of disparaging criticism of two papers that had been read at the conference in Lucerne.

"Most unsound, that fellow Hogarov," he said, "most unsound. How he gets away with it I don't know! Fellow isn't a scholar at all. Do you know what he actually said?"

The Archdeacon sighed and had to be firm with him. Otherwise there was a good chance that the rest of the evening would be spent in listening to criticism of fellow scholars at the Lucerne Conference. With some reluctance Dr. Weissgarten was pinned down to more personal matters.

"Pennyfather?" he said. "Pennyfather? He ought to have been there. Can't think why he wasn't there. Said he was going. Told me so only a week before when I saw him in the Athenaeum."

"You mean he wasn't at the conference at all?"

"That's what I've just said. He *ought* to have been there."

"Do you know *why* he wasn't there? Did he send an excuse?"

"How should I know? He certainly talked about being there. Yes, now I remember. He was expected. Several people remarked on his absence. Thought he might have had a chill or something. Very treacherous weather." He was about to revert to his criticisms of his fellow scholars but Archdeacon Simmons rang off.

He had got a fact but it was a fact that for the first time awoke in him an uneasy feeling. Canon Pennyfather had not been at the Lucerne Conference. He had meant to go to that conference. It seemed very extraordinary to the Archdeacon that he had not been there. He might, of course, have taken the wrong plane, though on

the whole BEA were pretty careful of you and shepherded you away from such possibilities. Could Canon Pennyfather have forgotten the actual day that he was going to the conference? It was always possible, he supposed. But if so where had he gone instead?

He addressed himself now to the air terminal. It involved a great deal of patient waiting and being transferred from department to department. In the end he got a definite fact. Canon Pennyfather had booked as a passenger on the 21:40 plane to Lucerne on the 18th but he had not been on the plane.

"We're getting on," said Archdeacon Simmons to Mrs. McCrae, who was hovering in the background. "Now, let me see. Who shall I try next?"

"All this telephoning will cost a fearful lot of money," said Mrs. McCrae.

"I'm afraid so. I'm afraid so," said Archdeacon Simmons. "But we've got to get on his track, you know. He's not a very young man."

"Oh, sir, you don't think there's anything could really have happened to him?"

"Well, I hope not...I don't think so, because I think you'd have heard if so. He—er—always had his name and address on him, didn't he?"

"Oh yes, sir, he had cards on him. He'd have letters too, and all sorts of things in his wallet."

"Well, I don't think he's in a hospital then," said the Archdeacon. "Let me see. When he left the hotel he took a taxi to the Athenaeum. I'll ring them up next."

Here he got some definite information. Canon Pennyfather, who was well known there, had dined there at seven thirty on the evening of the 19th. It was then that the Archdeacon was struck by something he had overlooked until then. The aeroplane ticket had been for the 18th but the Canon had left Bertram's Hotel by taxi to the Athenaeum, having mentioned he was going to the Lucerne Conference, on the 19th. Light began to break. "Silly old ass," thought Archdeacon Simmons to himself, but careful not to say it aloud in front of Mrs. McCrae. "Got his dates wrong. The conference

was on the 19th. I'm sure of it. He must have thought that he was leaving on the 18th. He was one day wrong."

He went over the next bit carefully. The Canon would have gone to the Athenaeum, he would have dined, he would have gone on to Kensington Air Station. There, no doubt, it would have been pointed out to him that his ticket was for the day before and he would then have realized that the conference he was going to attend was now over.

"That's what happened," said Archdeacon Simmons, "depend upon it." He explained it to Mrs. McCrae, who agreed that it was likely enough. "Then what would he do?"

"Go back to his hotel," said Mrs. McCrae.

"He wouldn't have come straight down here—gone straight to the station, I mean."

"Not if his luggage was at the hotel. At any rate, he would have called there for his luggage."

"True enough," said Simmons. "All right. We'll think of it like this. He left the airport with his little bag and he went back to the hotel, or started for the hotel at all events. He might have had dinner perhaps—no, he'd dined at the Athenaeum. All right, he went back to the hotel. *But* he never arrived there." He paused a moment or two and then said doubtfully, "Or did he? Nobody seems to have seen him there. So what happened to him on the way?"

"He could have met someone," said Mrs. McCrae, doubtfully.

"Yes. Of course that's perfectly possible. Some old friend he hadn't seen for a long time...He could have gone off with a friend to the friend's hotel or the friend's house, but he wouldn't have stayed there three days, would he? He couldn't have forgotten for three whole days that his luggage was at the hotel. He'd have rung up about it, he'd have called for it, or in a supreme fit of absentmindedness he might have come straight home. Three days' silence. That's what's so inexplicable."

"If he had an accident—"

"Yes, Mrs. McCrae, of course that's possible. We can try the hospitals. You say he had plenty of papers on him to identify him? Hm—I think there's only one thing for it."

Mrs. McCrae looked at him apprehensively.

"I think, you know," said the Archdeacon gently, "that we've got to go to the police."

Chapter Twelve

Miss Marple had found no difficulty in enjoying her stay in London. She did a lot of the things that she had not had the time to do in her hitherto brief visits to the capital. It has to be regretfully noted that she did not avail herself of the wide cultural activities that would have been possible to her. She visited no picture galleries and no museums. The idea of patronizing a dress show of any kind would not even have occurred to her. What she did visit were the glass and china departments of the large stores, and the household linen departments, and she also availed herself of some marked down lines in furnishing fabrics. Having spent what she considered a reasonable sum upon these household investments, she indulged in various excursions of her own. She went to places and shops she remembered from her young days, sometimes merely with the curiosity of seeing whether they were still there. It was not a pursuit that she had ever had time for before, and she enjoyed it very much. After a nice little nap after lunch, she would go out, and, avoiding the attentions of the commissionaire if possible, because he was so firmly imbued with the idea that a lady of her age and frailty should always go in a taxi, she walked towards a bus stop, or tube station. She had bought a small guide to buses and their routes—and an Underground Transport Map; and she would plan her excursion carefully. One afternoon she could be seen walking happily and nostalgically round Evelyn Gardens or Onslow Square murmuring softly, “Yes, that was Mrs. Van Dylan’s house. Of course it looks *quite* different now. They seem to have remodelled it. Dear

me, I see it's got four bells. Four flats, I suppose. Such a nice old-fashioned square this always was."

Rather shamefacedly she paid a visit to Madame Tussaud's, a well-remembered delight of her childhood. In Westbourne Grove she looked in vain for Bradley's. Aunt Helen had always gone to Bradley's about her sealskin jacket.

Window shopping in the general sense did not interest Miss Marple, but she had a splendid time rounding up knitting patterns, new varieties of knitting wool, and suchlike delights. She made a special expedition to Richmond to see the house that had been occupied by Great-Uncle Thomas, the retired admiral. The handsome terrace was still there but here again each house seemed to be turned into flats. Much more painful was the house in Lowndes Square where a distant cousin, Lady Merridew, had lived in some style. Here a vast skyscraper building of modernistic design appeared to have arisen. Miss Marple shook her head sadly and said firmly to herself, "There must *be* progress I suppose. If Cousin Ethel knew, she'd turn in her grave, I'm sure."

It was on one particularly mild and pleasant afternoon that Miss Marple embarked on a bus that took her over Battersea Bridge. She was going to combine the double pleasure of taking a sentimental look at Princes Terrace Mansions where an old governess of hers had once lived, and visiting Battersea Park. The first part of her quest was abortive. Miss Ledbury's former home had vanished without trace and had been replaced by a great deal of gleaming concrete. Miss Marple turned into Battersea Park. She had always been a good walker but had to admit that nowadays her walking powers were not what they were. Half a mile was quite enough to tire her. She could manage, she thought, to cross the Park and go out over Chelsea Bridge and find herself once more on a convenient bus route, but her steps grew gradually slower and slower, and she was pleased to come upon a tea enclosure situated on the edge of the lake.

Teas were still being served there in spite of the autumn chill. There were not many people today, a certain amount of mothers and prams, and a few pairs of young lovers. Miss Marple collected a tray with tea and two sponge cakes. She carried her tray carefully to

a table and sat down. The tea was just what she needed. Hot, strong and very reviving. Revived, she looked round her, and, her eyes stopping suddenly at a particular table, she sat up very straight in her chair. Really, a very strange coincidence, very strange indeed! First the Army & Navy Stores and now here. Very unusual places those particular two people chose! But no! She was wrong. Miss Marple took a second and stronger pair of glasses from her bag. Yes, she had been mistaken. There was a certain similarity, of course. That long straight blonde hair; but this was not Bess Sedgwick. It was someone years younger. Of course! It was the daughter! The young girl who had come into Bertram's with Lady Selina Hazy's friend, Colonel Luscombe. But the man was the same man who had been lunching with Lady Sedgwick in the Army & Navy Stores. No doubt about it, the same handsome, hawklike look, the same leanness, the same predatory toughness and—yes, the same strong, virile attraction.

"Bad!" said Miss Marple. "Bad all through! Cruel! Unscrupulous. I don't *like* seeing this. First the mother, now the daughter. What does it mean?"

It meant no good. Miss Marple was sure of that. Miss Marple seldom gave anyone the benefit of the doubt; she invariably thought the worst, and nine times out of ten, so she insisted, she was right in so doing. Both these meetings, she was sure, were more or less secret meetings. She observed now the way these two bent forward over the table until their heads nearly touched; and the earnestness with which they talked. The girl's face—Miss Marple took off her spectacles, rubbed the lenses carefully, then put them on again. Yes, this girl was in love. Desperately in love, as only the young can be in love. But what were her guardians about to let her run about London and have these clandestine assignments in Battersea Park? A nicely brought up, well-behaved girl like that. *Too* nicely brought up, no doubt! Her people probably believed her to be in some quite other spot. She had to tell lies.

On the way out Miss Marple passed the table where they were sitting, slowing down as much as she could without its being too obvious. Unfortunately, their voices were so low that she could not

hear what they said. The man was speaking, the girl was listening, half pleased, half afraid. "Planning to run away together, perhaps?" thought Miss Marple. "She's still under age."

Miss Marple passed through the small gate in the fence that led to the sidewalk of the park. There were cars parked along there and presently she stopped beside one particular car. Miss Marple was not particularly knowledgeable over cars but such cars as this one did not come her way very often, so she had noted and remembered it. She had acquired a little information about cars of this style from an enthusiastic great-nephew. It was a racing car. Some foreign make—she couldn't remember the name now. Not only that, she had seen this car, or one exactly like it, seen it only yesterday in a side street close to Bertram's Hotel. She had noticed it not only because of its size and its powerful and unusual appearance but because the number had awakened some vague memory, some trace of association in her memory. FAN 2266. It had made her think of her cousin Fanny Godfrey. Poor Fanny who stuttered, who had said "I have got t-t-t-wo s-s-s-potz...."

She walked along and looked at the number of this car. Yes, she was quite right. FAN 2266. It was the same car. Miss Marple, her footsteps growing more painful every moment, arrived deep in thought at the other side of Chelsea Bridge and by then was so exhausted that she hailed the first taxi she saw with decision. She was worried by the feeling that there was something she ought to do about things. But what things and what to do about them? It was all so indefinite. She fixed her eyes absently on some newsboards.

"Sensational developments in train robbery," they ran. "Engine driver's story," said another one. Really! Miss Marple thought to herself, every day there seemed to be a bank holdup or a train robbery or a wage pay snatch.

Crime seemed to have got above itself.

Chapter Thirteen

Vaguely reminiscent of a large bumblebee, Chief-Inspector Fred Davy wandered around the confines of the Criminal Investigation Department, humming to himself. It was a well-known idiosyncrasy of his, and caused no particular notice except to give rise to the remark that "Father was on the prowl again."

His prowling led him at last to the room where Inspector Campbell was sitting behind a desk with a bored expression. Inspector Campbell was an ambitious young man and he found much of his occupation tedious in the extreme. Nevertheless, he coped with the duties appointed to him and achieved a very fair measure of success in so doing. The powers that be approved of him, thought he should do well and doled out from time to time a few words of encouraging commendation.

"Good morning, sir," said Inspector Campbell, respectfully, when Father entered his domain. Naturally he called Chief-Inspector Davy "Father" behind his back as everyone else did; but he was not yet of sufficient seniority to do such a thing to his face.

"Anything I can do for you, sir?" he inquired.

"La, la, boom, boom," hummed the Chief-Inspector, slightly off key. "Why must they call me Mary when my name's Miss Gibbs?" After this rather unexpected resurrection of a bygone musical comedy, he drew up a chair and sat down.

"Busy?" he asked.

"Moderately so."

"Got some disappearance case or other on, haven't you, to do with some hotel or other. What's the name of it now? Bertram's. Is that it?"

"Yes, that's right, sir. Bertram's Hotel."

"Contravening the licensing hours? Call girls?"

"Oh no, sir," said Inspector Campbell, slightly shocked at hearing Bertram's Hotel being referred to in such a connection. "Very nice, quiet, old-fashioned place."

"Is it now?" said Father. "Yes, is it now? Well, that's interesting, really."

Inspector Campbell wondered why it was interesting. He did not like to ask, as tempers in the upper hierarchy were notoriously short since the mail train robbery, which had been a spectacular success for the criminals. He looked at Father's large, heavy, bovine face and wondered, as he had once or twice wondered before, how Chief-Inspector Davy had reached his present rank and why he was so highly thought of in the department. "All right in his day, I suppose," thought Inspector Campbell, "but there are plenty of go-ahead chaps about who could do with some promotion, once the dead wood is cleared away." But the dead wood had begun another song, partly hummed, with an occasional word or two here and there.

"*Tell me, gentle stranger, are there anymore at home like you?*" intoned Father and then in a sudden falsetto, "*A few, kind sir, and nicer girls you never knew.* No, let's see, I've got the sexes mixed-up. *Floradora.* That was a good show, too."

"I believe I've heard of it, sir," said Inspector Campbell.

"Your mother sang you to sleep in the cradle with it, I expect," said Chief-Inspector Davy. "Now then, what's been going on at Bertram's Hotel? Who has disappeared and how and why?"

"A Canon Pennyfather, sir. Elderly clergyman."

"Dull case, eh?"

Inspector Campbell smiled.

"Yes, sir, it *is* rather dull in a way."

"What did he look like?"

"Canon Pennyfather?"

"Yes—you've got a description, I suppose?"

"Of course." Campbell shuffled papers and read: "Height 5 ft 8. Large thatch of white hair—stoops...."

"And he disappeared from Bertram's Hotel—when?"

"About a week ago—November 19th."

"And they've just reported it. Took their time about it, didn't they?"

"Well, I think there was a general idea that he'd turn up."

"Any idea what's behind it?" asked Father. "Has a decent God-fearing man suddenly gone off with one of the churchwardens' wives? Or does he do a bit of secret drinking, or has he embezzled church funds? Or is he the sort of absentminded old chap who goes in for this sort of thing?"

"Well, from all I can hear, sir, I should say the latter. He's done it before."

"What—disappeared from a respectable West End hotel?"

"No, not exactly that, but he's not always returned home when he was expected. Occasionally he's turned up to stay with friends on a day when they haven't asked him, or not turned up on the date when they *had* asked him. That sort of thing."

"Yes," said Father. "Yes. Well that sounds very nice and natural and according to plan, doesn't it? When exactly did you say he disappeared?"

"Thursday. November 19th. He was supposed to be attending a congress at—" He bent down and studied some papers on his desk. "—oh yes, Lucerne. Society of Biblical Historical Studies. That's the English translation of it. I think it's actually a German society."

"And it was held at Lucerne? The old boy—I suppose he *is* an old boy?"

"Sixty-three, sir, I understand."

"The old boy didn't turn up, is that it?"

Inspector Campbell drew his papers towards him and gave Father the ascertainable facts in so far as they had been ascertained.

"Doesn't sound as if he'd gone off with a choirboy," observed Chief-Inspector Davy.

"I expect he'll turn up all right," said Campbell, "but we're looking into it, of course. Are you—er—particularly interested in the case,

sir?" He could hardly restrain his curiosity on this point.

"No," said Davy thoughtfully. "No, I'm not interested in the *case*. I don't see anything to be interested about in it."

There was a pause, a pause which clearly contained the words, "Well, then?" with a question mark after it from Inspector Campbell, which he was too well-trained to utter in audible tones.

"What I'm *really* interested in," said Father, "is the date. And Bertram's Hotel, of course."

"It's always been very well-conducted, sir. No trouble there."

"That's very nice, I'm sure," said Father. He added thoughtfully, "I'd rather like to have a look at the place."

"Of course, sir," said Inspector Campbell. "Anytime you like. I was thinking of going round there myself."

"I might as well come along with you," said Father. "Not to butt in, nothing like that. But I'd just rather like to have a look at the place, and this disappearing Archdeacon of yours, or whatever he is, makes rather a good excuse. No need to call me 'sir' when we're there—you throw your weight about. I'll just be your stooge."

Inspector Campbell became interested.

"Do you think there's something that might tie in there, sir, something that might tie in with something else?"

"There's no reason to believe so, so far," said Father. "But you know how it is. One gets—I don't know what to call them—whims, do you think? Bertram's Hotel, somehow, sounds almost too good to be true."

He resumed his impersonation of a bumblebee with a rendering of "Let's All Go Down the Strand."

The two detective officers went off together, Campbell looking smart in a lounge suit (he had an excellent figure), and Chief-Inspector Davy carrying with him a tweedy air of being up from the country. They fitted in quite well. Only the astute eye of Miss Gorringer, as she raised it from her ledgers, singled out and appreciated them for what they were. Since she had reported the disappearance of Canon Pennyfather herself and had already had a word with a lesser personage in the police force, she had been expecting something of this kind.

A faint murmur to the earnest-looking girl assistant whom she kept handy in the background, enabled the latter to come forward and deal with any ordinary inquiries or services while Miss Gorringer gently shifted herself a little farther along the counter and looked up at the two men. Inspector Campbell laid down his card on the desk in front of her and she nodded. Looking past him to the large tweed-coated figure behind him, she noted that he had turned slightly sideways, and was observing the lounge and its occupants with an apparently naïve pleasure at beholding such a well-bred, upper-class world in action.

"Would you like to come into the office?" said Miss Gorringer. "We can talk better there perhaps."

"Yes, I think that would be best."

"Nice place you've got here," said the large, fat, bovine-looking man, turning his head back towards her. "Comfortable," he added, looking approvingly at the large fire. "Good old-fashioned comfort."

Miss Gorringer smiled with an air of pleasure.

"Yes, indeed. We pride ourselves on making our visitors comfortable," she said. She turned to her assistant. "Will you carry on, Alice? There is the ledger. Lady Jocelyn will be arriving quite soon. She is sure to want to change her room as soon as she sees it but you must explain to her we are really full up. If necessary, you can show her number 340 on the third floor and offer her that instead. It's not a very pleasant room and I'm sure she will be content with her present one as soon as she sees that."

"Yes, Miss Gorringer. I'll do just that, Miss Gorringer."

"And remind Colonel Mortimer that his field glasses are here. He asked me to keep them for him this morning. Don't let him go off without them."

"No, Miss Gorringer."

These duties accomplished, Miss Gorringer looked at the two men, came out from behind the desk and walked along to a plain mahogany door with no legend on it. Miss Gorringer opened it and they went into a small, rather sad-looking office. All three sat down.

"The missing man is Canon Pennyfather, I understand," said Inspector Campbell. He looked at his notes. "I've got Sergeant

Wadell's report. Perhaps you'll tell me in your own words just what occurred."

"I don't think that Canon Pennyfather has really disappeared in the sense in which one would usually use that word," said Miss Gorringe. "I think, you know, that he's just met someone somewhere, some old friend or something like that, and has perhaps gone off with him to some scholarly meeting or reunion or something of that kind, on the Continent—he is so very vague."

"You've known him for a long time?"

"Oh yes, he's been coming here to stay for—let me see—oh five or six years at least, I should think."

"You've been here some time yourself, ma'am," said Chief-Inspector Davy, suddenly putting in a word.

"I have been here, let me think, fourteen years," said Miss Gorringe.

"It's a nice place," repeated Davy again. "And Canon Pennyfather usually stayed here when he was in London? Is that right?"

"Yes. He always came to us. He wrote well beforehand to retain his room. He was much less vague on paper than he was in real life. He asked for a room from the 17th to the 21st. During that time he expected to be away for one or two nights, and he explained that he wished to keep his room on while he was away. He quite often did that."

"When did you begin to get worried about him?" asked Campbell.

"Well, I didn't really. Of course it was awkward. You see, his room was let on from the 23rd and when I realized—I didn't at first—that he hadn't come back from Lugano—"

"I've got Lucerne here in my notes," said Campbell.

"Yes, yes, I think it *was* Lucerne. Some Archaeological Congress or other. Anyway, when I realized he hadn't come back here and that his baggage was still here waiting in his room, it made things rather awkward. You see, we are very booked up at this time of year and I had someone else coming into his room. The Honourable Mrs. Saunders, who lives at Lyme Regis. She always has that room. And then his housekeeper rang up. She was worried."

"The housekeeper's name is Mrs. McCrae, so I understand from Archdeacon Simmons. Do you know her?"

"Not personally, no, but I have spoken to her on the telephone once or twice. She is, I think, a very reliable woman and has been with Canon Pennyfather for some years. She was worried naturally. I believe she and Archdeacon Simmons got in touch with near friends and relations but they knew nothing of Canon Pennyfather's movements. And since he was expecting the Archdeacon to stay with him it certainly seemed very odd—in fact it still does—that the Canon should not have returned home."

"Is this Canon usually as absentminded as that?" asked Father.

Miss Gorringe ignored him. This large man, presumably the accompanying sergeant, seemed to her to be pushing himself forward a little too much.

"And now I understand," continued Miss Gorringe, in an annoyed voice, "and now I understand from Archdeacon Simmons that the Canon never even went to this conference in Lucerne."

"Did he send any message to say he wouldn't go?"

"I don't think so—not from here. No telegram or anything like that. I really know nothing about Lucerne—I am really only concerned with *our* side of the matter. It has got into the evening papers, I see—the fact that he is missing, I mean. They haven't mentioned he was staying *here*. I hope they won't. We don't want the Press here, our visitors wouldn't like that at all. If you can keep them off us, Inspector Campbell, we should be very grateful. I mean it's not as if he had disappeared from *here*."

"His luggage is still here?"

"Yes. In the baggage room. If he didn't go to Lucerne, have you considered the possibility of his being run over? Something like that?"

"Nothing like that has happened to him."

"It really does seem very, very curious," said Miss Gorringe, a faint flicker of interest appearing in her manner, to replace the annoyance. "I mean, it does make one wonder where he *could* have gone and why?"

Father looked at her comprehendingly.

"Of course," he said. "You've only been thinking of it from the hotel angle. Very natural."

"I understand," said Inspector Campbell, referring once more to his notes, "that Canon Pennyfather left here about six thirty on the evening of Thursday the 19th. He had with him a small overnight bag and he left here in a taxi, directing the commissionaire to tell the driver to drive to the Athenaeum Club."

Miss Gorringer nodded her head.

"Yes, he dined at the Athenaeum Club—Archdeacon Simmons told me that *that* was the place he was last seen."

There was a firmness in Miss Gorringer's voice as she transferred the responsibility of seeing the Canon last from Bertram's Hotel to the Athenaeum Club.

"Well, it's nice to get the facts straight," said Father in a gentle rumbling voice. "We've got 'em straight now. He went off with his little blue BOAC bag or whatever he'd got with him—it *was* a blue BOAC bag, yes? He went off and he didn't come back, and that's that."

"So you see, really I cannot help you," said Miss Gorringer, showing a disposition to rise to her feet and get back to work.

"It doesn't *seem* as if you could help us," said Father, "but someone else might be able to," he added.

"Someone else?"

"Why, yes," said Father. "One of the staff perhaps."

"I don't think anyone knows *anything*; or they would certainly have reported it to me."

"Well, perhaps they might. Perhaps they mightn't. What I mean is, they'd have told you if they'd distinctly *known* anything. But I was thinking more of something he might have *said*."

"What sort of thing?" said Miss Gorringer, looking perplexed.

"Oh, just some chance word that might give one a clue. Something like 'I'm going to see an old friend tonight that I haven't seen since we met in Arizona.' Something like that. Or 'I'm going to stay next week with a niece of mine for her daughter's confirmation.' With absentminded people, you know, clues like that are a great help. They show what was in the person's mind. It may be that after

his dinner at the Athenaeum, he gets into a taxi and thinks 'Now where am I going?' and having got—say—the confirmation in his mind—thinks he's going off there."

"Well, I see what you mean," said Miss Gorringer doubtfully. "It seems a little unlikely."

"Oh, one never knows one's luck," said Father cheerfully. "Then there are the various guests here. I suppose Canon Pennyfather knew some of them since he came here fairly often."

"Oh yes," said Miss Gorringer. "Let me see now. I've seen him talking to—yes, Lady Selina Hazy. Then there was the Bishop of Norwich. They're old friends, I believe. They were at Oxford together. And Mrs. Jameson and her daughters. They come from the same part of the world. Oh yes, quite a lot of people."

"You see," said Father, "he might have talked to one of *them*. He might have just mentioned some little thing that would give us a clue. Is there anyone staying here now that the Canon knew fairly well?"

Miss Gorringer frowned in thought.

"Well, I think General Radley is here still. And there's an old lady who came up from the country—who used to stay here as a girl, so she told me. Let me see, I can't remember her name at the moment, but I can find it for you. Oh yes, Miss Marple, that's her name. I believe she knew him."

"Well, we could make a start with those two. And there'd be a chambermaid, I suppose."

"Oh yes," said Miss Gorringer. "But she has been interviewed already by Sergeant Wadell."

"I know. But not perhaps from this angle. What about the waiter who attended on his table. Or the headwaiter?"

"There's Henry, of course," said Miss Gorringer.

"Who's Henry?" asked Father.

Miss Gorringer looked almost shocked. It was to her impossible that anyone should not know Henry.

"Henry has been here for more years than I can say," she said. "You must have noticed him serving teas as you came in."

"Kind of personality," said Davy. "I remember noticing him."

"I don't know what we should do without Henry," said Miss Gorringer with feeling. "He really is wonderful. He sets the tone of the place, you know."

"Perhaps he might like to serve tea to me," said Chief-Inspector Davy. "Muffins, I saw he'd got there. I'd like a good muffin again."

"Certainly if you like," said Miss Gorringer, rather coldly. "Shall I order two teas to be served to you in the lounge?" she added, turning to Inspector Campbell.

"That would—" the inspector began, when suddenly the door opened and Mr. Humfries appeared in his Olympian manner.

He looked slightly taken aback, then looked inquiringly at Miss Gorringer. Miss Gorringer explained.

"These are two gentlemen from Scotland Yard, Mr. Humfries," she said.

"Detective-Inspector Campbell," said Campbell.

"Oh yes. Yes, of course," said Mr. Humfries. "The matter of Canon Pennyfather, I suppose? Most extraordinary business. I hope nothing's happened to him, poor old chap."

"So do I," said Miss Gorringer. "Such a dear old man."

"One of the old school," said Mr. Humfries approvingly.

"You seem to have quite a lot of the old school here," observed Chief-Inspector Davy.

"I suppose we do, I suppose we do," said Mr. Humfries. "Yes, in many ways we are quite a survival."

"We have our regulars you know," said Miss Gorringer. She spoke proudly. "The same people come back year after year. We have a lot of Americans. People from Boston, and Washington. Very quiet, nice people."

"They like our English atmosphere," said Mr. Humfries, showing his very white teeth in a smile.

Father looked at him thoughtfully. Inspector Campbell said,

"You're quite sure that no message came here from the Canon? I mean it might have been taken by someone who forgot to write it down or to pass it on."

"Telephone messages are always taken down *most* carefully," said Miss Gorringer with ice in her voice. "I cannot conceive it possible

that a message would not have been passed on to me or to the appropriate person on duty."

She glared at him.

Inspector Campbell looked momentarily taken aback.

"We've really answered all these questions before, you know," said Mr. Humfries, also with a touch of ice in his voice. "We gave all the information at our disposal to your sergeant—I can't remember his name for the moment."

Father stirred a little and said, in a kind of homely way,

"Well you see, things have begun to look rather more serious. It looks like a bit more than absentmindedness. That's why, I think, it would be a good thing if we could have a word or two with those two people you mentioned—General Radley and Miss Marple."

"You want me to—to arrange an interview with them?" Mr. Humfries looked rather unhappy. "General Radley's very deaf."

"I don't think it will be necessary to make it too formal," said Chief-Inspector Davy. "We don't want to worry people. You can leave it quite safely to us. Just point out those two you mentioned. There is just a chance, you know, that Canon Pennyfather *might* have mentioned some plan of his, or some person he was going to meet at Lucerne or who was going with him to Lucerne. Anyway, it's worth trying."

Mr. Humfries looked somewhat relieved.

"Nothing more we can do for you?" he asked. "I'm sure you understand that we wish to help you in every way, only you do understand how we feel about any Press publicity."

"Quite," said Inspector Campbell.

"And I'll just have a word with the chambermaid," said Father.

"Certainly, if you like. I doubt very much whether she can tell you anything."

"Probably not. But there might be some detail—some remark the Canon made about a letter or an appointment. One never knows."

Mr. Humfries glanced at his watch.

"She'll be on duty at six," he said. "Second floor. Perhaps, in the meantime, you'd care for tea?"

"Suits me," said Father promptly.

They left the office together.

Miss Gorringer said, "General Radley will be in the smoking room. The first room down that passage on the left. He'll be in front of the fire there with *The Times*. I think," she added discreetly, "he might be asleep. You're sure you don't want me to—"

"No, no, I'll see to it," said Father. "And what about the other one—the old lady?"

"She's sitting over there, by the fireplace," said Miss Gorringer.

"The one with white fluffy hair and the knitting?" said Father, taking a look. "Might almost be on the stage, mightn't she? Everybody's universal great-aunt."

"Great-aunts aren't much like that nowadays," said Miss Gorringer, "nor grandmothers nor great-grandmothers, if it comes to that. We had the Marchioness of Barlowe in yesterday. She's a great-grandmother. Honestly, I didn't know her when she came in. Just back from Paris. Her face a mask of pink and white and her hair platinum blonde and I suppose an entirely false figure, but it looked wonderful."

"Ah," said Father, "I prefer the old-fashioned kind myself. Well, thank you, ma'am." He turned to Campbell. "I'll look after it, shall I, sir? I know you've got an important appointment."

"That's right," said Campbell, taking his cue. "I don't suppose anything much will come of it, but it's worth trying."

Mr. Humfries disappeared into his inner sanctum, saying as he did so:

"Miss Gorringer—just a moment, please."

Miss Gorringer followed him in and shut the door behind her.

Humfries was walking up and down. He demanded sharply:

"What do they want to see Rose for? Wadell asked all the necessary questions."

"I suppose it's just routine," said Miss Gorringer, doubtfully.

"You'd better have a word with her first."

Miss Gorringer looked a little startled.

"But surely Inspector Campbell—"

"Oh, I'm not worried about Campbell. It's the other one. Do you know who he is?"

"I don't think he gave his name. Sergeant of some kind, I suppose. He looks rather a yokel."

"Yokel, my foot," said Mr. Humfries, abandoning his elegance. "That's Chief-Inspector Davy, an old fox if there ever was one. They think a lot of him at the Yard. I'd like to know what *he's* doing here, nosing about and playing the genial hick. I don't like it at all."

"You can't think—"

"I don't know what to think. But I tell you I don't like it. Did he ask to see anyone else besides Rose?"

"I think he's going to have a word with Henry."

Mr. Humfries laughed. Miss Gorringer laughed too.

"We needn't worry about Henry."

"No, indeed."

"And the visitors who knew Canon Pennyfather?"

Mr. Humfries laughed again.

"I wish him joy of old Radley. He'll have to shout the place down and then he won't get anything worth having. He's welcome to Radley and that funny old hen, Miss Marple. All the same, I don't much like his poking his nose in...."

Chapter Fourteen

"You know," said Chief-Inspector Davy thoughtfully, "I don't much like that chap Humfries."

"Think there's something wrong with him?" asked Campbell.

"Well—" Father sounded apologetic, "you know the sort of feeling one gets. Smarmy sort of chap. I wonder if he's the owner or only the manager."

"I could ask him." Campbell took a step back towards the desk.

"No, don't ask him," said Father. "Just find out—quietly."

Campbell looked at him curiously.

"What's on your mind, sir?"

"Nothing in particular," said Father. "I just think I'd like to have a good deal more information about this place. I'd like to know who is behind it, what its financial status is. All that sort of thing."

Campbell shook his head.

"I should have said if there was one place in London that was absolutely above suspicion—"

"I know, I know," said Father. "And what a useful thing it is to have that reputation!"

Campbell shook his head and left. Father went down the passage to the smoking room. General Radley was just waking up. *The Times* had slipped from his knees and disintegrated slightly. Father picked it up and reassembled the sheets and handed it to him.

"Thank ye, sir. Very kind," said General Radley gruffly.

"General Radley?"

"Yes."

"You'll excuse me," said Father, raising his voice, "but I want to speak to you about Canon Pennyfather."

"Eh—what's that?" The General approached a hand to his ear.

"Canon Pennyfather," bellowed Father.

"My father? Dead years ago."

"Canon *Pennyfather*."

"Oh. What about him? Saw him the other day. He was staying here."

"There was an address he was going to give me. Said he'd leave it with you."

That was rather more difficult to get over but he succeeded in the end.

"Never gave me any address. Must have mixed me up with somebody else. Muddle-headed old fool. Always was. Scholarly sort of chap, you know. They're always absentminded."

Father persevered for a little longer but soon decided that conversation with General Radley was practically impossible and almost certainly unprofitable. He went and sat down in the lounge at a table adjacent to that of Miss Jane Marple.

"Tea, sir?"

Father looked up. He was impressed, as everyone was impressed, by Henry's personality. Though such a large and portly man he had appeared, as it were, like some vast travesty of Ariel who could materialize and vanish at will. Father ordered tea.

"Did I see you've got muffins here?" he asked.

Henry smiled benignly.

"Yes, sir. Very good indeed our muffins are, if I may say so. Everyone enjoys them. Shall I order you muffins, sir? Indian or China tea?"

"Indian," said Father. "Or Ceylon if you've got it."

"Certainly we have Ceylon, sir."

Henry made the faintest gesture with a finger and the pale young man who was his minion departed in search of Ceylon tea and muffins. Henry moved graciously elsewhere.

"You're *Someone*, you are," thought Father. "I wonder where they got hold of you and what they pay you. A packet, I bet, *and* you'd

be worth it." He watched Henry bending in a fatherly manner over an elderly lady. He wondered what Henry thought, if he thought anything, about Father. Father considered that he fitted into Bertram's Hotel reasonably well. He might have been a prosperous gentleman farmer or he might have been a peer of the realm with a resemblance to a bookmaker. Father knew two peers who were very like that. On the whole, he thought, he passed muster, but he also thought it possible that he had not deceived Henry. "Yes, you're *Someone* you are," Father thought again.

Tea came and the muffins. Father bit deeply. Butter ran down his chin. He wiped it off with a large handkerchief. He drank two cups of tea with plenty of sugar. Then he leaned forward and spoke to the lady sitting in the chair next to him.

"Excuse me," he said, "but aren't you Miss Jane Marple?"

Miss Marple transferred her gaze from her knitting to Chief Detective-Inspector Davy.

"Yes," she said, "I am Miss Marple."

"I hope you don't mind my speaking to you. As a matter of fact I am a police officer."

"Indeed? Nothing seriously wrong here, I hope?"

Father hastened to reassure her in his best paternal fashion.

"Now, don't you worry, Miss Marple," he said. "It's not the sort of thing you mean at all. No burglary or anything like that. Just a little difficulty about an absentminded clergyman, that's all. I think he's a friend of yours. Canon Pennyfather."

"Oh, Canon Pennyfather. He was here only the other day. Yes, I've known him slightly for many years. As you say, he *is* very absentminded." She added, with some interest, "What has he done now?"

"Well, as you might say in a manner of speaking, he's lost himself."

"Oh dear," said Miss Marple. "Where ought he to be?"

"Back at home in his Cathedral Close," said Father, "but he isn't."

"He told *me*," said Miss Marple, "he was going to a conference at Lucerne. Something to do with the Dead Sea Scrolls, I believe. He's a great Hebrew and Aramaic scholar, you know."

"Yes," said Father. "You're quite right. That's where he—well, that's where he was supposed to be going."

"Do you mean he didn't turn up there?"

"No," said Father, "he didn't turn up."

"Oh, well," said Miss Marple, "I expect he got his dates wrong."

"Very likely, very likely."

"I'm afraid," said Miss Marple, "that that's not the first time that that's happened. I went to have tea with him in Chadminster once. He was actually absent from home. His housekeeper told me then how very absentminded he was."

"He didn't say anything to you when he was staying here that might give us a clue, I suppose?" asked Father, speaking in an easy and confidential way. "You know the sort of thing I mean, any old friend he'd met or any plans he'd made apart from this Lucerne Conference?"

"Oh no. He just mentioned the Lucerne Conference. I think he said it was on the 19th. Is that right?"

"That was the date of the Lucerne Conference, yes."

"I didn't notice the date particularly. I mean—" like most old ladies, Miss Marple here became slightly involved—"I *thought* he said the 19th and he *might* have said the 19th, but at the same time he might have *meant* the 19th and it might really have been the *20th*. I mean, he may have thought the 20th *was* the 19th or he may have thought the 19th was the 20th."

"Well—" said Father, slightly dazed.

"I'm putting it badly," said Miss Marple, "but I mean people like Canon Pennyfather, if they say they're going somewhere on a Thursday, one is quite prepared to find that they didn't mean Thursday, it may be Wednesday or Friday they really mean. Usually they find out in time but sometimes they just don't. I thought at the time that something like that must have happened."

Father looked slightly puzzled.

"You speak as though you knew already, Miss Marple, that Canon Pennyfather hadn't gone to Lucerne."

"I knew he wasn't in Lucerne on *Thursday*," said Miss Marple. "He was here all day—or most of the day. That's why I thought, of

course, that though he may have said Thursday to me, it was really Friday he meant. He certainly left here on Thursday evening carrying his BEA bag."

"Quite so."

"I took it he was going off to the airport then," said Miss Marple. "That's why I was so surprised to see he was back again."

"I beg your pardon, what do you mean by 'back again'?"

"Well, that he was back here again, I mean."

"Now, let's get this quite clear," said Father, careful to speak in an agreeable and reminiscent voice, and not as though it was really important. "You saw the old idio—you saw the Canon, that is to say, leave as you thought for the airport with his overnight bag, fairly early in the evening. Is that right?"

"Yes. About half past six, I would say, or quarter to seven."

"But you say he came *back*."

"Perhaps he missed the plane. That would account for it."

"*When* did he come back?"

"Well, I don't really know. I didn't see him come back."

"Oh," said Father, taken aback. "I thought you said you *did* see him."

"Oh, I did see him *later*," said Miss Marple. "I meant I didn't see him actually come into the hotel."

"You saw him later? When?"

Miss Marple thought.

"Let me see. It was about 3 a.m. I couldn't sleep very well. Something woke me. Some sound. There are so many queer noises in London. I looked at my little clock, it was ten minutes past three. For some reason—I'm not quite sure what—I felt uneasy. Footsteps, perhaps, outside my door. Living in the country, if one hears footsteps in the middle of the night it makes one nervous. So I just opened my door and looked out. There was Canon Pennyfather leaving his room—it's next door to mine—and going off down the stairs wearing his overcoat."

"He came out of his room wearing his overcoat and went down the stairs at 3 a.m. in the morning?"

"Yes," said Miss Marple and added: "I thought it odd at the time."

Father looked at her for some moments.

"Miss Marple," he said, "why haven't you told anyone this before?"

"Nobody asked me," said Miss Marple simply.

Chapter Fifteen

Father drew a deep breath.

"No," he said. "No, I suppose nobody would ask you. It's as simple as that."

He relapsed into silence again.

"You think something has happened to him, don't you?" asked Miss Marple.

"It's over a week now," said Father. "He didn't have a stroke and fall down in the street. He's not in a hospital as a result of an accident. So where *is* he? His disappearance has been reported in the Press, but nobody's come forward with any information yet."

"They may not have seen it. *I* didn't."

"It looks—it really looks—" Father was following out his own line of thought—"as though he *meant* to disappear. Leaving this place like that in the middle of the night. You're quite sure about it, aren't you?" he demanded sharply. "You didn't dream it?"

"I am absolutely sure," said Miss Marple with finality.

Father heaved himself to his feet.

"I'd better go and see that chambermaid," he said.

Father found Rose Sheldon on duty and ran an approving eye over her pleasant person.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said. "I know you've seen our sergeant already. But it's about that missing gentleman, Canon Pennyfather."

"Oh yes, sir, a very nice gentleman. He often stays here."

"Absentminded," said Father.

Rose Sheldon permitted a discreet smile to appear on her respectful mask of a face.

"Now let me see." Father pretended to consult some notes. "The last time you saw Canon Pennyfather—was—"

"On the Thursday morning, sir. Thursday the 19th. He told me that he would not be back that night and possibly not the next either. He was going, I think, to Geneva. Somewhere in Switzerland, anyway. He gave me two shirts he wanted washed and I said they would be ready for him on the morning of the following day."

"And that's the last you saw of him, eh?"

"Yes, sir. You see, I'm not on duty in the afternoons. I come back again at 6 o'clock. By then he must have left, or at any rate he was downstairs. Not in his room. He had left two suitcases behind."

"That's right," said Father. The contents of the suitcases had been examined, but had given no useful lead. He went on: "Did you call him the next morning?"

"Call him? No, sir, he was away."

"What did you do ordinarily—take him early tea? Breakfast?"

"Early tea, sir. He breakfasted downstairs always."

"So you didn't go into his room at all the next day?"

"Oh yes, sir." Rose sounded shocked. "I went into his room as usual. I took his shirts in for one thing. And of course I dusted the room. We dust all the rooms every day."

"Had the bed been slept in?"

She stared at him. "The bed, sir? Oh no."

"Was it rumpled—creased in any way?"

She shook her head.

"What about the bathroom?"

"There was a damp hand towel, sir, that had been used. I presume that would be the evening before. He may have washed his hands last thing before going off."

"And there was nothing to show that he had come back into the room—perhaps quite late—after midnight?"

She stared at him with an air of bewilderment. Father opened his mouth, then shut it again. Either she knew nothing about the Canon's return or she was a highly accomplished actress.

"What about his clothes—suits. Were they packed up in his suitcases?"

"No, sir, they were hanging up in the cupboards. He was keeping his room on, you see, sir."

"Who did pack them up?"

"Miss Gorringer gave orders, sir. When the room was wanted for the new lady coming in."

A straightforward coherent account. But if that old lady was correct in stating that she saw Canon Pennyfather leaving his room at 3 a.m. on Friday morning, then he must have come back to that room sometime. Nobody had seen him enter the hotel. Had he, for some reason, deliberately avoided being seen? He had left no traces in the room. He hadn't even lain down on the bed. Had Miss Marple dreamed the whole thing? At her age it was possible enough. An idea struck him.

"What about the airport bag?"

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"A small bag, dark blue—a BEA or BOAC bag—you must have seen it?"

"Oh that—yes, sir. But of course he'd take that with him abroad."

"But he didn't *go* abroad. He never went to Switzerland after all. So he must have left it behind. Or else he came back and left it here with his other luggage."

"Yes—yes—I think—I'm not quite sure—I believe he did."

Quite unsolicited, the thought raced into Father's mind: *They didn't brief you on that, did they?*

Rose Sheldon had been calm and competent up till now. But that question had rattled her. She hadn't known the right answer to it. *But she ought to have known.*

The Canon had taken his bag to the airport, had been turned away from the airport. If he had come back to Bertram's, the bag would have been with him. *But Miss Marple had made no mention of it when she had described the Canon leaving his room and going down the stairs.*

Presumably it was left in the bedroom, but it had not been put in the baggage room with the suitcases. Why not? *Because the Canon*

was supposed to have gone to Switzerland?

He thanked Rose genially and went downstairs again.

Canon Pennyfather! Something of an enigma, Canon Pennyfather. Talked a lot about going to Switzerland, muddled up things so that he didn't go to Switzerland, came back to his hotel so secretly that nobody saw him, left it again in the early hours of the morning. (To go where? To do what?)

Could absentmindedness account for all this?

If not, then what was Canon Pennyfather up to? And more important, where was he?

From the staircase, Father cast a jaundiced eye over the occupants of the lounge, and wondered whether *anyone* was what they seemed to be. He had got to that stage! Elderly people, middle-aged people (nobody very young) nice old-fashioned people, nearly all well-to-do, all highly respectable. Service people, lawyers, clergymen; American husband and wife near the door, a French family near the fireplace. Nobody flashy, nobody out of place; most of them enjoying an old-fashioned English afternoon tea. Could there really be anything seriously wrong with a place that served old-fashioned afternoon teas?

The Frenchman made a remark to his wife that fitted in appositively enough.

"*Le Five-o'-clock*," he was saying. "*C'est bien Anglais ça, n'est ce pas?*" He looked round him with approval.

"*Le Five-o'-clock*," thought Davy as he passed through the swing doors to the street. "That chap doesn't know that '*le Five-o'-clock*' is as dead as the Dodo!"

Outside, various vast American wardrobe cases and suitcases were being loaded on to a taxi. It seemed that Mr. and Mrs. Elmer Cabot were on their way to the Hotel Vendôme, Paris.

Beside him on the kerb, Mrs. Elmer Cabot was expressing her views to her husband.

"The Pendleburys were quite right about this place, Elmer. It just *is* old England. So beautifully Edwardian. I just feel Edward the Seventh could walk right in any moment and sit down there for his afternoon tea. I mean to come back here next year—I really do."

"If we've got a million dollars or so to spare," said her husband dryly.

"Now, Elmer, it wasn't as bad as all *that*."

The baggage was loaded, the tall commissionaire helped them in, murmuring "Thank you, sir" as Mr. Cabot made the expected gesture. The taxi drove off. The commissionaire transferred his attention to Father.

"Taxi, sir?"

Father looked up at him.

Over six feet. Good-looking chap. A bit run to seed. Ex-Army. Lot of medals—genuine, probably. A bit shifty? Drinks too much.

Aloud he said: "Ex-Army man?"

"Yes, sir. Irish Guards."

"Military Medal, I see. Where did you get that?"

"Burma."

"What's your name?"

"Michael Gorman. Sergeant."

"Good job here?"

"It's a peaceful spot."

"Wouldn't you prefer the Hilton?"

"I would not. I like it here. Nice people come here, and quite a lot of racing gentlemen—for Ascot and Newbury. I've had good tips from them now and again."

"Ah, so you're an Irishman and gambler, is that it?"

"Och! Now, what would life be without a gamble?"

"Peaceful and dull," said Chief-Inspector Davy, "like mine."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Can you guess what my profession is?" asked Father.

The Irishman grinned.

"No offence to you, sir, but if I may guess I'd say you were a cop."

"Right first time," said Chief-Inspector Davy. "You remember Canon Pennyfather?"

"Canon Pennyfather now, I don't seem to mind the name—"

"Elderly clergyman."

Michael Gorman laughed.

"Ah now, clergyman are as thick as peas in a pod in there."

"This one disappeared from here."

"Oh, *that* one!" The commissionaire seemed slightly taken aback.

"Did you know him?"

"I wouldn't remember him if it hadn't been for people asking me questions about him. All I know is, I put him into a taxi and he went to the Athenaeum Club. That's the last I saw of him. Somebody told me he'd gone to Switzerland, but I hear he never got there. Lost himself, it seems."

"You didn't see him later that day?"

"Later—No, indeed."

"What time do you go off duty?"

"Eleven-thirty."

Chief-Inspector Davy nodded, refused a taxi and moved slowly away along Pond Street. A car roared past him close to the kerb, and pulled up outside Bertram's Hotel, with a scream of brakes. Chief-Inspector Davy turned his head soberly and noted the number plate. FAN 2266. There was something reminiscent about that number, though he couldn't for the moment place it.

Slowly he retraced his steps. He had barely reached the entrance before the driver of the car, who had gone through the doors a moment or two before, came out again. He and the car matched each other. It was a racing model, white with long gleaming lines. The young man had the same eager greyhound look with a handsome face and a body with not a superfluous inch of flesh on it.

The commissionaire held the car door open, the young man jumped in, tossed a coin to the commissionaire and drove off with a burst of powerful engine.

"You know who *he* is?" said Michael Gorman to Father.

"A dangerous driver, anyway."

"Ladislaus Malinowski. Won the Grand Prix two years ago—world champion he was. Had a bad smash last year. They say he's all right again now."

"Don't tell me *he's* staying at Bertram's. Highly unsuitable."

Michael Gorman grinned.

"He's not staying here, no. But a friend of his is—" He winked.

A porter in a striped apron came out with more American luxury travel equipment.

Father stood absentmindedly watching them being ensconced in a Daimler Hire Car whilst he tried to remember what he knew about Ladislaus Malinowski. A reckless fellow—said to be tied up with some well-known woman—what was her name now? Still staring at a smart wardrobe case, he was just turning away when he changed his mind and reentered the hotel again.

He went to the desk and asked Miss Gorringer for the hotel register. Miss Gorringer was busy with departing Americans, and pushed the book along the counter towards him. He turned the pages.

Lady Selina Hazy, Little Cottage, Merryfield, Hants.
Mr. and Mrs. Hennessey King, Elderberries, Essex.
Sir John Woodstock, 5 Beaumont Crescent, Cheltenham.
Lady Sedgwick, Hurstings House, Northumberland.
Mr. and Mrs. Elmer Cabot, Connecticut.
General Radley, 14, The Green, Chichester.
Mr. and Mrs. Woolmer Pickington, Marble Head, Connecticut.
La Comtesse de Beauville, Les Sapins, St. Germain en Laye.
Miss Jane Marple, St. Mary Mead, Much Benham.
Colonel Luscombe, Little Green, Suffolk.
Mrs. Carpenter, The Hon. Elvira Blake.
Canon Pennyfather, The Close, Chadminster.
Mrs. Holding, Mr. Holding, Miss Audrey Holding, The Manor
House, Carmanton.
Mr. and Mrs. Ryesville, Valley Forge, Pennsylvania.
The Duke of Barnstable, Doone Castle, N. Devon....

A cross section of the kind of people who stayed at Bertram's Hotel. They formed, he thought, a kind of pattern....

As he shut the book, a name on an earlier page caught his eye. Sir William Ludgrove.

Mr. Justice Ludgrove who had been recognized by a probation officer near the scene of a bank robbery. Mr. Justice Ludgrove—

Canon Pennyfather—both patrons of Bertram's Hotel....

"I hope you enjoyed your tea, sir?" It was Henry, standing at his elbow. He spoke courteously, and with the slight anxiety of the perfect host.

"The best tea I've had for years," said Chief-Inspector Davy.

He remembered he hadn't paid for it. He attempted to do so; but Henry raised a deprecating hand.

"Oh no, sir. I was given to understand that your tea was on the house. Mr. Humfries' orders."

Henry moved away. Father was left uncertain whether he ought to have offered Henry a tip or not. It was galling to think that Henry knew the answer to that social problem much better than he did!

As he moved away along the street, he stopped suddenly. He took out his notebook and put down a name and an address—no time to lose. He went into a telephone box. He was going to stick out his neck. Come hell or high water, he was going all out on a hunch.

Chapter Sixteen

It was the wardrobe that worried Canon Pennyfather. It worried him before he was quite awake. Then he forgot it and he fell asleep again. But when his eyes opened once more, there the wardrobe still was in the wrong place. He was lying on his left side facing the window and the wardrobe ought to have been there between him and the window on the left wall. But it wasn't. It was on the right. It worried him. It worried him so much that it made him feel tired. He was conscious of his head aching badly, and on top of that, to have the wardrobe in the wrong place. At this point once more his eyes closed.

There was rather more light in the room the next time he woke. It was not daylight yet. Only the faint light of dawn. "Dear me," said Canon Pennyfather to himself, suddenly solving the problem of the wardrobe. "How stupid I am! Of course, I'm not at home."

He moved gingerly. No, this wasn't his own bed. He was away from home. He was—where was he? Oh, of course. He'd gone to London, hadn't he? He was in Bertram's Hotel and—but no, he *wasn't* in Bertram's Hotel. In Bertram's Hotel his bed was facing the window. So that was wrong, too.

"Dear me, where can I be?" said Canon Pennyfather.

Then he remembered that he was going to Lucerne. "Of course," he said to himself, "I'm in Lucerne." He began thinking about the paper he was going to read. He didn't think about it long. Thinking about his paper seemed to make his head ache so he went to sleep again.

The next time he woke his head was a great deal clearer. Also there was a good deal more light in the room. He was not at home, he was not at Bertram's Hotel and he was fairly sure that he was not in Lucerne. This wasn't a hotel bedroom at all. He studied it fairly closely. It was an entirely strange room with very little furniture in it. A kind of cupboard (what he'd taken for the wardrobe) and a window with flowered curtains through which the light came. A chair and a table and a chest of drawers. Really, that was about all.

"Dear me," said Canon Pennyfather, "this is *most* odd. Where am I?"

He was thinking of getting up to investigate but when he sat up in bed his headache began again so he lay down.

"I must have been ill," decided Canon Pennyfather. "Yes, definitely I must have been ill." He thought a minute or two and then said to himself, "As a matter of fact, I think perhaps I'm still ill. Influenza, perhaps?" Influenza, people often said, came on very suddenly. Perhaps—perhaps it had come on at dinner at the Athenaeum. Yes, that was right. He remembered that he had dined at the Athenaeum.

There were sounds of moving about in the house. Perhaps they'd taken him to a nursing home. But no, he didn't think this was a nursing home. With the increased light it showed itself as a rather shabby and ill-furnished small bedroom. Sounds of movement went on. From downstairs a voice called out, "Good-bye, ducks. Sausage and mash this evening."

Canon Pennyfather considered this. Sausage and mash. The words had a faintly agreeable quality.

"I believe," he said to himself, "I'm *hungry*."

The door opened. A middle-aged woman came in, went across to the curtains, pulled them back a little and turned towards the bed.

"Ah, you're awake now," she said. "And how are you feeling?"

"Really," said Canon Pennyfather, rather feebly, "I'm not quite sure."

"Ah, I expect not. You've been quite bad, you know. Something hit you a nasty crack, so the doctor said. These motorists! Not even stopping after they'd knocked you down."

"Have I had an accident?" said Canon Pennyfather. "A motor accident?"

"That's right," said the woman. "Found you by the side of the road when we come home. Thought you was drunk at first." She chuckled pleasantly at the reminiscence. "Then my husband said he'd better take a look. It may have been an accident, he said. There wasn't no smell of drink or anything. No blood or anything neither. Anyway, there you was, out like a log. So my husband said, 'We can't leave him here lying like that,' and he carried you in here. See?"

"Ah," said Canon Pennyfather, faintly, somewhat overcome by all these revelations. "A good Samaritan."

"And he saw you were a clergyman so my husband said, 'It's all quite respectable.' Then he said he'd better not call the police because being a clergyman and all that you mightn't like it. That's if you was drunk, in spite of there being no smell of drink. So then we hit upon getting Dr. Stokes to come and have a look at you. We still call him Dr. Stokes although he's been struck off. A very nice man he is, embittered a bit, of course, by being struck off. It was only his kind heart really, helping a lot of girls who were no better than they should be. Anyway, he's a good enough doctor and we got him to come and take a look at you. He says you've come to no real harm, says it's mild concussion. All we'd got to do was to keep you lying flat and quiet in a dark room. 'Mind you,' he said, 'I'm not giving an opinion or anything like that. This is unofficial. I've no right to prescribe or to say anything. By rights I dare say you ought to report it to the police, but if you don't want to, why should you?' Give the poor old geezer a chance, that's what he said. Excuse me if I'm speaking disrespectful. He's a rough and ready speaker, the doctor is. Now what about a drop of soup or some hot bread and milk?"

"Either," said Canon Pennyfather faintly, "would be very welcome."

He relapsed on to his pillows. An accident? So *that* was it. An accident, and he couldn't remember a thing about it! A few minutes later the good woman returned bearing a tray with a steaming bowl on it.

"You'll feel better after this," she said. "I'd like to have put a drop of whisky or a drop of brandy in it but the doctor said you wasn't to have nothing like that."

"Certainly not," said Canon Pennyfather, "not with concussion. No. It would have been unadvisable."

"I'll put another pillow behind your back, shall I, ducks? There, is that all right?"

Canon Pennyfather was a little startled by being addressed as "ducks." He told himself that it was kindly meant.

"Upsydaisy," said the woman, "there we are."

"Yes, but where are we?" said Canon Pennyfather. "I mean, where am I? Where is this place?"

"Milton St. John," said the woman. "Didn't you know?"

"Milton St. John?" said Canon Pennyfather. He shook his head. "I never heard the name before."

"Oh well, it's not much of a place. Only a village."

"You have been very kind," said Canon Pennyfather. "May I ask your name?"

"Mrs. Wheeling. Emma Wheeling."

"You are most kind," said Canon Pennyfather again. "But this accident now. I simply cannot remember—"

"You put yourself outside that, luv, and you'll feel better and up to remembering things."

"Milton St. John," said Canon Pennyfather to himself, in a tone of wonder. "The name means nothing to me *at all*. How very extraordinary!"

Chapter Seventeen

Sir Ronald Graves drew a cat upon his blotting pad. He looked at the large portly figure of Chief-Inspector Davy sitting opposite him and drew a bulldog.

"Ladislaus Malinowski?" he said. "Could be. Got any evidence?"

"No. He'd fit the bill, would he?"

"A daredevil. No nerves. Won the World Championship. Bad crash about a year ago. Bad reputation with women. Sources of income doubtful. Spends money here and abroad freely. Always going to and fro to the Continent. Have you got some idea that he's the man behind these organized robberies and holdups?"

"I don't think he's the planner. But I think he's in with them."

"Why?"

"For one thing, he runs a Mercedes-Otto car. Racing model. A car answering to that description was seen near Bedhampton on the morning of the mail robbery. Different number plates—but we're used to that. And it's the same stunt—unlike, but not too unlike. FAN 2299 instead of 2266. There aren't so many Mercedes-Otto models of that type about. Lady Sedgwick has one and young Lord Merrivale."

"You don't think Malinowski runs the show?"

"No—I think there are better brains than his at the top. But he's in it. I've looked back over the files. Take the holdup at the Midland and West London. Three vans happened—just happened—to block a certain street. A Mercedes-Otto that was on the scene got clear away owing to that block."

"It was stopped later."

"Yes. And given a clean bill of health. Especially as the people who'd reported it weren't sure of the correct number. It was reported as FAM 3366—Malinowski's registration number is FAN 2266—It's all the same picture."

"And you persist in tying it up with Bertram's Hotel. They dug up some stuff about Bertram's for you—"

Father tapped his pocket.

"Got it here. Properly registered company. Balance—paid up capital—directors—etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. Doesn't mean a thing! These financial shows are all the same—just a lot of snakes swallowing each other! Companies, and holding companies—makes your brain reel!"

"Come now, Father. That's just a way they have in the City. Has to do with taxation—"

"What I want is the real dope. If you'll give me a chit, sir, I'd like to go and see some top brass."

The AC stared at him.

"And what exactly do you mean by top brass?"

Father mentioned a name.

The AC looked upset. "I don't know about that. I hardly think we dare approach *him*."

"It might be very helpful."

There was a pause. The two men looked at each other. Father looked bovine, placid, and patient. The AC gave in.

"You're a stubborn old devil, Fred," he said. "Have it your own way. Go and worry the top brains behind the international financiers of Europe."

"*He'll* know," said Chief-Inspector Davy. "He'll *know*. And if he doesn't, he can find out by pressing one buzzer on his desk or making one telephone call."

"I don't know that he'll be pleased."

"Probably not," said Father, "but it won't take much of his time. I've got to have authority behind me, though."

"You're really serious about this place, Bertram's, aren't you? But what have you got to go on? It's well run, has a good respectable

clientele—no trouble with the licensing laws.”

“I know—I know. No drinks, no drugs, no gambling, no accommodation for criminals. All pure as the driven snow. No beatniks, no thugs, no juvenile delinquents. Just sober Victorian-Edwardian old ladies, county families, visiting travellers from Boston and the more respectable parts of the USA. All the same, a respectable Canon of the church is seen to leave it at 3 a.m. in the morning in a somewhat surreptitious manner—”

“Who saw that?”

“An old lady.”

“How did she manage to see him. Why wasn’t she in bed and asleep?”

“Old ladies are like that, sir.”

“You’re not talking of—what’s his name—Canon Pennyfather?”

“That’s right, sir. His disappearance was reported and Campbell has been looking into it.”

“Funny coincidence—his name’s just come up in connection with the mail robbery at Bedhampton.”

“Indeed? In what way, sir?”

“Another old lady—or middle-aged anyway. When the train was stopped by that signal that had been tampered with, a good many people woke up and looked out into the corridor. This woman, who lives in Chadminster and knows Canon Pennyfather by sight, says she saw him entering the train by one of the doors. She thought he’d got out to see what was wrong and was getting in again. We were going to follow it up because of his disappearance being reported—”

“Let’s see—the train was stopped at 5.30 a.m. Canon Pennyfather left Bertram’s Hotel not long after 3 a.m. Yes, it could be done. If he were driven there—say—in a racing car...”

“So we’re back again to Ladislaus Malinowski!”

The AC looked at his blotting pad doodles. “What a bulldog you are, Fred,” he said.

Half an hour later Chief-Inspector Davy was entering a quiet and rather shabby office.

The large man behind the desk rose and put forward a hand.

"Chief-Inspector Davy? Do sit down," he said. "Do you care for a cigar?"

Chief-Inspector Davy shook his head.

"I must apologize," he said, in his deep countryman's voice, "for wasting your valuable time."

Mr. Robinson smiled. He was a fat man and very well dressed. He had a yellow face, his eyes were dark and sad looking and his mouth was large and generous. He frequently smiled to display overlarge teeth. "The better to eat you with," thought Chief-Inspector Davy irrelevantly. His English was perfect and without accent but he was not an Englishman. Father wondered, as many others had wondered before him, what nationality Mr. Robinson really was.

"Well, what can I do for you?"

"I'd like to know," said Chief-Inspector Davy, "who owns Bertram's Hotel."

The expression on Mr. Robinson's face did not change. He showed no surprise at hearing the name nor did he show recognition. He said thoughtfully:

"You want to know who owns Bertram's Hotel. That, I think, is in Pond Street, off Piccadilly."

"Quite right, sir."

"I have occasionally stayed there myself. A quiet place. Well run."

"Yes," said Father, "particularly well run."

"And you want to know who owns it? Surely that is easy to ascertain?"

There was a faint irony behind his smile.

"Through the usual channels, you mean? Oh yes." Father took a small piece of paper from his pocket and read out three or four names and addresses.

"I see," said Mr. Robinson, "someone has taken quite a lot of trouble. Interesting. And you come to me?"

"If anyone knows, you would, sir."

"Actually I do not know. But it is true that I have ways of obtaining information. One has—" he shrugged his very large, fat shoulders—"one has contacts."

"Yes, sir," said Father with an impassive face.

Mr. Robinson looked at him, then he picked up the telephone on his desk.

"Sonia? Get me Carlos." He waited a minute or two then spoke again. "Carlos?" He spoke rapidly half a dozen sentences in a foreign language. It was not a language that Father could even recognize.

Father could converse in good British French. He had a smattering of Italian and he could make a guess at plain travellers' German. He knew the sounds of Spanish, Russian and Arabic, though he could not understand them. This language was none of those. At a faint guess he hazarded it might be Turkish or Persian or Armenian, but even of that he was by no means sure. Mr. Robinson replaced the receiver.

"I do not think," he said genially, "that we shall have long to wait. I am interested, you know. Very much interested. I have occasionally wondered myself—"

Father looked inquiring.

"About Bertram's Hotel," said Mr. Robinson. "Financially, you know. One wonders how it can pay. However, it has never been any of my business. And one appreciates—" he shrugged his shoulders—"a comfortable hostelry with an unusually talented personnel and staff...Yes, I have wondered." He looked at Father. "You know how and why?"

"Not yet," said Father, "but I mean to."

"There are several possibilities," said Mr. Robinson, thoughtfully. "It is like music, you know. Only so many notes to the octave, yet one can combine them in—what is it—several million different ways? A musician told me once that you do not get the same tune twice. Most interesting."

There was a slight buzz on his desk and he picked up the receiver once more.

"Yes? Yes, you have been very prompt. I am pleased. I see. Oh! Amsterdam yes...Ah...Thank you...Yes. You will spell that? Good."

He wrote rapidly on a pad at his elbow.

"I hope this will be useful to you," he said, as he tore off the sheet and passed it across the table to Father, who read the name out loud. "Wilhelm Hoffman."

"Nationality Swiss," said Mr. Robinson. "Though not, I would say, born in Switzerland. Has a good deal of influence in Banking circles and though keeping strictly on the right side of the law, he has been behind a great many—questionable deals. He operates solely on the Continent, not in this country."

"Oh."

"But he has a brother," said Mr. Robinson. "Robert Hoffman. Living in London—a diamond merchant—most respectable business—His wife is Dutch—He also has offices in Amsterdam—Your people may know about him. As I say, he deals mainly in diamonds, but he is a very rich man, and he owns a lot of property, not usually in his own name. Yes, he is behind quite a lot of enterprises. He and his brother are the real owners of Bertram's Hotel."

"Thank you, sir," Chief-Inspector Davy rose to his feet. "I needn't tell you that I'm much obliged to you. It's wonderful," he added, allowing himself to show more enthusiasm than was normal.

"That I should know?" inquired Mr. Robinson, giving one of his larger smiles. "But this is one of my specialties. Information. I like to know. That is why you came to me, is it not?"

"Well," said Chief-Inspector Davy, "we do know about you. The Home Office. The Special Branch and all the rest of it." He added almost naïvely, "It took a bit of nerve on my part to approach you."

Again Mr. Robinson smiled.

"I find you an interesting personality, Chief-Inspector Davy," he said. "I wish you success in whatever you are undertaking."

"Thank you, sir. I think I shall need it. By the way, these two brothers, would you say they were violent men?"

"Certainly not," said Mr. Robinson. "It would be quite against their policy. The brothers Hoffman do not apply violence in business matters. They have other methods that serve them better. Year by year, I would say, they get steadily richer, or so my information from Swiss Banking circles tells me."

"It's a useful place, Switzerland," said Chief-Inspector Davy.

"Yes, indeed. What we should all do without it I do not know! So much rectitude. Such a fine business sense! Yes, we businessmen must all be very grateful to Switzerland. I myself," he added, "have

also a high opinion of Amsterdam.” He looked hard at Davy, then smiled again, and the Chief-Inspector left.

When he got back to headquarters again, he found a note awaiting him.

*Canon Pennyfather has turned up—safe if not sound.
Apparently was knocked down by a car at Milton St. John and
has concussion.*

Chapter Eighteen

Canon Pennyfather looked at Chief-Inspector Davy and Inspector Campbell, and Chief-Inspector Davy and Inspector Campbell looked at him. Canon Pennyfather was at home again. Sitting in the big armchair in his library, a pillow behind his head and his feet up on a pouffe, with a rug over his knees to emphasize his invalid status.

"I'm afraid," he was saying politely, "that I simply cannot remember anything at all."

"You can't remember the accident when the car hit you?"

"I'm really afraid not."

"Then how did you know a car did hit you?" demanded Inspector Campbell acutely.

"The woman there, Mrs—Mrs—was her name Wheeling?—told me about it."

"And how did she know?"

Canon Pennyfather looked puzzled.

"Dear me, you are quite right. She couldn't have known, could she? I suppose she thought it was what must have happened."

"And you really cannot remember *anything*? How did you come to be in Milton St. John?"

"I've no idea," said Canon Pennyfather. "Even the name is quite unfamiliar to me."

Inspector Campbell's exasperation was mounting, but Chief-Inspector Davy said in his soothing, homely voice:

"Just tell us again the last thing you do remember, sir."

Canon Pennyfather turned to him with relief. The inspector's dry scepticism had made him uncomfortable.

"I was going to Lucerne to a congress. I took a taxi to the airport—at least to Kensington Air Station."

"Yes. And then?"

"That's all. I can't remember anymore. The next thing I remember is the wardrobe."

"What wardrobe?" demanded Inspector Campbell.

"It was in the wrong place."

Inspector Campbell was tempted to go into this question of a wardrobe in the wrong place. Chief-Inspector Davy cut in.

"Do you remember arriving at the air station, sir?"

"I suppose so," said Canon Pennyfather, with the air of one who has a great deal of doubt on the matter.

"And you duly flew to Lucerne."

"Did I? I don't remember anything about it if so."

"Do you remember arriving back at Bertram's Hotel that night?"

"No."

"You do remember Bertram's Hotel?"

"Of course. I was staying there. Very comfortable. I kept my room on."

"Do you remember travelling in a train?"

"A train? No, I can't recall a train."

"There was a holdup. The train was robbed. Surely, Canon Pennyfather, you can remember *that*."

"I ought to, oughtn't I?" said Canon Pennyfather. "But somehow—" he spoke apologetically—"I don't." He looked from one to the other of the officers with a bland gentle smile.

"Then your story is that you remember nothing after going in a taxi to the air station until you woke up in the Wheelings' cottage at Milton St. John."

"There is nothing unusual in that," the Canon assured him. "It happens quite often in cases of concussion."

"What did you think had happened to you when you woke up?"

"I had such a headache I really couldn't think. Then of course I began to wonder where I was and Mrs. Wheeling explained and

brought me some excellent soup. She called me 'love' and 'dearie' and 'ducks,'" said the Canon with slight distaste, "but she was very kind. Very kind indeed."

"She ought to have reported the accident to the police. Then you would have been taken to hospital and properly looked after," said Campbell.

"She looked after me very well," the Canon protested, with spirit, "and I understand that with concussion there is very little you *can* do except keep the patient quiet."

"If you should remember anything more, Canon Pennyfather—"

The Canon interrupted him.

"Four whole days I seem to have lost out of my life," he said. "Very curious. Really very curious indeed. I wonder so much where I was and what I was doing. The doctor tells me it may all come back to me. On the other hand it may not. Possibly I shall never know what happened to me during those days." His eyelids flickered. "You'll excuse me. I think I am rather tired."

"That's quite enough now," said Mrs. McCrae, who had been hovering by the door, ready to intervene if she thought it necessary. She advanced upon them. "Doctor says he wasn't to be worried," she said firmly.

The policemen rose and moved towards the door. Mrs. McCrae shepherded them out into the hall rather in the manner of a conscientious sheepdog. The Canon murmured something and Chief-Inspector Davy, who was the last to pass through the door, wheeled round at once.

"What was that?" he asked, but the Canon's eyes were now closed.

"What did you think he said?" said Campbell as they left the house after refusing Mrs. McCrae's lukewarm offer of refreshment.

Father said thoughtfully:

"I thought he said 'the Walls of Jericho.'"

"What could he mean by that?"

"It sounds biblical," said Father.

"Do you think we'll ever know," asked Campbell, "how that old boy got from the Cromwell Road to Milton St. John?"

"It doesn't seem as if we shall get much help from him," agreed Davy.

"That woman who says she saw him on the train after the holdup. Can she possibly be right? Can he be mixed-up in some way with these robberies? It seems impossible. He's such a thoroughly respectable old boy. Can't very well suspect a Canon of Chadminster Cathedral of being mixed-up with a train robbery, can one?"

"No," said Father thoughtfully, "no. No more than one can imagine Mr. Justice Ludgrove being mixed-up with a bank holdup."

Inspector Campbell looked at his superior officer curiously.

The expedition to Chadminster concluded with a short and unprofitable interview with Dr. Stokes.

Dr. Stokes was aggressive, uncooperative and rude.

"I've known the Wheelings quite a while. They're by way of being neighbours of mine. They'd picked some old chap off the road. Didn't know whether he was dead drunk, or ill. Asked me in to have a look. I told them he wasn't drunk—that it was concussion—"

"And you treated him after that."

"Not at all. I didn't treat him, or prescribe for him or attend him. I'm not a doctor—I was once, but I'm not now—I told them what they ought to do was ring up the police. Whether they did or not I don't know. Not my business. They're a bit dumb, both of them—but kindly folk."

"You didn't think of ringing up the police yourself?"

"No, I did not. I'm not a doctor. Nothing to do with me. As a human being I told them not to pour whisky down his throat and keep him quiet and flat until the police came."

He glared at them and, reluctantly, they had to leave it at that.

Chapter Nineteen

Mr. Hoffman was a big solid-looking man. He gave the appearance of being carved out of wood—preferably teak.

His face was so expressionless as to give rise to surmise—could such a man be capable of thinking—of feeling emotion? It seemed impossible.

His manner was highly correct.

He rose, bowed, and held out a wedge-like hand.

“Chief-Inspector Davy? It is some years since I had the pleasure—you may not even remember—”

“Oh yes I do, Mr. Hoffman. The Aaronberg Diamond Case. You were a witness for the Crown—a most excellent witness, let me say. The defence was quite unable to shake you.”

“I am not easily shaken,” said Mr. Hoffman gravely.

He did not look a man who would easily be shaken.

“What can I do for you?” he went on. “No trouble, I hope—I always want to agree well with the police. I have the greatest admiration for your superb police force.”

“Oh! There is no trouble. It is just that we wanted you to confirm a little information.”

“I shall be delighted to help you in any way I can. As I say, I have the highest opinion of your London Police Force. You have such a splendid class of men. So full of integrity, so fair, so just.”

“You’ll make me embarrassed,” said Father.

“I am at your service. What is it that you want to know?”

"I was just going to ask you to give me a little dope about Bertram's Hotel."

Mr. Hoffman's face did not change. It was possible that his entire attitude became for a moment or two even more static than it had been before—that was all.

"Bertram's Hotel?" he said. His voice was inquiring, slightly puzzled. It might have been that he had never heard of Bertram's Hotel or that he could not quite remember whether he knew Bertram's Hotel or not.

"You have a connection with it, have you not, Mr. Hoffman?"

Mr. Hoffman moved his shoulders.

"There are so many things," he said. "One cannot remember them all. So much business—so much—it keeps me very busy."

"You have your fingers in a lot of pies, I know that."

"Yes." Mr. Hoffman smiled a wooden smile. "I pull out many plums, that is what you think? And so you believe I have a connection with this—Bertram's Hotel?"

"I shouldn't have said a connection. As a matter of fact, you own it, don't you?" said Father genially.

This time, Mr. Hoffman definitely did stiffen.

"Now who told you *that*, I wonder?" he said softly.

"Well, it's true, isn't it?" said Chief-Inspector Davy, cheerfully. "Very nice place to own, I should say. In fact, you must be quite proud of it."

"Oh yes," said Hoffman. "For the moment—I could not quite remember—you see—" he smiled deprecatingly—"I own quite a lot of property in London. It is a good investment—property. If something comes on the market in what I think is a good position, and there is a chance of snapping it up cheap, I invest."

"And was Bertram's Hotel going cheap?"

"As a running concern, it had gone down the hill," said Mr. Hoffman, shaking his head.

"Well, it's on its feet now," said Father. "I was in there just the other day. I was very much struck with the atmosphere there. Nice old-fashioned clientele, comfortable, old-fashioned premises, nothing rackety about it, a lot of luxury without looking luxurious."

"I know very little about it personally," explained Mr. Hoffman. "It is just one of my investments—but I believe it is doing well."

"Yes, you seem to have a first-class fellow running it. What is his name? Humfries? Yes, Humfries."

"An excellent man," said Mr. Hoffman. "I leave everything to him. I look at the balance sheet once a year to see that all is well."

"The place was thick with titles," said Father. "Rich travelling Americans too." He shook his head thoughtfully. "Wonderful combination."

"You say you were in there the other day?" Mr. Hoffman inquired. "Not—not officially, I hope?"

"Nothing serious. Just trying to clear up a little mystery."

"A mystery? In Bertram's Hotel?"

"So it seems. The Case of the Disappearing Clergyman, you might label it."

"That is a joke," Mr. Hoffman said. "That is your Sherlock Holmes language."

"This clergyman walked out of the place one evening and was never seen again."

"Peculiar," said Mr. Hoffman, "but such things happen. I remember many, many years ago now, a great sensation. Colonel—now let me think of his name—Colonel Fergusson I think, one of the equerries of Queen Mary. He walked out of his club one night and he, too, was never seen again."

"Of course," said Father, with a sigh, "a lot of these disappearances are voluntary."

"You know more about that than I do, my dear Chief-Inspector," said Mr. Hoffman. He added, "I hope they gave you every assistance at Bertram's Hotel?"

"They couldn't have been nicer," Father assured him. "That Miss Gorringer, she has been with you some time, I believe?"

"Possibly. I really know so very little about it. I take no *personal* interest, you understand. In fact—" he smiled disarmingly—"I was surprised that you even knew it belonged to me."

It was not quite a question; but once more there was a slight uneasiness in his eyes. Father noted it without seeming to.

"The ramifications that go on in the City are like a gigantic jigsaw," he said. "It would make my head ache if I had to deal with that side of things. I gather that a company—Mayfair Holding Trust or some name like that—is the registered owner. They're owned by another company and so on and so on. The real truth of the matter is that it belongs to *you*. Simple as that. I'm right, aren't I?"

"I and my fellow directors are what I dare say you'd call behind it, yes," admitted Mr. Hoffman rather reluctantly.

"Your fellow directors. And who might they be? Yourself and, I believe, a brother of yours?"

"My brother Wilhelm is associated with me in this venture. You must understand that Bertram's is only a part of a chain of various hotels, offices, clubs and other London properties."

"Any other directors?"

"Lord Pomfret, Abel Isaacstein." Hoffman's voice was suddenly edged. "Do you really need to know all these things? Just because you are looking into the Case of the Disappearing Clergyman?"

Father shook his head and looked apologetic.

"I suppose it's really curiosity. Looking for my disappearing clergyman was what took me to Bertram's, but then I got—well, interested if you understand what I mean. One thing leads to another sometimes, doesn't it?"

"I suppose that could be so, yes. And now?" He smiled. "Your curiosity is satisfied?"

"Nothing like coming to the horse's mouth when you want information, is there?" said Father, genially. He rose to his feet. "There's only one thing I'd really like to know—and I don't suppose you'll tell me that."

"Yes, Chief-Inspector?" Hoffman's voice was wary.

"Where do Bertram's get hold of their staff? Wonderful! That fellow what's-his-name—Henry. The one that looks like an Archduke or an Archbishop, I'm not sure which. Anyway, he serves you tea and muffins—most wonderful muffins! An unforgettable experience."

"You like muffins with much butter, yes?" Mr. Hoffman's eyes rested for a moment on the rotundity of Father's figure with disapprobation.

"I expect you can see I do," said Father. "Well, I mustn't be keeping you. I expect you're pretty busy taking over take-over bids, or something like that."

"Ah. It amuses you to pretend to be ignorant of all these things. No, I am not busy. I do not let business absorb me too much. My tastes are simple. I live simply, with leisure, with growing of roses, and my family to whom I am much devoted."

"Sounds ideal," said Father. "Wish I could live like that."

Mr. Hoffman smiled and rose ponderously to shake hands with him.

"I hope you will find your disappearing clergyman very soon."

"Oh! That's all right. I'm sorry I didn't make myself clear. He's found—disappointing case, really. Had a car accident and got concussion—simple as that."

Father went to the door, then turned and asked:

"By the way, is Lady Sedgwick a director of your company?"

"Lady Sedgwick?" Hoffman took a moment or two. "No. Why should she be?"

"Oh well, one hears things—Just a shareholder?"

"I—yes."

"Well, good-bye, Mr. Hoffman. Thanks very much."

Father went back to the Yard and straight to the AC.

"The two Hoffman brothers are the ones behind Bertram's Hotel—financially."

"What? Those scoundrels?" demanded Sir Ronald.

"Yes."

"They've kept it very dark."

"Yes—and Robert Hoffman didn't half like our finding it out. It was a shock to him."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, we kept it all very formal and polite. He tried, not too obviously, to learn how I had found out about it."

"And you didn't oblige him with that information, I suppose."

"I certainly did not."

"What excuse did you give for going to see him?"

"I didn't give any," said Father.

"Didn't he think that a bit odd?"

"I expect he did. On the whole I thought that was a good way to play it, sir."

"If the Hoffmans are behind all this, it accounts for a lot. They're never concerned in anything crooked themselves—oh no! *They* don't organize crime—they finance it though!

"Wilhelm deals with the banking side from Switzerland. He was behind those foreign currency rackets just after the war—we knew it—but we couldn't prove it. Those two brothers control a great deal of money and they use it for backing all kinds of enterprises—some legitimate—some not. But they're careful—they know every trick of the trade. Robert's diamond broking is straightforward enough—but it makes a suggestive picture—diamonds—banking interests, and property—clubs, cultural foundations, office buildings, restaurants, hotels—all apparently owned by somebody else."

"Do you think Hoffman is the planner of these organized robberies?"

"No, I think those two deal only with finance. No, you'll have to look elsewhere for your planner. Somewhere there's a first-class brain at work."

Chapter Twenty

I

The fog had come down over London suddenly that evening. Chief-Inspector Davy pulled up his coat collar and turned into Pond Street. Walking slowly, like a man who was thinking of something else, he did not look particularly purposeful but anyone who knew him well would realize that his mind was wholly alert. He was prowling as a cat prowls before the moment comes for it to pounce on its prey.

Pond Street was quiet tonight. There were few cars about. The fog had been patchy to begin with, had almost cleared, then had deepened again. The noise of the traffic from Park Lane was muted to the level of a suburban side road. Most of the buses had given up. Only from time to time individual cars went on their way with determined optimism. Chief-Inspector Davy turned up a cul-de-sac, went to the end of it and came back again. He turned again, aimlessly as it seemed, first one way, then the other, but he was not aimless. Actually his cat prowling was taking him in a circle round one particular building. Bertram's Hotel. He was appraising carefully just what lay to the east of it, to the west of it, to the north of it and to the south of it. He examined the cars that were parked by the pavement, he examined the cars that were in the cul-de-sac. He examined a mews with special care. One car in particular interested him and he stopped. He pursed his lips and said softly, "So you're here again, you beauty." He checked the number and nodded to himself. "FAN 2266 tonight, are you?" He bent down and ran his

fingers over the number plate delicately, then nodded approval. "Good job they made of it," he said under his breath.

He went on, came out at the other end of the mews, turned right and right again and came out in Pond Street once more, fifty yards from the entrance of Bertram's Hotel. Once again he paused, admiring the handsome lines of yet another racing car.

"You're a beauty, too," said Chief-Inspector Davy. "Your number plate's the same as the last time I saw you. I rather fancy your number plate always *is* the same. And that should mean—" he broke off—"or should it?" he muttered. He looked up towards what could have been the sky. "Fog's getting thicker," he said to himself.

Outside the door to Bertram's, the Irish commissionaire was standing swinging his arms backwards and forwards with some violence to keep himself warm. Chief-Inspector Davy said good evening to him.

"Good evening, sir. Nasty night."

"Yes. I shouldn't think anyone would want to go out tonight who hadn't got to."

The swing doors were pushed open and a middle-aged lady came out and paused uncertainly on the step.

"Want a taxi, ma'am?"

"Oh dear. I meant to walk."

"I wouldn't if I were you, ma'am. It's very nasty, this fog. Even in a taxi it won't be too easy."

"Do you think you could find me a taxi?" asked the lady doubtfully.

"I'll do my best. You go inside now and keep warm, and I'll come in and tell you if I've got one." His voice changed, modulated to a persuasive tone. "Unless you *have* to, ma'am, I wouldn't go out tonight at all."

"Oh dear. Perhaps you're right. But I'm expected at some friends in Chelsea. I don't know. It might be very difficult getting back here. What do you think?"

Michael Gorman took charge.

"If I were you, ma'am," he said firmly, "I'd go in and telephone to your friends. It's not nice for a lady like you to be out on a foggy

night like this."

"Well—really—yes, well, perhaps you're right."

She went back in again.

"I have to look after them," said Micky Gorman, turning in an explanatory manner to Father. "That kind would get her bag snatched, she would. Going out this time of night in a fog and wandering about Chelsea or West Kensington or wherever she's trying to go."

"I suppose you've had a good deal of experience of dealing with elderly ladies?" said Davy.

"Ah yes, indeed. This place is a home from home to them, bless their ageing hearts. How about you, sir? Were you wanting a taxi?"

"Don't suppose you could get me one if I did," said Father. "There don't seem to be many about in this. And I don't blame them."

"Ah, no, I might lay my hand on one for you. There's a place round the corner where there's usually a taxi driver got his cab parked, having a warm up and a drop of something to keep the cold out."

"A taxi's no good to me," said Father with a sigh.

He jerked his thumb towards Bertram's Hotel.

"I've got to go inside. I've got a job to do."

"Indeed now? Would it be still the missing Canon?"

"Not exactly. He's been found."

"Found?" The man stared at him. "Found where?"

"Wandering about with concussion after an accident."

"Ah, that's just what one might expect of him. Crossed the road without looking, I expect."

"That seems to be the idea," said Father.

He nodded, and pushed through the doors into the hotel. There were not very many people in the lounge this evening. He saw Miss Marple sitting in a chair near the fire and Miss Marple saw him. She made, however, no sign of recognition. He went towards the desk. Miss Gorringer, as usual, was behind her books. She was, he thought, faintly discomposed to see him. It was a very slight reaction, but he noted the fact.

"You remember me, Miss Gorringer," he said. "I came here the other day."

"Yes, of course I remember you, Chief-Inspector. Is there anything more you want to know? Do you want to see Mr. Humfries?"

"No thank you. I don't think that'll be necessary. I'd just like one more look at your register if I may."

"Of course." She pushed it along to him.

He opened it and looked slowly down the pages. To Miss Gorringer he gave the appearance of a man looking for one particular entry. In actuality this was not the case. Father had an accomplishment which he had learnt early in life and had developed into a highly skilled art. He could remember names and addresses with a perfect and photographic memory. That memory would remain with him for twenty-four or even forty-eight hours. He shook his head as he shut the book and returned it to her.

"Canon Pennyfather hasn't been in, I suppose?" he said in a light voice.

"Canon Pennyfather?"

"You know he's turned up again?"

"No indeed. Nobody has told *me*. Where?"

"Some place in the country. Car accident it seems. Wasn't reported to us. Some good Samaritan just picked him up and looked after him."

"Oh! I am pleased. Yes, I really am very pleased. I was worried about him."

"So were his friends," said Father. "Actually I was looking to see if one of them might be staying here now. Archdeacon—Archdeacon—I can't remember his name now, but I'd know it if I saw it."

"Tomlinson?" said Miss Gorringer helpfully. "He is due next week. From Salisbury."

"No, not Tomlinson. Well, it doesn't matter." He turned away.

It was quiet in the lounge tonight.

An ascetic-looking middle-aged man was reading through a badly typed thesis, occasionally writing a comment in the margin in such

small crabbed handwriting as to be almost illegible. Every time he did this, he smiled in vinegary satisfaction.

There were one or two married couples of long-standing who had little need to talk to each other. Occasionally two or three people were gathered together in the name of the weather conditions, discussing anxiously how they or their families were going to get where they wanted to be.

"—I rang up and begged Susan not to come by car...it means the M1 and always so dangerous in fog—"

"They say it's clearer in the Midlands...."

Chief-Inspector Davy noted them as he passed. Without haste, and with no seeming purpose, he arrived at his objective.

Miss Marple was sitting near the fire and observing his approach.

"So you're still here, Miss Marple. I'm glad."

"I go tomorrow," said Miss Marple.

That fact had, somehow, been implicit in her attitude. She had sat, not relaxed, but upright, as one sits in an airport lounge, or a railway waiting room. Her luggage, he was sure, would be packed, only toilet things and night wear to be added.

"It is the end of my fortnight's holiday," she explained.

"You've enjoyed it, I hope?"

Miss Marple did not answer at once.

"In a way—yes...." She stopped.

"And in another way, no?"

"It's difficult to explain what I mean—"

"Aren't you, perhaps, a little too near the fire? Rather hot, here. Wouldn't you like to move—into that corner perhaps?"

Miss Marple looked at the corner indicated, then she looked at Chief-Inspector Davy.

"I think you are quite right," she said.

He gave her a hand up, carried her handbag and her book for her and established her in the quiet corner he had indicated.

"All right?"

"Quite all right."

"You know why I suggested it?"

"You thought—very kindly—that it was too hot for me by the fire. Besides," she added, "our conversation cannot be overheard here."

"Have you got something you want to tell me, Miss Marple?"

"Now why should you think that?"

"You looked as though you had," said Davy.

"I'm sorry I showed it so plainly," said Miss Marple. "I didn't mean to."

"Well, what about it?"

"I don't know if I ought to do so. I would like you to believe, Inspector, that I am not really fond of interfering. I am against interference. Though often well-meant, it can cause a great deal of harm."

"It's like that, is it? I see. Yes, it's quite a problem for you."

"Sometimes one sees people doing things that seem to one unwise—even dangerous. But has one any right to interfere? Usually not, I think."

"Is this Canon Pennyfather you're talking about?"

"Canon Pennyfather?" Miss Marple sounded very surprised. "Oh no. Oh dear me no, nothing whatever to do with him. It concerns—a girl."

"A girl, indeed? And you thought I could help?"

"I don't know," said Miss Marple. "I simply don't know. But I'm worried, very worried."

Father did not press her. He sat there looking large and comfortable and rather stupid. He let her take her time. She had been willing to do her best to help him, and he was quite prepared to do anything he could to help her. He was not, perhaps, particularly interested. On the other hand, one never knew.

"One reads in the papers," said Miss Marple in a low clear voice, "accounts of proceedings in court; of young people, children or girls 'in need of care and protection.' It's just a sort of legal phrase, I suppose, but it could mean something real."

"This girl you mentioned, you feel she is in need of care and protection?"

"Yes. Yes I do."

"Alone in the world?"

"Oh no," said Miss Marple. "Very much not so, if I may put it that way. She is to all outward appearances very heavily protected and very well cared for."

"Sounds interesting," said Father.

"She was staying in this hotel," said Miss Marple, "with a Mrs. Carpenter, I think. I looked in the register to see the name. The girl's name is Elvira Blake."

Father looked up with a quick air of interest.

"She was a lovely girl. Very young, very much, as I say, sheltered and protected. Her guardian was a Colonel Luscombe, a very nice man. Quite charming. Elderly of course, and I am afraid terribly innocent."

"The guardian or the girl?"

"I meant the guardian," said Miss Marple. "I don't know about the girl. But I do think she is in danger. I came across her quite by chance in Battersea Park. She was sitting at a refreshment place there with a young man."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Father. "Undesirable, I suppose. Beatnik—spiv—thug—"

"A very handsome man," said Miss Marple. "Not so very young. Thirty-odd, the kind of man that I should say is very attractive to women, but his face is a bad face. Cruel, hawklike, predatory."

"He mayn't be as bad as he looks," said Father soothingly.

"If anything he is worse than he looks," said Miss Marple. "I am convinced of it. He drives a large racing car."

Father looked up quickly.

"Racing car?"

"Yes. Once or twice I've seen it standing near this hotel."

"You don't remember the number, do you?"

"Yes, indeed I do. FAN 2266. I had a cousin who stuttered," Miss Marple explained. "That's how I remember it."

Father looked puzzled.

"Do you know who he is?" demanded Miss Marple.

"As a matter of fact I do," said Father slowly. "Half French, half Polish. Very well-known racing driver, he was world champion three years ago. His name is Ladislaus Malinowski. You're quite right in

some of your views about him. He has a bad reputation where women are concerned. That is to say, he is not a suitable friend for a young girl. But it's not easy to do anything about that sort of thing. I suppose she is meeting him on the sly, is that it?"

"Almost certainly," said Miss Marple.

"Did you approach her guardian?"

"I don't know him," said Miss Marple. "I've only just been introduced to him once by a mutual friend. I don't like the idea of going to him in a tale-bearing way. I wondered if perhaps in some way *you* could do something about it."

"I can try," said Father. "By the way, I thought you might like to know that your friend, Canon Pennyfather, has turned up all right."

"Indeed!" Miss Marple looked animated. "Where?"

"A place called Milton St. John."

"How very odd. What was he doing there? Did he know?"

"*Apparently*—" Chief-Inspector Davy stressed the word—"he had had an accident."

"What kind of an accident?"

"Knocked down by a car—concussed—or else, of course, he might have been conked on the head."

"Oh! I see." Miss Marple considered the point. "Doesn't he know himself?"

"He *says*—" again the Chief-Inspector stressed the word—"that he does not know anything."

"Very remarkable."

"Isn't it? The last thing he remembers is driving in a taxi to Kensington Air Station."

Miss Marple shook her head perplexedly.

"I know it does happen that way in concussion," she murmured. "Didn't he say anything—useful?"

"He murmured something about the Walls of Jericho."

"Joshua?" hazarded Miss Marple, "or Archaeology—excavations?—or I remember, long ago, a play—by Mr. Sutro, I think."

"And all this week north of the Thames, Gaumont Cinemas—*The Walls of Jericho*, featuring Olga Radbourne and Bart Levinne," said Father.

Miss Marple looked at him suspiciously.

"He could have gone to that film in the Cromwell Road. He could have come out about eleven and come back here—though if so, someone ought to have seen him—it would be well before midnight —"

"Took the wrong bus," Miss Marple suggested. "Something like that—"

"Say he got back here *after* midnight," Father said—"he could have walked up to his room without anyone seeing him—But if so, what happened then—and why did he go out again three hours later?"

Miss Marple groped for a word.

"The only idea that occurs to me is—oh!"

She jumped as a report sounded from the street outside.

"Car backfiring," said Father soothingly.

"I'm sorry to be so jumpy—I am nervous tonight—that feeling one has—"

"That something's going to happen? I don't think you need worry."

"I have never liked fog."

"I wanted to tell you," said Chief-Inspector Davy, "that you've given me a lot of help. The things you've noticed here—just little things—they've added up."

"So there *was* something wrong with this place?"

"There was and is everything wrong with it."

Miss Marple sighed.

"It seemed wonderful at first—unchanged you know—like stepping back into the past—to the part of the past that one had loved and enjoyed."

She paused.

"But of course, it wasn't really like that. I learned (what I suppose I really knew already) that one can never go back, that one should not ever try to go back—that the essence of life is going forward. Life is really a One Way Street, isn't it?"

"Something of the sort," agreed Father.

"I remember," said Miss Marple, diverging from her main topic in a characteristic way, "I remember being in Paris with my mother and my grandmother, and we went to have tea at the Elysée Hotel. And my grandmother looked round, and she said suddenly, 'Clara, I do believe I am the only woman here in a *bonnet*!' And she was, too! When she got home she packed up all her bonnets, and her headed mantles too—and sent them off—"

"To the Jumble Sale?" inquired Father, sympathetically.

"Oh no. Nobody would have wanted them at a jumble sale. She sent them to a theatrical Repertory Company. They appreciated them very much. But let me see—" Miss Marple recovered her direction. "—Where was I?"

"Summing up this place."

"Yes. It seemed all right—but it wasn't. It was mixed-up—real people and people who weren't real. One couldn't always tell them apart."

"What do you mean by not real?"

"There were retired military men, but there were also what seemed to be military men but who had never been in the Army. And clergymen who weren't clergymen. And admirals and sea captains who've never been in the Navy. My friend, Selina Hazy—it amused me at first how she was always so anxious to recognize people she knew (quite natural, of course) and how often she was mistaken and they weren't the people she thought they were. But it happened too often. And so—I began to wonder. Even Rose, the chambermaid—so nice—but I began to think that perhaps *she* wasn't real, either."

"If it interests you to know, she's an ex-actress. A good one. Gets a better salary here than she ever drew on the stage."

"But—why?"

"Mainly, as part of the décor. Perhaps there's more than that to it."

"I'm glad to be leaving here," said Miss Marple. She gave a little shiver. "Before anything happens."

Chief-Inspector Davy looked at her curiously.

"What do you expect to happen?" he asked.

"Evil of some kind," said Miss Marple.

"Evil is rather a big word—"

"You think it is too melodramatic? But I have some experience—seem to have been—so often—in contact with murder."

"Murder?" Chief-Inspector Davy shook his head. "I'm not suspecting murder. Just a nice cosy round-up of some remarkably clever criminals—"

"That's not the same thing. Murder—the wish to do murder—is something quite different. It—how shall I say?—it defies God."

He looked at her and shook his head gently and reassuringly.

"There won't be any murders," he said.

A sharp report, louder than the former one, came from outside. It was followed by a scream and another report.

Chief-Inspector Davy was on his feet, moving with a speed surprising in such a bulky man. In a few seconds he was through the swing doors and out in the street.

II

The screaming—a woman's—was piercing the mist with a note of terror. Chief-Inspector Davy raced down Pond Street in the direction of the screams. He could dimly visualize a woman's figure backed against a railing. In a dozen strides he had reached her. She wore a long pale fur coat, and her shining blonde hair hung down each side of her face. He thought for a moment that he knew who she was, then he realized that this only a slip of a girl. Sprawled on the pavement at her feet was the body of a man in uniform. Chief-Inspector Davy recognized him. It was Michael Gorman.

As Davy came up to the girl, she clutched at him, shivering all over, stammering out broken phrases.

"Someone tried to kill me...Someone...they shot at me...If it hadn't been for *him*—" She pointed down at the motionless figure at her feet. "He pushed me back and got in front of me—and then the second shot came...and he fell...He saved my life. I think he's hurt—badly hurt...."

Chief-Inspector Davy went down on one knee. His torch came out. The tall Irish commissioner had fallen like a soldier. The left-hand side of his tunic showed a wet patch that was growing wetter as the blood oozed out into the cloth. Davy rolled up an eyelid, touched a wrist. He rose to his feet again.

"He's had it all right," he said.

The girl gave a sharp cry. "Do you mean he's *dead*? Oh no, no! He can't be *dead*."

"Who was it shot at you?"

"I don't know...I'd left my car just round the corner and was feeling my way along by the railings—I was going to Bertram's Hotel. And then suddenly there was a shot—and a bullet went past my cheek and then—he—the porter from Bertram's—came running down the street towards me, and shoved me behind him, and then another shot came...I think—I think whoever it was must have been hiding in that area there."

Chief-Inspector Davy looked where she pointed. At this end of Bertram's Hotel there was an old-fashioned area below the level of the street, with a gate and some steps down to it. Since it gave only on some storerooms it was not much used. But a man could have hidden there easily enough.

"You didn't see him?"

"Not properly. He rushed past me like a shadow. It was all thick fog."

Davy nodded.

The girl began to sob hysterically.

"But who could possibly want to kill me? Why should anyone want to kill me? That's the second time. I don't understand...why...."

One arm round the girl, Chief-Inspector Davy fumbled in his pocket with the other hand.

The shrill notes of a police whistle penetrated the mist.

III

In the lounge of Bertram's Hotel, Miss Gorringer had looked up sharply from the desk.

One or two of the visitors had looked up also. The older and deafer did not look up.

Henry, about to lower a glass of old brandy to a table, stopped poised with it still in his hand.

Miss Marple sat forward, clutching the arms of her chair. A retired admiral said derisively:

"Accident! Cars collided in the fog, I expect."

The swing doors from the street were pushed open. Through them came what seemed like an outsize policeman, looking a good deal larger than life.

He was supporting a girl in a pale fur coat. She seemed hardly able to walk. The policeman looked round for help with some embarrassment.

Miss Gorringer came out from behind the desk, prepared to cope. But at that moment the lift came down. A tall figure emerged, and the girl shook herself free from the policeman's support, and ran frantically across the lounge.

"Mother," she cried. "Oh *Mother, Mother...*" and threw herself, sobbing, into Bess Sedgwick's arms.

Chapter Twenty-one

Chief-Inspector Davy settled himself back in his chair and looked at the two women sitting opposite him. It was past midnight. Police officials had come and gone. There had been doctors, fingerprint men, an ambulance to remove the body; and now everything had narrowed to this one room dedicated for the purposes of the law by Bertram's Hotel. Chief-Inspector Davy sat one side of the table. Bess Sedgwick and Elvira sat the other side. Against the wall a policeman sat unobtrusively writing. Detective-Sergeant Wadell sat near the door.

Father looked thoughtfully at the two women facing him. Mother and daughter. There was, he noted, a strong superficial likeness between them. He could understand how for one moment in the fog he had taken Elvira Blake for Bess Sedgwick. But now, looking at them, he was more struck by the points of difference than the points of resemblance. They were not really alike save in colouring, yet the impression persisted that here he had a positive and a negative version of the same personality. Everything about Bess Sedgwick was positive. Her vitality, her energy, her magnetic attraction. He admired Lady Sedgwick. He always had admired her. He had admired her courage and had always been excited over her exploits; had said, reading his Sunday papers: "She'll never get away with *that*," and invariably she had got away with it! He had not thought it possible that she would reach journey's end and she had reached journey's end. He admired particularly the indestructible quality of her. She had had one air crash, several car crashes, had been

thrown badly twice from her horse, but at the end of it here she was. Vibrant, alive, a personality one could not ignore for a moment. He took off his hat to her mentally. Some day, of course, she would come a cropper. You could only bear a charmed life for so long. His eyes went from mother to daughter. He wondered. He wondered very much.

In Elvira Blake, he thought, everything had been driven inward. Bess Sedgwick had got through life by imposing her will on it. Elvira, he guessed, had a different way of getting through life. She submitted, he thought. She obeyed. She smiled in compliance and behind that, he thought, she slipped away through your fingers. "Sly," he said to himself, appraising that fact. "That's the only way she can manage, I expect. She can never brazen things out or impose herself. That's why, I expect, the people who've looked after her have never had the least idea of what she might be up to."

He wondered what she had been doing slipping along the street to Bertram's Hotel on a late foggy evening. He was going to ask her presently. He thought it highly probable that the answer he would get would not be the true one. "That's the way," he thought, "that the poor child defends herself." Had she come here to meet her mother or to find her mother? It was perfectly possible, but he didn't think so. Not for a moment. Instead he thought of the big sports car tucked away round the corner—the car with the number plate FAN 2266. Ladislaus Malinowski must be somewhere in the neighbourhood since his car was there.

"Well," said Father, addressing Elvira in his most kindly and fatherlike manner, "well, and how are you feeling now?"

"I'm quite all right," said Elvira.

"Good. I'd like you to answer a few questions if you feel up to it; because, you see, time is usually the essence of these things. You were shot at twice and a man was killed. We want as many clues as we can get to the person who killed him."

"I'll tell you everything I can, but it all came so suddenly. And you can't see anything in a fog. I've no idea myself who it could have been—or even what he looked like. That's what was so frightening."

"You said this was the second time somebody had tried to kill you. Does that mean there was an attempt on your life before?"

"Did I say that? I can't remember." Her eyes moved uneasily. "I don't think I said that."

"Oh, but you did, you know," said Father.

"I expect I was just being—hysterical."

"No," said Father, "I don't think you were. I think you meant just what you said."

"I might have been imagining things," said Elvira. Her eyes shifted again.

Bess Sedgwick moved. She said quietly:

"You'd better tell him, Elvira."

Elvira shot a quick, uneasy look at her mother.

"You needn't worry," said Father, reassuringly. "We know quite well in the police force that girls don't tell their mothers or their guardians everything. We don't take those things too seriously, but we've got to *know* about them, because, you see, it all helps."

Bess Sedgwick said:

"Was it in Italy?"

"Yes," said Elvira.

Father said: "That's where you've been at school, isn't it, or a finishing place or whatever they call it nowadays?"

"Yes. I was at Contessa Martinelli's. There were about eighteen or twenty of us."

"And you thought that somebody tried to kill you. How was that?"

"Well, a big box of chocolates and sweets and things came for me. There was a card with it written in Italian in a flowery hand. The sort of thing they say, you know, 'To the bellissima Signorina.' Something like that. And my friends and I—well—we laughed about it a bit, and wondered who'd sent it."

"Did it come by post?"

"No. No, it couldn't have come by post. It was just there in my room. Someone must have put it there."

"I see. Bribed one of the servants, I suppose. I am to take it that you didn't let the Contessa whoever-it-was in on this?"

A faint smile appeared on Elvira's face. "No. No. We certainly didn't. Anyway we opened the box and they were lovely chocolates. Different kinds, you know, but there were some violet creams. That's the sort of chocolate that has a crystallized violet on top. My favourite. So of course I ate one or two of those first. And then afterwards, in the night, I felt terribly ill. I didn't think it was the chocolates, I just thought it was something perhaps that I'd eaten at dinner."

"Anybody else ill?"

"No. Only me. Well, I was very sick and all that, but I felt all right by the end of the next day. Then a day or two later I ate another of the same chocolates, and the same thing happened. So I talked to Bridget about it. Bridget was my special friend. And we looked at the chocolates, and we found that the violet creams had got a sort of hole in the bottom that had been filled up again, so we thought that someone had put some poison in and they'd only put it in the violet creams so that I would be the one who ate them."

"Nobody else was ill?"

"No."

"So presumably nobody else ate the violet creams?"

"No. I don't think they could have. You see, it was my present and they knew I liked the violet ones, so they'd leave them for me."

"The chap took a risk, whoever he was," said Father. "The whole place might have been poisoned."

"It's absurd," said Lady Sedgwick sharply. "Utterly absurd! I never heard of anything so crude."

Chief-Inspector Davy made a slight gesture with his hand. "Please," he said, then he went on to Elvira: "Now I find that very interesting, Miss Blake. And you still didn't tell the Contessa?"

"Oh no, we didn't. She'd have made a terrible fuss."

"What did you do with the chocolates?"

"We threw them away," said Elvira. "They were lovely chocolates," she added, with a tone of slight grief.

"You didn't try and find out who sent them?" Elvira looked embarrassed.

"Well, you see, I thought it might have been Guido."

"Yes?" said Chief-Inspector Davy, cheerfully. "And who is Guido?"

"Oh, Guido..." Elvira paused. She looked at her mother.

"Don't be stupid," said Bess Sedgwick. "Tell Chief-Inspector Davy about Guido, whoever he is. Every girl of your age has a Guido in her life. You met him out there, I suppose?"

"Yes. When we were taken to the opera. He spoke to me there. He was nice. Very attractive. I used to see him sometimes when we went to classes. He used to pass me notes."

"And I suppose," said Bess Sedgwick, "that you told a lot of lies, and made plans with some friends and you managed to get out and meet him? Is that it?"

Elvira looked relieved by this short cut to confession. "Sometimes Guido managed to—"

"What was Guido's other name?"

"I don't know," said Elvira. "He never told me."

Chief-Inspector Davy smiled at her.

"You mean you're not going to tell? Never mind. I dare say we'll be able to find out quite all right without your help, if it should really matter. But why should you think that this young man, who was presumably fond of you, should want to kill you?"

"Oh, because he used to threaten things like that. I mean, we used to have rows now and then. He'd bring some of his friends with him, and I'd pretend to like them better than him, and then he'd get very, very wild and angry. He said I'd better be careful what I did. I couldn't give him up just like that! That if I wasn't faithful to him he'd kill me! I just thought he was being melodramatic and theatrical." Elvira smiled suddenly and unexpectedly. "But it was all rather fun. I didn't think it was *real* or *serious*."

"Well," said Chief-Inspector Davy, "I don't think it *does* seem very likely that a young man such as you describe would really poison chocolates and send them to you."

"Well, I don't think so really either," said Elvira, "but it must have been him because I can't see that there's anyone else. It worried me. And then, when I came back here, I got a note—" She stopped.

"What sort of a note?"

"It just came in an envelope and was printed. It said '*Be on your guard. Somebody wants to kill you.*'"

Chief-Inspector Davy's eyebrows went up.

"Indeed? Very curious. Yes, very curious. And it worried you. You were frightened?"

"Yes. I began to—to wonder who could possibly want me out of the way. That's why I tried to find out if I was really very rich."

"Go on."

"And the other day in London something else happened. I was in the tube and there were a lot of people on the platform. I thought someone tried to push me onto the line."

"My dear child!" said Bess Sedgwick. "Don't romance."

Again Father made that slight gesture of his hand.

"Yes," said Elvira apologetically. "I expect I *have* been imagining it all but—I don't know—I mean, after what happened this evening it seems, doesn't it, as though it might all be true?" She turned suddenly to Bess Sedgwick, speaking with urgency, "*Mother!* You *might* know. *Does* anyone want to kill me? *Could* there be anyone? Have I got an enemy?"

"Of course you've not got an enemy," said Bess Sedgwick, impatiently. "Don't be an idiot. Nobody wants to kill you. Why should they?"

"Then who shot at me tonight?"

"In that fog," said Bess Sedgwick, "you might have been mistaken for someone else. That's possible, don't you think?" she said, turning to Father.

"Yes, I think it might be quite possible," said Chief-Inspector Davy.

Bess Sedgwick was looking at him very intently. He almost fancied the motion of her lips saying "later."

"Well," he said cheerfully, "we'd better get down to some more facts now. Where had you come from tonight? What were you doing walking along Pond Street on such a foggy evening?"

"I came up for an Art class at the Tate this morning. Then I went to lunch with my friend Bridget. She lives in Onslow Square. We went to a film and when we came out, there was this fog—quite

thick and getting worse, and I thought perhaps I'd better not drive home."

"You drive a car, do you?"

"Yes. I took my driving test last summer. Only, I'm not a very good driver and I hate driving in fog. So Bridget's mother said I could stay the night, so I rang up Cousin Mildred—that's where I live in Kent—"

Father nodded.

"—and I said I was going to stay up overnight. She said that was very wise."

"And what happened next?" asked Father.

"And then the fog seemed lighter suddenly. You know how patchy fogs are. So I said I would drive down to Kent after all. I said good-bye to Bridget and started off. But then it began to come down again. I didn't like it very much. I ran into a very thick patch of it and I lost my way and I didn't know where I was. Then after a bit I realized I was at Hyde Park Corner and I thought 'I really *can't* go down to Kent in this.' At first, I thought I'd go back to Bridget's but then I remembered how I'd lost my way already. And then I realized that I was quite close to this nice hotel where Uncle Derek took me when I came back from Italy and I thought, 'I'll go there and I'm sure they can find me a room.' That was fairly easy, I found a place to leave the car and then I walked back up the street towards the hotel."

"Did you meet anyone or did you hear anyone walking near you?"

"It's funny you saying that, because I did think I heard someone walking behind me. Of course, there must be lots of people walking about in London. Only in a fog like this, it gives you a nervous feeling. I waited and listened but I didn't hear any footsteps and I thought I'd imagined them. I was quite close to the hotel by then."

"And then?"

"And then quite suddenly there was a shot. As I told you, it seemed to go right past my ear. The commissionaire man who stands outside the hotel came running down towards me and he pushed me behind him and then—then—the other shot came...He—

he fell down and I screamed.” She was shaking now. Her mother spoke to her.

“Steady, girl,” said Bess in a low, firm voice. “Steady now.” It was the voice Bess Sedgwick used for her horses and it was quite as efficacious when used on her daughter. Elvira blinked at her, drew herself up a little, and became calm again.

“Good girl,” said Bess.

“And then *you* came,” said Elvira to Father. “You blew your whistle, you told the policeman to take me into the hotel. And as soon as I got in, I saw—I saw Mother.” She turned and looked at Bess Sedgwick.

“And that brings us more or less up-to-date,” said Father. He shifted his bulk a little in the chair.

“Do you know a man called Ladislaus Malinowski?” he asked. His tone was even, casual, without any direct inflection. He did not look at the girl, but he was aware, since his ears were functioning at full attention, of a quick little gasp she gave. His eyes were not on the daughter but on the mother.

“No,” said Elvira, having waited just a shade too long to say it. “No, I don’t.”

“Oh,” said Father. “I thought you might. I thought he might have been here this evening.”

“Oh? Why should he be here?”

“Well, his car is here,” said Father. “That’s why I thought he might be.”

“I don’t know him,” said Elvira.

“My mistake,” said Father. “You do, of course?” He turned his head towards Bess Sedgwick.

“Naturally,” said Bess Sedgwick. “Known him for many years.” She added, smiling slightly, “He’s a madman, you know. Drives like an angel or a devil—he’ll break his neck one of these days. Had a bad smash eighteen months ago.”

“Yes, I remember reading about it,” said Father. “Not racing again yet, is he?”

“No, not yet. Perhaps he never will.”

"Do you think I could go to bed now?" asked Elvira, plaintively. "I'm—really terribly tired."

"Of course. You must be," said Father. "You've told us all you can remember?"

"Oh. Yes."

"I'll go up with you," said Bess.

Mother and daughter went out together.

"*She* knows him all right," said Father.

"Do you really think so?" asked Sergeant Wadell.

"I know it. She had tea with him in Battersea Park only a day or two ago."

"How did you find that out?"

"Old lady told me—distressed. Didn't think he was a nice friend for a young girl. He isn't of course."

"Especially if he and the mother—" Waddell broke off delicately. "It's pretty general gossip—"

"Yes. May be true, may not. Probably *is*."

"In that case which one is he really after?"

Father ignored that point. He said:

"I want him picked up. I want him badly. His car's here—just round the corner."

"Do you think he might be actually staying in this hotel?"

"Don't think so. It wouldn't fit into the picture. He's not supposed to be here. *If* he came here, he came to meet the girl. She definitely came to meet him, I'd say."

The door opened and Bess Sedgwick reappeared.

"I came back," she said, "because I wanted to speak to you."

She looked from him to the other two men.

"I wonder if I could speak to you alone? I've given you all the information I have, such as it is; but I would like a word or two with you in private."

"I don't see any reason why not," said Chief-Inspector Davy. He motioned with his head, and the young detective-constable took his notebook and went out. Wadell went with him. "Well?" said Chief-Inspector Davy.

Lady Sedgwick sat down again opposite him.

"That silly story about poisoned chocolates," she said. "It's nonsense. Absolutely ridiculous. I don't believe anything of the kind ever happened."

"You don't, eh?"

"Do you?"

Father shook his head doubtfully. "You think your daughter cooked it up?"

"Yes. But why?"

"Well, if you don't know why," said Chief-Inspector Davy, "how should I know? She's your daughter. Presumably you know her better than I do."

"I don't know her at all," said Bess Sedgwick bitterly. "I've not seen her or had anything to do with her since she was two years old, when I ran away from my husband."

"Oh yes. I know all that. I find it curious. You see, Lady Sedgwick, courts usually give the mother, even if she is a guilty party in a divorce, custody of a young child if she asks for it. Presumably then you didn't ask for it? You didn't want it."

"I thought it—better not."

"Why?"

"I didn't think it was—safe for her."

"On moral grounds?"

"No. Not on moral grounds. Plenty of adultery nowadays. Children have to learn about it, have to grow up with it. No. It's just that *I* am not really a safe person to be with. The life I'd lead wouldn't be a safe life. You can't help the way you're born. I was born to live dangerously. I'm not law-abiding or conventional. I thought it would be better for Elvira, happier, to have a proper English conventional bringing-up. Shielded, looked after...."

"But minus a mother's love?"

"I thought if she learned to love me it might bring sorrow to her. Oh, you mayn't believe me, but that's what I felt."

"I see. Do you still think you were right?"

"No," said Bess. "I don't. I think now I may have been entirely wrong."

"Does your daughter know Ladislaus Malinowski?"

"I'm sure she doesn't. She said so. You heard her."

"I heard her, yes."

"Well, then?"

"She was afraid, you know, when she was sitting here. In our profession we get to know fear when we meet up with it. She was afraid—why? Chocolates or no chocolates, her life *has* been attempted. That tube story may be true enough—"

"It was ridiculous. Like a thriller—"

"Perhaps. But that sort of thing does happen, Lady Sedgwick. Oftener than you'd think. Can you give me any idea who might want to kill your daughter?"

"Nobody—nobody at all!"

She spoke vehemently.

Chief-Inspector Davy sighed and shook his head.

Chapter Twenty-two

Chief-Inspector Davy waited patiently until Mrs. Melford had finished talking. It had been a singularly unprofitable interview. Cousin Mildred had been incoherent, unbelieving and generally featherheaded. Or that was Father's private view. Accounts of Elvira's sweet manners, nice nature, troubles with her teeth, odd excuses told through the telephone, had led on to serious doubts whether Elvira's friend Bridget was really a suitable friend for her. All these matters had been presented to the Chief-Inspector in a kind of general hasty pudding. Mrs. Melford knew nothing, had heard nothing, had seen nothing and had apparently deduced very little.

A short telephone call to Elvira's guardian, Colonel Luscombe, had been even more unproductive, though fortunately less wordy. "More Chinese monkeys," he muttered to his sergeant as he put down the receiver. "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil."

"The trouble is that everyone who's had anything to do with this girl has been far too nice—if you get my meaning. Too many nice people who don't know anything about evil. Not like my old lady."

"The Bertram's Hotel one?"

"Yes, that's the one. She's had a long life of experience in noticing evil, fancying evil, suspecting evil and going forth to do battle with evil. Let's see what we can get out of girlfriend Bridget."

The difficulties in this interview were represented first, last, and most of the time by Bridget's mamma. To talk to Bridget without the assistance of her mother took all Chief-Inspector Davy's adroitness and cajolery. He was, it must be admitted, ably seconded by Bridget.

After a certain amount of stereotyped questions and answers and expressions of horror on the part of Bridget's mother at hearing of Elvira's narrow escape from death, Bridget said, "You know it's time for that committee meeting, Mum. You said it was very important."

"Oh dear, dear," said Bridget's mother.

"You know they'll get into a frightful mess without you, Mummy."

"Oh they will, they certainly will. But perhaps I ought—"

"Now that's quite all right, Madam," said Chief-Inspector Davy, putting on his kindly old father look. "You don't want to worry. Just you get off. I've finished all the important things. You've told me really everything I wanted to know. I've just one or two routine inquiries about people in Italy which I think your daughter, Miss Bridget, might be able to help me with."

"Well, if you think you can manage, Bridget—"

"Oh, I can manage, Mummy," said Bridget.

Finally, with a great deal of fuss, Bridget's mother went off to her committee.

"Oh, dear," said Bridget, sighing, as she came back after closing the front door. "Really! I do think mothers are *difficult*."

"So they tell me," said Chief-Inspector Davy. "A lot of young ladies I come across have a lot of trouble with their mothers."

"I'd have thought you'd put it the other way round," said Bridget.

"Oh I do, I do," said Davy. "But that's not how the young ladies see it. Now you can tell me a little more."

"I couldn't really speak frankly in front of Mummy," explained Bridget. "But I do feel, of course, that it is really important that you should know as much as possible about all this. I do know Elvira was terribly worried about something and afraid. She wouldn't exactly admit she was in danger, but she was."

"I thought that might have been so. Of course I didn't like to ask you too much in front of your mother."

"Oh no," said Bridget, "we don't want *Mummy* to hear about it. She gets in such a frightful state about things and she'd go and *tell* everyone. I mean, if Elvira doesn't want things like this to be known...."

"First of all," said Chief-Inspector Davy, "I want to know about a box of chocolates in Italy. I gather there was some idea that a box was sent to her which might have been poisoned."

Bridget's eyes opened wide. "Poisoned," she said. "Oh no. I don't think so. At least..."

"There was something?"

"Oh yes. A box of chocolates came and Elvira did eat a lot of them and she was rather sick that night. Quite ill."

"But she didn't suspect poison?"

"No. At least—oh yes, she did say that someone was trying to poison one of us and we looked at the chocolates to see, you know, if anything had been injected into them."

"And had it?"

"No, it hadn't," said Bridget. "At least, not as far as we could see."

"But perhaps your friend, Miss Elvira, might still have thought so?"

"Well, she might—but she didn't *say* anymore."

"But you think she was afraid of someone?"

"I didn't think so at the time or notice anything. It was only here, later."

"What about this man, Guido?"

Bridget giggled.

"He had a terrific crush on Elvira," she said.

"And you and your friend used to meet him places?"

"Well, I don't mind telling *you*," said Bridget. "After all you're the police. It isn't important to you, that sort of thing and I expect you understand. Countess Martinelli was frightfully strict—or thought she was. And of course we had all sorts of dodges and things. We all stood in with each other. You know."

"And told the right lies, I suppose?"

"Well, I'm afraid so," said Bridget. "But what can one do when anyone is so suspicious?"

"So you did meet Guido and all that. And used he to threaten Elvira?"

"Oh, not seriously, I don't think."

"Then perhaps there was someone else she used to meet?"

"Oh—that—well, I don't know."

"Please tell me, Miss Bridget. It might be—vital, you know."

"Yes. Yes I can see that. Well there was *someone*. I don't know who it was, but there was someone else—she really minded about. She was deadly serious. I mean it was a really *important* thing."

"She used to meet him?"

"I think so. I mean she'd *say* she was meeting Guido but it wasn't Guido. It was this other man."

"Any idea who it was?"

"No." Bridget sounded a little uncertain.

"It wouldn't be a racing motorist called Ladislaus Malinowski?"

Bridget gaped at him.

"So you *know*?"

"Am I right?"

"Yes—I think so. She'd got a photograph of him torn out of a paper. She kept it under her stockings."

"That might have been just a pin-up hero, mightn't it?"

"Well it *might*, of course, but I don't think it was."

"Did she meet him here in this country, do you know?"

"I don't know. You see I don't know really what she's been doing since she came back from Italy."

"She came up to London to the dentist," Davy prompted her. "Or so she said. Instead she came to you. She rang up Mrs. Melford with some story about an old governess."

A faint giggle came from Bridget.

"That wasn't true, was it?" said the Chief-Inspector, smiling. "Where did she really go?"

Bridget hesitated and then said, "She went to Ireland."

"She went to Ireland, did she? Why?"

"She wouldn't tell me. She said there was something she had to find out."

"Do you know where she went in Ireland?"

"Not exactly. She mentioned a name. Bally something. Ballygowlan, I think it was."

"I see. You're sure she went to Ireland?"

"I saw her off at Kensington Airport. She went by Aer Lingus."

"She came back when?"

"The following day."

"Also by air?"

"Yes."

"You're quite sure, are you, that she came back by air?"

"Well—I suppose she did!"

"Had she taken a return ticket?"

"No. No, she didn't. I remember."

"She might have come back another way, mightn't she?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"She might have come back for instance by the Irish Mail?"

"She didn't say she had."

"But she didn't *say* she'd come by air, did she?"

"No," Bridget agreed. "But why should she come back by boat and train instead of by air?"

"Well, if she had found out what she wanted to know and had had nowhere to stay, she might think it would be easier to come back by the Night Mail."

"Why, I suppose she *might*."

Davy smiled faintly.

"I don't suppose you young ladies," he said, "think of going anywhere except in terms of flying, do you, nowadays?"

"I suppose we don't really," agreed Bridget.

"Anyway, she came back to England. Then what happened? Did she come to you or ring you up?"

"She rang up."

"What time of day?"

"Oh, in the morning sometime. Yes, it must have been about eleven or twelve o'clock, I think."

"And she said, what?"

"Well, she just asked if everything was all right."

"And was it?"

"No, it wasn't, because, you see, Mrs. Melford had rung up and Mummy had answered the phone and things had been very difficult and I hadn't known what to say. So Elvira said she would not come

to Onslow Square, but that she'd ring up her cousin Mildred and try to fix up some story or other."

"And that's all that you can remember?"

"That's all," said Bridget, making certain reservations. She thought of Mr. Bollard and the bracelet. That was certainly a thing she was not going to tell Chief-Inspector Davy. Father knew quite well that something was being kept from him. He could only hope that it was not something pertinent to his inquiry. He asked again:

"You think your friend was really frightened of someone or something?"

"Yes I do."

"Did she mention it to you or did you mention it to her?"

"Oh, I asked her outright. At first she said no and then she admitted that she *was* frightened. And I know she was," went on Bridget violently. "She was in danger. She was quite sure of it. But I don't know why or how or anything about it."

"Your surety on this point relates to that particular morning, does it, the morning she had come back from Ireland?"

"Yes. Yes, that's when I was so sure about it."

"On the morning when she *might* have come back on the Irish Mail?"

"I don't think it's very likely that she did. Why don't you ask her?"

"I probably shall do in the end. But I don't want to call attention to that point. Not at the moment. It might just possibly make things more dangerous for her."

Bridget opened round eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"You may not remember it, Miss Bridget, but that was the night, or rather the early morning, of the Irish Mail robbery."

"Do you mean that Elvira was in *that* and never told me a thing about it?"

"I agree it's unlikely," said Father. "But it just occurred to me that she might have seen something or someone, or some incident might have occurred connected with the Irish Mail. She might have seen someone she knew, for instance, and that might have put her in danger."

"Oh!" said Bridget. She thought it over. "You mean—someone she knew was mixed-up in the robbery."

Chief-Inspector Davy got up.

"I think that's all," he said. "Sure there's nothing more you can tell me? Nowhere where your friend went that day? Or the day before?"

Again visions of Mr. Bollard and the Bond Street shop rose before Bridget's eyes.

"No," she said.

"I think there is something you haven't told me," said Chief-Inspector Davy.

Bridget grasped thankfully at a straw.

"Oh, I forgot," she said. "Yes. I mean she did go to some lawyers. Lawyers who were trustees, to find out something."

"Oh, she went to some lawyers who were her trustees. I don't suppose you know their name?"

"Their name was Egerton—Forbes Egerton and Something," said Bridget. "Lots of names. I think that's more or less right."

"I see. And she wanted to find out something, did she?"

"She wanted to know how much money she'd got," said Bridget.

Inspector Davy's eyebrows rose.

"Indeed!" he said. "Interesting. Why didn't she know herself?"

"Oh, because people never told her anything about money," said Bridget. "They seem to think it's bad for you to know actually how much money you have."

"And she wanted to know badly, did she?"

"Yes," said Bridget. "I think she thought it was important."

"Well, thank you," said Chief-Inspector Davy. "You've helped me a good deal."

Chapter Twenty-three

Richard Egerton looked again at the official card in front of him, then up into the Chief-Inspector's face.

"Curious business," he said.

"Yes, sir," said Chief-Inspector Davy, "a very curious business."

"Bertram's Hotel," said Egerton, "in the fog. Yes it was a bad fog last night. I suppose you get a lot of that sort of thing in fogs, don't you? Snatch and grab—handbags—that sort of thing?"

"It wasn't quite like that," said Father. "Nobody attempted to snatch anything from Miss Blake."

"Where did the shot come from?"

"Owing to the fog we can't be sure. She wasn't sure herself. But we think—it seems the best idea—that the man may have been standing in the area."

"He shot at her twice, you say?"

"Yes. The first shot missed. The commissionaire rushed along from where he was standing outside the hotel door and shoved her behind him just before the second shot."

"So that he got hit instead, eh?"

"Yes."

"Quite a brave chap."

"Yes. He was brave," said the Chief-Inspector. "His military record was very good. An Irishman."

"What's his name?"

"Gorman. Michael Gorman."

"Michael Gorman." Egerton frowned for a minute. "No," he said. "For a moment I thought the name meant something."

"It's a very common name, of course. Anyway, he saved the girl's life."

"And why exactly have you come to me, Chief-Inspector?"

"I hoped for a little information. We always like full information, you know, about the victim of a murderous assault."

"Oh, naturally, naturally. But really, I've only seen Elvira twice since she was a child."

"You saw her when she came to call upon you about a week ago, didn't you?"

"Yes, that's quite right. What exactly do you want to know? If it's anything about her personality, who her friends were or about boyfriends, or lovers' quarrels—all that sort of thing—you'd do better to go to one of the women. There's a Mrs. Carpenter who brought her back from Italy, I believe, and there's Mrs. Melford with whom she lives in Kent."

"I've seen Mrs. Melford."

"Oh."

"No good. Absolutely no good at all, sir. And I don't so much want to know about the girl personally—after all, I've seen her for myself and I've heard what she can tell me—or rather what she's willing to tell me—"

At a quick movement of Egerton's eyebrows he saw that the other had appreciated the point of the word "willing."

"I've been told that she was worried, upset, afraid about something, and convinced that her life was in danger. Was that your impression when she came to see you?"

"No," said Egerton, slowly, "no, I wouldn't go as far as that; though she did say one or two things that struck me as curious."

"Such as?"

"Well, she wanted to know who would benefit if she were to die suddenly."

"Ah," said Chief-Inspector Davy, "so she had that possibility in her mind, did she? That she might die suddenly. Interesting."

"She'd got something in her head but I didn't know what it was. She also wanted to know how much money she had—or would have when she was twenty-one. That, perhaps, is more understandable."

"It's a lot of money I believe."

"It's a very large fortune, Chief-Inspector."

"Why do you think she wanted to know?"

"About the money?"

"Yes, and about who would inherit it."

"I don't know," said Egerton. "I don't know at all. She also brought up the subject of marriage—"

"Did you form the impression that there was a man in the case?"

"I've no evidence—but—yes, I did think just that. I felt sure there was a boyfriend somewhere in the offing. There usually is! Luscombe—that's Colonel Luscombe, her guardian, doesn't seem to know anything about a boyfriend. But then dear old Derek Luscombe wouldn't. He was quite upset when I suggested that there was such a thing in the background and probably an unsuitable one at that."

"He is unsuitable," said Chief-Inspector Davy.

"Oh. Then you know who he is?"

"I can have a very good guess at it. Ladislaus Malinowski."

"The racing motorist? Really! A handsome daredevil. Women fall for him easily. I wonder how he came across Elvira. I don't see very well where their orbits would meet except—yes, I believe he was in Rome a couple of months ago. Possibly she met him there."

"Very possibly. Or could she have met him through her mother?"

"What, through Bess? I wouldn't say that was at all likely."

Davy coughed.

"Lady Sedgwick and Malinowski are said to be close friends, sir."

"Oh yes, yes, I know that's the gossip. May be true, may not. They are close friends—thrown together constantly by their way of life. Bess has had her affairs, of course; though, mind you, she's not the nymphomaniac type. People are ready enough to say that about a woman, but it's not true in Bess's case. Anyway, as far as I know, Bess and her daughter are practically not even acquainted with each other."

"That's what Lady Sedgwick told me. And you agree?" Egerton nodded.

"What other relatives has Miss Blake got?"

"For all intents and purposes, none. Her mother's two brothers were killed in the war—and she was old Coniston's only child. Mrs. Melford, though the girl calls her 'Cousin Mildred,' is actually a cousin of Colonel Luscombe's. Luscombe's done his best for the girl in his conscientious old-fashioned way—but it's difficult...for a man."

"Miss Blake brought up the subject of marriage, you say? There's no possibility, I suppose, that she may actually already *be* married—"

"She's well under age—she'd have to have the assent of her guardian and trustees."

"Technically, yes. But they don't always wait for that," said Father.

"I know. Most regrettable. One has to go through all the machinery of making them Wards of Court, and all the rest of it. And even that has its difficulties."

"And once they're married, they're married," said Father. "I suppose, if she *were* married, and died suddenly, her husband would inherit?"

"This idea of marriage is most unlikely. She has been most carefully looked after and...." He stopped, reacting to Chief-Inspector Davy's cynical smile.

However carefully Elvira had been looked after, she seemed to have succeeded in making the acquaintance of the highly unsuitable Ladislaus Malinowski.

He said dubiously, "Her mother bolted, it's true."

"Her mother bolted, yes—that's what she would do—but Miss Blake's a different type. She's just as set on getting her own way, but she'd go about it differently."

"You don't really think—"

"I don't think anything—*yet*," said Chief-Inspector Davy.

Chapter Twenty-four

Ladislaus Malinowski looked from one to the other of the two police officers and flung back his head and laughed.

"It is very amusing!" he said. "You look solemn as owls. It is ridiculous that you should ask me to come here and wish to ask me questions. You have nothing against me, nothing."

"We think you may be able to assist us in our inquiries, Mr. Malinowski." Chief-Inspector Davy spoke with official smoothness. "You own a car, Mercedes-Otto, registration number FAN 2266."

"Is there any reason why I should not own such a car?"

"No reason at all, sir. There's just a little uncertainty as to the correct number. Your car was on a motor road, M7, and the registration plate on that occasion was a different one."

"Nonsense. It must have been some other car."

"There aren't so many of that make. We have checked up on those there are."

"You believe everything, I suppose, that your traffic police tell you! It is laughable! Where was all this?"

"The place where the police stopped you and asked to see your licence is not very far from Bedhampton. It was on the night of the Irish Mail robbery."

"You really do amuse me," said Ladislaus Malinowski.

"You have a revolver?"

"Certainly, I have a revolver and an automatic pistol. I have proper licences for them."

"Quite so. They are both still in your possession?"

"Certainly."

"I have already warned you, Mr. Malinowski."

"The famous policeman's warning! Anything you say will be taken down and used against you at your trial."

"That's not quite the wording," said Father mildly. "Used, yes. Against, no. You don't want to qualify that statement of yours?"

"No, I do not."

"And you are sure you don't want your solicitor here?"

"I do not like solicitors."

"Some people don't. Where are those firearms now?"

"I think you know very well where they are, Chief-Inspector. The small pistol is in the pocket of my car, the Mercedes-Otto whose registered number is, as I have said, FAN 2266. The revolver is in a drawer in my flat."

"You're quite right about the one in the drawer in your flat," said Father, "but the other—the pistol—is not in your car."

"Yes, it is. It is in the left-hand pocket."

Father shook his head. "It may have been once. It isn't now. Is this it, Mr. Malinowski?"

He passed a small automatic pistol across the table. Ladislaus Malinowski, with an air of great surprise, picked it up.

"Ah-ha, yes. This is it. So it was *you* who took it from my car?"

"No," said Father, "we didn't take it from your car. It was not in your car. We found it somewhere else."

"Where did you find it?"

"We found it," said Father, "in an area in Pond Street, which—as you no doubt know—is a street near Park Lane. It could have been dropped by a man walking down that street—or running perhaps."

Ladislaus Malinowski shrugged his shoulders. "That is nothing to do with me—I did not put it there. It was in my car a day or two ago. One does not continually look to see if a thing is still where one has put it. One assumes it will be."

"Do you know, Mr. Malinowski, that this is the pistol which was used to shoot Michael Gorman on the night of November 26th?"

"Michael Gorman? I do not know a Michael Gorman."

"The commissionaire from Bertram's Hotel."

"Ah yes, the one who was shot. I read about it. And you say *my* pistol shot him? Nonsense!"

"It's not nonsense. The ballistic experts have examined it. You know enough of firearms to be aware that their evidence is reliable."

"You are trying to frame me. I know what you police do!"

"I think you know the police of this country better than that, Mr. Malinowski."

"Are you suggesting that I shot Michael Gorman?"

"So far we are only asking for a statement. No charge has been made."

"But that is what you think—that I shot that ridiculous dressed-up military figure. Why should I? I didn't owe him money, I had no grudge against him."

"It was a young lady who was shot at. Gorman ran to protect her and received the second bullet in his chest."

"A young lady?"

"A young lady whom I think you know. Miss Elvira Blake."

"Do you say someone tried to shoot Elvira with *my* pistol?"

He sounded incredulous.

"It could be that you had had a disagreement."

"You mean that I quarrelled with Elvira and shot her? What madness! Why should I shoot the girl I am going to marry?"

"Is that part of your statement? That you are going to marry Miss Elvira Blake?"

Just for a moment or two Ladislaus hesitated. Then he said, shrugging his shoulders:

"She is still very young. It remains to be discussed."

"Perhaps she had promised to marry you, and then—she changed her mind. There was *someone* she was afraid of. Was it you, Mr. Malinowski?"

"Why should *I* want her to die? Either I am in love with her and want to marry her or if I do not want to marry her I need not marry her. It is as simple as that. So why should I kill her?"

"There aren't many people close enough to her to want to kill her." Davy waited a moment and then said, almost casually: "There's her mother, of course."

"What!" Malinowski sprang up. "*Bess?* Bess kill her own daughter? You are mad! Why should Bess kill Elvira?"

"Possibly because, as next of kin, she might inherit an enormous fortune."

"Bess? You mean Bess would kill for money? She has plenty of money from her American husband. Enough, anyway."

"Enough is not the same as a great fortune," said Father. "People do do murder for a large fortune, mothers have been known to kill their children, and children have killed their mothers."

"I tell you, you are mad!"

"You say that you may be going to marry Miss Blake. Perhaps you have already married her? If so, then *you* would be the one to inherit a vast fortune."

"What more crazy, stupid things can you say! No, I am not married to Elvira. She is a pretty girl. I like her, and she is in love with me. Yes, I admit it. I met her in Italy. We had fun—but that is all. No more, do you understand?"

"Indeed? Just now, Mr. Malinowski, you said quite definitely that she was the girl you were going to marry."

"Oh that."

"Yes—that. Was it true?"

"I said it because—it sounded more respectable that way. You are so—prudish in this country—"

"That seems to me an unlikely explanation."

"You do not understand anything at all. The mother and I—we are lovers—I did not wish to say so—I suggest instead that the daughter and I—we are engaged to be married. That sounds very English and proper."

"It sounds to me even more far-fetched. You're rather badly in need of money, aren't you, Mr. Malinowski?"

"My dear Chief-Inspector, I am always in need of money. It is very sad."

"And yet a few months ago I understand you were flinging money about in a very carefree way."

"Ah. I had had a lucky flutter. I am a gambler. I admit it."

"I find that quite easy to believe. Where did you have this 'flutter'?"

"That I do not tell. You can hardly expect it."

"I don't expect it."

"Is that all you have to ask me?"

"For the moment, yes. You have identified the pistol as yours. That will be very helpful."

"I don't understand—I can't conceive—" He broke off and stretched out his hand. "Give it me please."

"I'm afraid we'll have to keep it for the present, so I'll write you out a receipt for it."

He did so and handed it to Malinowski.

The latter went out slamming the door.

"Temperamental chap," said Father.

"You didn't press him on the matter of the false number plate and Bedhampton?"

"No. I wanted him rattled. But not too badly rattled. We'll give him one thing to worry about at a time—And he *is* worried."

"The Old Man wanted to see you, sir, as soon as you were through."

Chief-Inspector Davy nodded and made his way to Sir Ronald's room.

"Ah! Father. Making progress?"

"Yes. Getting along nicely—quite a lot of fish in the net. Small-fry mostly. But we're closing in on the big fellows. Everything's in train —"

"Good show, Fred," said the AC.

Chapter Twenty-five

I

Miss Marple got out of her train at Paddington and saw the burly figure of Chief-Inspector Davy standing on the platform waiting for her.

He said, "Very good of you, Miss Marple," put his hand under her elbow and piloted her through the barrier to where a car was waiting. The driver opened the door, Miss Marple got in, Chief-Inspector Davy followed her and the car drove off.

"Where are you taking me, Chief-Inspector Davy?"

"To Bertram's Hotel."

"Dear me, Bertram's Hotel again. Why?"

"The official reply is: because the police think you can assist them in their inquiries."

"That sounds familiar, but surely rather sinister? So often the prelude to an arrest, is it not?"

"I am not going to arrest you, Miss Marple." Father smiled. "You have an alibi."

Miss Marple digested this in silence. Then she said, "I see."

They drove to Bertram's Hotel in silence. Miss Gorrington looked up from the desk as they entered, but Chief-Inspector Davy piloted Miss Marple to the lift.

"Second floor."

The lift ascended, stopped, and Father led the way along the corridor.

As he opened the door of No. 18 Miss Marple said:

"This is the same room I had when I was staying here before."

"Yes," said Father.

Miss Marple sat down in the armchair.

"A very comfortable room," she observed, looking round with a slight sigh.

"They certainly know what comfort is here," Father agreed.

"You look tired, Chief-Inspector," said Miss Marple unexpectedly.

"I've had to get around a bit. As a matter of fact I've just got back from Ireland."

"Indeed. From Ballygowlan?"

"Now how the devil did *you* know about Ballygowlan? I'm sorry—I beg your pardon."

Miss Marple smiled forgiveness.

"I suppose Michael Gorman happened to tell you he came from there—was that it?"

"No, not exactly," said Miss Marple.

"Then how, if you'll excuse me asking you, *did* you know?"

"Oh dear," said Miss Marple, "it's really very embarrassing. It was just something I—happened to overhear."

"Oh, I see."

"I wasn't eavesdropping. It was in a public room—at least technically a public room. Quite frankly, I enjoy listening to people talking. One does. Especially when one is old and doesn't get about very much. I mean, if people are talking near you, you listen."

"Well, that seems to me quite natural," said Father.

"Up to a point, yes," said Miss Marple. "If people do not choose to lower their voices, one must assume that they are prepared to be overheard. But of course matters may develop. The situation sometimes arises when you realize that though it *is* a public room, other people talking do not realize that there is anyone else in it. And then one has to decide what to do about it. Get up and cough, or just stay quite quiet and hope they won't realize you've been there. Either way is embarrassing."

Chief-Inspector Davy glanced at his watch.

"Look here," he said, "I want to hear more about this—but I've got Canon Pennyfather arriving at any moment. I must go and collect him. You don't mind?"

Miss Marple said she didn't mind. Chief-Inspector Davy left the room.

II

Canon Pennyfather came through the swing doors into the hall of Bertram's Hotel. He frowned slightly, wondering what it was that seemed a little different about Bertram's today. Perhaps it had been painted or done up in some way? He shook his head. That was not it, but there was *something*. It did not occur to him that it was the difference between a six foot commissioner with blue eyes and dark hair and a five foot seven commissioner with sloping shoulders, freckles and a sandy thatch of hair bulging out under his commissioner's cap. He just knew something was different. In his usual vague way he wandered up to the desk. Miss Gorringer was there and greeted him.

"Canon Pennyfather. How nice to see you. Have you come to fetch your baggage? It's all ready for you. If you'd only let us know we could have sent it to you to any address you like."

"Thank you," said Canon Pennyfather, "thank you very much. You're always most kind, Miss Gorringer. But as I had to come up to London anyway today I thought I might as well call for it."

"We were so worried about you," said Miss Gorringer. "Being missing, you know. Nobody able to find you. You had a car accident, I hear?"

"Yes," said Canon Pennyfather. "Yes. People drive much too fast nowadays. Most dangerous. Not that I can remember much about it. It affected my head. Concussion, the doctor says. Oh well, as one is getting on in life, one's memory—" He shook his head sadly. "And how are you, Miss Gorringer?"

"Oh, I'm very well," said Miss Gorringer.

At that moment it struck Canon Pennyfather that Miss Gorringer also was different. He peered at her, trying to analyse where the

difference lay. Her hair? That was the same as usual. Perhaps even a little frizzier. Black dress, large locket, cameo brooch. All there as usual. But there was a difference. Was she perhaps a little thinner? Or was it—yes, surely, she looked *worried*. It was not often that Canon Pennyfather noticed whether people looked worried, he was not the kind of man who noticed emotion in the faces of others, but it struck him today, perhaps because Miss Gorringer had so invariably presented exactly the same countenance to guests for so many years.

"You've not been ill, I hope?" he asked solicitously. "You look a little thinner."

"Well, we've had a good deal of worry, Canon Pennyfather."

"Indeed. Indeed. I'm sorry to hear it. Not due to my disappearance, I hope?"

"Oh no," said Miss Gorringer. "We were worried, of course, about that, but as soon as we heard that you were all right—" She broke off and said, "No. No—it's this—well, perhaps you haven't read about it in the papers. Gorman, our outside porter, got killed."

"Oh yes," said Canon Pennyfather. "I remember now. I did see it mentioned in the paper—that you had had a murder here."

Miss Gorringer shuddered at this blunt mention of the word murder. The shudder went all up her black dress.

"Terrible," she said, "terrible. Such a thing has *never* happened at Bertram's. I mean, we're not the sort of hotel where murders happen."

"No, no, indeed," said Canon Pennyfather quickly. "I'm sure you're not. I mean it would never have occurred to me that anything like that could happen *here*."

"Of course it wasn't *inside* the hotel," said Miss Gorringer, cheering up a little as this aspect of the affair struck her. "It was outside in the street."

"So really nothing to do with you at all," said the Canon, helpfully.

That apparently was not quite the right thing to say.

"But it was connected with Bertram's. We had to have the police here questioning people, since it was our commissionaire who was shot."

"So that's a new man you have outside. D'you know, I thought somehow things looked a little strange."

"Yes, I don't know that he's very satisfactory. I mean, not quite the style we're used to here. But of course we had to get someone quickly."

"I remember all about it now," said Canon Pennyfather, assembling some rather dim memories of what he had read in the paper a week ago. "But I thought it was a *girl* who was shot."

"You mean Lady Sedgwick's daughter? I expect you remember seeing her here with her guardian, Colonel Luscombe. Apparently she was attacked by someone in the fog. I expect they wanted to snatch her bag. Anyway they fired a shot at her and then Gorman, who of course had been a soldier and was a man with a lot of presence of mind, rushed down, got in front of her and got shot himself, poor fellow."

"Very sad, very sad," said the Canon, shaking his head.

"It makes everything terribly difficult," complained Miss Gorringer. "I mean, the police constantly in and out. I suppose that's to be expected, but we don't *like* it here, though I must say Chief-Inspector Davy and Sergeant Wadell are very respectable-looking. Plain clothes, and very good style, not the sort with boots and mackintoshes like one sees on films. Almost like one of *us*."

"Er—yes," said Canon Pennyfather.

"Did you have to go to hospital?" inquired Miss Gorringer.

"No," said the Canon, "some very nice people, really good Samaritans—a market gardener, I believe—picked me up and his wife nursed me back to health. I'm most grateful, most grateful. It is refreshing to find that there is still human kindness in the world. Don't you think so?"

Miss Gorringer said she thought it was very refreshing. "After all one reads about the increase in crime," she added, "all those dreadful young men and girls holding up banks and robbing trains and ambushing people." She looked up and said, "There's Chief-Inspector Davy coming down the stairs now. I think he wants to speak to you."

"I don't know why he should want to speak to me," said Canon Pennyfather, puzzled. "He's already been to see me, you know," he said, "at Chadminster. He was very disappointed, I think, that I couldn't tell him anything useful."

"You couldn't?"

The Canon shook his head sorrowfully.

"I couldn't remember. The accident took place somewhere near a place called Bedhampton and really I don't understand *what* I can have been doing there. The Chief-Inspector kept asking me why I was there and I couldn't tell him. Very odd, isn't it? He seemed to think I'd been driving a car from somewhere near a railway station to a vicarage."

"That sounds very possible," said Miss Gorringer.

"It doesn't seem possible at all," said Canon Pennyfather. "I mean, why should I be driving about in a part of the world that I don't really know?"

Chief-Inspector Davy had come up to them.

"So here you are, Canon Pennyfather," he said. "Feeling quite yourself again?"

"Oh, I feel quite well now," said the Canon, "but rather inclined to have headaches still. And I've been told not to do too much. But I still don't seem to remember what I ought to remember and the doctor says it may never come back."

"Oh well," said Chief-Inspector Davy, "we mustn't give up hope." He led the Canon away from the desk. "There's a little experiment I want you to try," he said. "You don't mind helping me, do you?"

III

When Chief-Inspector Davy opened the door of No. 18, Miss Marple was still sitting in the armchair by the window.

"A good many people in the street today," she observed. "More than usual."

"Oh well—this is a way through to Berkeley Square and Shepherd Market."

"I didn't mean only passersby. Men doing things—road repairs, a telephone repair van—meat trolley—a couple of private cars—"

"And what—may I ask—do you deduce from that?"

"I didn't say that I deduced anything."

Father gave her a look. Then he said:

"I want you to help me."

"Of course. That is why I am here. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to do exactly what you did on the night of November 19th. You were asleep—you woke up—possibly awakened by some unusual noise. You switched on the light, looked at the time, got out of bed, opened the door and looked out. Can you repeat those actions?"

"Certainly," said Miss Marple. She got up and went across to the bed.

"Just a moment."

Chief-Inspector Davy went and tapped on the connecting walls of the next room.

"You'll have to do that louder," said Miss Marple. "This place is very well built."

The Chief-Inspector redoubled the force of his knuckles.

"I told Canon Pennyfather to count ten," he said, looking at his watch. "Now then, off you go."

Miss Marple touched the electric lamp, looked at an imaginary clock, got up, walked to the door, opened it and looked out. To her right, just leaving his room, walking to the top of the stairs, was Canon Pennyfather. He arrived at the top of the stairs and started down them. Miss Marple gave a slight catch of her breath. She turned back.

"Well?" said Chief-Inspector Davy.

"The man I saw that night can't have been Canon Pennyfather," said Miss Marple. "Not if that's Canon Pennyfather now."

"I thought you said—"

"I know. He looked like Canon Pennyfather. His hair and his clothes and everything. But he didn't walk the same way. I think—I think he must have been a younger man. I'm sorry, very sorry, to

have misled you, but it wasn't Canon Pennyfather that I saw that night. I'm quite sure of it."

"You really are quite sure this time, Miss Marple?"

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "I'm sorry," she added again, "to have misled you."

"You were very nearly right. Canon Pennyfather did come back to the hotel that night. Nobody saw him come in—but that wasn't remarkable. He came in after midnight. He came up the stairs, he opened the door of his room next door and he went in. What he saw or what happened next we don't know, because he can't or won't tell us. If there was only some way we could jog his memory...."

"There's that German word of course," said Miss Marple, thoughtfully.

"What German word?"

"Dear me, I've forgotten it now, but—"

There was a knock at the door.

"May I come in?" said Canon Pennyfather. He entered. "Was it satisfactory?"

"Most satisfactory," said Father. "I was just telling Miss Marple—you know Miss Marple?"

"Oh yes," said Canon Pennyfather, really slightly uncertain as to whether he did or not.

"I was just telling Miss Marple how we have traced your movements. You came back to the hotel that night after midnight. You came upstairs and you opened the door of your room and went in—" He paused.

Miss Marple gave an exclamation.

"I remember now," she said, "what the German word is. *Doppelgänger!*"

Canon Pennyfather uttered an exclamation. "But of course," he said, "of *course!* How could I have forgotten? You're quite right, you know. After that film, *The Walls of Jericho*, I came back here and I came upstairs and I opened my room and I saw—extraordinary, I distinctly saw *myself* sitting in a chair facing me. As you say, dear lady, a *doppelgänger*. How very remarkable! And then—let me see—" He raised his eyes, trying to think.

“And then,” said Father, “startled out of their lives to see you, when they thought you were safely in Lucerne, somebody hit you on the head.”

Chapter Twenty-six

Canon Pennyfather had been sent on his way in a taxi to the British Museum. Miss Marple had been ensconced in the lounge by the Chief-Inspector. Would she mind waiting for him there for about ten minutes? Miss Marple had not minded. She welcomed the opportunity to sit and look around her and think.

Bertram's Hotel. So many memories...The past fused itself with the present. A French phrase came back to her. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. She reversed the wording. *Plus c'est la même chose, plus ça change*. Both true, she thought.

She felt sad—for Bertram's Hotel and for herself. She wondered what Chief-Inspector Davy wanted of her next. She sensed in him the excitement of purpose. He was a man whose plans were at last coming to fruition. It was Chief-Inspector Davy's D-Day.

The life of Bertram's went on as usual. No, Miss Marple decided, *not* as usual. There was a difference, though she could not have defined where the difference lay. An underlying uneasiness, perhaps?

"All set?" he inquired genially.

"Where are you taking me now?"

"We're going to pay a call on Lady Sedgwick."

"Is she staying here?"

"Yes. With her daughter."

Miss Marple rose to her feet. She cast a glance round her and murmured: "Poor Bertram's."

"What do you mean—poor Bertram's?"

"I think you know quite well what I mean."

"Well—looking at it from your point of view, perhaps I do."

"It is always sad when a work of art has to be destroyed."

"You call this place a work of art?"

"Certainly I do. So do you."

"I see what you mean," admitted Father.

"It is like when you get ground elder really badly in a border. There's nothing else you can do about it—except dig the whole thing up."

"I don't know much about gardens. But change the metaphor to dry rot and I'd agree."

They went up in the lift and along a passage to where Lady Sedgwick and her daughter had a corner suite.

Chief-Inspector Davy knocked on the door, a voice said, "Come in," and he entered with Miss Marple behind him.

Bess Sedgwick was sitting in a high-backed chair near the window. She had a book on her knee which she was not reading.

"So it's you again, Chief-Inspector." Her eyes went past him towards Miss Marple, and she looked slightly surprised.

"This is Miss Marple," explained Chief-Inspector Davy. "Miss Marple—Lady Sedgwick."

"I've met you before," said Bess Sedgwick. "You were with Selina Hazy the other day, weren't you? Do sit down," she added. Then she turned towards Chief-Inspector Davy again. "Have you any news of the man who shot at Elvira?"

"Not actually what you'd call *news*."

"I doubt if you ever will have. In a fog like that, predatory creatures come out and prowl around looking for women walking alone."

"True up to a point," said Father. "How is your daughter?"

"Oh, Elvira is quite all right again."

"You've got her here with you?"

"Yes. I rang up Colonel Luscombe—her guardian. He was delighted that I was willing to take charge." She gave a sudden laugh. "Dear old boy. He's always been urging a mother-and-daughter reunion act!"

"He may be right at that," said Father.

"Oh no, he isn't. Just at the moment, yes, I think it is the best thing." She turned her head to look out of the window and spoke in a changed voice. "I hear you've arrested a friend of mine—Ladislaus Malinowski. On what charge?"

"Not *arrested*," Chief-Inspector Davy corrected her. "He's just assisting us with our inquiries."

"I've sent my solicitor to look after him."

"Very wise," said Father approvingly. "Anyone who's having a little difficulty with the police is very wise to have a solicitor. Otherwise they may so easily say the wrong thing."

"Even if completely innocent?"

"Possibly it's even more necessary in that case," said Father.

"You're quite a cynic, aren't you? What are you questioning him about, may I ask? Or mayn't I?"

"For one thing we'd like to know just exactly what his movements were on the night when Michael Gorman died."

Bess Sedgwick sat up sharply in her chair.

"Have you got some ridiculous idea that *Ladislaus* fired those shots at Elvira? They didn't even know each other."

"He could have done it. His car was just round the corner."

"Rubbish," said Lady Sedgwick robustly.

"How much did that shooting business the other night upset you, Lady Sedgwick?"

She looked faintly surprised.

"Naturally I was upset when my daughter had a narrow escape of her life. What do you expect?"

"I didn't mean that. I mean how much did the death of Michael Gorman upset you?"

"I was very sorry about it. He was a brave man."

"Is that all?"

"What more would you expect me to say?"

"You knew him, didn't you?"

"Of course. He worked here."

"You knew him a little better than that, though, didn't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Come, Lady Sedgwick. He was your husband, wasn't he?"

She did not answer for a moment or two, though she displayed no signs of agitation or surprise.

"You know a good deal, don't you, Chief-Inspector?" She sighed and sat back in her chair. "I hadn't seen him for—let me see—a great many years. Twenty—more than twenty. And then I looked out of the window one day, and suddenly recognized Micky."

"And he recognized you?"

"Quite surprising that we did recognize each other," said Bess Sedgwick. "We were only together for about a week. Then my family caught up with us, paid Micky off, and took me home in disgrace."

She sighed.

"I was very young when I ran away with him. I knew very little. Just a fool of a girl with a head full of romantic notions. He was a hero to me, mainly because of the way he rode a horse. He didn't know what fear was. And he was handsome and gay with an Irishman's tongue! I suppose really *I* ran away with *him*! I doubt if he'd have thought of it himself! But I was wild and headstrong and madly in love!" She shook her head. "It didn't last long...The first twenty-four hours were enough to disillusion me. He drank and he was coarse and brutal. When my family turned up and took me back with them, I was thankful. I never wanted to see him or hear of him again."

"Did your family know that you were married to him?"

"No."

"You didn't tell them?"

"I didn't think I *was* married."

"How did that come about?"

"We were married in Ballygowlan, but when my people turned up, Micky came to me and told me the marriage had been a fake. He and his friends had cooked it up between them, he said. By that time it seemed to me quite a natural thing for him to have done. Whether he wanted the money that was being offered him, or whether he was afraid he'd committed a breach of the law by marrying me when I wasn't of age, I don't know. Anyway, I didn't doubt for a moment that what he said was true—not then."

"And later?"

She seemed lost in her thoughts. "It wasn't until—oh, quite a number of years afterwards, when I knew a little more of life, and of legal matters, that it suddenly occurred to me that probably I was married to Micky Gorman after all!"

"In actual fact, then, when you married Lord Coniston, you committed bigamy."

"And when I married Johnnie Sedgwick, and again when I married my American husband, Ridgway Becker." She looked at Chief-Inspector Davy and laughed with what seemed like genuine amusement.

"So much bigamy," she said. "It really does seem very ridiculous."

"Did you never think of getting a divorce?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "It all seemed like a silly dream. Why rake it up? I told Johnnie, of course." Her voice softened and mellowed as she said his name.

"And what did he say?"

"He didn't care. Neither Johnnie nor I were ever very law-abiding."

"Bigamy carries certain penalties, Lady Sedgwick."

She looked at him and laughed.

"Who was ever going to worry about something that had happened in Ireland years ago? The whole thing was over and done with. Micky had taken his money and gone off. Oh, don't you understand? It seemed just a silly little incident. An incident I wanted to forget. I put it aside with the things—the very many things—that don't matter in life."

"And then," said Father, in a tranquil voice, "one day in November, Michael Gorman turned up again and blackmailed you?"

"Nonsense! Who said he blackmailed me?"

Slowly Father's eyes went round to the old lady sitting quietly, very upright in her chair.

"You." Bess Sedgwick stared at Miss Marple. "What can *you* know about it?"

Her voice was more curious than accusing.

"The armchairs in this hotel have very high backs," said Miss Marple. "Very comfortable they are. I was sitting in one in front of the fire in the writing room. Just resting before I went out one morning. You came in to write a letter. I suppose you didn't realize there was anyone else in the room. And so—I heard your conversation with this man Gorman."

"You listened?"

"Naturally," said Miss Marple. "Why not? It was a public room. When you threw up the window and called to the man outside, I had no idea that it was going to be a private conversation."

Bess stared at her for a moment, then she nodded her head slowly.

"Fair enough," she said. "Yes, I see. But all the same you misunderstood what you heard. Micky didn't blackmail me. He might have thought of it—but I warned him off before he could try!" Her lips curled up again in that wide generous smile that made her face so attractive. "I frightened him off."

"Yes," agreed Miss Marple. "I think you probably did. You threatened to shoot him. You handled it—if you won't think it impertinent of me to say so—very well indeed."

Bess Sedgwick's eyebrows rose in some amusement.

"But I wasn't the only person to hear you," Miss Marple went on.

"Good gracious! Was the whole hotel listening?"

"The other armchair was also occupied."

"By whom?"

Miss Marple closed her lips. She looked at Chief-Inspector Davy, and it was almost a pleading glance. "If it *must* be done, *you* do it," the glance said, "but I can't...."

"Your daughter was in the other chair," said Chief-Inspector Davy.

"Oh no!" The cry came out sharply. "Oh *no*. Not Elvira! I see—yes, I see. She must have thought—"

"She thought seriously enough of what she had overheard to go to Ireland and search for the truth. It wasn't difficult to discover."

Again Bess Sedgwick said softly: "Oh no..." And then: "Poor child...Even now, she's never asked me a thing. She's kept it all to

herself. Bottled it up inside herself. If she'd only told me I could have explained it all to her—showed her how it didn't matter."

"She mightn't have agreed with you there," said Chief-Inspector Davy. "It's a funny thing, you know," he went on, in a reminiscent, almost gossipy manner, looking like an old farmer discussing his stock and his land, "I've learnt after a great many years' trial and error—I've learned to distrust a pattern when it's simple. Simple patterns are often too good to be true. The pattern of this murder the other night was like that. Girl says someone shot at her and missed. The commissionaire came running to save her, and copped it with a second bullet. That may be all true enough. That may be the way the girl saw it. But actually behind the appearances, things might be rather different.

"You said pretty vehemently just now, Lady Sedgwick, that there could be no reason for Ladislaus Malinowski to attempt your daughter's life. Well, I'll agree with you. I don't think there was. He's the sort of young man who might have a row with a woman, pull out a knife and stick it into her. But I don't think he'd hide in an area, and wait cold-bloodedly to shoot her. But supposing he wanted to shoot *someone else*. Screams and shots—but what actually has happened is that *Michael Gorman* is dead. Suppose that was actually what was *meant* to happen. Malinowski plans it very carefully. He chooses a foggy night, hides in the area and waits until your daughter comes up the street. He knows she's coming because he has managed to arrange it that way. He fires a shot. It's not meant to hit the girl. He's careful not to let the bullet go anywhere near her, but *she* thinks it's aimed at her all right. She screams. The porter from the hotel, hearing the shot and the scream, comes rushing down the street and *then Malinowski shoots the person he's come to shoot. Michael Gorman.*"

"I don't believe a word of it! Why on earth should Ladislaus want to shoot Micky Gorman?"

"A little matter of blackmail, perhaps," said Father.

"Do you mean that Micky was blackmailing *Ladislaus*? What about?"

"Perhaps," said Father, "about the things that go on at Bertram's Hotel. Michael Gorman might have found out quite a lot about that."

"Things that go on at Bertram's Hotel? What *do* you mean?"

"It's been a good racket," said Father. "Well planned, beautifully executed. But nothing lasts forever. Miss Marple here asked me the other day what was wrong with this place. Well, I'll answer that question now. Bertram's Hotel is to all intents and purposes the headquarters of one of the best and biggest crime syndicates that's been known for years."

Chapter Twenty-seven

There was silence for about a minute and a half. Then Miss Marple spoke.

"How *very* interesting," she said conversationally.

Bess Sedgwick turned on her. "You don't seem surprised, Miss Marple."

"I'm not. Not really. There were so many curious things that didn't seem quite to fit in. It was all too good to be true—if you know what I mean. What they call in theatrical circles, a beautiful performance. But it *was* a performance—not real.

"And there were a lot of little things, people claiming a friend or an acquaintance—and turning out to be wrong."

"These things happen," said Chief-Inspector Davy, "but they happened too often. Is that right, Miss Marple?"

"Yes," agreed Miss Marple. "People like Selina Hazy do make that kind of mistake. But there were so many other people doing it too. One couldn't help *noticing* it."

"She notices a lot," said Chief-Inspector Davy, speaking to Bess Sedgwick as though Miss Marple was his pet performing dog.

Bess Sedgwick turned on him sharply.

"What did you mean when you said this place was the headquarters of a Crime Syndicate? I should have said that Bertram's Hotel was the most respectable place in the world."

"Naturally," said Father. "It would have to be. A lot of money, time, and thought has been spent on making it just what it is. The genuine and the phony are mixed-up very cleverly. You've got a

superb actor manager running the show in Henry. You've got that chap, Humfries, wonderfully plausible. He hasn't got a record in this country but he's been mixed-up in some rather curious hotel dealings abroad. There are some very good character actors playing various parts here. I'll admit, if you like, that I can't help feeling a good deal of admiration for the whole setup. It has cost this country a mint of money. It's given the CID and the provincial police forces constant headaches. Every time we seemed to be getting somewhere, and put our finger on some particular incident—it turned out to be the kind of incident that had nothing to do with anything else. But we've gone on working on it, a piece there, a piece here. A garage where stacks of number plates were kept, transferable at a moment's notice to certain cars. A firm of furniture vans, a butcher's van, a grocer's van, even one or two phony postal vans. A racing driver with a racing car covering incredible distances in incredibly few minutes, and at the other end of the scale an old clergyman jogging along in his old Morris Oxford. A cottage with a market gardener in it who lends first aid if necessary and who is in touch with a useful doctor. I needn't go into it all. The ramifications seem unending. That's one half of it. The foreign visitors who come to Bertram's are the other half. Mostly from America, or from the Dominions. Rich people above suspicion, coming here with a good lot of luxury luggage, leaving here with a good lot of luxury luggage which looks the same but isn't. Rich tourists arriving in France and not worried unduly by the Customs because the Customs don't worry tourists when they're bringing money into the country. Not the same tourists too many times. The pitcher mustn't go to the well too often. None of it's going to be easy to prove or to tie up, but it will all tie up in the end. We've made a beginning. The Cabots, for instance—"

"What about the Cabots?" asked Bess sharply.

"You remember them? Very nice Americans. Very nice indeed. They stayed here last year and they've been here again this year. They wouldn't have come a third time. Nobody ever comes here more than twice on the same racket. Yes, we arrested them when they arrived at Calais. Very well-made job, that wardrobe case they

had with them. It had over three hundred thousand pounds neatly stashed. Proceeds of the Bedhampton train robbery. Of course, that's only a drop in the ocean.

"Bertram's Hotel, let me tell you, is the headquarters of the whole thing! Half the staff are in on it. Some of the guests are in on it. Some of the guests are who they say they are—some are not. The real Cabots, for instance, are in Yucatan just now. Then there was the identification racket. Take Mr. Justice Ludgrove. A familiar face, bulbous nose and a wart. Quite easy to impersonate. Canon Pennyfather. A mild country clergyman, with a great white thatch of hair and notable absentminded behaviour. His mannerisms, his way of peering over his spectacles—all very easily imitated by a good character actor."

"But what was the use of all that?" asked Bess.

"Are you really asking me? Isn't it obvious? Mr. Justice Ludgrove is seen near the scene of a bank holdup. Someone recognizes him, mentions it. We go into it. It's all a mistake. He was somewhere else at the time. But it wasn't for a while that we realized that these were all what is sometimes called 'deliberate mistakes.' Nobody's bothered about the man who had looked so like him. And doesn't look particularly like him really. He takes off his makeup and stops acting his part. The whole thing brings about confusion. At one time we had a High Court judge, an Archdeacon, an Admiral, a Major-General, all seen near the scene of a crime.

"After the Bedhampton train robbery at least four vehicles were concerned before the loot arrived in London. A racing car driven by Malinowski took part in it, a false Metal Box lorry, an old-fashioned Daimler with an admiral in it, and an old clergyman with a thatch of white hair in a Morris Oxford. The whole thing was a splendid operation, beautifully planned.

"And then one day the gang had a bit of bad luck. That muddle-headed old ecclesiastic, Canon Pennyfather, went off to catch his plane on the wrong day, they turned him away from the air station, he wandered out into Cromwell Road, went to a film, arrived back here after midnight, came up to his room, of which he had the key in his pocket, opened the door, and walked in to get the shock of his

life when he saw what appeared to be *himself* sitting in a chair facing him! The last thing the gang expected was to see the real Canon Pennyfather, supposed to be safely in Lucerne, walk in! His double was just getting ready to start off to play his part at Bedhampton when in walked the real man. They didn't know what to do but there was a quick reflex action from one member of the party. Humfries, I suspect. He hit the old man on the head, and he went down unconscious. Somebody, I think, was angry over that. Very angry. However, they examined the old boy, decided he was only knocked out, and would probably come round later and they went on with their plans. The false Canon Pennyfather left his room, went out of the hotel and drove to the scene of activities where he was to play his part in the relay race. What they did with the real Canon Pennyfather I don't know. I can only guess. I presume he too was moved later that night, driven down in a car, taken to the market gardener's cottage which was at a spot not too far from where the train was to be held up and where a doctor could attend to him. Then, if reports came through about Canon Pennyfather having been seen in the neighbourhood, it would all fit in. It must have been an anxious moment for all concerned until he regained consciousness and they found that at least three days had been knocked out of his remembrance."

"Would they have killed him otherwise?" asked Miss Marple.

"No," said Father. "I don't think they would have killed him. Someone wouldn't have let that happen. It had seemed very clear all along that whoever ran this show had an objection to murder."

"It sounds fantastic," said Bess Sedgwick. "Utterly fantastic! And I don't believe you have any evidence whatever to link Ladislaus Malinowski with this rigmarole."

"I've got plenty of evidence against Ladislaus Malinowski," said Father. "He's careless, you know. He hung around here when he shouldn't have. On the first occasion he came to establish connection with your daughter. They had a code arranged."

"Nonsense. She told you herself that she didn't know him."

"She may have told me that but it wasn't true. She's in love with him. She wants the fellow to marry her."

"I don't believe it!"

"You're not in a position to know," Chief-Inspector Davy pointed out. "Malinowski isn't the sort of person who tells all his secrets and your daughter you don't know at all. You admitted as much. You were angry, weren't you, when you found out Malinowski had come to Bertram's Hotel."

"Why should I be angry?"

"*Because you're the brains of the show,*" said Father. "You and Henry. The financial side was run by the Hoffman brothers. They made all the arrangements with the Continental banks and accounts and that sort of thing, but the boss of the syndicate, the brains that run it, and plan it, are your brains, Lady Sedgwick."

Bess looked at him and laughed. "I never heard anything so ridiculous!" she said.

"Oh no, it's not ridiculous at all. You've got brains, courage and daring. You've tried most things; you thought you'd turn your hand to crime. Plenty of excitement in it, plenty of risk. It wasn't the money that attracted you, I'd say, it was the fun of the whole thing. But you wouldn't stand for murder, or for undue violence. There were no killings, no brutal assaults, only nice quiet scientific taps on the head if necessary. You're a very interesting woman, you know. One of the few really interesting great criminals."

There was silence for some few minutes. Then Bess Sedgwick rose to her feet.

"I think you must be mad." She put her hand out to the telephone.

"Going to ring up your solicitor? Quite the right thing to do before you say too much."

With a sharp gesture she slammed the receiver back on the hook.

"On second thoughts I hate solicitors...All right. Have it your own way. Yes, I ran this show. You're quite correct when you say it was fun. I loved every minute of it. It was fun scooping money from banks, trains and post offices and so-called security vans! It was fun planning and deciding; glorious fun and I'm glad I had it. The pitcher goes to the well once too often? That's what you said just now, wasn't it? I suppose it's true. Well, I've had a good run for my

money! But you're wrong about Ladislaus Malinowski shooting Michael Gorman! He didn't. *I did.*" She laughed a sudden high, excited laugh. "Never mind what it was he did, what he threatened... I told him I'd shoot him—Miss Marple heard me—and I *did* shoot him. I did very much what you suggested Ladislaus did. I hid in that area. When Elvira passed, I fired one shot wild, and when she screamed and Micky came running down the street, I'd got him where I wanted him, and I let him have it! I've got keys to all the hotel entrances, of course. I just slipped in through the area door and up to my room. It never occurred to me you'd trace the pistol to Ladislaus—or would even suspect him. I'd pinched it from his car without his knowing. But not, I can assure you, with any idea of throwing suspicion on *him.*"

She swept round on Miss Marple. "You're a witness to what I've said, remember. *I killed Gorman.*"

"Or perhaps you are saying so because you're in love with Malinowski," suggested Davy.

"I'm not." Her retort came sharply. "I'm his good friend, that's all. Oh yes, we've been lovers in a casual kind of way, but I'm not in love with him. In all my life, I've only loved one person—John Sedgwick." her voice changed and softened as she pronounced the name.

"But Ladislaus is my friend. I don't want him railroaded for something he didn't do. *I killed Michael Gorman.* I've said so, and Miss Marple has heard me...And now, dear Chief-Inspector Davy—" her voice rose excitedly, and her laughter rang out—"*catch me if you can.*"

With a sweep of her arm, she smashed the window with the heavy telephone set, and before Father could get to his feet, she was out of the window and edging her way rapidly along the narrow parapet. With surprising quickness in spite of his bulk, Davy had moved to the other window and flung up the sash. At the same time he blew the whistle he had taken from his pocket.

Miss Marple, getting to her feet with rather more difficulty a moment or two later, joined him. Together they stared out along the façade of Bertram's Hotel.

"She'll fall. She's climbing up a drainpipe," Miss Marple exclaimed. "But why *up*?"

"Going to the roof. It's her only chance and she knows it. Good God, look at her. Climbs like a cat. She looks like a fly on the side of the wall. The risks she's taking!"

Miss Marple murmured, her eyes half closing, "She'll fall. She can't do it..."

The woman they were watching disappeared from sight. Father drew back a little into the room.

Miss Marple asked:

"Don't you want to go and—"

Father shook his head. "What good am I with my bulk? I've got my men posted ready for something like this. They know what to do. In a few minutes we shall know...I wouldn't put it past her to beat the lot of them! She's a woman in a thousand, you know." He sighed. "One of the wild ones. Oh, we've some of them in every generation. You can't tame them, you can't bring them into the community and make them live in law and order. They go their own way. If they're saints they go and tend lepers or something, or get themselves martyred in jungles. If they're bad lots they commit the atrocities that you don't like hearing about: and sometimes—they're just wild! They'd have been all right, I suppose, born in another age when it was everyone's hand for himself, everyone fighting to keep life in their veins. Hazards at every turn, danger all round them, and they themselves perforce dangerous to others. That world would have suited them; they'd have been at home in it. This one doesn't."

"Did you know what she was going to do?"

"Not really. That's one of her gifts. The unexpected. She must have thought this out, you know. She knew what was coming. So she sat looking at us—keeping the ball rolling—and thinking. Thinking and planning hard. I expect—ah—" He broke off as there came the sudden roar of a car's exhaust, the screaming of wheels, and the sound of a big racing engine. He leaned out. "She's made it, she's got to her car."

There was more screaming as the car came round the corner on two wheels, a great roar, and the beautiful white monster came

tearing up the street.

"She'll kill someone," said Father, "she'll kill a lot of people...even if she doesn't kill herself."

"I wonder," said Miss Marple.

"She's a good driver, of course. A damn good driver. Whoof, that was a near one!"

They heard the roar of the car racing away with the horn blaring, heard it grow fainter. Heard cries, shouts, the sound of brakes, cars hooting and pulling up and finally a great scream of tyres and a roaring exhaust and—

"She's crashed," said Father.

He stood there very quietly waiting with the patience that was characteristic of his whole big patient form. Miss Marple stood silent beside him. Then, like a relay race, word came down along the street. A man on the pavement opposite looked up at Chief-Inspector Davy and made rapid signs with his hands.

"She's had it," said Father heavily. "Dead! Went about ninety miles an hour into the park railings. No other casualties bar a few slight collisions. Magnificent driving. Yes, she's dead." He turned back into the room and said heavily, "Well, she told her story first. You heard her."

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "I heard her." There was a pause. "It wasn't true, of course," said Miss Marple quietly.

Father looked at her. "You didn't believe her, eh?"

"Did you?"

"No," said Father. "No, it wasn't the right story. She thought it out so that it would meet the case exactly, but it wasn't true. She didn't shoot Michael Gorman. D'you happen to know who did?"

"Of course I know," said Miss Marple. "The girl."

"Ah! When did you begin to think that?"

"I always wondered," said Miss Marple.

"So did I," said Father. "She was full of fear that night. And the lies she told were poor lies. But I couldn't see a motive at first."

"That puzzled me," said Miss Marple. "She had found out her mother's marriage was bigamous, but would a girl do murder for that? Not nowadays! I suppose there was a money side to it?"

"Yes, it was money," said Chief-Inspector Davy. "Her father left her a colossal fortune. When she found out that her mother was married to Michael Gorman she realized that the marriage to Coniston hadn't been legal. She thought that meant that the money wouldn't come to her because, though she was his daughter, she wasn't legitimate. She was wrong, you know. We had a case something like that before. Depends on the terms of a will. Coniston left it quite clearly to her, naming her by name. She'd get it all right, but she didn't know that. And she wasn't going to let go of the cash."

"Why did she need it so badly?"

Chief-Inspector Davy said grimly, "To buy Ladislaus Malinowski. He would have married her for her money. He wouldn't have married her without it. She wasn't a fool, that girl. She knew that. But she wanted him on any terms. She was desperately in love with him."

"I know," said Miss Marple. She explained: "I saw her face that day in Battersea Park...."

"She knew that with the money she'd get him, and without the money she'd lose him," said Father. "And so she planned a cold-blooded murder. She didn't hide in the area, of course. There was nobody in the area. She just stood by the railings and fired a shot and screamed, and when Michael Gorman came racing down the street from the hotel, she shot him at close quarters. Then she went on screaming. She was a cool hand. She'd no idea of incriminating young Ladislaus. She pinched his pistol because it was the only way she could get hold of one easily; and she never dreamed that he would be suspected of the crime, or that he would be anywhere in the neighbourhood that night. She thought it would be put down to some thug taking advantage of the fog. Yes, she was a cool hand. But she was afraid that night—afterwards! And her mother was afraid for her..."

"And now—what will you do?"

"I know she did it," said Father, "but I've no evidence. Maybe she'll have beginner's luck...Even the law seems to go on the principle now of allowing a dog to have one bite—translated into human terms. An experienced counsel could make great play with

the sob stuff—so young a girl, unfortunate upbringing—and she's beautiful, you know."

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "The children of Lucifer are often beautiful—And as we know, they flourish like the green bay tree."

"But as I tell you, it probably won't even come to that—there's no evidence—take yourself—you'll be called as a witness—a witness to what her mother said—to her mother's confession of the crime."

"I know," said Miss Marple. "She impressed it on me, didn't she? She chose death for herself, at the price of her daughter going free. She forced it on me as a dying request...."

The connecting door to the bedroom opened. Elvira Blake came through. She was wearing a straight shift dress of pale blue. Her fair hair fell down each side of her face. She looked like one of the angels in an early primitive Italian painting. She looked from one to the other of them. She said:

"I heard a car and a crash and people shouting...Has there been an accident?"

"I'm sorry to tell you, Miss Blake," said Chief-Inspector Davy formally, "that your mother is dead."

Elvira gave a little gasp. "Oh no," she said. It was a faint uncertain protest.

"Before she made her escape," said Chief-Inspector Davy, "because it *was* an escape—she confessed to the murder of Michael Gorman."

"You mean—she said—that it was *she*—"

"Yes," said Father. "That is what she *said*. Have you anything to add?"

Elvira looked for a long time at him. Very faintly she shook her head.

"No," she said, "I haven't anything to add."

Then she turned and went out of the room.

"Well," said Miss Marple. "Are you going to let her get away with it?"

There was a pause, then Father brought down his fist with a crash on the table.

"No," he roared—"No, by God I'm not!"

Miss Marple nodded her head slowly and gravely.
“May God have mercy on her soul,” she said.

Credits

Cover illustration and design by Sara Wood

MISS
MARPLE

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha Christie



A Miss Marple Mystery

Agatha Christie

Nemesis

A Miss Marple Mystery

HARPER

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

To Dauphne Honeybone

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Credits

One

OVERTURE

In the afternoons it was the custom of Miss Jane Marple to unfold her second newspaper. Two newspapers were delivered at her house every morning. The first one Miss Marple read while sipping her early morning tea, that is, if it was delivered in time. The boy who delivered the papers was notably erratic in his management of time. Frequently, too, there was either a new boy or a boy who was acting temporarily as a stand-in for the first one. And each one would have ideas of his own as to the geographical route that he should take in delivering. Perhaps it varied monotony for him. But those customers who were used to reading their paper early so that they could snap up the more saucy items in the day's news before departing for their bus, train or other means of progress to the day's work were annoyed if the papers were late, though the middle-aged and elderly ladies who resided peacefully in St. Mary Mead often preferred to read a newspaper propped up on their breakfast table.

Today, Miss Marple had absorbed the front page and a few other items in the daily paper that she had nicknamed "the Daily All-Sorts," this being a slightly satirical allusion to the fact that her paper, the *Daily Newsgiver*, owing to a change of proprietor, to her own and to other of her friends' great annoyance, now provided articles on men's tailoring, women's dress, female heartthrobs, competitions for

children, and complaining letters from women and had managed pretty well to shove any real news off any part of it but the front page, or to some obscure corner where it was impossible to find it. Miss Marple, being old-fashioned, preferred her newspapers to *be* newspapers and give you news.

In the afternoon, having finished her luncheon, treated herself to twenty minutes' nap in a specially purchased, upright armchair which catered for the demands of her rheumatic back, she had opened *The Times*, which lent itself still to a more leisurely perusal. Not that *The Times* was what it used to be. The maddening thing about *The Times* was that you couldn't *find* anything anymore. Instead of going through from the front page and knowing where everything else was so that you passed easily to any special articles on subjects in which you were interested, there were now extraordinary interruptions to this time-honoured programme. Two pages were suddenly devoted to travel in Capri with illustrations. Sport appeared with far more prominence than it had ever had in the old days. Court news and obituaries were a little more faithful to routine. The births, marriages and deaths which had at one time occupied Miss Marple's attention first of all owing to their prominent position had migrated to a different part of *The Times*, though of late, Miss Marple noted, they had come almost permanently to rest on the back page.

Miss Marple gave her attention first to the main news on the front page. She did not linger long on that because it was equivalent to what she had already read this morning, though possibly couched in a slightly more dignified manner. She cast her eye down the table of contents. Articles, comments, science, sport; then she pursued her usual plan, turned the paper over and had a quick run down the births, marriages and deaths, after which she proposed to turn to the page given to correspondence, where she nearly always found something to enjoy; from that she passed on to the Court Circular, on which page today's news from the Sale Rooms could also be found. A short article on Science was often placed there but she did not propose to read that. It seldom made sense for her.

Having turned the paper over as usual to the births, marriages and deaths, Miss Marple thought to herself, as so often before,

"It's sad really, but nowadays one is only interested in the *deaths!*"

People had babies, but the people who had babies were not likely to be even known by name to Miss Marple. If there had been a column dealing with babies labelled as grandchildren, there might have been some chance of a pleasurable recognition. She might have thought to herself,

"Really, Mary Prendergast has had a *third* granddaughter!," though even that perhaps might have been a bit remote.

She skimmed down Marriages, also with not a very close survey, because most of her old friends' daughters or sons had married some years ago already. She came to the Deaths column, and gave that her more serious attention. Gave it enough, in fact, so as to be sure she would not miss a name. Alloway, Angopastro, Arden, Barton, Bedshaw, Burgoweisser—(dear me, what a *German* name, but he seemed to be late of Leeds). Carpenter, Camperdown, Clegg. Clegg? Now was that one of the Cleggs she knew? No, it didn't seem to be. Janet Clegg. Somewhere in Yorkshire. McDonald, McKenzie, Nicholson. Nicholson? No. Again not a Nicholson she knew. Ogg, Ormerod—that must be one of the aunts, she thought. Yes, probably so. Linda Ormerod. No, she hadn't known her. Quantril? Dear me, that must be Elizabeth Quantril. Eighty-five. Well, really! She had thought Elizabeth Quantril had died some years ago. Fancy her having lived so long! So delicate she'd always been, too. Nobody had expected *her* to make old bones. Race, Radley, Rafiel. Rafiel? Something stirred. That name was familiar. Rafiel. Belford Park, Maidstone. Belford Park, Maidstone. No, she couldn't recall that address. No flowers. Jason Rafiel. Oh well, an unusual name. She supposed she'd just heard it somewhere. Ross-Perkins. Now that might be—no, it wasn't. Ryland? Emily Ryland. No. No, she'd never known an Emily Ryland. *Deeply loved by her husband and children.* Well, very nice or very sad. Whichever way you liked to look at it.

Miss Marple laid down her paper, glancing idly through the crossword while she puzzled to remember why the name Rafiel was familiar to her.

"It will come to me," said Miss Marple, knowing from long experience the way old people's memories worked.

"It'll come to me, I have no doubt."

She glanced out of the window towards the garden, withdrew her gaze and tried to put the garden out of her mind. Her garden had been the source of great pleasure and also a great deal of hard work to Miss Marple for many, many years. And now, owing to the fussiness of doctors, working in the garden was forbidden to her. She'd once tried to fight this ban, but had come to the conclusion that she had, after all, better do as she was told. She had arranged her chair at such an angle as not to be easy to look out in the garden unless she definitely and clearly wished to see something in particular. She sighed, picked up her knitting bag and took out a small child's woolly jacket in process of coming to a conclusion. The back was done and the front. Now she would have to get on with the sleeves. Sleeves were always boring. Two sleeves, both alike. Yes, very boring. Pretty coloured pink wool, however. Pink wool. Now wait a minute, where did that fit in? Yes—yes—it fitted in with that name she'd just read in the paper. Pink wool. A blue sea. A Caribbean sea. A sandy beach. Sunshine. Herself knitting and—why, of course, Mr. Rafiel. That trip she had made to the Caribbean. The island of St. Honoré. A treat from her nephew Raymond. And she remembered Joan, her niece-in-law, Raymond's wife, saying:

"Don't get mixed up in any more murders, Aunt Jane. It isn't good for you."

Well, she hadn't *wished* to get mixed up in any murders, but it just happened. That was all. Simply because of an elderly Major with a glass eye who had insisted on telling her some very long and boring stories. Poor Major—now what was *his* name? She'd forgotten that now. Mr. Rafiel and his secretary, Mrs.—Mrs. Walters, yes, Esther Walters, and his masseur-attendant, Jackson. It all came back. Well, well. Poor Mr. Rafiel. So Mr. Rafiel was dead. He had known he was going to die before very long. He had practically told her so. It seemed as though he had lasted longer than the doctors had thought. He was a strong man, an obstinate man—a very rich man.

Miss Marple remained in thought, her knitting needles working regularly, but her mind not really on her knitting. Her mind was on the late Mr. Rafiel, and remembering what she could remember about him. Not an easy man to forget, really. She could conjure his appearance up mentally quite well. Yes, a very definite personality, a difficult man, an irritable man, shockingly rude sometimes. Nobody ever resented his being rude, though. She remembered that also. They didn't resent his being rude because he was so rich. Yes, he had been very rich. He had had his secretary with him and a valet attendant, a qualified masseur. He had not been able to get about very well without help.

Rather a doubtful character that nurse-attendant had been, Miss Marple thought. Mr. Rafiel had been very rude to him sometimes. He had never seemed to mind. And that, again, of course was because Mr. Rafiel was so rich.

"Nobody else would pay him half what I do," Mr. Rafiel had said, "and he knows it. He's good at his job, though."

Miss Marple wondered whether Jackson?—Johnson? had stayed on with Mr. Rafiel. Stayed on for what must have been—another year? A year and three or four months. She thought probably not. Mr. Rafiel was one who liked a change. He got tired of people, tired of their ways, tired of their faces, tired of their voices.

Miss Marple understood that. She had felt the same sometimes. That companion of hers, that nice, attentive, maddening woman with her cooing voice.

"Ah," said Miss Marple, "what a change for the better since—" oh dear, she'd forgotten *her* name now—Miss—Miss Bishop?—no, not Miss Bishop. Oh dear, how difficult it was.

Her mind went back to Mr. Rafiel and to—no, it wasn't Johnson, it had been Jackson, Arthur Jackson.

"Oh, dear," said Miss Marple again, "I always get *all* the names wrong. And of course, it was Miss *Knight* I was thinking of. Not Miss *Bishop*. Why do I think of her as Miss Bishop?" The answer came to her. Chess, of course. A chess piece. A knight. A bishop.

"I shall be calling her Miss Castle next time I think of her, I suppose, or Miss Rook. Though, really, she's not the sort of person

who would ever rook anybody. No, indeed. And now what was the name of that nice secretary that Mr. Rafiel had. Oh yes, Esther Walters. That was right. I wonder what has happened to Esther Walters? She'd inherited money? She would probably inherit money now."

Mr. Rafiel, she remembered, had told her something about that, or she had—oh, dear, what a muddle things were when you tried to remember with any kind of exactitude. Esther Walters. It had hit her badly, that business in the Caribbean, but she would have got over it. She'd been a widow, hadn't she? Miss Marple hoped that Esther Walters had married again, some nice, kindly, reliable man. It seemed faintly unlikely. Esther Walters, she thought, had had rather a genius for liking the wrong kind of men to marry.

Miss Marple went back to thinking about Mr. Rafiel. No flowers, it had said. Not that she herself would have dreamed of sending flowers to Mr. Rafiel. He could buy up all the nurseries in England if he'd wanted to. And anyway, they hadn't been on those terms. They hadn't been—friends, or on terms of affection. They had been—what was the word she wanted?—allies. Yes, they had been allies for a very short time. A very exciting time. And he had been an ally worth having. She had known so. She'd known it as she had gone running through a dark, tropical night in the Caribbean and had come to him. Yes, she remembered, she'd been wearing that pink wool—what used they to call them when she was young?—a fascinator. That nice pink wool kind of shawl-scarf that she'd put round her head, and he had looked at her and laughed, and later when she had said—she smiled at the remembrance—one word she had used and he had laughed, but he hadn't laughed in the end. No, he'd done what she asked him and therefore—"Ah!" Miss Marple sighed, it had been, she had to admit it, all very exciting. And she'd never told her nephew or dear Joan about it because, after all, it was what they'd told her not to do, wasn't it? Miss Marple nodded her head. Then she murmured softly,

"Poor Mr. Rafiel, I hope he didn't—suffer."

Probably not. Probably he'd been kept by expensive doctors under sedatives, easing the end. He had suffered a great deal in

those weeks in the Caribbean. He'd nearly always been in pain. A brave man.

A brave man. She was sorry he was dead because she thought that though he'd been elderly and an invalid and ill, the world had lost something through his going. She had no idea what he could have been like in business. Ruthless, she thought, and rude and overmastering and aggressive. A great attacker. But—but a good friend, she thought. And somewhere in him a deep kind of kindness that he was very careful never to show on the surface. A man she admired and respected. Well, she was sorry he was gone and she hoped he hadn't minded too much and that his passing had been easy. And now he would be cremated no doubt and put in some large, handsome marble vault. She didn't even know if he'd been married. He had never mentioned a wife, never mentioned children. A lonely man? Or had his life been so full that he hadn't needed to feel lonely? She wondered.

She sat there quite a long time that afternoon, wondering about Mr. Rafiel. She had never expected to see him again after she had returned to England and she never *had* seen him again. Yet in some queer way she could at any moment have felt she was in touch with him. If he had approached her or had suggested that they meet again, feeling perhaps a bond because of a life that had been saved between them, or of some other bond. A bond—

"Surely," said Miss Marple, aghast at an idea that had come into her mind, "there can't be a bond of *ruthlessness* between us?" Was she, Jane Marple—could she ever be—ruthless? "D'you know," said Miss Marple to herself, "it's extraordinary, I never thought about it before. I believe, you know, I *could* be ruthless...."

The door opened and a dark, curly head was popped in. It was Cherry, the welcome successor to Miss Bishop—Miss Knight.

"Did you say something?" said Cherry.

"I was speaking to myself," said Miss Marple, "I just wondered if I could ever be ruthless."

"What, you?" said Cherry. "Never! You're kindness itself."

"All the same," said Miss Marple, "I believe I *could* be ruthless if there was due cause."

"What would you call due cause?"

"In the cause of justice," said Miss Marple.

"You did have it in for little Gary Hopkins I must say," said Cherry. "When you caught him torturing his cat that day. Never knew you had it in you to go for anyone like that! Scared him stiff, you did. He's never forgotten it."

"I hope he hasn't tortured anymore cats."

"Well, he's made sure you weren't about if he did," said Cherry. "In fact I'm not at all sure as there isn't other boys as got scared. Seeing you with your wool and the pretty things you knits and all that—anyone would think you were gentle as a lamb. But there's times I could say you'd behave like a lion if you was goaded into it."

Miss Marple looked a little doubtful. She could not quite see herself in the rôle in which Cherry was now casting her. Had she ever—she paused on the reflection, recalling various moments—there had been intense irritation with Miss Bishop—Knight. (Really, she must *not* forget names in this way.) But her irritation had shown itself in more or less ironical remarks. Lions, presumably, did not use irony. There was nothing ironical about a lion. It sprang. It roared. It used its claws, presumably it took large bites at its prey.

"Really," said Miss Marple, "I don't think I have ever behaved *quite* like that."

Walking slowly along her garden that evening with the usual feelings of vexation rising in her, Miss Marple considered the point again. Possibly the sight of a plant of snapdragons recalled it to her mind. Really, she had *told* old George again and again that she only wanted sulphur-coloured antirrhinums, *not* that rather ugly purple shade that gardeners always seemed so fond of. "Sulphur yellow," said Miss Marple aloud.

Someone the other side of the railing that abutted on the lane past her house turned her head and spoke.

"I beg your pardon? You said something?"

"I was talking to myself, I'm afraid," said Miss Marple, turning to look over the railing.

This was someone she did not know, and she knew most people in St. Mary Mead. Knew them by sight even if not personally. It was

a thickset woman in a shabby but tough tweed skirt, and wearing good country shoes. She wore an emerald pullover and a knitted woollen scarf.

"I'm afraid one does at my age," added Miss Marple.

"Nice garden you've got here," said the other woman.

"Not particularly nice now," said Miss Marple. "When I could attend to it myself—"

"Oh I know. I understand just what you feel. I suppose you've got one of those—I have a lot of names for them, mostly very rude—elderly chaps who say they know all about gardening. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't know a thing about it. They come and have a lot of cups of tea and do a little very mild weeding. They're quite nice, some of them, but all the same it does make one's temper rise." She added, "I'm quite a keen gardener myself."

"Do you live here?" asked Miss Marple, with some interest.

"Well, I'm boarding with a Mrs. Hastings. I think I've heard her speak of you. You're Miss Marple, aren't you?"

"Oh yes."

"I've come as a sort of companion-gardener. My name is Bartlett, by the way. Miss Bartlett. There's not really much to do there," said Miss Bartlett. "She goes in for annuals and all that. Nothing you can really get your teeth into." She opened her mouth and showed her teeth when making this remark. "Of course I do a few odd jobs as well. Shopping, you know, and things like that. Anyway, if you want any time put in here, I could put in an hour or two for you. I'd say I might be better than any chap you've got now."

"That would be easy," said Miss Marple. "I like flowers best. Don't care so much for vegetables."

"I do vegetables for Mrs. Hastings. Dull but necessary. Well, I'll be getting along." Her eyes swept over Miss Marple from head to foot, as though memorizing her, then she nodded cheerfully and tramped off.

Mrs. Hastings? Miss Marple couldn't remember the name of any Mrs. Hastings. Certainly Mrs. Hastings was not an old friend. She had certainly never been a gardening chum. Ah, of course, it was probably those newly built houses at the end of Gibraltar Road.

Several families had moved in in the last year. Miss Marple sighed, looked again with annoyance at the antirrhinums, saw several weeds which she yearned to root up, one or two exuberant suckers she would like to attack with her secateurs, and finally, sighing, and manfully resisting temptation, she made a detour round by the lane and returned to her house. Her mind recurred again to Mr. Rafiel. They had been, he and she—what was the title of that book they used to quote so much when she was young? *Ships that pass in the night*. Rather apt it was really, when she came to think of it. Ships that pass in the night ... It was in the night that she had gone to him to ask—no, to demand—help. To insist, to say no time must be lost. And he had agreed, and put things in train at once! Perhaps she *had* been rather lionlike on that occasion? No. No, that was quite wrong. It had not been anger she had felt. It had been insistence on something that was absolutely imperative to be put in hand at once. And he'd understood.

Poor Mr. Rafiel. The ship that had passed in the night had been an interesting ship. Once you got used to his being rude, he might have been quite an agreeable man? No! She shook her head. Mr. Rafiel could never have been an agreeable man. Well, she must put Mr. Rafiel out of her head.

*Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing;
Only a signal shown and a distant voice in the darkness.*

She would probably never think of him again. She would look out perhaps to see if there was an obituary of him in *The Times*. But she did not think it was very likely. He was not a very well known character, she thought. Not famous. He had just been very rich. Of course, many people did have obituaries in the paper just because they were very rich; but she thought that Mr. Rafiel's richness would possibly not have been of that kind. He had not been prominent in any great industry, he had not been a great financial genius, or a noteworthy banker. He had just all his life made enormous amounts of money....

Two

CODE WORD NEMESIS

I

It was about a week or so after Mr. Rafiel's death that Miss Marple picked up a letter from her breakfast tray, and looked at it for a moment before opening it. The other two letters that had come by this morning's post were bills, or just possibly receipts for bills. In either case they were not of any particular interest. This letter might be.

A London postmark, typewritten address, a long, good quality envelope. Miss Marple slit it neatly with the paper knife she always kept handy on her tray. It was headed, Messrs. Broadribb and Schuster, Solicitors and Notaries Public, with an address in Bloomsbury. It asked her, in suitable courteous and legal phraseology, to call upon them one day in the following week, at their office, to discuss a proposition that might be to her advantage. Thursday, the 24th was suggested. If that date was not convenient, perhaps she would let them know what date she would be likely to be in London in the near future. They added that they were the solicitors to the late Mr. Rafiel, with whom they understood she had been acquainted.

Miss Marple frowned in some slight puzzlement. She got up rather more slowly than usual, thinking about the letter she had received. She was escorted downstairs by Cherry, who was meticulous in hanging about in the hall so as to make sure that Miss Marple did not come to grief walking by herself down the staircase, which was of the old-fashioned kind which turned a sharp corner in the middle of its run.

"You take very good care of me, Cherry," said Miss Marple.

"Got to," said Cherry, in her usual idiom. "Good people are scarce."

"Well, thank you for the compliment," said Miss Marple, arriving safely with her last foot on the ground floor.

"Nothing the matter, is there?" asked Cherry. "You look a bit rattled like, if you know what I mean."

"No, nothing's the matter," said Miss Marple. "I had rather an unusual letter from a firm of solicitors."

"Nobody is suing you for anything, are they?" said Cherry, who was inclined to regard solicitors' letters as invariably associated with disaster of some kind.

"Oh no, I don't think so," said Miss Marple. "Nothing of that kind. They just asked me to call upon them next week in London."

"Perhaps you've been left a fortune," said Cherry, hopefully.

"That, I think, is *very* unlikely," said Miss Marple.

"Well, you never know," said Cherry.

Settling herself in her chair, and taking her knitting out of its embroidered knitting bag, Miss Marple considered the possibility of Mr. Rafiel having left her a fortune. It seemed even more unlikely than when Cherry had suggested it. Mr. Rafiel, she thought, was not that kind of a man.

It was not possible for her to go on the date suggested. She was attending a meeting of the Women's Institute to discuss the raising of a sum for building a small additional couple of rooms. But she wrote, naming a day in the following week. In due course her letter was answered and the appointment definitely confirmed. She wondered what Messrs. Broadribb and Schuster were like. The letter had been signed by J. R. Broadribb who was, apparently, the senior

partner. It was possible, Miss Marple thought, that Mr. Rafiel *might* have left her some small memoir or souvenir in his will. Perhaps some book on rare flowers that had been in his library and which he thought would please an old lady who was keen on gardening. Or perhaps a cameo brooch which had belonged to some great-aunt of his. She amused herself by these fancies. They were only fancies, she thought, because in either case it would merely be a case of the Executors—if these lawyers were the Executors—forwarding her by post any such object. They would not have wanted an interview.

"Oh well," said Miss Marple, "I shall know next Tuesday."

II

"Wonder what she'll be like," said Mr. Broadribb to Mr. Schuster, glancing at the clock as he did so.

"She's due in a quarter of an hour," said Mr. Schuster. "Wonder if she'll be punctual?"

"Oh, I should think so. She's elderly, I gather, and much more punctilious than the young scatterbrains of today."

"Fat or thin, I wonder?" said Mr. Schuster.

Mr. Broadribb shook his head.

"Didn't Rafiel ever describe her to you?" asked Mr. Schuster.

"He was extraordinarily cagey in everything he said about her."

"The whole thing seems very odd to me," said Mr. Schuster. "If we only knew a bit more about what it all meant...."

"It might be," said Mr. Broadribb thoughtfully, "something to do with Michael."

"What? After all these years? Couldn't be. What put that into your head? Did he mention—"

"No, he didn't mention anything. Gave me no clue at all as to what was in his mind. Just gave me instructions."

"Think he was getting a bit eccentric and all that towards the end?"

"Not in the least. Mentally he was a brilliant as ever. His physical ill health never affected his brain, anyway. In the last two months of

his life he made an extra two hundred thousand pounds. Just like that."

"He had a *flair*," said Mr. Schuster with due reverence. "Certainly, he always had a flair."

"A great financial brain," said Mr. Broadribb, also in a tone of reverence suitable to the sentiment. "Not many like him, more's the pity."

A buzzer went on the table. Mr. Schuster picked up the receiver. A female voice said,

"Miss Jane Marple is here to see Mr. Broadribb by appointment."

Mr. Schuster looked at his partner, raising an eyebrow for an affirmative or a negative. Mr. Broadribb nodded.

"Show her up," said Mr. Schuster. And he added, "Now we'll see."

Miss Marple entered a room where a middle-aged gentleman with a thin, spare body and a long rather melancholy face rose to greet her. This apparently was Mr. Broadribb, whose appearance somewhat contradicted his name. With him was a rather younger middle-aged gentleman of definitely more ample proportions. He had black hair, small keen eyes and a tendency to a double chin.

"My partner, Mr. Schuster," Mr. Broadribb presented.

"I hope you didn't feel the stairs too much," said Mr. Schuster. "Seventy if she is a day—nearer eighty perhaps," he was thinking in his own mind.

"I always get a little breathless going upstairs."

"An old-fashioned building this," said Mr. Broadribb apologetically. "No lift. Ah well, we are a very long established firm and we don't go in for as many of the modern gadgets as perhaps our clients expect of us."

"This room has very pleasant proportions," said Miss Marple, politely.

She accepted the chair that Mr. Broadribb drew forward for her. Mr. Schuster, in an unobtrusive sort of way, left the room.

"I hope that chair is comfortable," said Mr. Broadribb. "I'll pull that curtain slightly, shall I? You may feel the sun a little too much in your eyes."

"Thank you," said Miss Marple, gratefully.

She sat there, upright as was her habit. She wore a light tweed suit, a string of pearls and a small velvet toque. To himself Mr. Broadribb was saying, "The Provincial Lady. A good type. Fluffy old girl. May be scatty—may not. Quite a shrewd eye. I wonder where Rafiel came across her. Somebody's aunt, perhaps, up from the country?" While these thoughts passed through his head, he was making the kind of introductory small talk relating to the weather, the unfortunate effects of late frosts early in the year and such other remarks as he considered suitable.

Miss Marple made the necessary responses and sat placidly awaiting the opening of preliminaries to the meeting.

"You will be wondering what all this is about," said Mr. Broadribb, shifting a few papers in front of him and giving her a suitable smile. "You've heard, no doubt, of Mr. Rafiel's death, or perhaps you saw it in the paper."

"I saw it in the paper," said Miss Marple.

"He was, I understand, a friend of yours."

"I met him first just over a year ago," said Miss Marple. "In the West Indies," she added.

"Ah. I remember. He went out there, I believe, for his health. It did him some good, perhaps, but he was already a very ill man, badly crippled, as you know."

"Yes," said Miss Marple.

"You knew him well?"

"No," said Miss Marple, "I would not say that. We were fellow visitors in a hotel. We had occasional conversations. I never saw him again after my return to England. I live very quietly in the country, you see, and I gather that he was completely absorbed in business."

"He continued transacting business right up—well, I could almost say right up to the day of his death," said Mr. Broadribb. "A very fine financial brain."

"I am sure that was so," said Miss Marple. "I realized quite soon that he was a—well, a very remarkable character altogether."

"I don't know if you have any idea—whether you've been given any idea at some time by Mr. Rafiel—as to what this proposition is that I have been instructed to put up to you?"

"I cannot imagine," said Miss Marple, "what possible kind of proposition Mr. Rafiel might have wanted to put up to me. It seems most unlikely."

"He had a very high opinion of you."

"That is kind of him, but hardly justified," said Miss Marple. "I am a very simple person."

"As you no doubt realize, he died a very rich man. The provisions of his Will are on the whole fairly simple. He had already made dispositions of his fortune some time before his death. Trusts and other beneficiary arrangements."

"That is, I believe, very usual procedure nowadays," said Miss Marple, "though I am not at all cognizant of financial matters myself."

"The purpose of this appointment," said Mr. Broadribb, "is that I am instructed to tell you that a sum of money has been laid aside to become yours absolutely at the end of one year, but conditional on your accepting a certain proposition, with which I am to make you acquainted."

He took from the table in front of him a long envelope. It was sealed. He passed it across the table to her.

"It would be better, I think, that you should read for yourself of what this consists. There is no hurry. Take your time."

Miss Marple took her time. She availed herself of a small paper knife which Mr. Broadribb handed to her, slit up the envelope, took out the enclosure, one sheet of typewriting, and read it. She folded it up again, then reread it and looked at Mr. Broadribb.

"This is hardly very definite. Is there no more definite elucidation of any kind?"

"Not so far as I am concerned. I was to hand you this, and tell you the amount of the legacy. The sum in question is twenty thousand pounds free of legacy duty."

Miss Marple sat looking at him. Surprise had rendered her speechless. Mr. Broadribb said no more for the moment. He was watching her closely. There was no doubt of her surprise. It was obviously the last thing Miss Marple had expected to hear. Mr. Broadribb wondered what her first words would be. She looked at

him with the directness, the severity that one of his own aunts might have done. When she spoke it was almost accusingly.

"That is a very large sum of money," said Miss Marple.

"Not quite so large as it used to be," said Mr. Broadribb (and just restrained himself from saying, "Mere chicken feed nowadays").

"I must admit," said Miss Marple, "that I am amazed. Frankly, quite amazed."

She picked up the document and read it carefully through again.

"I gather you know the terms of this?" she said.

"Yes. It was dictated to me personally by Mr. Rafiel."

"Did he not give you any explanation of it?"

"No, he did not."

"You suggested, I suppose, that it might be better if he did," said Miss Marple. There was a slight acidity in her voice now.

Mr. Broadribb smiled faintly.

"You are quite right. That is what I did. I said that you might find it difficult to—oh, to understand exactly what he was driving at."

"Very remarkable," said Miss Marple.

"There is no need, of course," said Mr. Broadribb, "for you to give me an answer now."

"No," said Miss Marple, "I should have to reflect upon this."

"It is, as you have pointed out, quite a substantial sum of money."

"I am old," said Miss Marple. "Elderly, we say, but old is a better word. Definitely old. It is both possible and indeed probable that I might not live as long as a year to earn this money, in the rather doubtful case that I *was* able to earn it."

"Money is not to be despised at any age," said Mr. Broadribb.

"I could benefit certain charities in which I have an interest," said Miss Marple, "and there are always people. People whom one wishes one could do a little something for but one's own funds do not admit of it. And then I will not pretend that there are not pleasures and desires—things that one has not been able to indulge in or to afford—I think Mr. Rafiel knew quite well that to be able to do so, quite unexpectedly, would give an elderly person a great deal of pleasure."

"Yes, indeed," said Mr. Broadribb. "A cruise abroad, perhaps? One of these excellent *tours* as arranged nowadays. Theatres, concerts—

the ability to replenish one's cellars."

"My tastes would be a little more moderate than that," said Miss Marple. "Partridges," she said thoughtfully, "it is very difficult to get partridges nowadays, and they're very expensive. I should enjoy a partridge—a whole partridge—to myself, very much. A box of *marrons glacés* is an expensive taste which I cannot often gratify. Possibly a visit to the opera. It means a car to take one to Covent Garden and back, and the expense of a night in a hotel. But I must not indulge in idle chat," she said. "I will take this back with me and reflect upon it. Really, what on earth made Mr. Rafiel—you have no idea *why* he should have suggested this particular proposition, and why he should think that I could be of service to him in any way? He must have known that it was over a year, nearly two years since he had seen me and that I might have got much more feeble than I have, and much more unable to exercise such small talents as I might have. He was taking a risk. There are other people surely much better qualified to undertake an investigation of this nature?"

"Frankly, one would think so," said Mr. Broadribb, "but he selected *you*, Miss Marple. Forgive me if this is idle curiosity but have you had—oh, how shall I put it?—any connection with crime or the investigation of crime?"

"Strictly speaking I should say no," said Miss Marple. "Nothing professional, that is to say. I have never been a probation officer or indeed sat as a magistrate on a Bench or been connected in any way with a detective agency. To explain to you, Mr. Broadribb, which I think it is only fair for me to do and which I think Mr. Rafiel ought to have done, to explain it in any way all I can say is that during our stay in the West Indies, we both, Mr. Rafiel and myself, had a certain connection with a crime that took place there. A rather unlikely and perplexing murder."

"And you and Mr. Rafiel solved it?"

"I should not put it quite like that," said Miss Marple. "Mr. Rafiel, by the force of his personality, and I, by putting together one or two obvious indications that came to my notice, were successful in preventing a second murder just as it was about to take place. I could not have done it alone, I was physically far too feeble. Mr.

Rafiel could not have done it alone, he was a cripple. We acted as allies, however."

"Just one other question I should like to ask you, Miss Marple. Does the word "Nemesis" mean anything to you?"

"*Nemesis*," said Miss Marple. It was not a question. A very slow and unexpected smile dawned on her face. "Yes," she said, "it does mean something to me. It meant something to me and it meant something to Mr. Rafiel. I said it to him, and he was much amused by my describing myself by that name."

Whatever Mr. Broadribb had expected it was not that. He looked at Miss Marple with something of the same astonished surprise that Mr. Rafiel had once felt in a bedroom by the Caribbean sea. A nice and quite intelligent old lady. But really—Nemesis!

"You feel the same, I am sure," said Miss Marple.

She rose to her feet.

"If you should find or receive any further instructions in this matter, you will perhaps let me know, Mr. Broadribb. It seems to me extraordinary that there should not be *something* of that kind. This leaves me entirely in the dark really as to what Mr. Rafiel is asking me to do or try to do."

"You are not acquainted with his family, his friends, his—"

"No. I told you. He was a fellow traveller in a foreign part of the world. We had a certain association as allies in a very mystifying matter. That is all." As she was about to go to the door she turned suddenly and asked: "He had a secretary, Mrs. Esther Walters. Would it be infringing etiquette if I asked if Mr. Rafiel left her fifty thousand pounds?"

"His bequest will appear in the press," said Mr. Broadribb. "I can answer your question in the affirmative. Mrs. Walters' name is now Mrs. Anderson, by the way. She has remarried."

"I am glad to hear that. She was a widow with one daughter, and she was a very adequate secretary, it appears. She understood Mr. Rafiel very well. A nice woman. I am glad she has benefited."

That evening, Miss Marple, sitting in her straightbacked chair, her feet stretched out to the fireplace where a small wood fire was burning owing to the sudden cold spell which, as is its habit, can

always descend on England at any moment selected by itself, took once more from the long envelope the document delivered to her that morning. Still in a state of partial unbelief she read, murmuring the words here and there below her breath as though to impress them on her mind,

"To Miss Jane Marple, resident in the village of St. Mary Mead.

This will be delivered to you after my death by the good offices of my solicitor, James Broadribb. He is the man I employ for dealing with such legal matters as fall in the field of my private affairs, not my business activities. He is a sound and trustworthy lawyer. Like the majority of the human race he is susceptible to the sin of curiosity. I have not satisfied his curiosity. In some respects this matter will remain between you and myself. Our code word, my dear lady, is Nemesis. I don't think you will have forgotten in what place and in what circumstances you first spoke that word to me. In the course of my business activities over what is now quite a long life, I have learnt one thing about a man whom I wish to employ. He has to have a flair. A flair for the particular job I want him to do. It is not knowledge, it is not experience. The only word that describes it is flair. A natural gift for doing a certain thing.

You, my dear, if I may call you that, have a natural flair for justice, and that has led to your having a natural flair for crime. I want you to investigate a certain crime. I have ordered a certain sum to be placed so that if you accept this request and as a result of your investigation this crime is properly elucidated, the money will become yours absolutely. I have set aside a year for you to engage on this mission. You are not young, but you are, if I may say so, tough. I think I can trust a reasonable fate to keep you alive for a year at least.

I think the work involved will not be distasteful to you. You have a natural genius, I should say, for investigation. The necessary funds for what I may describe as working capital for making this investigation will be remitted to you during

that period, whenever necessary. I offer this to you as an alternative to what may be your life at present.

I envisage you sitting in a chair, a chair that is agreeable and comfortable for whatever kind or form of rheumatism from which you may suffer. All persons of your age, I consider, are likely to suffer from some form of rheumatism. If this ailment affects your knees or your back, it will not be easy for you to get about much and you will spend your time mainly in knitting. I see you, as I saw you once one night as I rose from sleep disturbed by your urgency, in a cloud of pink wool.

I envisage you knitting more jackets, head scarves and a good many other things of which I do not know the name. If you prefer to continue knitting, that is your decision. If you prefer to serve the cause of justice, I hope that you may at least find it interesting.

Let justice roll down like waters.

And righteousness like an everlasting stream.

Amos."

Three

MISS MARPLE TAKES ACTION

I

Miss Marple read this letter three times—then she laid it aside and sat frowning slightly while she considered the letter and its implications.

The first thought that came to her was that she was left with a surprising lack of definite information. Would there be any further information coming to her from Mr. Broadribb? Almost certainly she felt that there would be no such thing. That would not have fitted in with Mr. Rafiel's plan. Yet how on earth could Mr. Rafiel expect her to do anything, to take any course of action in a matter about which she knew nothing? It was intriguing. After a few minutes more for consideration, she decided that Mr. Rafiel had meant it to be intriguing. Her thoughts went back to him, for the brief time that she had known him. His disability, his bad temper, his flashes of brilliance, of occasional humour. He'd enjoy, she thought, teasing people. He had been enjoying, she felt, and this letter made it almost certain, baffling the natural curiosity of Mr. Broadribb.

There was nothing in the letter he had written her to give her the slightest clue as to what this business was all about. It was no help to her whatsoever. Mr. Rafiel, she thought, had very definitely not

meant it to be of any help. He had had—how could she put it?—other ideas. All the same, she could not start out into the blue knowing nothing. This could almost be described as a crossword puzzle with no clues given. There would *have* to be clues. She would *have* to know what she was wanted to do, where she was wanted to go, whether she was to solve some problem sitting in her armchair and laying aside her knitting needles in order to concentrate better. Or did Mr. Rafiel intend her to take a plane or a boat to the West Indies or to South America or to some other specially directed spot? She would either have to find out for herself what it was she was meant to do, or else she would have to receive definite instructions. He might think she had sufficient ingenuity to guess at things, to ask questions, to find out that way? No, she couldn't quite believe *that*.

"If he does think that," said Miss Marple aloud, "he's gaga. I mean, he was gaga before he died."

But she didn't think Mr. Rafiel would have been gaga.

"I shall receive instructions," said Miss Marple. "But what instructions and when?"

It was only then that it occurred to her suddenly that without noticing it she had definitely accepted the mandate. She spoke aloud again, addressing the atmosphere.

"I believe in eternal life," said Miss Marple. "I don't know exactly where you are, Mr. Rafiel, but I have no doubt that you are *somewhere*—I will do my best to fulfil your wishes."

II

It was three days later when Miss Marple wrote to Mr. Broadribb. It was a very short letter, keeping strictly to the point.

"Dear Mr. Broadribb,

I have considered the suggestion you made to me and I am letting you know that I have decided to accept the proposal made to me by the late Mr. Rafiel. I shall do my best to comply with his wishes, though I am not at all assured of success. Indeed, I hardly see how it is possible for me to be successful. I

have been given no direct instructions in his letter and have not been—I think the term is briefed—in any way. If you have any further communication you are holding for me which sets out definite instructions, I should be glad if you will send it to me, but I imagine that as you have not done so, that is not the case.

I presume that Mr. Rafiel was of sound mind and disposition when he died? I think I am justified in asking if there has been recently in his life any criminal affair in which he might possibly have been interested, either in the course of his business or in his personal relations. Has he ever expressed to you any anger or dissatisfaction with some notable miscarriage of justice about which he felt strongly? If so, I think I should be justified in asking you to let me know about it. Has any relation or connection of his suffered some hardship, lately been the victim of some unjust dealing, or what might be considered as such?

I am sure you will understand my reasons for asking these things. Indeed, Mr. Rafiel himself may have expected me to do so."

III

Mr. Broadribb showed this to Mr. Schuster, who leaned back in his chair and whistled.

"She's going to take it on, is she? Sporting old bean," he said. Then he added, "I suppose she knows something of what it's all about, does she?"

"Apparently not," said Mr. Broadribb.

"I wish we did," said Mr. Schuster. "He was an odd cuss."

"A difficult man," said Mr. Broadribb.

"I haven't got the least idea," said Mr. Schuster, "have you?"

"No, I haven't," said Mr. Broadribb. He added, "He didn't want me to have, I suppose."

"Well, he's made things a lot more difficult by doing that. I don't see the least chance that some old pussy from the country can interpret a dead man's brain and know what fantasy was plaguing

him. You don't think he was leading her up the garden path? Having her on? Sort of joke, you know. Perhaps he thinks that she thinks she's the cat's whiskers at solving village problems, but he's going to teach her a sharp lesson—"

"No," said Mr. Broadribb, "I don't quite think that. Rafael wasn't that type of man."

"He was a mischievous devil sometimes," said Mr. Schuster.

"Yes, but not—I think he was serious over this. *Something* was worrying him. In fact I'm quite sure something was worrying him."

"And he didn't tell you what it was or give you the least idea?"

"No, he didn't."

"Then how the devil can he expect—" Schuster broke off.

"He can't really have expected anything to come of this," said Mr. Broadribb. "I mean, how is she going to set about it?"

"A practical joke, if you ask me."

"Twenty thousand pounds is a lot of money."

"Yes, but if he knows she can't do it?"

"No," said Mr. Broadribb. "He wouldn't have been as unsporting as all that. He must think she's got a chance of doing or finding out whatever it is."

"And what do we do?"

"Wait," said Mr. Broadribb. "Wait and see what happens next. After all, there has to be some development."

"Got some sealed orders somewhere, have you?"

"My dear Schuster," said Mr. Broadribb, "Mr. Rafael had implicit trust in my discretion and in my ethical conduct as a lawyer. Those sealed instructions are to be opened only under certain circumstances, none of which has yet arisen."

"And never will," said Mr. Schuster.

That ended the subject.

IV

Mr. Broadribb and Mr. Schuster were lucky in so much as they had a full professional life to lead. Miss Marple was not so fortunate. She

knitted and she reflected and she also went out for walks, occasionally remonstrated with by Cherry for so doing.

"You know what the doctor said. You weren't to take too much exercise."

"I walk very slowly," said Miss Marple, "and I am not doing anything. Digging, I mean, or weeding. I just—well, I just put one foot in front of the other and wonder about things."

"What things?" asked Cherry, with some interest.

"I wish I knew," said Miss Marple, and asked Cherry to bring her an extra scarf as there was a chilly wind.

"What's fidgeting her, that's what I would like to know," said Cherry to her husband as she set before him a Chinese plate of rice and a concoction of kidneys. "Chinese dinner," she said.

Her husband nodded approval

"You get a better cook every day," he said.

"I'm worried about her," said Cherry. "I'm worried because she's worried a bit. She had a letter and it stirred her all up."

"What she needs is to sit quiet," said Cherry's husband. "Sit quiet, take it easy, get herself new books from the library, get a friend or two to come and see her."

"She's thinking out something," said Cherry. "Sort of plan. Thinking out how to tackle something, that's how I look at it."

She broke off the conversation at this stage and took in the coffee tray and put it down by Miss Marple's side.

"Do you know a woman who lives in a new house somewhere here, she's called Mrs. Hastings?" asked Miss Marple. "And someone called Miss Bartlett, I think it is, who lives with her—"

"What—do you mean the house that's been all done up and repainted at the end of the village? The people there haven't been there very long. I don't know what their names are. Why do you want to know? They're not very interesting. At least I shouldn't say they were."

"Are they related?" asked Miss Marple.

"No. Just friends, I think."

"I wonder why—" said Miss Marple, and broke off.

"You wondered why what?"

"Nothing," said Miss Marple. "Clear my little hand desk, will you, and give me my pen and the notepaper. I'm going to write a letter."

"Who to?" said Cherry, with the natural curiosity of her kind.

"To a clergyman's sister," said Miss Marple. "His name is Canon Prescott."

"That's the one you met abroad, in the West Indies, isn't it? You showed me his photo in your album."

"Yes."

"Not feeling bad, are you? Wanting to write to a clergyman and all that?"

"I'm feeling extremely well," said Miss Marple, "and I am anxious to get busy on something. It's just possible Miss Prescott might help."

"Dear Miss Prescott," wrote Miss Marple, "I hope you have not forgotten me. I met you and your brother in the West Indies, if you remember, at St. Honoré. I hope the dear Canon is well and did not suffer much with his asthma in the cold weather last winter.

I am writing to ask you if you can possibly let me have the address of Mrs. Walters—Esther Walters—whom you may remember from the Caribbean days. She was a secretary to Mr. Rafael. She did give me her address at the time, but unfortunately I have mislaid it. I was anxious to write to her as I have some horticultural information which she asked me about but which I was not able to tell her at the time. I heard in a roundabout way the other day that she had married again, but I don't think my informant was very certain of these facts. Perhaps you know more about her than I do.

I hope this is not troubling you too much. With kind regards to your brother and best wishes to yourself,

*Yours sincerely,
Jane Marple."*

Miss Marple felt better when she had despatched this missive.

"At least," she said, "I've started *doing* something. Not that I hope much from this, but still it might help."

Miss Prescott answered the letter almost by return of post. She was a most efficient woman. She wrote a pleasant letter and enclosed the address in question.

"I have not heard anything directly about Esther Walters," she said, "but like you I heard from a friend that they had seen a notice of her remarriage. Her name now is, I believe, Mrs. Alderson or Anderson. Her address is Winslow Lodge, near Alton, Hants. My brother sends his best wishes to you. It is sad that we live so far apart. We in the north of England and you south of London. I hope that we may meet on some occasion in the future.

*Yours sincerely,
Joan Prescott."*

"Winslow Lodge, Alton," said Miss Marple, writing it down.

"Not so far away from here, really. No. Not so far away. I could—I don't know what would be the best method—possibly one of Inch's taxis. Slightly extravagant, but if anything results from it, it could be charged as expenses quite legitimately. Now do I write to her beforehand or do I leave it to chance? I think it would be better really, to leave it to chance. Poor Esther. She could hardly remember me with any affection or kindness."

Miss Marple lost herself in a train of thought that arose from her thoughts. It was quite possible that her actions in the Caribbean had saved Esther Walters from being murdered in the not far distant future. At any rate, that was Miss Marple's belief, but probably Esther Walters had not believed any such thing. "A nice woman," said Miss Marple, uttering the words in a soft tone aloud, "a very nice woman. The kind that would so easily marry a bad lot. In fact, the sort of woman that would marry a murderer if she were ever given half a chance. I still consider," continued Miss Marple thoughtfully, sinking her voice still lower, "that I probably saved her life. In fact, I am almost sure of it, but I don't think she would agree with that point of

view. She probably dislikes me very much. Which makes it more difficult to use her as a source of information. Still, one can but try. It's better than sitting here, waiting, waiting, waiting."

Was Mr. Rafiel perhaps making fun of her when he had written that letter? He was not always a particularly kindly man—he could be very careless of people's feelings.

"Anyway," said Miss Marple, glancing at the clock and deciding that she would have an early night in bed, "when one thinks of things just before going to sleep, quite often ideas come. It may work out that way."

V

"Sleep well?" asked Cherry, as she put down an early morning tea tray on the table at Miss Marple's elbow.

"I had a curious dream," said Miss Marple.

"Nightmare?"

"No, no, nothing of that kind. I was talking to someone, not anyone I knew very well. Just talking. Then when I looked, I saw it wasn't that person at all I was talking to. It was somebody else. Very odd."

"Bit of a mix up," said Cherry, helpfully.

"It just reminded me of something," said Miss Marple, "or rather of someone I once knew. Order Inch for me, will you? To come here about half past eleven."

Inch was part of Miss Marple's past. Originally the proprietor of a cab, Mr. Inch had died, been succeeded by his son "Young Inch," then aged forty-four, who had turned the family business into a garage and acquired two aged cars. On his decease the garage acquired a new owner. There had been since then Pip's Cars, James's Taxis and Arthur's Car Hire—old inhabitants still spoke of Inch.

"Not going to London, are you?"

"No, I'm not going to London. I shall have lunch perhaps in Haslemere."

"Now what are you up to now?" said Cherry, looking at her suspiciously.

"Endeavouring to meet someone by accident and make it seem purely natural," said Miss Marple. "Not really very easy, but I hope that I can manage it."

At half past eleven the taxi waited. Miss Marple instructed Cherry.

"Ring up this number, will you, Cherry? Ask if Mrs. Anderson is at home. If Mrs. Anderson answers or if she is going to come to the telephone, say a Mr. Broadribb wants to speak to her. You," said Miss Marple, "are Mr. Broadribb's secretary. If she's out, find out what time she will be in."

"And if she is in and I get her?"

"Ask what day she could arrange to meet Mr. Broadribb at his office in London next week. When she tells you, make a note of it and ring off."

"The things you think of! Why all this? Why do you want *me* to do it?"

"Memory is a curious thing," said Miss Marple. "Sometimes one remembers a voice even if one hasn't heard it for over a year."

"Well, Mrs. What's-a-name won't have heard mine at any time, will she?"

"No," said Miss Marple. "That is why *you* are making the call."

Cherry fulfilled her instruction. Mrs. Anderson was out shopping, she learned, but would be in for lunch and all the afternoon.

"Well, that makes things easier," said Miss Marple. "Is Inch here? Ah yes. Good morning, Edward," she said, to the present driver of Arthur's taxis whose actual name was George. "Now this is where I want you to go. It ought not to take, I think, more than an hour and a half."

The expedition set off.

Four

ESTHER WALTERS

Esther Anderson came out of the Supermarket and went towards where she had parked her car. Parking grew more difficult every day, she thought. She collided with somebody, an elderly woman limping a little who was walking towards her. She apologized, and the other woman made an exclamation.

"Why, indeed, it's—surely—it's Mrs. Walters, isn't it? Esther Walters? You don't remember me, I expect. Jane Marple. We met in the hotel in St. Honoré, oh—quite a long time ago. A year and a half."

"Miss Marple? So it is, of course. Fancy seeing you!"

"How very nice to see you. I am lunching with some friends near here but I have to pass back through Alton later. Will you be at home this afternoon? I should so like to have a nice chat with you. It's so nice to see an old friend."

"Yes, of course. Anytime after 3 o'clock."

The arrangement was ratified.

"Old Jane Marple," said Esther Anderson, smiling to herself. "Fancy her turning up. I thought she'd died a long time ago."

Miss Marple rang the bell of Winslow Lodge at 3:30 precisely. Esther opened the door to her and brought her in.

Miss Marple sat down in the chair indicated to her, fluttering a little in the restless manner that she adopted when slightly flustered. Or at any rate, when she was seeming to be slightly flustered. In this case it was misleading, since things had happened exactly as she had hoped they would happen.

"It's so nice to see you," she said to Esther. "So very nice to see you again. You know, I do think things are so very odd in this world. You hope you'll meet people again and you're quite sure you will. And then time passes and suddenly it's all such a surprise."

"And then," said Esther, "one says it's a small world, doesn't one?"

"Yes, indeed, and I think there *is* something in that. I mean it does *seem* a very large world and the West Indies are such a very long way away from England. Well, I mean, of course I might have met you anywhere. In London or at Harrods. On a railway station or in a bus. There are so many possibilities."

"Yes, there are a lot of possibilities," said Esther. "I certainly shouldn't have expected to meet you just here because this isn't really quite your part of the world, is it?"

"No. No, it isn't. Not that you're really so very far from St. Mary Mead where I live. Actually, I think it's only about twenty-five miles. But twenty-five miles in the country, when one hasn't got a car—and of course I couldn't afford a car, and anyway, I mean, I can't drive a car—so it wouldn't be much to the point, so one really only does see one's neighbours on the bus route, or else go by a taxi from the village."

"You're looking wonderfully well," said Esther.

"I was just going to say *you* were looking wonderfully well, my dear. I had no idea you lived in this part of the world."

"I have only done so for a short time. Since my marriage, actually."

"Oh, I didn't know. How interesting. I suppose I must have missed it. I always do look down the marriages."

"I've been married four or five months," said Esther. "My name is Anderson now."

"Mrs. Anderson," said Miss Marple. "Yes. I must try and remember that. And your husband?"

It would be unnatural, she thought, if she did not ask about the husband. Old maids were notoriously inquisitive.

"He is an engineer," said Esther. "He runs the Time and Motion Branch. He is," she hesitated—"a little younger than I am."

"Much better," said Miss Marple immediately. "Oh, much better, my dear. In these days men age so much quicker than women. I know it used not to be said so, but actually it's true. I mean, they get more things the matter with them. I think, perhaps, they worry and work too much. And then they get high blood pressure or low blood pressure or sometimes a little heart trouble. They're rather prone to gastric ulcers, too. I don't think we worry so much, you know. I think we're a tougher sex."

"Perhaps we are," said Esther.

She smiled now at Miss Marple, and Miss Marple felt reassured. The last time she had seen Esther, Esther had looked as though she hated her and probably she had hated her at that moment. But now, well now, perhaps, she might even feel slightly grateful. She might have realized that she, herself, might even have been under a stone slab in a respectable churchyard, instead of living a presumably happy life with Mr. Anderson.

"You look very well," she said, "and very gay."

"So do you, Miss Marple."

"Well, of course, I am rather older now. And one has so many ailments. I mean, not desperate ones, nothing of that kind, but I mean one has always some kind of rheumatism or some kind of ache and pain somewhere. One's feet are not what one would like feet to be. And there's usually one's back or a shoulder or painful hands. Oh, dear, one shouldn't talk about these things. What a very nice house you have."

"Yes, we haven't been in it very long. We moved in about four months ago."

Miss Marple looked round. She had rather thought that that was the case. She thought, too, that when they had moved in they had moved in on quite a handsome scale. The furniture was expensive, it was comfortable, comfortable and just this side of luxury. Good curtains, good covers, no particular artistic taste displayed, but then

she would not have expected that. She thought she knew the reason for this appearance of prosperity. She thought it had come about on the strength of the late Mr. Rafiel's handsome legacy to Esther. She was glad to think that Mr. Rafiel had not changed his mind.

"I expect you saw the notice of Mr. Rafiel's death," said Esther, speaking almost as if she knew what was in Miss Marple's mind.

"Yes. Yes, indeed I did. It was about a month ago now, wasn't it? I was so sorry. Very distressed really, although, well, I suppose one knew—he almost admitted it himself, didn't he? He hinted several times that it wouldn't be very long. I think he was quite a brave man about it all, don't you?"

"Yes, he was a very brave man, and a very kind one really," said Esther. "He told me, you know, when I first worked for him, that he was going to give me a very good salary but that I would have to save out of it because I needn't expect to have anything more from him. Well, I certainly didn't expect to have *anything* more from him. He was very much a man of his word, wasn't he? But apparently he changed his mind."

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "Yes. I am very glad of that. I thought perhaps—not that he, of course, said anything—but I wondered."

"He left me a very big legacy," said Esther. "A surprisingly large sum of money. It came as a very great surprise. I could hardly believe it at first."

"I think he wanted it to be a surprise to you. I think he was perhaps that kind of man," said Miss Marple. She added: "Did he leave anything to—oh, what was his name?—the man attendant, the nurse-attendant?"

"Oh, you mean Jackson? No, he didn't leave anything to Jackson, but I believe he made him some handsome presents in the last year."

"Have you ever seen anything more of Jackson?"

"No. No, I don't think I've met him once since the time out in the islands. He didn't stay with Mr. Rafiel after they got back to England. I think he went to Lord somebody who lives in Jersey or Guernsey."

"I would like to have seen Mr. Rafiel again," said Miss Marple. "It seems odd after we'd all been mixed up so. He and you and I and

some others. And then, later, when I'd come home, when six months had passed—it occurred to me one day how closely associated we had been in our time of stress, and yet how little I really knew about Mr. Rafiel. I was thinking it only the other day, after I'd seen the notice of his death. I wished I could know a little more. Where he was born, you know, and his parents. What they were like. Whether he had any children, or nephews or cousins or any family. I would so like to know."

Esther Anderson smiled slightly. She looked at Miss Marple and her expression seemed to say "Yes, I'm sure you always want to know everything of that kind about everyone you meet." But she merely said:

"No, there was really only one thing that everyone *did* know about him."

"That he was very rich," said Miss Marple immediately. "That's what you mean, isn't it? When you know that someone is very rich, somehow, well, you don't ask anymore. I mean you don't ask to *know* anymore. You say 'He is very rich' or you say 'He is enormously rich,' and your voice just goes down a little because it's so impressive, isn't it, when you meet someone who *is* immensely rich."

Esther laughed slightly.

"He wasn't married, was he?" asked Miss Marple. "He never mentioned a wife."

"He lost his wife many years ago. Quite soon after they were married, I believe. I believe she was much younger than he was—I think she died of cancer. Very sad."

"Had he children?"

"Oh yes, two daughters, and a son. One daughter is married and lives in America. The other daughter died young, I believe. I met the American one once. She wasn't at all like her father. Rather a quiet, depressed looking young woman." She added, "Mr. Rafiel never spoke about the son. I rather think that there had been trouble there. A scandal or something of that kind. I believe he died some years ago. Anyway—his father never mentioned him."

"Oh dear. That was very sad."

"I think it happened quite a long time ago. I believe he took off for somewhere or other abroad and never came back—died out there, wherever it was."

"Was Mr. Rafiel very upset about it?"

"One wouldn't know with him," said Esther. "He was the kind of man who would always decide to cut his losses. If his son turned out to be unsatisfactory, a burden instead of a blessing, I think he would just shrug the whole thing off. Do what was necessary perhaps in the way of sending him money for support, but never thinking of him again."

"One wonders," said Miss Marple. "He never spoke of him or said anything?"

"If you remember, he was a man who never said anything much about personal feelings or his own life."

"No. No, of course not. But I thought perhaps, you having been—well, his secretary for so many years, that he might have confided any troubles to you."

"He was not a man for confiding troubles," said Esther. "If he had any, which I rather doubt. He was wedded to his business, one might say. He was father to his business and his business was the only kind of son or daughter that he had that mattered, I think. He enjoyed it all, investment, making money. Business coups—"

"Call no man happy until he is dead—" murmured Miss Marple, repeating the words in the manner of one pronouncing them as a kind of slogan, which indeed they appeared to be in these days, or so she would have said.

"So there was nothing especially worrying him, was there, before his death?"

"No. Why should you think so?" Esther sounded surprised.

"Well, I didn't actually think so," said Miss Marple, "I just wondered because things do worry people more when they are—I won't say getting old—because he really wasn't old, but I mean things worry you more when you are laid up and can't do as much as you did and have to take things easy. Then worries just come into your mind and make themselves *felt*."

"Yes, I know what you mean," said Esther. "But I don't think Mr. Rafiel was like that. Anyway," she added, "I ceased being his secretary some time ago. Two or three months after I met Edmund."

"Ah yes. Your husband. Mr. Rafiel must have been very upset at losing you."

"Oh I don't think so," said Esther lightly. "He was not one who would be upset over that sort of thing. He'd immediately get another secretary—which he did. And then if she didn't suit him he'd just get rid of her with a kindly golden handshake and get somebody else, till he found somebody who suited him. He was an intensely sensible man always."

"Yes. Yes, I can see that. Though he could lose his temper very easily."

"Oh, he enjoyed losing his temper," said Esther. "It made a bit of drama for him, I think."

"Drama," said Miss Marple thoughtfully. "Do you think—I have often wondered—do you think that Mr. Rafiel had any particular interest in criminology, the study of it, I mean? He—well, I don't know...."

"You mean because of what happened in the Caribbean?" Esther's voice had gone suddenly hard.

Miss Marple felt doubtful of going on, and yet she must somehow or other try and get a little helpful knowledge.

"Well, no, not because of that, but afterwards, perhaps, he wondered about the psychology of these things. Or he got interested in the cases where justice had not been administered properly or—oh, well...."

She sounded more scatty every minute.

"Why should he take the least interest in anything of that kind? And don't let's talk about that horrible business in St. Honoré."

"Oh no, I think you are *quite* right. I'm sure I'm very sorry. I was just thinking of some of the things that Mr. Rafiel sometimes *said*. Queer turns of phrase, sometimes, and I just wondered if he had any theories, you know ... about the causes of crime?"

"His interests were always entirely financial," said Esther shortly. "A really clever swindle of a criminal kind might have interested him,

nothing else—”

She was looking coldly still at Miss Marple.

“I am sorry,” said Miss Marple apologetically. “I—I shouldn’t have talked about distressing matters that are fortunately past. And I must be getting on my way,” she added. “I have got my train to catch and I shall only just have time. Oh dear, what did I do with my bag—oh yes, here it is.”

She collected her bag, umbrella and a few other things, fussing away until the tension had slightly abated. As she went out of the door, she turned to Esther who was urging her to stay and have a cup of tea.

“No thank you, my dear, I’m so short of time. I’m very pleased to have seen you again and I do offer my best congratulations and hopes for a very happy life. I don’t suppose you will be taking up any post again now, will you?”

“Oh, some people do. They find it interesting, they say. They get bored when they have nothing to do. But I think I shall rather enjoy living a life of leisure. I shall enjoy my legacy, too, that Mr. Rafiel left me. It was very kind of him and I think he’d want me—well, to enjoy it even if I spent it in what he’d think of perhaps as a rather silly, female way! Expensive clothes and a new hairdo and all that. He’d have thought that sort of thing very silly.” She added suddenly, “I was fond of him, you know. Yes, I was quite fond of him. I think it was because he was a sort of challenge to me. He was difficult to get on with, and therefore I enjoyed managing it.”

“And managing him?”

“Well, not quite managing him, but perhaps a little more than he knew I was.”

Miss Marple trotted away down the road. She looked back once and waved her hand—Esther Anderson was still standing on the doorstep, and she waved back cheerfully.

“I thought this might have been something to do with her or something she knew about,” said Miss Marple to herself. “I think I’m wrong. No. I don’t think she’s concerned in this business, whatever it is, *in any way*. Oh dear, I feel Mr. Rafiel expected me to be much *cleverer* than I am being. I think he expected me to put things

together—but what things? And what do I do next, I wonder?” She shook her head.

She had to think over things very carefully. This business had been, as it were, left to her. Left to her to refuse, to accept, to understand what it was all about? Or *not* understand anything, but to go forward and hope that some kind of guidance might be given to her. Occasionally she closed her eyes and tried to picture Mr. Rafiel’s face. Sitting in the garden of the hotel in the West Indies, in his tropical suit; his bad-tempered corrugated face, his flashes of occasional humour. What she really wanted to know was what had been in his mind when he worked up this scheme, when he set out to bring it about. To lure her into accepting it, to persuade her to accept it, to—well, perhaps one should say—to bully her into accepting it. The third was much the most likely, knowing Mr. Rafiel. And yet, take it that he had wanted something done and he had chosen her, settled upon her to do it. Why? Because she had suddenly come into his mind? But why should she have come into his mind?

She thought back to Mr. Rafiel and the things that had occurred at St. Honoré. Had perhaps the problem he had been considering at the time of his death sent his mind back to that visit to the West Indies? Was it in some way connected with someone who had been out there, who had taken part or been an onlooker there and was that what had put Miss Marple into his mind? Was there some link or some connection? If not, why should he suddenly think of her? What was it about her that could make her useful to him, in any way at all? She was an elderly, rather scatty, quite ordinary person, physically not very strong, mentally not nearly as alert as she used to be. What had been her special qualifications, if any? She couldn’t think of any. Could it possibly have been a bit of *fun* on Mr. Rafiel’s part? Even if Mr. Rafiel had been on the point of death he might have wanted to have some kind of joke that suited his peculiar sense of humour.

She could not deny that Mr. Rafiel could quite possibly wish to have a joke, even on his deathbed. Some ironical humour of his might be satisfied.

"I must," said Miss Marple to herself firmly, "I *must* have some qualification for something." After all, since Mr. Rafiel was no longer in this world, he could not enjoy his joke at firsthand. What qualifications *had* she got? "What qualities have I got that could be useful to anyone for *anything*?" said Miss Marple.

She considered herself with proper humility. She was inquisitive, she asked questions, she was the sort of age and type that could be expected to ask questions. That was one point, a possible point. You could send a private detective round to ask questions, or some psychological investigator, but it was true that you could much more easily send an elderly lady with a habit of snooping and being inquisitive, of talking too much, of wanting to find out about things, and it would seem perfectly natural.

"An old pussy," said Miss Marple to herself. "Yes, I can see I'm quite recognizable as an old pussy. There are so many old pussies, and they're all so much alike. And, of course, yes, I'm very ordinary. An ordinary rather scatty old lady. And that of course is very good *camouflage*. Dear me, I wonder if I'm thinking on the right lines. I do, sometimes, know what people are *like*. I mean, I know what people are like, because they remind me of certain other people I have known. So I know some of their faults and some of their virtues. I know what kind of people *they* are. There's that."

She thought again of St. Honoré and the Hotel of the Golden Palm. She had made one attempt to enquire into the possibilities of a link, by her visit to Esther Walters. That had been definitely nonproductive, Miss Marple decided. There didn't seem any further link leading from there. Nothing that would tie up with his request that Miss Marple should busy herself with something, the nature of which she still had no idea!

"Dear me," said Miss Marple, "what a tiresome man you are, Mr. Rafiel!" She said it aloud and there was definite reproach in her voice.

Later, however, as she climbed into bed and applied her cosy hot water bottle to the most painful portion of her rheumatic back, she spoke again—in what might be taken as a semi-apology.

"I've done the best I could," she said.

She spoke aloud with the air of addressing one who might easily be in the room. It is true he might be anywhere, but even then there might be some telepathic or telephonic communication, and if so, she was going to speak definitely and to the point.

"I've done all I could. The best according to my limitations, and I must now leave it up to *you*."

With that she settled herself more comfortably, stretched out a hand, switched off the electric light, and went to sleep.

Five

INSTRUCTIONS FROM BEYOND

I

It was some three or four days later that a communication arrived by the second post. Miss Marple picked up the letter, did what she usually did to letters, turned it over, looked at the stamp, looked at the handwriting, decided that it wasn't a bill and opened it. It was typewritten.

"Dear Miss Marple,

By the time you read this I shall be dead and also buried. Not cremated, I am glad to think. It has always seemed to me unlikely that one would manage to rise up from one's handsome bronze vase full of ashes and haunt anyone if one wanted so to do! Whereas the idea of rising from one's grave and haunting anyone is quite possible. Shall I want to do that? Who knows. I might even want to communicate with you.

By now my solicitors will have communicated with you and will have put a certain proposition before you. I hope you will have accepted it. If you have not accepted it, don't feel in the least remorseful. It will be your choice.

This should reach you, if my solicitors have done what they were told to do, and if the posts have done the duty they are

expected to perform, on the 11th of the month. In two days from now you will receive a communication from a travel bureau in London. I hope what it proposes will not be distasteful to you. I needn't say more. I want you to have an open mind. Take care of yourself. I think you will manage to do that. You are a very shrewd person. The best of luck and may your guardian angel be at your side looking after you. You may need one.

*Your affectionate friend,
J. B. Rafiel."*

"Two days!" said Miss Marple.

She found it difficult to pass the time. The Post Office did their duty and so did the Famous Houses and Gardens of Great Britain.

"Dear Miss Jane Marple,

Obedying instructions given us by the late Mr. Rafiel we send you particulars of our Tour No. 37 of the Famous Houses and Gardens of Great Britain which starts from London on Thursday next—the 17th.

If it should be possible for you to come to our office in London, our Mrs. Sandbourne who is to accompany the tour, will be very glad to give you all particulars and to answer all questions.

Our tours last for a period of two to three weeks. This particular tour, Mr. Rafiel thinks, will be particularly acceptable to you as it will visit a part of England which as far as he knows you have not yet visited, and takes in some really very attractive scenery and gardens. He has arranged for you to have the best accommodation and all the luxury available that we can provide.

Perhaps you will let us know which day would suit you to visit our office in Berkeley Street?"

Miss Marple folded up the letter, put it in her bag, noted the telephone number, thought of a few friends whom she knew, rang up two of them, one of whom had been for tours with the Famous Houses and Gardens, and spoke highly of them, the other one had

not been personally on a tour but had friends who had travelled with this particular firm and who said everything was very well done, though rather expensive, and not too exhausting for the elderly. She then rang up the Berkeley Street number and said she would call upon them on the following Tuesday.

The next day she spoke to Cherry on the subject.

"I may be going away, Cherry," she said. "On a Tour."

"A Tour?" said Cherry. "One of these travel tours? You mean a package tour abroad?"

"Not abroad. In this country," said Miss Marple. "Mainly visiting historic buildings and gardens."

"Do you think it's all right to do that at your age? These things can be very tiring, you know. You have to walk miles sometimes."

"My health is really very good," said Miss Marple, "and I have always heard that in these tours they are careful to provide restful intervals for such people who are not particularly strong."

"Well, be careful of yourself, that's all," said Cherry. "We don't want you falling down with a heart attack, even if you are looking at a particularly sumptuous fountain or something. You're a bit old, you know, to do this sort of thing. Excuse me saying it, it sounds rude, but I don't like to think of you passing out because you've done too much or anything like that."

"I can take care of myself," said Miss Marple, with some dignity.

"All right, but you just be careful," said Cherry.

Miss Marple packed a suitcase bag, went to London, booked a room at a modest hotel—"Ah, Bertram's Hotel," she thought in her mind, "what a wonderful hotel *that* was! Oh dear, I must forget all those things, the St. George is quite a pleasant place.") At the appointed time she was at Berkeley Street and was shown in to the office where a pleasant woman of about thirty-five rose to meet her, explained that her name was Mrs. Sandbourne and that she would be in personal charge of this particular tour.

"Am I to understand," said Miss Marple, "that this trip is in my case—" she hesitated.

Mrs. Sandbourne, sensing slight embarrassment, said:

"Oh yes, I ought to have explained perhaps better in the letter we sent you. Mr. Rafiel has paid all expenses."

"You *do* know that he is dead?" said Miss Marple.

"Oh yes, but this was arranged before his death. He mentioned that he was in ill health but wanted to provide a treat for a very old friend of his who had not had the opportunity of travelling as much as she could have wished."

II

Two days later, Miss Marple, carrying her small overnight bag, her new and smart suitcase surrendered to the driver, had boarded a most comfortable and luxurious coach which was taking a north-westerly route out of London; she was studying the passenger list which was attached to the inside of a handsome brochure giving details of the daily itinerary of the coach, and various information as to hotels and meals, places to be seen, and occasional alternatives on some days which, although the fact was not stressed, actually intimated that one choice of itinerary was for the young and active and that the other choice would be peculiarly suitable for the elderly, those whose feet hurt them, who suffered from arthritis or rheumatism and who would prefer to sit about and *not* walk long distances or up too many hills. It was all very tactful and well arranged.

Miss Marple read the passenger list and surveyed her fellow passengers. There was no difficulty about doing this because the other fellow passengers were doing much the same themselves. They were surveying her, amongst others, but nobody as far as Miss Marple could notice was taking any particular interest in her.

Mrs. Riseley-Porter

Miss Joanna Crawford

Colonel and Mrs. Walker

Mr. and Mrs. H. T. Butler

Miss Elizabeth Temple

Professor Wanstead

Mr. Richard Jameson
Miss Lumley
Miss Bentham
Mr. Casper
Miss Cooke
Miss Barrow
Mr. Emlyn Price
Miss Jane Marple

There were four elderly ladies. Miss Marple took note of them first so, as it were, to clear them out of the way. Two were travelling together. Miss Marple put them down as about seventy. They could roughly be considered as contemporaries of her own. One of them was very definitely the complaining type, one who would want to have seats at the front of the coach or else would make a point of having them at the back of the coach. Would wish to sit on the sunny-side or could only bear to sit on the shady side. Who would want more fresh air, or less fresh air. They had with them travelling rugs and knitted scarves and quite an assortment of guidebooks. They were slightly crippled and often in pain from feet or backs or knees but were nevertheless of those whom age and ailments could not prevent from enjoying life while they still had it. Old pussies, but definitely *not* stay-at-home old pussies. Miss Marple made an entry in the little book she carried.

Fifteen passengers not including herself, or Mrs. Sandbourne. And since she had been sent on this coach tour, one at least of those fifteen passengers must be of importance in some way. Either as a source of information or someone concerned with the law or a law case, or it might even be a murderer. A murderer who might have already killed or one who might be preparing to kill. Anything was possible, Miss Marple thought, with Mr. Rafiel! Anyway, she must make notes of these people.

On the right-hand page of her notebook, she would note down who might be worthy of attention from Mr. Rafiel's point of view and on the left she would note down or cross off those who could only be of any interest if they could produce some useful information for

her. Information, it might be, that they did not even know they possessed. Or rather that even if they possessed it, they did not know it could possibly be useful to her or to Mr. Rafiel or to the law or to Justice with a capital "J." At the back of her little book, she might this evening make a note or two as to whether anyone had reminded her of characters she had known in the past at St. Mary Mead and other places. Any similarities might make a useful pointer. It had done so on other occasions.

The other two elderly ladies were apparently separate travellers. Both of them were about sixty. One was a well-preserved, well-dressed woman of obvious social importance in her own mind, but probably in other people's minds as well. Her voice was loud and dictatorial. She appeared to have in tow a niece, a girl of about eighteen or nineteen who addressed her as Aunt Geraldine. The niece, Miss Marple noted, was obviously well accustomed to coping with Aunt Geraldine's bossiness. She was a competent girl as well as being an attractive one.

Across the aisle from Miss Marple was a big man with square shoulders and a clumsy-looking body, looking as though he had been carelessly assembled by an ambitious child out of chunky bricks. His face looked as though nature had planned it to be round but the face had rebelled at this and decided to achieve a square effect by developing a powerful jaw. He had a thick head of greyish hair and enormous bushy eyebrows which moved up and down to give point to what he was saying. His remarks seemed mainly to come out in a series of barks as though he was a talkative sheepdog. He shared his seat with a tall dark foreigner who moved restlessly in his seat and gesticulated freely. He spoke a most peculiar English, making occasional remarks in French and German. The bulky man seemed quite capable of meeting these onslaughts of foreign language, and shifted obligingly to either French or German. Taking a quick glance at them again, Miss Marple decided that the bushy eyebrows must be Professor Wanstead and the excitable foreigner was Mr. Caspar.

She wondered what it was they were discussing with such animation, but was baffled by the rapidity and force of Mr. Caspar's delivery.

The seat in front of them was occupied by the other woman of about sixty, a tall woman, possibly over sixty, but a woman who would have stood out in a crowd anywhere. She was still a very handsome woman with dark grey hair coiled high on her head, drawn back from a fine forehead. She had a low, clear, incisive voice. A personality, Miss Marple thought. Someone! Yes, she was decidedly someone. "Reminds me," she thought to herself, "of Dame Emily Waldron." Dame Emily Waldron had been the Principal of an Oxford College and a notable scientist, and Miss Marple, having once met her in her nephew's company, had never quite forgotten her.

Miss Marple resumed her survey of the passengers. There were two married couples, one American, middle-aged, amiable, a talkative wife and a placidly agreeing husband. They were obviously dedicated travellers and sightseers. There was also an English middle-aged couple whom Miss Marple noted down without hesitation as a retired military man and wife. She ticked them off from the list as Colonel and Mrs. Walker.

In the seat behind her was a tall, thin man of about thirty with a highly technical vocabulary, clearly an architect. There were also two middle-aged ladies travelling together rather further up the coach. They were discussing the brochure and deciding what the tour was going to hold for them in the way of attractions. One was dark and thin and the other was fair and sturdily built and the latter's face seemed faintly familiar to Miss Marple. She wondered where she had seen or met her before. However, she could not recall the occasion to mind. Possibly someone she had met at a cocktail party or sat opposite to in a train. There was nothing very special about her to remember.

Only one more passenger remained for her to appraise, and this was a young man, possibly of about nineteen or twenty. He wore the appropriate clothes for his age and sex; tight black jeans, a polo-necked purple sweater and his head was an outsize rich mop of non-disciplined black hair. He was looking with an air of interest at the bossy woman's niece, and the bossy woman's niece also, Miss Marple thought, was looking with some interest at him. In spite of

the preponderance of elderly pussies and middle-aged females there were, at any rate, two *young* people among the passengers.

They stopped for lunch at a pleasant riverside hotel, and the afternoon sightseeing was given over to Blenheim. Miss Marple had already visited Blenheim twice before, so she saved her feet by limiting the amount of sightseeing indoors and coming fairly soon to the enjoyment of the gardens and the beautiful view.

By the time they arrived at the hotel where they were to stay the night, the passengers were getting to know each other. The efficient Mrs. Sandbourne, still brisk and unwearied by her duties in directing the sightseeing, did her part very well; creating little groups by adding anyone who looked as if they were left out to one or other of them, murmuring, "You *must* make Colonel Walker describe his garden to you. Such a wonderful collection of fuchsias he has." With such little sentences she drew people together.

Miss Marple was now able to attach names to all the passengers. Bushy eyebrows turned out to be Professor Wanstead, as she had thought, and the foreigner was Mr. Caspar. The bossy woman was Mrs. Riseley-Porter and her niece was called Joanna Crawford. The young man with the hair was Emlyn Price and he and Joanna Crawford appeared to be finding out that certain things in life, such as decided opinions, they had in common, on economics, art, general dislikes, politics and such topics.

The two eldest pussies graduated naturally to Miss Marple as a kindred elderly pussy. They discussed happily arthritis, rheumatism, diets, new doctors, remedies both professional, patent, and reminiscences of old wives' treatments which had had success where all else failed. They discussed the many tours they had been on to foreign places in Europe; hotels, travel agencies and finally the County of Somerset where Miss Lumley and Miss Bentham lived, and where the difficulties of getting suitable gardeners could hardly be believed.

The two middle-aged ladies travelling together turned out to be Miss Cooke and Miss Barrow. Miss Marple still felt that one of these two, the fair one, Miss Cooke, was faintly familiar to her, but she still could not remember where she had seen her before. Probably it was

only her fancy. It might also be just fancy but she could not help feeling that Miss Barrow and Miss Cooke appeared to be avoiding her. They seemed rather anxious to move away if she approached. That, of course, *might* be entirely her imagination.

Fifteen people, one of whom at least must matter in some way. In casual conversation that evening she introduced the name of Mr. Rafiel, so as to note if anyone reacted in any way. Nobody did.

The handsome woman was identified as Miss Elizabeth Temple, who was the retired Headmistress of a famous girls' school. Nobody appeared to Miss Marple likely to be a murderer except possibly Mr. Caspar, and that was probably foreign prejudice. The thin young man was Richard Jameson, an architect.

"Perhaps I shall do better tomorrow," said Miss Marple to herself.

III

Miss Marple went to bed definitely tired out. Sightseeing was pleasant but exhausting, and trying to study fifteen or sixteen people at once and wondering as you did so which of them could possibly be connected with a murder, was even more exhausting. It had a touch of such unreality about it that one could not, Miss Marple felt, take it seriously. These seemed to be all perfectly nice people, the sort of people who go on cruises and on tours and all the rest of it. However, she took another quick and cursory glance at the passenger list, making a few little entries in her notebook.

Mrs. Riseley-Porter? *Not* connected with crime. Too social and self-centred.

Niece, Joanna Crawford? The same? But very efficient.

Mrs. Riseley-Porter, however, might have information of some kind which Miss Marple might find had a bearing on matters. She must keep on agreeable terms with Mrs. Riseley-Porter.

Miss Elizabeth Temple? A personality. Interesting. She did not remind Miss Marple of any murderer she'd ever known. "In fact," said Miss Marple to herself, "she really radiates integrity. *If* she had committed a murder, it would be a very popular murder. Perhaps for

some noble reason or for some reason that she thought noble?" But that wasn't satisfactory either. Miss Temple, she thought, would always know what she was doing and why she was doing it and would not have any silly ideas about nobility when merely evil existed. "All the same," said Miss Marple, "she's *someone* and she might—she just *might* be a person Mr. Rafiel wanted me to meet for some reason." She jotted down these thoughts on the right-hand side of her notebook.

She shifted her point of view. She had been considering a possible murderer—what about a prospective victim? Who was a possible victim? No one very likely. Perhaps Mrs. Riseley-Porter might qualify—rich—rather disagreeable. The efficient niece might inherit. She and the anarchistic Emlyn Price might combine in the cause of anticapitalism. Not a very credible idea, but no other feasible murder seemed on offer.

Professor Wanstead? An interesting man, she was sure. Kindly, too. Was he a scientist or was he medical? She was not as yet sure, but she put him down on the side of science. She herself knew nothing of science, but it seemed not at all unlikely.

Mr. and Mrs. Butler? She wrote them off. Nice Americans. No connections with anyone in the West Indies or anyone she had known. No, she didn't think that the Butlers could be relevant.

Richard Jameson? That was the thin architect. Miss Marple didn't see how architecture could come into it, though it might, she supposed. A priest's hole, perhaps? One of the houses they were going to visit might have a priest's hole which would contain a skeleton. And Mr. Jameson, being an architect, would know just where the priest's hole was. He might aid her to discover it, or she might aid him to discover it and then they would find a body. "Oh really," said Miss Marple. "What nonsense I am talking and thinking."

Miss Cooke and Miss Barrow? A perfectly ordinary pair. And yet she'd certainly seen one of them before. At least she'd seen Miss Cooke before. Oh well, it would come to her, she supposed.

Colonel and Mrs. Walker? Nice people. Retired Army folk. Served abroad mostly. Nice to talk to, but she didn't think there'd be anything for her there.

Miss Bentham and Miss Lumley? The elderly pussies. Unlikely to be criminals, but, being elderly pussies, they might know plenty of gossip, or have some information, or might make some illuminating remark even if it happened to come about in connection with rheumatism, arthritis or patent medicine.

Mr. Caspar? Possibly a dangerous character. Very excitable. She would keep him on the list for the present.

Emlyn Price? A student presumably. Students were very violent. Would Mr. Rafiel have sent her on the track of a student? Well, it would depend perhaps on what the student had done or wished to do or was going to do. A dedicated anarchist, perhaps.

"Oh dear," said Miss Marple, suddenly exhausted, "I *must* go to bed."

Her feet ached, her back ached and her mental reactions were not, she thought, at their best. She slept at once. Her sleep was enlivened by several dreams.

One where Professor Wanstead's bushy eyebrows fell off because they were not his own eyebrows, but false ones. As she woke again, her first impression was that which so often follows dreams, a belief that the dream in question had solved everything. "Of course," she thought, "of *course!*" His eyebrows were false and that solved the whole thing. *He* was the criminal.

Sadly, it came to her that nothing was solved. Professor Wanstead's eyebrows coming off was of no help at all.

Unfortunately now, she was no longer sleepy. She sat up in bed with some determination.

She sighed and slipped on her dressing gown, moved from her bed to an upright chair, took a slightly larger notebook from her suitcase and started work.

"The project I have undertaken," she wrote, "is connected certainly with crime of some kind. Mr. Rafiel has distinctly stated that in his letter. He said I had a flair for justice and that necessarily included a flair for crime. So crime is involved, and it is presumably not espionage or fraud or robbery, because such things have never come my way and I have no

connection with such things, or knowledge of them, or special skills. What Mr. Rafiel knows of me is only what he knew during the period of time when we were both in St. Honoré. We were connected there with a murder. Murders as reported in the press have never claimed my attention. I have never read books on criminology as a subject or really been interested in such a thing. No, it has just happened that I have found myself in the vicinity of murder rather more often than would seem normal. My attention has been directed to murders involving friends or acquaintances. These curious coincidences of connections with special subjects seem to happen to people in life. One of my aunts, I remember, was on five occasions shipwrecked and a friend of mine was what I believe is officially called accident-prone. I know some of her friends refused to ride in a taxi with her. She had been in four taxi accidents and three car accidents and two railway accidents. Things like this seem to happen to certain people for no appreciable reason. I do not like to write it down but it does appear that murders seem to happen, not to me myself, thank goodness, but seem to happen in my vicinity."

Miss Marple paused, changed her position, put a cushion in her back, and continued:

"I must try to make as logical a survey as I can of this project which I have undertaken. My instructions, or my 'briefing' as naval friends of mine put it, are so far quite inadequate. Practically nonexistent. So I must ask myself one clear question. What is all this about? Answer! I do not know. Curious and interesting. An odd way for a man like Mr. Rafiel to go about things, especially when he was a successful business and financial operator. He wants me to guess, to employ my instinct, to observe and to obey such directions as are given to me or are hinted to me.

"So: Point 1. Direction will be given me. Direction from a dead man. Point 2. What is involved in my problem is justice.

Either to set right an injustice or to avenge evil by bringing it to justice. This is in accord with the code word Nemesis given to me by Mr. Rafiel.

"After explanations of the principle involved, I received my first factual directive. It was arranged by Mr. Rafiel before his death that I was to go on Tour No. 37 of Famous Houses and Gardens. Why? That is what I have to ask myself. Is it for some geographical or territorial reason? A connection or a clue? Some particular famous house? Or something involving some particular garden or landscape connected? This seems unlikely. The more likely explanation lies in the people or one of the people on this particular coach party. None of them is known to me personally, but one of them at least must be connected with the riddle I have to solve. Somebody among our group is connected or concerned with a murder. Somebody has information or a special link with the victim of a crime, or someone personally is himself or herself a murderer. A murderer as yet unsuspected."

Miss Marple stopped here suddenly. She nodded her head. She was satisfied now with her analysis so far as it went.

And so to bed.

Miss Marple added to her notebook.

"Here endeth the First Day."

Six

LOVE

The following morning they visited a small Queen Anne Manor House. The drive there had not been very long or tiring. It was a very charming-looking house and had an interesting history as well as a very beautiful and unusually laid out garden.

Richard Jameson, the architect, was full of admiration for the structural beauty of the house and being the kind of young man who is fond of hearing his own voice, he slowed down in nearly every room that they went through, pointing out every special moulding of fireplace, and giving historical dates and references. Some of the group, appreciative at first, began to get slightly restive, as the somewhat monotonous lecturing went on. Some of them began to edge carefully away and fall behind the party. The local caretaker, who was in charge, was not himself too pleased at having his occupation usurped by one of the sightseers. He made a few efforts to get matters back into his own hands but Mr. Jameson was unyielding. The caretaker made a last try.

"In this room, ladies and gentlemen, the White Parlour, folks call it, is where they found a body. A young man it was, stabbed with a dagger, lying on the hearthrug. Way back in seventeen hundred and something it was. It was said that the Lady Moffat of that day had a lover. He came through a small side door and up a steep staircase to

this room through a loose panel there was to the left of the fireplace. Sir Richard Moffat, her husband, you see, was said to be across the seas in the Low Countries. But he come home, and in he came unexpectedly and caught 'em there together."

He paused proudly. He was pleased at the response from his audience, glad of a respite from the architectural details which they had been having forced down their throats.

"Why, isn't that just too romantic, Henry?" said Mrs. Butler in her resonant transatlantic tones. "Why, you know, there's quite an *atmosphere* in this room. I feel it. I certainly can feel it."

"Mamie is very sensitive to atmospheres," said her husband proudly to those around him. "Why, once when we were in an old house down in Louisiana...."

The narrative of Mamie's special sensitivity got into its swing and Miss Marple and one or two others seized their opportunity to edge gently out of the room and down the exquisitely moulded staircase to the ground floor.

"A friend of mine," said Miss Marple to Miss Cooke and Miss Barrow who were next to her, "had a most nerve-racking experience only a few years ago. A dead body on their library floor one morning."

"One of the family?" asked Miss Barrow. "An epileptic fit?"

"Oh no, it was a murder. A strange girl in evening dress. A blonde. But her hair was dyed. She was really a brunette; and—oh ..."

Miss Marple broke off, her eyes fixed on Miss Cooke's yellow hair where it escaped from her headscarf.

It had come to her suddenly. She knew why Miss Cooke's face was familiar and she knew where she had seen her before. But when she had seen her then, Miss Cooke's hair had been dark—almost black. And now it was bright yellow.

Mrs. Riseley-Porter, coming down the stairs, spoke decisively as she pushed past them and completed the staircase and turned into the hall.

"I really cannot go up and down anymore of those stairs," she declared, "and standing around in these rooms is very tiring. I believe the gardens here, although not extensive, are quite

celebrated in horticultural circles. I suggest we go there without loss of time. It looks as though it might cloud over before long. I think we shall get rain before morning is out."

The authority with which Mrs. Riseley-Porter could enforce her remarks had its usual result. All those near at hand or within hearing followed her obediently out through french doors in the dining room into the garden. The gardens had indeed all that Mrs. Riseley-Porter had claimed for them. She herself took possession firmly of Colonel Walker and set off briskly. Some of the others followed them, others took paths in the opposite direction.

Miss Marple herself made a determined beeline for a garden seat which appeared to be of comfortable proportions as well as of artistic merit. She sank down on it with relief, and a sigh matching her own was emitted by Miss Elizabeth Temple as she followed Miss Marple and came to sit beside her on the seat.

"Going over houses is always tiring," said Miss Temple. "The most tiring thing in the world. Especially if you have to listen to an exhaustive lecture in each room."

"Of course, all that we were told is very interesting," said Miss Marple, rather doubtfully.

"Oh, do you think so?" said Miss Temple. Her head turned slightly and her eyes met those of Miss Marple. Something passed between the two women, a kind of *rapprochement*—of understanding tinged with mirth.

"Don't you?" asked Miss Marple.

"No," said Miss Temple.

This time the understanding was definitely established between them. They sat there companionably in silence. Presently Elizabeth Temple began to talk about gardens, and this garden in particular. "It was designed by Holman," she said, "somewhere about 1800 or 1798. He died young. A pity. He had great genius."

"It is so sad when anyone dies young," said Miss Marple.

"I wonder," said Elizabeth Temple.

She said it in a curious, meditative way.

"But they miss so much," said Miss Marple. "So many things."

"Or escape so much," said Miss Temple.

"Being as old as I am now," said Miss Marple, "I suppose I can't help feeling that early death means missing things."

"And I," said Elizabeth Temple, "having spent nearly all my life amongst the young, look at life as a period in time complete in itself. What did T. S. Eliot say: *The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew tree are of equal duration.*"

Miss Marple said, "I see what you mean ... A life of whatever length is a complete experience. But don't you—" she hesitated, "—ever feel that a life could be incomplete because it has been cut unduly short?"

"Yes, that *is* so."

Miss Marple said, looking at the flowers near her, "How beautiful peonies are. That long border of them—so proud and yet so beautifully fragile."

Elizabeth Temple turned her head towards her.

"Did you come on this trip to see the houses or to see gardens?" she asked.

"I suppose really to see the houses," said Miss Marple. "I shall enjoy the gardens most, though, but the houses—they will be a new experience for me. Their variety and their history, and the beautiful old furniture and the pictures." She added: "A kind friend gave me this trip as a gift. I am very grateful. I have not seen very many big and famous houses in my life."

"A kind thought," said Miss Temple.

"Do you often go on these sightseeing tours?" asked Miss Marple.

"No. This is not for me exactly a sightseeing tour."

Miss Marple looked at her with interest. She half opened her lips to speak but refrained from putting a question. Miss Temple smiled at her.

"You wonder why I am here, what my motive is, my reason. Well, why don't you make a guess?"

"Oh, I wouldn't like to do that," said Miss Marple.

"Yes, do do so." Elizabeth Temple was urgent. "It would interest me. Yes, really interest me. Make a guess."

Miss Marple was silent for quite a few moments. Her eyes looked at Elizabeth Temple steadily, ranging over her thoughtfully in her

appraisement. She said,

"This is not from what I know about you or what I have been told about you. I know that you are quite a famous person and that your school is a very famous one. No. I am only making my guess from what you look like. I should—write you down as a pilgrim. You have the look of one who is on a pilgrimage."

There was a silence and then Elizabeth said,

"That describes it very well. Yes. I am on a pilgrimage."

Miss Marple said after a moment or two,

"The friend who sent me on this tour and paid all my expenses, is now dead. He was a Mr. Rafiel, a very rich man. Did you by any chance know him?"

"Jason Rafiel? I know him by name, of course. I never knew him personally, or met him. He gave a large endowment once to an educational project in which I was interested. I was very grateful. As you say, he was a very wealthy man. I saw the notice of his death in the papers a few weeks ago. So he was an old friend of yours?"

"No," said Miss Marple. "I had met him just over a year ago abroad. In the West Indies. I never knew much about him. His life or his family or any personal friends that he had. He was a great financier but otherwise, or so people always said, he was a man who was very reserved about himself. Did you know his family or anyone ...?" Miss Marple paused. "I often wondered, but one does not like to ask questions and seem inquisitive."

Elizabeth was silent for a minute—then she said:

"I knew a girl once ... A girl who had been a pupil of mine at Fallowfield, my school. She was no actual relation to Mr. Rafiel, but she *was* at one time engaged to marry Mr. Rafiel's son."

"But she didn't marry him?" Miss Marple asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

Miss Temple said,

"One might hope to say—like to say—because she had too much sense. He was not the type of a young man one would want anyone one was fond of to marry. She was a very lovely girl and a very

sweet girl. I don't know why she didn't marry him. Nobody has ever told me." She sighed and then said, "Anyway, she died...."

"Why did she die?" said Miss Marple.

Elizabeth Temple stared at the peonies for some minutes. When she spoke she uttered one word. It echoed like the tone of a deep bell—so much so that it was startling.

"Love!" she said.

Miss Marple queried the word sharply. "Love?"

"One of the most frightening words there is in the world," said Elizabeth Temple.

Again her voice was bitter and tragic.

"Love...."

Seven

AN INVITATION

I

Miss Marple decided to miss out on the afternoon's sightseeing. She admitted to being somewhat tired and would perhaps give a miss to an ancient church and its 14th-century glass. She would rest for a while and join them at the tearoom which had been pointed out to her in the main street. Mrs. Sandbourne agreed that she was being very sensible.

Miss Marple, resting on a comfortable bench outside the tearoom, reflected on what she planned to do next and whether it would be wise to do it or not.

When the others joined her at teatime it was easy for her to attach herself unobtrusively to Miss Cooke and Miss Barrow and sit with them at a table for four. The fourth chair was occupied by Mr. Caspar whom Miss Marple considered as not sufficiently conversant with the English language to matter.

Leaning across the table, as she nibbled a slice of Swiss roll, Miss Marple said to Miss Cooke,

"You know, I am *quite* sure we have met before. I have been wondering and wondering about it—I'm not as good as I was at remembering faces, but I'm sure I have met you somewhere."

Miss Cooke looked kindly but doubtful. Her eyes went to her friend, Miss Barrow. So did Miss Marple's. Miss Barrow showed no signs of helping to probe the mystery.

"I don't know if you've ever stayed in my part of the world," went on Miss Marple, "I live in St. Mary Mead. Quite a small village, you know. At least, not so small nowadays, there is so much building going on everywhere. Not very far from Much Benham and only twelve miles from the coast at Loomouth."

"Oh," said Miss Cooke, "let me see. Well, I know Loomouth quite well and perhaps—"

Suddenly Miss Marple made a pleased exclamation.

"Why, of *course!* I was in my garden one day at St. Mary Mead and you spoke to me as you were passing by on the footpath. You said you were staying down there, I remember, with a friend—"

"Of course," said Miss Cooke. "How stupid of me. I do remember you now. We spoke of how difficult it was nowadays to get anyone—to do job gardening, I mean—anyone who was any *use.*"

"Yes. You were not living there, I think? You were staying with someone."

"Yes, I was staying with ... with ..." for a moment Miss Cooke hesitated, with the air of one who hardly knows or remembers a name.

"With a Mrs. Sutherland, was it?" suggested Miss Marple.

"No, no, it was ... er ... Mrs.—"

"Hastings," said Miss Barrow firmly as she took a piece of chocolate cake.

"Oh yes, in one of the new houses," said Miss Marple.

"Hastings," said Mr. Caspar unexpectedly. He beamed. "I have been to Hastings—I have been to Eastbourne, too." He beamed again. "Very nice—by the sea."

"Such a coincidence," said Miss Marple, "meeting again so soon—such a small world, isn't it?"

"Oh, well, we are all so fond of gardens," said Miss Cooke vaguely.

"Flowers very pretty," said Mr. Caspar. "I like very much—" He beamed again.

"So many rare and beautiful shrubs," said Miss Cooke.

Miss Marple went full speed ahead with a gardening conversation of some technicality—Miss Cooke responded. Miss Barrow put in an occasional remark.

Mr. Caspar relapsed into smiling silence.

Later, as Miss Marple took her usual rest before dinner, she coned over what she had collected. Miss Cooke *had* admitted being in St. Mary Mead. She *had* admitted walking past Miss Marple's house. Had agreed it was quite a coincidence. Coincidence? thought Miss Marple meditatively, turning the word over in her mouth rather as a child might do to a certain lollipop to decide its flavour. Was it a coincidence? Or had she had some reason to come there? Had she been *sent* there? Sent there—for what reason? Was that a ridiculous thing to imagine?

"Any coincidence," said Miss Marple to herself, "is *always* worth noticing. You can throw it away later if it *is* only a coincidence."

Miss Cooke and Miss Barrow appeared to be a perfectly normal pair of friends doing the kind of tour which, according to them, they did every year. They had been on an Hellenic cruise last year and a tour of bulbs in Holland the year before, and Northern Ireland the year before that. They seemed perfectly pleasant and ordinary people. But Miss Cooke, she thought, had for a moment looked as though she were about to disclaim her visit to St. Mary Mead. She had looked at her friend, Miss Barrow, rather as though she were seeking instruction as to what to say. Miss Barrow was presumably the senior partner—

"Of course, really, I may have been imagining all these things," thought Miss Marple. "They may have no significance whatever."

The word danger came unexpectedly into her mind. Used by Mr. Rafiel in his first letter—and there had been some reference to her needing a guardian angel in his second letter. Was she going into danger in this business?—and why? From whom?

Surely not from Miss Cooke and Miss Barrow. Such an ordinary-looking couple.

All the same Miss Cooke *had* dyed her hair and altered her style of hairdressing. Disguised her appearance as much as she could, in

fact. Which was odd, to say the least of it! She considered once more her fellow travellers.

Mr. Caspar, now, it would have been much easier to imagine that *he* might be dangerous. Did he understand more English than he pretended to do? She began to wonder about Mr. Caspar.

Miss Marple had never quite succeeded in abandoning her Victorian view of foreigners. One never *knew* with foreigners. Quite absurd, of course, to feel like that—she had many friends from various foreign countries. All the same ...? Miss Cooke, Miss Barrow, Mr. Caspar, that young man with the wild hair—Emlyn Something—a revolutionary—a practising anarchist? Mr. and Mrs. Butler—such nice Americans—but perhaps—too good to be true?

“Really,” said Miss Marple, “I *must* pull myself together.”

She turned her attention to the itinerary of their trip. Tomorrow, she thought, was going to be rather strenuous. A morning’s sightseeing drive, starting rather early: a long, rather athletic walk on a coastal path in the afternoon. Certain interesting marine flowering plants—it would be tiring. A tactful suggestion was appended. Anyone who felt like a rest could stay behind in their hotel, the Golden Boar, which had a very pleasant garden or could do a short excursion which would only take an hour, to a beauty spot nearby. She thought perhaps that she would do that.

But though she did not know it then, her plans were to be suddenly altered.

II

As Miss Marple came down from her room in the Golden Boar the next day after washing her hands before luncheon, a woman in a tweed coat and skirt came forward rather nervously and spoke to her.

“Excuse me, are you Miss Marple—Miss Jane Marple?”

“Yes, that is my name,” said Miss Marple, slightly surprised.

“My name is Mrs. Glynne. Lavinia Glynne. I and my two sisters live near here and—well, we heard you were coming, you see—”

"You heard I was coming?" said Miss Marple with some slight surprise.

"Yes. A very old friend of ours wrote to us—oh, quite some time ago, it must have been three weeks ago, but he asked us to make a note of this date. The date of the Famous Houses and Gardens Tour. He said that a great friend of his—or a relation, I'm not quite sure which—would be on that tour."

Miss Marple continued to look surprised.

"I'm speaking of a Mr. Rafiel," said Mrs. Glynne.

"Oh! Mr. Rafiel," said Miss Marple—"you—you know that—"

"That he died? Yes. So sad. Just after his letter came. I think it must have been certainly very soon after he wrote to us. But we felt a special *urgency* to try to do what he had asked. He suggested, you know, that perhaps you would like to come and stay with us for a couple of nights. This part of the tour is rather strenuous. I mean, it's all right for the young people, but it is very trying for anyone older. It involves several miles of walking and a certain amount of climbing up difficult cliff paths and places. My sisters and I would be so very pleased if you could come and stay in our house here. It is only ten minutes' walk from the hotel and I'm sure we could show you many interesting things locally."

Miss Marple hesitated a minute. She liked the look of Mrs. Glynne, plump, good-natured, and friendly though a little shy. Besides—here again must be Mr. Rafiel's instructions—the next step for her to take? Yes, it must be so.

She wondered why she felt nervous. Perhaps because she was now at home with the people in the tour, felt part of the group although as yet she had only known them for three days.

She turned to where Mrs. Glynne was standing, looking up at her anxiously.

"Thank you—it is most kind of you. I shall be very pleased to come."

Eight

THE THREE SISTERS

Miss Marple stood looking out of a window. Behind her, on the bed, was her suitcase. She looked out over the garden with unseeing eyes. It was not often that she failed to see a garden she was looking at, in either a mood of admiration or a mood of criticism. In this case it would presumably have been criticism. It was a neglected garden, a garden on which little money had been spent possibly for some years, and on which very little work had been done. The house, too, had been neglected. It was well proportioned, the furniture in it had been good furniture once, but had had little in late years of polishing or attention. It was not a house, she thought, that had been, at any rate of late years, loved in any way. It lived up to its name: The Old Manor House. A house, built with grace and a certain amount of beauty, lived in once, cherished. The daughters and sons had married and left and now it was lived in by Mrs. Glynne who, from a word she had let fall when she showed Miss Marple up to the bedroom appointed to her, had inherited it with her sisters from an uncle and had come here to live with her sisters after her husband had died. They had all grown older, their incomes had dwindled, labour had been more difficult to get.

The other sisters, presumably, had remained unmarried, one older, one younger than Mrs. Glynne, two Miss Bradbury-Scotts.

There was no sign of anything which belonged to a child in the house. No discarded ball, no old perambulator, no little chair or a table. This was just a house with three sisters.

"Sounds very Russian," murmured Miss Marple to herself. She did mean The Three Sisters, didn't she? Chekhov, was it? Or Dostoyevsky? Really, she couldn't remember. Three sisters. But these would certainly not be the kind of three sisters who were yearning to go to Moscow. These three sisters were presumably, she was almost sure they were, content to remain where they were. She had been introduced to the other two who had come, one out of the kitchen and one down a flight of stairs, to welcome her. Their manners were well-bred and gracious. They were what Miss Marple would have called in her youth by the now obsolete term "ladies"—and what she once recalled calling "decayed ladies." Her father had said to her:

"No, dear Jane, not *decayed*. Distressed gentlewomen."

Gentlewomen nowadays were not so liable to be distressed. They were aided by Government or by Societies or by a rich relation. Or, perhaps—by someone like Mr. Rafiel. Because, after all, that was the whole point, the whole reason for her being here, wasn't it? Mr. Rafiel had arranged all this. He had taken, Miss Marple thought, a good deal of trouble about it. He had known, presumably, some four or five weeks before his death, just when that death was likely to be, give and take a little, since doctors were usually moderately optimistic, knowing from experience that patients who ought to die within a certain period very often took an unexpected lease of life and lingered on, still doomed, but obstinately declining to take the final step. On the other hand, hospital nurses when in charge of patients, had, Miss Marple thought from her experience, always expected the patients to be dead the next day, and were much surprised when they were not. But in voicing their gloomy views to Doctor, when he came, they were apt to receive in reply as the doctor went out of the hall door, a private aside of, "Linger a few weeks yet, I shouldn't wonder." Very nice of Doctor to be so optimistic, Nurse would think, but surely Doctor was wrong. Doctor very often wasn't wrong. He knew that people who were in pain, helpless, crippled, even unhappy, still liked living and wanting to live.

They would take one of Doctor's pills to help them pass the night, but they had no intention of taking a few more than necessary of Doctor's pills, just in order to pass the threshold to a world that they did not as yet know anything about!

Mr. Rafiel. That was the person Miss Marple was thinking about as she looked across the garden with unseeing eyes. Mr. Rafiel? She felt now that she was getting a little closer to understanding the task laid upon her, the project suggested to her. Mr. Rafiel was a man who made plans. Made them in the same way that he planned financial deals and takeovers. In the words of her servant, Cherry, he had had a problem. When Cherry had a problem, she often came and consulted Miss Marple about it.

This was a problem that Mr. Rafiel could not deal with himself, which must have annoyed him very much, Miss Marple thought, because he could usually deal with any problem himself and insisted on doing so. But he was bedridden and dying. He could arrange his financial affairs, communicate with his lawyers, with his employees and with such friends and relations as he had, but there was something or someone that he had not arranged for. A problem he had not solved, a problem he still wanted to solve, a project he still wanted to bring about. And apparently it was not one that could be settled by financial aid, by business dealings, by the services of a lawyer.

"So he thought of me," said Miss Marple.

It still surprised her very much. Very much indeed. However, in the sense she was now thinking of it, his letter had been quite explicit. He had thought she had certain qualifications for doing something. It had to do, she thought once again, with something in the nature of crime or affected by crime. The only other thing he knew about Miss Marple was that she was devoted to gardens. Well it could hardly be a gardening problem that he wanted her to solve. But he might think of her in connection with crime. Crime in the West Indies and crimes in her own neighbourhood at home.

A crime—where?

Mr. Rafiel had made arrangements. Arrangements, to begin with, with his lawyers. They had done their part. After the right interval of

time they had forwarded to her his letter. It had been, she thought, a well considered and well thought out letter. It would have been simpler, certainly, to tell her exactly what he wanted her to do and why he wanted it. She was surprised in a way that he had not, before his death, sent for her, probably in a somewhat peremptory way and more or less lying on what he would have assured her was his deathbed, and would then have bullied her until she consented to do what he was asking her. But no, that would not really have been Mr. Rafiel's way, she thought. He *could* bully people, none better, but this was not a case for bullying, and he did not wish either, she was sure, to appeal to her, to beg her to do him a favour, to urge her to redress a wrong. No. That again would not have been Mr. Rafiel's way. He wanted, she thought, as he had probably wanted all his life, to pay for what he required. He wanted to pay her and therefore he wanted to interest her enough to enjoy doing certain work. The pay was offered to intrigue her, not really to tempt her. It was to arouse her interest. She did not think that he had said to himself, "Offer enough money and she'll leap at it" because, as she knew very well herself, the money sounded very agreeable but she was not in urgent need of money. She had her dear and affectionate nephew who, if she was in straits for money of any kind, if she needed repairs to her house or a visit to a specialist or special treats, dear Raymond would always provide them. No. The sum he offered was to be exciting. It was to be exciting in the same way as it was exciting when you had a ticket for the Irish Sweep. It was a fine big sum of money that you could never achieve by any other means except luck.

But all the same, Miss Marple thought to herself, she would need some luck as well as hard work, she would require a lot of thought and pondering and possibly what she was doing might involve a certain amount of danger. But she'd got to find out herself what it was all about, he wasn't going to tell her, partly perhaps because he did not want to influence her? It is hard to tell anyone about something without letting slip your own point of view about it. It could be that Mr. Rafiel had thought that his own point of view might be wrong. It was not very like him to think such a thing, but it could

be possible. He might suspect that his judgment, impaired by illness, was not quite as good as it used to be. So she, Miss Marple, his agent, his employee, was to make her own guesses, come to her own conclusions. Well, it was time she came to a few conclusions now. In other words, back to the old question, *what was all this about?*

She had been directed. Let her take that first. She had been directed by a man who was now dead. She had been directed away from St. Mary Mead. Therefore, the task, whatever it must be, could not be attacked from there. It was not a neighbourhood problem, it was not a problem that you could solve just by looking through newspaper cuttings or making enquiries, not, that is, until you found what you had to make enquiries about. She had been directed, first to the lawyer's office, then to read a letter—two letters—in her home, then to be sent on a pleasant and well run tour round some of the Famous Houses and Gardens of Great Britain. From that she had come to the next stepping stone. The house she was in at this moment. The Old Manor House, Jocelyn St. Mary, where lived Miss Clotilde Bradbury-Scott, Mrs. Glynne and Miss Anthea Bradbury-Scott. Mr. Rafiel had arranged that, arranged it beforehand. Some weeks before he died. Probably it was the next thing he had done after instructing his lawyers and after booking a seat on the tour in her name. Therefore, she was in this house for a purpose. It might be for only two nights, it might be for longer. There might be certain things arranged which would lead her to stay longer or she would be asked to stay longer. That brought her back to where she stood now.

Mrs. Glynne and her two sisters. They must be concerned, implicated in whatever this was. She would have to find out what it was. The time was short. That was the only trouble. Miss Marple had no doubt for one moment that she had the capacity to find out things. She was one of those chatty, fluffy old ladies whom other people expect to talk, to ask questions that were, on the face of it, merely gossip questions. She would talk about her childhood and that would lead to one of the sisters talking about theirs. She'd talk about food she had eaten, servants she had had, daughters and cousins and relations, travel, marriages, births and—yes—deaths.

There must be no show of special interest in her eyes when she heard about a death. Not at all. Almost automatically she was sure she could come up with the right response such as, "Oh dear me, how *very* sad!" She would have to find out relationships, incidents, life stories, see if any suggestive incidents would pop up, so to speak. It might be some incidents in the neighbourhood, not directly concerned with these three people. Something they could know about, talk about, or were pretty sure to talk about. Anyway, there would be *something* here, some clue, some pointer. The second day from now she would rejoin the tour unless she had by that time some indication that she was *not* to rejoin the tour. Her mind swept from the house to the coach and the people who had sat in it. It might be that what she was seeking had been there in the coach, and would be there again when she rejoined it. One person, several people, some innocent (some not so innocent), some long past story. She frowned a little, trying to remember something. Something that had flashed in her mind that she had thought: Really I am sure—of what had she been sure?

Her mind went back to the three sisters. She must not be too long up here. She must unpack a few modest needs for two nights, something to change into this evening, night clothes, sponge bag, and then go down and rejoin her hostesses and make pleasant talk. A main point had to be decided. Were the three sisters to be her allies or were the three sisters enemies? They might fall into either category. She must think about that carefully.

There was a tap on the door and Mrs. Glynne entered.

"I do hope you will be quite comfortable here. Can I help you to unpack? We have a very nice woman who comes in but she is only here in the morning. But she'll help you with anything."

"Oh no, thank you," said Miss Marple. "I only took out just a few necessities."

"I thought I'd show you the way downstairs again. It's rather a rambling house, you know. There are two staircases and it does make it a little difficult. Sometimes people lose their way."

"Oh, it's very kind of you," said Miss Marple.

"I hope then you will come downstairs and we will have a glass of sherry before lunch."

Miss Marple accepted gratefully and followed her guide down the stairs. Mrs. Glynne, she judged, was a good many years younger than she herself was. Fifty, perhaps. Not much more. Miss Marple negotiated the stairs carefully, her left knee was always a little uncertain. There was, however, a banister at one side of the stairs. Very beautiful stairs they were, and she remarked on them.

"It is really a very lovely house," she said. "Built I suppose in the 1700s. Am I right?"

"1780," said Mrs. Glynne.

She seemed pleased with Miss Marple's appreciation. She took Miss Marple into the drawing room. A large graceful room. There were one or two rather beautiful pieces of furniture. A Queen Anne desk and a William and Mary oystershell bureau. There were also some rather cumbrous Victorian settees and cabinets. The curtains were of chintz, faded and somewhat worn, the carpet was, Miss Marple thought, Irish. Possibly a Limerick Aubusson type. The sofa was ponderous and the velvet of it much worn. The other two sisters were already sitting there. They rose as Miss Marple came in and approached her, one with a glass of sherry, the other directing her to a chair.

"I don't know whether you like sitting rather high? So many people do."

"I do," said Miss Marple. "It's so much easier. One's back, you know."

The sisters appeared to know about the difficulties of backs. The eldest of the sisters was a tall handsome woman, dark with a black coil of hair. The other one might have been a good deal younger. She was thin with grey hair that had once been fair hanging untidily on her shoulders and a faintly wraithlike appearance. She could be cast successfully as a mature Ophelia, Miss Marple thought.

Clotilde, Miss Marple thought, was certainly no Ophelia, but she would have made a magnificent Clytemnestra—she could have stabbed a husband in his bath with exultation. But since she had never had a husband, that solution wouldn't do. Miss Marple could

not see her murdering anyone else but a husband—and there had been no Agamemnon in this house.

Clotilde Bradbury-Scott, Anthea Bradbury-Scott, Lavinia Glynne. Clotilde was handsome, Lavinia was plain but pleasant-looking, Anthea had one eyelid which twitched from time to time. Her eyes were large and grey and she had an odd way of glancing round to right and then to left, and then suddenly, in a rather strange manner, behind her over her shoulder. It was as though she felt someone was watching her all the time. Odd, thought Miss Marple. She wondered a little about Anthea.

They sat down and conversation ensued. Mrs. Glynne left the room, apparently for the kitchen. She was, it seemed, the active domestic one of the three. The conversation took a usual course. Clotilde Bradbury-Scott explained that the house was a family one. It had belonged to her great-uncle and then to her uncle and when he had died it was left to her and her two sisters who had joined her there.

"He only had one son, you see," explained Miss Bradbury-Scott, "and he was killed in the war. We are really the last of the family, except for some very distant cousins."

"A beautifully proportioned house," said Miss Marple. "Your sister tells me it was built about 1780."

"Yes, I believe so. One could wish, you know, it was not quite so large and rambling."

"Repairs too," said Miss Marple, "come very heavy nowadays."

"Oh yes, indeed," Clotilde sighed. "And in many ways we have to let a lot of it just fall down. Sad, but there it is. A lot of the outhouses, for instance, and a greenhouse. We had a very beautiful big greenhouse."

"Lovely muscat grapevine in it," said Anthea. "And Cherry Pie used to grow all along the walls inside. Yes, I really regret that very much. Of course, during the war one could not get any gardeners. We had a very young gardener and then he was called up. One does not of course grudge that, but all the same it was impossible to get things repaired and so the whole greenhouse fell down."

"So did the little conservatory near the house."

Both sisters sighed, with the sighing of those who have noted time passing, and times changing—but not for the better.

There was a melancholy here in this house, thought Miss Marple. It was impregnated somehow with sorrow—a sorrow that could not be dispersed or removed since it had penetrated too deep. It had sunk in ... She shivered suddenly.

Nine

POLYGONUM BALDSCHUANICUM

The meal was conventional. A small joint of mutton, roast potatoes, followed by a plum tart with a small jug of cream and rather indifferent pastry. There were a few pictures round the dining room wall, family pictures, Miss Marple presumed, Victorian portraits without any particular merit, the sideboard was large and heavy, a handsome piece of plum-coloured mahogany. The curtains were of dark crimson damask and at the big mahogany table ten people could easily have been seated.

Miss Marple chatted about the incidents of the tour in so far as she had been on it. As this, however, had only been three days, there was not very much to say.

"Mr. Rafiel, I suppose, was an old friend of yours?" said the eldest Miss Bradbury-Scott.

"Not really," said Miss Marple. "I met him first when I was on a cruise to the West Indies. He was out there for his health, I imagine."

"Yes, he had been very crippled for some years," said Anthea.

"Very sad," said Miss Marple. "Very sad indeed. I really admired his fortitude. He seemed to manage to do so much work. Every day, you know, he dictated to his secretary and was continually sending

off cables. He did not seem to give in at all kindly to being an invalid."

"Oh no, he wouldn't," said Anthea.

"We have not seen much of him of late years," said Mrs. Glynne. "He was a busy man, of course. He always remembered us at Christmas very kindly."

"Do you live in London, Miss Marple?" asked Anthea.

"Oh no," said Miss Marple. "I live in the country. A very small place halfway between Loomouth and Market Basing. About twenty-five miles from London. It used to be a very pretty old-world village but of course like everything else, it is becoming what they call developed nowadays." She added, "Mr. Rafiel, I suppose, lived in London? At least I noticed that in the St. Honoré hotel register his address was somewhere in Eaton Square, I think, or was it Belgrave Square?"

"He had a country house in Kent," said Clotilde. "He used to entertain there, I think, sometimes. Business friends, mostly you know, or people from abroad. I don't think any of us ever visited him there. He nearly always entertained us in London on the rare occasions when we happened to meet."

"It was very kind of him," said Miss Marple, "to suggest to you that you should invite me here during the course of this tour. Very thoughtful. One wouldn't really have expected a busy man such as he must have been to have had such kindly thoughts."

"We have invited before friends of his who have been on these tours. On the whole they are very considerate the way they arrange these things. It is impossible, of course, to suit everybody's taste. The young ones naturally wish to walk, to make long excursions, to ascend hills for a view, and all that sort of thing. And the older ones who are not up to it, remain in the hotels, but hotels round here are not really at all luxurious. I am sure you would have found today's trip and the one to St. Bonaventure tomorrow also, very fatiguing. Tomorrow I believe there is a visit to an island, you know, in a boat and sometimes it can be very rough."

"Even going round houses can be very tiring," said Mrs. Glynne.

"Oh, I know," said Miss Marple. "So much walking and standing about. One's feet get very tired. I suppose really I ought not to take these expeditions, but it is such a temptation to see beautiful buildings and fine rooms and furniture. All these things. And of course some splendid pictures."

"And the gardens," said Anthea. "You like gardens, don't you?"

"Oh yes," said Miss Marple, "specially the gardens. From the description in the prospectus I am really looking forward very much to seeing some of the really finely kept gardens of the historic houses we have still to visit." She beamed round the table.

It was all very pleasant, very natural, and yet she wondered why for some reason she had a feeling of strain. A feeling that there was something unnatural here. But what did she mean by unnatural? The conversation was ordinary enough, consisting mainly of platitudes. She herself was making conventional remarks and so were the three sisters.

The Three Sisters, thought Miss Marple once again considering that phrase. Why did anything thought of in threes somehow seem to suggest a sinister atmosphere? The Three Sisters. The Three Witches of Macbeth. Well, one could hardly compare these three sisters to the three witches. Although Miss Marple had always thought at the back of her mind that the theatrical producers made a mistake in the way in which they produced the three witches. One production which she had seen, indeed, seemed to her quite absurd. The witches had looked more like pantomime creatures with flapping wings and ridiculously spectacular steeple hats. They had danced and slithered about. Miss Marple remembered saying to her nephew, who was standing her this Shakespearean treat, "You know, Raymond, my dear, if *I* were ever producing this splendid play I would make the three witches *quite* different. I would have them three ordinary, normal old women. Old Scottish women. They wouldn't dance or caper. They would look at each other rather slyly and you would feel a sort of menace just behind the ordinariness of them."

Miss Marple helped herself to the last mouthful of plum tart and looked across the table at Anthea. Ordinary, untidy, very vague-

looking, a bit scatty. Why should she feel that Anthea was sinister?

"I am imagining things," said Miss Marple to herself. "I mustn't do that."

After luncheon she was taken on a tour of the garden. It was Anthea who was deputed to accompany her. It was, Miss Marple thought, rather a sad progress. Here, there had once been a well kept, though certainly not in any way an outstanding or remarkable, garden. It had had the elements of an ordinary Victorian garden. A shrubbery, a drive of speckled laurels, no doubt there had once been a well kept lawn and paths, a kitchen garden of about an acre and a half, too big evidently for the three sisters who lived here now. Part of it was unplanted and had gone largely to weeds. Ground elder had taken over most of the flower beds and Miss Marple's hands could hardly restrain themselves from pulling up the vagrant bindweed asserting its superiority.

Miss Anthea's long hair flapped in the wind, shedding from time to time a vague hairpin on the path or the grass. She talked rather jerkily.

"*You* have a very nice garden, I expect," she said.

"Oh, it's a very small one," said Miss Marple.

They had come along a grass path and were pausing in front of a kind of hillock that rested against the wall at the end of it.

"Our greenhouse," said Miss Anthea, mournfully.

"Oh yes, where you had such a delightful grapevine."

"Three vines," said Anthea. "A Black Hamburg and one of those small white grapes, very sweet, you know. And a third one of beautiful muscats."

"And a heliotrope, you said."

"Cherry Pie," said Anthea.

"Ah yes, Cherry Pie. Such a lovely smell. Was there any bomb trouble round here? Did that—er—knock the greenhouse down?"

"Oh no, we never suffered from anything of that kind. This neighbourhood was quite free of bombs. No, I'm afraid it just fell down from decay. We hadn't been here so very long and we had no money to repair it, or to build it up again. And in fact, it wouldn't have been worth it really because we couldn't have kept it up even if

we did. I'm afraid we just let it fall down. There was nothing else we could do. And now you see, it's all grown over."

"Ah that, completely covered by—what is that flowering creeper just coming into bloom?"

"Oh yes. It's quite a common one," said Anthea. "It begins with a P. Now what is the name of it?" she said doubtfully. "Poly something, something like that."

"Oh yes. I think I do know the name. Polygonum Baldschuanicum. Very quick growing, I think, isn't it? Very useful really if one wants to hide any tumbledown building or anything ugly of that kind."

The mound in front of her was certainly thickly covered with the all-enveloping green and white flowering plant. It was, as Miss Marple well knew, a kind of menace to anything else that wanted to grow. Polygonum covered everything, and covered it in a remarkably short time.

"The greenhouse must have been quite a big one," she said.

"Oh yes—we had peaches in it, too—and nectarines." Anthea looked miserable.

"It looks really very pretty now," said Miss Marple in a consoling tone. "Very pretty little white flowers, aren't they?"

"We have a very nice magnolia tree down this path to the left," said Anthea. "Once I believe there used to be a very fine border here—a herbaceous border. But that again one cannot keep up. It is too difficult. Everything is too difficult. Nothing is like it used to be—it's all spoilt—everywhere."

She led the way quickly down a path at right angles which ran along a side wall. Her pace had increased. Miss Marple could hardly keep up with her. It was, thought Miss Marple, as though she were deliberately being steered away from the Polygonum mound by her hostess. Steered away as from some ugly or displeasing spot. Was she ashamed perhaps that the past glories no longer remained? The Polygonum certainly was growing with extraordinary abandonment. It was not even being clipped or kept to reasonable proportions. It made a kind of flowery wilderness of that bit of the garden.

She almost looks as though she was running away from it, thought Miss Marple, as she followed her hostess. Presently her attention was diverted to a broken down pigsty which had a few rose tendrils round it.

"My great-uncle used to keep a few pigs," explained Anthea, "but of course one would never dream of doing anything of that kind nowadays, would one? Rather too noisome, I am afraid. We have a few floribunda roses near the house. I really think floribundas are such a great answer to difficulties."

"Oh, I know," said Miss Marple.

She mentioned the names of a few recent productions in the rose line. All the names, she thought, were entirely strange to Miss Anthea.

"Do you often come on these tours?"

The question came suddenly.

"You mean the tours of houses and of gardens?"

"Yes. Some people do it every year."

"Oh I couldn't hope to do that. They're rather expensive, you see. A friend very kindly gave me a present of this to celebrate my next birthday. So kind."

"Oh. I wondered. I wondered *why* you came. I mean—it's bound to be rather tiring, isn't it? Still, if you usually go to the West Indies, and places like that..."

"Oh, the West Indies was the result of kindness, too. On the part of a nephew, that time. A dear boy. So very thoughtful for his old aunt."

"Oh, I see. Yes, I see."

"I don't know what one would do without the younger generation," said Miss Marple. "They are so kind, are they not?"

"I—I suppose so. I don't really know. I—we haven't—any young relations."

"Does your sister, Mrs. Glynne, have any children? She did not mention any. One never likes to ask."

"No. She and her husband never had any children. It's as well perhaps."

“And what do you mean by that?” Miss Marple wondered as they returned to the house.

Ten

"OH! FOND, OH! FAIR, THE DAYS THAT WERE"

I

At half past eight the next morning there was a smart tap on the door, and in answer to Miss Marple's "Come in" the door was opened and an elderly woman entered, bearing a tray with a teapot, a cup and a milk jug and a small plate of bread and butter.

"Early morning tea, ma'am," she said cheerfully. "It's a nice day, it is. I see you've got your curtains drawn back already. You've slept well then?"

"Very well indeed," said Miss Marple, laying aside a small devotional book which she had been reading.

"Well, it's a lovely day, it is. They'll have it nice for going to the Bonaventure Rocks. It's just as well you're not doing it. It's cruel hard on the legs, it is."

"I'm really very happy to be here," said Miss Marple. "So kind of Miss Bradbury-Scott and Mrs. Glynne to issue this invitation."

"Ah well, it's nice for them too. It cheers them up to have a bit of company come to the house. Ah, it's a sad place nowadays, so it is."

She pulled the curtains at the window rather more fully, pushed back a chair and deposited a can of hot water in the china basin.

"There's a bathroom on the next floor," she said, "but we think it's better always for someone elderly to have their hot water here, so they don't have to climb the stairs."

"It's very kind of you, I'm sure—you know this house well?"

"I was here as a girl—I was the housemaid then. Three servants they had—a cook, a housemaid—a parlourmaid—kitchen maid too at one time. That was in the old Colonel's time. Horses he kept too, and a groom. Ah, those were the days. Sad it is when things happen the way they do. He lost his wife young, the Colonel did. His son was killed in the war and his only daughter went away to live on the other side of the world. Married a New Zealander she did. Died having a baby and the baby died too. He was a sad man living alone here, and he let the house go—it wasn't kept up as it should have been. When he died he left the place to his niece Miss Clotilde and her two sisters, and she and Miss Anthea came here to live—and later Miss Lavinia lost her husband and came to join them—" she sighed and shook her head. "They never did much to the house—couldn't afford it—and they let the garden go as well—"

"It all seems a great pity," said Miss Marple.

"And such nice ladies as they all are, too—Miss Anthea is the scatty one, but Miss Clotilde went to university and is very brainy—she talks three languages—and Mrs. Glynne, she's a very nice lady indeed. I thought when she came to join them as things might go better. But you never know, do you, what the future holds? I feel sometimes, as though there was a doom on this house."

Miss Marple looked enquiring.

"First one thing and then another. The dreadful plane accident—in Spain it was—and everybody killed. Nasty things, aeroplanes—I'd never go in one of them. Miss Clotilde's friends were both killed, they were husband and wife—the daughter was still at school, luckily, and escaped, but Miss Clotilde brought her here to live and did everything for her. Took her abroad for trips—to Italy and France, treated her like a daughter. She was such a happy girl—and a very sweet nature. You'd never dream that such an awful thing could happen."

"An awful thing. What was it? Did it happen here?"

"No, not here, thank God. Though in a way you might say it *did* happen here. It was here that she met him. He was in the neighbourhood—and the ladies knew his father, who was a very rich man, so he came here to visit—that was the beginning—"

"They fell in love?"

"Yes, she fell in love with him right away. He was an attractive-looking boy, with a nice way of talking and passing the time of day. You'd never think—you'd never think for one moment—" she broke off.

"There was a love affair? And it went wrong? And the girl committed suicide?"

"Suicide?" The old woman stared at Miss Marple with startled eyes.

"Whoever now told you *that*? Murder it was, barefaced murder. Strangled and her head beaten to pulp. Miss Clotilde had to go and identify her—she's never been quite the same since. They found her body a good thirty miles from here—in the scrub of a disused quarry. And it's believed that it wasn't the first murder he'd done. There had been other girls. Six months she'd been missing. And the police searching far and wide. Oh! A wicked devil he was—a bad lot from the day he was born or so it seems. They say nowadays as there are those as can't help what they do—not right in the head, and they can't be held responsible. I don't believe a word of it! Killers are killers. And they won't even hang them nowadays. I know as there's often madness as runs in old families—there was the Derwents over at Brassington—every second generation one or other of them died in the loony bin—and there was old Mrs. Paulett; walked about the lanes in her diamond tiara saying she was Marie Antoinette until they shut her up. But there wasn't anything really wrong with her—just silly like. But this boy. Yes, he was a devil right enough."

"What did they do to him?"

"They'd abolished hanging by then—or else he was too young. I can't remember it all now. They found him guilty. It may have been Bostol or Broadsand—one of those places beginning with 'B' as they sent him to."

"What was the name of the boy?"

"Michael—can't remember his last name. It's ten years ago that it happened—one forgets. Italian sort of name—like a picture. Someone who paints pictures—Raffle, that's it—"

"Michael Rafiel?"

"That's right! There was a rumour as went about that his father being so rich got him wangled out of prison. An escape like the Bank Robbers. But I think as that was just talk—"

So it had not been suicide. It had been murder. "Love!" Elizabeth Temple had named as the cause of a girl's death. In a way she was right. A young girl had fallen in love with a killer—and for love of him had gone unsuspecting to an ugly death.

Miss Marple gave a little shudder. On her way along the village street yesterday she had passed a newspaper placard:

EPSOM DOWNS MURDER, SECOND GIRL'S BODY DISCOVERED, YOUTH ASKED TO ASSIST POLICE.

So history repeated itself. An old pattern—an ugly pattern. Some lines of forgotten verse came haltingly into her brain:

*Rose white youth, passionate, pale,
A singing stream in a silent vale,
A fairy prince in a prosy tale,
Oh there's nothing in life so finely frail
As Rose White Youth.*

Who was there to guard Youth from Pain and Death? Youth who could not, who had never been able to, guard itself. Did they know too little? Or was it that they knew too much? And therefore thought they knew it all.

II

Miss Marple, coming down the stairs that morning, probably rather earlier than she had been expected, found no immediate sign of her hostesses. She let herself out at the front door and wandered once

round the garden. It was not because she'd really enjoyed this particular garden. It was some vague feeling that there was something here that she ought to notice, something that would give her some idea, or that had given her some idea only she had not—well, frankly, she had not been bright enough to realize just what the bright idea had been. Something she ought to take note of, something that had a bearing.

She was not at the moment anxious to see any of the three sisters. She wanted to turn a few things over in her mind. The new facts that had come to her through Janet's early tea chat.

A side gate stood open and she went through it to the village street and along a line of small shops to where a steeple poked up announcing the site of the church and its churchyard. She pushed open the lych-gate and wandered about among the graves, some dating from quite a while back, some by the far wall later ones, and one or two beyond the wall in what was obviously a new enclosure. There was nothing of great interest among the older tombs. Certain names recurred as they do in villages. A good many Princes of village origin had been buried. Jasper Prince, deeply regretted. Margery Prince, Edgar and Walter Prince, Melanie Prince, 4 years old. A family record. Hiram Broad—Ellen Jane Broad, Eliza Broad, 91 years.

She was turning away from the latter when she observed an elderly man moving in slow motion among the graves, tidying up as he walked. He gave her a salute and a "good morning."

"Good morning," said Miss Marple. "A very pleasant day."

"It'll turn to rain later," said the old man.

He spoke with the utmost certainty.

"There seem to be a lot of Princes and Broads buried here," said Miss Marple.

"Ah yes, there've always been Princes here. Used to own quite a bit of land once. There have been Broads a good many years, too."

"I see a child is buried here. Very sad when one sees a child's grave."

"Ah, that'll be little Melanie that was. Mellie, we called her. Yes, it was a sad death. Run over, she was. Ran out into the street, went to

get sweets at the sweet shop. Happens a lot nowadays with cars going through at the pace they do."

"It is sad to think," said Miss Marple, "that there are so many deaths all the time. And one doesn't really notice it until one looks at the inscriptions in the churchyard. Sickness, old age, children run over, sometimes even more dreadful things. Young girls killed. Crimes, I mean."

"Ah, yes, there's a lot of that about. Silly girls, I call most of 'em. And their mums haven't got time to look after them properly nowadays—what with going out to work so much."

Miss Marple rather agreed with his criticism, but had no wish to waste time in agreement on the trend of the day.

"Staying at The Old Manor House, aren't you?" the old man asked. "Come here on the coach tour I saw. But it got too much for you, I suppose. Some of those that are gettin' on can't always take it."

"I *did* find it a little exhausting," confessed Miss Marple, "and a very kind friend of mine, a Mr. Rafiel, wrote to some friends of his here and they invited me to stay for a couple of nights."

The name, Rafiel, clearly meant nothing to the elderly gardener.

"Mrs. Glynne and her two sisters have been very kind," said Miss Marple. "I suppose they've lived here a long time?"

"Not so long as that. Twenty years maybe. Belonged to old Colonel Bradbury-Scott. The Old Manor House did. Close on seventy he was when he died."

"Did he have any children?"

"A son what was killed in the war. That's why he left the place to his nieces. Nobody else to leave it to."

He went back to his work amongst the graves.

Miss Marple went into the church. It had felt the hand of a Victorian restorer, and had bright Victorian glass in the windows. One or two brasses and some tablets on the walls were all that was left of the past.

Miss Marple sat down in an uncomfortable pew and wondered about things.

Was she on the right track now? Things were connecting up—but the connections were far from clear.

A girl had been murdered—(actually several girls had been murdered)—suspected young men (or “youths” as they were usually called nowadays) had been rounded up by the police, to “assist them in their enquiries.” A common pattern, but this was all old history, dating back ten or twelve years. There was nothing to find out—now, no problems to solve. A tragedy labelled *Finis*.

What could be done by her? What could Mr. Rafiel possibly want her to do?

Elizabeth Temple ... She must get Elizabeth Temple to tell her more. Elizabeth had spoken of a girl who had been engaged to be married to Michael Rafiel. But was that really so? That did not seem to be known to those in The Old Manor House.

A more familiar version came into Miss Marple’s mind—the kind of story that had been reasonably frequent in her own village. Starting as always, “Boy meets girl.” Developing in the usual way—

“And then the girl finds she is pregnant,” said Miss Marple to herself, “and she tells the boy and she wants him to marry her. But he, perhaps, doesn’t want to marry her—he has never had any idea of marrying her. But things may be made difficult for him in this case. His father, perhaps, won’t hear of such a thing. Her relations will insist that he ‘does the right thing.’ And by now he is tired of the girl—he’s got another girl perhaps. And so he takes a quick brutal way out—strangles her, beats her head to a pulp to avoid identification. It fits with his record—a brutal sordid crime—*but* forgotten and done with.”

She looked round the church in which she was sitting. It looked so peaceful. The reality of Evil was hard to believe in. A *flair* for Evil—that was what Mr. Rafiel had attributed to her. She rose and walked out of the church and stood looking round the churchyard again. Here, amongst the gravestones and their worn inscriptions, no sense of Evil moved in her.

Was it Evil she had sensed yesterday at The Old Manor House? That deep depression of despair, that dark desperate grief. Anthea Bradbury-Scott, her eyes gazing fearfully back over *one* shoulder, as

though fearing some presence that stood there—always stood there—behind her.

They knew something, those Three Sisters, but what was it that they knew?

Elizabeth Temple, she thought again. She pictured Elizabeth Temple with the rest of the coach party, striding across the downs at this moment, climbing up a steep path and gazing over the cliffs out to sea.

Tomorrow, when she rejoined the tour, she would get Elizabeth Temple to tell her more.

III

Miss Marple retraced her steps to The Old Manor House, walking rather slowly because she was by now tired. She could not really feel that her morning had been productive in any way. So far The Old Manor House had given her no distinctive ideas of any kind, a tale of a past tragedy told by Janet, but there were always past tragedies treasured in the memories of domestic workers and which were remembered quite as clearly as all the happy events such as spectacular weddings, big entertainments and successful operations or accidents from which people had recovered in a miraculous manner.

As she drew near the gate she saw two female figures standing there. One of them detached itself and came to meet her. It was Mrs. Glynne.

"Oh, there you are," she said. "We wondered, you know. I thought you must have gone out for a walk somewhere and I did so hope you wouldn't overtire yourself. If I had known you had come downstairs and gone out, I would have come with you to show anything there is to show. Not that there is very much."

"Oh, I just wandered around," said Miss Marple. "The churchyard, you know, and the church. I'm always very interested in churches. Sometimes there are very curious epitaphs. Things like that. I make

quite a collection of them. I suppose the church here was restored in Victorian times?"

"Yes, they did put in some rather ugly pews, I think. You know, good quality wood, and strong and all that, but not very artistic."

"I hope they didn't take away anything of particular interest."

"No, I don't think so. It's not really a very old church."

"There did not seem to be many tablets or brasses or anything of that kind," agreed Miss Marple.

"You are quite interested in ecclesiastical architecture?"

"Oh, I don't make a study of it or anything like that, but of course in my own village, St. Mary Mead, things do rather revolve round the church. I mean, they always have. In my young days, that was so. Nowadays of course it's rather different. Were you brought up in this neighbourhood?"

"Oh, not really. We lived not very far away, about thirty miles or so. At Little Herdsley. My father was a retired serviceman—a Major in the Artillery. We came over here occasionally to see my uncle—indeed to see my great-uncle before him. No. I've not even been here very much of late years. My other two sisters moved in after my uncle's death, but at that time I was still abroad with my husband. He only died about four or five years ago."

"Oh, I see."

"They were anxious I should come and join them here and really, it seemed the best thing to do. We had lived in India for some years. My husband was still stationed there at the time of his death. It is very difficult nowadays to know where one would wish to—should I say, put one's roots down."

"Yes, indeed. I can quite see that. And you felt, of course, that you had roots here since your family had been here for a long time."

"Yes. Yes, one did feel that. Of course, I'd always kept up with my sisters, had been to visit them. But things are always very different from what one thinks they will be. I have bought a small cottage near London, near Hampton Court, where I spend a good deal of my time, and I do a little occasional work for one or two charities in London."

"So your time is fully occupied. How wise of you."

"I have felt of late that I should spend more time here, perhaps. I've been a little worried about my sisters."

"Their health?" suggested Miss Marple. "One *is* rather worried nowadays, especially as there is not really anyone competent whom one can employ to look after people as they become rather feeble or have certain ailments. So much rheumatism and arthritis about. One is always so afraid of people falling down in the bath or an accident coming down stairs. Something of that kind."

"Clotilde has always been very strong," said Mrs. Glynne. "Tough, I should describe her. But I am rather worried sometimes about Anthea. She is vague, you know, very vague indeed. And she wanders off sometimes—and doesn't seem to know where she is."

"Yes, it is sad when people worry. There is so much to worry one."

"I don't really think there is much to worry Anthea."

"She worries about income tax, perhaps, money affairs," suggested Miss Marple.

"No, no, not that so much but—oh, she worries so much about the garden. She remembers the garden as it used to be, and she's very anxious, you know, to—well, to spend money in putting things right again. Clotilde has had to tell her that really one can't afford that nowadays. But she keeps talking of the hothouses, the peaches that used to be there. The grapes—and all that."

"And the Cherry Pie on the walls?" suggested Miss Marple, remembering a remark.

"Fancy your remembering that. Yes. Yes, it's one of the things one does remember. Such a charming smell, heliotrope. And such a nice name for it, Cherry Pie. One always remembers that. And the grapevine. The little, small, early sweet grapes. Ah well, one must not remember the past too much."

"And the flower borders too, I suppose," said Miss Marple.

"Yes. Yes, Anthea would like to have a big well kept herbaceous border again. Really *not* feasible now. It is as much as one can do to get local people who will come and mow the lawns every fortnight. Every year one seems to employ a different firm. And Anthea would like pampas grass planted again. And the Mrs. Simpkin pinks. White,

you know. All along the stone edge border. And a fig tree that grew just outside the greenhouse. She remembers all these and talks about them."

"It must be difficult for you."

"Well, yes. Arguments, you see, hardly appeal in any way. Clotilde, of course, is very downright about things. She just refuses point-blank and says she doesn't want to hear another word about it."

"It is difficult," said Miss Marple, "to know how to take things. Whether one should be firm. Rather authoritative. Perhaps, even, well, just a little—a little *fierce*, you know, or whether one should be sympathetic. Listen to things and perhaps hold out hopes which one knows are not justified. Yes, it's difficult."

"But it's easier for me because you see I go away again, and then come back now and then to stay. So it's easy for me to pretend things may be easier soon and that something may be done. But really, the other day when I came home and I found that Anthea had tried to engage a most expensive firm of landscape gardeners to renovate the garden, to build up the greenhouse again—which is *quite* absurd because even if you put vines in they would not bear for another two or three years. Clotilde knew nothing about it and she was extremely angry when she discovered the estimate for this work on Anthea's desk. She was really quite unkind."

"So many things are difficult," said Miss Marple.

It was a useful phrase which she used often.

"I shall have to go rather early tomorrow morning. I think," said Miss Marple. "I was making enquiries at the Golden Boar where I understand the coach party assembles tomorrow morning. They are making quite an early start. Nine o'clock, I understand."

"Oh dear. I hope you will not find it too fatiguing."

"Oh, I don't think so. I gather we are going to a place called—now wait a minute, what was it called?—Stirling St. Mary. Something like that. And it does not seem to be very far away. There's an interesting church to see on the way and a castle. In the afternoon there is a quite pleasant garden, not too many acres; but some special flowers. I feel sure that after this very nice rest that I have

had here, I shall be quite all right. I understand now that I would have been very tired if I had had these days of climbing up cliffsides and all the rest of it."

"Well, you must rest this afternoon, so as to be fresh for tomorrow," said Mrs. Glynne, as they went into the house. "Miss Marple has been to visit the church," said Mrs. Glynne to Clotilde.

"I'm afraid there is not very much to see," said Clotilde. "Victorian glass of a most hideous kind, I think myself. No expense spared. I'm afraid my uncle was partly to blame. He was very pleased with those rather crude reds and blues."

"Very crude. Very vulgar, I always think," said Lavinia Glynne.

Miss Marple settled down after lunch to have a nap, and she did not join her hostesses until nearly dinnertime. After dinner a good deal of chat went on until it was bedtime. Miss Marple set the tone in remembrances ... Remembrances of her own youth, her early days, places she had visited, travels or tours she had made, occasional people she had known.

She went to bed tired, with a sense of failure. She had learned nothing more, possibly because there was nothing more to learn. A fishing expedition where the fish did not rise—possibly because there were no fish there. Or it could be that she did not know the right bait to use?

Eleven

ACCIDENT

I

Miss Marple's tea was brought at seven thirty the following morning so as to allow her plenty of time to get up and pack her few belongings. She was just closing her small suitcase when there was a rather hurried tap on the door and Clotilde came in, looking upset.

"Oh dear, Miss Marple, there is a young man downstairs who has called to see you. Emlyn Price. He is on the tour with you and they sent him here."

"Of course, I remember him. Yes. Quite young?"

"Oh yes. Very modern-looking, and a lot of hair and all that, but he has really come to—well, to break some bad news to you. There has been, I am sorry to say, an accident."

"An accident?" Miss Marple stared. "You mean—to the coach? There has been an accident on the road? Someone has been hurt?"

"No. No, it was not the coach. There was no trouble there. It was in the course of the expedition yesterday afternoon. There was a great deal of wind you may remember, though I don't think that had anything to do with it. People strayed about a bit, I think. There is a regular path, but you can also climb up and go across the downs. Both ways lead to the Memorial Tower on the top of Bonaventure—"

where they were all making for. People got separated a bit and I suppose, really, there was no one actually guiding them or looking after them which, perhaps, there ought to have been. People aren't very sure-footed always and the slope overhanging the gorge is very steep. There was a bad fall of stones or rocks which came crashing down the hillside and knocked someone out on the path below."

"Oh dear," said Miss Marple, "I am sorry. I am most terribly sorry. Who was it who was hurt?"

"A Miss Temple or Tenderdon, I understand."

"Elizabeth Temple," said Miss Marple. "Oh dear, I am sorry. I talked to her a good deal. I sat in the next seat to her on the coach. She is, I believe, a retired schoolmistress, a very well known one."

"Of course," said Clotilde, "I know her quite well. She was Headmistress of Fallowfield, quite a famous school. I'd no idea she was on this tour. She retired as Headmistress, I think a year or two ago, and there is a new, rather young Headmistress there now with rather advanced progressive ideas. But Miss Temple is not very old, really, she's about sixty, I should think, and very active, fond of climbing and walking and all the rest of it. This really seems *most* unfortunate. I hope she's not badly hurt. I haven't heard any details yet."

"This is quite ready now," said Miss Marple, snapping down the lid of her suitcase. "I will come down at once and see Mr. Price."

Clotilde seized the suitcase.

"Let me. I can carry this perfectly. Come down with me, and be careful of the stairs."

Miss Marple came down. Emlyn Price was waiting for her. His hair was looking even wilder than usual and he was wearing a splendid array of fancy boots and a leather jerkin and brilliant emerald green trousers.

"Such an unfortunate business," he said, seizing Miss Marple's hand. "I thought I'd come along myself and—well, break it to you about the accident. I expect Miss Bradbury-Scott has told you. It's Miss Temple. You know. The school dame. I don't know quite what she was doing or what happened, but some stones, or rather boulders, rolled down from above. It's rather a precipitous slope and

it knocked her out and they had to take her off to hospital with concussion last night. I gather she's rather bad. Anyway, the tour for today is cancelled and we are stopping on here tonight."

"Oh dear," said Miss Marple, "I am sorry. I'm very sorry."

"I think they've decided not to go on today because they really have to wait and see what the medical report is, so we are proposing to spend one more night here at the Golden Boar and to rearrange the tour a little, so that perhaps we shall miss out altogether going to Grangmering which we were going to do tomorrow, and which is not very interesting really, or so they say. Mrs. Sandbourne has gone off early to the hospital to see how things are this morning. She's going to join us at the Golden Boar for coffee at 11 o'clock. I thought perhaps you'd like to come along and hear the latest news."

"I'll certainly come along with you," said Miss Marple. "Of course. At once."

She turned to say good-bye to Clotilde and Mrs. Glynne who had joined her.

"I must thank you so much," she said. "You have been so kind and it has been so delightful to have these two nights here. I feel so rested and everything. Most unfortunate this has occurred."

"If you would like to spend another night," said Mrs. Glynne, "I am sure—" She looked at Clotilde.

It occurred to Miss Marple, who had as sharp a sideways glance as anyone could desire, that Clotilde had a slightly disapproving look. She almost shook her head, though it was such a small movement that it was hardly noticeable. But she was, Miss Marple thought, hushing down the suggestion that Mrs. Glynne was making.

"... although of course I expect it would be nicer for you to be with the others and to—"

"Oh yes, I think it would be better," said Miss Marple. "I shall know then what the plans are and what to do about things, and perhaps I could be of help in some way. One never knows. So thank you again very much. It will not be difficult, I expect, to get a room at the Golden Boar." She looked at Emlyn, who said reassuringly, "That'll be all right. Several rooms have been vacated today, They

won't be full at all. Mrs. Sandbourne, I think, has booked for all the party to stay there tonight, and tomorrow we shall see—well, we shall see how this all goes on."

Good-byes were said again and thanks. Emlyn Price took Miss Marple's belongings and started out at a good striding pace.

"It's really only just round the corner, and then the first street to the left," he said.

"Yes, I passed it yesterday, I think. Poor Miss Temple. I do hope she's not badly hurt."

"I think she is rather," said Emlyn Price. "Of course, you know what doctors are, and hospital people. They say the same thing always: 'as well as can be expected.' There's no local hospital—they had to take her to Carristown which is about eight miles away. Anyway, Mrs. Sandbourne will be back with the news by the time we've fixed you up at the hotel."

They got there to find the tour assembled in the coffee room and coffee and morning buns and pastries were being served. Mr. and Mrs. Butler were talking at the moment.

"Oh, it's just too, too tragic this happening," said Mrs. Butler. "Just too upsetting, isn't it? Just when we were all so happy and enjoying everything so much. Poor Miss Temple. And I always thought she was very sure-footed. But there, you know, you never can tell, can you, Henry?"

"No, indeed," said Henry. "No, indeed. I am wondering really—yes, our time's very short you know—whether we hadn't better—well, give up this tour at this point here. Not continue with it. It seems to me that there's bound to be a bit of difficulty resuming things until we know definitely. If this was—well—I mean, if this should be so serious that it could prove fatal, there might—well—I mean there might have to be an inquest or something of that kind."

"Oh Henry, don't say dreadful things like that!"

"I'm sure," said Miss Cooke, "that you are being a little too pessimistic, Mr. Butler. I am sure that things couldn't be as serious as that."

In his foreign voice Mr. Caspar said: "But yes, they are serious. I hear yesterday. When Mrs. Sandbourne talk on telephone to doctor.

It is very, very serious. They say she has concussion bad—very bad. A special doctor he is coming to look at her and see if he can operate or if impossible. Yes—it is all very bad.”

“Oh dear,” said Miss Lumley. “If there’s any doubt, perhaps we ought to go home, Mildred. I must look up the trains, I think.” She turned to Mrs. Butler. “You see, I have made arrangements about my cats with the neighbours, and if I was delayed a day or two it might make great difficulties for *everyone*.”

“Well, it’s no good our working ourselves up too much,” said Mrs. Riseley-Porter, in her deep, authoritative voice. “Joanna, put this bun in the wastepaper basket, will you? It is really quite uneatable. Most unpleasant jam. But I don’t want to leave it on my plate. It might make for bad feeling.”

Joanna got rid of the bun. She said:

“Do you think it would be all right if Emlyn and I went out for a walk? I mean, just saw something of the town. It’s not much good our sitting about here, making gloomy remarks, is it? We can’t *do* anything.”

“I think you’d be very wise to go out,” said Miss Cooke.

“Yes, you go along,” said Miss Barrow before Mrs. Riseley-Porter could speak.

Miss Cooke and Miss Barrow looked at each other and sighed, shaking their heads.

“The grass was very slippery,” said Miss Barrow. “I slid once or twice myself, you know, on that very short turf.”

“And the stones, too,” said Miss Cooke. “Quite a shower of small stones fell down just as I was turning a corner on the path. Yes, one struck me on the shoulder quite sharply.”

II

Tea, coffee, biscuits and cakes despatched, everyone seemed somewhat dissociated and ill at ease. When a catastrophe has occurred, it is very difficult to know what is the proper way to meet it. Everyone had given their view, had expressed surprise and

distress. They were now awaiting news and at the same time had a slight hankering after some form of sightseeing, some interest to carry them through the morning. Lunch would not be served until one o'clock and they really felt that to sit around and repeat their same remarks would be rather a gloomy business.

Miss Cooke and Miss Barrow rose as one woman and explained that it was necessary for them to do a little shopping. One or two things they needed, and they also wished to go to the post office and buy stamps.

"I want to send off one or two postcards. And I want to enquire about postal dues on a letter to China," said Miss Barrow.

"And I want to match some wools," said Miss Cooke. "And also it seemed to me there was rather an interesting building on the other side of the Market Square."

"I think it would do us all good to get out," said Miss Barrow.

Colonel and Mrs. Walker also rose, and suggested to Mr. and Mrs. Butler that they too might go out and see what there was to see. Mrs. Butler expressed hopes of an antique shop.

"Only I don't really mean a real antique shop. More what you would call a junk shop. Sometimes you can pick up some really interesting things there."

They all trooped out. Emlyn Price had already sidled to the door and disappeared in pursuit of Joanna without troubling to use conversation to explain his departure. Mrs. Riseley-Porter, having made a belated attempt to call her niece back, said she thought that at least the lounge would be rather more pleasant to sit in. Miss Lumley agreed—Mr. Caspar escorted the ladies with the air of a foreign equerry.

Professor Wanstead and Miss Marple remained.

"I think myself," said Professor Wanstead, addressing Miss Marple, "that it would be pleasant to sit outside the hotel. There is a small terrace giving on the street. If I might persuade you?"

Miss Marple thanked him and rose to her feet. She had hardly exchanged a word so far with Professor Wanstead. He had several learned looking books with him, one of which he was usually perusing. Even in the coach he continued to try and read.

"But perhaps you too want to shop," he said. "For myself, I would prefer to wait somewhere peacefully for the return of Mrs. Sandbourne. It is important, I think, that we should know exactly what we are in for."

"I quite agree with you, as to that," said Miss Marple. "I did a certain amount of walking round the town yesterday and I don't feel any necessity to do so again today. I'd rather wait here in case there is anything I can do to help. Not that I suppose there is, but one never knows."

They moved together through the hotel door and round the corner to where there was a little square of garden with a raised stone walk close to the wall of the hotel and on which there were various forms of basket chairs. There was no one there at the moment so they sat down. Miss Marple looked thoughtfully at her vis-à-vis. At his corrugated and wrinkled face, his bushy brows, his luxuriant head of grey hair. He walked with a slight stoop. He had an interesting face, Miss Marple decided. His voice was dry and caustic, a professional man of some kind, she thought.

"I am not wrong, am I," said Professor Wanstead. "You *are* Miss Jane Marple?"

"Yes, I am Jane Marple."

She was slightly surprised, though for no particular reason. They had not been long enough together for people to be identified by the other travellers. The last two nights she had not been with the rest of the party. It was quite natural.

"I thought so," said Professor Wanstead, "from a description I have had of you."

"A description of me?" Miss Marple was again slightly surprised.

"Yes, I had a description of you—" he paused for a moment. His voice was not exactly lowered, but it lost volume, although she could still hear it quite easily "—from Mr. Rafiel."

"Oh," said Miss Marple, startled. "From Mr. Rafiel."

"You are surprised?"

"Well, yes, I am rather."

"I don't know that you should be."

"I didn't expect—" began Miss Marple and then stopped.

Professor Wanstead did not speak. He was merely sitting, looking at her intently. In a minute or two, thought Miss Marple to herself, he will say to me, "What symptoms exactly, dear lady? Any discomfort in swallowing? Any lack of sleep? Digestion in good order?" She was almost sure now that he was a doctor.

"When did he describe me to you? That must have been—"

"You were going to say some time ago—some weeks ago. Before his death—that is so. He told me that you would be on this tour."

"And he knew that you would be on it too—that you were going on it."

"You can put it that way," said Professor Wanstead. "He said," he continued, "that you would be travelling on this tour, that he had in fact arranged for you to be travelling on this tour."

"It was very kind of him," said Miss Marple. "Very kind indeed. I was most surprised when I found he'd booked me. Such a treat. Which I could not have afforded for myself."

"Yes," said Professor Wanstead. "Very well put." He nodded his head as one who applauds a good performance by a pupil.

"It is sad that it has been interrupted in this fashion," said Miss Marple. "Very sad indeed. When I am sure we were all enjoying ourselves so much."

"Yes," said Professor Wanstead. "Yes, very sad. And unexpected, do you think, or not unexpected?"

"Now what do you mean by that, Professor Wanstead?"

His lips curled in a slight smile as he met her challenging look.

"Mr. Rafiel," he said, "spoke to me about you at some length, Miss Marple. He suggested that I should be on this tour with you. I should in due course almost certainly make your acquaintance, since members in a tour inevitably do make each other's acquaintance, though it usually takes a day or two for them to split up, as it were, into possible groupings led by similar tastes or interests. And he further suggested to me that I should, shall we say, keep an eye on you."

"Keep an eye on me?" said Miss Marple, showing some slight displeasure. "And for what reason?"

"I think reasons of protection. He wanted to be quite sure that nothing should happen to you."

"Happen to me? What should happen to me, I should like to know?"

"Possibly what happened to Miss Elizabeth Temple," said Professor Wanstead.

Joanna Crawford came round the corner of the hotel. She was carrying a shopping basket. She passed them, nodding a little, she looked towards them with slight curiosity and went on down the street. Professor Wanstead did not speak until she had gone out of sight.

"A nice girl," he said, "at least I think so. Content at present to be a beast of burden to an autocratic aunt, but I have no doubt will reach the age of rebellion fairly soon."

"What did you mean by what you said just now?" said Miss Marple, uninterested for the moment in Joanna's possible rebellion.

"That is a question which, perhaps, owing to what has happened, we shall have to discuss."

"You mean because of the accident?"

"Yes. If it was an accident."

"Do you think it *wasn't* an accident?"

"Well, I think it's just possible. That's all."

"I don't of course know anything about it," said Miss Marple, hesitating.

"No. You were absent from the scene. You were—shall I put it this way—were you just possibly on duty elsewhere?"

Miss Marple was silent for a moment. She looked at Professor Wanstead once or twice and then she said:

"I don't think I know exactly what you mean."

"You are being careful. You are quite right to be careful."

"I have made it a habit," said Miss Marple.

"To be careful?"

"I should not put it exactly like that, but I have made a point of being always ready to disbelieve as well as believe anything that is told to me."

"Yes, and you are quite right too. You don't know anything about me. You know my name from the passenger list of a very agreeable tour visiting castles and historic houses and splendid gardens. Possibly the gardens are what will interest you most."

"Possibly."

"There are other people here too who are interested in gardens."

"Or profess to be interested in gardens."

"Ah," said Professor Wanstead. "You have noticed that."

He went on. "Well, it was my part, or at any rate to begin with, to observe you, to watch what you were doing, to be near at hand in case there was any possibility of—well, we might call it roughly—dirty work of any kind. But things are slightly altered now. You must make up your mind if I am your enemy or your ally."

"Perhaps you are right," said Miss Marple. "You put it very clearly but you have not given me any information about yourself yet on which to judge. You were a friend, I presume, of the late Mr. Rafiel?"

"No," said Professor Wanstead, "I was not a friend of Mr. Rafiel. I had met him once or twice. Once on a committee of a hospital, once at some other public event. I knew about him. He, I gather, also knew about me. If I say to you, Miss Marple, that I am a man of some eminence in my own profession, you may think me a man of bounding conceit."

"I don't think so," said Miss Marple. "I should say, if you say that about yourself, that you are probably speaking the truth. You are, perhaps, a medical man."

"Ah. You are perceptive, Miss Marple. Yes, you are quite perceptive. I have a medical degree, but I have a speciality too. I am a pathologist and psychologist. I don't carry credentials about with me. You will probably have to take my word up to a certain point, though I can show you letters addressed to me, and possibly official documents that might convince you. I undertake mainly specialist work in connection with medical jurisprudence. To put it in perfectly plain everyday language, I am interested in the different types of criminal brain. That has been a study of mine for many years. I have written books on the subject, some of them violently disputed, some of them which have attracted adherence to my ideas. I do not do

very arduous work nowadays, I spend my time mainly writing up my subject, stressing certain points that have appealed to me. From time to time I come across things that strike me as interesting. Things that I want to study more closely. This I am afraid must seem rather tedious to you."

"Not at all," said Miss Marple. "I am hoping perhaps, from what you are saying now, that you will be able to explain to me certain things which Mr. Rafiel did not see fit to explain to me. He asked me to embark upon a certain project but he gave me no useful information on which to work. He left me to accept it and proceed, as it were, completely in the dark. It seemed to me extremely foolish of him to treat the matter in that way."

"But you accepted it?"

"I accepted it. I will be quite honest with you. I had a financial incentive."

"Did that weigh with you?"

Miss Marple was silent for a moment and then she said slowly,

"You may not believe it, but my answer to that is, 'Not really.'"

"I am not surprised. But your interest was aroused. That is what you are trying to tell me."

"Yes. My interest was aroused. I had known Mr. Rafiel not well, casually, but for a certain period of time—some weeks in fact—in the West Indies. I see you know about it, more or less."

"I know that that was where Mr. Rafiel met you and where—shall I say—you two collaborated."

Miss Marple looked at him rather doubtfully. "Oh," she said, "he said that, did he?" She shook her head.

"Yes, he did," said Professor Wanstead. "He said you had a remarkable flair for criminal matters."

Miss Marple raised her eyebrows as she looked at him.

"And I suppose that seems to you most unlikely," she said. "It surprises you."

"I seldom allow myself to be surprised at what happens," said Professor Wanstead. "Mr. Rafiel was a very shrewd and astute man, a good judge of people. He thought that you, too, were a good judge of people."

"I would not set myself up as a good judge of people," said Miss Marple. "I would only say that certain people remind me of certain other people that I have known, and that therefore I can presuppose a certain likeness between the way they would act. If you think I know all about what I am supposed to be doing here, you are wrong."

"By accident more than design," said Professor Wanstead, "we seem to have settled here in a particularly suitable spot for discussion of certain matters. We do not appear to be overlooked, we cannot easily be overheard, we are not near a window or a door and there is no balcony or window overhead. In fact, we can talk."

"I should appreciate that," said Miss Marple. "I am stressing the fact that I am myself completely in the dark as to what I am doing or supposed to be doing. I don't know why Mr. Rafiel wanted it that way."

"I think I can guess that. He wanted you to approach a certain set of facts, of happenings, unbiased by what anyone would tell you first."

"So you are not going to tell me anything either?" Miss Marple sounded irritated. "Really!" she said, "there are limits."

"Yes," said Professor Wanstead. He smiled suddenly. "I agree with you. We must do away with some of these limits. I am going to tell you certain facts that will make certain things fairly clear to you. You in turn may be able to tell me certain facts."

"I rather doubt it," said Miss Marple. "One or two rather peculiar indications perhaps, but indications are not facts."

"Therefore—" said Professor Wanstead, and paused.

"For goodness' sake, tell me something," said Miss Marple.

Twelve

A CONSULTATION

"I'm not going to make a long story of things. I'll explain quite simply how I came into this matter. I act as confidential adviser from time to time for the Home Office. I am also in touch with certain institutions. There are certain establishments which, in the event of crime, provide board and lodging for certain types of criminal who have been found guilty of certain acts. They remain there at what is termed Her Majesty's pleasure, sometimes for a definite length of time and in direct association with their age. If they are below a certain age they have to be received in some place of detention specially indicated. You understand that, no doubt."

"Yes, I understand quite well what you mean."

"Usually I am consulted fairly soon after whatever the—shall we call it—crime has happened, to judge such matters as treatment, possibilities in the case, prognosis favourable or unfavourable, all the various words. They do not mean much and I will not go into them. But occasionally also I am consulted by a responsible Head of such an institution for a particular reason. In this matter I received a communication from a certain Department which was passed to me through the Home Office. I went to visit the Head of this institution. In fact, the Governor responsible for the prisoners or patients or whatever you like to call them. He was by way of being a friend of

mine. A friend of fairly long standing though not one with whom I was on terms of great intimacy. I went down to the institution in question and the Governor laid his troubles before me. They referred to one particular inmate. He was not satisfied about this inmate. He had certain doubts. This was the case of a young man or one who had been a young man, in fact little more than a boy, when he came there. That was now several years ago. As time went on, and after the present Governor had taken up his own residence there (he had not been there at the original arrival of this prisoner), he became worried. Not because he himself was a professional man, but because he was a man of experience of criminal patients and prisoners. To put it quite simply, this had been a boy who from his early youth had been completely unsatisfactory. You can call it by what term you like. A young delinquent, a young thug, a bad lot, a person of diminished responsibility. There are many terms. Some of them fit, some of them don't fit, some of them are merely puzzling. He was a criminal type. That was certain. He had joined gangs, he had beaten up people, he was a thief, he had stolen, he had embezzled, he had taken part in swindles, he had initiated certain frauds. In fact, he was a son who would be any father's despair."

"Oh, I see," said Miss Marple.

"And what do you see, Miss Marple?"

"Well, what I think I see is that you are talking of Mr. Rafiel's son."

"You are quite right. I am talking of Mr. Rafiel's son. What do you know about him?"

"Nothing," said Miss Marple. "I only heard—and that was yesterday—that Mr. Rafiel had a delinquent, or unsatisfactory, if we like to put it mildly, son. A son with a criminal record. I know very little about him. Was he Mr. Rafiel's only son?"

"Yes, he was Mr. Rafiel's only son. But Mr. Rafiel also had two daughters. One of them died when she was fourteen, the elder daughter married quite happily but had no children."

"Very sad for him."

"Possibly," said Professor Wanstead. "One never knows. His wife died young and I think it possible that *her* death saddened him very much, though he was never willing to show it. How much he cared

for his son and daughters I don't know. He provided for them. He did his best for them. He did his best for his son, but what his feelings were one cannot say. He was not an easy man to read that way. I think his whole life and interest lay in his profession of making money. It was the making of it, like all great financiers, that interested him. Not the actual money which he secured by it. That, as you might say, was sent out like a good servant to earn more money in more interesting and unexpected ways. He enjoyed finance. He loved finance. He thought of very little else.

"I think he did all that was possible for his son. He got him out of scrapes at school, he employed good lawyers to get him released from Court proceedings whenever possible, but the final blow came, perhaps presaged by some early happenings. The boy was taken to Court on a charge of assault against a young girl. It was said to be assault and rape and he suffered a term of imprisonment for it, with some leniency shown because of his youth. But later, a second and really serious charge was brought against him."

"He killed a girl," said Miss Marple. "Is that right? That's what I heard."

"He lured a girl away from her home. It was some time before her body was found. She had been strangled. And afterwards her face and head had been disfigured by some heavy stones or rocks, presumably to prevent her identity being made known."

"Not a very nice business," said Miss Marple, in her most old-ladylike tone.

Professor Wanstead looked at her for a moment or two.

"You describe it that way?"

"It is how it seems to me," said Miss Marple. "I don't like that sort of thing. I never have. If you expect me to feel sympathy, regret, urge an unhappy childhood, blame bad environment; if you expect me in fact to weep over him, this young murderer of yours, I do not feel inclined so to do. I do not like evil beings who do evil things."

"I am delighted to hear it," said Professor Wanstead. "What I suffer in the course of my profession from people weeping and gnashing their teeth, and blaming everything on some happening in the past, you would hardly believe. If people knew the bad

environments that people have had, the unkindness, the difficulties of their lives and the fact that nevertheless they can come through unscathed, I don't think they would so often take the opposite point of view. The misfits are to be pitied, yes, they are to be pitied if I may say so for the genes with which they are born and over which they have no control themselves. I pity epileptics in the same way. If you know what genes are—"

"I know, more or less," said Miss Marple. "It's common knowledge nowadays, though naturally I have no exact chemical or technical knowledge."

"The Governor, a man of experience, told me exactly why he was so anxious to have my verdict. He had felt increasingly in his experience of this particular inmate that, in plain words, the boy was *not* a killer. He didn't think he was the type of a killer, he was like no killer he had ever seen before, he was of the opinion that the boy was the kind of criminal type who would never go straight no matter what treatment was given to him, would never reform himself; and for whom nothing in one sense of the word could be done, but at the same time he felt increasingly certain that the verdict upon him had been a wrong one. He did not believe that the boy had killed a girl, first strangled her and then disfigured her after rolling her body into a ditch. He just couldn't bring himself to believe it. He'd looked over the facts of the case, which seemed to be fully proved. This boy had known the girl, he had been seen with her on several different occasions before the crime. They had presumably slept together and there were other points. His car had been seen in the neighbourhood. He himself had been recognized and all the rest of it. A perfectly fair case. But my friend was unhappy about it, he said. He was a man who had a very strong feeling for justice. He wanted a different opinion. He wanted, in fact, not the police side which he knew, he wanted a professional medical view. That was my field, he said. My line of country entirely. He wanted me to see this young man and talk with him, visit him, make a professional appraisal of him and give him my opinion."

"Very interesting," said Miss Marple. "Yes, I call that very interesting. After all, your friend—I mean your Governor—was a man

of experience, a man who loved justice. He was a man whom you'd be willing to listen to. Presumably then, you did listen to him."

"Yes," said Professor Wanstead, "I was deeply interested. I saw the subject, as I will call him, I approached him from several different attitudes. I talked to him, I discussed various changes likely to occur in the law. I told him it might be possible to bring down a lawyer, a Queen's Counsel, to see what points there might be in his favour, and other things. I approached him as a friend but also as an enemy so that I could see how he responded to different approaches, and I also made a good many physical tests, such as we use very frequently nowadays. I will not go into those with you because they are wholly technical."

"Then what did you think in the end?"

"I thought," said Professor Wanstead, "I thought my friend was likely to be right. I did not think that Michael Rafiel was a murderer."

"What about the earlier case you mentioned?"

"That told against him, of course. Not in the jury's mind, because of course they did not hear about that until after the judge's summing up, but certainly in the judge's mind. It told against him, but I made a few enquiries myself afterwards. He had assaulted a girl. He had conceivably raped her, but he had not attempted to strangle her and in my opinion—I have seen a great many cases which come before the Assizes—it seemed to me highly unlikely that there was a very definite case of rape. Girls, you must remember, are far more ready to be raped nowadays than they used to be. Their mothers insist, very often, that they should call it rape. The girl in question had had several boyfriends who had gone further than friendship. I did not think it counted very greatly as evidence against him. The actual murder case—yes, that was undoubtedly murder—but I continued to feel by all tests, physical tests, mental tests, psychological tests, none of them accorded with this particular crime."

"Then what did you do?"

"I communicated with Mr. Rafiel. I told him that I would like an interview with him on a certain matter concerning his son. I went to him. I told him what I thought, what the Governor thought, that we

had no evidence, that there were no grounds of appeal, at present, but that we both believed that a miscarriage of justice had been committed. I said I thought possibly an enquiry might be held, it might be an expensive business, it might bring out certain facts that could be laid before the Home Office, it might be successful, it might not. There might be something there, some evidence if you looked for it. I said it would be expensive to look for it but I presumed that would make no difference to anyone in his position. I had realized by that time that he was a sick man, a very ill man. He told me so himself. He told me that he had been in expectation of an early death, that he'd been warned two years ago that death could not be delayed for what they first thought was about a year, but later they realized that he would last rather longer because of his unusual physical strength. I asked him what he felt about his son."

"And what did he feel about his son?" said Miss Marple.

"Ah, you want to know that. So did I. He was, I think, extremely honest with me even if—"

"—even if rather ruthless?" said Miss Marple.

"Yes, Miss Marple. You are using the right word. He was a ruthless man, but he was a just man and an honest man. He said, 'I've known what my son was like for many years. I have not tried to change him because I don't believe that anyone could change him. He is made a certain way. He is crooked. He's a bad lot. He'll always be in trouble. He's dishonest. Nobody, nothing could make him go straight. I am well assured of that. I have in a sense washed my hands of him. Though not legally or outwardly; he has always had money if he required it. Help legal or otherwise if he gets into trouble. I have done always what I could do. Well, let us say if I had a son who was a spastic who was sick, who was epileptic, I would do what I could for him. If you have a son who is sick morally, shall we say, and for whom there is no cure, I have done what I could also. No more and no less. What can I do for him now?' I told him that it depended what he wanted to do. 'There's no difficulty about that,' he said. 'I am handicapped but I can see quite clearly what I want to do. I want to get him vindicated. I want to get him released from confinement. I want to get him free to continue to lead his own

life as best he can lead it. If he must lead it in further dishonesties, then he must lead it that way. I will leave provision for him, to do for him everything that can be done. I don't want him suffering, imprisoned, cut off from his life because of a perfectly natural and unfortunate mistake. If somebody else, some other man killed that girl, I want the fact brought to light and recognized. I want justice for Michael. But I am handicapped. I am a very ill man. My time is measured now not in years or months but in weeks.'

"Lawyers, I suggested—I know a firm—He cut me short. 'Your lawyers will be useless. You can employ them but they will be useless. I must arrange what I can arrange in such a limited time.' He offered me a large fee to undertake the search for the truth and to undertake everything possible with no expense spared. 'I can do next to nothing myself. Death may come at any moment. I empower you as my chief help, and to assist you at my request I will try to find a certain person.' He wrote down a name for me. Miss Jane Marple. He said 'I don't want to give you her address. I want you to meet her in surroundings of my own choosing,' and he then told me of this tour, this charming, harmless, innocent tour of historic houses, castles and gardens. He would provide me with a reservation on it ahead for a certain date. 'Miss Jane Marple,' he said, 'will also be on that tour. You will meet her there, you will encounter her casually, and thus it will be seen clearly to be a casual meeting.'

"I was to choose my own time and moment to make myself known to you if I thought that that would be the better way. You have already asked me if I or my friend, the Governor, had any reason to suspect or know of any other person who might have been guilty of the murder. My friend the Governor certainly suggested nothing of the kind, and he had already taken up the matter with the police officer who had been in charge of the case. A most reliable detective-superintendent with very good experience in these matters."

"No other man was suggested? No other friend of the girl's? No other former friend who might have been supplanted?"

"There was nothing of that kind to find. I asked him to tell me a little about you. He did not however consent to do so. He told me you were elderly. He told me that you were a person who knew about people. He told me one other thing." He paused.

"What's the other thing?" said Miss Marple. "I have some natural curiosity, you know. I really can't think of any other advantage I conceivably could have. I am slightly deaf. My eyesight is not quite as good as it used to be. I cannot really think that I have any advantages beyond the fact that I may, I suppose, seem rather foolish and simple, and am in fact, what used to be called in rather earlier days an 'old pussy.' I *am* an old pussy. Is that the sort of thing he said?"

"No," said Professor Wanstead. "What he said was he thought you had a very fine sense of evil."

"Oh," said Miss Marple. She was taken aback.

Professor Wanstead was watching her.

"Would you say that was true?" he said.

Miss Marple was quiet for quite a long time. At last she said,

"Perhaps it is. Yes, perhaps. I have at several different times in my life been apprehensive, have recognized that there was evil in the neighbourhood, the surroundings, that the environment of someone who was evil was near me, connected with what was happening."

She looked at him suddenly and smiled.

"It's rather, you know," she said, "like being born with a very keen sense of smell. You can smell a leak of gas when other people can't do so. You can distinguish one perfume from another very easily. I had an aunt once," continued Miss Marple thoughtfully, "who said she could smell when people told a lie. She said there was quite a distinctive odour came to her. Their noses twitched, she said, and then the smell came. I don't know if it was true or not, but—well, on several occasions she was quite remarkable. She said to my uncle once, 'Don't, Jack, engage that young man you were talking to this morning. He was telling you lies the whole time he was talking.' That turned out to be quite true."

"A sense of evil," said Professor Wanstead. "Well, if you do sense evil, tell me. I shall be glad to know. I don't think I have a particular sense of evil myself. Ill health, yes, but not—not evil up here." He tapped his forehead.

"I'd better tell you briefly how I came into things now," said Miss Marple. "Mr. Rafiel, as you know, died. His lawyers asked me to come and see them, apprised me of his proposition. I received a letter from him which explained nothing. After that I heard nothing more for some little time. Then I got a letter from the company who run these tours saying that Mr. Rafiel before his death had made a reservation for me knowing that I should enjoy a trip very much, and wanting to give it me as a surprise present. I was very astonished but took it as an indication of the first step that I was to undertake. I was to go on this tour and presumably in the course of the tour some other indication or hint or clue or direction would come to me. I think it did. Yesterday, no, the day before, I was received on my arrival here by three ladies who live at an old manor house here and who very kindly extended an invitation to me. They had heard from Mr. Rafiel, they said, who had written some time before his death, saying that a very old friend of his would be coming on this tour and would they be kind enough to put her up for two or three days as he thought she was not fit to attempt the particular ascent of this rather difficult climb up the headland to where there was a memorial tower which was the principal event of yesterday's tour."

"And you took that also as an indication of what you were to do?"

"Of course," said Miss Marple. "There can be no other reason for it. He was not a man to shower benefits for nothing, out of compassion for an old lady who wasn't good at walking up hills. No. He *wanted* me to go there."

"And you went there? And what then?"

"Nothing," said Miss Marple. "Three sisters."

"Three weird sisters?"

"They ought to have been," said Miss Marple, "but I don't think they were. They didn't seem to be anyway. I don't know yet. I suppose they may have been—they may be, I mean. They seem ordinary enough. They didn't belong to this house. It had belonged

to an uncle of theirs and they'd come here to live some years ago. They are in rather poor circumstances, they are amiable, not particularly interesting. All slightly different in type. They do not appear to have been well acquainted with Mr. Rafiel. Any conversation I have had with them appears to yield nothing."

"So you learnt nothing during your stay?"

"I learnt the facts of the case you've just told me. Not from them. From an elderly servant, who started her reminiscences dating back to the time of the uncle. She knew of Mr. Rafiel only as a name. But she was eloquent on the theme of the murder: it had all started with the visit here of a son of Mr. Rafiel's who was a bad lot, of how the girl had fallen in love with him and that he'd strangled the girl, and how sad and tragic and terrible it all was. 'With bells on,' as you might say," said Miss Marple, using a phrase of her youth. "Plenty of exaggeration, but it was a nasty story, and she seemed to believe that the police view was that this hadn't been his only murder—"

"It didn't seem to you to connect up with the three weird sisters?"

"No, only that they'd been the guardians of the girl—and had loved her dearly. No more than that."

"They might know something—something about another man?"

"Yes—that's what we want, isn't it? The other man—a man of brutality, who wouldn't hesitate to bash in a girl's head after he'd killed her. The kind of man who could be driven frantic with jealousy. There are men like that."

"No other curious things happened at The Old Manor?"

"Not really. One of the sisters, the youngest I think, kept talking about the garden. She sounded as though she was a very keen gardener, but she couldn't be because she didn't know the names of half the things. I laid a trap or two for her, mentioning special rare shrubs and saying did she know it? and yes, she said, wasn't it a wonderful plant? I said it was not very hardy and she agreed. But she didn't know anything about plants. That reminds me—"

"Reminds you of what?"

"Well, you'll think I'm just silly about gardens and plants, but I mean one does *know* things about them. I mean, I know a few things about birds and I know some things about gardens."

"And I gather that it's not birds but gardens that are troubling you."

"Yes. Have you noticed two middle-aged women on this tour? Miss Barrow and Miss Cooke."

"Yes. I've noticed them. Pair of middle-aged spinsters travelling together."

"That's right. Well, I've found out something odd about Miss Cooke. That is her name, isn't it? I mean it's her name on the tour."

"Why—has she got another name?"

"I think so. She's the same person who visited me—I won't say visited me exactly, but she was outside my garden fence in St. Mary Mead, the village where I live. She expressed pleasure at my garden and talked about gardening with me. Told me she was living in the village and working in somebody's garden, who'd moved into a new house there. I rather think," said Miss Marple, "yes, I rather think that the whole thing was lies. There again, she knew nothing about gardening. She pretended to but it wasn't true."

"Why do you think she came there?"

"I'd no idea at the time. She said her name was Bartlett—and the name of the woman she said she was living with began with 'H,' though I can't remember it for the moment. Her hair was not only differently done but it was a different colour and her clothes were of a different style. I didn't recognize her at first on this trip. Just wondered why her face was vaguely familiar. And then suddenly it came to me. Because of the dyed hair. I said where I had seen her before. She admitted that she'd been there—but pretended that she, too, hadn't recognized *me*. All lies."

"And what's your opinion about all that?"

"Well, one thing certainly—Miss Cooke (to give her her present name) came to St. Mary Mead just to have a look at me—so that she'd be quite sure to be able to recognize me when we met again —"

"And why was that felt to be necessary?"

"I don't know. There are two possibilities. I'm not sure that I like one of them very much."

"I don't know," said Professor Wanstead, "that I like it very much either."

They were both silent for a minute or two, and then Professor Wanstead said—

"I don't like what happened to Elizabeth Temple. You've talked to her during this trip?"

"Yes, I have. When she's better I'd like to talk to her again—she could tell me—us—things about the girl who was murdered. She spoke to me of this girl—who had been at her school, who had been going to marry Mr. Rafiel's son—but didn't marry him. Instead she died. I asked how or why she died—and she answered with the word 'Love.' I took it as meaning a suicide—but it was murder. Murder through jealousy would fit. Another man. Some other man we've got to find. Miss Temple may be able to tell us who he was."

"No other sinister possibilities?"

"I think, really, it is casual information we need. I see no reason to believe that there is any sinister suggestion in any of the coach passengers—or any sinister suggestion about the people living in The Old Manor House. But one of those three sisters may have known or remembered something that the girl or Michael once said. Clotilde used to take the girl abroad. Therefore, she may know of something that occurred on some foreign trip perhaps. Something that the girl said or mentioned or did on some trip. Some man that the girl met. Something which has nothing to do with The Old Manor House here. It is difficult because only by talking, by casual information, can you get any clue. The second sister, Mrs. Glynne, married fairly early, has spent time, I gather, in India and in Africa. She may have heard of something through her husband, or through her husband's relations, through various things that are unconnected with The Old Manor House here although she has visited it from time to time. She knew the murdered girl presumably, but I should think she knew her much less well than the other two. But that does not mean that she may not know some significant *facts* about the girl. The third sister is more scatty, more localized, does not seem to have known the girl as well. But still, she too *may* have information

about possible lovers—or boyfriends—seen the girl with an unknown man. That's her, by the way, passing the hotel now."

Miss Marple, however occupied by her tête-à-tête, had not relinquished the habits of a lifetime. A public thoroughfare was always to her an observation post. All the passersby, either loitering or hurrying, had been noticed automatically.

"Anthea Bradbury-Scott—the one with the big parcel. She's going to the post office, I suppose. It's just round the corner, isn't it?"

"Looks a bit daft to me," said Professor Wanstead, "all that floating hair—grey hair too—a kind of Ophelia of fifty."

"I thought of Ophelia too, when I first saw her. Oh dear, I wish I knew what I ought to do next. Stay here at the Golden Boar for a day or two, or go on with the coach tour. It's like looking for a needle in a haystack. If you stick your fingers in it long enough, you ought to come up with something—even if one does get pricked in the process."

Thirteen

BLACK AND RED CHECK

I

Mrs. Sandbourne returned just as the party was sitting down to lunch. Her news was not good. Miss Temple was still unconscious. She certainly could not be moved for several days.

Having given the bulletin, Mrs. Sandbourne turned the conversation to practical matters. She produced suitable timetables of trains for those who wished to return to London and proposed suitable plans for the resumption of the tour on the morrow or the next day. She had a list of suitable short expeditions in the near neighbourhood for this afternoon—small groups in hired cars.

Professor Wanstead drew Miss Marple aside as they went out of the dining room—

"You may want to rest this afternoon. If not, I will call for you here in an hour's time. There is an interesting church you might care to see—?"

"That would be very nice," said Miss Marple.

II

Miss Marple sat quite still in the car that had come to fetch her. Professor Wanstead had called for her at the time he had said.

"I thought you might enjoy seeing this particular church. And a very pretty village, too," he explained. "There's no reason really why one should not enjoy the local sights when one can."

"It's very kind of you, I'm sure," Miss Marple had said.

She had looked at him with that slightly fluttery gaze of hers.

"Very kind," she said. "It just seems—well, I don't want to say it seems heartless, but well, you know what I mean."

"My dear lady, Miss Temple is not an old friend of yours or anything like that. Sad as this accident has been."

"Well," said Miss Marple again, "this is very kind of you."

Professor Wanstead had opened the door of the car and Miss Marple got into it. It was, she presumed, a hired car. A kindly thought to take an elderly lady to see one of the sights of the neighbourhood. He might have taken somebody younger, more interesting and certainly better looking. Miss Marple looked at him thoughtfully once or twice as they drove through the village. He was not looking at her. He was gazing out of his own window.

When they had left the village behind and were on a second class country road twisting round the hillside, he turned his head and said to her,

"We are not going to a church, I am afraid."

"No," said Miss Marple, "I thought perhaps we weren't."

"Yes, the idea would have come to you."

"Where are we going, may I ask?"

"We are going to a hospital, in Carristown."

"Ah yes, that was where Miss Temple was taken?"

It was a question, though it hardly needed to be one.

"Yes," he said. "Mrs. Sandbourne saw her and brought me back a letter from the Hospital Authorities. I have just finished talking to them on the telephone."

"Is she going on well?"

"No. Not going on very well."

"I see. At least—I hope I don't see," said Miss Marple.

"Her recovery is very problematical but there is nothing that can be done. She may not recover consciousness again. On the other hand she may have a few lucid intervals."

"And you are taking *me* there? Why? I am not a friend of hers, you know. I only just met her for the first time on this trip."

"Yes, I realize that. I'm taking you there because in one of the lucid intervals she has had, she asked for you."

"I see," said Miss Marple. "I wonder why she should ask for *me*, why she should have thought that I—that I could be useful in any way to her, or do anything. She is a woman of perception. In her way, you know, a great woman. As Headmistress of Fallowfield she occupied a prominent position in the educational world."

"The best girls' school there is, I suppose?"

"Yes. She was a great personality. She was herself a woman of considerable scholarship. Mathematics were her speciality, but she was an 'all round'—what I should call an educator. Was interested in education, what girls were fitted for, how to encourage them. Oh, many other things. It is sad and very cruel if she dies," said Miss Marple. "It will seem such a waste of a life. Although she had retired from her Headmistresship she still exercised a lot of power. This accident—" She stopped. "Perhaps you do not want us to discuss the accident?"

"I think it is better that we should do so. A big boulder crashed down the hillside. It has been known to happen before though only at very long divided intervals of time. However, somebody came and spoke to me about it," said Professor Wanstead.

"Came and spoke to you about the accident? Who was it?"

"The two young people. Joanna Crawford and Emlyn Price."

"What did they say?"

"Joanna told me that she had the impression there was someone on the hillside. Rather high up. She and Emlyn were climbing up from the lower main path, following a rough track that wound round the curve of the hill. As they turned a corner she definitely saw, outlined against the skyline, a man or a woman who was trying to roll a big boulder forward along the ground. The boulder was rocking—and finally it started to roll, at first slowly and then gathering

speed down the hillside. Miss Temple was walking along the main path below, and had come to a point just underneath it when the boulder hit her. If it was done deliberately it might not, of course, have succeeded; it might have missed her—but it did succeed. If what was being attempted was a deliberate attack on the woman walking below it succeeded only too well.”

“Was it a man or a woman they saw?” asked Miss Marple.

“Unfortunately, Joanna Crawford could not say. Whoever it was, was wearing jeans or trousers, and had on a lurid polo-neck pullover in red and black checks. The figure turned and moved out of sight almost immediately. She is inclined to think it was a man but cannot be certain.”

“And she thinks, or you think, that it was a deliberate attempt on Miss Temple’s life?”

“The more she mulls it over, the more she thinks that that was exactly what it was. The boy agrees.”

“You have no idea who it might have been?”

“No idea whatever. No more have they. It might be one of our fellow travellers, someone who went for a stroll that afternoon. It might be someone completely unknown who knew that the coach was making a halt here and chose this place to make an attack on one of the passengers. Some youthful lover of violence for violence’s sake. Or it might have been an enemy.”

“It seems very melodramatic if one says ‘a secret enemy,’” said Miss Marple.

“Yes, it does. Who would want to kill a retired and respected Headmistress? That is a question we want answered. It is possible, faintly possible that Miss Temple herself might be able to tell us. She might have recognized the figure above her or she might more likely have known of someone who bore her ill will for some special reason.”

“It still seems unlikely.”

“I agree with you,” said Professor Wanstead. “She seems a totally unlikely person to be a fit victim of attack, but yet when one reflects, a Headmistress knows a great many people. A great many people, shall we put it this way, have passed through her hands.”

"A lot of girls you mean have passed through her hands."

"Yes. Yes, that is what I meant. Girls and their families. A Headmistress must have knowledge of many things. Romances, for instance, that girls might indulge in, unknown to their parents. It happens, you know. It happens very often. Especially in the last ten or twenty years. Girls are said to mature earlier. That is physically true, though in a deeper sense of the word, they mature late. They remain childish longer. Childish in the clothes they like to wear, childish with their floating hair. Even their mini skirts represent a worship of childishness. Their Baby Doll nightdresses, their gymslips and shorts—all children's fashions. They wish *not* to become adult—*not* to have to accept our kind of responsibility. And yet like all children, they want to be *thought* grown up, and free to do what they think are grown up things. And that leads sometimes to tragedy and sometimes to the aftermath of tragedy."

"Are you thinking of some particular case?"

"No. No, not really. I'm only thinking—well, shall we say letting possibilities pass through my mind. I cannot believe that Elizabeth Temple had a *personal* enemy. An enemy ruthless enough to wish to take an opportunity of killing her. What I do think—" he looked at Miss Marple, "—would you like to make a suggestion?"

"Of a possibility? Well, I think I know or guess what you *are* suggesting. You are suggesting that Miss Temple knew something, knew some fact or had some knowledge that would be inconvenient or even dangerous to somebody if it was known."

"Yes, I do feel exactly that."

"In that case," said Miss Marple, "it seems indicated that there is someone on our coach tour who recognized Miss Temple or knew who she was, but who perhaps after the passage of some years was not remembered or might even not have been recognized by Miss Temple. It seems to throw it back on our passengers, does it not?" She paused. "That pullover you mentioned—red and black checks, you said?"

"Oh yes? The pullover—" He looked at her curiously. "What was it that struck you about that?"

"It was very noticeable," said Miss Marple. "That is what your words led me to infer. It was very mentionable. So much so that the girl Joanna mentioned it specifically."

"Yes. And what does that suggest to you?"

"The trailing of flags," said Miss Marple thoughtfully. "Something that will be seen, remembered, observed, recognized."

"Yes." Professor Wanstead looked at her with encouragement.

"When you describe a person you have seen, seen not close at hand but from a distance, the first thing you will describe will be their clothes. Not their faces, not their walk, not their hands, not their feet. A scarlet tam-o'-shanter, a purple cloak, a bizarre leather jacket, a pullover of brilliant reds and blacks. Something very recognizable, very noticeable. The object of it being that when that person removes that garment, gets rid of it, sends it by post in a parcel to some address, say, about a hundred miles away, or thrusts it in a rubbish bin in a city or burns it or tears it up or destroys it, she or he will be the one person modestly and rather drably attired who will not be suspected or looked at or thought of. It must have been *meant*, that scarlet and black check jersey. Meant so that it will be recognized again though actually it will never again be seen on that particular person."

"A very sound idea," said Professor Wanstead. "As I have told you," continued the Professor, "Fallowfield is situated not very far from here. Sixteen miles, I think. So this is Elizabeth Temple's part of the world, a part she knows well with people in it that she also might know well."

"Yes. It widens the possibilities," said Miss Marple. "I agree with you," she said presently, "that the attacker is more likely to have been a man than a woman. That boulder, if it was done with intent, was sent on its course very accurately. Accuracy is more a male quality than a female one. On the other hand there might easily have been someone on our coach, or possibly in the neighbourhood, who saw Miss Temple in the street, a former pupil of hers in past years. Someone whom she herself might not recognize after a period of time. But the girl or woman would have recognized her, because a Headmaster or Headmistress of over sixty is not unlike the same

Headmaster or Headmistress at the age of fifty. She is recognizable. Some woman who recognized her former mistress and also knew that her mistress knew something damaging about her. Someone who might in some way prove a danger to her." She sighed. "I myself do not know this part of the world at all. Have you any particular knowledge of it?"

"No," said Professor Wanstead. "I could not claim a personal knowledge of this part of the country. I know something, however, of various things that have happened in this part of the world entirely because of what you have told me. If it had not been for my acquaintanceship with you and the things you have told me I could have been more at sea than I am.

"What are you yourself actually doing here? You do not know. Yet you were sent here. It was deliberately arranged by Rafiel that you should come here, that you should take this coach tour, that you and I should meet. There have been other places where we have stopped or through which we have passed, but special arrangements were made so that you should actually stay for a couple of nights here. You were put up with former friends of his who would not have refused any request he made. Was there a reason for that?"

"So that I could learn certain facts that I had to know," said Miss Marple.

"A series of murders that took place a good many years ago?" Professor Wanstead looked doubtful. "There is nothing unusual in that. You can say the same of many places in England and Wales. These things seem always to go in a series. First a girl found assaulted and murdered. Then another girl not very far away. Then something of the same kind perhaps twenty miles away. The same pattern of death.

"Two girls were reported missing from Jocelyn St. Mary itself, the one that we have been discussing whose body was found six months later, many miles away and who was last seen in the company of Michael Rafiel—"

"And the other?"

"A girl called Nora Broad. *Not*-a 'quiet girl with no boyfriends.' Possibly with one boyfriend too many. Her body was never found. It

will be—one day. There have been cases when twenty years have passed,” said Wanstead. He slowed down: “We have arrived. This is Carristown, and here is the Hospital.”

Shepherded by Professor Wanstead, Miss Marple entered. The Professor was obviously expected. He was ushered into a small room where a woman rose from a desk.

“Oh yes,” she said, “Professor Wanstead. And—er—this is—er—” She hesitated slightly.

“Miss Jane Marple,” said Professor Wanstead. “I talked to Sister Barker on the telephone.”

“Oh yes. Sister Barker said that she would be accompanying you.”

“How is Miss Temple?”

“Much the same, I think. I am afraid there is not much improvement to report.” She rose. “I will take you to Sister Barker.”

Sister Barker was a tall, thin woman. She had a low, decisive voice and dark grey eyes that had a habit of looking at you and looking away almost immediately, leaving you with the feeling that you had been inspected in a very short space of time, and judgment pronounced upon you.

“I don’t know what arrangements you have in mind,” said Professor Wanstead.

“Well, I had better tell Miss Marple just what we have arranged. First I must make it clear to you that the patient, Miss Temple, is still in a coma with very rare intervals. She appears to come to occasionally, to recognize her surroundings and to be able to say a few words. But there is nothing one can do to stimulate her. It has to be left to the utmost patience. I expect Professor Wanstead has already told you that in one of her intervals of consciousness she uttered quite distinctly the words ‘Miss Jane Marple.’ And then: ‘*I want to speak to her. Miss Jane Marple.*’ After that she relapsed into unconsciousness. Doctor thought it advisable to get in touch with the other occupants of the coach. Professor Wanstead came to see us and explained various matters and said he would bring you over. I am afraid that all we can ask you to do is to sit in the private ward where Miss Temple is, and perhaps be ready to make a note of any words she should say, if she does regain consciousness. I am afraid

the prognosis is not very helpful. To be quite frank, which is better I think, since you are not a near relative and are unlikely to be disturbed by this information, Doctor thinks that she is sinking fast, that she may die without recovering consciousness. There is nothing one can do to relieve the concussion. It is important that someone should hear what she says and Doctor thinks it advisable that she should not see too many people round her if she regains consciousness. If Miss Marple is not worried at the thought of sitting there alone, there will be a nurse in the room, though not obviously so. That is, she will not be noticed from the bed, and will not move unless she's asked for. She will sit in a corner of the room shielded by a screen." She added, "We have a police official there also, ready to take down anything. The Doctor thinks it advisable that he also should not be noticed by Miss Temple. One person alone, and that possibly a person she *expects* to see, will not alarm her or make her lose knowledge of what she wants to say to you. I hope this will not be too difficult a thing to ask you?"

"Oh no," said Miss Marple, "I'm quite prepared to do that. I have a small notebook with me and a Biro pen that will not be in evidence. I can remember things by heart for a very short time, so I need not appear to be obviously taking notes of what she says. You can trust my memory and I am not deaf—not deaf in the real sense of the word. I don't think my hearing is quite as good as it used to be, but if I am sitting near a bedside, I ought to be able to hear anything she says quite easily even if it is whispered. I am used to sick people. I have had a good deal to do with them in my time."

Again the lightning glance of Sister Barker went over Miss Marple. This time a faint inclination of the head showed satisfaction.

"It is kind of you," she said, "and I am sure that if there is any help you can give, we can rely on you to give it. If Professor Wanstead likes to sit in the waiting room downstairs, we can call him at any moment if it should be necessary. Now, Miss Marple, perhaps you will accompany me."

Miss Marple followed Sister along a passage and into a small well appointed single room. In the bed there, in a dimly-lighted room since the blinds were half drawn, lay Elizabeth Temple. She lay there

like a statue, yet she did not give the impression of being asleep. Her breath came uncertainly in slight gasps. Sister Barker bent to examine her patient, motioned Miss Marple into a chair beside the bed. She then crossed the room to the door again. A young man with a notebook in his hand came from behind the screen there.

"Doctor's orders, Mr. Reckitt," said Sister Barker.

A nurse also appeared. She had been sitting in the opposite corner of the room.

"Call me if necessary, Nurse Edmonds," said Sister Barker, "and get Miss Marple anything she may need."

Miss Marple loosened her coat. The room was warm. The nurse approached and took it from her. Then she retired to her former position, Miss Marple sat down in the chair. She looked at Elizabeth Temple thinking, as she had thought before when looking at her in the coach, what a fine shaped head she had. Her grey hair drawn back from it, fitted her face in a perfect cap-like effect. A handsome woman, and a woman of personality. Yes, a thousand pities, Miss Marple thought, a thousand pities if the world was going to lose Elizabeth Temple.

Miss Marple eased the cushion at her back, moved the chair a fraction of an inch and sat quietly to wait. Whether to wait in vain or to some point, she had no idea. Time passed. Ten minutes, twenty minutes, half an hour, thirty-five minutes. Then suddenly, quite unexpectedly as it were, a voice came. Low, but distinct, slightly husky. None of the resonance it had once held. "Miss Marple."

Elizabeth Temple's eyes were open now. They were looking at Miss Marple. They looked competent, perfectly sensible. She was studying the face of the woman who was sitting by her bed, studying her without any sign of emotion, of surprise. Only, one would say, of scrutiny. Fully conscious scrutiny. And the voice spoke again.

"Miss Marple. You are Jane Marple?"

"That is right. Yes," said Miss Marple. "Jane Marple."

"Henry often spoke of you. He said things about you."

The voice stopped. Miss Marple said with a slight query in her voice,

"Henry?"

"Henry Clithering, an old friend of mine—very old friend."

"An old friend of mine too," said Miss Marple. "Henry Clithering."

Her mind went back to the many years she had known him, Sir Henry Clithering, the things he had said to her, the assistance he had asked from her sometimes, and the assistance that she had asked from him. A very old friend.

"I remembered your name. On the passenger list. I thought it must be you. You could help. That's what he—Henry, yes—would say if he were here. You might be able to help. To find out. It's important. Very important although—it's a long time ago now—a—long—time—ago."

Her voice faltered a little, her eyes half closed. Nurse got up, came across the room, picked up a small glass and held it to Elizabeth Temple's lips. Miss Temple took a sip, nodded her head dismissively. Nurse put down the glass and went back to her chair.

"If I can help, I will," said Miss Marple. She asked no further questions.

Miss Temple said, "Good," and after a minute or two, again, "Good."

For two or three minutes she lay with her eyes closed. She might have been asleep or unconscious. Then her eyes opened again suddenly.

"Which," she said, "which of them? That's what one has got to know. Do you know what I am talking about?"

"I think so. A girl who died—Nora Broad?" A frown came quickly to Elizabeth Temple's forehead.

"No, no, no. The other girl. Verity Hunt."

There was a pause and then, "Jane Marple. You're old—older than when he talked about you. You're older, but you can still find out things, can't you?"

Her voice became slightly higher, more insistent.

"You can, can't you? Say you can. I've not much time. I know that. I know it quite well. One of them, but which? Find out. Henry would have said you can. It may be dangerous for you—but you'll find out, won't you?"

"With God's help, I will," said Miss Marple. It was a vow.

"Ah."

The eyes closed, then opened again. Something like a smile seemed to try and twitch the lips.

"The big stone from above. The Stone of Death."

"Who rolled that stone down?"

"Don't know. No matter—only—Verity. Find out about Verity. Truth. Another name for truth, Verity."

Miss Marple saw the faint relaxation of the body on the bed. There was a faintly whispered: "Good-bye. Do your best...."

Her body relaxed, the eyes closed. The nurse came again to the bedside. This time she took up the pulse, felt it, and beckoned to Miss Marple. Miss Marple rose obediently and followed her out of the room.

"That's been a big effort for her," said the nurse. "She won't regain consciousness again for some time. Perhaps not at all. I hope you learnt something?"

"I don't think I did," said Miss Marple, "but one never knows, does one."

"Did you get anything?" asked Professor Wanstead, as they went out to the car.

"A name," said Miss Marple. "Verity. Was that the girl's name?"

"Yes. Verity Hunt."

Elizabeth Temple died an hour and a half later. She died without regaining consciousness.

Fourteen

MR. BROADRIBB WONDERS

"**S**een The *Times* this morning?" said Mr. Broadribb to his partner, Mr. Schuster.

Mr. Schuster said he couldn't afford The *Times*, he took the *Telegraph*.

"Well, it may be in that too," said Mr. Broadribb. "In the deaths, Miss Elizabeth Temple, D.Sc."

Mr. Schuster looked faintly puzzled.

"Headmistress of Fallowfield. You've heard of Fallowfield, haven't you?"

"Of course," said Schuster. "Girls' school. Been going for fifty years or so. First class, fantastically expensive. So she was the Headmistress of it, was she? I thought the Headmistress had resigned some time ago. Six months at least. I'm sure I read about it in the paper. That is to say there was a bit about the new Headmistress. Married woman. Youngish. Thirty-five to forty. Modern ideas. Give the girls lessons in cosmetics, let 'em wear trouser suits. Something of that kind."

"Hum," said Mr. Broadribb, making the noise that solicitors of his age are likely to make when they hear something which elicits criticism based on long experience. "Don't think she'll ever make the

name that Elizabeth Temple did. Quite someone, she was. Been there a long time, too."

"Yes," said Mr. Schuster, somewhat uninterested. He wondered why Broadribb was so interested in defunct schoolmistresses.

Schools were not really of particular interest to either of the two gentlemen. Their own offspring were now more or less disposed of. Mr. Broadribb's two sons were respectively in the Civil Service and in an oil firm, and Mr. Schuster's rather younger progeny were at different universities where both of them respectively were making as much trouble for those in authority as they possibly could do. He said,

"What about her?"

"She was on a coach tour," said Mr. Broadribb.

"Those coaches," said Mr. Schuster. "I wouldn't let any of my relations go on one of those. One went off a precipice in Switzerland last week and two months ago one had a crash and twenty were killed. Don't know who drives these things nowadays."

"It was one of those Country Houses and Gardens and Objects of Interest in Britain—or whatever they call it—tours," said Mr. Broadribb. "That's not quite the right name, but you know what I mean."

"Oh yes, I know. Oh the—er—yes, that's the one we sent Miss What's-a-name on. The one old Rafiel booked."

"Miss Jane Marple was on it."

"She didn't get killed too, did she?" asked Mr. Schuster.

"Not so far as I know," said Mr. Broadribb. "I just wondered a bit, though."

"Was it a road accident?"

"No. It was at one of the beauty spot places. They were walking on a path up a hill. It was a stiff walk. Up a rather steep hill with boulders and things on it. Some of the boulders got loose and came rushing down the mountainside. Miss Temple was knocked out and taken to hospital with concussion and died—"

"Bad luck," said Mr. Schuster, and waited for more.

"I only wondered," said Mr. Broadribb, "because I happened to remember that—well, that Fallowfield was the school where the girl

was at."

"What girl? I don't really know what you're talking about, Broadribb."

"The girl who was done in by young Michael Rafiel. I was just recalling a few things which might seem to have some slight connection with this curious Jane Marple business that old Rafiel was so keen on. Wish he'd told us more."

"What's the connection?" said Mr. Schuster.

He looked more interested now. His legal wits were in process of being sharpened, to give a sound opinion on whatever it was that Mr. Broadribb was about to confide to him.

"That girl. Can't remember her last name now. Christian name was Hope or Faith or something like that. Verity, that was her name. Verity Hunter, I think it was. She was one of that series of murdered girls. Found her body in a ditch about thirty miles away from where she'd gone missing. Been dead six months. Strangled apparently, and her head and face had been bashed in—to delay recognition, they thought, but she *was* recognized all right. Clothes, handbag, jewellery nearby—some mole or scar. Oh yes, she was identified quite easily—"

"Actually, she was the one the trial was all about, wasn't she?"

"Yes. Suspected of having done away with perhaps three other girls during the past year, Michael was. But evidence wasn't so good in the other deaths—so the police went all out on this one—plenty of evidence—bad record. Earlier cases of assault and rape. Well, we all know what rape is nowadays. Mum tells the girl she's got to accuse the young man of rape even if the young man hasn't had much chance, with the girl at him all the time to come to the house while mum's away at work or dad's gone on holiday. Doesn't stop badgering him until she's forced him to sleep with her. Then, as I say, mum tells the girl to call it rape. However, that's not the point," said Mr. Broadribb. "I wondered if things mightn't tie up a bit, you know. I thought this Jane Marple business with Rafiel might have something to do with Michael."

"Found guilty, wasn't he? And given a life sentence?"

"I can't remember now—it's so long ago. Or did they get away with a verdict of diminished responsibility?"

"And Verity Hunter or Hunt was educated at that school. Miss Temple's school? She wasn't still a schoolgirl though, was she, when she was killed? Not that I can remember."

"Oh no. She was eighteen or nineteen, living with relations or friends of her parents, or something like that. Nice house, nice people, nice girl by all accounts. The sort of girl whose relations always say 'she was a very quiet girl, rather shy, didn't go about with strange people and had no boyfriends.' Relations never know what boyfriends a girl has. The girls take mighty good care of that. And young Rafiel was said to be very attractive to girls."

"Never been any doubt that he did it?" asked Mr. Schuster.

"Not a scrap. Told a lot of lies in the witness box, anyway. His Counsel would have done better not to have let him give evidence. A lot of his friends gave him an alibi that didn't stand up, if you know what I mean. All his friends seemed to be fluent liars."

"What's your feeling about it, Broadribb?"

"Oh, I haven't got any feelings," said Mr. Broadribb, "I was just wondering if this woman's death might tie up."

"In what way?"

"Well, you know—about these boulders that fall down cliff sides and drop on top of someone. It's not always in the course of nature. Boulders usually stay where they are, in my experience."

Fifteen

VERITY

I

"Verity," said Miss Marple.

Elizabeth Margaret Temple had died the evening before. It had been a peaceful death. Miss Marple, sitting once more amidst the faded chintz of the drawing room in The Old Manor House, had laid aside the baby's pink coat which she had previously been engaged in knitting and had substituted a crocheted purple scarf. This half-mourning touch went with Miss Marple's early Victorian ideas of tactfulness in face of tragedy.

An inquest was to be held on the following day. The vicar had been approached and had agreed to hold a brief memorial service in the church as soon as arrangements could be made. Undertakers suitably attired, with proper mourning faces, took general charge of things in liaison with the police. The inquest was to take place on the following morning at 11 o'clock. Members of the coach tour had agreed to attend the inquest. And several of them had chosen to remain on so as to attend the church service also.

Mrs. Glynne had come to the Golden Boar and urged Miss Marple to return to The Old Manor House until she finally returned to the tour.

"You will get away from all the reporters."

Miss Marple had thanked all three sisters warmly and had accepted.

The coach tour would be resumed after the memorial service, driving first to South Bedestone, thirty-five miles away, where there was a good class hotel which had been originally chosen for a stopping place. After that the tour would go on as usual.

There were, however, as Miss Marple had considered likely, certain persons who were disengaging themselves and returning home, or were going in other directions and not continuing on the tour. There was something to be said in favour of either decision. To leave what would become a journey of painful memories, or to continue with the sightseeing that had already been paid for and which had been interrupted only by one of those painful accidents that may happen on any sightseeing expedition. A lot would depend, Miss Marple thought, on the outcome of the inquest.

Miss Marple, after exchanging various conventional remarks proper to the occasion with her three hostesses, had devoted herself to her purple wool and had sat considering her next line of investigation. And so it was that with her fingers still busy, she had uttered the one word, "Verity." Throwing it as one throws a pebble into a stream, solely to observe what the result—if any—would be. Would it mean something to her hostesses? It might or it might not. Otherwise, when she joined the members of the tour at their hotel meal this evening, which had been arranged, she would try the effect of it there. It had been, she thought to herself, the last word or almost the last word that Elizabeth Temple had spoken. So therefore, thought Miss Marple (her fingers still busy because she did not need to look at her crocheting, she could read a book or conduct a conversation while her fingers, though slightly crippled with rheumatism, would proceed correctly through their appointed movements). So therefore, "Verity."

Like a stone into a pool, causing ripples, a splash, something? Or nothing. Surely there would be a reaction of one sort or another. Yes, she had not been mistaken. Although her face registered nothing, the keen eyes behind her glasses had watched three people

in a simultaneous manner as she had trained herself to do for many years now, when wishing to observe her neighbours either in church, mothers' meetings, or at other public functions in St. Mary Mead when she had been on the track of some interesting piece of news or gossip.

Mrs. Glynne had dropped the book she was holding and had looked across towards Miss Marple with slight surprise. Surprise, it seemed, at the particular word coming from Miss Marple, but not surprised really to hear it.

Clotilde reacted differently. Her head shot up, she leant forward a little, then she looked not at Miss Marple but across the room in the direction of the window. Her hands clenched themselves, she kept very still. Miss Marple, although dropping her head slightly as though she was not looking any more, noted that her eyes were filling with tears. Clotilde sat quite still and let the tears roll down her cheeks. She made no attempt to take out a handkerchief, she uttered no word. Miss Marple was impressed by the aura of grief that came from her.

Anthea's reaction was different. It was quick, excited, almost pleasurable.

"Verity? Verity, did you say? Did you know her? I'd no idea. It is Verity Hunt you mean?"

Lavinia Glynne said, "It's a Christian name?"

"I never knew anyone of that name," said Miss Marple, "but I *did* mean a Christian name. Yes. It is rather unusual, I think. Verity." She repeated it thoughtfully.

She let her purple wool ball fall and looked round with the slightly apologetic and embarrassed look of one who realizes she has made a serious *faux pas*, but not sure why.

"I—I am so sorry. Have I said something I shouldn't? It was only because..."

"No, of course not," said Mrs. Glynne. "It was just that it is—it is a name we know, a name with which we have—associations."

"It just came into my mind," said Miss Marple, still apologetic, "because, you know, it was poor Miss Temple who said it. I went to see her, you know, yesterday afternoon. Professor Wanstead took

me. He seemed to think that I might be able to—to—I don't know if it's the proper word—to *rouse* her, in some way. She was in a coma and they thought—not that I was a friend of hers at any time, but we had chatted together on the tour and we often sat beside each other, as you know, on some of the days and we had talked. And he thought perhaps I might be of some use. I'm afraid I wasn't though. Not at all. I just sat there and waited and then she did say one or two words, but they didn't seem to mean anything. But finally, just when it was time for me to go, she did open her eyes and looked at me—I don't know if she was mistaking me for someone—but she did say that word. Verity! And, well of course it stuck in my mind, especially with her passing away yesterday evening. It must have been someone or something that she had in her mind. But of course it might just mean—well, of course it might just mean Truth. That's what verity means, doesn't it?"

She looked from Clotilde to Lavinia to Anthea.

"It was the Christian name of a girl we knew," said Lavinia Glynne. "That is why it startled us."

"Especially because of the awful way she died," said Anthea.

Clotilde said in her deep voice, "Anthea! there's no need to go into these details."

"But after all, everyone knows quite well about her," said Anthea. She looked towards Miss Marple. "I thought perhaps you might have known about her because you knew Mr. Rafiel, didn't you? Well, I mean, he wrote to us about you so you must have known him. And I thought perhaps—well, he'd mentioned the whole thing to you."

"I'm so sorry," said Miss Marple, "I'm afraid I don't quite understand what you're talking about."

"They found her body in a ditch," said Anthea.

There was never any holding Anthea, Miss Marple thought, not once she got going. But she thought that Anthea's vociferous talk was putting additional strain on Clotilde. She had taken out a handkerchief now in a quiet, noncommittal way. She brushed tears from her eyes and then sat upright, her back very straight, her eyes deep and tragic.

"Verity," she said, "was a girl we cared for very much. She lived here for a while. I was very fond of her—"

"And she was very fond of you," said Lavinia.

"Her parents were friends of mine," said Clotilde. "They were killed in a plane accident."

"She was at school at Fallowfield," explained Lavinia. "I suppose that was how Miss Temple came to remember her."

"Oh I see," said Miss Marple. "Where Miss Temple was Headmistress, is that it? I have heard of Fallowfield often, of course. It's a very fine school, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Clotilde. "Verity was a pupil there. After her parents died she came to stay with us for a time while she could decide what she wanted to do with her future. She was eighteen or nineteen. A very sweet girl and a very affectionate and loving one. She thought perhaps of training for nursing, but she had very good brains and Miss Temple was very insistent that she ought to go to university. So she was studying and having coaching for that when—when this terrible thing happened."

She turned her face away.

"I—do you mind if we don't talk about it any more just now?"

"Oh, of course not," said Miss Marple. "I'm so sorry to have impinged on some tragedy. I didn't know. I—I haven't heard ... I thought—well I mean ..." She became more and more incoherent.

II

That evening she heard a little more. Mrs. Glynne came to her bedroom when she was changing her dress to go out and join the others at the hotel.

"I thought I ought to come and explain a little to you," said Mrs. Glynne, "about—about the girl Verity Hunt. Of course you couldn't know that our sister Clotilde was particularly fond of her and that her really horrible death was a terrible shock. We never mention her if we can help it, but—I think it would be easier if I told you the facts completely and you will understand. Apparently Verity had, without

our knowledge, made friends with an undesirable—a more than undesirable—it turned out to be a dangerous—young man who already had a criminal record. He came here to visit us when he was passing through once. We knew his father very well.” She paused. “I think I’d better tell you the whole truth if you don’t know, and you don’t seem to. He was actually Mr. Rafiel’s son, Michael—”

“Oh dear,” said Miss Marple, “not—not—I can’t remember his name but I do remember hearing that there was a son—and, that he hadn’t been very satisfactory.”

“A little more than that,” said Mrs. Glynne. “He’d always given trouble. He’d been had up in court once or twice for various things. Once assaulting a teenager—other things of that type. Of course I consider myself that the magistrates are too lenient with that kind of thing. They don’t want to upset a young man’s university career. And so they let them off with a—I forget what they call it—a suspended sentence, something of that kind. If these boys were sent to gaol at once it would perhaps warn them off that type of life. He was a thief, too. He had forged cheques, he pinched things. He was a thoroughly bad lot. We were friends of his mother’s. It was lucky for her, I think, that she died young before she had time to be upset by the way her son was turning out. Mr. Rafiel did all he could, I think. Tried to find suitable jobs for the boy, paid fines for him and things like that. But I think it was a great blow to him, though he pretended to be more or less indifferent and to write it off as one of those things that happen. We had, as probably people here in the village will tell you, we had a bad outbreak of murders and violence in this district. Not only here. They were in different parts of the country, twenty miles away, sometimes fifty miles away. One or two, it’s suspected by the police, were nearly a hundred miles away. But they seemed to centre more or less on this part of the world. Anyway, Verity one day went out to visit a friend and—well, she didn’t come back. We went to the police about it, the police sought for her, searched the whole countryside but they couldn’t find any trace of her. We advertised, they advertised, and they suggested that she’d gone off with a boyfriend. Then word began to get round that she had been seen with Michael Rafiel. By now the police had their eye on Michael as a possibility for

certain crimes that had occurred, although they couldn't find any direct evidence. Verity was said to have been seen, described by her clothing and other things, with a young man of Michael's appearance and in a car that corresponded to a description of his car. But there was no further evidence until her body was discovered six months later, thirty miles from here in a rather wild part of wooded country, in a ditch covered with stones and piled earth. Clotilde had to go to identify it—it was Verity all right. She'd been strangled and her head beaten in. Clotilde has never quite got over the shock. There were certain marks, a mole and an old scar and of course her clothes and the contents of her handbag. Miss Temple was very fond of Verity. She must have thought of her just before she died."

"I'm sorry," said Miss Marple. "I'm really very, very sorry. Please tell your sister that I didn't know. I had no idea."

Sixteen

THE INQUEST

I

Miss Marple walked slowly along the village street on her way towards the market place where the inquest was to take place in the old-fashioned Georgian building which had been known for a hundred years as the Curfew Arms. She glanced at her watch. There was still a good twenty minutes before she need be there. She looked into the shops. She paused before the shop that sold wool and babies' jackets, and peered inside for a few moments. A girl in the shop was serving. Small woolly coats were being tried on two children. Further along the counter there was an elderly woman.

Miss Marple went into the shop, went along the counter to a seat opposite the elderly woman, and produced a sample of pink wool. She had run out, she explained, of this particular brand of wool and had a little jacket she needed to finish. The match was soon made, some more samples of wool that Miss Marple had admired were brought out for her to look at, and soon she was in conversation. Starting with the sadness of the accident which had just taken place. Mrs. Merrypit, if her name was identical with that which was written up outside the shop, was full of the importance of the accident, and

the general difficulties of getting local governments to do anything about the dangers of footpaths and public rights of way.

"After the rain, you see, you get all the soil washed off and then the boulders get loose and then down they comes. I remember one year they had three falls—three accidents there was. One boy nearly killed, he was, and then later that year, oh six months later, I think, there was a man got his arm broken, and the third time it was poor old Mrs. Walker. Blind she was and pretty well deaf too. She never heard nothing or she could have got out of the way, they say. Somebody saw it and they called out to her, but they was too far away to reach her or to run to get her. And so she was killed."

"Oh how sad," said Miss Marple, "how tragic. The sort of thing that's not easily forgotten, is it."

"No indeed. I expect the Coroner'll mention it today."

"I expect he will," said Miss Marple. "In a terrible way it seems quite a natural thing to happen, doesn't it, though of course there are accidents sometimes by pushing things about, you know. Just pushing, making stones rock. That sort of thing."

"Ah well, there's boys as be up to anything. But I don't think I've ever seen them up that way, fooling about."

Miss Marple went on to the subject of pullovers. Bright coloured pullovers.

"It's not for myself," she said, "it's for one of my great-nephews. You know he wants a polo-necked pullover and very bright colours he'd like."

"Yes, they do like bright colours nowadays, don't they?" agreed Mrs. Merrypit. "Not in jeans. Black jeans they like. Black or dark blue. But they like a bit of brightness up above."

Miss Marple described a pullover of check design in bright colours. There appeared to be quite a good stock of pullovers and jerseys, but anything in red and black did not seem to be on display, nor even was anything like it mentioned as having been lately in stock. After looking at a few samples Miss Marple prepared to take her departure, chatting first about the former murders she had heard about which had happened in this part of the world.

"They got the fellow in the end," said Mrs. Merrypit. "Nice looking boy, hardly have thought it of him. He'd been well brought up, you know. Been to university and all that. Father was very rich, they say. Touched in the head, I suppose. Not that they sent him to Broadway, or whatever the place is. No, they didn't do that, but I think myself he must have been a mental case—there was five or six other girls, so they said. The police had one after another of the young men round hereabouts to help them. Geoffrey Grant they had up. They were pretty sure it was him to begin with. He was always a bit queer, ever since he was a boy. Interfered with little girls going to school, you know. He used to offer them sweets and get them to come down the lanes with him and see the primroses, or something like that. Yes, they had very strong suspicions about him. But it wasn't him. And then there was another one. Bert Williams, but he'd been far away on two occasions, at least—what they call an alibi, so it couldn't be him. And then at last it came to this—what'sis-name, I can't remember him now. Luke I think his name was—no Mike something. Very nice looking, as I say, but he had a bad record. Yes, stealing, forging cheques, all sorts of things like that. And two what-you-call 'em paternity cases, no, I don't mean that, but you know what I mean. When a girl's going to have a baby. You know and they make an order and make the fellow pay. He'd got two girls in the family way before this."

"Was this girl in the family way?"

"Oh yes, she was. At first we thought when the body was found it might have been Nora Broad. That was Mrs. Broad's niece, down at the mill shop. Great one for going with the boys, she was. She'd gone away missing from home in the same way. Nobody knew where she was. So when this body turned up six months later they thought at first it was her."

"But it wasn't?"

"No—someone quite different."

"Did her body ever turn up?"

"No. I suppose it might some day, but they think on the whole it was pushed into the river. Ah well, you never know, do you? You never know what you may dig up off a ploughed field or something

like that. I was taken once to see all that treasure. Luton Loo was it—some name like that? Somewhere in the East Counties. Under a ploughed field it was. Beautiful. Gold ships and Viking ships and gold plate, enormous great platters. Well, you never know. Any day you may turn up a dead body or you may turn up a gold platter. And it may be hundreds of years old like that gold plate was, or it may be a three-or four-years-old body, like Mary Lucas who'd been missing for four years, they say. Somewhere near Reigate she was found. Ah well, all these things! It's a sad life. Yes, it's a very sad life. You never know what's coming."

"There was another girl who'd lived here, wasn't there?" said Miss Marple, "who was killed."

"You mean the body they thought was Nora Broad's but it wasn't? Yes. I've forgotten her name now. Hope, it was, I think. Hope or Charity. One of those sort of names, if you know what I mean. Used to be used a lot in Victorian times but you don't hear them so much nowadays. Lived at the Manor House, she did. She'd been there for some time after her parents were killed."

"Her parents died in an accident, didn't they?"

"That's right. In a plane going to Spain or Italy, one of those places."

"And you say she came to live here? Were they relations of hers?"

"I don't know if they were relations, but Mrs. Glynne as she is now, was I think a great friend of her mother's or something that way. Mrs. Glynne, of course, was married and gone abroad but Miss Clotilde—that's the eldest one, the dark one—she was very fond of the girl. She took her abroad, to Italy and France and all sorts of places, and she had her trained a bit of typewriting and shorthand and that sort of thing, and art classes too. She's very arty, Miss Clotilde is. Oh, she was mighty fond of the girl. Brokenhearted she was when she disappeared. Quite different to Miss Anthea—"

"Miss Anthea is the youngest one, isn't she?"

"Yes. Not quite all there, some people say. Scatty like, you know, in her mind. Sometimes you see her walking along, talking to herself, you know, and tossing her head in a very queer way. Children get frightened of her sometimes. They say she's a bit queer

about things. I don't know. You hear everything in a village, don't you? The great-uncle who lived here before, he was a bit peculiar too. Used to practise revolver shooting in the garden. For no reason at all so far as anyone could see. Proud of his marksmanship, he said he was, whatever marksmanship is."

"But Miss Clotilde is not peculiar?"

"Oh no, she's clever, she is. Knows Latin and Greek, I believe. Would have liked to go to university but she had to look after her mother who was an invalid for a long time. But she was very fond of Miss—now, what was her name?—Faith perhaps. She was very fond of her and treated her like a daughter. And then along comes this young what's-his-name, Michael I think it was—and then one day the girl just goes off without saying a word to anyone. I don't know if Miss Clotilde knew as she was in the family way."

"But you knew," said Miss Marple.

"Ah well, I've got a lot of experience. I usually know when a girl's that way. It's plain enough to the eye. It's not only the shape, as you might say, you can tell by the look in their eyes and the way they walk and sit, and the sort of giddy fits they get and sick turns now and again. Oh yes, I thought to myself, here's another one of them. Miss Clotilde had to go and identify the body. Nearly broke her up, it did. She was like a different woman for weeks afterwards. Fairly loved that girl, she did."

"And the other one—Miss Anthea?"

"Funnily enough, you know, I thought she had a kind of pleased look as though she was—yes, just pleased. Not nice, eh? Farmer Plummer's daughter used to look like that. Always used to go and see pigs killed. Enjoyed it. Funny things goes on in families."

Miss Marple said good-bye, saw she had another ten minutes to go and passed on to the post office. The post office and general store of Jocelyn St. Mary was just off the Market Square.

Miss Marple went into the post office, bought some stamps, looked at some of the postcards and then turned her attention to various paperback books. A middle-aged woman with rather a vinegary face presided behind the postal counter. She assisted Miss

Marple to free a book from the wire support in which the books were.

"Stick a bit sometimes, they do. People don't put them back straight, you see."

There was by now no one else in the shop. Miss Marple looked with distaste at the jacket of the book, a naked girl with blood-stained markings on her face and a sinister-looking killer bending over her with a blood-stained knife in his hand.

"Really," she said, "I don't like these horrors nowadays."

"Gone a bit too far with some of their jackets, haven't they," said Mrs. Vinegar. "Not everyone as likes them. Too fond of violence in every way, I'd say nowadays."

Miss Marple detached a second book. "*Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*," she read. "Oh dear, it's a sad world one lives in."

"Oh yes, I know. Saw in yesterday's paper, I did, some woman left her baby outside a supermarket and then someone else comes along and wheels it away. And all for no reason as far as one can see. The police found her all right. They all seem to say the same things, whether they steal from a supermarket or take away a baby. Don't know what came over them, they say."

"Perhaps they really don't," suggested Miss Marple.

Mrs. Vinegar looked even more like vinegar.

"Take me a lot to believe that, it would."

Miss Marple looked round—the post office was still empty. She advanced to the window.

"If you are not too busy, I wonder if you could answer a question of mine," said Miss Marple. "I have done something extremely stupid. Of late years I make so many mistakes. This was a parcel addressed to a charity. I send them clothes—pullovers and children's woollies, and I did it up and addressed it and it was sent off—and only this morning it came to me suddenly that I'd made a mistake and written the wrong address. I *don't* suppose any list is kept of the address of parcels—but I thought someone might have just happened to remember it. The address I meant to put was The Dockyard and Thames Side Welfare Association."

Mrs. Vinegar was looking quite kindly now, touched by Miss Marple's patent incapacity and general state of senility and dither.

"Did you bring it yourself?"

"No, I didn't—I'm staying at The Old Manor House—and one of them, Mrs. Glynne, I think—said she or her sister would post it. Very kind of her—"

"Let me see now. It would have been on Tuesday, would it? It wasn't Mrs. Glynne who brought it in, it was the youngest one, Miss Anthea."

"Yes, yes, I think that was the day—"

"I remember it quite well. In a good sized dress box—and moderately heavy, I think. But not what you said, Dockyard Association—I can't recall anything like that. It was the Reverend Matthews—The East Ham Women and Children's Woollen Clothing Appeal."

"Oh yes." Miss Marple clasped her hands in an ecstasy of relief. "How clever of you—I see now how I came to do it. At Christmas I *did* send things to the East Ham Society in answer to a special appeal for knitted things, so I must have copied down the wrong address. Can you just repeat it?" She entered it carefully in a small notebook.

"I'm afraid the parcel's gone off, though—"

"Oh yes, but I can write, explaining the mistake and ask them to forward the parcel to the Dockyard Association instead. Thank you *so much*."

Miss Marple trotted out.

Mrs. Vinegar produced stamps for her next customer, remarking in an aside to a colleague—"Scatty as they make them, poor old creature. Expect she's always doing that sort of thing."

Miss Marple went out of the post office and ran into Emlyn Price and Joanna Crawford.

Joanna, she noticed, was very pale and looked upset.

"I've got to give evidence," she said. "I don't know—what will they ask me? I'm so afraid. I—I don't like it. I told the police sergeant, I told him what I thought we saw."

"Don't you worry, Joanna," said Emlyn Price. "This is just a coroner's inquest, you know. He's a nice man, a doctor, I believe. He'll just ask you a few questions and you'll say what you saw."

"You saw it too," said Joanna.

"Yes, I did," said Emlyn. "At least I saw there was someone up there. Near the boulders and things. Now come on, Joanna."

"They came and searched our rooms in the hotel," said Joanna. "They asked our permission but they had a search warrant. They looked in our rooms and among the things in our luggage."

"I think they wanted to find that check pullover you described. Anyway, there's nothing for you to worry about. If you'd had a black and scarlet pullover yourself you wouldn't have talked about it, would you. It was black and scarlet, wasn't it?"

"I don't know," said Emlyn Price. "I don't really know the colours of things very well. I think it was a sort of bright colour. That's all I know."

"They didn't find one," said Joanna. "After all, none of us have very many things with us. You don't when you go on a coach travel. There wasn't anything like that among anybody's things. I've never seen anyone—of our lot, I mean, wearing anything like that. Not so far. Have you?"

"No, I haven't, but I suppose—I don't know that I should know if I *had* seen it," said Emlyn Price. "I don't always know red from green."

"No, you're a bit colour-blind, aren't you," said Joanna. "I noticed that the other day."

"What do you mean, you noticed it."

"My red scarf. I asked if you'd seen it. You said you'd seen a green one somewhere and you brought me the red one. I'd left it in the dining room. But you didn't really know it was red."

"Well, don't go about saying I'm colour-blind. I don't like it. Puts people off in some way."

"Men are more often colour-blind than women," said Joanna. "It's one of those sex-link things," she added, with an air of erudition. "You know, it passes through the female and comes out in the male."

"You make it sound as though it was measles," said Emlyn Price. "Well, here we are."

"You don't seem to mind," said Joanna, as they walked up the steps.

"Well, I don't really. I've never been to an inquest. Things are rather interesting when you do them for the first time."

II

Dr. Stokes was a middle-aged man with greying hair and spectacles. Police evidence was given first, then the medical evidence with technical details of the concussion injuries which had caused death. Mrs. Sandbourne gave particulars of the coach tour, the expedition as arranged for that particular afternoon, and particulars of how the fatality had occurred. Miss Temple, she said, although not young, was a very brisk walker. The party were going along a well-known footpath which led around the curve of a hill which slowly mounted to the old Moorland Church originally built in Elizabethan times, though repaired and added to later. On an adjoining crest was what was called the Bonaventure Memorial. It was a fairly steep ascent and people usually climbed it at different paces from each other. The younger ones very often ran or walked ahead and reached their destination much earlier than the others. The elderly ones took it slowly. She herself usually kept at the rear of the party so that she could, if necessary, suggest to people who were tired that they could, if they liked, go back. Miss Temple, she said, had been talking to a Mr. and Mrs. Butler. Miss Temple, though she was over sixty, had been slightly impatient at their slow pace and had outdistanced them, had turned a corner and gone on ahead rather rapidly, which she had done often before. She was inclined to get impatient if waiting for people to catch up for too long, and preferred to make her own pace. They had heard a cry ahead, and she and the others had run on, turned a curve of the pathway and had found Miss Temple lying on the ground. A large boulder detached from the hillside above where there were several others of the same kind,

must, they had thought, have rolled down the hillside and struck Miss Temple as she was going along the path below. A most unfortunate and tragic accident.

"You had no idea there was anything but an accident?"

"No, indeed. I can hardly see how it could have been anything but an accident."

"You saw no one above you on the hillside?"

"No. This is the main path round the hill but of course people do wander about over the top. I did not see anyone that particular afternoon."

Then Joanna Crawford was called. After particulars of her name and age Dr. Stokes asked,

"You were not walking with the remainder of the party?"

"No, we had left the path. We'd gone round the hill a little higher up the slope."

"You were walking with a companion?"

"Yes. With Mr. Emlyn Price."

"There was no one else actually walking with you?"

"No. We were talking and we were looking at one or two of the flowers. They seemed of rather an uncommon kind. Emlyn's interested in botany."

"Were you out of sight of the rest of the party?"

"Not all the time. They were walking along the main path—some way below us, that is."

"Did you see Miss Temple?"

"I think so. She was walking ahead of the others, and I think I saw her turn a corner of the path ahead of them after which we didn't see her because the contour of the hill hid her."

"Did you see someone walking above you on the hillside?"

"Yes. Up amongst a good many boulders. There's a sort of great patch of boulders on the side of the hill."

"Yes," said Dr. Stokes, "I know exactly the place you mean. Large granite boulders. People call them the Wethers, or the Grey Wethers sometimes."

"I suppose they might look like sheep from a distance but we weren't so very far away from them."

"And you saw someone up there?"

"Yes. Someone was more or less in the middle of the boulders, leaning over them."

"Pushing them, do you think?"

"Yes. I thought so, and wondered why. He seemed to be pushing at one on the outside of the group near the edge. They were so big and so heavy I would have thought it was impossible to push them. But the one he or she was pushing seemed to be balanced like a rocking stone."

"You said first *he*, now you say *he* or *she*, Miss Crawford. Which do you think it was?"

"Well, I thought—I suppose—I suppose I thought it was a man, but I wasn't actually thinking at the time. It was—he or she was—wearing trousers and a pullover, a sort of man's pullover with a polo-neck."

"What colour was the pullover?"

"Rather a bright red and black in checks. And there was longish hair at the back of a kind of beret, rather like a woman's hair, but then it might just as well have been a man's."

"It certainly might," said Dr. Stokes, rather drily. "Identifying a male or female figure by their hair is certainly not easy these days." He went on, "What happened next?"

"Well, the stone began to roll over. It sort of toppled over the edge and then it began to gain speed. I said to Emlyn, "Oh it's going to go right over down the hill." Then we heard a sort of crash as it fell. And I think I heard a cry from below but I might have imagined it."

"And then?"

"Oh, we ran on up a bit and round the corner of the hill to see what happened to the stone."

"And what did you see?"

"We saw the boulder below on the path with a body underneath it—and people coming running round the corner."

"Was it Miss Temple who uttered the cry?"

"I think it must have been. It might have been one of the others who was catching up and turned the corner. Oh! it was—it was

horrible.”

“Yes, I’m sure it was. What had happened to the figure you’d seen above? The man or woman in the red and black pullover? Was that figure still there among the stones?”

“I don’t know. I never looked up there. I was—I was busy looking at the accident, and running down the hill to see if one could do anything. I did just look up, I think, but there wasn’t anyone in sight. Only the stones. There were a lot of contours and you could lose anyone quite easily from view.”

“Could it have been one of your party?”

“Oh, no. I’m sure it wasn’t one of us. I would have known because, I mean, one would have known by their clothes. I’m sure nobody was wearing a scarlet and black pullover.”

“Thank you, Miss Crawford.”

Emlyn Price was called next. His story was practically a replica of Joanna’s.

There was a little more evidence which did not amount to much.

The Coroner brought in that there was not sufficient evidence to show how Elizabeth Temple had come to her death, and adjourned the inquest for a fortnight.

Seventeen

MISS MARPLE MAKES A VISIT

I

As they walked back from the inquest to the Golden Boar hardly anyone spoke. Professor Wanstead walked beside Miss Marple, and since she was not a very fast walker, they fell slightly behind the others.

"What will happen next?" Miss Marple asked at last.

"Do you mean legally or to us?"

"I suppose both," said Miss Marple, "because one will surely affect the other."

"It will be presumably a case of the police making further enquiries, arising out of the evidence given by those two young people."

"Yes."

"Further enquiry will be necessary. The inquest was bound to be adjourned. One can hardly expect the Coroner to give a verdict of accidental death."

"No, I understand that." She said, "What did you think of their evidence?"

Professor Wanstead directed a sharp glance from under his beetling eyebrows.

"Have you any ideas on the subject, Miss Marple?" His voice was suggestive. "Of course," said Professor Wanstead, "we knew beforehand what they were going to say."

"Yes."

"What you mean is that you are asking what I thought about them themselves, their feelings about it."

"It was interesting," said Miss Marple. "Very interesting. The red and black check pullover. Rather important, I think, don't you? Rather striking?"

"Yes, exactly that."

He shot again that look at her under his eyebrows. "What does it suggest to you exactly?"

"I think," said Miss Marple, "I think the description of that might give us a valuable clue."

They came to the Golden Boar. It was only about half past twelve and Mrs. Sandbourne suggested a little refreshment before going in to luncheon. As sherry and tomato juice and other liquors were being consumed, Mrs. Sandbourne proceeded to make certain announcements.

"I have taken advice," she said, "both from the Coroner and Inspector Douglas. Since the medical evidence has been taken fully, there will be at the church a funeral memorial service tomorrow at eleven o'clock. I'm going to make arrangements with Mr. Courtney, the local vicar, about it. On the following day it will be best, I think, to resume our tour. The programme will be slightly altered, since we have lost three days, but I think it can be reorganized on rather simpler lines. I have heard from one or two members of our party that they would prefer to return to London, presumably by rail. I can quite understand the feelings lying behind this, and would not like to try and influence you in any way. This death has been a very sad occurrence. I still cannot help but believe that Miss Temple's death *was* the result of an accident. Such a thing has happened before on that particular pathway, though there do not appear in this case to have been any geological or atmospherical conditions causing it. I think a good deal more investigation will have to be made. Of course, some hiker on a walking tour—that kind of thing—may have

been pushing about boulders quite innocently, not realizing that there was a danger for someone walking below in what he or she was doing. If so, if that person comes forward, the whole thing may be cleared up quite quickly, but I agree one cannot take that for granted at present. It seems unlikely that the late Miss Temple could have had an enemy, or anyone who wished her harm of any kind. What I should suggest is, that we do not discuss the accident any further. Investigations will be made by the local authorities whose business it is. I think we will probably all like to attend the memorial service in the church tomorrow. And after that, on continuing the tour, I hope that it may distract our minds from the shock we have had. There are still some very interesting and famous houses to see and some very beautiful scenery also."

Luncheon being announced shortly after that, the subject was not discussed any further. That is to say, not openly. After lunch, as they took coffee in the lounge, people were prone to get together in little groups, discussing their further arrangements.

"Are you continuing on the tour?" asked Professor Wanstead of Miss Marple.

"No," said Miss Marple. She spoke thoughtfully. "No. I think—I think that what has happened inclines me to remain here a little longer."

"At the Golden Boar or at The Old Manor House?"

"That rather depends as to whether I receive any further invitation to go back to The Old Manor House. I would not like to suggest it myself because my original invitation was for the two nights that the tour was to have stayed here originally. I think possibly it would be better for me to remain at the Golden Boar."

"You don't feel like returning to St. Mary Mead?"

"Not yet," said Miss Marple. "There are one or two things I could do here, I think. One thing I have done already." She met his enquiring gaze. "If you are going on," she said, "with the rest of the party, I will tell you what I have put in hand, and suggest a small sideline of enquiry that might be helpful. The other reason that I wish to stay here I will tell you later. There are certain enquiries—"

local enquiries—that I want to make. They may not lead anywhere so I think it as well not to mention them now. And you?”

“I should like to return to London. I have work there waiting to be done. Unless, that is, I can be helpful to you here?”

“No,” said Miss Marple, “I do not think so at present. I expect you have various enquiries of your own that you wish to put in hand.”

“I came on the tour to meet you, Miss Marple.”

“And now you have met me and know what I know, or practically all that I know, you have other enquiries to put in hand. I understand that. But before you leave here, I think there are one or two things—well, that might be helpful, might give a result.”

“I see. You have ideas.”

“I am remembering what you said.”

“You have perhaps pinned down the smell of evil?”

“It is difficult,” said Miss Marple, “to know exactly what something wrong in the atmosphere really means.”

“But you do feel that there is something wrong in the atmosphere?”

“Oh yes. Very clearly.”

“And especially since Miss Temple’s death which, of course, was not an accident, no matter what Mrs. Sandbourne hopes.”

“No,” said Miss Marple, “it was not an accident. What I don’t think I have told you is that Miss Temple said to me once that she was on a pilgrimage.”

“Interesting,” said the Professor. “Yes, interesting. She didn’t tell you what the pilgrimage was, to where or to whom?”

“No,” said Miss Marple, “if she’d lived just a little longer and not been so weak, she might have told me. But unfortunately, death came a little too soon.”

“So that you have not any further ideas on that subject.”

“No. Only a feeling of assurance that her pilgrimage was put an end to by malign design. Someone wanted to stop her going wherever she was going, or stop her going to whomever she was going to. One can only hope that chance or Providence may throw light on that.”

“That’s why you’re staying here?”

"Not only that," said Miss Marple. "I want to find out something more about a girl called Nora Broad."

"Nora Broad." He looked faintly puzzled.

"The other girl who disappeared about the same time as Verity Hunt did. You remember you mentioned her to me. A girl who had boyfriends and was, I understand, very *ready* to *have* boyfriends. A foolish girl, but attractive apparently to the male sex. I think," said Miss Marple, "that to learn a little more about her might help me in my enquiries."

"Have it your own way, Detective-Inspector Marple," said Professor Wanstead.

II

The service took place on the following morning. All the members of the tour were there. Miss Marple looked round the church. Several of the locals were there also. Mrs. Glynne was there and her sister Clotilde. The youngest one, Anthea, did not attend. There were one or two people from the village also, she thought. Probably not acquainted with Miss Temple but there out of a rather morbid curiosity in regard to what was now spoken of by the term "foul play." There was, too, an elderly clergyman; in gaiters, well over seventy, Miss Marple thought, a broad-shouldered old man with a noble mane of white hair. He was slightly crippled and found it difficult both to kneel and to stand. It was a fine face, Miss Marple thought, and she wondered who he was. Some old friend of Elizabeth Temple, she presumed, who might perhaps have come from quite a long distance to attend the service?

As they came out of the church Miss Marple exchanged a few words with her fellow travellers. She knew now pretty well who was doing what. The Butlers were returning to London.

"I told Henry I just couldn't go on with it," said Mrs. Butler. "You know—I feel all the time that any minute just as we might be walking round a corner, someone, you know, might shoot us or

throw a stone at us. Someone who has got a down on the Famous Houses of England."

"Now then, Mamie, now then," said Mr. Butler, "don't you let your imagination go as far as that!"

"Well, you just don't know nowadays. What with hijackers about and kidnapping and all the rest of it, I don't feel really protected anywhere."

Old Miss Lumley and Miss Bentham were continuing with the tour, their anxieties allayed.

"We've paid very highly for this tour and it seems a pity to miss anything just because this very sad accident has happened. We rang up a very good neighbour of ours last night, and they are going to see to the cats, so we don't need to worry."

It was going to remain an accident for Miss Lumley and Miss Bentham. They had decided it was more comfortable that way.

Mrs. Riseley-Porter was also continuing on the tour. Colonel and Mrs. Walker were resolved that nothing would make them miss seeing a particularly rare collection of fuchsias in the garden due to be visited the day after tomorrow. The architect, Jameson, was also guided by his wish to see various buildings of special interest for him. Mr. Caspar, however, was departing by rail, he said. Miss Cooke and Miss Barrow seemed undecided.

"Pretty good walks round here," said Miss Cooke. "I think we'll stay at the Golden Boar for a little. That's what you're going to do, isn't it, Miss Marple?"

"I really think so," said Miss Marple. "I don't feel quite equal to going on travelling and all that. I think a day or two's rest would be helpful to me after what's happened."

As the little crowd dispersed, Miss Marple took an unostentatious route of her own. From her handbag she took out a leaf torn from her notebook on which she had entered two addresses. The first, a Mrs. Blackett, lived in a neat little house and garden just by the end of the road where it sloped down towards the valley. A small neat woman opened the door.

"Mrs. Blackett?"

"Yes, yes, ma'am, that's my name."

"I wonder if I might just come in and speak to you for a minute or two. I have just been to the service and I am feeling a little giddy. If I could just sit down for a minute or two?"

"Dear me, now, dear me. Oh, I'm sorry for that. Come right in, ma'am, come right in. That's right. You sit down here. Now I'll get you a glass of water—or maybe you'd like a pot of tea?"

"No, thank you," said Miss Marple, "a glass of water would put me right."

Mrs. Blackett returned with a glass of water and a pleasurable prospect of talking about ailments and giddiness and other things.

"You know, I've got a nephew like that. He oughtn't to be at his age, he's not much over fifty but now and then he'll come over giddy all of a sudden and unless he sits down at once—why you don't know, sometimes he'll pass out right on the floor. Terrible, it is. Terrible. And doctors, they don't seem able to do anything about it. Here's your glass of water."

"Ah," said Miss Marple, sipping, "I feel much better."

"Been to the service, have you, for the poor lady as got done in, as some say, or accident as others. I'd say it's accident every time. But these inquests and coroners, they always want to make things look criminal, they do."

"Oh yes," said Miss Marple. "I've been so sorry to hear of a lot of things like that in the past. I was hearing a great deal about a girl called Nora. Nora Broad, I think."

"Ah, Nora, yes. Well, she was my cousin's daughter. Yes. A long while ago, that was. Went off and never come back. These girls, there's no holding them. I said often, I did, to Nancy Broad—that's my cousin—I said to her, 'You're out working all day' and I said 'What's Nora doing? You know she's the kind that likes the boys. Well,' I said, 'there'll be trouble. You see if there isn't.' And sure enough, I was quite right."

"You mean—?"

"Ah, the usual trouble. Yes, in the family way. Mind you, I don't think as my cousin Nancy knew about it yet. But of course, I'm sixty-five and I know what's what and I know the way a girl looks and I think I know who it was, but I'm not sure. I might have been wrong

because he went on living in the place and he was real cut up when Nora was missing."

"She went off, did she?"

"Well, she accepted a lift from someone—a stranger. That's the last time she was seen. I forget the make of the car now. Some funny name it had. An Audit or something like that. Anyway, she'd been seen once or twice in that car. And off she went in it. And it was said it was that same car that the poor girl what got herself murdered used to go riding in. But I don't think as that happened to Nora. If Nora'd been murdered, the body would have come to light by now. Don't you think so?"

"It certainly seems likely," said Miss Marple. "Was she a girl who did well at school and all that?"

"Ah no, she wasn't. She was idle and she wasn't too clever at her books either. No. She was all for the boys from the time she was twelve-years-old onwards. I think in the end she must have gone off with someone or other for good. But she never let anyone know. She never sent as much as a postcard. Went off, I think, with someone as promised her things. You know. Another girl I knew—but that was when I was young—went off with one of them Africans. He told her as his father was a Shake. Funny sort of word, but a shake I think it was. Anyway it was somewhere in Africa or in Algiers. Yes, in Algiers it was. Somewhere there. And she was going to have all sorts of wonderful things. He had six camels, the boy's father, she said and a whole troop of horses and she was going to live in a wonderful house, she was, with carpets hanging up all over the walls, which seems a funny place to put carpets. And off she went. She come back again three years later. Yes. Terrible time, she'd had. Terrible. They lived in a nasty little house made of earth. Yes, it was. And nothing much to eat except what they call cos-cos which I always thought was lettuce, but it seems it isn't. Something more like semolina pudding. Oh terrible it was. And in the end he said she was no good to him and he'd divorce her. He said he'd only got to say 'I divorce you' three times, and he did and walked out and somehow or other, some kind of Society out there took charge of her and paid her fare home to England. And there she was. Ah, but that was

about thirty to forty years ago, that was. Now Nora, that was only about seven or eight years ago. But I expect she'll be back one of these days, having learnt her lesson and finding out that all these fine promises didn't come to much."

"Had she anyone to go to here except her—her mother—your cousin, I mean? Anyone who—"

"Well, there's many as was kind to her. There was the people at The Old Manor House, you know. Mrs. Glynne wasn't there then, but Miss Clotilde, she was always one to be good to the girls from school. Yes, many a nice present she's given Nora. She gave her a very nice scarf and a pretty dress once. Very nice, it was. A summer frock, a sort of foulard silk. Ah, she was very kind, Miss Clotilde was. Tried to make Nora take more interest in her schooling. Lots of things like that. Advised her against the way she was going on because, you see—well, I wouldn't like to say it, not when she's my cousin's child though, mark you, my cousin is only one who married my boy cousin, that is to say—but I mean it was something terrible the way she went on with all the boys. Anyone could pick her up. Real sad it is. I'd say she'll go on the streets in the end. I don't believe she has any future but that. I don't like to say these things, but there it is. Anyway, perhaps it's better than getting herself murdered like Miss Hunt did, what lived at The Old Manor House. Cruel, that was. They thought she'd gone off with someone and the police, they was busy. Always asking questions and having the young men who'd been with the girl up to help them with their enquiries and all that. Geoffrey Grant there was, Billy Thompson, and the Landfords' Harry. All unemployed—with plenty of jobs going if they'd wanted to take them. Things usedn't to be like that when I was young. Girls behaved proper. And the boys knew they'd got to work if they wanted to get anywhere."

Miss Marple talked a little more, said that she was now quite restored, thanked Mrs. Blackett, and went out.

Her next visit was to a girl who was planting out lettuces.

"Nora Broad? Oh, *she* hasn't been in the village for years. Went off with someone, she did. She was a great one for boys. I always

wondered where she'd end up. Did you want to see her for any particular reason?"

"I had a letter from a friend abroad," said Miss Marple, untruthfully. "A very nice family and they were thinking of engaging a Miss Nora Broad. She'd been in some trouble, I think. Married someone who was rather a bad lot and had left her and gone off with another woman, and she wanted to get a job looking after children. My friend knew nothing about her, but I gathered she came from this village. So I wondered if there was anyone here who could—well, tell me something about her. You went to school with her, I understand?"

"Oh yes, we were in the same class, we were. Mind you, I didn't approve of all Nora's goings-on. She was boy mad, she was. Well, I had a nice boyfriend myself that I was going steady with at the time, and I told her she'd do herself no good going off with every Tom, Dick and Harry that offered her a lift in a car or took her along to a pub where she told lies about her age, as likely as not. She was a good mature girl as looked a lot older than she was."

"Dark or fair?"

"Oh, she had dark hair. Pretty hair it was. Always loose like, you know, as girls do."

"Were the police worried about her when she disappeared?"

"Yes. You see, she didn't leave no word behind. She just went out one night and didn't come back. She was seen getting into a car and nobody saw the car again and nobody saw her. Just at that time there'd been a good many murders, you know. Not specially round here, but all over the country. The police, they were rounding up a lot of young men and boys. Thought as Nora might be a body at the time we did. But not she. She was all right. I'd say as likely as not she's making a bit of money still in London or one of these big towns doing a striptease, something of that kind. That's the kind she was."

"I don't think," said Miss Marple, "that if it's the same person, that she'd be very suitable for my friend."

"She'd have to change a bit if she was to be suitable," said the girl.

Eighteen

ARCHDEACON BRABAZON

When Miss Marple, slightly out of breath and rather tired, got back to the Golden Boar, the receptionist came out from her pen and across to greet her.

"Oh, Miss Marple, there is someone here who wants to speak to you. Archdeacon Brabazon."

"Archdeacon Brabazon?" Miss Marple looked puzzled.

"Yes. He's been trying to find you. He had heard you were with this tour and he wanted to talk to you before you might have left or gone to London. I told him that some of them were going back to London by the later train this afternoon, but he is very, very anxious to speak to you before you go. I have put him in the television lounge. It is quieter there. The other is very noisy just at this moment."

Slightly surprised, Miss Marple went to the room indicated. Archdeacon Brabazon turned out to be the elderly cleric whom she had noticed at the memorial service. He rose and came towards her.

"Miss Marple. Miss Jane Marple?"

"Yes, that is my name. You wanted—"

"I am Archdeacon Brabazon. I came here this morning to attend the service for a very old friend of mine, Miss Elizabeth Temple."

"Oh yes?" said Miss Marple. "Do sit down."

"Thank you, I will, I am not quite as strong as I was." He lowered himself carefully into a chair.

"And you—"

Miss Marple sat down beside him.

"Yes," she said, "you wanted to see me?"

"Well, I must explain how that comes about. I'm quite aware that I am a complete stranger to you. As a matter of fact I made a short visit to the hospital at Carristown, talking to the matron before going on to the church here. It was she who told me that before she died Elizabeth had asked to see a fellow member of the tour. Miss Jane Marple. And that Miss Jane Marple had visited her and sat with her just a very, very short time before Elizabeth died."

He looked at her anxiously.

"Yes," said Miss Marple, "that is so. It surprised me to be sent for."

"You are an old friend of hers?"

"No," said Miss Marple. "I only met her on this tour. That's why I was surprised. We had expressed ideas to each other, occasionally sat next to each other in the coach, and had struck up quite an acquaintanceship. But I was surprised that she should have expressed a wish to see me when she was so ill."

"Yes. Yes, I can quite imagine that. She was, as I have said, a very old friend of mine. In fact, she was coming to see me, to visit me. I live in Fillminster, which is where your coach tour will be stopping the day after tomorrow. And by arrangement she was coming to visit me there, she wanted to talk to me about various matters about which she thought I could help her."

"I see," said Miss Marple. "May I ask you a question? I hope it is not too intimate a question."

"Of course, Miss Marple. Ask me anything you like."

"One of the things Miss Temple said to me was that her presence on the tour was *not* merely because she wished to visit historic homes and gardens. She described it by a rather unusual word to use, as a pilgrimage."

"Did she," said Archdeacon Brabazon. "Did she indeed now? Yes, that's interesting. Interesting and perhaps significant."

"So what I am asking you is, do you think that the pilgrimage she spoke of was her visit to you?"

"I think it must have been," said the Archdeacon. "Yes, I think so."

"We had been talking," said Miss Marple, "about a young girl. A girl called Verity."

"Ah yes. Verity Hunt."

"I did not know her surname. Miss Temple, I think, mentioned her only as Verity."

"Verity Hunt is dead," said the Archdeacon. "She died quite a number of years ago. Did you know that?"

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "I knew it. Miss Temple and I were talking about her. Miss Temple told me something that I did not know. She said she had been engaged to be married to the son of a Mr. Rafiel. Mr. Rafiel is, or again I must say was, a friend of mine. Mr. Rafiel has paid the expenses of this tour out of his kindness. I think, though, that possibly he wanted—indeed, intended—me to meet Miss Temple on this tour. I think he thought she could give me certain information."

"Certain information about Verity?"

"Yes."

"That is why she was coming to me. She wanted to know certain facts."

"She wanted to know," said Miss Marple, "why Verity broke off her engagement to marry Mr. Rafiel's son."

"Verity," said Archdeacon Brabazon, "did *not* break off her engagement. I am certain of that. As certain as one can be of anything."

"Miss Temple did not know that, did she?"

"No. I think she was puzzled and unhappy about what happened and was coming to me to ask me why the marriage did not take place."

"And why did it not take place?" asked Miss Marple. "Please do not think that I am unduly curious. It's not idle curiosity that is driving me. I too am on—not a pilgrimage—but what I should call a mission. I too want to know why Michael Rafiel and Verity Hunt did not marry."

The Archdeacon studied her for a moment or two.

"You are involved in some way," he said. "I see that."

"I am involved," said Miss Marple, "by the dying wishes of Michael Rafiel's father. He asked me to do this for him."

"I have no reason not to tell you all I know," said the Archdeacon slowly. "You are asking me what Elizabeth Temple would have been asking me, you are asking me something I do not know myself. Those two young people, Miss Marple, intended to marry. They had made arrangements to marry. I was going to marry them. It was a marriage, I gather, which was being kept a secret. I knew both these young people, I knew that dear child Verity from a long way back. I prepared her for confirmation, I used to hold services in Lent, for Easter, on other occasions, in Elizabeth Temple's school. A very fine school it was, too. A very fine woman she was. A wonderful teacher with a great sense of each girl's capabilities—for what she was best fitted for in studies. She urged careers on girls she thought would relish careers, and did not force girls that she felt were not really suited to them. She was a great woman and a very dear friend. Verity was one of the most beautiful children—girls, rather—that I have come across. Beautiful in mind, in heart, as well as in appearance. She had the great misfortune to lose her parents before she was truly adult. They were both killed in a charter plane going on a holiday to Italy. Verity went to live when she left school with a Miss Clotilde Bradbury-Scott whom you know, probably, as living here. She had been a close friend of Verity's mother. There are three sisters, though the second one was married and living abroad, so there were only two of them living here. Clotilde, the eldest one, became extremely attached to Verity. She did everything possible to give her a happy life. She took her abroad once or twice, gave her art lessons in Italy and loved and cared for her dearly in every way. Verity, too, came to love her probably as much as she could have loved her own mother. She depended on Clotilde. Clotilde herself was an intellectual and well educated woman. She did not urge a university career on Verity, but this I gather was really because Verity did not really yearn after one. She preferred to study art and music and such subjects. She lived here at The Old Manor House

and had, I think, a very happy life. She always seemed to be happy. Naturally, I did not see her after she came here since Fillminster, where I was in the cathedral, is nearly sixty miles from here. I wrote to her at Christmas and other festivals, and she remembered me always with a Christmas card. But I saw nothing of her until the day came when she suddenly turned up, a very beautiful and fully grown young woman by then, with an attractive young man whom I also happened to know slightly, Mr. Rafiel's son, Michael. They came to me because they were in love with each other and wanted to get married."

"And you agreed to marry them?"

"Yes, I did. Perhaps, Miss Marple, you may think that I should not have done so. They had come to me in secret, it was obvious. Clotilde Bradbury-Scott, I should imagine, had tried to discourage the romance between them. She was well within her rights in doing so. Michael Rafiel, I will tell you frankly, was not the kind of husband you would want for any daughter or relation of yours. She was too young really, to make up her mind, and Michael had been a source of trouble ever since his very young days. He had been had up before junior courts, he had had unsuitable friends, he had been drawn into various gangster activities, he'd sabotaged buildings and telephone boxes. He had been on intimate terms with various girls, had maintenance claims which he had had to meet. Yes, he was a bad lot with the girls as well as in other ways, yet he was extremely attractive and they fell for him and behaved in an extremely silly fashion. He had served two short jail sentences. Frankly, he had a criminal record. I was acquainted with his father, though I did not know him well, and I think that his father did all that he could—all that a man of his character could—to help his son. He came to his rescue, he got him jobs in which he might have succeeded. He paid up his debts, paid out damages. He did all this. I don't know—"

"But he could have done more, you think?"

"No," said the Archdeacon, "I've come to an age now when I know that one must accept one's fellow human beings as being the kind of people and having the kind of, shall we say in modern terms, genetic makeup which gives them the characters they have. I don't

think that Mr. Rafiel had affection for his son, a great affection at any time. To say he was reasonably fond of him would be the most you could say. He gave him no love. Whether it would have been better for Michael if he had had love from his father, I do not know. Perhaps it would have made no difference. As it was, it was sad. The boy was not stupid. He had a certain amount of intellect and talent. He could have done well if he had wished to do well, and had taken the trouble. But he was by nature—let us admit it frankly—a delinquent. He had certain qualities one appreciated. He had a sense of humour, he was in various ways generous and kindly. He would stand by a friend, help a friend out of a scrape. He treated his girlfriends badly, got them into trouble as the local saying is, and then more or less abandoned them and took up with somebody else. So there I was faced with those two and—yes—I agreed to marry them. I told Verity, I told her quite frankly, the kind of boy she wanted to marry. I found that he had not tried to deceive her in any way. He'd told her that he'd always been in trouble both with the police, and in every other way. He told her that he was going, when he married her, to turn over a new leaf. Everything would be changed. I warned her that that would not happen, he would not change. People do not change. He might *mean* to change. Verity, I think, knew that almost as well as I did. She admitted that she knew it. She said, 'I know what Mike is like. I know he'll probably always be like it, but I love him. I may be able to help him and I may not. But I'll take that risk.' And I will tell you this, Miss Marple. I know—none better, I have done a lot with young people, I have married a lot of young people and I have seen them come to grief, I have seen them unexpectedly turn out well—but I know this and recognize it. I know when a couple are really in love with each other. And by that I do not mean just sexually attracted. There is too much talk about sex, too much attention is paid to it. I do not mean that anything about sex is wrong. That is nonsense. But sex cannot take the place of love, it goes *with* love but it cannot succeed by itself. To love means the words of the marriage service. For better, for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health. That is what you take on if you love and wish to marry. Those two loved each other. To love

and to cherish until death do us part. And that," said the Archdeacon, "is where my story ends. I cannot go on because *I do not know what happened*. I only know that I agreed to do as they asked, that I made the necessary arrangements; we settled a day, an hour, a time, a place. I think perhaps that I was to blame for agreeing to the secrecy."

"They didn't want anyone to know?" said Miss Marple.

"No. Verity did not want anyone to know, and I should say most certainly Mike did not want anyone to know. They were afraid of being stopped. To Verity, I think, besides love, there was also a feeling of escape. Natural, I think, owing to the circumstances of her life. She had lost her real guardians, her parents, she had entered on her new life after their death, at an age when a school girl arrives at having a 'crush' on someone. An attractive mistress. Anything from the games mistress to the mathematics mistress, or a prefect or an older girl. A state that does not last for very long, is merely a natural part of life. Then from that you go on to the next stage when you realize that what you want in your life is what complements yourself. A relationship between a man and a woman. You start then to look about you for a mate. The mate you want in life. And if you are wise, you take your time, you have friends, but you are looking, as the old nurses used to say to children, for Mr. Right to come along. Clotilde Bradbury-Scott was exceptionally good to Verity, and Verity, I think, gave her what I should call hero worship. She was a personality as a woman. Handsome, accomplished, interesting. I think Verity adored her in an almost romantic way and I think Clotilde came to love Verity as though she were her own daughter. And so Verity grew to maturity in an atmosphere of adoration, lived an interesting life with interesting subjects to stimulate her intellect. It was a happy life, but I think little by little she was conscious—conscious without knowing she was conscious, shall we say—of a wish to escape. Escape from being loved. To escape, she didn't know into what or *where*. But she did know after she met Michael. She wanted to escape to a life where male and female come together to create the next stage of living in this world. But she knew that it was impossible to make Clotilde understand how she felt. She knew that

Clotilde would be bitterly opposed to her taking her love for Michael seriously. And Clotilde, I fear, was right in her belief ... I know that now. He was not a husband that Verity ought to have taken or had. The road that she started out on led not to life, not to increased living and happiness. It led to shock, pain, death. You see, Miss Marple, that I have a grave feeling of guilt. My motives were good, but I didn't know what I ought to have known. I knew Verity, *but I didn't know Michael*. I understood Verity's wish for secrecy because I knew what a strong personality Clotilde Bradbury-Scott had. She might have had a strong enough influence over Verity to persuade her to give up the marriage."

"You think then that that was what she did do? You think Clotilde told her enough about Michael to persuade her to give up the idea of marrying him?"

"No, I do *not* believe that. I still do not. Verity would have told me if so. She would have got word to me."

"What did actually happen on that day?"

"I haven't told you that yet. The day was fixed. The time, the hour and the place, and I waited. Waited for a bride and bridegroom who didn't come, who sent no word, no excuse, *nothing*. I didn't know why! I never *have* known why. It still seems to me unbelievable. Unbelievable, I mean, not that they did not come, that could be explicable easily enough, but that they sent no word. Some scrawled line of writing. And that is why I wondered and hoped that Elizabeth Temple, before she died, might have told *you* something. Given you some message perhaps for me. If she knew or had any idea that she was dying, she might have wanted to get a message to me."

"She wanted information *from* you," said Miss Marple. "That, I am sure, was the reason she was coming to you."

"Yes. Yes, that is probably true. It seemed to me, you see, that Verity would have said nothing to the people who could have stopped her. Clotilde and Anthea Bradbury-Scott, but because she had always been very devoted to Elizabeth Temple—and Elizabeth Temple had had great influence over her—it seems to me that she would have written and given her information of some kind."

"I think she did," said Miss Marple.

"Information, you think?"

"The information she gave to Elizabeth Temple," said Miss Marple, "was this. That she was going to marry Michael Rafiel. Miss Temple knew that. It was one of the things she said to me. She said: 'I knew a girl called Verity who was going to marry Michael Rafiel' and the only person who could have told her that was Verity herself. Verity must have written to her or sent some word to her. And then when I said 'Why didn't she marry him?' she said: 'She died.'"

"Then we come to a full stop," said Archdeacon Brabazon. He sighed. "Elizabeth and I know no more than those two facts. Elizabeth, that Verity was going to marry Michael. And I that those two were going to marry, that they had arranged it and that they were coming on a settled day and time. And I waited for them, but there was no marriage. No bride, no bridegroom, no word."

"And you have no idea what happened?" said Miss Marple.

"I do not for one minute believe that Verity or Michael definitely parted, broke off."

"But *something* must have happened between them? Something that opened Verity's eyes perhaps, to certain aspects of Michael's character and personality, that she had not realized or known before."

"That is not a satisfying answer because still she would have let me know. She would not have left me waiting to join them together in holy matrimony. To put the most ridiculous side of it, she was a girl with beautiful manners, well brought up. She would have sent word. No. I'm afraid that only one thing could have happened."

"Death?" said Miss Marple. She was remembering that one word that Elizabeth Temple had said which had sounded like the deep tone of a bell.

"Yes." Archdeacon Brabazon sighed. "Death."

"Love," said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

"By that you mean—" he hesitated.

"It's what Miss Temple said to me. I said 'What killed her?' and she said 'Love' and that love was the most frightening word in the world. The most frightening word."

"I see," said the Archdeacon. "I see—or I think I see."

"What is your solution?"

"Split personality," he sighed. "Something that is not apparent to other people unless they are technically qualified to observe it. Jekyll and Hyde are real, you know. They were not Stevenson's invention as such. Michael Rafiel was a—must have been schizophrenic. He had a dual personality. I have no medical knowledge, no psychoanalytic experience. But there must have been in him the two parts of two identities. One, a well-meaning, almost lovable boy, a boy perhaps whose principal attraction was his wish for happiness. But there was also a second personality, someone who was forced by some mental deformation perhaps—something we as yet are not sure of—to kill—not an enemy, but the person he loved, and so he killed Verity. Not knowing perhaps *why* he had to or *what* it meant. There are very frightening things in this world of ours, mental quirks, mental disease or deformity of a brain. One of my parishioners was a very sad case in point. Two elderly women living together, pensioned. They had been friends in service together somewhere. They appeared to be a happy couple. And yet one day one of them killed the other. She sent for an old friend of hers, the vicar of her parish, and said: 'I have killed Louisa. It is very sad,' she said, 'but I saw the devil looking out of her eyes and I knew I was being commanded to kill her.' Things like that make one sometimes despair of living. One says why? and how? and yet one day knowledge will come. Doctors will find out or learn just some small deformity of a chromosome or gene. Some gland that overworks or leaves off working."

"So you think that's what happened?" said Miss Marple.

"It *did* happen. The body was not found, I know, for some time afterwards. Verity just disappeared. She went away from home and was not seen again...."

"But it must have happened *then*—that very day—"

"But surely at the trial—"

"You mean after the body was found, when the police finally arrested Michael?"

"He had been one of the first, you know, to be asked to come and give assistance to the police. He had been seen about with the girl, she had been noticed in his car. They were sure all along that he was the man they wanted. He was their first suspect, and they never stopped suspecting him. The other young men who had known Verity were questioned, and one and all had alibis or lack of evidence. They continued to suspect Michael, and finally the body was found. Strangled and the head and face disfigured with heavy blows. A mad frenzied attack. He wasn't sane when he struck those blows. Mr. Hyde, let us say, had taken over."

Miss Marple shivered.

The Archdeacon went on, his voice low and sad. "And yet, even now sometimes, I hope and feel that it was some other young man who killed her. Someone who was definitely mentally deranged, though no one had any idea of it. Some stranger, perhaps, whom she had met in the neighborhood. Someone who she had met by chance, who had given her a lift in a car, and then—" He shook his head.

"I suppose that *could* have been true," said Miss Marple.

"Mike made a bad impression in court," said the Archdeacon. "Told foolish and senseless lies. Lied as to where his car had been. Got his friends to give him impossible alibis. He was frightened. He said nothing of his plan to marry. I believe his Counsel was of the opinion that that would tell against him—that she might have been forcing him to marry her and that he didn't want to. It's so long ago now, I remember no details. But the evidence was dead against him. He was guilty—and he looked guilty.

"So you see, do you not, Miss Marple, that I'm a very sad and unhappy man. I made the wrong judgment, I encouraged a very sweet and lovely girl to go to her death, because I did not know enough of human nature. I was ignorant of the danger she was running. I believed that if she had had any fear of him, any sudden knowledge of something evil in him, she would have broken her pledge to marry him and have come to me and told me of her fear, of her knowledge of him. But nothing of that ever happened. Why *did* he kill her? Did he kill her because perhaps he knew she was

going to have a child? Because by now he had formed a tie with some other girl and did not want to be forced to marry Verity? I can't believe it. Or was it some entirely different reason. Because *she* had suddenly felt a fear of him, a knowledge of danger from him, and had broken off her association with him? Did that rouse his anger, his fury, and did that lead him to violence and to killing her? One does not know."

"You do not know?" said Miss Marple, "but you *do* still know and believe one thing, don't you?"

"What do you mean exactly by 'believe'? Are you talking from the religious point of view?"

"Oh no," said Miss Marple, "I didn't mean that. I mean, there seems to be in you, or so I feel it, a very strong belief that those two loved each other, that they meant to marry, but that *something* happened that prevented it. Something that ended in her death, but you still really believe that they *were* coming to you to get married that day?"

"You are quite right, my dear. Yes, I cannot help still believing in two lovers who wished to get married, who were ready to take each other on for better, for worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. She loved him and she would have taken him for better or for worse. As far as she had gone, she took him for worse. It brought about her death."

"You must go on believing as you do," said Miss Marple. "I think, you know, that *I* believe it too."

"But then what?"

"I don't know yet," said Miss Marple. "I'm not sure, but I think Elizabeth Temple did know or was beginning to know what happened. A frightening word, she said. *Love*. I thought when she spoke that what she meant was that because of a love affair Verity committed suicide. Because she found out something about Michael, or because something about Michael suddenly upset her and revolted her. But it couldn't have been suicide."

"No," said the Archdeacon, "that couldn't be so. The injuries were described very fully at the trial. You don't commit suicide by beating in your own head."

“Horrible!” said Miss Marple. “Horrible! And you couldn’t do that to anyone you loved even if you had to kill ‘for love,’ could you? If he’d killed her, he couldn’t have done it that way. Strangling—perhaps, but you wouldn’t beat in the face and the head that you loved.” She murmured, “Love, love—a frightening word.”

Nineteen

GOOD-BYES ARE SAID

The coach was drawn up in front of the Golden Boar on the following morning. Miss Marple had come down and was saying good-bye to various friends. She found Mrs. Riseley-Porter in a state of high indignation.

"Really, girls nowadays," she said. "No vigour. No stamina."

Miss Marple looked at her enquiringly.

"Joanna, I mean. My niece."

"Oh dear. Is she not well?"

"Well, she says not. I can't see anything much the matter with her. She says she's got a sore throat, she feels she might have a temperature coming on. All nonsense, I think."

"Oh, I'm very sorry," said Miss Marple. "Is there anything I can do? Look after her?"

"I should leave her alone, if I were you," said Mrs. Riseley-Porter. "If you ask me, it's all an excuse."

Miss Marple looked enquiringly at her once more.

"Girls are so silly. Always falling in love."

"Emlyn Price?" said Miss Marple.

"Oh, so you've noticed it too. Yes, they're really getting to a stage of spooning about together. I don't much care for him anyway. One of these long-haired students, you know. Always going on demos or

something like that. Why can't they say demonstration properly? I hate abbreviations. And how am *I* going to get along? Nobody to look after me, collect my luggage, take it in, take it out. Really. I'm paying for this complete trip and everything."

"I thought she seemed so attentive to you," said Miss Marple.

"Well, not the last day or two. Girls don't understand that people have to have a little assistance when they get to middle age. They seem to have some absurd idea—she and the Price boy—of going to visit some mountain or some landmark. About a seven or eight mile walk there and back."

"But surely if she has a sore throat and a temperature...."

"You'll see, as soon as the coach is gone the sore throat will get better and the temperature will go down," said Mrs. Riseley-Porter. "Oh dear, we've got to get on board now. Oh, good-bye, Miss Marple, it's nice to have met you. I'm sorry you're not coming with us."

"I'm very sorry myself," said Miss Marple, "but really you know, I'm not so young and vigorous as you are, Mrs. Riseley-Porter, and I really feel after all the—well, shock and everything else the last few days, I really must have a complete twenty-four hours' rest."

"Well, hope to see you somewhere in the future."

They shook hands. Mrs. Riseley-Porter climbed into the coach.

A voice behind Miss Marple's shoulder said:

"*Bon Voyage* and Good Riddance."

She turned to see Emlyn Price. He was grinning.

"Was that addressed to Mrs. Riseley-Porter?"

"Yes. Who else."

"I'm sorry to hear that Joanna is under the weather this morning."

Emlyn Price grinned at Miss Marple again.

"She'll be all right," he said, "as soon as that coach is gone."

"Oh really!" said Miss Marple, "do you mean—?"

"Yes, I do mean," said Emlyn Price. "Joanna's had enough of that aunt of hers, bossing her around all the time."

"Then you are not going in the coach either?"

"No. I'm staying on here for a couple of days. I'm going to get around a bit and do a few excursions. Don't look so disapproving,

Miss Marple. You're not really as disapproving as all that, are you?"

"Well," said Miss Marple, "I have known such things happen in my own youth. The excuses may have been different, and I think we had less chance of getting away with things than you do now."

Colonel and Mrs. Walker came up and shook Miss Marple warmly by the hand.

"So nice to have known you and had all those delightful horticultural talks," said the Colonel. "I believe the day after tomorrow we're going to have a real treat, if nothing else happens. Really it's too sad, this very unfortunate accident. I must say I think myself it *is* an accident. I really think the Coroner was going beyond everything in his feelings about this."

"It seems very odd," said Miss Marple, "that nobody has come forward, if they were up on top there, pushing about rocks and boulders and things, that they haven't come forward to say so."

"Think they'll be blamed, of course," said Colonel Walker. "They're going to keep jolly quiet, that's what they're going to do. Well, good-bye. I'll send you a cutting of that *magnolia highdownensis* and one of the *mahonia japonica* too. Though I'm not quite sure if it would do as well where you live."

They in turn got into the coach. Miss Marple turned away. She turned to see Professor Wanstead waving to the departing coach. Mrs. Sandbourne came out, said good-bye to Miss Marple and got in the coach and Miss Marple took Professor Wanstead by the arm.

"I want you," she said. "Can we go somewhere where we can talk?"

"Yes. What about the place where we sat the other day?"

"Round here there's a very nice verandah place, I think."

They walked round the corner of the hotel. There was some gay horn blowing, and the coach departed.

"I wish, in a way, you know," said Professor Wanstead, "that you weren't staying behind. I'd rather have seen you safely on your way in the coach." He looked at her sharply. "Why are you staying here? Nervous exhaustion or something else?"

"Something else," said Miss Marple. "I'm not particularly exhausted, though it makes a perfectly natural excuse for somebody

of my age."

"I feel really I ought to stay here and keep an eye on you."

"No," said Miss Marple, "there's no need to do that. There are other things you ought to be doing."

"What things?" He looked at her. "Have you got ideas or knowledge?"

"I think I have knowledge, but I'll have to verify it. There are certain things that I can't do myself. I think you will help to do them because you're in touch with what I refer to as the authorities."

"Meaning Scotland Yard, Chief Constables and the Governors of Her Majesty's Prisons?"

"Yes. One or other or all of them. You might have the Home Secretary in your pocket, too."

"You certainly do have ideas! Well, what do you want me to do?"

"First of all I want to give you this address."

She took out a notebook and tore out one page and handed it to him.

"What's this? Oh yes, well-known charity, isn't it?"

"One of the better ones, I believe. They do a lot of good. You send them clothes," said Miss Marple, "children's clothes and women's clothes. Coats. Pullovers, all those sort of things."

"Well, do you want me to contribute to this?"

"No, it's an appeal for charity, it's a bit of what belongs to what we're doing. What you and I are doing."

"In what way?"

"I want you to make enquiries there about a parcel which was sent from here two days ago, posted from this post office."

"Who posted it—did you?"

"No," said Miss Marple. "No. But I assumed responsibility for it."

"What does that mean?"

"It means," said Miss Marple, smiling slightly, "that I went into the post office here and I explained rather scattily and—well, like the old pussy I am—that I had very foolishly asked someone to take a parcel for me and post it, and I had put the wrong address on it. I was very upset by this. The postmistress very kindly said she remembered the parcel, but the address on it was not the one I was

mentioning. It was this one, the one I have just given to you. I explained that I had been very foolish and written the wrong address on it, confusing it with another one I sometimes send things to. She told me it was too late to do anything about it now because the parcel, naturally, had gone off. I said it was quite all right, that I would send a letter to the particular charity to which the parcel had been sent, and explain that it had been addressed to them by mistake. Would they very kindly forward it on to the charity that I had meant to receive it."

"It seems rather a roundabout way."

"Well," said Miss Marple, "one has to say *something*. I'm not going to do that at all. *You* are going to deal with the matter. We've got to know what's inside that parcel! I have no doubt you can get means."

"Will there be anything inside the parcel to say who actually sent it?"

"I rather think not. It may have a slip of paper saying 'from friends' or it may have a fictitious name and address—something like Mrs. Pippin, 14 Westbourne Grove—and if anyone made enquiries there, there'd be no person of such a name living there."

"Oh. Any other alternatives?"

"It might possibly, most unlikely but possible, have a slip saying 'From Miss Anthea Bradbury-Scott'—"

"Did she—?"

"She took it to the post," said Miss Marple.

"And you had asked her to take it there?"

"Oh no," said Miss Marple. "I hadn't asked anyone to post anything. The first I saw of the parcel was when Anthea passed the garden of the Golden Boar where you and I were sitting talking, carrying it."

"But you went to the post office and represented that the parcel was yours."

"Yes," said Miss Marple, "which was quite untrue. But post offices are careful. And, you see, I wanted to find out where it had been sent."

"You wanted to find out if such a parcel had been sent, and if it had been sent by one of the Bradbury-Scotts—or especially Miss Anthea?"

"I knew it would be Anthea," said Miss Marple, "because we'd seen her."

"Well?" He took the paper from her hand. "Yes, I can set this in motion. You think this parcel will be interesting?"

"I think the contents of it might be quite important."

"You like keeping your secrets, don't you?" said Professor Wanstead.

"Not exactly secrets," said Miss Marple, "they are only *probabilities* that I am exploring. One does not like to make definite assertions unless one has a little more definite knowledge."

"Anything else?"

"I think—I think that whoever's in charge of these things, ought to be warned that there might be a second body to be found."

"Do you mean a second body connected with the particular crime that we have been considering? A crime that took place ten years ago?"

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "I'm quite sure of it, as a matter of fact."

"Another body. Whose body?"

"Well," said Miss Marple, "it's only my idea so far."

"Any idea where this body is?"

"Oh! Yes," said Miss Marple, "I'm quite sure I know where it *is*, but I have to have a little more time before I can tell you that."

"What kind of a body? Man's? Woman's? Child's? Girl's?"

"There's another girl who is missing," said Miss Marple. "A girl called Nora Broad. She disappeared from here and she's never been heard anymore of. I think her body might be in a particular place."

Professor Wanstead looked at her.

"You know, the more you say, the less I like leaving you here," he said. "Having all these ideas—and possibly doing something foolish—either—" He stopped.

"Either it's all nonsense?—" said Miss Marple.

"No, no, I didn't mean that. But either you know too much—which might be dangerous ... I think I am going to stay here to keep

an eye on you."

"No, you're not," said Miss Marple. "You've got to go to London and set certain things moving."

"You spoke as though you knew a good deal now, Miss Marple."

"I think I do know a good deal now. But I have got to be sure."

"Yes, but if you make sure, that may be the last thing you do make sure of! We don't want a third body. Yours."

"Oh, I'm not expecting anything like that," said Miss Marple.

"There might be danger, you know, if any of your ideas are right. Have you suspicions of any one particular person?"

"I think I have certain knowledge as to one person. I have got to find out—I have got to stay here. You asked me once if I felt an atmosphere of evil. Well, that atmosphere is here all right, an atmosphere of evil, of danger if you like—of great unhappiness, of fear ... I've got to do something about that. The best I can do. But an old woman like me can't do very much."

Professor Wanstead counted under his breath. "One—two—three—four—"

"What are you counting?" asked Miss Marple.

"The people who left in the coach. Presumably you're not interested in them, since you've let them go off and you're staying here."

"Why should I be interested in them?"

"Because you said Mr. Rafiel had sent you in the coach for a particular reason and sent you on this tour for a particular reason and sent you to The Old Manor House for a particular reason. Very well then. The death of Elizabeth Temple ties up with someone in the coach. Your remaining here ties up with The Old Manor House."

"You're not quite right," said Miss Marple. "There are connections between the two. I want someone to tell me things."

"Do you think you can make anyone tell you things?"

"I think I might. You'll miss your train if you don't go soon."

"Take care of yourself," said Professor Wanstead.

"I mean to take care of myself."

The door into the lounge opened and two people came out. Miss Cooke and Miss Barrow.

"Hullo," said Professor Wanstead, "I thought you'd gone off with the coach."

"Well, we changed our minds at the last moment," said Miss Cooke cheerfully. "You know we've just discovered that there are some very agreeable walks near here and there are one or two places I'm very anxious to see. A church with a very unusual Saxon font. Only four or five miles away and quite easily reached by the local bus, I think. You see, it's not only houses and gardens. I'm very interested in church architecture."

"So am I," said Miss Barrow. "There's also Finley Park which is a very fine piece of horticultural planting not far from here. We really thought that it would be much pleasanter to stay here for a day or two."

"You're staying here at the Golden Boar?"

"Yes. We were fortunate enough to be able to get a very nice double room. Really a better one than the one we have had for the last two days."

"You will miss your train," said Miss Marple again.

"I wish," said Professor Wanstead, "that you—"

"I shall be quite all right," said Miss Marple urgently. "Such a kind man," she said, as he disappeared round the side of the house, "who really takes so much care of me—I might be a great-aunt of his or something like that."

"It's all been a great shock, hasn't it," said Miss Cooke. "Perhaps you may like to come with us when we go to visit St. Martins in the Grove."

"You're very kind," said Miss Marple, "but I don't think today I feel quite strong enough for expeditions. Perhaps tomorrow if there is anything interesting to see."

"Well, we must leave you then."

Miss Marple smiled at them both and went into the hotel.

Twenty

MISS MARPLE HAS IDEAS

Having had lunch in the dining room, Miss Marple went out on the terrace to drink her coffee. She was just sipping her second cup when a tall, thin figure came striding up the steps, and approached her, speaking rather breathlessly. She saw that it was Anthea Bradbury-Scott.

"Oh, Miss Marple, we've only just heard, you know, that you didn't go with the coach, after all. We thought you were going on with the tour. We had no idea you were staying on here. Both Clotilde and Lavinia sent me here to say we do so hope you will come back to The Old Manor House and stay with us. I'm sure it will be nicer for you to be there. There are so many people coming and going here always, especially over a weekend and things like that. So we'd be very, very glad—we really would—if you would come back to us."

"Oh, that's very kind of you," said Miss Marple. "Really very kind, but I'm sure—I mean, you know it was just a two-day visit. I meant originally to go off with the coach. I mean, after the two days. If it hadn't been for this very, very tragic accident but—well, I really felt I couldn't go on any longer. I thought I must have at least, well at least one night's rest."

"But I mean it would be so much better if you came to us. We'd try and make you comfortable."

"Oh, there's no question of that," said Miss Marple. "I was extremely comfortable staying with you. Oh yes, I did enjoy it very much. Such a beautiful house. And all your things are so nice. You know, your china and glass and furniture. It's such a pleasure to be in a home and not a hotel."

"Then you must come with me now. Yes, you really must. I could go and pack your things for you."

"Oh—well, that's very kind of you. I can do that myself."

"Well, shall I come and help you?"

"That would be very kind," said Miss Marple.

They repaired to her bedroom where Anthea, in a somewhat slapdash manner, packed Miss Marple's belongings together. Miss Marple, who had her own ways of folding things, had to bite her lip to keep an air of complacency on her face. Really, she thought, she can't fold *anything* properly.

Anthea got hold of a porter from the hotel and he carried the suitcase round the corner and down the street to The Old Manor House. Miss Marple tipped him adequately and, still uttering fussy little speeches of thanks and pleasure, rejoined the sisters.

"The Three Sisters!" she was thinking, "here we are again." She sat down in the drawing room, and closed her eyes for a minute, breathing rather fast. She appeared to be somewhat out of breath. It was only natural, she felt at her age, and after all Anthea and the hotel porter had set a fast pace. But really she was trying to acquire through her closed eyes what the feeling was she had on coming into this house again. Was something in it sinister? No, not so much sinister as unhappy. Deep unhappiness. So much so it was almost frightening.

She opened her eyes again and looked at the two other occupants of the room. Mrs. Glynne had just come in from the kitchen, bearing an afternoon tea tray. She looked as she had looked all along. Comfortable, no particular emotions or feelings. Perhaps almost too devoid of them, Miss Marple thought. Had she accustomed herself, through perhaps a life of some stress and

difficulty, to show nothing to the outer world, to keep a reserve and let no one know what her inner feelings were?

She looked from her to Clotilde. She had a Clytemnestra look, as she had thought before. She had certainly not murdered her husband for she had never had a husband to murder and it seemed unlikely that she had murdered the girl to whom she was said to have been extremely attached. That, Miss Marple was quite sure, was true. She had seen before how the tears had welled from Clotilde's eyes when the death of Verity had been mentioned.

And what about Anthea? Anthea had taken that cardboard box to the post office. Anthea had come to fetch her. Anthea—she was very doubtful about Anthea. Scatty? Too scatty for her age. Eyes that wandered and came back to you. Eyes that seemed to see things that other people might not see, over your shoulder. She's frightened, thought Miss Marple. Frightened of something. What was she frightened of? Was she perhaps a mental case of some kind? Frightened perhaps of going back to some institution or establishment where she might have spent part of her life? Frightened of those two sisters of hers feeling that it was unwise for her to remain at liberty? Were they uncertain, those two, what their sister Anthea might do or say?

There was *some* atmosphere here. She wondered, as she sipped the last of her tea, what Miss Cooke and Miss Barrow were doing. Had they gone to visit that church or was that all talk, meaningless talk? It was odd. Odd the way they had come and looked at her at St. Mary Mead so as to know her again on the coach, but not to acknowledge that they had ever seen or met her before.

There were quite a lot of difficult things going on. Presently Mrs. Glynne removed the tea tray, Anthea went out into the garden and Miss Marple was left alone with Clotilde.

"I think," said Miss Marple, "that you know an Archdeacon Brabazon, do you not?"

"Oh yes," said Clotilde, "he was in church yesterday at the service. Do you know him?"

"Oh no," said Miss Marple, "but he did come to the Golden Boar and he came and spoke to me there. I gather he had been to the

hospital and was enquiring about poor Miss Temple's death. He wondered if Miss Temple had sent any message to him. I gather she was thinking of paying him a visit. But of course I told him that although I did go there in case I could do anything there was nothing that could be done except sit by poor Miss Temple's bed. She was unconscious, you know. I could have done nothing to help her."

"She didn't say—say anything—any explanation of what had happened?" asked Clotilde.

She asked without much interest. Miss Marple wondered if she felt more interest than she expressed, but on the whole she thought not. She thought Clotilde was busy with thoughts of something quite different.

"Do you think it *was* an accident?" Miss Marple asked, "Or do you think there is something in that story that Mrs. Riseley-Porter's niece told? About seeing someone pushing a boulder."

"Well, I suppose if those two said so, they must have seen it."

"Yes. They both said so, didn't they," said Miss Marple, "though not quite in the same terms. But perhaps that's quite natural."

Clotilde looked at her curiously.

"You seem to be intrigued by that."

"Well, it seems so very unlikely," said Miss Marple, "an unlikely story, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Well, I just wondered," said Miss Marple.

Mrs. Glynne came into the room again.

"You just wondered what?" she asked.

"We're talking about the accident, or the nonaccident," said Clotilde.

"But who—"

"It seems a very odd story that they told," said Miss Marple again.

"There's something about this place," said Clotilde suddenly. "Something about this atmosphere. We never got over it here. Never. Never since—since Verity died. It's years but it doesn't go away. A shadow's here." She looked at Miss Marple. "Don't you think so too? Don't you feel a shadow here?"

"Well, I'm a stranger," said Miss Marple. "It's different for you and your sisters who've lived here and who knew the dead girl. She was, I gather, as Archdeacon Brabazon was saying—a very charming and beautiful girl."

"She was a lovely girl. A dear child too," said Clotilde.

"I wish I'd known her better," said Mrs. Glynne. "Of course I was living abroad at that time. My husband and I came home on leave once, but we were mostly in London. We didn't come down here often."

Anthea came in from the garden. She was carrying in her hand a great bunch of lilies.

"Funeral flowers," she said. "That's what we ought to have here today, isn't it? I'll put them in a great jar. Funeral flowers," and she laughed suddenly. A queer, hysterical little giggle.

"Anthea," said Clotilde, "don't—don't do that. It's not—it's not right."

"I'll go and put them in water," said Anthea, cheerfully. She went out of the room.

"Really," said Mrs. Glynne, "Anthea! I do think she's—"

"She's getting worse," said Clotilde.

Miss Marple adopted an attitude of not listening or hearing. She picked up a small enamel box and looked at it with admiring eyes.

"She'll probably break a vase now," said Lavinia.

She went out of the room. Miss Marple said,

"You are worried about your sister, about Anthea?"

"Well yes, she's always been rather unbalanced. She's the youngest and she was rather delicate as a girl. But lately, I think, she's got definitely worse. She hasn't got any idea, I think, of the gravity of things. She has these silly fits of hysteria. Hysterical laughter at things one ought to be serious about. We don't want to—well, to send her anywhere or—you know. She ought to have treatment, I think, but I don't think she would like to go away from home. This is her home, after all. Though sometimes it's—it's very difficult."

"All life is difficult sometimes," said Miss Marple.

"Lavinia talks of going away," said Clotilde. "She talks of going to live abroad again. At Taormina, I think. She was there with her husband a lot and they were very happy. She's been at home with us now for many years, but she seems to have this longing to get away and to travel. Sometimes I think—sometimes I think she doesn't like being in the same house as Anthea."

"Oh dear," said Miss Marple. "Yes, I have heard of cases like that where these difficulties do arise."

"She's afraid of Anthea," said Clotilde. "Definitely afraid of her. And really, I keep telling her there's nothing to be afraid of. Anthea's just rather silly at times. You know, has queer ideas and says queer things. But I don't think there's any danger of her—well, I mean of—oh, I don't know what I mean. Doing anything dangerous or strange or queer."

"There's never been any trouble of that kind?" enquired Miss Marple.

"Oh no. There's never been anything. She gets nervous fits of temper sometimes and she takes rather sudden dislikes to people. She's very jealous, you know, over things. Very jealous of a lot of—well, fuss being made over different people. I don't know. Sometimes I think we'd better sell this house and leave it altogether."

"It is sad for you, isn't it," said Miss Marple. "I think I can understand that it must be very sad for you living here with the memory of the past."

"You understand that, do you? Yes, I can see that you do. One cannot help it. One's mind goes back to that dear, lovable child. She was like a daughter to me. She was the daughter, anyway, of one of my best friends. She was very intelligent too. She was a clever girl. She was a good artist. She was doing very well with her art training and designing. She was taking up a good deal of designing. I was very proud of her. And then—this wretched attachment, this terrible mentally afflicted boy."

"You mean Mr. Rafiel's son, Michael Rafiel?"

"Yes. If only he'd never come here. It just happened that he was staying in this part of the world and his father suggested he might

look us up and he came and had a meal with us. He could be very charming, you know. But he always had been a sad delinquent, a bad record. He'd been in prison twice, and a very bad history with girls. But I never thought that Verity ... just a case of infatuation. I suppose it happens to girls of that age. She was infatuated with him. Insisted that everything that had happened to him had not been his fault. You know the things girls say. 'Everyone is against him,' that's what they always say. Everyone's against him. Nobody made allowances for him. Oh, one gets tired of hearing these things said. Can't one put a little sense into girls?"

"They have not usually very much sense, I agree," said Miss Marple.

"She wouldn't listen. I—I tried to keep him away from the house. I told him he was not to come here any more. That of course was stupid. I realized that afterwards. It only meant that she went and met him outside the house. I don't know where. They had various meeting places. He used to call for her in his car at an agreed spot and bring her home late at night. Once or twice he didn't bring her home until the next day. I tried to tell them it must stop, that it must all cease, but they wouldn't listen. Verity wouldn't listen. I didn't expect him to, of course."

"She intended to marry him?" asked Miss Marple.

"Well, I don't think it ever got as far as that. I don't think he ever wanted to marry her or thought of such a thing."

"I am very sorry for you," said Miss Marple. "You must have suffered a lot."

"Yes. The worst was having to go and identify the body. That was some time after—after she'd disappeared from here. We thought of course that she'd run away with him and we thought that we'd get news of them some time. I knew the police seemed to be taking it rather seriously. They asked Michael to go to the police station and help them with enquiries and his account of himself didn't seem to agree with what local people were saying.

"Then they found her. A long way from here. About thirty miles away. In a kind of ditchy hedgy spot down an unfrequented lane where anyone hardly ever went. Yes, I had to go and view the body

in the mortuary. A terrible sight. The cruelty, the force that had been used. What did he want to do that to her for? Wasn't it enough that he strangled her? He strangled her with her own scarf. I can't—I can't talk about it any more. I can't bear it, I can't bear it."

Tears rained suddenly down her face.

"I'm sorry for you," said Miss Marple. "I'm very, very sorry."

"I believe you are." Clotilde looked at her suddenly. "And even you don't know the worst of it."

"In what way?"

"I don't know—I don't know about Anthea."

"What do you mean about Anthea?"

"She was so queer at that time. She was—she was very jealous. She suddenly seemed to turn against Verity. To look at her as though she hated her. Sometimes I thought—I thought perhaps—oh no, it's an awful thing to think, you can't think that about your own sister—she did once attack someone. You know, she used to get these storms of rage. I wondered if it *could* have been—oh, I mustn't say such things. There's no question of any such thing. Please forget what I've said. There's nothing in it, nothing at all. But—but—well, she's not quite normal. I've got to face that. When she was quite young queer things happened once or twice—with animals. We had a parrot. A parrot that said things, silly things like parrots do say and she wrung its neck and I've never felt the same since. I've never felt that I could trust her. I've never felt *sure*. I've never felt—oh, goodness, I'm getting hysterical, too."

"Come, come," said Miss Marple, "don't think of these things."

"No. It's bad enough to know—to know that Verity died. Died in that horrible way. At any rate, other girls are safe from that boy. Life sentence he got. He's still in prison. They won't let him out to do anything to anyone else. Though why they couldn't bring it in as some mental trouble—diminished responsibility—one of these things they use nowadays. He ought to have gone to Broadmoor. I'm sure he wasn't responsible for anything that he did."

She got up and went out of the room. Mrs. Glynne had come back and passed her sister in the doorway.

"You mustn't pay any attention to Clotilde," she said. "She's never quite recovered from that ghastly business years ago. She loved Verity very much."

"She seems to be worried about your other sister."

"About Anthea? Anthea's all right. She's—er—well, she's scatty, you know. She's a bit—hysterical. Apt to get worked up about things, and she has queer fancies, imagination sometimes. But I don't think there's any need for Clotilde to worry so much. Dear me, who's that passing the window?"

Two apologetic figures suddenly showed themselves in the french window.

"Oh do excuse us," said Miss Barrow, "we were just walking round the house to see if we could find Miss Marple. We had heard she'd come here with you and I wonder—oh, there you are, my dear Miss Marple. I wanted to tell you that we didn't get to that church after all this afternoon. Apparently it's closed for cleaning, so I think we shall have to give up any other expedition today and go on one tomorrow. I do hope you don't mind us coming in this way. I did ring at the front doorbell but it didn't seem to be ringing."

"I'm afraid it doesn't sometimes," said Mrs. Glynne. "You know, it's rather temperamental. Sometimes it rings and sometimes it doesn't. But do sit down and talk to us a little. I'd no idea that you hadn't gone with the coach."

"No, we thought we would do a little sightseeing round here, as we had got so far, and going with the coach would really be rather—well, rather painful after what has happened just a day or two ago."

"You must have some sherry," said Mrs. Glynne.

She went out of the room and presently returned. Anthea was with her, quite calm now, bringing glasses and a decanter of sherry, and they sat down together.

"I can't help wanting to know," said Mrs. Glynne, "what really is going to happen in this business. I mean of poor Miss Temple. I mean, it seems so very impossible to know what the police think. They still seem to be in charge, and I mean the inquest being adjourned, so obviously they are not satisfied. I don't know if there's anything in the nature of the wound."

"I shouldn't think so," said Miss Barrow. "I mean a blow on the head, bad concussion—well, I mean that came from the boulder. The only point is, Miss Marple, if the boulder rolled itself down or somebody rolled it."

"Oh," said Miss Cooke, "but surely you can't think that—who on earth would want to roll a boulder down, do that sort of thing? I suppose there are always hooligans about. You know, some young foreigners or students. I really wonder, you know, whether—well—"

"You mean," said Miss Marple, "you wondered if that someone was one of our fellow travellers."

"Well, I—I didn't say that," said Miss Cooke.

"But surely," said Miss Marple, "we can't help—well, thinking about that sort of thing. I mean, there must be some explanation. If the police seem sure it wasn't an accident, well then it must have been done by somebody and—well, I mean, Miss Temple was a stranger to this place here. It doesn't seem as if anyone could have done it—anyone local I mean. So it really comes back to—well, I mean, to all of us who were in the coach, doesn't it?"

She gave a faint, rather whinnying old lady's laugh.

"Oh surely!"

"No, I suppose I ought not to say such things. But you know, really crimes are very interesting. Sometimes the most extraordinary things have happened."

"Have you any definite feeling yourself, Miss Marple? I should be interested to hear," said Clotilde.

"Well, one does think of possibilities."

"Mr. Caspar," said Miss Cooke. "You know, I didn't like the look of that man from the first. He looked to me—well, I thought he might have something to do with espionage or something. You know, perhaps come to this country to look for atomic secrets or something."

"I don't think we've got any atomic secrets round here," said Mrs. Glynne.

"Of course we haven't," said Anthea. "Perhaps it was someone who was following her. Perhaps it was someone who was tracking her because she was a criminal of some kind."

"Nonsense," said Clotilde. "She was the Headmistress, retired, of a very well-known school, she was a very fine scholar. Why should anyone be trying to track *her* down?"

"Oh, I don't know. She might have gone peculiar or something."

"I'm sure," said Mrs. Glynne, "that Miss Marple has some ideas."

"Well, I have some ideas," said Miss Marple. "It seems to me that—well, the only people that could be ... Oh dear, this is so difficult to say. But I mean there are two people who just spring into one's mind as possibilities logically. I mean, I don't think that it's really so at all because I'm sure they're both very nice people, but I mean there's nobody else really logically who could be suspected, should I say."

"Who do you mean? This is very interesting."

"Well, I don't think I ought to say such things. It's only a—sort of wild conjecture."

"Who do you think might have rolled the boulder down? Who do you think could have been the person that Joanna and Emlyn Price saw?"

"Well, what I did think was that—that perhaps they hadn't seen anybody."

"I don't quite understand," said Anthea, "they hadn't seen anybody?"

"Well, perhaps they might have made it all up."

"What—about seeing someone?"

"Well, it's possible, isn't it."

"Do you mean as a sort of joke or a sort of unkind idea? What *do* you mean?"

"Well, I suppose—one does hear of young people doing very extraordinary things nowadays," said Miss Marple. "You know, putting things in horses' eyes, smashing Legation windows and attacking people. Throwing stones, at people, and it's usually being done by somebody young, isn't it? And they were the only young people, weren't they?"

"You mean Emlyn Price and Joanna might have rolled over that boulder?"

"Well, they're the only sort of obvious people, aren't they?" said Miss Marple.

"Fancy!" said Clotilde. "Oh, I should never have thought of that. But I see—yes, I just see that there could be something in what you say. Of course, I don't know what those two were like. I haven't been travelling with them."

"Oh, they were very nice," said Miss Marple. "Joanna seemed to me a particularly—you know, capable girl."

"Capable of doing anything?" asked Anthea.

"Anthea," said Clotilde, "do be quiet."

"Yes. Quite capable," said Miss Marple. "After all, if you're going to do what may result in murder, you'd have to be rather capable so as to manage not to be seen or anything."

"They must have been in it together, though," suggested Miss Barrow.

"Oh yes," said Miss Marple. "They were in it together and they told roughly the same story. They are the—well, they are the obvious suspects, that's all I can say. They were out of sight of the others. All the other people were on the lower path. They could have gone up to the top of the hill, they could have rocked the boulder. Perhaps they didn't mean to kill Miss Temple specially. They may have meant it just as a—well, just as a piece of anarchy or smashing something or someone—anyone in fact. They rolled it over. And then of course they told the story of seeing someone there. Some rather peculiar costume or other which also sounds very unlikely and—well, I oughtn't to say these things but I *have* been thinking about it."

"It seems to me a very interesting thought," said Mrs. Glynn. "What do you think, Clotilde?"

"I think it's a possibility. I shouldn't have thought of it myself."

"Well," said Miss Cooke, rising to her feet, "we must be going back to the Golden Boar now. Are you coming with us, Miss Marple?"

"Oh no," said Miss Marple. "I suppose you don't know. I've forgotten to tell you. Miss Bradbury-Scott very kindly asked me to come back and stay another night—or two nights—here."

"Oh, I see. Well, I'm sure that'll be very nice for you. Much more comfortable. They seem rather a noisy lot that have arrived at the

Golden Boar this evening."

"Won't you come round and have some coffee with us after dinner?" suggested Clotilde. "It's quite a warm evening. We can't offer you dinner because I'm afraid we haven't got enough in the house, but if you'll come in and have some coffee with us...."

"That would be very nice," said Miss Cooke. "Yes, we will certainly avail ourselves of your hospitality."

Twenty-one

THE CLOCK STRIKES THREE

I

Miss Cooke and Miss Barrow arrived very promptly at 8:45. One wore beige lace and the other one a shade of olive green. During dinner Anthea had asked Miss Marple about these two ladies.

"It seems very funny of them," she said, "to want to stay behind."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Miss Marple. "I think it is really quite natural. They have a rather exact plan, I imagine."

"What do you mean by a plan?" asked Mrs. Glynne.

"Well, I should think they are always prepared for various eventualities and have a plan for dealing with them."

"Do you mean," said Anthea, with some interest, "do you mean that they had a plan for dealing with murder?"

"I wish," said Mrs. Glynne, "that you wouldn't talk of poor Miss Temple's death as murder."

"But of course it's murder," said Anthea. "All I wonder is who wanted to murder her? I should think probably some pupil of hers at the school who always hated her and had it in for her."

"Do you think hate can last as long as that?" asked Miss Marple.

"Oh, I should think so. I should think you could hate anyone for years."

"No," said Miss Marple, "I think hate would die out. You could try and keep it up artificially, but I think you would fail. It's not as strong a force as love," she added.

"Don't you think that Miss Cooke or Miss Barrow or both of them might have done the murder?"

"Why should they?" said Mrs. Glynne. "Really, Anthea! They seemed very nice women to me."

"I think there's something rather mysterious about them," said Anthea. "Don't you, Clotilde?"

"I think perhaps you're right," said Clotilde. "They seemed to me to be slightly artificial, if you know what I mean."

"I think there's something very sinister about them," said Anthea.

"You've got such an imagination always," said Mrs. Glynne. "Anyway, they were walking along the bottom path, weren't they? You saw them there, didn't you?" she said to Miss Marple.

"I can't say that I noticed them particularly," said Miss Marple. "In fact, I had no opportunity of doing so."

"You mean—?"

"She wasn't there," said Clotilde. "She was here in our garden."

"Oh, of course. I forgot."

"A very nice, peaceful day it was," said Miss Marple. "I enjoyed it very much. Tomorrow morning I would like to go out and look again at that mass of white flowers coming into bloom at the end of the garden near that raised up mound. It was just beginning to come out the other day. It must be a mass of bloom now. I shall always remember that as part of my visit here, you know."

"I hate it," said Anthea. "I want it taken away. I want to build up a greenhouse again there. Surely if we save enough money we can do that, Clotilde?"

"We'll leave that alone," said Clotilde. "I don't want that touched. What use is a greenhouse to us now? It would be years before grapes would bear fruit again."

"Come," said Mrs. Glynne, "we can't go on arguing over that. Let us go into the drawing room. Our guests will be coming shortly for coffee."

It was then that the guests had arrived. Clotilde brought in the tray of coffee. She poured out the cups and distributed them. She placed one before each guest and then brought one to Miss Marple. Miss Cooke leaned forward.

"Oh, do forgive me, Miss Marple, but really, do you know, I shouldn't drink that if I were you. Coffee, I mean, at this time of night. You won't sleep properly."

"Oh, do you think so?" said Miss Marple. "I am quite used to coffee in the evening."

"Yes, but this is very strong, good coffee. I should advise you not to drink it."

Miss Marple looked at Miss Cooke. Miss Cooke's face was very earnest, her fair, unnatural-looking hair flopped over one eye. The other eye blinked slightly.

"I see what you mean," said Miss Marple. "Perhaps you are right. You know something, I gather, about diet."

"Oh yes, I make quite a study of it. I had some training in nursing, you know, and one thing and another."

"Indeed." Miss Marple pushed the cup away slightly. "I suppose there is no photograph of this girl?" she asked. "Verity Hunt, or whatever her name was? The Archdeacon was talking about her. He seemed to have been very fond of her."

"I think he was. He was fond of all young people," said Clotilde.

She got up, went across the room and lifted the lid of a desk. From that she brought a photograph and brought it over for Miss Marple to see.

"That was Verity," she said.

"A beautiful face," said Miss Marple. "Yes, a very beautiful and unusual face. Poor child."

"It's dreadful nowadays," said Anthea, "these things seem to be happening the whole time. Girls going out with every kind of young man. Nobody taking any trouble to look after them."

"They have to look after themselves nowadays," said Clotilde, "and they've no idea of how to do it, heaven help them!"

She stretched out a hand to take back the photograph from Miss Marple. As she did so her sleeve caught the coffee cup and knocked

it to the floor.

"Oh dear!" said Miss Marple. "Was that my fault? Did I jog your arm?"

"No," said Clotilde, "it was my sleeve. It's rather a floating sleeve. Perhaps you would like some hot milk, if you are afraid to take coffee?"

"That would be very kind," said Miss Marple. "A glass of hot milk when I go to bed would be very soothing indeed, and always gives one a good night."

After a little more desultory conversation, Miss Cooke and Miss Barrow took their departure. A rather fussy departure in which first one and then the other came back to collect some article they'd left behind. A scarf, a handbag and a pocket handkerchief.

"Fuss, fuss, fuss," said Anthea, when they had departed.

"Somehow," said Mrs. Glynne, "I agree with Clotilde that those two don't seem *real*, if you know what I mean," she said to Miss Marple.

"Yes," said Miss Marple, "I *do* rather agree with you. They *don't* seem very real. I have wondered about them a good deal. Wondered, I mean, why they came on this tour and if they were really enjoying it. And what was their reason for coming."

"And have you discovered the answers to all those things?" asked Clotilde.

"I think so," said Miss Marple. She sighed. "I've discovered the answers to a lot of things," she said.

"Up to now I hope you've enjoyed yourself," said Clotilde.

"I am glad to have left the tour now," said Miss Marple. "I don't think I should have enjoyed much more of it."

"No. I can quite understand that."

Clotilde fetched a glass of hot milk from the kitchen and accompanied Miss Marple up to her room.

"Is there anything else I can get you?" she asked. "Anything at all?"

"No, thank you," said Miss Marple. "I have everything I want. I have my little night bag here, you see, so I need not do anymore

unpacking. Thank you," she said, "it is very kind of you and your sisters to put me up again tonight."

"Well, we couldn't do much less, having had Mr. Rafiel's letter. He was a very thoughtful man."

"Yes," said Miss Marple, "the kind of man who—well, thinks of everything. A good brain, I should think."

"I believe he was a very noted financier."

"Financially and otherwise, he thought of a lot of things," said Miss Marple. "Oh well, I shall be glad to get to bed. Good night, Miss Bradbury-Scott."

"Shall I send you breakfast up in the morning, you'd like to have it in bed?"

"No, no, I wouldn't put you out for the world. No, no, I would rather come down. A cup of tea, perhaps, would be very nice, but I want to go out in the garden. I particularly want to see that mound all covered with white flowers, so beautiful and so triumphant—"

"Good night," said Clotilde, "sleep well."

II

In the hall of The Old Manor House the grandfather clock at the bottom of the stairs struck two o'clock. The clocks in the house did not all strike in unison and some of them, indeed, did not strike at all. To keep a house full of antique clocks in working order was not easy. At three o'clock the clock on the first floor landing struck a soft-chimed three o'clock. A faint chink of light showed through the hinge of the door.

Miss Marple sat up in bed and put her fingers on the switch of the electric lamp by her bed. The door opened very softly. There was no light outside now but the soft footstep came through the door into the room. Miss Marple switched the light on.

"Oh," she said, "it's you, Miss Bradbury-Scott. Is there anything special?"

"I just came to see if you wanted anything," said Miss Bradbury-Scott.

Miss Marple looked at her. Clotilde had on a long purple robe. What a handsome woman she was, thought Miss Marple. Her hair framing her forehead, a tragic figure, a figure of drama. Again Miss Marple thought of Greek plays. Clytemnestra again.

"You're sure there is nothing I can bring you?"

"No, thank you," said Miss Marple. "I'm afraid," she said apologetically, "that I have not drunk my milk."

"Oh dear, why not?"

"I did not think it would be very good for me," said Miss Marple.

Clotilde stood there, at the foot of the bed, looking at her.

"Not wholesome, you know," said Miss Marple.

"Just what do you mean by that?" Clotilde's voice was harsh now.

"I think you know what I mean," said Miss Marple. "I think you've known all the evening. Perhaps before that."

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

"No?" There was a faint satirical note to the questioning monosyllable.

"I am afraid the milk is cold now. I will take it away and get you some hot."

Clotilde stretched out a hand and took the glass of milk from the bedside.

"Don't trouble yourself," said Miss Marple. "Even if you brought it me, I should not drink it."

"I really cannot understand the point of what you're saying. Really," said Clotilde, looking at her. "What a very extraordinary person you are. What sort of a woman are you? Why are you talking like this? Who are you?"

Miss Marple pulled down the mass of pink wool that encircled her head, a pink wool scarf of the same kind that she had once worn in the West Indies.

"One of my names," she said, "is Nemesis."

"Nemesis? And what does that mean?"

"I think you know," said Miss Marple. "You are a very well educated woman. Nemesis is long delayed sometimes, but it comes in the end."

"What are you talking about?"

"About a very beautiful girl whom you killed," said Miss Marple.

"Whom I killed? What do you mean?"

"I mean the girl Verity."

"And why should I kill her?"

"Because you loved her," said Miss Marple.

"Of course I loved her. I was devoted to her. And she loved me."

"Somebody said to me not very long ago that love was a very frightening word. It *is* a frightening word. You loved Verity too much. She meant everything in the world to you. She was devoted to you until something else came into her life. A different kind of love came into her life. She fell in love with a boy, a young man. Not a very suitable one, not a very good specimen, not anyone with a good record, but she loved him and he loved her and she wanted to escape. To escape from the burden of the bondage of love she was living in with you. She wanted a normal woman's life. To live with the man of her choice, to have children by him. She wanted marriage and the happiness of normality."

Clotilde moved. She came to a chair and sat down in it, staring at Miss Marple.

"So," she said, "you seem to understand very well."

"Yes, I do understand."

"What you say is quite true. I shan't deny it. It doesn't matter if I do or do not deny it."

"No," said Miss Marple, "you are quite right there. It will not matter."

"Do you know at all—can you imagine—how I have suffered?"

"Yes," said Miss Marple, "I can imagine it. I've always been able to imagine things."

"Did you imagine the agony, the agony of thinking, of knowing you are going to lose the thing you love best in the world. And I was losing it to a miserable, depraved delinquent. A man unworthy of my beautiful, splendid girl. I had to stop it. I had to—I had to."

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "Sooner than let the girl go, you killed her. Because you loved her, you killed her."

"Do you think I could ever do a thing like that? Do you think I could strangle the girl I loved? Do you think I could bash her face in,

crush her head to a pulp? Nothing but a vicious, depraved man would do a thing like that."

"No," said Miss Marple, "you wouldn't do that. You loved her and you would not be able to do that."

"Well then, you see, you are talking nonsense."

"You didn't do that to her. The girl that happened to was not the girl you loved. Verity's here still, isn't she? She's here in the garden. I don't think you strangled her. I think you gave her a drink of coffee or of milk, you gave her a painless overdose of sleeping stuff. And then when she was dead, you took her out into the garden, you pulled aside the fallen bricks of the greenhouse, and you made a vault for her there, under the floor with the bricks, and covered it over. And then the polygonum was planted there and has flowered ever since, growing bigger and stronger every year. Verity has remained here with you. You never let her go."

"You fool! You crazy old fool! Do you think you are ever going to get away to tell this story?"

"I think so," said Miss Marple. "I'm not quite sure of it. You are a strong woman, a great deal stronger than I am."

"I'm glad you appreciate that."

"And you wouldn't have any scruples," said Miss Marple. "You know one doesn't stop at one murder. I have noticed that in the course of my life and in what I have observed of crime. You killed two girls, didn't you? You killed the girl you loved and you killed a different girl."

"I killed a silly little tramp, an adolescent tart. Nora Broad. How did you know about her?"

"I wondered," said Miss Marple. "I didn't think from what I saw of you that you could have borne to strangle and disfigure the girl you loved. But another girl disappeared also about that time, a girl whose body has never been found. But I thought the body *had* been found, only they hadn't known that the body was Nora Broad's. It was dressed in Verity's clothes, it was identified as Verity by the person who would be the first applied to, the person who knew her better than anyone else. You had to go and say if the body found

was the body of Verity. You recognized it. You said that that dead body was Verity's."

"And why should I do that?"

"Because you wanted the boy who had taken Verity away from you, the boy whom Verity had loved and who had loved Verity, you wanted him tried for murder. And so you hid that second body in a place where it would not be too easily discovered. When that was discovered, it would be thought to be the wrong girl. You would make sure that it was identified in the way you wanted. You dressed it in Verity's clothes, put her handbag there; a letter or two, a bangle, a little cross on a chain—you disfigured her face.

"A week ago you committed a third murder, the murder of Elizabeth Temple. You killed her because she was coming to this part of the world, and you were afraid of what she might have known, from what Verity might have written to her or told her, and you thought that if Elizabeth Temple got together with Archdeacon Brabazon, they might with what they both knew come at some appraisal of the truth. Elizabeth Temple must not be allowed to meet the Archdeacon. You are a very powerful woman. You could have rolled that boulder down the hillside. It must have taken some doing, but you are a very strong woman."

"Strong enough to deal with you," said Clotilde.

"I don't think," said Miss Marple, "that you will be allowed to do that."

"What do you mean, you miserable, shrivelled up old woman?"

"Yes," said Miss Marple, "I'm an elderly pussy and I have very little strength in my arms or my legs. Very little strength anywhere. But I am in my own way an emissary of justice."

Clotilde laughed, "And who'll stop me from putting an end to you?"

"I think," said Miss Marple, "my guardian angel."

"Trusting to your guardian angel, are you?" said Clotilde, and laughed again.

She advanced towards the bed.

"Possibly two guardian angels," said Miss Marple. "Mr. Rafiel always did things on a lavish scale."

Her hand slipped under the pillow and out again. In it was a whistle which she put to her lips. It was something of a sensation in whistles. It had the shrill fury which would attract a policeman from the end of a street. Two things happened almost simultaneously. The door of the room opened. Clotilde turned. Miss Barrow was standing in the doorway. At the same moment the large wardrobe hanging cupboard opened and Miss Cooke stepped out of it. There was a grim air of professionalism about them both which was very noticeable, in contrast to their pleasant social behaviour a little earlier in the evening.

"Two guardian angels," said Miss Marple happily. "Mr. Rafiel has done me very proud! as one used to say."

Twenty-two

MISS MARPLE TELLS HER STORY

“When did you find out,” asked Professor Wanstead, “that those two women were private agents accompanying you for your protection?”

He leaned forward in his chair looking thoughtfully at the white-haired old lady who sat in an upright position in the chair opposite him. They were in an official Government building in London, and there were four other persons present.

An official from the Public Prosecutor’s Office; the Assistant Commissioner of Scotland Yard, Sir James Lloyd, the Governor of Manstone Prison, Sir Andrew McNeil. The fourth person was the Home Secretary.

“Not until the last evening,” said Miss Marple. “I wasn’t actually sure until then. Miss Cooke had come to St. Mary Mead and I found out fairly quickly that she was not what she represented herself to be, which was a woman knowledgeable in gardening who had come there to help a friend with her garden. So I was left with the choice of deciding what her real object had been, once she had acquainted herself with my appearance, which was obviously the only thing she could have come for. When I recognized her again, on the coach, I had to make up my mind if she was accompanying the tour in the

rôle of guardianship, or whether those two women were enemies enlisted by what I might call the other side.

"I was only really sure that last evening when Miss Cooke prevented me, by very distinct words of warning, from drinking the cup of coffee that Clotilde Bradbury-Scott had just set down in front of me. She phrased it very cleverly, but the warning was clearly there. Later, when I was wishing those two good night, one of them took my hand in both of hers giving me a particularly friendly and affectionate handshake. And in doing so she passed something into my hand, which, when I examined it later, I found to be a high-powered whistle. I took it to bed with me, accepted the glass of milk which was urged upon me by my hostess, and wished her good night, being careful not to change my simple and friendly attitude."

"You didn't drink the milk?"

"Of course not," said Miss Marple. "What do you take me for?"

"I beg your pardon," said Professor Wanstead. "It surprises me that you didn't lock your door."

"That would have been quite the wrong thing to do," said Miss Marple. "I wanted Clotilde Bradbury-Scott to come in. I wanted to see what she would say or do. I thought it was almost certain that she *would* come in when sufficient time had elapsed, to make sure that I had drunk the milk, and was in an unconscious sleep from which presumably I would not have woken up again."

"Did you help Miss Cooke to conceal herself in the wardrobe?"

"No. It was a complete surprise when she came out of that suddenly. I suppose," said Miss Marple thoughtfully, thinking it over, "I suppose she slipped in there just when I had gone down the passage to the—er—to the bathroom."

"You knew the two women were in the house?"

"I thought they would be at hand somewhere after they'd given me the whistle. I do not think it was a difficult house to which to gain access, there were no shuttered windows or burglar alarms or anything of that kind. One of them came back on the pretext of having left a handbag and a scarf. Between them they probably managed to leave a window unfastened, and I should imagine they

came back into the house almost as soon as they left it, while the inhabitants inside were going up to bed."

"You took a big risk, Miss Marple."

"I hoped for the best," said Miss Marple. "One cannot go through life without attracting certain risks if they are necessary."

"Your tip about the parcel dispatched to that charity, by the way, was entirely successful. It contained a brand new brightly coloured man's polo-necked jumper in scarlet and black checks. Most noticeable. What made you think of that?"

"Well," said Miss Marple, "that was really very simple. The description that Emlyn and Joanna gave of the figure they had seen made it seem almost certain that these very bright coloured and noticeable clothes were *meant* to be noticed, and that therefore it would be very important that they should not be hidden locally or kept among the person's own belongings. They must be got out of the way as soon as could be. And really there is only one way successfully of disposing of something. That is through the general post. Anything in the nature of clothes can be very easily dispatched to charities. Think how pleased the people who collect winter garments for Unemployed Mothers, or whatever the name of the charity, would be to find a nearly brand new woollen jumper. All I had to do was to find out the address where it had been sent."

"And you *asked* them that at the post office?" The Home Secretary looked slightly shocked.

"Not directly, of course. I mean, I had to be a little flustered and explain how I'd put the wrong address on some clothes that I was sending to a charity and could they by any chance tell me if the parcel one of my kind hostesses had brought up there, had been sent off. And a very nice woman there did her best and remembered that it was *not* the address I was hoping it had been sent to, and she gave me the address that she *had* noted. She had no suspicion, I think, that I had any wish for the information apart from being—well, rather muddleheaded, elderly, and very worried about where my parcel of worn clothes had gone."

"Ah," said Professor Wanstead, "I see you are an actress, Miss Marple, as well as an avenger." Then he said, "When did you first

begin to discover what had happened ten years ago?"

"To begin with," said Miss Marple, "I found things very difficult, almost impossible. In my mind I was blaming Mr. Rafiel for not having made things clear to me. But I see now that he'd been very wise not to do so. Really, you know, he *was* extraordinary clever. I can see why he was such a big financier and made so much money so easily. He laid his plans so well. He gave me just enough information in small packets each time. I was, as it were, directed. First my guardian angels were alerted to note what I looked like. Then I was directed on the tour and to the people on it."

"Did you suspect, if I may use that word, anyone on the tour at first?"

"Only as possibilities."

"No feeling of evil?"

"Ah, you have remembered that. No, I did not think there was any definite atmosphere of evil. I was not told who my contact was there, but *she* made herself known to *me*."

"Elizabeth Temple?"

"Yes. It was like a searchlight," said Miss Marple, "illuminating things on a dark night. So far, you see, I had been in the dark. There were certain things that must be, must logically be, I mean, because of what Mr. Rafiel had indicated. There must be somewhere a victim and somewhere a murderer. Yes, a killer was indicated because that was the only liaison that had existed between Mr. Rafiel and myself. There had been a murder in the West Indies. Both he and I had been involved in it and all he knew of me was my connection with that. So it could not be any other type of crime. And it could not, either, be a casual crime. It must be, and show itself definitely to be, the handiwork of someone who had accepted evil. Evil instead of good. There seemed to be two victims indicated. There must be someone who had been killed and there must be clearly a victim of injustice. A victim who had been accused of a crime he or she had not committed. So now, while I pondered these things, I had no light upon them until I talked to Miss Temple. She was very intense, very compelling. There came the first link which I had with Mr. Rafiel. She spoke of a girl she had known, a girl who had once been

engaged to Mr. Rafiel's son. Here then was my first ray of light. Presently she also told me that the girl had not married him. I asked why not and she said 'because she died.' I asked then how she died, what had killed her, and she said very strongly, very compellingly—I can hear her voice still, it was like the sound of a deep bell—she said *Love*. And she said after that 'the most frightening word there can be is Love.' I did not know then exactly what she meant. In fact the first idea that came to me was that the girl had committed suicide as a result of an unhappy love affair. It can happen often enough, and a very sad tragedy it is when it does happen. That was the most I knew then. That and the fact that the journey she herself was engaged upon was no mere pleasure tour. She was going, she told me, on a pilgrimage. She was going to some place or to some person. I did not learn then who the person was, that only came later."

"Archdeacon Brabazon?"

"Yes. I had no idea then of his existence. But from then on I felt that the chief characters—the chief actors—in the drama, whichever way you like to put it, were not on the tour. They were not members of the coach party. I hesitated just for a short time, hesitated over some particular persons. I hesitated, considering Joanna Crawford and Emlyn Price."

"Why fix on them?"

"Because of their youth," said Miss Marple. "Because youth is so often associated with suicide, with violence, with intense jealousy and tragic love. A man kills his girl—it happens. Yes, my mind went to them but it did not seem to me there was any association there. No shadow of evil, of despair, of misery. I used the idea of them later as a kind of false pointer when we were drinking sherry at The Old Manor House that last evening. I pointed out how they could be the most easy suspects in the death of Elizabeth Temple. When I see them again," said Miss Marple, punctiliously, "I shall apologize to them for having used them as useful characters to distract attention from my real ideas."

"And the next thing was the death of Elizabeth Temple?"

"No," said Miss Marple. "Actually the next thing was my arrival at The Old Manor House. The kindness of my reception and taking up my stay there under their hospitable roof. That again had been arranged by Mr. Rafiel. So I knew that I must go there, but not for what reason I was to go there. It might be merely a place where more information would come to me to lead me onwards in my quest. I am sorry," Miss Marple said, suddenly becoming her normal apologetic and slightly fussy self, "I am talking at much too great a length. I really must not inflict on you all that I thought and...."

"Please go on," said Professor Wanstead. "You may not know it but what you are telling me is particularly interesting to me. It ties up with so much I have known and seen in the work I do. Go on giving me what you felt."

"Yes, go on," said Sir Andrew McNeil.

"It *was* feeling," said Miss Marple. "It wasn't really, you know, logical deduction. It was based on a kind of emotional reaction or susceptibility to—well, I can only call it atmosphere."

"Yes," said Wanstead, "there is atmosphere. Atmosphere in houses, atmosphere in places, in the garden, in the forest, in a public house, in a cottage."

"The three sisters. That is what I thought and felt and said to myself when I went into The Old Manor House. I was so kindly received by Lavinia Glynne. There's something about the phrase—the three sisters—that springs up in your mind as sinister. It combines with the three sisters in Russian literature, the three witches on Macbeth's heath. It seemed to me that there was an atmosphere there of sorrow, of deep felt unhappiness, also an atmosphere of fear and a kind of struggling different atmosphere which I can only describe as an atmosphere of normality."

"Your last word interests me," said Wanstead.

"It was due, I think, to Mrs. Glynne. She was the one who came to meet me when the coach arrived and explained the invitation. She was an entirely normal and pleasant woman, a widow. She was not very happy, but when I say she was not very happy it was nothing to do with sorrow or deep unhappiness, it was just that she had the wrong atmosphere for her own character. She took me back with her

and I met the other two sisters. The next morning I was to hear from an aged housemaid who brought my early morning tea, a story of past tragedy, of a girl who had been killed by her boyfriend. Of several other girls in the neighbourhood who'd fallen victims to violence, or sexual assault. I had to make my second appraisal. I had dismissed the people in the coach as not being personally concerned in my search. Somewhere still there was a killer. I had to ask myself if one of the killers could be here. Here in this house where I had been sent, Clotilde, Lavinia, Anthea. Three names of three weird sisters, three happy—unhappy—suffering—frightened—what were they? My attention was caught first by Clotilde. A tall, handsome woman. A personality. Just as Elizabeth Temple had been a personality. I felt that here where the field was limited, I must at least sum up what I could about the three sisters. Three Fates. Who could be a killer? What kind of a killer? What kind of a killing? I could feel then rising up rather slowly, rather slowly like a miasma does, an atmosphere. I don't think there is any other word that expresses it except evil. Not necessarily that any of these three was evil, but they were certainly living in an atmosphere where evil had happened, had left its shadow or was still threatening them. Clotilde, the eldest, was the first one I considered. She was handsome, she was strong, she was, I thought, a woman of intense emotional feeling. I saw her, I will admit, as a possible Clytemnestra. I had recently," Miss Marple dropped into her everyday tones, "been taken very kindly to a Greek play performed at a well-known boys' public school not far from my home. I had been very, very impressed by the acting of the Agamemnon and particularly the performance of the boy who had played Clytemnestra. A very remarkable performance. It seemed to me that in Clotilde I could imagine a woman who could plan and carry out the killing of a husband in his bath."

For a moment Professor Wanstead had all he could do to repress a laugh. It was the seriousness of Miss Marple's tone. She gave him a slight twinkle from her eyes.

"Yes, it sounds rather silly, does it not, said like that? But I could see her that way, playing that part, that is to say. Very unfortunately, she had no husband. She had never had a husband, and therefore

did not kill a husband. Then I considered my guide to the house. Lavinia Glynne. She seemed an extremely nice, wholesome and pleasant woman. But alas, certain people who have killed have produced much that effect on the world round them. They have been charming people. Many murderers have been delightful and pleasant men and people have been astonished. They are what I call the respectable killers. The ones who would commit murder from entirely utilitarian motives. Without emotion, but to gain a required end. I didn't think it was very likely and I should be highly surprised if it was so, but I could not leave out Mrs. Glynne. She had had a husband. She was a widow and had been a widow for some years. It could be. I left it at that. And then I came to the third sister. Anthea. She was a disquieting personality. Badly coordinated, it seemed to me, scatterbrained, and in a condition of some emotion which I thought on the whole was fear. She was frightened of something. Intensely frightened of something. Well, that could fit in too. If she had committed a crime of some kind, a crime which she had thought was finished with and past, there might have been some recrudescence, some raising up of old problems, something perhaps connected with the Elizabeth Temple enquiries; she might have felt fear that an old crime would be revived or discovered. She had a curious way of looking at you, and then looking sharply from side to side over one shoulder as though she saw something standing behind her. Something that made her afraid. So she too was a possible answer. A possibly slightly mentally unhinged killer who could have killed because she considered herself persecuted. Because she was afraid. These were only ideas. They were only a rather more pronounced assessment of possibilities that I had already gone through on the coach. But the atmosphere of the house was on me more than ever. The next day I walked in the garden with Anthea. At the end of the principal grass path was a mound. A mound created by the falling down of a former greenhouse. Owing to a lack of repairs and of gardeners at the end of the war it had fallen into disuse, come to pieces, bricks had been piled up surmounted with earth and turf, and had been planted with a certain creeper. A creeper well known when you want to hide or

cover some rather ugly pieces of building in your garden. Polygonum it is called. One of the quickest flowering shrubs which swallows and kills and dries up and gets rid of everything it grows over. It grows over everything. It is in a way a rather frightening plant. It has beautiful white flowers, it can look very lovely. It was not yet in bloom but it was going to be. I stood there with Anthea, and she seemed to be desperately unhappy over the loss of the greenhouse. She said it had had such lovely grapes, it seemed to be the thing she remembered most about the garden when she had been a child there. And she wanted, she wanted desperately to have enough money so as to dig up the mound, level the ground and rebuild the greenhouse and stock it with muscat grapes and peaches as the old greenhouse had been. It was a terrible nostalgia for the past she was feeling. It was more than that. Again, very clearly, I felt an atmosphere of fear. Something about the mound made her frightened. I couldn't then think what it was. You know the next thing that happened. It was Elizabeth Temple's death and there was no doubt from the story told by Emlyn Price and Joanna Crawford that there could be only one conclusion. It was not accident. It was deliberate murder.

"I think it was from then on," said Miss Marple, "that I knew. I came to the conclusion there had been three killings. I heard the full story of Mr. Rafiel's son, the delinquent boy, the exjailbird and I thought that he was all those things, but none of them showed him as being a killer or likely to be a killer. All the evidence was against him. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that he had killed the girl whose name I had now learned as being Verity Hunt. But Archdeacon Brabazon put the final crown on the business, as it were. He had known those two young people. They had come to him with their story of wanting to get married and he had taken it upon himself to decide that they should get married. He thought that it was not perhaps a wise marriage, but it was a marriage that was justified by the fact that they both loved each other. The girl loved the boy with what he called a true love. A love as true as her name. And he thought that the boy, for all his bad sexual reputation, had truly loved the girl and had every intention of being faithful to

her and trying to reform some of his evil tendencies. The Archdeacon was not optimistic. He did not, I think, believe it would be a thoroughly happy marriage, but it was to his mind what he called a necessary marriage. Necessary because if you love enough you will pay the price, even if the price is disappointment and a certain amount of unhappiness. But one thing I was quite sure of. That disfigured face, that battered-in head could not have been the action of a boy who really loved the girl. This was not a story of sexual assault. I was ready to take the Archdeacon's word for that. But I knew, too, that I'd got the right clue, the clue that was given me by Elizabeth Temple. She had said that the cause of Verity's death was Love—one of the most frightening words there is.

"It was quite clear then," said Miss Marple. "I think I'd known for some time really. It was just the small things that hadn't fitted in, but now they did. They fitted in with what Elizabeth Temple had said. The cause of Verity's death. She had said first the one word 'Love' and then that 'Love could be the most frightening word there was.' It was all mapped out so plainly then. The overwhelming love that Clotilde had had for this girl. The girl's hero worship of her, dependency on her, and then as she grew a little older, her normal instincts came into play. She wanted Love. She wanted to be free to love, to marry, to have children. And along came the boy that she could love. She knew that he was unreliable, she knew he was what was technically called a bad lot, but that," said Miss Marple, in a more ordinary tone of voice, "is not what puts any girl off a boy. No. Young women like bad lots. They always have. They fall in love with bad lots. They are quite sure they can change them. And the nice, kind, steady, reliable husbands got the answer, in my young days, that one would be 'a sister to them,' which never satisfied them at all. Verity fell in love with Michael Rafiel, and Michael Rafiel was prepared to turn over a new leaf and marry this girl and was sure he would never wish to look at another girl again. I don't say this would have been a happy-ever-after thing, but it was, as the Archdeacon said quite surely, it *was* real love. And so they planned to get married. And I think Verity wrote to Elizabeth and told her that she was going to marry Michael Rafiel. It was arranged in secret because

I think Verity did realize that what she was doing was essentially an escape. She was escaping from a life that she didn't want to live any longer, from someone whom she loved very much but not in the way she loved Michael. And she would not be allowed to do so. Permission would not be willingly given, every obstacle would be put in their way. So, like other young people, they were going to elope. There was no need for them to fly off to Gretna Green, they were of sufficiently mature age to marry. So she appealed to Archdeacon Brabazon, her old friend who had confirmed her—who was a real friend. And the wedding was arranged, the day, the time, probably even she bought secretly some garment in which to be married. They were to meet somewhere, no doubt. They were to come to the rendezvous separately. I think he came there, but she did *not* come. He waited perhaps. Waited and then tried to find out, perhaps, why she didn't come. I think then a message may have been given him, even a letter sent him, possibly in her forged handwriting, saying she had changed her mind. It was all over and she was going away for a time to get over it. I don't know. But I don't think he ever dreamt of the real reason of why she hadn't come, of why she had sent no word. He hadn't thought for one moment that she had been deliberately, cruelly, almost madly perhaps, destroyed. Clotilde was not going to lose the person she loved. She was not going to let her escape, she was not going to let her go to the young man whom she herself hated and loathed. She would keep Verity, keep her in her own way. But what I could not believe was—I did not believe that she'd strangled the girl and had then disfigured her face. I don't think she could have borne to do that. I think that she had rearranged the bricks of the fallen greenhouse and piled up earth and turf over most of it. The girl had already been given a drink, an overdose of sleeping draught probably. Grecian, as it were, in tradition. One cup of hemlock—even if it wasn't hemlock. And she buried the girl there in the garden, piled the bricks over her and the earth and the turf—”

“Did neither of the other sisters suspect it?”

“Mrs. Glynne was not there then. Her husband had not died and she was still abroad. But Anthea was there. I think Anthea did know

something of what went on. I don't know that she suspected death at first, but she knew that Clotilde had been occupying herself with the raising up of a mound at the end of the garden to be covered with flowering shrubs, to be a place of beauty. I think perhaps the truth came to her little by little. And then Clotilde, having accepted evil, done evil, surrendered to evil, had no qualms about what she would do next. I think she enjoyed planning it. She had a certain amount of influence over a sly, sexy little village girl who came to her cadging for benefits now and then. I think it was easy for her to arrange one day to take the girl on a picnic or an expedition a good long way away. Thirty or forty miles. She'd chosen the place beforehand, I think. She strangled the girl, disfigured her, hid her under turned earth, leaves and branches. Why should anyone ever suspect her of doing any such thing? She put Verity's handbag there and a little chain Verity used to wear round her neck and possibly dressed her in clothes belonging to Verity. She hoped the crime would not be found out for some time but in the meantime she spread abroad rumours of Nora Broad having been seen about in Michael's car, going about with Michael. Possibly she spread a story that Verity had broken off the engagement to be married because of his infidelity with this girl. She may have said anything and I think everything she said she enjoyed, poor lost soul."

"Why do you say 'poor lost soul,' Miss Marple?"

"Because," said Miss Marple, "I don't suppose there can be any agony so great as what Clotilde has suffered all this time—ten years now—living in eternal sorrow. Living, you see, with the thing she *had* to live with. She had kept Verity, kept her there at The Old Manor House, in the garden, kept her there for ever. She didn't realize at first what that meant. Her passionate longing for the girl to be alive again. I don't think she ever suffered from remorse. I don't think she had even that consolation. She just suffered—went on suffering year after year. And I know now what Elizabeth Temple meant. Better perhaps than she herself did. Love *is* a very terrible thing. It is alive to evil, it can be one of the most evil things there can be. And she had to live with that day after day, year after year. I think, you know, that Anthea was frightened of that. I think she knew more clearly

the whole time what Clotilde had done and she thought that Clotilde knew that she knew. And she was afraid of what Clotilde might do. Clotilde gave that parcel to Anthea to post, the one with the pullover. She said things to me about Anthea, that she was mentally disturbed, that if she suffered from persecution or jealousy Anthea might do anything. I think—yes—that in the not so distant future—something might have happened to Anthea—an arranged suicide because of a guilty conscience—”

“And yet you are sorry for that woman?” asked Sir Andrew. “Malignant evil is like cancer—a malignant tumour. It brings suffering.”

“Of course,” said Miss Marple.

“I suppose you have been told what happened that night,” said Professor Wanstead, “after your guardian angels had removed you?”

“You mean Clotilde? She had picked up my glass of milk, I remember. She was still holding it when Miss Cooke took me out of the room. I suppose she—drank it, did she?”

“Yes. Did you know that might happen?”

“I didn’t think of it, no, not at the moment. I suppose I could have known it if I’d thought about it.”

“Nobody could have stopped her. She was so quick about it, and nobody quite realized there was anything wrong in the milk.”

“So she drank it.”

“Does that surprise you?”

“No, it would have seemed to her the natural thing to do, one can’t really wonder. It had come by this time that she wanted to escape—from all the things she was having to live with. Just as Verity had wanted to escape from the life that she was living there. Very odd, isn’t it, that the retribution one brings on oneself fits so closely with what has caused it.”

“You sound sorrier for her than you were for the girl who died.”

“No,” said Miss Marple, “it’s a different kind of being sorry. I’m sorry for Verity because of all that she missed, all that she was so near to obtaining. A life of love and devotion and service to the man she had chosen, and whom she truly loved. Truly and in all verity. She missed all that and nothing can give that back to her. I’m sorry

for her because of what she *didn't* have. But she escaped what Clotilde had to suffer. Sorrow, misery, fear and a growing cultivation and imbibing of evil. Clotilde had to live with all those. Sorrow, frustrated love which she could never get back, she had to live with the two sisters who suspected, who were afraid of her, and she had to live with the girl she had kept there."

"You mean Verity?"

"Yes. Buried in the garden, buried in the tomb that Clotilde had prepared. She was *there* in The Old Manor House and I think Clotilde *knew* she was there. It might be that she even saw her or thought she saw her, sometimes when she went to pick a spray of polygonum blossom. She must have felt very close to Verity then. Nothing worse could happen to her, could it, than that? Nothing worse...."

Twenty-three

END PIECES

I

"That old lady gives me the creeps," said Sir Andrew McNeil, when he had said good-bye and thanks to Miss Marple.

"So gentle—and so ruthless," said the Assistant Commissioner.

Professor Wanstead took Miss Marple down to his car which was waiting, and then returned for a few final words.

"What do you think of her, Edmund?"

"The most frightening woman I ever met," said the Home Secretary.

"Ruthless?" asked Professor Wanstead.

"No, no, I don't mean that but—well, a very frightening woman."

"Nemesis," said Professor Wanstead thoughtfully.

"Those two women," said the P.P.D. man, "you know, the security agents who were looking after her, they gave a most extraordinary description of her that night. They got into the house quite easily, hid themselves in a small downstairs room until everyone went upstairs, then one went into the bedroom and into the wardrobe and the other stayed outside the room to watch. The one in the bedroom said that when she threw open the door of the wardrobe and came out, there was the old lady sitting up in bed with a pink fluffy shawl

round her neck and a perfectly placid face, twittering away and talking like an elderly school marm. They said she gave them quite a turn."

"A pink fluffy shawl," said Professor Wanstead. "Yes, yes, I do remember—."

"What do you remember?"

"Old Rafiel. He told me about her, you know, and then he laughed. He said one thing he'd never forget in all his life. He said it was when one of the funniest scatterbrained old pussies he'd ever met came marching into his bedroom out in the West Indies, with a fluffy pink scarf round her neck, telling him he was to get up and do something to prevent a murder. And he said, 'What on earth do you think you're doing?' And she said she was Nemesis. Nemesis! He could not imagine anything less like it, he said. I like the touch of the pink woolly scarf," said Professor Wanstead, thoughtfully, "I like that, very much."

II

"Michael," said Professor Wanstead, "I want to introduce you to Miss Jane Marple, who's been very active on your behalf."

The young man of thirty-two looked at the white-haired, rather dicky old lady with a slightly doubtful expression.

"Oh—er—" he said, "well, I guess I have heard about it. Thanks very much."

He looked at Wanstead.

"It's true, is it, they're going to give me a free pardon or something silly like that?"

"Yes. A release will be put through quite soon. You'll be a free man in a very short time."

"Oh." Michael sounded slightly doubtful.

"It will take a little getting used to, I expect," said Miss Marple kindly.

She looked at him thoughtfully. Seeing him in retrospect as he might have been ten years or so ago. Still quite attractive—though

he showed all the signs of strain. Attractive, yes. Very attractive, she thought he would have been once. A gaiety about him then, there would have been, and a charm. He'd lost that now, but it would come back perhaps. A weak mouth and attractively shaped eyes that could look you straight in the face, and probably had been always extremely useful for telling lies that you really wanted to believe. Very like—who was it?—she dived into past memories—Jonathan Birkin, of course. He had sung in the choir. A really delightful baritone voice. And how fond the girls had been of him! Quite a good job he'd had as a clerk in Messrs. Gabriel's firm. A pity there had been that little matter of the cheques.

"Oh," said Michael. He said, with even more embarrassment, "It's been very kind of you, I'm sure, to take so much trouble."

"I've enjoyed it," said Miss Marple. "Well, I'm glad to have met you. Good-bye. I hope you've got a very good time coming to you. Our country is in rather a bad way just now, but you'll probably find some job or other that you might quite enjoy doing."

"Oh yes. Thanks, thanks very much. I—I really am very grateful, you know."

His tone sounded still extremely unsure about it.

"It's not me you ought to be grateful to," said Miss Marple, "you ought to be grateful to your father."

"Dad? Dad never thought much of me."

"Your father, when he was a dying man, was determined to see that you got justice."

"Justice." Michael Rafiel considered it.

"Yes, your father thought Justice was important. He was, I think, a very just man himself. In the letter he wrote me asking me to undertake this proposition, he directed me to a quotation:

'Let Justice roll down like waters

And Righteousness like an everlasting stream.'"

"Oh! What's it mean? Shakespeare?"

"No, the Bible—one has to think about it—I had to."

Miss Marple unwrapped a parcel she had been carrying.

"They gave me this," she said. "They thought I might like to have it—because I had helped to find out the truth of what had really

happened. I think, though, that you are the person who should have first claim on it—that is if you really want it. But maybe you do *not* want it—”

She handed him the photograph of Verity Hunt that Clotilde Bradbury-Scott had shown her once in the drawing room of The Old Manor House.

He took it—and stood with it, staring down on it ... His face changed, the lines of it softened, then hardened. Miss Marple watched him without speaking. The silence went on for some little time. Professor Wanstead also watched—he watched them both, the old lady and the boy.

It came to him that this was in some way a crisis—a moment that might affect a whole new way of life.

Michael Rafiel sighed—he stretched out and gave the photograph back to Miss Marple.

“No, you are right, I do not want it. All that life is gone—she’s gone—I can’t keep her with me. Anything I do now has got to be new—going forward. You—” he hesitated, looking at her—“You understand?”

“Yes,” said Miss Marple—“I understand—I think you are right. I wish you good luck in the life you are now going to begin.”

He said good-bye and went out.

“Well,” said Professor Wanstead, “not an enthusiastic young man. He could have thanked you a bit more enthusiastically for what you did for him.”

“Oh, that’s quite all right,” said Miss Marple. “I didn’t expect him to do so. It would have embarrassed him even more. It is, you know,” she added, “very embarrassing when one has to thank people and start life again and see everything from a different angle and all that. I think he might do well. He’s not bitter. That’s the great thing. I understand quite well why that girl loved him—”

“Well, perhaps he’ll go straight this time.”

“One rather doubts that,” said Miss Marple. “I don’t know that he’d be able to help himself unless—of course,” she said, “the great thing to hope for is that he’ll meet a really nice girl.”

"What I like about you," said Professor Wanstead, "is your delightfully practical mind."

III

"She'll be here presently," said Mr. Broadribb to Mr. Schuster.

"Yes. The whole thing's pretty extraordinary, isn't it?"

"I couldn't believe it at first," said Broadribb. "You know, when poor old Rafiel was dying, I thought this whole thing was—well, senility or something. Not that he was old enough for that."

The buzzer went. Mr. Schuster picked up the phone.

"Oh, she's here, is she? Bring her up," he said. "She's come," he said. "I wonder now. You know, it's the oddest thing I ever heard in my life. Getting an old lady to go racketing round the countryside looking for she doesn't know what. The police think, you know, that that woman committed not just one murder but three. Three! I ask you! Verity Hunt's body was under the mound in the garden, just as the old lady said it was. She hadn't been strangled and the face was not disfigured."

"I wonder the old lady herself didn't get done in," said Mr. Broadribb. "Far too old to be able to take care of herself."

"She had a couple of detectives, apparently, looking after her."

"What, *two* of them?"

"Yes, I didn't know that."

Miss Marple was ushered into their room.

"Congratulations, Miss Marple," said Mr. Broadribb, rising to greet her.

"Very best wishes. Splendid job," said Mr. Schuster, shaking hands.

Miss Marple sat down composedly on the other side of the desk.

"As I told you in my letter," she said, "I think I have fulfilled the terms of the proposition that was made to me. I have succeeded in what I was asked to do."

"Oh I know. Yes, we've heard already. We've heard from Professor Wanstead and from the legal department and from the

police authorities. Yes, it's been a splendid job, Miss Marple. We congratulate you."

"I was afraid," said Miss Marple, "that I would not be able to do what was required of me. It seemed so very difficult, almost impossible at first."

"Yes indeed. It seems quite impossible to me. I don't know how you did it, Miss Marple."

"Oh well," said Miss Marple, "it's just perseverance, isn't it, that leads to things."

"Now about the sum of money we are holding. It's at your disposal at any time now. I don't know whether you would like us to pay it into your bank or whether you would like to consult us possibly as to the investment of it? It's quite a large sum."

"Twenty thousand pounds," said Miss Marple. "Yes, it is a very large sum by my way of thinking. Quite extraordinary," she added.

"If you would like an introduction to our brokers, they could give you possibly some ideas about investing."

"Oh, I don't want to invest any of it."

"But surely it would be—"

"There's no point in saving at my age," said Miss Marple. "I mean the point of this money—I'm sure Mr. Rafiel meant it that way—is to enjoy a few things that one thought one never would have the money to enjoy."

"Well, I see your point of view," said Mr. Broadribb. "Then your instructions would be that we pay this sum of money into your bank?"

"Middleton's Bank, 132 High Street, St. Mary Mead," said Miss Marple.

"You have a deposit account, I expect. We will place it to your deposit account?"

"Certainly not," said Miss Marple. "Put it into my current account."

"You don't think—"

"I do think," said Miss Marple. "I want it in my current account."

She got up and shook hands.

"You could ask your bank manager's advice, you know, Miss Marple. It really is—one never knows when one wants something for

a rainy day."

"The only thing I shall want for a rainy day will be my umbrella," said Miss Marple.

She shook hands with them both again.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Broadribb. And you too, Mr. Schuster. You've been so kind to me, giving me all the information I needed."

"You really want that money put into your current account?"

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "I'm going to spend it, you know. I'm going to have some fun with it."

She looked back from the door and she laughed. Just for one moment Mr. Schuster, who was a man of more imagination than Mr. Broadribb, had a vague impression of a young and pretty girl shaking hands with the vicar at a garden party in the country. It was, as he realized a moment later, a recollection of his own youth. But Miss Marple had, for a minute, reminded him of that particular girl, young, happy, going to enjoy herself.

"Mr. Rafiel would have liked me to have fun," said Miss Marple.

She went out of the door.

"Nemesis," said Mr. Broadribb. "That's what Rafiel called her. Nemesis. Never seen anybody less like Nemesis, have you?"

Mr. Schuster shook his head.

"It must have been another of Mr. Rafiel's little jokes," said Mr. Broadribb.

Credits

Cover illustration and design by Sara Wood

MISS
MARPLE

THE QUEEN OF MYSTERY

Agatha Christie



A Miss Marple Mystery

SLEEPING MURDER MISS MARPLE'S LAST CASE



Agatha Christie

Sleeping Murder

A Miss Marple Mystery

HARPER

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY

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One

A HOUSE

Gwenda Reed stood, shivering a little, on the quayside.

The docks and the custom sheds and all of England that she could see, were gently waving up and down.

And it was in that moment that she made her decision—the decision that was to lead to such very momentous events.

She wouldn't go by the boat train to London as she had planned.

After all, why should she? No one was waiting for her, nobody expected her. She had only just got off that heaving creaking boat (it had been an exceptionally rough three days through the Bay and up to Plymouth) and the last thing she wanted was to get into a heaving swaying train. She would go to a hotel, a nice firm steady hotel standing on good solid ground. And she would get into a nice steady bed that didn't creak and roll. And she would go to sleep, and the next morning—why, of course—what a splendid idea! She would hire a car and she would drive slowly and without hurrying herself all through the South of England looking about for a house—a nice house—the house that she and Giles had planned she should find. Yes, that was a splendid idea.

In that way she would see something of England—of the England that Giles had told her about and which she had never seen; although, like most New Zealanders, she called it Home. At the moment, England was not looking particularly attractive. It was a

grey day with rain imminent and a sharp irritating wind blowing. Plymouth, Gwenda thought, as she moved forward obediently in the queue for Passports and Customs, was probably not the best of England.

On the following morning, however, her feelings were entirely different. The sun was shining. The view from her window was attractive. And the universe in general was no longer waving and wobbling. It had steadied down. This was England at last and here she was, Gwenda Reed, young married woman of twenty-one, on her travels. Giles's return to England was uncertain. He might follow her in a few weeks. It might be as long as six months. His suggestion had been that Gwenda should precede him to England and should look about for a suitable house. They both thought it would be nice to have, somewhere, a permanency. Giles's job would always entail a certain amount of travelling. Sometimes Gwenda would come too, sometimes the conditions would not be suitable. But they both liked the idea of having a home—some place of their own. Giles had inherited some furniture from an aunt recently, so that everything combined to make the idea a sensible and practical one.

Since Gwenda and Giles were reasonably well-off the prospect presented no difficulties.

Gwenda had demurred at first at choosing a house on her own. "We ought to do it together," she had said. But Giles had said laughingly: "I'm not much of a hand at houses. If *you* like it, *I* shall. A bit of a garden, of course, and not some brand-new horror—and not too big. Somewhere on the south coast was my idea. At any rate, not too far inland."

"Was there any particular place?" Gwenda asked. But Giles said No. He'd been left an orphan young (they were both orphans) and had been passed around to various relations for holidays, and no particular spot had any particular association for him. It was to be Gwenda's house—and as for waiting until they could choose it together, suppose he were held up for six months? What would Gwenda do with herself all that time? Hang about in hotels? No, she was to find a house and get settled in.

"What you mean is," said Gwenda, "do all the work!"

But she liked the idea of finding a home and having it all ready, cosy and lived in, for when Giles came back.

They had been married just three months and she loved him very much.

After sending for breakfast in bed, Gwenda got up and arranged her plans. She spent a day seeing Plymouth which she enjoyed and on the following day she hired a comfortable Daimler car and chauffeur and set off on her journey through England.

The weather was good and she enjoyed her tour very much. She saw several possible residences in Devonshire but nothing that she felt was exactly right. There was no hurry. She would go on looking. She learned to read between the lines of the house agents' enthusiastic descriptions and saved herself a certain number of fruitless errands.

It was on a Tuesday evening about a week later that the car came gently down the curving hill road into Dillmouth and on the outskirts of that still charming seaside resort, passed a For Sale board where, through the trees, a glimpse of a small white Victorian villa could be seen.

Immediately Gwenda felt a throb of appreciation—almost of recognition. This was *her* house! Already she was sure of it. She could picture the garden, the long windows—she was sure that the house was just what she wanted.

It was late in the day, so she put up at the Royal Clarence Hotel and went to the house agents whose name she had noted on the board the following morning.

Presently, armed with an order to view, she was standing in the old-fashioned long drawing room with its two french windows giving on to a flagged terrace in front of which a kind of rockery interspersed with flowering shrubs fell sharply to a stretch of lawn below. Through the trees at the bottom of the garden the sea could be seen.

This is *my* house, thought Gwenda. It's *home*. I feel already as though I know every bit of it.

The door opened and a tall melancholy woman with a cold in the head entered, sniffing. "Mrs. Hengrave? I have an order from Messrs. Galbraith and Penderley. I'm afraid it's rather early in the day —"

Mrs. Hengrave, blowing her nose, said sadly that that didn't matter at all. The tour of the house began.

Yes, it was just right. Not too large. A bit old-fashioned, but she and Giles could put in another bathroom or two. The kitchen could be modernized. It already had an Aga, fortunately. With a new sink and up-to-date equipment—

Through all Gwenda's plans and preoccupations, the voice of Mrs. Hengrave droned thinly on recounting the details of the late Major Hengrave's last illness. Half of Gwenda attended to making the requisite noises of condolence, sympathy and understanding. Mrs. Hengrave's people all lived in Kent—anxious she should come and settle near them ... the Major had been very fond of Dillmouth, secretary for many years of the Golf Club, but she herself....

"Yes ... Of course ... Dreadful for you ... Most natural ... Yes, nursing homes *are* like that ... Of course ... You must be...."

And the other half of Gwenda raced along in thought: Linen cupboard here, I expect ... Yes. Double room—nice view of sea—Giles will like that. Quite a useful little room here—Giles might have it as a dressing room ... Bathroom—I expect the bath has a mahogany surround—Oh yes, it *has!* How lovely—and standing in the middle of the floor! I shan't change *that*—it's a period piece!

Such an enormous bath!

One could have apples on the surround. And sail boats—and painted ducks. You could pretend you were in the sea ... I know: we'll make that dark back spare room into a couple of really up-to-date green and chromium bathrooms—the pipes ought to be all right over the kitchen—and keep this just as it is....

"Pleurisy," said Mrs. Hengrave. "Turning to double pneumonia on the third day—"

"Terrible," said Gwenda. "Isn't there another bedroom at the end of this passage?"

There was—and it was just the sort of room she had imagined it would be—almost round, with a big bow window. She'd have to do it up, of course. It was in quite good condition, but why were people like Mrs. Hengrave so fond of that mustard-cum-biscuit shade of wall paint?

They retraced their steps along the corridor. Gwenda murmured, conscientiously, "Six, no, seven bedrooms, counting the little one and the attic."

The boards creaked faintly under her feet. Already she felt that it was she and not Mrs. Hengrave who lived here! Mrs. Hengrave was an interloper—a woman who did up rooms in mustard-cum-biscuit colour and liked a frieze of wisteria in her drawing room. Gwenda glanced down at the typewritten paper in her hand on which the details of the property and the price asked were given.

In the course of a few days Gwenda had become fairly conversant with house values. The sum asked was not large—of course the house needed a certain amount of modernization—but even then ... And she noted the words "Open to offer." Mrs. Hengrave must be very anxious to go to Kent and live near "her people"....

They were starting down the stairs when quite suddenly Gwenda felt a wave of irrational terror sweep over her. It was a sickening sensation, and it passed almost as quickly as it came. Yet it left behind it a new idea.

"The house isn't—haunted, is it?" demanded Gwenda.

Mrs. Hengrave, a step below, and having just got to the moment in her narrative when Major Hengrave was sinking fast, looked up in an affronted manner.

"Not that I am aware of, Mrs. Reed. Why—has anyone—been saying something of the kind?"

"You've never felt or seen anything yourself? Nobody's *died* here?"

Rather an unfortunate question, she thought, a split second of a moment too late, because presumably Major Hengrave—

"My husband died in the St. Monica's Nursing Home," said Mrs. Hengrave stiffly.

"Oh, of course. You told me so."

Mrs. Hengrave continued in the same rather glacial manner: "In a house which was presumably built about a hundred years ago, there would normally be deaths during that period. Miss Elworthy from whom my dear husband acquired this house seven years ago, was in excellent health, and indeed planning to go abroad and do missionary work, and she did not mention any recent demises in her family."

Gwenda hastened to soothe the melancholy Mrs. Hengrave down. They were now once more in the drawing room. It was a peaceful and charming room, with exactly the kind of atmosphere that Gwenda coveted. Her momentary panic just now seemed quite incomprehensible. What *had* come over her? There was nothing wrong with the house.

Asking Mrs. Hengrave if she could take a look at the garden, she went out through the french windows onto the terrace.

There should be steps here, thought Gwenda, going down to the lawn.

But instead there was a vast uprising of forsythia which at this particular place seemed to have got above itself and effectually shut out all view of the sea.

Gwenda nodded to herself. She would alter all that.

Following Mrs. Hengrave, she went along the terrace and down some steps at the far side onto the lawn. She noted that the rockery was neglected and overgrown, and that most of the flowering shrubs needed pruning.

Mrs. Hengrave murmured apologetically that the garden had been rather neglected. Only able to afford a man twice a week. And quite often *he* never turned up.

They inspected the small but adequate kitchen garden and returned to the house. Gwenda explained that she had other houses to see, and that though she liked Hillside (what a commonplace name!) very much, she could not decide immediately.

Mrs. Hengrave parted from her with a somewhat wistful look and a last long lingering sniff.

Gwenda returned to the agents, made a firm offer subject to surveyor's report and spent the rest of the morning walking round Dillmouth. It was a charming and old-fashioned little seaside town. At the far, "modern" end, there were a couple of new-looking hotels and some raw-looking bungalows, but the geographical formation of the coast with the hills behind had saved Dillmouth from undue expansion.

After lunch Gwenda received a telephone call from the agents saying that Mrs. Hengrave accepted her offer. With a mischievous smile on her lips Gwenda made her way to the post office and despatched a cable to Giles.

Have bought a house. Love. Gwenda.

"That'll tickle him up," said Gwenda to herself. "Show him that the grass doesn't grow under *my* feet!"

Two

WALLPAPER

I

A month had passed and Gwenda had moved into Hillside. Giles's aunt's furniture had come out of store and was arranged round the house. It was good quality old-fashioned stuff. One or two over-large wardrobes Gwenda had sold, but the rest fitted in nicely and was in harmony with the house. There were small gay papiermâché tables in the drawing room, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and painted with castles and roses. There was a prim little worktable with a gathered sack underneath of pure silk, there was a rosewood bureau and a mahogany sofa table.

The so-called easy chairs Gwenda had relegated to various bedrooms and had bought two large squashy wells of comfort for herself and Giles to stand each side of the fireplace. The large chesterfield sofa was placed near the windows. For curtains Gwenda had chosen old-fashioned chintz of pale eggshell blue with prim urns of roses and yellow birds on them. The room, she now considered, was exactly right.

She was hardly settled yet, since she had workmen in the house still. They should have been out by now, but Gwenda rightly estimated that until she herself came into residence, they would not go.

The kitchen alterations were finished, the new bathrooms nearly so. For further decorating Gwenda was going to wait a while. She wanted time to savour her new home and decide on the exact colour schemes she wanted for the bedrooms. The house was really in very good order and there was no need to do everything at once.

In the kitchen a Mrs. Cocker was now installed, a lady of condescending graciousness, inclined to repulse Gwenda's over-democratic friendliness, but who, once Gwenda had been satisfactorily put in her place, was willing to unbend.

On this particular morning, Mrs. Cocker deposited a breakfast tray on Gwenda's knees, as she sat up in bed.

"When there's no gentleman in the house," Mrs. Cocker affirmed, "a lady prefers her breakfast in bed." And Gwenda had bowed to this supposedly English enactment.

"Scrambled this morning," Mrs. Cocker observed, referring to the eggs. "You said something about finnan haddock, but you wouldn't like it in the bedroom. It leaves a smell. I'm giving it to you for your supper, creamed on toast."

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Cocker."

Mrs. Cocker smiled graciously and prepared to withdraw.

Gwenda was not occupying the big double bedroom. That could wait until Giles returned. She had chosen instead the end room, the one with the rounded walls and the bow window. She felt thoroughly at home in it and happy.

Looking round her now, she exclaimed impulsively: "I do like this room."

Mrs. Cocker looked round indulgently.

"It is quite a nice room, madam, though small. By the bars on the window I should say it had been the nursery at one time."

"I never thought of that. Perhaps it has."

"Ah, well," said Mrs. Cocker, with implication in her voice, and withdrew.

"Once we have a gentleman in the house," she seemed to be saying, "who knows? A nursery *may* be needed."

Gwenda blushed. She looked round the room. A nursery? Yes, it would be a nice nursery. She began furnishing it in her mind. A big

dolls' house there against the wall. And low cupboards with toys in them. A fire burning cheerfully in the grate and a tall guard round it with things airing on the rail. But not this hideous mustard wall. No, she would have a gay wallpaper. Something bright and cheerful. Little bunches of poppies alternating with bunches of cornflowers ... Yes, that would be lovely. She'd try and find a wallpaper like that. She felt sure she had seen one somewhere.

One didn't need much furniture in the room. There were two built-in cupboards, but one of them, a corner one, was locked and the key lost. Indeed the whole thing had been painted over, so that it could not have been opened for many years. She must get the men to open it up before they left. As it was, she hadn't got room for all her clothes.

She felt more at home every day in Hillside. Hearing a throat being ponderously cleared and a short dry cough through the open window, she hurried over her breakfast. Foster, the temperamental jobbing gardener, who was not always reliable in his promises, must be here today as he had said he would be.

Gwenda bathed, dressed, put on a tweed skirt and a sweater and hurried out into the garden. Foster was at work outside the drawing room window. Gwenda's first action had been to get a path made down through the rockery at this point. Foster had been recalcitrant, pointing out that the forsythia would have to go and the weigela, and them there lilacs, but Gwenda had been adamant, and he was now almost enthusiastic about his task.

He greeted her with a chuckle.

"Looks like you're going back to old times, miss." (He persisted in calling Gwenda "miss.")

"Old times? How?"

Foster tapped with his spade.

"I come on the old steps—see, that's where they went—just as you want 'em now. Then someone planted them over and covered them up."

"It was very stupid of them," said Gwenda. "You want a vista down to the lawn and the sea from the drawing room window."

Foster was somewhat hazy about a vista—but he gave a cautious and grudging assent.

"I don't say, mind you, that it won't be an improvement ... Gives you a view—and them shrubs made it dark in the drawing room. Still they was growing a treat—never seen a healthier lot of forsythia. Lilacs isn't much, but them wiglers costs money—and mind you—they're too old to replant."

"Oh, I know. But this is much, much nicer."

"Well." Foster scratched his head. "Maybe it is."

"It's *right*," said Gwenda, nodding her head. She asked suddenly, "Who lived here before the Hengraves? They weren't here very long, were they?"

"Matter of six years or so. Didn't belong. Afore them? The Miss Elworthys. Very churchy folk. Low church. Missions to the heathen. Once had a black clergyman staying here, they did. Four of 'em there was, and their brother—but he didn't get much of a look-in with all those women. Before them—now let me see, it was Mrs. Findeyson—ah! she was the real gentry, she was. She belonged. Was living here afore I was born."

"Did she die here?" asked Gwenda.

"Died out in Egypt or some such place. But they brought her home. She's buried up to churchyard. She planted that magnolia and those labiurnams. And those pittispores. Fond of shrubs, she was."

Foster continued: "Weren't none of those new houses built up along the hill then. Countrified, it was. No cinema then. And none of them new shops. Or that there parade on the front!" His tone held the disapproval of the aged for all innovations. "Changes," he said with a snort. "Nothing but changes."

"I suppose things are bound to change," said Gwenda. "And after all there are lots of improvements nowadays, aren't there?"

"So they say. I ain't noticed them. Changes!" He gestured towards the macrocarpa hedge on the left through which the gleam of a building showed. "Used to be the cottage hospital, that used," he said. "Nice place and handy. Then they goes and builds a great place near to a mile out of town. Twenty minutes' walk if you want to get there on a visiting day—or threepence on the bus." He gestured

once more towards the hedge ... "It's a girls' school now. Moved in ten years ago. Changes all the time. People takes a house nowadays and lives in it ten or twelve years and then off they goes. Restless. What's the good of that? You can't do any proper planting unless you can look well ahead."

Gwenda looked affectionately at the magnolia.

"Like Mrs. Findeyson," she said.

"Ah. She was the proper kind. Come here as a bride, she did. Brought up her children and married them, buried her husband, had her grandchildren down in the summers, and took off in the end when she was nigh on eighty."

Foster's tone held warm approval.

Gwenda went back into the house smiling a little.

She interviewed the workmen, and then returned to the drawing room where she sat down at the desk and wrote some letters. Amongst the correspondence that remained to be answered was a letter from some cousins of Giles who lived in London. Anytime she wanted to come to London they begged her to come and stay with them at their house in Chelsea.

Raymond West was a well-known (rather than popular) novelist and his wife Joan, Gwenda knew, was a painter. It would be fun to go and stay with them, though probably they would think she was a most terrible Philistine. Neither Giles nor I are a bit highbrow, reflected Gwenda.

A sonorous gong boomed pontifically from the hall. Surrounded by a great deal of carved and tortured black wood, the gong had been one of Giles's aunt's prized possessions. Mrs. Cocker herself appeared to derive distinct pleasure from sounding it and always gave full measure. Gwenda put her hands to her ears and got up.

She walked quickly across the drawing room to the wall by the far window and then brought herself up short with an exclamation of annoyance. It was the third time she'd done that. She always seemed to expect to be able to walk through solid wall into the dining room next door.

She went back across the room and out into the front hall and then round the angle of the drawing room wall and so along to the

dining room. It was a long way round, and it would be annoying in winter, for the front hall was draughty and the only central heating was in the drawing room and dining room and two bedrooms upstairs.

I don't see, thought Gwenda to herself as she sat down at the charming Sheraton dining table which she had just bought at vast expense in lieu of Aunt Lavender's massive square mahogany one, I don't see why I shouldn't have a doorway made through from the drawing room to the dining room. I'll talk to Mr. Sims about it when he comes this afternoon.

Mr. Sims was the builder and decorator, a persuasive middle-aged man with a husky voice and a little notebook which he always held at the ready, to jot down any expensive idea that might occur to his patrons.

Mr. Sims, when consulted, was keenly appreciative.

"Simplest thing in the world, Mrs. Reed—and a great improvement, if I may say so."

"Would it be very expensive?" Gwenda was by now a little doubtful of Mr. Sims's assents and enthusiasms. There had been a little unpleasantness over various extras not included in Mr. Sims's original estimate.

"A mere trifle," said Mr. Sims, his husky voice indulgent and reassuring. Gwenda looked more doubtful than ever. It was Mr. Sims's trifles that she had learnt to distrust. His straightforward estimates were studiously moderate.

"I'll tell you what, Mrs. Reed," said Mr. Sims coaxingly, "I'll get Taylor to have a look when he's finished with the dressing room this afternoon, and then I can give you an exact idea. Depends what the wall's like."

Gwenda assented. She wrote to Joan West thanking her for her invitation, but saying that she would not be leaving Dillmouth at present since she wanted to keep an eye on the workmen. Then she went out for a walk along the front and enjoyed the sea breeze. She came back into the drawing room, and Taylor, Mr. Sims's leading workman, straightened up from the corner and greeted her with a grin.

"Won't be no difficulty about this, Mrs. Reed," he said. "Been a door here before, there has. Somebody as didn't want it has just had it plastered over."

Gwenda was agreeably surprised. How extraordinary, she thought, that I've always seemed to feel there was a door there. She remembered the confident way she had walked to it at lunchtime. And remembering it, quite suddenly, she felt a tiny shiver of uneasiness. When you came to think of it, it was really rather odd ... Why should she have felt so sure that there was a door there? There was no sign of it on the outside wall. How had she guessed—known—that there was a door just there? Of course it would be convenient to have a door through to the dining room, but why had she always gone so unerringly to that one particular spot? Anywhere on the dividing wall would have done equally well, but she had always gone automatically, thinking of other things, to the one place where a door had actually been.

I hope, thought Gwenda uneasily, that I'm not *clairvoyant* or anything....

There had never been anything in the least psychic about her. She wasn't that kind of person. Or was she? That path outside from the terrace down through the shrubbery to the lawn. Had she in some way known it was there when she was so insistent on having it made in that particular place?

Perhaps I *am* a bit psychic, thought Gwenda uneasily. Or is it something to do with the house?

Why had she asked Mrs. Hengrave that day if the house was haunted?

It wasn't haunted! It was a darling house! There couldn't be anything wrong with the house. Why, Mrs. Hengrave had seemed quite surprised by the idea.

Or had there been a trace of reserve, of wariness, in her manner?

Good Heavens, I'm beginning to imagine things, thought Gwenda.

She brought her mind back with an effort to her discussion with Taylor.

"There's one other thing," she added. "One of the cupboards in my room upstairs is stuck. I want to get it opened."

The man came up with her and examined the door.

"It's been painted over more than once," he said. "I'll get the men to get it open for you tomorrow if that will do."

Gwenda acquiesced and Taylor went away.

That evening Gwenda felt jumpy and nervous. Sitting in the drawing room and trying to read, she was aware of every creak of the furniture. Once or twice she looked over her shoulder and shivered. She told herself repeatedly that there was nothing in the incident of the door and the path. They were just coincidences. In any case they were the result of plain common sense.

Without admitting it to herself, she felt nervous of going up to bed. When she finally got up and turned off the lights and opened the door into the hall, she found herself dreading to go up the stairs. She almost ran up them in her haste, hurried along the passage and opened the door of her room. Once inside she at once felt her fears calmed and appeased. She looked round the room affectionately. She felt safe in here, safe and happy. Yes, now she was here, she was safe. (Safe from what, you idiot? she asked herself.) She looked at her pyjamas spread out on the bed and her bedroom slippers below them.

Really, Gwenda, you might be six years old! You ought to have bunny shoes, with rabbits on them.

She got into bed with a sense of relief and was soon asleep.

The next morning she had various matters to see to in the town. When she came back it was lunchtime.

"The men have got the cupboard open in your bedroom, madam," said Mrs. Cocker as she brought in the delicately fried sole, the mashed potatoes and the creamed carrots.

"Oh good," said Gwenda.

She was hungry and enjoyed her lunch. After having coffee in the drawing room, she went upstairs to her bedroom. Crossing the room she pulled open the door of the corner cupboard.

Then she uttered a sudden frightened little cry and stood staring.

The inside of the cupboard revealed the original papering of the wall, which elsewhere had been done over in the yellowish wall paint. The room had once been gaily papered in a floral design, a

design of little bunches of scarlet poppies alternating with bunches of blue cornflowers....

II

Gwenda stood there staring a long time, then she went shakily over to the bed and sat down on it.

Here she was in a house she had never been in before, in a country she had never visited—and only two days ago she had lain in bed imagining a paper for this very room—and the paper she had imagined corresponded exactly with the paper that had once hung on the walls.

Wild fragments of explanation whirled round in her head. Dunne, Experiment with Time—seeing forward instead of back....

She could explain the garden path and the connecting door as coincidence—but there couldn't be coincidence about this. You couldn't conceivably imagine a wallpaper of such a distinctive design and then find one exactly as you had imagined it ... No, there was some explanation that eluded her and that—yes, frightened her. Every now and then she was seeing, not forward, but back—back to some former state of the house. Any moment she might see something more—something she didn't want to see ... The house frightened her ... But was it the house or *herself*? She didn't want to be one of those people who *saw* things....

She drew a long breath, put on her hat and coat and slipped quickly out of the house. At the post office she sent the following telegram:

West, 19 Addway Square Chelsea London. May I change my mind and come to you tomorrow Gwenda.

She sent it reply paid.

Three

"COVER HER FACE ..."

Raymond West and his wife did all they could to make young Giles's wife feel welcome. It was not their fault that Gwenda found them secretly rather alarming. Raymond, with his odd appearance, rather like a pouncing raven, his sweep of hair and his sudden crescendos of quite incomprehensible conversation, left Gwenda round-eyed and nervous. Both he and Joan seemed to talk a language of their own. Gwenda had never been plunged in a highbrow atmosphere before and practically all its terms were strange.

"We've planned to take you to a show or two," said Raymond whilst Gwenda was drinking gin and rather wishing she could have had a cup of tea after her journey.

Gwenda brightened up immediately.

"The Ballet tonight at Sadler's Wells, and tomorrow we've got a birthday party on for my quite incredible Aunt Jane—the *Duchess of Malfi* with Gielgud, and on Friday you simply must see *They Walked without Feet*. Translated from the Russian—absolutely the most significant piece of drama for the last twenty years. It's at the little Witmore Theatre."

Gwenda expressed herself grateful for these plans for her entertainment. After all, when Giles came home, they would go together to the musical shows and all that. She flinched slightly at

the prospect of *They Walked without Feet*, but supposed she might enjoy it—only the point about “significant” plays was that you usually didn’t.

“You’ll adore my Aunt Jane,” said Raymond. “She’s what I should describe as a perfect Period Piece. Victorian to the core. All her dressing tables have their legs swathed in chintz. She lives in a village, the kind of village where nothing ever happens, exactly like a stagnant pond.”

“Something did happen there once,” his wife said drily.

“A mere drama of passion—crude—no subtlety to it.”

“You enjoyed it frightfully at the time,” Joan reminded him with a slight twinkle.

“I sometimes enjoy playing village cricket,” said Raymond, with dignity.

“Anyway, Aunt Jane distinguished herself over that murder.”

“Oh, she’s no fool. She adores problems.”

“Problems?” said Gwenda, her mind flying to arithmetic.

Raymond waved a hand.

“Any kind of problem. Why the grocer’s wife took her umbrella to the church social on a fine evening. Why a gill of pickled shrimps was found where it was. What happened to the Vicar’s surplice. All grist to my Aunt Jane’s mill. So if you’ve any problem in your life, put it to her, Gwenda. She’ll tell you the answer.”

He laughed and Gwenda laughed too, but not very heartily. She was introduced to Aunt Jane, otherwise Miss Marple, on the following day. Miss Marple was an attractive old lady, tall and thin, with pink cheeks and blue eyes, and a gentle, rather fussy manner. Her blue eyes often had a little twinkle in them.

After an early dinner at which they drank Aunt Jane’s health, they all went off to His Majesty’s Theatre. Two extra men, an elderly artist and a young barrister were in the party. The elderly artist devoted himself to Gwenda and the young barrister divided his attentions between Joan and Miss Marple whose remarks he seemed to enjoy very much. At the theatre, however, this arrangement was reversed. Gwenda sat in the middle of the row between Raymond and the barrister.

The lights went down and the play began.

It was superbly acted and Gwenda enjoyed it very much. She had not seen very many first-rate theatrical productions.

The play drew to a close, came to that supreme moment of horror. The actor's voice came over the footlights filled with the tragedy of a warped and perverted mentality.

"Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle, she died young..."

Gwenda screamed.

She sprang up from her seat, pushed blindly past the others out into the aisle, through the exit and up the stairs and so to the street. She did not stop, even then, but half walked, half ran, in a blind panic up the Haymarket.

It was not until she had reached Piccadilly that she noticed a free taxi cruising along, hailed it and, getting in, gave the address of the Chelsea house. With fumbling fingers she got out money, paid the taxi and went up the steps. The servant who let her in glanced at her in surprise.

"You've come back early, miss. Didn't you feel well?"

"I—no, yes—I—I felt faint."

"Would you like anything, miss? Some brandy?"

"No, nothing. I'll go straight up to bed."

She ran up the stairs to avoid further questions.

She pulled off her clothes, left them on the floor in a heap and got into bed. She lay there shivering, her heart pounding, her eyes staring at the ceiling.

She did not hear the sound of fresh arrivals downstairs, but after about five minutes the door opened and Miss Marple came in. She had two hot-water bottles tucked under her arm and a cup in her hand.

Gwenda sat up in bed, trying to stop her shivering.

"Oh, Miss Marple, I'm frightfully sorry. I don't know what—it was awful of me. Are they very annoyed with me?"

"Now don't worry, my dear child," said Miss Marple. "Just tuck yourself up warmly with these hot-water bottles."

"I don't really need a hot-water bottle."

"Oh yes, you do. That's right. And now drink this cup of tea..."

It was hot and strong and far too full of sugar, but Gwenda drank it obediently. The shivering was less acute now.

"Just lie down now and go to sleep," said Miss Marple. "You've had a shock, you know. We'll talk about it in the morning. Don't worry about anything. Just go to sleep."

She drew the covers up, smiled, patted Gwenda and went out.

Downstairs Raymond was saying irritably to Joan: "What on earth was the matter with the girl? Did she feel ill, or what?"

"My dear Raymond, I don't know, she just screamed! I suppose the play was a bit too *macabre* for her."

"Well, of course Webster *is* a bit grisly. But I shouldn't have thought—" He broke off as Miss Marple came into the room. "Is she all right?"

"Yes, I think so. She'd had a bad shock, you know."

"Shock? Just seeing a Jacobean drama?"

"I think there must be a little more to it than that," said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

Gwenda's breakfast was sent up to her. She drank some coffee and nibbled a little piece of toast. When she got up and came downstairs, Joan had gone to her studio, Raymond was shut up in his workroom and only Miss Marple was sitting by the window, which had a view over the river; she was busily engaged in knitting.

She looked up with a placid smile as Gwenda entered.

"Good morning, my dear. You're feeling better, I hope."

"Oh yes, I'm quite all right. How I could make such an utter *idiot* of myself last night, I don't know. Are they—are they very mad with me?"

"Oh no, my dear. They quite understand."

"Understand what?"

Miss Marple glanced up over her knitting.

"That you had a bad shock last night." She added gently: "Hadn't you better tell me all about it?"

Gwenda walked restlessly up and down.

"I think I'd better go and see a psychiatrist or someone."

"There are excellent mental specialists in London, of course. But are you sure it is necessary?"

"Well—I think I'm going mad ... I *must* be going mad."

An elderly parlourmaid entered the room with a telegram on a salver which she handed to Gwenda.

"The boy wants to know if there's an answer, ma'am?"

Gwenda tore it open. It had been retelegraphed on from Dillmouth. She stared at it for a moment or two uncomprehendingly, then screwed it into a ball.

"There's no answer," she said mechanically.

The maid left the room.

"Not bad news, I hope, dear?"

"It's Giles—my husband. He's flying home. He'll be here in a week."

Her voice was bewildered and miserable. Miss Marple gave a gentle little cough.

"Well—surely—that is very nice, isn't it?"

"Is it? When I'm not sure if I'm mad or not? If I'm mad I ought never to have married Giles. And the house and everything. I can't go back there. Oh, I don't know what to do."

Miss Marple patted the sofa invitingly.

"Now suppose you sit down here, dear, and just tell me all about it."

It was with a sense of relief that Gwenda accepted the invitation. She poured out the whole story, starting with her first view of Hillside and going onto the incidents that had first puzzled her and then worried her.

"And so I got rather frightened," she ended. "And I thought I'd come up to London—get away from it all. Only, you see, I couldn't get away from it. It followed me. Last night—" she shut her eyes and gulped reminiscently.

"Last night?" prompted Miss Marple.

"I dare say you won't believe this," said Gwenda, speaking very fast. "You'll think I'm hysterical or queer or something. It happened quite suddenly, right at the end. I'd enjoyed the play. I'd never thought once of the house. And then it came—out of the blue—when he said those words—"

She repeated in a low quivering voice: "*Cover her face, mine eyes dazzle, she died young.*"

"I was back there—on the stairs, looking down on the hall through the banisters, and I saw her lying there. Sprawled out—dead. Her hair all golden and her face all—all *blue!* She was dead, strangled, and someone was saying those words in that same horrible gloating way—and I saw his hands—grey, wrinkled—not hands—monkey's paws ... It was horrible, I tell you. She was dead...."

Miss Marple asked gently: "Who was dead?"

The answer came back quick and mechanical.

"Helen...."

Four

HELEN?

For a moment Gwenda stared at Miss Marple, then she pushed back the hair from her forehead.

"Why did I say that?" she said. "Why did I say Helen? I don't know any Helen!"

She dropped her hands with a gesture of despair.

"You see," she said, "I'm mad! I imagine things! I go about seeing things that aren't there. First it was only wallpapers—but now it's dead bodies. So I'm getting worse."

"Now don't rush to conclusions, my dear—"

"Or else it's the *house*. The house is haunted—or bewitched or something ... I see things that have happened there—or else I see things that are going to happen there—and that would be worse. Perhaps a woman called Helen is going to be murdered there ... Only I don't see if it's the *house* that's haunted why I should see these awful things when I am away from it. So I think really that it must be me that's going queer. And I'd better go and see a psychiatrist *at once*—this morning."

"Well, of course, Gwenda dear, you can always do that when you've exhausted every other line of approach, but I always think myself that it's better to examine the simplest and most commonplace explanations first. Let me get the facts quite clear. There were three definite incidents that upset you. A path in the

garden that had been planted over but that you felt was there, a door that had been bricked up, and a wallpaper which you imagined correctly and in detail without having seen it? Am I right?"

"Yes."

"Well, the easiest, the most natural explanation would be that you *had* seen them before."

"In another life, you mean?"

"Well no, dear. I meant in *this* life. I mean that they might be actual *memories*."

"But I've never been in England until a month ago, Miss Marple."

"You are quite sure of that, my dear?"

"Of course I'm sure. I've lived near Christchurch in New Zealand all my life."

"Were you born there?"

"No, I was born in India. My father was a British Army officer. My mother died a year or two after I was born and he sent me back to her people in New Zealand to bring up. Then he himself died a few years later."

"You don't remember coming from India to New Zealand?"

"Not really. I do remember, frightfully vaguely, being on a boat. A round window thing—a porthole, I suppose. And a man in white uniform with a red face and blue eyes, and a mark on his chin—a scar, I suppose. He used to toss me up in the air and I remember being half frightened and half loving it. But it's all very fragmentary."

"Do you remember a nurse—or an ayah?"

"Not an ayah—Nannie. I remember Nannie because she stayed for some time—until I was five years old. She cut ducks out of paper. Yes, she was on the boat. She scolded me when I cried because the Captain kissed me and I didn't like his beard."

"Now that's very interesting, dear, because you see you are mixing up two different voyages. In one, the Captain had a beard and in the other he had a red face and a scar on his chin."

"Yes," Gwenda considered, "I suppose I must be."

"It seems possible to me," said Miss Marple, "that when your mother died, your father brought you to *England* with him first, and that you actually lived at this house, Hillside. You've told me, you

know, that the house felt like home to you as soon as you got inside it. And that room you chose to sleep in, it was probably your nursery —”

“It *was* a nursery. There were bars on the windows.”

“You see? It had this pretty gay paper of cornflowers and poppies. Children remember their nursery walls very well. I’ve always remembered the mauve irises on my nursery walls and yet I believe it was repapered when I was only three.”

“And that’s why I thought at once of the toys, the dolls’ house and the toy cupboards?”

“Yes. And the bathroom. The bath with the mahogany surround. You told me that you thought of sailing ducks in it as soon as you saw it.”

Gwenda said thoughtfully. “It’s true that I seemed to know right away just where everything was—the kitchen and the linen cupboard. And that I kept thinking there was a door through from the drawing room to the dining room. But surely it’s quite impossible that I should come to England and actually buy the identical house I’d lived in long ago?”

“It’s not *impossible*, my dear. It’s just a very remarkable coincidence—and remarkable coincidences do happen. Your husband wanted a house on the south coast, you were looking for one, and you passed a house that stirred memories, and attracted you. It was the right size and a reasonable price and so you bought it. No, it’s not too wildly improbable. Had the house been merely what is called (perhaps rightly) a haunted house, you would have reacted differently, I think. But you had no feeling of violence or repulsion except, so you have told me, at one very definite moment, and that was when you were just starting to come down the staircase and looking down into the hall.”

Some of the scared expression came back into Gwenda’s eyes.

She said: “You mean—that—that Helen—that *that’s* true too?”

Miss Marple said very gently: “Well, I think so, my dear ... I think we must face the position that if the other things are memories, *that* is a memory too....”

"That I really saw someone killed—strangled—and lying there dead?"

"I don't suppose you knew consciously that she was strangled, that was suggested by the play last night and fits in with your adult recognition of what a blue convulsed face must mean. I think a very young child, creeping down the stairs, would realize violence and death and evil and associate them with a certain series of words—for I think there's no doubt that the murderer actually *said* those words. It would be a very severe shock to a child. Children are odd little creatures. If they are badly frightened, especially by something they don't understand, they don't talk about it. They bottle it up. Seemingly, perhaps, they forget it. But the memory is still there deep down."

Gwenda drew a deep breath.

"And you think that's what happened to me? But why don't I remember it all *now*?"

"One can't remember to order. And often when one tries to, the memory goes further away. But I think there are one or two indications that that is what did happen. For instance when you told me just now about your experience in the theatre last night you used a very revealing turn of words. You said you seemed to be looking "*through* the banisters"—but normally, you know, one doesn't look down into a hall *through* the banisters but *over* them. Only a child would look *through*."

"That's clever of you," said Gwenda appreciatively.

"These little things are very significant."

"But who was Helen?" asked Gwenda in a bewildered way.

"Tell me, my dear, are you still quite sure it was Helen?"

"Yes ... It's frightfully odd, because I don't know who 'Helen' is—but at the same time I do know—I mean I know that it was 'Helen' lying there ... How am I going to find out more?"

"Well, I think the obvious thing to do is to find out definitely if you ever were in England as a child, or if you could have been. Your relatives—"

Gwenda interrupted. "Aunt Alison. She would know, I'm sure."

"Then I should write to her by airmail. Tell her circumstances have arisen which make it imperative for you to know if you have ever been in England. You would probably get an answer by airmail by the time your husband arrives."

"Oh, thank you, Miss Marple. You've been frightfully kind. And I do hope what you've suggested is true. Because if so, well, it's quite all right. I mean, it won't be anything supernatural."

Miss Marple smiled.

"I hope it turns out as we think. I am going to stay with some old friends of mine in the North of England the day after tomorrow. I shall be passing back through London in about ten days. If you and your husband are here then, or if you have received an answer to your letter, I should be *very* curious to know the result."

"*Of course*, dear Miss Marple! Anyway, I want you to meet Giles. He's a perfect pet. And we'll have a good pow-wow about the whole thing."

Gwenda's spirits were fully restored by now.

Miss Marple, however, looked thoughtful.

Five

MURDER IN RETROSPECT

I

It was some ten days later that Miss Marple entered a small hotel in Mayfair, and was given an enthusiastic reception by young Mr. and Mrs. Reed.

"This is my husband, Miss Marple. Giles, I can't tell you how kind Miss Marple was to me."

"I'm delighted to meet you, Miss Marple. I hear Gwenda nearly panicked herself into a lunatic asylum."

Miss Marple's gentle blue eyes summed up Giles Reed favourably. A very likeable young man, tall and fair with a disarming way of blinking every now and then out of a natural shyness. She noted his determined chin and the set of his jaw.

"We'll have tea in the little waiting room, the dark one," said Gwenda. "Nobody ever comes there. And then we can show Miss Marple Aunt Alison's letter."

"Yes," she added, as Miss Marple looked up sharply. "It's come, and it's almost exactly what you thought."

Tea over, the airmail letter was spread out and read.

Dearest Gwenda, (Miss Dandy had written)

I was much disturbed to hear you had had some worrying experience. To tell you the truth, it had really entirely escaped my memory that you had actually resided for a short time in England as a young child.

Your mother, my sister Megan, met your father, Major Halliday, when she was on a visit to some friends of ours at that time stationed in India. They were married and you were born there. About two years after your birth your mother died. It was a great shock to us and we wrote to your father with whom we had corresponded, but whom actually we had never seen, begging him to entrust you to our care, as we would be only too glad to have you, and it might be difficult for an Army man stranded with a young child. Your father, however, refused, and told us he was resigning from the Army and taking you back with him to England. He said he hoped we would at some time come over and visit him there.

I understand that on the voyage home, your father met a young woman, became engaged to her, and married her as soon as he got to England. The marriage was not, I gather, a happy one, and I understand they parted about a year later. It was then that your father wrote to us and asked if we were still willing to give you a home. I need hardly tell you, my dear, how happy we were to do so. You were sent out to us in the charge of an English nurse, and at the same time your father settled the bulk of his estate upon you and suggested that you might legally adopt our name. This, I may say, seemed a little curious to us, but we felt that it was kindly meant—and intended to make you more one of the family—we did not, however, adopt that suggestion. About a year later your father died in a nursing home. I surmise that he had already received bad news about his health at the time when he sent you out to us.

I'm afraid I cannot tell you where you lived whilst with your father in England. His letter naturally had the address on it at the time but that is now eighteen years ago and I'm afraid one doesn't remember such details. It was in the South of England, I know—and I fancy Dillmouth is correct. I had a vague idea it was

Dartmouth, but the two names are not unlike. I believe your stepmother married again, but I have no recollection of her name, nor even of her unmarried name, though your father had mentioned it in the original letter telling of his remarriage. We were, I think, a little resentful of his marrying again so soon, but of course one knows that on board ship the influence of propinquity is very great—and he may also have thought that it would be a good thing on your account.

It seemed stupid of me not to have mentioned to you that you had been in England even if you didn't remember the fact, but, as I say, the whole thing had faded from my mind. Your mother's death in India and your subsequently coming to live with us always seemed the important points.

I hope this is all cleared up now?

I do trust Giles will soon be able to join you. It is hard for you both being parted at this early stage.

All my news in my next letter, as I am sending this off hurriedly in answer to your wire.

Your loving aunt,

Alison Danby.

PS. You do not say what your worrying experience was?

"You see," said Gwenda. "It's almost exactly as you suggested."

Miss Marple smoothed out the flimsy sheet.

"Yes—yes, indeed. The commonsense explanation. I've found, you know, that that is so often right."

"Well, I'm very grateful to you, Miss Marple," said Giles. "Poor Gwenda was thoroughly upset, and I must say I'd have been rather worried myself to think that Gwenda was clairvoyant or psychic or something."

"It might be a disturbing quality in a wife," said Gwenda. "Unless you've always led a thoroughly blameless life."

"Which I have," said Giles.

"And the house? What do you feel about the house?" asked Miss Marple.

"Oh, that's all right. We're going down tomorrow. Giles is dying to see it."

"I don't know whether you realize it, Miss Marple," said Giles, "but what it amounts to is, that we've got a first-class murder mystery on our hands. Actually on our very doorstep—or more accurately in our front hall."

"I *had* thought of that, yes," said Miss Marple slowly.

"And Giles simply loves detective stories," said Gwenda.

"Well, I mean, it *is* a detective story. Body in the hall of a beautiful strangled woman. Nothing known of her but her Christian name. Of course I know it's nearly twenty years ago. There can't be any clues after all this time, but one can at least cast about, and try to pick up some of the threads. Oh! I dare say one won't succeed in solving the riddle—"

"I think you might," said Miss Marple. "Even after eighteen years. Yes, I think you might."

"But at any rate it won't do any harm to have a real good try?"

Giles paused, his face beaming.

Miss Marple moved uneasily, her face was grave—almost troubled.

"But it might do a great deal of harm," she said. "I would advise you both—oh yes, I really would advise it very strongly—to leave the whole thing alone."

"Leave it alone? Our very own murder mystery—if it *was* murder!"

"It was murder, I think. And that's just why I should leave it alone. Murder isn't—it really isn't—a thing to tamper with lightheartedly."

Giles said: "But, Miss Marple, if everybody felt like that—"

She interrupted him.

"Oh, I know. There are times when it is one's *duty*—an innocent person accused—suspicion resting on various other people—a dangerous criminal at large who may strike again. But you must realize that this murder is very much in the *past*. Presumably it wasn't known for murder—if so, you would have heard fast enough from your old gardener or someone down there—a murder, however long ago, is always news. No, the body must have been disposed of

somehow, and the whole thing never suspected. Are you sure—are you really sure, that you are wise to dig it all up again?”

“Miss Marple,” cried Gwenda, “you sound really concerned?”

“I am, my dear. You are two very nice and charming young people (if you will allow me to say so). You are newly married and happy together. Don’t, I beg of you, start to uncover things that may—well, that may—how shall I put it?—that may *upset* and *distress* you.”

Gwenda stared at her. “You’re thinking of something special—of something—what is it you’re hinting at?”

“Not hinting, dear. Just advising you (because I’ve lived a long time and know how very upsetting human nature can be) to let well alone. That’s *my* advice: *let well alone*.”

“But it isn’t letting well alone.” Giles’s voice held a different note, a sterner note. “Hillside is our house, Gwenda’s and mine, and someone was murdered in that house, or so we believe. I’m not going to stand for murder in my house and do nothing about it, even if it *is* eighteen years ago!”

Miss Marple sighed. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I imagine that most young men of spirit would feel like that. I even sympathize and almost admire you for it. But I wish—oh, I do wish—that you wouldn’t do it.”

II

On the following day, news went round the village of St. Mary Mead that Miss Marple was at home again. She was seen in the High Street at eleven o’clock. She called at the Vicarage at ten minutes to twelve. That afternoon three of the gossiping ladies of the village called upon her and obtained her impressions of the gay Metropolis and, this tribute to politeness over, themselves plunged into details of an approaching battle over the fancywork stall at the Fête and the position of the tea tent.

Later that evening Miss Marple could be seen as usual in her garden, but for once her activities were more concentrated on the

depredations of weeds than on the activities of her neighbours. She was *distraite* at her frugal evening meal, and hardly appeared to listen to her little maid Evelyn's spirited account of the goings-on of the local chemist. The next day she was still *distraite*, and one or two people, including the Vicar's wife, remarked upon it. That evening Miss Marple said that she did not feel very well and took to her bed. The following morning she sent for Dr. Haydock.

Dr. Haydock had been Miss Marple's physician, friend and ally for many years. He listened to her account of her symptoms, gave her an examination, then sat back in his chair and waggled his stethoscope at her.

"For a woman of your age," he said, "and in spite of that misleading frail appearance, you're in remarkably good fettle."

"I'm sure my general health is sound," said Miss Marple. "But I confess I do feel a little overtired—a little run-down."

"You've been gallivanting about. Late nights in London."

"That, of course. I do find London a little tiring nowadays. And the air—so used up. Not like fresh seaside air."

"The air of St. Mary Mead is nice and fresh."

"But often damp and rather muggy. Not, you know, exactly *bracing*."

Dr. Haydock eyed her with a dawning of interest.

"I'll send you round a tonic," he said obligingly.

"Thank you, Doctor. Easton's syrup is always very helpful."

"There's no need for you to do my prescribing for me, woman."

"I wondered if, perhaps, a change of air—?"

Miss Marple looked questioningly at him with guileless blue eyes.

"You've just been away for three weeks."

"I know. But to London which, as you say, is enervating. And then up North—a manufacturing district. Not like bracing sea air."

Dr. Haydock packed up his bag. Then he turned round, grinning.

"Let's hear why you sent for me," he said. "Just tell me what it's to be and I'll repeat it after you. You want my professional opinion that what you need is sea air—"

"I knew you'd understand," said Miss Marple gratefully.

"Excellent thing, sea air. You'd better go to Eastbourne right away, or your health may suffer seriously."

"Eastbourne, I think, is rather cold. The downs, you know."

"Bournemouth, then, or the Isle of Wight."

Miss Marple twinkled at him.

"I always think a small place is much pleasanter."

Dr. Haydock sat down again.

"My curiosity is roused. What small seaside town are you suggesting?"

"Well, I *had* thought of Dillmouth."

"Pretty little place. Rather dull. Why Dillmouth?"

For a moment or two Miss Marple was silent. The worried look had returned to her eyes. She said: "Supposing that one day, by accident, you turned up a fact that seemed to indicate that many years ago—nineteen or twenty—a murder had occurred. That fact was known to you alone, nothing of the kind had ever been suspected or reported. What would you do about it?"

"Murder in retrospect in fact?"

"Just exactly that."

Haydock reflected for a moment.

"There had been no miscarriage of justice? Nobody had suffered as a result of this crime?"

"As far as one can see, no."

"Hm. Murder in retrospect. Sleeping murder. Well, I'll tell you. I'd let sleeping murder lie—that's what I'd do. Messing about with murder is dangerous. It could be *very* dangerous."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"People say a murderer always repeats his crimes. That's not true. There's a type who commits a crime, manages to get away with it, and is darned careful never to stick his neck out again. I won't say they live happily ever after—I don't believe that's true—there are many kinds of retribution. But outwardly at least all goes well. Perhaps that was so in the case of Madeleine Smith or again in the case of Lizzie Borden. It was not proven in the case of Madeleine Smith and Lizzie was acquitted—but many people believe both of those women were guilty. I could name you others. They never

repeated their crimes—one crime gave them what they wanted and they were content. But suppose some danger had menaced them? I take it your killer, whoever he or she is, was one of that kind. He committed a crime and got away with it and nobody suspected. But supposing somebody goes poking about, digging into things, turning up stones and exploring avenues and finally, perhaps, hitting the target? What's your killer going to do about it? Just stay there smiling while the hunt comes nearer and nearer? No, if there's no principle involved, I'd say let it alone." He repeated his former phrase: "Let sleeping murder lie."

He added firmly: "And those are my orders to *you*. *Let the whole thing alone.*"

"But it's not I who am involved. It's two very delightful children. Let me tell you!"

She told him the story and Haydock listened.

"Extraordinary," he said when she had finished. "Extraordinary coincidence. Extraordinary business altogether. I suppose you see what the implications are?"

"Oh, of course. But I don't think it's occurred to *them* yet."

"It will mean a good deal of unhappiness and they'll wish they'd never meddled with the thing. Skeletons should be kept in their cupboards. Still, you know, I can quite see young Giles's point of view. Dash it all, I couldn't leave the thing alone myself. Even now, I'm curious...."

He broke off and directed a stern glance at Miss Marple.

"So that's what you're doing with your excuses to get to Dillmouth. Mixing yourself up in something that's no concern of yours."

"Not at all, Dr. Haydock. But I'm worried about those two. They're very young and inexperienced and much too trusting and credulous. I feel I ought to be there to look after them."

"So that's why you're going. To look after them! Can't you *ever* leave murder alone, woman? Even murder in retrospect?"

Miss Marple gave a small prim smile.

"But you do think, don't you, that a few weeks at Dillmouth would be beneficial to my health?"

"More likely to be the end of you," said Dr. Haydock. "But you won't listen to me!"

III

On her way to call upon her friends, Colonel and Mrs. Bantry, Miss Marple met Colonel Bantry coming along the drive, his gun in his hand and his spaniel at his heels. He welcomed her cordially.

"Glad to see you back again. How's London?"

Miss Marple said that London was very well. Her nephew had taken her to several plays.

"Highbrow ones, I bet. Only care for a musical comedy myself."

Miss Marple said that she had been to a Russian play that was very interesting, though perhaps a little too long.

"Russians!" said Colonel Bantry explosively. He had once been given a novel by Dostoievsky to read in a nursing home.

He added that Miss Marple would find Dolly in the garden.

Mrs. Bantry was almost always to be found in the garden. Gardening was her passion. Her favourite literature was bulb catalogues and her conversation dealt with primulas, bulbs, flowering shrubs and alpine novelties. Miss Marple's first view of her was a substantial posterior clad in faded tweed.

At the sound of approaching steps, Mrs. Bantry reassumed an erect position with a few creaks and winces, her hobby had made her rheumatically, wiped her hot brow with an earth-stained hand and welcomed her friend.

"Heard you were back, Jane," she said. "Aren't my new delphiniums doing well? Have you seen these new little gentians? I've had a bit of trouble with them, but I think they're all set now. What we need is rain. It's been terribly dry." She added, "Esther told me you were ill in bed." Esther was Mrs. Bantry's cook and liaison officer with the village. "I'm glad to see it's not true."

"Just a little overtired," said Miss Marple. "Dr. Haydock thinks I need some sea air. I'm rather run-down."

"Oh, but you couldn't go away *now*," said Mrs. Bantry. "This is absolutely the best time of the year in the garden. Your border must be just coming into flower."

"Dr. Haydock thinks it would be advisable."

"Well, Haydock's not such a fool as some doctors," admitted Mrs. Bantry grudgingly.

"I was wondering, Dolly, about that cook of yours."

"Which cook? Do you want a cook? You don't mean that woman who drank, do you?"

"No, no, no. I mean the one who made such delicious pastry. With a husband who was the butler."

"Oh, you mean the Mock Turtle," said Mrs. Bantry with immediate recognition. "Woman with a deep mournful voice who always sounded as though she was going to burst into tears. She *was* a good cook. Husband was a fat, rather lazy man. Arthur always said he watered the whisky. I don't know. Pity there's always one of a couple that's unsatisfactory. They got left a legacy by some former employer and they went off and opened a boardinghouse on the south coast."

"That's just what I thought. Wasn't it at Dillmouth?"

"That's right. 14 Sea Parade, Dillmouth."

"I was thinking that as Dr. Haydock has suggested the seaside I might go to—was their name Saunders?"

"Yes. That's an excellent idea, Jane. You couldn't do better. Mrs. Saunders will look after you well, and as it's out of the season they'll be glad to get you and won't charge very much. With good cooking and sea air you'll soon pick up."

"Thank you, Dolly," said Miss Marple, "I expect I shall."

Six

EXERCISE IN DETECTION

I

"Where do you think the body was? About here?" asked Giles.

He and Gwenda were standing in the front hall of Hillside. They had arrived back the night before, and Giles was now in full cry. He was as pleased as a small boy with his new toy.

"Just about," said Gwenda. She retreated up the stairs and peered down critically. "Yes—I think that's about it."

"Crouch down," said Giles. "You're only about three years old, you know."

Gwenda crouched obligingly.

"You couldn't actually see the man who said the words?"

"I can't remember seeing him. He must have been just a bit further back—yes, there. I could only see his paws."

"*Paws.*" Giles frowned.

"They *were* paws. Grey paws—not human."

"But look here, Gwenda. This isn't a kind of Murder in the Rue Morgue. A man doesn't have paws."

"Well, *he* had paws."

Giles looked doubtfully at her.

"You must have imagined that bit afterwards."

Gwenda said slowly, "Don't you think I may have imagined the whole thing? You know, Giles, I've been thinking. It seems to me far more probable that the whole thing was a *dream*. It might have been. It was the sort of dream a child might have, and be terribly frightened, and go on remembering about. Don't you think really that's the proper explanation? Because nobody in Dillmouth seems to have the faintest idea that there was ever a murder, or a sudden death, or a disappearance or *anything* odd about this house."

Giles looked like a different kind of little boy—a little boy who has had his nice new toy taken away from him.

"I suppose it might have been a nightmare," he admitted grudgingly. Then his face cleared suddenly.

"No," he said. "I don't believe it. You could have dreamt about monkeys' paws and someone dead—but I'm damned if you could have dreamt that quotation from *The Duchess of Malfi*."

"I could have heard someone say it and then dreamt about it afterwards."

"I don't think any child could do that. Not unless you heard it in conditions of great stress—and if that was the case we're back again where we were—hold on, I've got it. It was the *paws* you dreamt. You saw the body and heard the words and you were scared stiff and then you had a nightmare about it, and there were waving monkeys' paws too—probably you were frightened of monkeys."

Gwenda looked slightly dubious—she said slowly: "I suppose that *might* be it..."

"I wish you could remember a bit more ... Come down here in the hall. Shut your eyes. Think ... Doesn't anything more come back to you?"

"No, it doesn't, Giles ... The more I think, the further it all goes away ... I mean, I'm beginning to doubt now if I ever really saw anything at all. Perhaps the other night I just had a brainstorm in the theatre."

"No. There *was* something. Miss Marple thinks so, too. What about 'Helen'? Surely you must remember *something* about Helen?"

"I don't remember anything at all. It's just a *name*."

"It mightn't even be the right name."

"Yes, it was. It *was* Helen."

Gwenda looked obstinate and convinced.

"Then if you're so sure it was Helen, you must know something about her," said Giles reasonably. "Did you know her well? Was she living here? Or just staying here?"

"I tell you I don't *know*," Gwenda was beginning to look strained and nervy.

Giles tried another tack.

"Who else can you remember? Your father?"

"No. I mean, I can't tell. There was always his photograph, you see. Aunt Alison used to say: 'That's your Daddy.' I don't remember him *here*, in this house...."

"And no servants—nurses—anything like that?"

"No—no. The more I try to remember, the more it's all a blank. The things I know are all underneath—like walking to that door automatically. I didn't *remember* a door there. Perhaps if you wouldn't worry me so much, Giles, things would come back more. Anyway, trying to find out about it all is hopeless. It's so long ago."

"Of course it's not hopeless—even old Miss Marple admitted that."

"She didn't help us with any ideas of how to set about it," said Gwenda. "And yet I feel, from the glint in her eye, that she had a few. I wonder how *she* would have gone about it."

"I don't suppose she would be likely to think of ways that we wouldn't," said Giles positively. "We must stop speculating, Gwenda, and set about things in a systematic way. We've made a beginning—I've looked through the Parish registers of deaths. There's no 'Helen' of the right age amongst them. In fact there doesn't seem to be a Helen at all in the period I covered—Ellen Pugg, ninety-four, was the nearest. Now we must think of the next profitable approach. If your father, and presumably your stepmother, lived in this house, they must either have bought it or rented it."

"According to Foster, the gardener, some people called Elworthy had it before the Hengraves and before them Mrs. Findeyson. Nobody else."

"Your father might have bought it and lived in it for a very short time—and then sold it again. But I think that it's much more likely

that he rented it—probably rented it furnished. If so, our best bet is to go round the house agents.”

Going round the house agents was not a prolonged labour. There were only two house agents in Dillmouth. Messrs. Wilkinson were a comparatively new arrival. They had only opened their premises eleven years ago. They dealt mostly with the small bungalows and new houses at the far end of the town. The other agents, Messrs. Galbraith and Penderley, were the ones from whom Gwenda had bought the house. Calling upon them, Giles plunged into his story. He and his wife were delighted with Hillside and with Dillmouth generally. Mrs. Reed had only just discovered that she had actually lived in Dillmouth as a small child. She had some very faint memories of the place, and had an idea that Hillside was actually the house in which she had lived but could not be quite certain about it. Had they any record of the house being let to a Major Halliday? It would be about eighteen or nineteen years ago....

Mr. Penderley stretched out apologetic hands.

“I’m afraid it’s not possible to tell you, Mr. Reed. Our records do not go back that far—not, that is, of furnished or short-period lets. Very sorry I can’t help you, Mr. Reed. As a matter of fact if our old head clerk, Mr. Narracott, had still been alive—he died last winter—he might have been able to assist you. A most remarkable memory, really quite remarkable. He had been with the firm for nearly thirty years.”

“There’s no one else who would possibly remember?”

“Our staff is all on the comparatively young side. Of course there is old Mr. Galbraith himself. He retired some years ago.”

“Perhaps I could ask him?” said Gwenda.

“Well, I hardly know about that ...” Mr. Penderley was dubious. “He had a stroke last year. His faculties are sadly impaired. He’s over eighty, you know.”

“Does he live in Dillmouth?”

“Oh yes. At Calcutta Lodge. A very nice little property on the Seaton road. But I really don’t think—”

II

"It's rather a forlorn hope," said Giles to Gwenda. "But you never know. I don't think we'll write. We'll go there together and exert our personality."

Calcutta Lodge was surrounded by a neat trim garden, and the sitting room into which they were shown was also neat if slightly overcrowded. It smelt of beeswax and Ronuk. Its brasses shone. Its windows were heavily festooned.

A thin middle-aged woman with suspicious eyes came into the room.

Giles explained himself quickly, and the expression of one who expects to have a vacuum cleaner pushed at her left Miss Galbraith's face.

"I'm sorry, but I really don't think I can help you," she said. "It's so long ago, isn't it?"

"One does sometimes remember things," said Gwenda.

"Of course I shouldn't know anything myself. I never had any connection with the business. A Major Halliday, you said? No, I never remember coming across anyone in Dillmouth of that name."

"Your father might remember, perhaps," said Gwenda.

"Father?" Miss Galbraith shook her head. "He doesn't take much notice nowadays, and his memory's very shaky."

Gwenda's eyes were resting thoughtfully on a Benares brass table and they shifted to a procession of ebony elephants marching along the mantelpiece.

"I thought he might remember, perhaps," she said, "because my father had just come from India. Your house is called Calcutta Lodge?"

She paused interrogatively.

"Yes," said Miss Galbraith. "Father was out in Calcutta for a time. In business there. Then the war came and in 1920 he came into the firm here, but would have liked to go back, he always says. But my mother didn't fancy foreign parts—and of course you can't say the climate's really healthy. Well, I don't know—perhaps you'd like to see my father. I don't know that it's one of his good days—"

She led them into a small black study. Here, propped up in a big shabby leather chair sat an old gentleman with a white walrus moustache. His face was pulled slightly sideways. He eyed Gwenda with distinct approval as his daughter made the introductions.

"Memory's not what it used to be," he said in a rather indistinct voice. "Halliday, you say? No, I don't remember the name. Knew a boy at school in Yorkshire—but that's seventy-odd years ago."

"He rented Hillside, we think," said Giles.

"Hillside? Was it called Hillside then?" Mr. Galbraith's one movable eyelid snapped shut and open. "Findeyson lived there. Fine woman."

"My father might have rented it furnished ... He'd just come from India."

"India? India, d'you say? Remember a fellow—Army man. Knew that old rascal Mohammed Hassan who cheated me over some carpets. Had a young wife—and a baby—little girl."

"That was me," said Gwenda firmly.

"In—deed—you don't say so! Well, well, time flies. Now what *was* his name? Wanted a place furnished—yes—Mrs. Findeyson had been ordered to Egypt or some such place for the winter—all tomfoolery. Now what was his name?"

"Halliday," said Gwenda.

"That's right, my dear—Halliday. Major Halliday. Nice fellow. Very pretty wife—quite young—fair-haired, wanted to be near her people or something like that. Yes, very pretty."

"Who were her people?"

"No idea at all. No idea. You don't look like her."

Gwenda nearly said, "She was only my stepmother," but refrained from complicating the issue. She said, "What did she look like?"

Unexpectedly Mr. Galbraith replied: "Looked worried. That's what she looked, worried. Yes, very nice fellow, that Major chap. Interested to hear I'd been out in Calcutta. Not like these chaps that have never been out of England. Narrow—that's what they are. Now *I've* seen the world. What was his name, that Army chap—wanted a furnished house?"

He was like a very old gramophone, repeating a worn record.

"St. Catherine's. That's it. Took St. Catherine's—six guineas a week—while Mrs. Findeyson was in Egypt. Died there, poor soul. House was put up for auction—who bought it now? Elworthys—that's it—pack of women—sisters. Changed the name—said St. Catherine's was Popish. Very down on anything Popish—Used to send out tracts. Plain women, all of 'em—took an interest in niggers—Sent 'em out trousers and bibles. Very strong on converting the heathen."

He sighed suddenly and leant back.

"Long time ago," he said fretfully. "Can't remember names. Chap from India—nice chap ... I'm tired, Gladys. I'd like my tea."

Giles and Gwenda thanked him, thanked his daughter, and came away.

"So that's proved," said Gwenda. "My father and I were at Hillside. What do we do next?"

"I've been an idiot," said Giles. "Somerset House."

"What's Somerset House?" asked Gwenda.

"It's a record office where you can look up marriages. I'm going there to look up your father's marriage. According to your aunt, your father was married to his second wife immediately on arriving in England. Don't you see, Gwenda—it ought to have occurred to us before—it's perfectly possible that 'Helen' may have been a relation of your stepmother's—a young sister, perhaps. Anyway, once we know what her surname was, we may be able to get on to someone who knows about the general setup at Hillside. Remember the old boy said they wanted a house in Dillmouth to be near Mrs. Halliday's people. If her people live near here we may get something."

"Giles," said Gwenda. "I think you're wonderful."

III

Giles did not, after all, find it necessary to go to London. Though his energetic nature always made him prone to rush hither and thither and try to do everything himself, he admitted that a purely routine enquiry could be delegated.

He put through a trunk call to his office.

"Got it," he exclaimed enthusiastically, when the expected reply arrived.

From the covering letter he extracted a certified copy of a marriage certificate.

"Here we are, Gwenda. Friday, Aug. 7th Kensington Registry Office. Kelvin James Halliday to Helen Spenlove Kennedy."

Gwenda cried out sharply!

"Helen?"

They looked at each other.

Giles said slowly: "But—but—it can't be *her*. I mean—they separated, and she married again—and went away."

"We don't know," said Gwenda, "that she went away..."

She looked again at the plainly written name:

Helen Spenlove Kennedy.

Helen....

Seven

DR. KENNEDY

I

A few days later Gwenda, walking along the Esplanade in a sharp wind, stopped suddenly beside one of the glass shelters which a thoughtful Corporation had provided for the use of its visitors.

"Miss Marple?" she exclaimed in lively surprise.

For indeed Miss Marple it was, nicely wrapped up in a thick fleecy coat and well wound round with scarves.

"Quite a surprise to you, I'm sure, to find me here," said Miss Marple briskly. "But my doctor ordered me away to the seaside for a little change, and your description of Dillmouth sounded so attractive that I decided to come here—especially as the cook and butler of a friend of mine take in boarders."

"But why didn't you come and see us?" demanded Gwenda.

"Old people can be rather a nuisance, my dear. Newly married young couples should be left to themselves." She smiled at Gwenda's protest. "I'm sure you'd have made me very welcome. And how are you both? And are you progressing with your mystery?"

"We're hot on the trail," Gwenda said, sitting beside her.

She detailed their various investigations up to date.

"And now," she ended, "we've put an advertisement in lots of papers—local ones and *The Times* and the other big dailies. We've

just said will anyone with any knowledge of Helen Spenlove Halliday, née Kennedy, communicate etc. I should think, don't you, that we're bound to get *some* answers."

"I should think so, my dear—yes, I should think so."

Miss Marple's tone was placid as ever, but her eyes looked troubled. They flashed a quick appraising glance at the girl sitting beside her. That tone of determined heartiness did not ring quite true. Gwenda, Miss Marple thought, looked worried. What Dr. Haydock had called "the implications" were, perhaps, beginning to occur to her. Yes, but now it was too late to go back....

Miss Marple said gently and apologetically, "I have really become most interested in all this. My life, you know, has so *few* excitements. I hope you won't think me *very* inquisitive if I ask you to let me know how you progress?"

"Of course we'll let you know," said Gwenda warmly. "You shall be in on everything. Why, but for you, I should be urging doctors to shut me up in a loony bin. Tell me your address here, and then you must come and have a drink—I mean, have tea with us, and see the house. You've got to see the scene of the crime, haven't you?"

She laughed, but there was a slightly nervy edge to her laugh.

When she had gone on her way Miss Marple shook her head very gently and frowned.

II

Giles and Gwenda scanned the mail eagerly every day, but at first their hopes were disappointed. All they got was two letters from private enquiry agents who pronounced themselves willing and skilled to undertake investigations on their behalf.

"Time enough for them later," said Giles. "And if we do have to employ some agency, it will be a thoroughly first-class firm, not one that touts through the mail. But I don't really see what they could do that we aren't doing."

His optimism (or self-esteem) was justified a few days later. A letter arrived, written in one of those clear and yet somewhat

illegible handwritings that stamp the professional man.

*Galls Hill
Woodleigh Bolton.*

Dear Sir,

In answer to your advertisement in The Times, Helen Spenlove Kennedy is my sister. I have lost touch with her for many years and should be glad to have news of her.

*Yours faithfully,
James Kennedy, MD*

"Woodleigh Bolton," said Giles. "That's not too far away. Woodleigh Camp is where they go for picnics. Up on the moorland. About thirty miles from here. We'll write and ask Dr. Kennedy if we may come and see him, or if he would prefer to come to us."

A reply was received that Dr. Kennedy would be prepared to receive them on the following Wednesday; and on that day they set off.

Woodleigh Bolton was a straggling village set along the side of a hill. Galls Hill was the highest house just at the top of the rise, with a view over Woodleigh Camp and the moors towards the sea.

"Rather a bleak spot," said Gwenda shivering.

The house itself was bleak and obviously Dr. Kennedy scorned such modern innovations as central heating. The woman who opened the door was dark and rather forbidding. She led them across the rather bare hall, and into a study where Dr. Kennedy rose to receive them. It was a long, rather high room, lined with well-filled bookshelves.

Dr. Kennedy was a grey-haired elderly man with shrewd eyes under tufted brows. His gaze went sharply from one to the other of them.

"Mr. and Mrs. Reed? Sit here, Mrs. Reed, it's probably the most comfortable chair. Now, what's all this about?"

Giles went fluently into their prearranged story.

He and his wife had been recently married in New Zealand. They had come to England, where his wife had lived for a short time as a child, and she was trying to trace old family friends and connections.

Dr. Kennedy remained stiff and unbending. He was polite but obviously irritated by Colonial insistence on sentimental family ties.

"And you think my sister—my half-sister—and possibly myself—are connections of yours?" he asked Gwenda, civilly, but with slight hostility.

"She was my stepmother," said Gwenda. "My father's second wife. I can't really remember her properly, of course. I was so small. My maiden name was Halliday."

He stared at her—and then suddenly a smile illuminated his face. He became a different person, no longer aloof.

"Good Lord," he said. "Don't tell me that you're Gwennie!"

Gwenda nodded eagerly. The pet name, long forgotten, sounded in her ears with reassuring familiarity.

"Yes," she said. "I'm Gwennie."

"God bless my soul. Grown-up and married. How time flies! It must be—what—fifteen years—no, of course, much longer than that. You don't remember me, I suppose?"

Gwenda shook her head.

"I don't even remember my father. I mean, it's all a vague kind of blur."

"Of course—Halliday's first wife came from New Zealand—I remember his telling me so. A fine country, I should think."

"It's the loveliest country in the world—but I'm quite fond of England, too."

"On a visit—or settling down here?" He rang the bell. "We must have tea."

When the tall woman came, he said, "Tea, please—and—er—hot buttered toast, or—or cake, or something."

The respectable housekeeper looked venomous, but said, "Yes, sir," and went out.

"I don't usually go in for tea," said Dr. Kennedy vaguely. "But we must celebrate."

"It's very nice of you," said Gwenda. "No, we're not on a visit. We've bought a house." She paused and added, "Hillside."

Dr. Kennedy said vaguely, "Oh yes. In Dillmouth. You wrote from there."

"It's the most extraordinary coincidence," said Gwenda. "Isn't it, Giles?"

"I should say so," said Giles. "Really quite staggering."

"It was for sale, you see," said Gwenda, and added in face of Dr. Kennedy's apparent non-comprehension, "It's the same house where we used to live long ago."

Dr. Kennedy frowned. "Hillside? But surely—Oh yes, I did hear they'd changed the name. Used to be St. Something or other—if I'm thinking of the right house—on the Leahampton road, coming down into the town, on the right-hand side?"

"Yes."

"That's the one. Funny how names go out of your head. Wait a minute. St. Catherine's—that's what it used to be called."

"And I did live there, didn't I?" Gwenda said.

"Yes, of course you did." He stared at her, amused. "Why did you want to come back there? You can't remember much about it, surely?"

"No. But somehow—it felt like home."

"It felt like home," the doctor repeated. There was no expression in the words, but Giles wondered what he was thinking about.

"So you see," said Gwenda, "I hoped you'd tell me about it all—about my father and Helen and—" she ended lamely—"and everything...."

He looked at her reflectively.

"I suppose they didn't know very much—out in New Zealand. Why should they? Well, there isn't much to tell. Helen—my sister—was coming back from India on the same boat with your father. He was a widower with a small daughter. Helen was sorry for him or fell in love with him. He was lonely, or fell in love with her. Difficult to know just the way things happen. They were married in London on arrival, and came down to Dillmouth to me. I was in practice there,

then. Kelvin Halliday seemed a nice chap, rather nervy and run-down—but they seemed happy enough together—then.”

He was silent for a moment before he said, “However, in less than a year, she ran away with someone else. You probably know that?”

“Who did she run away with?” asked Gwenda.

He bent his shrewd eyes upon her.

“She didn’t tell me,” he said. “I wasn’t in her confidence. I’d seen—couldn’t help seeing—that there was friction between her and Kelvin. I didn’t know why. I was always a strait-laced sort of fellow—a believer in marital fidelity. Helen wouldn’t have wanted me to know what was going on. I’d heard rumours—one does—but there was no mention of any particular name. They often had guests staying with them who came from London, or from other parts of England. I imagined it was one of them.”

“There wasn’t a divorce, then?”

“Helen didn’t want a divorce. Kelvin told me that. That’s why I imagined, perhaps wrongly, that it was a case of some married man. Someone whose wife was an RC perhaps.”

“And my father?”

“He didn’t want a divorce, either.”

Dr. Kennedy spoke rather shortly.

“Tell me about my father,” said Gwenda. “Why did he decide suddenly to send me out to New Zealand?”

Kennedy paused a moment before saying, “I gather your people out there had been pressing him. After the breakup of his second marriage, he probably thought it was the best thing.”

“Why didn’t he take me out there himself?”

Dr. Kennedy looked along the mantelpiece searching vaguely for a pipe cleaner.

“Oh, I don’t know ... He was in rather poor health.”

“What was the matter with him? What did he die of?”

The door opened and the scornful housekeeper appeared with a laden tray.

There was buttered toast and some jam, but no cake. With a vague gesture Dr. Kennedy motioned Gwenda to pour out. She did so. When the cups were filled and handed round and Gwenda had

taken a piece of toast, Dr. Kennedy said with rather forced cheerfulness: "Tell me what you've done to the house? I don't suppose I'd recognize it now—after you two have finished with it."

"We're having a little fun with bathrooms," admitted Giles.

Gwenda, her eyes on the doctor, said: "What did my father die of?"

"I couldn't really tell, my dear. As I say, he was in rather poor health for a while, and he finally went into a Sanatorium—somewhere on the east coast. He died about two years later."

"Where was this Sanatorium exactly?"

"I'm sorry. I can't remember now. As I say, I have an impression it was on the east coast."

There was definite evasion now in his manner. Giles and Gwenda looked at each other for a brief second.

Giles said, "At least, sir, you can tell us where he's buried? Gwenda is—naturally—very anxious to visit his grave."

Dr. Kennedy bent over the fireplace, scraping in the bowl of his pipe with a penknife.

"Do you know," he said, rather indistinctly, "I don't really think I should dwell too much on the past. All this ancestor worship—it's a mistake. The future is what matters. Here you are, you two, young and healthy with the world in front of you. Think forward. No use going about putting flowers on the grave of someone whom, for all practical purposes, you hardly knew."

Gwenda said mutinously: "I should like to see my father's grave."

"I'm afraid I can't help you." Dr. Kennedy's tones were pleasant but cold. "It's a long time ago, and my memory isn't what it was. I lost touch with your father after he left Dillmouth. I think he wrote to me once from the Sanatorium and, as I say, I have an impression it was on the east coast—but I couldn't really be sure even of that. And I've no idea at all of where he is buried."

"How very odd," said Giles.

"Not really. The link between us, you see, was Helen. I was always very fond of Helen. She's my half sister and very many years younger than I am, but I tried to bring her up as well as I could. The right schools and all that. But there's no gainsaying that Helen—well,

that she never had a stable character. There was trouble when she was quite young with a very undesirable young man. I got her out of that safely. Then she elected to go out to India and marry Walter Fane. Well, that was all right, nice lad, son of Dillmouth's leading solicitor, but frankly, dull as ditchwater. He'd always adored her, but she never looked at him. Still, she changed her mind and went out to India to marry him. When she saw him again, it was all off. She wired to me for money for her passage home. I sent it. On the way back, she met Kelvin. They were married before I knew about it. I've felt, shall we say, apologetic for that sister of mine. It explains why Kelvin and I didn't keep up the relationship after she went away." He added suddenly: "Where's Helen now? Can you tell me? I'd like to get in touch with her."

"But we don't know," said Gwenda. "We don't know at all."

"Oh! I thought from your advertisement—" He looked at them with sudden curiosity. "Tell me, why did you advertise?"

Gwenda said: "We wanted to get in touch—" and stopped.

"With someone you can hardly remember?" Dr. Kennedy looked puzzled.

Gwenda said quickly: "I thought—if I could get in touch with her—she'd tell me—about my father."

"Yes—yes—I see. Sorry I can't be of much use. Memory not what it was. And it's a long time ago."

"At least," said Giles, "you know what kind of a Sanatorium it was? Tubercular?"

Dr. Kennedy's face again looked suddenly wooden: "Yes—yes, I rather believe it was."

"Then we ought to be able to trace that *quite* easily," said Giles. "Thank you very much, sir, for all you've told us."

He got up and Gwenda followed suit.

"Thank you very much," she said. "And do come and see us at Hillside."

They went out of the room and Gwenda, glancing back over her shoulder, had a final view of Dr. Kennedy standing by the mantelpiece, pulling his grizzled moustache and looking troubled.

"He knows something he won't tell us," said Gwenda, as they got into the car. "There's *something*—oh, Giles! I wish—I wish now that we'd never started...."

They looked at each other, and in each mind, unacknowledged to the other, the same fear sprang.

"Miss Marple was right," said Gwenda. "We should have left the past alone."

"We needn't go any further," said Giles uncertainly. "I think perhaps, Gwenda darling, we'd better not."

Gwenda shook her head.

"No, Giles, we can't stop now. We should always be wondering and imagining. No, we've got to go on ... Dr. Kennedy wouldn't tell us because he wanted to be kind—but that sort of business is no good. We'll have to go on and find out what really happened. Even if—even if—it was my father who ..." But she couldn't go on.

Eight

KELVIN HALLIDAY'S DELUSION

They were in the garden on the following morning when Mrs. Cocker came out and said: "Excuse me, sir. There's a Doctor Kennedy on the telephone."

Leaving Gwenda in consultation with old Foster, Giles went into the house and picked up the telephone receiver.

"Giles Reed here."

"This is Dr. Kennedy. I've been thinking over our conversation yesterday, Mr. Reed. There are certain facts which I think perhaps you and your wife ought to know. Will you be at home if I come over this afternoon?"

"Certainly we shall. What time?"

"Three o'clock?"

"Suits us."

In the garden old Foster said to Gwenda, "Is that Dr. Kennedy as used to live over at West Cliff?"

"I expect so. Did you know him?"

"E was allus reckoned to be the best doctor here—not but what Dr. Lazenby wasn't more popular. Always had a word and a laugh to jolly you along, Dr. Lazenby did. Dr. Kennedy was always short and a bit dry, like—but he knew his job."

"When did he give up his practice?"

"Long time ago now. Must be fifteen years or so. His health broke down, so they say."

Giles came out of the window and answered Gwenda's unspoken question.

"He's coming over this afternoon."

"Oh." She turned once more to Foster. "Did you know Dr. Kennedy's sister at all?"

"Sister? Not as I remember. She was only a bit of a lass. Went away to school, and then abroad, though I heard she come back here for a bit after she married. But I believe she run off with some chap—always wild she was, they said. Don't know as I ever laid eyes on her myself. I was in a job over to Plymouth for a while, you know."

Gwenda said to Giles as they walked to the end of the terrace, "Why is he coming?"

"We'll know at three o'clock."

Dr. Kennedy arrived punctually. Looking round the drawing room he said: "Seems odd to be here again."

Then he came to the point without preamble.

"I take it that you two are quite determined to track down the Sanatorium where Kelvin Halliday died and learn all the details you can about his illness and death?"

"Definitely," said Gwenda.

"Well, you can manage that quite easily, of course. So I've come to the conclusion that it will be less shock to you to hear the facts from me. I'm sorry to have to tell you, for it won't do you or anybody else a bit of good, and it will probably cause *you*, Gwennie, a good deal of pain. But there it is. Your father wasn't suffering from tuberculosis and the Sanatorium in question was a mental home."

"A mental home? Was he out of his mind, then?"

Gwenda's face had gone very white.

"He was never certified. And in my opinion he was not insane in the general meaning of the term. He had had a very severe nervous breakdown and suffered from certain delusional obsessions. He went into the nursing home of his own will and volition and could, of

course, have left it at any time he wanted to. His condition did not improve, however, and he died there."

"Delusional obsessions?" Giles repeated the words questioningly. "What kind of delusions?"

Dr. Kennedy said drily, "He was under the impression that he had strangled his wife."

Gwenda gave a stifled cry. Giles stretched out a hand quickly and took her cold hand in his.

Giles said, "And—and had he?"

"Eh?" Dr. Kennedy stared at him. "No, of course he hadn't. No question of such a thing."

"But—but how do you know?" Gwenda's voice came uncertainly.

"My dear child! There was never any question of such a thing. Helen left him for another man. He'd been in a very unbalanced condition for some time; nervous dreams, sick fancies. The final shock sent him over the edge. I'm not a psychiatrist myself. They have their explanations for such matters. If a man would rather his wife was dead than unfaithful, he can manage to make himself believe that she is dead—even that he has killed her."

Warily, Giles and Gwenda exchanged a warning glance.

Giles said quietly, "So you are quite sure that there was no question of his having actually done what he said he had done?"

"Oh, quite sure. I had two letters from Helen. The first one from France about a week after she went away and one about six months later. Oh no, the whole thing was a delusion pure and simple."

Gwenda drew a deep breath.

"Please," she said. "Will you tell me all about it?"

"I'll tell you everything I can, my dear. To begin with, Kelvin had been in a rather peculiar neurotic state for some time. He came to me about it. Said he had had various disquieting dreams. These dreams, he said, were always the same, and they ended in the same way—with his throttling Helen. I tried to get at the root of the trouble—there must, I think, have been some conflict in early childhood. His father and mother, apparently, were not a happy couple ... Well, I won't go into all that. That's only interesting to a medical man. I actually suggested that Kelvin should consult a

psychiatrist, there are several first-class chaps—but he wouldn't hear of it—thought that kind of thing was all nonsense.

"I had an idea that he and Helen weren't getting along too well, but he never spoke about that, and I didn't like to ask questions. The whole thing came to a head when he walked into my house one evening—it was a Friday, I remember, I'd just come back from the hospital and found him waiting for me in the consulting room; he'd been there about a quarter of an hour. As soon as I came in, he looked up and said, '*I've killed Helen.*'

"For a moment I didn't know what to think. He was so cool and matter-of-fact. I said, 'You mean—you've had another dream?' He said, 'It isn't a dream this time. It's true. She's lying there strangled. I strangled her.'

"Then he said—quite coolly and reasonably: 'You'd better come back with me to the house. Then you can ring up the police from there.' I didn't know what to think. I got out the car again, and we drove along here. The house was quiet and dark. We went up to the bedroom—"

Gwenda broke in, "*The bedroom?*" Her voice held pure astonishment.

Dr. Kennedy looked faintly surprised.

"Yes, yes, that's where it all happened. Well, of course when we got up there—there was nothing at all! No dead woman lying across the bed. Nothing disturbed—the coverlets not even rumpled. The whole thing had been an hallucination."

"But what did my father say?"

"Oh, he persisted in his story, of course. He really believed it, you see. I persuaded him to let me give him a sedative and I put him to bed in the dressing room. Then I had a good look round. I found a note that Helen had left crumpled up in the wastepaper basket in the drawing room. It was quite clear. She had written something like this: 'This is Good-bye. I'm sorry—but our marriage has been a mistake from the beginning. I'm going away with the only man I've ever loved. Forgive me if you can. Helen.'

"Evidently Kelvin had come in, read her note, gone upstairs, had a kind of emotional brainstorm and had then come over to me

persuaded that he had killed Helen.

"Then I questioned the housemaid. It was her evening out and she had come in late. I took her into Helen's room and she went through Helen's clothes, etc. It was all quite clear. Helen had packed a suitcase and a bag and had taken them away with her. I searched the house, but there was no trace of anything unusual—certainly no sign of a strangled woman.

"I had a very difficult time with Kelvin in the morning, but he realized at last that it was a delusion—or at least he said he did, and he consented to go into a nursing home for treatment.

"A week later I got, as I say, a letter from Helen. It was posted from Biarritz, but she said she was going on to Spain. I was to tell Kelvin that she did not want a divorce. He had better forget her as soon as possible.

"I showed the letter to Kelvin. He said very little. He was going ahead with his plans. He wired out to his first wife's people in New Zealand asking them to take the child. He settled up his affairs and he then entered a very good private mental home and consented to have appropriate treatment. That treatment, however, did nothing to help him. He died there two years later. I can give you the address of the place. It's in Norfolk. The present Superintendent was a young doctor there at the time, and will probably be able to give you full details of your father's case."

Gwenda said: "And you got another letter from your sister—after that again?"

"Oh yes. About six months later. She wrote from Florence—gave an address poste restante as 'Miss Kennedy.' She said she realized that perhaps it was unfair to Kelvin not to have a divorce—though she herself did not want one. If he wanted a divorce and I would let her know, she would see that he had the necessary evidence. I took the letter to Kelvin. He said at once that he did not want a divorce. I wrote to her and told her so. Since then I have never heard anymore. I don't know where she is living, or indeed if she is alive or dead. That is why I was attracted by your advertisement and hoped that I should get news of her."

He added gently: "I'm very sorry about this, Gwennie. But you had to know. I only wish you could have left well alone...."

Nine

UNKNOWN FACTOR?

I

When Giles came back from seeing Dr. Kennedy off, he found Gwenda sitting where he had left her. There was a bright red patch on each of her cheeks, and her eyes looked feverish. When she spoke her voice was harsh and brittle.

"What's the old catchphrase? Death or madness either way? That's what this is—death or madness."

"Gwenda—darling." Giles went to her—put his arm round her. Her body felt hard and stiff.

"Why didn't we leave it all alone? Why didn't we? It was my own father who strangled her. And it was my own father's voice I heard saying those words. No wonder it all came back—no wonder I was so frightened. My own father."

"Wait, Gwenda—wait. We don't really know—"

"Of course we know! He told Dr. Kennedy he had strangled his wife, didn't he?"

"But Kennedy is quite positive he didn't—"

"Because he didn't find a body. But there *was* a body—and I *saw* it."

"You saw it in the hall—not the bedroom."

"What difference does that make?"

"Well, it's queer, isn't it? Why should Halliday say he strangled his wife in the bedroom if he actually strangled her in the hall?"

"Oh, I don't know. That's just a minor detail."

"I'm not so sure. Pull your socks up, darling. There are some very funny points about the whole setup. We'll take it, if you like, that your father *did* strangle Helen. In the hall. What happened next?"

"He went off to Dr. Kennedy."

"And told him he had strangled his wife in the bedroom, brought him back with him and there was no body in the hall—*or* in the bedroom. Dash it all, there can't be a murder *without* a body. What had he done with the body?"

"Perhaps there was one and Dr. Kennedy helped him and hushed it all up—only of course he couldn't tell *us* that."

Giles shook his head.

"No, Gwenda—I don't see Kennedy acting that way. He's a hardheaded, shrewd, unemotional Scotsman. You're suggesting that he'd be willing to put himself in jeopardy as an accessory after the fact. I don't believe he would. He'd do his best for Halliday by giving evidence as to his mental state—that, yes. But why should he stick his neck out to hush the whole thing up? Kelvin Halliday wasn't any relation to him, nor a close friend. It was his own sister who had been killed and he was clearly fond of her—even if he did show slight Victorian disapproval of her gay ways. It's not, even, as though *you* were his sister's child. No, Kennedy wouldn't connive at concealing murder. If he did, there's only one possible way he could have set about it, and that would be deliberately to give a death certificate that she had died of heart failure or something. I suppose he *might* have got away with that—but we know definitely that he *didn't* do that. Because there's no record of her death in the Parish registers, and if he *had* done it, he would have told us that his sister had died. So go on from there and explain, if you can, what happened to the body."

"Perhaps my father buried it somewhere—in the garden?"

"And *then* went to Kennedy and told him he'd murdered his wife? Why? Why not rely on the story that she'd 'left him'?"

Gwenda pushed back her hair from her forehead. She was less stiff and rigid now, and the patches of sharp colour were fading.

"I don't know," she admitted. "It does seem a bit screwy now you've put it that way. Do you think Dr. Kennedy was telling us the truth?"

"Oh yes—I'm pretty sure of it. From his point of view it's a perfectly reasonable story. Dreams, hallucinations—finally a major hallucination. He's got no doubt that it was a hallucination because, as we've just said, you can't have a murder without a body. That's where we're in a different position from him. We know that there was a body."

He paused and went on: "From his point of view, everything fits in. Missing clothes and suitcase, the farewell note. And later, two letters from his sister.

Gwenda stirred.

"Those letters. How do we explain those?"

"We don't—but we've got to. If we assume that Kennedy was telling us the truth (and as I say, I'm pretty sure that he was), we've got to explain those letters."

"I suppose they really were in his sister's handwriting? He recognized it?"

"You know, Gwenda, I don't believe that point would arise. It's not like a signature on a doubtful cheque. If those letters were written in a reasonably close imitation of his sister's writing, it wouldn't occur to him to doubt them. He's already got the preconceived idea that she's gone away with someone. The letters just confirmed that belief. If he had never heard from her at all—why, then he *might* have got suspicious. All the same, there are certain curious points about those letters that wouldn't strike him, perhaps, but do strike me. They're strangely anonymous. No address except a poste restante. No indication of who the man in the case was. A clearly stated determination to make a clean break with all old ties. What I mean is, they're exactly the kind of letters a *murderer* would devise if he wanted to allay any suspicions on the part of his victim's family. It's the old Crippen touch again. To get the letters posted from abroad would be easy."

"You think my father—"

"No—that's just it—I *don't*. Take a man who's deliberately decided to get rid of his wife. He spreads rumours about her possible unfaithfulness. He stages her departure—note left behind, clothes packed and taken. Letters will be received from her at carefully spaced intervals from somewhere abroad. Actually he has murdered her quietly and put her, say, under the cellar floor. That's one pattern of murder—and it's often been done. But what that type of murderer *doesn't* do is to rush to his brother-in-law and say he's murdered his wife and hadn't they better go to the police? On the other hand, if your father was the emotional type of killer, and was terribly in love with his wife and strangled her in a fit of frenzied jealousy—Othello fashion—(and that fits in with the words you heard) he certainly doesn't pack clothes and arrange for letters to come, before he rushes off to broadcast his crime to a man who isn't the type likely to hush it up. It's all wrong, Gwenda. The whole pattern is wrong."

"Then what are you trying to get at, Giles?"

"I don't know ... It's just that throughout it all, there seems to be an unknown factor—call him X. Someone who hasn't appeared as yet. But one gets glimpses of his technique."

"X?" said Gwenda wonderingly. Then her eyes darkened. "You're making that up, Giles. To comfort me."

"I swear I'm not. Don't you see yourself that you can't make a satisfactory outline to fit all the facts? We know that Helen Halliday was strangled because you saw—"

He stopped.

"Good Lord! I've been a fool. I see it now. It covers everything. You're right. And Kennedy's right, too. Listen, Gwenda. Helen's preparing to go away with a lover—who that is we don't know."

"X?"

Giles brushed her interpolation aside impatiently.

"She's written her note to her husband—but at that moment he comes in, reads what she's writing and goes haywire. He crumples up the note, slings it into the wastebasket, and goes for her. She's terrified, rushes out into the hall—he catches up with her, throttles her—she goes limp and he drops her. And then, standing a little way

from her, he quotes those words from *The Duchess of Malfi* just as the child upstairs has reached the banisters and is peering down."

"And after that?"

"The point is, *that she isn't dead*. He may have thought she was dead—but she's merely semisuffocated. Perhaps her lover comes round—after the frantic husband has started for the doctor's house on the other side of the town, or perhaps she regains consciousness by herself. Anyway, as soon as she has come to, she beats it. Beats it quickly. And that explains everything. Kelvin's belief that he has killed her. The disappearance of the clothes; packed and taken away earlier in the day. And the subsequent letters *which are perfectly genuine*. There you are—that explains everything."

Gwenda said slowly, "It doesn't explain why Kelvin said he had strangled her in the bedroom."

"He was so het up, he couldn't quite remember where it had all happened."

Gwenda said: "I'd like to believe you. I want to believe ... But I go on feeling sure—quite sure—that when I looked down she was dead—quite dead."

"But how could you possibly tell? A child of barely three."

She looked at him queerly.

"I think one can tell—better than if one was older. It's like dogs—they know death and throw back their heads and howl. I think children—know death...."

"That's nonsense—that's fantastic."

The ring of the frontdoor bell interrupted him. He said, "Who's that, I wonder?"

Gwenda looked dismayed.

"I quite forgot. It's Miss Marple. I asked her to tea today. Don't let's go saying anything about all this to her."

II

Gwenda was afraid that tea might prove a difficult meal—but Miss Marple fortunately seemed not to notice that her hostess talked a

little too fast and too feverishly, and that her gaiety was somewhat forced. Miss Marple herself was gently garrulous—she was enjoying her stay in Dillmouth so much and—wasn't it exciting?—some friends of friends of hers had written to friends of theirs in Dillmouth, and as a result she had received some very pleasant invitations from the local residents.

"One feels so much less of an outsider, if you know what I mean, my dear, if one gets to know some of the people who have been established here for years. For instance, I am going to tea with Mrs. Fane—she is the widow of the senior partner in the best firm of solicitors here. Quite an old-fashioned family firm. Her son is carrying it on now."

The gentle gossiping voice went on. Her landlady was so kind—and made her so comfortable—"and really delicious cooking. She was for some years with my old friend Mrs. Bantry—although she does not come from this part of the world herself—her aunt lived here for many years and she and her husband used to come here for holidays—so she knows a great deal of the local gossip. Do you find your gardener satisfactory, by the way? I hear that he is considered locally as rather a *scrimshanker*—more talk than work."

"Talk and tea is his speciality," said Giles. "He has about five cups of tea a day. But he works splendidly when we are looking."

"Come out and see the garden," said Gwenda.

They showed her the house and the garden, and Miss Marple made the proper comments. If Gwenda had feared her shrewd observation of something amiss, then Gwenda was wrong. For Miss Marple showed no cognizance of anything unusual.

Yet, strangely enough, it was Gwenda who acted in an unpredictable manner. She interrupted Miss Marple in the midst of a little anecdote about a child and a seashell to say breathlessly to Giles:

"I don't care—I'm going to tell her..."

Miss Marple turned her head attentively. Giles started to speak, then stopped. Finally he said, "Well, it's your funeral, Gwenda."

And so Gwenda poured it all out. Their call on Dr. Kennedy and his subsequent call on them and what he had told them.

"That was what you meant in London, wasn't it?" Gwenda asked breathlessly. "You thought, then, that—that my father might be involved?"

Miss Marple said gently, "It occurred to me as a possibility—yes. 'Helen' might very well be a young stepmother—and in a case of—er—strangling, it is so often a husband who is involved."

Miss Marple spoke as one who observes natural phenomena without surprise or emotion.

"I do see why you urged us to leave it alone," said Gwenda. "Oh, and I wish now we had. But one can't go back."

"No," said Miss Marple, "one can't go back."

"And now you'd better listen to Giles. He's been making objections and suggestions."

"All I say is," said Giles, "that it doesn't fit."

And lucidly, clearly, he went over the points as he had previously outlined them to Gwenda.

Then he particularized his final theory.

"If you'll only convince Gwenda that that's the only way it could have been."

Miss Marple's eyes went from him to Gwenda and back again.

"It is a perfectly reasonable hypothesis," she said. "But there is always, as you yourself pointed out, Mr. Reed, the possibility of X."

"X!" said Gwenda.

"The unknown factor," said Miss Marple. "Someone, shall we say, who hasn't appeared yet—but whose presence, behind the obvious facts, can be deduced."

"We're going to the Sanatorium in Norfolk where my father died," said Gwenda. "Perhaps we'll find out something there."

Ten

A CASE HISTORY

I

Saltmarsh House was set pleasantly about six miles inland from the coast. It had a good train service to London from the five-miles-distant town of South Benham.

Giles and Gwenda were shown into a large airy sitting room with cretonne covers patterned with flowers. A very charming-looking old lady with white hair came into the room holding a glass of milk. She nodded to them and sat down near the fireplace. Her eyes rested thoughtfully on Gwenda and presently she leaned forward towards her and spoke in what was almost a whisper.

"Is it your poor child, my dear?"

Gwenda looked slightly taken aback. She said doubtfully: "No—no. It isn't."

"Ah, I wondered." The old lady nodded her head and sipped her milk. Then she said conversationally, "Half past ten—that's the time. It's always at half past ten. Most remarkable." She lowered her voice and leaned forward again.

"Behind the fireplace," she breathed. "But don't say I told you."

At this moment, a white uniformed maid came into the room and requested Giles and Gwenda to follow her.

They were shown into Dr. Penrose's study, and Dr. Penrose rose to greet them.

Dr. Penrose, Gwenda could not help thinking, looked a little mad himself. He looked, for instance, much madder than the nice old lady in the drawing room—but perhaps psychiatrists always looked a little mad.

"I had your letter, and Dr. Kennedy's," said Dr. Penrose. "And I've been looking up your father's case history, Mrs. Reed. I remembered his case quite well, of course, but I wanted to refresh my memory so that I should be in a position to tell you everything you wanted to know. I understand that you have only recently become aware of the facts?"

Gwenda explained that she had been brought up in New Zealand by her mother's relations and that all she had known about her father was that he had died in a nursing home in England.

Dr. Penrose nodded. "Quite so. Your father's case, Mrs. Reed, presented certain rather peculiar features."

"Such as?" Giles asked.

"Well, the obsession—or delusion—was very strong. Major Halliday, though clearly in a very nervous state, was most emphatic and categorical in his assertion that he had strangled his second wife in a fit of jealous rage. A great many of the usual signs in these cases were absent, and I don't mind telling you frankly, Mrs. Reed, that had it not been for Dr. Kennedy's assurance that Mrs. Halliday was actually alive, I should have been prepared, at that time, to take your father's assertion at its face value."

"You formed the impression that he had actually killed her?" Giles asked.

"I said 'at that time.' Later, I had cause to revise my opinion, as Major Halliday's character and mental makeup became more familiar to me. Your father, Mrs. Reed, was most definitely *not* a paranoiac type. He had no delusions of persecution, no impulses of violence. He was a gentle, kindly, and well-controlled individual. He was neither what the world calls mad, nor was he dangerous to others. But he did have this obstinate fixation about Mrs. Halliday's death and to account for its origin I am quite convinced we have to go

back a long way—to some childish experience. But I admit that all methods of analysis failed to give us the right clue. Breaking down a patient's resistance to analysis is sometimes a very long business. It may take several years. In your father's case, the time was insufficient."

He paused, and then, looking up sharply, said: "You know, I presume, that Major Halliday committed suicide."

"Oh *no!*" cried Gwenda.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Reed. I thought you knew that. You are entitled, perhaps, to attach some blame to us on that account. I admit that proper vigilance would have prevented it. But frankly I saw no sign of Major Halliday's being a suicidal type. He showed no tendency to melancholia—no brooding or despondency. He complained of sleeplessness and my colleague allowed him a certain amount of sleeping tablets. Whilst pretending to take them, he actually kept them until he had accumulated a sufficient amount and—"

He spread out his hands.

"Was he so dreadfully unhappy?"

"No. I do not think so. It was more, I should judge, a guilt complex, a desire for a penalty to be exacted. He had insisted at first, you know, on calling in the police, and though persuaded out of that, and assured that he had actually committed no crime at all, he obstinately refused to be wholly convinced. Yet it was proved to him over and over again, and he had to admit, that he had no recollection of committing the actual act." Dr. Penrose ruffled over the papers in front of him. "His account of the evening in question never varied. He came into the house, he said, and it was dark. The servants were out. He went into the dining room, as he usually did, poured himself out a drink and drank it, then went through the connecting door into the drawing room. After that he remembered nothing—nothing at all, until he was standing in his bedroom looking down at his wife who was dead—strangled. He knew he had done it —"

Giles interrupted. "Excuse me, Dr. Penrose, but *why* did he know he had done it?"

"There was no doubt in his mind. For some months past he had found himself entertaining wild and melodramatic suspicions. He told me, for instance, that he had been convinced his wife was administering drugs to him. He had, of course, lived in India, and the practice of wives driving their husbands insane by datura poisoning often comes up there in the native courts. He had suffered fairly often from hallucinations, with confusion of time and place. He denied strenuously that he suspected his wife of infidelity, but nevertheless I think that that was the motivating power. It seems that what actually occurred was that he went into the drawing room, read the note his wife left saying she was leaving him, and that his way of eluding this fact was to prefer to 'kill' her. Hence the hallucination."

"You mean he cared for her very much?" asked Gwenda.

"Obviously, Mrs. Reed."

"And he never—recognized—that it was a hallucination?"

"He had to acknowledge that it *must* be—but his inner belief remained unshaken. The obsession was too strong to yield to reason. If we could have uncovered the underlying childish fixation —"

Gwenda interrupted. She was uninterested in childish fixations.

"But *you're* quite sure, you say, that he—that he didn't do it?"

"Oh, if that is what is worrying you, Mrs. Reed, you can put it right out of your head. Kelvin Halliday, however jealous he may have been of his wife, was emphatically not a killer."

Dr. Penrose coughed and picked up a small shabby black book.

"If you would like this, Mrs. Reed, you are the proper person to have it. It contains various jottings set down by your father during the time he was here. When we turned over his effects to his executor (actually a firm of solicitors), Dr. McGuire, who was then Superintendent, retained this as part of the case history. Your father's case, you know, appears in Dr. McGuire's book—only under initials, of course. Mr. K.H. If you would like this diary—"

Gwenda stretched out her hand eagerly.

"Thank you," she said. "I should like it very much."

II

In the train on the way back to London, Gwenda took out the shabby little black book and began to read.

She opened it at random.

Kelvin Halliday had written:

I suppose these doctor wallahs know their business ... It all sounds such poppycock. Was I in love with my mother? Did I hate my father? I don't believe a word of it ... I can't help feeling this is a simple police case—criminal court—not a crazy loonybin matter. And yet—some of these people here—so natural, so reasonable—just like everyone else—except when you suddenly come across the kink. Very well, then, it seems that I, too, have a kink....

I've written to James ... urged him to communicate with Helen ... Let her come and see me in the flesh if she's alive ... He says he doesn't know where she is ... that's because he knows that she's dead and that I killed her ... he's a good fellow, but I'm not deceived ... Helen is dead....

When did I begin to suspect her? A long time ago ... Soon after we came to Dillmouth ... Her manner changed ... She was concealing something ... I used to watch her ... Yes, and she used to watch me....

Did she give me drugs in my food? Those queer awful nightmares. Not ordinary dreams ... living nightmares ... I know it was drugs ... Only she could have done that ... Why?... There's some man ... Some man she was afraid of....

Let me be honest. I suspected, didn't I, that she had a lover? There was someone—I know there was someone—She said as much to me on the boat ... Someone she loved and couldn't marry ... It was the same for both of us ... I couldn't forget Megan ... How like Megan little Gwennie looks sometimes. Helen played with Gwennie so sweetly on the boat ... Helen ... You are so lovely, Helen....

Is Helen alive? Or did I put my hands round her throat and choke the life out of her? I went through the dining room door and I saw the note—propped up on the desk, and then—and then—all black—just blackness. But there's no doubt about it ... I killed her ... Thank God Gwennie's all right in New Zealand. They're good people. They'll love her for Megan's sake. Megan—Megan, how I wish you were here....

It's the best way ... No scandal ... The best way for the child. I can't go on. Not year after year. I must take the short way out. Gwennie will never know anything about all this. She'll never know her father was a murderer....

Tears blinded Gwenda's eyes. She looked across at Giles, sitting opposite her. But Giles's eyes were riveted on the opposite corner.

Aware of Gwenda's scrutiny, he motioned faintly with his head.

Their fellow passenger was reading an evening paper. On the outside of it, clearly presented to their view was a melodramatic caption: *Who were the men in her life?*

Slowly, Gwenda nodded her head. She looked down at the diary.

There was someone—I know there was someone....

Eleven

THE MEN IN HER LIFE

I

Miss Marple crossed Sea Parade and walked along Fore Street, turning up the hill by the Arcade. The shops here were the old-fashioned ones. A wool and art needlework shop, a confectioner, a Victorian-looking Ladies' Outfitter and Draper and others of the same kind.

Miss Marple looked in at the window of the art needlework shop. Two young assistants were engaged with customers, but an elderly woman at the back of the shop was free.

Miss Marple pushed open the door and went in. She seated herself at the counter and the assistant, a pleasant woman with grey hair, asked, "What can I do for you, madam?"

Miss Marple wanted some pale blue wool to knit a baby's jacket. The proceedings were leisurely and unhurried. Patterns were discussed, Miss Marple looked through various children's knitting books and in the course of it discussed her great-nephews and nieces. Neither she nor the assistant displayed impatience. The assistant had attended to customers such as Miss Marple for many years. She preferred these gentle, gossipy, rambling old ladies to the impatient, rather impolite young mothers who didn't know what they wanted and had an eye for the cheap and showy.

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "I think that will be very nice indeed. And I always find Storkleg so reliable. It really doesn't shrink. I think I'll take an extra two ounces."

The assistant remarked that the wind was very cold today, as she wrapped up the parcel.

"Yes, indeed, I noticed it as I was coming along the front. Dillmouth has changed a good deal. I have not been here for, let me see, nearly nineteen years."

"Indeed, madam? Then you will find a lot of changes. The Superb wasn't built then, I suppose, nor the Southview Hotel?"

"Oh no, it was quite a small place. I was staying with friends ... A house called St. Catherine's—perhaps you know it? On the Leahampton road."

But the assistant had only been in Dillmouth a matter of ten years.

Miss Marple thanked her, took the parcel, and went into the draper's next door. Here, again, she selected an elderly assistant. The conversation ran much on the same lines, to an accompaniment of summer vests. This time, the assistant responded promptly.

"That would be Mrs. Findeyson's house."

"Yes—yes. Though the friends I knew had it furnished. A Major Halliday and his wife and a baby girl."

"Oh yes, madam. They had it for about a year, I think."

"Yes. He was home from India. They had a very good cook—she gave me a wonderful recipe for baked apple pudding—and also, I think, for gingerbread. I often wonder what became of her."

"I expect you mean Edith Pagett, madam. She's still in Dillmouth. She's in service now—at Windrush Lodge."

"Then there were some other people—the Fanes. A lawyer, I think he was!"

"Old Mr. Fane died some years ago—young Mr. Fane, Mr. Walter Fane, lives with his mother. Mr. Walter Fane never married. He's the senior partner now."

"Indeed? I had an idea Mr. Walter Fane had gone out to India—tea-planting or something."

"I believe he did, madam. As a young man. But he came home and went into the firm after about a year or two. They do all the best business round here—they're very highly thought of. A very nice quiet gentleman, Mr. Walter Fane. Everybody likes him."

"Why, of course," exclaimed Miss Marple. "He was engaged to Miss Kennedy, wasn't he? And then she broke it off and married Major Halliday."

"That's right, madam. She went out to India to marry Mr. Fane, but it seems as she changed her mind and married the other gentleman instead."

A faintly disapproving note had entered the assistant's voice.

Miss Marple leaned forward and lowered her voice.

"I was always so sorry for poor Major Halliday (I knew his mother) and his little girl. I understand his second wife left him. Ran away with someone. A rather flighty type, I'm afraid."

"Regular flibbertigibbet, she was. And her brother the doctor, such a nice man. Did my rheumatic knee a world of good."

"Whom did she run away with? I never heard."

"That I couldn't tell you, madam. Some said it was one of the summer visitors. But I know Major Halliday was quite broken up. He left the place and I believe his health gave way. Your change, madam."

Miss Marple accepted her change and her parcel.

"Thank you so much," she said. "I wonder if—Edith Pagett, did you say—still has that nice recipe for gingerbread? I lost it—or rather my careless maid lost it—and I'm so fond of good gingerbread."

"I expect so, madam. As a matter of fact her sister lives next door here, married to Mr. Mountford, the confectioner. Edith usually comes there on her days out and I'm sure Mrs. Mountford would give her a message."

"That's a very good idea. Thank you *so much* for all the trouble you've taken."

"A pleasure, madam, I assure you."

Miss Marple went out into the street.

"A nice old-fashioned firm," she said to herself. "And those vests are really very nice, so it isn't as though I had wasted any money."

She glanced at the pale blue enamel watch that she wore pinned to one side of her dress. "Just five minutes to go before meeting those two young things at the Ginger Cat. I hope they didn't find things too upsetting at the Sanatorium."

II

Giles and Gwenda sat together at a corner table at the Ginger Cat. The little black notebook lay on the table between them.

Miss Marple came in from the street and joined them.

"What will you have, Miss Marple? Coffee?"

"Yes, thank you—no, not cakes, just a scone and butter."

Giles gave the order, and Gwenda pushed the little black book across to Miss Marple.

"First you must read that," she said, "and then we can talk. It's what my father—what he wrote himself when he was at the nursing home. Oh, but first of all, just tell Miss Marple exactly what Dr. Penrose said, Giles."

Giles did so. Then Miss Marple opened the little black book and the waitress brought three cups of weak coffee, and a scone and butter, and a plate of cakes. Giles and Gwenda did not talk. They watched Miss Marple as she read.

Finally she closed the book and laid it down. Her expression was difficult to read. There was, Gwenda thought, anger in it. Her lips were pressed tightly together, and her eyes shone very brightly, unusually so, considering her age.

"Yes, indeed," she said. "Yes, indeed!"

Gwenda said: "You advised us once—do you remember?—not to go on. I can see why you did. But we did go on—and this is where we've got to. Only now, it seems as though we'd got to another place where one could—if one liked—stop ... Do you think we ought to stop? Or not?"

Miss Marple shook her head slowly. She seemed worried, perplexed.

"I don't know," she said. "I really don't know. It might be better to do so, much better to do so. Because after this lapse of time there is nothing that you can do—nothing, I mean, of a constructive nature."

"You mean that after this lapse of time, there is nothing we can find out?" asked Giles.

"Oh no," said Miss Marple. "I didn't mean that *at all*. Nineteen years is not such a long time. There are people who would remember things, who could answer questions—quite a lot of people. Servants for instance. There must have been at least *two* servants in the house at the time, *and* a nurse, and probably a gardener. It will only take time and a little trouble to find and talk to these people. As a matter of fact, I've found *one* of them already. The cook. No, it wasn't that. It was more the question of what practical *good* you can accomplish, and I'd be inclined to say to that—None. And yet..."

She stopped: "There *is* a yet ... I'm a little slow in thinking things out, but I have a feeling that there is something—something, perhaps, not very tangible—that would be worth taking risks for—even that one *should* take risks for—but I find it difficult to say just what that is..."

Giles began "It seems to me—" and stopped.

Miss Marple turned to him gratefully.

"Gentlemen," she said, "always seem to be able to tabulate things so clearly. I'm sure you have thought things out."

"I've been thinking things out," said Giles. "And it seems to me that there are just two conclusions one can come to. One is the same as I suggested before. Helen Halliday wasn't dead when Gwennie saw her lying in the hall. She came to, and went away with her lover, whoever he was. That would still fit the facts as we know them. It would square with Kelvin Halliday's rooted belief that he had killed his wife, and it would square with the missing suitcase and clothes and with the note that Dr. Kennedy found. But it leaves certain points unaccounted for. It doesn't explain why Kelvin was convinced he strangled his wife in the *bedroom*. And it doesn't cover the one, to my mind, really staggering question—*where is Helen*

Halliday now? Because it seems to me against all reason that Helen should never have been heard of or from again. Grant that the two letters she wrote are genuine, what happened *after* that? Why did she never write again? She was on affectionate terms with her brother, he's obviously deeply attached to her and always has been. He might disapprove of her conduct, but that doesn't mean that he expected never to hear from her again. And if you ask me, that point has obviously been worrying Kennedy himself. Let's say he accepted at the time absolutely the story he's told us. His sister's going off and Kelvin's breakdown. But he didn't expect never to hear from his sister again. I think, as the years went on, and he didn't hear, and Kelvin Halliday persisted in his delusion and finally committed suicide, that a terrible doubt began to creep up in his mind. Supposing that Kelvin's story was *true*? That he actually *had* killed Helen? There's no word from her—and surely if she had died somewhere abroad, word would have come to him? I think that explains his eagerness when he saw our advertisement. He hoped that it might lead to some account of where she was or what she had been doing. I'm sure it's absolutely unnatural for someone to disappear as—as *completely* as Helen seems to have done. That, in itself, is highly suspicious."

"I agree with you," said Miss Marple. "But the alternative, Mr. Reed?"

Giles said slowly, "I've been thinking out the alternative. It's pretty fantastic, you know, and even rather frightening. Because it involves—how can I put it—a kind of *malevolence*..."

"Yes," said Gwenda. "Malevolence is just right. Even, I think, something that isn't quite sane ..." She shivered.

"That *is* indicated, I think," said Miss Marple. "You know, there's a great deal of—well, *queerness* about—more than people imagine. I have seen some of it..."

Her face was thoughtful.

"There can't be, you see, any *normal* explanation," said Giles. "I'm taking now the fantastic hypothesis that Kelvin Halliday *didn't* kill his wife, but genuinely *thought* he had done so. That's what Dr. Penrose, who seems a decent sort of bloke, obviously wants to

think. His first impression of Halliday was that there was a man who had killed his wife and wanted to give himself up to the police. Then he had to take Kennedy's word for it that that wasn't so, so he had perforce to believe that Halliday was a victim of a complex or a fixation or whatever the jargon is—but he didn't really *like* that solution. He's had a good experience of the type and Halliday didn't square with it. However, on knowing Halliday better he became quite genuinely sure that Halliday was not the type of man who would strangle a woman under any provocation. So he accepted the fixation theory, but with misgivings. And that really means that only one theory will fit the case—Halliday was induced to believe that he had killed his wife, *by someone else*. In other words, we've come to X.

"Going over the facts very carefully, I'd say that that hypothesis is at least *possible*. According to his own account, Halliday came into the house that evening, went into the dining room, took a drink *as he usually did*—and then went into the next room, saw a note on the desk and had a blackout—"

Giles paused and Miss Marple nodded her head in approval. He went on:

"Say it wasn't a blackout—that it was just simply dope—knock-out drops in the whisky. The next step is quite clear, isn't it? X had strangled Helen in the hall, but afterwards he took her upstairs and arranged her artistically as a *crime passionel* on the bed, and that's where Kelvin is when he comes to; and the poor devil, who may have been suffering from jealousy where she's concerned, *thinks that he's done it*. What does he do next? Goes off to find his brother-in-law—on the other side of the town and on foot. And that gives X time to do his next trick. Pack and remove a suitcase of clothes and also remove the body—though what he did with the body," Giles ended vexedly, "beats me completely."

"It surprises me you should say that, Mr. Reed," said Miss Marple. "I should say that that problem would present few difficulties. But do please go on."

"*Who Were The Men In Her Life?*" quoted Giles. "I saw that in a newspaper as we came back in the train. It set me wondering,

because that's really the crux of the matter, isn't it? If there *is* an X, as we believe, all we know about him is that he must have been crazy about her—literally crazy about her."

"And so he hated my father," said Gwenda. "And he wanted him to suffer."

"So that's where we come up against it," said Giles. "We know what kind of a girl Helen was—" he hesitated.

"Man mad," supplied Gwenda.

Miss Marple looked up suddenly as though to speak, and then stopped.

"—and that she was beautiful. But we've no clue to what other men there were in her life besides her husband. There may have been any number."

Miss Marple shook her head.

"Hardly that. She was quite young, you know. But you are not quite accurate, Mr. Reed. We do know something about what you have termed 'the men in her life.' There was the man she was going out to marry—"

"Ah yes—the lawyer chap? What was his name?"

"Walter Fane," said Miss Marple.

"Yes. But you can't count him. He was out in Malaya or India or somewhere."

"But was he? He didn't remain a tea-planter, you know," Miss Marple pointed out. "He came back here and went into the firm, and is now the senior partner."

Gwenda exclaimed: "Perhaps he followed her back here?"

"He may have done. We don't know."

Giles was looking curiously at the old lady.

"How did you find all this out?"

Miss Marple smiled apologetically.

"I've been gossiping a little. In shops—and waiting for buses. Old ladies are supposed to be inquisitive. Yes, one can pick up quite a lot of local news."

"Walter Fane," said Giles thoughtfully. "Helen turned him down. That may have rankled quite a lot. Did he ever marry?"

"No," said Miss Marple. "He lives with his mother. I'm going to tea there at the end of the week."

"There's someone else we know about, too," said Gwenda suddenly. "You remember there was somebody she got engaged to, or entangled with, when she left school—someone undesirable, Dr. Kennedy said. I wonder just *why* he was undesirable...."

"That's two men," said Giles. "Either of them may have had a grudge, may have brooded ... Perhaps the first young man may have had some unsatisfactory mental history."

"Dr. Kennedy could tell us that," said Gwenda. "Only it's going to be a little difficult asking him. I mean, it's all very well for me to go along and ask for news of my stepmother whom I barely remember. But it's going to take a bit of explaining if I want to know about her early love affairs. It seems rather excessive interest in a stepmother you hardly knew."

"There are probably other ways of finding out," said Miss Marple. "Oh yes, I think with time and patience, we can gather the information we want."

"Anyway, we've got two possibilities," said Giles.

"We might, I think, infer a third," said Miss Marple. "It would be, of course, a pure hypothesis, but justified, I think, by the turn of events."

Gwenda and Giles looked at her in slight surprise.

"It is just an inference," said Miss Marple, turning a little pink. "Helen Kennedy went out to India to marry young Fane. Admittedly she was not wildly in love with him, but she must have been fond of him, and quite prepared to spend her life with him. Yet as soon as she gets there, she breaks off the engagement and wires her brother to send her money to get home. Now why?"

"Changed her mind, I suppose," said Giles.

Both Miss Marple and Gwenda looked at him in mild contempt.

"Of course she changed her mind," said Gwenda. "We know that. What Miss Marple means is—why?"

"I suppose girls do change their minds," said Giles vaguely.

"*Under certain circumstances,*" said Miss Marple.

Her words held all the pointed innuendo that elderly ladies are able to achieve with the minimum of actual statement.

"Something he did—" Giles was suggesting vaguely, when Gwenda chipped in sharply.

"Of course," she said. "Another man!"

She and Miss Marple looked at each other with the assurance of those admitted to a freemasonry from which men were excluded.

Gwenda added with certainty: "On the boat! Going out!"

"Propinquity," said Miss Marple.

"Moonlight on the boat deck," said Gwenda. "All that sort of thing. Only—it must have been serious—not just a flirtation."

"Oh yes," said Miss Marple, "I think it was serious."

"If so, why didn't she marry the chap?" demanded Giles.

"Perhaps he didn't really care for her," Gwenda said slowly. Then shook her head. "No, I think in that case she would still have married Walter Fane. Oh, of course, I'm being stupid. Married man."

She looked triumphantly at Miss Marple.

"Exactly," said Miss Marple. "That's how I should reconstruct it. They fell in love, probably desperately in love. But if he was a married man—with children, perhaps—and probably an honourable type—well, that would be the end of it."

"Only she couldn't go on and marry Walter Fane," said Gwenda. "So she wired her brother and went home. Yes, that all fits. And on the boat home, she met my father..."

She paused, thinking it out.

"Not wildly in love," she said. "But attracted ... and then there was me. They were both unhappy ... and they consoled each other. My father told her about my mother, and perhaps she told him about the other man ... Yes—of course—" She flicked over the pages of the diary.

"I knew there was someone—she said as much to me on the boat—someone she loved and couldn't marry."

Yes—that's it. Helen and my father felt they were alike—and there was me to be looked after, and she thought she could make him happy—and she even thought, perhaps, that she'd be quite happy herself in the end."

She stopped, nodded violently at Miss Marple, and said brightly: "That's it."

Giles was looking exasperated.

"Really, Gwenda, you make a whole lot of things up and pretend that they actually happened."

"They did happen. They must have happened. And that gives us a third person for X."

"You mean—?"

"The married man. We don't know what he was like. He mayn't have been nice at all. He may have been a little mad. He may have followed her here—"

"You've just placed him as going out to India."

"Well, people can come back from India, can't they? Walter Fane did. It was nearly a year later. I don't say this man *did* come back, but I say he's a possibility. You keep harping on who the men were in her life. Well, we've got three of them. Walter Fane, and some young man whose name we don't know, and a married man—"

"Whom we don't know exists," finished Giles.

"We'll find out," said Gwenda. "Won't we, Miss Marple?"

"With time and patience," said Miss Marple, "we may find out a great deal. Now for my contribution. As a result of a very fortunate little conversation in the draper's today, I have discovered that Edith Pagett who was cook at St. Catherine's at the time we are interested in, is still in Dillmouth. Her sister is married to a confectioner here. I think it would be quite natural, Gwenda, for you to want to see her. She may be able to tell us a good deal."

"That's wonderful," said Gwenda. "I've thought of something else," she added. "I'm going to make a new will. Don't look so grave, Giles, I shall still leave my money to you. But I shall get Walter Fane to do it for me."

"Gwenda," said Giles. "Do be careful."

"Making a will," said Gwenda, "is a most natural thing to do. And the line of approach I've thought up is quite good. Anyway, I want to see him. I want to see what he's like, and if I think that possibly—"

She left the sentence unfinished.

"What surprises me," said Giles, "is that no one else answered that advertisement of ours—this Edith Pagett, for example—"

Miss Marple shook her head.

"People take a long time to make up their minds about a thing like that in these country districts," she said. "They're suspicious. They like to think things over."

Twelve

LILY KIMBLE

Lily Kimble spread a couple of old newspapers on the kitchen table in readiness for draining the chipped potatoes which were hissing in the pan. Humming tunelessly a popular melody of the day she leaned forward aimlessly studying the newsprint spread out before her.

Then suddenly she stopped humming and called: "Jim—Jim. Listen here, will you?"

Jim Kimble, an elderly man of few words, was washing at the scullery sink. To answer his wife, he used his favourite monosyllable.

"Ar?" said Jim Kimble.

"It's a piece in the paper. Will anyone with any knowledge of Helen Spenlove Halliday, née Kennedy, communicate with Messrs. Reed and Hardy, Southampton Row! Seems to me they might be meaning Mrs. Halliday as I was in service with at St. Catherine's. Took it from Mrs. Findeyson, they did, she and 'er 'usband. *Her* name was Helen right enough—Yes, and she was sister to Dr. Kennedy, him as always said I ought to have had my adenoids out."

There was a momentary pause as Mrs. Kimble adjusted the frying chips with an expert touch. Jim Kimble was snorting into the roller towel as he dried his face.

"Course, it's an old paper, this," resumed Mrs. Kimble. She studied its date. "Nigh on a week or more old. Wonder what it's all about?"

Think as there's any money in it, Jim?"

Mr. Kimble said, "Ar," noncommittally.

"Might be a will or something," speculated his wife. "Powerful lot of time ago."

"Ar."

"Eighteen years or more, I shouldn't wonder ... Wonder what they're raking it all up for now? You don't think it could be *police*, do you, Jim?"

"Whatever?" asked Mr. Kimble.

"Well, you know what I always thought," said Mrs. Kimble mysteriously. "Told you at the time, I did, when we was walking out. Pretending that she'd gone off with a feller. That's what they say, husbands, when they do their wives in. Depend upon it, it was murder. That's what I said to you and what I said to Edie, but Edie she wouldn't have it at any price. Never no imagination, Edie hadn't. Those clothes she was supposed to have took away with her—well, they weren't right, if you know what I mean. There was a suitcase gone and a bag, and enough clothes to fill 'em, but they wasn't right, those clothes. And that's when I said to Edie, 'Depend upon it,' I said, 'the master's murdered her and put her in the cellar.' Only not really the cellar, because that Layonee, the Swiss nurse, she saw something. Out of the window. Come to the cinema along of me, she did, though she wasn't supposed to leave the nursery—but there, I said, the child never wakes up—good as gold she was, always, in her bed at night. 'And madam never comes up to the nursery in the evening,' I says. 'Nobody will know if you slip out with me.' So she did. And when we got in there was ever such a schemozzle going on. Doctor was there and the master ill and sleeping in the dressing room, and the doctor looking after him, and it was then he asked me about the clothes, and it seemed all right at the time. I thought she'd gone off all right with that fellow she was so keen on—and him a married man, too—and Edie said she did hope and pray we wouldn't be mixed up in any divorce case. What was his name now? I can't remember. Began with an M—or was it an R? Bless us, your memory does go."

Mr. Kimble came in from the scullery and ignoring all matters of lesser moment demanded if his supper was ready.

"I'll just drain the chips ... Wait, I'll get another paper. Better keep this one. 'T wouldn't be likely to be police—not after all this time. Maybe it's lawyers—and money in it. It doesn't *say* something to your advantage ... but it might be all the same ... Wish I knew who I could ask about it. It says write to some address in London—but I'm not sure I'd like to do a thing like that ... not to a lot of people in London ... What do you say, Jim?"

"Ar," said Mr. Kimble, hungrily eyeing the fish and chips.

The discussion was postponed.

Thirteen

WALTER FANE

I

Gwenda looked across the broad mahogany desk at Mr. Walter Fane.

She saw a rather tired-looking man of about fifty, with a gentle, nondescript face. The sort of man, Gwenda thought, that you would find it a little difficult to recollect if you had just met him casually ... A man who, in modern phrase, lacked personality. His voice, when he spoke, was slow and careful and pleasant. Probably, Gwenda decided, a very sound lawyer.

She stole a glance round the office—the office of the senior partner of the firm. It suited Walter Fane, she decided. It was definitely old-fashioned, the furniture was shabby, but was made of good solid Victorian material. There were deed boxes piled up against the walls—boxes with respectable County names on them. Sir John Vavasour-Trench. Lady Jessup. Arthur ffoulkes, Esq. Deceased.

The big sash windows, the panes of which were rather dirty, looked into a square backyard flanked by the solid walls of a seventeenth-century adjoining house. There was nothing smart or up to date anywhere, but there was nothing sordid either. It was superficially an untidy office with its piled-up boxes, and its littered

desk, and its row of law books leaning crookedly on a shelf—but it was actually the office of someone who knew exactly where to lay his hand upon anything he wanted.

The scratching of Walter Fane's pen ceased. He smiled his slow, pleasant smile.

"I think that's all quite clear, Mrs. Reed," he said. "A very simple will. When would you like to come in and sign it?"

Gwenda said whenever he liked. There was no particular hurry.

"We've got a house down here, you know," she said. "Hillside."

Walter Fane said, glancing down at his notes, "Yes, you gave me the address...."

There was no change in the even tenor of his voice.

"It's a very nice house," said Gwenda. "We love it."

"Indeed?" Walter Fane smiled. "Is it on the sea?"

"No," said Gwenda. "I believe the name has been changed. It used to be St. Catherine's."

Mr. Fane took off his pince-nez. He polished them with a silk handkerchief, looking down at the desk.

"Oh yes," he said. "On the Leahampton road?"

He looked up and Gwenda thought how different people who habitually wear glasses look without them. His eyes, a very pale grey, seemed strangely weak and unfocussed.

It makes his whole face look, thought Gwenda, as though he isn't really there.

Walter Fane put on the pince-nez again. He said in his precise lawyer's voice, "I think you said you did make a will on the occasion of your marriage?"

"Yes. But I'd left things in it to various relatives in New Zealand who have died since, so I thought it would be simpler really to make a new one altogether—especially as we mean to live permanently in this country."

Walter Fane nodded.

"Yes, quite a sound view to take. Well, I think this is all quite clear, Mrs. Reed. Perhaps if you come in the day after tomorrow? Will eleven o'clock suit you?"

"Yes, that will be quite all right."

Gwenda rose to her feet and Walter Fane rose also.

Gwenda said, with exactly the little rush she had rehearsed beforehand, "I—I asked specially for you, because I think—I mean I believe—that you once knew my—my mother."

"Indeed?" Walter Fane put a little additional social warmth into his manner. "What was her name?"

"Halliday. Megan Halliday. I think—I've been told—that you were once engaged to her?"

A clock on the wall ticked. One, two, one two, one two.

Gwenda suddenly felt her heart beating a little faster. What a very *quiet* face Walter Fane had. You might see a house like that—a house with all the blinds pulled down. That would mean a house with a dead body in it. (What idiotic thoughts you do have, Gwenda!)

Walter Fane, his voice unchanged, unruffled, said, "No, I never knew your mother, Mrs. Reed. But I was once engaged, for a short period, to Helen Kennedy who afterwards married Major Halliday as his second wife."

"Oh, I see. How stupid of me. I've got it all wrong. It was Helen—my stepmother. Of course it's all long before I remember. I was only a child when my father's second marriage broke up. But I heard someone say that you'd once been engaged to Mrs. Halliday in India—and I thought of course it was my own mother—because of India, I mean ... My father met her in India."

"Helen Kennedy came out to India to marry me," said Walter Fane. "Then she changed her mind. On the boat going home she met your father."

It was a plain unemotional statement of fact. Gwenda still had the impression of a house with the blinds down.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "Have I put my foot in it?"

Walter Fane smiled—his slow, pleasant smile. The blinds were up.

"It's nineteen or twenty years ago, Mrs. Reed," he said. "One's youthful troubles and follies don't mean much after that space of time. So you are Halliday's baby daughter. You know, don't you, that your father and Helen actually lived here in Dillmouth for a while?"

"Oh yes," said Gwenda, "that's really why we came here. I didn't remember it properly, of course, but when we had to decide where we'd live in England, I came to Dillmouth first of all, to see what it was really like, and I thought it was such an attractive place that I decided that we'd park ourselves right here and nowhere else. And wasn't it luck? We've actually got the same house that my people lived in long ago."

"I remember the house," said Walter Fane. Again he gave that slow, pleasant smile. "You may not remember me, Mrs. Reed, but I rather imagine I used to give you piggybacks once."

Gwenda laughed.

"Did you really? Then you're quite an old friend, aren't you? I can't pretend I remember you—but then I was only about two and a half or three, I suppose ... Were you back on leave from India or something like that?"

"No, I'd chucked India for good. I went out to try tea-planting—but the life didn't suit me. I was cut out to follow in my father's footsteps and be a prosy unadventurous country solicitor. I'd passed all my law exams earlier, so I simply came back and went straight into the firm." He paused and said, "I've been here ever since."

Again there was a pause and he repeated in a lower voice, "Yes—ever since...."

But eighteen years, thought Gwenda, isn't really such a long time as all that....

Then, with a change of manner, he shook hands with her and said, "Since we seem to be old friends, you really must bring your husband to tea with my mother one day. I'll get her to write to you. In the meanwhile, eleven o'clock on Thursday?"

Gwenda went out of the office and down the stairs. There was a cobweb in the angle of the stairway. In the middle of the web was a pale, rather nondescript spider. It didn't look, Gwenda thought, like a real spider. Not the fat juicy kind of spider who caught flies and ate them. It was more like a ghost of a spider. Rather like Walter Fane, in fact.

II

Giles met his wife on the seafront.

"Well?" he asked.

"He was here in Dillmouth at the time," said Gwenda. "Back from India, I mean. Because he gave me piggybacks. But he couldn't have murdered anyone—not possibly. He's much too quiet and gentle. Very nice, really, but the kind of person you never really notice. You know, they come to parties, but you never notice when they leave. I should think he was frightfully upright and all that, and devoted to his mother, and with a lot of virtues. But from a woman's point of view, terribly *dull*. I can see why he didn't cut any ice with Helen. You know, a nice safe person to marry—but you don't really want to."

"Poor devil," said Giles. "And I suppose he was just crazy about her."

"Oh, I don't know ... I shouldn't think so, really. Anyway, I'm sure he wouldn't be our malevolent murderer. He's not my idea of a murderer at all."

"You don't really know a lot about murderers, though, do you, my sweet?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well—I was thinking about quiet Lizzie Borden—only the jury said she didn't do it. And Wallace, a quiet man whom the jury insisted did kill his wife, though the sentence was quashed on appeal. And Armstrong who everybody said for years was such a kind unassuming fellow. I don't believe murderers are ever a special type."

"I really can't believe that Walter Fane—"

Gwenda stopped.

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

But she was remembering Walter Fane polishing his eyeglasses and the queer blind stare of his eyes when she had first mentioned St. Catherine's.

"Perhaps," she said uncertainly, "he *was* crazy about her..."

Fourteen

EDITH PAGETT

Mrs. Mountford's back parlour was a comfortable room. It had a round table covered with a cloth, and some old-fashioned armchairs and a stern-looking but unexpectedly well-sprung sofa against the wall. There were china dogs and other ornaments on the mantelpiece, and a framed coloured representation of the Princess Elizabeth and Margaret Rose. On another wall was the King in Naval uniform, and a photograph of Mr. Mountford in a group of other bakers and confectioners. There was a picture made with shells and a watercolour of a very green sea at Capri. There were a great many other things, none of them with any pretensions to beauty or the higher life; but the net result was a happy, cheerful room where people sat round and enjoyed themselves whenever there was time to do so.

Mrs. Mountford, née Pagett, was short and round and darkhaired with a few grey streaks in the dark. Her sister, Edith Pagett, was tall and dark and thin. There was hardly any grey in her hair though she was at a guess round about fifty.

"Fancy now," Edith Pagett was saying. "Little Miss Gwennie. You must excuse me, m'am, speaking like that, but it does take one back. You used to come into my kitchen, as pretty as could be. 'Winnies,' you used to say. 'Winnies.' And what you meant was raisins—though why you called them winnies is more than I can say. But

raisins was what you meant and raisins it was I used to give you, sultanas, that is, on account of the stones."

Gwenda stared hard at the upright figure and the red cheeks and black eyes, trying to remember—to remember—but nothing came. Memory was an inconvenient thing.

"I wish I could remember—" she began.

"It's not likely that you would. Just a tiny little mite, that's all you were. Nowadays nobody seems to want to go in a house where there's children. I can't see it, myself. Children give life to a house, that's what I feel. Though nursery meals are always liable to cause a bit of trouble. But if you know what I mean, m'am, that's the nurse's fault, not the child's. Nurses are nearly always difficult—trays and waiting upon and one thing and another. Do you remember Layonee at all, Miss Gwennie? Excuse me, Mrs. Reed, I should say."

"Léonie? Was she my nurse?"

"Swiss girl, she was. Didn't speak English very well, and very sensitive in her feelings. Used to cry a lot if Lily said something to upset her. Lily was house-parlourmaid. Lily Abbott. A young girl and pert in her ways and a bit flighty. Many a game Lily used to have with you, Miss Gwennie. Play peep-bo through the stairs."

Gwenda gave a quick uncontrollable shiver.

The stairs ...

Then she said suddenly, "I remember Lily. She put a bow on the cat."

"There now, fancy you remembering that! On your birthday it was, and Lily she was all for it, Thomas must have a bow on. Took one off the chocolate box, and Thomas was mad about it. Ran off into the garden and rubbed through the bushes until he got it off. Cats don't like tricks being played on them."

"A black and white cat."

"That's right. Poor old Tommy. Caught mice something beautiful. A real proper mouser." Edith Pagett paused and coughed primly. "Excuse me running on like this, m'am. But talking brings the old days back. You wanted to ask me something?"

"I like hearing you talk about the old days," said Gwenda. "That's just what I want to hear about. You see, I was brought up by

relations in New Zealand and of course they could never tell me anything about—about my father, and my stepmother. She—she was nice, wasn't she?"

"Very fond of you, she was. Oh yes, she used to take you down to the beach and play with you in the garden. She was quite young herself, you understand. Nothing but a girl, really. I often used to think she enjoyed the games as much as you did. You see she'd been an only child, in a manner of speaking. Dr. Kennedy, her brother, was years and years older and always shut up with his books. When she wasn't away at school, she had to play by herself...."

Miss Marple, sitting back against the wall, asked gently, "You've lived in Dillmouth all your life, haven't you?"

"Oh yes, madam. Father had the farm up behind the hill—Rylands it was always called. He'd no sons, and Mother couldn't carry on after he died, so she sold it and bought the little fancy shop at the end of the High Street. Yes, I've lived here all my life."

"And I suppose you know all about everyone in Dillmouth?"

"Well, of course it used to be a small place, then. Though there used always to be a lot of summer visitors as long as I can remember. But nice quiet people who came here every year, not these trippers and charabancs we have nowadays. Good families they were, who'd come back to the same rooms year after year."

"I suppose," said Giles, "that you knew Helen Kennedy before she was Mrs. Halliday?"

"Well, I knew *of* her, so to speak, and I may have seen her about. But I didn't know her proper until I went into service there."

"And you liked her," said Miss Marple.

Edith Pagett turned towards her.

"Yes, madam, I did," she said. There was a trace of defiance in her manner. "No matter what anybody says. She was as nice as could be to me always. I'd never have believed she'd do what she did do. Took my breath away, it did. Although, mind you, there *had* been talk—"

She stopped rather abruptly and gave a quick apologetic glance at Gwenda.

Gwenda spoke impulsively.

"I want to know," she said. "Please don't think I shall mind anything you say. She wasn't my own mother—"

"That's true enough, m'am."

"And you see, we are very anxious to—to find her. She went away from here—and she seems to have been quite lost sight of. We don't know where she is living now, or even if she is alive. And there are reasons—"

She hesitated and Giles said quickly, "Legal reasons. We don't know whether to presume death or—or what."

"Oh, I quite understand, sir. My cousin's husband was missing—after Ypres it was—and there was a lot of trouble about presuming death and that. Real vexing it was for her. Naturally, sir, if there is anything I can tell you that will help in any way—it isn't as if you were strangers. Miss Gwenda and her 'winnies.' So funny you used to say it."

"That's very kind of you," said Giles. "So, if you don't mind, I'll just fire away. Mrs. Halliday left home quite suddenly, I understand?"

"Yes, sir, it was a great shock to all of us—and especially to the Major, poor man. He collapsed completely."

"I'm going to ask you right out—have you any idea who the man was she went away with?"

Edith Pagett shook her head.

"That's what Dr. Kennedy asked me—and I couldn't tell him. Lily couldn't either. And of course that Layonee, being a foreigner, didn't know a thing about it."

"You didn't *know*," said Giles. "But could you make a guess? Now that it's all so long ago, it wouldn't matter—even if the guess is all wrong. You must, surely, have had some suspicion."

"Well, we had our suspicions ... but mind you, it wasn't more than suspicions. And as far as I'm concerned, I never saw anything at all. But Lily who, as I told you, was a sharp kind of girl, Lily had her ideas—had had them for a long time. 'Mark my words,' she used to say. 'That chap's sweet on her. Only got to see him looking at her as she pours out the tea. And does his wife look daggers!'"

"I see. And who was the—er—chap?"

"Now I'm afraid, sir, I just don't remember his name. Not after all these years. A Captain—Esdale—no, that wasn't it—Emery—no. I have a kind of feeling it began with an E. Or it might have been H. Rather an unusual kind of name. But I've never even thought of it for sixteen years. He and his wife were staying at the Royal Clarence."

"Summer visitors?"

"Yes, but I think that he—or maybe both of them—had known Mrs. Halliday before. They came to the house quite often. Anyway, according to Lily he was sweet on Mrs. Halliday."

"And his wife didn't like it."

"No, sir ... But mind you, I never believed for a moment that there was anything wrong about it. And I still don't know what to think."

Gwenda asked, "Were they still here—at the Royal Clarence—when—when Helen—my stepmother went away?"

"As far as I recollect they went away just about the same time, a day earlier or a day later—anyway, it was close enough to make people talk. But I never heard anything definite. It was all kept very quiet if it *was* so. Quite a nine days' wonder Mrs. Halliday going off like that, so sudden. But people did say she'd always been flighty—not that I ever saw anything of the kind myself. I wouldn't have been willing to go to Norfolk with them if I'd thought that."

For a moment three people stared at her intently. Then Giles said, "Norfolk? Were they going to Norfolk?"

"Yes, sir. They'd bought a house there. Mrs. Halliday told me about three weeks before—before all this happened. She asked me if I'd come with them when they moved, and I said I would. After all, I'd never been away from Dillmouth, and I thought perhaps I'd like a change—seeing as I liked the family."

"I never heard they had bought a house in Norfolk," said Giles.

"Well, it's funny you should say that, sir, because Mrs. Halliday seemed to want it kept very quiet. She asked me not to speak about it to anyone at all—so of course I didn't. But she'd been wanting to go away from Dillmouth for some time. She'd been pressing Major Halliday to go, but he liked it at Dillmouth. I even believe he wrote

to Mrs. Findeyson whom St. Catherine's belonged to, asking if she'd consider selling it. But Mrs. Halliday was dead against it. She seemed to have turned right against Dillmouth. It's almost as though she was afraid to stop there."

The words came out quite naturally, yet at the sound of them the three people listening again stiffened to attention.

Giles said, "You don't think she wanted to go to Norfolk to be near this—the man whose name you can't remember?"

Edith Pagett looked distressed.

"Oh indeed, sir, I wouldn't like to think *that*. And I don't think it, not for a moment. Besides I don't think that—I remember now—they came from up North somewhere, that lady and gentleman did. Northumberland, I think it was. Anyway, they liked coming south for a holiday because it was so mild down here."

Gwenda said: "She was afraid of something, wasn't she? Or of someone? My stepmother, I mean."

"I do remember—now that you say that—"

"Yes?"

"Lily came into the kitchen one day. She'd been dusting the stairs, and she said, 'Ructions!' she said. She had a very common way of talking sometimes, Lily had, so you must excuse me.

"So I asked her what she meant and she said that the missus had come in from the garden with the master into the drawing room and the door to the hall being open, Lily heard what they said.

"*'I'm afraid of you,'* that's what Mrs. Halliday had said.

"*'And she sounded scared too,'* Lily said. *'I've been afraid of you for a long time. You're mad. You're not normal. Go away and leave me alone. You must leave me alone. I'm frightened. I think, underneath, I've always been frightened of you... '*

"Something of that kind—of course I can't say now to the exact words. But Lily, she took it very seriously, and that's why, after it all happened, she—"

Edith Pagett stopped dead. A curious frightened look came over her face.

"I didn't mean, I'm sure—" she began. "Excuse me, madam, my tongue runs away with me."

Giles said gently: "Please tell us, Edith. It's really important, you see, that we should know. It's all a long time ago now, but we've got to *know*."

"I couldn't say, I'm sure," said Edith helplessly.

Miss Marple asked: "What was it Lily didn't believe—or did believe?"

Edith Pagett said apologetically: "Lily was always one to get ideas in her head. I never took no notice of them. She was always one for going to the pictures and she got a lot of silly melodramatic ideas that way. She was out at the pictures the night it happened—and what's more she took Layonee with her—and very wrong *that* was, and I told her so. 'Oh, that's all right,' she said. 'It's not leaving the child alone in the house. You're down in the kitchen and the master and the missus will be in later and anyway that child never wakes once she's off to sleep.' But it was wrong, and I told her so, though of course I never knew about Layonee going till afterwards. If I had, I'd have run up to see she—you, I mean, Miss Gwenda—were quite all right. You can't hear a thing from the kitchen when the baize door's shut."

Edith Pagett paused and then went on: "I was doing some ironing. The evening passed ever so quick and the first thing I knew Dr. Kennedy came out in the kitchen and asked me where Lily was and I said it was her night off but she'd be in any minute now and sure enough she came in that very minute and he took her upstairs to the mistress's room. Wanted to know if she'd taken any clothes away with her, and what. So Lily looked about and told him and then she come down to me. All agog she was. 'She's hooked it,' she said. 'Gone off with someone. The master's all in. Had a stroke or something. Apparently it's been a terrible shock to him. More fool he. He ought to have seen it coming.' 'You shouldn't speak like that,' I said. 'How do you know she's gone off with anybody? Maybe she had a telegram from a sick relation.' 'Sick relation my foot,' Lily says (always a common way of speaking, as I said). 'She left a note.' 'Who's she gone off with?' I said. 'Who do you think?' Lily said. 'Not likely to be Mr. Sobersides Fane, for all his sheep's eyes and the way he follows her round like a dog.' So I said, 'You think it's Captain—

whatever his name was.' And she said, 'He's my bet. Unless it's our mystery man in the flashy car.' (That's just a silly joke we had.) And I said, 'I don't believe it. Not Mrs. Halliday. She wouldn't do a thing like that.' And Lily says, 'Well, it seems she's done it.'

"All this was at first, you understand. But later on, up in our bedroom, Lily woke me up. 'Look here,' she says. 'It's all wrong.' 'What's wrong?' I said. And she said, 'Those clothes.' 'Whatever are you talking about?' I said. 'Listen, Edie,' she said. 'I went through her clothes because the doctor asked me to. And there's a suitcase gone and enough to fill it—but they're the *wrong* things.' 'What do you mean?' I said. And Lily said, 'She took an evening dress, her grey and silver—but she didn't take her evening belt and brassière, nor the slip that goes with it, and she took her gold brocade evening shoes, not the silver strap ones. And she took her green tweed—which she never wears until late on in the autumn, but she didn't take that fancy pullover and she took her lace blouses that she only wears with a town suit. Oh and her undies, too, they were a job lot. You mark my words, Edie,' Lily said. 'She's not gone away at all. The master's done her in.'

"Well, that made me wide awake. I sat right up and asked her what on earth she was talking about.

"Just like it was in the *News of the World* last week,' Lily says. 'The master found she'd been carrying on and he killed her and put her down in the cellar and buried her under the floor. *You'd* never hear anything because it's under the front hall. That's what he's done, and then he packed a suitcase to make it look as though she'd gone away. But that's where she is—under the cellar floor. *She never left this house alive.*' I gave her a piece of my mind then, saying such awful things. But I'll admit I slipped down to the cellar the next morning. But there, it was all just as usual and nothing disturbed and no digging been done—and I went and told Lily she'd just been making a fool of herself, but she stuck to it as the master had done her in. 'Remember,' she says, 'she was scared to death of him. I heard her telling him so.' 'And that's just where you're wrong, my girl,' I said, 'because it wasn't the master at all. Just after you'd told me, that day, I looked out of the window and there was the master

coming down the hill with his golf clubs, so it couldn't have been him who was with the mistress in the drawing room. It was someone else.'"

The words echoed lingeringly in the comfortable commonplace sitting room.

Giles said softly under his breath, "*It was someone else....*"

Fifteen

AN ADDRESS

The Royal Clarence was the oldest hotel in the town. It had a mellow bowfronted façade and an old-world atmosphere. It still catered for the type of family who came for a month to the seaside.

Miss Narracott who presided behind the reception desk was a full-bosomed lady of forty-seven with an old-fashioned style of hairdressing.

She unbent to Giles whom her accurate eye summed up as “one of our nice people.” And Giles, who had a ready tongue and a persuasive way with him when he liked, spun a very good tale. He had a bet on with his wife—about her godmother—and whether she had stayed at the Royal Clarence eighteen years ago. His wife had said that they could never settle the dispute because of course all the old registers would be thrown away by this time, but he had said Nonsense. An establishment like the Royal Clarence would keep its registers. They must go back for a hundred years.

“Well, not quite that, Mr. Reed. But we do keep all our old Visitors’ Books as we prefer to call them. Very interesting names in them, too. Why, the King stayed here once when he was Prince of Wales, and Princess Adlemar of Holstein-Rotz used to come every winter with her lady-in-waiting. And we’ve had some very famous novelists, too, and Mr. Dovey, the portrait-painter.”

Giles responded in suitable fashion with interest and respect and in due course the sacred volume for the year in question was brought out and exhibited to him.

Having first had various illustrious names pointed out to him, he turned the pages to the month of August.

Yes, here surely was the entry he was seeking.

Major and Mrs. Setoun Erskine, Anstell Manor, Daith,
Northumberland, July 27th—August 17th.

"If I may copy this out?"

"Of course, Mr. Reed. Paper and ink—Oh, you have your pen. Excuse me, I must just go back to the outer office."

She left him with the open book, and Giles set to work.

On his return to Hillside he found Gwenda in the garden, bending over the herbaceous border.

She straightened herself and gave him a quick glance of interrogation.

"Any luck?"

"Yes, I think this must be it."

Gwenda said softly, reading the words: "Anstell Manor, Daith, Northumberland. Yes, Edith Pagett said Northumberland. I wonder if they're still living there—"

"We'll have to go and see."

"Yes—yes, it would be better to go—when?"

"As soon as possible. Tomorrow? We'll take the car and drive up. It will show you a little more of England."

"Suppose they're dead—or gone away and somebody else is living there?"

Giles shrugged his shoulders.

"Then we come back and go on with our other leads. I've written to Kennedy, by the way, and asked him if he'll send me those letters Helen wrote after she went away—if he's still got them—*and* a specimen of her handwriting."

"I wish," said Gwenda, "that we could get in touch with the other servant—with Lily—the one who put the bow on Thomas—"

"Funny your suddenly remembering that, Gwenda."

"Yes, wasn't it? I remember Tommy, too. He was black with white patches and he had three lovely kittens."

"What? Thomas?"

"Well, he was called Thomas—but actually he turned out to be Thomasina. You know what cats are. But about Lily—I wonder what's become of her? Edith Pagett seems to have lost sight of her entirely. She didn't come from round here—and after the breakup at St. Catherine's she took a place in Torquay. She wrote once or twice but that was all. Edith said she'd heard she'd got married but she didn't know who to. If we could get hold of her we might learn a lot more."

"And from Léonie, the Swiss girl."

"Perhaps—but she was a foreigner and wouldn't catch on to much of what went on. You know, I don't remember her at all. No, it's Lily I feel would be useful. Lily was the sharp one ... I know, Giles, let's put in another advertisement—an advertisement for her—Lily Abbott, her name was."

"Yes," said Giles. "We might try that. And we'll definitely go north tomorrow and see what we can find out about the Erskines."

Sixteen

MOTHER'S SON

"Down, Henry," said Mrs. Fane to an asthmatic spaniel whose liquid eyes burned with greed. "Another scone, Miss Marple, while they're hot?"

"Thank you. Such delicious scones. You have an excellent cook."

"Louisa is not bad, really. Forgetful, like all of them. And no variety in her puddings. Tell me, how is Dorothy Yarde's sciatica nowadays? She used to be a martyr to it. Largely nerves, I suspect."

Miss Marple hastened to oblige with details of their mutual acquaintance's ailments. It was fortunate, she thought, that amongst her many friends and relations scattered over England, she had managed to find a woman who knew Mrs. Fane and who had written explaining that a Miss Marple was at present in Dillmouth, and would dear Eleanor be very kind and ask her to something.

Eleanor Fane was a tall, commanding woman with a steely grey eye, crisp white hair, and a baby pink and white complexion which masked the fact that there was no baby-like softness whatever about her.

They discussed Dorothy's ailments or imagined ailments and went on to Miss Marple's health, the air of Dillmouth, and the general poor condition of most of the younger generation.

"Not made to eat their crusts as children," Mrs. Fane pronounced. "None of that allowed in *my* nursery."

"You have more than one son?" asked Miss Marple.

"Three. The eldest, Gerald, is in Singapore in the Far East Bank. Robert is in the Army." Mrs. Fane sniffed. "Married a Roman Catholic," she said with significance. "You know what *that* means! All the children brought up as Catholics. What Robert's father would have said, I don't know. My husband was very low church. I hardly ever hear from Robert nowadays. He takes exception to some of the things I have said to him purely for his own good. I believe in being sincere and saying exactly what one thinks. His marriage was, in my opinion, a great misfortune. He may *pretend* to be happy, poor boy—but I can't feel that it is at all satisfactory."

"Your youngest son is not married, I believe?"

Mrs. Fane beamed.

"No, Walter lives at home. He is slightly delicate—always was from a child—and I have always had to look after his health very carefully. (He will be in presently.) I can't tell you what a thoughtful and devoted son he is. I am really a very lucky woman to have such a son."

"And he has never thought of marrying?" enquired Miss Marple.

"Walter always says he really cannot be bothered with the modern young woman. They don't appeal to him. He and I have so much in common that I'm afraid he doesn't go out as much as he should. He reads Thackeray to me in the evenings, and we usually have a game of picquet. Walter is a real home bird."

"How very nice," said Miss Marple. "Has he always been in the firm? Somebody told me that you had a son who was out in Ceylon, as a tea-planter, but perhaps they got it wrong."

A slight frown came over Mrs. Fane's face. She urged walnut cake upon her guest and explained.

"That was as a very young man. One of those youthful impulses. A boy always longs to see the world. Actually, there was a girl at the bottom of it. Girls can be *so* unsettling."

"Oh yes, indeed. My own nephew, I remember—"

Mrs. Fane swept on, ignoring Miss Marple's nephew. She held the floor and was enjoying the opportunity to reminisce to this sympathetic friend of dear Dorothy's.

"A *most* unsuitable girl—as seems always to be the way. Oh, I don't mean an *actress* or anything like that. The local doctor's sister—more like his daughter, really, years younger—and the poor man with no idea how to bring her up. Men are so helpless, aren't they? She ran quite wild, entangled herself first with a young man in the office—a mere clerk—and a very unsatisfactory character, too. They had to get rid of him. Repeated confidential information. Anyway, this girl, Helen Kennedy, was, I suppose, very pretty. *I* didn't think so. I always thought her hair was touched up. But Walter, poor boy, fell very much in love with her. As I say, quite unsuitable, no money and no prospects, and not the kind of girl one wanted as a daughter-in-law. Still, what can a mother do? Walter proposed to her and she refused him, and then he got this silly idea into his head of going out to India and being a tea-planter. My husband said, "Let him go," though of course he was very disappointed. He had been looking forward to having Walter with him in the firm and Walter had passed all his law exams and everything. Still, there it was. Really, the havoc these young women cause!"

"Oh, I know. My nephew—"

Once again Mrs. Fane swept over Miss Marple's nephew.

"So the dear boy went out to Assam or was it Bangalore—really I can't remember after all these years. And I felt most upset because I knew his health wouldn't stand it. And he hadn't been out there a year (doing very well, too. Walter does everything well) than—would you believe it?—this impudent chit of a girl changes her mind and writes out that she'd like to marry him after all."

"Dear, dear." Miss Marple shook her head.

"Gets together her trousseau, books her passage—and what do you think the next move is?"

"I can't imagine." Miss Marple leaned forward in rapt attention.

"Has a love affair with a married man, if you please. On the boat going out. A married man with three children, I believe. Anyway there is Walter on the quay to meet her and the first thing she does is to say she can't marry him after all. Don't you call that a wicked thing to do?"

"Oh, I do indeed. It might have completely destroyed your son's faith in human nature."

"It should have shown her to him in her true colours. But there, that type of woman gets away with anything."

"He didn't—" Miss Marple hesitated—"resent her action? Some men would have been terribly angry."

"Walter has always had wonderful self-control. However upset and annoyed Walter may be over anything, he never shows it."

Miss Marple peered at her speculatively. Hesitantly, she put out a feeler.

"That is because it goes really deep, perhaps? One is really astonished sometimes, with children. A sudden outburst from some child that one has thought didn't care at all. A sensitive nature that can't express itself until it's driven absolutely beyond endurance."

"Ah, it's very curious you should say that, Miss Marple. I remember so well. Gerald and Robert, you know, both hot-tempered and always apt to *fight*. Quite natural, of course, for healthy boys—"

"Oh, quite natural."

"And dear Walter, always so quiet and patient. And then, one day, Robert got hold of his model aeroplane—he'd built it up himself with days of work—so patient and clever with his fingers—and Robert, who was a dear high-spirited boy but careless, smashed it. And when I came into the schoolroom there was Robert down on the floor and Walter attacking him with the poker, he'd practically knocked him out—and I simply had all I could do to drag Walter off him. He kept repeating. 'He did it on purpose—he did it on purpose. I'm going to kill him.' You know, I was quite frightened. Boys feel things so intensely, do they not?"

"Yes, indeed," said Miss Marple. Her eyes were thoughtful.

She reverted to the former topic.

"And so the engagement was finally broken off. What happened to the girl?"

"She came home. Had another love affair on the way back, and this time married the man. A widower with one child. A man who has just lost his wife is always a fair target—helpless, poor fellow. She married him and they settled down here in a house the other

side of the town—St. Catherine's—next door to the hospital. It didn't last, of course—she left him within the year. Went off with some man or other."

"Dear, dear!" Miss Marple shook her head. "What a lucky escape your son had!"

"That's what I always tell him."

"And did he give up tea-planting because his health wouldn't stand it?"

A slight frown appeared on Mrs. Fane's brow.

"The life wasn't really congenial to him," she said. "He came home about six months after the girl did."

"It must have been rather awkward," ventured Miss Marple. "If the young woman was actually living here. In the same town—"

"Walter was wonderful," said Walter's mother. "He behaved exactly as though nothing had happened. I should have thought myself (indeed I said so at the time) that it would be advisable to make a clean break—after all, meetings could only be awkward for both parties. But Walter insisted on going out of his way to be friendly. He used to call at the house in the most informal fashion, and play with the child—Rather curious, by the way, the child's come back here. She's grown-up now, with a husband. Came into Walter's office to make her will the other day. Reed, that's her name now. Reed."

"Mr. and Mrs. Reed! I know them. Such a nice unaffected young couple. Fancy that now—and she is actually the child—"

"The first wife's child. The first wife died out in India. Poor Major—I've forgotten his name—Hallway—something like that—was completely broken up when that minx left him. Why the worst women should always attract the best men is something hard to fathom!"

"And the young man who was originally entangled with her? A clerk, I think you said, in your son's office. What happened to him?"

"Did very well for himself. He runs a lot of those Coach Tours. Daffodil Coaches. Afflick's Daffodil Coaches. Painted bright yellow. It's a vulgar world nowadays."

"Afflick?" said Miss Marple.

"Jackie Afflick. A nasty pushing fellow. Always determined to get on, I imagine. Probably why he took up with Helen Kennedy in the first place. Doctor's daughter and all that—thought it would better his social position."

"And this Helen has never come back again to Dillmouth?"

"No. Good riddance. Probably gone completely to the bad by now. I was sorry for Dr. Kennedy. Not his fault. His father's second wife was a fluffy little thing, years younger than he was. Helen inherited her wild blood from her, I expect. I've always thought—"

Mrs. Fane broke off.

"Here is Walter." Her mother's ear had distinguished certain well-known sounds in the hall. The door opened and Walter Fane came in.

"This is Miss Marple, my son. Ring the bell, son, and we'll have some fresh tea."

"Don't bother, Mother. I had a cup."

"Of course we will have fresh tea—and some scones, Beatrice," she added to the parlourmaid who had appeared to take the teapot.

"Yes, madam."

With a slow, likeable smile Walter Fane said: "My mother spoils me, I'm afraid."

Miss Marple studied him as she made a polite rejoinder.

A gentle quiet-looking person, slightly diffident and apologetic in manner—colourless. A very nondescript personality. The devoted type of young man whom women ignore and only marry because the man they love does not return their affection. Walter, who is Always There. Poor Walter, his mother's darling ... Little Walter Fane who had attacked his older brother with a poker and had tried to kill him....

Miss Marple wondered.

Seventeen

RICHARD ERSKINE

I

Anstell Manor had a bleak aspect. It was a white house, set against a background of bleak hills. A winding drive led up through dense shrubbery.

Giles said to Gwenda, "Why have we come? What can we possibly say?"

"We've got it worked out."

"Yes—so far as that goes. It's lucky that Miss Marple's cousin's sister's aunt's brother-in-law or whatever it was lives near here ... But it's a far step from a social call to asking your host about his bygone love affairs."

"And such a long time ago. Perhaps—perhaps he doesn't even remember her."

"Perhaps he doesn't. And perhaps there never was a love affair."

"Giles, are we making unutterable fools of ourselves?"

"I don't know ... Sometimes I feel that. I don't see why we're concerning ourselves with all this. What does it matter now?"

"So long after ... Yes, I know ... Miss Marple and Dr. Kennedy both said, "Leave it alone." Why don't we, Giles? What makes us go on? Is it *her*?"

"Her?"

"Helen. Is that why I remember? Is my childish memory the only link she's got with life—with truth? Is it Helen who's using me—and you—so that the truth will be known?"

"You mean, because she died a violent death—?"

"Yes. They say—books say—that sometimes they can't rest...."

"I think you're being fanciful, Gwenda."

"Perhaps I am. Anyway, we can—choose. This is only a social call. There's no need for it to be anything more—unless we want it to be —"

Giles shook his head.

"We shall go on. We can't help ourselves."

"Yes—you're right. All the same, Giles, I think I'm rather frightened—"

II

"Looking for a house, are you?" said Major Erskine.

He offered Gwenda a plate of sandwiches. Gwenda took one, looking up at him. Richard Erskine was a small man, five foot nine or so. His hair was grey and he had tired, rather thoughtful eyes. His voice was low and pleasant with a slight drawl. There was nothing remarkable about him, but he was, Gwenda thought, definitely attractive ... He was actually not nearly as good-looking as Walter Fane, but whereas most women would pass Fane without a second glance, they would not pass Erskine. Fane was nondescript. Erskine, in spite of his quietness, had personality. He talked of ordinary things in an ordinary manner, but there was *something*—that something that women are quick to recognize and to which they react in a purely female way. Almost unconsciously Gwenda adjusted her skirt, tweaked at a side curl, retouched her lips. Nineteen years ago Helen Kennedy could have fallen in love with this man. Gwenda was quite sure of that.

She looked up to find her hostess's eyes full upon her, and involuntarily she flushed. Mrs. Erskine was talking to Giles, but she was watching Gwenda and her glance was both appraising and

suspicious. Janet Erskine was a tall woman, her voice was deep—almost as deep as a man's. Her build was athletic, she wore a well-cut tweed with big pockets. She looked older than her husband, but, Gwenda decided, well might not be so. There was a certain haggardness about her face. An unhappy, hungry woman, thought Gwenda.

I bet she gives him Hell, she said to herself.

Aloud she continued the conversation.

"House-hunting is terribly discouraging," she said. "House agents' descriptions are always glowing—and then, when you actually get there, the place is quite unspeakable."

"You're thinking of settling down in this neighbourhood?"

"Well—this is one of the neighbourhoods we thought of. Really because it's near Hadrian's Wall. Giles has always been fascinated by Hadrian's Wall. You see—it sounds rather odd, I expect, to you—but almost anywhere in England is the same to us. My own home is in New Zealand and I haven't any ties here. And Giles was taken in by different aunts for different holidays and so hasn't any particular ties either. The one thing we don't want is to be too near London. We want the real country."

Erskine smiled.

"You'll certainly find it real country all round here. It's completely isolated. Our neighbours are few and far between."

Gwenda thought she detected an undercurrent of bleakness in the pleasant voice. She had a sudden glimpse of a lonely life—of short dark winter days with the wind whistling in the chimneys—the curtains drawn—shut in—shut in with that woman with the hungry, unhappy eyes—and neighbours few and far between.

Then the vision faded. It was summer again, with the french windows open to the garden—with the scent of roses and the sounds of summer drifting in.

She said: "This is an old house, isn't it?"

Erskine nodded.

"Queen Anne. My people have lived here for nearly three hundred years."

"It's a lovely house. You must be very proud of it."

"It's rather a shabby house now. Taxation makes it difficult to keep anything up properly. However, now the children are out in the world, the worst strain is over."

"How many children have you?"

"Two boys. One's in the Army. The other's just come down from Oxford. He's going into a publishing firm."

His glance went to the mantelpiece and Gwenda's eyes followed his. There was a photograph there of two boys—presumably about eighteen and nineteen, taken a few years ago, she judged. There was pride and affection in his expression.

"They're good lads," he said, "though I say it myself."

"They look awfully nice," said Gwenda.

"Yes," said Erskine. "I think it's worth it—really. Making sacrifices for one's children, I mean," he added in answer to Gwenda's enquiring look.

"I suppose—often—one has to give up a good deal," said Gwenda.

"A great deal sometimes...."

Again she caught a dark undercurrent, but Mrs. Erskine broke in, saying in her deep authoritative voice, "And you are really looking for a house in this part of the world? I'm afraid I don't know of anything at all suitable round here."

And wouldn't tell me if you did, thought Gwenda, with a faint spurt of mischief. That foolish old woman is actually jealous, she thought. Jealous because I'm talking to her husband and because I'm young and attractive!

"It depends how much of a hurry you're in," said Erskine.

"No hurry at all really," said Giles cheerfully. "We want to be sure of finding something we really like. At the moment we've got a house in Dillmouth—on the south coast."

Major Erskine turned away from the tea table. He went to get a cigarette box from a table by the window.

"Dillmouth," said Mrs. Erskine. Her voice was expressionless. Her eyes watched the back of her husband's head.

"Pretty little place," said Giles. "Do you know it at all?"

There was a moment's silence, then Mrs. Erskine said in that same expressionless voice, "We spent a few weeks there one summer—many, many years ago. We didn't care for it—found it too relaxing."

"Yes," said Gwenda. "That's just what we find. Giles and I feel we'd prefer more bracing air."

Erskine came back with the cigarettes. He offered the box to Gwenda.

"You'll find it bracing enough round here," he said. There was a certain grimness in his voice.

Gwenda looked up at him as he lighted her cigarette for her.

"Do you remember Dillmouth at all well?" she asked artlessly.

His lips twitched in what she guessed to be a sudden spasm of pain. In a noncommittal voice he answered, "Quite well, I think. We stayed—let me see—at the Royal George—no, Royal Clarence Hotel."

"Oh yes, that's the nice old-fashioned one. Our house is quite near there. Hillside it's called, but it used to be called St.—St.—Mary's, was it, Giles?"

"St. Catherine's," said Giles.

This time there was no mistaking the reaction. Erskine turned sharply away, Mrs. Erskine's cup clattered on her saucer.

"Perhaps," she said abruptly, "you would like to see the garden."

"Oh yes, please."

They went out through the french windows. It was a well-kept, well-stocked garden, with a long border and flagged walks. The care of it was principally Major Erskine's, so Gwenda gathered. Talking to her about roses, about herbaceous plants, Erskine's dark, sad face lit up. Gardening was clearly his enthusiasm.

When they finally took their leave, and were driving away in the car, Giles asked hesitantly, "Did you—did you drop it?"

Gwenda nodded.

"By the second clump of delphiniums." She looked down at her finger and twisted the wedding ring on it absently.

"And supposing you never find it again?"

"Well, it's not my real engagement ring. I wouldn't risk *that*."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"I'm very sentimental about that ring. Do you remember what you said when you put it on my finger? A green emerald because I was an intriguing green-eyed little cat."

"I dare say," said Giles dispassionately, "that our peculiar form of endearments might sound odd to someone of, say, Miss Marple's generation."

"I wonder what she's doing now, the dear old thing. Sitting in the sun on the front?"

"Up to something—if I know her! Poking here, or prying there, or asking a few questions. I hope she doesn't ask too many one of these days."

"It's quite a natural thing to do—for an old lady, I mean. It's not as noticeable as though we did it."

Giles's face sobered again.

"That's why I don't like—" He broke off. "It's you having to do it that I mind. I can't bear the feeling that I sit at home and send you out to do the dirty work."

Gwenda ran a finger down his worried cheek.

"I know, darling, I know. But you must admit, it's tricky. It's impertinent to catechize a man about his past love affairs—but it's the kind of impertinence a woman can just get away with—if she's clever. And I mean to be clever."

"I know you're clever. But if Erskine is the man we are looking for —"

Gwenda said meditatively: "I don't think he is."

"You mean we're barking up the wrong tree?"

"Not entirely. I think he was in love with Helen all right. But he's *nice*, Giles, awfully nice. Not the strangling kind at all."

"You haven't an awful lot of experience of the strangling kind, have you, Gwenda?"

"No. But I've got my woman's instinct."

"I dare say that's what a strangler's victims often say. No, Gwenda, joking apart, do be careful, won't you?"

"Of course. I feel so sorry for the poor man—that dragon of a wife. I bet he's had a miserable life."

"She's an odd woman ... Rather alarming somehow."

"Yes, quite sinister. Did you see how she watched me all the time?"

"I hope the plan will go off all right."

III

The plan was put into execution the following morning.

Giles, feeling, as he put it, rather like a shady detective in a divorce suit, took up his position at a point of vantage overlooking the front gate of Anstell Manor. About half past eleven he reported to Gwenda that all had gone well. Mrs. Erskine had left in a small Austin car, clearly bound for the market town three miles away. The coast was clear.

Gwenda drove up to the front door and rang the bell. She asked for Mrs. Erskine and was told she was out. She then asked for Major Erskine. Major Erskine was in the garden. He straightened up from operations on a flowerbed as Gwenda approached.

"I'm so sorry to bother you," said Gwenda. "But I think I must have dropped a ring somewhere out here yesterday. I know I had it when we came out from tea. It's rather loose, but I couldn't bear to lose it because it's my engagement ring."

The hunt was soon under way. Gwenda retraced her steps of yesterday, tried to recollect where she had stood and what flowers she had touched. Presently the ring came to light near a large clump of delphiniums. Gwenda was profuse in her relief.

"And now can I get you a drink, Mrs. Reed? Beer? A glass of sherry? Or would you prefer coffee, or something like that?"

"I don't want anything—no, really. Just a cigarette—thanks."

She sat down on a bench and Erskine sat down beside her.

They smoked for a few minutes in silence. Gwenda's heart was beating rather fast. No two ways about it. She had to take the plunge.

"I want to ask you something," she said. "Perhaps you'll think it terribly impertinent of me. But I want to know dreadfully—and

you're probably the only person who could tell me. I believe you were once in love with my stepmother."

He turned an astonished face towards her.

"With your stepmother?"

"Yes. Helen Kennedy. Helen Halliday as she became afterwards."

"I see." The man beside her was very quiet. His eyes looked out across the sunlit lawn unseeingly. The cigarette between his fingers smouldered. Quiet as he was, Gwenda sensed a turmoil within that taut figure, the arm of which touched her own.

As though answering some question he had put to himself, Erskine said: "Letters, I suppose."

Gwenda did not answer.

"I never wrote her many—two, perhaps three. She said she had destroyed them—but women never do destroy letters, do they? And so they came into *your* hands. And you want to know."

"I want to know more about her. I was—very fond of her. Although I was such a small child when—she went away."

"She went away?"

"Didn't you know?"

His eyes, candid and surprised, met hers.

"I've no news of her," he said, "since—since that summer in Dillmouth."

"Then you don't know where she is now?"

"How should I? It's years ago—years. All finished and done with. Forgotten."

"Forgotten?"

He smiled rather bitterly.

"No, perhaps not forgotten ... You're very perceptive, Mrs. Reed. But tell me about her. She's not—dead, is she?"

A small cold wind sprang up suddenly, chilled their necks and passed.

"I don't know if she is dead or not," said Gwenda. "I don't know anything about her. I thought perhaps *you* might know?"

She went on as he shook his head: "You see, she went away from Dillmouth that summer. Quite suddenly one evening. Without telling anyone. And she never came back."

"And you thought I might have heard from her?"

"Yes."

He shook his head.

"No. Never a word. But surely her brother—doctor chap—lives in Dillmouth. He must know. Or is he dead too?"

"No, he's alive. But he doesn't know either. You see—they all thought she went away—with somebody."

He turned his head to look at her. Deep sorrowful eyes.

"They thought she went away with *me*?"

"Well, it was a possibility."

"Was it a possibility? I don't think so. It was never that. Or were we fools—conscientious fools who passed up our chance of happiness?"

Gwenda did not speak. Again Erskine turned his head and looked at her.

"Perhaps you'd better hear about it. There isn't really very much to hear. But I wouldn't like you to misjudge Helen. We met on a boat going out to India. One of the children had been ill, and my wife was following on the next boat. Helen was going out to marry a man in the Woods and Forests or something of that kind. She didn't love him. He was just an old friend, nice and kind, and she wanted to get away from home where she wasn't happy. We fell in love."

He paused.

"Always a bald kind of statement. But it wasn't—I want to make that quite clear—just the usual shipboard love affair. It was serious. We were both—well—shattered by it. And there wasn't anything to be done. I couldn't let Janet and the children down. Helen saw it the same way as I did. If it had been only Janet—but there were the boys. It was all hopeless. We agreed to say good-bye and try and forget."

He laughed, a short mirthless laugh.

"Forget? I never forgot—not for one moment. Life was just a living Hell. I couldn't stop thinking about Helen....

"Well, she didn't marry the chap she had been going out to marry. At the last moment, she just couldn't face it. She went home to England and on the way home she met this other man—your

father, I suppose. She wrote to me a couple of months later telling me what she had done. He was very unhappy over the loss of his wife, she said, and there was a child. She thought that she could make him happy and that it was the best thing to do. She wrote from Dillmouth. About eight months later my father died and I came into this place. I sent in my papers and came back to England. We wanted a few weeks' holiday until we could get into this house. My wife suggested Dillmouth. Some friend had mentioned it as a pretty place and quiet. She didn't know, of course, about Helen. Can you imagine the temptation? To see her again. To see what this man she had married was like."

There was a short silence, then Erskine said:

"We came and stayed at the Royal Clarence. It was a mistake. Seeing Helen again was Hell ... She seemed happy enough, on the whole—I didn't know whether she cared still, or whether she didn't ... Perhaps she'd got over it. My wife, I think, suspected something ... She's—she's a very jealous woman—always has been."

He added brusquely, "That's all there is to it. We left Dillmouth—"

"On August 17th," said Gwenda.

"Was that the date? Probably. I can't remember exactly."

"It was a Saturday," said Gwenda.

"Yes, you're right. I remember Janet said it might be a crowded day to travel north—but I don't think it was...."

"Please try and remember, Major Erskine. When was the last time you saw my stepmother—Helen?"

He smiled, a gentle, tired smile.

"I don't need to try very hard. I saw her the evening before we left. On the beach. I'd strolled down there after dinner—and she was there. There was no one else about. I walked up with her to her house. We went through the garden—"

"What time?"

"I don't know ... Nine o'clock, I suppose."

"And you said good-bye?"

"And we said good-bye." Again he laughed. "Oh, not the kind of good-bye you're thinking of. It was very brusque and curt. Helen

said: 'Please go away now. Go quickly. I'd rather not—' She stopped then—and I—I just went."

"Back to the hotel?"

"Yes, yes, eventually. I walked a long way first—right out into the country."

Gwenda said, "It's difficult with dates—after so many years. But I think that that was the night she went away—and didn't come back."

"I see. And as I and my wife left the next day, people gossiped and said she'd gone away with me. Charming minds people have."

"Anyway," said Gwenda bluntly, "she didn't go away with you?"

"Good Lord, no, there was never any question of such a thing."

"Then why do you think," asked Gwenda, "that she went away?"

Erskine frowned. His manner changed, became interested.

"I see," he said. "That is a bit of a problem. She didn't—er—leave any explanation?"

Gwenda considered. Then she voiced her own belief.

"I don't think she left any word at all. Do you think she went away with someone else?"

"No, of course she didn't."

"You seem rather sure about that."

"I am sure."

"Then why did she go?"

"If she went off—suddenly—like that—I can only see one possible reason. She was running *away* from me."

"From you?"

"Yes. She was afraid, perhaps, that I'd try to see her again—that I'd pester her. She must have seen that I was still—crazy about her ... Yes, that must have been it."

"It doesn't explain," said Gwenda, "why she never came back. Tell me, did Helen say anything to you about my father? That she was worried about him? Or—or afraid of him? Anything like that?"

"Afraid of him? Why? Oh I see, you thought he might have been jealous. Was he a jealous man?"

"I don't know. He died when I was a child."

"Oh, I see. No—looking back—he always seemed normal and pleasant. He was fond of Helen, proud of her—I don't think more."

No, I was the one who was jealous of *him*."

"They seemed to you reasonably happy together?"

"Yes, they did. I was glad—and yet, at the same time, it hurt, to see it ... No, Helen never discussed him with me. As I tell you, we were hardly ever alone, never confidential together. But now that you have mentioned it, I do remember thinking that Helen was worried...."

"Worried?"

"Yes. I thought perhaps it was because of my wife—" He broke off. "But it was more than that."

He looked again sharply at Gwenda.

"Was she afraid of her husband? Was he jealous of other men where she was concerned?"

"You seem to think not."

"Jealousy is a very queer thing. It can hide itself sometimes so that you'd never suspect it." He gave a short quick shiver. "But it can be frightening—very frightening...."

"Another thing I would like to know—" Gwenda broke off.

A car had come up the drive. Major Erskine said, "Ah, my wife has come back from shopping."

In a moment, as it were, he became a different person. His tone was easy yet formal, his face expressionless. A slight tremor betrayed that he was nervous.

Mrs. Erskine came striding round the corner of the house.

Her husband went towards her.

"Mrs. Reed dropped one of her rings in the garden yesterday," he said.

Mrs. Erskine said abruptly: "Indeed?"

"Good morning," said Gwenda. "Yes, luckily I have found it."

"That's very fortunate."

"Oh, it is. I should have hated to lose it. Well, I must be going."

Mrs. Erskine said nothing. Major Erskine said: "I'll see you to your car."

He started to follow Gwenda along the terrace. His wife's voice came sharply.

"Richard. If Mrs. Reed will excuse you, there is a very important call—"

Gwenda said hastily, "Oh, that's quite all right. Please don't bother."

She ran quickly along the terrace and round the side of the house to the drive.

Then she stopped. Mrs. Erskine had drawn up her car in such a way that Gwenda doubted whether she could get her own car past and down the drive. She hesitated, then slowly retraced her steps to the terrace.

Just short of the french windows she stopped dead. Mrs. Erskine's voice, deep and resonant, came distinctly to her ears.

"I don't care what you say. You arranged it—arranged it yesterday. You fixed it up with that girl to come here whilst I was in Daith. You're always the same—any pretty girl. I won't stand it, I tell you. I won't stand it."

Erskine's voice cut in—quiet, almost despairing.

"Sometimes, Janet, I really think you're insane."

"I'm not the one who's insane. It's *you*! You can't leave women alone."

"You know that's not true, Janet."

"It *is* true! Even long ago—in the place where this girl comes from—Dillmouth. Do you dare tell me that you weren't in love with that yellow-haired Halliday woman?"

"Can you never forget anything? Why must you go on harping on these things? You simply work yourself up and—"

"It's you! You break my heart ... I won't stand it, I tell you! I won't stand it! Planning assassinations! Laughing at me behind my back! You don't care for me—you've never cared for me. I'll kill myself! I'll throw myself over a cliff—I wish I were dead—"

"Janet—Janet—for God's sake...."

The deep voice had broken. The sound of passionate sobbing floated out into the summer air.

On tip-toe Gwenda crept away and round into the drive again. She cogitated for a moment, then rang the front doorbell.

"I wonder," she said, "if there is anyone who—er—could move this car. I don't think I can get out."

The servant went into the house. Presently a man came round from what had been the stable yard. He touched his cap to Gwenda, got into the Austin and drove it into the yard. Gwenda got into her car and drove rapidly back to the hotel where Giles was waiting for her.

"What a time you've been," he greeted her. "Get anything?"

"Yes. I know all about it now. It's really rather pathetic. He was terribly in love with Helen."

She narrated the events of the morning.

"I really think," she ended, "that Mrs. Erskine is a bit insane. She sounded quite mad. I see now what he meant by jealousy. It must be awful to feel like that. Anyway, we know now that Erskine wasn't the man who went away with Helen, and that he knows nothing about her death. She was alive that evening when he left her."

"Yes," said Giles. "At least—that's what he says."

Gwenda looked indignant.

"That," repeated Giles firmly, "is what he *says*."

Eighteen

BINDWEED

Miss Marple bent down on the terrace outside the french window and dealt with some insidious bindweed. It was only a minor victory, since beneath the surface the bindweed remained in possession as always. But at least the delphiniums knew a temporary deliverance.

Mrs. Cocker appeared in the drawing room window.

"Excuse me, madam, but Dr. Kennedy has called. He is anxious to know how long Mr. and Mrs. Reed will be away, and I told him I couldn't take it upon myself to say exactly, but that you might know. Shall I ask him to come out here?"

"Oh. Oh, yes please, Mrs. Cocker."

Mrs. Cocker reappeared shortly afterwards with Dr. Kennedy.

Rather flutteringly, Miss Marple introduced herself.

"—and I arranged with dear Gwenda that I would come round and do a little weeding while she was away. I think, you know, that my young friends are being imposed upon by their jobbing gardener, Foster. He comes twice a week, drinks a great many cups of tea, does a lot of talking, and not—so far as I can see—very much work."

"Yes," said Dr. Kennedy rather absently. "Yes. They're all alike—all alike."

Miss Marple looked at him appraisingly. He was an older man than she had thought from the Reeds' description of him. Prematurely old, she guessed. He looked, too, both worried and unhappy. He

stood there, his fingers caressing the long, pugnacious line of his jaw.

"They've gone away," he said. "Do you know for how long?"

"Oh, not for long. They have gone to visit some friends in the North of England. Young people seem to me so restless, always dashing about here and there."

"Yes," said Dr. Kennedy. "Yes—that's true enough."

He paused and then said rather diffidently, "Young Giles Reed wrote and asked me for some papers—er—letters, if I could find them—"

He hesitated, and Miss Marple said quietly, "Your sister's letters?"

He shot her a quick, shrewd glance.

"So—you're in their confidence, are you? A relation?"

"Only a friend," said Miss Marple. "I have advised them to the best of my capacity. But people seldom take advice ... A pity, perhaps, but there it is...."

"What was your advice?" he asked curiously.

"To let sleeping murder lie," said Miss Marple firmly.

Dr. Kennedy sat down heavily on an uncomfortable rustic seat.

"That's not badly put," he said. "I'm fond of Gwennie. She was a nice small child. I should judge that she's grown up to be a nice young woman. I'm afraid that she's heading for trouble."

"There are so many kinds of trouble," said Miss Marple.

"Eh? Yes—yes—true enough."

He sighed. Then he said, "Giles Reed wrote and asked me if I could let him have my sister's letters, written after she left here—and also some authentic specimen of her handwriting." He shot a keen glance at her. "You see what that means?"

Miss Marple nodded. "I think so."

"They're harking back to the idea that Kelvin Halliday, when he said he had strangled his wife, was speaking neither more nor less than the truth. They believe that the letters my sister Helen wrote after she went away weren't written by her at all—that they were forgeries. They believe that she never left this house alive."

Miss Marple said gently, "And you are not, by now, so very sure yourself?"

"I was at the time." Kennedy still stared ahead of him. "It seemed absolutely clear. Pure hallucination on Kelvin's part. There was no body, a suitcase and clothes were taken—what else could I think?"

"And your sister had been—recently—rather—ahem—" Miss Marple coughed delicately—"interested in—in a certain gentleman?"

Dr. Kennedy looked at her. There was deep pain in his eyes.

"I loved my sister," he said, "but I have to admit that, with Helen, there was always some man in the offing. There are women who are made that way—they can't help it."

"It all seemed clear to you at the time," said Miss Marple. "But it does not seem so clear now. Why?"

"Because," said Kennedy with frankness, "it seems incredible to me that, if Helen is still alive, she has not communicated with me all these years. In the same way, if she is dead, it is equally strange that I have not been notified of the fact. Well—"

He got up. He took a packet from his pocket.

"Here is the best I can do. The first letter I received from Helen I must have destroyed. I can find no trace of it. But I did keep the second one—the one that gave the poste restante address. And here, for comparison, is the only bit of Helen's handwriting I've been able to find. It's a list of bulbs, etc., for planting. A copy that she had kept of some order. The handwriting of the order and the letter look alike to me, but then I'm no expert. I'll leave them here for Giles and Gwenda when they return. It's probably not worth forwarding."

"Oh no, I believe they expect to return tomorrow—or the next day."

The doctor nodded. He stood, looking along the terrace, his eyes still absent. He said suddenly, "You know what's worrying me? If Kelvin Halliday did kill his wife, he must have concealed the body or got rid of it in some way—and that means (I don't know what else it can mean) that his story to me was a cleverly made-up tale—that he'd already hidden a suitcase full of clothes to give colour to the idea that Helen had gone away—that he'd even arranged for letters to arrive from abroad ... It means, in fact, that it was a cold-blooded premeditated murder. Little Gwennie was a nice child. It would be

bad enough for her to have a father who's a paranoiac, but it's ten times worse to have a father who's a deliberate murderer."

He swung round to the open window. Miss Marple arrested his departure by a swift question.

"Who was your sister afraid of, Dr. Kennedy?"

He turned back to her and stared.

"Afraid of? No one, as far as I know."

"I only wondered ... Pray excuse me if I am asking indiscreet questions—but there was a young man, wasn't there?—I mean, some entanglement—when she was very young. Somebody called *Afflick*, I believe."

"Oh, that. Silly business most girls go through. An undesirable young fellow, shifty—and of course not her class, not her class at all. He got into trouble here afterwards."

"I just wondered if he could have been—revengeful."

Dr. Kennedy smiled rather sceptically.

"Oh, I don't think it went deep. Anyway, as I say, he got into trouble here, and left the place for good."

"What sort of trouble?"

"Oh, nothing criminal. Just indiscretions. Blabbed about his employer's affairs."

"And his employer was Mr. Walter Fane?"

Dr. Kennedy looked a little surprised.

"Yes—yes—now you say so, I remember, he did work in Fane and Watchman's. Not articled. Just an ordinary clerk."

Just an ordinary clerk? Miss Marple wondered, as she stooped again to the bindweed, after Dr. Kennedy had gone....

Nineteen

MR. KIMBLE SPEAKS

"I dunno, I'm sure," said Mrs. Kimble.

Her husband, driven into speech by what was neither more nor less than an outrage, became vocal.

He shoved his cup forward.

"What you thinking of, Lily?" he demanded. *"No sugar!"*

Mrs. Kimble hastily remedied the outrage, and then proceeded to elaborate on her own theme.

"Thinking about this advert, I am," she said. "Lily Abbott, it says, plain as plain. And 'formerly house-parlourmaid at St. Catherine's Dillmouth.' That's me, all right."

"Ar," agreed Mr. Kimble.

"After all these years—you must agree it's odd, Jim."

"Ar," said Mr. Kimble.

"Well, what am I going to do, Jim?"

"Leave it be."

"Suppose there's money in it?"

There was a gurgling sound as Mr. Kimble drained his teacup to fortify himself for the mental effort of embarking on a long speech. He pushed his cup along and prefaced his remarks with a laconic: "More." Then he got under way.

"You went on a lot at one time about what 'appened at St. Catherine's. I didn't take much account of it—reckoned as it was

mostly foolishness—women's chatter. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe something did 'appen. If so it's police business and you don't want to be mixed up in it. All over and done with, ain't it? You leave well alone, my girl."

"All very well to say that. It may be money as has been left me in a will. Maybe Mrs. Halliday's alive all the time and now she's dead and left me something in 'er will."

"Left you something in 'er will? What for? Ar!" said Mr. Kimble, reverting to his favourite monosyllable to express scorn.

"Even if it's police ... You know, Jim, there's a big reward sometimes for anyone as can give information to catch a murderer."

"And what could you give? All you know you made up yourself in your head!"

"That's what you say. But I've been thinking—"

"Ar," said Mr. Kimble disgustedly.

"Well, I have. Ever since I saw that first piece in the paper. Maybe I got things a bit wrong. That Layonee, she was a bit stupid like all foreigners, couldn't understand proper what you said to her—and her English was something awful. If she didn't mean what I thought she meant ... I've been trying to remember the name of that man ... Now if it was him she saw ... Remember that picture I told you about? *Secret Lover*. Ever so exciting. They tracked him down in the end through his car. Fifty thousand dollars he paid the garage man to forget he filled up with petrol that night. Dunno what that is in pounds ... And the other one was there, too, and the husband crazy with jealousy. All mad about her, they were. And in the end—"

Mr. Kimble pushed back his chair with a grating sound. He rose to his feet with slow and ponderous authority. Preparatory to leaving the kitchen, he delivered an ultimatum—the ultimatum of a man who, though usually inarticulate, had a certain shrewdness.

"You leave the whole thing alone, my girl," he said. "Or else, likely as not, you'll be sorry."

He went into the scullery, put on his boots (Lily was particular about her kitchen floor) and went out.

Lily sat on at the table, her sharp foolish little brain working things out. Of course she couldn't exactly go against what her

husband said, but all the same ... Jim was so hidebound, so stick-in-the-mud. She wished there was somebody else she could ask. Someone who would know all about rewards and the police and what it all meant. Pity to turn up a chance of good money.

That wireless set ... the home perm ... that cherry-coloured coat in Russell's (ever so smart)... even, maybe, a whole Jacobean suite for the sitting room....

Eager, greedy, shortsighted, she went on dreaming ... What exactly *had* Layonee said all those years ago?

Then an idea came to her. She got up and fetched the bottle of ink, the pen, and a pad of writing paper.

"Know what I'll do," she said to herself. "I'll write to the doctor, Mrs. Halliday's brother. He'll tell me what I ought to do—if he's alive still, that is. Anyway, it's on my conscience I never told him about Layonee—or about that car."

There was silence for some time apart from the laborious scratching of Lily's pen. It was very seldom that she wrote a letter and she found the composition of it a considerable effort.

However it was done at last and she put it into an envelope and sealed it up.

But she felt less satisfied than she had expected. Ten to one the doctor was dead or had gone away from Dillmouth.

Was there anyone else?

What was the name, now, of that fellow?

If she could only remember *that*....

Twenty

THE GIRL HELEN

Giles and Gwenda had just finished breakfast on the morning after their return from Northumberland when Miss Marple was announced. She came rather apologetically.

"I'm afraid this is a very early call. Not a thing I am in the habit of doing. But there was something I wanted to explain."

"We're delighted to see you," said Giles, pulling out a chair for her. "Do have a cup of coffee."

"Oh no, no, thank you—nothing at all. I have breakfasted *most* adequately. Now let me explain. I came in whilst you were away, as you kindly said I might, to do a little weeding—"

"Angelic of you," said Gwenda.

"And it really did strike me that two days a week is not quite enough for this garden. In any case I think Foster is taking advantage of you. Too much tea and too much talk. I found out that he couldn't manage another day himself, so I took it upon myself to engage another man just for one day a week—Wednesdays—today, in fact."

Giles looked at her curiously. He was a little surprised. It might be kindly meant, but Miss Marple's action savoured, very faintly, of interference. And interference was unlike her.

He said slowly: "Foster's far too old, I know, for really hard work."

"I'm afraid, Mr. Reed, that Manning is even older. Seventy-five, he tells me. But you see, I thought employing him, just for a few odd days, might be quite an advantageous move, because he used, many years ago, to be employed at Dr. Kennedy's. The name of the young man Helen got engaged to was Afflick, by the way."

"Miss Marple," said Giles, "I maligned you in thought. You are a genius. You know I've got those specimens of Helen's handwriting from Kennedy?"

"I know. I was here when he brought them."

"I'm posting them off today. I got the address of a good handwriting expert last week."

"Let's go into the garden and see Manning," said Gwenda.

Manning was a bent, crabbed-looking old man with a rheumy and slightly cunning eye. The pace at which he was raking a path accelerated noticeably as his employers drew near.

"Morning, sir. Morning, m'am. The lady said as how you could do with a little extra help of a Wednesday. I'll be pleased. Shameful neglected, this place looks."

"I'm afraid the garden's been allowed to run down for some years."

"It has that. Remember it, I do, in Mrs. Findeyson's time. A picture it were, then. Very fond of her garden she was, Mrs. Findeyson."

Giles leaned easily against a roller. Gwenda snipped off some rose heads. Miss Marple, retreating a little up stage, bent to the bindweed. Old Manning leant on his rake. All was set for a leisurely morning discussion of old times and gardening in the good old days.

"I suppose you know most of the gardens round here," said Giles encouragingly.

"Ar, I know this place moderate well, I do. And the fancies people went in for. Mrs. Yule, up at Niagra, she had a yew hedge used to be clipped like a squirrel. Silly, I thought it. Peacocks is one thing and squirrels is another. Then Colonel Lampard, he was a great man for begonias—lovely beds of begonias he used to have. Bedding out now, that's going out of fashion. I wouldn't like to tell you how often I've had to fill up beds in the front lawns and turf 'em over in the last

six years. Seems people ain't got no eye for geraniums and a nice bit of lobelia edging no more."

"You worked at Dr. Kennedy's, didn't you?"

"Ar. Long time ago, that were. Must have been 1920 and on. He's moved now—given up. Young Dr. Brent's up at Crosby Lodge now. Funny ideas, he has—little white tablets and so on. Vittapins he calls 'em."

"I suppose you remember Miss Helen Kennedy, the doctor's sister."

"Ar, I remember Miss Helen right enough. Prettymaid, she was, with her long yellow hair. The doctor set a lot of store by her. Come back and lived in this very house here, she did, after she was married. Army gentleman from India."

"Yes," said Gwenda. "We know."

"Ar. I did 'ear—Saturday night it was—as you and your 'usband was some kind of relations. Pretty as a picter, Miss Helen was, when she first come back from school. Full of fun, too. Wanting to go everywhere—dances and tennis and all that. 'Ad to mark the tennis court, I 'ad—hadn't been used for nigh twenty years, I'd say. And the shrubs overgrowing it cruel. 'Ad to cut 'em back, I did. *And* get a lot of whitewash and mark out the lines. Lot of work it made—and in the end hardly played on. Funny thing I always thought that was."

"What was a funny thing?" asked Giles.

"Business with the tennis court. Someone come along one night—and cut it to ribbons. Just to ribbons it was. Spite, as you might say. That was what it was—nasty bit of spite."

"But who would do a thing like that?"

"That's what the doctor wanted to know. Proper put out about it he was—and I don't blame him. Just paid for it, he had. But none of us could tell who'd done it. We never did know. And he said he wasn't going to get another—quite right, too, for if it's spite one time, it would be spite again. But Miss Helen, she was rare and put out. She didn't have no luck, Miss Helen didn't. First that net—and then her bad foot."

"A bad foot?" asked Gwenda.

"Yes—fell over a scraper or somesuch and cut it. Not much more than a graze, it seemed, but it wouldn't heal. Fair worried about it, the doctor was. He was dressing it and treating it, but it didn't get well. I remember him saying 'I can't understand it—there must have been something septic—or some word like that—on that scraper. And anyway,' he says, 'what was the scraper doing out in the middle of the drive?' Because that's where it was when Miss Helen fell over it, walking home on a dark night. The poor maid, there she was, missing going to dances and sitting about with her foot up. Seemed as though there was nothing but bad luck for her."

The moment had come, Giles thought. He asked casually, "Do you remember somebody called Afflick?"

"Ar. You mean Jackie Afflick? As was in Fane and Watchman's office?"

"Yes. Wasn't he a friend of Miss Helen's?"

"That were just a bit of nonsense. Doctor put a stop to it and quite right too. He wasn't any class, Jackie Afflick. And he was the kind that's too sharp by half. Cut themselves in the end, that kind do. But he weren't here long. Got himself into hot water. Good riddance. Us don't want the likes of he in Dillmouth. Go and be smart somewhere else, that's what he were welcome to do."

Gwenda said: "Was he here when that tennis net was cut up?"

"Ar. I see what you're thinking. But he wouldn't do a senseless thing like that. He were smart, Jackie Afflick were. Whoever did that it was just spite."

"Was there anybody who had a down on Miss Helen? Who would be likely to feel spiteful?"

Old Manning chuckled softly.

"Some of the young ladies might have felt spiteful all right. Not a patch on Miss Helen to look at, most of 'em weren't. No, I'd say that was done just in foolishness. Some tramp with a grudge."

"Was Helen very upset about Jackie Afflick?" asked Gwenda.

"Don't think as Miss Helen cared much about any of the young fellows. Just liked to enjoy herself, that's all. Very devoted some of them were—young Mr. Walter Fane, for one. Used to follow her round like a dog."

"But she didn't care for him at all?"

"Not Miss Helen. Just laughed—that's all she did. Went abroad to foreign parts, he did. But he come back later. Top one in the firm he is now. Never married. I don't blame him. Women causes a lot of trouble in a man's life."

"Are you married?" asked Gwenda.

"Buried two, I have," said old Manning. "Ar, well, I can't complain. Smoke me pipe in peace where I likes now."

In the ensuing silence, he picked up his rake again.

Giles and Gwenda walked back up the path towards the house and Miss Marple desisting from her attack on bindweed joined them.

"Miss Marple," said Gwenda. "You don't look well. Is there anything—"

"It's nothing, my dear." The old lady paused for a moment before saying with a strange kind of insistence, "You know, I don't like that bit about the tennis net. Cutting it to ribbons. Even then—"

She stopped. Giles looked at her curiously.

"I don't quite understand—" he began.

"Don't you? It seems so horribly plain to me. But perhaps it's better that you shouldn't understand. And anyway—perhaps I am wrong. Now do tell me how you got on in Northumberland."

They gave her an account of their activities, and Miss Marple listened attentively.

"It's really all very sad," said Gwenda. "Quite tragic, in fact."

"Yes, indeed. Poor thing—poor thing."

"That's what I felt. How that man must suffer—"

"He? Oh yes. Yes, of course."

"But you meant—"

"Well, yes—I was thinking of *her*—of the wife. Probably very deeply in love with him, and he married her because she was suitable, or because he was sorry for her, or for one of those quite kindly and sensible reasons that men often have, and which are actually so terribly unfair."

"I know a hundred ways of love,

And each one makes the loved one rue,"

quoted Giles softly.

Miss Marple turned to him.

"Yes, that is so true. Jealousy, you know, is usually not an affair of *causes*. It is much more—how shall I say?—fundamental than that. Based on the knowledge that one's love is not returned. And so one goes on waiting, watching, expecting ... that the loved one will turn to someone else. Which, again, invariably happens. So this Mrs. Erskine has made life a hell for her husband, and he, without being able to help it, has made life a hell for her. But I think she has suffered most. And yet, you know, I dare say he is really quite fond of her."

"He can't be," cried Gwenda.

"Oh, my dear, you are very young. He has never left his wife, and that means something, you know."

"Because of the children. Because it was his duty."

"The children, perhaps," said Miss Marple. "But I must confess that gentlemen do not seem to me to have a great regard for duty in so far as their wives are concerned—public service is another matter."

Giles laughed.

"What a wonderful cynic you are, Miss Marple."

"Oh dear, Mr. Reed, I do hope not *that*. One always has *hope* for human nature."

"I still don't feel it can have been Walter Fane," said Gwenda thoughtfully. "And I'm sure it wasn't Major Erskine. In fact I *know* it wasn't."

"One's feelings are not always reliable guides," said Miss Marple. "The most unlikely people do things—quite a sensation there was in my own little village when the Treasurer of the Christmas Club was found to have put every penny of the funds on a horse. He disapproved of horse racing and indeed any kind of betting or gambling. His father had been a Turf Agent and had treated his mother very badly—so, intellectually speaking, he was quite sincere."

But he chanced one day to be motoring near Newmarket and saw some horses training. And then it all came over him—blood does tell.”

“The antecedents of both Walter Fane and Richard Erskine seem above suspicion,” said Giles gravely but with a slight amused twist to his mouth. “But then murder is by way of being an amateur crime.”

“The important thing is,” said Miss Marple, “that they were *there*. On the spot. Walter Fane was here in Dillmouth. Major Erskine, by his own account, must actually have been with Helen Halliday very shortly before her death—and he did not return to his hotel for some time that night.”

“But he was quite frank about it. He—”

Gwenda broke off. Miss Marple was looking at her very hard.

“I only want to emphasize,” said Miss Marple, “the importance of being *on the spot*.” She looked from one to the other of them.

Then she said, “I think you will have no trouble in finding out J. J. Afflick’s address. As proprietor of the Daffodil Coaches, it should be easy enough.”

Giles nodded. “I’ll get on to it. Probably in the telephone directory.” He paused. “You think we should go and see him?”

Miss Marple waited for a moment or two, then she said: “If you do—you must be very careful. Remember what that old gardener just said—Jackie Afflick is smart. Please—*please* be careful....”

Twenty-one

J. J. AFFLICK

I

J. J. Afflick, Daffodil Coaches, Devon & Dorset Tours, etc. had two numbers listed in the telephone book. An office address in Exeter and a private address on the outskirts of that town.

An appointment was made for the following day.

Just as Giles and Gwenda were leaving in the car, Mrs. Cocker ran out and gesticulated. Giles put on the brake and stopped.

"It's Dr. Kennedy on the telephone, sir."

Giles got out and ran back. He picked up the receiver.

"Giles Reed here."

"Morning. I've just received rather an odd letter. From a woman called Lily Kimble. I've been racking my brains to remember who she is. Thought of a patient first—that put me off the scent. But I rather fancy she must be a girl who was in service once at your house. House-parlourmaid at the time we know of. I'm almost sure her name was Lily, though I don't recollect her last name."

"There *was* a Lily. Gwenda remembers her. She tied a bow on the cat."

"Gwennie must have a very remarkable memory."

"Oh, she has."

"Well, I'd like to have a word with you about this letter—not over the phone. Will you be in if I come over?"

"We're just on our way to Exeter. We could drop in on you, if you prefer, sir. It's all on our way."

"Good. That'll do splendidly."

"I don't like to talk too much about all this over the phone," explained the doctor when they arrived. "I always have an idea the local exchanges listen in. Here's the woman's letter."

He spread the letter on the table. It was written on cheap lined paper in an uneducated hand.

Dear sir (Lily Kimble had written)

I'd be grateful if you could give me advise about the enclosed wot i cut out of paper. I been thinking and i talked it over with mr. Kimble, but i don't know wots best to do about it. Do you think as it means money or a reward becos i could do with the money im sure but woodnt want the police or anything like that, i often hav been thinking about that nite wen mrs. Halliday went away and i don't think sir she ever did becos the clothes was wrong. i thort at first the master done it but now im not so sure becos of the car i saw out of the window. A posh car it was and i seen it before but i woodnt like to do anything without asking you first if it was all rite and not police becos i never hav been mixed up with police and mr. Kimble woodnt like it. I could come and see you sir if i may next thursday as its market day and mr. Kimble will be out. id be very grateful if you could.

yours respectfully,

Lily Kimble.

"It was addressed to my old house in Dillmouth," said Kennedy, "and forwarded on to me here. The cutting is your advertisement."

"It's wonderful," said Gwenda. "This Lily—you see—she *doesn't* think it was my father who did it!"

She spoke with jubilation. Dr. Kennedy looked at her with tired, kindly eyes.

"Good for you, Gwennie," he said gently. "I hope you're right. Now this is what I think we'd better do. I'll answer her letter and tell her to come here on Thursday. The train connection is quite good. By changing at Dillmouth Junction she can get here shortly after 4.30. If you two will come over that afternoon, we can tackle her all together."

"Splendid," said Giles. He glanced at his watch. "Come on, Gwenda, we must hurry. We've got an appointment," he explained. "With Mr. Afflick of the Daffodil Coaches, and, so he told us, he's a busy man."

"Afflick?" Kennedy frowned. "Of course! Devon Tours in Daffodil Coaches, horrible great butter-coloured brutes. But the name seemed familiar in some other way."

"Helen," said Gwenda.

"My goodness—not that chap?"

"Yes."

"But he was a miserable little rat. So he's come up in the world?"

"Will you tell me something, sir?" said Giles. "You broke up some funny business between him and Helen. Was that simply because of his—well, social position?"

Dr. Kennedy gave him a dry glance.

"I'm old-fashioned, young man. In the modern gospel, one man is as good as another. That holds morally, no doubt. But I'm a believer in the fact that there is a state of life into which you are born—and I believe you're happiest staying in it. Besides," he added, "I thought the fellow was a wrong 'un. As he proved to be."

"What did he do exactly?"

"That I can't remember now. It was a case, as far as I can recall, of his trying to cash in on some information obtained through his employment with Fane. Some confidential matter relating to one of their clients."

"Was he—sore about his dismissal?"

Kennedy gave him a sharp glance and said briefly: "Yes."

"And there wasn't any other reason at all for your disliking his friendship with your sister? You didn't think he was—well—odd in any way."

"Since you have brought the matter up, I will answer you frankly. It seemed to me, especially after his dismissal from his employment, that Jackie Afflick displayed certain signs of an unbalanced temperament. Incipient persecution mania, in fact. But that does not seem to have been borne out by his subsequent rise in life."

"Who dismissed him? Walter Fane?"

"I have no idea if Walter Fane was concerned. He was dismissed by the firm."

"And he complained that he had been victimized?"

Kennedy nodded.

"I see ... Well, we must drive like the wind. Till Thursday, sir."

II

The house was newly built. It was of Snowcrete, heavily curved, with a big expanse of window. They were shown in through an opulent hall to a study, half of which was taken up by a big chromium-plated desk.

Gwenda murmured nervously to Giles, "Really, I don't know what we should have done without Miss Marple. We lean upon her at every turn. First her friends in Northumberland and now her Vicar's wife's Boys' Club Annual Outing."

Giles raised an admonitory hand as the door opened and J. J. Afflick surged into the room.

He was a stout man of middle age, dressed in a rather violently checked suit. His eyes were dark and shrewd, his face rubicund and good-natured. He looked like the popular idea of a successful bookmaker.

"Mr. Reed? Good morning. Pleased to meet you."

Giles introduced Gwenda. She felt her hand taken in a rather over-zealous grip.

"And what can I do for you, Mr. Reed?"

Afflick sat down behind his huge desk. He offered cigarettes from an onyx box.

Giles entered upon the subject of the Boys' Club Outing. Old friends of his ran the show. He was anxious to arrange for a couple of days' touring in Devon.

Afflick replied promptly in a businesslike manner—quoting prices and making suggestions. But there was a faintly puzzled look on his face.

Finally he said: "Well, that's all clear enough, Mr. Reed, and I'll send you a line to confirm it. But this is strictly office business. I understood from my clerk that you wanted a private appointment at my private address."

"We did, Mr. Afflick. There were actually two matters on which I wanted to see you. We've disposed of one. The other is a purely private matter. My wife here is very anxious to get in touch with her stepmother whom she has not seen for many years, and we wondered if you could possibly help us."

"Well, if you tell me the lady's name—I gather that I'm acquainted with her?"

"You were acquainted with her at one time. Her name is Helen Halliday and before her marriage she was Miss Helen Kennedy."

Afflick sat quite still. He screwed up his eyes and tilted his chair slowly backwards.

"Helen Halliday—I don't recall ... Helen Kennedy..."

"Formerly of Dillmouth," said Gwenda.

The legs of Afflick's chair came down sharply.

"Got it," he said. "Of course." His round rubicund face beamed with pleasure. "Little Helen Kennedy! Yes, I remember her. But it's a long time ago. Must be twenty years."

"Eighteen."

"Is it really? Time flies, as the saying goes. But I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed, Mrs. Reed. I haven't seen anything of Helen since that time. Never heard of her, even."

"Oh dear," said Gwenda. "That's very disappointing. We did so hope you could help."

"What's the trouble?" His eyes flickered quickly from one face to another. "Quarrel? Left home? Matter of money?"

Gwenda said: "She went away—suddenly—from Dillmouth—eighteen years ago with—with someone."

Jackie Afflick said amusedly: "And you thought she might have gone away with me? Now why?"

Gwenda spoke boldly: "Because we heard that you—and she—had once—been—well, fond of each other."

"Me and Helen? Oh, but there was nothing in that. Just a boy and girl affair. Neither of us took it seriously." He added drily, "We weren't encouraged to do so."

"You must think us dreadfully impertinent," began Gwenda, but he interrupted her.

"What's the odds? I'm not sensitive. You want to find a certain person and you think I may be able to help. Ask me anything you please—I've nought to conceal." He looked at her thoughtfully. "So you're Halliday's daughter?"

"Yes. Did you know my father?"

He shook his head.

"I dropped in to see Helen once when I was over at Dillmouth on business. I'd heard she was married and living there. She was civil enough—" he paused—"but she didn't ask me to stay to dinner. No, I didn't meet your father."

Had there, Gwenda wondered, been a trace of rancour in that "She didn't ask me to stay to dinner?"

"Did she—if you remember—seem happy?"

Afflick shrugged his shoulders.

"Happy enough. But there, it's a long time ago. I'd have remembered if she'd looked unhappy."

He added with what seemed a perfectly natural curiosity: "Do you mean to say you've never heard anything of her since Dillmouth eighteen years ago?"

"Nothing."

"No—letters?"

"There were two letters," said Giles. "But we have some reason to think that she didn't write them."

"You think she didn't write them?" Afflick seemed faintly amused. "Sounds like a mystery on the flicks."

"That's rather what it seems like to us."

"What about her brother, the doctor chap, doesn't he know where she is?"

"No."

"I see. Regular mystery, isn't it? Why not advertise?"

"We have."

Afflick said casually: "Looks as though she's dead. You mightn't have heard."

Gwenda shivered.

"Cold, Mrs. Reed?"

"No. I was thinking of Helen dead. I don't like to think of her dead."

"You're right there. I don't like to think of it myself. Stunning looks she had."

Gwenda said impulsively: "You knew her. You knew her well. I've only got a child's memory of her. What was she like? What did people feel about her? What did *you* feel?"

He looked at her for a moment or two.

"I'll be honest with you, Mrs. Reed. Believe it or not, as you like. I was sorry for the kid."

"Sorry?" She turned a puzzled stare on him.

"Just that. There she was—just home from school. Longing for a bit of fun like any girl might, and there was that stiff middle-aged brother of hers with his ideas about what a girl could do and couldn't do. No fun at all, that kid hadn't. Well, I took her about a bit—showed her a bit of life. I wasn't really keen on her and she wasn't really keen on me. She just liked the fun of being a daredevil. Then of course they found out we were meeting and he put a stop to it. Don't blame him, really. Cut above me, she was. We weren't engaged or anything of that kind. I meant to marry sometime—but not till I was a good bit older. And I meant to get on and to find a wife who'd help me get on. Helen hadn't any money, and it wouldn't have been a suitable match in any way. We were just good friends with a bit of flirtation thrown in."

"But you must have been angry with the doctor—"

Gwenda paused and Afflick said: "I was riled, I admit. You don't fancy being told you're not good enough. But there, it's no good being thin-skinned."

"And then," said Giles, "you lost your job."

Afflick's face was not quite so pleasant.

"Fired, I was. Out of Fane and Watchman's. And I've a very good idea who was responsible for that."

"Oh?" Giles made his tone interrogative, but Afflick shook his head.

"I'm not saying anything. I've my own ideas. I was framed—that's all—and I've a very fair idea of who did it. *And why!*" The colour suffused his cheeks. "Dirty work," he said. "Spying on a man—laying traps for him—lying about him. Oh, I've had my enemies all right. But I've never let them get me down. I've always given as good as I got. *And I don't forget.*"

He stopped. Suddenly his manner changed back again. He was genial once more.

"So I can't help you, I'm afraid. A little bit of fun between me and Helen—that was all. It didn't go deep."

Gwenda stared at him. It was a clear enough story—but was it true? she wondered. Something jarred—it came to the surface of her mind what that something was.

"All the same," she said, "you looked her up when you came to Dillmouth later."

He laughed.

"You've got me there, Mrs. Reed. Yes, I did. Wanted to show her perhaps that I wasn't down and out just because a long-faced lawyer had pushed me out of his office. I had a nice business and I was driving a posh car and I'd done very well for myself."

"You came to see her more than once, didn't you?"

He hesitated a moment.

"Twice—perhaps three times. Just dropped in." He nodded with sudden finality. "Sorry I can't help you."

Giles got up.

"We must apologize for taking up so much of your time."

"That's all right. Quite a change to talk about old times."

The door opened and a woman looked in and apologized swiftly.

"Oh, I'm so sorry—I didn't know you had anyone—"

"Come in, my dear, come in. Meet my wife. This is Mr. and Mrs. Reed."

Mrs. Afflick shook hands. She was a tall, thin, depressed-looking woman, dressed in rather unexpectedly well-cut clothes.

"Been talking over old times, we have," said Mr. Afflick. "Old times before I met you, Dorothy."

He turned to them.

"Met my wife on a cruise," he said. "She doesn't come from this part of the world. Cousin of Lord Polterham's, she is."

He spoke with pride—the thin woman flushed.

"They're very nice, these cruises," said Giles.

"Very educational," said Afflick. "Now, I didn't have any education to speak of."

"I always tell my husband we must go on one of those Hellenic cruises," said Mrs. Afflick.

"No time. I'm a busy man."

"And we mustn't keep you," said Giles. "Good-bye and thank you. You'll let me know about the quotation for the outing?"

Afflick escorted them to the door. Gwenda glanced back over her shoulder. Mrs. Afflick was standing in the doorway of the study. Her face, fastened on her husband's back, was curiously and rather unpleasantly apprehensive.

Giles and Gwenda said good-bye again and went towards their car.

"Bother, I've left my scarf," said Gwenda.

"You're always leaving something," said Giles.

"Don't look martyred. I'll get it."

She ran back into the house. Through the open door of the study she heard Afflick say loudly: "What do you want to come butting in for? Never any sense."

"I'm sorry, Jackie. I didn't know. Who are those people and why have they upset you so?"

"They haven't upset me. I—" He stopped as he saw Gwenda standing in the doorway.

"Oh, Mr. Afflick, did I leave a scarf?"

"Scarf? No, Mrs. Reed, it's not here."

"Stupid of me. It must be in the car."

She went out again.

Giles had turned the car. Drawn up by the kerb was a large yellow limousine resplendent with chromium.

"Some car," said Giles.

"A posh car," said Gwenda. "Do you remember, Giles? Edith Pagett when she was telling us what Lily said? Lily had put her money on Captain Erskine, not 'our mystery man in the flashy car.' Don't you see, the mystery man in the flashy car was Jackie Afflick?"

"Yes," said Giles. "And in her letter to the doctor Lily mentioned a 'posh car.'"

They looked at each other.

"He was there—'on the spot,' as Miss Marple would say—on that night. Oh Giles, I can hardly wait until Thursday to hear what Lily Kimble says."

"Suppose she gets cold feet and doesn't turn up after all?"

"Oh, she'll come. Giles, if that flashy car was there that night—"

"Think it was a yellow peril like this?"

"Admiring my bus?" Mr. Afflick's genial voice made them jump. He was leaning over the neatly clipped hedge behind them. "Little Buttercup, that's what I call her. I've always liked a nice bit of bodywork. Hits you in the eye, doesn't she?"

"She certainly does," said Giles.

"Fond of flowers, I am," said Mr. Afflick. "Daffodils, buttercups, calceolarias—they're all my fancy. Here's your scarf, Mrs. Reed. It had slipped down behind the table. Good-bye. Pleased to have met you."

"Do you think he heard us calling his car a yellow peril?" asked Gwenda as they drove away.

"Oh, I don't think so. He seemed quite amiable, didn't he?"

Giles looked slightly uneasy.

"Ye-es—but I don't think that means much ... Giles, that wife of his—she's frightened of him, I saw her face."

"What? That jovial pleasant chap?"

"Perhaps he isn't so jovial and pleasant underneath ... Giles, I don't think I like Mr. Afflick ... I wonder how long he'd been there behind us listening to what we were saying ... Just what did we say?"

"Nothing much," said Giles.

But he still looked uneasy.

Twenty-two

LILY KEEPS AN APPOINTMENT

I

"Well, I'm damned," exclaimed Giles.

He had just torn open a letter that had arrived by the after-lunch post and was staring in complete astonishment at its contents.

"What's the matter?"

"It's the report of the handwriting experts."

Gwenda said eagerly: "And she *didn't* write that letter from abroad?"

"That's just it, Gwenda. *She did.*"

They stared at each other.

Gwenda said incredulously: "Then those letters *weren't* a fake. They were *genuine*. Helen *did* go away from the house that night. And she *did* write from abroad. And she wasn't strangled at all?"

Giles said slowly: "It seems so. But it really is very upsetting. I don't understand it. Just as everything seems to be pointing the other way."

"Perhaps the experts are wrong?"

"I suppose they might be. But they seem quite confident. Gwenda, I really don't understand a single thing about all this. Have we been making the most colossal idiots of ourselves?"

"All based on my silly behaviour at the theatre? I tell you what, Giles, let's call round on Miss Marple. We'll have time before we get to Dr. Kennedy's at four thirty."

Miss Marple, however, reacted rather differently from the way they had expected. She said it was very nice indeed.

"But darling Miss Marple," said Gwenda, "what do you mean by that?"

"I mean, my dear, that somebody hasn't been as clever as they might have been."

"But how—in what way?"

"Slipped up," said Miss Marple, nodding her head with satisfaction.

"But how?"

"Well, dear Mr. Reed, surely you can see how it narrows the field."

"Accepting the fact that Helen actually wrote the letters—do you mean that she might still have been murdered?"

"I mean that it seemed very important to someone that the letters should actually be in Helen's handwriting."

"I see ... At least I think I see. There must be certain possible circumstances in which Helen could have been induced to write those particular letters ... That would narrow things down. But what circumstances exactly?"

"Oh, come now, Mr. Reed. You're not really thinking. It's perfectly simple, really."

Giles looked annoyed and mutinous.

"It's not obvious to me, I can assure you."

"If you'd just reflect a little—"

"Come on, Giles," said Gwenda. "We'll be late."

They left Miss Marple smiling to herself.

"That old woman annoys me sometimes," said Giles. "I don't know now what the hell she was driving at."

They reached Dr. Kennedy's house in good time.

The doctor himself opened the door to them.

"I've let my housekeeper go out for the afternoon," he explained. "It seemed to be better."

He led the way into the sitting room where a tea tray with cups and saucers, bread and butter and cakes was ready.

"Cup of tea's a good move, isn't it?" he asked rather uncertainly of Gwenda. "Put this Mrs. Kimble at her ease and all that."

"You're absolutely right," said Gwenda.

"Now what about you two? Shall I introduce you straight away? Or will it put her off?"

Gwenda said slowly: "Country people are very suspicious. I believe it would be better if you received her alone."

"I think so too," said Giles.

Dr. Kennedy said, "If you were to wait in the room next door, and if this communicating door were slightly ajar, you would be able to hear what went on. Under the circumstances of the case, I think that you would be justified."

"I suppose it's eavesdropping, but I really don't care," said Gwenda.

Dr. Kennedy smiled faintly and said: "I don't think any ethical principle is involved. I do not propose, in any case, to give a promise of secrecy—though I am willing to give my advice if I am asked for it."

He glanced at his watch.

"The train is due at Woodleigh Road at four thirty-five. It should arrive in a few minutes now. Then it will take her about five minutes to walk up the hill."

He walked restlessly up and down the room. His face was lined and haggard.

"I don't understand," he said. "I don't understand in the least what it all means. If Helen never left that house, if her letters to me were forgeries." Gwenda moved sharply—but Giles shook his head at her. The doctor went on: "If Kelvin, poor fellow, didn't kill her, then what on earth did happen?"

"Somebody else killed her," said Gwenda.

"But my dear child, if somebody else killed her, why on earth should Kelvin insist that he had done so?"

"Because he thought he had. He found her there on the bed and he thought he had done it. That could happen, couldn't it?"

Dr. Kennedy rubbed his nose irritably.

"How should I know? I'm not a psychiatrist. Shock? Nervous condition already? Yes, I suppose it's possible. But who would want to kill Helen?"

"We think one of three people," said Gwenda.

"Three people? What three people? Nobody could have any possible reason for killing Helen—unless they were completely off their heads. She'd no enemies. Everybody liked her."

He went to the desk drawer and fumbled through its contents.

He held out a faded snapshot. It showed a tall schoolgirl in a gym tunic, her hair tied back, her face radiant. Kennedy, a younger, happy-looking Kennedy, stood beside her, holding a terrier puppy.

"I've been thinking a lot about her lately," he said indistinctly. "For many years I hadn't thought about her at all—almost managed to forget ... Now I think about her all the time. That's *your* doing."

His words sounded almost accusing.

"I think it's *her* doing," said Gwenda.

He wheeled round on her sharply.

"What do you mean?"

"Just that. I can't explain. But it's not really us. It's Helen herself."

The faint melancholy scream of an engine came to their ears. Dr. Kennedy stepped out of the window and they followed him. A trail of smoke showed itself retreating slowly along the valley.

"There goes the train," said Kennedy.

"Coming into the station?"

"No, leaving it." He paused. "She'll be here any minute now."

But the minutes passed and Lily Kimble did not come.

II

Lily Kimble got out of the train at Dillmouth Junction and walked across the bridge to the siding where the little local train was waiting. There were few passengers—a half-dozen at most. It was a slack time of day and in any case it was market day at Helchester.

Presently the train started—puffing its way importantly along a winding valley. There were three stops before the terminus at Lonsbury Bay: Newton Langford, Matchings Halt (for Woodleigh Camp) and Woodleigh Bolton.

Lily Kimble looked out of the window with eyes that did not see the lush countryside, but saw instead a Jacobean suite upholstered in jade green....

She was the only person to alight at the tiny station of Matchings Halt. She gave up her ticket and went out through the booking office. A little way along the road a signpost with "To Woodleigh Camp" indicated a footpath leading up a steep hill.

Lily Kimble took the footpath and walked briskly uphill. The path skirted the side of a wood, on the other side the hill rose steeply covered with heather and gorse.

Someone stepped out from the trees and Lily Kimble jumped.

"My, you did give me a start," she exclaimed. "I wasn't expecting to meet you here."

"Gave you a surprise, did I? I've got another surprise for you."

It was very lonely in among the trees. There was no one to hear a cry or a struggle. Actually there was no cry and the struggle was very soon over.

A wood-pigeon, disturbed, flew out of the wood....

III

"What can have become of the woman?" demanded Dr. Kennedy irritably.

The hands of the clock pointed to ten minutes to five.

"Could she have lost her way coming from the station?"

"I gave her explicit directions. In any case it's quite simple. Turn to the left when she got out of the station and then take the first road to the right. As I say, it's only a few minutes' walk."

"Perhaps she's changed her mind," said Giles.

"It looks like it."

"Or missed the train," suggested Gwenda.

Kennedy said slowly, "No, I think it's more likely that she decided not to come after all. Perhaps her husband stepped in. All these country people are quite incalculable."

He walked up and down the room.

Then he went to the telephone and asked for a number.

"Hullo? Is that the station? This is Dr. Kennedy speaking. I was expecting someone by the four thirty-five. Middle-aged country woman. Did anyone ask to be directed to me? Or—what do you say?"

The others were near enough to hear the soft lazy accent of Woodleigh Bolton's one porter.

"Don't think as there could be anyone for you, Doctor. Weren't no strangers on the four thirty-five. Mr. Narracotts from Meadows, and Johnnie Lawes, and old Benson's daughter. Weren't no other passengers at all."

"So she changed her mind," said Dr. Kennedy. "Well, I can offer *you* tea. The kettle's on. I'll go out and make it."

He returned with the teapot and they sat down.

"It's only a temporary check," he said more cheerfully. "We've got her address. We'll go over and see her, perhaps."

The telephone rang and the doctor got up to answer.

"Dr. Kennedy?"

"Speaking."

"This is Inspector Last, Longford police station. Were you expecting a woman called Lily Kimble—Mrs. Lily Kimble—to call upon you this afternoon?"

"I was. Why? Has there been an accident?"

"Not what you'd call an accident exactly. She's dead. We found a letter from you on the body. That's why I rang you up. Can you make it convenient to come along to Longford police station as soon as possible?"

"I'll come at once."

IV

"Now let's get this quite clear," Inspector Last was saying.

He looked from Kennedy to Giles and Gwenda who had accompanied the doctor. Gwenda was very pale and held her hands tightly clasped together. "You were expecting this woman by the train that leaves Dillmouth Junction at four-five? And gets to Woodleigh Bolton at four thirty-five?"

Dr. Kennedy nodded.

Inspector Last looked down at the letter he had taken from the dead woman's body. It was quite clear.

Dear Mrs. Kimble (Dr. Kennedy had written)

I shall be glad to advise you to the best of my power. As you will see from the heading of this letter I no longer live in Dillmouth. If you will take the train leaving Coombeleigh at 3.30, change at Dillmouth Junction, and come by the Lonsbury Bay train to Woodleigh Bolton, my house is only a few minutes' walk. Turn to the left as you come out of the station, then take the first road on the right. My house is at the end of it on the right. The name is on the gate.

Yours truly,

James Kennedy.

"There was no question of her coming by an earlier train?"

"An earlier train?" Dr. Kennedy looked astonished.

"Because that's what she did. She left Coombeleigh, not at three thirty but at one thirty—caught the two-five from Dillmouth Junction and got out, not at Woodleigh Bolton, but at Matchings Halt, the station before it."

"But that's extraordinary!"

"Was she consulting you professionally, Doctor?"

"No. I retired from practice some years ago."

"That's what I thought. You knew her well?"

Kennedy shook his head.

"I hadn't seen her for nearly twenty years."

"But you—er—recognized her just now?"

Gwenda shivered, but dead bodies did not affect a doctor and Kennedy replied thoughtfully: "Under the circumstances it is hard to say if I recognized her or not. She was strangled, I presume?"

"She was strangled. The body was found in a copse a short way along the track leading from Matchings Halt to Woodleigh Camp. It was found by a hiker coming down from the Camp at about ten minutes to four. Our police surgeon puts the time of death at between two fifteen and three o'clock. Presumably she was killed shortly after she left the station. No other passenger got out at Matchings Halt. She was the only person to get out of the train there.

"Now why did she get out at Matchings Halt? Did she mistake the station? I hardly think so. In any case she was two hours early for her appointment with you, and had not come by the train you suggested, although she had your letter with her.

"Now just what was her business with you, Doctor?"

Dr. Kennedy felt in his pocket and brought out Lily's letter.

"I brought this with me. The enclosed cutting and the insertion put in the local paper by Mr. and Mrs. Reed here."

Inspector Last read Lily Kimble's letter and the enclosure. Then he looked from Dr. Kennedy to Giles and Gwenda.

"Can I have the story behind all this? It goes back a long way, I gather?"

"Eighteen years," said Gwenda.

Piecemeal, with additions, and parentheses, the story came out. Inspector Last was a good listener. He let the three people in front of him tell things in their own way. Kennedy was dry, and factual, Gwenda was slightly incoherent, but her narrative had imaginative power. Giles gave, perhaps, the most valuable contribution. He was clear and to the point, with less reserve than Kennedy, and with more coherence than Gwenda. It took a long time.

Then Inspector Last sighed and summed up.

"Mrs. Halliday was Dr. Kennedy's sister and your stepmother, Mrs. Reed. She disappeared from the house you are at present living in eighteen years ago. Lily Kimble (whose maiden name was Abbott) was a servant (house-parlourmaid) in the house at the time. For

some reason Lily Kimble inclines (after the passage of years) to the theory that there was foul play. At the time it was assumed that Mrs. Halliday had gone away with a man (identity unknown). Major Halliday died in a mental establishment fifteen years ago still under the delusion that he had strangled his wife—if it was a delusion—”

He paused.

“These are all interesting but somewhat unrelated facts. The crucial point seems to be, is Mrs. Halliday alive or dead? If dead, when did she die? And what did Lily Kimble know?”

“It seems, on the face of it, that she must have known something rather important. So important that she was killed in order to prevent her talking about it.”

Gwenda cried, “But how could anyone possibly know she was going to talk about it—except us?”

Inspector Last turned his thoughtful eyes on her.

“It is a significant point, Mrs. Reed, that she took the two-five instead of the four-five train from Dillmouth Junction. There must be some reason for that. Also, she got out at the station before Woodleigh Bolton. Why? It seems possible to me that, *after* writing to the doctor, she wrote to *someone else*, suggesting a rendezvous at Woodleigh Camp, perhaps, and that she proposed after that rendezvous, if it was unsatisfactory, to go on to Dr. Kennedy and ask his advice. It is possible that she had suspicions of some definite person, and she may have written to that person hinting at her knowledge and suggesting a rendezvous.”

“Blackmail,” said Giles bluntly.

“I don’t suppose she thought of it that way,” said Inspector Last. “She was just greedy and hopeful—and a little muddled about what she could get out of it all. We’ll see. Maybe the husband can tell us more.”

V

“Warned her, I did,” said Mr. Kimble heavily. “Don’t have nought to do with it,’ them were my words. Went behind my back, she did.”

Thought as she knew best. That were Lily all over. Too smart by half."

Questioning revealed that Mr. Kimble had little to contribute.

Lily had been in service at St. Catherine's before he met her and started walking out with her. Fond of the pictures, she was, and told him that likely as not, she'd been in a house where there'd been a murder.

"Didn't pay much account, I didn't. All imagination, I thought. Never content with plain fact, Lily wasn't. Long rigmarole she told me, about the master doing in the missus and maybe putting the body in the cellar—and something about a French girl what had looked out of the window and seen something or somebody. 'Don't you pay no attention to foreigners, my girl,' I said. 'One and all they're liars. Not like us.' And when she run on about it, I didn't listen because, mark you, she was working it all up out of nothing. Liked a bit of crime, Lily did. Used to take the *Sunday News* what was running a series about Famous Murderers. Full of it, she was, and if she liked to think she'd been in a house where there was a murder, well, thinking don't hurt nobody. But when she was on at me about answering this advertisement—'You leave it alone,' I says to her. 'It's no good stirring up trouble.' And if she'd done as I telled her, she'd be alive today."

He thought for a moment or two.

"Ar," he said. "She'd be alive right now. Too smart by half, that was Lily."

Twenty-three

WHICH OF THEM?

Giles and Gwenda had not gone with Inspector Last and Dr. Kennedy to interview Mr. Kimble. They arrived home about seven o'clock. Gwenda looked white and ill. Dr. Kennedy had said to Giles: "Give her some brandy and make her eat something, then get her to bed. She's had a bad shock."

"It's so awful, Giles," Gwenda kept saying. "So awful. That silly woman, making an appointment with the murderer, and going along so confidently—to be killed. Like a sheep to the slaughter."

"Well, don't think about it, darling. After all, we did know there was someone—a killer."

"No, we didn't. Not a killer *now*. I mean, it was *then*—eighteen years ago. It wasn't, somehow, quite real ... It might all have been a mistake."

"Well, this proves that it wasn't a mistake. You were right all the time, Gwenda."

Giles was glad to find Miss Marple at Hillside. She and Mrs. Cocker between them fussed over Gwenda who refused brandy because she said it always reminded her of Channel steamers, but accepted some hot whisky and lemon, and then, coaxed by Mrs. Cocker, sat down and ate an omelette.

Giles would have talked determinedly of other things, but Miss Marple, with what Giles admitted to be superior tactics, discussed

the crime in a gentle aloof manner.

"Very dreadful, my dear," she said. "And of course a great shock, but interesting, one must admit. And of course I am so old that death doesn't shock me as much as it does you—only something lingering and painful like cancer really distresses me. The really vital thing is that this proves definitely and beyond any possible doubt that poor young Helen Halliday was killed. We've thought so all along and now we *know*."

"And according to you we ought to know where the body is," said Giles. "The cellar, I suppose."

"No, no, Mr. Reed. You remember Edith Pagett said she went down there on the morning after because she was disturbed by what Lily had said, and she found no signs of anything of the kind—and there would be signs, you know, if somebody was really looking for them."

"Then what happened to it? Taken away in a car and thrown over a cliff into the sea?"

"No. Come now, my dears, what struck you first of all when you came here—struck you, Gwenda, I should say. The fact that from the drawing room window, you had no view down to the sea. Where you felt, very properly, that steps should lead down to the lawn—there was instead a plantation of shrubs. The steps, you found subsequently, had been there originally, but had at some time been transferred to the end of the terrace. Why were they moved?"

Gwenda stared at her with dawning comprehension.

"You mean that *that's* where—"

"There must have been a reason for making the change, and there doesn't really seem to be a sensible one. It is, frankly, a stupid place to have steps down to the lawn. But that end of the terrace is a very quiet place—it's not overlooked from the house except by one window—the window of the nursery, on the first floor. Don't you see, that if you want to bury a body the earth will be disturbed and there must be a *reason* for its being disturbed. The reason was that it had been decided to move the steps from in front of the drawing room to the end of the terrace. I've learnt already from Dr. Kennedy that Helen Halliday and her husband were very keen on the garden, and

did a lot of work in it. The daily gardener they employed used merely to carry out their orders, and if he arrived to find that this change was in progress and some of the flags had already been moved, he would only have thought that the Hallidays had started on the work when he wasn't there. The body, of course, could have been buried at either place, but we can be quite certain, I think, that it is actually buried at the end of the terrace and not in front of the drawing room window."

"Why can we be sure?" asked Gwenda.

"Because of what poor Lily Kimble said in her letter—that she changed her mind about the body being in the cellar because of what Léonie saw when she looked out of the window. That makes it very clear, doesn't it? The Swiss girl looked out of the nursery window at some time during the night and saw the grave being dug. Perhaps she actually saw who it was digging it."

"And never said anything to the police?"

"My dear, there was no question at the time of a *crime* having occurred. Mrs. Halliday had run away with a lover—that was all that Léonie would grasp. She probably couldn't speak much English anyway. She did mention to Lily, perhaps not at the time, but later, a curious thing she had observed from her window that night, and that stimulated Lily's belief in a crime having occurred. But I've no doubt that Edith Pagett told Lily off for talking nonsense, and the Swiss girl would accept her point of view and would certainly not wish to be mixed-up with the police. Foreigners always seem to be particularly nervous about the police when they are in a strange country. So she went back to Switzerland and very likely never thought of it again."

Giles said: "If she's alive now—if she can be traced—"

Miss Marple nodded her head. "Perhaps."

Giles demanded: "How can we set about it?"

Miss Marple said: "The police will be able to do that much better than you can."

"Inspector Last is coming over here tomorrow morning."

"Then I think I should tell him—about the steps."

"And about what I saw—or think I saw—in the hall?" asked Gwenda nervously.

"Yes, dear. You've been very wise to say nothing of that until now. Very wise. But I think the time has come."

Giles said slowly: "She was strangled in the hall, and then the murderer carried her upstairs and put her on the bed. Kelvin Halliday came in, passed out with doped whisky, and in his turn was carried upstairs to the bedroom. He came to, and thought he had killed her. The murderer must have been watching somewhere near at hand. When Kelvin went off to Dr. Kennedy's, the murderer took away the body, probably hid it in the shrubbery at the end of the terrace and waited until everybody had gone to bed and was presumably asleep, before he dug the grave and buried the body. That means he must have been here, hanging about the house, pretty well all that night?"

Miss Marple nodded.

"He had to be—*on the spot*. I remember your saying that that was important. We've got to see which of our three suspects fits in best with the requirements. We'll take Erskine first. Now he definitely was on the spot. By his own admission he walked up here with Helen Kennedy from the beach at round about nine o'clock. He said good-bye to her. But did he say good-bye to her? Let's say instead that he strangled her."

"But it was all over between them," cried Gwenda. "Long ago. He said himself that he was hardly ever alone with Helen."

"But don't you see, Gwenda, that the way we must look at it now, we can't depend on anything anyone *says*."

"Now I'm so glad to hear you say that," said Miss Marple. "Because I've been a little worried, you know, by the way you two have seemed willing to accept, as actual fact, all the things that people have told you. I'm afraid I have a sadly distrustful nature, but, especially in a matter of *murder*, I make it a rule to take nothing that is told to me as true, unless it is *checked*. For instance, it does seem quite certain that Lily Kimble mentioned the clothes packed and taken away in a suitcase were not the ones Helen Halliday would herself have taken, because not only did Edith Pagett tell us that Lily said so to her, but Lily herself mentioned the fact in her letter to Dr. Kennedy. So that is one *fact*. Dr. Kennedy told us that Kelvin Halliday believed that his wife was secretly drugging him, and

Kelvin Halliday in his diary confirms that—so there is another fact—and a very curious fact it is, don't you think? However, we will not go into that now.

"But I would like to point out that a great many of the assumptions you have made have been based upon what has been told you—possibly told you very plausibly."

Giles stared hard at her.

Gwenda, her colour restored, sipped coffee, and leaned across the table.

Giles said: "Let's check up now on what three people have said to us. Take Erskine first. He says—"

"You've got a down on him," said Gwenda. "It's waste of time going on about him, because now he's definitely out of it. He couldn't have killed Lily Kimble."

Giles went on imperturbly: "He says that he met Helen on the boat going out to India and they fell in love, but that he couldn't bring himself to leave his wife and children, and that they agreed they must say good-bye. Suppose it wasn't quite like that. Suppose he fell desperately in love with Helen, and that it was *she* who wouldn't run off with him. Supposing he threatened that if she married anyone else he would kill her."

"Most improbable," said Gwenda.

"Things like that do happen. Remember what you overheard his wife say to him. You put it all down to jealousy, but it may have been true. Perhaps she *has* had a terrible time with him where women are concerned—he may be a little bit of a sex maniac."

"I don't believe it."

"No, because he's attractive to women. I think, myself, that there is something a little queer about Erskine. However, let's go on with my case against him. Helen breaks off her engagement to Fane and comes home and marries your father and settles down here. And then suddenly, Erskine turns up. He comes down ostensibly on a summer holiday with his wife. That's an odd thing to do, really. He admits he came here to see Helen again. Now let's take it that *Erskine* was the man in the drawing room with her that day when

Lily overheard her say she was afraid of him. *'I'm afraid of you—I've always been afraid of you—I think you're mad.'*

"And, because she's afraid, she makes plans to go and live in Norfolk, but she's very secretive about it. No one is to know. No one is to know, that is, until the Erskines have left Dillmouth. So far that fits. Now we come to the fatal night. What the Hallidays were doing earlier that evening we don't know—"

Miss Marple coughed.

"As a matter of fact, I saw Edith Pagett again. She remembers that there was early supper that night—seven o'clock—because Major Halliday was going to some meeting—Golf Club, she thinks it was, or some Parish meeting. Mrs. Halliday went out after supper."

"Right. Helen meets Erskine, by appointment, perhaps, on the beach. He is leaving the following day. Perhaps he refuses to go. He urges Helen to go away with him. She comes back here and he comes with her. Finally, in a fit of frenzy he strangles her. The next bit is as we have already agreed. He's slightly mad, he wants Kelvin Halliday to believe it is *he* who has killed her. Later, Erskine buries the body. You remember, he told Gwenda that he didn't go back to the hotel until very late because he was walking about Dillmouth."

"One wonders," said Miss Marple, "what his wife was doing?"

"Probably frenzied with jealousy," said Gwenda. "And gave him hell when he did get in."

"That's my reconstruction," said Giles. "And it's possible."

"But he couldn't have killed Lily Kimble," said Gwenda, "because he lives in Northumberland. So thinking about him is just waste of time. Let's take Walter Fane."

"Right. Walter Fane is the repressed type. He seems gentle and mild and easily pushed around. But Miss Marple has brought us one valuable bit of testimony. Walter Fane was once in such a rage that he nearly killed his brother. Admittedly he was a child at the time, but it was startling because he had always seemed of such a gentle forgiving nature. Anyway, Walter Fane falls in love with Helen Halliday. Not merely in love, he's crazy about her. She won't have him and he goes off to India. Later she writes him that she will come out and marry him. She starts. Then comes the second blow. She

arrives and promptly jilts him. She has 'met someone on the boat.' She goes home and marries Kelvin Halliday. Possibly Walter Fane thinks that Kelvin Halliday was the original cause of her turning him down. He broods, nurses a crazy jealous hate and comes home. He behaves in a most forgiving, friendly manner, is often at this house, has become apparently a tame cat around the house, the faithful Dobbin. But perhaps Helen realizes that this isn't true. She gets a glimpse of what is going on below the surface. Perhaps, long ago, she sensed something disturbing in quiet young Walter Fane. She says to him, 'I think I've always been afraid of you.' She makes plans, secretly, to go right away from Dillmouth and live in Norfolk. Why? Because she's afraid of Walter Fane.

"Now we come again to the fatal evening. Here, we're not on very sure ground. We don't know what Walter Fane was doing that night, and I don't see any probability of ever finding out. But he fulfils Miss Marple's requirement of being 'on the spot' to the extent of living in a house that is only two or three minutes' walk away. He may have said he was going to bed early with a headache, or shut himself into his study with work to do—something of that kind. He could have done all the things we've decided the murderer did do, and I think that he's the most likely of the three to have made mistakes in packing a suitcase. He wouldn't know enough about what women wear to do it properly."

"It was queer," said Gwenda. "In his office that day I had an odd sort of feeling that he was like a house with its blinds pulled down ... and I even had a fanciful idea that—that there was someone dead in the house."

She looked at Miss Marple.

"Does that seem very silly to you?" she asked.

"No, my dear. I think that perhaps you were right."

"And now," said Gwenda, "we come to Afflick. Afflick's Tours. Jackie Afflick who was always too smart by half. The first thing against him is that Dr. Kennedy believed he had incipient persecution mania. That is—he was never really normal. He's told us about himself and Helen—but we'll agree now that that was all a pack of lies. He didn't just think she was a cute kid—he was madly,

passionately in love with her. But she wasn't in love with him. She was just amusing herself. She was man mad, as Miss Marple says."

"No, dear. *I* didn't say that. Nothing of the kind."

"Well, a nymphomaniac if you prefer the term. Anyway, she had an affair with Jackie Afflick and then wanted to drop him. He didn't want to be dropped. Her brother got her out of her scrape, but Jackie Afflick never forgave or forgot. He lost his job—according to him through being framed by Walter Fane. That shows definite signs of persecution mania."

"Yes," agreed Giles. "But on the other hand, if it was true, it's another point against Fane—quite a valuable point."

Gwenda went on.

"Helen goes abroad, and he leaves Dillmouth. But he never forgets her, and when she returns to Dillmouth, married, he comes over and visits her. He said first of all, he came *once*, but later on, he admits that he came more than once. And, oh Giles, don't you remember? Edith Pagett used a phrase about 'our mystery man in a flashy car.' You see, he came often enough to make the servants talk. But Helen took pains not to ask him to a meal—not to let him meet Kelvin. Perhaps she was afraid of him. Perhaps—"

Giles interrupted.

"This might cut both ways. Supposing Helen was in love with him—the first man she ever was in love with, and supposing she went on being in love with him. Perhaps they had an affair together and she didn't let anyone know about it. But perhaps he wanted her to go away with him, and by that time she was tired of him, and wouldn't go, and so—and so—he killed her. And all the rest of it. Lily said in her letter to Dr. Kennedy there was a posh car standing outside that night. It was Jackie Afflick's car. Jackie Afflick was 'on the spot,' too.

"It's an assumption," said Giles. "But it seems to me a reasonable one. But there are Helen's letters to be worked into our reconstruction. I've been puzzling my brains to think of the 'circumstances,' as Miss Marple put it, under which she could have been induced to write those letters. It seems to me that to explain them, we've got to admit that she actually *had* a lover, and that she

was expecting to go away with him. We'll test our three possibilities again. Erskine first. Say that he still wasn't prepared to leave his wife or break up his home, but that Helen had agreed to leave Kelvin Halliday and go somewhere where Erskine could come and be with her from time to time. The first thing would be to disarm Mrs. Erskine's suspicions, so Helen writes a couple of letters to reach her brother in due course which will look as though she has gone abroad with someone. That fits in very well with her being so mysterious about who the man in question is."

"But if she was going to leave her husband for him, why did he kill her?" asked Gwenda.

"Perhaps because she suddenly changed her mind. Decided that she did really care for her husband after all. He just saw red and strangled her. Then, he took the clothes and suitcase and used the letters. That's a perfectly good explanation covering everything."

"The same might apply to Walter Fane. I should imagine that scandal might be absolutely disastrous to a country solicitor. Helen might have agreed to go somewhere nearby where Fane could visit her but pretend that she had gone abroad with someone else. Letters all prepared and then, as you suggested, she changed her mind. Walter went mad and killed her."

"What about Jackie Afflick?"

"It's more difficult to find a reason for the letters with him. I shouldn't imagine that scandal would affect him. Perhaps Helen was afraid, not of him, but of my father—and so thought it would be better to pretend she'd gone abroad—or perhaps Afflick's wife had the money at that time, and he wanted her money to invest in his business. Oh yes, there are lots of possibilities for the letters."

"Which one do you fancy, Miss Marple?" asked Gwenda. "I don't really think Walter Fane—but then—"

Mrs. Cocker had just come in to clear away the coffee cups.

"There now, madam," she said. "I quite forgot. All this about a poor woman being murdered and you and Mr. Reed mixed up in it, not at all the right thing for you, madam, *just now*. Mr. Fane was here this afternoon, asking for you. He waited quite half an hour. Seemed to think you were expecting him."

"How strange," said Gwenda. "What time?"

"It must have been about four o'clock or just after. And then, after that, there was another gentleman, came in a great big yellow car. He was positive you were expecting him. Wouldn't take no for an answer. Waited twenty minutes. I wondered if you'd had some idea of a tea party and forgotten it."

"No," said Gwenda. "How odd."

"Let's ring up Fane now," said Giles. "He won't have gone to bed."

He suited the action to the word.

"Hullo, is that Fane speaking? Giles Reed here. I hear you came round to see us this afternoon—What?—No—no, I'm sure of it—no, how very odd. Yes, I wonder, too."

He laid down the receiver.

"Here's an odd thing. He was rung up in his office this morning. A message left would he come round and see us this afternoon. It was very important."

Giles and Gwenda stared at each other. Then Gwenda said, "Ring up Afflick."

Again Giles went to the telephone, found the number and rang through. It took a little longer, but presently he got the connection.

"Mr. Afflick? Giles Reed, I—"

Here he was obviously interrupted by a flow of speech from the other end.

At last he was able to say:

"But we didn't—no, I assure you—nothing of the kind—Yes—yes, I know you're a busy man. I wouldn't have dreamed of—Yes, but look here, who was it rang you—a man?—No, I tell you it wasn't me. No—no, I see. Well, I agree, it's quite extraordinary."

He replaced the receiver and came back to the table.

"Well, there it is," he said. "Somebody, a man who said he was me, rang up Afflick and asked him to come over here. It was urgent—big sum of money involved."

They looked at each other.

"It could have been either of them," said Gwenda. "Don't you see, Giles? Either of them *could have killed Lily and come on here as an alibi.*"

"Hardly an alibi, dear," put in Miss Marple.

"I don't mean quite an alibi, but an excuse for being away from their office. What I mean is, one of them is speaking the truth and one is lying. One of them rang up the other and asked him to come here—to throw suspicion on him—but we don't know which. It's a clear issue now between the two of them. Fane or Afflick. I say—Jackie Afflick."

"I think Walter Fane," said Giles.

They both looked at Miss Marple.

She shook her head.

"There's another possibility," she said.

"Of course. Erskine."

Giles fairly ran across to the telephone.

"What are you going to do?" asked Gwenda.

"Put through a trunk call to Northumberland."

"Oh Giles—you can't really think—"

"We've got to *know*. If he's there—he can't have killed Lily Kimble this afternoon. No private aeroplanes or silly stuff like that."

They waited in silence until the telephone bell rang.

Giles picked up the receiver.

"You were asking for a personal call to Major Erskine. Go ahead, please. Major Erskine is waiting."

Clearing his throat nervously, Giles said, "Er—Erskine? Giles Reed here—Reed, yes."

He cast a sudden agonized glance at Gwenda which said as plainly as possible, "What the hell do I say now?"

Gwenda got up and took the receiver from him.

"Major Erskine? This is Mrs. Reed here. We've heard of—of a house. Linscott Brake. Is—is it—do you know anything about it? It's somewhere near you, I believe."

Erskine's voice said: "Linscott Brake? No, I don't think I've ever heard of it. What's the postal town?"

"It's terribly blurred," said Gwenda. "You know those awful typescripts agents send out. But it says fifteen miles from Daith so we thought—"

"I'm sorry. I haven't heard of it. Who lives there?"

"Oh, it's empty. But never mind, actually we've—we've practically settled on a house. I'm so sorry to have bothered you. I expect you were busy."

"No, not at all. At least only busy domestically. My wife's away. And our cook had to go off to her mother, so I've been dealing with domestic routine. I'm afraid I'm not much of a hand at it. Better in the garden."

"I'd always rather do gardening than housework. I hope your wife isn't ill?"

"Oh no, she was called away to a sister. She'll be back tomorrow."

"Well, good night, and so sorry to have bothered you."

She put down the receiver.

"Erskine is out of it," she said triumphantly. "His wife's away and he's doing all the chores. So that leaves it between the two others. Doesn't it, Miss Marple?"

Miss Marple was looking grave.

"I don't think, my dears," she said, "that you have given quite enough thought to the matter. Oh dear—I am really very worried. If only I knew exactly what to do...."

Twenty-four

THE MONKEY'S PAWS

I

Gwenda leaned her elbows on the table and cupped her chin in her hands while her eyes roamed dispassionately over the remains of a hasty lunch. Presently she must deal with them, carry them out to the scullery, wash up, put things away, see what there would be, later, for supper.

But there was no wild hurry. She felt she needed a little time to take things in. Everything had been happening too fast.

The events of the morning, when she reviewed them, seemed to be chaotic and impossible. Everything had happened too quickly and too improbably.

Inspector Last had appeared early—at half past nine. With him had come Detective Inspector Primer from headquarters and the Chief Constable of the County. The latter had not stayed long. It was Inspector Primer who was now in charge of the case of Lily Kimble deceased and all the ramifications arising therefrom.

It was Inspector Primer, a man with a deceptively mild manner and a gentle apologetic voice, who had asked her if it would inconvenience her very much if his men did some digging in the garden.

From the tone of his voice, it might have been a case of giving his men some healthful exercise, rather than of seeking for a dead body which had been buried for eighteen years.

Giles had spoken up then. He had said: "I think, perhaps, we could help you with a suggestion or two."

And he told the Inspector about the shifting of the steps leading down to the lawn, and took the Inspector out on to the terrace.

The Inspector had looked up at the barred window on the first floor at the corner of the house and had said: "That would be the nursery, I presume."

And Giles said that it would.

Then the Inspector and Giles had come back into the house, and two men with spades had gone out into the garden, and Giles, before the Inspector could get down to questions, had said:

"I think, Inspector, you had better hear something that my wife has so far not mentioned to anyone except myself—and—er—one other person."

The gentle, rather compelling gaze of Inspector Primer came to rest on Gwenda. It was faintly speculative. He was asking himself, Gwenda thought: "Is this a woman who can be depended upon, or is she the kind who imagines things?"

So strongly did she feel this, that she started in a defensive way: "I may have imagined it. Perhaps I did. But it seems awfully real."

Inspector Primer said softly and soothingly:

"Well, Mrs. Reed, let's hear about it."

And Gwenda had explained. How the house had seemed familiar to her when she first saw it. How she had subsequently learned that she had, in fact, lived there as a child. How she had remembered the nursery wallpaper, and the connecting door, and the feeling she had had that there ought to be steps down to the lawn.

Inspector Primer nodded. He did not say that Gwenda's childish recollections were not particularly interesting, but Gwenda wondered whether he were thinking it.

Then she nerved herself to the final statement. How she had suddenly remembered, when sitting in a theatre, looking through the banisters at Hillside and seeing a dead woman in the hall.

"With a blue face, strangled, and golden hair—and it was Helen— But it was so stupid, I didn't know at all who Helen *was*."

"We think that—" Giles began, but Inspector Primer, with unexpected authority, held up a restraining hand.

"Please let Mrs. Reed tell me in her own words."

And Gwenda had stumbled on, her face flushed, with Inspector Primer gently helping her out, using a dexterity that Gwenda did not appreciate as the highly technical performance it was.

"Webster?" he said thoughtfully. "Hm, *Duchess of Malfi*. Monkey's paws?"

"But that was probably a nightmare," said Giles.

"Please, Mr. Reed."

"It may all have been a nightmare," said Gwenda.

"No, I don't think it was," said Inspector Primer. "It would be very hard to explain Lily Kimble's death, unless we assume that there *was* a woman murdered in this house."

That seemed so reasonable and almost comforting, that Gwenda hurried on.

"And it wasn't my father who murdered her. It wasn't, really. Even Dr. Penrose says he wasn't the right type, and that he couldn't have murdered anybody. And Dr. Kennedy was quite sure he hadn't done it, but only thought he had. So you see it was someone who wanted it to *seem* as though my father had done it, and we think we know who—at least it's one of two people—"

"Gwenda," said Giles. "We can't really—"

"I wonder, Mr. Reed," said the Inspector, "if you would mind going out into the garden and seeing how my men are getting on. Tell them I sent you."

He closed the french windows after Giles and latched them and came back to Gwenda.

"Now just tell me all your ideas, Mrs. Reed. Never mind if they are rather incoherent."

And Gwenda had poured out all her and Giles's speculations and reasonings, and the steps they had taken to find out all they could about the three men who might have figured in Helen Halliday's life, and the final conclusions they had come to—and how both Walter

Fane and J. J. Afflick had been rung up, as though by Giles, and had been summoned to Hillside the preceding afternoon.

"But you do see, don't you, Inspector—that one of them might be lying?"

And in a gentle, rather tired voice, the Inspector said: "That's one of the principal difficulties in my kind of work. So many people may be lying. And so many people usually are ... Though not always for the reasons that you'd think. And some people don't even know they're lying."

"Do you think I'm like that?" Gwenda asked apprehensively.

And the Inspector had smiled and said: "I think you're a very truthful witness, Mrs. Reed."

"And you think I'm right about who murdered her?"

The Inspector sighed and said: "It's not a question of thinking—not with us. It's a question of checking up. Where everybody was, what account everybody gives of their movements. We know accurately enough, to within ten minutes or so, when Lily Kimble was killed. Between two twenty and two forty-five. Anyone could have killed her and then come on here yesterday afternoon. I don't see, myself, any reason for those telephone calls. It doesn't give either of the people you mention an alibi for the time of the murder."

"But you will find out, won't you, what they were doing at the time? Between two twenty and two forty-five. You will ask them."

Inspector Primer smiled.

"We shall ask all the questions necessary, Mrs. Reed, you may be sure of that. All in good time. There's no good in rushing things. You've got to see your way ahead."

Gwenda had a sudden vision of patience and quiet unsensational work. Unhurried, remorseless....

She said: "I see ... yes. Because you're professional. And Giles and I are just amateurs. We might make a lucky hit—but we wouldn't really know how to follow it up."

"Something of the kind, Mrs. Reed."

The Inspector smiled again. He got up and unfastened the french windows. Then, just as he was about to step through them, he stopped. Rather, Gwenda thought, like a pointing dog.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Reed. That lady wouldn't be a Miss Jane Marple, would she?"

Gwenda had come to stand beside him. At the bottom of the garden Miss Marple was still waging a losing war with bindweed.

"Yes, that's Miss Marple. She's awfully kind in helping us with the garden."

"Miss Marple," said the Inspector. "*I see.*"

And as Gwenda looked at him enquiringly and said, "She's rather a dear," he replied:

"She's a very celebrated lady, is Miss Marple. Got the Chief Constables of at least three counties in her pocket. She's not got my Chief yet, but I dare say that will come. So Miss Marple's got her finger in this pie."

"She's made an awful lot of helpful suggestions," said Gwenda.

"I bet she has," said the Inspector. "Was it her suggestion where to look for the deceased Mrs. Halliday?"

"She said that Giles and I ought to know quite well where to look," said Gwenda. "And it did seem stupid of us not to have thought of it before."

The Inspector gave a soft little laugh, and went down to stand by Miss Marple. He said: "I don't think we've been introduced, Miss Marple. But you were pointed out to me once by Colonel Melrose."

Miss Marple stood up, flushed and grasping a handful of clinging green.

"Oh yes. Dear Colonel Melrose. He has always been *most* kind. Ever since—"

"Ever since a churchwarden was shot in the Vicar's study. Quite a while ago. But you've had other successes since then. A little poison pen trouble down near Lymstock."

"You seem to know quite a lot about me, Inspector—"

"Primer, my name is. And you've been busy here, I expect."

"Well, I try to do what I can in the garden. Sadly neglected. This bindweed, for instance, such nasty stuff. Its roots," said Miss Marple, looking very earnestly at the Inspector, "go down underground a long way. A very long way—they run along underneath the soil."

"I think you're right about that," said the Inspector. "A long way down. A long way back ... this murder, I mean. Eighteen years."

"And perhaps before that," said Miss Marple. "Running underground ... And terribly harmful, Inspector, squeezing the life out of the pretty growing flowers...."

One of the police constables came along the path. He was perspiring and had a smudge of earth on his forehead.

"We've come to—something, sir. Looks as though it's her all right."

II

And it was then, Gwenda reflected, that the nightmarish quality of the day had begun. Giles coming in, his face rather pale, saying: "It's—she's there all right, Gwenda."

Then one of the constables had telephoned and the police surgeon, a short, bustling man, had arrived.

And it was then that Mrs. Cocker, the calm and imperturbable Mrs. Cocker, had gone out into the garden—not led, as might have been expected, by ghoulish curiosity, but solely in the quest of culinary herbs for the dish she was preparing for lunch. And Mrs. Cocker, whose reaction to the news of a murder on the preceding day had been shocked censure and an anxiety for the effect upon Gwenda's health (for Mrs. Cocker had made up her mind that the nursery upstairs was to be tenanted after the due number of months), had walked straight in upon the gruesome discovery, and had been immediately "taken queer" to an alarming extent.

"Too horrible, madam. Bones is a thing I never could abide. Not skeleton bones, as one might say. And here in the garden, just by the mint and all. And my heart's beating at such a rate—palpitations—I can hardly get my breath. And if I might make so bold, just a thimbleful of brandy...."

Alarmed by Mrs. Cocker's gasps and her ashy colour, Gwenda had rushed to the sideboard, poured out some brandy and brought it to Mrs. Cocker to sip.

And Mrs. Cocker had said: "That's just what I needed, madam—" when, quite suddenly, her voice had failed, and she had looked so alarming, that Gwenda had screamed for Giles, and Giles had yelled to the police surgeon.

"And it's fortunate I was on the spot," the latter said afterwards. "It was touch and go anyway. Without a doctor, that woman would have died then and there."

And then Inspector Primer had taken the brandy decanter, and then he and the doctor had gone into a huddle over it, and Inspector Primer had asked Gwenda when she and Giles had last had any brandy out of it.

Gwenda said she thought not for some days. They'd been away—up North, and the last few times they'd had a drink, they'd had gin. "But I nearly had some brandy yesterday," said Gwenda. "Only it makes me think of Channel steamers, so Giles opened a new bottle of whisky."

"That was very lucky for you, Mrs. Reed. If you'd drunk brandy yesterday, I doubt if you would be alive today."

"Giles nearly drank some—but in the end he had whisky with me." Gwenda shivered.

Even now, alone in the house, with the police gone and Giles gone with them after a hasty lunch scratched up out of tins (since Mrs. Cocker had been removed to hospital), Gwenda could hardly believe in the morning turmoil of events.

One thing stood out clearly: the presence in the house yesterday of Jackie Afflick and Walter Fane. Either of them could have tampered with the brandy, and what was the purpose of the telephone calls unless it was to afford one or other of them the opportunity to poison the brandy decanter? Gwenda and Giles had been getting too near the truth. Or had a third person come in from outside, through the open dining room window perhaps, whilst she and Giles had been sitting in Dr. Kennedy's house waiting for Lily Kimble to keep her appointment? A third person who had engineered the telephone calls to steer suspicion on the other two?

But a third person, Gwenda thought, didn't make sense. For a third person, surely, would have telephoned to only *one* of the two

men. A third person would have wanted one suspect, not two. And anyway, who could the third person be? Erskine had definitely been in Northumberland. No, either Walter Fane had telephoned to Afflick and had pretended to be telephoned to himself. Or else Afflick had telephoned Fane, and had made the same pretence of receiving a summons. One of those two, and the police, who were cleverer and had more resources than she and Giles had, would find out which. And in the meantime both of those men would be watched. They wouldn't be able to—to try again.

Again Gwenda shivered. It took a little getting used to—the knowledge that someone had tried to kill you. “Dangerous,” Miss Marple had said long ago. But she and Giles had not really taken the idea of danger seriously. Even after Lily Kimble had been killed, it still hadn't occurred to her that anyone would try and kill her and Giles. Just because she and Giles were getting too near the truth of what had happened eighteen years ago. Working out what must have happened then—and who had made it happen.

Walter Fane and Jackie Afflick....

Which?

Gwenda closed her eyes, seeing them afresh in the light of her new knowledge.

Quiet Walter Fane, sitting in his office—the pale spider in the centre of its web. So quiet, so harmless-looking. A house with its blinds down. Someone dead in the house. Someone dead eighteen years ago—but still there. How sinister the quiet Walter Fane seemed now. Walter Fane who had once flung himself murderously upon his brother. Walter Fane whom Helen had scornfully refused to marry, once here at home, and once again in India. A double rebuff. A double ignominy. Walter Fane, so quiet, so unemotional, who could express himself, perhaps, only in sudden murderous violence—as, possibly, quiet Lizzie Borden had once done....

Gwenda opened her eyes. She had convinced herself, hadn't she, that Walter Fane was the man?

One might, perhaps, just consider Afflick. With her eyes open, not shut.

His loud check suit, his domineering manner—just the opposite to Walter Fane—nothing repressed or quiet about Afflick. But possibly he had put that manner on because of an inferiority complex. It worked that way, experts said. If you weren't sure of yourself, you had to boast and assert yourself, and be overbearing. Turned down by Helen because he wasn't good enough for her. The sore festering, not forgotten. Determination to get on in the world. Persecution. Everyone against him. Discharged from his employment by a faked charge made up by an "enemy." Surely that did show that Afflick wasn't normal. And what a feeling of power a man like that would get out of killing. That good-natured, jovial face of his, it was a cruel face really. He was a cruel man—and his thin pale wife knew it and was afraid of him. Lily Kimble had threatened him and Lily Kimble had died. Gwenda and Giles had interfered—then Gwenda and Giles must die, too, and he would involve Walter Fane who had sacked him long ago. That fitted in very nicely.

Gwenda shook herself, came out of her imaginings, and returned to practicality. Giles would be home and want his tea. She must clear away and wash up lunch.

She fetched a tray and took the things out to the kitchen. Everything in the kitchen was exquisitely neat. Mrs. Cocker was really a treasure.

By the side of the sink was a pair of surgical rubber gloves. Mrs. Cocker always wore a pair for washing up. Her niece, who worked in a hospital, got them at a reduced price.

Gwenda fitted them on over her hands and began to wash up the dishes. She might as well keep her hands nice.

She washed the plates and put them in the rack, washed and dried the other things and put everything neatly away.

Then, still lost in thought, she went upstairs. She might as well, she thought, wash out those stockings and a jumper or two. She'd keep the gloves on.

These things were in the forefront of her mind. But somewhere, underneath them, something was nagging at her.

Walter Fane or Jackie Afflick, she had said. One or the other of them. And she had made out quite a good case against either of

them. Perhaps that was what really worried her. Because, strictly speaking, it would be much more satisfactory if you could only make out a good case against *one* of them. One ought to be sure, by now, *which*. And Gwenda wasn't sure.

If only there was someone else ... But there couldn't be anyone else. Because Richard Erskine was out of it. Richard Erskine had been in Northumberland when Lily Kimble was killed and when the brandy in the decanter had been tampered with. Yes, Richard Erskine was right out of it.

She was glad of that, because she liked Richard Erskine. Richard Erskine was attractive, very attractive. How sad for him to be married to that megalith of a woman with her suspicious eyes and deep bass voice. Just like a man's voice....

Like a man's voice....

The idea flashed through her mind with a queer misgiving.

A man's voice ... Could it have been Mrs. Erskine, not her husband, who had replied to Giles on the telephone last night?

No—no, surely not. No, of course not. She and Giles would have known. And anyway, to begin with, Mrs. Erskine could have had no idea of who was ringing up. No, of course it was Erskine speaking, and his wife, as he said, was away.

His wife was away ...

Surely—no, that was impossible ... Could it have been *Mrs.* Erskine? Mrs. Erskine, driven insane by jealousy? Mrs. Erskine to whom Lily Kimble had written? Was it a *woman* Léonie had seen in the garden that night when she looked out of the window?

There was a sudden bang in the hall below. Somebody had come in through the front door.

Gwenda came out from the bathroom on to the landing and looked over the banisters. She was relieved to see it was Dr. Kennedy. She called down:

"I'm here."

Her hands were held out in front of her—wet, glistening, a queer pinkish grey—they reminded her of something....

Kennedy looked up, shading his eyes.

"Is that you, Gwennie? I can't see your face ... My eyes are dazzled—"

And then Gwenda screamed....

Looking at those smooth monkey's paws and hearing that voice in the hall—

"It was you," she gasped. "You killed her ... killed Helen ... I—know now. It was you ... all along ... You...."

He came up the stairs towards her. Slowly. Looking up at her.

"Why couldn't you leave me alone?" he said. "Why did you have to meddle? Why did you have to bring—Her—back? Just when I'd begun to forget—to forget. You brought her back again—Helen—my Helen. Bringing it all up again. I had to kill Lily—now I'll have to kill you. Like I killed Helen ... Yes, like I killed Helen...."

He was close upon her now—his hands out towards her—reaching, she knew, for her throat. That kind, quizzical face—that nice, ordinary, elderly face—the same still, but for the eyes—the eyes were not sane....

Gwenda retreated before him, slowly, the scream frozen in her throat. She had screamed once. She could not scream again. And if she did scream no one would hear.

Because there was no one in the house—not Giles, and not Mrs. Cocker, not even Miss Marple in the garden. Nobody. And the house next door was too far away to hear if she screamed. And anyway, she couldn't scream ... Because she was too frightened to scream. Frightened of those horrible reaching hands....

She could back away to the nursery door and then—and then—those hands would fasten round her throat....

A pitiful little stifled whimper came from between her lips.

And then, suddenly, Dr. Kennedy stopped and reeled back as a jet of soapy water struck him between the eyes. He gasped and blinked and his hands went to his face.

"So fortunate," said Miss Marple's voice, rather breathless, for she had run violently up the back stairs, "that I was just syringing the greenfly off your roses."

Twenty-five

POSTSCRIPT AT TORQUAY

"But, of course, dear Gwenda, I should never have dreamed of going away and leaving you alone in the house," said Miss Marple. "I knew there was a very dangerous person at large, and I was keeping an unobtrusive watch from the garden."

"Did you know it was—him—all along?" asked Gwenda.

They were all three, Miss Marple, Gwenda and Giles, sitting on the terrace of the Imperial Hotel at Torquay.

"A change of scene," Miss Marple had said, and Giles had agreed, would be the best thing for Gwenda. So Inspector Primer had concurred and they had driven to Torquay forthwith.

Miss Marple said in answer to Gwenda's question, "Well, he did seem indicated, my dear. Although unfortunately there was nothing in the way of evidence to go upon. Just indications, nothing more."

Looking at her curiously, Giles said, "But I can't see any indications even."

"Oh dear, Giles, think. He was *on the spot*, to begin with."

"On the spot?"

"But certainly. When Kelvin Halliday came to him that night he *had just come back from the hospital*. And the hospital, at that time, as several people told us, was actually next door to Hillside, or St. Catherine's as it was then called. So that, as you see, puts him in *the right place at the right time*. And then there were a hundred and one

little significant facts. Helen Halliday told Richard Erskine she had gone out to marry Walter Fane because *she wasn't happy at home*. Not happy, that is, living with her brother. Yet her brother was by all accounts devoted to her. So why wasn't she happy? Mr. Afflick told you that 'he was sorry for the poor kid.' I think that he was absolutely truthful when he said that. He *was* sorry for her. Why did she have to go and meet young Afflick in that clandestine way? Admittedly she was not wildly in love with him. Was it because she couldn't meet young men in the ordinary normal way? Her brother was 'strict' and 'old-fashioned.' It is vaguely reminiscent, is it not, of Mr. Barrett of Wimpole Street?"

Gwenda shivered.

"He was mad," she said. "Mad."

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "He wasn't normal. He adored his half-sister, and that affection became possessive and unwholesome. That kind of thing happens oftener than you'd think. Fathers who don't want their daughters to marry—or even to meet young men. Like Mr. Barrett. I thought of that when I heard about the tennis net."

"The tennis net?"

"Yes, that seemed to me very significant. Think of that girl, young Helen, coming home from school, and eager for all a young girl wants out of life, anxious to meet young men—to flirt with them—"

"A little sex-crazy."

"No," said Miss Marple with emphasis. "*That* is one of the wickedest things about this crime. Dr. Kennedy didn't only kill her physically. If you think back carefully, you'll see that the only evidence for Helen Kennedy's having been man mad or practically—what is the word you used, dear? oh yes, a nymphomaniac—came actually from *Dr. Kennedy* himself. I think, myself, that she was a perfectly normal young girl who wanted to have fun and a good time and flirt a little and finally settle down with the man of her choice—no more than that. And see what steps her brother took. First he was strict and old-fashioned about allowing her liberty. Then, when she wanted to give tennis parties—a most normal and harmless desire—he pretended to agree and then one night secretly cut the tennis net to ribbons—a very significant and sadistic action. Then,

since she could still go out to play tennis or to dances, he took advantage of a grazed foot which he treated, to infect it so that it wouldn't heal. Oh yes, I think he did that ... in fact, I'm sure of it.

"Mind you. I don't think Helen realized any of all this. She knew her brother had a deep affection for her and I don't think she knew *why* she felt uneasy and unhappy at home. But she did feel like that and at last she decided to go out to India and marry young Fane simply in order to get away. To get away from *what*? She didn't know. She was too young and guileless to know. So she went off to India and on the way she met Richard Erskine and fell in love with him. There again, she behaved not like a sex-crazy girl, but like a decent and honourable girl. She didn't urge him to leave his wife. She urged him not to do so. But when she saw Walter Fane she knew that she couldn't marry him, and because she didn't know what else to do, she wired her brother for money to go home.

"On the way home she met your father—and another way of escape showed itself. This time it was one with good prospect of happiness.

"She didn't marry your father under false pretences, Gwenda. He was recovering from the death of a dearly loved wife. She was getting over an unhappy love affair. They could both help each other. I think it is significant that she and Kelvin Halliday were married in London and then went down to Dillmouth to break the news to Dr. Kennedy. She must have had some instinct that that would be a wiser thing to do than to go down and be married in Dillmouth, which ordinarily would have been the normal thing to do. I still think she didn't know what she was up against—but she was uneasy, and she felt safer in presenting her brother with the marriage as a *fait accompli*.

"Kelvin Halliday was very friendly to Kennedy and liked him. Kennedy seems to have gone out of his way to appear pleased about the marriage. The couple took a furnished house there.

"And now we come to that very significant fact—the suggestion that Kelvin was being drugged by his wife. There are only two possible explanations of that—because there are only two people who could have had the opportunity of doing such a thing. Either

Helen Halliday *was* drugging her husband, and if so, why? Or else the drugs were being administered by Dr. Kennedy. Kennedy was Halliday's physician as is clear by Halliday's consulting him. He had confidence in Kennedy's medical knowledge—and the suggestion that his wife was drugging him was very cleverly put to him by Kennedy."

"But could any drug make a man have the hallucination that he was strangling his wife?" asked Giles. "I mean there isn't any drug, is there, that has that *particular* effect?"

"My dear Giles, you've fallen into the trap again—the trap of believing *what is said to you*. There is only Dr. Kennedy's word for it that Halliday ever had *that* hallucination. He himself never says so in his diary. He had hallucinations, yes, but he does not mention their nature. But I dare say Kennedy talked to him about men who had strangled their wives after passing through a phase such as Kelvin Halliday was experiencing."

"Dr. Kennedy was really wicked," said Gwenda.

"I think," said Miss Marple, "that he'd definitely passed the borderline between sanity and madness by that time. And Helen, poor girl, began to realize it. It was to her brother she must have been speaking that day when she was overheard by Lily. "I think I've always been afraid of you." That was one of the things she said. And that always was very significant. And so she determined to leave Dillmouth. She persuaded her husband to buy a house in Norfolk, she persuaded him not to tell anyone about it. The secrecy about it was very illuminating. She was clearly very afraid of *someone* knowing about it—but that did not fit in with the Walter Fane theory or the Jackie Afflick theory—and certainly not with Richard Erskine's being concerned. No, it pointed to somewhere much nearer home.

"And in the end, Kelvin Halliday, whom doubtless the secrecy irked and who felt it to be pointless, told his brother-in-law.

"And in so doing, sealed his own fate and that of his wife. For Kennedy was not going to let Helen go and live happily with her husband. I think perhaps his idea was simply to break down Halliday's health with drugs. But at the revelation that his victim and Helen were going to escape him, he became completely unhinged.

From the hospital he went through into the garden of St. Catherine's and he took with him a pair of surgical gloves. He caught Helen in the hall, and he strangled her. Nobody saw him, there was no one there to see him, or so he thought, and so, racked with love and frenzy, he quoted those tragic lines that were so apposite."

Miss Marple sighed and clucked her tongue.

"I was stupid—very stupid. We were all stupid. We should have seen at once. Those lines from *The Duchess of Malfi* were really the clue to the whole thing. They are said, are they not, by a *brother* who has just contrived his sister's death to avenge her marriage to the man she loved. Yes, we were stupid—"

"And then?" asked Giles.

"And then he went through with the whole devilish plan. The body carried upstairs. The clothes packed in a suitcase. A note, written and thrown in the wastepaper basket to convince Halliday later."

"But I should have thought," said Gwenda, "that it would have been better from his point of view for my father actually to have been convicted of the murder."

Miss Marple shook her head.

"Oh no, he couldn't risk that. He had a lot of shrewd Scottish common sense, you know. He had a wholesome respect for the police. The police take a lot of convincing before they believe a man guilty of murder. The police might have asked a lot of awkward questions and made a lot of awkward enquiries as to times and places. No, his plan was simpler and, I think, more devilish. He only had Halliday to convince. First, that he had killed his wife. Secondly that he was mad. He persuaded Halliday to go into a mental home, but I don't think he really wanted to convince him that it was all a delusion. Your father accepted that theory, Gwennie, mainly, I should imagine, for your sake. He continued to believe that he had killed Helen. He died believing that."

"Wicked," said Gwenda. "Wicked—wicked—wicked."

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "There isn't really any other word. And I think, Gwenda, that that is why your childish impression of what you

saw remained so strong. It was real evil that was in the air that night."

"But the letters," said Giles. "Helen's letters? They *were* in her handwriting, so they couldn't be forgeries."

"Of course they were forgeries! But that is where he overreached himself. He was so anxious, you see, to stop you and Giles making investigations. He could probably imitate Helen's handwriting quite nicely—but it wouldn't fool an expert. So the sample of Helen's handwriting he sent you with the letter wasn't her handwriting either. He wrote it himself. So naturally it tallied."

"Goodness," said Giles. "I never thought of that."

"No," said Miss Marple. "*You believed what he said*. It really is very dangerous to believe people. *I never have for years*."

"And the brandy?"

"He did that the day he came to Hillside with Helen's letter and talked to me in the garden. He was waiting in the house while Mrs. Cocker came out and told me he was there. It would only take a minute."

"Good Lord," said Giles. "And he urged me to take Gwenda home and *give her brandy* after we were at the police station when Lily Kimble was killed. How did he arrange to meet her earlier?"

"That was very simple. The original letter he sent her asked her to meet him at Woodleigh Camp and come to Matchings Halt by the two-five train from Dillmouth Junction. He came out of the copse of trees, probably, and accosted her as she was going up the lane—and strangled her. Then he simply substituted the letter you all saw for the letter she had with her (and which he had asked her to bring because of the directions in it) and went home to prepare for you and play out the little comedy of waiting for Lily."

"And Lily really was threatening him? Her letter didn't sound as though she was. Her letter sounded as though she suspected Afflick."

"Perhaps she did. But Léonie, the Swiss girl, had talked to Lily, and Léonie was the one danger to Kennedy. Because she looked out of the nursery window and saw him digging in the garden. In the morning he talked to her, told her bluntly that Major Halliday had

killed his wife—that Major Halliday was insane, and that he, Kennedy, was hushing up the matter for the child's sake. If, however, Léonie felt she ought to go to the police, she must do so, but it would be very unpleasant for her—and so on.

"Léonie took immediate fright at the mention of the police. She adored you and had implicit faith in what *M. le docteur* thought best. Kennedy paid her a handsome sum of money and hustled her back to Switzerland. But before she went, she hinted something to Lily as to your father's having killed his wife and that she had seen the body buried. That fitted in with Lily's ideas at the time. She took it for granted that it was Kelvin Halliday Léonie had seen digging the grave."

"But Kennedy didn't know that, of course," said Gwenda.

"Of course not. When he got Lily's letter the words in it that frightened him were that Léonie had told Lily what she had seen *out of the window* and the mention of the car outside."

"The car? Jackie Afflick's car?"

"Another misunderstanding. Lily remembered, or thought she remembered, a car like Jackie Afflick's being outside in the road. Already her imagination had got to work on the Mystery Man who came over to see Mrs. Halliday. With the hospital next door, no doubt a good many cars did park along this road. But you must remember that the *doctor's* car was actually standing outside the hospital that night—he probably leaped to the conclusion that she meant *his* car. The adjective posh was meaningless to him."

"I see," said Giles. "Yes, to a guilty conscience that letter of Lily's might look like blackmail. But how do you know all about Léonie?"

Her lips pursed close together, Miss Marple said: "He went—right over the edge, you know. As soon as the men Inspector Primer had left rushed in and seized him, he went over the whole crime again and again—everything he'd done. Léonie died, it seems, very shortly after her return to Switzerland. Overdose of some sleeping tablets ... Oh no, he wasn't taking any chances."

"Like trying to poison me with the brandy."

"You were very dangerous to him, you and Giles. Fortunately you never told him about your memory of seeing Helen dead in the hall.

He never knew there had been an eyewitness."

"Those telephone calls to Fane and Afflick," said Giles. "Did he put those through?"

"Yes. If there was an enquiry as to who could have tampered with the brandy, either of them would make an admirable suspect, and if Jackie Afflick drove over in his car alone, it might tie him in with Lily Kimble's murder. Fane would most likely have an alibi."

"And he seemed fond of me," said Gwenda. "Little Gwennie."

"He had to play his part," said Miss Marple. "Imagine what it meant to him. After eighteen years, you and Giles come along, asking questions, burrowing into the past, disturbing a murder that had seemed dead but was only sleeping ... Murder in retrospect ... A horribly dangerous thing to do, my dears. I have been sadly worried."

"Poor Mrs. Cocker," said Gwenda. "She had a terribly near escape. I'm glad she's going to be all right. Do you think she'll come back to us, Giles? After all this?"

"She will if there's a nursery," said Giles gravely, and Gwenda blushed, and Miss Marple smiled a little and looked out across Torbay.

"How very odd it was that it should happen the way it did," mused Gwenda. "My having those rubber gloves on, and looking at them, and then his coming into the hall and saying those words that sounded so like the others. 'Face'... and then: 'Eyes dazzled'—"

She shuddered.

"*Cover her face ... Mine eyes dazzle ... she died young ...* that might have been me ... if Miss Marple hadn't been there."

She paused and said softly, "Poor Helen ... Poor lovely Helen, who died young ... You know, Giles, she isn't there anymore—in the house—in the hall. I could feel that yesterday before we left. There's just the house. And the house is fond of us. We can go back if we like...."

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Credits

Author's Foreword to *The Thirteen Problems*

These problems were Miss Marple's first introduction to the world of detective story readers. Miss Marple has some faint affinity with my own grandmother, also a pink and white pretty old lady who, although having led the most sheltered and Victorian of lives, nevertheless always appeared to be intimately acquainted with all the depths of human depravity. One could be made to feel incredibly naïve and credulous by her reproachful remark: "But did you *believe* what they said to you? You shouldn't do that. *I* never do!"

I enjoyed writing the Miss Marple stories very much, conceived a great affection for my fluffy old lady, and hoped that she might be a success. She was. After the first six stories had appeared, six more were requested, Miss Marple had definitely come to stay.

She has appeared now in several books and also in a play—and actually rivals Hercule Poirot in popularity. I get about an equal number of letters, one lot saying: "I wish you would always have Miss Marple and not Poirot," and the other "I wish you would have Poirot and not Miss Marple." I myself incline to her side. I think, that she is at her best in the solving of *short* problems; they suit her more intimate style. Poirot, on the other hand, insists on a full-length book to display his talents.

These *Thirteen Problems* contain, I consider, the real essence of Miss Marple for those who like her.

Agatha Christie

Penguin edition, 1953

One

THE TUESDAY NIGHT CLUB

Unsolved mysteries.”

Raymond West blew out a cloud of smoke and repeated the words with a kind of deliberate self-conscious pleasure.

“Unsolved mysteries.”

He looked round him with satisfaction. The room was an old one with broad black beams across the ceiling and it was furnished with good old furniture that belonged to it. Hence Raymond West’s approving glance. By profession he was a writer and he liked the atmosphere to be flawless. His Aunt Jane’s house always pleased him as the right setting for her personality. He looked across the hearth to where she sat erect in the big grandfather chair. Miss Marple wore a black brocade dress, very much pinched in round the waist. Mechlin lace was arranged in a cascade down the front of the bodice. She had on black lace mittens, and a black lace cap surmounted the piled-up masses of her snowy hair. She was knitting—something white and soft and fleecy. Her faded blue eyes, benignant and kindly, surveyed her nephew and her nephew’s guests with gentle pleasure. They rested first on Raymond himself, self-consciously debonair, then on Joyce Lemprière, the artist, with her close-cropped black head and queer hazel-green eyes, then on that well-groomed man of the world, Sir Henry Clithering. There were

two other people in the room, Dr. Pender, the elderly clergyman of the parish, and Mr. Petherick, the solicitor, a dried-up little man with eyeglasses which he looked over and not through. Miss Marple gave a brief moment of attention to all these people and returned to her knitting with a gentle smile upon her lips.

Mr. Petherick gave the dry little cough with which he usually prefaced his remarks.

"What is that you say, Raymond? Unsolved mysteries? Ha—and what about them?"

"Nothing about them," said Joyce Lemprière. "Raymond just likes the sound of the words and of himself saying them."

Raymond West threw her a glance of reproach at which she threw back her head and laughed.

"He is a humbug, isn't he, Miss Marple?" she demanded. "You know that, I am sure."

Miss Marple smiled gently at her but made no reply.

"Life itself is an unsolved mystery," said the clergyman gravely.

Raymond sat up in his chair and flung away his cigarette with an impulsive gesture.

"That's not what I mean. I was not talking philosophy," he said. "I was thinking of actual bare prosaic facts, things that have happened and that no one has ever explained."

"I know just the sort of thing you mean, dear," said Miss Marple. "For instance Mrs. Carruthers had a very strange experience yesterday morning. She bought two gills of picked shrimps at Elliot's. She called at two other shops and when she got home she found she had not got the shrimps with her. She went back to the two shops she had visited but these shrimps had completely disappeared. Now that seems to me very remarkable."

"A very fishy story," said Sir Henry Clithering gravely.

"There are, of course, all kinds of possible explanations," said Miss Marple, her cheeks growing slightly pinker with excitement. "For instance, somebody else—"

"My dear Aunt," said Raymond West with some amusement, "I didn't mean that sort of village incident. I was thinking of murders

and disappearances—the kind of thing that Sir Henry could tell us about by the hour if he liked.”

“But I never talk shop,” said Sir Henry modestly. “No, I never talk shop.”

Sir Henry Clithering had been until lately Commissioner of Scotland Yard.

“I suppose there are a lot of murders and things that never are solved by the police,” said Joyce Lemprière.

“That is an admitted fact, I believe,” said Mr. Petherick.

“I wonder,” said Raymond West, “what class of brain really succeeds best in unravelling a mystery? One always feels that the average police detective must be hampered by lack of imagination.”

“That is the layman’s point of view,” said Sir Henry dryly.

“You really want a committee,” said Joyce, smiling. “For psychology and imagination go to the writer—”

She made an ironical bow to Raymond but he remained serious.

“The art of writing gives one an insight into human nature,” he said gravely. “One sees, perhaps, motives that the ordinary person would pass by.”

“I know, dear,” said Miss Marple, “that your books are very clever. But do you think that people are really so unpleasant as you make them out to be?”

“My dear Aunt,” said Raymond gently, “keep your beliefs. Heaven forbid that *I* should in any way shatter them.”

“I mean,” said Miss Marple, puckering her brow a little as she counted the stitches in her knitting, “that so many people seem to me not to be either bad or good, but simply, you know, very silly.”

Mr. Petherick gave his dry little cough again.

“Don’t you think, Raymond,” he said, “that you attach too much weight to imagination? Imagination is a very dangerous thing, as we lawyers know only too well. To be able to sift evidence impartially, to take the facts and look at them as facts—that seems to me the only logical method of arriving at the truth. I may add that in my experience it is the only one that succeeds.”

“Bah!” cried Joyce, flinging back her black head indignantly. “I bet I could beat you all at this game. I am not only a woman—and

say what you like, women have an intuition that is denied to men—I am an artist as well. I see things that you don't. And then, too, as an artist I have knocked about among all sorts and conditions of people. I know life as darling Miss Marple here cannot possibly know it."

"I don't know about that, dear," said Miss Marple. "Very painful and distressing things happen in villages sometimes."

"May I speak?" said Dr. Pender smiling. "It is the fashion nowadays to decry the clergy, I know, but we hear things, we know a side of human character which is a sealed book to the outside world."

"Well," said Joyce, "it seems to me we are a pretty representative gathering. How would it be if we formed a Club? What is today? Tuesday? We will call it The Tuesday Night Club. It is to meet every week, and each member in turn has to propound a problem. Some mystery of which they have personal knowledge, and to which, of course, they know the answer. Let me see, how many are we? One, two, three, four, five. We ought really to be six."

"You have forgotten me, dear," said Miss Marple, smiling brightly.

Joyce was slightly taken aback, but she concealed the fact quickly.

"That would be lovely, Miss Marple," she said. "I didn't think you would care to play."

"I think it would be very interesting," said Miss Marple, "especially with so many clever gentlemen present. I am afraid I am not clever myself, but living all these years in St. Mary Mead does give one an insight into human nature."

"I am sure your cooperation will be very valuable," said Sir Henry, courteously.

"Who is going to start?" said Joyce.

"I think there is no doubt as to that," said Dr. Pender, "when we have the great good fortune to have such a distinguished man as Sir Henry staying with us—"

He left his sentence unfinished, making a courtly bow in the direction of Sir Henry.

The latter was silent for a minute or two. At last he sighed and recrossed his legs and began:

"It is a little difficult for me to select just the kind of thing you want, but I think, as it happens, I know of an instance which fits these conditions very aptly. You may have seen some mention of the case in the papers of a year ago. It was laid aside at the time as an unsolved mystery, but, as it happens, the solution came into my hands not very many days ago.

"The facts are very simple. Three people sat down to a supper consisting, amongst other things, of tinned lobster. Later in the night, all three were taken ill, and a doctor was hastily summoned. Two of the people recovered, the third one died."

"Ah!" said Raymond approvingly.

"As I say, the facts as such were very simple. Death was considered to be due to ptomaine poisoning, a certificate was given to that effect, and the victim was duly buried. But things did not rest at that."

Miss Marple nodded her head.

"There was talk, I suppose," she said, "there usually is."

"And now I must describe the actors in this little drama. I will call the husband and wife Mr. and Mrs. Jones, and the wife's companion Miss Clark. Mr. Jones was a traveller for a firm of manufacturing chemists. He was a good-looking man in a kind of coarse, florid way, aged about fifty. His wife was a rather commonplace woman, of about forty-five. The companion, Miss Clark, was a woman of sixty, a stout cheery woman with a beaming rubicund face. None of them, you might say, very interesting.

"Now the beginning of the troubles arose in a very curious way. Mr. Jones had been staying the previous night at a small commercial hotel in Birmingham. It happened that the blotting paper in the blotting book had been put in fresh that day, and the chambermaid, having apparently nothing better to do, amused herself by studying the blotter in the mirror just after Mr. Jones had been writing a letter there. A few days later there was a report in the papers of the death of Mrs. Jones as the result of eating tinned lobster, and the chambermaid then imparted to her fellow servants the words that

she had deciphered on the blotting pad. They were as follows:
*Entirely dependent on my wife . . . when she is dead I will . . .
hundreds and thousands. . . .*

"You may remember that there had recently been a case of a wife being poisoned by her husband. It needed very little to fire the imagination of these maids. Mr. Jones had planned to do away with his wife and inherit hundreds of thousands of pounds! As it happened one of the maids had relations living in the small market town where the Joneses resided. She wrote to them, and they in return wrote to her. Mr. Jones, it seemed, had been very attentive to the local doctor's daughter, a good-looking young woman of thirty-three. Scandal began to hum. The Home Secretary was petitioned. Numerous anonymous letters poured into Scotland Yard all accusing Mr. Jones of having murdered his wife. Now I may say that not for one moment did we think there was anything in it except idle village talk and gossip. Nevertheless, to quiet public opinion an exhumation order was granted. It was one of these cases of popular superstition based on nothing solid whatever, which proved to be so surprisingly justified. As a result of the autopsy sufficient arsenic was found to make it quite clear that the deceased lady had died of arsenical poisoning. It was for Scotland Yard working with the local authorities to prove how that arsenic had been administered, and by whom."

"Ah!" said Joyce. "I like this. This is the real stuff."

"Suspicion naturally fell on the husband. He benefited by his wife's death. Not to the extent of the hundreds of thousands romantically imagined by the hotel chambermaid, but to the very solid amount of £8000. He had no money of his own apart from what he earned, and he was a man of somewhat extravagant habits with a partiality for the society of women. We investigated as delicately as possible the rumour of his attachment to the doctor's daughter; but while it seemed clear that there had been a strong friendship between them at one time, there had been a most abrupt break two months previously, and they did not appear to have seen each other since. The doctor himself, an elderly man of a straightforward and unsuspicious type, was dumbfounded at the result of the autopsy. He had been called in about midnight to find

all three people suffering. He had realized immediately the serious condition of Mrs. Jones, and had sent back to his dispensary for some opium pills, to allay the pain. In spite of all his efforts, however, she succumbed, but not for a moment did he suspect that anything was amiss. He was convinced that her death was due to a form of botulism. Supper that night had consisted of tinned lobster and salad, trifle and bread and cheese. Unfortunately none of the lobster remained—it had all been eaten and the tin thrown away. He had interrogated the young maid, Gladys Linch. She was terribly upset, very tearful and agitated, and he found it hard to get her to keep to the point, but she declared again and again that the tin had not been distended in any way and that the lobster had appeared to her in a perfectly good condition.

“Such were the facts we had to go upon. If Jones had feloniously administered arsenic to his wife, it seemed clear that it could not have been done in any of the things eaten at supper, as all three persons had partaken of the meal. Also—another point—Jones himself had returned from Birmingham just as supper was being brought in to table, so that he would have had no opportunity of doctoring any of the food beforehand.”

“What about the companion?” asked Joyce—“the stout woman with the good-humoured face.”

Sir Henry nodded.

“We did not neglect Miss Clark, I can assure you. But it seemed doubtful what motive she could have had for the crime. Mrs. Jones left her no legacy of any kind and the net result of her employer’s death was that she had to seek for another situation.”

“That seems to leave her out of it,” said Joyce thoughtfully.

“Now one of my inspectors soon discovered a significant fact,” went on Sir Henry. “After supper on that evening Mr. Jones had gone down to the kitchen and had demanded a bowl of cornflour for his wife who had complained of not feeling well. He had waited in the kitchen until Gladys Linch prepared it, and then carried it up to his wife’s room himself. That, I admit, seemed to clinch the case.”

The lawyer nodded.

"Motive," he said, ticking the points off on his fingers. "Opportunity. As a traveller for a firm of druggists, easy access to the poison."

"And a man of weak moral fibre," said the clergyman.

Raymond West was staring at Sir Henry.

"There is a catch in this somewhere," he said. "Why did you not arrest him?"

Sir Henry smiled rather wryly.

"That is the unfortunate part of the case. So far all had gone swimmingly, but now we come to the snags. Jones was not arrested because on interrogating Miss Clark she told us that the whole of the bowl of cornflour was drunk not by Mrs. Jones but by her.

"Yes, it seems that she went to Mrs. Jones's room as was her custom. Mrs. Jones was sitting up in bed and the bowl of cornflour was beside her.

"I am not feeling a bit well, Milly," she said. 'Serves me right, I suppose, for touching lobster at night. I asked Albert to get me a bowl of cornflour, but now that I have got it I don't seem to fancy it.'

"A pity," commented Miss Clark—"it is nicely made too, no lumps. Gladys is really quite a nice cook. Very few girls nowadays seem to be able to make a bowl of cornflour nicely. I declare I quite fancy it myself, I am that hungry.'

"I should think you were with your foolish ways," said Mrs. Jones.

"I must explain," broke off Sir Henry, "that Miss Clark, alarmed at her increasing stoutness, was doing a course of what is popularly known as 'banting.'

"It is not good for you, Milly, it really isn't," urged Mrs. Jones. 'If the Lord made you stout he meant you to be stout. You drink up that bowl of cornflour. It will do you all the good in the world.'

"And straight away Miss Clark set to and did in actual fact finish the bowl. So, you see, that knocked our case against the husband to pieces. Asked for an explanation of the words on the blotting book Jones gave one readily enough. The letter, he explained, was in answer to one written from his brother in Australia who had applied to him for money. He had written, pointing out that he was entirely dependent on his wife. When his wife was dead he would have

control of money and would assist his brother if possible. He regretted his inability to help but pointed out that there were hundreds and thousands of people in the world in the same unfortunate plight."

"And so the case fell to pieces?" said Dr. Pender.

"And so the case fell to pieces," said Sir Henry gravely. "We could not take the risk of arresting Jones with nothing to go upon."

There was a silence and then Joyce said, "And that is all, is it?"

"That is the case as it has stood for the last year. The true solution is now in the hands of Scotland Yard, and in two or three days' time you will probably read of it in the newspapers."

"The true solution," said Joyce thoughtfully. "I wonder. Let's all think for five minutes and then speak."

Raymond West nodded and noted the time on his watch. When the five minutes were up he looked over at Dr. Pender.

"Will you speak first?" he said.

The old man shook his head. "I confess," he said, "that I am utterly baffled. I can but think that the husband in some way must be the guilty party, but how he did it I cannot imagine. I can only suggest that he must have given her the poison in some way that has not yet been discovered, although how in that case it should have come to light after all this time I cannot imagine."

"Joyce?"

"The companion!" said Joyce decidedly. "The companion every time! How do we know what motive she may have had? Just because she was old and stout and ugly it doesn't follow that she wasn't in love with Jones herself. She may have hated the wife for some other reason. Think of being a companion—always having to be pleasant and agree and stifle yourself and bottle yourself up. One day she couldn't bear it any longer and then she killed her. She probably put the arsenic in the bowl of cornflour and all that story about eating it herself is a lie."

"Mr. Petherick?"

The lawyer joined the tips of his fingers together professionally. "I should hardly like to say. On the facts I should hardly like to say."

"But you have got to, Mr. Petherick," said Joyce. "You can't reserve judgement and say 'without prejudice,' and be legal. You have got to play the game."

"On the facts," said Mr. Petherick, "there seems nothing to be said. It is my private opinion, having seen, alas, too many cases of this kind, that the husband was guilty. The only explanation that will cover the facts seems to be that Miss Clark for some reason or other deliberately sheltered him. There may have been some financial arrangement made between them. He might realize that he would be suspected, and she, seeing only a future of poverty before her, may have agreed to tell the story of drinking the cornflour in return for a substantial sum to be paid to her privately. If that was the case it was of course most irregular. Most irregular indeed."

"I disagree with you all," said Raymond. "You have forgotten the one important factor in the case. *The doctor's daughter*. I will give you my reading of the case. The tinned lobster was bad. It accounted for the poisoning symptoms. The doctor was sent for. He finds Mrs. Jones, who has eaten more lobster than the others, in great pain, and he sends, as you told us, for some opium pills. He does not go himself, he sends. Who will give the messenger the opium pills? Clearly his daughter. Very likely she dispenses his medicines for him. She is in love with Jones and at this moment all the worst instincts in her nature rise and she realizes that the means to procure his freedom are in her hands. The pills she sends contain pure white arsenic. That is my solution."

"And now, Sir Henry, tell us," said Joyce eagerly.

"One moment," said Sir Henry. "Miss Marple has not yet spoken."

Miss Marple was shaking her head sadly.

"Dear, dear," she said. "I have dropped another stitch. I have been so interested in the story. A sad case, a very sad case. It reminds me of old Mr. Hargraves who lived up at the Mount. His wife never had the least suspicion—until he died, leaving all his money to a woman he had been living with and by whom he had five children. She had at one time been their housemaid. Such a nice girl, Mrs. Hargraves always said—thoroughly to be relied upon to turn the mattresses every day—except Fridays, of course. And there was old

Hargraves keeping this woman in a house in the neighbouring town and continuing to be a Churchwarden and to hand round the plate every Sunday."

"My dear Aunt Jane," said Raymond with some impatience. "What has dead and gone Hargraves got to do with the case?"

"This story made me think of him at once," said Miss Marple. "The facts are so very alike, aren't they? I suppose the poor girl has confessed now and that is how you know, Sir Henry."

"What girl?" said Raymond. "My dear Aunt, what *are* you talking about?"

"That poor girl, Gladys Linch, of course—the one who was so terribly agitated when the doctor spoke to her—and well she might be, poor thing. I hope that wicked Jones is hanged, I am sure, making that poor girl a murderess. I suppose they will hang her too, poor thing."

"I think, Miss Marple, that you are under a slight misapprehension," began Mr. Petherick.

But Miss Marple shook her head obstinately and looked across at Sir Henry.

"I am right, am I not? It seems so clear to me. The hundreds and thousands—and the trifle—I mean, one cannot miss it."

"What about the trifle and the hundreds and thousands?" cried Raymond.

His aunt turned to him.

"Cooks nearly always put hundreds and thousands on trifle, dear," she said. "Those little pink and white sugar things. Of course when I heard that they had trifle for supper and that the husband had been writing to someone about hundreds and thousands, I naturally connected the two things together. That is where the arsenic was—in the hundreds and thousands. He left it with the girl and told her to put it on the trifle."

"But that is impossible," said Joyce quickly. "They all ate the trifle."

"Oh, no," said Miss Marple. "The companion was banting, you remember. You never eat anything like trifle if you are banting; and I expect Jones just scraped the hundreds and thousands off his share

and left them at the side of his plate. It was a clever idea, but a very wicked one."

The eyes of the others were all fixed upon Sir Henry.

"It is a very curious thing," he said slowly, "but Miss Marple happens to have hit upon the truth. Jones had got Gladys Linch into trouble, as the saying goes. She was nearly desperate. He wanted his wife out of the way and promised to marry Gladys when his wife was dead. He doctored the hundreds and thousands and gave them to her with instructions how to use them. Gladys Linch died a week ago. Her child died at birth and Jones had deserted her for another woman. When she was dying she confessed the truth."

There was a few moments' silence and then Raymond said:

"Well, Aunt Jane, this is one up to you. I can't think how on earth you managed to hit upon the truth. I should never have thought of the little maid in the kitchen being connected with the case."

"No, dear," said Miss Marple, "but you don't know as much of life as I do. A man of that Jones's type—coarse and jovial. As soon as I heard there was a pretty young girl in the house I felt sure that he would not have left her alone. It is all very distressing and painful, and not a very nice thing to talk about. I can't tell you the shock it was to Mrs. Hargraves, and a nine days' wonder in the village."

Two

THE IDOL HOUSE OF ASTARTE

"And now, Dr. Pender, what are you going to tell us?"

The old clergyman smiled gently.

"My life has been passed in quiet places," he said. "Very few eventful happenings have come my way. Yet once, when I was a young man, I had one very strange and tragic experience."

"Ah!" said Joyce Lemprière encouragingly.

"I have never forgotten it," continued the clergyman. "It made a profound impression on me at the time, and to this day by a slight effort of memory I can feel again the awe and horror of that terrible moment when I saw a man stricken to death by apparently no mortal agency."

"You make me feel quite creepy, Pender," complained Sir Henry.

"It made me feel creepy, as you call it," replied the other. "Since then I have never laughed at the people who use the word atmosphere. There is such a thing. There are certain places imbued and saturated with good or evil influences which can make their power felt."

"That house, The Larches, is a very unhappy one," remarked Miss Marple. "Old Mr. Smithers lost all his money and had to leave it, then the Carslakes took it and Johnny Carslake fell downstairs and broke his leg and Mrs. Carslake had to go away to the south of France for

her health, and now the Burdens have got it and I hear that poor Mr. Burden has got to have an operation almost immediately."

"There is, I think, rather too much superstition about such matters," said Mr. Petherick. "A lot of damage is done to property by foolish reports heedlessly circulated."

"I have known one or two 'ghosts' that have had a very robust personality," remarked Sir Henry with a chuckle.

"I think," said Raymond, "we should allow Dr. Pender to go on with his story."

Joyce got up and switched off the two lamps, leaving the room lit only by the flickering firelight.

"Atmosphere," she said. "Now we can get along."

Dr. Pender smiled at her, and leaning back in his chair and taking off his pince-nez, he began his story in a gentle reminiscent voice.

"I don't know whether any of you know Dartmoor at all. The place I am telling you about is situated on the borders of Dartmoor. It was a very charming property, though it had been on the market without finding a purchaser for several years. The situation was perhaps a little bleak in winter, but the views were magnificent and there were certain curious and original features about the property itself. It was bought by a man called Haydon—Sir Richard Haydon. I had known him in his college days, and though I had lost sight of him for some years, the old ties of friendship still held, and I accepted with pleasure his invitation to go down to Silent Grove, as his new purchase was called.

"The house party was not a very large one. There was Richard Haydon himself, and his cousin, Elliot Haydon. There was a Lady Mannering with a pale, rather inconspicuous daughter called Violet. There was a Captain Rogers and his wife, hard riding, weatherbeaten people, who lived only for horses and hunting. There was also a young Dr. Symonds and there was Miss Diana Ashley. I knew something about the last named. Her picture was very often in the Society papers and she was one of the notorious beauties of the Season. Her appearance was indeed very striking. She was dark and tall, with a beautiful skin of an even tint of pale cream, and her half closed dark eyes set slantways in her head gave her a curiously

piquant oriental appearance. She had, too, a wonderful speaking voice, deep-toned and bell-like.

"I saw at once that my friend Richard Haydon was very much attracted by her, and I guessed that the whole party was merely arranged as a setting for her. Of her own feelings I was not so sure. She was capricious in her favours. One day talking to Richard and excluding everyone else from her notice, and another day she would favour his cousin, Elliot, and appear hardly to notice that such a person as Richard existed, and then again she would bestow the most bewitching smiles upon the quiet and retiring Dr. Symonds.

"On the morning after my arrival our host showed us all over the place. The house itself was unremarkable, a good solid house built of Devonshire granite. Built to withstand time and exposure. It was unromantic but very comfortable. From the windows of it one looked out over the panorama of the Moor, vast rolling hills crowned with weather-beaten Tors.

"On the slopes of the Tor nearest to us were various hut circles, relics of the bygone days of the late Stone Age. On another hill was a barrow which had recently been excavated, and in which certain bronze implements had been found. Haydon was by way of being interested in antiquarian matters and he talked to us with a great deal of energy and enthusiasm. This particular spot, he explained, was particularly rich in relics of the past.

"Neolithic hut dwellers, Druids, Romans, and even traces of the early Phoenicians were to be found.

"But this place is the most interesting of all," he said "You know its name—Silent Grove. Well, it is easy enough to see what it takes its name from."

"He pointed with his hand. That particular part of the country was bare enough—rocks, heather and bracken, but about a hundred yards from the house there was a densely planted grove of trees.

"That is a relic of very early days," said Haydon, "The trees have died and been replanted, but on the whole it has been kept very much as it used to be—perhaps in the time of the Phoenician settlers. Come and look at it."

"We all followed him. As we entered the grove of trees a curious oppression came over me. I think it was the silence. No birds seemed to nest in these trees. There was a feeling about it of desolation and horror. I saw Haydon looking at me with a curious smile.

"Any feeling about this place, Pender?' he asked me. 'Antagonism now? Or uneasiness?'

"I don't like it,' I said quietly.

"You are within your rights. This was a stronghold of one of the ancient enemies of your faith. This is the Grove of Astarte.'

"Astarte?'

"Astarte, or Ishtar, or Ashtoreth, or whatever you choose to call her. I prefer the Phoenician name of Astarte. There is, I believe, one known Grove of Astarte in this country—in the North on the Wall. I have no evidence, but I like to believe that we have a true and authentic Grove of Astarte here. Here, within this dense circle of trees, sacred rites were performed.'

"Sacred rites,' murmured Diana Ashley. Her eyes had a dreamy faraway look. 'What were they, I wonder?'

"Not very reputable by all accounts,' said Captain Rogers with a loud unmeaning laugh. 'Rather hot stuff, I imagine.'

"Haydon paid no attention to him.

"In the centre of the Grove there should be a Temple,' he said. 'I can't run to Temples, but I have indulged in a little fancy of my own.'

"We had at that moment stepped out into a little clearing in the centre of the trees. In the middle of it was something not unlike a summerhouse made of stone. Diana Ashley looked inquiringly at Haydon.

"I call it The Idol House,' he said. 'It is the Idol House of Astarte.'

"He led the way up to it. Inside, on a rude ebony pillar, there reposed a curious little image representing a woman with crescent horns, seated on a lion.

"Astarte of the Phoenicians,' said Haydon, 'the Goddess of the Moon.'

"The Goddess of the Moon,' cried Diana. 'Oh, do let us have a wild orgy tonight. Fancy dress. And we will come out here in the

moonlight and celebrate the rites of Astarte.'

"I made a sudden movement and Elliot Haydon, Richard's cousin, turned quickly to me.

"You don't like all this, do you, Padre?' he said.

"No,' I said gravely. 'I don't.'

"He looked at me curiously. 'But it is only tomfoolery. Dick can't know that this really is a sacred grove. It is just a fancy of his; he likes to play with the idea. And anyway, if it were—'

"If it were?'

"Well—' he laughed uncomfortably. 'You don't believe in that sort of thing, do you? You, a parson.'

"I am not sure that as a parson I ought not to believe in it.'

"But that sort of thing is all finished and done with.'

"I am not so sure,' I said musingly. 'I only know this: I am not as a rule a sensitive man to atmosphere, but ever since I entered this grove of trees I have felt a curious impression and sense of evil and menace all round me.'

"He glanced uneasily over his shoulder.

"Yes,' he said, 'it is—it is queer, somehow. I know what you mean but I suppose it is only our imagination makes us feel like that. What do you say, Symonds?'

"The doctor was silent a minute or two before he replied. Then he said quietly:

"I don't like it. I can't tell you why. But somehow or other, I don't like it.'

"At that moment Violet Mannering came across to me.

"I hate this place,' she cried. 'I hate it. Do let's get out of it.'

"We moved away and the others followed us. Only Diana Ashley lingered. I turned my head over my shoulder and saw her standing in front of the Idol House gazing earnestly at the image within it.

"The day was an unusually hot and beautiful one and Diana Ashley's suggestion of a Fancy Dress party that evening was received with general favour. The usual laughing and whispering and frenzied secret sewing took place and when we all made our appearance for dinner there were the usual outcries of merriment. Rogers and his wife were Neolithic hut dwellers—explaining the sudden lack of

hearth rugs. Richard Haydon called himself a Phoenician sailor, and his cousin was a Brigand Chief, Dr. Symonds was a chef, Lady Mannering was a hospital nurse, and her daughter was a Circassian slave. I myself was arrayed somewhat too warmly as a monk. Diana Ashley came down last and was somewhat of a disappointment to all of us, being wrapped in a shapeless black domino.

"‘The Unknown,’ she declared airily. ‘That is what I am. Now for goodness’ sake let’s go in to dinner.’

"After dinner we went outside. It was a lovely night, warm and soft, and the moon was rising.

"We wandered about and chatted and the time passed quickly enough. It must have been an hour later when we realized that Diana Ashley was not with us.

"‘Surely she has not gone to bed,’ said Richard Haydon.

"Violet Mannering shook her head.

"‘Oh, no,’ she said. ‘I saw her going off in that direction about a quarter of an hour ago.’ She pointed as she spoke towards the grove of trees that showed black and shadowy in the moonlight.

"‘I wonder what she is up to,’ said Richard Haydon, ‘some devilment, I swear. Let’s go and see.’

"We all trooped off together, somewhat curious as to what Miss Ashley had been up to. Yet I, for one, felt a curious reluctance to enter that dark foreboding belt of trees. Something stronger than myself seemed to be holding me back and urging me not to enter. I felt more definitely convinced than ever of the essential evilness of the spot. I think that some of the others experienced the same sensations that I did, though they would have been loath to admit it. The trees were so closely planted that the moonlight could not penetrate. There were a dozen soft sounds all round us, whisperings and sighings. The feeling was eerie in the extreme, and by common consent we all kept close together.

"Suddenly we came out into the open clearing in the middle of the grove and stood rooted to the spot in amazement, for there, on the threshold of the Idol House, stood a shimmering figure wrapped tightly round in diaphanous gauze and with two crescent horns rising from the dark masses of her hair.

“My God!” said Richard Haydon, and the sweat sprang out on his brow.

“But Violet Mannering was sharper.

“Why, it’s Diana,” she exclaimed. “What has she done to herself? Oh, she looks quite different somehow!”

“The figure in the doorway raised her hands. She took a step forward and chanted in a high sweet voice.

“I am the Priestess of Astarte,” she crooned. “Beware how you approach me, for I hold death in my hand.”

“Don’t do it, dear,” protested Lady Mannering. “You give us the creeps, you really do.”

“Haydon sprang forward towards her.

“My God, Diana!” he cried. “You are wonderful.”

“My eyes were accustomed to the moonlight now and I could see more plainly. She did, indeed, as Violet had said, look quite different. Her face was more definitely oriental, and her eyes more of slits with something cruel in their gleam, and the strange smile on her lips was one that I had never seen there before.

“Beware,” she cried warningly. “Do not approach the Goddess. If anyone lays a hand on me it is death.”

“You are wonderful, Diana,” cried Haydon, “but do stop it. Somehow or other I—I don’t like it.”

“He was moving towards her across the grass and she flung out a hand towards him.

“Stop,” she cried. “One step nearer and I will smite you with the magic of Astarte.”

“Richard Haydon laughed and quickened his pace, when all at once a curious thing happened. He hesitated for a moment, then seemed to stumble and fall headlong.

“He did not get up again, but lay where he had fallen prone on the ground.

“Suddenly Diana began to laugh hysterically. It was a strange horrible sound breaking the silence of the glade.

“With an oath Elliot sprang forward.

“I can’t stand this,” he cried, “get up, Dick, get up, man.”

"But still Richard Haydon lay where he had fallen. Elliot Haydon reached his side, knelt by him and turned him gently over. He bent over him, peering in his face.

"Then he rose sharply to his feet and stood swaying a little.

"'Doctor,' he said. 'Doctor, for God's sake come. I—I think he is dead.'

"Symonds ran forward and Elliot rejoined us walking very slowly. He was looking down at his hands in a way I didn't understand.

"At that moment there was a wild scream from Diana.

"'I have killed him,' she cried. 'Oh, my God! I didn't mean to, but I have killed him.'

"And she fainted dead away, falling in a crumpled heap on the grass.

"There was a cry from Mrs. Rogers.

"'Oh, do let us get away from this dreadful place,' she wailed, 'anything might happen to us here. Oh, it's awful!'

"Elliot got hold of me by the shoulder.

"'It can't be, man,' he murmured. 'I tell you it can't *be*. A man cannot be killed like that. It is—it's against Nature.'

"I tried to soothe him.

"'There is some explanation,' I said. 'Your cousin must have had some unsuspected weakness of the heart. The shock and excitement —'

"He interrupted me.

"'You don't understand,' he said. He held up his hands for me to see and I noticed a red stain on them.

"'Dick didn't die of shock, he was stabbed—stabbed to the heart, and *there is no weapon*.'

"I stared at him incredulously. At that moment Symonds rose from his examination of the body and came towards us. He was pale and shaking all over.

"'Are we all mad?' he said. 'What is this place—that things like this can happen in it?'

"'Then it is true,' I said.

"He nodded.

“The wound is such as would be made by a long thin dagger, but—there is no dagger there.’

“We all looked at each other.

“But it must be there,’ cried Elliot Haydon. ‘It must have dropped out. It must be on the ground somewhere. Let us look.’

“We peered about vainly on the ground. Violet Mannering said suddenly:

“Diana had something in her hand. A kind of dagger. I saw it. I saw it glitter when she threatened him.’

“Elliot Haydon shook his head.

“He never even got within three yards of her,’ he objected.

“Lady Mannering was bending over the prostrate girl on the ground.

“There is nothing in her hand now,’ she announced, ‘and I can’t see anything on the ground. Are you sure you saw it, Violet? I didn’t.’

“Dr. Symonds came over to the girl.

“We must get her to the house,’ he said. ‘Rogers, will you help?’

“Between us we carried the unconscious girl back to the house. Then we returned and fetched the body of Sir Richard.”

Dr. Pender broke off apologetically and looked round.

“One would know better nowadays,” he said, “owing to the prevalence of detective fiction. Every street boy knows that a body must be left where it is found. But in these days we had not the same knowledge, and accordingly we carried the body of Richard Haydon back to his bedroom in the square granite house and the butler was despatched on a bicycle in search of the police—a ride of some twelve miles.

“It was then that Elliot Haydon drew me aside.

“Look here,’ he said. ‘I am going back to the grove. That weapon has got to be found.’

“If there was a weapon,’ I said doubtfully.

“He seized my arm and shook it fiercely. ‘You have got that superstitious stuff into your head. You think his death was supernatural; well, I am going back to the grove to find out.’

"I was curiously averse to his doing so. I did my utmost to dissuade him, but without result. The mere idea of that thick circle of trees was abhorrent to me and I felt a strong premonition of further disaster. But Elliot was entirely pigheaded. He was, I think, scared himself, but would not admit it. He went off fully armed with determination to get to the bottom of the mystery.

"It was a very dreadful night, none of us could sleep, or attempt to do so. The police, when they arrived, were frankly incredulous of the whole thing. They evinced a strong desire to cross-examine Miss Ashley, but there they had to reckon with Dr. Symonds, who opposed the idea vehemently. Miss Ashley had come out of her faint or trance and he had given her a long sleeping draught. She was on no account to be disturbed until the following day.

"It was not until about seven o'clock in the morning that anyone thought about Elliot Haydon, and then Symonds suddenly asked where he was. I explained what Elliot had done and Symonds's grave face grew a shade graver. 'I wish he hadn't. It is—it is foolhardy,' he said.

"'You don't think any harm can have happened to him?'

"'I hope not. I think, Padre, that you and I had better go and see.'

"I knew he was right, but it took all the courage in my command to nerve myself for the task. We set out together and entered once more that ill-fated grove of trees. We called him twice and got no reply. In a minute or two we came into the clearing, which looked pale and ghostly in the early morning light. Symonds clutched my arm and I uttered a muttered exclamation. Last night when we had seen it in the moonlight there had been the body of a man lying face downwards on the grass. Now in the early morning light the same sight met our eyes. Elliot Haydon was lying on the exact spot where his cousin had been.

"'My God!' said Symonds. *'It has got him too!'*

"We ran together over the grass. Elliot Haydon was unconscious but breathing feebly and this time there was no doubt of what had caused the tragedy. A long thin bronze weapon remained in the wound.

"Got him through the shoulder, not through the heart. That is lucky," commented the doctor. "On my soul, I don't know what to think. At any rate he is not dead and he will be able to tell us what happened."

"But that was just what Elliot Haydon was not able to do. His description was vague in the extreme. He had hunted about vainly for the dagger and at last giving up the search had taken up a stand near the Idol House. It was then that he became increasingly certain that someone was watching him from the belt of trees. He fought against this impression but was not able to shake it off. He described a cold strange wind that began to blow. It seemed to come not from the trees but from the interior of the Idol House. He turned round, peering inside it. He saw the small figure of the Goddess and he felt he was under an optical delusion. The figure seemed to grow larger and larger. Then he suddenly received something that felt like a blow between his temples which sent him reeling back, and as he fell he was conscious of a sharp burning pain in his left shoulder.

"The dagger was identified this time as being the identical one which had been dug up in the barrow on the hill, and which had been bought by Richard Haydon. Where he had kept it, in the house or in the Idol House in the grove, none seemed to know.

"The police were of the opinion, and always will be, that he was deliberately stabbed by Miss Ashley, but in view of our combined evidence that she was never within three yards of him, they could not hope to support the charge against her. So the thing has been and remains a mystery."

There was a silence.

"There doesn't seem anything to say," said Joyce Lemprière at length. "It is all so horrible—and uncanny. Have you no explanation for yourself, Dr. Pender?"

The old man nodded. "Yes," he said. "I have an explanation—a kind of explanation, that is. Rather a curious one—but to my mind it still leaves certain factors unaccounted for."

"I have been to séances," said Joyce, "and you may say what you like, very queer things can happen. I suppose one can explain it by some kind of hypnotism. The girl really turned herself into a

Priestess of Astarte, and I suppose somehow or other she must have stabbed him. Perhaps she threw the dagger that Miss Mannering saw in her hand."

"Or it might have been a javelin," suggested Raymond West. "After all, moonlight is not very strong. She might have had a kind of spear in her hand and stabbed him at a distance, and then I suppose mass hypnotism comes into account. I mean, you were all prepared to see him stricken down by supernatural means and so you saw it like that."

"I have seen many wonderful things done with weapons and knives at music halls," said Sir Henry. "I suppose it is possible that a man could have been concealed in the belt of trees, and that he might from there have thrown a knife or a dagger with sufficient accuracy—agreeing, of course, that he was a professional. I admit that that seems rather far-fetched, but it seems the only really feasible theory. You remember that the other man was distinctly under the impression that there was someone in the grove of trees watching him. As to Miss Mannering saying that Miss Ashley had a dagger in her hand and the others saying she hadn't, that doesn't surprise me. If you had had my experience you would know that five persons' account of the same thing will differ so widely as to be almost incredible."

Mr. Petherick coughed.

"But in all these theories we seem to be overlooking one essential fact," he remarked. "What became of the weapon? Miss Ashley could hardly get rid of a javelin standing as she was in the middle of an open space; and if a hidden murderer had thrown a dagger, then the dagger would still have been in the wound when the man was turned over. We must, I think, discard all far-fetched theories and confine ourselves to sober fact."

"And where does sober fact lead us?"

"Well, one thing seems quite clear. No one was near the man when he was stricken down, so the only person who *could* have stabbed him was he himself. Suicide, in fact."

"But why on earth should he wish to commit suicide?" asked Raymond West incredulously.

The lawyer coughed again. "Ah, that is a question of theory once more," he said. "At the moment I am not concerned with theories. It seems to me, excluding the supernatural in which I do not for one moment believe, that that was the only way things could have happened. He stabbed himself, and as he fell his arms flew out, wrenching the dagger from the wound and flinging it far into the zone of the trees. That is, I think, although somewhat unlikely, a possible happening."

"I don't like to say, I am sure," said Miss Marple. "It all perplexes me very much indeed. But curious things do happen. At Lady Sharpley's garden party last year the man who was arranging the clock golf tripped over one of the numbers—quite unconscious he was—and didn't come round for about five minutes."

"Yes, dear Aunt," said Raymond gently, "but he wasn't stabbed, was he?"

"Of course not, dear," said Miss Marple. "That is what I am telling you. Of course there is only one way that poor Sir Richard could have been stabbed, but I do wish I knew what caused him to stumble in the first place. Of course, it might have been a tree root. He would be looking at the girl, of course, and when it is moonlight one does trip over things."

"You say that there is only one way that Sir Richard could have been stabbed, Miss Marple," said the clergyman, looking at her curiously.

"It is very sad and I don't like to think of it. He was a right-handed man, was he not? I mean to stab himself in the left shoulder he must have been. I was always so sorry for poor Jack Baynes in the War. He shot himself in the foot, you remember, after very severe fighting at Arras. He told me about it when I went to see him in hospital, and very ashamed of it he was. I don't expect this poor man, Elliot Haydon, profited much by his wicked crime."

"Elliot Haydon," cried Raymond. "You think he did it?"

"I don't see how anyone else could have done it," said Miss Marple, opening her eyes in gentle surprise. "I mean if, as Mr. Petherick so wisely says, one looks at the facts and disregards all that atmosphere of heathen goddesses which I don't think is very

nice. He went up to him first and turned him over, and of course to do that he would have to have had his back to them all, and being dressed as a brigand chief he would be sure to have a weapon of some kind in his belt. I remember dancing with a man dressed as a brigand chief when I was a young girl. He had five kinds of knives and daggers, and I can't tell you how awkward and uncomfortable it was for his partner."

All eyes were turned towards Dr. Pender.

"I knew the truth," said he, "five years after that tragedy occurred. It came in the shape of a letter written to me by Elliot Haydon. He said in it that he fancied that I had always suspected him. He said it was a sudden temptation. He too loved Diana Ashley, but he was only a poor struggling barrister. With Richard out of the way and inheriting his title and estates, he saw a wonderful prospect opening up before him. The dagger had jerked out of his belt as he knelt down by his cousin, and almost before he had time to think he drove it in and returned it to his belt again. He stabbed himself later in order to divert suspicion. He wrote to me on the eve of starting on an expedition to the South Pole in case, as he said, he should never come back. I do not think that he meant to come back, and I know that, as Miss Marple has said, his crime profited him nothing. 'For five years,' he wrote, 'I have lived in Hell. I hope, at least, that I may expiate my crime by dying honourably.'"

There was a pause.

"And he did die honourably," said Sir Henry. "You have changed the names in your story, Dr. Pender, but I think I recognize the man you mean."

"As I said," went on the old clergyman, "I do not think that explanation quite covers the facts. I still think there was an evil influence in that grove, an influence that directed Elliot Haydon's action. Even to this day I can never think without a shudder of The Idol House of Astarte."

Three

INGOTS OF GOLD

I do not know that the story that I am going to tell you is a fair one," said Raymond West, "because I can't give you the solution of it. Yet the facts were so interesting and so curious that I should like to propound it to you as a problem. And perhaps between us we may arrive at some logical conclusion.

"The date of these happenings was two years ago, when I went down to spend Whitsuntide with a man called John Newman, in Cornwall."

"Cornwall?" said Joyce Lemprière sharply.

"Yes. Why?"

"Nothing. Only it's odd. My story is about a place in Cornwall, too—a little fishing village called Rathole. Don't tell me yours is the same?"

"No. My village is called Polperran. It is situated on the west coast of Cornwall; a very wild and rocky spot. I had been introduced a few weeks previously and had found him a most interesting companion. A man of intelligence and independent means, he was possessed of a romantic imagination. As a result of his latest hobby he had taken the lease of Pol House. He was an authority on Elizabethan times, and he described to me in vivid and graphic language the rout of the Spanish Armada. So enthusiastic was he

that one could almost imagine that he had been an eyewitness at the scene. Is there anything in reincarnation? I wonder—I very much wonder.”

“You are so romantic, Raymond dear,” said Miss Marple, looking benignantly at him.

“Romantic is the last thing that I am,” said Raymond West, slightly annoyed. “But this fellow Newman was chock-full of it, and he interested me for that reason as a curious survival of the past. It appears that a certain ship belonging to the Armada, and known to contain a vast amount of treasure in the form of gold from the Spanish Main, was wrecked off the coast of Cornwall on the famous and treacherous Serpent Rocks. For some years, so Newman told me, attempts had been made to salve the ship and recover the treasure. I believe such stories are not uncommon, though the number of mythical treasure ships is largely in excess of the genuine ones. A company had been formed, but had gone bankrupt, and Newman had been able to buy the rights of the thing—or whatever you call it—for a mere song. He waxed very enthusiastic about it all. According to him it was merely a question of the latest scientific, up-to-date machinery. The gold was there, and he had no doubt whatever that it could be recovered.

“It occurred to me as I listened to him how often things happen that way. A rich man such as Newman succeeds almost without effort, and yet in all probability the actual value in money of his find would mean little to him. I must say that his ardour infected me. I saw galleons drifting up the coast, flying before the storm, beaten and broken on the black rocks. The mere word galleon has a romantic sound. The phrase ‘Spanish Gold’ thrills the schoolboy—and the grown-up man also. Moreover, I was working at the time upon a novel, some scenes of which were laid in the sixteenth century, and I saw the prospect of getting valuable local colour from my host.

“I set off that Friday morning from Paddington in high spirits, and looking forward to my trip. The carriage was empty except for one man, who sat facing me in the opposite corner. He was a tall, soldierly-looking man, and I could not rid myself of the impression that somewhere or other I had seen him before. I cudgelled my

brains for some time in vain; but at last I had it. My travelling companion was Inspector Badgworth, and I had run across him when I was doing a series of articles on the Everson disappearance case.

"I recalled myself to his notice, and we were soon chatting pleasantly enough. When I told him I was going to Polperran he remarked that that was a rum coincidence, because he himself was also bound for that place. I did not like to seem inquisitive, so was careful not to ask him what took him there. Instead, I spoke of my own interest in the place, and mentioned the wrecked Spanish galleon. To my surprise the Inspector seemed to know all about it. 'That will be the *Juan Fernandez*,' he said. 'Your friend won't be the first who has sunk money trying to get money out of her. It is a romantic notion.'

"And probably the whole story is a myth,' I said. 'No ship was ever wrecked there at all.'

"Oh, the ship was sunk there right enough,' said the Inspector — 'along with a good company of others. You would be surprised if you knew how many wrecks there are on that part of the coast. As a matter of fact, that is what takes me down there now. That is where the *Otranto* was wrecked six months ago.'

"I remember reading about it,' I said. 'No lives were lost, I think?'

"No lives were lost,' said the Inspector; 'but something else was lost. It is not generally known, but the *Otranto* was carrying bullion.'

"Yes?' I said, much interested.

"Naturally we have had divers at work on salvage operations, but — *the gold has gone, Mr. West.*'

"Gone!' I said, staring at him. 'How can it have gone?'

"That is the question,' said the Inspector. 'The rocks tore a gaping hole in her strongroom. It was easy enough for the divers to get in that way, but they found the strongroom empty. The question is, was the gold stolen before the wreck or afterwards? Was it ever in the strongroom at all?'

"It seems a curious case,' I said.

“It is a very curious case, when you consider what bullion is. Not a diamond necklace that you could put into your pocket. When you think how cumbersome it is and how bulky—well, the whole thing seems absolutely impossible. There may have been some hocus-pocus before the ship sailed; but if not, it must have been removed within the last six months—and I am going down to look into the matter.’

“I found Newman waiting to meet me at the station. He apologized for the absence of his car, which had gone to Truro for some necessary repairs. Instead, he met me with a farm lorry belonging to the property.

“I swung myself up beside him, and we wound carefully in and out of the narrow streets of the fishing village. We went up a steep ascent, with a gradient, I should say, of one in five, ran a little distance along a winding lane, and turned in at the granite-pillared gates of Pol House.

“The place was a charming one; it was situated high up the cliffs, with a good view out to sea. Part of it was some three or four hundred years old, and a modern wing had been added. Behind it farming land of about seven or eight acres ran inland.

“‘Welcome to Pol House,’ said Newman. ‘And to the Sign of the Golden Galleon.’ And he pointed to where, over the front door, hung a perfect reproduction of a Spanish galleon with all sails set.

“My first evening was a most charming and instructive one. My host showed me the old manuscripts relating to the *Juan Fernandez*. He unrolled charts for me and indicated positions on them with dotted lines, and he produced plans of diving apparatus, which, I may say, mystified me utterly and completely.

“I told him of my meeting with Inspector Badgworth, in which he was much interested.

“‘They are a queer people round this coast,’ he said reflectively. ‘Smuggling and wrecking is in their blood. When a ship goes down on their coast they cannot help regarding it as lawful plunder meant for their pockets. There is a fellow here I should like you to see. He is an interesting survival.’

"Next day dawned bright and clear. I was taken down into Polperran and there introduced to Newman's diver, a man called Higgins. He was a wooden-faced individual, extremely taciturn, and his contributions to the conversation were mostly monosyllables. After a discussion between them on highly technical matters, we adjourned to the Three Anchors. A tankard of beer somewhat loosened the worthy fellow's tongue.

"Detective gentleman from London has come down,' he grunted. 'They do say that that ship that went down there last November was carrying a mortal lot of gold. Well, she wasn't the first to go down, and she won't be the last.'

"Hear, hear,' chimed in the landlord of the Three Anchors. 'That is a true word you say there, Bill Higgins.'

"I reckon it is, Mr. Kelvin,' said Higgins.

"I looked with some curiosity at the landlord. He was a remarkable-looking man, dark and swarthy, with curiously broad shoulders. His eyes were bloodshot, and he had a curiously furtive way of avoiding one's glance. I suspected that this was the man of whom Newman had spoken, saying he was an interesting survival.

"We don't want interfering foreigners on this coast,' he said, somewhat truculently.

"Meaning the police?' asked Newman, smiling.

"Meaning the police—and *others*,' said Kelvin significantly. 'And don't you forget it, mister.'

"Do you know, Newman, that sounded to me very like a threat,' I said as we climbed the hill homewards.

"My friend laughed.

"Nonsense; I don't do the folk down here any harm.'

"I shook my head doubtfully. There was something sinister and uncivilized about Kelvin. I felt that his mind might run in strange, unrecognized channels.

"I think I date the beginning of my uneasiness from that moment. I had slept well enough that first night, but the next night my sleep was troubled and broken. Sunday dawned, dark and sullen, with an overcast sky and the threatenings of thunder in the air. I am

always a bad hand at hiding my feelings, and Newman noticed the change in me.

“What is the matter with you, West? You are a bundle of nerves this morning.”

“I don’t know,” I confessed, “but I have got a horrible feeling of foreboding.”

“It’s the weather.”

“Yes, perhaps.”

“I said no more. In the afternoon we went out in Newman’s motor boat, but the rain came on with such vigour that we were glad to return to shore and change into dry clothing.

“And that evening my uneasiness increased. Outside the storm howled and roared. Towards ten o’clock the tempest calmed down. Newman looked out of the window.

“It is clearing,” he said. “I shouldn’t wonder if it was a perfectly fine night in another half hour. If so, I shall go out for a stroll.”

“I yawned. ‘I am frightfully sleepy,’ I said. ‘I didn’t get much sleep last night. I think that tonight I shall turn in early.’

“This I did. On the previous night I had slept little. Tonight I slept heavily. Yet my slumbers were not restful. I was still oppressed with an awful foreboding of evil. I had terrible dreams. I dreamt of dreadful abysses and vast chasms, amongst which I was wandering, knowing that a slip of the foot meant death. I waked to find the hands of my clock pointing to eight o’clock. My head was aching badly, and the terror of my night’s dreams was still upon me.

“So strongly was this so that when I went to the window and drew it up I started back with a fresh feeling of terror, for the first thing I saw, or thought I saw—was a man digging an open grave.

“It took me a minute or two to pull myself together; then I realized that the gravedigger was Newman’s gardener, and the ‘grave’ was destined to accommodate three new rose trees which were lying on the turf waiting for the moment they should be securely planted in the earth.

“The gardener looked up and saw me and touched his hat.

“Good morning, sir. Nice morning, sir.”

“‘I suppose it is,’ I said doubtfully, still unable to shake off completely the depression of my spirits.

“‘However, as the gardener had said, it was certainly a nice morning. The sun was shining and the sky a clear pale blue that promised fine weather for the day. I went down to breakfast whistling a tune. Newman had no maids living in the house. Two middle-aged sisters, who lived in a farmhouse nearby, came daily to attend to his simple wants. One of them was placing the coffeepot on the table as I entered the room.

“‘Good morning, Elizabeth,’ I said. ‘Mr. Newman not down yet?’

“‘He must have been out very early, sir,’ she replied. ‘He wasn’t in the house when we arrived.’

“‘Instantly my uneasiness returned. On the two previous mornings Newman had come down to breakfast somewhat late; and I didn’t fancy that at any time he was an early riser. Moved by those forebodings, I ran up to his bedroom. It was empty, and, moreover, his bed had not been slept in. A brief examination of his room showed me two other things. If Newman had gone out for a stroll he must have gone out in his evening clothes, for they were missing.

“‘I was sure now that my premonition of evil was justified. Newman had gone, as he had said he would do, for an evening stroll. For some reason or other he had not returned. Why? Had he met with an accident? Fallen over the cliffs? A search must be made at once.

“‘In a few hours I had collected a large band of helpers, and together we hunted in every direction along the cliffs and on the rocks below. But there was no sign of Newman.

“‘In the end, in despair, I sought out Inspector Badgworth. His face grew very grave.

“‘It looks to me as if there has been foul play,’ he said. ‘There are some not over-scrupulous customers in these parts. Have you seen Kelvin, the landlord of the Three Anchors?’

“‘I said that I had seen him.

“‘Did you know he did a turn in gaol four years ago? Assault and battery.’

“‘It doesn’t surprise me,’ I said.

“The general opinion in this place seems to be that your friend is a bit too fond of nosing his way into things that do not concern him. I hope he has come to no serious harm.’

“The search was continued with redoubled vigour. It was not until late that afternoon that our efforts were rewarded. We discovered Newman in a deep ditch in a corner of his own property. His hands and feet were securely fastened with rope, and a handkerchief had been thrust into his mouth and secured there so as to prevent him crying out.

“He was terribly exhausted and in great pain; but after some frictioning of his wrists and ankles, and a long draught from a whisky flask, he was able to give his account of what had occurred.

“The weather having cleared, he had gone out for a stroll about eleven o’clock. His way had taken him some distance along the cliffs to a spot commonly known as Smugglers’ Cove, owing to the large number of caves to be found there. Here he had noticed some men landing something from a small boat, and had strolled down to see what was going on. Whatever the stuff was it seemed to be a great weight, and it was being carried into one of the farthestmost caves.

“With no real suspicion of anything being amiss, nevertheless Newman had wondered. He had drawn quite near them without being observed. Suddenly there was a cry of alarm, and immediately two powerful seafaring men had set upon him and rendered him unconscious. When next he came to himself he found himself lying on a motor vehicle of some kind, which was proceeding, with many bumps and bangs, as far as he could guess, up the lane which led from the coast to the village. To his great surprise, the lorry turned in at the gate of his own house. There, after a whispered conversation between the men, they at length drew him forth and flung him into a ditch at a spot where the depth of it rendered discovery unlikely for some time. Then the lorry drove on, and, he thought, passed out through another gate some quarter of a mile nearer the village. He could give no description of his assailants except that they were certainly seafaring men and, by their speech, Cornishmen.

“Inspector Badgworth was very interested.

“‘Depend upon it that is where the stuff has been hidden,’ he cried. ‘Somehow or other it has been salvaged from the wreck and has been stored in some lonely cave somewhere. It is known that we have searched all the caves in Smugglers’ Cove, and that we are now going farther afield, and they have evidently been moving the stuff at night to a cave that has been already searched and is not likely to be searched again. Unfortunately they have had at least eighteen hours to dispose of the stuff. If they got Mr. Newman last night I doubt if we will find any of it there by now.’

“The Inspector hurried off to make a search. He found definite evidence that the bullion had been stored as supposed, but the gold had been once more removed, and there was no clue as to its fresh hiding place.

“One clue there was, however, and the Inspector himself pointed it out to me the following morning.

“‘That lane is very little used by motor vehicles,’ he said, ‘and in one or two places we get the traces of the tyres very clearly. There is a three-cornered piece out of one tyre, leaving a mark which is quite unmistakable. It shows going into the gate; here and there is a faint mark of it going out of the other gate, so there is not much doubt that it is the right vehicle we are after. Now, why did they take it out through the farther gate? It seems quite clear to me that the lorry came from the village. Now, there aren’t many people who own a lorry in the village—not more than two or three at most. Kelvin, the landlord of the Three Anchors, has one.’

“‘What was Kelvin’s original profession?’ asked Newman.

“‘It is curious that you should ask me that, Mr. Newman. In his young days Kelvin was a professional diver.’

“Newman and I looked at each other. The puzzle seemed to be fitting itself together piece by piece.

“‘You didn’t recognize Kelvin as one of the men on the beach?’ asked the Inspector.

“Newman shook his head.

“‘I am afraid I can’t say anything as to that,’ he said regretfully. ‘I really hadn’t time to see anything.’

"The Inspector very kindly allowed me to accompany him to the Three Anchors. The garage was up a side street. The big doors were closed, but by going up a little alley at the side we found a small door that led into it, and the door was open. A very brief examination of the tyres sufficed for the Inspector. 'We have got him, by Jove!' he exclaimed. 'Here is the mark as large as life on the rear left wheel. Now, Mr. Kelvin, I don't think you will be clever enough to wriggle out of this.'"

Raymond West came to a halt.

"Well?" said Joyce. "So far I don't see anything to make a problem about—unless they never found the gold."

"They never found the gold certainly," said Raymond. "And they never got Kelvin either. I expect he was too clever for them, but I don't quite see how he worked it. He was duly arrested—on the evidence of the tyre mark. But an extraordinary hitch arose. Just opposite the big doors of the garage was a cottage rented for the summer by a lady artist."

"Oh, these lady artists!" said Joyce, laughing.

"As you say, 'Oh, these lady artists!' This particular one had been ill for some weeks, and, in consequence, had two hospital nurses attending her. The nurse who was on night duty had pulled her armchair up to the window, where the blind was up. She declared that the motor lorry could not have left the garage opposite without her seeing it, and she swore that in actual fact it never left the garage that night."

"I don't think that is much of a problem," said Joyce. "The nurse went to sleep, of course. They always do."

"That has—er—been known to happen," said Mr. Petherick, judiciously; "but it seems to me that we are accepting facts without sufficient examination. Before accepting the testimony of the hospital nurse, we should inquire very closely into her bona fides. The alibi coming with such suspicious promptness is inclined to raise doubts in one's mind."

"There is also the lady artist's testimony," said Raymond. "She declared that she was in pain, and awake most of the night, and that

she would certainly have heard the lorry, it being an unusual noise, and the night being very quiet after the storm."

"H'm," said the clergyman, "that is certainly an additional fact. Had Kelvin himself any alibi?"

"He declared that he was at home and in bed from ten o'clock onwards, but he could produce no witnesses in support of that statement."

"The nurse went to sleep," said Joyce, "and so did the patient. Ill people always think they have never slept a wink all night."

Raymond West looked inquiringly at Dr. Pender.

"Do you know, I feel very sorry for that man Kelvin. It seems to me very much a case of 'Give a dog a bad name.' Kelvin had been in prison. Apart from the tyre mark, which certainly seems too remarkable to be coincidence, there doesn't seem to be much against him except his unfortunate record."

"You, Sir Henry?"

Sir Henry shook his head.

"As it happens," he said, smiling, "I know something about this case. So clearly I mustn't speak."

"Well, go on, Aunt Jane; haven't you got anything to say?"

"In a minute, dear," said Miss Marple. "I am afraid I have counted wrong. Two purl, three plain, slip one, two purl—yes, that's right. What did you say, dear?"

"What is your opinion?"

"You wouldn't like my opinion, dear. Young people never do, I notice. It is better to say nothing."

"Nonsense, Aunt Jane; out with it."

"Well, dear Raymond," said Miss Marple, laying down her knitting and looking across at her nephew. "I do think you should be more careful how you choose your friends. You are so credulous, dear, so easily gulled. I suppose it is being a writer and having so much imagination. All that story about a Spanish galleon! If you were older and had more experience of life you would have been on your guard at once. A man you had known only a few weeks, too!"

Sir Henry suddenly gave vent to a great roar of laughter and slapped his knee.

"Got you this time, Raymond," he said. "Miss Marple, you are wonderful. Your friend Newman, my boy, has another name—several other names in fact. At the present moment he is not in Cornwall but in Devonshire—Dartmoor, to be exact—a convict in Princetown prison. We didn't catch him over the stolen bullion business, but over the rifling of the strongroom of one of the London banks. Then we looked up his past record and we found a good portion of the gold stolen buried in the garden at Pol House. It was rather a neat idea. All along that Cornish coast there are stories of wrecked galleons full of gold. It accounted for the diver and it would account later for the gold. But a scapegoat was needed, and Kelvin was ideal for the purpose. Newman played his little comedy very well, and our friend Raymond, with his celebrity as a writer, made an unimpeachable witness."

"But the tyre mark?" objected Joyce.

"Oh, I saw that at once, dear, although I know nothing about motors," said Miss Marple. "People change a wheel, you know—I have often seen them doing it—and, of course, they could take a wheel off Kelvin's lorry and take it out through the small door into the alley and put it on to Mr. Newman's lorry and take the lorry out of one gate down to the beach, fill it up with the gold and bring it up through the other gate, and then they must have taken the wheel back and put it back on Mr. Kelvin's lorry while, I suppose, someone else was tying up Mr. Newman in a ditch. Very uncomfortable for him and probably longer before he was found than he expected. I suppose the man who called himself the gardener attended to that side of the business."

"Why do you say, 'called himself the gardener,' Aunt Jane?" asked Raymond curiously.

"Well, he can't have been a real gardener, can he?" said Miss Marple. "Gardeners don't work on Whit Monday. Everybody knows that."

She smiled and folded up her knitting.

"It was really that little fact that put me on the right scent," she said. She looked across at Raymond.

“When you are a householder, dear, and have a garden of your own, you will know these little things.”

Four

THE BLOODSTAINED PAVEMENT

It's curious," said Joyce Lemprière, "but I hardly like telling you my story. It happened a long time ago—five years ago to be exact—but it's sort of haunted me ever since. The smiling, bright, top part of it—and the hidden gruesomeness underneath. And the queer thing is that the sketch I painted at the time has become tinged with the same atmosphere. When you look at it first it is just a rough sketch of a little steep Cornish street with the sunlight on it. But if you look long enough at it something sinister creeps in. I have never sold it but I never look at it. It lives in the studio in a corner with its face to the wall.

"The name of the place was Rathole. It is a queer little Cornish fishing village, very picturesque—too picturesque perhaps. There is rather too much of the atmosphere of 'Ye Olde Cornish Tea House' about it. It has shops with bobbed-headed girls in smocks doing hand-illuminated mottoes on parchment. It is pretty and it is quaint, but it is very self-consciously so."

"Don't I know," said Raymond West, groaning. "The curse of the charabanc, I suppose. No matter how narrow the lanes leading down to them no picturesque village is safe."

Joyce nodded.

"They are narrow lanes that lead down to Rathole and very steep, like the side of a house. Well, to get on with my story. I had come down to Cornwall for a fortnight, to sketch. There is an old inn in Rathole, The Polharwith Arms. It was supposed to be the only house left standing by the Spaniards when they shelled the place in fifteen hundred and something."

"Not shelled," said Raymond West, frowning. "Do try to be historically accurate, Joyce."

"Well, at all events they landed guns somewhere along the coast and they fired them and the houses fell down. Anyway that is not the point. The inn was a wonderful old place with a kind of porch in front built on four pillars. I got a very good pitch and was just settling down to work when a car came creeping and twisting down the hill. Of course, it *would* stop before the inn—just where it was most awkward for me. The people got out—a man and a woman—I didn't notice them particularly. She had a kind of mauve linen dress on and a mauve hat.

"Presently the man came out again and to my great thankfulness drove the car down to the quay and left it there. He strolled back past me towards the inn. Just at that moment another beastly car came twisting down, and a woman got out of it dressed in the brightest chintz frock I have ever seen, scarlet poinsettias, I think they were, and she had on one of those big native straw hats—Cuban, aren't they?—in very bright scarlet.

"This woman didn't stop in front of the inn but drove the car farther down the street towards the other one. Then she got out and the man seeing her gave an astonished shout. 'Carol,' he cried, 'in the name of all that is wonderful. Fancy meeting you in this out-of-the-way spot. I haven't seen you for years. Hello, there's Margery—my wife, you know. You must come and meet her.'

"They went up the street towards the inn side by side, and I saw the other woman had just come out of the door and was moving down towards them. I had had just a glimpse of the woman called Carol as she passed by me. Just enough to see a very white powdered chin and a flaming scarlet mouth and I wondered—I just wondered—if Margery would be so very pleased to meet her. I

hadn't seen Margery near to, but in the distance she looked dowdy and extra prim and proper.

"Well, of course, it was not any of my business but you get very queer little glimpses of life sometimes, and you can't help speculating about them. From where they were standing I could just catch fragments of their conversation that floated down to me. They were talking about bathing. The husband, whose name seemed to be Denis, wanted to take a boat and row round the coast. There was a famous cave well worth seeing, so he said, about a mile along. Carol wanted to see the cave too but suggested walking along the cliffs and seeing it from the land side. She said she hated boats. In the end they fixed it that way. Carol was to go along the cliff path and meet them at the cave, and Denis and Margery would take a boat and row round.

"Hearing them talk about bathing made me want to bathe too. It was a very hot morning and I wasn't doing particularly good work. Also, I fancied that the afternoon sunlight would be far more attractive in effect. So I packed up my things and went off to a little beach that I knew of—it was quite the opposite direction from the cave, and was rather a discovery of mine. I had a ripping bathe there and I lunched off a tinned tongue and two tomatoes, and I came back in the afternoon full of confidence and enthusiasm to get on with my sketch.

"The whole of Rathole seemed to be asleep. I had been right about the afternoon sunlight, the shadows were far more telling. The Polhar with Arms was the principal note of my sketch. A ray of sunlight came slanting obliquely down and hit the ground in front of it and had rather a curious effect. I gathered that the bathing party had returned safely, because two bathing dresses, a scarlet one and a dark blue one, were hanging from the balcony, drying in the sun.

"Something had gone a bit wrong with one corner of my sketch and I bent over it for some moments doing something to put it right. When I looked up again there was a figure leaning against one of the pillars of The Polharwith Arms, who seemed to have appeared there by magic. He was dressed in seafaring clothes and was, I suppose, a fisherman. But he had a long dark beard, and if I had

been looking for a model for a wicked Spanish captain I couldn't have imagined anyone better. I got to work with feverish haste before he should move away, though from his attitude he looked as though he was perfectly prepared to prop up the pillars through all eternity.

"He did move, however, but luckily not until I had got what I wanted. He came over to me and he began to talk. Oh, how that man talked.

"'Rathole,' he said, 'was a very interesting place.'

"I knew that already but although I said so that didn't save me. I had the whole history of the shelling—I mean the destroying—of the village, and how the landlord of the Polharwith Arms was the last man to be killed. Run through on his own threshold by a Spanish captain's sword, and of how his blood spurted out on the pavement and no one could wash out the stain for a hundred years.

"It all fitted in very well with the languorous drowsy feeling of the afternoon. The man's voice was very suave and yet at the same time there was an undercurrent in it of something rather frightening. He was very obsequious in his manner, yet I felt underneath he was cruel. He made me understand the Inquisition and the terrors of all the things the Spaniards did better than I have ever done before.

"All the time he was talking to me I went on painting, and suddenly I realized that in the excitement of listening to his story I had painted in something that was not there. On that white square of pavement where the sun fell before the door of The Polharwith Arms, I had painted in bloodstains. It seemed extraordinary that the mind could play such tricks with the hand, but as I looked over towards the inn again I got a second shock. My hand had only painted what my eyes saw—drops of blood on the white pavement.

"I stared for a minute or two. Then I shut my eyes, said to myself, 'Don't be so stupid, there's nothing there, really,' then I opened them again, but the bloodstains were still there.

"I suddenly felt I couldn't stand it. I interrupted the fisherman's flood of language.

"'Tell me,' I said, 'my eyesight is not very good. Are those bloodstains on that pavement over there?'

"He looked at me indulgently and kindly.

"No bloodstains in these days, lady. What I am telling you about is nearly five hundred years ago.'

"Yes,' I said, 'but now—on the pavement'—the words died away in my throat. I *knew—I knew* that he wouldn't see what I was seeing. I got up and with shaking hands began to put my things together. As I did so the young man who had come in the car that morning came out of the inn door. He looked up and down the street perplexedly. On the balcony above his wife came out and collected the bathing things. He walked down towards the car but suddenly swerved and came across the road towards the fisherman.

"Tell me, my man,' he said. 'You don't know whether the lady who came in that second car there has got back yet?'

"Lady in a dress with flowers all over it? No, sir, I haven't seen her. She went along the cliff towards the cave this morning.'

"I know, I know. We all bathed there together, and then she left us to walk home and I have not seen her since. It can't have taken her all this time. The cliffs round here are not dangerous, are they?'

"It depends, sir, on the way you go. The best way is to take a man what knows the place with you.'

"He very clearly meant himself and was beginning to enlarge on the theme, but the young man cut him short unceremoniously and ran back towards the inn calling up to his wife on the balcony.

"I say, Margery, Carol hasn't come back yet. Odd, isn't it?'

"I didn't hear Margery's reply, but her husband went on. 'Well, we can't wait any longer. We have got to push on to Penrithar. Are you ready? I will turn the car.'

"He did as he had said, and presently the two of them drove off together. Meanwhile I had deliberately been nerving myself to prove how ridiculous my fancies were. When the car had gone I went over to the inn and examined the pavement closely. Of course there were no bloodstains there. No, all along it had been the result of my distorted imagination. Yet, somehow, it seemed to make the thing more frightening. It was while I was standing there that I heard the fisherman's voice.

"He was looking at me curiously. 'You thought you saw bloodstains here, eh, lady?'

"I nodded.

"That is very curious, that is very curious. We have got a superstition here, lady. If anyone sees those bloodstains—'

"He paused.

"Well?' I said.

"He went on in his soft voice, Cornish in intonation, but unconsciously smooth and well-bred in its pronunciation, and completely free from Cornish turns of speech.

"They do say, lady, that if anyone sees those bloodstains that there will be a death within twenty-four hours.'

"Creepy! It gave me a nasty feeling all down my spine.

"He went on persuasively. 'There is a very interesting tablet in the church, lady, about a death—'

"No thanks,' I said decisively, and I turned sharply on my heel and walked up the street towards the cottage where I was lodging. Just as I got there I saw in the distance the woman called Carol coming along the cliff path. She was hurrying. Against the grey of the rocks she looked like some poisonous scarlet flower. Her hat was the colour of blood. . . .

"I shook myself. Really, I had blood on the brain.

"Later I heard the sound of her car. I wondered whether she too was going to Penrithar; but she took the road to the left in the opposite direction. I watched the car crawl up the hill and disappear, and I breathed somehow more easily. Rathole seemed its quiet sleepy self once more."

"If that is all," said Raymond West as Joyce came to a stop, "I will give my verdict at once. Indigestion, spots before the eyes after meals."

"It isn't all," said Joyce. "You have got to hear the sequel. I read it in the paper two days later under the heading of 'Sea Bathing Fatality.' It told how Mrs. Dacre, the wife of Captain Denis Dacre, was unfortunately drowned at Landeer Cove, just a little farther along the coast. She and her husband were staying at the time at the hotel there, and had declared their intention of bathing, but a

cold wind sprang up. Captain Dacre had declared it was too cold, so he and some other people in the hotel had gone off to the golf links nearby. Mrs. Dacre, however, had said it was not too cold for her and she went off alone down to the cove. As she didn't return her husband became alarmed, and in company with his friends went down to the beach. They found her clothes lying beside a rock, but no trace of the unfortunate lady. Her body was not found until nearly a week later when it was washed ashore at a point some distance down the coast. There was a bad blow on her head which had occurred before death, and the theory was that she must have dived into the sea and hit her head on a rock. As far as I could make out her death would have occurred just twenty-four hours after the time I saw the bloodstains."

"I protest," said Sir Henry. "This is not a problem—this is a ghost story. Miss Lemprière is evidently a medium."

Mr. Petherick gave his usual cough.

"One point strikes me—" he said, "that blow on the head. We must not, I think, exclude the possibility of foul play. But I do not see that we have any data to go upon. Miss Lemprière's hallucination, or vision, is interesting certainly, but I do not see clearly the point on which she wishes us to pronounce."

"Indigestion and coincidence," said Raymond, "and anyway you can't be sure that they were the same people. Besides, the curse, or whatever it was, would only apply to the actual inhabitants of Rathole."

"I feel," said Sir Henry, "that the sinister seafaring man has something to do with this tale. But I agree with Mr. Petherick, Miss Lemprière has given us very little data."

Joyce turned to Dr. Pender who smilingly shook his head.

"It is a most interesting story," he said, "but I am afraid I agree with Sir Henry and Mr. Petherick that there is very little data to go upon."

Joyce then looked curiously at Miss Marple, who smiled back at her.

"I, too, think you are just a little unfair, Joyce dear," she said. "Of course, it is different for me. I mean, we, being women, appreciate

the point about clothes. I don't think it is a fair problem to put to a man. It must have meant a lot of rapid changing. What a wicked woman! And a still more wicked man."

Joyce stared at her.

"Aunt Jane," she said. "Miss Marple, I mean, I believe—I do really believe you know the truth."

"Well, dear," said Miss Marple, "it is much easier for me sitting here quietly than it was for you—and being an artist you are so susceptible to atmosphere, aren't you? Sitting here with one's knitting, one just sees the facts. Bloodstains dropped on the pavement from the bathing dress hanging above, and being a red bathing dress, of course, the criminals themselves did not realize it was bloodstained. Poor thing, poor young thing!"

"Excuse me, Miss Marple," said Sir Henry, "but you do know that I am entirely in the dark still. You and Miss Lemprière seem to know what you are talking about, but we men are still in utter darkness."

"I will tell you the end of the story now," said Joyce. "It was a year later. I was at a little east coast seaside resort, and I was sketching, when suddenly I had that queer feeling one has of something having happened before. There were two people, a man and a woman, on the pavement in front of me, and they were greeting a third person, a woman dressed in a scarlet poinsettia chintz dress. 'Carol, by all that is wonderful! Fancy meeting you after all these years. You don't know my wife? Joan, this is an old friend of mine, Miss Harding.'

"I recognized the man at once. It was the same Denis I had seen at Rathole. The wife was different—that is, she was a Joan instead of a Margery; but she was the same type, young and rather dowdy and very inconspicuous. I thought for a minute I was going mad. They began to talk of going bathing. I will tell you what I did. I marched straight then and there to the police station. I thought they would probably think I was off my head, but I didn't care. And as it happened everything was quite all right. There was a man from Scotland Yard there, and he had come down just about this very thing. It seems—oh, it's horrible to talk about—that the police had got suspicions of Denis Dacre. That wasn't his real name—he took

different names on different occasions. He got to know girls, usually quiet inconspicuous girls without many relatives or friends, he married them and insured their lives for large sums and then—oh, it's horrible! The woman called Carol was his real wife, and they always carried out the same plan. That is really how they came to catch him. The insurance companies became suspicious. He would come to some quiet seaside place with his new wife, then the other woman would turn up and they would all go bathing together. Then the wife would be murdered and Carol would put on her clothes and go back in the boat with him. Then they would leave the place, wherever it was, after inquiring for the supposed Carol and when they got outside the village Carol would hastily change back into her own flamboyant clothes and her vivid makeup and would go back there and drive off in her own car. They would find out which way the current was flowing and the supposed death would take place at the next bathing place along the coast that way. Carol would play the part of the wife and would go down to some lonely beach and would leave the wife's clothes there by a rock and depart in her flowery chintz dress to wait quietly until her husband could rejoin her.

"I suppose when they killed poor Margery some of the blood must have spurted over Carol's bathing suit, and being a red one they didn't notice it, as Miss Marple says. But when they hung it over the balcony it dripped. Ugh!" she gave a shiver. "I can see it still."

"Of course," said Sir Henry, "I remember very well now. Davis was the man's real name. It had quite slipped my memory that one of his many aliases was Dacre. They were an extraordinarily cunning pair. It always seemed so amazing to me that no one spotted the change of identity. I suppose, as Miss Marple says, clothes are more easily identified than faces; but it was a very clever scheme, for although we suspected Davis it was not easy to bring the crime home to him as he always seemed to have an unimpeachable alibi."

"Aunt Jane," said Raymond, looking at her curiously, "how do you do it? You have lived such a peaceful life and yet nothing seems to surprise you."

"I always find one thing very like another in this world," said Miss Marple. "There was Mrs. Green, you know, she buried five children—and every one of them insured. Well, naturally, one began to get suspicious."

She shook her head.

"There is a great deal of wickedness in village life. I hope you dear young people will never realize how very wicked the world is."

Five

MOTIVE V. OPPORTUNITY

Mr. Petherick cleared his throat rather more importantly than usual.

"I am afraid my little problem will seem rather tame to you all," he said apologetically, "after the sensational stories we have been hearing. There is no bloodshed in mine, but it seems to me an interesting and rather ingenious little problem, and fortunately I am in the position to know the right answer to it."

"It isn't terribly legal, is it?" asked Joyce Lemprière. "I mean points of law and lots of *Barnaby v Skinner* in the year 1881, and things like that."

Mr. Petherick beamed appreciatively at her over his eyeglasses.

"No, no, my dear young lady. You need have no fears on that score. The story I am about to tell is a perfectly simple and straightforward one and can be followed by any layman."

"No legal quibbles, now," said Miss Marple, shaking a knitting needle at him.

"Certainly not," said Mr. Petherick.

"Ah well, I am not so sure, but let's hear the story."

"It concerns a former client of mine. I will call him Mr. Clode—Simon Clode. He was a man of considerable wealth and lived in a large house not very far from here. He had had one son killed in the War and this son had left one child, a little girl. Her mother had died

at her birth, and on her father's death she had come to live with her grandfather who at once became passionately attached to her. Little Chris could do anything she liked with her grandfather. I have never seen a man more completely wrapped up in a child, and I cannot describe to you his grief and despair when, at the age of eleven, the child contracted pneumonia and died.

"Poor Simon Clode was inconsolable. A brother of his had recently died in poor circumstances and Simon Clode had generously offered a home to his brother's children—two girls, Grace and Mary, and a boy, George. But though kind and generous to his nephew and nieces, the old man never expended on them any of the love and devotion he had accorded to his little grandchild. Employment was found for George Clode in a bank nearby, and Grace married a clever young research chemist of the name of Philip Garrod. Mary, who was a quiet, self-contained girl, lived at home and looked after her uncle. She was, I think, fond of him in her quiet undemonstrative way. And to all appearances things went on very peacefully. I may say that after the death of little Christobel, Simon Clode came to me and instructed me to draw up a new will. By this will, his fortune, a very considerable one, was divided equally between his nephew and nieces, a third share to each.

"Time went on. Chancing to meet George Clode one day I inquired for his uncle, whom I had not seen for some time. To my surprise George's face clouded over. 'I wish you could put some sense into Uncle Simon,' he said ruefully. His honest but not very brilliant countenance looked puzzled and worried. 'This spirit business is getting worse and worse.'

"'What spirit business?' I asked, very much surprised.

"Then George told me the whole story. How Mr. Clode had gradually got interested in the subject and how on the top of this interest he had chanced to meet an American medium, a Mrs. Eurydice Spragg. This woman, whom George did not hesitate to characterize as an out and out swindler, had gained an immense ascendancy over Simon Clode. She was practically always in the house and many séances were held in which the spirit of Christobel manifested itself to the doting grandfather.

"I may say here and now that I do not belong to the ranks of those who cover spiritualism with ridicule and scorn. I am, as I have told you, a believer in evidence. And I think that when we have an impartial mind and weigh the evidence in favour of spiritualism there remains much that cannot be put down to fraud or lightly set aside. Therefore, as I say, I am neither a believer nor an unbeliever. There is certain testimony with which one cannot afford to disagree.

"On the other hand, spiritualism lends itself very easily to fraud and imposture, and from all young George Clode told me about this Mrs. Eurydice Spragg I felt more and more convinced that Simon Clode was in bad hands and that Mrs. Spragg was probably an imposter of the worst type. The old man, shrewd as he was in practical matters, would be easily imposed on where his love for his dead grandchild was concerned.

"Turning things over in my mind I felt more and more uneasy. I was fond of the young Clodes, Mary and George, and I realized that this Mrs. Spragg and her influence over their uncle might lead to trouble in the future.

"At the earliest opportunity I made a pretext for calling on Simon Clode. I found Mrs. Spragg installed as an honoured and friendly guest. As soon as I saw her my worst apprehensions were fulfilled. She was a stout woman of middle age, dressed in a flamboyant style. Very full of cant phrases about 'Our dear ones who have passed over,' and other things of the kind.

"Her husband was also staying in the house, Mr. Absalom Spragg, a thin lank man with a melancholy expression and extremely furtive eyes. As soon as I could, I got Simon Clode to myself and sounded him tactfully on the subject. He was full of enthusiasm. Eurydice Spragg was wonderful! She had been sent to him directly in answer to a prayer! She cared nothing for money, the joy of helping a heart in affliction was enough for her. She had quite a mother's feeling for little Chris. He was beginning to regard her almost as a daughter. Then he went on to give me details—how he had heard his Chris's voice speaking—how she was well and happy with her father and mother. He went on to tell other sentiments expressed by the child, which in my remembrance of little Christobel seemed to me highly

unlikely. She laid stress on the fact that 'Father and Mother loved dear Mrs. Spragg.'

"'But, of course,' he broke off, 'you are a scoffer, Petherick.'

"'No, I am not a scoffer. Very far from it. Some of the men who have written on the subject are men whose testimony I would accept unhesitatingly, and I should accord any medium recommended by them respect and credence. I presume that this Mrs. Spragg is well vouched for?'

"Simon went into ecstasies over Mrs. Spragg. She had been sent to him by Heaven. He had come across her at the watering place where he had spent two months in the summer. A chance meeting, with what a wonderful result!

"I went away very dissatisfied. My worst fears were realized, but I did not see what I could do. After a good deal of thought and deliberation I wrote to Philip Garrod who had, as I mentioned, just married the eldest Clode girl, Grace. I set the case before him—of course, in the most carefully guarded language. I pointed out the danger of such a woman gaining ascendancy over the old man's mind. And I suggested that Mr. Clode should be brought into contact if possible with some reputable spiritualistic circles. This, I thought, would not be a difficult matter for Philip Garrod to arrange.

"Garrod was prompt to act. He realized, which I did not, that Simon Clode's health was in a very precarious condition, and as a practical man he had no intention of letting his wife or her sister and brother be despoiled of the inheritance which was so rightly theirs. He came down the following week, bringing with him as a guest no other than the famous Professor Longman. Longman was a scientist of the first order, a man whose association with spiritualism compelled the latter to be treated with respect. Not only a brilliant scientist; he was a man of the utmost uprightness and probity.

"The result of the visit was most unfortunate. Longman, it seemed, had said very little while he was there. Two séances were held—under what conditions I do not know. Longman was noncommittal all the time he was in the house, but after his departure he wrote a letter to Philip Garrod. In it he admitted that he had not been able to detect Mrs. Spragg in fraud, nevertheless

his private opinion was that the phenomena were not genuine. Mr. Garrod, he said, was at liberty to show this letter to his uncle if he thought fit, and he suggested that he himself should put Mr. Clode in touch with a medium of perfect integrity.

"Philip Garrod had taken this letter straight to his uncle, but the result was not what he had anticipated. The old man flew into a towering rage. It was all a plot to discredit Mrs. Spragg who was a maligned and injured saint! She had told him already what bitter jealousy there was of her in this country. He pointed out that Longman was forced to say he had not detected fraud. Eurydice Spragg had come to him in the darkest hour of his life, had given him help and comfort, and he was prepared to espouse her cause even if it meant quarrelling with every member of his family. She was more to him than anyone else in the world.

"Philip Garrod was turned out of the house with scant ceremony; but as a result of his rage Clode's own health took a decided turn for the worse. For the last month he had kept to his bed pretty continuously, and now there seemed every possibility of his being a bedridden invalid until such time as death should release him. Two days after Philip's departure I received an urgent summons and went hurriedly over. Clode was in bed and looked even to my layman's eye very ill indeed. He was gasping for breath.

"'This is the end of me,' he said. 'I feel it. Don't argue with me, Petherick. But before I die I am going to do my duty by the one human being who has done more for me than anyone else in the world. I want to make a fresh will.'

"'Certainly,' I said, 'if you will give me your instructions now I will draft out a will and send it to you.'

"'That won't do,' he said. 'Why, man, I might not live through the night. I have written out what I want here,' he fumbled under his pillow, 'and you can tell me if it is right.'

"He produced a sheet of paper with a few words roughly scribbled on it in pencil. It was quite simple and clear. He left £5000 to each of his nieces and nephew, and the residue of his vast property outright to Eurydice Spragg 'in gratitude and admiration.'

"I didn't like it, but there it was. There was no question of unsound mind, the old man was as sane as anybody.

"He rang the bell for two of the servants. They came promptly. The housemaid, Emma Gaunt, was a tall middle-aged woman who had been in service there for many years and who had nursed Clode devotedly. With her came the cook, a fresh buxom young woman of thirty. Simon Clode glared at them both from under his bushy eyebrows.

"I want you to witness my will. Emma, get me my fountain pen."

"Emma went over obediently to the desk.

"Not that left-hand drawer, girl," said old Simon irritably. "Don't you know it is in the right-hand one?"

"No, it is here, sir," said Emma, producing it.

"Then you must have put it away wrong last time," grumbled the old man. "I can't stand things not being kept in their proper places."

"Still grumbling he took the pen from her and copied his own rough draught, amended by me, onto a fresh piece of paper. Then he signed his name. Emma Gaunt and the cook, Lucy David, also signed. I folded the will up and put it into a long blue envelope. It was necessarily, you understand, written on an ordinary piece of paper.

"Just as the servants were turning to leave the room Clode lay back on the pillows with a gasp and a distorted face. I bent over him anxiously and Emma Gaunt came quickly back. However, the old man recovered and smiled weakly.

"It is all right, Petherick, don't be alarmed. At any rate I shall die easy now having done what I wanted to."

"Emma Gaunt looked inquiringly at me as if to know whether she could leave the room. I nodded reassuringly and she went out—first stopping to pick up the blue envelope which I had let slip to the ground in my moment of anxiety. She handed it to me and I slipped it into my coat pocket and then she went out.

"You are annoyed, Petherick," said Simon Clode. "You are prejudiced, like everybody else."

"It is not a question of prejudice," I said. "Mrs. Spragg may be all that she claims to be. I should see no objection to you leaving her a

small legacy as a memento of gratitude; but I tell you frankly, Clode, that to disinherit your own flesh and blood in favour of a stranger is wrong.'

"With that I turned to depart. I had done what I could and made my protest.

"Mary Clode came out of the drawing room and met me in the hall.

"'You will have tea before you go, won't you? Come in here,' and she led me into the drawing room.

"A fire was burning on the hearth and the room looked cosy and cheerful. She relieved me of my overcoat just as her brother, George, came into the room. He took it from her and laid it across a chair at the far end of the room, then he came back to the fireside where we drank tea. During the meal a question arose about some point concerning the estate. Simon Clode said he didn't want to be bothered with it and had left it to George to decide. George was rather nervous about trusting to his own judgment. At my suggestion, we adjourned to the study after tea and I looked over the papers in question. Mary Clode accompanied us.

"A quarter of an hour later I prepared to take my departure. Remembering that I had left my overcoat in the drawing room, I went there to fetch it. The only occupant of the room was Mrs. Spragg, who was kneeling by the chair on which the overcoat lay. She seemed to be doing something rather unnecessary to the cretonne cover. She rose with a very red face as we entered.

"'That cover never did sit right,' she complained. 'My! I could make a better fit myself.'

"I took up my overcoat and put it on. As I did so I noticed that the envelope containing the will had fallen out of the pocket and was lying on the floor. I replaced it in my pocket, said goodbye, and took my departure.

"On arrival at my office, I will describe my next actions carefully. I removed my overcoat and took the will from the pocket. I had it in my hand and was standing by the table when my clerk came in. Somebody wished to speak to me on the telephone, and the extension to my desk was out of order. I accordingly accompanied

him to the outer office and remained there for about five minutes engaged in conversation over the telephone.

"When I emerged, I found my clerk waiting for me.

"Mr. Spragg has called to see you, sir. I showed him into your office.'

"I went there to find Mr. Spragg sitting by the table. He rose and greeted me in a somewhat unctuous manner, then proceeded to a long discursive speech. In the main it seemed to be an uneasy justification of himself and his wife. He was afraid people were saying etc., etc. His wife had been known from her babyhood upwards for the pureness of her heart and her motives. . . and so on and so on. I was, I am afraid, rather curt with him. In the end I think he realized that his visit was not being a success and he left somewhat abruptly. I then remembered that I had left the will lying on the table. I took it, sealed the envelope, and wrote on it and put it away in the safe.

"Now I come to the crux of my story. Two months later Mr. Simon Clode died. I will not go into long-winded discussions, I will just state the bare facts. *When the sealed envelope containing the will was opened it was found to contain a sheet of blank paper."*

He paused, looking round the circle of interested faces. He smiled himself with a certain enjoyment.

"You appreciate the point, of course? For two months the sealed envelope had lain in my safe. It could not have been tampered with then. No, the time limit was a very short one. Between the moment the will was signed and my locking it away in the safe. Now who had had the opportunity, and to whose interests would it be to do so?

"I will recapitulate the vital points in a brief summary: The will was signed by Mr. Clode, placed by me in an envelope—so far so good. It was then put by me in my overcoat pocket. That overcoat was taken from me by Mary and handed by her to George, who was in full sight of me whilst handling the coat. During the time that I was in the study Mrs. Eurydice Spragg would have had plenty of time to extract the envelope from the coat pocket and read its contents and, as a matter of fact, finding the envelope on the ground and not in the pocket seemed to point to her having done

so. But here we come to a curious point: she had the *opportunity* of substituting the blank paper, but no *motive*. The will was in her favour, and by substituting a blank piece of paper she despoiled herself of the heritage she had been so anxious to gain. The same applied to Mr. Spragg. He, too, had the opportunity. He was left alone with the document in question for some two or three minutes in my office. But again, it was not to his advantage to do so. So we are faced with this curious problem: the two people who had the *opportunity* of substituting a blank piece of paper had no *motive* for doing so, and the two people who had a *motive* had no *opportunity*. By the way, I would not exclude the housemaid, Emma Gaunt, from suspicion. She was devoted to her young master and mistress and detested the Spraggs. She would, I feel sure, have been quite equal to attempting the substitution if she had thought of it. But although she actually handled the envelope when she picked it up from the floor and handed it to me, she certainly had no opportunity of tampering with its contents and she could not have substituted another envelope by some sleight of hand (of which anyway she would not be capable) because the envelope in question was brought into the house by me and no one there would be likely to have a duplicate."

He looked round, beaming on the assembly.

"Now, there is my little problem. I have, I hope, stated it clearly. I should be interested to hear your views."

To everyone's astonishment Miss Marple gave vent to a long and prolonged chuckle. Something seemed to be amusing her immensely.

"What *is* the matter, Aunt Jane? Can't we share the joke?" said Raymond.

"I was thinking of little Tommy Symonds, a naughty little boy, I am afraid, but sometimes very amusing. One of those children with innocent childlike faces who are always up to some mischief or other. I was thinking how last week in Sunday School he said, 'Teacher, do you say yolk of eggs *is* white or yolk of eggs *are* white?' And Miss Durston explained that anyone would say 'yolks of eggs *are* white, or yolk of egg *is* white'—and naughty Tommy said: 'Well, *I* should say

yolk of egg is yellow!' Very naughty of him, of course, and as old as the hills. I knew that one as a child."

"Very funny, my dear Aunt Jane," Raymond said gently, "but surely that has nothing to do with the very interesting story that Mr. Petherick has been telling us."

"Oh yes, it has," said Miss Marple. "It is a catch! And so is Mr. Petherick's story a catch. So like a lawyer! Ah, my dear old friend!" She shook a reproving head at him.

"I wonder if you really know," said the lawyer with a twinkle.

Miss Marple wrote a few words on a piece of paper, folded them up and passed them across to him.

Mr. Petherick unfolded the paper, read what was written on it and looked across at her appreciatively.

"My dear friend," he said, "is there anything you do not know?"

"I knew that as a child," said Miss Marple. "Played with it too."

"I feel rather out of this," said Sir Henry. "I feel sure that Mr. Petherick has some clever legal legerdemain up his sleeve."

"Not at all," said Mr. Petherick. "Not at all. It is a perfectly fair straightforward proposition. You must not pay any attention to Miss Marple. She has her own way of looking at things."

"We *should* be able to arrive at the truth," said Raymond West a trifle vexedly. "The facts certainly seem plain enough. Five persons actually touched that envelope. The Spraggs clearly could have meddled with it but equally clearly they did not do so. There remains the other three. Now, when one sees the marvellous ways that conjurers have of doing a thing before one's eyes, it seems to me that the paper could have been extracted and another substituted by George Clode during the time he was carrying the overcoat to the far end of the room."

"Well, *I* think it was the girl," said Joyce. "I think the housemaid ran down and told her what was happening and she got hold of another blue envelope and just substituted the one for the other."

Sir Henry shook his head. "I disagree with you both," he said slowly. "These sort of things are done by conjurers, and they are done on the stage and in novels, but I think they would be impossible to do in real life, especially under the shrewd eyes of a

man like my friend Mr. Petherick here. But I have an idea—it is only an idea and nothing more. We know that Professor Longman had just been down for a visit and that he said very little. It is only reasonable to suppose that the Spraggs may have been very anxious as to the result of that visit. If Simon Clode did not take them into his confidence, which is quite probable, they may have viewed his sending for Mr. Petherick from quite another angle. They may have believed that Mr. Clode had already made a will which benefited Eurydice Spragg and that this new one might be made for the express purpose of cutting her out as a result of Professor Longman's revelations, or alternatively, as you lawyers say, Philip Garrod had impressed on his uncle the claims of his own flesh and blood. In that case, suppose Mrs. Spragg prepared to effect a substitution. This she does, but Mr. Petherick coming in at an unfortunate moment she had no time to read the real document and hastily destroys it by fire in case the lawyer should discover his loss."

Joyce shook her head very decidedly.

"She would never burn it without reading it."

"The solution is rather a weak one," admitted Sir Henry. "I suppose—er—Mr. Petherick did not assist Providence himself."

The suggestion was only a laughing one, but the little lawyer drew himself up in offended dignity.

"A most improper suggestion," he said with some asperity.

"What does Dr. Pender say?" asked Sir Henry.

"I cannot say I have any very clear ideas. I think the substitution must have been effected by either Mrs. Spragg or her husband, possibly for the motive that Sir Henry suggests. If she did not read the will until after Mr. Petherick had departed, she would then be in somewhat of a dilemma, since she could not own up to her action in the matter. Possibly she would place it among Mr. Clode's papers where she thought it would be found after his death. But why it wasn't found I don't know. It *might* be a mere speculation this—that Emma Gaunt came across it—and out of misplaced devotion to her employers—deliberately destroyed it."

"I think Dr. Pender's solution is the best of all," said Joyce. "Is it right, Mr. Petherick?"

The lawyer shook his head.

"I will go on where I left off. I was dumbfounded and quite as much at sea as all of you are. I don't think I should ever have guessed the truth—probably not—but I was enlightened. It was cleverly done too.

"I went and dined with Philip Garrod about a month later and in the course of our after-dinner conversation he mentioned an interesting case that had recently come to his notice."

"I should like to tell you about it, Petherick, in confidence, of course."

"Quite so," I replied.

"A friend of mine who had expectations from one of his relatives was greatly distressed to find that that relative had thoughts of benefiting a totally unworthy person. My friend, I am afraid, is a trifle unscrupulous in his methods. There was a maid in the house who was greatly devoted to the interests of what I may call the legitimate party. My friend gave her very simple instructions. He gave her a fountain pen, duly filled. She was to place this in a drawer in the writing table in her master's room, but not the usual drawer where the pen was generally kept. If her master asked her to witness his signature to any document and asked her to bring him his pen, she was to bring him not the right one, but this one which was an exact duplicate of it. That was all she had to do. He gave her no other information. She was a devoted creature and she carried out his instructions faithfully."

"He broke off and said:

"I hope I am not boring you, Petherick."

"Not at all," I said. "I am keenly interested."

"Our eyes met.

"My friend is, of course, not known to you," he said.

"Of course not," I replied.

"Then that is all right," said Philip Garrod.

"He paused then said smilingly, 'You see the point? The pen was filled with what is commonly known as Evanescent Ink—a solution of starch in water to which a few drops of iodine has been added. This

makes a deep blue-black fluid, but the writing disappears entirely in four or five days.”

Miss Marple chuckled.

“Disappearing ink,” she said. “I know it. Many is the time I have played with it as a child.”

And she beamed round on them all, pausing to shake a finger once more at Mr. Petherick.

“But all the same it’s a catch, Mr. Petherick,” she said. “Just like a lawyer.”

Six

THE THUMB MARK OF ST. PETER

"And now, Aunt Jane, it is up to you," said Raymond West.

"Yes, Aunt Jane, we are expecting something really spicy," chimed in Joyce Lemprière.

"Now, you are laughing at me, my dears," said Miss Marple placidly. "You think that because I have lived in this out-of-the-way spot all my life I am not likely to have had any very interesting experiences."

"God forbid that I should ever regard village life as peaceful and uneventful," said Raymond with fervour. "Not after the horrible revelations we have heard from you! The cosmopolitan world seems a mild and peaceful place compared with St. Mary Mead."

"Well, my dear," said Miss Marple, "human nature is much the same everywhere, and, of course, one has opportunities of observing it at close quarters in a village."

"You really are unique, Aunt Jane," cried Joyce. "I hope you don't mind me calling you Aunt Jane?" she added. "I don't know why I do it."

"Don't you, my dear?" said Miss Marple.

She looked up for a moment or two with something quizzical in her glance, which made the blood flame to the girl's cheeks.

Raymond West fidgeted and cleared his throat in a somewhat embarrassed manner.

Miss Marple looked at them both and smiled again, and bent her attention once more to her knitting.

"It is true, of course, that I have lived what is called a very uneventful life, but I have had a lot of experience in solving different little problems that have arisen. Some of them have been really quite ingenious, but it would be no good telling them to you, because they are about such unimportant things that you would not be interested—just things like: Who cut the meshes of Mrs. Jones's string bag? and why Mrs. Sims only wore her new fur coat once. Very interesting things, really, to any student of human nature. No, the only experience I can remember that would be of interest to you is the one about my poor niece Mabel's husband.

"It is about ten or fifteen years ago now, and happily it is all over and done with, and everyone has forgotten about it. People's memories are very short—a lucky thing, I always think."

Miss Marple paused and murmured to herself:

"I must just count this row. The decreasing is a little awkward. One, two, three, four, five, and then three purl; that is right. Now, what was I saying? Oh, yes, about poor Mabel.

"Mabel was my niece. A nice girl, really a very nice girl, but just a trifle what one might call *silly*. Rather fond of being melodramatic and of saying a great deal more than she meant whenever she was upset. She married a Mr. Denman when she was twenty-two, and I am afraid it was not a very happy marriage. I had hoped very much that the attachment would not come to anything, for Mr. Denman was a man of very violent temper—not the kind of man who would be patient with Mabel's foibles—and I also learned that there was insanity in his family. However, girls were just as obstinate then as they are now, and as they always will be. And Mabel married him.

"I didn't see very much of her after her marriage. She came to stay with me once or twice, and they asked me there several times, but, as a matter of fact, I am not very fond of staying in other people's houses, and I always managed to make some excuse. They had been married ten years when Mr. Denman died suddenly. There

were no children, and he left all his money to Mabel. I wrote, of course, and offered to come to Mabel if she wanted me; but she wrote back a very sensible letter, and I gathered that she was not altogether overwhelmed by grief. I thought that was only natural, because I knew they had not been getting on together for some time. It was not until about three months afterwards that I got a most hysterical letter from Mabel, begging me to come to her, and saying that things were going from bad to worse, and she couldn't stand it much longer.

"So, of course," continued Miss Marple, "I put Clara on board wages and sent the plate and the King Charles tankard to the bank, and I went off at once. I found Mabel in a very nervous state. The house, Myrtle Dene, was a fairly large one, very comfortably furnished. There was a cook and a house-parlourmaid as well as a nurse-attendant to look after old Mr. Denman, Mabel's husband's father, who was what is called 'not quite right in the head.' Quite peaceful and well-behaved, but distinctly odd at times. As I say, there was insanity in the family.

"I was really shocked to see the change in Mabel. She was a mass of nerves, twitching all over, yet I had the greatest difficulty in making her tell me what the trouble was. I got at it, as one always does get at these things, indirectly. I asked her about some friends of hers she was always mentioning in her letters, the Gallaghers. She said, to my surprise, that she hardly ever saw them nowadays. Other friends whom I mentioned elicited the same remark. I spoke to her then of the folly of shutting herself up and brooding, and especially of the silliness of cutting herself adrift from her friends. Then she came bursting out with the truth.

"'It is not my doing, it is theirs. There is not a soul in the place who will speak to me now. When I go down the High Street they all get out of the way so that they shan't have to meet me or speak to me. I am like a kind of leper. It is awful, and I can't bear it any longer. I shall have to sell the house and go abroad. Yet why should I be driven away from a home like this? I have done nothing.'

"I was more disturbed than I can tell you. I was knitting a comforter for old Mrs. Hay at the time, and in my perturbation I

dropped two stitches and never discovered it until long after.

“My dear Mabel,” I said, “you amaze me. But what is the cause of all this?”

“Even as a child Mabel was always difficult. I had the greatest difficulty in getting her to give me a straightforward answer to my question. She would only say vague things about wicked talk and idle people who had nothing better to do than gossip, and people who put ideas into other people’s heads.

“That is all quite clear to me,” I said. “There is evidently some story being circulated about you. But what that story is you must know as well as anyone. And you are going to tell me.”

“It is so wicked,” moaned Mabel.

“Of course it is wicked,” I said briskly. “There is nothing that you can tell me about people’s minds that would astonish or surprise me. Now, Mabel, will you tell me in plain English what people are saying about you?”

“Then it all came out.

“It seemed that Geoffrey Denman’s death, being quite sudden and unexpected, gave rise to various rumours. In fact—and in plain English as I had put it to her—people were saying that she had poisoned her husband.

“Now, as I expect you know, there is nothing more cruel than talk, and there is nothing more difficult to combat. When people say things behind your back there is nothing you can refute or deny, and the rumours go on growing and growing, and no one can stop them. I was quite certain of one thing: Mabel was quite incapable of poisoning anyone. And I didn’t see why life should be ruined for her and her home made unbearable just because in all probability she had been doing something silly and foolish.

“There is no smoke without fire,” I said. “Now, Mabel, you have got to tell me what started people off on this tack. There must have been something.”

“Mabel was very incoherent, and declared there was nothing—nothing at all, except, of course, that Geoffrey’s death had been very sudden. He had seemed quite well at supper that evening, and had taken violently ill in the night. The doctor had been sent for, but the

poor man had died a few minutes after the doctor's arrival. Death had been thought to be the result of eating poisoned mushrooms.

"Well," I said, "I suppose a sudden death of that kind might start tongues wagging, but surely not without some additional facts. Did you have a quarrel with Geoffrey or anything of that kind?"

"She admitted that she had had a quarrel with him on the preceding morning at breakfast time.

"And the servants heard it, I suppose?" I asked.

"They weren't in the room."

"No, my dear," I said, "but they probably were fairly near the door outside."

"I knew the carrying power of Mabel's high-pitched hysterical voice only too well. Geoffrey Denman, too, was a man given to raising his voice loudly when angry.

"What did you quarrel about?" I asked.

"Oh, the usual things. It was always the same things over and over again. Some little thing would start us off, and then Geoffrey became impossible and said abominable things, and I told him what I thought of him."

"There had been a lot of quarrelling, then?" I asked.

"It wasn't my fault—"

"My dear child," I said, "it doesn't matter whose fault it was. That is not what we are discussing. In a place like this everybody's private affairs are more or less public property. You and your husband were always quarrelling. You had a particularly bad quarrel one morning, and that night your husband died suddenly and mysteriously. Is that all, or is there anything else?"

"I don't know what you mean by anything else," said Mabel sullenly.

"Just what I say, my dear. If you have done anything silly, don't for Heaven's sake keep it back now. I only want to do what I can to help you."

"Nothing and nobody can help me," said Mabel wildly, "except death."

"Have a little more faith in Providence, dear," I said. "Now then, Mabel, I know perfectly well there *is* something else that you are

keeping back.'

"I always did know, even when she was a child, when she was not telling me the whole truth. It took a long time, but I got it out at last. She had gone down to the chemist's that morning and had bought some arsenic. She had had, of course, to sign the book for it. Naturally, the chemist had talked.

"'Who is your doctor?' I asked.

"'Dr. Rawlinson.'

"I knew him by sight. Mabel had pointed him out to me the other day. To put it in perfectly plain language he was what I would describe as an old dodderer. I have had too much experience of life to believe in the infallibility of doctors. Some of them are clever men and some of them are not, and half the time the best of them don't know what is the matter with you. I have no truck with doctors and their medicines myself.

"I thought things over, and then I put my bonnet on and went to call on Dr. Rawlinson. He was just what I had thought him—a nice old man, kindly, vague, and so shortsighted as to be pitiful, slightly deaf, and, withal, touchy and sensitive to the last degree. He was on his high horse at once when I mentioned Geoffrey Denman's death, talked for a long time about various kinds of fungi, edible and otherwise. He had questioned the cook, and she had admitted that one or two of the mushrooms cooked had been 'a little queer,' but as the shop had sent them she thought they must be all right. The more she had thought about them since, the more she was convinced that their appearance was unusual.

"'She would be,' I said. 'They would start by being quite like mushrooms in appearance, and they would end by being orange with purple spots. There is nothing that class cannot remember if it tries.'

"I gathered that Denman had been past speech when the doctor got to him. He was incapable of swallowing, and had died within a few minutes. The doctor seemed perfectly satisfied with the certificate he had given. But how much of that was obstinacy and how much of it was genuine belief I could not be sure.

"I went straight home and asked Mabel quite frankly why she had bought arsenic.

"You must have had some idea in your mind,' I pointed out.

"Mabel burst into tears. 'I wanted to make away with myself,' she moaned. 'I was too unhappy. I thought I would end it all.'

"Have you the arsenic still?' I asked.

"No, I threw it away.'

"I sat there turning things over and over in my mind.

"What happened when he was taken ill? Did he call you?'

"No.' She shook her head. 'He rang the bell violently. He must have rung several times. At last Dorothy, the house-parlourmaid, heard it, and she waked the cook up, and they came down. When Dorothy saw him she was frightened. He was rambling and delirious. She left the cook with him and came rushing to me. I got up and went to him. Of course I saw at once he was dreadfully ill. Unfortunately Brewster, who looks after old Mr. Denman, was away for the night, so there was no one who knew what to do. I sent Dorothy off for the doctor, and cook and I stayed with him, but after a few minutes I couldn't bear it any longer; it was too dreadful. I ran away back to my room and locked the door.'

"Very selfish and unkind of you,' I said; 'and no doubt that conduct of yours has done nothing to help you since, you may be sure of that. Cook will have repeated it everywhere. Well, well, this is a bad business.'

"Next I spoke to the servants. The cook wanted to tell me about the mushrooms, but I stopped her. I was tired of these mushrooms. Instead, I questioned both of them very closely about their master's condition on that night. They both agreed that he seemed to be in great agony, that he was unable to swallow, and he could only speak in a strangled voice, and when he did speak it was only rambling—nothing sensible.

"What did he say when he was rambling?' I asked curiously.

"Something about some fish, wasn't it?' turning to the other.

"Dorothy agreed.

"A heap of fish,' she said; 'some nonsense like that. I could see at once he wasn't in his right mind, poor gentleman.'

"There didn't seem to be any sense to be made out of that. As a last resource I went up to see Brewster, who was a gaunt, middle-aged woman of about fifty.

"It is a pity that I wasn't here that night,' she said. 'Nobody seems to have tried to do anything for him until the doctor came.'

"I suppose he was delirious,' I said doubtfully; 'but that is not a symptom of ptomaine poisoning, is it?'

"It depends,' said Brewster.

"I asked her how her patient was getting on.

"She shook her head.

"He is pretty bad,' she said.

"Weak?'

"Oh no, he is strong enough physically—all but his eyesight. That is failing badly. He may outlive all of us, but his mind is failing very fast now. I have already told both Mr. and Mrs. Denman that he ought to be in an institution, but Mrs. Denman wouldn't hear of it at any price.'

"I will say for Mabel that she always had a kindly heart.

"Well, there the thing was. I thought it over in every aspect, and at last I decided that there was only one thing to be done. In view of the rumours that were going about, permission must be applied for to exhume the body, and a proper postmortem must be made and lying tongues quietened once and for all. Mabel, of course, made a fuss, mostly on sentimental grounds—disturbing the dead man in his peaceful grave, etc., etc.—but I was firm.

"I won't make a long story of this part of it. We got the order and they did the autopsy, or whatever they call it, but the result was not so satisfactory as it might have been. There was no trace of arsenic—that was all to the good—but the actual words of the report were *that there was nothing to show by what means deceased had come to his death.*

"So, you see, that didn't lead us out of trouble altogether. People went on talking—about rare poisons impossible to detect, and rubbish of that sort. I had seen the pathologist who had done the postmortem, and I had asked him several questions, though he tried his best to get out of answering most of them; but I got out of him

that he considered it highly unlikely that the poisoned mushrooms were the cause of death. An idea was simmering in my mind, and I asked him what poison, if any, could have been employed to obtain that result. He made a long explanation to me, most of which, I must admit, I did not follow, but it amounted to this: That death might have been due to some strong vegetable alkaloid.

"The idea I had was this: Supposing the taint of insanity was in Geoffrey Denman's blood also, might he not have made away with himself? He had, at one period of his life, studied medicine, and he would have a good knowledge of poisons and their effects.

"I didn't think it sounded very likely, but it was the only thing I could think of. And I was nearly at my wits' end, I can tell you. Now, I dare say you modern young people will laugh, but when I am in really bad trouble I always say a little prayer to myself—anywhere, when I am walking along the street, or at a bazaar. And I always get an answer. It may be some trifling thing, apparently quite unconnected with the subject, but there it is. I had that text pinned over my bed when I was a little girl: *Ask and you shall receive*. On the morning that I am telling you about, I was walking along the High Street, and I was praying hard. I shut my eyes, and when I opened them, what do you think was the first thing that I saw?"

Five faces with varying degrees of interest were turned to Miss Marple. It may be safely assumed, however, that no one would have guessed the answer to the question right.

"I saw," said Miss Marple impressively, "*the window of the fishmonger's shop*. There was only one thing in it, *a fresh haddock*."

She looked round triumphantly.

"Oh, my God!" said Raymond West. "An answer to prayer—a fresh haddock!"

"Yes, Raymond," said Miss Marple severely, "and there is no need to be profane about it. The hand of God is everywhere. The first thing I saw were the black spots—the marks of St. Peter's thumb. That is the legend, you know. St. Peter's thumb. And that brought things home to me. I needed faith, the ever true faith of St. Peter. I connected the two things together, faith—and fish."

Sir Henry blew his nose rather hurriedly. Joyce bit her lip.

"Now what did that bring to my mind? Of course, both the cook and house-parlourmaid mentioned fish as being one of the things spoken of by the dying man. I was convinced, absolutely convinced, that there was some solution of the mystery to be found in these words. I went home determined to get to the bottom of the matter."

She paused.

"Has it ever occurred to you," the old lady went on, "how much we go by what is called, I believe, the context? There is a place on Dartmoor called Grey Wethers. If you were talking to a farmer there and mentioned Grey Wethers, he would probably conclude that you were speaking of these stone circles, yet it is possible that you might be speaking of the atmosphere; and in the same way, if you were meaning the stone circles, an outsider, hearing a fragment of the conversation, might think you meant the weather. So when we repeat a conversation, we don't, as a rule, repeat the actual words; we put in some other words that seem to us to mean exactly the same thing.

"I saw both the cook and Dorothy separately. I asked the cook if she was quite sure that her master had really mentioned a heap of fish. She said she was quite sure.

"'Were these his exact words,' I asked, 'or did he mention some particular kind of fish?'

"'That's it,' said the cook; 'it was some particular kind of fish, but I can't remember what now. A heap of—now what was it? Not any of the fish you send to table. Would it be a perch now—or pike? No. It didn't begin with a P.'

"Dorothy also recalled that her master had mentioned some special kind of fish. 'Some outlandish kind of fish it was,' she said.

"'A pile of—now what was it?'

"'Did he say heap or pile?' I asked.

"'I think he said pile. But there, I really can't be sure—it's so hard to remember the actual words, isn't it, miss, especially when they don't seem to make sense. But now I come to think of it, I am pretty sure that it was a pile, and the fish began with C; but it wasn't a cod or a crayfish.'

"The next part is where I am really proud of myself," said Miss Marple, "because, of course, I don't know anything about drugs—nasty, dangerous things I call them. I have got an old recipe of my grandmother's for tansy tea that is worth any amount of your drugs. But I knew that there were several medical volumes in the house, and in one of them there was an index of drugs. You see, my idea was that Geoffrey had taken some particular poison, and was trying to say the name of it.

"Well, I looked down the list of H's, beginning He. Nothing there that sounded likely; then I began on the P's, and almost at once I came to—what do you think?"

She looked round, postponing her moment of triumph.

"Pilocarpine. Can't you understand a man who could hardly speak trying to drag that word out? What would that sound like to a cook who had never heard the word? Wouldn't it convey the impression 'pile of carp?'"

"By Jove!" said Sir Henry.

"I should never have hit upon that," said Dr. Pender.

"Most interesting," said Mr. Petherick. "Really most interesting."

"I turned quickly to the page indicated in the index. I read about pilocarpine and its effect on the eyes and other things that didn't seem to have any bearing on the case, but at last I came to a most significant phrase: *Has been tried with success as an antidote for atropine poisoning.*

"I can't tell you the light that dawned upon me then. I never had thought it likely that Geoffrey Denman would commit suicide. No, this new solution was not only possible, but I was absolutely sure it was the correct one, because all the pieces fitted in logically."

"I am not going to try to guess," said Raymond. "Go on, Aunt Jane, and tell us what was so startlingly clear to you."

"I don't know anything about medicine, of course," said Miss Marple, "but I did happen to know this, that when my eyesight was failing, the doctor ordered me drops with atropine sulphate in them. I went straight upstairs to old Mr. Denman's room. I didn't beat about the bush.

“‘Mr. Denman,’ I said, ‘I know everything. Why did you poison your son?’

“He looked at me for a minute or two—rather a handsome old man he was, in his way—and then he burst out laughing. It was one of the most vicious laughs I have ever heard. I can assure you it made my flesh creep. I had only heard anything like it once before, when poor Mrs. Jones went off her head.

“‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I got even with Geoffrey. I was too clever for Geoffrey. He was going to put me away, was he? Have me shut up in an asylum? I heard them talking about it. Mabel is a good girl—Mabel stuck up for me, but I knew she wouldn’t be able to stand up against Geoffrey. In the end he would have his own way; he always did. But I settled him—I settled my kind, loving son! Ha, ha! I crept down in the night. It was quite easy. Brewster was away. My dear son was asleep; he had a glass of water by the side of his bed; he always woke up in the middle of the night and drank it off. I poured it away—ha, ha!—and I emptied the bottle of eyedrops into the glass. He would wake up and swill it down before he knew what it was. There was only a tablespoonful of it—quite enough, quite enough. And so he did! They came to me in the morning and broke it to me very gently. They were afraid it would upset me. Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!’

“Well,” said Miss Marple, “that is the end of the story. Of course, the poor old man was put in an asylum. He wasn’t really responsible for what he had done, and the truth was known, and everyone was sorry for Mabel and could not do enough to make up to her for the unjust suspicions they had had. But if it hadn’t been for Geoffrey realizing what the stuff was he had swallowed and trying to get everybody to get hold of the antidote without delay, it might never have been found out. I believe there are very definite symptoms with atropine—dilated pupils of the eyes, and all that; but, of course, as I have said, Dr. Rawlinson was very shortsighted, poor old man. And in the same medical book which I went on reading—and some of it was *most* interesting—it gave the symptoms of ptomaine poisoning and atropine, and they are not unlike. But I can assure

you I have never seen a pile of fresh haddock without thinking of the thumb mark of St. Peter."

There was a very long pause.

"My dear friend," said Mr. Petherick. "My very dear friend, you really are amazing."

"I shall recommend Scotland Yard to come to you for advice," said Sir Henry.

"Well, at all events, Aunt Jane," said Raymond, "there is one thing that you don't know."

"Oh, yes, I do, dear," said Miss Marple. "It happened just before dinner, didn't it? When you took Joyce out to admire the sunset. It is a very favourite place, that. There by the jasmine hedge. That is where the milkman asked Annie if he could put up the banns."

"Dash it all, Aunt Jane," said Raymond, "don't spoil all the romance. Joyce and I aren't like the milkman and Annie."

"That is where you make a mistake, dear," said Miss Marple. "Everybody is very much alike, really. But fortunately, perhaps, they don't realize it."

Seven

THE BLUE GERANIUM

“When I was down here last year—” said Sir Henry Clithering, and stopped.

His hostess, Mrs. Bantry, looked at him curiously.

The Ex-Commissioner of Scotland Yard was staying with old friends of his, Colonel and Mrs. Bantry, who lived near St. Mary Mead.

Mrs. Bantry, pen in hand, had just asked his advice as to who should be invited to make a sixth guest at dinner that evening.

“Yes?” said Mrs. Bantry encouragingly. “When you were here last year?”

“Tell me,” said Sir Henry, “do you know a Miss Marple?”

Mrs. Bantry was surprised. It was the last thing she had expected.

“Know Miss Marple? Who doesn’t! The typical old maid of fiction. Quite a dear, but hopelessly behind the times. Do you mean you would like me to ask *her* to dinner?”

“You are surprised?”

“A little, I must confess. I should hardly have thought you—but perhaps there’s an explanation?”

“The explanation is simple enough. When I was down here last year we got into the habit of discussing unsolved mysteries—there

were five or six of us—Raymond West, the novelist, started it. We each supplied a story to which we knew the answer, but nobody else did. It was supposed to be an exercise in the deductive faculties—to see who could get nearest the truth.”

“Well?”

“Like in the old story—we hardly realized that Miss Marple was playing; but we were very polite about it—didn’t want to hurt the old dear’s feelings. And now comes the cream of the jest. The old lady outdid us every time!”

“What?”

“I assure you—straight to the truth like a homing pigeon.”

“But how extraordinary! Why, dear old Miss Marple has hardly ever been out of St. Mary Mead.”

“Ah! But according to her, that has given her unlimited opportunities of observing human nature—under the microscope as it were.”

“I suppose there’s something in that,” conceded Mrs. Bantry. “One would at least know the petty side of people. But I don’t think we have any really exciting criminals in our midst. I think we must try her with Arthur’s ghost story after dinner. I’d be thankful if she’d find a solution to that.”

“I didn’t know that Arthur believed in ghosts?”

“Oh! he doesn’t. That’s what worries him so. And it happened to a friend of his, George Pritchard—a most prosaic person. It’s really rather tragic for poor George. Either this extraordinary story is true—or else—”

“Or else what?”

Mrs. Bantry did not answer. After a minute or two she said irrelevantly:

“You know, I like George—everyone does. One can’t believe that he—but people do do such extraordinary things.”

Sir Henry nodded. He knew, better than Mrs. Bantry, the extraordinary things that people did.

So it came about that that evening Mrs. Bantry looked round her dinner table (shivering a little as she did so, because the dining room, like most English dining rooms, was extremely cold) and fixed

her gaze on the very upright old lady sitting on her husband's right. Miss Marple wore black lace mittens; an old lace fichu was draped round her shoulders and another piece of lace surmounted her white hair. She was talking animatedly to the elderly doctor, Dr. Lloyd, about the Workhouse and the suspected shortcomings of the District Nurse.

Mrs. Bantry marvelled anew. She even wondered whether Sir Henry had been making an elaborate joke—but there seemed no point in that. Incredible that what he had said could be really true.

Her glance went on and rested affectionately on her red-faced broad-shouldered husband as he sat talking horses to Jane Helier, the beautiful and popular actress. Jane, more beautiful (if that were possible) off the stage than on, opened enormous blue eyes and murmured at discreet intervals: "Really?" "Oh fancy!" "How extraordinary!" She knew nothing whatever about horses and cared less.

"Arthur," said Mrs. Bantry, "you're boring poor Jane to distraction. Leave horses alone and tell her your ghost story instead. You know . . . George Pritchard."

"Eh, Dolly? Oh! but I don't know—"

"Sir Henry wants to hear it too. I was telling him something about it this morning. It would be interesting to hear what everyone has to say about it."

"Oh do!" said Jane. "I love ghost stories."

"Well—" Colonel Bantry hesitated. "I've never believed much in the supernatural. But this—"

"I don't think any of you know George Pritchard. He's one of the best. His wife—well, she's dead now, poor woman. I'll just say this much: she didn't give George any too easy a time when she was alive. She was one of those semi-invalids—I believe she had really something wrong with her, but whatever it was she played it for all it was worth. She was capricious, exacting, unreasonable. She complained from morning to night. George was expected to wait on her hand and foot, and every thing he did was always wrong and he got cursed for it. Most men, I'm fully convinced, would have hit her over the head with a hatchet long ago. Eh, Dolly, isn't that so?"

"She was a dreadful woman," said Mrs. Bantry with conviction. "If George Pritchard had brained her with a hatchet, and there had been any woman on the jury, he would have been triumphantly acquitted."

"I don't quite know how this business started. George was rather vague about it. I gather Mrs. Pritchard had always had a weakness for fortune-tellers, palmists, clairvoyantes—anything of that sort. George didn't mind. If she found amusement in it well and good. But he refused to go into rhapsodies himself, and that was another grievance.

"A succession of hospital nurses was always passing through the house, Mrs. Pritchard usually becoming dissatisfied with them after a few weeks. One young nurse had been very keen on this fortune-telling stunt, and for a time Mrs. Pritchard had been very fond of her. Then she suddenly fell out with her and insisted on her going. She had back another nurse who had been with her previously—an older woman, experienced and tactful in dealing with a neurotic patient. Nurse Copling, according to George, was a very good sort—a sensible woman to talk to. She put up with Mrs. Pritchard's tantrums and nerve storms with complete indifference.

"Mrs. Pritchard always lunched upstairs, and it was usual at lunchtime for George and the nurse to come to some arrangement for the afternoon. Strictly speaking, the nurse went off from two to four, but 'to oblige' as the phrase goes, she would sometimes take her time off after tea if George wanted to be free for the afternoon. On this occasion, she mentioned that she was going to see a sister at Golders Green and might be a little late returning. George's face fell, for he had arranged to play a round of golf. Nurse Copling, however, reassured him.

"'We'll neither of us be missed, Mr. Pritchard.' A twinkle came into her eye. 'Mrs. Pritchard's going to have more exciting company than ours.'

"'Who's that?'

"'Wait a minute,' Nurse Copling's eyes twinkled more than ever. 'Let me get it right. *Zarida, Psychic Reader of the Future.*'

"'Oh Lord!' groaned George. 'That's a new one, isn't it?'

“Quite new. I believe my predecessor, Nurse Carstairs, sent her along. Mrs. Pritchard hasn’t seen her yet. She made me write, fixing an appointment for this afternoon.’

“Well, at any rate, I shall get my golf,’ said George, and he went off with the kindest feelings towards Zarida, the Reader of the Future.

“On his return to the house, he found Mrs. Pritchard in a state of great agitation. She was, as usual, lying on her invalid couch, and she had a bottle of smelling salts in her hand which she sniffed at frequent intervals.

“George,’ she exclaimed. ‘What did I tell you about this house? The moment I came into it, I *felt* there was something wrong! Didn’t I tell you so at the time?’

“Repressing his desire to reply, ‘You always do,’ George said, ‘No, I can’t say I remember it.’

“You never do remember anything that has to do with me. Men are all extraordinarily callous—but I really believe that you are even more insensitive than most.’

“Oh, come now, Mary dear, that’s not fair.’

“Well, as I was telling you, this woman *knew* at once! She—she actually blanched—if you know what I mean—as she came in at the door, and she said: ‘There is evil here—evil and danger. I feel it’”

“Very unwisely George laughed.

“Well, you have had your money’s worth this afternoon.’

“His wife closed her eyes and took a long sniff from her smelling bottle.

“How you hate me! You would jeer and laugh if I were dying.’

“George protested and after a minute or two she went on.

“You may laugh, but I shall tell you the whole thing. This house is definitely dangerous to me—the woman said so.’

“George’s formerly kind feeling towards Zarida underwent a change. He knew his wife was perfectly capable of insisting on moving to a new house if the caprice got hold of her.

“What else did she say?’ he asked.

“She couldn’t tell me very much. She was so upset. One thing she did say. I had some violets in a glass. She pointed at them and

cried out:

“Take those away. No blue flowers—never have blue flowers. *Blue flowers are fatal to you—remember that*”

“And you know,” added Mrs. Pritchard, ‘I always have told you that blue as a colour is repellent to me. I feel a natural instinctive sort of warning against.’

“George was much too wise to remark that he had never heard her say so before. Instead he asked what the mysterious Zarida was like. Mrs. Pritchard entered with gusto upon a description.

“Black hair in coiled knobs over her ears—her eyes were half closed—great black rims round them—she had a black veil over her mouth and chin—and she spoke in a kind of singing voice with a marked foreign accent—Spanish, I think—’

“In fact all the usual stock-in-trade,’ said George cheerfully.

“His wife immediately closed her eyes.

“I feel extremely ill,’ she said. ‘Ring for nurse. Unkindness upsets me, as you know only too well.’

“It was two days later that Nurse Copling came to George with a grave face.

“Will you come to Mrs. Pritchard, please. She has had a letter which upsets her greatly.’

“He found his wife with the letter in her hand. She held it out to him.

“Read it,’ she said.

“George read it. It was on heavily scented paper, and the writing was big and black.

“I have seen the future. Be warned before it is too late. Beware of the Full Moon. The Blue Primrose means Warning; the Blue Hollyhock means Danger; the Blue Geranium means Death. . . .

“Just about to burst out laughing, George caught Nurse Copling’s eye. She made a quick warning gesture. He said rather awkwardly, ‘The woman’s probably trying to frighten you, Mary. Anyway there aren’t such things as blue primroses and blue geraniums.’

“But Mrs. Pritchard began to cry and say her days were numbered. Nurse Copling came out with George upon the landing.

“Of all the silly tomfoolery,’ he burst out.

"‘I suppose it is.’

"Something in the nurse’s tone struck him, and he stared at her in amazement.

"‘Surely, nurse, you don’t believe—’

"No, no, Mr. Pritchard. I don’t believe in reading the future—that’s nonsense. What puzzles me is the *meaning* of this. Fortunetellers are usually out for what they can get. But this woman seems to be frightening Mrs. Pritchard with no advantage to herself. I can’t see the point. There’s another thing—’

"‘Yes?’

"‘Mrs. Pritchard says that something about Zarida was faintly familiar to her.’

"‘Well?’

"‘Well, I don’t like it, Mr. Pritchard, that’s all.’

"‘I didn’t know you were so superstitious, nurse.’

"‘I’m not superstitious; but I know when a thing is fishy.’

"It was about four days after this that the first incident happened. To explain it to you, I shall have to describe Mrs. Pritchard’s room—"

"You’d better let me do that," interrupted Mrs. Bantry. "It was papered with one of those new wallpapers where you apply clumps of flowers to make a kind of herbaceous border. The effect is almost like being in a garden—though, of course, the flowers are all wrong. I mean they simply couldn’t be in bloom all at the same time—"

"Don’t let a passion for horticultural accuracy run away with you, Dolly," said her husband. "We all know you’re an enthusiastic gardener."

"Well, it *is* absurd," protested Mrs. Bantry. "To have bluebells and daffodils and lupins and hollyhocks and Michaelmas daisies all grouped together."

"Most unscientific," said Sir Henry. "But to proceed with the story."

"Well, among these massed flowers were primroses, clumps of yellow and pink primroses and—oh go on, Arthur, this is your story —"

Colonel Bantry took up the tale.

"Mrs. Pritchard rang her bell violently one morning. The household came running—thought she was in extremis; not at all. She was violently excited and pointing at the wallpaper; and there sure enough was *one blue primrose* in the midst of the others. . . ."

"Oh!" said Miss Helier, "how creepy!"

"The question was: Hadn't the blue primrose always been there? That was George's suggestion and the nurse's. But Mrs. Pritchard wouldn't have it at any price. She had never noticed it till that very morning and the night before had been full moon. She was very upset about it."

"I met George Pritchard that same day and he told me about it," said Mrs. Bantry. "I went to see Mrs. Pritchard and did my best to ridicule the whole thing; but without success. I came away really concerned, and I remember I met Jean Instow and told her about it. Jean is a queer girl. She said, 'So she's really upset about it?' I told her that I thought the woman was perfectly capable of dying of fright—she was really abnormally superstitious."

"I remember Jean rather startled me with what she said next. She said, 'Well, that might be all for the best, mightn't it?' And she said it so coolly, in so matter-of-fact a tone that I was really—well, shocked. Of course I know it's done nowadays—to be brutal and outspoken; but I never get used to it. Jean smiled at me rather oddly and said, 'You don't like my saying that—but it's true. What use is Mrs. Pritchard's life to her? None at all; and it's hell for George Pritchard. To have his wife frightened out of existence would be the best thing that could happen to him.' I said, 'George is most awfully good to her always.' And she said, 'Yes, he deserves a reward, poor dear. He's a very attractive person, George Pritchard. The last nurse thought so—the pretty one—what was her name? Carstairs. That was the cause of the row between her and Mrs. P.'

"Now I didn't like hearing Jean say that. Of course one had *wondered*—"

Mrs. Bantry paused significantly.

"Yes, dear," said Miss Marple placidly. "One always does. Is Miss Instow a pretty girl? I suppose she plays golf?"

"Yes. She's good at all games. And she's nice-looking, attractive-looking, very fair with a healthy skin, and nice steady blue eyes. Of course we always have felt that she and George Pritchard—I mean if things had been different—they are so well suited to one another."

"And they were friends?" asked Miss Marple.

"Oh yes. Great friends."

"Do you think, Dolly," said Colonel Bantry plaintively, "that I might be allowed to go on with my story?"

"Arthur," said Mrs. Bantry resignedly, "wants to get back to his ghosts."

"I had the rest of the story from George himself," went on the Colonel. "There's no doubt that Mrs. Pritchard got the wind up badly towards the end of the next month. She marked off on a calendar the day when the moon would be full, and on that night she had both the nurse and then George into her room and made them study the wallpaper carefully. There were pink hollyhocks and red ones, but there were no blue amongst them. Then when George left the room she locked the door—"

"And in the morning there was a large blue hollyhock," said Miss Helier joyfully.

"Quite right," said Colonel Bantry. "Or at any rate, nearly right. One flower of a hollyhock just above her head had turned blue. It staggered George; and of course the more it staggered him the more he refused to take the thing seriously. He insisted that the whole thing was some kind of practical joke. He ignored the evidence of the locked door and the fact that Mrs. Pritchard discovered the change before anyone—even Nurse Copling—was admitted.

"It staggered George; and it made him unreasonable. His wife wanted to leave the house, and he wouldn't let her. He was inclined to believe in the supernatural for the first time, but he wasn't going to admit it. He usually gave in to his wife, but this time he wouldn't. Mary was not to make a fool of herself, he said. The whole thing was the most infernal nonsense.

"And so the next month sped away. Mrs. Pritchard made less protest than one would have imagined. I think she was superstitious

enough to believe that she couldn't escape her fate. She repeated again and again: 'The blue primrose—warning. The blue hollyhock—danger. The blue geranium—*death*.' And she would lie looking at the clump of pinky-red geraniums nearest her bed.

"The whole business was pretty nervy. Even the nurse caught the infection. She came to George two days before full moon and begged him to take Mrs. Pritchard away. George was angry.

"If all the flowers on that damned wall turned into blue devils it couldn't kill anyone!' he shouted.

"It might. Shock has killed people before now.'

"Nonsense,' said George.

"George has always been a shade pigheaded. You can't drive him. I believe he had a secret idea that his wife worked the change herself and that it was all some morbid hysterical plan of hers.

"Well, the fatal night came. Mrs. Pritchard locked the door as usual. She was very calm—in almost an exalted state of mind. The nurse was worried by her state—wanted to give her a stimulant, an injection of strychnine, but Mrs. Pritchard refused. In a way, I believe, she was enjoying herself. George said she was."

"I think that's quite possible," said Mrs. Bantry. "There must have been a strange sort of glamour about the whole thing."

"There was no violent ringing of a bell the next morning. Mrs. Pritchard usually woke about eight. When, at eight thirty, there was no sign from her, nurse rapped loudly on the door. Getting no reply, she fetched George, and insisted on the door being broken open. They did so with the help of a chisel.

"One look at the still figure on the bed was enough for Nurse Copling. She sent George to telephone for the doctor, but it was too late. Mrs. Pritchard, he said, must have been dead at least eight hours. Her smelling salts lay by her hand on the bed, *and on the wall beside her one of the pinky-red geraniums was a bright deep blue.*"

"Horrible," said Miss Helier with a shiver.

Sir Henry was frowning.

"No additional details?"

Colonel Bantry shook his head, but Mrs. Bantry spoke quickly.

"The gas."

"What about the gas?" asked Sir Henry.

"When the doctor arrived there was a slight smell of gas, and sure enough he found the gas ring in the fireplace very slightly turned on; but so little it couldn't have mattered."

"Did Mr. Pritchard and the nurse not notice it when they first went in?"

"The nurse said she did notice a slight smell. George said he didn't notice gas, but something made him feel very queer and overcome; but he put that down to shock—and probably it was. At any rate there was no question of gas poisoning. The smell was scarcely noticeable."

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

"No, it isn't. One way and another, there was a lot of talk. The servants, you see, had overheard things—had heard, for instance, Mrs. Pritchard telling her husband that he hated her and would jeer if she were dying. And also more recent remarks. She had said one day, apropos of his refusing to leave the house: 'Very well, when I am dead, I hope everyone will realize that you have killed me.' And as ill luck would have it, he had been mixing some weed killer for the garden paths the day before. One of the younger servants had seen him and had afterwards seen him taking up a glass of hot milk for his wife.

"The talk spread and grew. The doctor had given a certificate—I don't know exactly in what terms—shock, syncope, heart failure, probably some medical terms meaning nothing much. However the poor lady had not been a month in her grave before an exhumation order was applied for and granted."

"And the result of the autopsy was nil, I remember," said Sir Henry gravely. "A case, for once, of smoke without fire."

"The whole thing is really very curious," said Mrs. Bantry. "That fortune-teller, for instance—Zarida. At the address where she was supposed to be, no one had ever heard of any such person!"

"She appeared once—out of the blue," said her husband, "and then utterly vanished. Out of the *blue*—that's rather good!"

"And what is more," continued Mrs. Bantry, "little Nurse Carstairs, who was supposed to have recommended her, had never even heard of her."

They looked at each other.

"It's a mysterious story," said Dr. Lloyd. "One can make guesses; but to guess—"

He shook his head.

"Has Mr. Pritchard married Miss Instow?" asked Miss Marple in her gentle voice.

"Now why do you ask that?" inquired Sir Henry.

Miss Marple opened gentle blue eyes.

"It seems to me so important," she said. "Have they married?"

Colonel Bantry shook his head.

"We—well, we expected something of the kind—but it's eighteen months now. I don't believe they even see much of each other."

"That is important," said Miss Marple. "Very important."

"Then you think the same as I do," said Mrs. Bantry. "You think —"

"Now, Dolly," said her husband. "It's unjustifiable—what you're going to say. You can't go about accusing people without a shadow of proof."

"Don't be so—so manly, Arthur. Men are always afraid to say *anything*. Anyway, this is all between ourselves. It's just a wild fantastic idea of mine that possibly—only *possibly*—Jean Instow disguised herself as a fortune-teller. Mind you, she may have done it for a joke. I don't for a minute think that she meant any harm; but if she did do it, and if Mrs. Pritchard was foolish enough to die of fright—well, that's what Miss Marple meant, wasn't it?"

"No, dear, not quite," said Miss Marple. "You see, if I were going to kill anyone—which, of course, I wouldn't dream of doing for a minute, because it would be very wicked, and besides I don't like killing—not even wasps, though I know it has to be, and I'm sure the gardener does it as humanely as possible. Let me see, what was I saying?"

"If you wished to kill anyone," prompted Sir Henry.

"Oh yes. Well, if I did, I shouldn't be at all satisfied to trust to *fright*. I know one reads of people dying of it, but it seems a very uncertain sort of thing, and the most nervous people are far more brave than one really thinks they are. I should like something definite and certain, and make a thoroughly good plan about it."

"Miss Marple," said Sir Henry, "you frighten me. I hope you will never wish to remove me. Your plans would be too good."

Miss Marple looked at him reproachfully.

"I thought I had made it clear that I would never contemplate such wickedness," she said. "No, I was trying to put myself in the place of—er—a certain person."

"Do you mean George Pritchard?" asked Colonel Bantroy. "I'll never believe it of George—though—mind you, even the nurse believes it. I went and saw her about a month afterwards, at the time of the exhumation. She didn't know how it was done—in fact, she wouldn't say anything at all—but it was clear enough that she believed George to be in some way responsible for his wife's death. She was convinced of it."

"Well," said Dr. Lloyd, "perhaps she wasn't so far wrong. And mind you, a nurse often *knows*. She can't say—she's got no proof—but she *knows*."

Sir Henry leant forward.

"Come now, Miss Marple," he said persuasively. "You're lost in a daydream. Won't you tell us all about it?"

Miss Marple started and turned pink.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "I was just thinking about our District Nurse. A most difficult problem."

"More difficult than the problem of the blue geranium?"

"It really depends on the primroses," said Miss Marple. "I mean, Mrs. Bantroy said they were yellow and pink. If it was a pink primrose that turned blue, of course, that fits in perfectly. But if it happened to be a yellow one—"

"It was a pink one," said Mrs. Bantroy.

She stared. They all stared at Miss Marple.

"Then that seems to settle it," said Miss Marple. She shook her head regretfully. "And the wasp season and everything. And of

course the gas."

"It reminds you, I suppose, of countless village tragedies?" said Sir Henry.

"Not tragedies," said Miss Marple. "And certainly nothing criminal. But it does remind me a little of the trouble we are having with the District Nurse. After all, nurses are human beings, and what with having to be so correct in their behaviour and wearing those uncomfortable collars and being so thrown with the family—well, can you wonder that things sometimes happen?"

A glimmer of light broke upon Sir Henry.

"You mean Nurse Carstairs?"

"Oh no. Not Nurse Carstairs. Nurse *Copling*. You see, she had been there before, and very much thrown with Mr. Pritchard, who you say is an attractive man. I dare say she thought, poor thing—well, we needn't go into that. I don't suppose she knew about Miss Instow, and of course afterwards, when she found out, it turned her against him and she tried to do all the harm she could. Of course the letter really gave her away, didn't it?"

"What letter?"

"Well, she wrote to the fortune-teller at Mrs. Pritchard's request, and the fortune-teller came, apparently in answer to the letter. But later it was discovered that there never had been such a person at that address. So that shows that Nurse Copling was in it. She only pretended to write—so what could be more likely than that *she* was the fortune-teller herself?"

"I never saw the point about the letter," said Sir Henry. "That's a most important point, of course."

"Rather a bold step to take," said Miss Marple, "because Mrs. Pritchard might have recognized her in spite of the disguise—though of course if she had, the nurse could have pretended it was a joke."

"What did you mean," said Sir Henry, "when you said that if you were a certain person you would not have trusted to fright?"

"One couldn't be *sure* that way," said Miss Marple. "No, I think that the warnings and the blue flowers were, if I may use a military term," she laughed self-consciously—"just *camouflage*."

"And the real thing?"

"I know," said Miss Marple apologetically, "that I've got wasps on the brain. Poor things, destroyed in their thousands—and usually on such a beautiful summer's day. But I remember thinking, when I saw the gardener shaking up the cyanide of potassium in a bottle with water, how like smelling salts it looked. And if it were put in a smelling salt bottle and substituted for the real one—well, the poor lady was in the habit of using her smelling salts. Indeed you said they were found by her hand. Then, of course, while Mr. Pritchard went to telephone to the doctor, the nurse would change it for the real bottle, and she'd just turn on the gas a little bit to mask any smell of almonds and in case anyone felt queer, and I always have heard that cyanide leaves no trace if you wait long enough. But, of course I may be wrong, and it may have been something entirely different in the bottle; but that doesn't really matter, does it?"

Miss Marple paused, a little out of breath.

Jane Helier leant forward and said, "But the blue geranium, and the other flowers?"

"Nurses always have litmus paper, don't they?" said Miss Marple, "for—well, for testing. Not a very pleasant subject. We won't dwell on it. I have done a little nursing myself." She grew delicately pink. "Blue turns red with acids, and red turns blue with alkalis. So easy to paste some red litmus over a red flower—near the bed, of course. And then, when the poor lady used her smelling salts, the strong ammonia fumes would turn it blue. Really most ingenious. Of course, the geranium wasn't blue when they first broke into the room—nobody noticed it till afterwards. When nurse changed the bottles, she held the Sal Ammoniac against the wallpaper for a minute, I expect."

"You might have been there, Miss Marple," said Sir Henry.

"What worries me," said Miss Marple, "is poor Mr. Pritchard and that nice girl, Miss Instow. Probably both suspecting each other and keeping apart—and life so very short."

She shook her head.

"You needn't worry," said Sir Henry. "As a matter of fact I have something up my sleeve. A nurse has been arrested on a charge of murdering an elderly patient who had left her a legacy. It was done

with cyanide of potassium substituted for smelling salts. Nurse Copling trying the same trick again. Miss Instow and Mr. Pritchard need have no doubts as to the truth."

"Now isn't that nice?" cried Miss Marple. "I don't mean about the new murder, of course. That's very sad, and shows how much wickedness there is in the world, and that if once you give way—which reminds me I *must* finish my little conversation with Dr. Lloyd about the village nurse."

Eight

THE COMPANION

"Now, Dr. Lloyd," said Miss Helier. "Don't *you* know any creepy stories?"

She smiled at him—the smile that nightly bewitched the theatre-going public. Jane Helier was sometimes called the most beautiful woman in England, and jealous members of her own profession were in the habit of saying to each other: "Of course Jane's not an *artist*. She can't *act*—if you know what I mean. It's those eyes!"

And those "eyes" were at this minute fixed appealingly on the grizzled elderly bachelor doctor who, for the last five years, had ministered to the ailments of the village of St. Mary Mead.

With an unconscious gesture, the doctor pulled down his waistcoat (inclined of late to be uncomfortably tight) and racked his brains hastily, so as not to disappoint the lovely creature who addressed him so confidently.

"I feel," said Jane dreamily, "that I would like to wallow in crime this evening."

"Splendid," said Colonel Bantry, her host. "Splendid, splendid." And he laughed a loud hearty military laugh. "Eh, Dolly?"

His wife, hastily recalled to the exigencies of social life (she had been planning her spring border) agreed enthusiastically.

"Of course it's splendid," she said heartily but vaguely. "I always thought so."

"Did you, my dear?" said old Miss Marple, and her eyes twinkled a little.

"We don't get much in the creepy line—and still less in the criminal line—in St. Mary Mead, you know, Miss Helier," said Dr. Lloyd.

"You surprise me," said Sir Henry Clithering. The ex-Commissioner of Scotland Yard turned to Miss Marple. "I always understood from our friend here that St. Mary Mead is a positive hotbed of crime and vice."

"Oh, Sir Henry!" protested Miss Marple, a spot of colour coming into her cheeks. "I'm sure I never said anything of the kind. The only thing I ever said was that human nature is much the same in a village as anywhere else, only one has opportunities and leisure for seeing it at closer quarters."

"But *you* haven't always lived here," said Jane Helier, still addressing the doctor. "You've been in all sorts of queer places all over the world—places where things *happen!*"

"That is so, of course," said Dr. Lloyd, still thinking desperately. "Yes, of course . . . Yes. . . Ah! I have it!"

He sank back with a sigh of relief.

"It is some years ago now—I had almost forgotten. But the facts were really very strange—very strange indeed. And the final coincidence which put the clue into my hand was strange also."

Miss Helier drew her chair a little nearer to him, applied some lipstick and waited expectantly. The others also turned interested faces towards him.

"I don't know whether any of you know the Canary Islands," began the doctor.

"They must be wonderful," said Jane Helier. "They're in the South Seas, aren't they? Or is it the Mediterranean?"

"I've called in there on my way to South Africa," said the Colonel. "The Peak of Tenerife is a fine sight with the setting sun on it."

"The incident I am describing happened in the island of Grand Canary, not Tenerife. It is a good many years ago now. I had had a

breakdown in health and was forced to give up my practice in England and go abroad. I practised in Las Palmas, which is the principal town of Grand Canary. In many ways I enjoyed the life out there very much. The climate was mild and sunny, there was excellent surf bathing (and I am an enthusiastic bather) and the sea life of the port attracted me. Ships from all over the world put in at Las Palmas. I used to walk along the mole every morning far more interested than any member of the fair sex could be in a street of hat shops.

"As I say, ships from all over the world put in at Las Palmas. Sometimes they stay a few hours, sometimes a day or two. In the principal hotel there, the Metropole, you will see people of all races and nationalities—birds of passage. Even the people going to Tenerife usually come here and stay a few days before crossing to the other island.

"My story begins there, in the Metropole Hotel, one Thursday evening in January. There was a dance going on and I and a friend had been sitting at a small table watching the scene. There were a fair sprinkling of English and other nationalities, but the majority of the dancers were Spanish; and when the orchestra struck up a tango, only half a dozen couples of the latter nationality took the floor. They all danced well and we looked on and admired. One woman in particular excited our lively admiration. Tall, beautiful and sinuous, she moved with the grace of a half-tamed leopardess. There was something dangerous about her. I said as much to my friend and he agreed.

"'Women like that,' he said, 'are bound to have a history. Life will not pass them by.'

"'Beauty is perhaps a dangerous possession,' I said.

"'It's not only beauty,' he insisted. 'There is something else. Look at her again. Things are bound to happen to that woman, or because of her. As I said, life will not pass her by. Strange and exciting events will surround her. You've only got to look at her to know it.'

"He paused and then added with a smile:

“Just as you’ve only got to look at those two women over there, and know that nothing out of the way could ever happen to either of them! They are made for a safe and uneventful existence.’

“I followed his eyes. The two women he referred to were travellers who had just arrived—a Holland Lloyd boat had put into port that evening, and the passengers were just beginning to arrive.

“As I looked at them I saw at once what my friend meant. They were two English ladies—the thoroughly nice travelling English that you do find abroad. Their ages, I should say, were round about forty. One was fair and a little—just a little—too plump; the other was dark and a little—again just a little—inclined to scragginess. They were what is called well-preserved, quietly and inconspicuously dressed in well-cut tweeds, and innocent of any kind of makeup. They had that air of quiet assurance which is the birthright of well-bred Englishwomen. There was nothing remarkable about either of them. They were like thousands of their sisters. They would doubtless see what they wished to see, assisted by Baedeker, and be blind to everything else. They would use the English library and attend the English Church in any place they happened to be, and it was quite likely that one or both of them sketched a little. And as my friend said, nothing exciting or remarkable would ever happen to either of them, though they might quite likely travel half over the world. I looked from them back to our sinuous Spanish woman with her half-closed smouldering eyes and I smiled.”

“Poor things,” said Jane Helier with a sigh. “But I do think it’s so silly of people not to make the most of themselves. That woman in Bond Street—Valentine—is really wonderful. Audrey Denman goes to her; and have you seen her in ‘The Downward Step’? As the schoolgirl in the first act she’s really marvellous. And yet Audrey is fifty if she’s a day. As a matter of fact I happen to know she’s really nearer sixty.”

“Go on,” said Mrs. Bantry to Dr. Lloyd. “I love stories about sinuous Spanish dancers. It makes me forget how old and fat I am.”

“I’m sorry,” said Dr. Lloyd apologetically. “But you see, as a matter of fact, this story isn’t about the Spanish woman.”

“It isn’t?”

"No. As it happens my friend and I were wrong. Nothing in the least exciting happened to the Spanish beauty. She married a clerk in a shipping office, and by the time I left the island she had had five children and was getting very fat."

"Just like that girl of Israel Peters," commented Miss Marple. "The one who went on the stage and had such good legs that they made her principal boy in the pantomime. Everyone said she'd come to no good, but she married a commercial traveller and settled down splendidly."

"The village parallel," murmured Sir Henry softly.

"No," went on the doctor. "My story is about the two English ladies."

"Something happened to them?" breathed Miss Helier.

"Something happened to them—and the very next day, too."

"Yes?" said Mrs. Bantry encouragingly.

"Just for curiosity, as I went out that evening I glanced at the hotel register. I found the names easily enough. Miss Mary Barton and Miss Amy Durrant of Little Paddocks, Caughton Weir, Bucks. I little thought then how soon I was to encounter the owners of those names again—and under what tragic circumstances.

"The following day I had arranged to go for a picnic with some friends. We were to motor across the island, taking our lunch, to a place called (as far as I remember—it is so long ago) Las Nieves, a well-sheltered bay where we could bathe if we felt inclined. This programme we duly carried out, except that we were somewhat late in starting, so that we stopped on the way and picnicked, going on to Las Nieves afterwards for a bathe before tea.

"As we approached the beach, we were at once aware of a tremendous commotion. The whole population of the small village seemed to be gathered on the shore. As soon as they saw us they rushed towards the car and began explaining excitedly. Our Spanish not being very good, it took me a few minutes to understand, but at last I got it.

"Two of the mad English ladies had gone in to bathe, and one had swum out too far and got into difficulties. The other had gone after her and had tried to bring her in, but her strength in turn had

failed and she too would have drowned had not a man rowed out in a boat and brought in rescuer and rescued—the latter beyond help.

“As soon as I got the hang of things I pushed the crowd aside and hurried down the beach. I did not at first recognize the two women. The plump figure in the black stockinet costume and the tight green rubber bathing cap awoke no chord of recognition as she looked up anxiously. She was kneeling beside the body of her friend, making somewhat amateurish attempts at artificial respiration. When I told her that I was a doctor she gave a sigh of relief, and I ordered her off at once to one of the cottages for a rub down and dry clothing. One of the ladies in my party went with her. I myself worked unavailingly on the body of the drowned woman in vain. Life was only too clearly extinct, and in the end I had reluctantly to give in.

“I rejoined the others in the small fisherman’s cottage and there I had to break the sad news. The survivor was attired now in her own clothes, and I immediately recognized her as one of the two arrivals of the night before. She received the sad news fairly calmly, and it was evidently the horror of the whole thing that struck her more than any great personal feeling.

“‘Poor Amy,’ she said. ‘Poor, poor Amy. She had been looking forward to the bathing here so much. And she was a good swimmer too. I can’t understand it. What do you think it can have been, doctor?’

“‘Possibly cramp. Will you tell me exactly what happened?’

“‘We had both been swimming about for some time—twenty minutes, I should say. Then I thought I would go in, but Amy said she was going to swim out once more. She did so, and suddenly I heard her call and realized she was crying for help. I swam out as fast as I could. She was still afloat when I got to her, but she clutched at me wildly and we both went under. If it hadn’t been for that man coming out with his boat I should have been drowned too.’

“‘That has happened fairly often,’ I said. ‘To save anyone from drowning is not an easy affair.’

“‘It seems so awful,’ continued Miss Barton. ‘We only arrived yesterday, and were so delighting in the sunshine and our little

holiday. And now this—this terrible tragedy occurs.’

“I asked her then for particulars about the dead woman, explaining that I would do everything I could for her, but that the Spanish authorities would require full information. This she gave me readily enough.

“The dead woman, Miss Amy Durrant, was her companion and had come to her about five months previously. They had got on very well together, but Miss Durrant had spoken very little about her people. She had been left an orphan at an early age and had been brought up by an uncle and had earned her own living since she was twenty-one.

“And so that was that,” went on the doctor. He paused and said again, but this time with a certain finality in his voice, “And so that was that.”

“I don’t understand,” said Jane Helier. “Is that all? I mean, it’s very tragic, I suppose, but it isn’t—well, it isn’t what I call *creepy*.”

“I think there’s more to follow,” said Sir Henry.

“Yes,” said Dr. Lloyd, “there’s more to follow. You see, right at the time there was one queer thing. Of course I asked questions of the fishermen, etc., as to what they’d seen. They were eyewitnesses. And one woman had rather a funny story. I didn’t pay any attention to it at the time, but it came back to me afterwards. She insisted, you see, that Miss Durrant wasn’t in difficulties when she called out. The other swam out to her and, according to this woman, deliberately held Miss Durrant’s head under water. I didn’t, as I say, pay much attention. It was such a fantastic story, and these things look so differently from the shore. Miss Barton might have tried to make her friend lose consciousness, realizing that the latter’s panic-stricken clutching would drown them both. You see, according to the Spanish woman’s story, it looked as though—well, as though Miss Barton was deliberately trying to drown her companion.

“As I say, I paid very little attention to this story at the time. It came back to me later. Our great difficulty was to find out anything about this woman, Amy Durrant. She didn’t seem to have any relations. Miss Barton and I went through her things together. We found one address and wrote there, but it proved to be simply a

room she had taken in which to keep her things. The landlady knew nothing, had only seen her when she took the room. Miss Durrant had remarked at the time that she always liked to have one place she could call her own to which she could return at any moment. There were one or two nice pieces of old furniture and some bound numbers of Academy pictures, and a trunk full of pieces of material bought at sales, but no personal belongings. She had mentioned to the landlady that her father and mother had died in India when she was a child and that she had been brought up by an uncle who was a clergyman, but she did not say if he was her father's or her mother's brother, so the name was no guide.

"It wasn't exactly mysterious, it was just unsatisfactory. There must be many lonely women, proud and reticent, in just that position. There were a couple of photographs amongst her belongings in Las Palmas—rather old and faded and they had been cut to fit the frames they were in, so that there was no photographer's name upon them, and there was an old daguerreotype which might have been her mother or more probably her grandmother.

"Miss Barton had had two references with her. One she had forgotten, the other name she recollected after an effort. It proved to be that of a lady who was now abroad, having gone to Australia. She was written to. Her answer, of course, was a long time in coming, and I may say that when it did arrive there was no particular help to be gained from it. She said Miss Durrant had been with her as companion and had been most efficient and that she was a very charming woman, but that she knew nothing of her private affairs or relations.

"So there it was—as I say, nothing unusual, really. It was just the two things together that aroused my uneasiness. This Amy Durrant of whom no one knew anything, and the Spanish woman's queer story. Yes, and I'll add a third thing: When I was first bending over the body and Miss Barton was walking away towards the huts, she looked back. Looked back with an expression on her face that I can only describe as one of poignant anxiety—a kind of anguished uncertainty that imprinted itself on my brain.

"It didn't strike me as anything unusual at the time. I put it down to her terrible distress over her friend. But, you see, later I realized that they weren't on those terms. There was no devoted attachment between them, no terrible grief. Miss Barton was fond of Amy Durrant and shocked by her death—that was all.

"But, then, why that terrible poignant anxiety? That was the question that kept coming back to me. I had not been mistaken in that look. And almost against my will, an answer began to shape itself in my mind. Supposing the Spanish woman's story were true; supposing that Mary Barton wilfully and in coldblood tried to drown Amy Durrant. She succeeds in holding her under water whilst pretending to be saving her. She is rescued by a boat. They are on a lonely beach far from anywhere. And then I appear—the last thing she expects. A doctor! And an English doctor! She knows well enough that people who have been under water far longer than Amy Durrant have been revived by artificial respiration. But she has to play her part—to go off leaving me alone with her victim. And as she turns for one last look, a terrible poignant anxiety shows in her face. Will Amy Durrant come back to life *and tell what she knows?*"

"Oh!" said Jane Helier. "I'm thrilled now."

"Viewed in that aspect the whole business seemed more sinister, and the personality of Amy Durrant became more mysterious. Who was Amy Durrant? Why should she, an insignificant paid companion, be murdered by her employer? What story lay behind that fatal bathing expedition? She had entered Mary Barton's employment only a few months before. Mary Barton had brought her abroad, and the very day after they landed the tragedy had occurred. And they were both nice, commonplace, refined Englishwomen! The whole thing was fantastic, and I told myself so. I had been letting my imagination run away with me."

"You didn't do anything, then?" asked Miss Helier.

"My dear young lady, what could I do? There was no evidence. The majority of the eyewitnesses told the same story as Miss Barton. I had built up my own suspicions out of a fleeting expression which I might possibly have imagined. The only thing I could and did do was to see that the widest inquiries were made for the relations of Amy

Durrant. The next time I was in England I even went and saw the landlady of her room, with the results I have told you."

"But you felt there was something wrong," said Miss Marple.

Dr. Lloyd nodded.

"Half the time I was ashamed of myself for thinking so. Who was I to go suspecting this nice, pleasant-mannered English lady of a foul and cold-blooded crime? I did my best to be as cordial as possible to her during the short time she stayed on the island. I helped her with the Spanish authorities. I did everything I could do as an Englishman to help a compatriot in a foreign country; and yet I am convinced that she knew I suspected and disliked her."

"How long did she stay out there?" asked Miss Marple.

"I think it was about a fortnight. Miss Durrant was buried there, and it must have been about ten days later when she took a boat back to England. The shock had upset her so much that she felt she couldn't spend the winter there as she had planned. That's what she said."

"Did it seem to have upset her?" asked Miss Marple.

The doctor hesitated.

"Well, I don't know that it affected her appearance at all," he said cautiously.

"She didn't, for instance, grow fatter?" asked Miss Marple.

"Do you know—it's a curious thing your saying that. Now I come to think back, I believe you're right. She—yes, she did seem, if anything, to be putting on weight."

"How horrible," said Jane Helier with a shudder. "It's like—it's like fattening on your victim's blood."

"And yet, in another way, I may be doing her an injustice," went on Dr. Lloyd. "She certainly said something before she left, which pointed in an entirely different direction. There may be, I think there are, consciences which work very slowly—which take some time to awaken to the enormity of the deed committed."

"It was the evening before her departure from the Canaries. She had asked me to go and see her, and had thanked me very warmly for all I had done to help her. I, of course, made light of the matter, said I had only done what was natural under the circumstances, and

so on. There was a pause after that, and then she suddenly asked me a question.

“‘Do you think,’ she asked, ‘that one is ever justified in taking the law into one’s own hands?’

“I replied that that was rather a difficult question, but that on the whole, I thought not. The law was the law, and we had to abide by it.

“‘Even when it is powerless?’

“‘I don’t quite understand.’

“‘It’s difficult to explain; but one might do something that is considered definitely wrong—that is considered a crime, even, for a good and sufficient reason.’

“I replied drily that possibly several criminals had thought that in their time, and she shrank back.

“‘But that’s horrible,’ she murmured. ‘Horrible.’

“And then with a change of tone she asked me to give her something to make her sleep. She had not been able to sleep properly since—she hesitated—since that terrible shock.

“‘You’re sure it is that? There is nothing worrying you? Nothing on your mind?’

“‘On my mind? What should be on my mind?’

“She spoke fiercely and suspiciously.

“‘Worry is a cause of sleeplessness sometimes,’ I said lightly.

“She seemed to brood for a moment.

“‘Do you mean worrying over the future, or worrying over the past, which can’t be altered?’

“‘Either.’

“‘Only it wouldn’t be any good worrying over the past. You couldn’t bring back—Oh! what’s the use! One mustn’t think. One must not think.’

“I prescribed her a mild sleeping draught and made my adieu. As I went away I wondered not a little over the words she had spoken. ‘You couldn’t bring back—’ What? Or *who*?

“I think that last interview prepared me in a way for what was to come. I didn’t expect it, of course, but when it happened, I wasn’t surprised. Because, you see, Mary Barton struck me all along as a

conscientious woman—not a weak sinner, but a woman with convictions, who would act up to them, and who would not relent as long as she still believed in them. I fancied that in the last conversation we had she was beginning to doubt her own convictions. I know her words suggested to me that she was feeling the first faint beginnings of that terrible soul-searcher—remorse.

“The thing happened in Cornwall, in a small watering-place, rather deserted at that season of the year. It must have been—let me see—late March. I read about it in the papers. A lady had been staying at a small hotel there—a Miss Barton. She had been very odd and peculiar in her manner. That had been noticed by all. At night she would walk up and down her room, muttering to herself, and not allowing the people on either side of her to sleep. She had called on the vicar one day and had told him that she had a communication of the gravest importance to make to him. She had, she said, committed a crime. Then, instead of proceeding, she had stood up abruptly and said she would call another day. The vicar put her down as being slightly mental, and did not take her self-accusation seriously.

“The very next morning she was found to be missing from her room. A note was left addressed to the coroner. It ran as follows:

“I tried to speak to the vicar yesterday, to confess all, but was not allowed. She would not let me. I can make amends only one way—a life for a life; and my life must go the same way as hers did. I, too, must drown in the deep sea. I believed I was justified. I see now that that was not so. If I desire Amy’s forgiveness I must go to her. Let no one be blamed for my death—Mary Barton.

“Her clothes were found lying on the beach in a secluded cove nearby, and it seemed clear that she had undressed there and swum resolutely out to sea where the current was known to be dangerous, sweeping one down the coast.

"The body was not recovered, but after a time leave was given to presume death. She was a rich woman, her estate being proved at a hundred thousand pounds. Since she died intestate it all went to her next of kin—a family of cousins in Australia. The papers made discreet references to the tragedy in the Canary Islands, putting forward the theory that the death of Miss Durrant had unhinged her friend's brain. At the inquest the usual verdict of *Suicide whilst temporarily insane* was returned.

"And so the curtain falls on the tragedy of Amy Durrant and Mary Barton."

There was a long pause and then Jane Helier gave a great gasp.

"Oh, but you mustn't stop there—just at the most interesting part. Go on."

"But you see, Miss Helier, this isn't a serial story. This is real life; and real life stops just where it chooses."

"But I don't want it to," said Jane. "I want to know."

"This is where we use our brains, Miss Helier," explained Sir Henry. "Why did Mary Barton kill her companion? That's the problem Dr. Lloyd has set us."

"Oh, well," said Miss Helier, "she might have killed her for lots of reasons. I mean—oh, I don't know. She might have got on her nerves, or else she got jealous, although Dr. Lloyd doesn't mention any men, but still on the boat out—well, you know what everyone says about boats and sea voyages."

Miss Helier paused, slightly out of breath, and it was borne in upon her audience that the outside of Jane's charming head was distinctly superior to the inside.

"I would like to have a lot of guesses," said Mrs. Bantry. "But I suppose I must confine myself to one. Well, I think that Miss Barton's father made all his money out of ruining Amy Durrant's father, so Amy determined to have her revenge. Oh, no, that's the wrong way round. How tiresome! Why does the rich employer kill the humble companion? I've got it. Miss Barton had a young brother who shot himself for love of Amy Durrant. Miss Barton waits her time. Amy comes down in the world. Miss B. engages her as

companion and takes her to the Canaries and accomplishes her revenge. How's that?"

"Excellent," said Sir Henry. "Only we don't know that Miss Barton ever had a young brother."

"We deduce that," said Mrs. Bantry. "Unless she had a young brother there's no motive. So she must have had a young brother. Do you see, Watson?"

"That's all very fine, Dolly," said her husband. "But it's only a guess."

"Of course it is," said Mrs. Bantry. "That's all we can do—guess. We haven't got any clues. Go on, dear, have a guess yourself."

"Upon my word, I don't know what to say. But I think there's something in Miss Helier's suggestion that they fell out about a man. Look here, Dolly, it was probably some high church parson. They both embroidered him a cope or something, and he wore the Durrant woman's first. Depend upon it, it was something like that. Look how she went off to a parson at the end. These women all lose their heads over a good-looking clergyman. You hear of it over and over again."

"I think I must try to make my explanation a little more subtle," said Sir Henry, "though I admit it's only a guess. I suggest that Miss Barton was always mentally unhinged. There are more cases like that than you would imagine. Her mania grew stronger and she began to believe it her duty to rid the world of certain persons—possibly what is termed unfortunate females. Nothing much is known about Miss Durrant's past. So very possibly she *had* a past—an 'unfortunate' one. Miss Barton learns of this and decides on extermination. Later, the righteousness of her act begins to trouble her and she is overcome by remorse. Her end shows her to be completely unhinged. Now, do say you agree with me, Miss Marple."

"I'm afraid I don't, Sir Henry," said Miss Marple, smiling apologetically. "I think her end shows her to have been a very clever and resourceful woman."

Jane Helier interrupted with a little scream.

"Oh! I've been so stupid. May I guess again? Of course it must have been that. Blackmail! The companion woman was blackmailing

her. Only I don't see why Miss Marple says it was clever of her to kill herself. I can't see that at all."

"Ah!" said Sir Henry. "You see, Miss Marple knew a case just like it in St. Mary Mead."

"You always laugh at me, Sir Henry," said Miss Marple reproachfully. "I must confess it does remind me, just a little, of old Mrs. Trout. She drew the old age pension, you know, for three old women who were dead, in different parishes."

"It sounds a most complicated and resourceful crime," said Sir Henry. "But it doesn't seem to me to throw any light upon our present problem."

"Of course not," said Miss Marple. "It wouldn't—to you. But some of the families were very poor, and the old age pension was a great boon to the children. I know it's difficult for anyone outside to understand. But what I really meant was that the whole thing hinged upon one old woman being so like any other old woman."

"Eh?" said Sir Henry, mystified.

"I always explain things so badly. What I mean is that when Dr. Lloyd described the two ladies first, he didn't know which was which, and I don't suppose anyone else in the hotel did. They would have, of course, after a day or so, but the very next day one of the two was drowned, and if the one who was left said she was Miss Barton, I don't suppose it would ever occur to anyone that she mightn't be."

"You think—Oh! I see," said Sir Henry slowly.

"It's the only natural way of thinking of it. Dear Mrs. Bantry began that way just now. Why *should* the rich employer kill the humble companion? It's so much more likely to be the other way about. I mean—that's the way things happen."

"Is it?" said Sir Henry. "You shock me."

"But of course," went on Miss Marple, "she would have to wear Miss Barton's clothes, and they would probably be a little tight on her, so that her general appearance would look as though she had got a little fatter. That's why I asked that question. A gentleman would be sure to think it was the lady who had got fatter, and not the clothes that had got smaller—though that isn't quite the right way of putting it."

"But if Amy Durrant killed Miss Barton, what did she gain by it?" asked Mrs. Bantry. "She couldn't keep up the deception for ever."

"She only kept it up for another month or so," pointed out Miss Marple. "And during that time I expect she travelled, keeping away from anyone who might know her. That's what I meant by saying that one lady of a certain age looks so like another. I don't suppose the different photograph on her passport was ever noticed—you know what passports are. And then in March, she went down to this Cornish place and began to act queerly and draw attention to herself so that when people found her clothes on the beach and read her last letter they shouldn't think of the commonsense conclusion."

"Which was?" asked Sir Henry.

"No *body*," said Miss Marple firmly. "That's the thing that would stare you in the face, if there weren't such a lot of red herrings to draw you off the trail—including the suggestion of foul play and remorse. *No body*. That was the real significant fact."

"Do you mean—" said Mrs. Bantry—"do you mean that there wasn't any remorse? That there wasn't—that she didn't drown herself?"

"Not she!" said Miss Marple. "It's just Mrs. Trout over again. Mrs. Trout was very good at red herrings, but she met her match in me. And I can see through your remorse-driven Miss Barton. Drown herself? Went off to Australia, if I'm any good at guessing."

"You are, Miss Marple," said Dr. Lloyd. "Undoubtedly you are. Now it again took me quite by surprise. Why, you could have knocked me down with a feather that day in Melbourne."

"Was that what you spoke of as a final coincidence?"

Dr. Lloyd nodded.

"Yes, it was rather rough luck on Miss Barton—or Miss Amy Durrant—whatever you like to call her. I became a ship's doctor for a while, and landing in Melbourne, the first person I saw as I walked down the street was the lady I thought had been drowned in Cornwall. She saw the game was up as far as I was concerned, and she did the bold thing—took me into her confidence. A curious woman, completely lacking, I suppose, in some moral sense. She was the eldest of a family of nine, all wretchedly poor. They had

applied once for help to their rich cousin in England and been repulsed, Miss Barton having quarrelled with their father. Money was wanted desperately, for the three youngest children were delicate and wanted expensive medical treatment. Amy Barton then and there seems to have decided on her plan of cold-blooded murder. She set out for England, working her passage over as a children's nurse. She obtained the situation of companion to Miss Barton, calling herself Amy Durrant. She engaged a room and put some furniture into it so as to create more of a personality for herself. The drowning plan was a sudden inspiration. She had been waiting for some opportunity to present itself. Then she staged the final scene of the drama and returned to Australia, and in due time she and her brothers and sisters inherited Miss Barton's money as next of kin."

"A very bold and perfect crime," said Sir Henry. "Almost *the* perfect crime. If it had been Miss Barton who had died in the Canaries, suspicion might attach to Amy Durrant and her connection with the Barton family might have been discovered; but the change of identity and the double crime, as you may call it, effectually did away with that. Yes, almost the perfect crime."

"What happened to her?" asked Mrs. Bantry. "What did you do in the matter, Dr. Lloyd?"

"I was in a very curious position, Mrs. Bantry. Of evidence as the law understands it, I still have very little. Also, there were certain signs, plain to me as a medical man, that though strong and vigorous in appearance, the lady was not long for this world. I went home with her and saw the rest of the family—a charming family, devoted to their eldest sister and without an idea in their heads that she might prove to have committed a crime. Why bring sorrow on them when I could prove nothing? The lady's admission to me was unheard by anyone else. I let Nature take its course. Miss Amy Barton died six months after my meeting with her. I have often wondered if she was cheerful and unrepentant up to the last."

"Surely not," said Mrs. Bantry.

"I expect so," said Miss Marple. "Mrs. Trout was."

Jane Helier gave herself a little shake.

"Well," she said. "It's very, very thrilling. I don't quite understand now who drowned which. And how does this Mrs. Trout come into it?"

"She doesn't, my dear," said Miss Marple. "She was only a person—not a very nice person—in the village."

"Oh!" said Jane. "In the village. But nothing ever happens in a village, does it?" She sighed. "I'm sure I shouldn't have any brains at all if I lived in a village."

Nine

THE FOUR SUSPECTS

The conversation hovered round undiscovered and unpunished crimes. Everyone in turn vouchsafed their opinion: Colonel Bantry, his plump amiable wife, Jane Helier, Dr. Lloyd, and even old Miss Marple. The one person who did not speak was the one best fitted in most people's opinion to do so. Sir Henry Clithering, ex-Commissioner of Scotland Yard, sat silent, twisting his moustache—or rather stroking it—and half smiling, as though at some inward thought that amused him.

"Sir Henry," said Mrs. Bantry at last. "If you don't say something I shall scream. Are there a lot of crimes that go unpunished, or are there not?"

"You're thinking of newspaper headlines, Mrs. Bantry. SCOTLAND YARD AT FAULT AGAIN. And a list of unsolved mysteries to follow."

"Which really, I suppose, form a very small percentage of the whole?" said Dr. Lloyd.

"Yes; that is so. The hundreds of crimes that are solved and the perpetrators punished are seldom heralded and sung. But that isn't quite the point at issue, is it? When you talk of *undiscovered* crimes and *unsolved* crimes, you are talking of two different things. In the first category come all the crimes that Scotland Yard never hears about, the crimes that no one even knows have been committed."

"But I suppose there aren't very many of those?" said Mrs. Bantry.

"Aren't there?"

"Sir Henry! You don't mean there *are*?"

"I should think," said Miss Marple thoughtfully, "that there must be a very large number."

The charming old lady, with her old-world unruffled air, made her statement in a tone of the utmost placidity.

"My dear Miss Marple," said Colonel Bantry.

"Of course," said Miss Marple, "a lot of people are stupid. And stupid people get found out, whatever they do. But there are quite a number of people who aren't stupid, and one shudders to think of what they might accomplish unless they had very strongly rooted principles."

"Yes," said Sir Henry, "there are a lot of people who aren't stupid. How often does some crime come to light simply by reason of a bit of unmitigated bungling, and each time one asks oneself the question: If this hadn't been bungled, would anyone ever have known?"

"But that's very serious, Clithering," said Colonel Bantry. "Very serious, indeed."

"Is it?"

"What do you mean! It is! Of course it's serious."

"You say crime goes unpunished; but does it? Unpunished by the law perhaps; but cause and effect works outside the law. To say that every crime brings its own punishment is by way of being a platitude, and yet in my opinion nothing can be truer."

"Perhaps, perhaps," said Colonel Bantry. "But that doesn't alter the seriousness—the—er—seriousness—" He paused, rather at a loss.

Sir Henry Clithering smiled.

"Ninety-nine people out of a hundred are doubtless of your way of thinking," he said. "But you know, it isn't really guilt that is important—it's innocence. That's the thing that nobody will realize."

"I don't understand," said Jane Helier.

"I do," said Miss Marple. "When Mrs. Trent found half a crown missing from her bag, the person it affected most was the daily woman, Mrs. Arthur. Of course the Trents thought it was her, but being kindly people and knowing she had a large family and a husband who drinks, well—they naturally didn't want to go to extremes. But they felt differently towards her, and they didn't leave her in charge of the house when they went away, which made a great difference to her; and other people began to get a feeling about her too. And then it suddenly came out that it was the governess. Mrs. Trent saw her through a door reflected in a mirror. The purest chance—though I prefer to call it Providence. And that, I think, is what Sir Henry means. Most people would be only interested in who took the money, and it turned out to be the most unlikely person—just like in detective stories! But the real person it was life and death to was poor Mrs. Arthur, who had done nothing. That's what you mean, isn't it, Sir Henry?"

"Yes, Miss Marple, you've hit off my meaning exactly. Your charwoman person was lucky in the instance you relate. Her innocence was shown. But some people may go through a lifetime crushed by the weight of a suspicion that is really unjustified."

"Are you thinking of some particular instance, Sir Henry?" asked Mrs. Bantry shrewdly.

"As a matter of fact, Mrs. Bantry, I am. A very curious case. A case where we believe murder to have been committed, but with no possible chance of ever proving it."

"Poison, I suppose," breathed Jane. "Something untraceable."

Dr. Lloyd moved restlessly and Sir Henry shook his head.

"No, dear lady. *Not* the secret arrow poison of the South American Indians! I wish it *were* something of that kind. We have to deal with something much more prosaic—so prosaic, in fact, that there is no hope of bringing the deed home to its perpetrator. An old gentleman who fell downstairs and broke his neck; one of those regrettable accidents which happen every day."

"But what happened really?"

"Who can say?" Sir Henry shrugged his shoulders. "A push from behind? A piece of cotton or string tied across the top of the stairs

and carefully removed afterwards? That we shall never know."

"But you do think that it—well, wasn't an accident? Now why?" asked the doctor.

"That's rather a long story, but—well, yes, we're pretty sure. As I said there's no chance of being able to bring the deed home to anyone—the evidence would be too flimsy. But there's the other aspect of the case—the one I was speaking about. You see, there were four people who might have done the trick. One's guilty; *but the other three are innocent*. And unless the truth is found out, those three are going to remain under the terrible shadow of doubt."

"I think," said Mrs. Bantry, "that you'd better tell us your long story."

"I needn't make it so very long after all," said Sir Henry. "I can at any rate condense the beginning. That deals with a German secret society—the Schwartze Hand—something after the lines of the Camorra or what is most people's idea of the Camorra. A scheme of blackmail and terrorization. The thing started quite suddenly after the War, and spread to an amazing extent. Numberless people were victimized by it. The authorities were not successful in coping with it, for its secrets were jealously guarded, and it was almost impossible to find anyone who could be induced to betray them.

"Nothing much was ever known about it in England, but in Germany it was having a most paralysing effect. It was finally broken up and dispersed through the efforts of one man, a Dr. Rosen, who had at one time been very prominent in Secret Service work. He became a member, penetrated its inmost circle, and was, as I say, instrumental in bringing about its downfall.

"But he was, in consequence, a marked man, and it was deemed wise that he should leave Germany—at any rate for a time. He came to England, and we had letters about him from the police in Berlin. He came and had a personal interview with me. His point of view was both dispassionate and resigned. He had no doubts of what the future held for him.

"They will get me, Sir Henry," he said. 'Not a doubt of it.' He was a big man with a fine head, and a very deep voice, with only a slight guttural intonation to tell of his nationality. 'That is a foregone

conclusion. It does not matter, I am prepared. I faced the risk when I undertook this business. I have done what I set out to do. The organization can never be got together again. But there are many members of it at liberty, and they will take the only revenge they can—my life. It is simply a question of time; but I am anxious that that time should be as long as possible. You see, I am collecting and editing some very interesting material—the result of my life's work. I should like, if possible, to be able to complete my task.'

"He spoke very simply, with a certain grandeur which I could not but admire. I told him we would take all precautions, but he waved my words aside.

"Someday, sooner or later, they will get me,' he repeated. 'When that day comes, do not distress yourself. You will, I have no doubt, have done all that is possible.'

"He then proceeded to outline his plans which were simple enough. He proposed to take a small cottage in the country where he could live quietly and go on with his work. In the end he selected a village in Somerset—King's Gnaton, which was seven miles from a railway station, and singularly untouched by civilization. He bought a very charming cottage, had various improvements and alterations made, and settled down there most contentedly. His household consisted of his niece, Greta, a secretary, an old German servant who had served him faithfully for nearly forty years, and an outside handyman and gardener who was a native of King's Gnaton."

"The four suspects," said Dr. Lloyd softly.

"Exactly. The four suspects. There is not much more to tell. Life went on peacefully at King's Gnaton for five months and then the blow fell. Dr. Rosen fell down the stairs one morning and was found dead about half an hour later. At the time the accident must have taken place, Gertrud was in her kitchen with the door closed and heard nothing—so *she* says. Fräulein Greta was in the garden planting some bulbs—again, so *she* says. The gardener, Dobbs, was in the small potting shed having his elevenses—so *he* says; and the secretary was out for a walk, and once more there is only his own word for it. No one has an alibi—no one can corroborate anyone else's story. But one thing *is* certain. No one from outside could have

done it, for a stranger in the little village of King's Gnaton would be noticed without fail. Both the back and the front doors were locked, each member of the household having their own key. So you see it narrows down to those four. And yet each one seems to be above suspicion. Greta, his own brother's child. Gertrud, with forty years of faithful service. Dobbs, who has never been out of King's Gnaton. And Charles Templeton, the secretary—"

"Yes," said Colonel Bantry, "what about him? He seems the suspicious person to my mind. What do you know about him?"

"It is what I knew about him that put him completely out of court—at any rate at the time," said Sir Henry gravely. "You see, Charles Templeton was one of my own men."

"Oh!" said Colonel Bantry, considerably taken aback.

"Yes. I wanted to have someone on the spot, and at the same time I didn't want to cause talk in the village. Rosen really needed a secretary. I put Templeton on the job. He's a gentleman, he speaks German fluently, and he's altogether a very able fellow."

"But, then, which do you suspect?" asked Mrs. Bantry in a bewildered tone. "They all seem so—well, impossible."

"Yes, so it appears. But you can look at the thing from another angle. Fräulein Greta was his niece and a very lovely girl, but the War has shown us time and again that brother can turn against sister, or father against son and so on, and the loveliest and gentlest of young girls did some of the most amazing things. The same thing applies to Gertrud, and who knows what other forces might be at work in her case. A quarrel, perhaps, with her master, a growing resentment all the more lasting because of the long faithful years behind her. Elderly women of that class can be amazingly bitter sometimes. And Dobbs? Was he right outside it because he had no connection with the family? Money will do much. In some way Dobbs might have been approached and bought.

"For one thing seems certain: Some message or some order must have come from outside. Otherwise why five months' immunity? No, the agents of the society must have been at work. Not yet sure of Rosen's perfidy, they delayed till the betrayal had been traced to him beyond any possible doubt. And then, all doubts set aside, they must

have sent their message to the spy within the gates—the message that said, ‘Kill.’”

“How nasty!” said Jane Helier, and shuddered.

“But how did the message come? That was the point I tried to elucidate—the one hope of solving my problem. One of those four people must have been approached or communicated with in some way. There would be no delay—I knew that—as soon as the command came, it would be carried out. That was a peculiarity of the Schwartze Hand.

“I went into the question, went into it in a way that will probably strike you as being ridiculously meticulous. Who had come to the cottage that morning? I eliminated nobody. Here is the list.”

He took an envelope from his pocket and selected a paper from its contents.

“The *butcher*, bringing some neck of mutton. Investigated and found correct.

“The *grocer’s assistant*, bringing a packet of cornflour, two pounds of sugar, a pound of butter, and a pound of coffee. Also investigated and found correct.

“The *postman*, bringing two circulars for Fräulein Rosen, a local letter for Gertrud, three letters for Dr. Rosen, one with a foreign stamp and two letters for Mr. Templeton, one also with a foreign stamp.”

Sir Henry paused and then took a sheaf of documents from the envelope.

“It may interest you to see these for yourself. They were handed me by the various people concerned, or collected from the waste-paper basket. I need hardly say they’ve been tested by experts for invisible ink, etc. No excitement of that kind is possible.”

Everyone crowded round to look. The catalogues were respectively from a nurseryman and from a prominent London fur establishment. The two bills addressed to Dr. Rosen were a local one for seeds for the garden and one from a London stationery firm. The letter addressed to him ran as follows:

My Dear Rosen—just back from Dr. Helmuth Spath's. I saw Edgar Jackson the other day. He and Amos Perry have just come back from Tsingtau. In all Honesty I can't say I envy them the trip. Let me have news of you soon. As I said before: Beware of a certain person. You know who I mean, though you don't agree.—

Yours, Georgine.

"Mr. Templeton's mail consisted of this bill, which as you see, is an account rendered from his tailor, and a letter from a friend in Germany," went on Sir Henry. "The latter, unfortunately, he tore up whilst out on his walk. Finally we have the letter received by Gertrud."

Dear Mrs. Swartz,—We're hoping as how you be able to come the social on friday evening, the vicar says has he hopes you will—one and all being welcome. The resipy for the ham was very good, and I thanks you for it. Hoping as this finds you well and that we shall see you friday I remain.—Yours faithfully, Emma Greene.

Dr. Lloyd smiled a little over this and so did Mrs. Bantry.

"I think the last letter can be put out of court," said Dr. Lloyd.

"I thought the same," said Sir Henry; "but I took the precaution of verifying that there was a Mrs. Greene and a Church Social. One can't be too careful, you know."

"That's what our friend Miss Marple always says," said Dr. Lloyd, smiling. "You're lost in a daydream, Miss Marple. What are you thinking out?"

Miss Marple gave a start.

"So stupid of me," she said. "I was just wondering why the word Honesty in Dr. Rosen's letter was spelt with a capital H."

Mrs. Bantry picked it up.

"So it is," she said. "Oh!"

"Yes, dear," said Miss Marple. "I thought you'd notice!"

"There's a definite warning in that letter," said Colonel Bantry. "That's the first thing caught my attention. I notice more than you'd think. Yes, a definite warning—against whom?"

"There's rather a curious point about that letter," said Sir Henry. "According to Templeton, Dr. Rosen opened the letter at breakfast and tossed it across to him saying he didn't know who the fellow was from Adam."

"But it wasn't a fellow," said Jane Helier. "It was signed 'Georgina.'"

"It's difficult to say which it is," said Dr. Lloyd. "It might be Georgey; but it certainly looks more like Georgina. Only it strikes me that the writing is a man's."

"You know, that's interesting," said Colonel Bantry. "His tossing it across the table like that and pretending he knew nothing about it. Wanted to watch somebody's face. Whose face—the girl's? or the man's?"

"Or even the cook's?" suggested Mrs. Bantry. "She might have been in the room bringing in the breakfast. But what I don't see is . . . it's most peculiar—"

She frowned over the letter. Miss Marple drew closer to her. Miss Marple's finger went out and touched the sheet of paper. They murmured together.

"But why did the secretary tear up the other letter?" asked Jane Helier suddenly. "It seems—oh! I don't know—it seems queer. Why should he have letters from Germany? Although, of course, if he's above suspicion, as you say—"

"But Sir Henry didn't say that," said Miss Marple quickly, looking up from her murmured conference with Mrs. Bantry. "He said *four* suspects. So that shows that he includes Mr. Templeton. I'm right, am I not, Sir Henry?"

"Yes, Miss Marple. I have learned one thing through bitter experience. Never say to yourself that *anyone* is above suspicion. I gave you reasons just now why three of these people might after all be guilty, unlikely as it seemed. I did not at that time apply the same process to Charles Templeton. But I came to it at last through pursuing the rule I have just mentioned. And I was forced to

recognize this: That every army and every navy and every police force has a certain number of traitors within its ranks, much as we hate to admit the idea. And I examined dispassionately the case against Charles Templeton.

"I asked myself very much the same questions as Miss Helier has just asked. Why should he, alone of all the house, not be able to produce the letter he had received—a letter, moreover, with a German stamp on it. Why should he have letters from Germany?

"The last question was an innocent one, and I actually put it to him. His reply came simply enough. His mother's sister was married to a German. The letter had been from a German girl cousin. So I learned something I did not know before—that Charles Templeton had relations with people in Germany. And that put him definitely on the list of suspects—very much so. He is my own man—a lad I have always liked and trusted; but in common justice and fairness I must admit that he heads that list.

"But there it is—I do not know! I do not *know* . . . And in all probability I never shall know. It is not a question of punishing a murderer. It is a question that to me seems a hundred times more important. It is the blighting, perhaps, of an honourable man's whole career . . . because of suspicion—a suspicion that I dare not disregard."

Miss Marple coughed and said gently:

"Then, Sir Henry, if I understand you rightly, it is this young Mr. Templeton only who is so much on your mind?"

"Yes, in a sense. It should, in theory, be the same for all four, but that is not actually the case. Dobbs, for instance—suspicion may attach to him in my mind, but it will not actually affect his career. Nobody in the village has ever had any idea that old Dr. Rosen's death was anything but an accident. Gertrud is slightly more affected. It must make, for instance, a difference in Fräulein Rosen's attitude toward her. But that, possibly, is not of great importance to her.

"As for Greta Rosen—well, here we come to the crux of the matter. Greta is a very pretty girl and Charles Templeton is a good-looking young man, and for five months they were thrown together

with no outer distractions. The inevitable happened. They fell in love with each other—even if they did not come to the point of admitting the fact in words.

“And then the catastrophe happens. It is three months ago now and a day or two after I returned, Greta Rosen came to see me. She had sold the cottage and was returning to Germany, having finally settled up her uncle’s affairs. She came to me personally, although she knew I had retired, because it was really about a personal matter she wanted to see me. She beat about the bush a little, but at last it all came out. What did I think? That letter with the German stamp—she had worried about it and worried about it—the one Charles had torn up. Was it all right? Surely it *must* be all right. Of course she believed his story, but—oh! if she only *knew*! If she knew—for certain.

“You see? The same feeling: the wish to trust—but the horrible lurking suspicion, thrust resolutely to the back of the mind, but persisting nevertheless. I spoke to her with absolute frankness, and asked her to do the same. I asked her whether she had been on the point of caring for Charles, and he for her.

“‘I think so,’ she said. ‘Oh, yes, I know it was so. We were so happy. Every day passed so contentedly. We knew—we both knew. There was no hurry—there was all the time in the world. Someday he would tell me he loved me, and I should tell him that I too—Ah! But you can guess! And now it is all changed. A black cloud has come between us—we are constrained, when we meet we do not know what to say. It is, perhaps, the same with him as with me . . . We are each saying to ourselves, “If I were *sure*!” That is why, Sir Henry, I beg of you to say to me, “You may be sure, whoever killed your uncle, it was not Charles Templeton!” Say it to me! Oh, say it to me! I beg—I beg!’

“And, damn it all,” said Sir Henry, bringing down his fist with a bang on the table, “I couldn’t say it to her. They’ll drift farther and farther apart, those two—with suspicion like a ghost between them—a ghost that can’t be laid.”

He leant back in his chair, his face looked tired and grey. He shook his head once or twice despondently.

"And there's nothing more can be done, unless—" He sat up straight again and a tiny whimsical smile crossed his face—"unless Miss Marple can help us. Can't you, Miss Marple? I've a feeling that letter might be in your line, you know. The one about the Church Social. Doesn't it remind you of something or someone that makes everything perfectly plain? Can't you do something to help two helpless young people who want to be happy?"

Behind the whimsicality there was something earnest in his appeal. He had come to think very highly of the mental powers of this frail old-fashioned maiden lady. He looked across at her with something very like hope in his eyes.

Miss Marple coughed and smoothed her lace.

"It does remind me a little of Annie Poultny," she admitted. "Of course the letter is perfectly plain—both to Mrs. Bantry and myself. I don't mean the Church Social letter, but the other one. You living so much in London and not being a gardener, Sir Henry, would not have been likely to notice."

"Eh?" said Sir Henry. "Notice what?"

Mrs. Bantry reached out a hand and selected a catalogue. She opened it and read aloud with gusto:

"Dr. Helmuth Spath. Pure lilac, a wonderfully fine flower, carried on exceptionally long and stiff stem. Splendid for cutting and garden decoration. A novelty of striking beauty.

"Edgar Jackson. Beautifully shaped chrysanthemum-like flower of a distinct brick-red colour.

"Amos Perry. Brilliant red, highly decorative.

"Tsingtau. Brilliant orange-red, showy garden plant and lasting cut flower.

"Honesty—"

"With a capital H, you remember," murmured Miss Marple.

"Honesty. Rose and white shades, enormous perfect shaped flower."

Mrs. Bantry flung down the catalogue, and said with immense explosive force:

"*Dahlias!*"

"And their initial letters spell 'DEATH,' explained Miss Marple.

"But the letter came to Dr. Rosen himself," objected Sir Henry.

"That was the clever part of it," said Miss Marple. "That and the warning in it. What would he do, getting a letter from someone he didn't know, full of names he didn't know. Why, of course, toss it over to his secretary."

"Then, after all—"

"*Oh, no!*" said Miss Marple. "*Not* the secretary. Why, that's what makes it so perfectly clear that it *wasn't* him. He'd never have let that letter be found if so. And equally he'd never have destroyed a letter to himself with a German stamp on it. Really, his innocence is—if you'll allow me to use the word—just *shining*."

"Then who—"

"Well, it seems almost certain—as certain as anything can be in this world. There was another person at the breakfast table, and she would—quite naturally under the circumstances—put out her hand for the letter and read it. And that would be that. You remember that she got a gardening catalogue by the same post—"

"Greta Rosen," said Sir Henry, slowly. "Then her visit to me—"

"Gentlemen never see through these things," said Miss Marple. "And I'm afraid they often think we old women are—well, cats, to see things the way we do. But there it is. One does know a great deal about one's own sex, unfortunately. I've no doubt there was a barrier between them. The young man felt a sudden inexplicable repulsion. He suspected, purely through instinct, and couldn't hide the suspicion. And I really think that the girl's visit to you was just pure *spite*. She was safe enough really; but she just went out of her way to fix your suspicions definitely on poor Mr. Templeton. You weren't nearly so sure about him until after her visit."

"I'm sure it was nothing that she said—" began Sir Henry.

"Gentlemen," said Miss Marple calmly, "never see through these things."

"And that girl—" he stopped. "She commits a cold-blooded murder and gets off scot-free!"

"Oh! no, Sir Henry," said Miss Marple. "Not scot-free. Neither you nor I believe that. Remember what you said not long ago. No. Greta Rosen will not escape punishment. To begin with, she must be in

with a very queer set of people—blackmailers and terrorists—associates who will do her no good, and will probably bring her to a miserable end. As you say, one mustn't waste thoughts on the guilty—it's the innocent who matter. Mr. Templeton, who I dare say will marry that German cousin, his tearing up her letter looks—well, it looks *suspicious*—using the word in quite a different sense from the one we've been using all the evening. A little as though he were afraid of the other girl noticing or asking to see it? Yes, I think there must have been some little romance there. And then there's Dobbs—though, as you say, I dare say it won't matter much to him. His elevenses are probably all he thinks about. And then there's that poor old Gertrud—the one who reminded me of Annie Poultny. Poor Annie Poultny. Fifty years' faithful service and suspected of making away with Miss Lamb's will, though nothing could be proved. Almost broke the poor creature's faithful heart; and then after she was dead it came to light in the secret drawer of the tea caddy where old Miss Lamb had put it herself for safety. But too late then for poor Annie.

"That's what worries me so about that poor old German woman. When one is old, one becomes embittered very easily. I felt much more sorry for her than for Mr. Templeton, who is young and good-looking and evidently a favourite with the ladies. You will write to her, won't you, Sir Henry, and just tell her that her innocence is established beyond doubt? Her dear old master dead, and she no doubt brooding and feeling herself suspected of . . . Oh! It won't bear thinking about!"

"I will write, Miss Marple," said Sir Henry. He looked at her curiously. "You know, I shall never quite understand you. Your outlook is always a different one from what I expect."

"My outlook, I am afraid, is a very petty one," said Miss Marple humbly. "I hardly ever go out of St. Mary Mead."

"And yet you have solved what may be called an International mystery," said Sir Henry. "For you *have* solved it. I am convinced of that."

Miss Marple blushed, then bridled a little.

"I was, I think, well educated for the standard of my day. My sister and I had a German governess—a Fräulein. A very sentimental

creature. She taught us the language of flowers—a forgotten study nowadays, but most charming. A yellow tulip, for instance, means Hopeless Love, whilst a China Aster means I die of Jealousy at your feet. That letter was signed Georgine, which I seem to remember is Dahlia in German, and that of course made the whole thing perfectly clear. I wish I could remember the meaning of Dahlia, but alas, that eludes me. My memory is not what it was.”

“At any rate it didn’t mean DEATH.”

“No, indeed. Horrible, is it not? There are very sad things in the world.”

“There are,” said Mrs. Bantry with a sigh. “It’s lucky one has flowers and one’s friends.”

“She puts us last, you observe,” said Dr. Lloyd.

“A man used to send me purple orchids every night to the theatre,” said Jane dreamily.

“I await your favours,—that’s what that means,” said Miss Marple brightly.

Sir Henry gave a peculiar sort of cough and turned his head away.

Miss Marple gave a sudden exclamation.

“I’ve remembered. Dahlias mean ‘Treachery and Misrepresentation.’”

“Wonderful,” said Sir Henry. “Absolutely wonderful.”

And he sighed.

Ten

A CHRISTMAS TRAGEDY

I have a complaint to make," said Sir Henry Clithering. His eyes twinkled gently as he looked round at the assembled company. Colonel Bantry, his legs stretched out, was frowning at the mantelpiece as though it were a delinquent soldier on parade, his wife was surreptitiously glancing at a catalogue of bulbs which had come by the late post, Dr. Lloyd was gazing with frank admiration at Jane Helier, and that beautiful young actress herself was thoughtfully regarding her pink polished nails. Only that elderly, spinster lady, Miss Marple, was sitting bolt upright, and her faded blue eyes met Sir Henry's with an answering twinkle.

"A complaint?" she murmured.

"A very serious complaint. We are a company of six, three representatives of each sex, and I protest on behalf of the downtrodden males. We have had three stories told tonight—and told by the three men! I protest that the ladies have not done their fair share."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Bantry with indignation. "I'm sure we have. We've listened with the most intelligent appreciation. We've displayed the true womanly attitude—not wishing to thrust ourselves in the limelight!"

"It's an excellent excuse," said Sir Henry; "but it won't do. And there's a very good precedent in the Arabian Nights! So, forward, Scheherazade."

"Meaning me?" said Mrs. Bantry. "But I don't know anything to tell. I've never been surrounded by blood or mystery."

"I don't absolutely insist upon blood," said Sir Henry. "But I'm sure one of you three ladies has got a pet mystery. Come now, Miss Marple—the 'Curious Coincidence of the Charwoman' or the 'Mystery of the Mothers' Meeting.' Don't disappoint me in St. Mary Mead."

Miss Marple shook her head.

"Nothing that would interest you, Sir Henry. We have our little mysteries, of course—there was that gill of picked shrimps that disappeared so incomprehensibly; but that wouldn't interest you because it all turned out to be so trivial, though throwing a considerable light on human nature."

"You have taught me to dote on human nature," said Sir Henry solemnly.

"What about you, Miss Helier?" asked Colonel Bantry. "You must have had some interesting experiences."

"Yes, indeed," said Dr. Lloyd.

"Me?" said Jane. "You mean—you want me to tell you something that happened to me?"

"Or to one of your friends," amended Sir Henry.

"Oh!" said Jane vaguely. "I don't think anything has ever happened to me—I mean not that kind of thing. Flowers, of course, and queer messages—but that's just men, isn't it? I don't think"—she paused and appeared lost in thought.

"I see we shall have to have that epic of the shrimps," said Sir Henry. "Now then, Miss Marple."

"You're so fond of your joke, Sir Henry. The shrimps are only nonsense; but now I come to think of it, I *do* remember one incident—at least not exactly an incident, something very much more serious—a tragedy. And I was, in a way, mixed up in it; and for what I did, I have never had any regrets—no, no regrets at all. But it didn't happen in St. Mary Mead."

"That disappoints me," said Sir Henry. "But I will endeavour to bear up. I knew we should not rely upon you in vain."

He settled himself in the attitude of a listener. Miss Marple grew slightly pink.

"I hope I shall be able to tell it properly," she said anxiously. "I fear I am very inclined to become *rambling*. One wanders from the point—altogether without knowing that one is doing so. And it is so hard to remember each fact in its proper order. You must all bear with me if I tell my story badly. It happened a very long time ago now.

"As I say, it was not connected with St. Mary Mead. As a matter of fact, it had to do with a Hydro—"

"Do you mean a seaplane?" asked Jane with wide eyes.

"You wouldn't know, dear," said Mrs. Bantry, and explained. Her husband added his quota:

"Beastly places—absolutely beastly! Got to get up early and drink filthy-tasting water. Lot of old women sitting about. Ill-natured tittle tattle. God, when I think—"

"Now, Arthur," said Mrs. Bantry placidly. "You know it did you all the good in the world."

"Lot of old women sitting round talking scandal," grunted Colonel Bantry.

"That I am afraid is true," said Miss Marple. "I myself—"

"My dear Miss Marple," cried the Colonel, horrified. "I didn't mean for one moment—"

With pink cheeks and a little gesture of the hand, Miss Marple stopped him.

"But it is *true*, Colonel Bantry. Only I should just like to say this. Let me recollect my thoughts. Yes. Talking scandal, as you say—well, it *is* done a good deal. And people are very down on it—especially young people. My nephew, who writes books—and very clever ones, I believe—has said some most *scathing* things about taking people's characters away without any kind of proof—and how wicked it is, and all that. But what I say is that none of these young people ever stop to *think*. They really don't examine the facts. Surely the whole crux of the matter is this: *How often is tittle tattle*, as you call it,

true! And I think if, as I say, they really examined the facts they would find that it was true nine times out of ten! That's really just what makes people so annoyed about it."

"The inspired guess," said Sir Henry.

"No, not that, not that at all! It's really a matter of practice and experience. An Egyptologist, so I've heard, if you show him one of those curious little beetles, can tell you by the look and the feel of the thing what date BC it is, or if it's a Birmingham imitation. And he can't always give a definite rule for doing so. He just *knows*. His life has been spent handling such things.

"And that's what I'm trying to say (very badly, I know). What my nephew calls 'superfluous women' have a lot of time on their hands, and their chief interest is usually *people*. And so, you see, they get to be what one might call *experts*. Now young people nowadays—they talk very freely about things that weren't mentioned in my young days, but on the other hand their minds are terribly innocent. They believe in everyone and everything. And if one tries to warn them, ever so gently, they tell one that one has a Victorian mind—and that, they say, is like a *sink*."

"After all," said Sir Henry, "what is wrong with a *sink*?"

"Exactly," said Miss Marple eagerly. "It's the most necessary thing in any house; but, of course, not romantic. Now I must confess that I have my *feelings*, like everyone else, and I have sometimes been cruelly hurt by unthinking remarks. I know gentlemen are not interested in domestic matters, but I must just mention my maid Ethel—a very good-looking girl and obliging in every way. Now I realized as soon as I saw her that she was the same type as Annie Webb and poor Mrs. Bruitt's girl. If the opportunity arose *mine* and *thine* would mean nothing to her. So I let her go at the month and I gave her a written reference saying she was honest and sober, but privately I warned old Mrs. Edwards against taking her; and my nephew, Raymond, was exceedingly angry and said he had never heard of anything so wicked—yes, *wicked*. Well, she went to Lady Ashton, whom I felt no obligation to warn—and what happened? All the lace cut off her underclothes and two diamond brooches taken—

and the girl departed in the middle of the night and never heard of since!"

Miss Marple paused, drew a long breath, and then went on.

"You'll be saying this has nothing to do with what went on at Keston Spa Hydro—but it has in a way. It explains why I felt no doubt in my mind the first moment I saw the Sanders together that he meant to do away with her."

"Eh?" said Sir Henry, leaning forward.

Miss Marple turned a placid face to him.

"As I say, Sir Henry, I felt no doubt in my own mind. Mr. Sanders was a big, good-looking, florid-faced man, very hearty in his manner and popular with all. And nobody could have been pleasanter to his wife than he was. But I knew! He meant to make away with her."

"My dear Miss Marple—"

"Yes, I know. That's what my nephew, Raymond West, would say. He'd tell me I hadn't a shadow of proof. But I remember Walter Hones, who kept the Green Man. Walking home with his wife one night she fell into the river—and *he* collected the insurance money! And one or two other people that are walking about scot-free to this day—one indeed in our own class of life. Went to Switzerland for a summer holiday climbing with his wife. I warned her not to go—the poor dear didn't get angry with me as she might have done—she only laughed. It seemed to her funny that a queer old thing like me should say such things about her Harry. Well, well, there was an accident—and Harry is married to another woman now. But what could I *do*? I *knew*, but there was no proof."

"Oh! Miss Marple," cried Mrs. Bantry. "You don't really mean—"

"My dear, these things are very common—very common indeed. And gentlemen are especially tempted, being so much the stronger. So easy if a thing looks like an accident. As I say, I knew at once with the Sanders. It was on a tram. It was full inside and I had had to go on top. We all three got up to get off and Mr. Sanders lost his balance and fell right against his wife, sending her headfirst down the stairs. Fortunately the conductor was a very strong young man and caught her."

"But surely that must have been an accident."

"Of course it was an accident—nothing could have looked more accidental! But Mr. Sanders had been in the Merchant Service, so he told me, and a man who can keep his balance on a nasty tilting boat doesn't lose it on top of a tram if an old woman like me doesn't. Don't tell me!"

"At any rate we can take it that you made up your mind, Miss Marple," said Sir Henry. "Made it up then and there."

The old lady nodded.

"I was sure enough, and another incident in crossing the street not long afterwards made me surer still. Now I ask you, what could I do, Sir Henry? Here was a nice contented happy little married woman shortly going to be murdered."

"My dear lady, you take my breath away."

"That's because, like most people nowadays, you won't face facts. You prefer to think such a thing couldn't be. But it was so, and I knew it. But one is so sadly handicapped! I couldn't, for instance, go to the police. And to warn the young woman would, I could see, be useless. She was devoted to the man. I just made it my business to find out as much as I could about them. One has a lot of opportunities doing one's needlework round the fire. Mrs. Sanders (Gladys, her name was) was only too willing to talk. It seems they had not been married very long. Her husband had some property that was coming to him, but for the moment they were very badly off. In fact, they were living on her little income. One has heard that tale before. She bemoaned the fact that she could not touch the capital. It seems that somebody had had some sense somewhere! But the money was hers to will away—I found that out. And she and her husband had made wills in favour of each other directly after their marriage. Very touching. Of course, when Jack's affairs came right—That was the burden all day long, and in the meantime they were very hard up indeed—actually had a room on the top floor, all among the servants—and so dangerous in case of fire, though, as it happened, there was a fire escape just outside their window. I inquired carefully if there was a balcony—dangerous things, balconies. One push—you know!

"I made her promise not to go out on the balcony; I said I'd had a dream. That impressed her—one can do a lot with superstition sometimes. She was a fair girl, rather washed-out complexion, and an untidy roll of hair on her neck. Very credulous. She repeated what I had said to her husband, and I noticed him looking at me in a curious way once or twice. *He* wasn't credulous; and he knew I'd been on that tram.

"But I was very worried—terribly worried—because I couldn't see how to circumvent him. I could prevent anything happening at the Hydro, just by saying a few words to show him I suspected. But that only meant his putting off his plan till later. No, I began to believe that the only policy was a bold one—somehow or other to lay a trap for him. If I could induce him to attempt her life in a way of my own choosing—well, then he would be unmasked, and she would be forced to face the truth however much of a shock it was to her."

"You take my breath away," said Dr. Lloyd. "What conceivable plan could you adopt?"

"I'd have found one—never fear," said Miss Marple. "But the man was too clever for me. He didn't wait. He thought I might suspect, and so he struck before I could be sure. He knew I would suspect an accident. So he made it murder."

A little gasp went round the circle. Miss Marple nodded and set her lips grimly together.

"I'm afraid I've put that rather abruptly. I must try and tell you exactly what occurred. I've always felt very bitterly about it—it seems to me that I ought, somehow, to have prevented it. But doubtless Providence knew best. I did what I could at all events.

"There was what I can only describe as a curiously eerie feeling in the air. There seemed to be something weighing on us all. A feeling of misfortune. To begin with, there was George, the hall porter. Had been there for years and knew everybody. Bronchitis and pneumonia, and passed away on the fourth day. Terribly sad. A real blow to everybody. And four days before Christmas too. And then one of the housemaids—such a nice girl—a septic finger, actually died in twenty-four hours.

"I was in the drawing room with Miss Trollope and old Mrs. Carpenter, and Mrs. Carpenter was being positively ghoulish—relishing it all, you know.

"Mark my words,' she said. 'This *isn't the end*. You know the saying? *Never two without three*. I've proved it true time and again. There'll be another death. Not a doubt of it. And we shan't have long to wait. *Never two without three*.'

"As she said the last words, nodding her head and clicking her knitting needles, I just chanced to look up and there was Mr. Sanders standing in the doorway. Just for a minute he was off guard, and I saw the look in his face as plain as plain. I shall believe till my dying day that it was that ghoulish Mrs. Carpenter's words that put the whole thing into his head. I saw his mind working.

"He came forward into the room smiling in his genial way.

"Any Christmas shopping I can do for you ladies?' he asked. 'I'm going down to Keston presently.'

"He stayed a minute or two, laughing and talking, and then went out. As I tell you, I was troubled, and I said straight away:

"Where's Mrs. Sanders? Does anyone know?'

"Mrs. Trollope said she'd gone out to some friends of hers, the Mortimers, to play bridge, and that eased my mind for the moment. But I was still very worried and most uncertain as to what to do. About half an hour later I went up to my room. I met Dr. Coles, my doctor, there, coming down the stairs as I was going up, and as I happened to want to consult him about my rheumatism, I took him into my room with me then and there. He mentioned to me then (in confidence, he said) about the death of the poor girl Mary. The manager didn't want the news to get about, he said, so would I keep it to myself. Of course I didn't tell him that we'd all been discussing nothing else for the last hour—ever since the poor girl breathed her last. These things are always known at once, and a man of his experience should know that well enough; but Dr. Coles always was a simple unsuspecting fellow who believed what he wanted to believe and that's just what alarmed me a minute later. He said as he was leaving that Sanders had asked him to have a

look at his wife. It seemed she'd been seedy of late—indigestion, etc.

"Now that very self-same day Gladys Sanders had said to me that she'd got a wonderful digestion and was thankful for it.

"You see? All my suspicions of that man came back a hundredfold. He was preparing the way—for what? Dr. Coles left before I could make up my mind whether to speak to him or not—though really if I had spoken I shouldn't have known what to say. As I came out of my room, the man himself—Sanders—came down the stairs from the floor above. He was dressed to go out and he asked me again if he could do anything for me in the town. It was all I could do to be civil to the man! I went straight into the lounge and ordered tea. It was just on half past five, I remember.

"Now I'm very anxious to put clearly what happened next. I was still in the lounge at a quarter to seven when Mr. Sanders came in. There were two gentlemen with him and all three of them were inclined to be a little on the lively side. Mr. Sanders left his two friends and came right over to where I was sitting with Miss Trollope. He explained that he wanted our advice about a Christmas present he was giving his wife. It was an evening bag.

"And you see, ladies,' he said. 'I'm only a rough sailorman. What do I know about such things? I've had three sent to me on approval and I want an expert opinion on them.'

"We said, of course, that we would be delighted to help him, and he asked if we'd mind coming upstairs, as his wife might come in any minute if he brought the things down. So we went up with him. I shall never forget what happened next—I can feel my little fingers tingling now.

"Mr. Sanders opened the door of the bedroom and switched on the light. I don't know which of us saw it first. . . .

"Mrs. Sanders was lying on the floor, face downwards—dead.

"I got to her first. I knelt down and took her hand and felt for the pulse, but it was useless, the arm itself was cold and stiff. Just by her head was a stocking filled with sand—the weapon she had been struck down with. Miss Trollope, silly creature, was moaning and moaning by the door and holding her head. Sanders gave a great cry

of 'My wife, my wife,' and rushed to her. I stopped him touching her. You see, I was sure at the moment he had done it, and there might have been something that he wanted to take away or hide.

"Nothing must be touched,' I said. 'Pull yourself together, Mr. Sanders. Miss Trollope, please go down and fetch the manager.'

"I stayed there, kneeling by the body. I wasn't going to leave Sanders alone with it. And yet I was forced to admit that if the man was acting, he was acting marvellously. He looked dazed and bewildered and scared out of his wits.

"The manager was with us in no time. He made a quick inspection of the room then turned us all out and locked the door, the key of which he took. Then he went off and telephoned to the police. It seemed a positive age before they came (we learnt afterwards that the line was out of order). The manager had to send a messenger to the police station, and the Hydro is right out of the town, up on the edge of the moor; and Mrs. Carpenter tried us all very severely. She was so pleased at her prophecy of 'Never two without three' coming true so quickly. Sanders, I hear, wandered out into the grounds, clutching his head and groaning and displaying every sign of grief.

"However, the police came at last. They went upstairs with the manager and Mr. Sanders. Later they sent down for me. I went up. The Inspector was there, sitting at a table writing. He was an intelligent-looking man and I liked him.

"Miss Jane Marple?' he said.

"Yes.'

"I understand, Madam, that you were present when the body of the deceased was found?'

"I said I was and I described exactly what had occurred. I think it was a relief to the poor man to find someone who could answer his questions coherently, having previously had to deal with Sanders and Emily Trollope, who, I gather, was completely demoralized—she would be, the silly creature! I remember my dear mother teaching me that a gentlewoman should always be able to control herself in public, however much she may give way in private."

"An admirable maxim," said Sir Henry gravely.

"When I had finished the Inspector said:

"Thank you, Madam. Now I'm afraid I must ask you just to look at the body once more. Is that exactly the position in which it was lying when you entered the room? It hasn't been moved in any way?"

"I explained that I had prevented Mr. Sanders from doing so, and the Inspector nodded approval.

"The gentleman seems terribly upset," he remarked.

"He seems so—yes," I replied.

"I don't think I put any special emphasis on the 'seems,' but the Inspector looked at me rather keenly.

"So we can take it that the body is exactly as it was when found?" he said.

"Except for the hat, yes," I replied.

"The Inspector looked up sharply.

"What do you mean—the hat?"

"I explained that the hat had been on poor Gladys's head, whereas now it was lying beside her. I thought, of course, that the police had done this. The Inspector, however, denied it emphatically. Nothing had, as yet, been moved or touched. He stood looking down at that poor prone figure with a puzzled frown. Gladys was dressed in her outdoor clothes—a big dark-red tweed coat with a grey fur collar. The hat, a cheap affair of red felt, lay just by her head.

"The Inspector stood for some minutes in silence, frowning to himself. Then an idea struck him.

"Can you, by any chance, remember, Madam, whether there were earrings in the ears, or whether the deceased habitually wore earrings?"

"Now fortunately I am in the habit of observing closely. I remembered that there had been a glint of pearls just below the hat brim, though I had paid no particular notice to it at the time. I was able to answer his first question in the affirmative.

"Then that settles it. The lady's jewel case was rifled—not that she had anything much of value, I understand—and the rings were taken from her fingers. The murderer must have forgotten the earrings, and come back for them after the murder was discovered.

A cool customer! Or perhaps—' He stared round the room and said slowly, 'He may have been concealed here in this room—all the time.'

"But I negated that idea. I myself, I explained, had looked under the bed. And the manager had opened the doors of the wardrobe. There was nowhere else where a man could hide. It is true the hat cupboard was locked in the middle of the wardrobe, but as that was only a shallow affair with shelves, no one could have been concealed there.

"The Inspector nodded his head slowly whilst I explained all this.

"I'll take your word for it, Madam,' he said. 'In that case, as I said before, he must have come back. A very cool customer.'

"But the manager locked the door and took the key!

"That's nothing. The balcony and the fire escape—that's the way the thief came. Why, as likely as not, you actually disturbed him at work. He slips out of the window, and when you've all gone, back he comes and goes on with his business.'

"You are sure,' I said, 'that there *was* a thief?'

"He said drily:

"Well, it looks like it, doesn't it?'

"But something in his tone satisfied me. I felt that he wouldn't take Mr. Sanders in the role of the bereaved widower too seriously.

"You see, I admit it frankly. I was absolutely under the opinion of what I believe our neighbours, the French, call the *idée fixe*. I knew that that man, Sanders, intended his wife to die. What I didn't allow for was that strange and fantastic thing, coincidence. My views about Mr. Sanders were—I was sure of it—absolutely right and *true*. The man was a scoundrel. But although his hypocritical assumptions of grief didn't deceive me for a minute, I do remember feeling at the time that his *surprise* and *bewilderment* were marvellously well done. They seemed absolutely *natural*—if you know what I mean. I must admit that after my conversation with the Inspector, a curious feeling of doubt crept over me. Because if Sanders had done this dreadful thing, I couldn't imagine any conceivable reason why he should creep back by means of the fire escape and take the earrings from his wife's ears. It wouldn't have been a *sensible* thing to do,

and Sanders was such a very sensible man—that's just why I always felt he was so dangerous."

Miss Marple looked round at her audience.

"You see, perhaps, what I am coming to? It is, so often, the unexpected that happens in this world. I was so *sure*, and that, I think, was what blinded me. The result came as a shock to me. *For it was proved, beyond any possible doubt, that Mr. Sanders could not possibly have committed the crime. . .*"

A surprised gasp came from Mrs. Bantry. Miss Marple turned to her.

"I know, my dear, that isn't what you expected when I began this story. It wasn't what I expected either. But facts are facts, and if one is proved to be wrong, one must just be humble about it and start again. That Mr. Sanders was a murderer at heart I knew—and nothing ever occurred to upset that firm conviction of mine.

"And now, I expect, you would like to hear the actual facts themselves. Mrs. Sanders, as you know, spent the afternoon playing bridge with some friends, the Mortimers. She left them at about a quarter past six. From her friends' house to the Hydro was about a quarter of an hour's walk—less if one hurried. She must have come in then about six thirty. No one saw her come in, so she must have entered by the side door and hurried straight up to her room. There she changed (the fawn coat and skirt she wore to the bridge party were hanging up in the cupboard) and was evidently preparing to go out again, when the blow fell. Quite possibly, they say, she never even knew who struck her. The sandbag, I understand, is a very efficient weapon. That looks as though the attackers were concealed in the room, possibly in one of the big wardrobe cupboards—the one she didn't open.

"Now as to the movements of Mr. Sanders. He went out, as I have said, at about five thirty—or a little after. He did some shopping at a couple of shops and at about six o'clock he entered the Grand Spa Hotel where he encountered two friends—the same with whom he returned to the Hydro later. They played billiards and, I gather, had a good many whiskies and sodas together. These two men (Hitchcock and Spender, their names were) were actually with him

the whole time from six o'clock onwards. They walked back to the Hydro with him and he only left them to come across to me and Miss Trollope. That, as I told you, was about a quarter to seven—at which time his wife must have been already dead.

"I must tell you that I talked myself to these two friends of his. I did not like them. They were neither pleasant nor gentlemanly men, but I was quite certain of one thing, that they were speaking the absolute truth when they said that Sanders had been the whole time in their company.

"There was just one other little point that came up. It seems that while bridge was going on Mrs. Sanders was called to the telephone. A Mr. Littleworth wanted to speak to her. She seemed both excited and pleased about something—and incidentally made one or two bad mistakes. She left rather earlier than they had expected her to do.

"Mr. Sanders was asked whether he knew the name of Littleworth as being one of his wife's friends, but he declared he had never heard of anyone of that name. And to me that seems borne out by his wife's attitude—she too, did not seem to know the name of Littleworth. Nevertheless she came back from the telephone smiling and blushing, so it looks as though whoever it was did not give his real name, and that in itself has a suspicious aspect, does it not?

"Anyway, that is the problem that was left. The burglar story, which seems unlikely—or the alternative theory that Mrs. Sanders was preparing to go out and meet somebody. Did that somebody come to her room by means of the fire escape? Was there a quarrel? Or did he treacherously attack her?"

Miss Marple stopped.

"Well?" said Sir Henry. "What is the answer?"

"I wondered if any of you could guess."

"I'm never good at guessing," said Mrs. Bantry. "It seems a pity that Sanders had such a wonderful alibi; but if it satisfied you it must have been all right."

Jane Helier moved her beautiful head and asked a question.

"Why," she said, "was the hat cupboard locked?"

"How very clever of you, my dear," said Miss Marple, beaming. "That's just what I wondered myself. Though the explanation was quite simple. In it were a pair of embroidered slippers and some pocket handkerchiefs that the poor girl was embroidering for her husband for Christmas. That's why she locked the cupboard. The key was found in her handbag."

"Oh!" said Jane. "Then it isn't very interesting after all."

"Oh! but it is," said Miss Marple. "It's just the one really interesting thing—the thing that made all the murderer's plans go wrong."

Everyone stared at the old lady.

"I didn't see it myself for two days," said Miss Marple. "I puzzled and puzzled—and then suddenly there it was, all clear. I went to the Inspector and asked him to try something and he did."

"What did you ask him to try?"

"*I asked him to fit that hat on the poor girl's head—and of course he couldn't. It wouldn't go on. It wasn't her hat, you see.*"

Mrs. Bantry stared.

"But it was on her head to begin with?"

"Not on *her* head—"

Miss Marple stopped a moment to let her words sink in, and then went on.

"We took it for granted that it was poor Gladys's body there; but we never looked at the face. She was face downwards, remember, and the hat hid everything."

"But she *was* killed?"

"Yes, later. At the moment that we were telephoning to the police, Gladys Sanders was alive and well."

"You mean it was someone pretending to be her? But surely when you touched her—"

"It was a dead body, right enough," said Miss Marple gravely.

"But, dash it all," said Colonel Bantry, "you can't get hold of dead bodies right and left. What did they do with the—the first corpse afterwards?"

"He put it back," said Miss Marple. "It was a wicked idea—but a very clever one. It was our talk in the drawing room that put it into

his head. The body of poor Mary, the housemaid—why not use it? Remember, the Sanders' room was up amongst the servants' quarters. Mary's room was two doors off. The undertakers wouldn't come till after dark—he counted on that. He carried the body along the balcony (it was dark at five), dressed it in one of his wife's dresses and her big red coat. And then he found the hat cupboard locked! There was only one thing to be done, he fetched one of the poor girl's own hats. No one would notice. He put the sandbag down beside her. Then he went off to establish his alibi.

"He telephoned to his wife—calling himself Mr. Littleworth. I don't know what he said to her—she was a credulous girl, as I said just now. But he got her to leave the bridge party early and not to go back to the Hydro, and arranged with her to meet him in the grounds of the Hydro near the fire escape at seven o'clock. He probably told her he had some surprise for her.

"He returns to the Hydro with his friends and arranges that Miss Trollope and I shall discover the crime with him. He even pretends to turn the body over—and I stop him! Then the police are sent for, and he staggers out into the grounds.

"Nobody asked him for an alibi *after* the crime. He meets his wife, takes her up the fire escape, they enter their room. Perhaps he has already told her some story about the body. She stoops over it, and he picks up his sandbag and strikes. . . Oh, dear! It makes me sick to think of, even now! Then quickly he strips off her coat and skirt, hangs them up, and dresses her in the clothes from the other body.

"*But the hat won't go on.* Mary's head is shingled—Gladys Sanders, as I say, had a great bun of hair. He is forced to leave it beside the body and hope no one will notice. Then he carries poor Mary's body back to her own room and arranges it decorously once more."

"It seems incredible," said Dr. Lloyd. "The risks he took. The police might have arrived too soon."

"You remember the line was out of order," said Miss Marple. "That was a piece of *his* work. He couldn't afford to have the police on the spot too soon. When they did come, they spent some time in

the manager's office before going up to the bedroom. That was the weakest point—the chance that someone might notice the difference between a body that had been dead two hours and one that had been dead just over half an hour; but he counted on the fact that the people who first discovered the crime would have no expert knowledge."

Dr. Lloyd nodded.

"The crime would be supposed to have been committed about a quarter to seven or thereabouts, I suppose," he said. "It was actually committed at seven or a few minutes after. When the police surgeon examined the body it would be about half past seven at the earliest. He couldn't possibly tell."

"I am the person who should have known," said Miss Marple. "I felt the poor girl's hand and it was icy cold. Yet a short time later the Inspector spoke as though the murder must have been committed just before we arrived—and I saw nothing!"

"I think you saw a good deal, Miss Marple," said Sir Henry. "The case was before my time. I don't even remember hearing of it. What happened?"

"Sanders was hanged," said Miss Marple crisply. "And a good job too. I have never regretted my part in bringing that man to justice. I've no patience with modern humanitarian scruples about capital punishment."

Her stern face softened.

"But I have often reproached myself bitterly with failing to save the life of that poor girl. But who would have listened to an old woman jumping to conclusions? Well, well—who knows? Perhaps it was better for her to die while life was still happy than it would have been for her to live on, unhappy and disillusioned, in a world that would have seemed suddenly horrible. She loved that scoundrel and trusted him. She never found him out."

"Well, then," said Jane Helier, "she was all right. Quite all right. I wish—" she stopped.

Miss Marple looked at the famous, the beautiful, the successful Jane Helier and nodded her head gently.

"I see, my dear," she said very gently. "I see."

Eleven

THE HERB OF DEATH

Now then, Mrs. B.," said Sir Henry Clithering encouragingly.

Mrs. Bantry, his hostess, looked at him in cold reproof.

"I've told you before that I will *not* be called Mrs. B. It's not dignified."

"Scheherazade, then."

"And even less am I Sche—what's her name! I never can tell a story properly, ask Arthur if you don't believe me."

"You're quite good at the facts, Dolly," said Colonel Bantry, "but poor at the embroidery."

"That's just it," said Mrs. Bantry. She flapped the bulb catalogue she was holding on the table in front of her. "I've been listening to you all and I don't know how you do it. 'He said, she said, you wondered, they thought, everyone implied'—well, I just couldn't and there it is! And besides I don't know anything to tell a story about."

"We can't believe that, Mrs. Bantry," said Dr. Lloyd. He shook his grey head in mocking disbelief.

Old Miss Marple said in her gentle voice: "Surely dear—"

Mrs. Bantry continued obstinately to shake her head.

"You don't know how banal my life is. What with the servants and the difficulties of getting scullery maids, and just going to town

for clothes, and dentists, and Ascot (which Arthur hates) and then the garden—”

“Ah!” said Dr. Lloyd. “The garden. We all know where your heart lies, Mrs. Bantry.”

“It must be nice to have a garden,” said Jane Helier, the beautiful young actress. “That is, if you hadn’t got to dig, or to get your hands messed up. I’m ever so fond of flowers.”

“The garden,” said Sir Henry. “Can’t we take that as a starting point? Come, Mrs. B. The poisoned bulb, the deadly daffodils, the herb of death!”

“Now it’s odd your saying that,” said Mrs. Bantry. “You’ve just reminded me. Arthur, do you remember that business at Clodderham Court? You know. Old Sir Ambrose Bercy. Do you remember what a courtly charming old man we thought him?”

“Why, of course. Yes, that *was* a strange business. Go ahead, Dolly.”

“You’d better tell it, dear.”

“Nonsense. Go ahead. Must paddle your own canoe. I did my bit just now.”

Mrs. Bantry drew a deep breath. She clasped her hands and her face registered complete mental anguish. She spoke rapidly and fluently.

“Well, there’s really not much to tell. The Herb of Death—that’s what put it into my head, though in my own mind I call it *sage and onions*.”

“Sage and onions?” asked Dr. Lloyd.

Mrs. Bantry nodded.

“That was how it happened you see,” she explained. “We were staying, Arthur and I, with Sir Ambrose Bercy at Clodderham Court, and one day, by mistake (though very stupidly, I’ve always thought) a lot of foxglove leaves were picked with the sage. The ducks for dinner that night were stuffed with it and everyone was very ill, and one poor girl—Sir Ambrose’s ward—died of it.”

She stopped.

“Dear, dear,” said Miss Marple, “how very tragic.”

“Wasn’t it?”

"Well," said Sir Henry, "what next?"

"There isn't any next," said Mrs. Bantry, "that's all."

Everyone gasped. Though warned beforehand, they had not expected quite such brevity as this.

"But, my dear lady," remonstrated Sir Henry, "it can't be all. What you have related is a tragic occurrence, but not in any sense of the word a problem."

"Well, of course there's some more," said Mrs. Bantry. "But if I were to tell you it, you'd know what it was."

She looked defiantly round the assembly and said plaintively:

"I told you I couldn't dress things up and make it sound properly like a story ought to do."

"Ah ha!" said Sir Henry. He sat up in his chair and adjusted an eyeglass. "Really, you know, Scheherazade, this is most refreshing. Our ingenuity is challenged. I'm not so sure you haven't done it on purpose—to stimulate our curiosity. A few brisk rounds of 'Twenty Questions' is indicated, I think. Miss Marple, will you begin?"

"I'd like to know something about the cook," said Miss Marple. "She must have been a very stupid woman, or else very inexperienced."

"She was just very stupid," said Mrs. Bantry. "She cried a great deal afterwards and said the leaves had been picked and brought in to her as sage, and how was she to know?"

"Not one who thought for herself," said Miss Marple.

"Probably an elderly woman and, I dare say, a very good cook?"

"Oh! excellent," said Mrs. Bantry.

"Your turn, Miss Helier," said Sir Henry.

"Oh! You mean—to ask a question?" There was a pause while Jane pondered. Finally she said helplessly, "Really—I don't know what to ask."

Her beautiful eyes looked appealingly at Sir Henry.

"Why not *dramatis personae*, Miss Helier?" he suggested smiling. Jane still looked puzzled.

"Characters in order of their appearance," said Sir Henry gently.

"Oh, yes," said Jane. "That's a good idea."

Mrs. Bantry began briskly to tick people off on her fingers.

"Sir Ambrose—Sylvia Keene (that's the girl who died)—a friend of hers who was staying there, Maud Wye, one of those dark ugly girls who manage to make an effort somehow—I never know how they do it. Then there was a Mr. Curle who had come down to discuss books with Sir Ambrose—you know, rare books—queer old things in Latin—all musty parchment. There was Jerry Lorimer—he was a kind of next door neighbour. His place, Fairlies, joined Sir Ambrose's estate. And there was Mrs. Carpenter, one of those middle-aged pussies who always seem to manage to dig themselves in comfortably somewhere. She was by way of being *dame de compagnie* to Sylvia, I suppose."

"If it is my turn," said Sir Henry, "and I suppose it is, as I'm sitting next to Miss Helier, I want a good deal. I want a short verbal portrait, please, Mrs. Bantry, of all the foregoing."

"Oh!" Mrs. Bantry hesitated.

"Sir Ambrose now," continued Sir Henry. "Start with him. What was he like?"

"Oh! he was a very distinguished-looking old man—and not so very old really—not more than sixty, I suppose. But he was very delicate—he had a weak heart, could never go upstairs—he had to have a lift put in, and so that made him seem older than he was. Very charming manners—*courtly*—that's the word that describes him best. You never saw him ruffled or upset. He had beautiful white hair and a particularly charming voice."

"Good," said Sir Henry. "I see Sir Ambrose. Now the girl Sylvia—what did you say her name was?"

"Sylvia Keene. She was pretty—really *very* pretty. Fair-haired, you know, and a lovely skin. Not, perhaps, very clever. In fact, rather stupid."

"Oh! come, Dolly," protested her husband.

"Arthur, of course, wouldn't think so," said Mrs. Bantry drily. "But she *was* stupid—she really never said anything worth listening to."

"One of the most graceful creatures I ever saw," said Colonel Bantry warmly. "See her playing tennis—charming, simply charming. And she was full of fun—most amusing little thing. And such a pretty way with her. I bet the young fellows all thought so."

"That's just where you're wrong," said Mrs. Bantry. "Youth, as such, has no charms for young men nowadays. It's only old buffers like you, Arthur, who sit maundering on about young girls."

"Being young's no good," said Jane. "You've got to have SA."

"What," said Miss Marple, "is SA?"

"Sex appeal," said Jane.

"Ah! yes," said Miss Marple. "What in my day they used to call 'having the come hither in your eye.'"

"Not a bad description," said Sir Henry. "The *dame de compagnie* you described, I think, as a pussy, Mrs. Bantry?"

"I didn't mean a *cat*, you know," said Mrs. Bantry. "It's quite different. Just a big soft white purry person. Always very sweet. That's what Adelaide Carpenter was like."

"What sort of aged woman?"

"Oh! I should say fortyish. She'd been there some time—ever since Sylvia was eleven, I believe. A very tactful person. One of those widows left in unfortunate circumstances with plenty of aristocratic relations, but no ready cash. I didn't like her myself—but then I never do like people with very white long hands. And I don't like pussies."

"Mr. Curle?"

"Oh! one of those elderly stooping men. There are so many of them about, you'd hardly know one from the other. He showed enthusiasm when talking about his musty books, but not at any other time. I don't think Sir Ambrose knew him very well."

"And Jerry next door?"

"A really charming boy. He was engaged to Sylvia. That's what made it so sad."

"Now I wonder—" began Miss Marple, and then stopped.

"What?"

"Nothing, dear."

Sir Henry looked at the old lady curiously. Then he said thoughtfully:

"So this young couple were engaged. Had they been engaged long?"

"About a year. Sir Ambrose had opposed the engagement on the plea that Sylvia was too young. But after a year's engagement he had given in and the marriage was to have taken place quite soon."

"Ah! Had the young lady any property?"

"Next to nothing—a bare hundred or two a year."

"No rat in that hole, Clithering," said Colonel Bantry, and laughed.

"It's the doctor's turn to ask a question," said Sir Henry. "I stand down."

"My curiosity is mainly professional," said Dr. Lloyd. "I should like to know what medical evidence was given at the inquest—that is, if our hostess remembers, or, indeed, if she knows."

"I know roughly," said Mrs. Bantry. "It was poisoning by digitalin—is that right?"

Dr. Lloyd nodded.

"The active principle of the foxglove—digitalis—acts on the heart. Indeed, it is a very valuable drug in some forms of heart trouble. A very curious case altogether. I would never have believed that eating a preparation of foxglove leaves could possibly result fatally. These ideas of eating poisonous leaves and berries are very much exaggerated. Very few people realize that the vital principle, or alkaloid, has to be extracted with much care and preparation."

"Mrs. MacArthur sent some special bulbs round to Mrs. Toomie the other day," said Miss Marple. "And Mrs. Toomie's cook mistook them for onions, and all the Toomies were very ill indeed."

"But they didn't die of it," said Dr. Lloyd.

"No. They didn't die of it," admitted Miss Marple.

"A girl I knew died of ptomaine poisoning," said Jane Helier.

"We must get on with investigating the crime," said Sir Henry.

"Crime?" said Jane, startled. "I thought it was an accident."

"If it were an accident," said Sir Henry gently, "I do not think Mrs. Bantry would have told us this story. No, as I read it, this was an accident only in appearance—behind it is something more sinister. I remember a case—various guests in a house party were chatting after dinner. The walls were adorned with all kinds of old-fashioned weapons. Entirely as a joke one of the party seized an ancient horse pistol and pointed it at another man, pretending to fire it. The pistol

was loaded and went off, killing the man. We had to ascertain in that case, first, who had secretly prepared and loaded that pistol, and secondly who had so led and directed the conversation that that final bit of horseplay resulted—for the man who had fired the pistol was entirely innocent!

"It seems to me we have much the same problem here. Those digitalin leaves were deliberately mixed with the sage, knowing what the result would be. Since we exonerate the cook—we do exonerate the cook, don't we?—the question arises: Who picked the leaves and delivered them to the kitchen?"

"That's easily answered," said Mrs. Bantry. "At least the last part of it is. It was Sylvia herself who took the leaves to the kitchen. It was part of her daily job to gather things like salad or herbs, bunches of young carrots—all the sort of things that gardeners never pick right. They hate giving you anything young and tender—they wait for them to be fine specimens. Sylvia and Mrs. Carpenter used to see to a lot of these things themselves. And there was foxglove actually growing all amongst the sage in one corner, so the mistake was quite natural."

"But did Sylvia actually pick them herself?"

"That, nobody ever knew. It was assumed so."

"Assumptions," said Sir Henry, "are dangerous things."

"But I do know that Mrs. Carpenter didn't pick them," said Mrs. Bantry. "Because, as it happened, she was walking with me on the terrace that morning. We went out there after breakfast. It was unusually nice and warm for early spring. Sylvia went alone down into the garden, but later I saw her walking arm-in-arm with Maud Wye."

"So they were great friends, were they?" asked Miss Marple.

"Yes," said Mrs. Bantry. She seemed as though about to say something, but did not do so.

"Had she been staying there long?" asked Miss Marple.

"About a fortnight," said Mrs. Bantry.

There was a note of trouble in her voice.

"You didn't like Miss Wye?" suggested Sir Henry.

"I did. That's just it. I did."

The trouble in her voice had grown to distress.

"You're keeping something back, Mrs. Bantry," said Sir Henry accusingly.

"I wondered just now," said Miss Marple, "but I didn't like to go on."

"When did you wonder?"

"When you said that the young people were engaged. You said that that was what made it so sad. But, if you know what I mean, your voice didn't sound right when you said it—not convincing, you know."

"What a dreadful person you are," said Mrs. Bantry. "You always seem to *know*. Yes, I was thinking of something. But I don't really know whether I ought to say it or not."

"You must say it," said Sir Henry. "Whatever your scruples, it mustn't be kept back."

"Well, it was just this," said Mrs. Bantry. "One evening—in fact the very evening before the tragedy—I happened to go out on the terrace before dinner. The window in the drawing room was open. And as it chanced I saw Jerry Lorimer and Maud Wye. He was—well—kissing her. Of course I didn't know whether it was just a sort of chance affair, or whether—well, I mean, one can't *tell*. I knew Sir Ambrose never had really liked Jerry Lorimer—so perhaps he knew he was that kind of young man. But one thing I *am* sure of: that girl, Maud Wye, was *really* fond of him. You'd only to see her looking at him when she was off guard. And I think, too, they were really better suited than he and Sylvia were."

"I am going to ask a question quickly, before Miss Marple can," said Sir Henry. "I want to know whether, after the tragedy, Jerry Lorimer married Maud Wye?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Bantry. "He did. Six months afterwards."

"Oh! Scheherezade, Scheherezade," said Sir Henry. "To think of the way you told us this story at first! Bare bones indeed—and to think of the amount of flesh we're finding on them now."

"Don't speak so ghoulishly," said Mrs. Bantry. "And don't use the word flesh. Vegetarians always do. They say, 'I never eat flesh' in a way that puts you right off your little beefsteak. Mr. Curle was a

vegetarian. He used to eat some peculiar stuff that looked like bran for breakfast. Those elderly stooping men with beards are often faddy. They have patent kinds of underwear, too."

"What on earth, Dolly," said her husband, "do you know about Mr. Curle's underwear?"

"Nothing," said Mrs. Bantry with dignity. "I was just making a guess."

"I'll amend my former statement," said Sir Henry. "I'll say instead that the *dramatis personae* in your problem are very interesting. I'm beginning to see them all—eh, Miss Marple?"

"Human nature is always interesting, Sir Henry. And it's curious to see how certain types always tend to act in exactly the same way."

"Two women and a man," said Sir Henry. "The old eternal human triangle. Is that the base of our problem here? I rather fancy it is."

Dr. Lloyd cleared his throat.

"I've been thinking," he said rather diffidently. "Do you say, Mrs. Bantry, that you yourself were ill?"

"Was I not! So was Arthur! So was everyone!"

"That's just it—everyone," said the doctor. "You see what I mean? In Sir Henry's story which he told us just now, one man shot another—he didn't have to shoot the whole room full."

"I don't understand," said Jane. "Who shot who?"

"I'm saying that whoever planned this thing went about it very curiously, either with a blind belief in chance, or else with an absolutely reckless disregard for human life. I can hardly believe there is a man capable of deliberately poisoning eight people with the object of removing one amongst them."

"I see your point," said Sir Henry, thoughtfully. "I confess I ought to have thought of that."

"And mightn't he have poisoned himself too?" asked Jane.

"Was anyone absent from dinner that night?" asked Miss Marple.

Mrs. Bantry shook her head.

"Everyone was there."

"Except Mr. Lorimer, I suppose, my dear. He wasn't staying in the house, was he?"

"No; but he was dining there that evening," said Mrs. Bantry.

"Oh!" said Miss Marple in a changed voice. "That makes all the difference in the world."

She frowned vexedly to herself.

"I've been very stupid," she murmured. "Very stupid indeed."

"I confess your point worries me, Lloyd," said Sir Henry.

"How ensure that the girl, and the girl only, should get a fatal dose?"

"You can't," said the doctor. "That brings me to the point I'm going to make. *Supposing the girl was not the intended victim after all?*"

"What?"

"In all cases of food poisoning, the result is very uncertain. Several people share a dish. What happens? One or two are slightly ill, two more, say, are seriously indisposed, one dies. That's the way of it—there's no certainty anywhere. But there are cases where another factor might enter in. Digitalin is a drug that acts directly on the heart—as I've told you it's prescribed in certain cases. *Now, there was one person in that house who suffered from a heart complaint.* Suppose he was the victim selected? What would not be fatal to the rest *would* be fatal to him—or so the murderer might reasonably suppose. That the thing turned out differently is only a proof of what I was saying just now—the uncertainty and unreliability of the effects of drugs on human beings."

"Sir Ambrose," said Sir Henry, "you think *he* was the person aimed at? Yes, yes—and the girl's death was a mistake."

"Who got his money after he was dead?" asked Jane.

"A very sound question, Miss Helier. One of the first we always ask in my late profession," said Sir Henry.

"Sir Ambrose had a son," said Mrs. Bantry slowly. "He had quarrelled with him many years previously. The boy was wild, I believe. Still, it was not in Sir Ambrose's power to disinherit him—Clodderham Court was entailed. Martin Bercy succeeded to the title and estate. There was, however, a good deal of other property that Sir Ambrose could leave as he chose, and that he left to his ward Sylvia. I know this because Sir Ambrose died less than a year after the events I am telling you of, and he had not troubled to make a

new will after Sylvia's death. I think the money went to the Crown—or perhaps it was to his son as next of kin—I don't really remember."

"So it was only to the interest of a son who wasn't there and the girl who died herself to make away with him," said Sir Henry thoughtfully. "That doesn't seem very promising."

"Didn't the other woman get anything?" asked Jane. "The one Mrs. Bantry calls the Pussy woman."

"She wasn't mentioned in the will," said Mrs. Bantry.

"Miss Marple, you're not listening," said Sir Henry. "You're somewhere faraway."

"I was thinking of old Mr. Badger, the chemist," said Miss Marple. "He had a very young housekeeper—young enough to be not only his daughter, but his granddaughter. Not a word to anyone, and his family, a lot of nephews and nieces, full of expectations. And when he died, would you believe it, he'd been secretly married to her for two years? Of course Mr. Badger was a chemist, and a very rude, common old man as well, and Sir Ambrose Bercy was a very courtly gentleman, so Mrs. Bantry says, but for all that human nature is much the same everywhere."

There was a pause. Sir Henry looked very hard at Miss Marple who looked back at him with gently quizzical blue eyes. Jane Helier broke the silence.

"Was this Mrs. Carpenter good-looking?" she asked.

"Yes, in a very quiet way. Nothing startling."

"She had a very sympathetic voice," said Colonel Bantry.

"Purring—that's what I call it," said Mrs. Bantry. "Purring!"

"You'll be called a cat yourself one of these days, Dolly."

"I like being a cat in my home circle," said Mrs. Bantry. "I don't much like women anyway, and you know it. I like men and flowers."

"Excellent taste," said Sir Henry. "Especially in putting men first."

"That was tact," said Mrs. Bantry. "Well, now, what about my little problem? I've been quite fair, I think. Arthur, don't you think I've been fair?"

"Yes, my dear. I don't think there'll be any inquiry into the running by the stewards of the Jockey Club."

"First boy," said Mrs. Bantry, pointing a finger at Sir Henry.

"I'm going to be long-winded. Because, you see, I haven't really got any feeling of certainty about the matter. First, Sir Ambrose. Well, he wouldn't take such an original method of committing suicide—and on the other hand he certainly had nothing to gain by the death of his ward. Exit Sir Ambrose. Mr. Curle. No motive for death of girl. If Sir Ambrose was intended victim, he might possibly have purloined a rare manuscript or two that no one else would miss. Very thin and most unlikely. So I think, that in spite of Mrs. Bantry's suspicions as to his underclothing, Mr. Curle is cleared. Miss Wye. Motive for death of Sir Ambrose—none. Motive for death of Sylvia pretty strong. She wanted Sylvia's young man, and wanted him rather badly—from Mrs. Bantry's account. She was with Sylvia that morning in the garden, so had opportunity to pick leaves. No, we can't dismiss Miss Wye so easily. Young Lorimer. He's got a motive in either case. If he gets rid of his sweetheart, he can marry the other girl. Still it seems a bit drastic to kill her—what's a broken engagement these days? If Sir Ambrose dies, he will marry a rich girl instead of a poor one. That might be important or not—depends on his financial position. If I find that his estate was heavily mortgaged and that Mrs. Bantry has deliberately withheld that fact from us, I shall claim a foul. Now Mrs. Carpenter. You know, I have suspicions of Mrs. Carpenter. Those white hands, for one thing, and her excellent alibi at the time the herbs were picked—I always distrust alibis. And I've got another reason for suspecting her which I will keep to myself. Still, on the whole, if I've got to plump, I shall plump for Miss Maude Wye, because there's more evidence against her than anyone else."

"Next boy," said Mrs. Bantry, and pointed at Dr. Lloyd.

"I think you're wrong, Clithering, in sticking to the theory that the girl's death was meant. I am convinced that the murderer intended to do away with Sir Ambrose. I don't think that young Lorimer had the necessary knowledge. I am inclined to believe that Mrs. Carpenter was the guilty party. She had been a long time with the family, knew all about the state of Sir Ambrose's health, and could easily arrange for this girl Sylvia (who, you said yourself, was rather stupid) to pick the right leaves. Motive, I confess, I don't see; but I

hazard the guess that Sir Ambrose had at one time made a will in which she was mentioned. That's the best I can do."

Mrs. Bantry's pointing finger went on to Jane Helier.

"I don't know what to say," said Jane, "except this: Why shouldn't the girl herself have done it? She took the leaves into the kitchen after all. And you say Sir Ambrose had been sticking out against her marriage. If he died, she'd get the money and be able to marry at once. She'd know just as much about Sir Ambrose's health as Mrs. Carpenter would."

Mrs. Bantry's finger came slowly round to Miss Marple.

"Now then, School Marm," she said.

"Sir Henry has put it all very clearly—very clearly indeed," said Miss Marple. "And Dr. Lloyd was so right in what he said. Between them they seem to have made things so very clear. Only I don't think Dr. Lloyd quite realized one aspect of what he said. You see, not being Sir Ambrose's medical adviser, he couldn't know just what kind of heart trouble Sir Ambrose had, could he?"

"I don't quite see what you mean, Miss Marple," said Dr. Lloyd.

"You're assuming—aren't you?—that Sir Ambrose had the kind of heart that digitalin would affect adversely? But there's nothing to prove that that's so. It might be just the other way about."

"The other way about?"

"Yes, you did say that it was often prescribed for heart trouble?"

"Even then, Miss Marple, I don't see what that leads to?"

"Well, it would mean that he would have digitalin in his possession quite naturally—without having to account for it. What I am trying to say (I always express myself so badly) is this: Supposing you wanted to poison anyone with a fatal dose of digitalin. Wouldn't the simplest and easiest way be to arrange for everyone to be poisoned—actually by digitalin leaves? It wouldn't be fatal in anyone else's case, of course, but no one would be surprised at one victim because, as Dr. Lloyd said, these things are so uncertain. No one would be likely to ask whether the girl had actually had a fatal dose of infusion of digitalis or something of that kind. He might have put it in a cocktail, or in her coffee or even made her drink it quite simply as a tonic."

"You mean Sir Ambrose poisoned his ward, the charming girl whom he loved?"

"That's just it," said Miss Marple. "Like Mr. Badger and his young housekeeper. Don't tell me it's absurd for a man of sixty to fall in love with a girl of twenty. It happens every day—and I dare say with an old autocrat like Sir Ambrose, it might take him queerly. These things become a madness sometimes. He couldn't bear the thought of her getting married—did his best to oppose it—and failed. His mad jealousy became so great that he preferred killing her to letting her go to young Lorimer. He must have thought of it sometime beforehand, because that foxglove seed would have to be sown among the sage. He'd pick it himself when the time came, and send her into the kitchen with it. It's horrible to think of, but I suppose we must take as merciful a view of it as we can. Gentlemen of that age are sometimes very peculiar indeed where young girls are concerned. Our last organist—but there, I mustn't talk scandal."

"Mrs. Bantry," said Sir Henry. "Is this so?"

Mrs. Bantry nodded.

"Yes. I'd no idea of it—never dreamed of the thing being anything but an accident. Then, after Sir Ambrose's death, I got a letter. He had left directions to send it to me. He told me the truth in it. I don't know why—but he and I always got on very well together."

In the momentary silence, she seemed to feel an unspoken criticism and went on hastily:

"You think I'm betraying a confidence—but that isn't so. I've changed all the names. He wasn't really called Sir Ambrose Bercy. Didn't you see how Arthur stared stupidly when I said that name to him? He didn't understand at first. I've changed everything. It's like they say in magazines and in the beginning of books: 'All the characters in this story are purely fictitious.' You never know who they really are."

Twelve

THE AFFAIR AT THE BUNGALOW

"I've thought of something," said Jane Helier.

Her beautiful face was lit up with the confident smile of a child expecting approbation. It was a smile such as moved audiences nightly in London, and which had made the fortunes of photographers.

"It happened," she went on carefully, "to a friend of mine."

Everyone made encouraging but slightly hypocritical noises. Colonel Bantry, Mrs. Bantry, Sir Henry Clithering, Dr. Lloyd and old Miss Marple were one and all convinced that Jane's "friend" was Jane herself. She would have been quite incapable of remembering or taking an interest in anything affecting anyone else.

"My friend," went on Jane, "(I won't mention her name) was an actress—a very well-known actress."

No one expressed surprise. Sir Henry Clithering thought to himself: "Now I wonder how many sentences it will be before she forgets to keep up the fiction, and says 'I' instead of 'She?'"

"My friend was on tour in the provinces—this was a year or two ago. I suppose I'd better not give the name of the place. It was a riverside town not very far from London. I'll call it—"

She paused, her brows perplexed in thought. The invention of even a simple name appeared to be too much for her. Sir Henry

came to the rescue.

"Shall we call it Riverbury?" he suggested gravely.

"Oh, yes, that would do splendidly. Riverbury, I'll remember that. Well, as I say, this—my friend—was at Riverbury with her company, and a very curious thing happened."

She puckered her brows again.

"It's very difficult," she said plaintively, "to say just what you want. One gets things mixed up and tells the wrong things first."

"You're doing it beautifully," said Dr. Lloyd encouragingly. "Go on."

"Well, this curious thing happened. My friend was sent for to the police station. And she went. It seemed there had been a burglary at a riverside bungalow and they'd arrested a young man, and he told a very odd story. And so they sent for her.

"She'd never been to a police station before, but they were very nice to her—very nice indeed."

"They would be, I'm sure," said Sir Henry.

"The sergeant—I think it was a sergeant—or it may have been an inspector—gave her a chair and explained things, and of course I saw at once that it was some mistake—"

"Aha," thought Sir Henry. "I. Here we are. I thought as much."

"My friend said so," continued Jane, serenely unconscious of her self-betrayal. "She explained she had been rehearsing with her understudy at the hotel and that she'd never even heard of this Mr. Faulkener. And the sergeant said, 'Miss Hel—'"

She stopped and flushed.

"Miss Helman," suggested Sir Henry with a twinkle.

"Yes—yes, that would do. Thank you. He said, 'Well, Miss Helman, I felt it must be some mistake, knowing that you were stopping at the Bridge Hotel,' and he said would I have any objection to confronting—or was it being confronted? I can't remember."

"It doesn't really matter," said Sir Henry reassuringly.

"Anyway, with the young man. So I said, 'Of course not.' And they brought him and said, 'This is Miss Helier,' and—Oh!" Jane broke off openmouthed.

"Never mind, my dear," said Miss Marple consolingly. "We were bound to guess, you know. And you haven't given us the name of

the place or anything that really matters.”

“Well,” said Jane. “I did mean to tell it as though it happened to someone else. But it *is* difficult, isn’t it! I mean one forgets so.”

Everyone assured her that it was very difficult, and soothed and reassured, she went on with her slightly involved narrative.

“He was a nice-looking man—quite a nice-looking man. Young, with reddish hair. His mouth just opened when he saw me. And the sergeant said, ‘Is this the lady?’ And he said, ‘No, indeed it isn’t. What an ass I have been.’ And I smiled at him and said it didn’t matter.”

“I can picture the scene,” said Sir Henry.

Jane Helier frowned.

“Let me see—how had I better go on?”

“Supposing you tell us what it was all about, dear,” said Miss Marple, so mildly that no one could suspect her of irony. “I mean what the young man’s mistake was, and about the burglary.”

“Oh, yes,” said Jane. “Well, you see, this young man—Leslie Faulkener, his name was—had written a play. He’d written several plays, as a matter of fact, though none of them had ever been taken. And he had sent this particular play to me to read. I didn’t know about it, because of course I have hundreds of plays sent to me and I read very few of them myself—only the ones I know something about. Anyway, there it was, and it seems that Mr. Faulkener got a letter from me—only it turned out not to be really from me—you understand—”

She paused anxiously, and they assured her that they understood.

“Saying that I’d read the play, and liked it very much and would he come down and talk it over with me. And it gave the address—The Bungalow, Riverbury. So Mr. Faulkener was frightfully pleased and he came down and arrived at this place—The Bungalow. A parlourmaid opened the door, and he asked for Miss Helier, and she said Miss Helier was in and expecting him and showed him into the drawing room, and there a woman came to him. And he accepted her as me as a matter of course—which seems queer because after

all he had seen me act and my photographs are very well-known, aren't they?"

"Over the length and breadth of England," said Mrs. Bantry promptly. "But there's often a lot of difference between a photograph and its original, my dear Jane. And there's a great deal of difference between behind the footlights and off the stage. It's not every actress who stands the test as well as you do, remember."

"Well," said Jane slightly mollified, "that may be so. Anyway, he described this woman as tall and fair with big blue eyes and very good-looking, so I suppose it must have been near enough. He certainly had no suspicions. She sat down and began talking about his play and said she was anxious to do it. Whilst they were talking cocktails were brought in and Mr. Faulkener had one as a matter of course. Well—that's all he remembers—having this cocktail. When he woke up, or came to himself, or whatever you call it—he was lying out in the road, by the hedge, of course, so that there would be no danger of his being run over. He felt very queer and shaky—so much so that he just got up and staggered along the road not quite knowing where he was going. He said if he'd had his sense about him he'd have gone back to The Bungalow and tried to find out what had happened. But he felt just stupid and mazed and walked along without quite knowing what he was doing. He was just more or less coming to himself when the police arrested him."

"Why did the police arrest him?" asked Dr. Lloyd.

"Oh! didn't I tell you?" said Jane opening her eyes very wide. "How very stupid I am. The burglary."

"You mentioned a burglary—but you didn't say where or what or why," said Mrs. Bantry.

"Well, this bungalow—the one he went to, of course—it wasn't mine at all. It belonged to a man whose name was—"

Again Jane furrowed her brows.

"Do you want me to be godfather again?" asked Sir Henry. "Pseudonyms supplied free of charge. Describe the tenant and I'll do the naming."

"It was taken by a rich city man—a knight."

"Sir Herman Cohen," suggested Sir Henry.

"That will do beautifully. He took it for a lady—she was the wife of an actor, and she was also an actress herself."

"We'll call the actor Claud Leason," said Sir Henry, "and the lady would be known by her stage name, I suppose, so we'll call her Miss Mary Kerr."

"I think you're awfully clever," said Jane. "I don't know how you think of these things so easily. Well, you see this was a sort of weekend cottage for Sir Herman—did you say Herman?—and the lady. And, of course, his wife knew nothing about it."

"Which is so often the case," said Sir Henry.

"And he'd given this actress woman a good deal of jewellery including some very fine emeralds."

"Ah!" said Dr. Lloyd. "Now we're getting at it."

"This jewellery was at the bungalow, just locked up in a jewel case. The police said it was very careless—anyone might have taken it."

"You see, Dolly," said Colonel Banttry. "What do I always tell you?"

"Well, in my experience," said Mrs. Banttry, "it's always the people who are so dreadfully careful who lose things. I don't lock mine up in a jewel case—I keep it in a drawer loose, under my stockings. I dare say if—what's her name?—Mary Kerr had done the same, it would never have been stolen."

"It would," said Jane, "because all the drawers were burst open, and the contents strewn about."

"Then they weren't really looking for jewels," said Mrs. Banttry. "They were looking for secret papers. That's what always happens in books."

"I don't know about secret papers," said Jane doubtfully. "I never heard of any."

"Don't be distracted, Miss Helier," said Colonel Banttry. "Dolly's wild red-herrings are not to be taken seriously."

"About the burglary," said Sir Henry.

"Yes. Well, the police were rung up by someone who said she was Miss Mary Kerr. She said the bungalow had been burgled and described a young man with red hair who had called there that morning. Her maid had thought there was something odd about him

and had refused him admittance, but later they had seen him getting out through a window. She described the man so accurately that the police arrested him only an hour later and then he told his story and showed them the letter from me. And as I told you, they fetched me and when he saw me he said what I told you—that it hadn't been me at all!"

"A very curious story," said Dr. Lloyd. "Did Mr. Faulkener know this Miss Kerr?"

"No, he didn't—or he said he didn't. But I haven't told you the most curious part yet. The police went to the bungalow of course, and they found everything as described—drawers pulled out and jewels gone, but the whole place was empty. It wasn't till some hours later that Mary Kerr came back, and when she did she said she'd never rung them up at all and this was the first she'd heard of it. It seemed that she had had a wire that morning from a manager offering her a most important part and making an appointment, so she had naturally rushed up to town to keep it. When she got there, she found that the whole thing was a hoax. No telegram had ever been sent."

"A common enough ruse to get her out of the way," commented Sir Henry. "What about the servants?"

"The same sort of thing happened there. There was only one, and she was rung up on the telephone—apparently by Mary Kerr, who said she had left a most important thing behind. She directed the maid to bring up a certain handbag which was in the drawer of her bedroom. She was to catch the first train. The maid did so, of course locking up the house; but when she arrived at Miss Kerr's club, where she had been told to meet her mistress, she waited there in vain."

"H'm," said Sir Henry. "I begin to see. The house was left empty, and to make an entry by one of the windows would present few difficulties, I should imagine. But I don't quite see where Mr. Faulkener comes in. Who did ring up the police, if it wasn't Miss Kerr?"

"That's what nobody knew or ever found out."

"Curious," said Sir Henry. "Did the young man turn out to be genuinely the person he said he was?"

"Oh, yes, that part of it was all right. He'd even got the letter which was supposed to be written by me. It wasn't the least bit like my handwriting—but then, of course, he couldn't be supposed to know that."

"Well, let's state the position clearly," said Sir Henry. "Correct me if I go wrong. The lady and the maid are decoyed from the house. This young man is decoyed down there by means of a bogus letter—colour being lent to this last by the fact that you actually are performing at Riverbury that week. The young man is doped, and the police are rung up and have their suspicions directed against him. A burglary actually has taken place. I presume the jewels were taken?"

"Oh, yes."

"Were they ever recovered?"

"No, never. I think, as a matter of fact, Sir Herman tried to hush things up all he knew how. But he couldn't manage it, and I rather fancy his wife started divorce proceedings in consequence. Still, I don't really know about that."

"What happened to Mr. Leslie Faulkener?"

"He was released in the end. The police said they hadn't really got enough against him. Don't you think the whole thing was rather odd?"

"Distinctly odd. The first question is whose story to believe? In telling it, Miss Helier, I noticed that you incline towards believing Mr. Faulkener. Have you any reason for doing so beyond your own instinct in the matter?"

"No-no," said Jane unwillingly. "I suppose I haven't. But he was so very nice, and so apologetic for having mistaken anyone else for me, that I feel sure he *must* have been telling the truth."

"I see," said Sir Henry smiling. "But you must admit that he could have invented the story quite easily. He could write the letter purporting to be from you himself. He could also dope himself after successfully committing the burglary. But I confess I don't see where the *point* of all that would be. Easier to enter the house, help

himself, and disappear quietly—unless just possibly he was observed by someone in the neighbourhood and knew himself to have been observed. Then he might hastily concoct this plan for diverting suspicion from himself and accounting for his presence in the neighbourhood.”

“Was he well-off?” asked Miss Marple.

“I don’t think so,” said Jane. “No, I believe he was rather hard up.”

“The whole thing seems curious,” said Dr. Lloyd. “I must confess that if we accept the young man’s story as true, it seems to make the case very much more difficult. Why should the unknown woman who pretended to be Miss Helier drag this unknown man into the affair? Why should she stage such an elaborate comedy?”

“Tell me, Jane,” said Mrs. Bantry. “Did young Faulkener ever come face to face with Mary Kerr at any stage of the proceedings?”

“I don’t quite know,” said Jane slowly, as she puzzled her brows in remembrance.

“Because if he didn’t the case is solved!” said Mrs. Bantry. “I’m sure I’m right. What is easier than to pretend you’re called up to town? You telephone to your maid from Paddington or whatever station you arrive at, and as she comes up to town, you go down again. The young man calls by appointment, he’s doped, you set the stage for the burglary, overdoing it as much as possible. You telephone the police, give a description of your scapegoat, and off you go to town again. Then you arrive home by a later train and do the surprised innocent.”

“But why should she steal her own jewels, Dolly?”

“They always do,” said Mrs. Bantry. “And anyway, I can think of hundreds of reasons. She may have wanted money at once—old Sir Herman wouldn’t give her the cash, perhaps, so she pretends the jewels are stolen and then sells them secretly. Or she may have been being blackmailed by someone who threatened to tell her husband or Sir Herman’s wife. Or she may have already sold the jewels and Sir Herman was getting ratty and asking to see them, so she had to do something about it. That’s done a good deal in books. Or perhaps she was going to have them reset and she’d got paste

replicas. Or—here's a very good idea—and not so much done in books—she pretends they are stolen, gets in an awful state and he gives her a fresh lot. So she gets two lots instead of one. That kind of woman, I am sure, is most frightfully artful."

"You are clever, Dolly," said Jane admiringly. "I never thought of that."

"You may be clever, but she doesn't say you're right," said Colonel Bantley. "I incline to suspicion of the city gentleman. He'd know the sort of telegram to get the lady out of the way, and he could manage the rest easily enough with the help of a new lady friend. Nobody seems to have thought of asking *him* for an alibi."

"What do you think, Miss Marple?" asked Jane, turning towards the old lady who had sat silent, a puzzled frown on her face.

"My dear, I really don't know what to say. Sir Henry will laugh, but I recall no village parallel to help me this time. Of course there are several questions that suggest themselves. For instance, the servant question. In—ahem—an irregular ménage of the kind you describe, the servant employed would doubtless be perfectly aware of the state of things, and a really nice girl would not take such a place—her mother wouldn't let her for a minute. So I think we can assume that the maid was *not* a really trustworthy character. She may have been in league with the thieves. She would leave the house open for them and actually go to London as though sure of the pretence telephone message so as to divert suspicion from herself. I must confess that that seems the most probable solution. Only if ordinary thieves were concerned it seems very odd. It seems to argue more knowledge than a maidservant was likely to have."

Miss Marple paused and then went on dreamily:

"I can't help feeling that there was some—well, what I must describe as personal feeling about the whole thing. Supposing somebody had a spite, for instance? A young actress that he hadn't treated well? Don't you think that that would explain things better? A deliberate attempt to get him into trouble. That's what it looks like. And yet—that's not entirely satisfactory. . . ."

"Why, doctor, you haven't said anything," said Jane. "I'd forgotten you."

"I'm always getting forgotten," said the grizzled doctor sadly. "I must have a very inconspicuous personality."

"Oh, no!" said Jane. "Do tell us what you think."

"I'm rather in the position of agreeing with everyone's solutions—and yet with none of them. I myself have a far-fetched and probably totally erroneous theory that the wife may have had something to do with it. Sir Herman's wife, I mean. I've no grounds for thinking so—only you would be surprised if you knew the extraordinary—really *very* extraordinary things that a wronged wife will take it into her head to do."

"Oh! Dr. Lloyd," cried Miss Marple excitedly. "How clever of you. And I never thought of poor Mrs. Pebmarsh."

Jane stared at her.

"Mrs. Pebmarsh? Who is Mrs. Pebmarsh?"

"Well—" Miss Marple hesitated. "I don't know that she really comes in. She's a laundress. And she stole an opal pin that was pinned into a blouse and put it in another woman's house."

Jane looked more fogged than ever.

"And that makes it all perfectly clear to you, Miss Marple?" said Sir Henry, with his twinkle.

But to his surprise Miss Marple shook her head.

"No, I'm afraid it doesn't. I must confess myself completely at a loss. What I do realize is that women must stick together—one should, in an emergency, stand by one's own sex. I think that's the moral of the story Miss Helier has told us."

"I must confess that that particular ethical significance of the mystery has escaped me," said Sir Henry gravely. "Perhaps I shall see the significance of your point more clearly when Miss Helier has revealed the solution."

"Eh?" said Jane looking rather bewildered.

"I was observing that, in childish language, we 'give it up.' You and you alone, Miss Helier, have had the high honour of presenting such an absolutely baffling mystery that even Miss Marple has to confess herself defeated."

"You all give it up?" asked Jane.

"Yes." After a minute's silence during which he waited for the others to speak, Sir Henry constituted himself spokesman once more. "That is to say we stand or fall by the sketchy solutions we have tentatively advanced. One each for the mere men, two for Miss Marple, and a round dozen from Mrs. B."

"It was not a dozen," said Mrs. Bantry. "They were variations on a main theme. And how often am I to tell you that I will *not* be called Mrs. B?"

"So you all give it up," said Jane thoughtfully. "That's very interesting."

She leaned back in her chair and began to polish her nails rather absentmindedly.

"Well," said Mrs. Bantry. "Come on, Jane. What is the solution?"

"The solution?"

"Yes. What really happened?"

Jane stared at her.

"I haven't the least idea."

"*What?*"

"I've always wondered. I thought you were all so clever one of you would be able to tell *me*."

Everybody harboured feelings of annoyance. It was all very well for Jane to be so beautiful—but at this moment everyone felt that stupidity could be carried too far. Even the most transcendent loveliness could not excuse it.

"You mean the truth was never discovered?" said Sir Henry.

"No. That's why, as I say, I did think you would be able to tell *me*."

Jane sounded injured. It was plain that she felt she had a grievance.

"Well—I'm—I'm—" said Colonel Bantry, words failing him.

"You are the most aggravating girl, Jane," said his wife. "Anyway, I'm sure and always will be that I was right. If you just tell us the proper names of the people, I shall be *quite* sure."

"I don't think I could do that," said Jane slowly.

"No, dear," said Miss Marple. "Miss Helier couldn't do that."

"Of course she could," said Mrs. Bantry. "Don't be so high-minded, Jane. We older folk must have a bit of scandal. At any rate tell us who the city magnate was."

But Jane shook her head, and Miss Marple, in her old-fashioned way, continued to support the girl.

"It must have been a very distressing business," she said.

"No," said Jane truthfully. "I think—I think I rather enjoyed it."

"Well, perhaps you did," said Miss Marple. "I suppose it was a break in the monotony. What play were you acting in?"

"*Smith.*"

"Oh, yes. That's one of Mr. Somerset Maugham's, isn't it? All his are very clever, I think. I've seen them nearly all."

"You're reviving it to go on tour next autumn, aren't you?" asked Mrs. Bantry.

Jane nodded.

"Well," said Miss Marple rising. "I must go home. Such late hours! But we've had a very entertaining evening. Most unusually so. I think Miss Helier's story wins the prize. Don't you agree?"

"I'm sorry you're angry with me," said Jane. "About not knowing the end, I mean. I suppose I should have said so sooner."

Her tone sounded wistful. Dr. Lloyd rose gallantly to the occasion.

"My dear young lady, why should you? You gave us a very pretty problem to sharpen our wits on. I am only sorry we could none of us solve it convincingly."

"Speak for yourself," said Mrs. Bantry. "I *did* solve it. I'm convinced I am right."

"Do you know, I really believe you are," said Jane. "What you said sounded so probable."

"Which of her seven solutions do you refer to?" asked Sir Henry teasingly.

Dr. Lloyd gallantly assisted Miss Marple to put on her goloshes. "Just in case," as the old lady explained. The doctor was to be her escort to her old-world cottage. Wrapped in several woollen shawls, Miss Marple wished everyone good night once more. She came to Jane Helier last and leaning forward, she murmured something in

the actress's ear. A startled "Oh!" burst from Jane—so loud as to cause the others to turn their heads.

Smiling and nodding, Miss Marple made her exit, Jane Helier staring after her.

"Are you coming to bed, Jane?" asked Mrs. Bantry. "What's the matter with you? You're staring as though you'd seen a ghost."

With a deep sigh Jane came to herself, shed a beautiful and bewildering smile on the two men and followed her hostess up the staircase. Mrs. Bantry came into the girl's room with her.

"Your fire's nearly out," said Mrs. Bantry, giving it a vicious and ineffectual poke. "They can't have made it up properly. How stupid housemaids are. Still, I suppose we are rather late tonight. Why, it's actually past one o'clock!"

"Do you think there are many people like her?" asked Jane Helier.

She was sitting on the side of the bed apparently wrapped in thought.

"Like the housemaid?"

"No. Like that funny old woman—what's her name—Marple?"

"Oh! I don't know. I suppose she's a fairly common type in a small village."

"Oh dear," said Jane. "I don't know what to do."

She sighed deeply.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm worried."

"What about?"

"Dolly," Jane Helier was portentously solemn. "Do you know what that queer old lady whispered to me before she went out of the door tonight?"

"No. What?"

"She said: '*I shouldn't do it if I were you, my dear. Never put yourself too much in another woman's power, even if you do think she's your friend at the moment.*' You know, Dolly, that's awfully true."

"The maxim? Yes, perhaps it is. But I don't see the application."

"I suppose you can't ever really trust a woman. And I should be in her power. I never thought of that."

"What woman are you talking about?"

"Netta Greene, my understudy."

"What on earth does Miss Marple know about your understudy?"

"I suppose she guessed—but I can't see how."

"Jane, will you kindly tell me at once what you are talking about?"

"The story. The one I told. Oh, Dolly, that woman, you know—the one that took Claud from me?"

Mrs. Bantry nodded, casting her mind back rapidly to the first of Jane's unfortunate marriages—to Claud Averbury, the actor.

"He married her; and I could have told him how it would be. Claud doesn't know, but she's carrying on with Sir Joseph Salmon—weekends with him at the bungalow I told you about. I wanted her shown up—I would like everyone to know the sort of woman she was. And you see, with a burglary, everything would be bound to come out."

"Jane!" gasped Mrs. Bantry. "Did *you* engineer this story you've been telling us?"

Jane nodded.

"That's why I chose *Smith*. I wear parlourmaid's kit in it, you know. So I should have it handy. And when they sent for me to the police station it's the easiest thing in the world to say I was rehearsing my part with my understudy at the hotel. Really, of course, we would be at the bungalow. I just have to open the door and bring in the cocktails, and Netta to pretend to be me. He'd never see *her* again, of course, so there would be no fear of his recognizing her. And I can make myself look quite different as a parlourmaid; and besides, one doesn't look at parlourmaids as though they were people. We planned to drag him out into the road afterwards, bag the jewel case, telephone the police and get back to the hotel. I shouldn't like the poor young man to suffer, but Sir Henry didn't seem to think he would, did he? And she'd be in the papers and everything—and Claud would see what she was really like."

Mrs. Bantry sat down and groaned.

"Oh! my poor head. And all the time—Jane Helier, you deceitful girl! Telling us that story the way you did!"

"I *am* a good actress," said Jane complacently. "I always have been, whatever people choose to say. I didn't give myself away once, did I?"

"Miss Marple was right," murmured Mrs. Bantry. "The personal element. Oh, yes, the personal element. Jane, my good child, do you realize that theft is theft, and you might have been sent to prison?"

"Well, none of you guessed," said Jane. "Except Miss Marple." The worried expression returned to her face. "Dolly, do you *really* think there are many like her?"

"Frankly, I don't," said Mrs. Bantry.

Jane sighed again.

"Still, one had better not risk it. And of course I should be in Netta's power—that's true enough. She might turn against me or blackmail me or anything. She helped me think out the details and she professed to be devoted to me, but one never *does* know with women. No, I think Miss Marple was right. I had better not risk it."

"But, my dear, you have risked it."

"Oh, no." Jane opened her blue eyes very wide. "Don't you understand? *None of this has happened yet!* I was—well, trying it on the dog, so to speak."

"I don't profess to understand your theatrical slang," said Mrs. Bantry with dignity. "Do you mean this is a future project—not a past deed?"

"I was going to do it this autumn—in September. I don't know what to do now."

"And Jane Marple guessed—actually guessed the truth and never told us," said Mrs. Bantry wrathfully.

"I think that was why she said that—about women sticking together. She wouldn't give me away before the men. That was nice of her. I don't mind *your* knowing, Dolly."

"Well, give the idea up, Jane. I beg of you."

"I think I shall," murmured Miss Helier. "There might be other Miss Marples. . . ."

Thirteen

DEATH BY DROWNING

Sir Henry Clithering, Ex-Commissioner of Scotland Yard, was staying with his friends the Bantrys at their place near the little village of St. Mary Mead.

On Saturday morning, coming down to breakfast at the pleasant guestly hour of ten-fifteen, he almost collided with his hostess, Mrs. Bantry, in the doorway of the breakfast room. She was rushing from the room, evidently in a condition of some excitement and distress.

Colonel Bantry was sitting at the table, his face rather redder than usual.

"Morning, Clithering," he said. "Nice day. Help yourself."

Sir Henry obeyed. As he took his seat, a plate of kidneys and bacon in front of him, his host went on:

"Dolly's a bit upset this morning."

"Yes—er—I rather thought so," said Sir Henry mildly.

He wondered a little. His hostess was of a placid disposition, little given to moods or excitement. As far as Sir Henry knew, she felt keenly on one subject only—gardening.

"Yes," said Colonel Bantry. "Bit of news we got this morning upset her. Girl in the village—Emmott's daughter—Emmott who keeps the Blue Boar."

"Oh, yes, of course."

"Ye-es," said Colonel Bantry ruminatively. "Pretty girl. Got herself into trouble. Usual story. I've been arguing with Dolly about that. Foolish of me. Women never see sense. Dolly was all up in arms for the girl—you know what women are—men are brutes—all the rest of it, etcetera. But it's not so simple as all that—not in these days. Girls know what they're about. Fellow who seduces a girl's not necessarily a villain. Fifty-fifty as often as not. I rather liked young Sandford myself. A young ass rather than a Don Juan, I should have said."

"It is this man Sandford who got the girl into trouble?"

"So it seems. Of course I don't know anything personally," said the Colonel cautiously. "It's all gossip and chat. You know what this place is! As I say, I *know* nothing. And I'm not like Dolly—leaping to conclusions, flinging accusations all over the place. Damn it all, one ought to be careful in what one says. You know—inquest and all that."

"Inquest?"

Colonel Bantry stared.

"Yes. Didn't I tell you? Girl drowned herself. That's what all the pother's about."

"That's a nasty business," said Sir Henry.

"Of course it is. Don't like to think of it myself. Poor pretty little devil. Her father's a hard man by all accounts. I suppose she just felt she couldn't face the music."

He paused.

"That's what's upset Dolly so."

"Where did she drown herself?"

"In the river. Just below the mill it runs pretty fast. There's a footpath and a bridge across. They think she threw herself off that. Well, well, it doesn't bear thinking about."

And with a portentous rustle, Colonel Bantry opened his newspaper and proceeded to distract his mind from painful matters by an absorption in the newest iniquities of the government.

Sir Henry was only mildly interested by the village tragedy. After breakfast, he established himself on a comfortable chair on the lawn, tilted his hat over his eyes and contemplated life from a peaceful angle.

It was about half past eleven when a neat parlourmaid tripped across the lawn.

"If you please, sir, Miss Marple has called, and would like to see you."

"Miss Marple?"

Sir Henry sat up and straightened his hat. The name surprised him. He remembered Miss Marple very well—her gentle quiet old-maidish ways, her amazing penetration. He remembered a dozen unsolved and hypothetical cases—and how in each case this typical "old maid of the village" had leaped unerringly to the right solution of the mystery. Sir Henry had a very deep respect for Miss Marple. He wondered what had brought her to see him.

Miss Marple was sitting in the drawing room—very upright as always, a gaily coloured marketing basket of foreign extraction beside her. Her cheeks were rather pink and she seemed flustered.

"Sir Henry—I am so glad. So fortunate to find you. I just happened to hear that you were staying down here . . . I do hope you will forgive me. . . ."

"This is a great pleasure," said Sir Henry, taking her hand. "I'm afraid Mrs. Bantry's out."

"Yes," said Miss Marple. "I saw her talking to Footit, the butcher, as I passed. Henry Footit was run over yesterday—that was his dog. One of those smooth-haired fox terriers, rather stout and quarrelsome, that butchers always seem to have."

"Yes," said Sir Henry helpfully.

"I was glad to get here when she wasn't at home," continued Miss Marple. "Because it was you I wanted to see. About this sad affair."

"Henry Footit?" asked Sir Henry, slightly bewildered.

Miss Marple threw him a reproachful glance.

"No, no. Rose Emmott, of course. You've heard?"

Sir Henry nodded.

"Bantry was telling me. Very sad."

He was a little puzzled. He could not conceive why Miss Marple should want to see him about Rose Emmott.

Miss Marple sat down again. Sir Henry also sat. When the old lady spoke her manner had changed. It was grave, and had a certain dignity.

"You may remember, Sir Henry, that on one or two occasions we played what was really a pleasant kind of game. Propounding mysteries and giving solutions. You were kind enough to say that I—that I did not do too badly."

"You beat us all," said Sir Henry warmly. "You displayed an absolute genius for getting to the truth. And you always instanced, I remember, some village parallel which had supplied you with the clue."

He smiled as he spoke, but Miss Marple did not smile. She remained very grave.

"What you said has emboldened me to come to you now. I feel that if I say something to you—at least you will not laugh at me."

He realized suddenly that she was in deadly earnest.

"Certainly, I will not laugh," he said gently.

"Sir Henry—this girl—Rose Emmott. She did not drown herself—*she was murdered* . . . And I know who murdered her."

Sir Henry was silent with sheer astonishment for quite three seconds. Miss Marple's voice had been perfectly quiet and unexcited. She might have been making the most ordinary statement in the world for all the emotion she showed.

"This is a very serious statement to make, Miss Marple," said Sir Henry when he had recovered his breath.

She nodded her head gently several times.

"I know—I know—that is why I have come to you."

"But, my dear lady, I am not the person to come to. I am merely a private individual nowadays. If you have knowledge of the kind you claim, you must go to the police."

"I don't think I can do that," said Miss Marple.

"But why not?"

"Because, you see, I haven't got any—what you call *knowledge*."

"You mean it's only a guess on your part?"

"You can call it that, if you like, but it's not really that at all. I *know*. I'm in a position to know; but if I gave my reasons for

knowing to Inspector Drewitt—well, he'd simply laugh. And really, I don't know that I'd blame him. It's very difficult to understand what you might call specialized knowledge."

"Such as?" suggested Sir Henry.

Miss Marple smiled a little.

"If I were to tell you that I know because of a man called Pease-good leaving turnips instead of carrots when he came round with a cart and sold vegetables to my niece several years ago—"

She stopped eloquently.

"A very appropriate name for the trade," murmured Sir Henry. "You mean that you are simply judging from the facts in a parallel case."

"I know human nature," said Miss Marple. "It's impossible not to know human nature living in a village all these years. The question is, do you believe me, or don't you?"

She looked at him very straight. The pink flush had heightened on her cheeks. Her eyes met his steadily without wavering.

Sir Henry was a man with a very vast experience of life. He made his decisions quickly without beating about the bush. Unlikely and fantastic as Miss Marple's statement might seem, he was instantly aware that he accepted it.

"I *do* believe you, Miss Marple. But I do not see what you want me to do in the matter, or why you have come to me."

"I have thought and thought about it," said Miss Marple. "As I said, it would be useless going to the police without any facts. I have no facts. What I would ask you to do is to interest yourself in the matter—Inspector Drewitt would be most flattered, I am sure. And, of course, if the matter went farther, Colonel Melchett, the Chief Constable, I am sure, would be wax in your hands."

She looked at him appealingly.

"And what data are you going to give me to work upon?"

"I thought," said Miss Marple, "of writing a name—*the* name—on a piece of paper and giving it to you. Then if, on investigation, you decided that the—the *person*—is not involved in any way—well, I shall have been quite wrong."

She paused and then added with a slight shiver. "It would be so dreadful—so very dreadful—if an innocent person were to be hanged."

"What on earth—" cried Sir Henry, startled.

She turned a distressed face upon him.

"I may be wrong about that—though I don't think so. Inspector Drewitt, you see, is really an intelligent man. But a mediocre amount of intelligence is sometimes most dangerous. It does not take one far enough."

Sir Henry looked at her curiously.

Fumbling a little, Miss Marple opened a small reticule, took out a little notebook, tore out a leaf, carefully wrote a name on it and folding it in two, handed it to Sir Henry.

He opened it and read the name. It conveyed nothing to him, but his eyebrows lifted a little. He looked across at Miss Marple and tucked the piece of paper in his pocket.

"Well, well," he said. "Rather an extraordinary business, this. I've never done anything like it before. But I'm going to back my judgment—of *you*, Miss Marple."

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Sir Henry was sitting in a room with Colonel Melchett, the Chief Constable of the county, and Inspector Drewitt.

The Chief Constable was a little man of aggressively military demeanour. The Inspector was big and broad and eminently sensible.

"I really do feel I'm butting in," said Sir Henry with his pleasant smile. "I can't really tell you why I'm doing it." (Strict truth this!)

"My dear fellow, we're charmed. It's a great compliment."

"Honoured, Sir Henry," said the Inspector.

The Chief Constable was thinking: "Bored to death, poor fellow, at the Bantrys. The old man abusing the government and the old woman babbling on about bulbs."

The Inspector was thinking: "Pity we're not up against a real teaser. One of the best brains in England, I've heard it said. Pity it's

all such plain sailing."

Aloud, the Chief Constable said:

"I'm afraid it's all very sordid and straightforward. First idea was that the girl had pitched herself in. She was in the family way, you understand. However, our doctor, Haydock, is a careful fellow. He noticed the bruises on each arm—upper arm. Caused before death. Just where a fellow would have taken her by the arms and flung her in."

"Would that require much strength?"

"I think not. There would be no struggle—the girl would be taken unawares. It's a footbridge of slippery wood. Easiest thing in the world to pitch her over—there's no handrail that side."

"You know for a fact that the tragedy occurred there?"

"Yes. We've got a boy—Jimmy Brown—aged twelve. He was in the woods on the other side. He heard a kind of scream from the bridge and a splash. It was dusk you know—difficult to see anything. Presently he saw something white floating down in the water and he ran and got help. They got her out, but it was too late to revive her."

Sir Henry nodded.

"The boy saw no one on the bridge?"

"No. But, as I tell you, it was dusk, and there's mist always hanging about there. I'm going to question him as to whether he saw anyone about just afterwards or just before. You see he naturally assumed that the girl had thrown herself over. Everybody did to start with."

"Still, we've got the note," said Inspector Drewitt. He turned to Sir Henry.

"Note in the dead girl's pocket, sir. Written with a kind of artist's pencil it was, and all of a sop though the paper was we managed to read it."

"And what did it say?"

"It was from young Sandford. 'All right,' that's how it ran. 'I'll meet you at the bridge at eight thirty.—R.S.' Well, it was near as might be to eight thirty—a few minutes after—when Jimmy Brown heard the cry and the splash."

"I don't know whether you've met Sandford at all?" went on Colonel Melchett. "He's been down here about a month. One of these modern day young architects who build peculiar houses. He's doing a house for Allington. God knows what it's going to be like—full of new-fangled stuff, I suppose. Glass dinner table and surgical chairs made of steel and webbing. Well, that's neither here nor there, but it shows the kind of chap Sandford is. Bolshie, you know—no morals."

"Seduction," said Sir Henry mildly, "is quite an old-established crime though it does not, of course, date back so far as murder."

Colonel Melchett stared.

"Oh! yes," he said. "Quite. Quite."

"Well, Sir Henry," said Drewitt, "there it is—an ugly business, but plain. This young Sandford gets the girl into trouble. Then he's all for clearing off back to London. He's got a girl there—nice young lady—he's engaged to be married to her. Well, naturally this business, if she gets to hear of it, may cook his goose good and proper. He meets Rose at the bridge—it's a misty evening, no one about—he catches her by the shoulders and pitches her in. A proper young swine—and deserves what's coming to him. That's my opinion."

Sir Henry was silent for a minute or two. He perceived a strong undercurrent of local prejudice. A new-fangled architect was not likely to be popular in the conservative village of St. Mary Mead.

"There is no doubt, I suppose, that this man, Sandford, was actually the father of the coming child?" he asked.

"He's the father all right," said Drewitt. "Rose Emmott let out as much to her father. She thought he'd marry her. Marry her! Not he!"

"Dear me," thought Sir Henry. "I seem to be back in mid-Victorian melodrama. Unsuspecting girl, the villain from London, the stern father, the betrayal—we only need the faithful village lover. Yes, I think it's time I asked about him."

And aloud he said:

"Hadn't the girl a young man of her own down here?"

"You mean Joe Ellis?" said the Inspector. "Good fellow Joe. Carpentering's his trade. Ah! If she'd stuck to Joe—"

Colonel Melchett nodded approval.

"Stick to your own class," he snapped.

"How did Joe Ellis take this affair?" asked Sir Henry.

"Nobody knew how he was taking it," said the Inspector. "He's a quiet fellow, is Joe. Close. Anything Rose did was right in his eyes. She had him on a string all right. Just hoped she'd come back to him someday—that was his attitude, I reckon."

"I'd like to see him," said Sir Henry.

"Oh! We're going to look him up," said Colonel Melchett. "We're not neglecting any line. I thought myself we'd see Emmott first, then Sandford, and then we can go on and see Ellis. That suits you, Clithering?"

Sir Henry said it would suit him admirably.

They found Tom Emmott at the Blue Boar. He was a big burly man of middle-age with a shifty eye and a truculent jaw.

"Glad to see you, gentlemen—good morning, Colonel. Come in here and we can be private. Can I offer you anything, gentlemen? No? It's as you please. You've come about this business of my poor girl. Ah! She was a good girl, Rose was. Always was a good girl—till this bloody swine—beg pardon, but that's what he is—till he came along. Promised her marriage, he did. But I'll have the law on him. Drove her to it, he did. Murdering swine. Bringing disgrace on all of us. My poor girl."

"Your daughter distinctly told you that Mr. Sandford was responsible for her condition?" asked Melchett crisply.

"She did. In this very room she did."

"And what did you say to her?" asked Sir Henry.

"Say to her?" The man seemed momentarily taken aback.

"Yes. You didn't, for example, threaten to turn her out of the house."

"I was a bit upset—that's only natural. I'm sure you'll agree that's only natural. But, of course, I didn't turn her out of the house. I wouldn't do such a thing." He assumed virtuous indignation. "No. What's the law for—that's what I say. What's the law for? He'd got to do the right by her. And if he didn't, by God, he'd got to pay."

He brought down his fist on the table.

"What time did you last see your daughter?" asked Melchett.

"Yesterday—teatime."

"What was her manner then?"

"Well, much as usual. I didn't notice anything. If I'd known—"

"But you didn't know," said the Inspector drily.

They took their leave.

"Emmott hardly creates a favourable impression," said Sir Henry thoughtfully.

"Bit of a blackguard," said Melchett. "He'd have bled Sandford all right if he'd had the chance."

Their next call was on the architect. Rex Sandford was very unlike the picture Sir Henry had unconsciously formed of him. He was a tall young man, very fair and very thin. His eyes were blue and dreamy, his hair was untidy and rather too long. His speech was a little too ladylike.

Colonel Melchett introduced himself and his companions. Then passing straight to the object of his visit, he invited the architect to make a statement as to his movements on the previous evening.

"You understand," he said warningly. "I have no power to compel a statement from you and any statement you make may be used in evidence against you. I want the position to be quite clear to you."

"I—I don't understand," said Sandford.

"You understand that the girl Rose Emmott was drowned last night?"

"I know. Oh! it's too, too distressing. Really, I haven't slept a wink. I've been incapable of any work today. I feel responsible—terribly responsible."

He ran his hands through his hair, making it untidier still.

"I never meant any harm," he said piteously. "I never thought. I never dreamt she'd take it that way."

He sat down at a table and buried his face in his hands.

"Do I understand you to say, Mr. Sandford, that you refuse to make a statement as to where you were last night at eight thirty?"

"No, no—certainly not. I was out. I went for a walk."

"You went to meet Miss Emmott?"

"No. I went by myself. Through the woods. A long way."

"Then how do you account for this note, sir, which was found in the dead girl's pocket?"

And Inspector Drewitt read it unemotionally aloud.

"Now, sir," he finished. "Do you deny that you wrote that?"

"No—no. You're right. I did write it. Rose asked me to meet her. She insisted. I didn't know what to do. So I wrote that note."

"Ah, that's better," said the Inspector.

"But I didn't go!" Sandford's voice rose high and excited. "I didn't go! I felt it would be much better not. I was returning to town tomorrow. I felt it would be better not—not to meet. I intended to write from London and—and make—some arrangement."

"You are aware, sir, that this girl was going to have a child, and that she had named you as its father?"

Sandford groaned, but did not answer.

"Was that statement true, sir?"

Sandford buried his face deeper.

"I suppose so," he said in a muffled voice.

"Ah!" Inspector Drewitt could not disguise the satisfaction. "Now about this 'walk' of yours. Is there anyone who saw you last night?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. As far as I can remember, I didn't meet anybody."

"That's a pity."

"What do you mean?" Sandford stared wildly at him. "What does it matter whether I was out for a walk or not? What difference does that make to Rose drowning herself?"

"Ah!" said the Inspector. "But you see, *she didn't*. She was thrown in deliberately, Mr. Sandford."

"She was—" It took him a minute or two to take in all the horror of it. "My God! Then—"

He dropped into a chair.

Colonel Melchett made a move to depart.

"You understand, Sandford," he said. "You are on no account to leave this house."

The three men left together. The Inspector and the Chief Constable exchanged glances.

"That's enough, I think, sir," said the Inspector.

"Yes. Get a warrant made out and arrest him."

"Excuse me," said Sir Henry, "I've forgotten my gloves."

He reentered the house rapidly. Sandford was sitting just as they had left him, staring dazedly in front of him.

"I have come back," said Sir Henry, "to tell you that I personally, am anxious to do all I can to assist you. The motive of my interest in you I am not at liberty to reveal. But I am going to ask you, if you will, to tell me as briefly as possible exactly what passed between you and this girl Rose."

"She was very pretty," said Sandford. "Very pretty and very alluring. And—and she made a dead seat at me. Before God, that's true. She wouldn't let me alone. And it was lonely down here, and nobody liked me much, and—and, as I say she was amazingly pretty and she seemed to know her way about and all that—" His voice died away. He looked up. "And then this happened. She wanted me to marry her. I didn't know what to do. I'm engaged to a girl in London. If she ever gets to hear of this—and she will, of course—well, it's all up. She won't understand. How could she? And I'm a rotter, of course. As I say, I didn't know what to do. I avoided seeing Rose again. I thought I'd get back to town—see my lawyer—make arrangements about money and so forth, for her. God, what a fool I've been! And it's all so clear—the case against me. But they've made a mistake. She *must* have done it herself."

"Did she ever threaten to take her life?"

Sandford shook his head.

"Never. I shouldn't have said she was that sort."

"What about a man called Joe Ellis?"

"The carpenter fellow? Good old village stock. Dull fellow—but crazy about Rose."

"He might have been jealous?" suggested Sir Henry.

"I suppose he was a bit—but he's the bovine kind. He'd suffer in silence."

"Well," said Sir Henry. "I must be going."

He rejoined the others.

"You know, Melchett," he said, "I feel we ought to have a look at this other fellow—Ellis—before we do anything drastic. Pity if you

made an arrest that turned out to be a mistake. After all, jealousy is a pretty good motive for murder—and a pretty common one, too.”

“That’s true enough,” said the Inspector. “But Joe Ellis isn’t that kind. He wouldn’t hurt a fly. Why, nobody’s ever seen him out of temper. Still, I agree we’d better just ask him where he was last night. He’ll be at home now. He lodges with Mrs. Bartlett—very decent soul—a widow, she takes in a bit of washing.”

The little cottage to which they bent their footsteps was spotlessly clean and neat. A big stout woman of middle-age opened the door to them. She had a pleasant face and blue eyes.

“Good morning, Mrs. Bartlett,” said the Inspector. “Is Joe Ellis here?”

“Came back not ten minutes ago,” said Mrs. Bartlett. “Step inside, will you, please, sirs.”

Wiping her hands on her apron she led them into a tiny front parlour with stuffed birds, china dogs, a sofa and several useless pieces of furniture.

She hurriedly arranged seats for them, picked up a whatnot bodily to make further room and went out calling:

“Joe, there’s three gentlemen want to see you.”

A voice from the back kitchen replied:

“I’ll be there when I’ve cleaned myself.”

Mrs. Bartlett smiled.

“Come in, Mrs. Bartlett,” said Colonel Melchett. “Sit down.”

“Oh, no, sir, I couldn’t think of it.”

Mrs. Bartlett was shocked at the idea.

“You find Joe Ellis a good lodger?” inquired Melchett in a seemingly careless tone.

“Couldn’t have a better, sir. A real steady young fellow. Never touches a drop of drink. Takes a pride in his work. And always kind and helpful about the house. He put up those shelves for me, and he’s fixed a new dresser in the kitchen. And any little thing that wants doing in the house—why, Joe does it as a matter of course, and won’t hardly take thanks for it. Ah! there aren’t many young fellows like Joe, sir.”

"Some girl will be lucky someday," said Melchett carelessly. "He was rather sweet on that poor girl, Rose Emmott, wasn't he?"

Mrs. Bartlett sighed.

"It made me tired, it did. Him worshipping the ground she trod on and her not caring a snap of the fingers for him."

"Where does Joe spend his evenings, Mrs. Bartlett?"

"Here, sir, usually. He does some odd piece of work in the evenings, sometimes, and he's trying to learn bookkeeping by correspondence."

"Ah! really. Was he in yesterday evening?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're sure, Mrs. Bartlett?" said Sir Henry sharply.

She turned to him.

"Quite sure, sir."

"He didn't go out, for instance, somewhere about eight to eight thirty?"

"Oh, no." Mrs. Bartlett laughed. "He was fixing the kitchen dresser for me nearly all the evening, and I was helping him."

Sir Henry looked at her smiling assured face and felt his first pang of doubt.

A moment later Ellis himself entered the room.

He was a tall broad-shouldered young man, very good-looking in a rustic way. He had shy, blue eyes and a good-tempered smile. Altogether an amiable young giant.

Melchett opened the conversation. Mrs. Bartlett withdrew to the kitchen.

"We are investigating the death of Rose Emmott. You knew her, Ellis."

"Yes." He hesitated, then muttered, "Hoped to marry her one day. Poor lass."

"You have heard of what her condition was?"

"Yes." A spark of anger showed in his eyes. "Let her down, he did. But 'twere for the best. She wouldn't have been happy married to him. I reckoned she'd come to me when this happened. I'd have looked after her."

"In spite of—"

"'Tweren't her fault. He led her astray with fine promises and all. Oh! she told me about it. She'd no call to drown herself. He weren't worth it."

"Where were you, Ellis, last night at eight thirty?"

Was it Sir Henry's fancy, or was there really a shade of constraint in the ready—almost too ready—reply.

"I was here. Fixing up a contraption in the kitchen for Mrs. B. You ask her. She'll tell you."

"He was too quick with that," thought Sir Henry. "He's a slow-thinking man. That popped out so pat that I suspect he'd got it ready beforehand."

Then he told himself that it was imagination. He was imagining things—yes, even imagining an apprehensive glint in those blue eyes.

A few more questions and answers and they left. Sir Henry made an excuse to go to the kitchen. Mrs. Bartlett was busy at the stove. She looked up with a pleasant smile. A new dresser was fixed against the wall. It was not quite finished. Some tools lay about and some pieces of wood.

"That's what Ellis was at work on last night?" said Sir Henry.

"Yes, sir, it's a nice bit of work, isn't it? He's a very clever carpenter, Joe is."

No apprehensive gleam in her eye—no embarrassment.

But Ellis—had he imagined it? No, there *had* been something.

"I must tackle him," thought Sir Henry.

Turning to leave the kitchen, he collided with a perambulator.

"Not woken the baby up, I hope," he said.

Mrs. Bartlett's laugh rang out.

"Oh, no, sir. I've no children—more's the pity. That's what I take the laundry on, sir."

"Oh! I see—"

He paused then said on an impulse:

"Mrs. Bartlett. You knew Rose Emmott. Tell me what you really thought of her."

She looked at him curiously.

"Well, sir, I thought she was flighty. But she's dead—and I don't like to speak ill of the dead."

"But I have a reason—a very good reason for asking."

He spoke persuasively.

She seemed to consider, studying him attentively. Finally she made up her mind.

"She was a bad lot, sir," she said quietly. "I wouldn't say so before Joe. She took *him* in good and proper. That kind can—more's the pity. You know how it is, sir."

Yes, Sir Henry knew. The Joe Ellises of the world were peculiarly vulnerable. They trusted blindly. But for that very cause the shock of discovery might be greater.

He left the cottage baffled and perplexed. He was up against a blank wall. Joe Ellis had been working indoors all yesterday evening. Mrs. Bartlett had actually been there watching him. Could one possibly get round that? There was nothing to set against it—except possibly that suspicious readiness in replying on Joe Ellis's part—that suggestion of having a story pat.

"Well," said Melchett, "that seems to make the matter quite clear, eh?"

"It does, sir," agreed the Inspector. "Sandford's our man. Not a leg to stand upon. The thing's as plain as daylight. It's my opinion as the girl and her father were out to—well—practically blackmail him. He's no money to speak of—he didn't want the matter to get to his young lady's ears. He was desperate and he acted accordingly. What do you say, sir?" he added, addressing Sir Henry deferentially.

"It seems so," admitted Sir Henry. "And yet—I can hardly picture Sandford committing any violent action."

But he knew as he spoke that that objection was hardly valid. The meekest animal, when cornered, is capable of amazing actions.

"I should like to see the boy, though," he said suddenly. "The one who heard the cry."

Jimmy Brown proved to be an intelligent lad, rather small for his age, with a sharp, rather cunning face. He was eager to be questioned and was rather disappointed when checked in his dramatic tale of what he had heard on the fatal night.

"You were on the other side of the bridge, I understand," said Sir Henry. "Across the river from the village. Did you see anyone on that side as you came over the bridge?"

"There was someone walking up in the woods. Mr. Sandford, I think it was, the architecting gentleman who's building the queer house."

The three men exchanged glances.

"That was about ten minutes or so before you heard the cry?"

The boy nodded.

"Did you see anyone else—on the village side of the river?"

"A man came along the path that side. Going slow and whistling he was. Might have been Joe Ellis."

"You couldn't possibly have seen who it was," said the Inspector sharply. "What with the mist and its being dusk."

"It's on account of the whistle," said the boy. "Joe Ellis always whistles the same tune—I wanner be happy—it's the only tune he knows."

He spoke with the scorn of the modernist for the old-fashioned.

"Anyone might whistle a tune," said Melchett. "Was he going towards the bridge?"

"No. Other way—to village."

"I don't think we need concern ourselves with this unknown man," said Melchett. "You heard the cry and the splash and a few minutes later you saw the body floating downstream and you ran for help, going back to the bridge, crossing it, and making straight for the village. You didn't see anyone near the bridge as you ran for help?"

"I think as there were two men with a wheelbarrow on the river path; but they were some way away and I couldn't tell if they were going or coming and Mr. Giles's place was nearest—so I ran there."

"You did well, my boy," said Melchett. "You acted very creditably and with presence of mind. You're a scout, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. Very good indeed."

Sir Henry was silent—thinking. He took a slip of paper from his pocket, looked at it, shook his head. It didn't seem possible—and yet

—
He decided to pay a call on Miss Marple.

She received him in her pretty, slightly overcrowded old-style drawing room.

"I've come to report progress," said Sir Henry. "I'm afraid that from our point of view things aren't going well. They are going to arrest Sandford. And I must say I think they are justified."

"You have found nothing in—what shall I say—support of my theory, then?" She looked perplexed—anxious. "Perhaps I have been wrong—quite wrong. You have such wide experience—you would surely detect it if it were so."

"For one thing," said Sir Henry, "I can hardly believe it. And for another we are up against an unbreakable alibi. Joe Ellis was fixing shelves in the kitchen all the evening and Mrs. Bartlett was watching him do it."

Miss Marple leaned forward, taking in a quick breath.

"But that can't be so," she said. "It was Friday night."

"Friday night?"

"Yes—Friday night. On Friday evenings Mrs. Bartlett takes the laundry she has done round to the different people."

Sir Henry leaned back in his chair. He remembered the boy Jimmy's story of the whistling man and—yes—it would all fit in.

He rose, taking Miss Marple warmly by the hand.

"I think I see my way," he said. "At least I can try. . . ."

Five minutes later he was back at Mrs. Bartlett's cottage and facing Joe Ellis in the little parlour among the china dogs.

"You lied to us, Ellis, about last night," he said crisply. "You were not in the kitchen here fixing the dresser between eight and eight thirty. You were seen walking along the path by the river towards the bridge a few minutes before Rose Emmott was murdered."

The man gasped.

"She weren't murdered—she weren't. I had naught to do with it. She threw herself in, she did. She was desperate like. I wouldn't have harmed a hair on her head, I wouldn't."

"Then why did you lie as to where you were?" asked Sir Henry keenly.

The man's eyes shifted and lowered uncomfortably.

"I was scared. Mrs. B. saw me around there and when we heard just afterwards what had happened—well, she thought it might look bad for me. I fixed I'd say I was working here, and she agreed to back me up. She's a rare one, she is. She's always been good to me."

Without a word Sir Henry left the room and walked into the kitchen. Mrs. Bartlett was washing up at the sink.

"Mrs. Bartlett," he said, "I know everything. I think you'd better confess—that is, unless you want Joe Ellis hanged for something he didn't do . . . No. I see you don't want that. I'll tell you what happened. You were out taking the laundry home. You came across Rose Emmott. You thought she'd given Joe the chuck and was taking up with this stranger. Now she was in trouble—Joe was prepared to come to the rescue—marry her if need be, and if she'd have him. He's lived in your house for four years. You've fallen in love with him. You want him for yourself. You hated this girl—you couldn't bear that this worthless little slut should take your man from you. You're a strong woman, Mrs. Bartlett. You caught the girl by the shoulders and shoved her over into the stream. A few minutes later you met Joe Ellis. The boy Jimmy saw you together in the distance—but in the darkness and the mist he assumed the perambulator was a wheelbarrow and two men wheeling it. You persuaded Joe that he might be suspected and you concocted what was supposed to be an alibi for him, but which was really an alibi for *you*. Now then, I'm right, am I not?"

He held his breath. He had staked all on this throw.

She stood before him rubbing her hands on her apron, slowly making up her mind.

"It's just as you say, sir," she said at last, in her quiet subdued voice (a dangerous voice, Sir Henry suddenly felt it to be). "I don't know what came over me. Shameless—that's what she was. It just came over me—she shan't take Joe from me. I haven't had a happy life, sir. My husband, he was a poor lot—an invalid and cross-grained. I nursed and looked after him true. And then Joe came here to lodge. I'm not such an old woman, sir, in spite of my grey hair. I'm

just forty, sir. Joe's one in a thousand. I'd have done anything for him—anything at all. He was like a little child, sir, so gentle and believing. He was mine, sir, to look after and see to. And this—this —" She swallowed—checked her emotion. Even at this moment she was a strong woman. She stood up straight and looked at Sir Henry curiously. "I'm ready to come, sir. I never thought anyone would find out. I don't know how you knew, sir—I don't, I'm sure."

Sir Henry shook his head gently.

"It was not I who knew," he said—and he thought of the piece of paper still reposing in his pocket with the words on it written in neat old-fashioned handwriting.

"Mrs. Bartlett, with whom Joe Ellis lodges at 2 Mill Cottages."

Miss Marple had been right again.

Fourteen

MISS MARPLE TELLS A STORY

I don't think I've ever told you, my dears—you, Raymond, and you, Joan, about the rather curious little business that happened some years ago now. I don't want to seem *vain* in any way—of course I know that in comparison with you young people I'm not clever at all—Raymond writes those very modern books all about rather unpleasant young men and women—and Joan paints those very remarkable pictures of square people with curious bulges on them—very clever of you, my dear, but as Raymond always says (only quite kindly, because he is the kindest of nephews) I am hopelessly Victorian. I admire Mr. Alma-Tadema and Mr. Frederic Leighton and I suppose to you they seem hopelessly *vieux jeu*. Now let me see, what was I saying? Oh, yes—that I didn't want to appear vain—but I couldn't help being just a teeny weeny bit pleased with myself, because, just by applying a little common sense, I believe I really did solve a problem that had baffled cleverer heads than mine. Though really I should have thought the whole thing was *obvious* from the beginning. . . .

Well, I'll tell you my little story, and if you think I'm inclined to be conceited about it, you must remember that I did at least help a fellow creature who was in very grave distress.

The first I knew of this business was one evening about nine o'clock when Gwen—(you remember Gwen? My little maid with red hair) well—Gwen came in and told me that Mr. Petherick and a gentleman had called to see me. Gwen had shown them into the drawing room—quite rightly. I was sitting in the dining room because in early spring I think it is so wasteful to have two fires going.

I directed Gwen to bring in the cherry brandy and some glasses and I hurried into the drawing room. I don't know whether you remember Mr. Petherick? He died two years ago, but he had been a friend of mine for many years as well as attending to all my legal business. A very shrewd man and a really clever solicitor. His son does my business for me now—a very nice lad and very up to date—but somehow I don't feel quite the *confidence* I had with Mr. Petherick.

I explained to Mr. Petherick about the fires and he said at once that he and his friend would come into the dining room—and then he introduced his friend—a Mr. Rhodes. He was a youngish man—not much over forty—and I saw at once there was something very wrong. His manner was most *peculiar*. One might have called it *rude* if one hadn't realized that the poor fellow was suffering from *strain*.

When we were settled in the dining room and Gwen had brought the cherry brandy, Mr. Petherick explained the reason for his visit.

"Miss Marple," he said, "you must forgive an old friend for taking a liberty. What I have come here for is a consultation."

I couldn't understand at all what he meant, and he went on:

"In a case of illness one likes two points of view—that of the specialist and that of the family physician. It is the fashion to regard the former as of more value, but I am not sure that I agree. The specialist has experience only in his own subject—the family doctor has, perhaps, less knowledge—but a wider experience."

I knew just what he meant, because a young niece of mine not long before had hurried her child off to a very well-known specialist in skin diseases without consulting her own doctor whom she considered an old dodderer, and the specialist had ordered some very expensive treatment, and later found that all the child was suffering from was a rather unusual form of measles.

I just mention this—though I have a horror of *digressing*—to show that I appreciate Mr. Petherick's point—but I still hadn't any idea what he was driving at.

"If Mr. Rhodes is ill—" I said, and stopped—because the poor man gave a most dreadful laugh.

He said: "I expect to die of a broken neck in a few months' time."

And then it all came out. There had been a case of murder lately in Barnchester—a town about twenty miles away. I'm afraid I hadn't paid much attention to it at the time, because we had been having a lot of excitement in the village about our district nurse, and outside occurrences like an earthquake in India and a murder in Barnchester, although of course far more important really—had given way to our own little local excitements. I'm afraid villages are like that. Still, I *did* remember having read about a woman having been stabbed in a hotel, though I hadn't remembered her name. But now it seemed that this woman had been Mr. Rhodes's wife—and as if that wasn't bad enough—he was actually under suspicion of having murdered her himself.

All this Mr. Petherick explained to me very clearly, saying that, although the Coronor's jury had brought in a verdict of murder by a person or persons unknown, Mr. Rhodes had reason to believe that he would probably be arrested within a day or two, and that he had come to Mr. Petherick and placed himself in his hands. Mr. Petherick went on to say that they had that afternoon consulted Sir Malcolm Olde, K.C., and that in the event of the case coming to trial Sir Malcolm had been briefed to defend Mr. Rhodes.

Sir Malcolm was a young man, Mr. Petherick said, very up to date in his methods, and he had indicated a certain line of defence. But with that line of defence Mr. Petherick was not entirely satisfied.

"You see, my dear lady," he said, "it is tainted with what I call the specialist's point of view. Give Sir Malcolm a case and he sees only one point—the most likely line of defence. But even the best line of defence may ignore completely what is, to my mind, the vital point. It takes no account of what actually happened."

Then he went on to say some very kind and flattering things about my acumen and judgement and my knowledge of human

nature, and asked permission to tell me the story of the case in the hopes that I might be able to suggest some explanation.

I could see that Mr. Rhodes was highly sceptical of my being of any use and he was annoyed at being brought here. But Mr. Petherick took no notice and proceeded to give me the facts of what occurred on the night of March 8th.

Mr. and Mrs. Rhodes had been staying at the Crown Hotel in Barnchester. Mrs. Rhodes who (so I gathered from Mr. Petherick's careful language) was perhaps just a shade of a hypochondriac, had retired to bed immediately after dinner. She and her husband occupied adjoining rooms with a connecting door. Mr. Rhodes, who is writing a book on prehistoric flints, settled down to work in the adjoining room. At eleven o'clock he tidied up his papers and prepared to go to bed. Before doing so, he just glanced into his wife's room to make sure that there was nothing she wanted. He discovered the electric light on and his wife lying in bed stabbed through the heart. She had been dead at least an hour—probably longer. The following were the points made. There was another door in Mrs. Rhodes's room leading into the corridor. This door was locked and bolted on the inside. The only window in the room was closed and latched. According to Mr. Rhodes nobody had passed through the room in which he was sitting except a chambermaid bringing hot-water bottles. The weapon found in the wound was a stiletto dagger which had been lying on Mrs. Rhodes's dressing table. She was in the habit of using it as a paper knife. There were no fingerprints on it.

The situation boiled down to this—no one but Mr. Rhodes and the chambermaid had entered the victim's room.

I enquired about the chambermaid.

"That was our first line of enquiry," said Mr. Petherick. "Mary Hill is a local woman. She had been chambermaid at the Crown for ten years. There seems absolutely no reason why she should commit a sudden assault on a guest. She is, in any case, extraordinarily stupid, almost half-witted. Her story has never varied. She brought Mrs. Rhodes her hot-water bottle and says the lady was drowsy—

just dropping off to sleep. Frankly, I cannot believe, and I am sure no jury would believe, that she committed the crime.”

Mr. Petherick went on to mention a few additional details. At the head of the staircase in the Crown Hotel is a kind of miniature lounge where people sometimes sit and have coffee. A passage goes off to the right and the last door in it is the door into the room occupied by Mr. Rhodes. The passage then turns sharply to the right again and the first door round the corner is the door into Mrs. Rhodes’s room. As it happened, both these doors could be seen by witnesses. The first door—that into Mr. Rhodes’s room, which I will call A, could be seen by four people, two commercial travellers and an elderly married couple who were having coffee. According to them nobody went in or out of door A except Mr. Rhodes and the chambermaid. As to the other door in the passage B, there was an electrician at work there and he also swears that nobody entered or left door B except the chambermaid.

It was certainly a very curious and interesting case. On the face of it, it looked as though Mr. Rhodes *must* have murdered his wife. But I could see that Mr. Petherick was quite convinced of his client’s innocence and Mr. Petherick was a very shrewd man.

At the inquest Mr. Rhodes had told a hesitating and rambling story about some woman who had written threatening letters to his wife. His story, I gathered, had been unconvincing in the extreme. Appealed to by Mr. Petherick, he explained himself.

“Frankly,” he said, “I never believed it. I thought Amy had made most of it up.”

Mrs. Rhodes, I gathered, was one of those romantic liars who go through life embroidering everything that happens to them. The amount of adventures that, according to her own account, happened to her in a year was simply incredible. If she slipped on a bit of banana peel it was a case of near escape from death. If a lampshade caught fire she was rescued from a burning building at the hazard of her life. Her husband got into the habit of discounting her statements. Her tale as to some woman whose child she had injured in a motor accident and who had vowed vengeance on her—well—Mr. Rhodes had simply not taken any notice of it. The incident

had happened before he married his wife and although she had read him letters couched in crazy language, he had suspected her of composing them herself. She had actually done such a thing once or twice before. She was a woman of hysterical tendencies who craved ceaselessly for excitement.

Now, all that seemed to me very natural—indeed, we have a young woman in the village who does much the same thing. The danger with such people is that when anything at all extraordinary really does happen to them, nobody believes they are speaking the truth. It seemed to me that that was what had happened in this case. The police, I gathered, merely believed that Mr. Rhodes was making up this unconvincing tale in order to avert suspicion from himself.

I asked if there had been any women staying by themselves in the hotel. It seemed there were two—a Mrs. Granby, an Anglo-Indian widow, and a Miss Carruthers, rather a horsey spinster who dropped her g's. Mr. Petherick added that the most minute enquiries had failed to elicit anyone who had seen either of them near the scene of the crime and there was nothing to connect either of them with it in any way. I asked him to describe their personal appearance. He said that Mrs. Granby had reddish hair rather untidily done, was sallow-faced and about fifty years of age. Her clothes were rather picturesque, being made mostly of native silk, etc. Miss Carruthers was about forty, wore pince-nez, had close-cropped hair like a man and wore mannish coats and skirts.

"Dear me," I said, "that makes it very difficult."

Mr. Petherick looked enquiringly at me, but I didn't want to say anymore just then, so I asked what Sir Malcolm Olde had said.

Sir Malcolm was confident of being able to call conflicting medical testimony and to suggest some way of getting over the fingerprint difficulty. I asked Mr. Rhodes what he thought and he said all doctors were fools but he himself couldn't really believe that his wife had killed herself. "She wasn't that kind of woman," he said simply—and I believed him. Hysterical people don't usually commit suicide.

I thought a minute and then I asked if the door from Mrs. Rhodes's room led straight into the corridor. Mr. Rhodes said no—

there was a little hallway with a bathroom and lavatory. It was the door from the bedroom to the hallway that was locked and bolted on the inside.

"In that case," I said, "the whole thing seems remarkably simple."

And really, you know, it *did* . . . the simplest thing in the world. And yet no one seemed to have seen it that way.

Both Mr. Petherick and Mr. Rhodes were staring at me so that I felt quite embarrassed.

"Perhaps," said Mr. Rhodes, "Miss Marple hasn't quite appreciated the difficulties."

"Yes," I said, "I think I have. There are four possibilities. Either Mrs. Rhodes was killed by her husband, or by the chambermaid, or she committed suicide, or she was killed by an outsider whom nobody saw enter or leave."

"And that's impossible," Mr. Rhodes broke in. "Nobody could come in or go out through my room without my seeing them, and even if anyone did manage to come in through my wife's room without the electrician seeing them, how the devil could they get out again leaving the door locked and bolted on the inside?"

Mr. Petherick looked at me and said: "Well, Miss Marple?" in an encouraging manner.

"I should like," I said, "to ask a question. Mr. Rhodes, what did the chambermaid look like?"

He said he wasn't sure—she was tallish, he thought—he didn't remember if she was fair or dark. I turned to Mr. Petherick and asked the same question.

He said she was of medium height, had fairish hair and blue eyes and rather a high colour.

Mr. Rhodes said: "You are a better observer than I am, Petherick."

I ventured to disagree. I then asked Mr. Rhodes if he could describe the maid in my house. Neither he nor Mr. Petherick could do so.

"Don't you see what that means?" I said. "You both came here full of your own affairs and the person who let you in was only a *parlourmaid*. The same applies to Mr. Rhodes at the hotel. He saw

her uniform and her apron. He was engrossed by his work. But Mr. Petherick has interviewed the same woman in a different capacity. He has looked at her as a *person*.

"That's what the woman who did the murder counted upon."

As they still didn't see, I had to explain.

"I think," I said, "that this is how it went. The chambermaid came in by door A, passed through Mr. Rhodes's room into Mrs. Rhodes's room with the hot-water bottle and went out through the hallway into passage B. X—as I will call our murderess—came in by door B into the little hallway, concealed herself in—well, in a certain apartment, ahem—and waited until the chambermaid had passed out. Then she entered Mrs. Rhodes's room, took the stiletto from the dressing table (she had doubtless explored the room earlier in the day), went up to the bed, stabbed the dozing woman, wiped the handle of the stiletto, locked and bolted the door by which she had entered, and then passed out through the room where Mr. Rhodes was working."

Mr. Rhodes cried out: "But I should have *seen* her. The electrician would have seen her go in."

"No," I said. "That's where you're wrong. You wouldn't see her—*not if she were dressed as a chambermaid*." I let it sink in, then I went on, "You were engrossed in your work—out of the tail of your eye you saw a chambermaid come in, go into your wife's room, come back and go out. It was the same *dress*—but not the same woman. That's what the people having coffee saw—a chambermaid go in and a chambermaid come out. The electrician did the same. I dare say if a chambermaid were very pretty a gentleman might notice her face—human nature being what it is—but if she were just an ordinary middle-aged woman—well—it would be the chambermaid's *dress* you would see—not the woman herself."

Mr. Rhodes cried: "Who was she?"

"Well," I said, "that is going to be a little difficult. It must be either Mrs. Granby or Miss Carruthers. Mrs. Granby sounds as though she might wear a wig normally—so she could wear her own hair as a chambermaid. On the other hand, Miss Carruthers with her close-cropped mannish head might easily put on a wig to play her

part. I dare say you will find out easily enough which of them it is. Personally, I incline myself to think it will be Miss Carruthers."

And really, my dears, that is the end of the story. Carruthers was a false name, but she was the woman all right. There was insanity in her family. Mrs. Rhodes, who was a most reckless and dangerous driver, had run over her little girl, and it had driven the poor woman off her head. She concealed her madness very cunningly except for writing distinctly insane letters to her intended victim. She had been following her about for some time, and she laid her plans very cleverly. The false hair and maid's dress she posted in a parcel first thing the next morning. When taxed with the truth she broke down and confessed at once. The poor thing is in Broadmoor now. Completely unbalanced of course, but a very cleverly planned crime.

Mr. Petherick came to me afterwards and brought me a very nice letter from Mr. Rhodes—really, it made me blush. Then my old friend said to me: "Just one thing—why did you think it was more likely to be Carruthers than Granby? You'd never seen either of them."

"Well," I said. "It was the g's. You said she dropped her g's. Now, that's done by a lot of hunting people in books, but I don't know many people who do it in reality—and certainly no one under sixty. You said this woman was forty. Those dropped g's sounded to me like a woman who was playing a part and overdoing it."

I shan't tell you what Mr. Petherick said to that—but he was very complimentary—and I really couldn't help feeling just a teeny weeny bit pleased with myself.

And it's extraordinary how things turn out for the best in this world. Mr. Rhodes has married again—such a nice, sensible girl—and they've got a dear little baby and—what do you think?—they asked me to be godmother. Wasn't it nice of them?

Now I do hope you don't think I've been running on too long. . . .

Fifteen

STRANGE JEST

"And this," said Jane Helier, completing her introductions, "is Miss Marple!"

Being an actress, she was able to make her point. It was clearly the climax, the triumphant finale! Her tone was equally compounded of reverent awe and triumph.

The odd part of it was that the object thus proudly proclaimed was merely a gentle, fussy-looking, elderly spinster. In the eyes of the two young people who had just, by Jane's good offices, made her acquaintance, there showed incredulity and a tinge of dismay. They were nice-looking people; the girl, Charmian Stroud, slim and dark—the man, Edward Rossiter, a fair-haired, amiable young giant.

Charmian said a little breathlessly. "Oh! We're awfully pleased to meet you." But there was doubt in her eyes. She flung a quick, questioning glance at Jane Helier.

"Darling," said Jane, answering the glance, "she's absolutely *marvellous*. Leave it all to her. I told you I'd get her here and I have." She added to Miss Marple, "*You'll* fix it for them, I know. It will be easy for *you*."

Miss Marple turned her placid, china-blue eyes towards Mr. Rossiter. "Won't you tell me," she said, "what all this is about?"

"Jane's a friend of ours," Charmian broke in impatiently. "Edward and I are in rather a fix. Jane said if we would come to her party, she'd introduce us to someone who was—who would—who could—"

Edward came to the rescue. "Jane tells us you're the last word in sleuths, Miss Marple!"

The old lady's eyes twinkled, but she protested modestly. "Oh, no, no! Nothing of the kind. It's just that living in a village as I do, one gets to know so much about human nature. But really you have made me quite curious. Do tell me your problem."

"I'm afraid it's terribly hackneyed—just buried treasure," said Edward.

"Indeed? But that sounds most exciting!"

"I know. Like *Treasure Island*. But our problem lacks the usual romantic touches. No point on a chart indicated by a skull and crossbones, no directions like 'four paces to the left, west by north.' It's horribly prosaic—just where we ought to dig."

"Have you tried at all?"

"I should say we'd dug about two solid square acres! The whole place is ready to be turned into a market garden. We're just discussing whether to grow vegetable marrows or potatoes."

Charmian said rather abruptly, "May we really tell you all about it?"

"But, of course, my dear."

"Then let's find a peaceful spot. Come on, Edward." She led the way out of the overcrowded and smoke-laden room, and they went up the stairs, to a small sitting room on the second floor.

When they were seated, Charmian began abruptly. "Well, here goes! The story starts with Uncle Mathew, uncle—or rather, great-great-uncle—to both of us. He was incredibly ancient. Edward and I were his only relations. He was fond of us and always declared that when he died he would leave his money between us. Well, he died last March and left everything he had to be divided equally between Edward and myself. What I've just said sounds rather callous—I don't mean that it was right that he died—actually we were very fond of him. But he'd been ill for some time.

"The point is that the 'everything' he left turned out to be practically nothing at all. And that, frankly, was a bit of a blow to us both, wasn't it, Edward?"

The amiable Edward agreed. "You see," he said, "we'd counted on it a bit. I mean, when you know a good bit of money is coming to you, you don't—well—buckle down and try to make it yourself. I'm in the army—not got anything to speak of outside my pay—and Charmian herself hasn't got a bean. She works as a stage manager in a repertory theatre—quite interesting, and she enjoys it—but no money in it. We'd counted on getting married, but weren't worried about the money side of it because we both knew we'd be jolly well-off someday."

"And now, you see, we're not!" said Charmian. "What's more, Ansteys—that's the family place, and Edward and I both love it—will probably have to be sold. And Edward and I feel we just can't bear that! But if we don't find Uncle Mathew's money, we shall have to sell."

Edward said, "You know, Charmian, we still haven't come to the vital point."

"Well, you talk, then."

Edward turned to Miss Marple. "It's like this, you see. As Uncle Mathew grew older, he got more and more suspicious. He didn't trust anybody."

"Very wise of him," said Miss Marple. "The depravity of human nature is unbelievable."

"Well, you may be right. Anyway, Uncle Mathew thought so. He had a friend who lost his money in a bank, and another friend who was ruined by an absconding solicitor, and he lost some money himself in a fraudulent company. He got so that he used to hold forth at great length that the only safe and sane thing to do was to convert your money into solid bullion and bury it."

"Ah," said Miss Marple. "I begin to see."

"Yes. Friends argued with him, pointed out that he'd get no interest that way, but he held that that didn't really matter. The bulk of your money, he said, should be 'kept in a box under the bed or buried in the garden.' Those were his words."

Charmian went on. "And when he died, he left hardly anything at all in securities, though he was very rich. So we think that that's what he must have done."

Edward explained. "We found that he had sold securities and drawn out large sums of money from time to time, and nobody knows what he did with them. But it seems probable that he lived up to his principles, and that he did buy gold and bury it."

"He didn't say anything before he died? Leave any paper? No letter?"

"That's the maddening part of it. He didn't. He'd been unconscious for some days, but he rallied before he died. He looked at us both and chuckled—a faint, weak little chuckle. He said, 'You'll be all right, my pretty pair of doves.' And then he tapped his eye—his right eye—and winked at us. And then—he died. Poor old Uncle Mathew."

"He tapped his eye," said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

Edward said eagerly. "Does that convey anything to you? It made me think of an Arsene Lupin story where there was something hidden in a man's glass eye. But Uncle Mathew didn't have a glass eye."

Miss Marple shook her head. "No—I can't think of anything at the moment."

Charmian said disappointedly, "Jane told us you'd say *at once* where to dig!"

Miss Marple smiled. "I'm not quite a conjurer, you know. I didn't know your uncle, or what sort of man he was, and I don't know the house or the grounds."

Charmian said, "If you did know them?"

"Well, it must be quite simple, really, mustn't it?" said Miss Marple.

"Simple!" said Charmian. "You come down to Ansteys and see if it's simple!"

It is possible that she did not mean the invitation to be taken seriously, but Miss Marple said briskly, "Well, really, my dear, that's very kind of you. I've always wanted to have the chance of looking

for buried treasure. And," she added, looking at them with a beaming, late-Victorian smile, "with a love interest, too!"

"You see!" said Charmian, gesturing dramatically.

They had just completed a grand tour of Ansteys. They had been round the kitchen garden—heavily trenched. They had been through the little woods, where every important tree had been dug round, and had gazed sadly on the pitted surface of the once smooth lawn. They had been up to the attic, where old trunks and chests had been rifled of their contents. They had been down to the cellars, where flagstones had been heaved unwillingly from their sockets. They had measured and tapped walls, and Miss Marple had been shown every antique piece of furniture that contained or could be suspected of containing a secret drawer.

On a table in the morning room there was a heap of papers—all the papers that the late Mathew Stroud had left. Not one had been destroyed, and Charmian and Edward were wont to return to them again and again, earnestly perusing bills, invitations, and business correspondence in the hope of spotting a hitherto unnoticed clue.

"Can you think of anywhere we haven't looked?" demanded Charmian hopefully.

Miss Marple shook her head. "You seem to have been very thorough, my dear. Perhaps, if I may say so, just a little *too* thorough. I always think, you know, that one should have a plan. It's like my friend, Mrs. Eldritch, she had such a nice little maid, polished linoleum beautifully, but she was so thorough that she polished the bathroom floor too much, and as Mrs. Eldritch was stepping out of the bath the cork mat slipped from under her, and she had a very nasty fall and actually broke her leg! Most awkward, because the bathroom door was locked, of course, and the gardener had to get a ladder and come in through the window—terribly distressing to Mrs. Eldritch, who had always been a very modest woman."

Edward moved restlessly.

Miss Marple said quickly, "Please forgive me. So apt, I know, to fly off at a tangent. But one thing does remind one of another. And

sometimes that is helpful. All I was trying to say was that perhaps if we tried to sharpen our wits and think of a likely place—”

Edward said crossly, “You think of one, Miss Marple. Charmian’s brains and mine are now only beautiful blanks!”

“Dear, dear. Of course—most tiring for you. If you don’t mind I’ll just look through all this.” She indicated the papers on the table. “That is, if there’s nothing private—I don’t want to appear to pry.”

“Oh, that’s all right. But I’m afraid you won’t find anything.”

She sat down by the table and methodically worked through the sheaf of documents. As she replaced each one, she sorted them automatically into tidy little heaps. When she had finished she sat staring in front of her for some minutes.

Edward asked, not without a touch of malice, “Well, Miss Marple?”

Miss Marple came to herself with a little start. “I beg your pardon. Most helpful.”

“You’ve found something relevant?”

“Oh, no, nothing like that, but I do believe I know what sort of man your Uncle Mathew was. Rather like my own Uncle Henry, I think. Fond of rather obvious jokes. A bachelor, evidently—I wonder why—perhaps an early disappointment? Methodical up to a point, but not very fond of being tied up—so few bachelors are!”

Behind Miss Marple’s back, Charmian made a sign to Edward. It said, *She’s gaga.*

Miss Marple was continuing happily to talk of her deceased Uncle Henry. “Very fond of puns, he was. And to some people, puns are most annoying. A mere play upon words may be very irritating. He was a suspicious man, too. Always was convinced the servants were robbing him. And sometimes, of course, they were, but not always. It grew upon him, poor man. Towards the end he suspected them of tampering with his food, and finally refused to eat anything but boiled eggs! Said nobody could tamper with the inside of a boiled egg. Dear Uncle Henry, he used to be such a merry soul at one time—very fond of his coffee after dinner. He always used to say, ‘This coffee is very Moorish,’ meaning, you know, that he’d like a little more.”

Edward felt that if he heard anymore about Uncle Henry he'd go mad.

"Fond of young people, too," went on Miss Marple, "but inclined to tease them a little, if you know what I mean. Used to put bags of sweets where a child just couldn't reach them."

Casting politeness aside, Charmian said, "I think he sounds horrible!"

"Oh, no, dear, just an old bachelor, you know, and not used to children. And he wasn't at all stupid, really. He used to keep a good deal of money in the house, and he had a safe put in. Made a great fuss about it—and how very secure it was. As a result of his talking so much, burglars broke in one night and actually cut a hole in the safe with a chemical device."

"Served him right," said Edward.

"Oh, but there was nothing in the safe," said Miss Marple. "You see, he really kept the money somewhere else—behind some volumes of sermons in the library, as a matter of fact. He said people never took a book of that kind out of the shelf!"

Edward interrupted excitedly. "I say, that's an idea. What about the library?"

But Charmian shook a scornful head. "Do you think I hadn't thought of that? I went through all the books Tuesday of last week, when you went off to Portsmouth. Took them all out, shook them. Nothing there."

Edward sighed. Then, rousing himself, he endeavoured to rid himself tactfully of their disappointing guest. "It's been awfully good of you to come down as you have and try to help us. Sorry it's been all a washout. Feel we trespassed a lot on your time. However—I'll get the car out, and you'll be able to catch the three thirty—"

"Oh," said Miss Marple, "but we've got to find the money, haven't we? You mustn't give up, Mr. Rossiter. 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again.'"

"You mean you're going to—go on trying?"

"Strictly speaking," said Miss Marple, "I haven't begun yet. 'First catch your hare—' as Mrs. Beaton says in her cookery book—a wonderful book but terribly expensive; most of the recipes begin,

'Take a quart of cream and a dozen eggs.' Let me see, where was I? Oh, yes. Well, we have, so to speak, caught our hare—the hare being, of course, your Uncle Mathew, and we've only got to decide now where he would have hidden the money. It ought to be quite simple."

"Simple?" demanded Charmian.

"Oh, yes, dear. I'm sure he would have done the obvious thing. A secret drawer—that's my solution."

Edward said dryly, "You couldn't put bars of gold in a secret drawer."

"No, no, of course not. But there's no reason to believe the money is in gold."

"He always used to say—"

"So did my Uncle Henry about his safe! So I should strongly suspect that that was just a blind. Diamonds—now they could be in a secret drawer quite easily."

"But we've looked in all the secret drawers. We had a cabinetmaker over to examine the furniture."

"Did you, dear? That was clever of you. I should suggest your uncle's own desk would be the most likely. Was it the tall escritoire against the wall there?"

"Yes. And I'll show you." Charmian went over to it. She took down the flap. Inside were pigeonholes and little drawers. She opened a small door in the centre and touched a spring inside the left-hand drawer. The bottom of the centre recess clicked and slid forward. Charmian drew it out, revealing a shallow well beneath. It was empty.

"Now isn't that a coincidence?" exclaimed Miss Marple. "Uncle Henry had a desk just like this, only his was burr walnut and this is mahogany."

"At any rate," said Charmian, "there's nothing there, as you can see."

"I expect," said Miss Marple, "your cabinetmaker was a young man. He didn't know everything. People were very artful when they made hiding places in those days. There's such a thing as a secret inside a secret."

She extracted a hairpin from her neat bun of grey hair. Straightening it out, she stuck the point into what appeared to be a tiny wormhole in one side of the secret recess. With a little difficulty she pulled out a small drawer. In it was a bundle of faded letters and a folded paper.

Edward and Charmian pounced on the find together. With trembling fingers Edward unfolded the paper. He dropped it with an exclamation of disgust.

"A damned cookery recipe. Baked ham!"

Charmian was untying a ribbon that held the letters together. She drew one out and glanced at it. "Love letters!"

Miss Marple reacted with Victorian gusto. "How interesting! Perhaps the reason your uncle never married."

Charmian read aloud:

"My ever dear Mathew, I must confess that the time seems long indeed since I received your last letter. I try to occupy myself with the various tasks allotted to me, and often say to myself that I am indeed fortunate to see so much of the globe, though little did I think when I went to America that I should voyage off to these far islands!"

Charmian broke off. "Where is it from? Oh! Hawaii!" She went on:

"Alas, these natives are still far from seeing the light. They are in an unclothed and savage state and spend most of their time swimming and dancing, adorning themselves with garlands of flowers. Mr. Gray has made some converts but it is uphill work, and he and Mrs. Gray get sadly discouraged. I try to do all I can to cheer and encourage him, but I, too, am often sad for a reason you can guess, dear Mathew. Alas, absence is a severe trial for a loving heart. Your renewed vows and protestations of affection cheered me greatly. Now and always you have my faithful and devoted heart, dear Mathew, and I remain—Your true love, Betty Martin."

"PS—I address my letter under cover to our mutual friend, Matilda Graves, as usual. I hope heaven will pardon this little subterfuge."

Edward whistled. "A female missionary! So that was Uncle Mathew's romance. I wonder why they never married?"

"She seems to have gone all over the world," said Charmian, looking through the letters. "Mauritius—all sorts of places. Probably died of yellow fever or something."

A gentle chuckle made them start. Miss Marple was apparently much amused. "Well, well," she said. "Fancy that, now!"

She was reading the recipe for baked ham. Seeing their enquiring glances, she read out: "'Baked ham with spinach. Take a nice piece of gammon, stuff with cloves, and cover with brown sugar. Bake in a slow oven. Serve with a border of pureed spinach.' What do you think of that, now?"

"I think it sounds filthy," said Edward.

"No, no, actually it would be very good—but what do you think of *the whole thing?*"

A sudden ray of light illuminated Edward's face. "Do you think it's a code—cryptogram of some kind?" He seized it. "Look here, Charmian, it might be, you know! No reason to put a cooking-recipe in a secret drawer otherwise."

"Exactly," said Miss Marple. "Very, very significant."

Charmian said, "I know what it might be—invisible ink! Let's heat it. Turn on the electric fire."

Edward did so, but no signs of writing appeared under the treatment.

Miss Marple coughed. "I really think, you know, that you're making it rather *too* difficult. The recipe is only an indication, so to speak. It is, I think, the letters that are significant."

"The letters?"

"Especially," said Miss Marple, "the signature."

But Edward hardly heard her. He called excitedly, "Charmian! Come here! She's right. See—the envelopes are old, right enough,

but the letters themselves were written much later."

"Exactly," said Miss Marple.

"They're only fake old. I bet anything old Uncle Mat faked them himself—"

"Precisely," said Miss Marple.

"The whole thing's a sell. There never was a female missionary. It must be a code."

"My dear, dear children—there's really no need to make it all so difficult. Your uncle was really a very simple man. He had to have his little joke, that was all."

For the first time they gave her their full attention.

"Just exactly what do you mean, Miss Marple?" asked Charmian.

"I mean, dear, that you're actually holding the money in your hand this minute."

Charmian stared down.

"The signature, dear. That gives the whole thing away. The recipe is just an indication. Shorn of all the cloves and brown sugar and the rest of it, what is it *actually*? Why, gammon and spinach to be sure! *Gammon and spinach!* Meaning—nonsense! So it's clear that it's the letters that are important. And then, if you take into consideration what your uncle did just before he died. He tapped his eye, you said. Well, there you are—that gives you the clue, you see."

Charmian said, "Are we mad, or are you?"

"Surely, my dear, you must have heard the expression meaning that something is not a true picture, or has it quite died out nowadays? 'All my eye and Betty Martin.'"

Edward gasped, his eyes falling to the letter in his hand. "Betty Martin—"

"Of course, Mr. Rossiter. As you have just said, there isn't—there wasn't any such person. The letters were written by your uncle, and I dare say he got a lot of fun out of writing them! As you say, the writing on the envelopes is much older—in fact, the envelope couldn't belong to the letters, anyway, because the postmark of one you are holding is eighteen fifty-one."

She paused. She made it very emphatic. "Eighteen fifty-one. And that explains everything, doesn't it?"

"Not to me," said Edward.

"Well, of course," said Miss Marple, "I dare say it wouldn't to me if it weren't for my great-nephew Lionel. Such a dear little boy and a passionate stamp collector. Knows all about stamps. It was he who told me about the rare and expensive stamps and that a wonderful new find had come up for auction. And I actually remember his mentioning one stamp—an eighteen fifty-one *blue two-cent*. It realized something like twenty-five thousand dollars, I believe. Fancy! I should imagine that the other stamps are something also rare and expensive. No doubt your uncle bought through dealers and was careful to 'cover his tracks,' as they say in detective stories."

Edward groaned. He sat down and buried his face in his hands.

"What's the matter?" demanded Charmian.

"Nothing. It's only the awful thought that, but for Miss Marple, we might have burned these letters in a decent, gentlemanly way!"

"Ah," said Miss Marple, "that's just what these old gentlemen who are fond of their jokes never realize. Uncle Henry, I remember, sent a favourite niece a five-pound note for a Christmas present. He put it in a Christmas card, gummed the card together, and wrote on it, 'Love and best wishes. Afraid this is all I can manage this year.'"

"She, poor girl, was annoyed at what she thought was his meanness and threw it all straight into the fire; then, of course, he had to give her another."

Edward's feelings towards Uncle Henry had suffered an abrupt and complete change.

"Miss Marple," he said, "I'm going to get a bottle of champagne. We'll all drink the health of your Uncle Henry."

Sixteen

THE CASE OF THE PERFECT MAID

Oh, if you please, madam, could I speak to you a moment?"

It might be thought that this request was in the nature of an absurdity, since Edna, Miss Marple's little maid, was actually speaking to her mistress at the moment.

Recognizing the idiom, however, Miss Marple said promptly, "Certainly, Edna, come in and shut the door. What is it?"

Obediently shutting the door, Edna advanced into the room, pleated the corner of her apron between her fingers, and swallowed once or twice.

"Yes, Edna?" said Miss Marple encouragingly.

"Oh, please, ma'am, it's my cousin, Gladdie."

"Dear me," said Miss Marple, her mind leaping to the worst—and, alas, the most usual conclusion. "Not—not in trouble?"

Edna hastened to reassure her. "Oh, no, ma'am, nothing of that kind. Gladdie's not that kind of girl. It's just that she's upset. You see, she's lost her place."

"Dear me, I am sorry to hear that. She was at Old Hall, wasn't she, with the Miss—Misses—Skinner?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's right, ma'am. And Gladdie's very upset about it—very upset indeed."

"Gladys has changed places rather often before, though, hasn't she?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am. She's always one for a change, Gladdie is. She never seems to get really settled, if you know what I mean. But she's always been the one to give the notice, you see!"

"And this time it's the other way round?" asked Miss Marple dryly.

"Yes, ma'am, and it's upset Gladdie something awful."

Miss Marple looked slightly surprised. Her recollection of Gladys, who had occasionally come to drink tea in the kitchen on her "days out," was a stout, giggling girl of unshakably equable temperament.

Edna went on. "You see, ma'am, it's the way it happened—the way Miss Skinner looked."

"How," enquired Miss Marple patiently, "did Miss Skinner look?"

This time Edna got well away with her news bulletin.

"Oh, ma'am, it was ever such a shock to Gladdie. You see, one of Miss Emily's brooches was missing, and such a hue and cry for it as never was, and of course nobody likes a thing like that to happen; it's upsetting, ma'am, if you know what I mean. And Gladdie's helped search everywhere, and there was Miss Lavinia saying she was going to the police about it, and then it turned up again, pushed right to the back of a drawer in the dressing table, and very thankful Gladdie was.

"And the very next day as ever was a plate got broken, and Miss Lavinia she bounced out right away and told Gladdie to take a month's notice. And what Gladdie feels is it couldn't have been the plate and that Miss Lavinia was just making an excuse of that, and that it must be because of the brooch and they think as she took it and put it back when the police was mentioned, and Gladdie wouldn't do such a thing, not never she wouldn't, and what she feels is as it will get round and tell against her and it's a very serious thing for a girl, as you know, ma'am."

Miss Marple nodded. Though having no particular liking for the bouncing, self-opinionated Gladys, she was quite sure of the girl's intrinsic honesty and could well imagine that the affair must have upset her.

Edna said wistfully, "I suppose, ma'am, there isn't anything you could do about it? Gladdie's in ever such a taking."

"Tell her not to be silly," said Miss Marple crisply. "If she didn't take the brooch—which I'm sure she didn't—then she has no cause to be upset."

"It'll get about," said Edna dismally.

Miss Marple said, "I—er—am going up that way this afternoon. I'll have a word with the Misses Skinner."

"Oh, thank you, madam," said Edna.

• • •

Old Hall was a big Victorian house surrounded by woods and park land. Since it had been proved unlettable and unsaleable as it was, an enterprising speculator had divided it into four flats with a central hot-water system, and the use of "the grounds" to be held in common by the tenants. The experiment had been satisfactory. A rich and eccentric old lady and her maid occupied one flat. The old lady had a passion for birds and entertained a feathered gathering to meals every day. A retired Indian judge and his wife rented a second. A very young couple, recently married, occupied the third, and the fourth had been taken only two months ago by two maiden ladies of the name of Skinner. The four sets of tenants were only on the most distant terms with each other, since none of them had anything in common. The landlord had been heard to say that this was an excellent thing. What he dreaded were friendships followed by estrangements and subsequent complaints to him.

Miss Marple was acquainted with all the tenants, though she knew none of them well. The elder Miss Skinner, Miss Lavinia, was what might be termed the working member of the firm, Miss Emily, the younger, spent most of her time in bed suffering from various complaints which, in the opinion of St. Mary Mead, were largely imaginary. Only Miss Lavinia believed devoutly in her sister's martyrdom and patience under affliction, and willingly ran errands and trotted up and down to the village for things that "my sister had suddenly fancied."

It was the view of St. Mary Mead that if Miss Emily suffered half as much as she said she did, she would have sent for Doctor Haydock long ago. But Miss Emily, when this was hinted to her, shut her eyes in a superior way and murmured that her case was not a simple one—the best specialists in London had been baffled by it—and that a wonderful new man had put her on a most revolutionary course of treatment and that she really hoped her health would improve under it. No humdrum GP could possibly understand her case.

“And it’s my opinion,” said the outspoken Miss Hartnell, “that she’s very wise not to send for him. Dear Doctor Haydock, in that breezy manner of his, would tell her that there was nothing the matter with her and to get up and not make a fuss! Do her a lot of good!”

Failing such arbitrary treatment, however, Miss Emily continued to lie on sofas, to surround herself with strange little pill boxes, and to reject nearly everything that had been cooked for her and ask for something else—usually something difficult and inconvenient to get.

The door was opened to Miss Marple by “Gladdie,” looking more depressed than Miss Marple had ever thought possible. In the sitting room (a quarter of the late drawing room, which had been partitioned into a dining room, drawing room, bathroom, and housemaid’s cupboard), Miss Lavinia rose to greet Miss Marple.

Lavinia Skinner was a tall, gaunt, bony female of fifty. She had a gruff voice and an abrupt manner.

“Nice to see you,” she said. “Emily’s lying down—feeling low today, poor dear. Hope she’ll see you, it would cheer her up, but there are times when she doesn’t feel up to seeing anybody. Poor dear, she’s wonderfully patient.”

Miss Marple responded politely. Servants were the main topic of conversation in St. Mary Mead, so it was not difficult to lead the conversation in that direction. Miss Marple said she had heard that that nice girl, Gladys Holmes, was leaving.

Miss Lavinia nodded. “Wednesday week. Broke things, you know. Can’t have that.”

Miss Marple sighed and said we all had to put up with things nowadays. It was so difficult to get girls to come to the country. Did Miss Skinner really think it was wise to part with Gladys?

"Know it's difficult to get servants," admitted Miss Lavinia. "The Devereuxs haven't got anybody—but then, I don't wonder—always quarrelling, jazz on all night—meals anytime—that girl knows nothing of housekeeping. I pity her husband! Then the Larkins have just lost their maid. Of course, what with the judge's Indian temper and his wanting chota hazri, as he calls it, at six in the morning and Mrs. Larkin always fussing, I don't wonder at that, either. Mrs. Carmichael's Janet is a fixture of course—though in my opinion she's the most disagreeable woman, and absolutely bullies the old lady."

"Then don't you think you might reconsider your decision about Gladys? She really is a nice girl. I know all her family; very honest and superior."

Miss Lavinia shook her head.

"I've got my reasons," she said importantly.

Miss Marple murmured, "You missed a brooch, I understand—"

"Now, who has been talking? I suppose the girl has. Quite frankly, I'm almost certain she took it. And then got frightened and put it back—but, of course, one can't say anything unless one is sure." She changed the subject. "Do come and see Emily, Miss Marple. I'm sure it would do her good."

Miss Marple followed meekly to where Miss Lavinia knocked on a door, was bidden enter, and ushered her guest into the best room in the flat, most of the light of which was excluded by half-drawn blinds. Miss Emily was lying in bed, apparently enjoying the half gloom and her own indefinite sufferings.

The dim light showed her to be a thin, indecisive-looking creature, with a good deal of greyish-yellow hair untidily wound around her head and erupting into curls, the whole thing looking like a bird's nest of which no self-respecting bird could be proud. There was a smell in the room of Eau de Cologne, stale biscuits, and camphor.

With half-closed eyes and a thin, weak voice, Emily Skinner explained that this was "one of her bad days."

"The worst of ill health is," said Miss Emily in a melancholy tone, "that one knows what a burden one is to everyone around one."

"Lavinia is very good to me. Lavinia dear, I do so hate giving trouble but if my hot-water bottle could only be filled in the way I like it—too full it weighs on me so—on the other hand, if it is not sufficiently filled, it gets cold immediately!"

"I'm sorry, dear. Give it to me. I will empty a little out."

"Perhaps, if you're doing that, it might be refilled. There are no rusks in the house, I suppose—no, no, it doesn't matter. I can do without. Some weak tea and a slice of lemon—no lemons? No, really, I couldn't drink tea without lemon. I think the milk was slightly turned this morning. It has put me against milk in my tea. It doesn't matter. I can do without my tea. Only I do feel so weak. Oysters, they say, are nourishing. I wonder if I could fancy a few? No, no, too much bother to get hold of them so late in the day. I can fast until tomorrow."

Lavinia left the room murmuring something incoherent about bicycling down to the village.

Miss Emily smiled feebly at her guest and remarked that she did hate giving anyone any trouble.

Miss Marple told Edna that evening that she was afraid her embassy had met with no success.

She was rather troubled to find that rumours as to Gladys's dishonesty were already going around the village.

In the post office, Miss Wetherby tackled her. "My dear Jane, they gave her a written reference saying she was willing and sober and respectable, but saying nothing about honesty. That seems to me most significant! I hear there was some trouble about a brooch. I think there must be something in it, you know, because one doesn't let a servant go nowadays unless it's something rather grave. They'll find it most difficult to get anyone else. Girls simply will not go to Old Hall. They're nervous coming home on their days out. You'll see, the Skinners won't find anyone else, and then, perhaps, that dreadful hypochondriac sister will have to get up and do something!"

Great was the chagrin of the village when it was made known that the Misses Skinner had engaged, from an agency, a new maid who, by all accounts, was a perfect paragon.

"A three-years" reference recommending her most warmly, she prefers the country, and actually asks less wages than Gladys. I really feel we have been most fortunate."

"Well, really," said Miss Marple, to whom these details were imparted by Miss Lavinia in the fishmonger's shop. "It does seem too good to be true."

It then became the opinion of St. Mary Mead that the paragon would cry off at the last minute and fail to arrive.

None of these prognostications came true, however, and the village was able to observe the domestic treasure, by name, Mary Higgins, driving through the village in Reed's taxi to Old Hall. It had to be admitted that her appearance was good. A most respectable-looking woman, very neatly dressed.

When Miss Marple next visited Old Hall, on the occasion of recruiting stall-holders for the vicarage fete, Mary Higgins opened the door. She was certainly a most superior-looking maid, at a guess forty years of age, with neat black hair, rosy cheeks, a plump figure discreetly arrayed in black with a white apron and cap—"quite the good, old-fashioned type of servant," as Miss Marple explained afterwards, and with the proper, inaudible respectful voice, so different from the loud but adenoidal accents of Gladys.

Miss Lavinia was looking far less harassed than usual and, although she regretted that she could not take a stall owing to her preoccupation with her sister, she nevertheless tendered a handsome monetary contribution, and promised to produce a consignment of pen-wipers and babies' socks.

Miss Marple commented on her air of well-being.

"I really feel I owe a great deal to Mary, I am so thankful I had the resolution to get rid of that other girl. Mary is really invaluable. Cooks nicely and waits beautifully and keeps our little flat scrupulously clean—mattresses turned over every day. And she is really wonderful with Emily!"

Miss Marple hastily enquired after Emily.

"Oh, poor dear, she has been very much under the weather lately. She can't help it, of course, but it really makes things a little difficult sometimes. Wanting certain things cooked and then, when they come, saying she can't eat now—and then wanting them again half an hour later and everything spoiled and having to be done again. It makes, of course, a lot of work—but fortunately Mary does not seem to mind at all. She's used to waiting on invalids, she says, and understands them. It is such a comfort."

"Dear me," said Miss Marple. "You are fortunate."

"Yes, indeed. I really feel Mary has been sent to us as an answer to prayer."

"She sounds to me," said Miss Marple, "almost too good to be true. I should—well, I should be a little careful if I were you."

Lavinia Skinner failed to perceive the point of this remark. She said, "Oh! I assure you I do all I can to make her comfortable. I don't know what I should do if she left."

"I don't expect she'll leave until she's ready to leave," said Miss Marple and stared very hard at her hostess.

Miss Lavinia said, "If one has no domestic worries, it takes such a load off one's mind, doesn't it? How is your little Edna shaping?"

"She's doing quite nicely. Not much head, of course. Not like your Mary. Still, I do know all about Edna because she's a village girl."

As she went out into the hall she heard the invalid's voice fretfully raised. "This compress has been allowed to get quite dry—Doctor Allerton particularly said moisture continually renewed. There, there, leave it. I want a cup of tea and a boiled egg—boiled only three minutes and a half, remember, and send Miss Lavinia to me."

The efficient Mary emerged from the bedroom and, saying to Lavinia, "Miss Emily is asking for you, madam," proceeded to open the door for Miss Marple, helping her into her coat and handing her her umbrella in the most irreproachable fashion.

Miss Marple took the umbrella, dropped it, tried to pick it up, and dropped her bag, which flew open. Mary politely retrieved various odds and ends—a handkerchief, an engagement book, an old-fashioned leather purse, two shillings, three pennies, and a striped piece of peppermint rock.

Miss Marple received the last with some signs of confusion.

"Oh, dear, that must have been Mrs. Clement's little boy. He was sucking it, I remember, and he took my bag to play with. He must have put it inside. It's terribly sticky, isn't it?"

"Shall I take it, madam?"

"Oh, would you? Thank you so much."

Mary stooped to retrieve the last item, a small mirror, upon recovering which Miss Marple exclaimed fervently, "How lucky, now, that that isn't broken."

She thereupon departed, Mary standing politely by the door holding a piece of striped rock with a completely expressionless face.

For ten days longer St. Mary Mead had to endure hearing of the excellencies of Miss Lavinia's and Miss Emily's treasure.

On the eleventh day, the village awoke to its big thrill.

Mary, the paragon, was missing! Her bed had not been slept in, and the front door was found ajar. She had slipped out quietly during the night.

And not Mary alone was missing! Two brooches and five rings of Miss Lavinia's; three rings, a pendant, a bracelet, and four brooches of Miss Emily's were missing, also!

It was the beginning of a chapter of catastrophe.

Young Mrs. Devereux had lost her diamonds which she kept in an unlocked drawer and also some valuable furs given to her as a wedding present. The judge and his wife also had had jewellery taken and a certain amount of money. Mrs. Carmichael was the greatest sufferer. Not only had she some very valuable jewels but she also kept in the flat a large sum of money which had gone. It had been Janet's evening out, and her mistress was in the habit of walking round the gardens at dusk calling to the birds and scattering crumbs. It seemed clear that Mary, the perfect maid, had had keys to fit all the flats!

There was, it must be confessed, a certain amount of ill-natured pleasure in St. Mary Mead. Miss Lavinia had boasted so much of her marvellous Mary.

"And all the time, my dear, just a common thief!"

Interesting revelations followed. Not only had Mary disappeared into the blue, but the agency who had provided her and vouched for her credentials was alarmed to find that the Mary Higgins who had applied to them and whose references they had taken up had, to all intents and purposes, never existed. It was the name of a bona fide servant who had lived with the bona fide sister of a dean, but the real Mary Higgins was existing peacefully in a place in Cornwall.

"Damned clever, the whole thing," Inspector Slack was forced to admit. "And, if you ask me, that woman works with a gang. There was a case of much the same kind in Northumberland a year ago. Stuff was never traced, and they never caught her. However, we'll do better than that in Much Benham!"

Inspector Slack was always a confident man.

Nevertheless, weeks passed, and Mary Higgins remained triumphantly at large. In vain Inspector Slack redoubled that energy that so belied his name.

Miss Lavinia remained tearful. Miss Emily was so upset, and felt so alarmed by her condition that she actually sent for Doctor Haydock.

The whole of the village was terribly anxious to know what he thought of Miss Emily's claims to ill health, but naturally could not ask him. Satisfactory data came to hand on the subject, however, through Mr. Meek, the chemist's assistant, who was walking out with Clara, Mrs. Price-Ridley's maid. It was then known that Doctor Haydock had prescribed a mixture of asafoetida and valerian which, according to Mr. Meek, was the stock remedy for malingerers in the army!

Soon afterwards it was learned that Miss Emily, not relishing the medical attention she had had, was declaring that in the state of her health she felt it her duty to be near the specialist in London who understood her case. It was, she said, only fair to Lavinia.

The flat was put up for subletting.

It was a few days after that that Miss Marple, rather pink and flustered, called at the police station in Much Benham and asked for Inspector Slack.

Inspector Slack did not like Miss Marple. But he was aware that the Chief Constable, Colonel Melchett, did not share that opinion. Rather grudgingly, therefore, he received her.

"Good afternoon, Miss Marple, what can I do for you?"

"Oh, dear," said Miss Marple, "I'm afraid you're in a hurry."

"Lots of work on," said Inspector Slack, "but I can spare a few moments."

"Oh dear," said Miss Marple. "I hope I shall be able to put what I say properly. So difficult, you know, to explain oneself, don't you think? No, perhaps you don't. But you see, not having been educated in the modern style—just a governess, you know, who taught one the dates of the kings of England and general knowledge—Doctor Brewer—three kinds of diseases of wheat—blight, mildew—now what was the third—was it smut?"

"Do you want to talk about smut?" asked Inspector Slack and then blushed.

"Oh, no, no." Miss Marple hastily disclaimed any wish to talk about smut. "Just an illustration, you know. And how needles are made, and all that. Discursive, you know, but not teaching one to keep to the point. Which is what I want to do. It's about Miss Skinner's maid, Gladys, you know."

"Mary Higgins," said Inspector Slack.

"Oh, yes, the second maid. But it's Gladys Holmes I mean—rather an impertinent girl and far too pleased with herself but really strictly honest, and it's so important that that should be recognized."

"No charge against her so far as I know," said the inspector.

"No, I know there isn't a charge—but that makes it worse. Because, you see, people go on thinking things. Oh, dear—I knew I should explain things badly. What I really mean is that the important thing is to find Mary Higgins."

"Certainly," said Inspector Slack. "Have you any ideas on the subject?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I have," said Miss Marple. "May I ask you a question? Are fingerprints of no use to you?"

"Ah," said Inspector Slack, "that's where she was a bit too artful for us. Did most of her work in rubber gloves or housemaid's gloves,

it seems. And she'd been careful—wiped off everything in her bedroom and on the sink. Couldn't find a single fingerprint in the place!"

"If you did have fingerprints, would it help?"

"It might, madam. They may be known at the Yard. This isn't her first job, I'd say!"

Miss Marple nodded brightly. She opened her bag and extracted a small cardboard box. Inside it, wedged in cotton wool, was a small mirror.

"From my handbag," said Miss Marple. "The maid's prints are on it. I think they should be satisfactory—she touched an extremely sticky substance a moment previously."

Inspector Slack stared. "Did you get her fingerprints on purpose?"

"Of course."

"You suspected her then?"

"Well, you know, it did strike me that she was a little too good to be true. I practically told Miss Lavinia so. But she simply wouldn't take the hint! I'm afraid, you know, Inspector, that I don't believe in paragons. Most of us have our faults—and domestic service shows them up very quickly!"

"Well," said Inspector Slack, recovering his balance, "I'm obliged to you, I'm sure. We'll send these up to the Yard and see what they have to say."

He stopped. Miss Marple had put her head a little on one side and was regarding him with a good deal of meaning.

"You wouldn't consider, I suppose, Inspector, looking a little nearer home?"

"What do you mean, Miss Marple?"

"It's very difficult to explain, but when you come across a peculiar thing you notice it. Although, often, peculiar things may be the merest trifles. I've felt that all along, you know; I mean about Gladys and the brooch. She's an honest girl; she didn't take that brooch. Then why did Miss Skinner think she did? Miss Skinner's not a fool; far from it! Why was she so anxious to let a girl go who was a good servant when servants are hard to get? It was peculiar, you

know. So I wondered. I wondered a good deal. And I noticed another peculiar thing! Miss Emily's a hypochondriac, but she's the first hypochondriac who hasn't sent for some doctor or other at once. Hypochondriacs love doctors, Miss Emily didn't!"

"What are you suggesting, Miss Marple?"

"Well, I'm suggesting, you know, that Miss Lavinia and Miss Emily are peculiar people. Miss Emily spends nearly all her time in a dark room. And if that hair of hers isn't a wig I—I'll eat my own back switch! And what I say is this—it's perfectly possible for a thin, pale, grey-haired, whining woman to be the same as a black-haired, rosy-cheeked, plump woman. And nobody that I can find ever saw Miss Emily and Mary Higgins at one and the same time.

"Plenty of time to get impressions of all the keys, plenty of time to find out all about the other tenants, and then—get rid of the local girl. Miss Emily takes a brisk walk across country one night and arrives at the station as Mary Higgins next day. And then, at the right moment, Mary Higgins disappears, and off goes the hue and cry after her. I'll tell you where you'll find her, Inspector. On Miss Emily Skinner's sofa! Get her fingerprints if you don't believe me, but you'll find I'm right! A couple of clever thieves, that's what the Skinners are—and no doubt in league with a clever post and rails or fence or whatever you call it. But they won't get away with it this time! I'm not going to have one of our village girls' character for honesty taken away like that! Gladys Holmes is as honest as the day, and everybody's going to know it! Good afternoon!"

Miss Marple had stalked out before Inspector Slack had recovered.

"Whew?" he muttered. "I wonder if she's right?"

He soon found out that Miss Marple was right again.

Colonel Melchett congratulated Slack on his efficiency, and Miss Marple had Gladys come to tea with Edna and spoke to her seriously on settling down in a good situation when she got one.

Seventeen

THE CASE OF THE CARETAKER

“Well,” demanded Doctor Haydock of his patient. “And how goes it today?”

Miss Marple smiled at him wanly from pillows.

“I suppose, really, that I’m better,” she admitted, “but I feel so terribly depressed. I can’t help feeling how much better it would have been if I had died. After all, I’m an old woman. Nobody wants me or cares about me.”

Doctor Haydock interrupted with his usual brusqueness. “Yes, yes, typical after-reaction of this type of flu. What you need is something to take you out of yourself. A mental tonic.”

Miss Marple sighed and shook her head.

“And what’s more,” continued Doctor Haydock, “I’ve brought my medicine with me!”

He tossed a long envelope on to the bed.

“Just the thing for you. The kind of puzzle that is right up your street.”

“A puzzle?” Miss Marple looked interested.

“Literary effort of mine,” said the doctor, blushing a little. “Tried to make a regular story of it. ‘He said,’ ‘she said,’ ‘the girl thought,’ etc. Facts of the story are true.”

“But why a puzzle?” asked Miss Marple.

Doctor Haydock grinned. "Because the interpretation is up to you. I want to see if you're as clever as you always make out."

With that Parthian shot he departed.

Miss Marple picked up the manuscript and began to read.

"And where is the bride?" asked Miss Harmon genially.

The village was all agog to see the rich and beautiful young wife that Harry Laxton had brought back from abroad. There was a general indulgent feeling that Harry—wicked young scapegrace—had had all the luck. Everyone had always felt indulgent towards Harry. Even the owners of windows that had suffered from his indiscriminate use of a catapult had found their indignation dissipated by young Harry's abject expression of regret. He had broken windows, robbed orchards, poached rabbits, and later had run into debt, got entangled with the local tobacconist's daughter—been disentangled and sent off to Africa—and the village as represented by various ageing spinsters had murmured indulgently. "Ah, well! Wild oats! He'll settle down!"

And now, sure enough, the prodigal had returned—not in affliction, but in triumph. Harry Laxton had "made good" as the saying goes. He had pulled himself together, worked hard, and had finally met and successfully wooed a young Anglo-French girl who was the possessor of a considerable fortune.

Harry might have lived in London, or purchased an estate in some fashionable hunting county, but he preferred to come back to the part of the world that was home to him. And there, in the most romantic way, he purchased the derelict estate in the dower house of which he had passed his childhood.

Kingsdean House had been unoccupied for nearly seventy years. It had gradually fallen into decay and abandon. An elderly caretaker and his wife lived in the one habitable corner of it. It was a vast, unprepossessing grandiose mansion, the

gardens overgrown with rank vegetation and the trees hemming it in like some gloomy enchanter's den.

The dower house was a pleasant, unpretentious house and had been let for a long term of years to Major Laxton, Harry's father. As a boy, Harry had roamed over the Kingsdean estate and knew every inch of the tangled woods, and the old house itself had always fascinated him.

Major Laxton had died some years ago, so it might have been thought that Harry would have had no ties to bring him back—nevertheless it was to the home of his boyhood that Harry brought his bride. The ruined old Kingsdean House was pulled down. An army of builders and contractors swooped down upon the place, and in almost a miraculously short space of time—so marvellously does wealth tell—the new house rose white and gleaming among the trees.

Next came a posse of gardeners and after them a procession of furniture vans.

The house was ready. Servants arrived. Lastly, a costly limousine deposited Harry and Mrs. Harry at the front door.

The village rushed to call, and Mrs. Price, who owned the largest house, and who considered herself to lead society in the place, sent out cards of invitation for a party "to meet the bride."

It was a great event. Several ladies had new frocks for the occasion. Everyone was excited, curious, anxious to see this fabulous creature. They said it was all so like a fairy story!

Miss Harmon, weather-beaten, hearty spinster, threw out her question as she squeezed her way through the crowded drawing room door. Little Miss Brent, a thin, acidulated spinster, fluttered out information.

"Oh, my dear, quite charming. Such pretty manners. And quite young. Really, you know, it makes one feel quite envious to see someone who has everything like that. Good looks and money and breeding—most distinguished, nothing in the least common about her—and dear Harry so devoted!"

"Ah," said Miss Harmon, "it's early days yet!"

Miss Brent's thin nose quivered appreciatively. "Oh, my dear, do you really think—"

"We all know what Harry is," said Miss Harmon.

"We know what he was! But I expect now—"

"Ah," said Miss Harmon, "men are always the same. Once a gay deceiver, always a gay deceiver. I know them."

"Dear, dear. Poor young thing." Miss Brent looked much happier. "Yes, I expect she'll have trouble with him. Someone ought really to warn her. I wonder if she's heard anything of the old story?"

"It seems so very unfair," said Miss Brent, "that she should know nothing. So awkward. Especially with only the one chemist's shop in the village."

For the erstwhile tobacconist's daughter was now married to Mr. Edge, the chemist.

"It would be so much nicer," said Miss Brent, "if Mrs. Laxton were to deal with Boots in Much Benham."

"I dare say," said Miss Harmon, "that Harry Laxton will suggest that himself."

And again a significant look passed between them.

"But I certainly think," said Miss Harmon, "that she ought to know."

"Beasts!" said Clarice Vane indignantly to her uncle, Doctor Haydock. "Absolute beasts some people are."

He looked at her curiously.

She was a tall, dark girl, handsome, warmhearted and impulsive. Her big brown eyes were alight now with indignation as she said, "All these cats—saying things—hinting things."

"About Harry Laxton?"

"Yes, about his affair with the tobacconist's daughter."

"Oh, that!" The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "A great many young men have affairs of that kind."

"Of course they do. And it's all over. So why harp on it? And bring it up years after? It's like ghouls feasting on dead bodies."

"I dare say, my dear, it does seem like that to you. But you see, they have very little to talk about down here, and so I'm afraid they do tend to dwell upon past scandals. But I'm curious to know why it upsets you so much?"

Clarice Vane bit her lip and flushed. She said, in a curiously muffled voice. "They—they look so happy. The Laxtons, I mean. They're young and in love, and it's all so lovely for them. I hate to think of it being spoiled by whispers and hints and innuendoes and general beastliness."

"H'm. I see."

Clarice went on. "He was talking to me just now. He's so happy and eager and excited and—yes, thrilled—at having got his heart's desire and rebuilt Kingsdean. He's like a child about it all. And she—well, I don't suppose anything has ever gone wrong in her whole life. She's always had everything. You've seen her. What did you think of her?"

The doctor did not answer at once. For other people, Louise Laxton might be an object of envy. A spoiled darling of fortune. To him she had brought only the refrain of a popular song heard many years ago, Poor little rich girl—

A small, delicate figure, with flaxen hair curled rather stiffly round her face and big, wistful blue eyes.

Louise was drooping a little. The long stream of congratulations had tired her. She was hoping it might soon be time to go. Perhaps, even now, Harry might say so. She looked at him sideways. So tall and broadshouldered with his eager pleasure in this horrible, dull party.

Poor little rich girl—

"Ooph!" It was a sigh of relief.

Harry turned to look at his wife amusedly. They were driving away from the party.

She said, "Darling, what a frightful party!"

Harry laughed. "Yes, pretty terrible. Never mind, my sweet. It had to be done, you know. All these old pussies knew me when I lived here as a boy. They'd have been terribly disappointed not to have got a look at you close up."

Louise made a grimace. She said, "Shall we have to see a lot of them?"

"What? Oh, no. They'll come and make ceremonious calls with card cases, and you'll return the calls and then you needn't bother anymore. You can have your own friends down or whatever you like."

Louise said, after a minute or two, "Isn't there anyone amusing living down here?"

"Oh, yes. There's the County, you know. Though you may find them a bit dull, too. Mostly interested in bulbs and dogs and horses. You'll ride, of course. You'll enjoy that. There's a horse over at Eglinton I'd like you to see. A beautiful animal, perfectly trained, no vice in him but plenty of spirit."

The car slowed down to take the turn into the gates of Kingsdean. Harry wrenched the wheel and swore as a grotesque figure sprang up in the middle of the road and he only just managed to avoid it. It stood there, shaking a fist and shouting after them.

Louise clutched his arm. "Who's that—that horrible old woman?"

Harry's brow was black. "That's old Murgatroyd. She and her husband were caretakers in the old house. They were there for nearly thirty years."

"Why does she shake her fist at you?"

Harry's face got red. "She—well, she resented the house being pulled down. And she got the sack, of course. Her husband's been dead two years. They say she got a bit queer after he died."

"Is she—she isn't—starving?"

Louise's ideas were vague and somewhat melodramatic. Riches prevented you coming into contact with reality.

Harry was outraged. "Good Lord, Louise, what an idea! I pensioned her off, of course—and handsomely, too! Found her a new cottage and everything."

Louise asked, bewildered, "Then why does she mind?"

Harry was frowning, his brows drawn together. "Oh, how should I know? Craziness! She loved the house."

"But it was a ruin, wasn't it?"

"Of course it was—crumbling to pieces—roof leaking—more or less unsafe. All the same I suppose it meant something to her. She'd been there a long time. Oh, I don't know! The old devil's cracked, I think."

Louise said uneasily, "She—I think she cursed us. Oh, Harry, I wish she hadn't."

It seemed to Louise that her new home was tainted and poisoned by the malevolent figure of one crazy old woman. When she went out in the car, when she rode, when she walked out with the dogs, there was always the same figure waiting. Crouched down on herself, a battered hat over wisps of iron-grey hair, and the slow muttering of imprecations.

Louise came to believe that Harry was right—the old woman was mad. Nevertheless that did not make things easier. Mrs. Murgatroyd never actually came to the house, nor did she use definite threats, nor offer violence. Her squatting figure remained always just outside the gates. To appeal to the police would have been useless and, in any case, Harry Laxton was averse to that course of action. It would, he said, arouse local sympathy for the old brute. He took the matter more easily than Louise did.

"Don't worry about it, darling. She'll get tired of this silly cursing business. Probably she's only trying it on."

"She isn't, Harry. She—she hates us! I can feel it. She—she's illwishing us."

"She's not a witch, darling, although she may look like one! Don't be morbid about it all."

Louise was silent. Now that the first excitement of settling in was over, she felt curiously lonely and at a loose end. She had been used to life in London and the Riviera. She had no knowledge of or taste for English country life. She was ignorant of gardening, except for the final act of "doing the flowers." She did not really care for dogs. She was bored by such neighbours as she met. She enjoyed riding best, sometimes with Harry, sometimes, when he was busy about the estate, by herself. She hacked through the woods and lanes, enjoying the easy paces of the beautiful horse that Harry had bought for her. Yet even Prince Hal, most sensitive of chestnut steeds, was wont to shy and snort as he carried his mistress past the huddled figure of a malevolent old woman.

One day Louise took her courage in both hands. She was out walking. She had passed Mrs. Murgatroyd, pretending not to notice her, but suddenly she swerved back and went right up to her. She said, a little breathlessly, "What is it? What's the matter? What do you want?"

The old woman blinked at her. She had a cunning, dark gypsy face, with wisps of iron-grey hair, and bleared, suspicious eyes. Louise wondered if she drank.

She spoke in a whining and yet threatening voice. "What do I want, you ask? What, indeed! That which has been took away from me. Who turned me out of Kingsdean House? I'd lived there, girl and woman, for near on forty years. It was a black deed to turn me out and it's black bad luck it'll bring to you and him!"

Louise said, "You've got a very nice cottage and—"

She broke off. The old woman's arms flew up. She screamed, "What's the good of that to me? It's my own place I want and my own fire as I sat beside all them years. And as for you and him, I'm telling you there will be no happiness for you in your new fine house. It's the black sorrow will be upon you! Sorrow and death and my curse. May your fair face rot."

Louise turned away and broke into a little stumbling run. She thought, I must get away from here! We must sell the house! We must go away.

At the moment, such a solution seemed easy to her. But Harry's utter incomprehension took her back. He exclaimed, "Leave here? Sell the house? Because of a crazy old woman's threats? You must be mad."

"No, I'm not. But she—she frightens me, I know something will happen."

Harry Laxton said grimly, "Leave Mrs. Murgatroyd to me. I'll settle her!"

A friendship had sprung up between Clarice Vane and young Mrs. Laxton. The two girls were much of an age, though dissimilar both in character and in tastes. In Clarice's company, Louise found reassurance. Clarice was so self-reliant, so sure of herself. Louise mentioned the matter of Mrs. Murgatroyd and her threats, but Clarice seemed to regard the matter as more annoying than frightening.

"It's so stupid, that sort of thing," she said. "And really very annoying for you."

"You know, Clarice, I—I feel quite frightened sometimes. My heart gives the most awful jumps."

"Nonsense, you mustn't let a silly thing like that get you down. She'll soon tire of it."

She was silent for a minute or two. Clarice said, "What's the matter?"

Louise paused for a minute, then her answer came with a rush. "I hate this place! I hate being here. The woods and this house, and the awful silence at night, and the queer noise owls make. Oh, and the people and everything."

"The people. What people?"

"The people in the village. Those prying, gossiping old maids."

Clarice said sharply, "What have they been saying?"

"I don't know. Nothing particular. But they've got nasty minds. When you've talked to them you feel you wouldn't trust anybody—not anybody at all."

Clarice said harshly, "Forget them. They've nothing to do but gossip. And most of the muck they talk they just invent."

Louise said, "I wish we'd never come here. But Harry adores it so." Her voice softened.

Clarice thought, How she adores him. She said abruptly, "I must go now."

"I'll send you back in the car. Come again soon."

Clarice nodded. Louise felt comforted by her new friend's visit. Harry was pleased to find her more cheerful and from then on urged her to have Clarice often to the house.

Then one day he said, "Good news for you, darling."

"Oh, what?"

"I've fixed the Murgatroyd. She's got a son in America, you know. Well, I've arranged for her to go out and join him. I'll pay her passage."

"Oh, Harry, how wonderful. I believe I might get to like Kingsdean after all."

"Get to like it? Why, it's the most wonderful place in the world!"

Louise gave a little shiver. She could not rid herself of her superstitious fear so easily.

If the ladies of St. Mary Mead had hoped for the pleasure of imparting information about her husband's past to the bride, this pleasure was denied them by Harry Laxton's own prompt action.

Miss Harmon and Clarice Vane were both in Mr. Edge's shop, the one buying mothballs and the other a packet of boracic, when Harry Laxton and his wife came in.

After greeting the two ladies, Harry turned to the counter and was just demanding a toothbrush when he stopped in

mid-speech and exclaimed heartily, "Well, well, just see who's here! Bella, I do declare."

Mrs. Edge, who had hurried out from the back parlour to attend to the congestion of business, beamed back cheerfully at him, showing her big white teeth. She had been a dark, handsome girl and was still a reasonably handsome woman, though she had put on weight, and the lines of her face had coarsened; but her large brown eyes were full of warmth as she answered, "Bella, it is, Mr. Harry, and pleased to see you after all these years."

Harry turned to his wife. "Bella's an old flame of mine, Louise," he said. "Head-over-heels in love with her, wasn't I, Bella?"

"That's what you say," said Mrs. Edge.

Louise laughed. She said, "My husband's very happy seeing all his old friends again."

"Ah," said Mrs. Edge, "we haven't forgotten you, Mr. Harry. Seems like a fairy tale to think of you married and building up a new house instead of that ruined old Kingsdean House."

"You look very well and blooming," said Harry, and Mrs. Edge laughed and said there was nothing wrong with her and what about that toothbrush?

Clarice, watching the baffled look on Miss Harmon's face, said to herself exultantly, Oh, well-done, Harry. You've spiked their guns.

Doctor Haydock said abruptly to his niece, "What's all this nonsense about old Mrs. Murgatroyd hanging about Kingsdean and shaking her fist and cursing the new regime?"

"It isn't nonsense. It's quite true. It's upset Louise a good deal."

"Tell her she needn't worry—when the Murgatroyds were caretakers they never stopped grumbling about the place—they only stayed because Murgatroyd drank and couldn't get another job."

"I'll tell her," said Clarice doubtfully, "but I don't think she'll believe you. The old woman fairly screams with rage."

"Always used to be fond of Harry as a boy. I can't understand it."

Clarice said, "Oh, well—they'll be rid of her soon. Harry's paying her passage to America."

Three days later, Louise was thrown from her horse and killed.

Two men in a baker's van were witnesses of the accident. They saw Louise ride out of the gates, saw the old woman spring up and stand in the road waving her arms and shouting, saw the horse start, swerve, and then bolt madly down the road, flinging Louise Laxton over his head.

One of them stood over the unconscious figure, not knowing what to do, while the other rushed to the house to get help.

Harry Laxton came running out, his face ghastly. They took off a door of the van and carried her on it to the house. She died without regaining consciousness and before the doctor arrived.

(End of Doctor Haydock's manuscript.)

When Doctor Haydock arrived the following day, he was pleased to note that there was a pink flush in Miss Marple's cheek and decidedly more animation in her manner.

"Well," he said, "what's the verdict?"

"What's the problem, Doctor Haydock?" countered Miss Marple.

"Oh, my dear lady, do I have to tell you that?"

"I suppose," said Miss Marple, "that it's the curious conduct of the caretaker. Why did she behave in that very odd way? People do mind being turned out of their old homes. But it wasn't her home. In fact, she used to complain and grumble while she was there. Yes, it certainly looks very fishy. What became of her, by the way?"

"Did a bunk to Liverpool. The accident scared her. Thought she'd wait there for her boat."

"All very convenient for somebody," said Miss Marple. "Yes, I think the 'Problem of the Caretaker's Conduct' can be solved easily enough. Bribery, was it not?"

"That's your solution?"

"Well, if it wasn't natural for her to behave in that way, she must have been 'putting on an act' as people say, and that means that somebody paid her to do what she did."

"And you know who that somebody was?"

"Oh, I think so. Money again, I'm afraid. And I've always noticed that gentlemen always tend to admire the same type."

"Now I'm out of my depth."

"No, no, it all hangs together. Harry Laxton admired Bella Edge, a dark, vivacious type. Your niece Clarice was the same. But the poor little wife was quite a different type—fair-haired and clinging—not his type at all. So he must have married her for her money. And murdered her for her money, too!"

"You use the word 'murder'?"

"Well, he sounds the right type. Attractive to women and quite unscrupulous. I suppose he wanted to keep his wife's money and marry your niece. He may have been seen talking to Mrs. Edge. But I don't fancy he was attached to her anymore. Though I dare say he made the poor woman think he was, for ends of his own. He soon had her well under his thumb, I fancy."

"How exactly did he murder her, do you think?"

Miss Marple stared ahead of her for some minutes with dreamy blue eyes.

"It was very well-timed—with the baker's van as witness. They could see the old woman and, of course, they'd put down the horse's fright to that. But I should imagine, myself, that an air gun, or perhaps a catapult. Yes, just as the horse came through the gates. The horse bolted, of course, and Mrs. Laxton was thrown."

She paused, frowning.

"The fall might have killed her. But he couldn't be sure of that. And he seems the sort of man who would lay his plans carefully and leave nothing to chance. After all, Mrs. Edge could get him something suitable without her husband knowing. Otherwise, why

would Harry bother with her? Yes, I think he had some powerful drug handy, that could be administered before you arrived. After all, if a woman is thrown from her horse and has serious injuries and dies without recovering consciousness, well—a doctor wouldn't normally be suspicious, would he? He'd put it down to shock or something."

Doctor Haydock nodded.

"Why did you suspect?" asked Miss Marple.

"It wasn't any particular cleverness on my part," said Doctor Haydock. "It was just the trite, well-known fact that a murderer is so pleased with his cleverness that he doesn't take proper precautions. I was just saying a few consolatory words to the bereaved husband—and feeling damned sorry for the fellow, too—when he flung himself down on the settee to do a bit of playacting and a hypodermic syringe fell out of his pocket.

"He snatched it up and looked so scared that I began to think. Harry Laxton didn't drug; he was in perfect health; what was he doing with a hypodermic syringe? I did the autopsy with a view to certain possibilities. I found strophanthin. The rest was easy. There was strophanthin in Laxton's possession, and Bella Edge, questioned by the police, broke down and admitted to having got it for him. And finally old Mrs. Murgatroyd confessed that it was Harry Laxton who had put her up to the cursing stunt."

"And your niece got over it?"

"Yes, she was attracted by the fellow, but it hadn't gone far."

The doctor picked up his manuscript.

"Full marks to you, Miss Marple—and full marks to me for my prescription. You're looking almost yourself again."

Eighteen

TAPE-MEASURE MURDER

Miss Politt took hold of the knocker and rapped politely on the cottage door. After a discreet interval she knocked again. The parcel under her left arm shifted a little as she did so, and she readjusted it. Inside the parcel was Mrs. Spenlow's new green winter dress, ready for fitting. From Miss Politt's left hand dangled a bag of black silk, containing a tape measure, a pincushion, and a large, practical pair of scissors.

Miss Politt was tall and gaunt, with a sharp nose, pursed lips, and meagre iron-grey hair. She hesitated before using the knocker for the third time. Glancing down the street, she saw a figure rapidly approaching. Miss Hartnell, jolly, weather-beaten, fifty-five, shouted out in her usual loud bass voice, "Good afternoon, Miss Politt!"

The dressmaker answered, "Good afternoon, Miss Hartnell." Her voice was excessively thin and genteel in its accents. She had started life as a lady's maid. "Excuse me," she went on, "but do you happen to know if by any chance Mrs. Spenlow isn't at home?"

"Not the least idea," said Miss Hartnell.

"It's rather awkward, you see. I was to fit on Mrs. Spenlow's new dress this afternoon. Three thirty, she said."

Miss Hartnell consulted her wrist watch. "It's a little past the half hour now."

"Yes. I have knocked three times, but there doesn't seem to be any answer, so I was wondering if perhaps Mrs. Spenlow might have gone out and forgotten. She doesn't forget appointments as a rule, and she wants the dress to wear the day after tomorrow."

Miss Hartnell entered the gate and walked up the path to join Miss Politt outside the door of Laburnum Cottage.

"Why doesn't Gladys answer the door?" she demanded. "Oh, no, of course, it's Thursday—Gladys's day out. I expect Mrs. Spenlow has fallen asleep. I don't expect you've made enough noise with this thing."

Seizing the knocker, she executed a deafening *rat-a-tat-tat*, and in addition thumped upon the panels of the door. She also called out in a stentorian voice, "What ho, within there!"

There was no response.

Miss Politt murmured, "Oh, I think Mrs. Spenlow must have forgotten and gone out, I'll call round some other time." She began edging away down the path.

"Nonsense," said Miss Hartnell firmly. "She can't have gone out. I'd have met her. I'll just take a look through the windows and see if I can find any signs of life."

She laughed in her usual hearty manner, to indicate that it was a joke, and applied a perfunctory glance to the nearest windowpane—perfunctory because she knew quite well that the front room was seldom used, Mr. and Mrs. Spenlow preferring the small back sitting room.

Perfunctory as it was, though, it succeeded in its object. Miss Hartnell, it is true, saw no signs of life. On the contrary, she saw, through the window, Mrs. Spenlow lying on the hearthrug—dead.

"Of course," said Miss Hartnell, telling the story afterwards, "I managed to keep my head. That Politt creature wouldn't have had the least idea of what to do. 'Got to keep our heads,' I said to her. '*You* stay here, and I'll go for Constable Palk.' She said something about not wanting to be left, but I paid no attention at all. One has to be firm with that sort of person. I've always found they enjoy making a fuss. So I was just going off when, at that very moment, Mr. Spenlow came round the corner of the house."

Here Miss Hartnell made a significant pause. It enabled her audience to ask breathlessly, "Tell me, how did he *look*?"

Miss Hartnell would then go on, "Frankly, *I* suspected something at once! He was *far* too calm. He didn't seem surprised in the least. And you may say what you like, it isn't natural for a man to hear that his wife is dead and display no emotion whatever."

Everybody agreed with this statement.

The police agreed with it, too. So suspicious did they consider Mr. Spenlow's detachment, that they lost no time in ascertaining how that gentleman was situated as a result of his wife's death. When they discovered that Mrs. Spenlow had been the monied partner, and that her money went to her husband under a will made soon after their marriage, they were more suspicious than ever.

Miss Marple, that sweet-faced—and, some said, vinegar-tongued—elderly spinster who lived in the house next to the rectory, was interviewed very early—within half an hour of the discovery of the crime. She was approached by Police Constable Palk, importantly thumbing a notebook. "If you don't mind, ma'am, I've a few questions to ask you."

Miss Marple said, "In connection with the murder of Mrs. Spenlow?"

Palk was startled. "May I ask, madam, how you got to know of it?"

"The fish," said Miss Marple.

The reply was perfectly intelligible to Constable Palk. He assumed correctly that the fishmonger's boy had brought it, together with Miss Marple's evening meal.

Miss Marple continued gently. "Lying on the floor in the sitting room, strangled—possibly by a very narrow belt. But whatever it was, it was taken away."

Palk's face was wrathful. "How that young Fred gets to know everything—"

Miss Marple cut him short adroitly. She said, "There's a pin in your tunic."

Constable Palk looked down, startled. He said, "They do say, 'See a pin and pick it up, all the day you'll have good luck.'"

"I hope that will come true. Now what is it you want me to tell you?"

Constable Palk cleared his throat, looked important, and consulted his notebook. "Statement was made to me by Mr. Arthur Spenlow, husband of the deceased. Mr. Spenlow says that at two thirty, as far as he can say, he was rung up by Miss Marple, and asked if he would come over at a quarter past three as she was anxious to consult him about something. Now, ma'am, is that true?"

"Certainly not," said Miss Marple.

"You did not ring up Mr. Spenlow at two thirty?"

"Neither at two thirty nor any other time."

"Ah," said Constable Palk, and sucked his moustache with a good deal of satisfaction.

"What else did Mr. Spenlow say?"

"Mr. Spenlow's statement was that he came over here as requested, leaving his own house at ten minutes past three; that on arrival here he was informed by the maidservant that Miss Marple was 'not at home.'"

"That part of it is true," said Miss Marple. "He did come here, but I was at a meeting at the Women's Institute."

"Ah," said Constable Palk again.

Miss Marple exclaimed, "Do tell me, Constable, do you suspect Mr. Spenlow?"

"It's not for me to say at this stage, but it looks to me as though somebody, naming no names, has been trying to be artful."

Miss Marple said thoughtfully, "Mr. Spenlow?"

She liked Mr. Spenlow. He was a small, spare man, stiff and conventional in speech, the acme of respectability. It seemed odd that he should have come to live in the country, he had so clearly lived in towns all his life. To Miss Marple he confided the reason. He said, "I have always intended, ever since I was a small boy, to live in the country someday and have a garden of my own. I have always been very much attached to flowers. My wife, you know, kept a flower shop. That's where I saw her first."

A dry statement, but it opened up a vista of romance. A younger, prettier Mrs. Spenlow, seen against a background of flowers.

Mr. Spenlow, however, really knew nothing about flowers. He had no idea of seeds, of cuttings, of bedding out, of annuals or perennials. He had only a vision—a vision of a small cottage garden thickly planted with sweet-smelling, brightly coloured blossoms. He had asked, almost pathetically, for instruction, and had noted down Miss Marple's replies to questions in a little book.

He was a man of quiet method. It was, perhaps, because of this trait, that the police were interested in him when his wife was found murdered. With patience and perseverance they learned a good deal about the late Mrs. Spenlow—and soon all St. Mary Mead knew it, too.

The late Mrs. Spenlow had begun life as a between-maid in a large house. She had left that position to marry the second gardener, and with him had started a flower shop in London. The shop had prospered. Not so the gardener, who before long had sickened and died.

His widow carried on the shop and enlarged it in an ambitious way. She had continued to prosper. Then she had sold the business at a handsome price and embarked upon matrimony for the second time—with Mr. Spenlow, a middle-aged jeweller who had inherited a small and struggling business. Not long afterwards, they had sold the business and came down to St. Mary Mead.

Mrs. Spenlow was a well-to-do woman. The profits from her florist's establishment she had invested—"under spirit guidance," as she explained to all and sundry. The spirits had advised her with unexpected acumen.

All her investments had prospered, some in quite a sensational fashion. Instead, however, of this increasing her belief in spiritualism, Mrs. Spenlow basely deserted mediums and sittings, and made a brief but wholehearted plunge into an obscure religion with Indian affinities which was based on various forms of deep breathing. When, however, she arrived at St. Mary Mead, she had relapsed into a period of orthodox Church-of-England beliefs. She was a good deal at the vicarage, and attended church services with assiduity. She patronized the village shops, took an interest in the local happenings, and played village bridge.

A humdrum, everyday life. And—suddenly—murder.

Colonel Melchett, the chief constable, had summoned Inspector Slack.

Slack was a positive type of man. When he had made up his mind, he was sure. He was quite sure now. "Husband did it, sir," he said.

"You think so?"

"Quite sure of it. You've only got to look at him. Guilty as hell. Never showed a sign of grief or emotion. He came back to the house knowing she was dead."

"Wouldn't he at least have tried to act the part of the distracted husband?"

"Not him, sir. Too pleased with himself. Some gentlemen can't act. Too stiff."

"Any other woman in his life?" Colonel Melchett asked.

"Haven't been able to find any trace of one. Of course, he's the artful kind. He'd cover his tracks. As I see it, he was just fed up with his wife. She'd got the money, and I should say was a trying woman to live with—always taking up with some 'ism' or other. He cold-bloodedly decided to do away with her and live comfortably on his own."

"Yes, that could be the case, I suppose."

"Depend upon it, that was it. Made his plans careful. Pretended to get a phone call—"

Melchett interrupted him. "No call been traced?"

"No, sir. That means either that he lied, or that the call was put through from a public telephone booth. The only two public phones in the village are at the station and the post office. Post office it certainly wasn't. Mrs. Blade sees everyone who comes in. Station it might be. Train arrives at two twenty-seven and there's a bit of a bustle then. But the main thing is *he* says it was Miss Marple who called him up, and that certainly isn't true. The call didn't come from her house, and she herself was away at the Institute."

"You're not overlooking the possibility that the husband was deliberately got out of the way—by someone who wanted to murder

Mrs. Spenlow?"

"You're thinking of young Ted Gerard, aren't you, sir? I've been working on him—what we're up against there is lack of motive. He doesn't stand to gain anything."

"He's an undesirable character, though. Quite a pretty little spot of embezzlement to his credit."

"I'm not saying he isn't a wrong 'un. Still, he did go to his boss and own up to that embezzlement. And his employers weren't wise to it."

"An Oxford Grouper," said Melchett.

"Yes, sir. Became a convert and went off to do the straight thing and own up to having pinched money. I'm not saying, mind you, that it mayn't have been astuteness. He may have thought he was suspected and decided to gamble on honest repentance."

"You have a sceptical mind, Slack," said Colonel Melchett. "By the way, have you talked to Miss Marple at all?"

"What's *she* got to do with it, sir?"

"Oh, nothing. But she hears things, you know. Why don't you go and have a chat with her? She's a very sharp old lady."

Slack changed the subject. "One thing I've been meaning to ask you, sir. That domestic-service job where the deceased started her career—Sir Robert Abercrombie's place. That's where that jewel robbery was—emeralds—worth a packet. Never got them. I've been looking it up—must have happened when the Spenlow woman was there, though she'd have been quite a girl at the time. Don't think she was mixed up in it, do you, sir? Spenlow, you know, was one of those little tuppenny-ha'penny jewellers—just the chap for a fence."

Melchett shook his head. "Don't think there's anything in that. She didn't even know Spenlow at the time. I remember the case. Opinion in police circles was that a son of the house was mixed up in it—Jim Abercrombie—awful young waster. Had a pile of debts, and just after the robbery they were all paid off—some rich woman, so they said, but I don't know—Old Abercrombie hedged a bit about the case—tried to call the police off."

"It was just an idea, sir," said Slack.



Miss Marple received Inspector Slack with gratification, especially when she heard that he had been sent by Colonel Melchett.

"Now, really, that is very kind of Colonel Melchett. I didn't know he remembered me."

"He remembers you, all right. Told me that what you didn't know of what goes on in St. Mary Mead isn't worth knowing."

"Too kind of him, but really I don't know anything at all. About this murder, I mean."

"You know what the talk about it is."

"Oh, of course—but it wouldn't do, would it, to repeat just idle talk?"

Slack said, with an attempt at geniality, "This isn't an official conversation, you know. It's in confidence, so to speak."

"You mean you really want to know what people are saying? Whether there's any truth in it or not?"

"That's the idea."

"Well, of course, there's been a great deal of talk and speculation. And there are really two distinct camps, if you understand me. To begin with, there are the people who think that the husband did it. A husband or a wife is, in a way, the natural person to suspect, don't you think so?"

"Maybe," said the inspector cautiously.

"Such close quarters, you know. Then, so often, the money angle. I hear that it was Mrs. Spenlow who had the money, and therefore Mr. Spenlow does benefit by her death. In this wicked world I'm afraid the most uncharitable assumptions are often justified."

"He comes into a tidy sum, all right."

"Just so. It would seem quite plausible, wouldn't it, for him to strangle her, leave the house by the back, come across the fields to my house, ask for me and pretend he'd had a telephone call from me, then go back and find his wife murdered in his absence—hoping, of course, that the crime would be put down to some tramp or burglar."

The inspector nodded. "What with the money angle—and if they'd been on bad terms lately—"

But Miss Marple interrupted him. "Oh, but they hadn't."

"You know that for a fact?"

"Everyone would have known if they'd quarrelled! The maid, Gladys Brent—she'd have soon spread it round the village."

The inspector said feebly, "She mightn't have known—" and received a pitying smile in reply.

Miss Marple went on. "And then there's the other school of thought. Ted Gerard. A good-looking young man. I'm afraid, you know, that good looks are inclined to influence one more than they should. Our last curate but one—quite a magical effect! All the girls came to church—evening service as well as morning. And many older women became unusually active in parish work—and the slippers and scarfs that were made for him! Quite embarrassing for the poor young man.

"But let me see, where was I? Oh, yes, this young man, Ted Gerard. Of course, there has been talk about him. He's come down to see her so often. Though Mrs. Spenlow told me herself that he was a member of what I think they call the Oxford Group. A religious movement. They are quite sincere and very earnest, I believe, and Mrs. Spenlow was impressed by it all."

Miss Marple took a breath and went on. "And I'm sure there was no reason to believe that there was anything more in it than that, but you know what people are. Quite a lot of people are convinced that Mrs. Spenlow was infatuated with the young man, and that she'd lent him quite a lot of money. And it's perfectly true that he was actually seen at the station that day. In the train—the two twenty-seven down train. But of course it would be quite easy, wouldn't it, to slip out of the other side of the train and go through the cutting and over the fence and round by the hedge and never come out of the station entrance at all. So that he need not have been seen going to the cottage. And, of course, people do think that what Mrs. Spenlow was wearing was rather peculiar."

"Peculiar?"

"A kimono. Not a dress." Miss Marple blushed. "That sort of thing, you know, is, perhaps, rather suggestive to some people."

"You think it was suggestive?"

"Oh, no, *I* don't think so, I think it was perfectly natural."

"You think it was natural?"

"Under the circumstances, yes." Miss Marple's glance was cool and reflective.

Inspector Slack said, "It might give us another motive for the husband. Jealousy."

"Oh, no, Mr. Spenlow would never be jealous. He's not the sort of man who notices things. If his wife had gone away and left a note on the pincushion, it would be the first he'd know of anything of that kind."

Inspector Slack was puzzled by the intent way she was looking at him. He had an idea that all her conversation was intended to hint at something he didn't understand. She said now, with some emphasis, "Didn't *you* find any clues, Inspector—on the spot?"

"People don't leave fingerprints and cigarette ash nowadays, Miss Marple."

"But this, I think," she suggested, "was an old-fashioned crime—"

Slack said sharply, "Now what do you mean by that?"

Miss Marple remarked slowly, "I think, you know, that Constable Palk could help you. He was the first person on the—on the 'scene of the crime,' as they say."

Mr. Spenlow was sitting in a deck chair. He looked bewildered. He said, in his thin, precise voice, "I may, of course, be imagining what occurred. My hearing is not as good as it was. But I distinctly think I heard a small boy call after me, 'Yah, who's a Crippen?' It—it conveyed the impression to me that he was of the opinion that I had—had killed my dear wife."

Miss Marple, gently snipping off a dead rose head, said, "That was the impression he meant to convey, no doubt."

"But what could possibly have put such an idea into a child's head?"

Miss Marple coughed. "Listening, no doubt, to the opinions of his elders."

"You—you really mean that other people think that, also?"

"Quite half the people in St. Mary Mead."

"But—my dear lady—what can possibly have given rise to such an idea? I was sincerely attached to my wife. She did not, alas, take to living in the country as much as I had hoped she would do, but perfect agreement on every subject is an impossible idea. I assure you I feel her loss very keenly."

"Probably. But if you will excuse my saying so, you don't sound as though you do."

Mr. Spence drew his meagre frame up to its full height. "My dear lady, many years ago I read of a certain Chinese philosopher who, when his dearly loved wife was taken from him, continued calmly to beat a gong in the street—a customary Chinese pastime, I presume—exactly as usual. The people of the city were much impressed by his fortitude."

"But," said Miss Marple, "the people of St. Mary Mead react rather differently. Chinese philosophy does not appeal to them."

"But you understand?"

Miss Marple nodded. "My Uncle Henry," she explained, "was a man of unusual self-control. His motto was 'Never display emotion.' He, too, was very fond of flowers."

"I was thinking," said Mr. Spence with something like eagerness, "that I might, perhaps, have a pergola on the west side of the cottage. Pink roses and, perhaps, wisteria. And there is a white starry flower, whose name for the moment escapes me—"

In the tone in which she spoke to her grandnephew, aged three, Miss Marple said, "I have a very nice catalogue here, with pictures. Perhaps you would like to look through it—I have to go up to the village."

Leaving Mr. Spence sitting happily in the garden with his catalogue, Miss Marple went up to her room, hastily rolled up a dress in a piece of brown paper, and, leaving the house, walked briskly up to the post office. Miss Politt, the dressmaker, lived in the rooms over the post office.

But Miss Marple did not at once go through the door and up the stairs. It was just two thirty, and, a minute late, the Much Ben-ham bus drew up outside the post office door. It was one of the events of the day in St. Mary Mead. The postmistress hurried out with parcels, parcels connected with the shop side of her business, for the post office also dealt in sweets, cheap books, and children's toys.

For some four minutes Miss Marple was alone in the post office.

Not till the postmistress returned to her post did Miss Marple go upstairs and explain to Miss Politt that she wanted her old grey crepe altered and made more fashionable if that were possible. Miss Politt promised to see what she could do.

The chief constable was rather astonished when Miss Marple's name was brought to him. She came in with many apologies. "So sorry—so very sorry to disturb you. You are so busy, I know, but then you have always been so very kind, Colonel Melchett, and I felt I would rather come to you instead of Inspector Slack. For one thing, you know, I should hate Constable Palk to get into any trouble. Strictly speaking, I suppose he shouldn't have touched anything at all."

Colonel Melchett was slightly bewildered. He said, "Palk? That's the St. Mary Mead constable, isn't it? What has he been doing?"

"He picked up a pin, you know. It was in his tunic. And it occurred to me at the time that it was quite probable he had actually picked it up in Mrs. Spenlow's house."

"Quite, quite. But after all, you know, what's a pin? Matter of fact he did pick the pin up just by Mrs. Spenlow's body. Came and told Slack about it yesterday—you put him up to that, I gather? Oughtn't to have touched anything, of course, but as I said, what's a pin? It was only a common pin. Sort of thing any woman might use."

"Oh, no, Colonel Melchett, that's where you're wrong. To a man's eye, perhaps, it looked like an ordinary pin, but it wasn't. It was a special pin, a very thin pin, the kind you buy by the box, the kind used mostly by dressmakers."

Melchett stared at her, a faint light of comprehension breaking in on him. Miss Marple nodded her head several times, eagerly.

"Yes, of course. It seems to me so obvious. She was in her kimono because she was going to try on her new dress, and she went into the front room, and Miss Politt just said something about measurements and put the tape measure round her neck—and then all she'd have to do was to cross it and pull—quite easy, so I've heard. And then, of course, she'd go outside and pull the door to and stand there knocking as though she'd just arrived. But the pin shows she'd *already been in the house*."

"And it was Miss Politt who telephoned to Spenlow?"

"Yes. From the post office at two thirty—just when the bus comes and the post office would be empty."

Colonel Melchett said, "But my dear Miss Marple, why? In heaven's name, why? You can't have a murder without a motive."

"Well, I think, you know, Colonel Melchett, from all I've heard, that the crime dates from a long time back. It reminds me, you know, of my two cousins, Antony and Gordon. Whatever Antony did always went right for him, and with poor Gordon it was just the other way about. Race horses went lame, and stocks went down, and property depreciated. As I see it, the two women were in it together."

"In what?"

"The robbery. Long ago. Very valuable emeralds, so I've heard. The lady's maid and the tweeny. Because one thing hasn't been explained—how, when the tweeny married the gardener, did they have enough money to set up a flower shop?"

"The answer is, it was her share of the—the swag, I think is the right expression. Everything she did turned out well. Money made money. But the other one, the lady's maid, must have been unlucky. She came down to being just a village dressmaker. Then they met again. Quite all right at first, I expect, until Mr. Ted Gerard came on the scene.

"Mrs. Spenlow, you see, was already suffering from conscience, and was inclined to be emotionally religious. This young man no doubt urged her to 'face up' and to 'come clean' and I dare say she was strung up to do it. But Miss Politt didn't see it that way. All she saw was that she might go to prison for a robbery she had

committed years ago. So she made up her mind to put a stop to it all. I'm afraid, you know, that she was always rather a wicked woman. I don't believe she'd have turned a hair if that nice, stupid Mr. Spenlow had been hanged."

Colonel Melchett said slowly, "We can—er—verify your theory—up to a point. The identity of the Politt woman with the lady's maid at the Abercrombies,' but—"

Miss Marple reassured him. "It will be all quite easy. She's the kind of woman who will break down at once when she's taxed with the truth. And then, you see, I've got her tape measure. I—er—abstracted it yesterday when I was trying on. When she misses it and thinks the police have got it—well, she's quite an ignorant woman and she'll think it will prove the case against her in some way."

She smiled at him encouragingly. "You'll have no trouble, I can assure you." It was the tone in which his favourite aunt had once assured him that he could not fail to pass his entrance examination into Sandhurst.

And he had passed.

Nineteen

GREENSHAW'S FOLLY

The two men rounded the corner of the shrubbery.

"Well, there you are," said Raymond West. "That's it."

Horace Bindler took a deep, appreciative breath.

"But my dear," he cried, "how wonderful." His voice rose in a high screech of 'sthetic delight, then deepened in reverent awe. "It's unbelievable. Out of this world! A period piece of the best."

"I thought you'd like it," said Raymond West, complacently.

"Like it? My dear—" Words failed Horace. He unbuckled the strap of his camera and got busy. "This will be one of the gems of my collection," he said happily. "I do think, don't you, that it's rather amusing to have a collection of monstrosities? The idea came to me one night seven years ago in my bath. My last real gem was in the Campo Santo at Genoa, but I really think this beats it. What's it called?"

"I haven't the least idea," said Raymond.

"I suppose it's got a name?"

"It must have. But the fact is that it's never referred to round here as anything but Greenshaw's Folly."

"Greenshaw being the man who built it?"

"Yes. In eighteen-sixty or seventy or thereabouts. The local success story of the time. Barefoot boy who had risen to immense

prosperity. Local opinion is divided as to why he built this house, whether it was sheer exuberance of wealth or whether it was done to impress his creditors. If the latter, it didn't impress them. He either went bankrupt or the next thing to it. Hence the name, Greenshaw's Folly."

Horace's camera clicked. "There," he said in a satisfied voice. "Remind me to show you No. 310 in my collection. A really incredible marble mantelpiece in the Italian manner." He added, looking at the house, "I can't conceive of how Mr. Greenshaw thought of it all."

"Rather obvious in some ways," said Raymond. "He had visited the châteaux of the Loire, don't you think? Those turrets. And then, rather unfortunately, he seems to have travelled in the Orient. The influence of the Taj Mahal is unmistakable. I rather like the Moorish wing," he added, "and the traces of a Venetian palace."

"One wonders how he ever got hold of an architect to carry out these ideas."

Raymond shrugged his shoulders.

"No difficulty about that, I expect," he said. "Probably the architect retired with a good income for life while poor old Greenshaw went bankrupt."

"Could we look at it from the other side?" asked Horace, "or are we trespassing!"

"We're trespassing all right," said Raymond, "but I don't think it will matter."

He turned towards the corner of the house and Horace skipped after him.

"But who lives here, my dear? Orphans or holiday visitors? It can't be a school. No playing fields or brisk efficiency."

"Oh, a Greenshaw lives here still," said Raymond over his shoulder. "The house itself didn't go in the crash. Old Greenshaw's son inherited it. He was a bit of a miser and lived here in a corner of it. Never spent a penny. Probably never had a penny to spend. His daughter lives here now. Old lady—very eccentric."

As he spoke Raymond was congratulating himself on having thought of Greenshaw's Folly as a means of entertaining his guest. These literary critics always professed themselves as longing for a

weekend in the country, and were wont to find the country extremely boring when they got there. Tomorrow there would be the Sunday papers, and for today Raymond West congratulated himself on suggesting a visit to Greenshaw's Folly to enrich Horace Bindler's well-known collection of monstrosities.

They turned the corner of the house and came out on a neglected lawn. In one corner of it was a large artificial rockery, and bending over it was a figure at sight of which Horace clutched Raymond delightedly by the arm.

"My dear," he exclaimed, "do you see what she's got on? A sprigged print dress. Just like a housemaid—when there were housemaids. One of my most cherished memories is staying at a house in the country when I was quite a boy where a real housemaid called you in the morning, all crackling in a print dress and a cap. Yes, my boy, really—a cap. Muslin with streamers. No, perhaps it was the parlourmaid who had the streamers. But anyway she was a real housemaid and she brought in an enormous brass can of hot water. What an exciting day we're having."

The figure in the print dress had straightened up and had turned towards them, trowel in hand. She was a sufficiently startling figure. Unkempt locks of iron-grey fell wispily on her shoulders, a straw hat rather like the hats that horses wear in Italy was crammed down on her head. The coloured print dress she wore fell nearly to her ankles. Out of a weather-beaten, not-too-clean face, shrewd eyes surveyed them appraisingly.

"I must apologize for trespassing, Miss Greenshaw," said Raymond West, as he advanced towards her, "but Mr. Horace Bindler who is staying with me—"

Horace bowed and removed his hat.

"—is most interested in—er—ancient history and—er—fine buildings."

Raymond West spoke with the ease of a well-known author who knows that he is a celebrity, that he can venture where other people may not.

Miss Greenshaw looked up at the sprawling exuberance behind her.

"It *is* a fine house," she said appreciatively. "My grandfather built it—before my time, of course. He is reported as having said that he wished to astonish the natives."

"I'll say he did that, ma'am," said Horace Bindler.

"Mr. Bindler is the well-known literary critic," said Raymond West.

Miss Greenshaw had clearly no reverence for literary critics. She remained unimpressed.

"I consider it," said Miss Greenshaw, referring to the house, "as a monument to my grandfather's genius. Silly fools come here, and ask me why I don't sell it and go and live in a flat. What would *I* do in a flat? It's my home and I live in it," said Miss Greenshaw. "Always have lived here." She considered, brooding over the past. "There were three of us. Laura married the curate. Papa wouldn't give her any money, said clergymen ought to be unworldly. She died, having a baby. Baby died too. Nettie ran away with the riding master. Papa cut her out of his will, of course. Handsome fellow, Harry Fletcher, but no good. Don't think Nettie was happy with him. Anyway, she didn't live long. They had a son. He writes to me sometimes, but of course he isn't a Greenshaw. *I'm* the last of the Greenshaws." She drew up her bent shoulders with a certain pride, and readjusted the rakish angle of the straw hat. Then, turning, she said sharply,

"Yes, Mrs. Cresswell, what is it?"

Approaching them from the house was a figure that, seen side by side with Miss Greenshaw, seemed ludicrously dissimilar. Mrs. Cresswell had a marvellously dressed head of well-blued hair towering upwards in meticulously arranged curls and rolls. It was as though she had dressed her head to go as a French marquise to a fancy-dress party. The rest of her middle-aged person was dressed in what ought to have been rustling black silk but was actually one of the shinier varieties of black rayon. Although she was not a large woman, she had a well-developed and sumptuous bust. Her voice when she spoke, was unexpectedly deep. She spoke with exquisite diction, only a slight hesitation over words beginning with "h" and the final pronunciation of them with an exaggerated aspirate gave rise to a suspicion that at some remote period in her youth she might have had trouble over dropping her h's.

"The fish, madam," said Mrs. Cresswell, "the slice of cod. It has not arrived. I have asked Alfred to go down for it and he refuses to do so."

Rather unexpectedly, Miss Greenshaw gave a cackle of laughter.

"Refuses, does he?"

"Alfred, madam, has been most disobliging."

Miss Greenshaw raised two earth-stained fingers to her lips, suddenly produced an ear-splitting whistle and at the same time yelled:

"Alfred. Alfred, come here."

Round the corner of the house a young man appeared in answer to the summons, carrying a spade in his hand. He had a bold, handsome face and as he drew near he cast an unmistakably malevolent glance towards Mrs. Cresswell.

"You wanted me, miss?" he said.

"Yes, Alfred. I hear you've refused to go down for the fish. What about it, eh?"

Alfred spoke in a surly voice.

"I'll go down for it if you wants it, miss. You've only got to say."

"I do want it. I want it for my supper."

"Right you are, miss. I'll go right away."

He threw an insolent glance at Mrs. Cresswell, who flushed and murmured below her breath:

"Really! It's unsupportable."

"Now that I think of it," said Miss Greenshaw, "a couple of strange visitors are just what we need aren't they, Mrs. Cresswell?"

Mrs. Cresswell looked puzzled.

"I'm sorry, madam—"

"For you-know-what," said Miss Greenshaw, nodding her head. "Beneficiary to a will mustn't witness it. That's right, isn't it?" She appealed to Raymond West.

"Quite correct," said Raymond.

"I know enough law to know that," said Miss Greenshaw. "And you two are men of standing."

She flung down her trowel on her weeding basket.

"Would you mind coming up to the library with me?"

"Delighted," said Horace eagerly.

She led the way through french windows and through a vast yellow and gold drawing room with faded brocade on the walls and dust covers arranged over the furniture, then through a large dim hall, up a staircase and into a room on the first floor.

"My grandfather's library," she announced.

Horace looked round the room with acute pleasure. It was a room, from his point of view, quite full of monstrosities. The heads of sphinxes appeared on the most unlikely pieces of furniture, there was a colossal bronze representing, he thought, Paul and Virginia, and a vast bronze clock with classical motifs of which he longed to take a photograph.

"A fine lot of books," said Miss Greenshaw.

Raymond was already looking at the books. From what he could see from a cursory glance there was no book here of any real interest or, indeed, any book which appeared to have been read. They were all superbly bound sets of the classics as supplied ninety years ago for furnishing a gentleman's library. Some novels of a bygone period were included. But they too showed little signs of having been read.

Miss Greenshaw was fumbling in the drawers of a vast desk. Finally she pulled out a parchment document.

"My will," she explained. "Got to leave your money to someone—or so they say. If I died without a will I suppose that son of a horse-coper would get it. Handsome fellow, Harry Fletcher, but a rogue if there ever was one. Don't see why *his* son should inherit this place. No," she went on, as though answering some unspoken objection, "I've made up my mind. I'm leaving it to Cresswell."

"Your housekeeper?"

"Yes. I've explained it to her. I make a will leaving her all I've got and then I don't need to pay her any wages. Saves me a lot in current expenses, and it keeps her up to the mark. No giving me notice and walking off at any minute. Very la-di-dah and all that, isn't she? But her father was a working plumber in a very small way. *She's* nothing to give herself airs about."

She had by now unfolded the parchment. Picking up a pen she dipped it in the inkstand and wrote her signature, Katherine Dorothy Greenshaw.

"That's right," she said. "You've seen me sign it, and then you two sign it, and that makes it legal."

She handed the pen to Raymond West. He hesitated a moment, feeling an unexpected repulsion to what he was asked to do. Then he quickly scrawled the well-known signature, for which his morning's mail usually brought at least six demands a day.

Horace took the pen from him and added his own minute signature.

"That's done," said Miss Greenshaw.

She moved across to the bookcase and stood looking at them uncertainly, then she opened a glass door, took out a book and slipped the folded parchment inside.

"I've my own places for keeping things," she said.

"*Lady Audley's Secret*," Raymond West remarked, catching sight of the title as she replaced the book.

Miss Greenshaw gave another cackle of laughter.

"Best seller in its day," she remarked. "Not like your books, eh?"

She gave Raymond a sudden friendly nudge in the ribs. Raymond was rather surprised that she even knew he wrote books. Although Raymond West was quite a name in literature, he could hardly be described as a best seller. Though softening a little with the advent of middle age, his books dealt bleakly with the sordid side of life.

"I wonder," Horace demanded breathlessly, "if I might just take a photograph of the clock?"

"By all means," said Miss Greenshaw. "It came, I believe, from the Paris exhibition."

"Very probably," said Horace. He took his picture.

"This room's not been used much since my grandfather's time," said Miss Greenshaw. "This desk's full of old diaries of his. Interesting, I should think. I haven't the eyesight to read them myself. I'd like to get them published, but I suppose one would have to work on them a good deal."

"You could engage someone to do that," said Raymond West.

"Could I really? It's an idea, you know. I'll think about it."

Raymond West glanced at his watch.

"We mustn't trespass on your kindness any longer," he said.

"Pleased to have seen you," said Miss Greenshaw graciously. "Thought you were the policeman when I heard you coming round the corner of the house."

"Why a policeman?" demanded Horace, who never minded asking questions.

Miss Greenshaw responded unexpectedly.

"If you want to know the time, ask a policeman," she carolled, and with this example of Victorian wit, nudged Horace in the ribs and roared with laughter.

"It's been a wonderful afternoon," sighed Horace as they walked home. "Really, that place has everything. The only thing the library needs is a body. Those old-fashioned detective stories about murder in the library—that's just the kind of library I'm sure the authors had in mind."

"If you want to discuss murder," said Raymond, "you must talk to my Aunt Jane."

"Your Aunt Jane? Do you mean Miss Marple?" He felt a little at a loss.

The charming old-world lady to whom he had been introduced the night before seemed the last person to be mentioned in connection with murder.

"Oh, yes," said Raymond. "Murder is a speciality of hers."

"But my dear, how intriguing. What do you really mean?"

"I mean just that," said Raymond. He paraphrased: "Some commit murder, some get mixed-up in murders, others have murder thrust upon them. My Aunt Jane comes into the third category."

"You are joking."

"Not in the least. I can refer you to the former Commissioner of Scotland Yard, several Chief Constables and one or two hardworking inspectors of the CID."

Horace said happily that wonders would never cease. Over the tea table they gave Joan West, Raymond's wife, Lou Oxley her niece, and old Miss Marple, a résumé of the afternoon's happenings,

recounting in detail everything that Miss Greenshaw had said to them.

"But I do think," said Horace, "that there is something a little *sinister* about the whole setup. That duchess-like creature, the housekeeper—arsenic, perhaps, in the teapot, now that she knows her mistress has made the will in her favour?"

"Tell us, Aunt Jane," said Raymond. "Will there be murder or won't there? What do *you* think?"

"I think," said Miss Marple, winding up her wool with a rather severe air, "that you shouldn't joke about these things as much as you do, Raymond. Arsenic is, of course, *quite* a possibility. So easy to obtain. Probably present in the toolshed already in the form of weed killer."

"Oh, really, darling," said Joan West, affectionately. "Wouldn't that be rather too obvious?"

"It's all very well to make a will," said Raymond, "I don't suppose really the poor old thing has anything to leave except that awful white elephant of a house, and who would want that?"

"A film company possibly," said Horace, "or a hotel or an institution?"

"They'd expect to buy it for a song," said Raymond, but Miss Marple was shaking her head.

"You know, dear Raymond, I cannot agree with you there. About the money, I mean. The grandfather was evidently one of those lavish spenders who make money easily, but can't keep it. He may have gone broke, as you say, but hardly bankrupt or else his son would not have had the house. Now the son, as is so often the case, was an entirely different character to his father. A miser. A man who saved every penny. I should say that in the course of his lifetime he probably put by a very good sum. This Miss Greenshaw appears to have taken after him, to dislike spending money, that is. Yes, I should think it quite likely that she had quite a good sum tucked away."

"In that case," said Joan West, "I wonder now—what about Lou?"

They looked at Lou as she sat, silent, by the fire.

Lou was Joan West's niece. Her marriage had recently, as she herself put it, come unstuck, leaving her with two young children and a bare sufficiency of money to keep them on.

"I mean," said Joan, "if this Miss Greenshaw really wants someone to go through diaries and get a book ready for publication. . . ."

"It's an idea," said Raymond.

Lou said in a low voice:

"It's work I could do—and I'd enjoy it."

"I'll write to her," said Raymond.

"I wonder," said Miss Marple thoughtfully, "what the old lady meant by that remark about a policeman?"

"Oh, it was just a joke."

"It reminded me," said Miss Marple, nodding her head vigorously, "yes, it reminded me very much of Mr. Naysmith."

"Who was Mr. Naysmith?" asked Raymond, curiously.

"He kept bees," said Miss Marple, "and was very good at doing the acrostics in the Sunday papers. And he liked giving people false impressions just for fun. But sometimes it led to trouble."

Everybody was silent for a moment, considering Mr. Naysmith, but as there did not seem to be any points of resemblance between him and Miss Greenshaw, they decided that dear Aunt Jane was perhaps getting a *little* bit disconnected in her old age.

Horace Bindler went back to London without having collected any more monstrosities and Raymond West wrote a letter to Miss Greenshaw telling her that he knew of a Mrs. Louisa Oxley who would be competent to undertake work on the diaries. After a lapse of some days, a letter arrived, written in spidery old-fashioned handwriting, in which Miss Greenshaw declared herself anxious to avail herself of the services of Mrs. Oxley, and making an appointment for Mrs. Oxley to come and see her.

Lou duly kept the appointment, generous terms were arranged and she started work on the following day.

"I'm awfully grateful to you," she said to Raymond. "It will fit in beautifully. I can take the children to school, go on to Greenshaw's

Folly and pick them up on my way back. How fantastic the whole setup is! That old woman has to be seen to be believed."

On the evening of her first day at work she returned and described her day.

"I've hardly seen the housekeeper," she said. "She came in with coffee and biscuits at half past eleven with her mouth pursed up very prunes and prisms, and would hardly speak to me. I think she disapproves deeply of my having been engaged." She went on, "It seems there's quite a feud between her and the gardener, Alfred. He's a local boy and fairly lazy, I should imagine, and he and the housekeeper won't speak to each other. Miss Greenshaw said in her rather grand way, 'There have always been feuds as far as I can remember between the garden and the house staff. It was so in my grandfather's time. There were three men and a boy in the garden then, and eight maids in the house, but there was always friction.'"

On the following day Lou returned with another piece of news.

"Just fancy," she said, "I was asked to ring up the nephew this morning."

"Miss Greenshaw's nephew?"

"Yes. It seems he's an actor playing in the company that's doing a summer season at Boreham on Sea. I rang up the theatre and left a message asking him to lunch tomorrow. Rather fun, really. The old girl didn't want the housekeeper to know. I think Mrs. Cresswell has done something that's annoyed her."

"Tomorrow another instalment of this thrilling serial," murmured Raymond.

"It's exactly like a serial, isn't it? Reconciliation with the nephew, blood is thicker than water—another will to be made and the old will destroyed."

"Aunt Jane, you're looking very serious."

"Was I, my dear? Have you heard anymore about the policeman?"

Lou looked bewildered. "I don't know anything about a policeman."

"That remark of hers, my dear," said Miss Marple, "must have meant *something*."

Lou arrived at her work the next day in a cheerful mood. She passed through the open front door—the doors and windows of the house were always open. Miss Greenshaw appeared to have no fear of burglars, and was probably justified, as most things in the house weighed several tons and were of no marketable value.

Lou had passed Alfred in the drive. When she first caught sight of him he had been leaning against a tree smoking a cigarette, but as soon as he had caught sight of her he had seized a broom and begun diligently to sweep leaves. An idle young man, she thought, but good-looking. His features reminded her of someone. As she passed through the hall on her way upstairs to the library she glanced at the large picture of Nathaniel Greenshaw which presided over the mantelpiece, showing him in the acme of Victorian prosperity, leaning back in a large armchair, his hands resting on the gold Albert across his capacious stomach. As her glance swept up from the stomach to the face with its heavy jowls, its bushy eyebrows and its flourishing black moustache, the thought occurred to her that Nathaniel Greenshaw must have been handsome as a young man. He had looked, perhaps, a little like Alfred. . . .

She went into the library, shut the door behind her, opened her typewriter and got out the diaries from the drawer at the side of the desk. Through the open window she caught a glimpse of Miss Greenshaw in a puce-coloured sprigged print, bending over the rockery, weeding assiduously. They had had two wet days, of which the weeds had taken full advantage.

Lou, a town-bred girl, decided that if she ever had a garden it would never contain a rockery which needed hand weeding. Then she settled down to her work.

When Mrs. Cresswell entered the library with the coffee tray at half past eleven, she was clearly in a very bad temper. She banged the tray down on the table, and observed to the universe.

"Company for lunch—and nothing in the house! What am *I* supposed to do, I should like to know? And no sign of Alfred."

"He was sweeping in the drive when I got here," Lou offered.

"I dare say. A nice soft job."

Mrs. Cresswell swept out of the room and banged the door behind her. Lou grinned to herself. She wondered what "the nephew" would be like.

She finished her coffee and settled down to her work again. It was so absorbing that time passed quickly. Nathaniel Greenshaw, when he started to keep a diary, had succumbed to the pleasure of frankness. Trying out a passage relating to the personal charm of a barmaid in the neighbouring town, Lou reflected that a good deal of editing would be necessary.

As she was thinking this, she was startled by a scream from the garden. Jumping up, she ran to the open window. Miss Greenshaw was staggering away from the rockery towards the house. Her hands were clasped to her breast and between them there protruded a feathered shaft that Lou recognized with stupefaction to be the shaft of an arrow.

Miss Greenshaw's head, in its battered straw hat, fell forward on her breast. She called up to Lou in a failing voice: ". . . shot. . . he shot me . . . with an arrow . . . get help. . . ."

Lou rushed to the door. She turned the handle, but the door would not open. It took her a moment or two of futile endeavour to realize that she was locked in. She rushed back to the window.

"I'm locked in."

Miss Greenshaw, her back towards Lou, and swaying a little on her feet was calling up to the housekeeper at a window farther along.

"Ring police . . . telephone. . . ."

Then, lurching from side to side like a drunkard she disappeared from Lou's view through the window below into the drawing room. A moment later Lou heard a crash of broken china, a heavy fall, and then silence. Her imagination reconstructed the scene. Miss Greenshaw must have staggered blindly into a small table with a Sèvres tea set on it.

Desperately Lou pounded on the door, calling and shouting. There was no creeper or drainpipe outside the window that could help her to get out that way.

Tired at last of beating on the door, she returned to the window. From the window of her sitting room farther along, the housekeeper's head appeared.

"Come and let me out, Mrs. Oxley. I'm locked in."

"So am I."

"Oh dear, isn't it awful? I've telephoned the police. There's an extension in this room, but what I can't understand, Mrs. Oxley, is our being locked in. *I* never heard a key turn, did you?"

"No. I didn't hear anything at all. Oh dear, what shall we do? Perhaps Alfred might hear us." Lou shouted at the top of her voice, "Alfred, Alfred."

"Gone to his dinner as likely as not. What time is it?"

Lou glanced at her watch.

"Twenty-five past twelve."

"He's not supposed to go until half past, but he sneaks off earlier whenever he can."

"Do you think—do you think—"

Lou meant to ask "Do you think she's dead?" but the words stuck in her throat.

There was nothing to do but wait. She sat down on the window-sill. It seemed an eternity before the stolid helmeted figure of a police constable came round the corner of the house. She leant out of the window and he looked up at her, shading his eyes with his hand. When he spoke his voice held reproof.

"What's going on here?" he asked disapprovingly.

From their respective windows, Lou and Mrs. Cresswell poured a flood of excited information down on him.

The constable produced a notebook and pencil. "You ladies ran upstairs and locked yourselves in? Can I have your names, please?"

"No. Somebody else locked us in. Come and let us out."

The constable said reprovingly, "All in good time," and disappeared through the window below.

Once again time seemed infinite. Lou heard the sound of a car arriving, and, after what seemed an hour, but was actually three minutes, first Mrs. Cresswell and then Lou, were released by a police sergeant more alert than the original constable.

"Miss Greenshaw?" Lou's voice faltered. "What—what's happened?"

The sergeant cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you, madam," he said, "what I've already told Mrs. Cresswell here. Miss Greenshaw is dead."

"Murdered," said Mrs. Cresswell. "That's what it is—murder."

The sergeant said dubiously:

"Could have been an accident—some country lads shooting with bows and arrows."

Again there was the sound of a car arriving. The sergeant said:

"That'll be the MO," and started downstairs.

But it was not the MO. As Lou and Mrs. Cresswell came down the stairs a young man stepped hesitatingly through the front door and paused, looking round him with a somewhat bewildered air.

Then, speaking in a pleasant voice that in some way seemed familiar to Lou—perhaps it had a family resemblance to Miss Greenshaw's—he asked:

"Excuse me, does—er—does Miss Greenshaw live here?"

"May I have your name if you please," said the sergeant advancing upon him.

"Fletcher," said the young man. "Nat Fletcher. I'm Miss Greenshaw's nephew, as a matter of fact."

"Indeed, sir, well—I'm sorry—I'm sure—"

"Has anything happened?" asked Nat Fletcher.

"There's been an—accident—your aunt was shot with an arrow—penetrated the jugular vein—"

Mrs. Cresswell spoke hysterically and without her usual refinement:

"Your h'aunt's been murdered, that's what's 'appened. Your h'aunt's been murdered."

Inspector Welch drew his chair a little nearer to the table and let his gaze wander from one to the other of the four people in the room. It was the evening of the same day. He had called at the Wests' house to take Lou Oxley once more over her statement.

"You are sure of the exact words? *Shot—he shot me—with an arrow—get help?*"

Lou nodded.

"And the time?"

"I looked at my watch a minute or two later—it was then twelve twenty-five."

"Your watch keeps good time?"

"I looked at the clock as well."

The inspector turned to Raymond West.

"It appears, sir, that about a week ago you and a Mr. Horace Bindler were witnesses to Miss Greenshaw's will?"

Briefly, Raymond recounted the events of the afternoon visit that he and Horace Bindler had paid to Greenshaw's Folly.

"This testimony of yours may be important," said Welch. "Miss Greenshaw distinctly told you, did she, that her will was being made in favour of Mrs. Cresswell, the housekeeper, that she was not paying Mrs. Cresswell any wages in view of the expectations Mrs. Cresswell had of profiting by her death?"

"That is what she told me—yes."

"Would you say that Mrs. Cresswell was definitely aware of these facts?"

"I should say undoubtedly. Miss Greenshaw made a reference in my presence to beneficiaries not being able to witness a will and Mrs. Cresswell clearly understood what she meant by it. Moreover, Miss Greenshaw herself told me that she had come to this arrangement with Mrs. Cresswell."

"So Mrs. Cresswell had reason to believe she was an interested party. Motive's clear enough in her case, and I dare say she'd be our chief suspect now if it wasn't for the fact that she was securely locked in her room like Mrs. Oxley here, and also that Miss Greenshaw definitely said a *man* shot her—"

"She definitely *was* locked in her room?"

"Oh yes. Sergeant Cayley let her out. It's a big old-fashioned lock with a big old-fashioned key. The key was in the lock and there's not a chance that it could have been turned from inside or any hanky-panky of that kind. No, you can take it definitely that Mrs. Cresswell

was locked inside that room and couldn't get out. And there were no bows and arrows in the room and Miss Greenshaw couldn't in any case have been shot from a window—the angle forbids it—no, Mrs. Cresswell's out of it."

He paused and went on:

"Would you say that Miss Greenshaw, in your opinion, was a practical joker?"

Miss Marple looked up sharply from her corner.

"So the will wasn't in Mrs. Cresswell's favour after all?" she said.

Inspector Welch looked over at her in a rather surprised fashion.

"That's a very clever guess of yours, madam," he said. "No. Mrs. Cresswell isn't named as beneficiary."

"Just like Mr. Naysmith," said Miss Marple, nodding her head. "Miss Greenshaw told Mrs. Cresswell she was going to leave her everything and so got out of paying her wages; and then she left her money to somebody else. No doubt she was vastly pleased with herself. No wonder she chortled when she put the will away in *Lady Audley's Secret*."

"It was lucky Mrs. Oxley was able to tell us about the will and where it was put," said the inspector. "We might have had a long hunt for it otherwise."

"A Victorian sense of humour," murmured Raymond West. "So she left her money to her nephew after all," said Lou.

The inspector shook his head.

"No," he said, "she didn't leave it to Nat Fletcher. The story goes around here—of course I'm new to the place and I only get the gossip that's secondhand—but it seems that in the old days both Miss Greenshaw and her sister were set on the handsome young riding master, and the sister got him. No, she didn't leave the money to her nephew—" He paused, rubbing his chin, "She left it to Alfred," he said.

"Alfred—the gardener?" Joan spoke in a surprised voice.

"Yes, Mrs. West. Alfred Pollock."

"But why?" cried Lou.

Miss Marple coughed and murmured:

"I should imagine, though perhaps I am wrong, that there may have been—what we might call *family* reasons."

"You could call them that in a way," agreed the inspector. "It's quite well-known in the village, it seems, that Thomas Pollock, Alfred's grandfather, was one of old Mr. Greenshaw's by-blows."

"Of course," cried Lou, "the resemblance! I saw it this morning."

She remembered how after passing Alfred she had come into the house and looked up at old Greenshaw's portrait.

"I dare say," said Miss Marple, "that she thought Alfred Pollock might have a pride in the house, might even want to live in it, whereas her nephew would almost certainly have no use for it whatever and would sell it as soon as he could possibly do so. He's an actor, isn't he? What play exactly is he acting in at present?"

Trust an old lady to wander from the point, thought Inspector Welch, but he replied civilly:

"I believe, madam, they are doing a season of James Barrie's plays."

"Barrie," said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

"*What Every Woman Knows*," said Inspector Welch, and then blushed. "Name of a play," he said quickly. "I'm not much of a theatregoer myself," he added, "but the wife went along and saw it last week. Quite well done, she said it was."

"Barrie wrote some very charming plays," said Miss Marple, "though I must say that when I went with an old friend of mine, General Easterly, to see Barrie's *Little Mary*—" she shook her head sadly, "—neither of us knew where to look."

The inspector, unacquainted with the play *Little Mary* looked completely fogged. Miss Marple explained:

"When I was a girl, Inspector, nobody ever mentioned the word *stomach*."

The inspector looked even more at sea. Miss Marple was murmuring titles under her breath.

"*The Admirable Crichton*. Very clever. *Mary Rose*—a charming play. I cried, I remember. *Quality Street* I didn't care for so much. Then there was *A Kiss for Cinderella*. Oh, of course."

Inspector Welch had no time to waste on theatrical discussion. He returned to the matter in hand.

"The question is," he said, "did Alfred Pollock know that the old lady had made a will in his favour? Did she tell him?" He added: "You see—there's an archery club over at Boreham Lovell and *Alfred Pollock's a member*. He's a very good shot indeed with a bow and arrow."

"Then isn't your case quite clear?" asked Raymond West. "It would fit in with the doors being locked on the two women—he'd know just where they were in the house."

The inspector looked at him. He spoke with deep melancholy.

"He's got an alibi," said the inspector.

"I always think alibis are definitely suspicious."

"Maybe, sir," said Inspector Welch. "You're talking as a writer."

"I don't write detective stories," said Raymond West, horrified at the mere idea.

"Easy enough to say that alibis are suspicious," went on Inspector Welch, "but unfortunately we've got to deal with facts."

He sighed.

"We've got three good suspects," he said. "Three people who, as it happened, were very close upon the scene at the time. Yet the odd thing is that it looks as though none of the three could have done it. The housekeeper I've already dealt with—the nephew, Nat Fletcher, at the moment Miss Greenshaw was shot, was a couple of miles away filling up his car at a garage and asking his way—as for Alfred Pollock six people will swear that he entered the Dog and Duck at twenty past twelve and was there for an hour having his usual bread and cheese and beer."

"Deliberately establishing an alibi," said Raymond West hopefully.

"Maybe," said Inspector Welch, "but if so, he *did* establish it."

There was a long silence. Then Raymond turned his head to where Miss Marple sat upright and thoughtful.

"It's up to you, Aunt Jane," he said. "The inspector's baffled, the sergeant's baffled, I'm baffled, Joan's baffled, Lou is baffled. But to you, Aunt Jane, it is crystal clear. Am I right?"

"I wouldn't say that, dear," said Miss Marple, "not *crystal* clear, and murder, dear Raymond, isn't a game. I don't suppose poor Miss Greenshaw wanted to die, and it was a particularly brutal murder. Very well planned and quite cold-blooded. It's not a thing to make *jokes* about!"

"I'm sorry," said Raymond, abashed. "I'm not really as callous as I sound. One treats a thing lightly to take away from the—well, the horror of it."

"That is, I believe, the modern tendency," said Miss Marple, "All these wars, and having to joke about funerals. Yes, perhaps I was thoughtless when I said you were callous."

"It isn't," said Joan, "as though we'd known her at all well."

"That is *very* true," said Miss Marple. "You, dear Joan, did not know her at all. I did not know her at all. Raymond gathered an impression of her from one afternoon's conversation. Lou knew her for two days."

"Come now, Aunt Jane," said Raymond, "tell us your views. You don't mind, Inspector?"

"Not at all," said the inspector politely.

"Well, my dear, it would seem that we have three people who had, or might have thought they had, a motive to kill the old lady. And three quite simple reasons why none of the three could have done so. The housekeeper could not have done so because she was locked in her room and because Miss Greenshaw definitely stated that a *man* shot her. The gardener could not have done it because he was inside the Dog and Duck at the time the murder was committed, the nephew could not have done it because he was still some distance away in his car at the time of the murder."

"Very clearly put, madam," said the inspector.

"And since it seems most unlikely that any outsider should have done it, where, then, are we?"

"That's what the inspector wants to know," said Raymond West.

"One so often looks at a thing the wrong way round," said Miss Marple apologetically. "If we can't alter the movements or the position of those three people, then couldn't we perhaps alter the time of the murder?"

"You mean that both my watch and the clock were wrong?" asked Lou.

"No dear," said Miss Marple, "I didn't mean that at all. I mean that the murder didn't occur when you thought it occurred."

"But I *saw* it," cried Lou.

"Well, what I have been wondering, my dear, was whether you weren't *meant* to see it. I've been asking myself, you know, whether that wasn't the real reason why you were engaged for this job."

"What *do* you mean, Aunt Jane?"

"Well, dear, it seems odd. Miss Greenshaw did not like spending money, and yet she engaged you and agreed quite willingly to the terms you asked. It seems to me that perhaps you were meant to be there in that library on the first floor, looking out of the window so that you could be the key witness—someone from outside of irreproachable good faith—to fix a definite time and place for the murder."

"But you can't mean," said Lou, incredulously, "that Miss Greenshaw *intended* to be murdered."

"What I mean, dear," said Miss Marple, "is that you didn't really know Miss Greenshaw. There's no real reason, is there, why the Miss Greenshaw you saw when you went up to the house should be the same Miss Greenshaw that Raymond saw a few days earlier? Oh, yes, I know," she went on, to prevent Lou's reply, "she was wearing the peculiar old-fashioned print dress and the strange straw hat, and had unkempt hair. She corresponded exactly to the description Raymond gave us last weekend. But those two women, you know, were much of an age and height and size. The housekeeper, I mean, and Miss Greenshaw."

"But the housekeeper is fat!" Lou exclaimed. "She's got an enormous bosom."

Miss Marple coughed.

"But my dear, surely, nowadays I have seen—er—them myself in shops most indelicately displayed. It is very easy for anyone to have a—a bust—of *any* size and dimension."

"What are you trying to say?" demanded Raymond.

"I was just thinking, dear, that during the two or three days Lou was working there, one woman could have played the two parts. You said yourself, Lou, that you hardly saw the housekeeper, except for the one moment in the morning when she brought you in the tray with coffee. One sees those clever artists on the stage coming in as different characters with only a minute or two to spare, and I am sure the change could have been effected quite easily. That marquise head-dress could be just a wig slipped on and off."

"Aunt Jane! Do you mean that Miss Greenshaw was dead before I started work there?"

"Not dead. Kept under drugs, I should say. A very easy job for an unscrupulous woman like the housekeeper to do. Then she made the arrangements with you and got you to telephone to the nephew to ask him to lunch at a definite time. The only person who would have known that this Miss Greenshaw was *not* Miss Greenshaw would have been Alfred. And if you remember, the first two days you were working there it was wet, and Miss Greenshaw stayed in the house. Alfred never came into the house because of his feud with the housekeeper. And on the last morning Alfred was in the drive, while Miss Greenshaw was working on the rockery—I'd like to have a look at that rockery."

"Do you mean it was Mrs. Cresswell who killed Miss Greenshaw?"

"I think that after bringing you your coffee, the woman locked the door on you as she went out, carried the unconscious Miss Greenshaw down to the drawing room, then assumed her 'Miss Greenshaw' disguise and went out to work on the rockery where you could see her from the window. In due course she screamed and came staggering to the house clutching an arrow as though it had penetrated her throat. She called for help and was careful to say '*he* shot me' so as to remove suspicion from the housekeeper. She also called up to the housekeeper's window as though she saw her there. Then, once inside the drawing room, she threw over a table with porcelain on it—and ran quickly upstairs, put on her marquise wig and was able a few moments later to lean her head out of the window and tell you that she, too, was locked in."

"But she *was* locked in," said Lou.

"I know. That is where the policeman comes in."

"What policeman?"

"Exactly—what policeman? I wonder, Inspector, if you would mind telling me how and when *you* arrived on the scene?"

The inspector looked a little puzzled.

"At twelve twenty-nine we received a telephone call from Mrs. Cresswell, housekeeper to Miss Greenshaw, stating that her mistress had been shot. Sergeant Cayley and myself went out there at once in a car and arrived at the house at twelve thirty-five. We found Miss Greenshaw dead and the two ladies locked in their rooms."

"So, you see, my dear," said Miss Marple to Lou. "The police constable *you* saw wasn't a real police constable. You never thought of him again—one doesn't—one just accepts one more uniform as part of the law."

"But who—why?"

"As to who—well, if they are playing *A Kiss for Cinderella*, a policeman is the principal character. Nat Fletcher would only have to help himself to the costume he wears on the stage. He'd ask his way at a garage being careful to call attention to the time—twelve twenty-five, then drive on quickly, leave his car round a corner, slip on his police uniform and do his 'act.'"

"But why?—why?"

"*Someone* had to lock the housekeeper's door on the outside, and someone had to drive the arrow through Miss Greenshaw's throat. You can stab anyone with an arrow just as well as by shooting it—but it needs force."

"You mean they were both in it?"

"Oh yes, I think so. Mother and son as likely as not."

"But Miss Greenshaw's sister died long ago."

"Yes, but I've no doubt Mr. Fletcher married again. He sounds the sort of man who would, and I think it possible that the child died too, and that this so-called nephew was the second wife's child, and not really a relation at all. The woman got a post as housekeeper and spied out the land. Then he wrote as her nephew and proposed to call upon her—he may have made some joking reference to coming in his policeman's uniform—or asked her over to see the

play. But I think she suspected the truth and refused to see him. He would have been her heir if she had died without making a will—but of course once she had made a will in the housekeeper's favour (as they thought) then it was clear sailing."

"But why use an arrow?" objected Joan. "So very far-fetched."

"Not far-fetched at all, dear. Alfred belonged to an archery club—Alfred was meant to take the blame. The fact that he was in the pub as early as twelve twenty was most unfortunate from their point of view. He always left a little before his proper time and that would have been just right—" she shook her head. "It really seems all wrong—morally, I mean, that Alfred's laziness should have saved his life."

The inspector cleared his throat.

"Well, madam, these suggestions of yours are very interesting. I shall have, of course, to investigate—"

Miss Marple and Raymond West stood by the rockery and looked down at that gardening basket full of dying vegetation.

Miss Marple murmured:

"Alyssum, saxifrage, cytisus, thimble campanula . . . Yes, that's all the proof *I* need. Whoever was weeding here yesterday morning was no gardener—she pulled up plants as well as weeds. So now I *know* I'm right. Thank you, dear Raymond, for bringing me here. I wanted to see the place for myself."

She and Raymond both looked up at the outrageous pile of Greenshaw's Folly.

A cough made them turn. A handsome young man was also looking at the house.

"Plaguey big place," he said. "Too big for nowadays—or so they say. I dunno about that. If I won a football pool and made a lot of money, that's the kind of house I'd like to build."

He smiled bashfully at them.

"Reckon I can say so now—that there house was built by my great-grandfather," said Alfred Pollock. "And a fine house it is, for all they call it Greenshaw's Folly!"

Twenty

SANCTUARY

The vicar's wife came round the corner of the vicarage with her arms full of chrysanthemums. A good deal of rich garden soil was attached to her strong brogue shoes and a few fragments of earth were adhering to her nose, but of that fact she was perfectly unconscious.

She had a slight struggle in opening the vicarage gate which hung, rustily, half off its hinges. A puff of wind caught at her battered felt hat, causing it to sit even more rakishly than it had done before. "Bother!" said Bunch.

Christened by her optimistic parents Diana, Mrs. Harmon had become Bunch at an early age for somewhat obvious reasons and the name had stuck to her ever since. Clutching the chrysanthemums, she made her way through the gate to the churchyard, and so to the church door.

The November air was mild and damp. Clouds scudded across the sky with patches of blue here and there. Inside, the church was dark and cold; it was unheated except at service times.

"Brrrrrh!" said Bunch expressively. "I'd better get on with this quickly. I don't want to die of cold."

With the quickness born of practice she collected the necessary paraphernalia: vases, water, flower-holders. "I wish we had lilies,"

thought Bunch to herself. "I get so tired of these scraggy chrysanthemums." Her nimble fingers arranged the blooms in their holders.

There was nothing particularly original or artistic about the decorations, for Bunch Harmon herself was neither original nor artistic, but it was a homely and pleasant arrangement. Carrying the vases carefully, Bunch stepped up the aisle and made her way towards the altar. As she did so the sun came out.

It shone through the east window of somewhat crude coloured glass, mostly blue and red—the gift of a wealthy Victorian churchgoer. The effect was almost startling in its sudden opulence. "Like jewels," thought Bunch. Suddenly she stopped, staring ahead of her. On the chancel steps was a huddled dark form.

Putting down the flowers carefully, Bunch went up to it and bent over it. It was a man lying there, huddled over on himself. Bunch knelt down by him and slowly, carefully, she turned him over. Her fingers went to his pulse—a pulse so feeble and fluttering that it told its own story, as did the almost greenish pallor of his face. There was no doubt, Bunch thought, that the man was dying.

He was a man of about forty-five, dressed in a dark, shabby suit. She laid down the limp hand she had picked up and looked at his other hand. This seemed clenched like a fist on his breast. Looking more closely she saw that the fingers were closed over what seemed to be a large wad or handkerchief which he was holding tightly to his chest. All round the clenched hand there were splashes of a dry brown fluid which, Bunch guessed, was dry blood. Bunch sat back on her heels, frowning.

Up till now the man's eyes had been closed but at this point they suddenly opened and fixed themselves on Bunch's face. They were neither dazed nor wandering. They seemed fully alive and intelligent. His lips moved, and Bunch bent forward to catch the words, or rather the word. It was only one word that he said:

"Sanctuary."

There was, she thought, just a very faint smile as he breathed out this word. There was no mistaking it, for after a moment he said it again, "Sanctuary. . . ."

Then, with a faint, long-drawn-out sigh, his eyes closed again. Once more Bunch's fingers went to his pulse. It was still there, but fainter now and more intermittent. She got up with decision.

"Don't move," she said, "or try to move. I'm going for help."

The man's eyes opened again but he seemed now to be fixing his attention on the coloured light that came through the east window. He murmured something that Bunch could not quite catch. She thought, startled, that it might have been her husband's name.

"Julian?" she said. "Did you come here to find Julian?" But there was no answer. The man lay with eyes closed, his breathing coming in slow, shallow fashion.

Bunch turned and left the church rapidly. She glanced at her watch and nodded with some satisfaction. Dr. Griffiths would still be in his surgery. It was only a couple of minutes' walk from the church. She went in, without waiting to knock or ring, passing through the waiting room and into the doctor's surgery.

"You must come at once," said Bunch. "There's a man dying in the church."

Some minutes later Dr. Griffiths rose from his knees after a brief examination.

"Can we move him from here into the vicarage? I can attend to him better there—not that it's any use."

"Of course," said Bunch. "I'll go along and get things ready. I'll get Harper and Jones, shall I? To help you carry him."

"Thanks. I can telephone from the vicarage for an ambulance, but I'm afraid—by the time it comes. . . ." He left the remark unfinished.

Bunch said, "Internal bleeding?"

Dr. Griffiths nodded. He said, "How on earth did he come here?"

"I think he must have been here all night," said Bunch, considering. "Harper unlocks the church in the morning as he goes to work, but he doesn't usually come in."

It was about five minutes later when Dr. Griffiths put down the telephone receiver and came back into the morning room where the injured man was lying on quickly arranged blankets on the sofa.

Bunch was moving a basin of water and clearing up after the doctor's examination.

"Well, that's that," said Griffiths. "I've sent for an ambulance and I've notified the police." He stood, frowning, looking down on the patient who lay with closed eyes. His left hand was plucking in a nervous, spasmodic way at his side.

"He was shot," said Griffiths. "Shot at fairly close quarters. He rolled his handkerchief up into a ball and plugged the wound with it so as to stop the bleeding."

"Could he have gone far after that happened?" Bunch asked.

"Oh, yes, it's quite possible. A mortally wounded man has been known to pick himself up and walk along a street as though nothing had happened, and then suddenly collapse five or ten minutes later. So he needn't have been shot in the church. Oh no. He may have been shot some distance away. Of course, he may have shot himself and then dropped the revolver and staggered blindly towards the church. I don't quite know why he made for the church and not for the vicarage."

"Oh, I know *that*," said Bunch. "He said it: 'Sanctuary.'"

The doctor stared at her. "Sanctuary?"

"Here's Julian," said Bunch, turning her head as she heard her husband's steps in the hall. "Julian! Come here."

The Reverend Julian Harmon entered the room. His vague, scholarly manner always made him appear much older than he really was. "Dear me!" said Julian Harmon, staring in a mild, puzzled manner at the surgical appliances and the prone figure on the sofa.

Bunch explained with her usual economy of words. "He was in the church, dying. He'd been shot. Do you know him, Julian? I thought he said your name."

The vicar came up to the sofa and looked down at the dying man. "Poor fellow," he said, and shook his head. "No, I don't know him. I'm almost sure I've never seen him before."

At that moment the dying man's eyes opened once more. They went from the doctor to Julian Harmon and from him to his wife. The eyes stayed there, staring into Bunch's face. Griffiths stepped forward.

"If you could tell us," he said urgently.

But with eyes fixed on Bunch, the man said in a weak voice, "Please—*please*—" And then, with a slight tremor, he died. . . .

Sergeant Hayes licked his pencil and turned the page of his notebook.

"So that's all you can tell me, Mrs. Harmon?"

"That's all," said Bunch. "These are the things out of his coat pockets."

On a table at Sergeant Hayes's elbow was a wallet, a rather battered old watch with the initials W.S. and the return half of a ticket to London. Nothing more.

"You've found out who he is?" asked Bunch.

"A Mr. and Mrs. Eccles phoned up the station. He's her brother, it seems. Name of Sandbourne. Been in a low state of health and nerves for some time. He's been getting worse lately. The day before yesterday he walked out and didn't come back. He took a revolver with him."

"And he came out here and shot himself with it?" said Bunch. "Why?"

"Well, you see, he'd been depressed. . . ."

Bunch interrupted him. "I don't mean *that*. I mean, why here?"

Since Sergeant Hayes obviously did not know the answer to that one, he replied in an oblique fashion, "Come out here, he did, on the five ten bus."

"Yes," said Bunch again. "But *why*?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Harmon," said Sergeant Hayes. "There's no accounting. If the balance of the mind is disturbed—"

Bunch finished for him. "They may do it anywhere. But it still seems to me unnecessary to take a bus out to a small country place like this. He didn't know anyone here, did he?"

"Not so far as can be ascertained," said Sergeant Hayes. He coughed in an apologetic manner and said, as he rose to his feet, "It may be as Mr. and Mrs. Eccles will come out and see you, ma'am—if you don't mind, that is."

"Of course I don't mind," said Bunch. "It's very natural. I only wish I had something to tell them."

"I'll be getting along," said Sergeant Hayes.

"I'm only so thankful," said Bunch, going with him to the front door, "that it wasn't murder."

A car had driven up at the vicarage gate. Sergeant Hayes, glancing at it, remarked: "Looks as though that's Mr. and Mrs. Eccles come here now, ma'am, to talk with you."

Bunch braced herself to endure what, she felt, might be rather a difficult ordeal. "However," she thought, "I can always call Julian to help me. A clergyman's a great help when people are bereaved."

Exactly what she had expected Mr. and Mrs. Eccles to be like, Bunch could not have said, but she was conscious, as she greeted them, of a feeling of surprise. Mr. Eccles was a stout florid man whose natural manner would have been cheerful and facetious. Mrs. Eccles had a vaguely flashy look about her. She had a small, mean, pursed-up mouth. Her voice was thin and reedy.

"It's been a terrible shock, Mrs. Harmon, as you can imagine," she said.

"Oh, I know," said Bunch. "It must have been. Do sit down. Can I offer you—well, perhaps it's a little early for tea—"

Mr. Eccles waved a pudgy hand. "No, no, nothing for us," he said. "It's very kind of you, I'm sure. Just wanted to . . . well . . . what poor William said and all that, you know?"

"He's been abroad a long time," said Mrs. Eccles, "and I think he must have had some very nasty experiences. Very quiet and depressed he's been, ever since he came home. Said the world wasn't fit to live in and there was nothing to look forward to. Poor Bill, he was always moody."

Bunch stared at them both for a moment or two without speaking.

"Pinched my husband's revolver, he did," went on Mrs. Eccles. "Without our knowing. Then it seems he come here by bus. I suppose that was nice feeling on his part. He wouldn't have liked to do it in our house."

"Poor fellow, poor fellow," said Mr. Eccles, with a sigh. "It doesn't do to judge."

There was another short pause, and Mr. Eccles said, "Did he leave a message? Any last words, nothing like that?"

His bright, rather pig-like eyes watched Bunch closely. Mrs. Eccles, too, leaned forward as though anxious for the reply.

"No," said Bunch quietly. "He came into the church when he was dying, for sanctuary."

Mrs. Eccles said in a puzzled voice. "Sanctuary? I don't think I quite"

Mr. Eccles interrupted. "Holy place, my dear," he said impatiently. "That's what the vicar's wife means. It's a sin—suicide, you know. I expect he wanted to make amends."

"He tried to say something just before he died," said Bunch. "He began, 'Please,' but that's as far as he got."

Mrs. Eccles put her handkerchief to her eyes and sniffed. "Oh, dear," she said. "It's terribly upsetting, isn't it?"

"There, there, Pam," said her husband. "Don't take on. These things can't be helped. Poor Willie. Still, he's at peace now. Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Harmon. I hope we haven't interrupted you. A vicar's wife is a busy lady, we know that."

They shook hands with her. Then Eccles turned back suddenly to say, "Oh yes, there's just one other thing. I think you've got his coat here, haven't you?"

"His coat?" Bunch frowned.

Mrs. Eccles said, "We'd like all his things, you know. Sentimental-like."

"He had a watch and a wallet and a railway ticket in the pockets," said Bunch. "I gave them to Sergeant Hayes."

"That's all right, then," said Mr. Eccles. "He'll hand them over to us, I expect. His private papers would be in the wallet."

"There was a pound note in the wallet," said Bunch. "Nothing else."

"No letters? Nothing like that?"

Bunch shook her head.

"Well, thank you again, Mrs. Harmon. The coat he was wearing—perhaps the sergeant's got that too, has he?"

Bunch frowned in an effort of remembrance.

"No," she said. "I don't think . . . let me see. The doctor and I took his coat off to examine his wound." She looked round the room vaguely. "I must have taken it upstairs with the towels and basin."

"I wonder now, Mrs. Harmon, if you don't mind . . . We'd like his coat, you know, the last thing he wore. Well, the wife feels rather sentimental about it."

"Of course," said Bunch. "Would you like me to have it cleaned first? I'm afraid it's rather—well—stained."

"Oh, no, no, no, that doesn't matter."

Bunch frowned. "Now I wonder where . . . excuse me a moment." She went upstairs and it was some few minutes before she returned.

"I'm so sorry," she said breathlessly, "my daily woman must have put it aside with other clothes that were going to the cleaners. It's taken me quite a long time to find it. Here it is. I'll do it up for you in brown paper."

Disclaiming their protests she did so; then once more effusively bidding her farewell the Eccleses departed.

Bunch went slowly back across the hall and entered the study. The Reverend Julian Harmon looked up and his brow cleared. He was composing a sermon and was fearing that he'd been led astray by the interest of the political relations between Judaea and Persia, in the reign of Cyrus.

"Yes, dear?" he said hopefully.

"Julian," said Bunch. "What's *Sanctuary* exactly?"

Julian Harmon gratefully put aside his sermon paper.

"Well," he said. "Sanctuary in Roman and Greek temples applied to the *cella* in which stood the statue of a god. The Latin word for altar '*ara*' also means protection." He continued learnedly: "In three hundred and ninety-nine A.D. the right of sanctuary in Christian churches was finally and definitely recognized. The earliest mention of the right of sanctuary in England is in the Code of Laws issued by Ethelbert in A.D. six hundred. . . ."

He continued for some time with his exposition but was, as often, disconcerted by his wife's reception of his erudite pronouncement.

"Darling," she said. "You *are* sweet."

Bending over, she kissed him on the tip of his nose. Julian felt rather like a dog who has been congratulated on performing a clever trick.

"The Eccleses have been here," said Bunch.

The vicar frowned. "The Eccleses? I don't seem to remember. . . ."

"You don't know them. They're the sister and her husband of the man in the church."

"My dear, you ought to have called me."

"There wasn't any need," said Bunch. "They were not in need of consolation. I wonder now. . . ." She frowned. "If I put a casserole in the oven tomorrow, can you manage, Julian? I think I shall go up to London for the sales."

"The sails?" Her husband looked at her blankly. "Do you mean a yacht or a boat or something?"

Bunch laughed. "No, darling. There's a special white sale at Burrows and Portman's. You know, sheets, tablecloths and towels and glass-cloths. I don't know what we do with our glass-cloths, the way they wear through. Besides," she added thoughtfully, "I think I ought to go and see Aunt Jane."

That sweet old lady, Miss Jane Marple, was enjoying the delights of the metropolis for a fortnight, comfortably installed in her nephew's studio flat.

"So kind of dear Raymond," she murmured. "He and Joan have gone to America for a fortnight and they insisted I should come up here and enjoy myself. And now, dear Bunch, do tell me what it is that's worrying you."

Bunch was Miss Marple's favourite godchild, and the old lady looked at her with great affection as Bunch, thrusting her best felt hat farther on the back of her head, started her story.

Bunch's recital was concise and clear. Miss Marple nodded her head as Bunch finished. "I see," she said. "Yes, I see."

"That's why I felt I had to see you," said Bunch. "You see, not being clever—"

"But you *are* clever, my dear."

"No, I'm not. Not clever like Julian."

"Julian, of course, has a very solid intellect," said Miss Marple.

"That's it," said Bunch. "Julian's got the intellect, but on the other hand, I've got the *sense*."

"You have a lot of common sense, Bunch, and you're very intelligent."

"You see, I don't really know what I ought to do. I can't ask Julian because—well, I mean, Julian's so full of rectitude. . . ."

This statement appeared to be perfectly understood by Miss Marple, who said, "I know what you mean, dear. We women—well, it's different." She went on. "You told me what happened, Bunch, but I'd like to know first exactly what you think."

"It's all wrong," said Bunch. "The man who was there in the church, dying, knew all about Sanctuary. He said it just the way Julian would have said it. I mean, he was a well-read, educated man. And if he'd shot himself, he wouldn't drag himself to a church afterwards and say 'sanctuary.' Sanctuary means that you're pursued, and when you get into a church you're safe. Your pursuers can't touch you. At one time even the law couldn't get at you."

She looked questioningly at Miss Marple. The latter nodded. Bunch went on, "Those people, the Eccleses, were quite different. Ignorant and coarse. And there's another thing. That watch—the dead man's watch. It had the initials W.S. on the back of it. But inside—I opened it—in very small lettering there was 'To Walter from his father' and a date. *Walter*. But the Eccleses kept talking of him as William or Bill."

Miss Marple seemed about to speak but Bunch rushed on. "Oh, I know you're not always called the name you're baptized by. I mean, I can understand that you might be christened William and called 'Porgy' or 'Carrots' or something. But your sister wouldn't call you William or Bill if your name was Walter."

"You mean that she wasn't his sister?"

"I'm quite sure she wasn't his sister. They were horrid—both of them. They came to the vicarage to get his things and to find out if he'd said anything before he died. When I said he hadn't I saw it in

their faces—relief. I think myself,” finished Bunch, “it was Eccles who shot him.”

“Murder?” said Miss Marple.

“Yes,” said Bunch. “Murder. That’s why I came to you, darling.”

Bunch’s remark might have seemed incongruous to an ignorant listener, but in certain spheres Miss Marple had a reputation for dealing with murder.

“He said ‘please’ to me before he died,” said Bunch. “He wanted me to do something for him. The awful thing is I’ve no idea what.”

Miss Marple considered for a moment or two, and then pounced on the point that had already occurred to Bunch. “But why was he there at all?” she asked.

“You mean,” said Bunch, “if you wanted sanctuary you might pop into a church anywhere. There’s no need to take a bus that only goes four times a day and come out to a lonely spot like ours for it.”

“He must have come there for a purpose,” Miss Marple thought. “He must have come to see someone. Chipping Cleghorn’s not a big place, Bunch. Surely you must have some idea of who it was he came to see?”

Bunch reviewed the inhabitants of her village in her mind before rather doubtfully shaking her head. “In a way,” she said, “it could be anybody.”

“He never mentioned a name?”

“He said Julian, or I thought he said Julian. It might have been Julia, I suppose. As far as I know, there isn’t any Julia living in Chipping Cleghorn.”

She screwed up her eyes as she thought back to the scene. The man lying there on the chancel steps, the light coming through the window with its jewels of red and blue light.

“Jewels,” said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

“I’m coming now,” said Bunch, “to the most important thing of all. The reason why I’ve really come here today. You see, the Eccleses made a great fuss about having his coat. We took it off when the doctor was seeing him. It was an old, shabby sort of coat—there was no reason they should have wanted it. They pretended it was sentimental, but that was nonsense.

"Anyway, I went up to find it, and as I was just going up the stairs I remembered how he'd made a kind of picking gesture with his hand, as though he was fumbling with the coat. So when I got hold of the coat I looked at it very carefully and I saw that in one place the lining had been sewn up again with a different thread. So I unpicked it and I found a little piece of paper inside. I took it out and I sewed it up again properly with thread that matched. I was careful and I don't really think that the Eccleses would know I've done it. I don't *think* so, but I can't be sure. And I took the coat down to them and made some excuse for the delay."

"The piece of paper?" asked Miss Marple.

Bunch opened her handbag. "I didn't show it to Julian," she said, "because he would have said that I ought to have given it to the Eccleses. But I thought I'd rather bring it to you instead."

"A cloakroom ticket," said Miss Marple, looking at it. "Paddington Station."

"He had a return ticket to Paddington in his pocket," said Bunch.

The eyes of the two women met.

"This calls for action," said Miss Marple briskly. "But it would be advisable, I think, to be careful. Would you have noticed at all, Bunch dear, whether you were followed when you came to London today?"

"Followed!" exclaimed Bunch. "You don't think—"

"Well, I think it's *possible*," said Miss Marple. "When anything is possible, I think we ought to take precautions." She rose with a brisk movement. "You came up here ostensibly, my dear, to go to the sales. I think the right thing to do, therefore, would be for us to *go* to the sales. But before we set out, we might put one or two little arrangements in hand. I don't suppose," Miss Marple added obscurely, "that I shall need the old speckled tweed with the beaver collar just at present."

It was about an hour and a half later that the two ladies, rather the worse for wear and battered in appearance, and both clasping parcels of hardly-won household linen, sat down at a small and sequestered hostelry called the Apple Bough to restore their forces with steak and kidney pudding followed by apple tart and custard.

"Really a prewar quality face towel," gasped Miss Marple, slightly out of breath. "With a J on it, too. So fortunate that Raymond's wife's name is Joan. I shall put them aside until I really need them and then they will do for her if I pass on sooner than I expect."

"I really did need the glass-cloths," said Bunch. "And they were very cheap, though not as cheap as the ones that woman with the ginger hair managed to snatch from me."

A smart young woman with a lavish application of rouge and lipstick entered the Apple Bough at that moment. After looking around vaguely for a moment or two, she hurried to their table. She laid down an envelope by Miss Marple's elbow.

"There you are, miss," she said briskly.

"Oh, thank you, Gladys," said Miss Marple. "Thank you very much. So kind of you."

"Always pleased to oblige, I'm sure," said Gladys. "Ernie always says to me, 'Everything what's good you learned from that Miss Marple of yours that you were in service with,' and I'm sure I'm always glad to oblige you, miss."

"Such a dear girl," said Miss Marple as Gladys departed again. "Always so willing and so kind."

She looked inside the envelope and then passed it on to Bunch. "Now be very careful, dear," she said. "By the way, is there still that nice young inspector at Melchester that I remember?"

"I don't know," said Bunch. "I expect so."

"Well, if not," said Miss Marple thoughtfully. "I can always ring up the Chief Constable. I *think* he would remember me."

"Of course he'd remember you," said Bunch. "Everybody would remember *you*. You're quite unique." She rose.

Arrived at Paddington, Bunch went to the luggage office and produced the cloakroom ticket. A moment or two later a rather shabby old suitcase was passed across to her, and carrying this she made her way to the platform.

The journey home was uneventful. Bunch rose as the train approached Chipping Cleghorn and picked up the old suitcase. She had just left her carriage when a man, sprinting along the platform, suddenly seized the suitcase from her hand and rushed off with it.

"Stop!" Bunch yelled. "Stop him, stop him. He's taken my suitcase."

The ticket collector who, at this rural station, was a man of somewhat slow processes, had just begun to say, "Now, look here, you can't do that—" when a smart blow on the chest pushed him aside, and the man with the suitcase rushed out from the station. He made his way towards a waiting car. Tossing the suitcase in, he was about to climb after it, but before he could move a hand fell on his shoulder, and the voice of Police Constable Abel said, "Now then, what's all this?"

Bunch arrived, panting, from the station. "He snatched my suitcase. I just got out of the train with it."

"Nonsense," said the man. "I don't know what this lady means. It's my suitcase. I just got out of the train with it."

He looked at Bunch with a bovine and impartial stare. Nobody would have guessed that Police Constable Abel and Mrs. Harmon spent long half hours in Police Constable Abel's off-time discussing the respective merits of manure and bone meal for rose bushes.

"You say, madam, that this is your suitcase?" said Police Constable Abel.

"Yes," said Bunch. "Definitely."

"And you, sir?"

"I say this suitcase is mine."

The man was tall, dark and well-dressed, with a drawling voice and a superior manner. A feminine voice from inside the car said, "Of course it's your suitcase, Edwin. I don't know what this woman means."

"We'll have to get this clear," said Police Constable Abel. "If it's your suitcase, madam, what do you say is inside it?"

"Clothes," said Bunch. "A long speckled coat with a beaver collar, two wool jumpers and a pair of shoes."

"Well, that's clear enough," said Police Constable Abel. He turned to the other.

"I am a theatrical costumer," said the dark man importantly. "This suitcase contains theatrical properties which I brought down here for an amateur performance."

"Right, sir," said Police Constable Abel. "Well, we'll just look inside, shall we, and see? We can go along to the police station, or if you're in a hurry we'll take the suitcase back to the station and open it there."

"It'll suit me," said the dark man. "My name is Moss, by the way, Edwin Moss."

The police constable, holding the suitcase, went back into the station. "Just taking this into the parcels office, George," he said to the ticket collector.

Police Constable Abel laid the suitcase on the counter of the parcels office and pushed back the clasp. The case was not locked. Bunch and Mr. Edwin Moss stood on either side of him, their eyes regarding each other vengefully.

"Ah!" said Police Constable Abel, as he pushed up the lid.

Inside, neatly folded, was a long rather shabby tweed coat with a beaver fur collar. There were also two wool jumpers and a pair of country shoes.

"Exactly as you say, madam," said Police Constable Abel, turning to Bunch.

Nobody could have said that Mr. Edwin Moss underdid things. His dismay and compunction were magnificent.

"I do apologize," he said. "I really *do* apologize. Please believe me, dear lady, when I tell you how very, very sorry I am. Unpardonable—quite unpardonable—my behaviour has been." He looked at his watch. "I must rush now. Probably my suitcase has gone on the train." Raising his hat once more, he said meltingly to Bunch, "Do, *do* forgive me," and rushed hurriedly out of the parcels office.

"Are you going to let him get away?" asked Bunch in a conspiratorial whisper to Police Constable Abel.

The latter slowly closed a bovine eye in a wink.

"He won't get too far, ma'am," he said. "That's to say he won't get far unobserved, if you take my meaning."

"Oh," said Bunch, relieved.

"That old lady's been on the phone," said Police Constable Abel, "the one as was down here a few years ago. Bright she is, isn't she?"

But there's been a lot cooking up all today. Shouldn't wonder if the inspector or sergeant was out to see you about it tomorrow morning."

• • •

It was the inspector who came, the Inspector Craddock whom Miss Marple remembered. He greeted Bunch with a smile as an old friend.

"Crime in Chipping Cleghorn again," he said cheerfully. "You don't lack for sensation here, do you, Mrs. Harmon?"

"I could do with rather less," said Bunch. "Have you come to ask me questions or are you going to tell me things for a change?"

"I'll tell you some things first," said the inspector. "To begin with, Mr. and Mrs. Eccles have been having an eye kept on them for some time. There's reason to believe they've been connected with several robberies in this part of the world. For another thing, although Mrs. Eccles *has* a brother called Sandbourne who has recently come back from abroad, the man you found dying in the church yesterday was definitely not Sandbourne."

"I knew that he wasn't," said Bunch. "His name was Walter, to begin with, not William."

The inspector nodded. "His name was Walter St. John, and he escaped forty-eight hours ago from Charrington Prison."

"Of course," said Bunch softly to herself, "he was being hunted down by the law, and he took sanctuary." Then she asked, "What had he done?"

"I'll have to go back rather a long way. It's a complicated story. Several years ago there was a certain dancer doing turns at the music halls. I don't expect you'll have ever heard of her, but she specialized in an Arabian Night turn, 'Aladdin in the Cave of Jewels' it was called. She wore bits of rhinestone and not much else.

"She wasn't much of a dancer, I believe, but she was—well—attractive. Anyway, a certain Asiatic royalty fell for her in a big way. Amongst other things he gave her a very magnificent emerald necklace."

"The historic jewels of a Rajah?" murmured Bunch ecstatically.

Inspector Craddock coughed. "Well, a rather more modern version, Mrs. Harmon. The affair didn't last very long, broke up when our potentate's attention was captured by a certain film star whose demands were not quite so modest.

"Zobeida, to give the dancer her stage name, hung onto the necklace, and in due course it was stolen. It disappeared from her dressing room at the theatre, and there was a lingering suspicion in the minds of the authorities that she herself might have engineered its disappearance. Such things have been known as a publicity stunt, or indeed from more dishonest motives.

"The necklace was never recovered, but during the course of the investigation the attention of the police was drawn to this man, Walter St. John. He was a man of education and breeding who had come down in the world, and who was employed as a working jeweller with a rather obscure firm which was suspected of acting as a fence for jewel robberies.

"There was evidence that this necklace had passed through his hands. It was, however, in connection with the theft of some other jewellery that he was finally brought to trial and convicted and sent to prison. He had not very much longer to serve, so his escape was rather a surprise."

"But why did he come here?" asked Bunch.

"We'd like to know that very much, Mrs. Harmon. Following up his trial, it seems that he went first to London. He didn't visit any of his old associates but he visited an elderly woman, a Mrs. Jacobs who had formerly been a theatrical dresser. She won't say a word of what he came for, but according to other lodgers in the house he left carrying a suitcase."

"I see," said Bunch. "He left it in the cloakroom at Paddington and then he came down here."

"By that time," said Inspector Craddock, "Eccles and the man who calls himself Edwin Moss were on his trail. They wanted that suitcase. They saw him get on the bus. They must have driven out in a car ahead of him and been waiting for him when he left the bus."

"And he was murdered?" said Bunch.

"Yes," said Craddock. "He was shot. It was Eccles's revolver, but I rather fancy it was Moss who did the shooting. Now, Mrs. Harmon, what we want to know is, where is the suitcase that Walter St. John actually deposited at Paddington Station?"

Bunch grinned. "I expect Aunt Jane's got it by now," she said. "Miss Marple, I mean. That was her plan. She sent a former maid of hers with a suitcase packed with her things to the cloakroom at Paddington and we exchanged tickets. I collected her suitcase and brought it down by train. She seemed to expect that an attempt would be made to get it from me."

It was Inspector Craddock's turn to grin. "So she said when she rang up. I'm driving up to London to see her. Do you want to come, too, Mrs. Harmon?"

"Well," said Bunch, considering. "Well, as a matter of fact, it's very fortunate. I had a toothache last night so I really ought to go to London to see the dentist, oughtn't I?"

"Definitely," said Inspector Craddock. . . .

Miss Marple looked from Inspector Craddock's face to the eager face of Bunch Harmon. The suitcase lay on the table. "Of course, I haven't opened it," the old lady said. "I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing till somebody official arrived. Besides," she added, with a demurely mischievous Victorian smile, "it's locked."

"Like to make a guess at what's inside, Miss Marple?" asked the inspector.

"I should imagine, you know," said Miss Marple, "that it would be Zobeida's theatrical costumes. Would you like a chisel, Inspector?"

The chisel soon did its work. Both women gave a slight gasp as the lid flew up. The sunlight coming through the window lit up what seemed like an inexhaustible treasure of sparkling jewels, red, blue, green, orange.

"Aladdin's Cave," said Miss Marple. "The flashing jewels the girl wore to dance."

"Ah," said Inspector Craddock. "Now, what's so precious about it, do you think, that a man was murdered to get hold of it?"

"She was a shrewd girl, I expect," said Miss Marple thoughtfully. "She's dead, isn't she, Inspector?"

"Yes, died three years ago."

"She had this valuable emerald necklace," said Miss Marple, musingly. "Had the stones taken out of their setting and fastened here and there on her theatrical costume, where everyone would take them for merely coloured rhinestones. Then she had a replica made of the real necklace, and that, of course, was what was stolen. No wonder it never came on the market. The thief soon discovered the stones were false."

"Here is an envelope," said Bunch, pulling aside some of the glittering stones.

Inspector Craddock took it from her and extracted two official-looking papers from it. He read aloud, "'Marriage Certificate between Walter Edmund St. John and Mary Moss.' That was Zobeida's real name."

"So they were married," said Miss Marple. "I see."

"What's the other?" asked Bunch.

"A birth certificate of a daughter, Jewel."

"Jewel?" cried Bunch. "Why, of course. Jewel! *Jill!* That's it. I see now why he came to Chipping Cleghorn. *That's* what he was trying to say to me. Jewel. The Mundys, you know. Laburnum Cottage. They look after a little girl for someone. They're devoted to her. She's been like their own granddaughter. Yes, I remember now, her name *was* Jewel, only, of course, they call her Jill.

"Mrs. Mundy had a stroke about a week ago, and the old man's been very ill with pneumonia. They were both going to go to the infirmary. I've been trying hard to find a good home for Jill somewhere. I didn't want her taken away to an institution.

"I suppose her father heard about it in prison and he managed to break away and get hold of this suitcase from the old dresser he or his wife left it with. I suppose if the jewels really belonged to her mother, they can be used for the child now."

"I should imagine so, Mrs. Harmon. *If* they're here."

"Oh, they'll be here all right," said Miss Marple cheerfully. . . .

"Thank goodness you're back, dear," said the Reverend Julian Harmon, greeting his wife with affection and a sigh of content. "Mrs.

Burt always tries to do her best when you're away, but she really gave me some *very* peculiar fish-cakes for lunch. I didn't want to hurt her feelings so I gave them to Tiglath Pileser, but even *he* wouldn't eat them so I had to throw them out of the window."

"Tiglath Pileser," said Bunch, stroking the vicarage cat, who was purring against her knee, "is *very* particular about what fish he eats. I often tell him he's got a proud stomach!"

"And your tooth, dear? Did you have it seen to?"

"Yes," said Bunch. "It didn't hurt much, and I went to see Aunt Jane again, too. . . ."

"Dear old thing," said Julian. "I hope she's not failing at all."

"Not in the least," said Bunch, with a grin.

The following morning Bunch took a fresh supply of chrysanthemums to the church. The sun was once more pouring through the east window, and Bunch stood in the jewelled light on the chancel steps. She said very softly under her breath, "Your little girl will be all right. *I'll* see that she is. I promise."

Then she tidied up the church, slipped into a pew and knelt for a few moments to say her prayers before returning to the vicarage to attack the piled-up chores of two neglected days.

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Agatha Christie is the most widely published author of all time and in any language, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. Her books have sold over a billion copies in English and another billion in a hundred foreign languages. She died in 1976.

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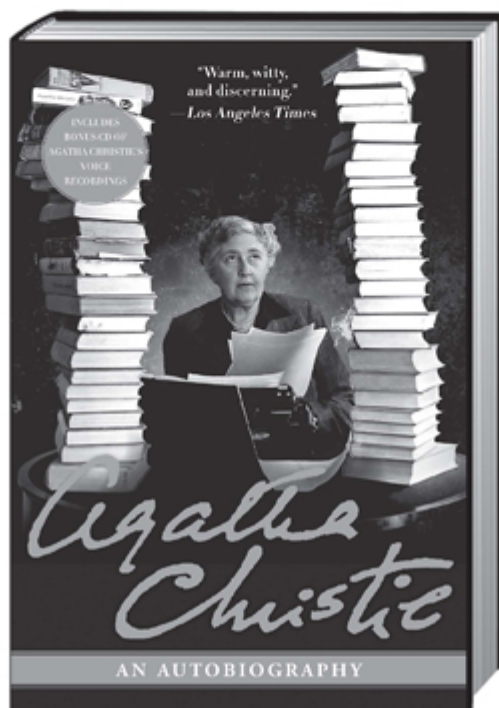
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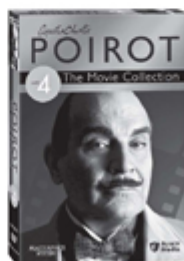
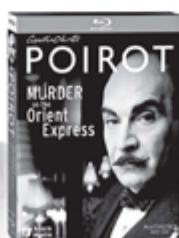
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