Dr. Thorndyke's Crime File

by

R. Austin Freeman

I. — MEET DR THORNDYKE

A FASCINATING INSIGHT INTO THE CHARACTER WRITTEN BY THE AUTHOR

MY subject is Dr. John Thorndyke, the hero or central character of most of my detective stories. So I'll give you a short account of his real origin; of the way in which he did in fact come into existence.

To discover the origin of John Thorndyke I have to reach back into the past for at least fifty years, to the time when I was a medical student preparing for my final examination. For reasons which I need not go into I gave rather special attention to the legal aspects of medicine and the medical aspects of law. And as I read my text-books, and especially the illustrative cases, I was profoundly impressed by their dramatic quality. Medical jurisprudence deals with the human body in its relation to all kinds of legal problems. Thus its subject matter includes all sorts of crime against the person and all sorts of violent death and bodily injury: hanging, drowning, poisons and their effects, problems of suicide and homicide, of personal identity and survivorship, and a host of other problems of the highest dramatic possibilities, though not always quite presentable for the purposes of fiction. And the reported cases which were given in illustration were often crime stories of the most thrilling interest. Cases of disputed identity such as the Tichbourne Case, famous poisoning cases such as the Rugeley Case and that of Madeline Smith, cases of mysterious disappearance or the detection of long-forgotten crimes such as that of Eugene Aram; all these, described and analysed with strict scientific accuracy, formed the matter of Medical Jurisprudence which thrilled me as I read and made an indelible impression.

But it produced no immediate results. I had to pass my examinations and get my diploma, and then look out for the means of earning my living. So all this curious lore was put away for the time being in the pigeon-holes of my mind—which Dr. Freud would call the Unconscious—not forgotten, but ready to come to the surface when the need for it should arise. And there it reposed for some twenty years, until failing health compelled me to abandon medical practice and take to literature as a profession.

It was then that my old studies recurred to my mind. A fellow doctor, Conan Doyle, had made a brilliant and well-deserved success by the creation of the immortal Sherlock Holmes. Considering

that achievement, I asked myself whether it might not be possible to devise a detective story of a slightly different kind; one based on the science of Medical Jurisprudence, in which, by the sacrifice of a certain amount of dramatic effect, one could keep entirely within the facts of real life, with nothing fictitious excepting the persons and the events. I came to the conclusion that it was, and began to turn the idea over in my mind.

But I think that the influence which finally determined the character of my detective stories, and incidentally the character of John Thorndyke, operated when I was working at the Westminster Ophthalmic Hospital. There I used to take the patients into the dark room, examine their eyes with the ophthalmoscope, estimate the errors of refraction, and construct an experimental pair of spectacles to correct those errors. When a perfect correction had been arrived at, the formula for it was embodied in a prescription which was sent to the optician who made the permanent spectacles.

Now when I was writing those prescriptions it was borne in on me that in many cases, especially the more complex, the formula for the spectacles, and consequently the spectacles themselves, furnished an infallible record of personal identity. If, for instance, such a pair of spectacles should have been found in a railway carriage, and the maker of those spectacles could be found, there would be practically conclusive evidence that a particular person had travelled by that train. About that time I drafted out a story based on a pair of spectacles, which was published some years later under the title of *The Mystery of 31 New Inn*, and the construction of that story determined, as I have said, not only the general character of my future work but of the hero around whom the plots were to be woven. But that story remained for some years in cold storage. My first published detective novel was *The Red Thumb-mark*, and in that book we may consider that John Thorndyke was born. And in passing on to describe him I may as well explain how and why he came to be the kind of person that he is.

I may begin by saying that he was not modelled after any real person. He was deliberately created to play a certain part, and the idea that was in my mind was that he should be such a person as would be likely and suitable to occupy such a position in real life. As he was to be a medico-legal expert, he had to be a doctor and a fully trained lawyer. On the physical side I endowed him with every kind of natural advantage. He is exceptionally tall, strong, and athletic because those qualities are useful in his vocation. For the same reason he has acute eyesight and hearing and considerable general manual skill, as every doctor ought to have. In appearance he is handsome and of an imposing presence, with a symmetrical face of the classical type and a Grecian nose. And here I may remark that his distinguished appearance is not merely a concession to my personal taste but is also a protest against the monsters of ugliness whom some detective writers have evolved.

These are quite opposed to natural truth. In real life a first-class man of any kind usually tends to be a good-looking man.

Mentally, Thorndyke is quite normal. He has no gifts of intuition or other supernormal mental qualities. He is just a highly intellectual man of great and varied knowledge with exceptionally acute reasoning powers and endowed with that invaluable asset, a scientific imagination (by a scientific imagination I mean that special faculty which marks the born investigator; the capacity to perceive the essential nature of a problem before the detailed evidence comes into sight). But he arrives at his conclusions by ordinary reasoning, which the reader can follow when he has been supplied with the facts; though the intricacy of the train of reasoning may at times call for an exposition at the end of the investigation.

Thorndyke has no eccentricities or oddities which might detract from the dignity of an eminent professional man, unless one excepts an unnatural liking for Trichinopoly cheroots. In manner he

is quiet, reserved and self-contained, and rather markedly secretive, but of a kindly nature, though not sentimental, and addicted to occasional touches of dry humour. That is how Thorndyke appears to me.

As to his age. When he made his first bow to the reading public from the doorway of Number 4 King's Bench Walk he was between thirty-five and forty. As that was thirty years ago, he should now be over sixty-five. But he isn't. If I have to let him "grow old along with me" I need not saddle him with the infirmities of age, and I can (in his case) put the brake on the passing years. Probably he is not more than fifty after all!

Now a few words as to how Thorndyke goes to work. His methods are rather different from those of the detectives of the Sherlock Holmes school. They are more technical and more specialized. He is an investigator of crime but he is not a detective. The technique of Scotland Yard would be neither suitable nor possible to him. He is a medico-legal expert, and his methods are those of medico-legal science. In the investigation of a crime there are two entirely different methods of approach. One consists in the careful and laborious examination of a vast mass of small and commonplace detail: inquiring into the movements of suspected and other persons; interrogating witnesses and checking their statements particularly as to times and places; tracing missing persons, and so forth—the aim being to accumulate a great body of circumstantial evidence which will ultimately disclose the solution of the problem. It is an admirable method, as the success of our police proves, and it is used with brilliant effect by at least one of our contemporary detective writers. But it is essentially a police method.

The other method consists in the search for some fact of high evidential value which can be demonstrated by physical methods and which constitutes conclusive proof of some important point. This method also is used by the police in suitable cases. Finger-prints are examples of this kind of evidence, and another instance is furnished by the Gutteridge murder. Here the microscopical examination of a cartridge-case proved conclusively that the murder had been committed with a particular revolver; a fact which incriminated the owner of that revolver and led to his conviction.

This is Thorndyke's procedure. It consists in the interrogation of things rather than persons; of the ascertainment of physical facts which can be made visible to eyes other than his own. And the facts which he seeks tend to be those which are apparent only to the trained eye of the medical practitioner.

I feel that I ought to say a few words about Thorndyke's two satellites, Jervis and Polton. As to the former, he is just the traditional narrator proper to this type of story. Some of my readers have complained that Dr. Jervis is rather slow in the uptake. But that is precisely his function. He is the expert misunderstander. His job is to observe and record all the facts, and to fail completely to perceive their significance. Thereby he gives the reader all the necessary information, and he affords Thorndyke the opportunity to expound its bearing on the case.

Polton is in a slightly different category. Although he is not drawn from any real person, he is associated in my mind with two actual individuals. One is a Mr. Pollard, who was the laboratory assistant in the hospital museum when I was a student, and who gave me many a valuable tip in matters of technique, and who, I hope, is still to the good. The other was a watch- and clock-maker of the name of Parsons —familiarly known as Uncle Parsons—who had premises in a basement near the Royal Exchange, and who was a man of boundless ingenuity and technical resource. Both of these I regard as collateral relatives, so to speak, of Nathaniel Polton. But his personality is not like either. His crinkly countenance is strictly his own copyright.

To return to Thorndyke, his rather technical methods have, for the purposes of fiction, advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is that his facts are demonstrably true, and often they are intrinsically interesting. The disadvantage is that they are frequently not matters of common knowledge, so that the reader may fail to recognize them or grasp their significance until they are explained. But this is the case with all classes of fiction. There is no type of character or story that can be made sympathetic and acceptable to every kind of reader. The personal equation affects the reading as well as the writing of a story.

II. — THE EYE OF OSIRIS

CHAPTER I. THE VANISHING MAN

THE SCHOOL of St Margaret's Hospital was fortunate in its lecturer on Medical Jurisprudence, or Forensic Medicine, as it is sometimes described. At some schools the lecturer on this subject is appointed apparently for the reason that he lacks the qualifications to lecture on any other. But with us it was very different: John Thorndyke was not only an enthusiast, a man of profound learning and great reputation, but he was an exceptional teacher, lively and fascinating in style and of endless resources. Every remarkable case that had ever been reported he appeared to have at his fingers' ends; every fact—chemical, physical, biological, or even historical—that could in any way be twisted into a medico-legal significance, was pressed into his service; and his own varied and curious experiences seemed as inexhaustible as the widow's cruse. One of his favourite devices for giving life and interest to a rather dry subject was that of analysing and commenting upon contemporary cases as reported in the papers (always, of course, with a due regard to the legal and social proprieties); and it was in this way that I first became introduced to the astonishing series of events that was destined to exercise so great an influence on my own life.

The lecture which had just been concluded had dealt with the rather unsatisfactory subject of survivorship. Most of the students had left the theatre, and the remainder had gathered round the lecturer's table to listen to the informal comments that Dr. Thorndyke was wont to deliver on these occasions in an easy, conversational manner, leaning against the edge of the table and apparently addressing his remarks to a stick of blackboard chalk that he held in his fingers.

'The problem of survivorship,' he was saying, in reply to a question put by one of the students, 'ordinarily occurs in cases where the bodies of the parties are producible, or where, at any rate, the occurrence of death and its approximate time are actually known. But an analogous difficulty may arise in a case where the body of one of the parties is not forthcoming, and the fact of death may have to be assumed on collateral evidence.

'Here, of course, the vital question to be settled is, what is the latest instant at which it is certain that this person was alive? And the settlement of that question may turn on some circumstance of the most trivial and insignificant kind. There is a case in this morning's paper which illustrates this. A gentleman has disappeared rather mysteriously. He was last seen by the servant of a relative at whose house he had called. Now, if this gentleman should never reappear, dead or alive, the question as to what was the latest moment at which he was certainly alive will turn upon the further question: "Was he or was he not wearing a particular article of jewellery when he called at the relative's house?"'

He paused with a reflective eye bent upon the stump of chalk he still held; then, noting the expectant interest with which we were regarding him, he resumed:

'The circumstances in this case are very curious; in fact, they are highly mysterious; and if any legal issues should arise in respect of them, they are likely to yield some very remarkable complications. The gentleman who has disappeared, Mr. John Bellingham, is a man well known in archaeological circles. He recently returned from Egypt, bringing with him a very fine collection of antiquities—some of which, by the way, he has presented to the British Museum, where they are now on view—and having made this presentation, he appears to have gone to Paris on business. I may mention that the gift consisted of a very fine mummy and a complete set of tomb-furniture. The latter, however, had not arrived from Egypt at the time when the missing man left for Paris, but the mummy was inspected on the fourteenth of October at Mr. Bellingham's house by Dr. Norbury of the British Museum, in the presence of the donor and his solicitor, and the latter was authorised to hand over the complete collection to the British Museum authorities when the tomb-furniture arrived; which he has since done.

'From Paris he seems to have returned on the twenty-third of November, and to have gone direct to Charing Cross to the house of a relative, a Mr. Hurst, who is a bachelor and lives at Eltham. He appeared at the house at twenty minutes past five, and as Mr. Hurst had not yet come down from town and was not expected until a quarter to six, he explained who he was and said he would wait in the study and write some letters. The housemaid accordingly showed him into the study, furnished him with writing materials, and left him.

'At a quarter to six Mr. Hurst let himself in with his latchkey, and before the housemaid had time to speak to him he had passed through into the study and shut the door.

'At six o'clock, when the dinner bell was rung, Mr. Hurst entered the dining-room alone, and observing the table was laid for two, asked the reason.

'"I thought Mr. Bellingham was staying to dinner, sir," was the housemaid's reply.

'"Mr. Bellingham!" exclaimed the astonished host. "I didn't know he was here. Why was I not told?"

'"I thought he was in the study with you, sir," said the housemaid.

'On this a search was made for the visitor, with the result that he was nowhere to be found. He had disappeared without leaving a trace, and what made the incident more odd was that the housemaid was certain that he had not gone out by the front door. For since neither she nor the cook was acquainted with Mr. John Bellingham, she had remained the whole time either in the kitchen, which commanded a view of the front gate, or in the dining-room, which opened into the hall opposite the study door. The study itself has a French window opening on a narrow grass plot, across which is a side-gate that opens into an alley; and it appears that Mr. Bellingham must have made his exit by this rather eccentric route. At any rate—and this is the important fact—he was not in the house, and no one had seen him leave it.

'After a hasty meal Mr. Hurst returned to town and called at the office of Mr. Bellingham's solicitor and confidential agent, a Mr. Jellicoe, and mentioned the matter to him. Mr. Jellicoe knew nothing of his client's return from Paris, and the two men at once took the train down to Woodford, where the missing man's brother, Mr. Godfrey Bellingham, lives. The servant who admitted them said that Mr. Godfrey was not at home, but that his daughter was in the library, which is a detached building situated in a shrubbery beyond the garden at the back of the house. Here the two men found, not only Miss Bellingham, but also her father, who had come in by the back gate.

'Mr. Godfrey and his daughter listened to Mr. Hurst's story with the greatest surprise, and assured him that they had neither seen nor heard anything of John Bellingham.

'Presently the party left the library to walk up to the house; but only a few feet from the library door Mr. Jellicoe noticed an object lying in the grass and pointed it out to Mr. Godfrey.

'The latter picked it up, and they all recognised it as a scarab which Mr. John Bellingham had been accustomed to wear suspended from his watch-chain. There was no mistaking it. It was a very fine scarab of the eighteenth dynasty fashioned of lapis lazuli and engraved with the cartouche of Amenhotep III. It had been suspended by a gold ring fastened to a wire which passed through the suspension hole, and the ring, though broken, was still in position.

'This discovery of course only added to the mystery, which was still further increased when, on inquiry, a suit-case bearing the initials J. B. was found to be unclaimed in the cloak-room at Charing Cross. Reference to the counterfoil of the ticket-book showed that it had been deposited about the time of the arrival of the Continental express on the twenty-third of November, so that its owner must have gone straight on to Eltham.

'That is how the affair stands at present, and, should the missing man never reappear or should his body never be found, the question, as you see, which will be required to be settled is, "What is the exact time and place, when and where, he was last known to be alive!" As to the place, the importance of the issues involved in that question are obvious and we need not consider them. But the question of time has another kind of significance. Cases have occurred, as I pointed out in the lecture, in which proof of survivorship by less than a minute has secured succession to property. Now, the missing man was last seen alive at Mr. Hurst's house at twenty minutes past five on the twenty-third of November. But he appears to have visited his brother's house at Woodford, and, since nobody saw him at that house, it is at present uncertain whether he went there before calling on Mr. Hurst. If he went there first, then twenty minutes past five on the evening of the twenty-third is the latest moment at which he is known to have been alive; but if he went there after, there would have to be added to this time the shortest time possible in which he could travel from the one house to the other.

'But the question as to which house he visited first hinges on the scarab. If he was wearing the scarab when he arrived at Mr. Hurst's house, it would be certain that he went there first; but if it was not then on his watch-chain, a probability would be established that he went first to Woodford. Thus, you see, a question which may conceivably become of the most vital moment in determining the succession of property turns on the observation or non-observation by this housemaid of an apparently trivial and insignificant fact.'

'Has the servant made any statement on this subject, sir?' I ventured to enquire.

'Apparently not,' replied Dr. Thorndyke; 'at any rate, there is no reference to any such statement in the newspaper report, though otherwise, the case is reported in great detail; indeed, the wealth of detail, including plans of the two houses, is quite remarkable and well worth noting as being in itself a fact of considerable interest.'

'In what respect, sir, is it of interest?' one of the students asked.

'Ah,' replied Dr. Thorndyke, 'I think I must leave you to consider that question yourself. This is an untried case, and we mustn't make free with the actions and motives of individuals.'

'Does the paper give any description of the missing man, sir?' I asked.

'Yes; quite an exhaustive description. Indeed, it is exhaustive to the verge of impropriety, considering that the man may turn up alive and well at any moment. It seems that he has an old Pott's fracture of the left ankle, a linear, longitudinal scar on each knee—origin not stated, but easily guessed at—and that he has tattooed on his chest in vermilion a very finely and distinctly executed representation of the symbolical Eye of Osiris—or Horus or Ra, as the different authorities have it. There certainly ought to be no difficulty in identifying the body. But we hope that it will not come to that.

'And now I must really be running away, and so must you; but I would advise you all to get copies of the paper and file them when you have read the remarkably full details. It is a most curious case, and it is highly probable that we shall hear of it again. Good afternoon, gentlemen.'

Dr Thorndyke's advice appealed to all who heard it, for medical jurisprudence was a live subject at St Margaret's, and all of us were keenly interested in it. As a result, we sallied forth in a body to the nearest newsvendor's, and, having each provided himself with a copy of the Daily Telegraph, adjourned together to the Common Room to devour the report and thereafter to discuss the bearings of the case, unhampered by those considerations of delicacy that afflicted our more squeamish and scrupulous teacher.

CHAPTER II. THE EAVESDROPPER

IT IS one of the canons of correct conduct, scrupulously adhered to (when convenient) by all well-bred persons, that an acquaintance should be initiated by a proper introduction. To this salutary rule, which I have disregarded to the extent of an entire chapter, I now hasten to conform; and the more so inasmuch as nearly two years have passed since my first informal appearance.

Permit me then, to introduce Paul Berkeley, MB, etc., recently—very recently—qualified, faultlessly attired in the professional frock-coat and tall hat, and, at the moment of introduction, navigating with anxious care a perilous strait between a row of well-filled coal-sacks and a colossal tray piled high with kidney potatoes.

The passage of this strait landed me on the terra firma of Fleur-de-Lys Court, where I halted for a moment to consult my visiting list. There was only one more patient for me to see this morning, and he lived at 49, Nevill's Court, wherever that might be. I turned for information to the presiding deity of the coal shop.

'Can you direct me, Mrs. Jablett, to Nevill's Court?'

She could and she did, grasping me confidentially by the arm (the mark remained on my sleeve for weeks) and pointing a shaking forefinger at the dead wall ahead. 'Nevill's Court', said Mrs. Jablett, 'is a alley, and you goes into it through a archway. It turns out on Fetter Lane on the right and as you goes up, oppersight Bream's Buildings.'

I thanked Mrs. Jablett and went on my way, glad that the morning round was nearly finished, and vaguely conscious of a growing appetite and of a desire to wash in hot water.

The practice which I was conducting was not my own. It belonged to poor Dick Barnard, an old St Margaret's man of irrepressible spirits and indifferent physique, who had started only the day before for a trip down the Mediterranean on board a tramp engaged in the currant trade; and this, my second morning's round, was in some sort a voyage of geographical discovery.

I walked on briskly up Fetter Lane until a narrow arched opening, bearing the superscription 'Nevill's Court', arrested my steps, and here I turned to encounter one of those surprises that lie in wait for the traveller in London by-ways. Expecting to find the grey squalor of the ordinary London court, I looked out from under the shadow of the arch past a row of decent little shops through a vista full of light and colour—a vista of ancient, warm-toned roofs and walls relieved by sunlit foliage. In the heart of London a tree is always a delightful surprise; but here were not only trees, but bushes and even flowers. The narrow footway was bordered by little gardens, which, with their wooden palings and well-kept shrubs, gave to the place an air of quaint and sober rusticity; and even as I entered a bevy of workgirls, with gaily-coloured blouses and hair aflame in the sunlight, brightened up the quiet background like the wild flowers that sprangle a summer hedgerow.

In one of the gardens I noticed that the little paths were paved with what looked like circular tiles, but which, on inspection, I found to be old-fashioned stone ink-bottles, buried bottom upwards; and I was meditating upon the quaint conceit of the forgotten scrivener who had thus adorned his habitation—a law-writer perhaps or an author, or perchance even a poet—when I perceived the number that I was seeking inscribed on a shabby door in a high wall. There was no bell or knocker, so, lifting the latch, I pushed the door open and entered.

But if the court itself had been a surprise, this was a positive wonder, a dream. Here, within earshot of the rumble of Fleet Street, I was in an old-fashioned garden enclosed by high walls and, now that the gate was shut, cut off from all sight and knowledge of the urban world that seethed without. I stood and gazed in delighted astonishment. Sun-gilded trees and flower beds gay with blossom; lupins, snapdragons, nasturtiums, spiry foxgloves, and mighty hollyhocks formed the foreground; over which a pair of sulphur-tinted butterflies flitted, unmindful of a buxom and miraculously clean white cat which pursued them, dancing across the borders and clapping her snowy paws fruitlessly in mid-air. And the background was no less wonderful; a grand old house, dark-eaved and venerable, that must have looked down on this garden when ruffled dandies were borne in sedan chairs through the court, and gentle Izaak Walton, stealing forth from his shop in Fleet Street, strolled up Fetter Lane to 'go a-angling' at Temple Mills.

So overpowered was I by this unexpected vision that my hand was on the bottom knob of a row of bell-pulls before I recollected myself; and it was not until a most infernal jangling from within recalled me to my business that I observed underneath it a small brass plate inscribed 'Miss Oman'.

The door opened with some suddenness and a short, middle-aged woman surveyed me hungrily.

'Have I rung the wrong bell?' I asked—foolishly enough, I must admit.

'How can I tell?' she demanded. 'I expect you have. It's the sort of thing a man would do—ring the wrong bell and then say he's sorry.'

'I didn't go as far as that,' I retorted. 'It seems to have had the desired effect, and I've made your acquaintance into the bargain.'

'Whom do you want to see?' she asked.

'Mr. Bellingham.'

'Are you the doctor?'

'I'm a doctor.'

'Follow me upstairs,' said Miss Oman, 'and don't tread on the paint.'

I crossed the spacious hall, and, preceded by my conductress, ascended a noble oak staircase, treading carefully on a ribbon of matting that ran up the middle. On the first-floor landing Miss Oman opened a door and, pointing to the room, said, 'Go in there and wait; I'll tell her you're here.'

'I said Mr. Bellingham—' I began; but the door slammed on me, and Miss Oman's footsteps retreated rapidly down the stairs.

It was at once obvious to me that I was in a very awkward position. The room into which I had been shown communicated with another, and though the door of communication was shut, I was unpleasantly aware of a conversation that was taking place in the adjoining room. At first, indeed, only a vague mutter, with a few disjointed phrases, came through the door, but suddenly an angry voice rang out clear and painfully distinct:

'Yes, I did! And I say it again. Bribery! Collusion! That's what it amounts to. You want to square me!'

'Nothing of the kind, Godfrey,' was the reply in a lower tone; but at this point I coughed emphatically and moved a chair, and the voices subsided once more into an indistinct murmur.

To distract my attention from my unseen neighbours I glanced curiously about the room and speculated upon the personal ties of its occupants. A very curious room it was, with its pathetic suggestion of decayed splendour and old-world dignity; a room full of interest and character and of contrasts and perplexing contradictions. For the most part it spoke of unmistakable though decent poverty. It was nearly bare of furniture, and what little there was was of the cheapest—a small kitchen table and three Windsor chairs (two of them with arms); a threadbare string carpet on the floor, and a cheap cotton cloth on the table; these, with a set of bookshelves, frankly constructed of grocer's boxes, formed the entire suite. And yet, despite its poverty, the place exhaled an air of homely if rather ascetic comfort, and the taste was irreproachable. The quiet russet of the table-cloth struck a pleasant harmony with the subdued bluish green of the worn carpet; the Windsor chairs and the legs of the table had been carefully denuded of their glaring varnish and stained a sober brown; and the austerity of the whole was relieved by a ginger jar filled with fresh-cut flowers and set in the middle of the table.

But the contrasts of which I have spoken were most singular and puzzling. There were the bookshelves, for instance, home made and stained at the cost of a few pence, but filled with recent and costly new works on archaeology and ancient art. There were the objects on the mantelpiece: a facsimile in bronze—not bronze plaster—of the beautiful head of Hypnos and a pair of fine Ushabti figures. There were the decorations of the walls, a number of etchings—signed proofs, every one of them—of Oriental subjects, and a splendid facsimile reproduction of an Egyptian papyrus. It was incongruous in the extreme, this mingling of costly refinements with the barest and shabbiest necessaries of life, of fastidious culture with manifest poverty. I could make nothing of it. What manner of man, I wondered, was this new patient of mine? Was he a miser, hiding himself and his wealth in this obscure court? An eccentric savant? A philosopher? Or—more probably—a crank? But at this point my meditations were interrupted by the voice from the adjoining room, once more raised in anger.

'Tut I say that you are making an accusation! You are implying that I made away with him.'

'Not at all,' was the reply; 'but I repeat that it is your business to ascertain what has become of him. The responsibility rests upon you.'

'Upon me!' rejoined the first voice. 'And what about you? Your position is a pretty fishy one if it comes to that.'

'What!' roared the other. 'Do you insinuate that I murdered my own brother?'

During this amazing colloquy I had stood gaping with sheer astonishment. Suddenly I recollected myself, and dropping into a chair, set my elbows on my knees and clapped my hands over my ears; and thus I must have remained for a full minute when I became aware of the closing of a door behind me.

I sprang to my feet and turned in some embarrassment (for I must have looked unspeakably ridiculous) to confront the sombre figure of a rather tall and strikingly handsome girl, who, as she stood with her hand on the knob of the door, saluted me with a formal bow. In an instantaneous glance I noted how perfectly she matched her strange surroundings. Black-robed, black-haired, with black-grey eyes and a grave sad face of ivory pallor, she stood, like one of old Terboch's portraits, a harmony in tones so low as to be but a step removed from monochrome. Obviously a lady in spite of the worn and rusty dress, and something in the poise of the head and the set of the straight brows hinted at a spirit that adversity had hardened rather than broken.

'I must ask you to forgive me for keeping you waiting,' she said; and as she spoke a certain softening at the corners of the austere mouth reminded me of the absurd position in which she had found me.

I murmured that the trifling delay was of no consequence whatever; that I had, in fact, been rather glad of the rest; and I was beginning somewhat vaguely to approach the subject of the invalid when the voice from the adjoining room again broke forth with hideous distinctness.

'I tell you I'll do nothing of the kind! Why, confound you, it's nothing less than a conspiracy that you're proposing!'

Miss Bellingham—as I assumed her to be—stepped quickly across the floor, flushing angrily, as well she might; but, as she reached the door, it flew open and a small, spruce, middle-aged man burst into the room.

'Your father is mad, Ruth!' he exclaimed; 'absolutely stark mad! And I refuse to hold any further communication with him.'

'The present interview was not of his seeking,' Miss Bellingham replied coldly.

'No, it was not,' was the wrathful rejoinder; 'it was my mistaken generosity. But there—what is the use of talking? I've done my best for you and I'll do no more. Don't trouble to let me out; I can find my way. Good-morning.' With a stiff bow and a quick glance at me, the speaker strode out of the room, banging the door after him.

'I must apologise for this extraordinary reception,' said Miss Bellingham; 'but I believe medical men are not easily astonished. I will introduce you to your patient now.' She opened the door and, as I followed her into the adjoining room, she said: 'Here is another visitor for you, dear. Doctor—'

'Berkeley,' said I. 'I am acting for my friend Doctor Barnard.'

The invalid, a fine-looking man of about fifty-five, who sat propped up in bed with a pile of pillows, held out an excessively shaky hand, which I grasped cordially, making a mental note of the tremor.

'How do you do, sir?' said Mr. Bellingham. 'I hope Doctor Barnard is not ill.'

'Oh, no,' I answered; 'he has gone for a trip down the Mediterranean on a currant ship. The chance occurred rather suddenly, and I bustled him off before he had time to change his mind. Hence my rather unceremonious appearance, which I hope you will forgive.'

'Not at all,' was the hearty response. 'I'm delighted to hear that you sent him off; he wanted a holiday, poor man. And I am delighted to make your acquaintance, too.'

'It is very good of you,' I said; whereupon he bowed as gracefully as a man may who is propped up in bed with a heap of pillows; and having thus exchanged broadsides of civility, so to speak, we—or, at least, I—proceeded to business.

'How long have you been laid up?' I asked cautiously, not wishing to make too evident the fact that my principal had given me no information respecting his case.

'A week to-day,' he replied. 'Thefons et origo mail was a hansom-cab which upset me opposite the Law Courts—sent me sprawling in the middle of the road. My own fault, of course—at least, the cabby said so, and I suppose he knew. But that was no consolation to me.'

'Were you hurt much?'

'No, not really; but the fall bruised my knee rather badly and gave me a deuce of a shake up. I'm too old for that sort of thing, you know.'

'Most people are,' said I.

'True; but you can take a cropper more gracefully at twenty than at fifty-five. However, the knee is getting on quite well—you shall see it presently—and you observe that I am giving it complete rest. But that isn't the whole of the trouble or the worst of it. It's my confounded nerves. I'm as irritable as the devil and as nervous as a cat. And I can't get a decent night's rest.'

I recalled the tremulous hand that he had offered me. He did not look like a drinker, but still—

'Do you smoke much?' I inquired diplomatically.

He looked at me slyly and chuckled. 'That's a very delicate way to approach the subject, Doctor,' he said. 'No, I don't smoke much, and I don't crook my little finger. I saw you look at my shaky hand just now—oh, it's all right; I'm not offended. It's a doctor's business to keep lifting his eyelids. But my hand is steady enough as a rule, when I'm not upset, but the least excitement sets me shaking like a jelly. And the fact is that I have just had a deucedly unpleasant interview—'

'I think,' Miss Bellingham interrupted, 'Doctor Berkeley and, in fact, the neighbourhood at large, are aware of the fact.'

Mr. Bellingham laughed rather shamefacedly. 'I'm afraid I did lose my temper,' he said; 'but I am always an impulsive old fellow, Doctor, and when I'm put out I'm apt to speak my mind—a little too bluntly perhaps.'

'And audibly,' his daughter added. 'Do you know that Doctor Berkeley was reduced to the necessity of stopping his ears?' She glanced at me as she spoke, with something like a twinkle in her solemn grey eyes.

'Did I shout?' Mr. Bellingham asked, not very contritely, I thought, though he added: 'I'm very sorry, my dear; but it won't happen again. I think we've seen the last of that good gentleman.'

'I am sure I hope so,' she rejoined, adding: 'And now I will leave you to your talk; I shall be in the next room if you should want me.'

I opened the door for her, and when she had passed out with a stiff little bow I seated myself by the bedside and resumed the consultation. It was evidently a case of breakdown, to which the cab accident had, no doubt, contributed. As to the other antecedents, they were of no concern of mine, though Mr. Bellingham seemed to think otherwise, for he resumed: 'That cab business was the last straw, you know, and it finished me off, but I have been going down the hill for a long time. I've had a lot of trouble during the last two years. But I suppose I oughtn't to pester you with the details of my personal affairs.'

'Anything that bears on your present state of health is of interest to me if you don't mind telling me it,' I said.

'Mind!' he exclaimed. 'Did you ever meet an invalid who didn't enjoy talking about his own health? It's the listener who minds, as a rule.'

'Well, the present listener doesn't,' I said.

'Then,' said Mr. Bellingham, 'I'll treat myself to the luxury of telling you all my troubles; I don't often get the chance of a confidential grumble to a responsible man of my own class. And I really have some excuses for railing at Fortune, as you will agree when I tell you that, a couple of years ago, I went to bed one night a gentleman of independent means and excellent prospects and woke up in the morning to find myself practically a beggar. Not a cheerful experience that, you know, at my time of life, eh?'

'No,' I agreed, 'not at any other.'

'And that was not all,' he continued; 'For at the same moment I lost my brother, my dearest, kindest friend. He disappeared—vanished off the face of the earth; but perhaps you have heard of the affair. The confounded papers were full of it at the time.'

He paused abruptly, noticing, no doubt, a sudden change in my face. Of course, I recollected the case now. Indeed, ever since I had entered the house some chord of memory had been faintly vibrating, and now his last words had struck out the full note.

'Yes,' I said, 'I remember the incident, though I don't suppose I should but for the fact that our lecturer on medical jurisprudence drew my attention to it.'

'Indeed,' said Mr. Bellingham, rather uneasily, as I fancied. 'What did he say about it?'

'He referred to it as a case that was calculated to give rise to some very pretty legal complications.'

'By Jove!' exclaimed Bellingham, 'that man was a prophet! Legal complications, indeed! But I'll be bound he never guessed at the sort of infernal tangle that has actually gathered round the affair. By the way, what was his name?'

'Thorndyke,' I replied. 'Doctor John Thorndyke.'

'Thorndyke,' Mr. Bellingham repeated in a musing, retrospective tone. 'I seem to remember the name. Yes, of course. I have heard a legal friend of mine, a Mr. Marchmont, speak of him in reference to the case of a man whom I knew slightly years ago—a certain Jeffrey Blackmore, who also disappeared very mysteriously. I remember now that Dr. Thorndyke unravelled that case with most remarkable ingenuity.'

'I daresay he would be very much interested to hear about your case,' I suggested.

'I daresay he would,' was the reply; 'but one can't take up a professional man's time for nothing, and I couldn't afford to pay him. And that reminds me that I'm taking up your time by gossiping about purely personal affairs.'

'My morning round is finished,' said I, 'and, moreover, your personal affairs are highly interesting. I suppose I mustn't ask what is the nature of the legal entanglement?'

'Not unless you are prepared to stay here for the rest of the day and go home a raving lunatic. But I'll tell you this much: the trouble is about my poor brother's will. In the first place it can't be administered because there is not sufficient evidence that my brother is dead; and in the second place, if it could, all the property would go to people who were never intended to benefit. The will itself is the most diabolically exasperating document that was ever produced by the perverted ingenuity of a wrong-headed man. That's all. Will you have a look at my knee?'

As Mr. Bellingham's explanation (delivered in a rapid crescendo and ending almost in a shout) had left him purple-faced and trembling, I thought it best to bring our talk to an end. Accordingly I proceeded to inspect the injured knee, which was now nearly well, and to overhaul my patient generally; and having given him detailed instructions as to his general conduct, I rose and took my leave.

'And remember,' I said as I shook his hand, 'no tobacco, no coffee, no excitement of any kind. Lead a quiet, bovine life.'

'That's all very well,' he grumbled, 'but supposing people come here and excite me?'

'Disregard them,' said I, 'and read Whitaker's Almanack.' And with this parting advice I passed out into the other room.

Miss Bellingham was seated at the table with a pile of blue-covered notebooks before her, two of which were open, displaying pages closely written in a small, neat handwriting. She rose as I entered and looked at me inquiringly.

'I heard you advising my father to read Whitaker's Almanack,' she said. 'Was that a curative measure?'

'Entirely,' I replied. 'I recommended it for its medicinal virtues, as an antidote to mental excitement.'

She smiled faintly. 'It certainly is not a highly emotional book,' she said, and then asked: 'Have you any other instructions to give?'

'Well, I might give the conventional advice—to maintain a cheerful outlook and avoid worry; but I don't suppose you would find it very helpful.'

'No,' she answered bitterly; 'it is a counsel of perfection. People in our position are not a very cheerful class, I'm afraid; but still they don't seek out worries from sheer perverseness. The worries come unsought. But, of course, you can't enter into that.'

'I can't give you any practical help, I fear, though I do sincerely hope that your father's affairs will straighten themselves out soon.'

She thanked me for my good wishes and accompanied me down to the street door, where, with a bow and a rather stiff handshake, she gave me my conge.

Very ungratefully the noise of Fetter Lane smote on my ears as I came out through the archway, and very squalid and unrestful the little street looked when contrasted with the dignity and monastic quiet of the old garden. As to the surgery, with its oilcloth floor and walls made hideous with gaudy insurance show-cards in sham gilt frailties, its aspect was so revolting that I flew to the day-book for distraction, and was still busily entering the morning's visits when the bottle-boy, Adolphus, entered stealthily to announce lunch.

CHAPTER III. JOHN THORNDYKE

THAT THE character of an individual tends to be reflected in his dress is a fact familiar to the least observant. That the observation is equally applicable to aggregates of men is less familiar, but equally true. Do not the members of the fighting professions, even to this day, deck themselves in feathers, in gaudy colours and gilded ornaments, after the manner of the African war-chief or the Redskin 'brave', and thereby indicate the place of war in modern civilisation? Does not the Church of Rome send her priests to the altar in habiliments that were fashionable before the fall of the Roman Empire, in token of her immovable conservatism? And, lastly, does not the Law, lumbering on in the wake of progress, symbolise its subjection to precedent by head-gear reminiscent of the good days of Queen Anne?

I should apologise for obtruding upon the reader these somewhat trite reflections; which were set going by the quaint stock-in-trade of the wig-maker's shop in the cloisters of the Inner Temple, whither I strayed on a sultry afternoon in quest of shade and quiet. I had halted opposite the little shop window, and, with my eyes bent dreamily on the row of wigs, was pursuing the above train of thought when I was startled by a deep voice saying softly in my ear: 'I'd have the full-bottomed one if I were you.'

I turned swiftly and rather fiercely, and looked into the face of my old friend and fellow-student, Jervis, behind whom, regarding us with a sedate smile, stood my former teacher, Dr. John Thorndyke. Both men greeted me with a warmth that I felt to be very flattering, for Thorndyke was quite a great personage, and even Jervis was several years my academic senior.

'You are coming in to have a cup of tea with us, I hope,' said Thorndyke; and as I assented gladly, he took my arm and led me across the court in the direction of the Treasury.

'But why that hungry gaze at those forensic vanities, Berkeley?' he asked. 'Are you thinking of following my example and Jervis's—deserting the bedside for the Bar?'

'What! Has Jervis gone in for the law?' I exclaimed.

'Bless you, yes!' replied Jervis. 'I have become parasitical on Thorndyke! "The big fleas have little fleas", you know. I am the additional fraction trailing after the whole number in the rear of a decimal point.'

'Don't you believe him, Berkeley,' interposed Thorndyke. 'He is the brains of the firm. I supply the respectability and moral worth. But you haven't answered my question. What are you doing here on a summer afternoon staring into a wig-maker's window?'

'I am Barnard's locum; he is in practice in Fetter Lane.'

'I know,' said Thorndyke; 'we meet him occasionally, and very pale and peaky he has been looking of late. Is he taking a holiday?'

'Yes. He has gone for a trip to the Isles of Greece in a currant ship.'

'Then,' said Jervis, 'you are actually a local GP. I thought you were looking beastly respectable.'

'And judging from your leisured manner when we encountered you,' added Thorndyke, 'the practice is not a strenuous one. I suppose it is entirely local?'

'Yes,' I replied. 'The patients mostly live in the small streets and courts within a half-mile radius of the surgery, and the abodes of some of them are pretty squalid. Oh! and that reminds me of a very strange coincidence. It will interest you, I think.'

'Life is made up of strange coincidences,' said Thorndyke. 'Nobody but a reviewer of novels is ever really surprised at a coincidence. But what is yours?'

'It is connected with a case that you mentioned to us at the hospital about two years ago, the case of a man who disappeared under rather mysterious circumstances. Do you remember it? The man's name was Bellingham.'

'The Egyptologist? Yes, I remember the case quite well. What about it?'

'The brother is a patient of mine. He is living in Nevill's Court with his daughter, and they seem to be as poor as church mice.'

'Really,' said Thorndyke, 'this is quite interesting. They must have come down in the world rather suddenly. If I remember rightly, the brother was living in a house of some pretensions standing in its own grounds.'

'Yes, that is so. I see you recollect all about the case.'

'My dear fellow,' said Jervis, 'Thorndyke never forgets a likely case. He is a sort of medico-legal camel. He gulps down the raw facts from the newspapers or elsewhere, and then, in his leisure moments, he calmly regurgitates them and has a quiet chew at them. It is a quaint habit. A case crops up in the papers or in one of the courts, and Thorndyke swallows it whole. Then it lapses and every one forgets it. A year or two later it crops up in a new form, and, to your astonishment, you

find that Thorndyke has got it all cut and dried. He has been ruminating on it periodically in the interval.'

'You notice,' said Thorndyke, 'that my learned friend is pleased to indulge in mixed metaphors. But his statement is substantially true, though obscurely worded. You must tell us more about the Bellinghams when we have fortified you with a cup of tea.'

Our talk had brought us to Thorndyke's chambers, which were on the first floor of No. 5A, King's Bench Walk, and as we entered the fine, spacious, panelled room we found a small, elderly man, neatly dressed in black, setting out the tea-service on the table. I glanced at him with some curiosity. He hardly looked like a servant, in spite of his neat, black clothes: in fact, his appearance was rather puzzling, for while his quiet dignity and his serious, intelligent face suggested some kind of professional man, his neat, capable hands were those of a skilled mechanic.

Thorndyke surveyed the tea-tray thoughtfully and then looked at his retainer. 'I see you have put three tea-cups, Polton,' he said. 'Now, how did you know I was bringing some one in to tea?'

The little man smiled a quaint, crinkly smile of gratification as he explained:

'I happened to look out of the laboratory window as you turned the corner, sir.'

'How disappointingly simple,' said Jervis. 'We were hoping for something abstruse and telepathic.'

'Simplicity is the soul of efficiency, sir,' replied Polton as he checked the tea-service to make sure that nothing was forgotten, and with this remarkable aphorism he silently evaporated.

'To return to the Bellingham case,' said Thorndyke, when he had poured out the tea. 'Have you picked up any facts relating to the parties—and facts, I mean, of course, that it would be proper for you to mention?'

'I have learned one or two things that there is no harm in repeating. For instance, I gather that Godfrey Bellingham—my patient—lost all his property quite suddenly about the time of the disappearance.'

'That is really odd,' said Thorndyke. 'The opposite condition would be quite understandable, but one doesn't see exactly how this can have happened, unless there was an allowance of some sort.'

'No, that was what struck me. But there seem to be some queer features in the case, and the legal position is evidently getting complicated. There is a will, for example, which is giving trouble.'

'They will be hardly able to administer the will without either proof or presumption of death,' Thorndyke remarked.

'Exactly. That's one of the difficulties. Another is that there seems to be some fatal drafting of the will itself. I don't know what it is, but I expect I shall hear sooner or later. By the way, I mentioned the interest that you have taken in the case, and I think Bellingham would have liked to consult you, but, of course, the poor devil has no money.'

'That is awkward for him if the other interested parties have, There will probably be legal proceedings of some kind, and as the law takes no account of poverty, he is likely to go to the wall. He ought to have advice of some sort.'

'I don't see how he is to get it,' said I.

'Neither do I,' Thorndyke admitted. 'There are no hospitals for impecunious litigants; it is assumed that only persons of means have a right to go to law. Of course, if we knew the man and the circumstances we might be able to help him; but for all we know to the contrary, he may be an arrant scoundrel.'

I had recalled the strange conversation that I had overheard, and wondered what Thorndyke would have thought of it if it had been allowable for me to repeat it. Obviously it was not, however, and I could only give my own impressions.

'He doesn't strike me as that,' I said; 'but, of course, one never knows. Personally, he impressed me rather favourably, which is more than the other man did.'

'What other man?' asked Thorndyke.

'There was another man in the case, wasn't there? I forget his name. I saw him at the house and didn't much like the look of him. I suspect he's putting some sort of pressure on Bellingham.'

'Berkeley knows more about this than he's telling us,' said Jervis. 'Let us look up the report and see who this stranger is.' He took down from a shelf a large volume of newspaper cuttings and laid it on the table.

'You see,' said he, as he ran his finger down the index. 'Thorndyke files all the cases that are likely to come to something, and I know he had expectations regarding this one. I fancy he had some ghoulish hope that the missing gentleman's head might turn up in somebody's dust-bin. Here we are; the other man's name is Hurst. He is apparently a cousin, and it was at his house the missing man was last seen alive.'

'So you think Mr. Hurst is moving in the matter?' said Thorndyke, when he had glanced over the report.

'That is my impression,' I replied, 'though I really know nothing about it.'

'Well,' said Thorndyke, 'if you should learn what is being done and should have permission to speak of it, I shall be very interested to hear how the case progresses; and if an unofficial opinion on any point would be of service, I think there would be no harm in giving it.'

'It would certainly be of great value if the other parties are taking professional advice,' I said; and then, after a pause, I asked: 'Have you given this case much consideration?'

Thorndyke reflected. 'No,' he said, 'I can't say that I have. I turned it over rather carefully when the report first appeared, and I have speculated on it occasionally since. It is my habit, as Jervis was telling you, to utilise odd moments of leisure (such as a railway journey, for instance) by constructing theories to account for the facts of such obscure cases as have come to my notice. It is a useful habit, I think, for, apart from the mental exercise and experience that one gains from it, an appreciable portion of these cases ultimately comes into my hands, and then the previous consideration of them is so much time gained.'

'Have you formed any theory to account for the facts in this case?' I asked.

'Yes; I have several theories, one of which I especially favour, and I am awaiting with great interest such new facts as may indicate to me which of these theories is probably the correct one.'

'It's no use your trying to pump him, Berkeley,' said Jervis. 'He is fitted with an information valve that opens inwards. You can pour in as much as you like, but you can't get any out.'

Thorndyke chuckled. 'My learned friend is, in the main, correct,' he said. 'You see, I may be called upon any day to advise on this case, in which event I should feel remarkably foolish if I had already expounded my views in detail. But I should like to hear what you and Jervis make of the case as reported in the newspapers.'

'There now,' exclaimed Jervis, 'what did I tell you? He wants to suck your brains.'

'As far as my brain is concerned,' I said, 'the process of suction isn't likely to yield much except vacuum, so I will resign in favour of you. You are a full-blown lawyer, whereas I am only a simple GP.'

Jervis filled his pipe with deliberate care and lighted it. Then, blowing a slender stream of smoke into the air, he said:

'If you want to know what I make of the case from that report, I can tell you in one word—nothing. Every road seems to end in a cul-de-sac.'

'Oh, come!' said Thorndyke, 'this is mere laziness. Berkeley wants to witness a display of your forensic wisdom. A learned counsel may be in a fog—he very often is—but he doesn't state the fact baldly; he wraps it up in a decent verbal disguise. Tell us how you arrive at your conclusion. Show us that you have really weighed the facts.'

'Very well,' said Jervis, 'I will give you a masterly analysis of the case—leading to nothing.' He continued to puff at his pipe for a time with slight embarrassment, as I thought—and I fully sympathised with him. Finally he blew a little cloud and commenced:

'The position appears to be this: Here is a man seen to enter a certain house, who is shown into a certain room, and shut in. He is not seen to come out, and yet, when the room is next entered, it is found to be empty; and that man is never seen again, alive or dead. That is a pretty tough beginning.

'Now, it is evident that one of three things must have happened. Either he must have remained in that room, or at least in that house, alive; or he must have died, naturally or otherwise, and his body have been concealed; or he must have left the house unobserved. Let us take the first case. Now, he couldn't have remained alive in the house for two years. This affair happened nearly two years ago. He would have been noticed. The servants, for instance, when cleaning out the rooms, would have observed him.'

Here Thorndyke interposed with an indulgent smile at his junior: 'My learned friend is treating the inquiry with unbecoming levity. We accept the conclusion that the man did not remain in the house alive.'

'Very well. Then did he remain in it dead? Apparently not. The report says that as soon as the man was missed, Hurst and the servants together searched the house thoroughly. But there had been no time or opportunity to dispose of the body, whence the only possible conclusion is that the body was not there. Moreover, if we admit the possibility of his having been murdered—for that is what

concealment of the body would imply—there is the question: Who could have murdered him? Not the servants, obviously, and as to Hurst—well, of course, we don't know what his relations with the missing man may have been—at least, I don't.'—

'Neither do I,' said Thorndyke. 'I know nothing beyond what is in the newspaper report and what Berkeley has told us.'

'Then we know nothing. He may have had a motive for murdering the man or he may not. The point is that he doesn't seem to have had the opportunity. Even if we suppose that he managed to conceal the body temporarily, still there was the final disposal of it. He couldn't have buried it in the garden with the servants about; neither could he have burned it. The only conceivable method by which he could have got rid of it would have been that of cutting it up into fragments and burying the dismembered parts in some secluded spots or dropping them into ponds or rivers. But no remains of the kind have been found, as some of them probably would have been by now, so that there is nothing to support this suggestion; indeed, the idea of murder, in this house at least, seems to be excluded by the search that was made the instant the man was missed.

'Then to take the third alternative: Did he leave the house unobserved? Well, it is not impossible, but it would be a queer thing to do. He may have been an impulsive or eccentric man. We can't say. We know nothing about him. But two years have clasped and he has never turned up, so that if he left the house secretly he must have gone into hiding and be hiding still. Of course, he may have been the sort of lunatic who would behave in that manner or he may not. We have no information as to his personal character.

'Then there is the complication of the scarab that was picked up in the grounds of his brother's house at Woodford. That seems to show that he visited that house at some time. But no one admits having seen him there; and it is uncertain, therefore, whether he went first to his brother's house or to Hurst's. If he was wearing the scarab when he arrived at the Eltham house, he must have left that house unobserved and gone to Woodford; but if he was not wearing it he probably went from Woodford to Eltham, and there finally disappeared. As to whether he was or was not wearing the scarab when he was last seen alive by Hurst's housemaid, there is at present no evidence.

'If he went to his brother's house after his visit to Hurst, the disappearance is more understandable if we don't mind flinging accusations of murder about rather casually; for the disposal of the body would be much less difficult in that case. Apparently no one saw him enter the house, and, if he did enter, it was by a back gate which communicated with the library—a separate building some distance from the house. In that case it would have been physically possible for the Bellinghams to have made away with him. There was plenty of time to dispose of the body unobserved—temporarily, at any rate. Nobody had seen him come to the house, and nobody knew that he was there—if he was there; and apparently no search was made either at the time or afterwards. In fact, if it could be shown that the missing man left Hurst's house alive, or that he was wearing the scarab when he arrived there, things would look rather fishy for the Bellinghams—for, of course, the girl must have been in it if the father was. But there's the crux: there is no proof that the man ever did leave Hurst's house alive. And if he didn't—but there! as I said at first, whichever turning you take, you find that it ends in a blind alley.'—

'A lame ending to a masterly exposition,' was Thorndyke's comment.

'I know,' said Jervis. 'But what would you have? There are quite a number of possible solutions, and one of them must be the true one. But how are we to judge which it is? I maintain that until we know something of the parties and the financial and other interests involved we have no data.'

'There,' said Thorndyke, 'I disagree with you entirely. I maintain that we have ample data. You say that we have no means of judging which of the various possible solutions is the true one; but I think that if you read the report carefully and thoughtfully you will find that the facts now known point clearly to one explanation, and one only. It may not be the true explanation, and I don't suppose it is. But we are now dealing with the matter speculatively, academically, and I contend that our data yield a definite conclusion. What do you say, Berkeley?'

'I say that it is time for me to be off; the evening consultations begin at half-past six.'

'Well,' said Thorndyke, 'don't let us keep you from your duties, with poor Barnard currant-picking in the Grecian Isles. But come in and see us again. Drop in when you like after your work is done. You won't be in our way even if we are busy, which we very seldom are after eight o'clock.'

I thanked Dr. Thorndyke most heartily for making me free of his chambers in this hospitable fashion and took my leave, setting forth homewards by way of Middle Temple Lane and the Embankment; not a very direct route for Fetter Lane, it must be confessed; but our talk had revived my interest in the Bellingham household and put me in a reflective vein.

From the remarkable conversation that I had overheard it was evident that the plot was thickening. Not that I supposed that these two respectable gentlemen really suspected one another of having made away with the missing man; but still, their unguarded words, spoken in anger, made it clear that each had allowed the thought of sinister possibilities to enter his mind—a dangerous condition that might easily grow into actual suspicion. And then the circumstances really were highly mysterious, as I realised with especial vividness now after listening to my friend's analysis of the evidence.

From the problem itself my mind travelled, not for the first time during the last few days, to the handsome girl, who had seemed in my eyes the high-priestess of this temple of mystery in the quaint little court. What a strange figure she had made against this strange background, with her quiet, chilly, self-contained manner, her pale face, so sad and worn, her black, straight brows and solemn grey eyes, so inscrutable, mysterious, Sibylline. A striking, even impressive, personality this, I reflected, with something in it sombre and enigmatic that attracted and yet repelled.

And here I recalled Jervis's words: 'The girl must have been in it if the father was.' It was a dreadful thought, even though only speculatively uttered, and my heart rejected it; rejected it with indignation that rather surprised me. And this notwithstanding that the sombre black-robed figure that my memory conjured up was one that associated itself with the idea of mystery and tragedy.

CHAPTER IV. LEGAL COMPLICATIONS AND A JACKAL

MY MEDITATIONS brought me by a circuitous route, and ten minutes late, to the end of Fetter Lane, where, exchanging my rather abstracted air for the alert manner of a busy practitioner, I strode briskly forward and darted into the surgery with knitted brows, as though just released from an anxious case. But there was only one patient waiting, and she saluted me as I entered with a snort of defiance.

'Here you are, then?' said she.

'You are perfectly correct, Miss Oman,' I replied; 'in fact, you have put the case in a nutshell. What can I have the pleasure of doing for you?'

'Nothing,' was the answer. 'My medical adviser is a lady; but I've brought a note from Mr. Bellingham. Here it is,' and she thrust the envelope into my hand.

I glanced through the note and learned that my patient had had a couple of bad nights and a very harassing day. 'Could I have something to give me a night's rest?' it concluded.

I reflected for a few moments. One is not very ready to prescribe sleeping draughts for unknown patients, but still, insomnia is a very distressing condition. In the end I temporised with a moderate dose of bromide, deciding to call and see if more energetic measures were necessary.

'He had better take a dose of this at once, Miss Oman,' said I, as I handed her the bottle, 'and I will look in later and see how he is.'

'I expect he will be glad to see you,' she answered, 'for he is all alone to-night and very dumpy. Miss Bellingham is out. But I must remind you that he's a poor man and pays his way. You must excuse my mentioning it.'

'I am much obliged to you for the hint, Miss Oman,' I rejoined. 'It isn't necessary for me to see him, but I should like just to look in and have a chat.'

'Yes, it will do him good. You have your points, though punctuality doesn't seem to be one of them,' and with this parting shot Miss Oman bustled away.

Half-past eight found me ascending the great, dim staircase the house in Nevill's Court preceded by Miss Oman, by whom I was ushered into the room. Mr. Bellingham, who had just finished some sort of meal, was sitting hunched up in his chair gazing gloomily into the empty grate. He brightened up as I entered, but was evidently in very low spirits.

'I didn't mean to drag you out after your day's work was finished,' he said, 'though I am very glad to see you.'

'You haven't dragged me out. I heard you were alone, so I just dropped in for a few minutes' gossip.'

'That is really kind of you,' he said heartily. 'But I'm afraid you'll find me rather poor company. A man who is full of his own highly disagreeable affairs is not a desirable companion.'

'You mustn't let me disturb you if you'd rather be alone,' said I, with a sudden fear that I was intruding.

'Oh, you won't disturb me,' he replied; adding, with a laugh: 'It's more likely to be the other way about. In fact, if I were not afraid of boring you to death I would ask you to let me talk my difficulties over with you.'

'You won't bore me,' I said. 'It is generally interesting to share another man's experiences without their inconveniences. "The proper study of mankind is—man," you know, especially to a doctor.'

Mr. Bellingham chuckled grimly. 'You make me feel like a microbe,' he said. 'However, if you would care to take a peep at me through your microscope, I will crawl on to the stage for your inspection, though it is not my actions that furnish the materials for your psychological studies. It is my poor brother who is the Deus ex machina, who, from his unknown grave, as I fear, pulls the strings of this infernal puppet-show.'

He paused and for a space gazed thoughtfully into the grate as if he had forgotten my presence. At length he looked up and resumed:

'It is a curious story, Doctor—a very curious story. Part of it you know—the middle part. I will tell you it from the beginning, and then you will know as much as I do; for, as to the end, that is known to no one. It is written, no doubt, in the book of destiny, but the page has yet to be turned.

'The mischief began with my father's death. He was a country clergyman of very moderate means, a widower with two children, my brother John and me. He managed to send us both to Oxford, after which John went into the Foreign Office and I was to have gone into the Church. But I suddenly discovered that my views on religion had undergone a change that made this impossible, and just about this time my father came into a quite considerable property. Now, as it was his expressed intention to leave the estate equally divided between my brother and me, there was no need for me to take up any profession for a livelihood. Archaeology was already the passion of my life, and I determined to devote myself henceforth to my favourite study, in which, by the way, I was following a family tendency; for my father was an enthusiastic student of ancient Oriental history, and John was, as you know, an ardent Egyptologist.

'Then my father died quite suddenly, and left no will. He had intended to have one drawn up, but had put it off until it was too late. And since nearly all the property was in the form of real estate, my brother inherited practically the whole of it. However, in deference to the known wishes of my father, he made me an allowance of five hundred a year, which was about a quarter of the annual income. I urged him to assign me a lump sum, but he refused to do this. Instead, he instructed his solicitor to pay me an allowance in quarterly instalments during the rest of his life; and it was understood that, on his death, the entire estate should devolve on me, or if I died first, on my daughter, Ruth. Then, as you know, he disappeared suddenly, and as the circumstances suggested that he was dead, and there was no evidence that he was alive, his solicitor—a Mr. Jellicoe—found himself unable to continue the payment of the allowance. On the other hand, as there was no positive evidence that my brother was dead, it was impossible to administer the will.'

'You say the circumstances suggested that your brother was dead. What circumstances were they?'

'Principally the suddenness and completeness of the disappearance. His luggage, as you may remember, was found lying unclaimed at the railway station; and there was another circumstance even more suggestive. My brother drew a pension from the Foreign Office, for which he had to apply in person, or, if abroad, produce proof that he was alive on the date when the payment became due. Now, he was exceedingly regular in this respect; in fact, he had never been known to fail, either to appear in person or to transmit the necessary documents to his agent, Mr. Jellicoe. But from the moment when he vanished so mysteriously to the present day, nothing whatever has been heard of him.'

'It's a very awkward position for you,' I said, 'but I should think there will not be much difficulty in obtaining the permission of the Court to presume death and to proceed to prove the will.'

Mr. Bellingham made a wry face. 'I expect you are right,' he said, 'but that doesn't help me much. You see, Mr. Jellicoe, having waited a reasonable time for my brother to reappear, took a very unusual but, I think, in the special circumstances, a very proper step: he summoned me and the other interested party to his office and communicated to us the provisions of the will. And very extraordinary provisions they turned out to be. I was thunderstruck when I heard them. And the exasperating thing is that I feel sure my poor brother imagined that he had made everything perfectly safe and simple.'

'They generally do,' I said, rather vaguely.

'I suppose they do,' said Mr. Bellingham; 'but poor John has made the most infernal hash of his will, and I am certain that he has utterly defeated his own intentions. You see, we are an old London family. The house in Queen Square where my brother nominally lived, but actually kept his collection, has been occupied by us for generations, and most of the Bellinghams are buried in St George's burial-ground close by, though some members of the family are buried in other churchyards in the neighbourhood. Now, my brother—who, by the way, was a bachelor—had a strong feeling for the family traditions, and he stipulated, not unnaturally, in his will that he should be buried in St George's burial-ground among his ancestors, or, at least, in one of the places of burial appertaining to his native parish. But instead of simply expressing the wish and directing his executors to carry it out, he made it a condition affecting the operation of the will.'

'Affecting it in what respect?' I asked.

'In a very vital respect,' answered Mr. Bellingham. 'The bulk of the property he bequeathed to me, or if I predeceased him, to my daughter Ruth. But the bequest was subject to the condition I have mentioned—that he should be buried in a certain place—and if that condition was not fulfilled, the bulk of the property was to go to my cousin, George Hurst.'

'But in that case,' said I, 'as you can't produce the body, neither of you can get the property.'

'I am not so sure of that,' he replied. 'If my brother is dead, it is pretty certain that he is not buried in St George's or any of the other places mentioned, and the fact can easily be proved by; production of the registers. So that a permission to presume death would result in the handing over to Hurst of almost the entire estate.'

'Who is the executor?' I asked.

'Ah!' he exclaimed, 'there is another muddle. There are two executors; Jellicoe is one, and the other is the principal beneficiary—Hurst or myself, as the case may be. But, you see, neither of us can become an executor until the Court has decided which of us is the principal beneficiary.'

'But who is to apply to the Court? I thought that was the business of the executors.'

'Exactly, that is Hurst's difficulty. We were discussing it when you called the other day, and a very animated discussion it was,' he '. added, with a grim smile. 'You see, Jellicoe naturally refuses to move in the matter alone. He says he must have the support of the other executor. But Hurst is not at present the other executor; neither am I. But the two of us together are the co-executor, since the duty devolves upon one or other of us, in any case.'

'It's a complicated position,' I said.

'It is; and the complication has elicited a very curious proposal from Hurst. He points out—quite correctly, I am afraid—that as the conditions as to burial have not been complied with, the property must come to him, and he proposes a very neat little arrangement, which is this: That I shall support him and Jellicoe in their application for permission to presume death and to administer the will, and that he shall pay me four hundred a year for life; the arrangement to hold good in all eventualities.'

'What does he mean by that?'

'He means,' said Bellingham, fixing me with a ferocious scowl, 'that if the body should turn up at any future time, so that the conditions as to burial should be able to be carried out, he should still retain the property and pay me the four hundred a year.'—

'The deuce!' said I. 'He seems to know how to drive a bargain.'

'His position is that he stands to lose four hundred a year for the term of my life if the body is never found, and he ought to stand to win if it is.'

'And I gather that you have refused this offer?'

'Yes; very emphatically, and my daughter agrees with me; but I am not sure that I have done the right thing. A man should think twice, I suppose, before he burns his boats.'

'Have you spoken to Mr. Jellicoe about the matter?'

'Yes, I have been to see him to-day. He is a cautious man, and he doesn't advise me one way or the other. But I think he disapproves of my refusal; in fact, he remarked that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, especially when the whereabouts of the bush is unknown.'

'Do you think he will apply to the Court without your sanction?'

'He doesn't want to; but I suppose, if Hurst puts pressure on him, he will have to. Besides, Hurst, as an interested party, could apply on his own account, and after my refusal he probably will; at least, that is Jellicoe's opinion.'

'The whole thing is a most astonishing muddle,' I said, 'especially when one remembers that your brother had a lawyer to advise him. Didn't Mr. Jellicoe point out to him how absurd the provisions were?'

'Yes, he did. He tells me that he implored my brother to let him draw up a will embodying the matter in a reasonable form. But John wouldn't listen to him. Poor old fellow! he could be very pigheaded when he chose.'

'And is Hurst's proposal still open?'

'No, thanks to my peppery temper. I refused it very definitely, and sent him off with a flea in his ear. I hope I have not made a false step; I was quite taken by surprise when Hurst made the proposal and got rather angry. You remember, my brother was last seen alive at Hurst's house—but there, I oughtn't to talk like that, and I oughtn't to pester you with my confounded affairs when you come in for a friendly chat, though I gave you fair warning, you remember.'

'Oh, but you have been highly entertaining. You don't realise what an interest I take in your case.'

Mr. Bellingham laughed somewhat grimly. 'My case!' he repeated. 'You speak as if I were some rare and curious sort of criminal lunatic. However, I'm glad you find me amusing. It's more than I find myself.'

'I didn't say amusing; I said interesting. I view you with deep respect as the central figure of a stirring drama. And I am not the only person who regards you in that light. Do you remember my speaking to you of Doctor Thorndyke?'

'Yes, of course I do.'

'Well, oddly enough, I met him this afternoon and we had a long talk at his chambers. I took the liberty of mentioning that I had made your acquaintance. Did I do wrong?'

'No. Certainly not. Why shouldn't you tell him? Did he remember my infernal case, as you call it?'

'Perfectly, in all its details. He is quite an enthusiast, you know, and uncommonly keen to hear how the case develops.'

'So am I, for that matter,' said Mr. Bellingham.

'I wonder,' said I, 'if you would mind my telling him what you have told me to-night? It would interest him enormously.'

Mr. Bellingham reflected for a while with his eyes fixed on the empty grate. Presently he looked up, and said slowly:

'I don't know why I should. It's no secret; and if it were, I hold no monopoly on it. No; tell him, if you think he'd care to hear about it.'

'You needn't be afraid of his talking,' I said. 'He's as close as an oyster; and the facts may mean more to him than they do to us. He may be able to give a useful hint or two.'

'Oh, I'm not going to pick his brains,' Mr. Bellingham said quickly and with some wrath. 'I'm not the sort of man who goes round cadging for free professional advice. Understand that, Doctor?'

'I do,' I answered hastily. 'That wasn't what I meant at all. Is that Miss Bellingham coming in? I heard the front door shut.'

'Yes, that will be my girl, I expect; but don't run away. You're not afraid of her, are you?' he added as I hurriedly picked up my hat.

'I'm not sure that I'm not,' I answered. 'She is rather a majestic young lady.'

Mr. Bellingham chuckled and smothered a yawn, and at that moment his daughter entered the room; and, in spite of her shabby black dress and a shabbier handbag that she carried, I thought her appearance and manner fully justified my description.

'You come in, Miss Bellingham,' I said as she shook my hand with cool civility, 'to find your father yawning and me taking my departure. So I have my uses, you see. My conversation is the infallible cure for insomnia.'

Miss Bellingham smiled. 'I believe I am driving you away,' she said.

'Not at all,' I replied hastily. 'My mission was accomplished, that was all.'

'Sit down for a few moments, Doctor,' urged Mr. Bellingham, 'and let Ruth sample the remedy. She will be affronted if you run away as soon as she comes in.'

'Well, you mustn't let me keep you up,' I said.

'Oh, I'll let you know when I fall asleep,' he replied, with a chuckle; and with this understanding I sat down again—not at all unwillingly.

At this moment Miss Oman entered with a small tray and a smile of which I should not have supposed her capable.

'You'll take your toast and cocoa while they're hot, dear, won't you?' she said coaxingly.

'Yes, I will, Phyllis, thank you,' Miss Bellingham answered. 'I am only just going to take off my hat,' and she left the room, followed by the astonishingly transfigured spinster.

She returned almost immediately as Mr. Bellingham was in the midst of a profound yawn, and sat down to her frugal meal, when her father mystified me considerably by remarking:

'You're late to-night, chick. Have the Shepherd Kings been giving trouble?'

'No,' she replied; 'but I thought I might as well get them done. So I dropped in at the Ormond Street library on my way home and finished them.'

'Then they are ready for stuffing now?'

'Yes.' As she answered she caught my astonished eye (for a stuffed Shepherd King is undoubtedly a somewhat surprising phenomenon) and laughed softly.

'We mustn't talk in riddles like this,' she said, 'before Doctor Berkeley, or he will turn us both into pillars of salt. My father is referring to my work,' she explained to me.

'Are you a taxidermist, then?' I asked.

She hastily set down the cup that she was raising to her lips and broke into a ripple of quiet laughter.

'I am afraid my father has misled you with his irreverent expressions. He will have to atone by explaining.'

'You see, Doctor,' said Mr. Bellingham, 'Ruth is a literary searcher—'

'Oh, don't call me a searcher!' Miss Bellingham protested. 'It suggests the female searcher at a police-station. Say investigator.'

'Very well, investigator or investigatrix, if you like. She hunts up references and bibliographies at the Museum for people who are writing books. She looks up everything that has been written on a given subject, and then, when she has crammed herself to a bursting-point with facts, she goes to her client and disgorges and crams him or her, and he or she finally disgorges into the Press.'

'What a disgusting way to put it!' said his daughter. 'However, that is what it amounts to. I am a literary jackal, a collector of provender for the literary lions. Is that quite clear?'

'Perfectly. But I don't think that, even now, I quite understand about the stuffed Shepherd Kings.'

'Oh, it was not the Shepherd Kings who were to be stuffed. It was the author! That was mere obscurity of speech on the part of my father. The position is this: A venerable Archdeacon wrote an article on the patriarch Joseph—'

'And didn't know anything about him,' interrupted Mr. Bellingham, 'and got tripped up by a specialist who did, and then got shirty—'

'Nothing of the kind,' said Miss Bellingham. 'He knew as much as venerable archdeacons ought to know; but the expert knew more. So the archdeacon commissioned me to collect the literature on the state of Egypt at the end of the seventeenth dynasty, which I have done; and to-morrow I shall go and stuff him, as my father expresses it, and then—'

'And then,' Mr. Bellingham interrupted, 'the archdeacon will rush forth and pelt that expert with Shepherd Kings and Sequenen-Ra and the whole tag-rag and bobtail of the seventeenth dynasty. Oh, there'll be wigs on the green, I can tell you.'

'Yes, I expect there will be quite a skirmish,' said Miss Bellingham. And thus dismissing the subject she made an energetic attack on the toast while her father refreshed himself with a colossal yawn.

I watched her with furtive admiration and deep and growing interest. In spite of her pallor, her weary eyes, and her drawn and almost haggard face, she was an exceedingly handsome girl; and there was in her aspect a suggestion of purpose, of strength and character that marked her off from the rank and file of womanhood. I noted this as I stole an occasional glance at her or turned to answer some remark addressed to me; and I noted, too, that her speech, despite a general undertone of depression, was yet not without a certain caustic, ironical humour. She was certainly a rather enigmatical young person, but very decidedly interesting.

When she had finished her repast she put aside the tray and, opening the shabby handbag, asked:

'Do you take any interest in Egyptian history? We are as mad as hatters on the subject. It seems to be a family complaint.'

'I don't know much about it,' I answered. 'Medical studies are rather engrossing and don't leave much time for general reading.'

'Naturally,' she said. 'You can't specialise in everything. But if you would care to see how the business of a literary jackal is conducted, I will show you my notes.'

I accepted the offer eagerly (not, I fear, from pure enthusiasm for the subject), and she brought forth from the bag four blue-covered, quarto notebooks, each dealing with one of the four dynasties from the fourteenth to the seventeenth. As I glanced through the neat and orderly extracts with which they were filled we discussed the intricacies of the peculiarly difficult and confused period that they covered, gradually lowering our voices as Mr. Bellingham's eyes closed and his head fell against the back of his chair. We had just reached the critical reign of Apepa II when a resounding snore broke in upon the studious quiet of the room and sent us both into a fit of silent laughter.

'Your conversation has done its work,' she whispered as I stealthily picked up my hat, and together we stole on tiptoe to the door, which she opened without a sound. Once outside, she suddenly dropped her bantering manner and said quite earnestly:

'How kind it was of you to come and see him to-night! You have done him a world of good, and I am most grateful. Good-night!'

She shook hands with me really cordially, and I took my way down the creaking stairs in a whirl of happiness that I was quite at a loss to account for.

CHAPTER V. THE WATERCRESS-BED

BARNARD'S PRACTICE, like most others, was subject to those fluctuations that fill the struggling practitioner alternately with hope and despair. The work came in paroxysms with intervals of almost complete stagnation. One of these intermissions occurred on the day after my visit to Nevill's Court, with the result that by half-past eleven I found myself wondering what I should do with the remainder of the day. The better to consider this weighty problem, I strolled down to the Embankment, and, leaning on the parapet, contemplated the view across the river; the grey stone bridge with its perspective of arches, the picturesque pile of the shot-towers, and beyond, the shadowy shapes of the Abbey and St Stephen's.

It was a pleasant scene, restful and quiet, with a touch of life and a hint of sober romance, when a barge swept down through the—middle arch of the bridge with a lugsail hoisted to a jury mast and a white-aproned woman at the tiller. Dreamily I watched the craft creep by upon the moving tide, noted the low freeboard, almost awash, the careful helmswoman, and the dog on the forecastle yapping at the distant shore—and thought of Ruth Bellingham.

What was there about this strange girl that had made so deep an impression on me? That was the question that I propounded to myself, and not for the first time. Of the fact itself there was no doubt. But what was the explanation? Was it her unusual surroundings? Her occupation and rather recondite learning? Her striking personality and exceptional good looks? Or her connection with the dramatic mystery of her lost uncle?

I concluded that it was all of these. Everything connected with her was unusual and arresting; but over and above these circumstances there was a certain sympathy and personal affinity of which I was strongly conscious and of which I dimly hoped that she, perhaps, was a little conscious too. At any rate, I was deeply interested in her; of that there was no doubt whatever. Short as our acquaintance had been, she held a place in my thoughts that had never been held by any other woman.

From Ruth Bellingham my reflections passed by a natural transition to the curious story that her father had told me. It was a queer affair, that ill-drawn will, with the baffled lawyer protesting in the background. It almost seemed as if there must be something behind it all, especially when I remembered Mr. Hurst's very singular proposal. But it was out of my depth; it was a case for a lawyer, and to a lawyer it should go. This very night, I resolved, I would go to Thorndyke and give him the whole story as it had been told to me.

And then there happened one of those coincidences at which we all wonder when they occur, but which are so frequent as to have become enshrined in a proverb. For even as I formed the resolution, I observed two men approaching from the direction of Blackfriars, and recognised in them my quondam teacher and his junior.

'I was just thinking about you,' I said as they came up.

'Very flattering,' replied Jervis; 'but I thought you had to talk of the devil.'

'Perhaps,' suggested Thorndyke, 'he was talking to himself. But why were you thinking of us, and what was the nature of your thoughts?'

'My thoughts had reference to the Bellingham case. I spent the whole of last evening at Nevill's Court.'

'Ha! And are there any fresh developments?'

'Yes, by Jove! there are. Bellingham gave me a full detailed description of the will; and a pretty document it seems to be.'

'Did he give you permission to repeat the details to me?'

'Yes. I asked specifically if I might, and he had no objection whatever.'

'Good. We are lunching at Soho to-day as Polton has his hands full. Come with us and share our table and tell us your story as we go. Will that suit you?'

It suited me admirably in the present state of the practice, and I accepted the invitation with undissembled glee.

'Very well,' said Thorndyke; 'then let us walk slowly and finish with matters confidential before we plunge into the madding crowd.'

We set forth at a leisurely pace along the broad pavement and I commenced my narration. As well as I could remember, I related the circumstances that had led up to the present disposition of the property and then proceeded to the actual provisions of the will; to all of which my two friends listened with rapt interest, Thorndyke occasionally stopping me to jot down a memorandum in his pocket-book.

'Why, the fellow must have been a stark lunatic!' Jervis exclaimed, when I had finished. 'He seems to have laid himself out with the most devilish ingenuity to defeat his own ends.'

'That is not an uncommon peculiarity with testators,' Thorndyke remarked. 'A direct and perfectly intelligible will is rather the exception. But we can hardly judge until we have seen the actual document. I suppose Bellingham hasn't a copy?'

'I don't know,' said I; 'but I will ask him.'

'If he has one, I should like to look through it,' said Thorndyke. 'The provisions are very peculiar, and, as Jervis says, admirably calculated to defeat the testator's wishes if they have been correctly reported. And, apart from that, they have a remarkable bearing on the circumstances of the disappearance. I daresay you noticed that.'

'I noticed that it is very much to Hurst's advantage that the body has not been found.'

'Yes, of course. But there are some other points that are very significant. However, it would be premature to discuss the terms of the will until we have seen the actual document or a certified copy.'

'If there is a copy extant,' I said, 'I will try to get hold of it. But Bellingham is terribly afraid of being suspected of a desire to get professional advice gratis.'

'That,' said Thorndyke, 'is natural enough, and not discreditable. But you must overcome his scruples somehow. I expect you will be able to. You are a plausible young gentleman, as I remember of old, and you seem to have established yourself as quite the friend of the family.'

'They are rather interesting people,' I explained; 'very cultivated and with a strong leaning towards archaeology. It seems to be in the blood.'

'Yes,' said Thorndyke; 'a family tendency, probably due to contact and common surroundings rather than heredity. So you like Godfrey Bellingham?'

'Yes. He is a trifle peppery and impulsive, but quite an agreeable, genial old butler.'

'And the daughter,' said Jervis, 'what is she like?'

'Oh, she is a learned lady; works up bibliographies and references at the Museum.'

'Ah!' Jervis exclaimed with disfavour, 'I know the breed. Inky fingers; no chest to speak of; all side and spectacles.'

'You're quite wrong,' I exclaimed indignantly, contrasting Jervis's hideous presentment with the comely original. 'She is an exceedingly good-looking girl, and her manners all that a lady's should be. A little stiff, perhaps, but then I am only an acquaintance—almost a stranger.'

'But,' Jervis persisted, 'what is she like, in appearance I mean. Short? fat? sandy? Give us intelligible details.'

I made a rapid mental inventory, assisted by my recent cogitations.

'She is about five feet seven, slim but rather plump, very erect in carriage and graceful in movements; black hair, loosely parted in the middle and falling very prettily away from the forehead; pale, clear complexion, dark grey eyes, straight eyebrows, straight, well-shaped nose, short mouth, rather full; round chin—what the deuce are you grinning at, Jervis?' For my friend had suddenly unmasked his batteries and now threatened, like the Cheshire cat, to dissolve into a mere abstraction of amusement.

'If there is a copy of that will, Thorndyke,' he said, 'we shall get it. I think you agree with me, reverend senior?'

'I have already said,' was the reply, 'that I put my trust in Berkeley. And now let us dismiss professional topics. This is our hostelry.'

He pushed open an unpretentious glazed door, and we followed him into the restaurant, whereof the atmosphere was pervaded by an appetising mealiness mingled with less agreeable suggestions of the destructive distillation of fat.

It was some two hours later when I wished my friends adieu under the golden-leaved plane trees of King's Bench Walk.

'I won't ask you to come in now,' said Thorndyke, 'as we have some consultations this afternoon. But come in and see us soon; don't wait for that copy of the will.'

'No,' said Jervis. 'Drop in in the evening when your work is done; unless, of course, there is more attractive society elsewhere. Oh, you needn't turn that colour, my dear child; we have all been young once; there is even a tradition that Thorndyke was young some time back in the pre-dynastic period.'

'Don't take any notice of him, Berkeley,' said Thorndyke. 'The egg-shell is sticking to his head still. He'll know better when he is my age.'

'Methuselah!' exclaimed Jervis; 'I hope I shan't have to wait as long as that!'

Thorndyke smiled benevolently at his irrepressible junior, and, shaking my hand cordially, turned into the entry.

From the Temple I wended northward, to the adjacent College of Surgeons, where I spent a couple of profitable hours examining the 'pickles' and refreshing my memory on the subjects of pathology and anatomy; marvelling afresh (as every practical anatomist must marvel) at the incredibly perfect technique of the dissections, and inwardly paying tribute to the founder of the collection. At length the warning of the clock, combined with an increasing craving for tea, drove me forth and bore me towards the scene of my not very strenuous labours. My mind was still occupied with the contents of the cases and the great glass jars, so that I found myself at the corner of Fetter Lane without a very clear idea of how I had got there. But at that point I was aroused from my reflections rather abruptly by a raucous voice in my ear.

'Orrible discovery at Sidcup!'

I turned wrathfully—for a London street-boy's yell, let off at point-blank range, is, in effect, like the smack of an open hand—but the inscription on the staring yellow poster that was held up for my inspection changed my anger to curiosity.

'Horrible discovery in a watercress-bed!'

Now, let prigs deny it if they will, but there is something very attractive in a 'horrible discovery'. It hints at tragedy, at mystery, at romance. It promises to bring into our grey and commonplace life that element of the dramatic which is the salt that our existence is savoured withal. 'In a watercress-bed,' too! The rusticity of the background seemed to emphasise the horror of the discovery, whatever it might be.

I bought a copy of the paper, and, tucking it under my arm, hurried on to the surgery, promising myself a mental feast of watercress; but as I opened the door I found myself confronted by a corpulent woman of piebald and pimply aspect who saluted me with a deep groan. It was the lady from the coal shop in Fleur-de-Lys Court.

'Good-evening, Mrs. Jablett,' I said briskly; 'not come about yourself, I hope.'

'Yes, I have,' she answered, rising and following me gloomily into the consulting-room; and then, when I had seated her in the patient's chair and myself at the writing table, she continued: 'It's my inside, you know, doctor.'

The statement lacked anatomical precision and merely excluded the domain of the skin specialist. I accordingly waited for enlightenment and speculated on the watercress-beds, while Mrs. Jablett regarded me expectantly with a dim and watery eye.

'Ah!' I said at length; 'it's your—your inside, is it, Mrs. Jablett?'

'Yus. And my 'ead,' she added, with a voluminous sigh that filled the apartment with odorous reminiscences of 'unsweetened'.

'Your head aches, does it?'

'Something chronic!' said Mrs. Jablett. 'Feels as if it was a-opening and a-shutting, a-opening and a-shutting, and when I sit down I feel as if I should bust.'

This picturesque description of her sensations—not wholly inconsistent with her figure—gave the clue to Mrs. Jablett's sufferings. Resisting a frivolous impulse to reassure her as to the elasticity of the human integument, I considered her case in exhaustive detail, coasting delicately round the subject of 'unsweetened' and finally sent her away, revived in spirits and grasping a bottle of Mist. Sodae cum Bismutho from Barnard's big stock-jar. Then I went back to investigate the Horrible Discovery; but before I could open the paper, another patient arrived (Impetigo contagiosa, this time, affecting the 'wide and arched-front sublime' of a juvenile Fetter Laner), and then yet another, and so on through the evening, until at last I forgot the watercress-beds altogether. It was only when I had purified myself from the evening consultations with hot water and a nail-brush and was about to sit down to a frugal supper, that I remembered the newspaper and fetched it from the drawer of the consulting-room table, where it had been hastily thrust out of sight. I folded it into a convenient form, and, standing it upright against the water-jug, read the report at my ease as I supped.

There was plenty of it. Evidently the reporter had regarded it as a 'scoop', and the editor had backed him up with ample space and hair-raising head-lines.

'HORRIBLE DISCOVERY
IN A WATERCRESS-BED
AT SIDCUP!'

'A startling discovery was made yesterday afternoon in the course of clearing out a watercress-bed near the erstwhile rural village of Sidcup in Kent; a discovery that will occasion many a disagreeable qualm to those persons who have been in the habit of regaling themselves with this refreshing esculent. But before proceeding to a description of the circumstances of the actual discovery or of the objects found—which, however, it may be stated at once, are nothing more or less than the fragments of a dismembered human body—it will be interesting to trace the remarkable chain of coincidences by virtue of which the discovery was made.

'The beds in question have been laid out in a small artificial lake fed by a tiny streamlet which forms one of the numerous tributaries of the River Cray. Its depth is greater than usual in the watercress-beds, otherwise the gruesome relics could never have been concealed beneath its surface, and the flow of water through it, though continuous, is slow. The tributary streamlet meanders through a succession of pasture meadows, in one of which the beds themselves are situated, and here throughout most of the year the fleecy victims of the human carnivore carry on the industry of converting grass into mutton. Now it happened some years ago that the sheep frequenting these pastures became affected with the disease known as "liver-rot"; and here we must make a short digression into the domain of pathology.

'"Liver-rot" is a disease of quite romantic antecedents. Its cause is a small flat worm—the liver-fluke—which infests the liver and bile-ducts of the affected sheep.

'Now how does the worm get into the sheep's liver? That is where the romance comes in. Let us see.

'The cycle of transformations begins with the deposit of the eggs of the fluke in some shallow stream or ditch running through pasture lands. Now each egg has a sort of lid, which presently opens and lets out a minute, hairy creature who swims away in search of a particular kind of water-snail—the kind called by naturalists Limnosa truncatula. If he finds a snail, he bores his way into its flesh and soon begins to grow and wax fat. Then he brings forth a family—of tiny worms quite unlike himself, little creatures called rediae, which soon give birth to families of young redice. So they go on for several generations, but at last there comes a generation of redia which, instead of giving birth to fresh redia, produce families of totally different offspring; big-headed, long-tailed creatures like miniature tadpoles, called by the learned cercarice. The cercarice soon wriggle their way out of the body of the snail, and then complications arise: for it is the habit of this particular snail to leave the water occasionally and take a stroll in the fields. Thus the cercarice, escaping from the snail, find themselves on the grass, whereupon they promptly drop their tails and stick themselves to the grass-blades. Then comes the unsuspecting sheep to take his frugal meal, and, cropping the grass, swallows it, cercarice and all. But the latter, when they find themselves in the sheep's stomach, make their way straight to the bile-ducts, up which they travel to the liver. Here, in a few weeks, they grow up into full-blown flukes and begin the important business of producing eggs.

'Such is the pathological romance of the "liver-rot"; and now what is its connection with this mysterious discovery? It is this. After the outbreak of "liver-rot" above referred to, the ground landlord, a Mr. John Bellingham, instructed his solicitor to insert a clause in the lease of the beds directing that the latter should be periodically cleared and examined by an expert to make sure that they were free from the noxious water-snails. The last lease expired about two years ago, and since then the beds have been out of cultivation; but, for the safety of the adjacent pastures, it was considered necessary to make the customary periodical inspection, and it was in the course of cleaning the beds for this purpose that r the present discovery was made.

'The operation began two days ago. A gang of three men proceeded systematically to grub up the plants and collect the multitudes of water-snails that they might be examined by the expert to see if any obnoxious species were present. They had cleared nearly half of the beds when, yesterday afternoon, one of the men working in the deepest part came upon some bones, the appearance of which excited his suspicion. Thereupon he called his mates, and they carefully picked away the plants piece-meal, a process that soon laid bare an unmistakable human hand lying on the mud amongst the roots. Fortunately they had the wisdom not to disturb the remains, but at once sent off a message to the police. Very soon, an inspector and a sergeant, accompanied by the divisional surgeon, arrived on the scene, and were able to view the remains lying as they had been found. And now another very strange fact came to light; for it was seen that the hand—a left one—lying on the mud was minus its third finger. This is regarded by the police as a very important fact as bearing on the question of identification, seeing that the number of persons having the third finger of the left hand missing must be quite small. After a thorough examination on the spot, the bones were carefully collected and conveyed to the mortuary, where they now lie awaiting further inquiries.

'The divisional surgeon, Dr. Brandon, in an interview with our representative, made the following statements:

'"The bones are those of the left arm of a middle-aged or elderly man about five feet eight inches in height. All the bones of the arm are present, including the scapula, or shoulder-blade, and the clavicle, or collar-bone, but the three bones of the third finger are missing."

'"Is this a deformity or has the finger been cut off?" our correspondent asked.

'"The finger has been amputated," was the reply. "If it had been absent from birth, the corresponding hand bone, or metacarpal, would have been wanting or deformed, whereas it is present and quite normal."

'"How long have the bones been in the water?" was the next question.

'"More than a year, I should say. They are quite clean; there is not a vestige of the soft structures left."

'"Have you any theory as to how the arm came to be deposited where it was found?"

'"I should rather not answer that question," was the guarded response.

'"One more question," our correspondent urged. "The ground landlord, Mr. John Bellingham; is he not the gentleman who disappeared so mysteriously some time ago?"

'"So I understand," Dr. Brandon replied.

'"Can you tell me if Mr. Bellingham had lost the third finger of his left hand?"

'"I cannot say," said Dr. Brandon; and he added with a smile, "you had better ask the police."

'That is how the matter stands at present. But we understand that the police are making active inquiries for any missing man who has lost the third finger of his left hand, and if any of our readers know of such a person, they are earnestly requested to communicate at once, either with us or with the authorities.

'Also we believe that a systematic search is to be made for further remains.'

I laid the newspaper down and fell into a train of reflection. It was certainly a most mysterious affair. The thought that had evidently come to the reporter's mind stole naturally into mine. Could these remains be those of John Bellingham? It was obviously possible, though I could not but see that the fact of the bones having been found on his land, while it undoubtedly furnished the suggestion, did not in any way add to its probability. The connection was accidental and in nowise relevant.

Then, too, there was the missing finger. No reference to any such deformity had been made in the original report of the disappearance, though it could hardly have been overlooked. I should be seeing Thorndyke in the course of the next few days, and, undoubtedly, if the discovery had any bearing upon the disappearance of John Bellingham, I should hear of it. With such a reflection I rose from the table, and, adopting the advice contained in the spurious Johnsonian quotation, proceeded to 'take a walk in Fleet Street' before settling down for the evening.

CHAPTER VI. SIDELIGHTS

THE association of coal with potatoes is one upon which I have frequently speculated, without arriving at any more satisfactory explanation than that both products are of the earth, earthy. Of the connection itself Barnard's practice furnished several instances besides Mrs. Jablett's establishment in Fleur-de-Lys Court, one of which was a dark and mysterious cavern a foot below the level of

the street, that burrowed under an ancient house on the west side of Fetter Lane—a crinkly, timber house of the three-decker type that leaned back drunkenly from the road as if about to sit down in its own back yard.

Passing this repository of the associated products about ten o'clock in the morning, I perceived in the shadows of the cavern no less a person than Miss Oman. She saw me at the same moment, and beckoned peremptorily with a hand that held a large Spanish onion. I approached with a deferential smile.

'What a magnificent onion, Miss Oman! and how generous of you to offer it to me—'

'I wasn't offering it to you. But there! Isn't it just like a man—'

'Isn't what just like a man?' I interrupted. 'If you mean the onion—'

'I don't!' she snapped; 'and I wish you wouldn't talk such a parcel of nonsense. A grown man and a member of a serious profession, too! You ought to know better.'

'I suppose I ought,' I said reflectively. And she continued:

'I called in at the surgery just now.'—

'To see me?'—

'What else should I come for? Do you suppose that I called to consult the bottle-boy?'

'Certainly not, Miss Oman. So you find the lady doctor no use, after all?'

Miss Oman gnashed her teeth at me (and very fine teeth they were too).

'I called,' she said majestically, 'on behalf of Miss Bellingham.'

My facetiousness evaporated instantly. 'I hope Miss Bellingham is not ill,' I said with a sudden anxiety that elicited a sardonic smile from Miss Oman.

'No,' was the reply, 'she is not ill, but she has cut her hand rather badly. It's her right hand too, and she can't afford to lose the use of it, not being a great, hulky, lazy, lolloping man. So you had better go and put some stuff on it.'

With this advice, Miss Oman whisked to the right-about and vanished into the depths of the cavern like the witch of Wokey, while I hurried on to the surgery to provide myself with the necessary instruments and materials, and thence proceeded to Nevill's Court.

Miss Oman's juvenile maidservant, who opened the door to me, stated the existing conditions with epigrammatic conciseness.

'Mr. Bellingham is hout, sir; but Miss Bellingham is hin.'

Having thus delivered herself she retreated towards the kitchen and I ascended the stairs, at the head of which I found Miss Bellingham awaiting me with her right hand encased in what looked like a white boxing-glove.

'I'm glad you have come,' she said. 'Phyllis—Miss Oman, you know—has kindly bound up my hand, but I should like you to see that it is all right.'

We went into the sitting-room, where I laid out my paraphernalia on the table while I inquired into the particulars of the accident.

'It is most unfortunate that it should have happened just now,' she said, as I wrestled with one of those remarkable feminine knots that, while they seem to defy the utmost efforts of human ingenuity to untie, yet have a singular habit of untying themselves at inopportune moments.

'Why just now in particular?' I asked.

'Because I have some specially important work to do. A very learned lady who is writing an historical book has commissioned me to collect all the literature relating to the Tell el Amarna letters—the cuneiform tablets, you know, of Amenhotep the Fourth.'

'Well,' I said soothingly, 'I expect your hand will soon be well.'

'Yes, but that won't do. The work has to be done immediately. I have to send in completed notes not later than this day week, and it will be quite impossible. I am dreadfully disappointed.'

By this time I had unwound the voluminous wrappings and exposed the injury—a deep gash in the palm that must have narrowly missed a good-sized artery. Obviously the hand would be useless for fully a week.

'I suppose,' she said, 'you couldn't patch it up so that I could write with it?'

I shook my head.

'No, Miss Bellingham. I shall have to put it on a splint. We can't run any risks with a deep wound like this.'

'Then I shall have to give up the commission, and I don't know how my client will get the work done in the time. You see, I am pretty well up in the literature of Ancient Egypt; in fact, I was to receive special payment on that account. And it would have been such an interesting task, too. However, it can't be helped.'

I proceeded methodically with the application of the dressings, and meanwhile reflected. It was evident that she was deeply disappointed. Loss of work meant loss of money, and it needed but a glance at her rusty black dress to see that there was little margin for that. Possibly, too, there was some special need to be met. Her manner seemed almost to imply that there was. And at this point I had a brilliant idea.

'I'm not sure that it can't be helped,' said I.

She looked at me inquiringly, and I continued: 'I am going to make a proposition, and I shall ask you to consider it with an open mind.'

'That sounds rather portentous,' said she; 'but I promise. What is it?'

'It is this: When I was a student I acquired the useful art of writing shorthand. I am not a lightning reporter, you understand, but I can take matter down from dictation at quite respectable speed.'

'Yes.'

'Well, I have several hours free every day—usually the whole afternoon up to six or half-past—and it occurs to me that if you were to go to the Museum in the mornings you could get out your book, look up passages (you could do that without using your right hand), and put in bookmarks. Then I could come along in the afternoon and you could read out the selected passages to me, and I could take them down in shorthand. We should get through as much in a couple of hours as you could in a day using long-hand.'

'Oh, but how kind of you, Dr. Berkeley!' she exclaimed. 'How very kind! Of course, I couldn't think of taking up all your leisure in that way; but I do appreciate your kindness very much.'

I was rather chapfallen at this very definite refusal, but persisted feebly:

'I wish you would. It may seem rather a cheek for a comparative stranger like me to make such a proposal to a lady: but if you'd been a man—in those special circumstances—I should have made it all the same, and you would have accepted as a matter of course.'

'I doubt that. At any rate, I am not a man. I sometimes wish I were.'

'Oh, I am sure you are much better as you are!' I exclaimed, with such earnestness that we both laughed. And at this moment Mr. Bellingham entered the room carrying several large brand-new books in a strap.

'Well, I'm sure!' he exclaimed genially; 'here are pretty goings on. Doctor and patient giggling like a pair of schoolgirls! What's the joke?'

He thumped his parcel of books down on the table and listened smilingly while my unconscious witticism was expounded.

'The doctor's quite right,' he said. 'You'll do as you are, chick; but the Lord knows what sort of man you would make. You take his advice and let well alone.'

Finding him in this genial frame of mind, I ventured to explain my proposition to him and to enlist his support. He considered it with attentive approval, and when I had finished turned to his daughter.

'What is your objection, chick?' he asked.

'It would give Doctor Berkeley such a fearful lot of work,' she answered.

'It would give him a fearful lot of pleasure,' I said. 'It would really.'

'Then why not?' said Mr. Bellingham. 'We don't mind being under an obligation to the Doctor, do we?'

'Oh, it isn't that!' she exclaimed hastily.

'Then take him at his word. He means it. It is a kind action and he'll like doing it, I'm sure. That's all right, Doctor; she accepts, don't you, chick?'

'Yes, if you say so, I do; and most thankfully.'

She accompanied the acceptance with a gracious smile that was in itself a large repayment on account, and when we had made the necessary arrangements, I hurried away in a state of the most perfect satisfaction to finish my morning's work and order an early lunch.

When I called for her a couple of hours later I found her waiting in the garden with the shabby handbag, of which I relieved her, and we set forth together, watched jealously by Miss Oman, who had accompanied her to the gate.

As I walked up the court with this wonderful maid by my side I could hardly believe in my good fortune. By her presence and my own resulting happiness the mean surroundings became glorified and the commonest objects transfigured into things of beauty. What a delightful thoroughfare, for instance, was Fetter Lane, with its quaint charm and mediaeval grace! I snuffed the cabbage-laden atmosphere and seemed to breathe the scent of the asphodel. Holborn was even as the Elysian Fields; the omnibus that bore us westward was a chariot of glory; and the people who swarmed verminously on the pavements bore the semblance of the children of light.

Love is a foolish thing judged by workaday standards, and the thoughts and actions of lovers foolish beyond measure. But the workaday standard is the wrong one, after all; for the utilitarian mind does but busy itself with the trivial and transitory interests of life, behind which looms the great and everlasting reality of the love of man and woman. There is more significance in a nightingale's song in the hush of a summer night than in all the wisdom of Solomon (who, by the way, was not without his little experiences of the tender passion).

The janitor in the little glass box by the entrance to the library inspected us and passed us on, with a silent benediction, to the lobby, whence (when I had handed my stick to a bald-headed demigod and received a talismanic disc in exchange) we entered the enormous rotunda of the reading-room.

I have often thought that, if some lethal vapour of highly preservative properties—such as formaldehyde, for instance—could be shed into the atmosphere of this apartment, the entire and complete collection of books and book-worms would be well worth preserving, for the enlightenment of posterity, as a sort of anthropological appendix to the main collection of the Museum. For, surely, nowhere else in the world are so many strange and abnormal human beings gathered together in one place. And a curious question that must have occurred to many observers is: Whence do these singular creatures come, and whither do they go when the very distinct-faced clock (adjusted to literary eyesight) proclaims closing time? The tragic-faced gentleman, for instance, with the corkscrew ringlets that bob up and down like spiral springs as he walks? Or the short, elderly gentleman in the black cassock and bowler hat, who shatters your nerves by turning suddenly and revealing himself as a middle-aged woman? Whither do they go? One never sees them elsewhere. Do they steal away at closing time into the depths of the Museum and hide themselves until morning in sarcophagi or mummy cases? Or do they creep through spaces in the book-shelves and spend the night behind the volumes in a congenial atmosphere of leather and antique paper? Who can say? What I do know is that when Ruth Bellingham entered the reading-room she appeared in comparison with these like a creature of another order; even as the head of Antinous, which formerly stood (it has since been moved) amidst the portrait-busts of the Roman Emperors, seemed like the head of a god set in a portrait gallery of illustrious baboons.

'What have we got to do?' I asked when we had found a vacant seat. 'Do you want to look up the catalogue?'

'No, I have the tickets in my bag. The books are waiting in the "kept books" department.'

I placed my hat on the leather-covered shelf, dropped her gloves into it—how delightfully intimate and companionable it seemed!—altered the numbers on the tickets, and then we proceeded together to the 'kept books' desk to collect the volumes that contained the material for our day's work.

It was a blissful afternoon. Two and a half hours of happiness unalloyed did I spend at that shiny, leather-clad desk, guiding my nimble pen across the pages of the notebook. It introduced me to a newt world—a world in which love and learning, sweet intimacy and crusted archaeology, were mingled into the oddest, most whimsical and most delicious confection that the mind of man can conceive. Hitherto, these recondite histories had been far beyond my ken. Of the wonderful heretic, Amenhotep the Fourth, I had already heard—at the most he had been a mere name; the Hittites a mythical race of undetermined habitat; while cuneiform tablets had presented themselves to my mind merely as an uncouth kind of fossil biscuit suited to the digestion of a prehistoric ostrich.

Now all this was changed. As we sat with our chairs creaking together and she whispered the story of those stirring times into my receptive ear—talking is strictly forbidden in the reading-room—the disjointed fragments arranged themselves into a romance of supreme fascination. Egyptian, Babylonian, Aramaean, Hittite, Memphis, Babylon, Hamath, Megiddo—I swallowed them all thankfully, wrote them down, and asked for more. Only once did I disgrace myself. An elderly clergyman of ascetic and acidulous aspect had passed us with a glance of evident disapproval, clearly setting us down as intruding philanderers; and when I contrasted the parson's probable conception of the whispered communications that were being poured into my ear so tenderly and confidentially with the dry reality, I chuckled aloud. But my fair taskmistress only paused, with her finger on the page, smilingly to rebuke me, and then went on with the dictation. She was certainly a Tartar for work.

It was a proud moment for me when, in response to my interrogative 'Yes?' my companion said 'That is all' and closed the book. We had extracted the pith and marrow of six considerable volumes in two and a half hours.

'You have been better than your word,' she said. 'It would have taken me two full days of really hard work to make the notes that you have written down since we commenced. I don't know how to thank you.'

'There's no need to. I've enjoyed myself and polished up my shorthand. What is the next thing? We shall want some books for to-morrow, shan't we?'

'Yes. I have made out a list, so if you will come with me to the catalogue desk I will look out the numbers and ask you to write the tickets.'

The selection of a fresh batch of authorities occupied us for another quarter of an hour, and then, having handed in the volumes that we had squeezed dry, we took our way out of the reading-room.

'Which way shall we go?' she asked as we passed out of the gate, where stood a massive policeman, like the guardian angel at the gate of Paradise (only, thank Heaven! he bore no flaming sword forbidding re-entry).

'We are going,' I replied, 'to Museum Street, where is a milkshop in which one can get an excellent cup of tea.'

She looked as if she would have demurred, but eventually followed obediently, and we were soon settled side by side at the little marble-topped table, retracing the ground we had covered in the afternoon's work and discussing various points of interest over a joint teapot.

'Have you been doing this sort of work long?' I asked, as she handed me my second cup of tea.

'Professionally,' she answered, 'only about two years; since we broke up our home, in fact. But long before that I used to come to the Museum with my Uncle John—the one who disappeared, you know, in that dreadfully mysterious way—and help him to look up references. We were good friends, he and I.'

'I suppose he was a very learned man?' I suggested.

'Yes, in a certain way; in the way of the better-class collector he was very learned indeed. He knew the contents of every museum in the world, in so far as they were connected with Egyptian antiquities, and had studied them specimen by specimen. Consequently, as Egyptology is largely a museum science, he was a learned Egyptologist. But his real interest was in things rather than events. Of course, he knew a great deal—a very great deal—about Egyptian history, but still he was, before all, a collector.'

'And what will happen to his collection if he is really dead?'

'The greater part of it goes to the British Museum by his will, and the remainder he has left to his solicitor, Mr. Jellicoe.'

'To Mr. Jellicoe! Why, what will Mr. Jellicoe do with Egyptian antiquities?'

'Oh, he is an Egyptologist too, and quite an enthusiast. He has really a fine collection of scarabs and other small objects such as it is possible to keep in a private house. I have always thought that it was his enthusiasm for everything Egyptian that brought him and my uncle together on terms of such intimacy; though I believe he is an excellent lawyer, and he is certainly a very discreet, cautious man.'

'Is he? I shouldn't have thought so, judging by your uncle's will.'

'Oh, but that was not Mr. Jellicoe's fault. He assures us that he entreated my uncle to let him draw up a fresh document with more reasonable provisions. But he says Uncle John was immovable; and he really was a rather obstinate man. Mr. Jellicoe repudiates any responsibility in the matter. He washes his hands of the whole affair, and says that it is the will of a lunatic. And so it is. I was glancing through it only a night or two ago, and really I cannot conceive how a sane man could have written such nonsense.'

'You have a copy then?' I asked eagerly, remembering Thorndyke's parting instructions.

'Yes. Would you like to see it? I know my father has told you about it, and it is worth reading as a curiosity of perverseness.'

'I should very much like to show it to my friend, Doctor Thorndyke,' I replied. 'He said he would be interested to read it and learn the exact provisions; and it might be well to let him, and hear what he has to say about it.'

'I see no objection,' she rejoined; 'but you know what my father is: his horror, I mean, of what he calls "cadging for advice gratis".'

'Oh, but he need have no scruples on that score. Doctor Thorndyke wants to see the will because the case interests him. He is an enthusiast, you know, and he put the request as a personal favour to himself.'

'That is very nice and delicate of him, and I will explain the position to my father. If he is willing for Doctor Thorndyke to see the copy, I will send or bring it over this evening. Have we finished?'

I regretfully admitted that we had, and, when I had paid the modest reckoning, we sallied forth, turning back with one accord into Great Russell Street to avoid the noise and bustle of the larger thoroughfares.

'What sort of man was your uncle?' I asked presently, as we walked along the quiet, dignified street. And then I added hastily: 'I hope you don't think me inquisitive, but, to my mind, he presents himself as a kind of mysterious abstraction; the unknown quantity of a legal problem.'

'My Uncle John,' she answered reflectively, 'was a very peculiar man, rather obstinate, very self-willed, what people call "masterful", and decidedly wrong-headed and unreasonable.'

'That is certainly the impression that the terms of his will convey,' I said.

'Yes, and not the will only. There was the absurd allowance that he made to my father. That was a ridiculous arrangement, and very unfair too. He ought to have divided the property up as my grandfather intended. And yet he was by no means ungenerous, only he would have his own way, and his own way was very commonly the wrong way.'

'I remember,' she continued, after a short pause, 'a very odd instance of his wrong-headedness and obstinacy. It was a small matter, but very typical of him. He had in his collection a beautiful little ring of the eighteenth dynasty. It was said to have belonged to Queen Ti, the mother of our friend Amenhotep the Fourth; but I don't think that could have been so, because the device on it was the Eye of Osiris, and Ti, as you know, was an Aten-worshipper. However, it was a very charming ring, and Uncle John, who had a queer sort of devotion to the mystical eye of Osiris, commissioned a very clever goldsmith to make two exact copies of it, one for himself and one for me. The goldsmith naturally wanted to take the measurements of our fingers, but this Uncle John would not hear of; the rings were to be exact copies, and an exact copy must be the same size as the original. You can imagine the result; my ring was so loose that I couldn't keep it on my finger, and Uncle John's was so tight that though he did manage to get it on, he was never able to get it off. And it was only the circumstance that his left hand was decidedly smaller than his right that made it possible for him to wear it at all.'

'So you never wore your copy?'

'No. I wanted to have it altered to make it fit, but he objected strongly; so I put it away, and have it in a box still.'

'He must have been an extraordinarily pig-headed old fellow,' I remarked.

'Yes; he was very tenacious. He annoyed my father a good deal, too, by making unnecessary alterations in the house in Queen Square when he fitted up his museum. We have a certain sentiment with regard to that house. Our people have lived in it ever since it was built, when the

square was first laid out in the reign of Queen Anne, after whom it was named. It is a dear old house. Would you like to see it? We are quite near it now.'

I assented eagerly. If it had been a coal-shed or a fried-fish shop I would still have visited it with pleasure, for the sake of prolonging our walk; but I was also really interested in this old house as a part of the background of the mystery of the vanished John Bellingham.

We crossed into Cosmo Place, with its quaint row of the now rare, cannon-shaped iron posts, and passing through stood for a few moments looking into the peaceful, stately old square. A party of boys disported themselves noisily on the range of stone posts that form a bodyguard round the ancient lamp-surmounted pump, but otherwise the place was wrapped in dignified repose suited to its age and station. And very pleasant it looked on this summer afternoon with the sunlight gilding the foliage of its widespreading plane trees and lighting up the warm-toned brick of the house-fronts. We walked slowly down the shady west side, near the middle of which my companion halted.

'This is the house,' she said. 'It looks gloomy and forsaken now; but it must have been a delightful house in the days when my ancestors could look out of the windows through the open end of the square across the fields of meadows to the heights of Hampstead and Highgate.'

She stood at the edge of the pavement looking up with a curious wistfulness at the old house; a very pathetic figure, I thought, with her handsome face and proud carriage, her threadbare dress and shabby gloves, standing at the threshold of the home that had been her family's for generations, that should now have been hers, and that was shortly to pass away into the hands of strangers.

I, too, looked up at it with a strange interest, impressed by something gloomy and forbidding in its aspect. The windows were shuttered from basement to attic, and no sign of life was visible. Silent, neglected, desolate, it breathed an air of tragedy. It seemed to mourn in sackcloth and ashes for its lost master. The massive door within the splendid carven portico was crusted with grime, and seemed to have passed out of use as completely as the ancient lamp-irons or the rusted extinguishers wherein the footmen were wont to quench their torches when some Bellingham dame was borne up the steps in her gilded chair, in the days of good Queen Anne.

It was in a somewhat sobered frame of mind that we presently turned away and started homeward by way of Great Ormond Street. My companion was deeply thoughtful, relapsing for a while into that sombreness of manner that had so impressed me when I first met her. Nor was I without a certain sympathetic pensiveness; as if, from the great, silent house, the spirit of the vanished man had issued forth to bear us company.

But still it was a delightful walk, and I was sorry when at last we arrived at the entrance to Nevill's Court, and Miss Bellingham halted and held out her hand.

'Good-bye,' she said; 'and many, many thanks for your invaluable help. Shall I take the bag?'

'If you want it. But I must take out the note-books.'

'Why must you take them?' she asked.

'Why, haven't I got to copy the notes out into long-hand?'

An expression of utter consternation spread over her face; in fact, she was so completely taken aback that she forgot to release my hand.

'Heavens!' she exclaimed. 'How idiotic of me! But it is impossible, Doctor Berkeley! It will take you hours!'

'It is perfectly possible, and it is going to be done; otherwise the notes would be useless. Do you want the bag?'

'No, of course not. But I am positively appalled. Hadn't you better give up the idea?'

'And this is the end of our collaboration?' I exclaimed tragically, giving her hand a final squeeze (whereby she became suddenly aware of its position, and withdrew it rather hastily). 'Would you throw away a whole afternoon's work? I won't certainly; so, goodbye until to-morrow. I shall turn up in the reading-room as early as I can. You had better take the tickets. Oh, and you won't forget a bin t the copy of the will for Doctor Thorndyke, will you?'

'No; if my father agrees, you shall have it this evening.'

She took the tickets from me, and, thanking me yet again, retired into the court.

CHAPTER VII. JOHN BELLINGHAM'S WILL

THE task upon which I had embarked so light-heartedly, when considered in cold blood, did certainly appear, as Miss Bellingham had said, rather appalling. The result of two and a half hours' pretty steady work at an average speed of nearly a hundred words a minute, would take some time to transcribe into long-hand; and if the notes were to be delivered punctually on the morrow, the sooner I got to work the better.

Recognising this truth, I lost no time, but, within five minutes of my arrival at the surgery, was seated at the writing-table with my copy before me busily converting the sprawling, inexpressive characters into good, legible round-hand.

The occupation was by no means unpleasant, apart from the fact that it was a labour of love; for the sentences, as I picked them up, were fragrant with the reminiscences of the gracious whisper in which they had first come to me. And then the matter itself was full of interest. I was gaining a fresh outlook on life, was crossing the threshold of a new world (which was her world); and so the occasional interruptions from the patients, while they gave me intervals of enforced rest, were far from welcome.

The evening wore on without any sign from Nevill's Court, and I began to fear that Mr. Bellingham's scruples had proved insurmountable. Not, I am afraid, that I was so much concerned for the copy of the will as for the possibility of a visit, no matter howsoever brief, from my fair employer; and when, on the stroke of half-past seven, the surgery door flew open with startling abruptness, my fears were allayed and my hopes shattered simultaneously. For it was Miss Oman who stalked in, holding out a blue foolscap envelope with a warlike air as if it were an ultimatum.

'I've brought you this from Mr. Bellingham,' she said. 'There's a note inside.'

'May I read the note, Miss Oman?' I asked.

'Bless the man!' she exclaimed. 'What else would you do with it? Isn't that what it's brought for?'

I supposed it was; and, thanking her for her gracious permission, I glanced through the note—a few lines authorising me to show the copy of the will to Dr. Thorndyke. When I looked up from the paper I found her eyes fixed on me with an expression critical and rather disapproving.

'You seem to be making yourself mighty agreeable in a certain quarter,' she remarked.

'I make myself universally agreeable. It is my nature to.'

'Ha!' she snorted.

'Don't you find me rather agreeable?' I asked.

'Oily,' said Miss Oman. And then with a sour smile at the open notebooks, she remarked:

'You've got some work to do now; quite a change for you.'

'A delightful change, Miss Oman. "For Satan findeth"—but no doubt you are acquainted with the philosophical works of Dr. Watts?'

'If you are referring to "idle hands",' she replied, 'I'll give you a bit of advice. Don't you keep that hand idle any longer than is really necessary. I have my suspicions about that splint—oh, you know what I mean,' and before I had time to reply, she had taken advantage of the entrance of a couple of patients to whisk out of the surgery with the abruptness that had distinguished her arrival.

The evening consultations were considered to be over by half-past eight; at which time Adolphus was wont with exemplary punctuality to close the outer door of the surgery. To-night he was not less prompt than usual; and having performed this, his last daily office, and turned down the surgery gas, he reported the fact and took his departure.

As his retreating footsteps died away and the slamming of the outer door announced his final disappearance, I sat up and stretched myself. The envelope containing the copy of the will lay on the table, and I considered it thoughtfully. It ought to be conveyed to Thorndyke with as little delay as possible, and, as it certainly could not be trusted out of my hands, it ought to be conveyed by me.

I looked at the notebooks. Nearly two hours' work had made a considerable impression on the matter that I had to transcribe, but still, a great deal of the task yet remained to be done. However, I reflected, I could put in a couple of hours or more before going to bed and there would be an hour or two to spare in the morning. Finally I locked the notebooks, open as they were, in the writing-table drawer, and slipping the envelope into my pocket, set out for the Temple.

The soft chime of the Treasury clock was telling out, in confidential tones, the third quarter as I rapped with my stick on the forbidding 'oak' of my friends' chambers. There was no response, nor had I perceived any gleam of light from the windows as I approached, and I was considering the advisability of trying the laboratory on the next floor, when footsteps on the stone stairs and familiar voices gladdened my ear.

'Hallo, Berkeley!' said Thorndyke, 'do we find you waiting like a Peri at the gates of Paradise? Polton is upstairs, you know, tinkering at one of his inventions. If you ever find the nest empty, you had better go up and bang at the laboratory door. He's always there in the evenings.'

'I haven't been waiting long,' said I, 'and I was just thinking of rousing him up when you came.'

'That was right,' said Thorndyke, turning up the gas. 'And what news do you bring? Do I see a blue envelope sticking out of your pocket?'

'You do.'

'Is it a copy of the will?' he asked.

I answered 'yes', and added that I had full permission to show it to him.

'What did I tell you?' exclaimed Jervis. 'Didn't I say that he would get the copy for us if it existed?'

'We admit the excellence of your prognosis,' said Thorndyke, 'but there is no need to be boastful. Have you read through the document, Berkeley?'

'No, I haven't taken it out of the envelope.'

'Then it will be equally new to us all, and we shall see if it tallies with your description.'

He placed three easy chairs at a convenient distance from the light, and Jervis, watching him with a smile, remarked:

'Now Thorndyke is going to enjoy himself. To him, a perfectly unintelligible will is a thing of beauty and a joy for ever; especially if associated with some kind of recondite knavery.'

'I don't know,' said I, 'that this will is particularly unintelligible. The mischief seems to be that it is rather too intelligible. However, here it is,' and I handed it over to Thorndyke.

'I suppose that we can depend on this copy,' said the latter, as he drew out the document and glanced at it. 'Oh, yes,' he added, 'I see it is copied by Godfrey Bellingham, compared with the original and certified correct. In that case I will get you to read it out slowly, Jervis, and I will make a rough copy for reference. Let us make ourselves comfortable and light our pipes before we begin.'

He provided himself with a writing-pad, and, when we had seated ourselves and got our pipes well alight, Jervis opened the document, and with a premonitory 'hem!' commenced the reading.

'In the name of God, Amen. This is the last will and testament of me John Bellingham of number 141 Queen Square in the parish of St George Bloomsbury London in the county of Middlesex Gentleman made this twenty-first day of September in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and ninety-two.

'1. I give and bequeath unto Arthur Jellicoe of number 184 New Square Lincoln's Inn London in the county of Middlesex Attorney-at-law the whole of my collection of seals and scarabs and those in my cabinets marked A, B, and D together with the contents thereof and the sum of two thousand pounds sterling free of legacy duty.

'Unto the trustees of the British Museum the residue of my collection of antiquities.

'Unto my cousin George Hurst of The Poplars Eltham in the county of Kent the sum of five thousand pounds free of legacy duty and unto my brother Godfrey Bellingham or if he should die before the occurrence of my death unto his daughter Ruth Bellingham the residue of my estate and effects real and personal subject to the conditions set forth hereinafter namely:

'2. That my body shall be deposited with those of my ancestors in the churchyard appertaining to the church and parish of St George the Martyr or if that shall not be possible in some other churchyard cemetery burial ground church or chapel or other authorised place for the reception of bodies of the dead situate within or appertaining to the parishes of St Andrew above the Bars and St George the Martyr or St George Bloomsbury and St Giles in the Fields. But if the condition in this clause be not carried out then:

'3. I give and devise the said residue of my estate and effects unto my cousin George Hurst aforesaid and I hereby revoke all wills and codicils made by me at any time heretofore and I appoint Arthur Jellicoe aforesaid to be the executor of this my will jointly with the principal beneficiary and residuary legatee that is to say with the aforesaid Godfrey Bellingham if the conditions set forth hereinbefore in clause 2 shall be duly carried out but with the aforesaid George Hurst if the said conditions in the said clause 2 be not carried out.

'john bellingham

'Signed by the said testator John Bellingham in the presence of us present at the same time who at his request and in his presence and in the presence of each other have subscribed our names as witnesses.

'Frederick Wilton, 16 Medford Road, London, N, clerk.

'James Barber, 32 Wadbury Crescent, London, SW, clerk.'

'Well,' said Jervis, laying down the document as Thorndyke detached the last sheet from his writing-pad, 'I have met with a good many idiotic wills, but this one can give them all points. I don't see how it is ever going to be administered. One of the two executors is a mere abstraction—a sort of algebraical problem with no answer.'

'I think that difficulty could be overcome,' said Thorndyke.

'I don't see how,' retorted Jervis. 'If the body is deposited in a certain place, A is the executor; if it is somewhere else, B is the executor. But as you cannot produce the body, and no one has the least idea where it is, it is impossible to prove either that it is or that it is not in any specified place.'

'You are magnifying the difficulty, Jervis,' said Thorndyke. 'The body may, of course, be anywhere in the entire world, but the place where it is lying is either inside or out the general boundary of those two parishes. If it has been deposited within the boundary of those two parishes, the fact must be ascertainable by examining the burial certificates issued since the date when the missing man was last seen alive and by consulting the registers of those specified places of burial. I think that if no record can be found of any such interment within the boundary of those two parishes, that fact will be taken by the Court as proof that no such interment has taken place, and that therefore the body must have been deposited somewhere else. Such a decision would constitute George Hurst the co-executor and residuary legatee.'

'That is cheerful for your friends, Berkeley,' Jervis remarked, 'for we may take it as pretty certain that the body has not been deposited in any of the places named.'

'Yes,' I agreed gloomily, 'I'm afraid there is very little doubt of that. But what an ass the fellow must have been to make such a to-do about his beastly carcass! What the deuce could it have mattered to him where it was dumped, when he had done with it?'

Thorndyke chuckled softly. 'Thus the irreverent youth of to-day,' said he. 'But yours is hardly a fair comment, Berkeley. Our training makes us materialists, and puts us a little out of sympathy with those in whom primitive beliefs and emotions survive. A worthy priest who came to look at our dissecting-room expressed surprise to me that the students, thus constantly in the presence of relics of mortality, should be able to think of anything but the resurrection and the life hereafter. He was a bad psychologist. There is nothing so dead as a dissecting-room "subject"; and the contemplation of the human body in the process of being quietly taken to pieces—being resolved into its structural units like a worn-out clock or an old engine in the scrapper's yard—is certainly not conducive to a vivid realisation of the doctrine of the resurrection.'

'No; but this absurd anxiety to be buried in some particular place has nothing to do with religious belief; it is merely silly sentiment.'

'It is sentiment, I admit,' said Thorndyke, 'but I wouldn't call it silly. The feeling is so widespread in time and space that we must look on it with respect as something inherent in human nature. Think—as doubtless John Bellingham did—of the ancient Egyptians, whose chief aspiration was that of everlasting repose for the dead. See the trouble they took to achieve it. Think of the great Pyramid, or that of Amenemhat the Fourth with its labyrinth of false passages and its sealed and hidden sepulchral chambers. Think of Jacob, borne after death all those hundreds of weary miles in order that he might sleep with his fathers, and then remember Shakespeare and his solemn adjuration to posterity to let him rest undisturbed in his grave. No, Berkeley, it is not a silly sentiment. I am as indifferent as you as to what becomes of my body "when I have done with it," to use your irreverent phrase; but I recognise the solicitude that some other men display on the subject as a natural feeling that has to be taken seriously.'

'But even so,' I said, 'if this man had a hankering for a freehold residence in some particular bone-yard, he might have gone about the business in a. more reasonable way.'

'There I am entirely with you,' Thorndyke replied. 'It is the absurd way in which this provision is worded that not only creates all the trouble but also makes the whole document so curiously significant in view of the testator's disappearance.'

'How significant?' Jervis demanded eagerly.

'Let us consider the provisions of the will point by point,' said Thorndyke; 'and first note that the testator commanded the services of a very capable lawyer.'

'But Mr. Jellicoe disapproved of the will,' said I; 'in fact, he protested strongly against the form of it.'

'We will bear that in mind too,' Thorndyke replied. 'And now with reference to what we may call the contentious clauses: the first thing that strikes us is their preposterous injustice. Godfrey's inheritance is made conditional on a particular disposal of the testator's body. But this is a matter not necessarily under Godfrey's control. The testator might have been lost at sea, or killed in a fire or explosion, or have died abroad and been buried where his grave could not have been identified.

There are numerous probable contingencies besides the improbable one that has happened that might prevent the body from being recovered.

'But even if the body had been recovered, there is another difficulty. The places of burial in the parishes have all been closed for many years. It would be impossible to reopen any of them without a special faculty, and I doubt whether such a faculty would be granted. Possibly cremation might meet the difficulty, but even that is doubtful; and, in any case, the matter would not be in the control of Godfrey Bellingham. Yet, if the required interment should prove impossible, he is to be deprived of his legacy.'

'It is a monstrous and absurd injustice,' I exclaimed.

'It is,' Thorndyke agreed; 'but this is nothing to the absurdity that comes to light when we consider clauses two and three in detail. Observe that the testator presumably wished to be buried in a certain place; also he wished his brother should benefit under the will. Let us take the first point and see how he has set about securing the accomplishment of what he desired. Now if we read clauses two and three carefully, we shall see that he has rendered it virtually impossible that his wishes can be carried out. He desires to be buried in a certain place and makes Godfrey responsible for his being so buried. But he gives Godfrey no power or authority to carry out the provision, and places insuperable obstacles in his way. For until Godfrey is an executor, he has no power or authority to carry out the provisions; and until the provisions are carried out, he does not become an executor.'

'It is a preposterous muddle,' exclaimed Jervis.

'Yes, but that is not the worst of it,' Thorndyke continued. 'The moment John Bellingham dies, his dead body has come into existence; and it is "deposited", for the time being, wherever he happens to have died. But unless he should happen to have died in one of the places of burial mentioned—which is in the highest degree unlikely—his body will be, for the time being, "deposited" in some place other than those specified. In that case clause two is—for the time being—not complied with, and consequently George Hurst becomes, automatically, the co-executor.

'But will George Hurst carry out the provisions of clause two? Probably not. Why should he? The will contains no instructions to that effect. It throws the whole duty on Godfrey. On the other hand, if he should carry out clause two, what happens? He ceases to be an executor and he loses some seventy thousand pounds. We may be pretty certain that he will do nothing of the kind. So that, on considering the two clauses, we see that the wishes of the testator could only be carried out in the unlikely event of his dying in one of the burial-places mentioned, or his body being conveyed immediately after death to p. public mortuary in one of the said parishes. In any other event, it is virtually certain that he will be buried in some place other than that which he desired, and that his brother will be left absolutely without provision or recognition.'

'John Bellingham could never have intended that,' I said.

'Clearly not,' agreed Thorndyke; 'the provisions of the will furnish internal evidence that he did not. You note that he bequeathed five thousand pounds to George Hurst, in the event of clause two being carried out; but he has made no bequest to his brother in the event of its not being carried out. Obviously, he had not entertained the possibility of this contingency at all. He assumed, as a matter of course, that the conditions of clause two would be fulfilled, and regarded the conditions themselves as a mere formality.'

'But,' Jervis objected, 'Jellicoe must have seen the danger of a miscarriage and pointed it out to his client.'

'Exactly,' said Thorndyke. 'There is the mystery. We understand that he objected strenuously, and that John Bellingham was obdurate. Now it is perfectly understandable that a man should adhere obstinately to the most stupid and perverse disposition of his property; but that a man should persist in retaining a particular form of words after it has been proved to him that the use of such form will almost certainly result in the defeat of his own wishes; that, I say, is a mystery that calls for very careful consideration.'

'If Jellicoe had been an interested party,' said Jervis, 'one would have suspected him of lying low. But the form of clause two doesn't affect him at all.'

'No,' said Thorndyke; 'the person who stands to profit by the muddle is George Hurst. But we understand that he was unacquainted with the terms of the will, and there is certainly nothing to suggest that he is in any way responsible for it.'

'The practical question is,' said I, 'what is going to happen? and what can be done for the Bellinghams?'

'The probability is,' Thorndyke replied, 'that the next move will be made by Hurst. He is the party immediately interested. He will probably apply to the Court for permission to presume death and administer the will.'

'And what will the Court do?'

Thorndyke smiled dryly. 'Now you are asking a very pretty conundrum. The decisions of Courts depend on idiosyncrasies of temperament that no one can foresee. But one may say that a Court does not lightly grant permission to presume death. There will be a rigorous inquiry—and a decidedly unpleasant one, I suspect—and the evidence will be reviewed by the judge with a strong predisposition to regard the testator as being still alive. On the other hand, the known facts point very distinctly to the probability that he is dead; and, if the will were less complicated and all the parties interested were unanimous in supporting the application, I don't see why it might not be granted. But it will clearly be to the interest of Godfrey to oppose the application, unless he can show that the conditions of clause two have been complied with—which it is virtually certain he cannot; and he may be able to bring forward reasons for believing John to be still alive. But even if he is unable to do this, inasmuch as it is pretty clear that he was intended to be the chief beneficiary, his opposition is likely to have considerable weight with the Court.'

'Oh, is it?' I exclaimed eagerly. 'Then that accounts for a very peculiar proceeding on the part of Hurst. I have stupidly forgotten to tell you about it. He has been trying to come to a private agreement with Godfrey Bellingham.'

'Indeed!' said Thorndyke. 'What sort of agreement?'

'His proposal was this: that Godfrey should support him and Jellicoe in an application to the Court for permission to presume death and to administer the will, that if it was successful, Hurst should pay him four hundred pounds a year for life: the arrangement to hold good in all eventualities.'

'By which he means?'

'That if the body should be discovered at any future time, so that the conditions of clause two could be carried out, Hurst should still retain the property and continue to pay Godfrey the four hundred a year for life.'

'Hey, ho!' exclaimed Thorndyke; 'that is a queer proposal; a very queer proposal indeed.'

'Not to say fishy,' added Jervis. 'I don't fancy the Court would look with approval on that little arrangement.'

'The law does not look with much favour on any little arrangements that aim at getting behind the provisions of a will,' Thorndyke replied; 'though there would be nothing to complain of in this proposal if it were not for the reference to "all eventualities". If a will is hopelessly impracticable, it is not unreasonable or improper for the various beneficiaries to make such private arrangements among themselves as may seem necessary to avoid useless litigation and delay in administering the will. If, for instance, Hurst had proposed to pay four hundred a year to Godfrey so long as the body remained undiscovered on condition that, in the event of its discovery, Godfrey should pay him a like sum for life, there would have been nothing to comment upon. It would have been an ordinary sporting chance. But the reference to "all eventualities" is an entirely different matter. Of course, it may be mere greediness, but all the same it suggests some very curious reflections.'

'Yes, it does,' said Jervis. 'I wonder if he has any reason to expect that the body will be found? Of course it doesn't follow that he has. He may be merely taking the opportunity offered by the other man's poverty to make sure of the bulk of the property whatever happens. But it is uncommonly sharp practice, to say the least.'

'Do I understand that Godfrey declined the proposal?' Thorndyke asked.

'Yes, he did, very emphatically; and I fancy the two gentlemen proceeded to exchange opinions on the circumstances of the disappearance with more frankness than delicacy.'

'Ah,' said Thorndyke, 'that is a pity. If the case comes into Court, there is bound to be a good deal of unpleasant discussion and still more unpleasant comment in the newspapers. But if the parties themselves begin to express suspicions of one another there is no telling where the matter will end.'

'No, by Jove!' said Jervis. 'If they begin flinging accusations of murder about, the fat will be in the fire with a vengeance. That way lies the Old Bailey.'

'We must try to prevent them from making an unnecessary scandal,' said Thorndyke. 'It may be that an exposure will be unavoidable, and that must be ascertained in advance. But to return to your question, Berkeley, as to what is to be done. Hurst will probably make some move pretty soon. Do you know if Jellicoe will act with him?'

'No, he won't. He declines to take any steps without Godfrey's assent—at least, that is what he says at present. His attitude is one of correct neutrality.'

'That is satisfactory so far,' said Thorndyke, 'though he may alter his tone when the case comes into Court. From what you said just now I gathered that Jellicoe would prefer to have the will administered and be quit of the whole business; which is natural enough, especially as he benefits under the will to the extent of two thousand pounds and a valuable collection. Consequently, we may fairly assume that, even if he maintains an apparent neutrality, his influence will be exerted in

favour of Hurst rather than of Bellingham; from which it follows that Bellingham ought certainly to be properly advised, and, when the case goes into Court, properly represented.'

'He can't afford either the one or the other,' said I. 'He's as poor as an insolvent church mouse and as proud as the devil. He wouldn't accept professional aid that he couldn't pay for.'

'H'm,' grunted Thorndyke, 'that's awkward. But we can't allow the case to go "by default", so to speak—to fail for the mere lack of technical assistance. Besides, it is one of the most interesting cases that I have ever met with, and I am not going to see it bungled. He couldn't object to a little general advice in a friendly, informal way—amicus curia, as old Brodribb is so fond of saying; and there is nothing to prevent us from pushing forward the preliminary inquiries.'

'Of what nature would they be?'

'Well, to begin with, we have to satisfy ourselves that the conditions of clause two have not been complied with: that John Bellingham has not been buried within the parish boundaries mentioned. Of course he has not, but we must not take anything for granted. Then we have to satisfy ourselves that he is not still alive and accessible. It is perfectly possible that he is, after all, and it is our business to trace him, if he is still in the land of the living. Jervis and I can carry out these investigations without saying anything to Bellingham; my learned brother will look through the register of burials—not forgetting the cremations—in the metropolitan area, and I will take the other matter in hand.'

'You really think that John Bellingham may still be alive?' said I.

'Since his body has not been found, it is obviously a possibility. I think it in the highest degree improbable, but the improbable has to be investigated before it can be excluded.'

'It sounds rather a hopeless quest,' I remarked. 'How do you propose to begin?'

'I think of beginning at the British Museum. The people there may be able to throw some light on his movements. I know that there are some important evacuations in progress at Heliopolis—in fact, the Director of the Egyptian Department is out there at the present moment; and Doctor Norbury, who is taking his place temporarily, is an old friend of Bellingham's. I shall call on him and try to discover if there is anything that might have induced Bellingham suddenly to go abroad—to Heliopolis, for instance. Also he may be able to tell me what it was that took the missing man to Paris on that last, rather mysterious journey. That might turn out to be an important clue. And meanwhile, Berkeley, you must endeavour tactfully to reconcile your friend to the idea of letting us give an eye to the case. Make it clear to him that I am doing this entirely for the enlargement of my own knowledge.'

'But won't you have to be instructed by a solicitor?' I asked.

'Yes, nominally; but only as a matter of etiquette. We shall do all the actual work. Why do you ask?'

'I was thinking of the solicitor's costs, and I was going to mention that I have a little money of my own—'

'Then you keep it, my dear fellow. You'll want it when you go into practice. There will be no difficulty about the solicitor; I shall ask one of my friends to act nominally as a personal favour to me—Marchmont would take the case for us, Jervis, I am sure.'

'Yes,' said Jervis. 'Or old Brodribb, if we put it to him amicus curia.'

'It is excessively kind of both of you to take this benevolent interest in the case of my friends,' I said; 'and it is to be hoped that they won't be foolishly proud and stiff-necked about it. It's rather the way with poor gentlefolk.'

'I'll tell you what!' exclaimed Jervis. 'I have a most brilliant idea. You shall give us a little supper at your rooms and invite the Bellinghams to meet us. Then you and I will attack the old gentleman, and Thorndyke shall exercise his persuasive powers on the lady. These chronic incurable old bachelors, you know, are quite irresistible.'

'You observe that my respected junior condemns me to lifelong celibacy,' Thorndyke remarked. 'But,' he added, 'his suggestion is quite a good one. Of course, we mustn't put any sort of pressure on Bellingham to employ us—for that is what it amounts to, even if we accept no payment—but a friendly talk over the supper-table would enable us to put the matter delicately and yet convincingly.'

'Yes,' said I, 'I see that, and I like the idea immensely. But it won't be possible for several days, because I've got a job that takes up all my spare time—and that I ought to be at work on now,' I added, with a sudden qualm at the way in which I had forgotten the passage of time in the interest of Thorndyke's analysis.

My two friends looked at me inquiringly and I felt it necessary to explain about the injured hand and the Tell el Amarna tablets; which I accordingly did rather shyly and with a nervous eye upon Jervis. The slow grin, however, for which I was watching, never came; on the contrary, he not only heard me through quite gravely, but when I had finished said with some warmth, and using my old hospital pet name:

'I'll say one thing for you, Polly; you're a good chum, and you always were. I hope your Nevill's Court friends appreciate the fact.'

They are far more appreciative than the occasion warrants,' I answered. 'But to return to this question: how will this day week suit you?'

'It will suit me,' Thorndyke answered, with a glance at his junior.

'And me too,' said the latter; 'so, if it will do for the Bellinghams, we will consider it settled; but if they can't come, you must fix another night.'

'Very well,' I said, rising and knocking out my pipe, 'I will issue the invitation to-morrow. And now I must be off to have another slog at those notes.'

As I walked homewards I speculated cheerfully on the prospect of entertaining my friends under my own (or rather Barnard's) roof, if they could be lured out of their eremitical retirement. The idea had, in fact, occurred to me already, but I had been deterred by the peculiarities of Barnard's housekeeper. For Mrs. Gummer was one of those housewives who make up for an archaic simplicity of production by preparations on the most portentous and alarming scale. But this time I would not be deterred. If only the guests could be enticed into my humble lair it would be easy to furnish the raw materials of the feast from outside; and the consideration of ways and means occupied me pleasantly until I found myself once more at my writing-table, confronted by my voluminous notes on the incidents of the North Syrian War.

CHAPTER VIII. A MUSEUM IDYLL

WHETHER it was that practice revived a forgotten skill on my part, or that Miss Bellingham had over-estimated the amount of work to be done, I am unable to say. But whichever may have been the explanation, the fact is that the fourth afternoon saw our task so nearly completed that I was fain to plead that a small remainder might be left over to form an excuse for yet one more visit to the reading-room.

Short, however, as had been the period of our collaboration, it had been long enough to produce a great change in our relations to one another. For there is no friendship so intimate and satisfying as that engendered by community of work, and none—between man and woman, at any rate—so frank and wholesome.

Every day had arrived to find a pile of books with the places duly marked and the blue-covered quarto notebooks in readiness. Every day we had worked steadily at the allotted task, had then handed in the books and gone forth together to enjoy a most companionable tea in the milk-shop; thereafter to walk home by way of Queen Square, talking over the day's work and discussing the state of the world in the far-off days when Ahkhenaten was king and the Tell el Amarna tablets were a-writing.

It had been a pleasant time, so pleasant, that as I handed in the books for the last time, I sighed to think that it was over; that not only was the task finished, but that the recovery of my fair patient's hand, from which I had that morning removed the splint, had put an end to the need of my help.

'What shall we do?' I asked, as we came out into the central hall. 'It is too early for tea. Shall we go and look at some of the galleries?'

'Why not?' she answered. 'We might look over some of the things connected with what we have been doing. For instance, there is a relief of Ahkhenaten upstairs in the Third Egyptian Room; we might go and look at it.'

I fell in eagerly with the suggestion, placing myself under her experienced guidance, and we started by way of the Roman Gallery, past the long row of extremely commonplace and modern-looking Roman Emperors.

'I don't know,' she said, pausing for a moment opposite a bust labelled 'Trajan' (but obviously a portrait of Phil May), 'how I am ever even to thank you for all that you have done, to say nothing of repayment.'

'There is no need to do either,' I replied. 'I have enjoyed working with you so I have had my reward. But still,' I added, 'if you want to do me a great kindness, you have it in your power.'

'How?'

'In connection with my friend, Doctor Thorndyke. I told you he was an enthusiast. Now he is, for some reason, most keenly interested in everything relating to your uncle, and I happen to know that, if any legal proceedings should take place, he would very much like to keep a friendly eye on the case.'

'And what do you want me to do?'

'I want you, if an opportunity should occur for him to give your father advice or help of any kind, to use your influence with your father in favour of, rather than in opposition to, his accepting it—always assuming that you have no real feeling against his doing so.'

Miss Bellingham looked at me thoughtfully for a few moments, and then laughed softly.

'So the great kindness that I am to do you is to let you do me a further kindness through your friend!'

'No,' I protested; 'that is where you are mistaken. It isn't benevolence on Doctor Thorndyke's part; it's professional enthusiasm.'

She smiled sceptically.

'You don't believe in it,' I said; 'but consider other cases. Why does a surgeon get out of bed on a winter's night to do an emergency operation at a hospital? He doesn't get paid for it. Do you think it is altruism?'

'Yes, of course. Isn't it?'

'Certainly not. He does it because it is his job, because it is his business to fight with disease—and win.'

'I don't see much difference,' she said. 'It's work done for love instead of for payment. However, I will do as you ask if the opportunity arises; but I shan't suppose that I am repaying your kindness to me.'

'I don't mind so long as you do it,' I said, and we walked on for some time in silence.

'Isn't it odd,' she said presently, 'how our talk always seems to come back to my uncle? Oh, and that reminds me that the things he gave to the Museum are in the same room as the Ahkhenaten relief. Would you like to see them?'

'Of course I should.'

'Then we will go and look at them first.' She paused, and then, rather shyly and with a rising colour, she continued: 'And I think I should like to introduce you to a very dear friend of mine—with your permission, of course.'

This last addition she made hastily, seeing, I suppose, that I looked rather glum at the suggestion. Inwardly I consigned her friend to the devil, especially if of the masculine gender; outwardly I expressed my felicity at making the acquaintance of any person whom she should honour with her friendship. Whereat, to my discomfiture, she laughed enigmatically; a very soft laugh, low-pitched and musical, like the cooing of a glorified pigeon.

I strolled on by her side, speculating a little anxiously on the coming introduction. Was I being conducted to the lair of one of the servants attached to the establishment? and would he add a superfluous third to our little party of two, so complete and companionable, solus cum sola, in this populated wilderness? Above all, would he turn out to be a young man, and bring my aerial castles tumbling about my ears. The shy look and the blush with which she had suggested the introduction were ominous indications, upon which I mused gloomily as we ascended the stairs and passed

through the wide doorway. I glanced apprehensively at my companion, and met a quiet, inscrutable smile; and at that moment she halted opposite a wall-case and faced me.

'This is my friend,' she said. 'Let me present you to Artemidorus, late of the Fayyum. Oh, don't smile!' she pleaded. 'I am quite serious. Have you never heard of pious Catholics who cherish a devotion to some long-departed saint? That is my feeling towards Artemidorus, and if you only knew what comfort he has shed into the heart of a lonely woman; what a quiet, unobtrusive friend he has been to me in my solitary, friendless days, always ready with a kindly greeting on his gentle, thoughtful face, you would like him for that alone. And I want you to like him and to share our silent friendship. Am I very silly, very sentimental?'

A wave of relief swept over me, and the mercury of my emotional thermometer, which had shrunk almost into the bulb, leaped up to summer heat. How charming it was of her and how sweetly intimate, to wish to share this mystical friendship with me! And what a pretty conceit it was, too, and how like this strange, inscrutable maiden, to come here and hold silent converse with this long-departed Greek. And the pathos of it all touched me deeply amidst the joy of this new-born intimacy.

'Are you scornful?' she asked, with a shade of disappointment, as I made no reply.

'No, indeed I am not,' I answered earnestly. 'I want to make you aware of my sympathy and my appreciation without offending you by seeming to exaggerate, and I don't know how to express it.' Oh, never mind about the expression, so long as you feel it. I thought you would understand,' and she gave me a smile that made me tingle to my finger-tips.

We stood awhile gazing in silence at the mummy—for such, indeed, was her friend Artemidorus. But not an ordinary mummy. Egyptian in form, it was entirely Greek in feeling; and brightly coloured as it was, in accordance with the racial love of colour, the tasteful refinement with which the decoration of the case was treated made those around look garish and barbaric. But the most striking feature was a charming panel picture which occupied the place of the usual mask. This painting was a revelation to me. Except that it was executed in tempera instead of oil, it differed in no respect from modern work. There was nothing archaic or ancient about it. With its freedom of handling and its correct rendering of light and shade, it might have been painted yesterday; indeed, enclosed in an ordinary gilt frame, it might have passed without remark in an exhibition of modern portraits.

Miss Bellingham observed my admiration and smiled approvingly.

'It is a charming little portrait, isn't it?' she said; 'and such a sweet face too; so thoughtful and human, with a shade of melancholy. But the whole thing is full of charm. I fell in love with it the first time I saw it. And it is so Greek!'

'Yes, it is, in spite of the Egyptian gods and symbols.'

'Rather because of them, I think,' said she. 'There we have the typical Greek attitude, the genial, cultivated electicism that appreciated the fitness of even the most alien forms of art. There is Anubis standing beside the bier; there are Isis and Nephthys, and there below Horus and Tahuti. But we can't suppose Artemidorus worshipped or believed in those gods. They are there because they are splendid decoration and perfectly appropriate in character. The real feeling of those who loved the dead man breaks out in the inscription.' She pointed to a band below the pectoral, where, in gilt capital letters, was written the two words, (Greek).'

'Yes,' I said, 'it is very dignified and very human.'

'And so sincere and full of real emotion,' she added. 'I find it unspeakably touching. "O Artemidorus, farewell!" There is the real note of human grief, the sorrow of eternal parting. How much finer it is than the vulgar boastfulness of the Semitic epitaphs, or our own miserable, insincere make-believe of the "Not lost but gone before" type. He has gone from them for ever; they would look on his face and hear his voice no more; they realised that this was their last farewell. Oh, there is a world of love and sorrow in those two simple words!'

For some time neither of us spoke. The glamour of this touching memorial of a long-buried grief had stolen over me, and I was content to stand silent by my beloved companion and revive, with a certain pensive pleasure, the ghosts of human emotions over which the many centuries had rolled. Presently she turned to me with a frank smile. 'You have been weighed in the balance of friendship,' she said, 'and not found wanting. You have the gift of sympathy, even with a woman's sentimental fancies.'

I suspected that a good many men would have developed this precious quality under the circumstances, but I refrained from saying so. There is no use in crying down one's own wares. I was glad enough to have earned her good opinion so easily, and when she at length turned away from the case and passed through into the adjoining room, it was a very complacent young man who bore her company.

'Here is Ahkhenaten—or Khu-en-aten, as the authorities here render the hieroglyphics. She indicated a fragment of a coloured relief labelled: 'Portion of a painted stone tablet with a portrait figure of Amenhotep IV, and we stopped to look at the frail, effeminate figure of the great king, with his large cranium, his queer, pointed chin, and the Aten rays stretching out their weird hands as if caressing him.

'We mustn't stay here if you want to see my uncle's gift, because this room closes at four to-day.' With this admonition she moved on to the other end of the room, where she halted before a large floor-case containing a mummy and a large number of other objects. A black label with white lettering set forth the various contents with a brief explanation as follows:

'Mummy of Sebekhotep, a scribe of the twenty-second dynasty, together with the objects found in the tomb. These include the four Canopic jars, in which the internal organs were deposited, the Ushabti figures, tomb provisions and various articles that had belonged to the deceased; his favourite chair, his head-rest, his ink-palette, inscribed with his name and the name of the king, Osorkon I, in whose reign he lived, and other smaller articles. Presented by John Bellingham, Esq.'

'They have put all the objects together in one case,' Miss Bellingham explained, 'to show the contents of an ordinary tomb of the better class. You see that the dead man was provided with all his ordinary comforts: provisions, furniture, the ink-palette that he had been accustomed to use in writing on papyri, and a staff of servants to wait on him.'

'Where are the servants?' I asked.

'The little Ushabti figures,' she answered; 'they were the attendants of the dead, you know, his servants in the under-world. It was a quaint idea, wasn't it? But it was all very complete and

consistent, and quite reasonable, too, if one once accepts the belief in the persistence of the individual apart from the body.'

'Yes,' I agreed, 'and that is the only fair way to judge a religious system, by taking the main beliefs for granted. But what a business it must have been, bringing all these things from Egypt to London.'

'It was worth the trouble, though, for it is a fine and instructive collection. And the work is all very good of its kind. You notice that the Ushabti figures and the heads that form the stoppers of the Canopic jars are quite finely modelled. The mummy itself, too, is rather handsome, though that coat of bitumen on the back doesn't improve it. But Sebekhotep must have been a fine-looking man.'

'The mask on the face is a portrait, I suppose?'

'Yes; in fact, it's rather more. To some extent it is the actual face of the man himself. This mummy is enclosed in what is called a cartonnage, that is a case moulded on the figure. The cartonnage was formed of a number of layers of linen or papyrus united by glue or cement, and when the case had been fitted to a mummy it was moulded to the body, so that the general form of the features and limbs was often apparent. After the cement was dry the case was covered with a thin layer of stucco and the face modelled more completely, and then decorations and inscriptions were painted on. So that, you see, in a cartonnage, the body was sealed up like a nut in its shell, unlike the more ancient forms in which the mummy was merely rolled up and enclosed in a wooden coffin.'

At this moment there smote upon our ears a politely protesting voice announcing in sing-song tones that it was closing time; and simultaneously a desire for tea suggested the hospitable milk-shop. With leisurely dignity that ignored the official who shepherded us along the galleries, we made our way to the entrance, still immersed in conversation on matters sepulchral.

It was rather earlier than our usual hour for leaving the Museum and, moreover, it was our last day—for the present. Wherefore we lingered over our tea to an extent that caused the milk-shop lady to view us with some disfavour, and when at length we started homeward, we took so many short cuts that six o'clock found us no nearer our destination than Lincoln's Inn Fields; whither we had journeyed by a slightly indirect route that traversed (among other places) Russell Square, Red Lion Square, with the quaint passage of the same name, Bedford Row, Jockey's Fields, Hand Court, and Great Turnstile.

It was in the latter thoroughfare that our attention was attracted by a flaming poster outside a newsvendor's bearing the startling inscription:

MORE MEMENTOES

OF MURDERED MAN

Miss Bellingham glanced at the poster and shuddered.

'Horrible, isn't it?' she said. 'Have you read about them?'

'I haven't been noticing the papers the last few days,' I replied.

'No, of course you haven't. You've been slaving at those wretched notes. We don't very often see the papers, at least we don't take them in, but Miss Oman has kept us supplied during the last day

or two. She is a perfect little ghoul; she delights in horrors of every kind, and the more horrible the better.'

'But,' I asked, 'what is it they have found?'

'Oh, they are the remains of some poor creature who seems to have been murdered and cut into pieces. It is dreadful. It made me shudder to read of it, for I couldn't help thinking of poor Uncle John, and, as for my father, he was really quite upset.'

'Are these the bones that were found in a watercress-bed at Sidcup?'

'Yes, but they have found several more. The police have been most energetic. They seem to have been making a systematic search, and the result has been that they have discovered several portions of the body, scattered about in very widely separated places—Sidcup, Lee, St Mary Cray; and yesterday it was reported that an arm had been found in one of the ponds called "the Cuckoo Pits," close to our old home.'

'What! in Essex?' I exclaimed.

'Yes, in Epping Forest, quite near Woodford. Isn't it dreadful to think of it? They were probably hidden when we were living there. I think it was that that horrified my father so much. When he read it he was so upset that he gathered up the whole bundle of newspapers and tossed them out of the window; and they blew over the wall, and poor Miss Oman had to rush and pursue them up the court.'

'Do you think he suspects that these remains may be those of your uncle?'

'I think so, though he has said nothing to that effect, and, of course, I have not made any suggestion to him. We always preserve the fiction between ourselves of believing that Uncle John is still alive.'

'But you don't think he is, do you?'

'No, I'm afraid I don't; and I feel pretty sure that my father doesn't think so either, but he doesn't like to admit it to me.'

'Do you happen to remember what bones have been found?'

'No, I don't. I know that an arm was found in the Cuckoo Pits, and I think a thigh-bone was dredged up out of a pond near St Mary Cray. But Miss Oman will be able to tell you all about it, if you are interested. She will be delighted to meet a kindred spirit,' Miss Bellingham added, with a smile.

'I don't know that I claim spiritual kinship with a ghoul,' said I; 'especially such a very sharp-tempered ghoul.'

'Oh, don't disparage her, Doctor Berkeley!' Miss Bellingham pleaded. 'She isn't really bad-tempered; only a little prickly on the surface. I oughtn't to have called her a ghoul; she is just the sweetest, most affectionate, most unselfish little angelic human hedgehog that you could find if you travelled the wide world through. Do you know that she has been working her fingers to the bone making an old dress of mine presentable because she is so anxious that I shall look nice at your little supper party.'

'You are sure to do that, in any case,' I said; 'but I withdraw my remark as to her temper unreservedly. And I really didn't mean it, you know; I have always liked the little lady.'

'That's right; and now won't you come in and have a few minutes' chat with my father? We are quite early in spite of the short cuts.'

I accepted readily, and the more so inasmuch as I wanted a few words with Miss Oman on the subject of catering and did not want to discuss it before my friends. Accordingly I went and gossiped with Mr. Bellingham, chiefly about the work we had done at the Museum, until it was time for me to return to the surgery.

Having taken my leave, I walked down the stairs with reflective slowness and as much creaking of my boots as I could manage; with the result, hopefully anticipated, that as I approached the door of Miss Oman's room it opened and the lady's head protruded.

'I'd change my cobbler if I were you,' she said.

I thought of the 'angelic human hedgehog', and nearly sniggered in her face.

'I am sure you would, Miss Oman, instantly; though, mind you, the poor fellow can't help his looks.'

'You are a very flippant young man,' she said severely. Whereat I grinned, and she regarded me silently with a baleful glare. Suddenly I remembered my mission and became serious and sober.

'Miss Oman,' I said, 'I very much want to take your advice on a matter of some importance—to me, at least.' (That ought to fetch her, I thought. The 'advice fly'—strangely neglected by Izaak Walton—is guaranteed to kill in any weather.) And it did fetch her. She rose in a flash and gorged it, cock's feathers, worsted body and all.

'What is it about?' she asked eagerly. 'But don't stand out here where everybody can hear but me. Come in and sit down.'

Now I didn't want to discuss the matter here, and, besides, there was not time. I therefore assumed an air of mystery.

'I can't, Miss Oman. I'm due at the surgery now. But if you should be passing and should have a few minutes to spare, I should be greatly obliged if you would look in. I really don't quite know how to act.'

'No, I expect not. Men very seldom do. But you're better than most, for you know when you are in difficulties and have the sense to consult a woman. But what is it about? Perhaps I might be thinking it over.'

'Well, you know,' I began evasively, 'it's a simple matter, but I can't very well—no, by Jove!' I added, looking at my watch, 'I must run, or I shall keep the multitude waiting.' And with this I bustled away, leaving her literally dancing with curiosity.

CHAPTER IX. THE SPHINX OF LINCOLN'S INN

AT the age of twenty-six one cannot claim to have attained to the position of a person of experience. Nevertheless, the knowledge of human nature accumulated in that brief period sufficed to make me feel confident that, at some time during the evening, I should receive a visit from Miss Oman. And circumstances justified my confidence; for the clock yet stood at two minutes to seven when a premonitory tap at the surgery door heralded her arrival.

'I happened to be passing,' she explained, and I forbore to smile at the coincidence, 'so I thought I might as well drop in and hear what you wanted to ask me about.'

She seated herself in the patients' chair and laying a bundle of newspapers on the table, glared at me expectantly.

'Thank you, Miss Oman,' said I. 'It is very good of you to look in on me. I am ashamed to give you all this trouble about such a trifling matter.'

She rapped her knuckles impatiently on the table.

'Never mind about the trouble,' she exclaimed tartly. 'What—is—it—that—you—want—to—ask—me about?'

I stated my difficulties in respect of the supper-party, and, as I proceeded, an expression of disgust and disappointment spread over her countenance.

'I don't see why you need have been so mysterious about it,' she said glumly.

'I didn't mean to be mysterious; I was only anxious not to make a mess of the affair. It's all very fine to assume a lofty scorn of the pleasures of the table, but there is great virtue in a really good feed, especially when low-living and high-thinking have been the order of the day.'

'Coarsely put,' said Miss Oman, 'but perfectly true.'

'Very well. Now, if I leave the management to Mrs. Gummer, she will probably provide a tepid Irish stew with flakes of congealed fat on it, and a plastic suet-pudding or something of that kind, and turn the house upside down in getting it ready. So I thought of having a cold spread and getting the things from outside. But I don't want it to look as if I had been making enormous preparations.'

'They won't think the things came down from heaven,' said Miss Oman.

'No, I suppose they won't. But you know what I mean. Now, where do you advise me to go for the raw materials of conviviality?'

Miss Oman reflected. 'You had better let me do your shopping and manage the whole business,' was her final verdict.

This was precisely what I wanted, and I accepted thankfully, regardless of the feelings of Mrs. Gummer. I handed her two pounds, and, after some protests at my extravagance, she bestowed them in her purse; a process that occupied time, since that receptacle, besides being a sort of miniature Record Office of frayed and time-stained bills, already bulged with a lading of draper's samples, ends of tape, a card of linen buttons, another of hooks and eyes, a lump of beeswax, a rat-eaten stump of lead-pencil, and other trifles that I have forgotten. As she closed the purse at the imminent risk of wrenching off its fastenings she looked at me severely and pursed her lips.

'You're a very plausible young man,' she remarked.

'What makes you say that?' I asked.

'Philandering about museums,' she continued, 'with handsome young ladies on the pretence of work. Work, indeed! Oh, I heard her telling her father about it. She thinks you were perfectly enthralled by the mummies and dried cats and chunks of stone and all the other trash. She doesn't know what humbugs men are.'

'Really, Miss Oman—' I began.

'Oh, don't talk to me!' she snapped. 'I can see it all. You can't impose upon me. I can see you staring into those glass cases, egging her on to talk and listening open-mouthed and bulging-eyed and sitting at her feet—now, didn't you?'

'I don't know about sitting at her feet,' I said, 'though it might easily have come to that with those infernal slippery floors; but I had a very jolly time, and I mean to go again if I can. Miss Bellingham is the cleverest and most accomplished woman I have ever spoken to.'

This was a poser for Miss Oman, whose admiration and loyalty, I knew, were only equalled by my own. She would have liked to contradict me, but the thing was impossible. To cover her defeat she snatched up the bundle of newspapers and began to open them out.

'What sort of stuff is "hibernation"?' she demanded suddenly.

'Hibernation!' I exclaimed.

'Yes. They found a patch of it on a bone that was discovered in a pond at St Mary Cray, and a similar patch on one that was found at some other place in Essex. Now, I want to know what "hibernation" is.'

'You must mean "eburnation,"' I said, after a moment's reflection.

'The newspapers say "hibernation," and I suppose they know what they are talking about. If you don't know what it is, don't be ashamed to say so.'

'Well, then, I don't.'

'In that case you had better read the papers and find out,' she said, a little illogically. And then: 'Are you fond of murders? I am, awfully.'

'What a shocking little ghoul you must be!' I exclaimed.

She stuck out her chin at me. I'll trouble you,' she said, 'to be a little more respectful in your language. Do you realise that I am old enough to be your mother?'

'Impossible!' I ejaculated.

'Fact,' said Miss Oman.

'Well, anyhow,' said I, 'age is not the only qualification. And besides, you are too late for the billet. The vacancy's filled.'

Miss Oman slapped the papers down on the table and rose abruptly.

'You had better read the papers and see if you can learn a little sense,' she said severely as she turned to go. 'Oh, and don't forget the finger!' she added eagerly. 'That is really thrilling.'

'The finger?' I repeated.

'Yes. They found a hand with one missing. The police think it is an important clue. I don't know what they mean; but you read the account and tell me what you think.'

With this parting injunction she bustled out through the surgery, and I followed to bid her a ceremonious adieu on the doorstep. I watched her little figure tripping with quick, bird-like steps down Fetter Lane, and was about to turn back into the surgery when my attention was attracted by the evolutions of an elderly gentleman on the opposite side of the street. He was a somewhat peculiar-looking man, tall, gaunt, and bony, and the way in which he carried his head suggested to the medical mind a pronounced degree of near sight and a pair of deep spectacle glasses. Suddenly he espied me and crossed the road with his chin thrust forward and a pair of keen blue eyes directed at me through the centres of his spectacles.

'I wonder if you can and will help me,' said he, with a courteous salute. 'I wish to call on an acquaintance, and I have forgotten his address. It is in some court, but the name of that court has escaped me for the moment. My friend's name is Bellingham. I suppose you don't chance to know it? Doctors know a great many people, as a rule.'

'Do you mean Mr. Godfrey Bellingham?'

'Ah! Then you do know him. I have not consulted the oracle in vain. He is a patient of yours, no doubt?'

'A patient and personal friend. His address is Forty-nine Nevill's Court.'

'Thank you, thank you. Oh, and as you are a friend, perhaps you can inform me as to the customs of the household. I am not expected, and I do not wish to make an untimely visit. What are Mr. Bellingham's habits as to his evening meal? Would this be a convenient time to call?'

'I generally make my evening visits a little later than this—say about half-past eight; they have finished their meal by then.'

'Ah! Half-past eight, then? Then I suppose I had better take a walk until that time. I don't want to disturb them.'

'Would you care to come in and smoke a cigar until it is time to make your call? If you would, I could walk over with you and show you the house.'

'That is very kind of you,' said my new acquaintance, with an inquisitive glance at me through his spectacles. 'I think I should like to sit down. It's a dull affair, mooning about the streets, and there isn't time to go back to my chambers—in Lincoln's Inn.'

'I wonder,' said I, as I ushered him into the room lately vacated by Miss Oman, 'if you happen to be Mr. Jellicoe?'

He turned his spectacles full on me with a keen, suspicious glance. 'What makes you think I am Mr. Jellicoe?' he asked.

'Oh, only that you live in Lincoln's Inn.'

'Ha! I see. I live in Lincoln's Inn; Mr. Jellicoe lives in Lincoln's Inn; therefore I am Mr. Jellicoe. Ha! ha! Bad logic, but a correct conclusion. Yes, I am Mr. Jellicoe. What do you know about me?'

'Mighty little, excepting that you were the late John Bellingham's man of business.'

'The "late John Bellingham," hey! How do you know he is the late John Bellingham?'

'As a matter of fact, I don't; only I rather understood that that was your own belief.'

'You understood! Now from whom did you "understand" that? From Godfrey Bellingham? H'm! And how did he know what I believe? I never told him. It is a very unsafe thing, my dear sir, to expound another man's beliefs.'

'Then you think that John Bellingham is alive?'

'Do I? Who said so? I did not, you know.'

'But he must be either dead or alive.'

'There,' said Mr. Jellicoe, 'I am entirely with you. You have stated an undeniable truth.'

'It is not a very illuminating one, however,' I replied, laughing.

'Undeniable truths often are not,' he retorted. 'They are apt to be extremely general. In fact, I would affirm that the certainty of the truth of a given proposition is directly proportional to its generality.'

'I suppose that is so,' said I.

'Undoubtedly. Take an instance from your own profession. Given a million normal human beings under twenty, and you can say with certainty that a majority of them will die before reaching a certain age, that they will die in certain circumstances and of certain diseases. Then take a single unit from that million, and what can you predict concerning him? Nothing. He may die to-morrow; he may live to be a couple of hundred. He may die of a cold in the head or a cut finger, or from falling off the cross of St Paul's. In a particular case you can predict nothing.'

'That is perfectly true,' said I. And then realising that I had been led away from the topic of John Bellingham, I ventured to return to it.

'That was a very mysterious affair—the disappearance of John Bellingham, I mean.'

'Why mysterious?' asked Mr. Jellicoe. 'Men disappear from time to time, and when they reappear, the explanations that they give (when they give any) seem more or less adequate.'

'But the circumstances were surely rather mysterious.'

'What circumstances?' asked Mr. Jellicoe.

'I mean the way in which he vanished from Mr. Hurst's house.'

'In what way did he vanish from it?'

'Well, of course, I don't know.'

'Precisely. Neither do I. Therefore I can't say whether that way was a mysterious one or not.'

'It is not even certain that he did leave it,' I remarked, rather recklessly.

'Exactly,' said Mr. Jellicoe. 'And if he did not, he is there still. And if he is there still, he has not disappeared—in the sense understood. And if he has not disappeared, there is no mystery.'

I laughed heartily, but Mr. Jellicoe preserved a wooden solemnity and continued to examine me through his spectacles (which I, in my turn, inspected and estimated at about minus five dioptres). There was something highly diverting about this grim lawyer, with his dry contentiousness and almost farcical caution. His ostentatious reserve encouraged me to ply him with fresh questions, the more indiscreet the better.

'I suppose,' said I, 'that, under these circumstances, you would hardly favour Mr. Hurst's proposal to apply for permission to presume death?'

'Under what circumstances?' he inquired.

'I was referring to the doubt you have expressed as to whether John Bellingham is, after all, really dead.'

'My dear sir,' said he, 'I fail to see your point. If it were certain that the man was alive, it would be impossible to presume that he was dead; and if it were certain that he was dead, presumption of death would still be impossible. You do not presume a certainty. The uncertainty is of the essence of the transaction.'

'But,' I persisted, 'if you really believe that he may be alive, I should hardly have thought that you would take the responsibility of presuming his death and dispersing his property.'

'I don't,' said Mr. Jellicoe. 'I take no responsibility. I act in accordance with the decision of the Court and have no choice in the matter.'

'But the Court may decide that he is dead and he may nevertheless be alive.'

'Not at all. If the Court decides that he is presumably dead, then he is presumably dead. As a mere irrelevant, physical circumstance he may, it is true, be alive. But legally speaking, and for testamentary purposes, he is dead. You fail to perceive the distinction, no doubt?'

'I am afraid I do,' I admitted.

'Yes; the members of your profession usually do. That is what makes them such bad witnesses in a court of law. The scientific outlook is radically different from the legal. The man of science relies on his own knowledge and observation and judgment, and disregards testimony. A man comes to you and tells you he is blind in one eye. Do you accept his statement? Not in the least. You proceed to test his eyesight with some infernal apparatus of coloured glasses, and you find that he can see perfectly well with both eyes. Then you decide that he is not blind in one eye; that is to say, you reject his testimony in favour of facts of your own ascertaining.'

'But surely that is the rational method of coming to a conclusion?'

'In science, no doubt. Not in law. A court of law must decide according to the evidence which is before it; and that evidence is of the nature of sworn testimony. If a witness is prepared to swear that black is white and no evidence to the contrary is offered, the evidence before the Court is that black is white, and the Court must decide accordingly. The judge and the jury may think otherwise—they may even have private knowledge to the contrary—but they have to decide according to the evidence.'

'Do you mean to say that a judge would be justified in giving a decision which he knew to be contrary to the facts? Or that he might sentence a man whom he knew to be innocent?'

'Certainly. It has been done. There is a case of a judge who sentenced a man to death and allowed the execution to take place, notwithstanding that he—the judge—had actually seen the murder committed by another man. But that was carrying correctness of procedure to the verge of pedantry.'

'It was, with a vengeance,' I agreed. 'But to return to the case of John Bellingham. Supposing that after the Court has decided that he is dead he should return alive? What then?'

'Ah! It would then be his turn to make an application, and the Court, having fresh evidence laid before it, would probably decide that he was alive.'

'And meantime his property would have been dispersed?'

'Probably. But you will observe that the presumption of death would have arisen out of his own proceedings. If a man acts in such a way as to create a belief that he is dead, he must put up with the consequences.'

'Yes, that is reasonable enough,' said I. And then, after a pause, I asked: 'Is there any immediate likelihood of proceedings of the kind being commenced?'

'I understood from what you said just now that Mr. Hurst was contemplating some action of the kind. No doubt you had your information from a reliable quarter.' This answer Mr. Jellicoe delivered without moving a muscle, regarding me with the fixity of a spectacled figurehead.

I smiled feebly. The operation of pumping Mr. Jellicoe was rather like the sport of boxing with a porcupine, being chiefly remarkable as a demonstration of the power of passive resistance. I determined, however, to make one more effort, rather, I think, for the pleasure of witnessing his defensive manoeuvres than with the expectation of getting anything out of him. I accordingly 'opened out' on the subject of the 'remains.'

'Have you been following these remarkable discoveries of human bones that have been appearing in the papers?' I asked.

He looked at me stonily for some moments, and then replied:

'Human bones are rather more within your province than mine, but, now that you mention it, I think I recall having read of some such discoveries. They were disconnected bones, I believe.'

'Yes; evidently parts of a dismembered body.'

'So I should suppose. No, I have not followed the accounts. As we get on in life our interests tend to settle into grooves, and my groove is chiefly connected with conveyancing. These discoveries would be of more interest to a criminal lawyer.'

'I thought you might, perhaps, have connected them with the disappearance of your client?'

'Why should I? What could be the nature of the connection?'

'Well,' I said, 'these are the bones of a man—'

'Yes; and my client was a man with bones. That is a connection, certainly, though not a very specific or distinctive one. But perhaps you had something more particular in your mind?'

'I had,' I replied. 'The fact that some of the bones were actually found on land belonging to your client seemed to me rather significant.'

'Did it, indeed?' said Mr. Jellicoe. He reflected for a few moments, gazing steadily at me the while, and then continued: 'In that I am unable to follow you. It would have seemed to me that the finding of human remains upon a certain piece of land might conceivably throw a prima fade suspicion upon the owner or occupant of the land as being the person who deposited them. But the case that you suggest is the one case in which this would be impossible. A man cannot deposit his own dismembered remains.'

'No, of course not. I was not suggesting that he deposited them himself, but merely that the fact of their being deposited on his land, in a way, connected these remains with him.'

'Again,' said Mr. Jellicoe, 'I fail to follow you, unless you are suggesting that it is customary for murderers who mutilate bodies to be punctilious in depositing the dismembered remains upon land belonging to their victims. In which case I am sceptical as to your facts. I am not aware of the existence of any such custom. Moreover, it appears that only a portion of the body was deposited on Mr. Bellingham's land, the remaining portions having been scattered broadcast over a wide area. How does that agree with your suggestion?'

'It doesn't, of course,' I admitted. 'But there is another fact that I think you will admit to be more significant. The first remains that were discovered were found at Sidcup. Now, Sidcup is close to Eltham; and Eltham is the place where Mr. Bellingham was last seen alive.'

'And what is the significance of this? Why do you connect the remains with one locality rather than the various other localities in which other portions of the body were found?'

'Well,' I replied, rather gravelled by this very pertinent question, 'the appearances seem to suggest that the person who deposited these remains started from the neighbourhood of Eltham, where the missing man was last seen.'

Mr. Jellicoe shook his head. 'You appear,' said he, 'to be confusing the order of deposition with the order of discovery. What evidence is there that the remains found at Sidcup were deposited before those found elsewhere?'

'I don't know that there is any,' I admitted.

'Then,' said he, 'I don't see how you support your suggestion that the person started from the neighbourhood of Eltham.'

On consideration, I had to admit that I had nothing to offer in support of my theory; and having thus shot my last arrow in this very unequal contest, I thought it time to change the subject.

'I called in at the British Museum the other day,' said I, 'and had a look at Mr. Bellingham's last gift to the nation. The things are very well shown in that central case.'

'Yes. I was very pleased with the position they have given to the exhibit, and so would my poor old friend have been. I wished, as I looked at the case, that he could have seen it. But perhaps he may, after all.'

'I am sure I hope he will,' said I, with more sincerity, perhaps, than the lawyer gave me credit for. For the return of John Bellingham would most effectually have cut the Gordian knot of my friend Godfrey's difficulties. 'You are a good deal interested in Egyptology yourself, aren't you?' I added.

'Greatly interested,' replied Mr. Jellicoe, with more animation than I had thought possible in his wooden face. 'It is a fascinating subject, the study of this venerable civilisation, extending back to the childhood of the human race, preserved for ever for our instruction in its own unchanging monuments like a fly in a block of amber. Everything connected with Egypt is full of an impressive solemnity. A feeling of permanence, of stability, defying time and change, pervades it. The place, the people, and the monuments alike breathe of eternity.'

I was mightily surprised at this rhetorical outburst on the part of this dry, taciturn lawyer. But I liked him the better for the touch of enthusiasm that made him human, and determined to keep him astride of his hobby.

'Yet,' said I, 'the people must have changed in the course of centuries.'

'Yes, that is so. The people who fought against Cambyses were not the race who marched into Egypt five thousand years before—the dynastic people whose portraits we see on the early monuments. In those fifty centuries the blood of Hyksos and Syrians and Ethiopians and Hittites, and who can say how many more races, must have mingled with that of the old Egyptians. But still the national life went on without a break; the old culture leavened the new peoples, and the immigrant strangers ended by becoming Egyptians. It is a wonderful phenomenon. Looking back on it from our own time, it seems more like a geological period than the life history of a single nation. Are you at all interested in the subject?'

'Yes, decidedly, though I am completely ignorant of it. The fact is that my interest is of quite recent growth. It is only of late that I have been sensible of the glamour of things Egyptian.'

'Since you made Miss Bellingham's acquaintance, perhaps?' suggested Mr. Jellicoe, himself as unchanging in aspect as an Egyptian effigy.

I suppose I must have reddened—I certainly resented the remark—for he continued in the same even tone: 'I made the suggestion because I know that she takes an intelligent interest in the subject and is, in fact, quite well informed on it.'

'Yes; she seems to know a great deal about the antiquities of Egypt, and I may as well admit that your surmise was correct. It was she who showed me her uncle's collection.'

'So I had supposed,' said Mr. Jellicoe. 'And a very instructive collection it is, in a popular sense; very suitable for exhibition in a public museum, though there is nothing in it of unusual interest to the expert. The tomb furniture is excellent of its kind and the cartonnage case of the mummy is well made and rather finely decorated.'

'Yes, I thought it quite handsome. But can you explain to me why, after taking all that trouble to decorate it, they should have disfigured it with those great smears of bitumen?'

'Ah!' said Mr. Jellicoe, 'that is quite an interesting question. It is not unusual to find mummy cases smeared with bitumen; there is a mummy of a priestess in the next gallery which is completely coated with bitumen except the gilded face. Now, this bitumen was put on for a purpose—for the purpose of obliterating the inscriptions and thus concealing the identity of the deceased from the robbers and desecrators of tombs. And there is the oddity of this mummy of Sebekhotep. Evidently there was an intention of obliterating the inscriptions. The whole of the back is covered thickly with bitumen, and so are the feet. Then the workers seem to have changed their minds and left the inscriptions and decoration untouched. Why they intended to cover it, and why, having commenced, they left it partially covered only, is a mystery. The mummy was found in its original tomb and quite undisturbed, so far as tomb-robbers are concerned. Poor Bellingham was greatly puzzled as to what the explanation could be.'

'Speaking of bitumen,' said I, 'reminds me of a question that has occurred to me. You know that this substance has been used a good deal by modern painters and that it has a very dangerous peculiarity; I mean its tendency to liquefy, without any obvious reason, long after it has dried.'

'Yes, I know. Isn't there some story about a picture of Reynolds' in which bitumen had been used? A portrait of a lady, I think. The bitumen softened, and one of the lady's eyes slipped down on to her cheek; and they had to hang the portrait upside down and keep it warm until the eye slipped back again into its place. But what was your question?'

'I was wondering whether the bitumen used by the Egyptian artists has ever been known to soften after this great lapse of time.'

'Yes, I think it has. I have heard of instances in which the bitumen coatings have softened under certain circumstances and become quite "tacky". But, bless my soul! here am I gossiping with you and wasting your time, and it is nearly a quarter to nine!'

My guest rose hastily, and I, with many apologies for having detained him, proceeded to fulfil my promise to guide him to his destination. As we sallied forth together the glamour of Egypt faded by degrees, and when he shook my hand stiffly at the gate of the Bellinghams' house, all his vivacity and enthusiasm had vanished, leaving the taciturn lawyer, dry, uncommunicative, and not a little suspicious.

CHAPTER X. THE NEW ALLIANCE

THE 'Great Lexicographer'—tutelary deity of my adopted habitat—has handed down to shuddering posterity a definition of the act of eating which might have been framed by a dyspeptic ghoul, 'Eat: to devour with the mouth.' It is a shocking view to take of so genial a function: cynical, indelicate, and finally unforgivable by reason of its very accuracy. For, after all, that is what eating amounts to, if one must needs express it with such crude brutality. But if 'the ingestion of alimentary substances'—to ring a modern change upon the older formula—is in itself a process material even unto carnality, it is undeniable that it forms a highly agreeable accompaniment to more psychic manifestations.

And so, as the lamplight, reinforced by accessory candles, falls on the little first-floor room looking on Fetter Lane—only now the curtains are drawn—the conversation is not the less friendly and bright for a running accompaniment executed with knives and forks, for clink of goblet, and jovial gurgle of wine-flask. On the contrary, to one of us, at least—to wit, Godfrey Bellingham—the occasion is one of uncommon festivity, and his boyish enjoyment of the simple feast makes pathetic suggestions of hard times, faced uncomplainingly, but keenly felt nevertheless.

The talk flitted from topic to topic, mainly concerning itself with matters artistic, and never for one moment approaching the critical subject of John Bellingham's will. From the stepped pyramid of Sakkara with its encaustic tiles to mediaeval church floors; from Elizabethan woodwork to Mycenaean pottery, and thence to the industrial arts of the Stone age and the civilisation of the Aztecs, began to suspect that my two legal friends were so carried away by the interest of the conversation that they had forgotten the secret purpose of the meeting, for the dessert had been placed on the table (by Mrs. Gummer with the manner of a bereaved dependant dispensing funeral bakemeats), and still no reference had been made to the 'case'. But it seemed that Thorndyke was but playing a waiting game; was only allowing the intimacy to ripen while he watched for the opportunity. And that opportunity came, even as Mrs. Gummer vanished spectrally with a tray of plates and glasses.

'So you had a visitor last night, Doctor,' said Mr. Bellingham. 'I mean my friend Jellicoe. He told us he had seen you, and mighty curious he was about you. I have never known Jellicoe to be so inquisitive before. What did you think of him?'

'A quaint old cock. I found him highly amusing. We entertained one another for quite a long time with questions and crooked answers; I affecting eager curiosity, he replying with a defensive attitude of universal ignorance. It was a most diverting encounter.'

'He needn't have been so close,' Miss Bellingham remarked, 'seeing that all the world will be regaled with our affairs before long.'

'They are proposing to take the case into Court, then?' said Thorndyke.

'Yes,' said Mr. Bellingham. 'Jellicoe came to tell me that my cousin, Hurst, has instructed his solicitors to make the application and to invite me to join him. Actually he came to deliver an ultimatum from Hurst—but I mustn't disturb the harmony of this festive gathering with litigious discords.'

'Now, why mustn't you?' asked Thorndyke. 'Why is a subject in which we are all keenly interested to be taboo? You don't mind telling us about it, do you?'

'No, of course not. But what do you think of a man who buttonholes a doctor at a dinner-party to retail a list of ailments?'

'It depends on what his ailments are,' replied Thorndyke. 'If he is a chronic dyspeptic and wishes to expound the virtues of Doctor Snaffler's Purple Pills for Pimply People, he is merely a bore. But if he chances to suffer from some rare and choice disease, such as Trypanosomiasis or Acromegaly, the doctor will be delighted to listen.'

'Then are we to understand,' Miss Bellingham asked, 'that we are rare and choice products, in a legal sense?'

'Undoubtedly,' replied Thorndyke. 'The case of John Bellingham is, in many respects, unique. It will be followed with the deepest interest by the profession at large, and especially by medical jurists.'

'How gratifying that should be to us!' said Miss Bellingham. 'We may even attain undying fame in textbooks and treatises; and yet we are not so very much puffed up with our importance.'

'No,' said her father; 'we could do without the fame quite well, and so, I think, could Hurst. Did Berkeley tell you of the proposal that he made?'

'Yes,' said Thorndyke; 'and I gather from what you say that he has repeated it.'

'Yes. He sent Jellicoe to give me another chance, and I was tempted to take it; but my daughter was strongly against any compromise, and probably she is right. At any rate, she is more concerned than I am.'

'What view did Mr. Jellicoe take?' Thorndyke asked.

'Oh, he was very cautious and reserved, but he didn't disguise his feeling that I should be wise to take a certainty in lieu of a very problematical fortune. He would certainly like me to agree, for he naturally wishes to get the affair settled and pocket his legacy.'

'And have you definitely refused?'

'Yes; quite definitely. So Hurst will apply for permission to presume death and prove the will, and Jellicoe will support him; he says he has no choice.'

'And you?'

'I suppose I shall oppose the application, though I don't quite know on what grounds.'

'Before you take definite steps,' said Thorndyke, 'you ought to give the matter very careful consideration. I take it that you have very little doubt that your brother is dead. And if he is dead, any benefit that you may receive under the will must be conditional on the previous presumption or proof of death. But perhaps you have taken advice?'

'No, I have not. As our friend the Doctor has probably told you, my means—or rather, the lack of them—do not admit of my getting professional advice. Hence my delicacy about discussing the case with you.'

'Then do you propose to conduct your case in person?'

'Yes; if it is necessary for me to appear in Court, as I suppose it will be, if I oppose the application.'

Thorndyke reflected for a few moments and then said gravely:

'You had much better not appear in person to conduct your case, Mr. Bellingham, for several reasons. To begin with, Mr. Hurst is sure to be represented by a capable counsel, and you will find yourself quite unable to meet the sudden exigencies of a contest in Court. You will be out-maneuvered. Then there is the judge to be considered.'

'But surely one can rely on the judge dealing fairly with a man who is unable to afford a solicitor and counsel?'

'Undoubtedly, as a rule, a judge will give an unrepresented litigant every assistance and consideration. English judges in general are high-minded men with a deep sense of their great responsibilities. But you cannot afford to take any chances. You must consider the exceptions. A judge has been a counsel, and he may carry to the bench some of the professional prejudices of the bar. Indeed, if you consider the absurd licence permitted to counsel in their treatment of witnesses, and the hostile attitude adopted by some judges towards medical and other scientific men who have to give their evidence, you will see that the judicial mind is not always quite as judicial as one would wish, especially when the privileges and immunities of the profession are concerned. Now, your appearance in person to conduct your case must unavoidably, cause some inconvenience to the Court. Your ignorance of procedure and legal details must occasion some delay; and if the judge should happen to be an irritable man he might resent the inconvenience and delay. I don't say that would affect his decision—I don't think it would—but I am sure it would be wise to avoid giving offence to the judge. And, above all, it is most desirable to be able to detect and reply to any manoeuvres on the part of the opposing counsel, which you certainly would not be able to do.'

'This is excellent advice, Doctor Thorndyke,' said Bellingham, with a grim smile; 'but I'm afraid I shall have to take my chance.'

'Not necessarily,' said Thorndyke. 'I am going to make a little proposal, which I will ask you to consider without prejudice as a mutual accommodation. You see, your case is one of exceptional interest—it will become a textbook case, as Miss Bellingham prophesied; and, since it lies within my speciality, it will be necessary for me to follow it in the closest detail. Now, it would be much more satisfactory for me to study it from within than from without, to say nothing of the credit which would accrue to me if I should be able to conduct it to a successful issue. I am therefore going to ask you to put your case in my hands and let me see what can be done with it. I know this is an unusual course for a professional man to take, but I think it is not improper under the circumstances.'

Mr. Bellingham pondered in silence for a few moments, and then, after a glance at his daughter, began rather hesitatingly: 'It's very generous of you, Doctor Thorndyke—'

'Pardon me,' interrupted Thorndyke, 'it is not. My motives, as I have explained, are purely egoistic.'

Mr. Bellingham laughed uneasily and again glanced at his daughter, who, however, pursued her occupation of peeling a pear with calm deliberation and without lifting her eyes. Getting no help from her he asked: 'Do you think that there is any possibility whatever of a successful issue?'

'Yes, a remote possibility—very remote, I fear, as things look at present; but if I thought the case absolutely hopeless I should advise you to stand aside and let events take their course.'

'Supposing the case should come to a favourable termination, would you allow me to settle your fees in the ordinary way?'

'If the choice lay with me,' replied Thorndyke, 'I should say "yes" with pleasure. But it does not. The attitude of the profession is very definitely unfavourable to "speculative" practice. You may remember the well-known firm of Dodson and Fogg, who gained thereby much profit, but little credit. But why discuss contingencies of this kind? If I bring your case to a successful issue I shall have done very well for myself. We shall have benefited one another mutually. Come now, Miss Bellingham, I appeal to you. We have eaten salt together, to say nothing of pigeon pie and other cakes. Won't you back me up, and at the same time do a kindness to Doctor Berkeley?'

'Why, is Doctor Berkeley interested in our decision?'

'Certainly he is, as you will appreciate when I tell you that he actually tried to bribe me secretly out of his own pocket.'

'Did you?' she asked, looking at me with an expression that rather alarmed me.

'Well, not exactly,' I replied, mighty hot and uncomfortable, and wishing Thorndyke at the devil with his confidences. 'I merely mentioned that the—the—solicitor's costs, you know, and that sort of thing—but you needn't jump on me, Miss Bellingham; Doctor Thorndyke did all that was necessary in that way.'

She continued to look at me thoughtfully as I stammered out my excuses, and then said: 'I wasn't going to. I was only thinking that poverty has its compensations. You are all so very good to us; and, for my part, I should accept Doctor Thorndyke's generous offer most gratefully, and thank him for making it so easy for us.'

'Very well, my dear,' said Mr. Bellingham; 'we will enjoy thesweets of poverty, as you say—we have sampled the other kind of I thing pretty freely—and do ourselves the pleasure of accepting a | great kindness, most delicately offered.'

'Thank you,' said Thorndyke. 'You have justified my faith in you, Miss Bellingham, and in the power of Dr. Berkeley's salt. I understand that you place your affairs in my hands?'

'Entirely and thankfully,' replied Mr. Bellingham. 'Whatever you think best to be done we agree to beforehand.'

'Then,' said I, 'let us drink success to the cause. Port, if you please, Miss Bellingham; the vintage is not recorded, but it is quite wholesome, and a suitable medium for the sodium chloride of friendship.' I filled her glass, and when the bottle had made its circuit, we stood up and solemnly pledged the new alliance.

There is just one thing I would say before we dismiss the subject for the present,' said Thorndyke. 'It is a good thing to keep one's own counsel. When you get formal notice from Mr. Hurst's solicitors that proceedings are being commenced, you may refer them to Mr. Marchmont of Gray's Inn, who will nominally act for you. He will actually have nothing to do, but we must preserve the fiction that I am instructed by a solicitor. Meanwhile, and until the case goes into Court, I think it very necessary that neither Mr. Jellicoe nor anyone else should know that I am connected with it. We must keep the other side in the dark, if we can.'

'We will be as secret as the grave,' said Mr. Bellingham; 'and, as a matter of fact, it will be quite easy, since it happens, by a curious coincidence, that I am already acquainted with Mr. Marchmont. He acted for Stephen Blackmore, you remember, in that case that you unravelled so wonderfully well. I knew the Blackmores.'

'Did you?' said Thorndyke. 'What a small world it is. And what a remarkable affair that was! The intricacies and cross-issues made it quite absorbingly interesting; and it is noteworthy for me in another respect, for it was one of the first cases in which I was associated with Doctor Jervis.'

'Yes, and a mighty useful associate I was,' remarked Jervis, 'though I did pick up one or two facts by accident. And, by the way, the Blackmore case had certain points in common with your case, Mr. Bellingham. There was a disappearance and a disputed will, and the man who vanished was a scholar and an antiquarian.'

'Cases in our speciality are apt to have certain general resemblances,' Thorndyke said; and as he spoke he directed a keen glance at his junior, the significance of which I partly understood when he abruptly changed the subject.

'The newspaper reports of your brother's disappearance, Mr. Bellingham, were remarkably full of detail. There were even plans of your house and that of Mr. Hurst. Do you know who supplied the information?'

'No, I don't,' replied Mr. Bellingham. 'I know that I didn't. Some newspaper men came to me for information, but I sent them packing. So, I understand, did Hurst; and as for Jellicoe, you might as well cross-examine an oyster.'

'Well,' said Thorndyke, 'the pressmen have queer methods of getting "copy"; but still, some one must have given them that description of your brother and those plans. It would be interesting to know who it was. However, we don't know; and now let us dismiss these legal topics, with suitable apologies for having introduced them.'

'And perhaps,' said I, 'we may as well adjourn to what we call the drawing-room—it is really Barnard's den—and leave the housekeeper to wrestle with the debris.'

We migrated to the cheerfully shabby little apartment, and, when Mrs. Gummer had served coffee, with gloomy resignation (as who should say: 'If you will drink this sort of stuff I suppose you must, but don't blame me for the consequences'), I settled Mr. Bellingham in Barnard's favourite lop-sided easy chair—the depressed seat of which suggested its customary use by an elephant of sedentary habits—and opened the diminutive piano.

'I wonder if Miss Bellingham would give us a little music?' I said.

'I wonder if she could?' was the smiling response. 'Do you know,' she continued, 'I have not touched a piano for nearly two years? It will be quite an interesting experiment—to me; but if it fails, you will be the sufferers. So you must choose.'

'My verdict,' said Mr. Bellingham, 'is fiat experimentum, though I won't complete the quotation, as that would seem to disparage Doctor Barnard's piano. But before you begin, Ruth, there is one rather disagreeable matter that I want to dispose of, so that I may not disturb the harmony with it later.'

He paused and we all looked at him expectantly.

'I suppose, Doctor Thorndyke,' he said, 'you read the newspapers?'

'I don't,' replied Dr. Thorndyke. 'But I ascertain, for purely business purposes, what they contain.'

'Then,' said Mr. Bellingham, 'you have probably met with some accounts of the finding of certain human remains, apparently portions of a mutilated body.'

'Yes, I have seen those reports and filed them for future reference.'

'Exactly. Well, now, it can hardly be necessary for me to tell you that those remains—the mutilated remains of some poor murdered creature, as there can be no doubt they are—have seemed to have a very dreadful significance for me. You will understand what I mean; and I want to ask you if—if they have made a similar suggestion to you?'

Thorndyke paused before replying, with his eyes bent thoughtfully on the floor, and we all looked at him anxiously.

'It's very natural,' he said at length, 'that you should associate these remains with the mystery of your brother's disappearance. I should like to say that you are wrong in doing so, but if I did I should be uncandid. There are certain facts that do, undoubtedly, seem to suggest a connection, and, up to the present, there are no definite facts of a contrary significance.'

Mr. Bellingham sighed deeply and shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

'It is a horrible affair!' he said huskily; 'horrible! Would you mind, Doctor Thorndyke, telling us just how the matter stands in your opinion—what the probabilities are, for and against?'

Again Thorndyke reflected awhile, and it seemed to me that he was not very willing to discuss the subject. However, the question had been asked pointedly, and eventually he answered:

'At the present stage of the investigation it is not very easy to state the balance of probabilities. The matter is still quite speculative. The bones which have been found hitherto (for we are dealing with a skeleton, not with a body) have been exclusively those which are useless for personal identification; which is, in itself, a rather curious and striking fact. The general character and dimension of the bones seem to suggest a middle-aged man of about your brother's height, and the date of deposition appears to be in agreement with the date of his disappearance.'

'Is it known, then, when they were deposited?' asked Mr. Bellingham.

'In the case of those found at Sidcup it seems possible to deduct an approximate date. The watercress-bed was cleaned out about two years ago, so they could not have been lying there longer than that; and their condition suggests that they could not have been there much less than two years, as there is apparently no vestige of the soft structures left. Of course, I am speaking from the newspaper reports only; I have no direct knowledge of the matter.'

'Have they found any considerable part of the body yet? I haven't been reading the papers myself. My little friend, Miss Oman, brought a great bundle of 'em for me to read, but I couldn't stand it; I pitched the whole boiling of 'em out of the window.'

I thought I detected a slight twinkle in Thorndyke's eye, but he answered quite gravely:

'I think I can give you the particulars from memory, though I won't guarantee the dates. The original discovery was made, apparently quite accidentally, at Sidcup on the fifteenth of July. It consisted of a complete left arm, minus the third finger and including the bones of the shoulder—the shoulder-blade and collar bone. This discovery seems to have set the local population, especially the juvenile part of it, searching all the ponds and streams of the neighbourhood—'

'Cannibals!' interjected Mr. Bellingham.

'With the result that there was dredged up out of a pond near St Mary Cray, in Kent, a right thigh-bone. There is a slight clue to identity in respect of this bone, since the head of it has a small patch of "eburnation"—that is a sort of porcelain-like polish that occurs on the parts of bones that form a joint when the natural covering of cartilage is destroyed by disease. It is produced by the unprotected surface of the bone grinding against the similarly unprotected surface of another.'

'And how,' Mr. Bellingham asked, 'would that help the identification?'

'It would indicate,' Thorndyke replied, 'that the deceased had probably suffered from rheumatoid arthritis—what is commonly I known as rheumatic gout—and he would probably have limped! slightly and complained of some pain in the right hip.'

'I'm afraid that doesn't help us very much,' said Mr. Bellingham; 'for, you see, John had a pretty pronounced limp from another cause, an old injury to his left ankle; and as to complaining of pain—well, he was a hardy old fellow and not much given to making complaints of any kind. But don't let me interrupt you.'

'The next discovery,' continued Thorndyke, 'was made near Lee, by the police this time. They seem to have developed sudden activity in the matter, and in searching the neighbourhood of West Kent they dragged out of a pond near Lee the bones of a right foot. Now, if it had been the left instead of the right we might have a clue, as I understand your brother had fractured his left ankle, and there might have been some traces of the injury on the foot itself.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Bellingham. 'I suppose there might. The injury was described as a Pott's fracture.'

'Exactly. Well, now, after this discovery at Lee it seems that the police set on foot a systematic search of all the ponds and small pieces of water around London, and, on the twenty-third, they found in the Cuckoo Pits in Epping Forest, not far from Woodford, the bones of a right arm (including those of the shoulder, as before), which seem to be part of the same body.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Bellingham, 'I heard of that. Quite close to my old house. Horrible! horrible! It gave me the shudders to think of it—to think that poor old John may have been waylaid and murdered when he was actually coming to see me. He may even have got into the grounds by the back gate, if it was left unfastened, and been followed in there and murdered. You remember that a scarab from his watch-chain was found there? But is it clear that this arm was the fellow of the arm that was found at Sidcup?'

'It seems to agree in character and dimensions,' said Thorndyke, 'and the agreement is strongly supported by a discovery made two days later.'

'What is that?' Mr. Bellingham demanded.

'It is the lower half of a trunk which the police dragged out of a rather deep pond on the skirts of the forest at Loughton—Staple's Pond, it is called. The bones found were the pelvis—that is, the two hip-bones—and six vertebrae, or joints of the backbone. Having discovered these, the police dammed the stream and pumped the pond dry, but no other bones were found; which is rather odd, as there should have been a pair of ribs belonging to the upper vertebra—the twelfth dorsal vertebra. It suggests some curious questions as to the method of dismemberment; but I mustn't go into unpleasant details. The point is that the cavity of the right hip-joint showed a patch of

eburnation corresponding to that on the head of the right thigh-bone that was found at St Mary Cray. So there can be very little doubt that these bones are all part of the same body.'

'I see,' grunted Mr. Bellingham; and he added, after a moment's thought: 'Now, the question is, Are these bones the remains of my brother John? What do you say, Doctor Thorndyke?'

'I say that the question cannot be answered on the facts at present known to us. It can only be said that they may be, and that some of the circumstances suggest that they are. But we can only wait for further discoveries. At any moment the police may light upon some portion of the skeleton which will settle the question definitely one way or the other.'

'I suppose,' said Mr. Bellingham, 'I can't be of any service to you in the matter of identification?'

'Indeed you can,' said Thorndyke, 'and I was going to ask you to assist me. What I want you to do is this: Write down a full description of your brother, including every detail known to you, together with an account of every illness or injury from which you know him to have suffered; also the names and, if possible, the addresses of any doctors, surgeons, or dentists who may have attended him at any time. The dentists are particularly important, as their information would be invaluable if the skull belonging to these bones should be discovered.'

Mr. Bellingham shuddered.

'It's a shocking idea,' he said, 'but, of course you are right. You must have the facts if you are to form an opinion. I will write out what you want and send it to you without delay. And now, for God's sake, let us throw off this nightmare, for a little while, at least! What is there, Ruth, among Doctor Barnard's music that you can manage?'

Barnard's collection in general inclined to the severely classical, but we disinterred from the heap a few lighter works of an old-fashioned kind, including a volume of Mendelssohn's Lieder ohne Worte, and with one of these Miss Bellingham made trial of her skill, playing it with excellent taste and quite adequate execution. That, at least, was her father's verdict; for, as to me, I found it the perfection of happiness merely to sit and look at her—a state of mind that would have been in no wise disturbed even by 'Silvery Waves' or 'The Maiden's Prayer'.

Thus with simple, homely music, and conversation always cheerful and sometimes brilliant, slipped away one of the pleasantest evenings of my life, and slipped away all too soon. St Dunstan's clock was the fly in the ointment, for it boomed out intrusively the hour of eleven just as my guests were beginning to thoroughly appreciate one another, and thereby carried the sun (with a minor paternal satellite) out of the firmament of my heaven. For I had, in my professional capacity, given strict injunctions that Mr. Bellingham should on no account sit up late; and now, in my social capacity, I had smilingly to hear 'the doctor's orders' quoted. It was a scurvy return for all my care.

When Mr. and Miss Bellingham departed, Thorndyke and Jervis would have gone too; but noting my bereaved condition, and being withal compassionate and tender of heart, they were persuaded to stay awhile and bear me company in a consolatory pipe.

CHAPTER XI. THE EVIDENCE REVIEWED

'SO THE game has opened,' observed Thorndyke, as he struck a match. 'The play has begun with a cautious lead off by the other side. Very cautious and not very confident.'

'Why do you say "not very confident"?' I asked.

'Well, it is evident that Hurst—and, I fancy, Jellicoe too—is anxious to buy off Bellingham's opposition, and at a pretty long price, under the circumstances. And when we consider how very little Bellingham has to offer against the presumption of his brother's death, it looks as if Hurst hadn't much to say on his side.'

'No,' said Jervis, 'he can't hold many trumps or he wouldn't be willing to pay four hundred a year for his opponent's chances; and that is just as well, for it seems to me that our own hand is a pretty poor one.'

'We must look through our hand and see what we do hold,' said Thorndyke. 'Our trump card at present—a rather small one, I'm afraid—is the obvious intention of the testator that the bulk of the property should go to his brother.'

'I suppose you will begin your inquiries now?' I said.

'We began them some time ago—the day after you brought us the will, in fact. Jervis had been through the registers and has ascertained that no interment under the name of John Bellingham has taken place since the disappearance; which was just what we expected. He has also discovered that some other person has been making similar inquiries; which, again, is what we expected.'

'And your own investigations?'

'Have given negative results for the most part. I found Doctor Norbury, at the British Museum, very friendly and helpful; so friendly, in fact, that I am thinking whether I may not be able to enlist his help in certain private researches of my own, with reference to the change effected by time in the physical properties of certain substances.'

'Oh; you haven't told me about that,' said Jervis.

'No; I haven't really commenced to plan my experiments yet, and they will probably lead to nothing when I do. It occurred to me that, possibly, in the course of time, certain molecular changes might take place in substances such as wood, bone, pottery, stucco, and other common materials, and that these changes might alter their power of conducting or transmitting molecular vibrations. Now, if this should turn out to be the case, it would be a fact of considerable importance, medico-legally and otherwise; for it would be possible to determine approximately the age of any object of known composition by testing its reactions to electricity, heat, light and other molecular vibrations. I thought of seeking Doctor Norbury's assistance because he can furnish me with materials for experiment of such great age that the reactions, if any, should be extremely easy to demonstrate. But to return to our case. I learned from him that John Bellingham had certain friends in Paris—collectors and museum officials—whom he was in the habit of visiting for the purpose of study and exchange of specimens. I have made inquiries of all these, and none of them had seen him during his last visit. In fact, I have not yet discovered anyone who had seen Bellingham in Paris on this occasion. So his visit there remains a mystery for the present.'

'It doesn't seem to be of much importance, since he undoubtedly came back,' I remarked; but to this Thorndyke demurred.

'It is impossible to estimate the importance of the unknown,' said he.

'Well, how does the matter stand,' asked Jervis, 'on the evidence that we have? John Bellingham disappeared on a certain date. Is there anything to show what was the manner of his disappearance?'

'The facts in our possession,' said Thorndyke, 'which are mainly those set forth in the newspaper report, suggest several alternative possibilities; and in view of the coming inquiry—for they will, no doubt, have to be gone into in Court, to some extent—it may be worth while to consider them. There are five conceivable hypotheses'—here Thorndyke checked them on his fingers as he proceeded—'First, he may still be alive. Second, he may have died and been buried without identification. Third, he may have been murdered by some unknown person. Fourth, he may have been murdered by Hurst and his body concealed. Fifth, he may have been murdered by his brother. Let us examine these possibilities seriatim.

'First, he may still be alive. If he is, he must either have disappeared voluntarily, have lost his memory suddenly and not been identified, or have been imprisoned—on a false charge or otherwise. Let us take the first case—that of voluntary disappearance. Obviously, its improbability is extreme.'

'Jellicoe doesn't think so,' said I. 'He thinks it quite on the cards that John Bellingham is alive. He says that it is not a very unusual thing for a man to disappear for a time.'

'Then why is he applying for a presumption of death?'

'Just what I asked him. He says that it is the correct thing to do; that the entire responsibility rests on the Court.'

'That is all nonsense,' said Thorndyke. 'Jellicoe is the trustee for his absent client, and, if he thinks that client is alive, it is his duty to keep the estate intact; and he knows that perfectly well. We may take it that Jellicoe is of the same opinion as I am: that John Bellingham is dead.'

'Still,' I urged, 'men do disappear from time to time, and turn up again after years of absence.'

'Yes, but for a definite reason. Either they are irresponsible vagabonds who take this way of shuffling of their responsibilities, or they are men who have been caught in a net of distasteful circumstances. For instance, a civil servant or a solicitor or a tradesman finds himself bound for life to a locality and an occupation of intolerable monotony. Perhaps he has an ill-tempered wife, who after the amiable fashion of a certain type of woman, thinking that her husband is pinned down without a chance of escape, gives a free rein to her temper. The man puts up with it for years, but at last it becomes unbearable. Then he suddenly disappears; and small blame to him. But this was not Bellingham's case. He was a wealthy bachelor with an engrossing interest in life, free to go whither he would and to do whatsoever he wished. Why should he disappear? The thing is incredible.

'As to his having lost his memory and remained unidentified, that, also, is incredible in the case of a man who had visiting-cards and letters in his pocket, whose linen was marked, and who was being inquired for everywhere by the police. As to his being in prison, we may dismiss that possibility, inasmuch as a prisoner, both before and after conviction, would have full opportunity of communicating with his friends.

'The second possibility, that he may have died suddenly and been buried without identification, is highly improbable; but, as it is conceivable that the body might have been robbed and the means of identification thus lost, it remains as a possibility that has to be considered, remote as it is.

'The third hypothesis, that he may have been murdered by some unknown person, is, under the circumstances, not wildly improbable; but, as the police were on the lookout and a detailed description of the missing man's person was published in the papers, it would involve the complete concealment of the body. But this would exclude the most probable form of crime—the casual robbery with violence. It is therefore possible, but highly improbable.

'The fourth hypothesis is that Bellingham was murdered by Hurst. Now the one fact which militates against this view is that Hurst apparently had no motive for committing the murder. We are assured by Jellicoe that no one but himself knew the contents of the will, and if this is so—but mind, we have no evidence that it is so—Hurst would have no reason to suppose that he had anything material to gain by his cousin's death. Otherwise the hypothesis presents no inherent improbabilities. The man was last seen alive at Hurst's house. He was seen to enter it and he was never seen to leave it—we are still taking the facts as stated in the newspapers, remember—and it now appears that he stands to benefit enormously by that man's death.'

'But,' I objected, 'you are forgetting that, directly the man was missed Hurst and the servants together searched the entire house.'

'Yes. What did they search for?'

'Why, for Mr. Bellingham, of course.'

'Exactly; for Mr. Bellingham. That is, for a living man. Now how do you search a house for a living man? You look in all the rooms. When you look in a room if he is there, you see him; if you do not see him, you assume that he is not there. You don't look under the sofa or behind the piano, you don't pull out large drawers or open cupboards. You just look into the rooms. That is what these people seem to have done. And they did not see Mr. Bellingham. Mr. Bellingham's corpse might have been stowed away out of sight in any one of the rooms that they looked into.'

'That is a grim thought,' said Jervis; 'but it is perfectly true. There is no evidence that the man was not lying dead in the house at the very time of the search.'

'But even so,' said I, 'there was the body to be disposed of somehow. Now how could he possibly have got rid of the body without being observed?'

'Ah!' said Thorndyke, 'now we are touching on a point of crucial importance. If anyone should ever write a treatise on the art of murder—not an exhibition of literary fireworks like De Quincey's, but a genuine working treatise—he might leave all other technical details to take care of themselves if he could describe to me some really practicable plan for disposing of the body. That is, and always has been, the great stumbling-block to the murderer: to get rid of the body. The human body,' he continued, thoughtfully regarding his pipe, just as, in the days of my pupilage, he was wont to regard the black-board chalk, 'is a very remarkable object. It presents a combination of properties that makes it singularly difficult to conceal permanently. It is bulky and of an awkward shape, it is heavy, it is completely incombustible, it is chemically unstable, and its decomposition yields great volumes of highly odorous gases, and it nevertheless contains identifiable structures of the highest degree of permanence. It is extremely difficult to preserve unchanged, and it is still more difficult completely to destroy. The essential permanence of the human body is well known in the classical case of Eugene Aram; but a still more striking instance is that of Sekenen-Ra the Third, one of the last kings of the seventeenth Egyptian dynasty. Here, after a lapse of four thousand years, it has been possible to determine not only the cause of death and the manner of its occurrence, but the way in which the king fell, the nature of the weapon with which the fatal wound was inflicted, and even the position of the assailant. And the permanence of the body under other conditions is

admirably shown in the case of Doctor Parkman, of Boston, USA, in which identification was actually effected by means of remains collected from the ashes of a furnace.'

'Then we may take it,' said Jervis, 'that the world has not yet seen the last of John Bellingham.'

'I think we may regard that as almost a certainty,' replied Thorndyke. 'The only question—and a very important one—is to when the reappearance may take place. It may be to-morrow or it may be centuries hence, when all the issues involved have been! forgotten.'

'Assuming,' said I, 'for the sake of argument, that Hurst did murder him and that the body was concealed in the study at the time the search was made. How could it have been disposed of? If you had been in Hurst's place, how would you have gone to work?'

Thorndyke smiled at the bluntness of my question.

'You are asking me for an incriminating statement,' said he, 'delivered in the presence of a witness too. But, as a matter of fact, there is no use in speculating a priori', we should have to reconstruct a purely imaginary situation, the circumstances of which are unknown to us, and we should almost certainly reconstruct it wrong. What we may fairly assume is that no reasonable person, no matter how immoral, would find himself in the position that you suggest. Murder is usually a crime of impulse, and the murderer a person of feeble self-control. Such persons are most unlikely to make elaborate and ingenious arrangements for the disposal of the bodies of their victims. Even the cold-blooded perpetrators of the most carefully planned murders appear as I have said, to break down at this point. The almost insuperable difficulty of getting rid of the human body is not appreciated until the murderer suddenly finds himself face to face with it.

'In the case you are suggesting, the choice would seem to lie between burial on the premises or dismemberment and dispersal of the fragments; and either method would be pretty certain to lead to discovery.'

'As illustrated by the remains of which you were speaking to Mr. Bellingham,' Jervis remarked.

'Exactly,' Thorndyke answered, 'though we could hardly imagine a reasonably intelligent criminal adopting a watercress-bed as a hiding place.'

'No. That was certainly an error of judgment. By the way, I thought it best to say nothing while you were talking to Bellingham, but I noticed that, in discussing the possibility of those being the bones of his brother, you made no comment on the absence of the third ringer of the left hand. I am sure you didn't overlook it, but isn't it a point of some importance?'

'As to identification? Under the present circumstances, I think not! If there were a man missing who had lost that finger it would, of course, be an important fact. But I have not heard of any such man. Or, again, if there were any evidence that the finger had been removed before death, it would be highly important. But there is no such evidence. It may have been cut off after death, and that is where the real significance of its absence lies.'

'I don't see quite what you mean,' said Jervis.

'I mean that, if there is no report of any missing man who had lost that particular finger, the probability is that the finger was removed after death. And then arises the interesting question of motive. Why should it have been removed? It could hardly have become detached accidentally. What do you suggest?'

'Well,' said Jervis, 'it might have been a peculiar finger; a finger, for instance, with some characteristic deformity such as an ankylosed joint, which would be easy to identify.'

'Yes; but that explanation introduces the same difficulty. No person with a deformed or ankylosed finger has been reported as missing.'

Jervis puckered up his brows, and looked at me.

'I'm hanged if I see any other explanation,' he said. 'Do you, Berkeley?'

I shook my head.

'Don't forget which finger it is that is missing,' said Thorndyke. 'The third finger of the left hand.'

'Oh, I see!' said Jervis. 'The ring-finger. You mean that it may have been removed for the sake of a ring that wouldn't come off.'

'Yes. It would not be the first instance of the kind. Fingers have been severed from dead hands—and even from living ones—for the sake of rings that were too tight to be drawn off. And the fact that it is the left hand supports the suggestion; for a ring that was inconveniently tight would be worn by preference on the left hand, as that is usually slightly smaller than the right. What is the matter, Berkeley?'

A sudden light had burst upon me, and I suppose my countenance betrayed the fact.

'I am a confounded fool!' I exclaimed.

'Oh, don't say that,' said Jervis. 'Give your friends a chance.'

'I ought to have seen this long ago and told you about it. John Bellingham did wear a ring, and it was so tight that, when once he had got it on, he could never get it off again.'

'Do you happen to know on which hand he wore it?' Thorndyke asked.

'Yes. It was on the left hand; because Miss Bellingham, who told me about it, said that he would never have been able to get the ring on at all but for the fact this his left hand was slightly smaller than his right.'

'There it is, then,' said Thorndyke. 'With this new fact in our possession, the absence of the finger furnishes the starting-point of some very curious speculations.'

'As, for instance,' said Jervis.

'Ah, under the circumstances, I must leave you to pursue those speculations independently. I am now acting for Mr. Bellingham.'

Jervis grinned and was silent for a while, refilling his pipe thoughtfully; but when he had got it alight he resumed.

'To return to the question of the disappearance; you don't consider it highly improbable that Bellingham might have been murdered by Hurst?'

'Oh, don't imagine I am making an accusation. I am considering the various probabilities merely in the abstract. The same reasoning applies to the Bellinghams. As to whether any of them did commit the murder, that is a question of personal character. I certainly do not suspect the Bellinghams after having seen them, and with regard to Hurst, I know nothing, or at least very little, to his disadvantage.'

'Well,' Thorndyke said, with some hesitation, 'it seems a thought unkind to rake up the little details of a man's past, and yet it has to be done. I have, of course, made the usual routine inquiries concerning the parties to this affair, and this is what they have brought to light:

'Hurst, as you know, is a stockbroker—a man of good position and reputation; but, about ten years ago, he seems to have committed an indiscretion, to put it mildly, which nearly got him into rather serious difficulties. He appears to have speculated rather heavily and considerably beyond his means, for when a sudden spasm of the markets upset his calculations, it turned out that he had been employing his clients' capital and securities. For a time it looked as if there was going to be serious trouble; then, quite unexpectedly, he managed to raise the necessary amount in some way and settle all claims. Whence he got the money has never been discovered to this day, which is a curious circumstance, seeing that the deficiency was rather over five thousand pounds; but the important fact is that he did get it and that he paid up all that he owed. So that he was only a potential defaulter, so to speak; and discreditable as the affair undoubtedly was, it does not seem to have any direct bearing on this present case.'

'No,' Jervis agreed, 'though it makes one consider his position with more attention than one would otherwise.'

'Undoubtedly,' said Thorndyke. 'A reckless gambler is a man whose conduct cannot be relied on. He is subject to vicissitudes of fortune which may force him into other kinds of wrong doing. Many an embezzlement has been preceded by an unlucky plunge on the turf.'

'Assuming the responsibility for this disappearance to lie between Hurst and—and the Bellinghams,' said I, with an uncomfortable gulp as I mentioned the names of my friends, 'to which side does the balance of probability incline?'

'To the side of Hurst, I should say, without doubt,' replied Thorndyke. 'The case stands thus—on the facts presented to us: Hurst appears to have had no motive for killing the deceased (as we will call him); but the man was seen to enter the house, was never seen to leave it, and was never again seen alive. Bellingham, on the other hand, had a motive, as he had believed himself to be the principal beneficiary under the will. But the deceased was not seen at his house, and there is no evidence that he went to the house or to the neighbourhood, excepting the scarab that was found there. But the evidence of the scarab is vitiated by the fact that Hurst was present when it was picked up, and that it was found on a spot over which Hurst had passed only a few minutes previously. Until Hurst is cleared, it seems to me that the presence of the scarab proves nothing against the Bellinghams.'

'Then your opinions on the case,' said I, 'are based entirely on the facts that have been made public.'

'Yes, mainly. I do not necessarily accept those facts just as they are presented, and I may have certain views of my own on the case. But if I have, I do not feel in a position to discuss them. For the present, discussion has to be limited to the facts and inferences offered by the parties concerned.'

'There!' exclaimed Jervis, rising to knock his pipe out, 'that is where Thorndyke has you. He lets you think you're in the thick of the "know" until one fine morning you wake up and discover that you have only been a gaping outsider; and then you are mightily astonished—and so are the other side, too, for that matter. But we must really be off now, mustn't we, reverend senior?'

'I suppose we must,' replied Thorndyke; and, as he drew on his gloves, he asked: 'Have you heard from Barnard lately?'

'Oh, yes,' I answered. 'I wrote to him at Smyrna to say that the practice was flourishing and that I was quite happy and contented, and that he might stay away as long as he liked. He writes by return that he will prolong his holiday if an opportunity offers, but will let me know later.'

'Gad,' said Jervis, 'it was a stroke of luck for Barnard that Bellingham happened to have such a magnificent daughter—there! don't mind me, old man. You go in and win—she's worth it, isn't she, Thorndyke?'

'Miss Bellingham's a very charming young lady,' replied Thorndyke. 'I am most favourably impressed by both the father and the daughter, and I only trust that we may be able to be of some service to them.' With this sedate little speech Thorndyke shook my hand, and I watched my two friends go on their way until their fading shapes were swallowed up in the darkness of Fetter Lane.

CHAPTER XII. A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

IT was two or three mornings after my little supper party that, as I stood in the consulting-room brushing my hat preparatory to starting on my morning round, Adolphus appeared at the door to announce two gentlemen waiting in the surgery. I told him to bring them in, and a moment later Thorndyke entered, accompanied by Jervis. I noted that they looked uncommonly large in that little apartment, especially Thorndyke, but I had no time to consider this phenomenon, for the latter, when he had shaken my hand, proceeded at once to explain the object of their visit.

'We have come to ask a favour, Berkeley,' he said; 'to ask you to do us a very great service in the interests of your friends the Bellinghams.'

'You know I shall be delighted,' I said warmly. 'What is it?'

'I will explain. You know—or perhaps you don't—that the police have collected all the bones that have been discovered and deposited them in the mortuary at Woodford, where they are to be viewed by the coroner's jury. Now, it has become imperative that I should have more definite and reliable information than I can get from the newspapers. The natural thing for me would be to go down and examine them myself, but there are circumstances that make it very desirable that my connection with the case should not leak out. Consequently, I can't go myself, and, for the same reason, I can't send Jervis. On the other hand, as it is now stated pretty openly that the police consider the bones to be almost certainly those of John Bellingham, it would seem perfectly natural that you, as Godfrey Bellingham's doctor, should go down to view them on his behalf.'

'I should like to,' I said. 'I would give anything to go; but how is it to be managed? It would mean a whole day off and leaving the practice to look after itself.'

'I think it could be managed,' said Thorndyke; 'and the matter is really important for two reasons. One is that the inquest opens tomorrow, and someone certainly ought to be there to watch the

proceedings on Godfrey's behalf; and the other is that our client has received notice from Hurst's solicitors that the application will be heard in the Probate Court in a few days.'

'Isn't that rather sudden?' I asked.

'It certainly suggests that there has been a good deal more activity than we were given to understand. But you see the importance of the affair. The inquest will be a sort of dress rehearsal for the Probate Court, and it is quite essential that we should have a chance of estimating the management.'

'Yes, I see that. But how are we to manage about the practice?'

'We shall find you a substitute.'

'Through a medical agent?'

'Yes,' said Jervis. 'Percival will find us a man; in fact, he has done it. I saw him this morning; he has a man who is waiting up in town to negotiate for the purchase of a practice and who would do the job for a couple of guineas. Quite a reliable man. Only say the word, and I will run off to Adam Street and engage him definitely.'

'Very well. You engage the locum tenens, and I will be prepared to start for Woodford as soon as he turns up.'

'Excellent!' said Thorndyke. 'That is a great weight off my mind. And if you could manage to drop in this evening and smoke a pipe with us we could talk over the plan of campaign and let you know what items of information we are particularly in want of.'

I promised to turn up at King's Bench Walk as soon after half-past eight as possible, and my two friends then took their departure, leaving me to set out in high spirits on my scanty round of visits.

It is surprising what different aspects things present from different points of view; how relative are our estimates of the conditions and circumstances of life. To the urban workman—the journeyman baker or tailor, for instance, labouring year in year out in a single building—a holiday ramble on Hampstead Heath is a veritable voyage of discovery; whereas to the sailor the shifting panorama of the whole wide world is but the commonplace of the day's work.

So I reflected as I took my place in the train at Liverpool Street on the following day. There had been a time when a trip by rail to the borders of Epping Forest would have been far from a thrilling experience; now, after vegetating in the little world of Fetter Lane, it was quite an adventure.

The enforced inactivity of a railway journey is favourable to thought, and I had much to think about. The last few weeks had witnessed momentous changes in my outlook. New interests had arisen, new friendships had grown up, and above all, there had stolen into my life that supreme influence that, for good or for evil, according to my fortune, was to colour and pervade it even to its close. Those few days of companionable labour in the reading-room, with the homely hospitalities of the milk-shop and the pleasant walks homeward through the friendly London streets, had called into existence a new world—a world in which the gracious personality of Ruth Bellingham was the one dominating reality. And thus, as I leaned back in the corner of the railway carriage with an unlighted pipe in my hand, the events of the immediate past, together with those more problematical ones of the impending future, occupied me rather to the exclusion of the business of the moment, which was to review the remains collected in the Woodford mortuary,

until, as the train approached Stratford, the odours of the soap and bone-manure factories poured in at the open window and (by a natural association of ideas) brought me back to the object of my quest.

As to the exact purpose of this expedition, I was not very clear; but I knew that I was acting as Thorndyke's proxy and thrilled with pride at the thought. But what particular light my investigations were to throw upon the intricate Bellingham case I had no very definite idea. With a view to fixing the procedure in my mind, I took Thorndyke's written instructions from my pocket and read them over carefully. They were very full and explicit, making ample allowance for my lack of experience in medico-legal matters:

'1. Do not appear to make minute investigations or in any way excite remark.

'2. Ascertain if all the bones belonging to each region are present, and if not, which are missing.

'3. Measure the extreme length of the principal bones and compare those of opposite sides.

'4. Examine the bones with reference to age, sex, and muscular development of the deceased.

'5. Note the presence or absence of signs of constitutional disease, local disease of bone or adjacent structures, old or recent injuries, and any other departures from the normal or usual.

'6. Observe the presence or absence of adipocere and its position, if present.

'7. Note any remains of tendons, ligaments, or other soft structures.

'8. Examine the Sidcup hand with reference to the question as to whether the finger was separated before or after death.

'9. Estimate the probable period of submersion and note any changes (as e.g., mineral or organic staining) due to the character of the water or mud.

'10. Ascertain the circumstances (immediate and remote) that led to the discovery of the bones and the names of the persons concerned in those circumstances.

'11. Commit all information to writing as soon as possible, and make plans and diagrams on the spot, if circumstances permit.

'12. Preserve an impassive exterior: listen attentively but without eagerness; ask as few questions as possible; pursue any inquiry that your observations on the spot may suggest.'

These were my instructions, and, considering that I was going merely to inspect a few dry bones, they appeared rather formidable; in fact, the more I read them over the greater became my misgivings as to my qualifications for the task.

As I approached the mortuary it became evident that some, at least, of Thorndyke's admonitions were by no means unnecessary. The place was in charge of a police sergeant, who watched my approach suspiciously; and some half-dozen men, obviously newspaper reporters, hovered about the entrance like a pack of jackals. I presented the coroner's order which Mr. Marchmont had obtained, and which the sergeant read with his back against the wall, to prevent the newspaper men from looking over his shoulder.

My credentials being found satisfactory, the door was unlocked and I entered, accompanied by three enterprising reporters, whom, however, the sergeant summarily ejected and locked out, returning to usher me into the presence and to observe my proceedings with intelligent but highly embarrassing interest.

The bones were laid out on a large table and covered with a sheet, which the sergeant slowly turned back, watching my face intently as he did so to note the impression that the spectacle made upon me. I imagine that he must have been somewhat disappointed by my impassive demeanour, for the remains suggested to me nothing more than a rather shabby set of 'student's osteology.' The whole collection had been set out by the police surgeon (as the sergeant informed me) in their proper anatomical order; notwithstanding which I counted them over carefully to make sure that none were missing, checking them by the list with which Thorndyke had furnished me.

'I see you have found the left thigh-bone,' I remarked, observing that this did not appear in the list.

'Yes,' said the sergeant; 'that turned up yesterday evening in a big pond called Baldwin's Pond in the Sandpit plain, near Little Monk Wood.'

'Is that near here?' I asked.

'In the forest up Loughton way,' was the reply.

I made a note of the fact (on which the sergeant looked as if he was sorry he had mentioned it), and then turned my attention to a general consideration of the bones before examining them in detail. Their appearance would have been improved and examination facilitated by a thorough scrubbing, for they were just as they had been taken from their respective resting-places, and it was difficult to decide whether their reddish-yellow colour was an actual stain or due to a deposit on the surface. In any case, as it affected them all alike, I thought it an interesting feature and made a note of it. They bore numerous traces of their sojourn in the various ponds from which they had been recovered, but these gave me little help in determining the length of time during which they had been submerged. They were, of course, encrusted with mud, and little wisps of pond-weed stuck to them in places; but these facts furnished only the vaguest measure of time.

Some of the traces were, indeed, more informing. To several of the bones, for instance, there adhered the dried egg-clusters of the common pond-snail, and in one of the hollows of the right shoulder-blade (the 'infra-spinous fossa') was a group of the mud-built tubes of the red river-worm. These remains gave proof of a considerable period of submersion, and since they could not have been deposited on the bones until all the flesh had disappeared they furnished evidence that some time—a month or two, at any rate—had elapsed since this had happened. Incidentally, too, their distribution showed the position in which the bones had lain, and though this appeared to be of no importance in the existing circumstances, I made careful notes of the situation of each adherent body, illustrating their position by rough sketches.

The sergeant watched my proceedings with an indulgent smile.

'You're making a regular inventory, sir,' he remarked, 'as if you were going to put 'em up for auction. I shouldn't think those snails' eggs would be much help in identification. And all that has been done already,' he added as I produced my measuring-tape.

'No doubt,' I replied; 'but my business is to make independent observations, to check the others, if necessary.' And I proceeded to measure each of the principal bones separately and to compare those of the opposite sides. The agreement in dimensions and general characteristics of the pairs of

bones left little doubt that all were parts of one skeleton, a conclusion that was confirmed by the eburnated patch on the head of the right thigh-bone and the corresponding patch in the socket of the right hip-bone. When I had finished my measurements I went over the entire series of bones in detail, examining each with the closest attention for any of those signs which Thorndyke had indicated, and eliciting nothing but a monotonously reiterated negative. They were distressingly and disappointingly normal.

'Well, sir, what do you make of 'em?' the sergeant asked cheerfully as I shut up my notebook and straightened my back. 'Whose bones are they? Are they Mr. Bellingham's, think ye?'

'I should be very sorry to say whose bones they are,' I replied. 'One bone is very much like another, you know.'

'I suppose it is,' he agreed; 'but I thought that, with all that measuring and all those notes, you might have arrived at something definite.' Evidently he was disappointed in me; and I was somewhat disappointed in myself when I contrasted Thorndyke's elaborate instructions with the meagre result of my investigations. For what did my discoveries amount to? And how much was the inquiry advanced by the few entries in my notebook?

The bones were apparently those of a man of fair though not remarkable muscular development; over thirty years of age, but how much older I was unable to say. His height I judged roughly to be five feet eight inches, but my measurements would furnish data for a more exact estimate by Thorndyke. Beyond this the bones were quite uncharacteristic. There were no signs of diseases either local or general, no indications of injuries either old or recent, no departures of any kind from the normal or usual; and the dismemberment had been effected with such care that there was not a single scratch on any of the separated surfaces. Of adipocere (the peculiar waxy or soapy substance that is commonly found in bodies that have slowly decayed in damp situations) there was not a trace; and the only remnant of the soft structures was a faint indication, like a spot of dried glue, of the tendon on the tip of the right elbow.

The sergeant was in the act of replacing the sheet, with the air of a showman who has just given an exhibition, when there came a sharp rapping on the mortuary door. The officer finished spreading the sheet with official precision, and having ushered me out into the lobby, turned the key and admitted three persons, holding the door open after they had entered for me to go out. But the appearance of the new-comers inclined me to linger. One of them was a local constable, evidently in official charge; a second was a labouring man, very wet and muddy, who carried a small sack; while in the third I thought I scented a professional brother.

The sergeant continued to hold the door open.

'Nothing more I can do for you, sir?' he asked genially.

'Is that the divisional surgeon?' I inquired.

'Yes. I am the divisional surgeon,' the new-comer answered. 'Did you want anything of me?'

'This,' said the sergeant, 'is a medical gentleman who has got permission from the coroner to inspect the remains. He is acting for the family of the deceased—I mean, for the family of Mr. Bellingham,' he added in answer to an inquiring glance from the surgeon.

'I see,' said the latter. 'Well, they have found the rest of the trunk, including, I understand, the ribs that were missing from the other part. Isn't that so, Davis?'

'Yes, sir,' replied the constable. 'Inspector Badger says all the ribs is here, and all the bones of the neck as well.'

'The inspector seems to be an anatomist,' I remarked.

The sergeant grinned. 'He is a very knowing gentleman, is Mr. Badger. He came down here this morning quite early and spent a long time looking over the bones and checking them by some notes in his pocket-book. I fancy he's got something on, but he was precious close about it.'

Here the sergeant shut up rather suddenly—perhaps contrasting his own conduct with that of his superior.

'Let us have these new bones out on the table,' said the police surgeon. 'Take the sheet off, and don't shoot them out as if they were coals. Hand them out carefully.'

The labourer fished out the wet and muddy bones one by one from the sack, and as he laid them on the table the surgeon arranged them in their proper relative positions.

'This has been a neatly executed job,' he remarked; 'none of your clumsy hacking with a chopper or a saw. The bones have been cleanly separated at the joints. The fellow who did this must have had some anatomical knowledge, unless he was a butcher, which, by the way, is not impossible. He has used his knife uncommonly skilfully, and you notice that each arm was taken off with the scapula attached, just as a butcher takes off a shoulder of mutton. Are there any more bones in that bag?'

'No, sir,' replied the labourer, wiping his hands with an air of finality on the posterior aspect of his trousers; 'that's the lot.'

The surgeon looked thoughtfully at the bones as he gave a final touch to their arrangement, and remarked:

'The inspector is right. All the bones of the neck are there. Very odd. Don't you think so?'

'You mean—'

'I mean that this very eccentric murderer seems to have given himself such an extraordinary amount of trouble for no reason that one can see. There are these neck vertebrae, for instance. He must have carefully separated the skull from the atlas instead of just cutting through the neck. Then there is the way he divided the trunk; the twelfth ribs have just come in with this lot, but the twelfth dorsal vertebra to which they belong was attached to the lower half. Imagine the trouble he must have taken to do that, and without cutting or hacking the bones about, either. It is extraordinary. This is rather interesting, by the way. Handle it carefully.'

He picked up the breast-bone daintily—for it was covered with wet mud—and handed it to me with the remark:

'That is the most definite piece of evidence we have.'

'You mean,' I said, 'that the union of the two parts into a single mass fixes this as the skeleton of an elderly man?'

'Yes, that is the obvious suggestion, which is confirmed by the deposit of bone in the rib-cartilages. You can tell the inspector, Davis, that I have checked this lot of bones and that they are all here.'

'Would you mind writing it down, sir?' said the constable. 'Inspector Badger said I was to have everything in writing.'

The surgeon took out his pocket-book, and, while he was selecting a suitable piece of paper, he asked: 'Did you form any opinion as to the height of the deceased?'

'Yes, I thought he would be about five feet eight' (here I caught the sergeant's eyes, fixed on me with a knowing leer).

'I made it five eight and a half,' said the police surgeon; 'but we shall know better when we have seen the lower leg-bones. Where was this lot found, Davis?'

'In the pond just off the road in Lord's Bushes, sir, and the inspector has gone off now to—'

'Never mind where he's gone,' interrupted the sergeant. 'You just answer questions and attend to your business.'

The sergeant's reproof conveyed a hint to me on which I was not slow to act. Friendly as my professional colleague was, it was clear that the police were disposed to treat me as an interloper who was to be kept out of the 'know' as far as possible. Accordingly I thanked my colleague and the sergeant for their courtesy, and bidding them adieu until we should meet at the inquest, took my departure and walked away quickly until I found an inconspicuous position from which I could keep the door of the mortuary in view. A few moments later I saw Constable Davis emerge and stride away up the road.

I watched his rapidly diminishing figure until he had gone as far as I considered desirable, and then I set forth in his wake. The road led straight away from the village, and in less than half a mile entered the outskirts of the forest. Here I quickened my pace to close up somewhat, and it was well that I did so, for suddenly he diverged from the road into a green lane, where for a while I lost sight of him. Still hurrying forward, I again caught sight of him just as he turned off into a narrow path that entered a beech wood with a thickish undergrowth of holly, along which I followed him for several minutes, gradually decreasing the distance between us, until suddenly there fell on my ear a rhythmical sound like the clank of a pump. Soon after I caught the sound of men's voices, and then the constable struck off the path into the wood.

I now advanced more cautiously, endeavouring to locate the search party by the sound of the pump, and when I had done this I made a little detour so that I might approach from the opposite direction to that from which the constable had appeared.

Still guided by the noise of the pump, I at length came out into a small opening among the trees and halted to survey the scene. The centre of the opening was occupied by a small pond, not more than a dozen yards across, by the side of which stood a builder's handcart. The little two-wheeled vehicle had evidently been used to convey the appliances which were deposited on the ground near it, and which consisted of a large tub—now filled with water—a shovel, a rake, a sieve, and a portable pump, the latter being fitted with a long delivery hose. There were three men besides the constable, one of whom was working the handle of the pump, while another was glancing at a paper that the constable had just delivered to him. He looked up sharply as I appeared, and viewed me with unconcealed disfavour.

'Hallo, sir!' said he. 'You can't come here.'

Now, seeing that I was actually here, this was clearly a mistake, and I ventured to point out the fallacy.

'Well, I can't allow you to stay here. Our business is of a private nature.'

'I know exactly what your business is, Inspector Badger.'

'Oh, do you?' said he, surveying me with a foxy smile. 'And I expect I know what yours is, too. But we can't have any of you newspaper gentry spying on us just at present, so you just be off.'

I thought it best to undeceive him at once, and accordingly, having explained who I was, I showed him the coroner's permit, which he read with manifest annoyance.

'This is all very well, sir,' said he as he handed me back the paper, 'but it doesn't authorise you to come spying on the proceedings of the police. Any remains that we discover will be deposited in the mortuary, where you can inspect them to your heart's content; but you can't stay here and watch us.'

I had no defined object in keeping a watch on the inspector's proceedings; but the sergeant's indiscreet hint had aroused my curiosity, which was further excited by Mr. Badger's evident desire to get rid of me. Moreover, while we had been talking, the pump had stopped (the muddy floor of the pond being now pretty fully exposed), and the inspector's assistant was handling the shovel impatiently.

'Now I put it to you, Inspector,' said I, persuasively, 'is it politic of you to allow it to be said that you refused an authorised representative of the family facilities for verifying any statements that you may make hereafter?'

'What do you mean?' he asked.

'I mean that if you should happen to find some bone which could be identified as part of the body of Mr. Bellingham, that fact would be of more importance to his family than to anyone else. You know that there is a very valuable estate and a rather difficult will.'

'I didn't know it, and I don't see the bearing of it now' (neither did I for that matter); 'but if you make such a point of being present at the search, I can't very well refuse. Only you mustn't get in our way, that's all.'

On hearing this conclusion, his assistant, who looked like a plain-clothes officer, took up his shovel and stepped into the mud that formed the bottom of the pond, stooping as he went and peering among the masses of weed that had been left stranded by the withdrawal of the water. The inspector watched him anxiously, cautioning him from time to time to 'look out where he was treading'; the labourer left the pump and craned forward from the margin of the mud, and the constable and I looked on from our respective points of vantage. For some time the search was fruitless. Once the searcher stooped and picked up what turned out to be a fragment of decayed wood; then the remains of a long-deceased jay were discovered, examined, and rejected. Suddenly the man bent down by the side of a small pool that had been left in one of the deeper hollows, stared intently into the mud, and stood up.

'There's something here that looks like a bone, sir,' he sang out.

'Don't grub about then,' said the inspector. 'Drive your shovel right into the mud where you saw it and bring it to the sieve.'

The man followed out these instructions, and as he came shore-wards with a great pile of the slimy mud on his shovel we all converged on the sieve, which the inspector took up and held over the tub, directing the constable and labourer to 'lend a hand,' meaning thereby that they were to crowd round the tub and exclude me as completely as possible. This, in fact, they did very effectively with his assistance, for, when the shovelful of mud had been deposited on the sieve, the four men leaned over it and so nearly hid it from view that it was only by craning over, first on one side and then on the other, that I was able to catch an occasional glimpse of it and to observe it gradually melting away as the sieve, immersed in the water, was shaken to and fro.

Presently the inspector raised the sieve from the water and stooped over it more closely to examine its contents. Apparently the examination yielded no very conclusive results, for it was accompanied by a series of rather dubious grunts.

At length the officer stood up, and turning to me with a genial but foxy smile, held out the sieve for my inspection.

'Like to see what we have found, Doctor?' said he.

I thanked him and stood over the sieve. It contained the sort of litter of twigs, skeleton leaves, weed, pond-snails, dead shells, and fresh-water mussels that one would expect to strain out from the mud of an ancient pond; but in addition to these there were three small bones which at first glance gave me quite a start until I saw what they were.

The inspector looked at me inquiringly. 'H'm?' said he.

'Yes,' I replied. 'Very interesting.'

'Those will be human bones, I fancy; h'm?'

'I should say so, undoubtedly,' I answered.

'Now,' said the inspector, 'could you say, off-hand, which finger those bones belong to?'

I smothered a grin (for I had been expecting this question), and answered:

'I can say off-hand that they don't belong to any finger. They are the bones of the left great toe.'

The inspector's jaw dropped.

'The deuce they are!' he muttered. 'H'm. I thought they looked a bit stout.'

'I expect,' said I, 'that if you go through the mud close to where this came from you'll find the rest of the foot.'

The plain-clothes man proceeded at once to act on my suggestion, taking the sieve with him to save time. And sure enough, after filling it twice with the mud from the bottom of the pool, the entire skeleton of the foot was brought to light.

'Now you're happy, I suppose,' said the inspector when I had checked the bones and found them all present.

'I should be more happy,' I replied, 'if I knew what you were searching for in this pond. You weren't looking for the foot, were you?'

'I was looking for anything that I might find,' he answered. 'I shall go on searching until we have the whole body. I shall go through all the streams and ponds around here, excepting Con-naught Water. That I shall leave to the last, as it will be a case of dredging from a boat and isn't so likely as the smaller ponds. Perhaps the head will be there; it's deeper than any of the others.'

It now occurred to me that as I had learned all that I was likely to learn, which was little enough, I might as well leave the inspector to pursue his searches unembarrassed by my presence. Accordingly I thanked him for his assistance and departed by the way I had come.

But as I retraced my steps along the shady path I speculated profoundly on the officer's proceedings. My examinations of the mutilated hand had yielded the conclusion that the finger had been removed after death or shortly before, but more probably after. Some one else had evidently arrived at the same conclusion, and had communicated his opinion to Inspector Badger; for it was clear that that gentleman was in full cry after the missing finger. But why was he searching for it here when the hand had been found at Sidcup? And what did he expect to learn from it when he found it? There is nothing particularly characteristic about a finger, or, at least, the bones of one; and the object of the present researches was to determine the identity of the person of whom these bones were the remains. There was something mysterious about the affair, something suggesting that Inspector Badger was in possession of private information of some kind. But what information could he have? And whence could he have obtained it? These were questions to which I could find no answer, and I was still fruitlessly revolving them when I arrived at the modest inn where the inquest was to be held, and I proposed to fortify myself with a correspondingly modest lunch as a preparation for my attendance at the inquiry.

CHAPTER XIII. THE CORONER'S QUEST

THE proceedings of that fine old institution, the coroner's court, are apt to have their dignity impaired by the somewhat unjudicial surroundings amidst which they are conducted. The present inquiry was to be held in a long room attached to the inn, ordinarily devoted, as its various appurtenances testified, to gatherings of a more convivial character.

Hither I betook myself after a protracted lunch and a meditative pipe, and being the first to arrive—the jury having already been sworn and conducted to the mortuary to view the remains—whiled away the time by considering the habits of the customary occupants of the room by the light of the objects contained in it. A wooden target with one or two darts sticking in it hung on the end wall and invited the Robin Hoods of the village to try their skill; a system of incised marks on the oaken table made sinister suggestions of shove-halfpenny; and a large open box filled with white wigs, gaudily coloured robes and wooden spears, swords and regalia, crudely coated with gilded paper, obviously appertained to the puerile ceremonials of the Order of Druids.

I had exhausted the interest of these relics and had transferred my attentions to the picture gallery when the other spectators and the witnesses began to arrive. Hastily I seated myself in the only comfortable chair besides the one placed at the head of the table, presumably for the coroner; and I had hardly done so when the latter entered accompanied by the jury. Immediately after them came the sergeant, Inspector Badger, one or two plain-clothes men, and finally the divisional surgeon.

The coroner took his seat at the head of the table and opened his book, and the jury seated themselves on a couple of benches on one side of the long table.

I looked with some interest at the twelve 'good men and true.' They were a representative group of British tradesmen, quiet, attentive, and rather solemn; but my attention was particularly attracted by a small man with a very large head and a shock of upstanding hair whom I had diagnosed, after a glance at his intelligent but truculent countenance and the shiny knees of his trousers, as the village cobbler. He sat between the broad-shouldered foreman, who looked like a blacksmith, and a dogged, red-faced man whose general aspect of prosperous greasiness suggested the calling of a butcher.

'The inquiry, gentlemen,' the coroner commenced, 'upon which we are now entering concerns itself with two questions. The first is that of identity: who was this person whose body we have just viewed? The second is: How, when, and by what means did he come by his death? We will take the identity first and begin with the circumstances under which the body was discovered.'

Here the cobbler stood up and raised an excessively dirty hand.

'I rise, Mr. Chairman,' said he, 'to a point of order.' The other jurymen looked at him curiously and some of them, I regret to say, grinned. 'You have referred, sir,' he continued, 'to the body which we have just viewed. I wish to point out that we have not viewed a body; we have viewed a collection of bones.'

'We will refer to them as the remains, if you prefer it,' said the coroner.

'I do prefer it,' was the reply, and the objector sat down.

'Very well,' rejoined the coroner, and he proceeded to call the witnesses, of whom the first was a labourer who had discovered the bones in the watercress-bed.

'Do you happen to know how long it was since the watercress-beds had been cleaned out previously?' the coroner asked, when the witness had told the story of the discovery.

'They was cleaned out by Mr. Tapper's orders just before he gave them up. That will be a little better than two years ago. In May it were. I helped to clean 'em. I worked on this very same place and there wasn't no bones there then.'

The coroner glanced at the jury. 'Any questions, gentlemen,' he asked.

The cobbler directed an intimidating scowl at the witness and demanded:

'Were you searching for bones when you came on these remains?'

'Me!' exclaimed the witness. 'What should I be searching for bones for?'

'Don't prevaricate,' said the cobbler sternly; 'answer the question: Yes or no.'

'No, of course I wasn't.'

The juryman shook his enormous head dubiously as though implying that he would let it pass this time but it mustn't happen again; and the examination of the witnesses continued, without eliciting

anything that was new to me or giving rise to any incident, until the sergeant had described the finding of the right arm in the Cuckoo Pits.

'Was this an accidental discovery?' the coroner asked.

'No. We had instructions from Scotland Yard to search any likely ponds in this neighbourhood.'

The coroner discreetly forbore to press this matter any further, but my friend the cobbler was evidently on the qui-vive, and I anticipated a brisk cross-examination for Mr. Badger when his turn came. The inspector was apparently of the same opinion, for I saw him cast a glance of the deepest malevolence at the too inquiring disciple of St Crispin. In fact, his turn came next, and the cobbler's hair stood up with unholy joy.

The finding of the lower half of the trunk in Staple's Pond at Loughton was the inspector's own achievement, but he was not boastful about it. The discovery, he remarked, followed naturally on the previous one in the Cuckoo Pits.

'Had you any private information that led you to search this particular neighbourhood?' the cobbler asked.

'We had no private information whatever,' replied Badger.

'Now I put it to you,' pursued the juryman, shaking a forensic, and very dirty, forefinger at the inspector; 'here are certain remains found at Sidcup; here are certain other remains found at St Mary Cray, and certain others at Lee. All those places are in Kent. Now isn't it very remarkable that you should come straight down to Epping Forest, which is in Essex, and search for those bones and find 'em?'

'We were making a systematic search of all likely places,' replied Badger.

'Exactly,' said the cobbler, with a ferocious grin, 'that's just my point. I say, isn't it very funny that, after finding the remains in Kent some twenty miles from here, with the River Thames between, you should come here to look for the bones and go straight to Staple's Pond, where they happen to be—and find 'em?'

'It would have been more funny,' Badger replied sourly, 'if we'd gone straight to a place where they happened not to be—and found them.'

A gratified snigger arose from the other eleven good men and true, and the cobbler grinned savagely; but before he could think of a suitable rejoinder the coroner interposed.

'The question is not very material,' he said, 'and we mustn't embarrass the police by unnecessary inquiries.'

'It's my belief,' said the cobbler, 'that he knew they were there all the time.'

'The witness has stated that he had no private information,' said the coroner; and he proceeded to take the rest of the inspector's evidence, watched closely by the critical juror.

The account of the finding of the remains having been given in full, the police surgeon was called and sworn; the jurymen straightened their backs with an air of expectancy, and I turned over a page of my notebook.

'You have examined the bones at present lying in the mortuary and forming the subject of this inquiry?' the coroner asked.

'I have.'

'Will you kindly tell us what you have observed?'

'I find that the bones are human bones, and are, in my opinion, all parts of the same person. They form a skeleton which is complete with the exception of the skull, the third finger of the left hand, the knee-caps, and the leg-bones—I mean the bones between the knees and the ankles.'

'Is there anything to account for the absence of the missing finger?'

'No. There is no deformity and no sign of its having been amputated during life. In my opinion it was removed after death.'

'Can you give us any description of the deceased?'

'I should say that these are the bones of an elderly man, probably over sixty years of age, about five feet eight and a half inches in height, of rather stout build, fairly muscular, and well preserved. There are no signs of disease excepting some old-standing rheumatic gout of the right hip-joint.'

'Can you form any opinion as to the cause of death?'

'No. There are no marks of violence or signs of injury. But it will be impossible to form any opinion as to the cause of death until we have seen the skull.'

'Did you note anything else of importance?'

'Yes. I was struck by the appearance of anatomical knowledge and skill on the part of the person who dismembered the body. The knowledge of anatomy is proved by the fact that the corpse has been divided into definite anatomical regions. For instance, the bones of the neck are complete and include the top joint of the backbone known as the atlas; whereas a person without anatomical knowledge would probably take off the head by cutting through the neck. Then the arms have been separated with the scapula (or shoulder-blade) and clavicle (or collar-bone) attached, just as an arm would be removed for dissection.

'The skill is shown by the neat way in which the dismemberment has been carried out. The parts have not been rudely hacked asunder, but have been separated at the joints so skilfully that I have not discovered a single scratch or mark of the knife on any of the bones.'

'Can you suggest any class of person who would be likely to possess the knowledge and skill to which you refer?'

'It would, of course, be possessed by a surgeon or medical student, and possibly by a butcher.'

'You think that the person who dismembered this body may have been a surgeon or a medical student?'

'Yes; or a butcher. Some one accustomed to the dismemberment of bodies and skilful with the knife.'

Here the cobbler suddenly rose to his feet.

'I rise, Mr. Chairman,' said he, 'to protest against the statement that has just been made.'

'What statement?' demanded the coroner.

'Against the aspersion,' continued the cobbler, with an oratorical flourish, 'that has been cast upon a honourable calling.'

'I don't understand you,' said the coroner.

'Doctor Summers has insinuated that this murder was committed by a butcher. Now a member of that honourable calling is sitting on this jury—'

'You let me alone,' growled the butcher.

'I will not let you alone,' persisted the cobbler. 'I desire—'

'Oh, shut up, Pope!' This was from the foreman, who, at the same moment, reached out an enormous hairy hand with which he grabbed the cobbler's coat-tails and brought him into a sitting posture with a thump that shook the room.

But Mr. Pope, though seated, was not silenced. 'I desire,' he said, 'to have my protest put on record.'

'I can't do that,' said the coroner, 'and I can't allow you to interrupt the witnesses.'

'I am acting,' said Mr. Pope, 'in the interests of my friend here and the members of a honourable—'

But here the butcher turned on him savagely, and, in a hoarse stage-whisper, exclaimed:

'Look here, Pope; you've got too much of what the cat licks—'

'Gentlemen! gentlemen!' the coroner protested sternly; 'I cannot permit this unseemly conduct. You are forgetting the solemnity of the occasion and your own responsible positions. I must insist on more decent and decorous behaviour.'

There was profound silence, in the midst of which the butcher concluded in the same hoarse whisper:

'—licks 'er paws with.'

The coroner cast a withering glance at him, and, turning to the witness, resumed the examination.

'Can you tell us, Doctor, how long a time has elapsed since the death of the deceased?'

'I should say not less than eighteen months, but probably more. How much more it is impossible from inspection alone to say. The bones are perfectly clean—that is, clean of all soft structures—and will remain substantially in their present condition for many years.'

'The evidence of the man who found the remains in the watercress-bed suggests that they could not have been there for more than two years. Do the appearances in your opinion agree with that view?'

'Yes; perfectly.'

'There is one more point, Doctor; a very important one. Do you find anything in any of the bones, or all of them together, which would enable you to identify them as the bones of any particular individual?'

'No,' replied Dr. Summers; 'I found no peculiarity that could furnish the means of personal identification.'

'The description of a missing individual has been given to us,' said the coroner; 'a man, fifty-nine years of age, five feet eight inches in height, healthy, well preserved, rather broad in build, and having an old Pott's fracture of the left ankle. Do the remains that you have examined agree with that description?'

'Yes, so far as agreement is possible. There is no disagreement.'

'The remains might be those of that individual?'

'They might; but there is no positive evidence that they are. The description would apply to a large proportion of elderly men, except as to the fracture.'

'You found no signs of such a fracture?'

'No. Pott's fracture affects the bone called the fibula. That is one of the bones that has not yet been found, so there is no evidence on that point. The left foot was quite normal, but then it would be in any case, unless the fracture had resulted in great deformity.'

'You estimated the height of the deceased as half an inch greater than that of the missing person. Does that constitute a disagreement?'

'No; my estimate is only approximate. As the arms are complete and the legs are not, I have based my calculations on the width across the two arms. But measurement of the thigh-bones gives the same result. The length of the thigh-bones is one foot seven inches and five-eighths.'

'So the deceased might not have been taller than five feet eight?'

'That is so; from five feet eight to five feet nine.'

'Thank you. I think that is all we want to ask you, Doctor; unless the jury wish to put any questions.'

He glanced uneasily at that august body, and instantly the irrepressible Pope rose to the occasion.

'About that finger that is missing,' said the cobbler. 'You say that it was cut off after death?'

'That is my opinion.'

'Now can you tell us why it was cut off?'

'No, I cannot.'

'Oh, come now, Doctor Summers, you must have formed some opinion on the subject.'

Here the coroner interposed. 'The Doctor is only concerned with the evidence arising out of the actual examination of the remains. Any personal opinions or conjectures that he may have formed are not evidence, and he must not be asked about them.'

'But, sir,' objected Pope, 'we want to know why that finger was cut off. It couldn't have been took off for no reason. May I ask, sir, if the person who is missing had anything peculiar about that finger?'

'Nothing is stated to that effect in the written description,' replied the coroner.

'Perhaps,' suggested Pope, 'Inspector Badger can tell us.'

'I think,' said the coroner, 'we had better not ask the police too many questions. They will tell us anything that they wish to be made public.'

'Oh, very well,' snapped the cobbler. 'If it's a matter of hushing it up I've got no more to say; only I don't see how we are to arrive at a verdict if we don't have the facts put before us.'

All the witnesses having now been examined, the coroner proceeded to sum up and address the jury.

'You have heard the evidence, gentlemen, of the various witnesses, and you will have perceived that it does not enable us to answer either of the questions that form the subject of this inquiry. We now know that the deceased was an elderly man, about sixty years of age, and about five feet eight to nine in height; and that his death took place from eighteen months to two years ago. That is all we know. From the treatment to which the body has been subjected we may form conjectures as to the circumstances of his death. But we have no actual knowledge. We do not know who the deceased was or how he came by his death. Consequently, it will be necessary to adjourn this inquiry until fresh facts are available, and as soon as that is the case, you will receive due notice that your attendance is required.'

The silence of the Court gave place to the confused noise of moving chairs and a general outbreak of eager talk, amidst which I rose and made my way out into the street. At the door I encountered Dr. Summers, whose dog-cart was waiting close by.

'Are you going back to town now?' he asked.

'Yes,' I answered; 'as soon as I can catch a train.'

'If you jump into my cart I'll run you down in time for the five-one. You'll miss it if you walk.'

I accepted his offer thankfully, and a minute later was spinning briskly down the road to the station.

'Queer little devil, that man Pope,' Dr. Summers remarked. 'Quite a character; a socialist, labourite, agitator, general crank; anything for a row.'

'Yes,' I answered; 'that was what his appearance suggested. It must be trying for the coroner to get a truculent rascal like that on a jury.'

Summers laughed. 'I don't know. He supplies the comic relief. And then, you know, those fellows have their uses. Some of his questions were pretty pertinent.'

'So Badger seemed to think.'

'Yes, by Jove,' chuckled Summers. 'Badger didn't like him a bit; and I suspect the worthy inspector was sailing pretty close to the wind in his answers.'

'You think he really has some private information?'

'Depends upon what you mean by "information." The police are not a speculative body. They wouldn't be taking all this trouble unless they had a pretty straight tip from somebody. How are Mr. and Miss Bellingham? I used to know them when they lived here.'

I was considering a discreet answer to this question when we swept into the station yard. At the same moment the train drew up at the platform, and, with a hurried hand-shake and hastily spoken thanks, I sprang from the dog-cart and darted into the station.

During the rather slow journey homewards I read over my notes and endeavoured to extract from the facts they set forth some significance other than that which lay on the surface, but without much success. Then I fell to speculating on what Thorndyke would think of the evidence at the inquest and whether he would be satisfied with the information that I had collected. These speculations lasted me, with occasional digressions, until I arrived at the Temple and ran up the stairs rather eagerly to my friends' chambers.

But here a disappointment awaited me. The nest was empty with the exception of Polton, who appeared at the laboratory door in his white apron, with a pair of flat-nosed pliers in his hand.

'The Doctor had to go down to Bristol to consult over an urgent case,' he explained, 'and Doctor Jervis has gone with him. They'll be away a day or two, I expect, but the Doctor left this note for you.'

He took a letter from the shelf, where it had been stood conspicuously on edge, and handed it to me. It was a short note from Thorndyke apologising for his sudden departure and asking me to give Polton my notes with any comments that I had to make.

'You will be interested to learn,' he added, 'that the application will be heard in the Probate Court the day after to-morrow. I shall not be present, of course, nor will Jervis, so I should like you to attend and keep your eyes open for anything that may happen during the hearing and that may not appear in the notes that Marchmont's clerk will be instructed to take. I have retained Dr. Payne to stand by and help you with the practice, so that you can attend the Court with a clear conscience.'

This was highly flattering and quite atoned for the small disappointment; with deep gratification at the trust that Thorndyke had reposed in me, I pocketed the letter, handed my notes to Polton, wished him 'Good-evening,' and betook myself to Fetter Lane.

CHAPTER XIV. WHICH CARRIES THE READER INTO THE PROBATE COURT

THE Probate Court wore an air of studious repose when I entered with Miss Bellingham and her father. Apparently the great and inquisitive public had not become aware of the proceedings that were about to take place, or had not realised their connection with the sensational 'Mutilation Case'; but barristers and Pressmen, better informed, had gathered in some strength, and the hum of their conversation filled the air like the droning of the voluntary that ushers in a cathedral service.

As we entered, a pleasant-faced, elderly gentleman rose and came forward to meet us, shaking Mr. Bellingham's hand cordially and saluting Miss Bellingham with a courtly bow.

'This is Mr. Marchmont, Doctor,' said the former, introducing me; and the solicitor, having thanked me for the trouble I had taken in attending at the inquest, led us to a bench, at the farther end of which was seated a gentleman whom I recognised as Mr. Hurst.

Mr. Bellingham recognised him at the same moment and glared at him wrathfully.

'I see that scoundrel is here!' he exclaimed in a distinctly audible voice, 'pretending that he doesn't see me, because he is ashamed to look me in the face, but—'

'Hush! hush! my dear sir,' exclaimed the horrified solicitor; 'we mustn't talk like that, especially in this place. Let me beg you—let me entreat you to control your feelings, to make no indiscreet remarks; in fact, to make no remarks at all,' he added, with the evident conviction that any remarks that Mr. Bellingham might make would be certain to be indiscreet.

'Forgive me, Marchmont,' Mr. Bellingham replied contritely. 'I will control myself: I will really be quite discreet. I won't even look at him again—because, if I do, I shall probably go over and pull his nose.'

This form of discretion did not appear to be quite to Mr. Marchmont's liking, for he took the precaution of insisting that Miss Bellingham and I should sit on the farther side of his client, and thus effectually separate him from his enemy.

'Who's the long-nosed fellow talking to Jellicoe?' Mr. Bellingham asked.

'That is Mr. Loram, KG, Mr. Hurst's counsel; and the convivial-looking gentleman next to him is our counsel, Mr. Heath, a most able man and'—here Mr. Marchmont whispered behind his hand—'fully instructed by Doctor Thorndyke.'

At this juncture the judge entered and took his seat; the usher proceeded with great rapidity to swear in the jury, and the Court gradually settled down into that state of academic quiet which it maintained throughout the proceedings, excepting when the noisy swing-doors were set oscillating by some bustling clerk or reporter.

The judge was a somewhat singular-looking old gentleman, very short as to his face and very long as to his mouth; which peculiarities, together with a pair of large and bulging eyes (which he usually kept closed), suggested a certain resemblance to a frog. And he had a curious frog-like trick of flattening his eyelids—as if in the act of swallowing a large beetle—which was the only outward and visible sign of emotion that he ever displayed.

As soon as the swearing in of the jury was completed Mr. Loram rose to introduce the case; whereupon his lordship leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, as if bracing himself for a painful operation.

'The present proceedings,' Mr. Loram explained, 'are occasioned by the unaccountable disappearance of Mr. John Bellingham, of 141, Queen Square, Bloomsbury, which occurred about two years ago, or, to be more precise, on the twenty-third of November, nineteen hundred and two. Since that date nothing has been heard of Mr. Bellingham, and, as there are certain substantial reasons for believing him to be dead, the principal beneficiary under his will, Mr. George Hurst, is now applying to the Court for permission to presume the death of the testator and prove the will. As the time which has elapsed since the testator was last seen alive is only two years, the application is based upon the circumstances of the disappearance, which were, in many respects, very singular, the most remarkable feature of that disappearance being, perhaps, its suddenness and completeness.'

Here the judge remarked in a still, small voice that 'It would, perhaps, have been even more remarkable if the testator had disappeared gradually and incompletely.'

'No doubt, my lord,' agreed Mr. Loram; 'but the point is that the testator, whose habits had always been regular and orderly, disappeared on the date mentioned without having made any of the usual provisions for the conduct of his affairs, and has not since then been seen or heard of.'

With this preamble Mr. Loram proceeded to give a narrative of the events connected with the disappearance of John Bellingham, which was substantially identical with that which I had read in the newspapers; and having laid the actual facts before the jury, he went on to discuss their probable import.

'Now, what conclusion,' he asked, 'will this strange, this most mysterious train of events suggest to an intelligent person who shall consider it impartially? Here is a man who steps forth from the house of his cousin or his brother, as the case may be, and forthwith, in the twinkling of an eye, vanishes from human ken. What is the explanation? Did he steal forth and, without notice or hint of his intention, take train to some seaport, thence to embark for some distant land, leaving his affairs to take care of themselves and his friends to speculate vainly as to his whereabouts? Is he now hiding abroad, or even at home, indifferent alike to the safety of his own considerable property and the peace of mind of his friends? Or is it that death has come upon him unawares by sickness, by accident, or, more probably, by the hand of some unknown criminal? Let us consider the probabilities.

'Can he have disappeared by his own deliberate act? Why not? it may be asked. Men undoubtedly do disappear from time to time, to be discovered by chance or to reappear voluntarily after intervals of years and find their names almost forgotten and their places filled by new-comers. Yes; but there is always some reason for a disappearance of this kind, even though it be a bad one. Family discords that make life a weariness; pecuniary difficulties that make life a succession of anxieties; distaste for particular circumstances and surroundings from which there seems no escape; inherent restlessness and vagabond tendencies, and so on.

'Do any of these explanations apply to the present case? No, they do not. Family discords—at least those capable of producing chronic misery—appertain exclusively to a married state. But the testator was a bachelor with no encumbrances whatever. Pecuniary anxieties can be equally excluded. The testator was in easy, in fact, in affluent circumstances. His mode of life was apparently agreeable and full of interest and activity, and he had full liberty of change if he wished. He had been accustomed to travel, and could do so again without absconding. He had reached an age when radical changes do not seem desirable. He was a man of fixed and regular habits, and his regularity was of his own choice and not due to compulsion or necessity. When last seen by his friends, as I shall prove, he was proceeding to a definite destination with the expressed

intention of returning for purposes of his own appointing. He did return and then vanished, leaving those purposes unachieved.

'If we conclude that he has voluntarily disappeared and is at present in hiding, we adopt an opinion that is entirely at variance with all these weighty facts. If, on the other hand, we conclude that he has died suddenly, or has been killed by an accident or otherwise, we are adopting a view that involves no inherent improbabilities and that is entirely congruous with the known facts; facts that will be proved by the testimony of the witnesses whom I shall call. The supposition that the testator is dead is not only more probable than that he is alive; I submit it is the only reasonable explanation of the circumstances of his disappearance.

'But this is not all. The presumption of death which arises so inevitably out of the mysterious and abrupt manner in which the testator disappeared has recently received most conclusive and dreadful confirmation. On the fifteenth of July last there were discovered at Sidcup the remains of a human arm—a left arm, gentlemen, from the hand of which the third, or ring, finger was missing. The doctor who has examined that arm will tell you that the finger was cut off either after death or immediately before; and his evidence will prove conclusively that that arm must have been deposited in the place where it was found just about the time when the testator disappeared. Since that first discovery, other portions of the same mutilated body have come to light; and it is a strange and significant fact that they have all been found in the immediate neighbourhood of Eltham or Woodford. You will remember, gentlemen, that it was either at Eltham or Woodford that the testator was last seen alive.

'And now observe the completeness of the coincidence. These human remains, as you will be told presently by the experienced and learned medical gentleman who has examined them most exhaustively, are those of a man of about sixty years of age, about five feet eight inches in height, fairly muscular and well preserved, apparently healthy, and rather stoutly built. Another witness will tell you that the missing man was about sixty years of age, about five feet eight inches in height, fairly muscular and well preserved, apparently healthy, and rather stoutly built. And—another most significant and striking fact—the testator was accustomed to wear upon the third finger of his left hand—the very finger that is missing from the remains that were found—a most peculiar ring, which fitted so tightly that he was unable to get it off after once putting it on; a ring, gentlemen, of so peculiar a pattern that had it been found on the body must have instantly established the identity of the remains. In a word, gentlemen, the remains which have been found are those of a man exactly like the testator; they differ from him in no respect whatever; they display a mutilation which suggests an attempt to conceal an identifying peculiarity which he undoubtedly presented; and they were deposited in their various hiding-places about the time of the testator's disappearance. Accordingly, when you have heard these facts proved by the sworn testimony of competent witnesses, together with the facts relating to the disappearance, I shall ask you for a verdict in accordance with that evidence.'

Mr. Loram sat down, and adjusting a pair of pince-nez, rapidly glanced over his brief while the usher was administering the oath to the first witness.

This was Mr. Jellicoe, who stepped into the box and directed a stony gaze at the (apparently) unconscious judge. The usual preliminaries having been gone through, Mr. Loram proceeded to examine him.

'You were the testator's solicitor and confidential agent, I believe?'

'I was—and am.'

'How long have you known him?'

'Twenty-seven years.'

'Judging from your experience of him, should you say that he was a person likely to disappear voluntarily and suddenly to cease to communicate with his friends?

'No.'

'Kindly give your reasons for that opinion.'

'Such conduct on the part of the testator would be entirely opposed to his habits and character as they are known to me. He was exceedingly regular and businesslike in his dealings with me.

When travelling abroad he always kept me informed as to his whereabouts, or, if he was likely to be beyond reach of communications, he always advised me beforehand. One of my duties was to collect a pension which he drew from the Foreign Office, and on no occasion, previous to his disappearance, has he ever failed to furnish me punctually with the necessary documents.'

'Had he, so far as you know, any reasons for wishing to disappear?'

'No.'

'When and where did you last see him alive?'

'At six o'clock in the evening, on the fourteenth of October, nineteen hundred and two, at 141, Queen Square, Bloomsbury.'

'Kindly tell us what happened on that occasion.'

'The testator had called for me at my office at a quarter past three, and asked me to come with him to his house to meet Doctor Norbury. I accompanied him to 141, Queen Square, and shortly after we arrived Doctor Norbury came to look at some antiquities that the testator proposed to give to the British Museum. The gift consisted of a mummy with four Canopic jars and other tomb-furniture which the testator stipulated should be exhibited together in a single case and in the state in which they were then presented. Of these objects, the mummy only was ready for inspection. The tomb-furniture had not yet arrived in England, but was expected within a week. Doctor Norbury accepted the gift on behalf of the Museum, but could not take possession of the objects until he had communicated with the Director and obtained his formal authority. The testator accordingly gave me certain instructions concerning the delivery of the gift, as he was leaving England that evening.'

'Are those instructions relevant to the subject of this inquiry?'

'I think they are. The testator was going to Paris, and perhaps thence to Vienna. He instructed me to receive and unpack the tomb-furniture on its arrival, and to store it, with the mummy, in a particular room, where it was to remain for three weeks. If he returned within that time he was to hand it over in person to the Museum authorities; if he had not returned within that time, he desired me to notify the Museum authorities that they were at liberty to take possession of and remove the collection at their convenience. From these instructions I gathered that the testator was uncertain as to the length of his absence from England and the extent of his journey.'

'Did he state precisely where he was going?'

'No. He said he was going to Paris and perhaps to Vienna, but he gave no particulars and I asked for none.' 'Do you, in fact, know where he went?'

'No. He left the house at six o'clock wearing a long, heavy overcoat and carrying a suit-case and an umbrella. I wished him "Good-bye" at the door and watched him walk away as if going towards Southampton Row. I have no idea where he went, and I never saw him again.'

'Had he no other luggage than the suit-case?' 'I do not know, but I believe not. He was accustomed to travel with the bare necessaries, and to buy anything further he wanted en route.'

'Did he say nothing to the servants as to the probable date of his return?'

'There were no servants excepting the caretaker. The house was not used for residential purposes. The testator slept and took his meals at his club, though he kept his clothes at the house.' 'Did you receive any communication from him after he left?' 'No. I never heard from him again in any way. I waited for three weeks as he had instructed me, and then notified the Museum authorities that the collection was ready for removal. Five days later Doctor Norbury came and took formal possession of it, and it was transferred to the Museum forthwith.' 'When did you next hear of the testator?'

'On the twenty-third of November following at a quarter-past seven in the evening. Mr. George Hurst came to my rooms, which are over my office, and informed me that the testator had called at his house during his absence and had been shown into the study to wait for him. That on his—Mr. Hurst's—arrival it was found that the testator had disappeared without acquainting the servants of his intended departure, and without being seen by anyone to leave the house. Mr. Hurst thought this so remarkable that he had hastened up to town to inform me. I also thought it a remarkable circumstance, especially as I had received no communication from the testator, and we both decided that it was advisable to inform the testator's brother, Godfrey, of what had happened.

'Accordingly-Mr. Hurst and I proceeded as quickly as possible to Liverpool Street and took the first train available to Woodford, where Mr. Godfrey Bellingham then resided. We arrived at his house at five minutes to nine, and were informed by the servant that he was not at home, but that his daughter was in the library, which was a detached building situated in the grounds. The servant lighted a lantern and conducted us through the grounds to the library, where we found Mr. Godfrey Bellingham and Miss Bellingham. Mr. Godfrey had only just come in and had entered by the back gate, which had a bell that rang in the library. Mr. Hurst informed Mr. Godfrey of what had occurred, and then we left the library to walk up to the house. A few paces from the library I noticed by the light of the lantern, which Mr. Godfrey was carrying, a small object lying on the lawn. I pointed it to him and he picked it up, and then we all recognised it as a scarab that the testator was accustomed to wear on his watch-chain. It was fitted with a gold wire passed through the suspension hole and a gold ring. Both the wire and the ring were in position, but the ring was broken. We went to the house and questioned the servants as to visitors; but none of them had seen the testator, and they all agreed that no visitor whatsoever had come to the house during the afternoon or evening. Mr. Godfrey and Miss Bellingham both declared that they had neither seen nor heard anything of the testator, and were both unaware that he had returned to England. As the circumstances were somewhat disquieting, I communicated, on the following morning, with the police and requested them to make inquiries; which they did, with the result that a suit-case bearing the initials "J. B.", was found to be lying unclaimed in the cloak-room at Charing Cross Station. I was able to identify the suit-case as that which I had seen the testator carry away from Queen Square. I was also able to identify some of the contents. I interviewed the cloak-room

attendant, who informed me that the suit-case had been deposited on the twenty-third about 4.15 p.m. He had no recollection of the person who deposited it. It remained unclaimed in the possession of the railway company for three months, and was then surrendered to me.'

'Were there any marks or labels on it showing the route by which it had travelled?'

'There were no labels on it and no marks other than the initials "J.B."

'Do you happen to know the testator's age?'

'Yes. He was fifty-nine on the eleventh of October, nineteen hundred and two.'

'Can you tell us what his height was?'

'Yes. He was exactly five feet eight inches.'

'What sort of health had he?'

'So far as I know his health was good. I am not aware that he suffered from any disease. I am only judging by his appearance, which was that of a healthy man.'

'Should you describe him as well preserved or otherwise?'

'I should describe him as a well preserved man for his age.'

'How should you describe his figure?'

'I should describe him as rather broad and stout in build, and fairly muscular, though not exceptionally so.'

Mr. Loram made a rapid note of these answers and then said:

'You have told us, Mr. Jellicoe, that you have known the testator intimately for twenty-seven years. Now, did you ever notice whether he was accustomed to wear any rings upon his fingers?'

'He wore upon the third finger of his left hand a copy of an antique ring which bore the device of the Eye of Osiris. That was the only ring he ever wore as far as I know.'

'Did he wear it constantly?'

'Yes, necessarily; because it was too small for him, and having once squeezed it on he was never able to get it off again.'

This was the sum of Mr. Jellicoe's evidence, and at its conclusion the witness glanced inquiringly at Mr. Bellingham's counsel. But Mr. Heath remained seated, attentively considering the notes that he had just made, and finding that there was to be no cross-examination, Mr. Jellicoe stepped down from the box. I leaned back on my bench, and, turning my head, observed Miss Bellingham deep in thought.

'What do you think of it?' I asked.

'It seems very complete and conclusive,' she replied. And then, with a sigh, she murmured: 'Poor old Uncle John! How horrid it sounds to talk of him in this cold-blooded, business-like way, as "the testator," as if he were nothing but a sort of algebraical sign.'

'There isn't much room for sentiment, I suppose, in the proceedings of the Probate Court,' I replied. To which she assented, and then asked: 'Who is this lady?'

'This lady' was a fashionably dressed young woman who had just bounced into the witness-box and was now being sworn. The preliminaries being finished, she answered Miss Bellingham's question and Mr. Loram's by stating that her name was Augustina Gwendoline Dobbs, and that she was housemaid to Mr. George Hurst, of' The Poplars,' Eltham.

'Mr. Hurst lives alone, I believe?' said Mr. Loram.

'I don't know what you mean by that,' Miss Dobbs began; but the barrister explained.

'I mean that I believe he is unmarried?'

'Well, and what about it?' the witness demanded tartly.

'I am asking you a question.'

'I know that,' said the witness viciously; 'and I say that you've no business to make any such insinuations to a respectable young lady when there's a cook-housekeeper and a kitchenmaid living in the house, and him old enough to be my father—'

Here his lordship flattened his eyelids with startling effect, and Mr. Loram interrupted: 'I make no insinuations. I merely ask, Is your employer, Mr. Hurst, an unmarried man, or is he not?'

'I never asked him,' said the witness sulkily.

'Please answer my question—yes or no.'

'How can I answer your question? He may be married or he may not. How do I know? I'm no private detective.'

Mr. Loram directed a stupefied gaze at the witness, and in the ensuing silence a plaintive voice came from the bench:

'Is that point material?'

'Certainly, my lord,' replied Mr. Loram.

'Then, as I see that you are calling Mr. Hurst, perhaps you had better put the question to him. He will probably know.'

Mr. Loram bowed, and as the judge subsided into his normal state of coma he turned to the triumphant witness.

'Do you remember anything remarkable occurring on the twenty-third of November the year before last?'

'Yes. Mr. John Bellingham called at our house.'

'How did you know he was Mr. John Bellingham?'

'I didn't; but he said he was, and I supposed he knew.'

'At what time did he arrive?'

'At twenty minutes past five in the evening.'

'What happened then?'

'I told him that Mr. Hurst had not come home yet, and he said he would wait for him in the study and write some letters; so I showed him into the study and shut the door.'

'What happened next?'

'Nothing. Then Mr. Hurst came home at his usual time—a quarter to six—and let himself in with his key. He went straight into the study where I supposed Mr. Bellingham still was, so I took no notice, but laid the table for two. At six o'clock Mr. Hurst came into the dining-room—he has tea in the City and dines at six—and when he saw the table laid for two he asked the reason. I said I thought Mr. Bellingham was staying to dinner.

'"Mr. Bellingham!" says he. "I didn't know he was here. Why didn't you tell me?" he says. "I thought he was with you, sir," I said. "I showed him into the study," I said. "Well, he wasn't there when I came in," he said, "and he isn't there now," he said. "Perhaps he has gone to wait in the drawing-room," he said. So we went and looked in the drawing-room, but he wasn't there. Then Mr. Hurst said he thought Mr. Bellingham must have got tired of waiting and gone away; but I told him I was quite sure he hadn't, because I had been watching all the time. Then he asked me if Mr. Bellingham was alone or whether his daughter was with him, and I said that it wasn't that Mr. Bellingham at all, but Mr. John Bellingham, and then he was more surprised than ever. I said we had better search the house to make sure whether he was there or not, and Mr. Hurst said he would come with me; so we all went over the house and looked in all the rooms, but there was not a sign of Mr. Bellingham in any of them. Then Mr. Hurst got very nervous and upset, and when he had just snatched a little dinner he ran off to catch the six thirty-one train up to town.'

'You say that Mr. Bellingham could not have left the house because you were watching all the time. Where were you while you were watching?'

'I was in the kitchen. I could see the front gate from the kitchen window.'

'You say that you laid the table for two. Where did you lay it?'

'In the dining-room, of course.'

'Could you see the front gate from the dining-room?'

'No, but I could see the study door. The study is opposite the dining-room.'

'Do you have to come upstairs to get from the kitchen to the dining-room?'

'Yes, of course you do!'

'Then, might not Mr. Bellingham have left the house while you were coming up the stairs?'

'No, he couldn't have done.'

'Why not?'

'Because it would have been impossible.'

'But why would it have been impossible?'

'Because he couldn't have done it.'

'I suggest that Mr. Bellingham left the house quietly while you were on the stairs?'

'No, he didn't.'

'How do you know he did not?'

'I am quite sure he didn't.'

'But how can you be certain?'

'Because I should have seen him if he had.'

'But I mean when you were on the stairs.'

'He was in the study when I was on the stairs.'

'How do you know he was in the study?'

'Because I showed him in there and he hadn't come out.'

Mr. Loram paused and took a deep breath, and his lordship flattened his eyelids.

'Is there a gate to the premises?' the barrister resumed wearily.

'Yes. It opens into a narrow lane at the side of the house.'

'And there is a French window in the study, is there not?'

'Yes It opens on to the small grass plot opposite the side gate.'

'Were the window and the gate locked or would it have been possible for Mr. Bellingham to let himself out into the lane?'

'The window and the gate both have catches on the inside. He could have got out that way, but, of course, he didn't.'

'Why not?'

'Well, no gentleman would go creeping out the back way like a thief.'

'Did you look to see if the French window was shut and fastened after you missed Mr. Bellingham?'

'I looked at it when we shut the house up for the night. It was then shut and fastened on the inside.'

'And the side gate?'

'That gate was shut and latched. You have to slam the gate to make the latch fasten, so no one could have gone out of the gate without being heard.'

Here the examination-in-chief ended, and Mr. Loram sat down with an audible sigh of relief. Miss Dobbs was about to step down from the witness-box when Mr. Heath rose to cross-examine.

'Did you see Mr. Bellingham in a good light?' he asked.

'Pretty good. It was dark outside, but the hall-lamp was alight.'

'Kindly look at this'—here a small object was passed across to the witness. 'It is a trinket that Mr. Bellingham is stated to have carried suspended from his watch-guard. Can you remember if he was wearing it in that manner when he came to the house?'

'No, he was not.'

'You are sure of that.'

'Quite sure.'

'Thank you. And now I want to ask you about the search that you have mentioned. You say that you went all over the house. Did you go into the study?'

'No—at least, not until Mr. Hurst had gone to London.'

'When you did go in, was the window fastened?'

'Yes.'

'Could it have been fastened from the outside?'

'No; there is no handle outside.'

'What furniture is there in the study?'

'There is a writing-table, a revolving-chair, two easy chairs, two large book-cases, and a wardrobe that Mr. Hurst keeps his overcoats and hats in.'

'Does the wardrobe lock?'

'Yes.'

'Was it locked when you went in?'

'I'm sure I don't know. I don't go about trying the cupboards and drawers.'

'What furniture is there in the drawing-room?'

'A cabinet, six or seven chairs, a Chesterfield sofa, a piano, a silver-table, and one or two occasional tables.'

'Is the piano a grand or upright?'

'It is an upright grand.'

'In what position is it placed?'

'It stands across a corner near the window.'

'Is there sufficient room behind it for a man to conceal himself?'

Miss Dobbs was amused and did not dissemble. 'Oh, yes,' she sniggered, 'there's plenty of room for a man to hide behind it.'

'When you searched the drawing-room, did you look behind the piano?'

'No, I didn't,' Miss Dobbs replied scornfully.

'Did you look under the sofa?'

'Certainly not!'

'What did you do then?'

'We opened the door and looked into the room. We were not looking for a cat or a monkey; we were looking for a middle-aged gentleman.'

'And am I to take it that your search over the rest of the house was conducted in a similar manner?'

'Certainly. We looked into the rooms, but we did not search under the beds or in the cupboards.'

'Are all the rooms in the house in use as living or sleeping rooms?'

'No; there is one room on the second floor that is used as a store and lumber-room, and one on the first floor that Mr. Hurst uses to store trunks and things that he is not using.'

'Did you look in those rooms when you searched the house?'

'No.'

'Have you looked in them since?'

'I have been in the lumber-room since, but not in the other. It is always kept locked.'

At this point an ominous flattening became apparent in his lordship's eyelids, but these symptoms passed when Mr. Heath sat down and indicated that he had no further questions to ask.

Miss Dobbs once more prepared to step down from the witness-box when Mr. Loram shot up like a jack-in-the-box.

'You have made certain statements,' said he, 'concerning the scarab which Mr. Bellingham was accustomed to wear suspended from his watch-guard. You say that he was not wearing it when he came to Mr. Hurst's house on the twenty-third of November, nineteen hundred and two. Are you quite sure of that?'

'Quite sure.'

'I must ask you to be very careful in your statement on this point. The question is a highly important one. Do you swear that the scarab was not hanging from his watch-guard?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Did you notice the watch-guard particularly?'

'No; not particularly.'

'Then what makes you sure that the scarab was not attached to it?'

'It couldn't have been.'

'Why could it not?'

'Because if it had been there I should have seen it.'

'What kind of watch-guard was Mr. Bellingham wearing?'

'Oh, an ordinary sort of watch-guard.'

'I mean was it a chain or a ribbon or a strap?'

'A chain, I think—or perhaps a ribbon—or it might have been a strap.'

His lordship flattened his eyelids, but made no further sign and Mr. Loram continued:

'Did you or did you not notice what kind of watch-guard Mr. Bellingham was wearing?'

'I did not. Why should I? It was no business of mine.'

'But yet you are quite sure about the scarab?'

'Yes, quite sure.'

'You noticed that then?'

Mr. Loram paused and looked helplessly at the witness; a suppressed titter arose from the body of the Court, and a faint voice from the bench inquired:

'Are you quite incapable of giving a straightforward answer?'

Miss Dobbs's only reply was to burst into tears; whereupon Mr. Loram abruptly sat down and abandoned his re-examination.

The witness-box vacated by Miss Dobbs was occupied successively by Dr. Norbury, Mr. Hurst and the cloakroom attendant, none of whom contributed any new facts, but merely corroborated the statements made by Mr. Jellicoe and the housemaid. Then came the labourer who discovered the bones at Sidcup, and who repeated the evidence that he had given at the inquest, showing that the remains could not have been lying in the watercress-bed more than two years. Finally Dr. Summers was called, and, after he had given a brief description of the bones that he had examined, was asked by Mr. Loram:

'You have heard the description that Mr. Jellicoe has given of the testator?'

'I have.'

'Does that description apply to the person whose remains you examined?'

'In a general way it does.'

'I must ask you for a direct answer—yes or no. Does it apply?'

'Yes. But I ought to say that my estimate of the height of the deceased is only approximate.'

'Quite so. Judging from your examination of those remains and from Mr. Jellicoe's description, might those remains be the remains of the testator, John Bellingham?'

'Yes, they might.'

On receiving this admission Mr. Loram sat down, and Mr. Heath immediately rose to cross-examine.

'When you examined these remains, Doctor Summers, did you discover any personal peculiarities which would enable you to identify them as the remains of any one individual rather than any other individual of similar size, age, and proportions?'

'No. I found nothing that would identify the remains as those of any particular individual.'

As Mr. Heath asked no further questions, the witness received his dismissal, and Mr. Loram informed the Court that that was his case. The judge bowed somnolently, and then Mr. Heath rose to address the Court on behalf of the respondent. It was not a long speech, nor was it enriched by any displays of florid rhetoric; it concerned itself exclusively with a rebutment of the arguments of the counsel for the petitioner.

Having briefly pointed out that the period of absence was too short to give rise of itself to the presumption of death, Mr. Heath continued:

'The claim therefore rests upon evidence of a positive character. My learned friend asserts that the testator is presumably dead, and it is for him to prove what he has affirmed. Now, has he done this? I submit that he has not. He has argued with great force and ingenuity that the testator, being a bachelor, a solitary man without wife or child, dependant or master, public or private office of duty, or any bond, responsibility, or any other condition limiting his freedom of action, had no reason or inducement for absconding. This is my learned friend's argument, and he has conducted it with so much skill and ingenuity that he has not only succeeded in proving his case; he has proved a great deal too much. For if it is true, as my learned friend so justly argues, that a man thus unfettered by obligations of any kind has no reason for disappearing, is it not even more true that he has no reason for not disappearing? My friend has urged that the testator was at liberty to go where he pleased, when he pleased, and how he pleased; and that therefore there was no need for him to abscond. I reply, if he was at liberty to go away, whither, when, and how he pleased, why do we express surprise that he has made use of his liberty? My learned friend points out that the testator notified to nobody his intention of going away and has acquainted no one with his whereabouts; but, I ask, whom should he have notified? He was responsible to nobody; there was no one dependent upon him; his presence or absence was the concern of nobody but himself. If circumstances suddenly arising made it desirable that he should go abroad, why should he not go? I say there was no reason whatever.

'My learned friend has said that the testator went away leaving his affairs to take care of themselves. Now, gentlemen, I ask you if this can fairly be said of a man whose affairs are, as they have been for many years, in the hands of a highly capable, completely trustworthy agent who is better acquainted with them than the testator himself? Clearly it cannot.

'To conclude this part of the argument: I submit that the circumstances of the so-called disappearance of the testator present nothing out of the ordinary. The testator is a man of ample means, without any responsibilities to fetter his movements, and has been in the constant habit of travelling, often into remote and distant regions. The mere fact that he has been absent somewhat longer; than usual affords no ground whatever for the drastic proceeding of presumption of death and taking possession of his property.

'With reference to the human remains which have been mentioned in connection with the case I need say but little. The attempt; to connect them with the testator has failed completely. You, yourselves have heard Doctor Summers state on oath that they cannot be identified as the remains of any particular person. That would seem to dispose of them effectually. I must remark upon a very singular point that has been raised by the learned counsel for the petitioner, which is this:

'My learned friend points out that these remains were discovered near Eltham and near Woodford and that the testator was last seen alive at one of these two places. This he considers for some reason to be a highly significant fact. But I cannot agree with him. If the testator had been last seen alive at Woodford and the remains had been found at Woodford, or if he had disappeared from Eltham, and the remains had been found at Eltham, that would have had some significance. But he can only have been last seen at one of the places, whereas the remains have been found at both places. Here again my learned friend seems to have proved too much.

'But I need not occupy your time further. I repeat that, in order to justify us in presuming the death of the testator, clear and positive evidence would be necessary. That no such evidence has been brought forward. Accordingly, seeing that the testator may return at any time and is entitled to find his property intact, I shall ask you for a verdict that will secure to him this measure of ordinary justice.'

At the conclusion of Mr. Heath's speech the judge, as if awakening from a refreshing nap, opened his eyes; and uncommonly shrewd, intelligent eyes they were when the expressive eyelids were duly tucked up out of the way. He commenced by reading over a part of the will and certain notes—which he appeared to have made in some miraculous fashion with his eyes shut—and then proceeded to review the evidence and the counsels' arguments for the instruction of the jury.

'Before considering the evidence which you have heard, gentlemen' he said, 'it will be well for me to say a few words to you on the general aspects of the case which is occupying our attention.'

'If a person goes abroad or disappears from his home and his ordinary places of resort and is absent for a long period of time, the presumption of death arises at the expiration of seven years from the date on which he was last heard of. That is to say, that the total disappearance of an individual for seven years constitutes presumptive evidence that the said individual is dead; and the presumption can be set aside only by the production of evidence that he was alive at some time within that period of seven years. But if, on the other hand, it is sought to presume the death of a person who has been absent for a shorter period than seven years, it is necessary to produce such evidence as shall make it highly probable that the said person is dead. Of course, presumption implies supposition as opposed to actual demonstration; but, nevertheless, the evidence in such a case must be of a kind that tends to create a very strong belief that death has occurred; and I need hardly say that the shorter the period of absence, the more convincing must be the evidence.

'In the present case, the testator, John Bellingham, has been absent somewhat under two years. This is a relatively short period, and in itself gives rise to no presumption of death. Nevertheless, death has been presumed in a case where the period of absence was even shorter and the insurance recovered; but here the evidence supporting the belief in the occurrence of death was exceedingly weighty.

'The testator in this case was a shipmaster, and his disappearance was accompanied by the disappearance of the ship and the entire ship's company in the course of a voyage from London to Marseilles. The loss of the ship and her crew was the only reasonable explanation of the disappearance, and, short of actual demonstration, the facts offered convincing evidence of the death of all persons on board. I mention this case as an illustration. You are not dealing with speculative probabilities. You are contemplating a very momentous proceeding, and you must be very sure of your ground. Consider what it is that you are asked to do.

'The petitioner asks permission to presume the death of the testator in order that the testator's property may be distributed among the beneficiaries under the will. The granting of such permission involves us in the gravest responsibility. An ill-considered decision might be productive of a serious injustice to the testator, an injustice that could never be remedied. Hence it is incumbent upon you to weigh the evidence with the greatest care, to come to no decision without the profoundest consideration of all the facts.

'The evidence that you have heard divides itself into two parts—that relating to the circumstances of the testator's disappearance, and that relating to certain human remains. In connection with the latter I can only suggest my surprise and regret that the application was not postponed until the completion of the coroner's inquest, and leave you to consider the evidence. You will bear in mind that Doctor Summers has stated explicitly that the remains cannot be identified as those of any particular individual, but that the testator and the unknown deceased had so many points of resemblance that they might possibly be one and the same person.

'With reference to the circumstances of the disappearance, you have heard the evidence of Mr. Jellicoe to the effect that the testator has on no previous occasion gone abroad without informing

him as to his proposed destination. But in considering what weight you are to give to this statement you will bear in mind that when the testator set out for Paris after his interview with Doctor Norbury he left Mr. Jellicoe without any information as to his specific destination, his address in Paris, or the precise date when he should return, and that Mr. Jellicoe was unable to tell us where the testator went or what was his business. Mr. Jellicoe was, in fact, for a time without any means of tracing the testator or ascertaining his whereabouts.

'The evidence of the housemaid, Dobbs, and of Mr. Hurst is rather confusing. It appears that the testator came to the house, and when looked for later was not to be found. A search of the premises showed that he was not in the house, whence it seems to follow that he must have left it; but since no one was informed of his intention to leave, and he had expressed the intention of staying to see Mr. Hurst, his conduct in thus going away surreptitiously must appear somewhat eccentric. The point that you have to consider, therefore, is whether a person who is capable of thus departing in a surreptitious and eccentric manner from a house, without giving notice to the servants, is capable also of departing in a surreptitious and eccentric manner from his usual places of resort without giving notice to his friends or thereafter informing them of his whereabouts.

'The questions, then, gentlemen, that you have to ask yourselves before deciding on your verdict are two: first, Are the circumstances of the testator's disappearance and his continued absence incongruous with his habits and personal peculiarities as they are known to you? and second, Are there any facts which indicate in a positive manner that the testator is dead? Ask yourselves these questions, gentlemen, and the answers to them, furnished by the evidence that you have heard, will guide you to your decision.'

Having delivered himself of the above instructions, the judge applied himself to the perusal of the will with professional gusto, in which occupation he was presently disturbed by the announcement of the foreman of the jury that a verdict had been agreed upon.

The judge sat up and glanced at the jury-box, and when the foreman proceeded to state that 'We find no sufficient reason for presuming the testator, John Bellingham, to be dead,' he nodded approvingly. Evidently that was his opinion, too, as he was careful to explain when he conveyed to Mr. Loram the refusal of the Court to grant the permission applied for.

The decision was a great relief to me, and also, I think, to Miss Bellingham; but most of all to her father, who, with instinctive good manners, since he could not suppress a smile of triumph, rose and hastily stumped out of the Court, so that the discomfited Hurst should not see him. His daughter and I followed, and as we left the Court she remarked, with a smile:

'So our pauperism is not, after all, made absolute. There is still a chance for us in the Chapter of Accidents—and perhaps even for poor old Uncle John.'

CHAPTER XV. CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

THE morning after the hearing saw me setting forth on my round in more than usually good spirits. The round itself was but a short one, for my list contained only a couple of 'chronics,' and this, perhaps, contributed to my cheerful outlook on life. But there were other reasons. The decision of the Court had come as an unexpected reprieve and the ruin of my friends' prospects was at least postponed. Then, I had learned that Thorndyke was back from Bristol and wished me to look in on him; and, finally, Miss Bellingham had agreed to spend this very afternoon with me, browsing round the galleries at the British Museum.

I had disposed of my two patients by a quarter to eleven, and three minutes later was striding down Mitre Court, all agog to hear what Thorndyke had to say with reference to my notes on the inquest. The 'oak' was open when I arrived at his chambers, and a modest flourish on the little brass knocker of the inner door was answered by my quondam teacher himself.

'How good of you, Berkeley,' he said, shaking hands genially, 'to look me up so early. I am alone, just looking through the report of the evidence in yesterday's proceedings.'

He placed an easy chair for me, and, gathering up a bundle of typewritten papers, laid them aside on the table.

'Were you surprised at the decision?' I asked.

'No,' he answered. 'Two years is a short period of absence; but still, it might easily have gone the other way. I am greatly relieved. The respite gives us time to carry out our investigations without undue hurry.'

'Did you find my notes of any use?' I asked.

'Heath did. Polton handed them to him, and they were invaluable to him for his cross-examination. I haven't seen them yet; in fact, I have only just got them back from him. Let us go through them together now.'

He opened a drawer and taking from it my notebook, seated himself, and began to read through my notes with grave attention, while I stood and looked shyly over his shoulder. On the page that contained my sketches of the Sidcup arm, showing the distribution of the snails' eggs on the bones, he lingered with a faint smile that made me turn hot and red.

'Those sketches look rather footy,' I said; 'but I had to put something in my notebook.'

'You did not attach any importance, then, to the facts that they illustrated?'

'No. The egg-patches were there, so I noted the fact. That's all.'

'I congratulate you, Berkeley. There is not one man in twenty who would have had the sense to make a careful note of what he considers an unimportant or irrelevant fact; and the investigator who notes only those things that appear significant is perfectly useless. He gives himself no material for reconsideration. But you don't mean that these egg-patches and worm tubes appeared to you to have no significance at all?'

'Oh, of course, they show the position in which the bones were lying.'

'Exactly. The arm was lying, fully extended, with the dorsal side uppermost. But we also learn from these egg-patches that the hand had been separated from the arm before it was thrown into the pond; and there is something very remarkable in that.'

I leaned over his shoulder and gazed at my sketches, amazed at the rapidity with which he had reconstructed the limb from my rough drawings of the individual bones.

'I don't quite see how you arrived at it, though,' I said.

'Well, look at your drawings. The egg-patches are on the dorsal surface of the scapula, the humerus, and the bones of the fore-arm. But here you have shown six of the bones of the hand: two metacarpals, the os magnum, and three phalanges; and they all have egg-patches on the palmar surface. Therefore the hand was lying palm upwards.'

'But the hand may have been pronated.'

'If you mean pronated in relation to the arm, that is impossible, for the position of the egg-patches shows clearly that the bones of the arm were lying in the position of supination. Thus the dorsal surface of the arm and the palmar surface of the hand respectively were uppermost, which is an anatomical impossibility so long as the hand is attached to the arm.'

'But might not the hand have become detached after lying in the pond some time?'

'No. It could not have been detached until the ligaments had decayed, and if it had been separated after the decay of the soft parts, the bones would have been thrown into disorder. But the egg-patches are all on the palmar surface, showing that the bones were still in their normal relative positions. No, Berkeley, that hand was thrown into the pond separately from the arm.'

'But why should it have been?' I asked.

'Ah, there is a very pretty little problem for you to consider. And, meantime, let me tell you that your expedition has been a brilliant success. You are an excellent observer. Your only fault is that when you have noted certain facts you don't seem fully to appreciate their significance—which is merely a matter of inexperience. As to the facts that you have collected, several of them are of prime importance.'

'I am glad you are satisfied,' said I, 'though I don't see that I have discovered much excepting those snails' eggs; and they don't seem to have advanced matters very much.'

'A definite fact, Berkeley, is a definite asset. Perhaps we may presently find a little space in our Chinese puzzle which this fact of the detached hand will just drop into. But, tell me, did you find nothing unexpected or suggestive about those bones—as to their number and condition, for instance?'

'Well, I thought it a little queer that the scapula and clavicle should be there. I should have expected him to cut the arm off at the shoulder-joint.'

'Yes,' said Thorndyke; 'so should I; and so it has been done in every case of dismemberment that I am acquainted with. To an ordinary person, the arm seems to join on to the trunk at the shoulder-joint, and that is where he would naturally sever it. What explanation do you suggest of this unusual mode of severing the arm?'

'Do you think the fellow could have been a butcher?' I asked, remembering Dr. Summers' remark. 'This is the way a shoulder of mutton is taken off.'

'No,' replied Thorndyke. 'A butcher includes the scapula in a shoulder of mutton for a specific purpose, namely, to take off a given quantity of meat. And also, as a sheep has no clavicle, it is the easiest way to detach the limb. But I imagine a butcher would find himself in difficulties if he attempted to take off a man's arm in that way. The clavicle would be a new and perplexing feature. Then, too a butcher does not deal very delicately with his subject; if he has to divide a joint, he just cuts through it and does not trouble himself to avoid marking the bones. But you note here that

there is not a single scratch or score on any one of the bones, not even where the finger was removed. Now, if you have ever prepared bones for a museum, as I have, you will remember the extreme care that is necessary in disarticulating joints to avoid disfiguring the articular ends of the bones with cuts and scratches.'

'Then you think that the person who dismembered this body must have had some anatomical knowledge and skill?'

'That is what has been suggested. The suggestion is not mine.'

'Then I infer that you don't agree?'

Thorndyke smiled. 'I am sorry to be so cryptic, Berkeley, but you understand that I can't make statements. Still, I am trying to lead you to make certain inferences from the facts that are in your possession.'

'If I make the right inference, will you tell me?' I asked.

'It won't be necessary,' he answered, with the same quiet smile. 'When you have fitted the puzzle together you don't need to be told you have done it.'

It was most infernally tantalising. I pondered on the problem with a scowl of such intense cogitation that Thorndyke laughed outright.

'It seems to me,' I said, at length, 'that the identity of the remains is the primary question and that it is a question of fact. It doesn't seem any use to speculate about it.'

'Exactly. Either these bones are the remains of John Bellingham or they are not. There will be no doubt on the subject when all the bones are assembled—if ever they are. And the settlement of that question will probably throw light on the further question: Who deposited them in the places in which they were found? But to return to your observations: did you gather nothing from the other bones? From the complete state of the neck vertebrae, for instance?'

'Well, it did strike me as rather odd that the fellow should have gone to the trouble of separating the atlas from the skull. He must have been pretty handy with the scalpel to have done it as cleanly as he seems to have done; but I don't see why he should have gone about the business in the most inconvenient way.'

'You notice the uniformity of method. He has separated the head from the spine, instead of cutting through the spine lower down, as most persons would have done: he removed the arms with the entire shoulder-girdle, instead of simply cutting them off at the shoulder-joints. Even in the thighs the same peculiarity appears; for in neither case was the knee-cap found with the thigh-bone, although it seems to have been searched for. Now the obvious way to divide the leg is to cut through the patellar ligament, leaving the knee-cap attached to the thigh. But in this case, the knee-cap appears to have been left attached to the shank. Can you explain why this person should have adopted this unusual and rather inconvenient method? Can you suggest a motive for this procedure, or can you think of any circumstances which might lead a person to adopt this method by preference?'

'It seems as if he wished, for some reason, to divide the body into definite anatomical regions.'

Thorndyke chuckled. 'You are not offering that suggestion as an explanation, are you? Because it would require more explaining than the original problem. And it is not even true. Anatomically speaking, the knee-cap appertains to the thigh rather than to the shank. It is a sesamoid bone belonging to the thigh muscles; yet in this case it has been left attached, apparently, to the shank. No, Berkeley, that cat won't jump. Our unknown operator was not preparing a skeleton as a museum specimen; he was dividing a body up into convenient sized portions for the purpose of conveying them to various ponds. Now what circumstances might have led him to divide it in this peculiar manner?'

'I am afraid I have no suggestion to offer. Have you?'

Thorndyke suddenly lapsed into ambiguity. 'I think,' he said, 'it is possible to conceive such circumstances, and so, probably, will you if you think it over.'

'Did you gather anything of importance from the evidence at the inquest?' I asked.

'It is difficult to say,' he replied. 'The whole of my conclusions in this case are based on what is virtually circumstantial evidence. I have not one single fact of which I can say that it admits only of a single interpretation. Still, it must be remembered that even the most inconclusive facts, if sufficiently multiplied, yield a highly conclusive total. And my little pile of evidence is growing, particle by particle; but we mustn't sit here gossiping at this hour of the day; I have to consult with Marchmont and you say that you have an early afternoon engagement. We can walk together as far as Fleet Street.'

A minute or two later we went our respective ways, Thorndyke towards Lombard Street and I to Fetter Lane, not unmindful of those coming events that were casting so agreeable a shadow before them.

There was only one message awaiting me, and when Adolphus had delivered it (amidst mephitic fumes that rose from the basement, premonitory of fried plaice), I pocketed my stethoscope and betook myself to Gunpowder Alley, the aristocratic abode of my patient, joyfully threading the now familiar passages of Gough Square and Wine Office Court, and meditating pleasantly on the curious literary flavour that pervades these little-known regions. For the shade of the author of 'Rasselas' still seems to haunt the scenes of his Titanic labours and his ponderous but homely and temperate rejoicings. Every court and alley whispers of books and of the making of books: formes of type, trundled noisily on trolleys by ink-smeared boys, salute the wayfarer at odd corners; piles of strawboard, rolls or bales of paper, drums of printing-ink or roller composition stand on the pavement outside dark entries; basement windows give glimpses into Hadean caverns tenanted by legions of printer's devils; and the very air is charged with the hum of press and with odours of glue and paste and oil. The entire neighbourhood is given up to the printer and binder; and even my patient turned out to be a guillotine-knife grinder—a ferocious and revolutionary calling strangely at variance with his harmless appearance and meek bearing.

I was in good time at my tryst, despite the hindrances of fried plaice and invalid guillotinists; but, early as I was, Miss Bellingham was already waiting in the garden—she had been filling a bowl with flowers—ready to sally forth.

'It is quite like old times,' she said, as we turned into Fetter Lane, 'to be going to the Museum together. It brings back the Tell el Amarna tablets and all your kindness and unselfish labour, suppose we shall walk there to-day?'

'Certainly,' I replied; 'I am not going to share your society with the common mortals who ride in omnibuses. That would be sheer, simple waste. Besides, it is more companionable to walk.'

'Yes, it is; and the bustle of the streets makes one more appreciative of the quiet of the Museum. What are we going to look at when we get there?'

'You must decide that,' I replied. 'You know the collection much better than I do.'

'Well, now,' she mused, 'I wonder what you would like to see; or, in other words, what I should like you to see. The old English pottery is rather fascinating, especially the Fulham ware. I rather think I shall take you to see that.'

She reflected a while, and then, just as we reached the gate of Staple Inn, she stopped and looked thoughtfully down the Gray's Inn Road.

'You have taken a great interest in our "case" as Doctor Thorndyke calls it. Would you like to see the churchyard where Uncle John wished to be buried? It is a little out of our way, but we are not in a hurry, are we?'

I, certainly, was not. Any deviation that might prolong our walk was welcome, and, as to the place—why, all places were alike to me if only she were by my side. Besides, the churchyard was really of some interest, since it was undoubtedly the 'exciting cause' of the obnoxious paragraph two of the will. I accordingly expressed a desire to make its acquaintance, and we crossed to the entrance to Gray's Inn Road.

'Do you ever try,' she asked, as we turned down the dingy thoroughfare, 'to picture familiar places as they looked a couple of hundred years ago?'

'Yes,' I answered, 'and very difficult I find it. One has to manufacture the materials for reconstruction, and then the present aspect of the place will keep obtruding itself. But some places are easier to reconstitute than others.'

'That is what I find,' said she. 'Now Holborn, for example, is quite easy to reconstruct, though I daresay the imaginary form isn't a bit like the original. But there are fragments left, like Staple Inn and the front of Gray's Inn; and then one has seen prints of the old Middle Row and some of the taverns, so that one has some material with which to help out one's imagination. But this road we are walking in always baffles me. It looks so old and yet is, for the most part, so new that I find it impossible to make a satisfactory picture of its appearance, say, when Sir Roger de Coverley might have strolled in Gray's Inn Walks, or farther back, when Francis Bacon had chambers in the Inn.'

'I imagine,' said I, 'that part of the difficulty is in the mixed character of the neighbourhood. Here, on the one side, is old Gray's Inn, not much changed since Bacon's time—his chambers are still to be seen, I think, over the gateway; and there, on the Clerkenwell side, is a dense and rather squalid neighbourhood which has grown up over a region partly rural and wholly fugitive in character. Places like Bagnigge Wells and Hockley in the Hole would not have had many buildings that were likely to survive; and in the absence of surviving specimens the imagination hasn't much to work from.'

'I daresay you are right,' said she. 'Certainly, the purlieus of old Clerkenwell present a very confused picture to me; whereas, in the case of an old street like, say, Great Ormond Street, one has only to sweep away the modern buildings and replace them with glorious old houses like the few that remain, dig up the roadway and pavements and lay down cobble-stones, plant a few

wooden posts, hang up one or two oil-lamps, and the transformation is complete. And a very delightful transformation it is.'

'Very delightful; which, by the way, is a melancholy thought. For we ought to be doing better work than our forefathers; whereas what we actually do is to pull down the old buildings, clap the doorways, porticoes, panelling, and mantels in our museums, and then run up something inexpensive and useful and deadly uninteresting in their place.'

My companion looked at me and laughed softly. 'For a naturally cheerful, and even gay young man,' said she, 'you are most amazingly pessimistic. The mantle of Jeremiah—if he ever wore one—seems to have fallen on you, but without in the least impairing-your good spirits excepting in regard to matters architectural.'

'I have much to be thankful for,' said I. 'Am I not taken to the Museum by a fair lady? And does she not stay me with mummy cases and comfort me with crockery?'

'Pottery,' she corrected; and then as we met a party of grave-looking women emerging from a side-street, she said: 'I suppose these are lady medical students.'

'Yes, on their way to the Royal Free Hospital. Note the gravity of their demeanour and contrast it with the levity of the male student.'

'I was doing so,' she answered, 'and wondering why professional women are usually so much more serious than men.'

'Perhaps,' I suggested, 'it is a matter of selection. A peculiar type of woman is attracted to the professions, whereas every man has to earn his living as a matter of course.'

'Yes, I daresay that is the explanation. This is our turning.'

We passed into Heathcote Street, at the end of which was an open gate giving entrance to one of those disused and metamorphosed burial-grounds that are to be met with in the older districts of London; in which the dispossessed dead are jostled into corners to make room for the living. Many of the headstones were still standing, and others, displaced to make room for asphalted walks and seats, were ranged around by the walls exhibiting inscriptions made meaningless by their removal. It was a pleasant enough place on this summer afternoon, contrasted with the dingy streets whence we had come, though its grass was faded and yellow and the twitter of the birds in the trees mingled with the hideous Board-school drawl of the children who played around the seats and the few remaining tombs.

'So this is the last resting-place of the illustrious house of Bellingham,' said I.

'Yes; and we are not the only distinguished people who repose in this place. The daughter of no less a person than Richard Cromwell is buried here; the tomb is still standing—but perhaps you have been here before, and know it.'

'I don't think I have ever been here before; and yet there is something about the place that seems familiar.' I looked around, cudgelling my brains for the key to the dimly reminiscent sensations that the place evoked; until, suddenly, I caught sight of a group of buildings away to the west, enclosed within a wall heightened by a wooden trellis.

'Yes, of course!' I exclaimed. 'I remember the place now. I have never been in this part before, but in that enclosure beyond, which opens at the end of Henrietta Street, there used to be and may be still, for all I know, a school of anatomy, at which I attended in my first year; in fact, I did my first dissection there.'

'There was a certain gruesome appropriateness in the position of the school,' remarked Miss Bellingham. 'It would have been really convenient in the days of the resurrection men. Your material would have been delivered at your very door. Was it a large school?'

'The attendance varied according to the time of the year. Sometimes I worked there quite alone. I used to let myself in with a key and hoist my subject out of a sort of sepulchral tank by means of a chain tackle. It was a ghoulish business. You have no idea how awful the body used to look to my unaccustomed eyes, as it rose slowly out of the tank. It was like the resurrection scenes that you see on some old tombstones, where the deceased is shown rising out of his coffin while the skeleton, Death, falls vanquished with his dart shattered and his crown toppling off.

'I remember, too, that the demonstrator used to wear a blue apron, which created a sort of impression of a cannibal butcher's shop. But I am afraid I am shocking you.'

'No you are not. Every profession has its unpresentable aspects, which ought not to be seen by outsiders. Think of the sculptor's studio and of the sculptor himself when he is modelling a large figure or group in the clay. He might be a bricklayer or a road-sweeper if you judge by his appearance. This is the tomb I was telling you about.'

We halted before the plain coffer of stone, weathered and wasted by age, but yet kept in decent repair by some pious hands, and read the inscription, setting forth with modest pride, that here reposed Anna, sixth daughter of Richard Cromwell, 'The Protector.' It was a simple monument and commonplace enough, with the crude severity of the ascetic age to which it belonged. But still, it carried the mind back to those stirring times when the leafy shades of Gray's Inn Lane must have resounded with the clank of weapons and the tramp of armed men; when this bald recreation-ground was a rustic churchyard, standing amidst green fields and hedgerows, and countrymen leading their pack-horses into London through the Lane would stop to look in over the wooden gate.

Miss Bellingham looked at me critically as I stood thus reflecting, and presently remarked: 'I think you and I have a good many mental habits in common.'

'I looked up inquiringly, and she continued: 'I notice that an old tombstone seems to set you meditating. So it does me. When I look at an ancient monument, and especially an old headstone, I find myself almost unconsciously retracing the years to the date that is written on the stone. Why do you think that is? Why should a monument be so stimulating to the imagination? And why should a common headstone be more so than any other?'

'I suppose it is,' I answered reflectively, 'that a churchyard monument is a peculiarly personal thing and appertains in a peculiar way to a particular time. And the circumstance that it has stood untouched by the passing years while everything around has changed, helps the imagination to span the interval. And the common headstone, the memorial of some dead and gone farmer or labourer who lived and died in the village hard by, is still more intimate and suggestive. The rustic, childish sculpture of the village mason and the artless doggerel of the village schoolmaster, bring back the time and place and the conditions of life more vividly than the more scholarly inscriptions and the more artistic enrichments of monuments of greater pretensions. But where are your own family tombstones?'

'They are over in that farther corner. There is an intelligent, but inopportune, person apparently copying the epitaphs. I wish he would go away. I want to show them to you.'

I now noticed, for the first time, an individual engaged, notebook in hand, in making a careful survey of a group of old headstones. Evidently he was making a copy of the inscriptions, for not only was he poring attentively over the writing on the face of the stone, but now and again he helped out his vision by running his fingers over the worn lettering.

'That is my grandfather's tombstone that he is copying now,' said Miss Bellingham; and even as she spoke, the man turned and directed a searching glance at us with a pair of keen, spectacled eyes.

Simultaneously we uttered an exclamation of surprise; for the investigator was Mr. Jellicoe.

CHAPTER XVI. O ARTEMIDORUS, FAREWELL!

WHETHER or not Mr. Jellicoe was surprised to see us, it is impossible to say. His countenance (which served the ordinary purposes of a face, inasmuch as it contained the principal organs of special sense, with inlets to the alimentary and respiratory tracts) was, as an apparatus for the expression of the emotions, a total failure. To a thought-reader it would have been about as helpful as the face carved upon the handle of an umbrella; a comparison suggested, perhaps, by a certain resemblance to such an object. He advanced, holding open his notebook and pencil, and having saluted us with a stiff bow and an old-fashioned flourish of his hat, shook hands rheumatically and waited for us to speak.

'This is an unexpected pleasure, Mr. Jellicoe,' said Miss Bellingham.

'It is very good of you to say so,' he replied.

'And quite a coincidence—that we should all happen to come here on the same day.'

'A coincidence, certainly,' he admitted, 'and if we all happened not to come—which must have occurred frequently—that also would have been a coincidence.'

'I suppose it would,' said she, 'but I hope we are not interrupting you.'

'Thank you, no. I had just finished when I had the pleasure of perceiving you.'

You were making some notes in reference to the case, I imagine,' said I. It was an impertinent question, put with malice aforethought for the mere pleasure of hearing him evade it.

'The case?' he repeated. 'You are referring, perhaps, to Stevens versus the Parish Council?'

'I think Doctor Berkeley was referring to the case of my uncle's will,' Miss Bellingham said quite gravely, though with a suspicious dimpling about the corners of her mouth.

'Indeed,' said Mr. Jellicoe. 'There is a case, is there; a suit?'

'I mean the proceedings instituted by Mr. Hurst.'

'Oh, but that was merely an application to the Court, and is, moreover, finished and done with. At least, so I understand. I speak, of course, subject to correction; I am not acting for Mr. Hurst, you will be pleased to remember. As a matter of fact,' he continued, after a brief pause, 'I was just refreshing my memory as to the wording of the inscriptions on these stones, especially that of your grandfather, Francis Bellingham. It has occurred to me that if it should appear by the finding of the coroner's jury that your uncle is deceased, it would be proper and decorous that some memorial should be placed here. But, as the burial ground is closed, there might be some difficulty about erecting a new monument, whereas there would probably be none in adding an inscription to one already existing. Hence these investigations. For if the inscriptions on your grandfather's stone had set forth that "here rests the body of Francis Bellingham," it would have been manifestly improper to add "also that of John Bellingham, son of the above". Fortunately the inscription was more discreetly drafted, merely recording the fact that this monument is "sacred to the memory of the said Francis", and not committing itself as to the whereabouts of the remains. But perhaps I am interrupting you.'

'No, not at all,' replied Miss Bellingham (which was grossly untrue; he was interrupting me most intolerably); 'we were going to the British Museum and just looked in here on our way.'

'Ha,' said Mr. Jellicoe, 'now, I happen to be going to the Museum too, to see Doctor Norbury. I suppose that is another coincidence?'

'Certainly it is,' Miss Bellingham replied; and then she asked: 'Shall we walk together?' and the old curmudgeon actually said 'yes'—confound him!

We returned to the Gray's Inn Road, where, as there was now room for us to walk abreast, I proceeded to indemnify myself for the lawyer's unwelcome company by leading the conversation back to the subject of the missing man.

'Was there anything, Mr. Jellicoe, in Mr. John Bellingham's state of health that would make it probable that he might die suddenly?'

The lawyer looked at me suspiciously for a few moments and then remarked:

'You seem to be greatly interested in John Bellingham and his affairs.'

'I am. My friends are deeply concerned in them, and the case itself is of more than common interest from a professional point of view.'

'And what is the bearing of this particular question?'

'Surely it is obvious,' said I. 'If a missing man is known to have suffered from some affection, such as heart disease, aneurism, or arterial degeneration, likely to produce sudden death, that fact will surely be highly material to the question as to whether he is probably dead or alive.'

'No doubt you are right,' said Mr. Jellicoe. 'I have little knowledge of medical affairs, but doubtless you are right. As to the question itself, I am Mr. Bellingham's lawyer, not his doctor. His health is a matter that lies outside my jurisdiction. But you heard my evidence in Court, to the effect that the testator appeared, to my untutored observation, to be a healthy man. I can say no more now.'

'If the question is of any importance,' said Miss Bellingham, 'I wonder they did not call his doctor and settle it definitely. My own impression is that he was—or is—rather a strong and sound man. He certainly recovered very quickly and completely after his accident.'

'What accident was that?' I asked.

'Oh, hasn't my father told you? It occurred while he was staying with us. He slipped from a kerb and broke one of the bones of the left ankle—somebody's fracture—'

'Pott's?'

'Yes; that was the name—Pott's fracture; and he broke both his knee-caps as well. Sir Morgan Bennet had to perform an operation, or he would have been a cripple for life. As it was, he was about again in a few weeks, apparently none the worse excepting for a slight weakness of the left ankle.'

'Could he walk upstairs?' I asked.

'Oh, yes; and play golf and ride a bicycle.'

'You are sure he broke both knee-caps?'

'Quite sure. I remember that it was mentioned as an uncommon injury, and that Sir Morgan seemed quite pleased with him for doing it.'

'That sounds rather libellous; but I expect he was pleased with the result of the operation. He might well be.'

Here there was a brief lull in the conversation, and, even as I was trying to think of a poser for Mr. Jellicoe, that gentleman took the opportunity to change the subject.

'Are you going to the Egyptian rooms?' he asked.

'No,' replied Miss Bellingham; 'we are going to look at the pottery.'

'Ancient or modern?'

'That old Fulham ware is what chiefly interests us at present; that of the seventeenth century. I don't know whether you call that ancient or modern.'

'Neither do I,' said Mr. Jellicoe. 'Antiquity and modernity are terms that have no fixed connotation. They are purely relative and their application in a particular instance has to be determined by a sort of sliding-scale. To a furniture collector, a Tudor chair or a Jacobean chest is ancient; to an architect, their period is modern, whereas an eleventh-century church is ancient; but to an Egyptologist, accustomed to remains of a vast antiquity, both are products of modern periods separated by an insignificant interval. And, I suppose,' he added reflectively, 'that to a geologist, the traces of the very earliest dawn of human history appertain only to the recent period. Conceptions of time, like all other conceptions, are relative.'

'You would appear to be a disciple of Herbert Spencer,' I remarked.

'I am a disciple of Arthur Jellicoe, sir,' he retorted. And I believed him.

By the time we had reached the Museum he had become almost genial; and, if less amusing in this frame, he was so much more instructive and entertaining that I refrained from baiting him, and permitted him to discuss his favourite topic unhindered, especially since my companion listened

with lively interest. Nor, when we entered the great hall, did he relinquish possession of us, and we followed submissively, as he led the way past the winged bulls of Nineveh and the great seated statues, until we found ourselves, almost without the exercise of our volition, in the upper room amidst the glaring mummy cases that had witnessed the birth of my friendship with Ruth Bellingham.

'Before I leave you,' said Mr. Jellicoe, 'I should like to show you that mummy that we were discussing the other evening; the one, you remember, that my friend, John Bellingham, presented to the Museum a little time before his disappearance. The point that I mentioned is only a trivial one, but it may become of interest hereafter if any plausible explanation should be forthcoming.' He led us along the room until we arrived at the case containing John Bellingham's gift, where he halted and gazed in at the mummy with the affectionate reflectiveness of the connoisseur.

'The bitumen coating was what we were discussing, Miss Bellingham,' said he. 'You have seen it, of course.'

'Yes,' she answered. 'It is a dreadful disfigurement, isn't it?'

'Aesthetically it is to be deplored, but it adds a certain speculative interest to the specimen. You notice that the black coating leaves the principal decoration and the whole of the inscription untouched, which is precisely the part that one would expect to find covered up; whereas the feet and the back, which probably bore no writing, are quite thickly crusted. If you stoop down, you can see that the bitumen was daubed freely into the lacings of the back, where it served no purpose, so that even the strings are embedded.' He stooped as he spoke, and peered up inquisitively at the back of the mummy, where it was visible between the supports.

'Has Doctor Norbury any explanation to offer?' asked Miss Bellingham.

'None whatever,' replied Mr. Jellicoe. 'He finds it as great a mystery as I do. But he thinks that we may get some suggestion from the Director when he comes back. He is a very great authority, as you know, and a practical excavator of great experience too. I mustn't stay here talking of these things, and keeping you from your pottery. Perhaps I have stayed too long already. If I have I ask your pardon, and I will now wish you a very good afternoon.' With a sudden return to his customary wooden impassivity, he shook hands with us, bowed stiffly, and took himself off towards the curator's office.

'What a strange man that is,' said Miss Bellingham, as Mr. Jellicoe disappeared through the doorway at the end of the room, 'or perhaps I should say, a strange being, for I can hardly think of him as a man. I have never met any other human creature at all like him.'

'He is certainly a queer old fogey,' I agreed.

'Yes, but there is something more than that. He is so emotionless, so remote and aloof from all mundane concerns. He moves among ordinary men and women, but as a mere presence, an unmoved spectator of their actions, quite dispassionate and impersonal.'

'Yes; he is astonishingly self-contained; in fact, he seems, as you say, to go to and fro among men, enveloped in a sort of infernal atmosphere of his own, like Marley's ghost. But he is lively and human enough as soon as the subject of Egyptian antiquities is broached.'

'Lively, but not human. He is always, to me, quite unhuman. Even when he is most interested, and even enthusiastic, he is a mere personification of knowledge. Nature ought to have furnished him with an ibis' head like Tahuti; then he would have looked his part.'

'He would have made a rare sensation in Lincoln's Inn if he had,' said I; and we both laughed heartily at the imaginary picture of Tahuti Jellicoe, slender-beaked and top-hatted, going about his business in Lincoln's Inn and the Law Courts.

Insensibly, as we talked, we had drawn near to the mummy of Artemidorus, and now my companion halted before the case with her thoughtful grey eyes bent dreamily on the face that looked out at us. I watched her with reverent admiration. How charming she looked as she stood with her sweet, grave face turned so earnestly to the object of her mystical affection! How dainty and full of womanly dignity and grace! And then, suddenly it was borne in upon me that a great change had come over her since the day of our first meeting. She had grown younger, more girlish, and more gentle. At first she had seemed much older than I; a sad-faced woman, weary, solemn, enigmatic, almost gloomy, with a bitter, ironic humour and a bearing distant and cold. Now she was only maidenly and sweet; tinged, it is true, with a certain seriousness, but frank and gracious and wholly lovable.

Could the change be due to our friendship? As I asked myself the question, my heart leaped with a new hope. I yearned to tell her all that she was to me—all that I hoped we might be to one another in the years to come.

At length I ventured to break in upon her reverie.

'What are you thinking about so earnestly, fair lady?'

She turned quickly with a bright smile and sparkling eyes that looked frankly into mine. 'I was wondering,' said she, 'if he was jealous of my new friend. But what a baby I am to talk such nonsense!'

She laughed softly and happily with just an adorable hint of shyness.

'Why should he be jealous?' I asked.

'Well, you see, before—we were friends, he had me all to himself. I have never had a man friend before—except my father—and no really intimate friend at all. And I was very lonely in those days, after our troubles had befallen. I am naturally solitary, but still, I am only a girl; I am not a philosopher. So when I felt very lonely, I used to come here and look at Artemidorus and make believe that he knew all the sadness of my life and sympathised with me. It was very silly, I know, but yet, somehow it was a real comfort to me.'

'It was not silly of you at all. He must have been a good man, a gentle, sweet-faced man who had won the love of those who knew him, as this beautiful memorial tells; and it was wise and good of you to sweeten the bitterness of your life with the fragrance of this human love that blossoms in the dust after the lapse of centuries. No, you were not silly, and Artemidorus is not jealous of your new friend.'

'Are you sure?' She still smiled as she asked the question, but was soft—almost tender—and there was a note of whimsical anxiety in her voice.

'Quite sure. I give you my confident assurance.' She laughed gaily.

'Then,' said she, 'I am satisfied, for I am sure you know. But here is a mighty telepathist who can read the thoughts even of a mummy. A most formidable companion. But tell me how you know.'

'I know because it is he who gave you to me to be my friend. Don't you remember?'

'Yes, I remember,' she answered softly. 'It was when you were so sympathetic with my foolish whim that I felt we were really friends.'

'And I, when you confided your pretty fancy to me, thanked you for the gift of your friendship, and treasured it, and do still treasure it, above everything on earth.'

She looked at me quickly with a sort of nervousness in her manner, and cast down her eyes. Then, after a few moments' almost embarrassed silence, as if to bring back our talk to a less emotional plane, she said:

'Do you notice the curious way in which this memorial divides itself up into two parts?'

'How do you mean?' I asked, a little disconcerted by the sudden descent.

'I mean that there is a part of it that is purely decorative and a part that is expressive or emotional. You notice that the general design and scheme of decoration, although really Greek in feeling, follows rigidly the Egyptian conventions. But the portrait is entirely in the Greek manner, and when they came to that pathetic farewell, it had to be spoken in their own tongue, written in their own familiar characters.'

'Yes. I have noticed that and admired the taste with which they have kept the inscription so inconspicuous as not to clash with the decoration. An obtrusive inscription in Greek characters would have spoiled the consistency of the whole scheme.'

'Yes, it would.' She assented absently as if she were thinking of something else, and once more gazed thoughtfully at the mummy. I watched her with deep content: noted the lovely contour of her cheek, the soft masses of hair that strayed away so gracefully from her brow, and thought her the most wonderful creature that had ever trod the earth. Suddenly she looked at me reflectively.

'I wonder,' she said, 'what made me tell you about Artemidorus. It was a rather silly, childish sort of make-believe, and I wouldn't have told anyone else for the world; not even my father. How did I know that you would sympathise and understand?'

She asked the question in all simplicity with her serious grey eyes looking inquiringly into mine. And the answer came to me in a flash, with the beating of my own heart.

'I will tell you how you know, Ruth,' I whispered passionately. 'It was because I loved you more than anyone else in the world has ever loved you, and you felt my love in your heart and called it sympathy.'

I stopped short, for she had blushed scarlet, and then turned deathly pale. And now she looked at me wildly, almost with terror.

'Have I shocked you, Ruth dearest?' I exclaimed penitently, 'have I spoken too soon? If I have, forgive me. But I had to tell you. I have been eating my heart out for love of you for I don't know how long. I think I have loved you from the first day we met. Perhaps I shouldn't have spoken yet, but, Ruth dear, if you only knew what a sweet girl you are, you wouldn't blame me.'

'I don't blame you,' she said, almost in a whisper; 'I blame myself. I have been a bad friend to you, who have been so loyal and loving to me. I ought not to have let this happen. For it can't be, Paul; I can't say what you want me to say. We can never be anything more to one another than friends.'

A cold hand seemed to grasp my heart—a horrible fear that I had lost all that I cared for—all that made life desirable.

'Why can't we?' I asked. 'Do you mean that—that the gods have been gracious to some other man?'

'No, no,' she answered hastily—almost indignantly, 'of course I don't mean that.'

'Then it is only that you don't love me yet. Of course you don't. Why should you? But you will, dear, some day. And I will wait patiently until that day comes and not trouble you with entreaties. I will wait for you as Jacob waited for Rachel; and as the long years seemed to him but as a few days because of the love he bore her, so it shall be with me, if only you will not send me away quite without hope.'

She was looking down, white-faced, with a hardening of the lips as if she were in bodily pain. 'You don't understand,' she whispered. It can't be—it can never be. There is something that makes it impossible, now and always. I can't tell you more than that.'

But, Ruth dearest,' I pleaded despairingly, 'may it not become possible some day? Can it not be made possible? I can wait, but I can't give you up. Is there no chance whatever that this obstacle may be removed?'

'Very little, I fear. Hardly any. No, Paul; it is hopeless, and I can't bear to talk about it. Let me go now. Let us say good-bye here and see one another no more for a while. Perhaps we may be friends again some day—when you have forgiven me.'

'Forgiven you, dearest!' I exclaimed. 'There is nothing to forgive. And we are friends, Ruth. Whatever happens, you are the dearest friend I have on earth, or can ever have.'

'Thank you, Paul,' she said faintly. 'You are very good to me. But let me go, please. I must be alone.'

4 She held out a trembling hand, and, as I took it, I was shocked to see how terribly agitated and ill she looked.

'May I not come with you, dear?' I pleaded.

'No, no!' she exclaimed breathlessly; 'I must go away by myself. I want to be alone. Good-bye.'

'Before I let you go, Ruth—if you must go—I must have a most solemn promise from you.'

Her sad grey eyes met mine and her lips quivered with an unspoken question.

'You must promise me,' I went on, 'that if ever this barrier that parts us should be removed, you will let me know instantly. Remember that I love you always, and that I am waiting for you always on this side of the grave.'

She caught her breath in a quick little sob, and pressed my hand.

'Yes,' she whispered: 'I promise. Good-bye.'

She pressed my hand again and was gone; and, as I gazed at the empty doorway through which she had passed, I caught a glimpse of her reflection in a glass on the landing, where she had paused for a moment to wipe her eyes. I felt it, in a manner, indelicate to have seen her, and turned away my head quickly; and yet I was conscious of a certain selfish satisfaction in the sweet sympathy that her grief bespoke.

But now that she was gone a horrible sense of desolation descended on me. Only now, by the consciousness of irreparable loss, did I begin to realise the meaning of this passion of love that had stolen unawares into my life. How it had glorified the present and spread a glamour of delight over the dimly considered future: how all pleasures and desires, hopes and ambitions, had converged upon it as a focus; how it had stood out as the one great reality behind which the other circumstances of life were as a background, shimmering, half seen, immaterial and unreal. And now it was gone—lost, as it seemed, beyond hope; and that which was left to me was but the empty frame from which the picture had vanished.

I have no idea how long I stood rooted to the spot where she had left me, wrapped in a dull consciousness of pain, immersed in a half-numb reverie. Recent events flitted, dream-like, through my mind; our happy labours in the reading-room; our first visit to the Museum; and this present day that had opened so brightly and with such joyous promise. One by one these phantoms of a vanished happiness came and went. Occasional visitors sauntered into the room—but the galleries were mostly empty that day—gazed inquisitively at my motionless figure, and went their way. And still the dull, intolerable ache in my breast went on, the only vivid consciousness that was left to me.

Presently I raised my eyes and met those of the portrait. The sweet, pensive face of the old Greek settler looked out at me wistfully as though he would offer comfort; as though he would tell me that he, too, had known sorrow when he lived his life in the sunny Fayyum. And a subtle consolation, like the faint scent of old rose leaves, seemed to exhale from that friendly face that had looked on the birth of my happiness and had seen it wither and fade. I turned away, at last, with a silent farewell; and when I looked back, he seemed to speed me on my way with gentle valediction.

CHAPTER XVII. THE ACCUSING FINGER

OF my wanderings after I left the Museum on that black and dismal dies irie, I have but a dim recollection. But I must have travelled a quite considerable distance, since it wanted an hour or two to the time for returning to the surgery, and I spent the interval walking swiftly through streets and squares, unmindful of the happenings around, intent only on my present misfortune, and driven by a natural impulse to seek relief in bodily exertion. For mental distress sets up, as it were, a sort of induced current of physical unrest; a beneficent arrangement, by which a dangerous excess of emotional excitement may be transformed into motor energy, and so safely got rid of. The motor apparatus acts as a safety-valve to the psychical; and if the engine races for a while, with the onset of a bodily fatigue the emotional pressure-gauge returns to a normal reading.

And so it was with me. At first I was conscious of nothing but a sense of utter bereavement, of the shipwreck of all my hopes. But, by degrees, as I threaded my way among the moving crowds, I came to a better and more worthy frame of mind. After all, I had lost nothing that I had ever had. Ruth was still all that she had ever been to me—perhaps even more; and if that had been a rich endowment yesterday, why not to-day also? And how unfair it would be to her if I should mope and grieve over a disappointment that was no fault of hers and for which there was no remedy!

Thus I reasoned with myself, and to such purpose that, by the time I reached Fetter Lane, my dejection had come to quite manageable proportions and I had formed the resolution to get back to the status quo ante helium as soon as possible.

About eight o'clock, as I was sitting alone in the consulting-room, gloomily persuading myself that I was now quite resigned to the inevitable, Adolphus brought me a registered packet, at the handwriting on which my heart gave such a bound that I had much ado to sign the receipt. As soon as Adolphus had retired (with undissembled contempt of the shaky signature) I tore open the packet, and as I drew out a letter a tiny box dropped on the table.

The letter was all too short, and I devoured it over and over again with the eagerness of a condemned man reading a reprieve:

'My Dear Paul.

'Forgive me for leaving you so abruptly this afternoon, and leaving you so unhappy, too. I am more sane and reasonable now, and so send you greeting and beg you not to grieve for that which can never be. It is quite impossible, dear friend, and I entreat you, as you care for me, never speak of it again; never again to make me feel that I can give you so little when you have given so much. And do not try to see me for a little while. I shall miss your visits, and so will my father, who is very fond of you; but it is better that we should not meet, until we can take up our old relations—if that can ever be.

'I am sending you a little keepsake in case we should drift apart on the eddies of life. It is the ring that I told you about—the one that my uncle save me. Perhaps you may be able to wear it as you have a small hand, but in any case keep it in remembrance of our friendship. The device on it is the Eye of Osiris, a mystic symbol for which I have a sentimentally superstitious affection, as also had my poor uncle, who actually bore it tattooed in scarlet on his breast. It signifies that the great judge of the dead looks down on men to see that justice is done and that truth prevails. So I commend you to the good Osiris; may his eye be upon you, ever watchful over your welfare in the absence of

'Your affectionate friend.

'Ruth.'

It was a sweet letter, I thought, even if it carried little comfort; quiet and reticent like its writer, but with an undertone of affection. I laid it down at length, and, taking the ring from its box, examined it fondly. Though but a copy, it had all the quaintness and feeling of the antique original, and, above all, it was fragrant with the spirit of the giver. Dainty and delicate, wrought of silver and gold, with an inlay of copper, I would not have exchanged it for the Koh-i-noor; and when I had slipped it on my finger its tiny eye of blue enamel looked up at me so friendly and companionable that I felt the glamour of the old-world superstition stealing over me too.

Not a single patient came in this evening, which was well for me (and also for the patient), as I was able forthwith to write in reply a long letter; but this I shall spare the long-suffering reader excepting its concluding paragraph:

'And now, dearest, I have said my say; once for all I have said it, and I will not open my mouth on the subject again (I am not actually opening it now) "until the times do alter". And if the times do never alter—if it shall come to pass, in due course, that we two shall sit side by side, white-haired, and crinkly-nosed, and lean our poor old chins upon our sticks and mumble and gibber amicably over the things that might have been if the good Osiris had come up to the scratch—I will still be content, because your friendship, Ruth, is better than another woman's love. So you see, I have taken my gruel and come up to lime smiling—if you will pardon the pugilistic metaphor—and I promise you loyally to do your bidding and never again to distress you.'

'Your faithful and loving friend.

Paul.'

This letter I addressed and stamped, and then, with a wry grimace which I palmed off on myself (but not on Adolphus) as a cheerful smile, I went out and dropped it into the post-box; after which I further deluded myself by murmuring Nunc dimittis and assuring myself that the incident was now absolutely closed.

But despite this comfortable assurance I was, in the days that followed, an exceedingly miserable young man. It is all very well to write down troubles of this kind as trivial and sentimental. They are nothing of the kind. When a man of essentially serious nature has found the one woman of all the world who fulfils his highest ideals of womanhood, who is, in fact, a woman in ten thousand, to whom he has given all that he has to give of love and worship, the sudden wreck of all his hopes is no small calamity. And so I found it. Resign myself as I would to the bitter reality, the ghost of the might-have-been haunted me night and day, so that I spent my leisure wandering abstractedly about the streets, always trying to banish thought and never for an instant succeeding. A great unrest was upon me; and when I received a letter from Dick Barnard announcing his arrival at Madeira, homeward bound, I breathed a sigh of relief. I had no plans for the future, but I longed to be rid of thenow irksome, routine of the practice—to be free to come and go when and how I pleased.

One evening, as I sat consuming with little appetite my solitary supper, there fell on me a sudden sense of loneliness. The desire that I had hitherto felt to be alone with my own miserable reflections gave place to a yearning for human companionship. That, indeed, which I craved for most was forbidden, and I must abide by my lady's wishes; but there were my friends in the Temple. It was more than a week since I had seen them; in fact, we had not met since the morning of that unhappiest day of my life. They would be wondering what had become of me. I rose from the table, and having filled my pouch from a tin of tobacco, set forth for King's Bench Walk.

As I approached the entry of No. 5A in the gathering darkness I met Thorndyke himself emerging encumbered with two deck-chairs, a reading-lantern, and a book.

'Why, Berkeley!' he exclaimed, 'is it indeed thou? We have been wondering what had become of you.'

'It is a long time since I looked you up,' I admitted.

He scrutinised me attentively by the light of the entry lamp, and then remarked: 'Fetter Lane doesn't seem to be agreeing with you very well, my son. You are looking quite thin and peaky.'

'Well, I've nearly done with it. Barnard will be back in about ten days. His ship is putting in at Madeira to coal and take in some cargo, and then he is coming home. Where are you going with those chairs?'

'I am going to sit down at the end of the Walk by the railings. It's cooler there than indoors. If you will wait a moment I will go and fetch another chair for Jervis, though he won't be back for a little while.' He ran up the stairs, and presently returned with a third chair, and we carried our impedimenta down to the quiet corner of the Walk.

'So your term of servitude is coming to an end,' said he, when we had placed the chairs and hung the lantern on the railings. 'Any other news?'

'No. Have you any?'

'I am afraid I have not. All my inquiries have yielded negative results. There is, of course, a considerable body of evidence, and it all seems to point one way. But I am unwilling to make a decisive move without something more definite. I am really waiting for confirmation or otherwise of my ideas on the subject; for some new item of evidence.'

'I didn't know there was any evidence.'

'Didn't you?' said Thorndyke. 'But you know as much as I know. You have all the essential facts; but apparently you haven't collated them and extracted their meaning. If you had, you would have found them curiously significant.'

'I suppose I mustn't ask what their significance is?' No, I think not. When I am conducting a case I mention my surmises to nobody—not even to Jervis. Then I can say confidently that there has been no leakage. Don't think I distrust you. Remember that my thoughts are my client's property, and that the essence of strategy is to keep the enemy in the dark.'

'Yes, I see that. Of course I ought not to have asked.'

'You ought not to need to ask,' Thorndyke replied, with a smile; 'you should put the facts together and reason from them yourself.'

While we had been talking I had noticed Thorndyke glance at me inquisitively from time to time. Now after an interval of silence, he asked suddenly:

'Is anything amiss, Berkeley? Are you worrying about your friends' affairs?'

'No, not particularly; though their prospects don't look very rosy.' Perhaps they are not quite so bad as they look,' said he. 'But I am afraid something is troubling you. All your gay spirits seem to have evaporated.' He paused for a few moments, and then added: 'I don't want to intrude on your private affairs, but if I can help you by advice or otherwise, remember that we are old friends and that you are my academic offspring.'

Instinctively, with a man's natural reticence, I began to mumble a half-articulate disclaimer; and then I stopped. After all, why should I not confide in him? He was a good man and a wise man, full of human sympathy, as I knew, though so cryptic and secretive in his professional capacity. And I wanted a friend badly just now.

'I'm afraid,' I began shyly, 'it is not a matter that admits of much help, and it's hardly the sort of thing that I ought to worry you by talking about—'

'If it is enough to make you unhappy, my dear fellow, it is enough to merit serious consideration by your friend; so if you don't mind telling me—'

'Of course I don't, sir!' I exclaimed.

'Then fire away; and don't call me "sir." We are brother practitioners just now.'

Thus encouraged, I poured out the story of my little romance; bashfully at first and with halting phrases, but later, with more freedom and confidence. He listened with grave attention, and once or twice put a question when my narrative became a little disconnected. When I had finished he laid his hand softly on my arm.

'You have had rough luck, Berkeley. I don't wonder that you are miserable. I am more sorry than I can tell you.'

'Thank you,' I said. 'It's exceedingly good of you to listen so patiently, but it's a shame for me to pester you with my sentimental troubles.'

'Now, Berkeley, you don't think that, and I hope you don't think that I do. We should be bad biologists and worse physicians if we should underestimate the importance of that which is nature's chiefest care. The one salient biological truth is the paramount importance of sex; and we are deaf and blind if we do not hear and see it in everything that lives when we look abroad upon the world; when we listen to the spring song of the birds, or when we consider the lilies of the field. And as is man to the lower organisms, so is human love to their merely reflex manifestations of sex. I will maintain, and you will agree with me, I know, that the love of a serious and honourable man for a woman who is worthy of him is the most momentous of all human affairs. It is the foundation of social life, and its failure is a serious calamity, not only to those whose lives may be thereby spoilt, but to society at large.'

'It's a serious enough matter for the parties concerned,' I agreed; 'but that is no reason why they should bore their friends.'

'But they don't. Friends should help one another and think it a privilege.'

'Oh, I shouldn't mind coming to you for help, knowing you as I do. But no one can help a poor devil in a case like this—and certainly not a medical jurist.'

'Oh, come, Berkeley!' he protested, 'don't rate us too low. The humblest of creatures has its uses—"even the little pismire," you know, as Isaak Walton tells us. Why, I have got substantial help from a stamp-collector. And then reflect upon the motor-scorcher and the earth-worm and the blow-fly. All these lowly creatures play their parts in the scheme of nature; and shall we cast out the medical jurist as nothing worth?'

I laughed dejectedly at my teacher's genial irony.

What I meant,' said I, 'was that there is nothing to be done but wait—perhaps for ever. I don't know why she isn't able to marry me, and I mustn't ask her. She can't be married already.'

'Certainly not. She told you explicitly that there was no man in the case.'

'Exactly. And I can think of no other valid reason, excepting that she doesn't care enough for me. That would be a perfectly sound reason, but then it would only be a temporary one, not the insuperable obstacle that she assumes to exist, especially as we really got on excellently together. I hope it isn't some confounded perverse feminine scruple. I don't see how it could be; but women are most frightfully tortuous and wrong-headed at times.'

'I don't see,' said Thorndyke, 'why we should cast about for perversely abnormal motives when there is a perfectly reasonable explanation staring us in the face.'

Us there?' I exclaimed. 'I see none.'

'You are, not unnaturally, overlooking some of the circumstances that affect Miss Bellingham; but I don't suppose she has failed to grasp their meaning. Do you realise what her position really is? I mean with regard to her uncle's disappearance?'

'I don't think I quite understand you.'

'Well, there is no use in blinking the facts,' said Thorndyke. 'The position is this: if John Bellingham ever went to his brother's house at Woodford, it is nearly certain that he went there after his visit to Hurst. Mind, I say "if he went"; I don't say that I believe he did. But it is stated that he appears to have gone there; and if he did go, he was never seen alive afterwards. Now, he did not go in at the front door. No one saw him enter the house. But there was a back gate, which John Bellingham knew, and which had a bell which rang in the library. And you will remember that, when Hurst and Jellicoe called, Mr. Bellingham had only just come in. Previous to that time Miss Bellingham had been alone in the library; that is to say, she was alone in the library at the very time when John Bellingham is said to have made his visit. That is the position, Berkeley. Nothing pointed has been said up to the present. But, sooner or later, if John Bellingham is not found, dead or alive, the question will be opened. Then it is certain that Hurst, in self-defence, will make the most of any facts that may transfer suspicion from him to some one else. And that some one else will be Miss Bellingham.'

I sat for some moments literally paralysed with horror. Then my dismay gave place to indignation. 'But, damn it!' I exclaimed, starting up—'I beg your pardon—but could anyone have the infernal audacity to insinuate that that gentle, refined lady murdered her uncle?'

'That is what will be hinted, if not plainly asserted; and she knows it. And that being so, is it difficult to understand why she should refuse to allow you to be publicly associated with her? To run the risk of dragging your honourable name into the sordid transactions of the police-court or the Old Bailey? To invest it, perhaps, with a dreadful notoriety?'

'Oh, don't! for God's sake! It is too horrible! Not that I would care for myself. I would be proud to share her martyrdom of ignominy, if it had to be; but it is the sacrilege, the blasphemy of even thinking of her in such terms, that enrages me.'

'Yes,' said Thorndyke; 'I understand and sympathise with you. Indeed, I share your righteous indignation at this dastardly affair. So you mustn't think me brutal for putting the case so plainly.'

'I don't. You have only shown me the danger that I was fool enough not to see. But you seem to imply that this hideous position has been brought about deliberately.'

'Certainly I do! This is no chance affair. Either the appearances indicate the real events—which I am sure they do not—or they have been created of a set purpose to lead to false conclusions. But

the circumstances convince me that there has been a deliberate plot; and I am waiting—in no spirit of Christian patience, I can tell you—to lay my hand on the wretch who has done this.'

'What are you waiting for?' I asked.

'I am waiting for the inevitable,' he replied; 'for the false move that the most artful criminal invariably makes. At present he is lying low; but presently he will make a move, and then I shall have him.'

'But he may go on lying low. What will you do then?'

'Yes, that is the danger. We may have to deal with the perfect villain who knows when to leave well alone. I have never met him, but he may exist, nevertheless.'

'And then we should have to stand by and see our friends go under.'

'Perhaps,' said Thorndyke; and we both subsided into gloomy and silent reflection.

The place was peaceful and quiet, as only a backwater of London can be. Occasional hoots from far-away tugs and steamers told of the busy life down below in the crowded Pool. A faint hum of traffic was borne in from the streets outside the precincts, and the shrill voices of newspaper boys came in unceasing chorus from the direction of Carmelite Street. They were too far away to be physically disturbing, but the excited yells, toned down as they were by distance, nevertheless stirred the very marrow in my bones, so dreadfully suggestive were they of those possibilities of the future at which Thorndyke had hinted. They seemed like the sinister shadows oncoming misfortunes.

Perhaps they called up the same association of ideas in Thorndyke's mind, for he remarked presently: 'The newsvendor is abroad to-night like a bird of ill-omen. Something unusual has happened: some public or private calamity, most likely, and these yelling ghouls are out to feast on the remains. The newspaper men have a good deal in common with the carrion-birds that hover over a battle-field.'

Again we subsided into silence and reflection. Then, after an interval, I asked:

'Would it be possible for me to help in any way in this investigation of yours?'

'That is exactly what I have been asking myself,' replied Thorndyke. 'It would be right and proper that you should, and I think you might.'

'How?' I asked eagerly.

'I can't say off-hand; but Jervis will be going away for his holiday almost at once—in fact, he will go off actual duty to-night. There is very little doing; the long vacation is close upon us, and I can do without him. But if you would care to come down here and take his place, you would be very useful to me; and if there should be anything to be done in the Bellinghams' case, I am sure you would make up in enthusiasm for any deficiency in experience.'

'I couldn't really take Jervis's place,' said I, 'but if you would let me help you in any way it would be a great kindness. I would rather clean your boots than be out of it altogether.'

'Very well. Let us leave it that you come here as soon as Barnard has done with you. You can have Jervis's room, which he doesn't often use nowadays, and you will be more happy here than elsewhere, I know. I may as well give you my latch-key now. I have a duplicate upstairs, and you understand that my chambers are yours too from this moment.'

He handed me the latch-key and I thanked him warmly from my heart, for I felt sure that the suggestion was made, not for any use that I should be to him, but for my own peace of mind. I had hardly finished speaking when a quick step on the paved walk caught my ear.

'Here is Jervis,' said Thorndyke. 'We will let him know that there is a locum tenens ready to step into his shoes when he wants to be off.' He flashed the lantern across the path, and a few moments later his junior stepped up briskly with a bundle of newspapers tucked under his arm.

It struck me that Jervis looked at me a little queerly when he recognised me in the dim light; also he was a trifle constrained in his manner, as if my presence were an embarrassment. He listened to Thorndyke's announcement of our newly made arrangement without much enthusiasm and with none of his customary facetious comments. And again I noticed a quick glance at me, half curious, half uneasy, and wholly puzzling to me.

'That's all right,' he said when Thorndyke had explained the situation. 'I daresay you'll find Berkeley as useful as me, and, in any case, he'll be better here than staying on with Barnard.' He spoke with unwonted gravity, and there was in his tone a solicitude for me that attracted my notice and that of Thorndyke as well, for the latter looked at him curiously, though he made no comment. After a short silence, however, he asked: 'And what news does my learned brother bring? There is a mighty shouting among the outer barbarians and I see a bundle of newspapers under my learned friend's arm. Has anything in particular happened?'

Jervis looked more uncomfortable than ever. 'Well—yes,' he replied hesitatingly, 'something has happened—there! It's no use beating about the bush; Berkeley may as well learn it from me as from those yelling devils outside.' He took a couple of papers from his bundle and silently handed one to me and the other to Thorndyke.

Jervis's ominous manner, naturally enough, alarmed me not a little. I opened the paper with a nameless dread. But whatever my vague fears, they fell far short of the occasion; and when I saw those yells from without crystallised into scare head-lines and flaming capitals I turned for a moment sick and dizzy with fear.

The paragraph was only a short one, and I read it through in less than a minute.

'THE MISSING FINGER

DRAMATIC DISCOVERY AT WOODFORD'

'The mystery that has surrounded the remains of a mutilated human body, portions of which have been found in various places in Kent and Essex, has received a partial and very sinister solution. The police have, all along, suspected that those remains were those of a Mr. John Bellingham who disappeared under circumstances of some suspicion about two years ago. There is now no doubt upon the subject, for the finger which was missing from the hand that was found at Sidcup has been discovered at the bottom of a disused well together with a ring, which has been identified as one habitually worn by Mr. John Bellingham.

'The house in the garden of which the well is situated was the property of the murdered man, and was occupied at the time of the disappearance by his brother, Mr. Godfrey Bellingham. But the latter left it very soon after, and it has been empty ever since. Just lately it has been put in repair, and it was in this way that the well came to be emptied and cleaned out. It seems that Detective-Inspector Badger, who was searching the neighbourhood for further remains, heard of the emptying of the well and went down in the bucket to examine the bottom, where he found the three bones and the ring.

'Thus the identity of the body is established beyond all doubt, and the question that remains is, Who killed John Bellingham? It may be remembered that a trinket, apparently broken from his watch-chain, was found in the grounds of this house on the day that he disappeared, and that he was never again seen alive. What may be the import of these facts time will show.'

That was all; but it was enough. I dropped the paper to the ground and glanced round furtively at Jervis, who sat gazing gloomily at the toes of his boots. It was horrible! It was incredible! The blow was so crushing that it left my faculties numb, and for a while I seemed unable even to think intelligibly.

I was aroused by Thorndyke's voice—calm, businesslike, composed:

'Time will show, indeed! But meanwhile we must go warily. And don't be unduly alarmed, Berkeley. Go home, take a good dose of bromide with a little stimulant, and turn in. I am afraid this has been rather a shock to you.'

I rose from my chair like one in a dream and held out my hand to Thorndyke; and even in the dim light and in my dazed condition I noticed that his face bore a look that I had never seen before; the look of a granite mask of Fate—grim, stern, inexorable.

My two friends walked with me as far as the gateway at the top of Inner Temple Lane, and as we reached the entry a stranger, coming quickly up the Lane, overtook and passed us. In the glare of the lamp outside the porter's lodge he looked at us quickly over his shoulder, and though he passed on without halt or greeting, I recognised him with a certain dull surprise which I did not understand then and do not understand now. It was Mr. Jellicoe.

I shook hands once more with my friends and strode out into Fleet Street, but as soon as I was outside the gate I made direct for Nevill's Court. What was in my mind I do not know; only that some instinct of protection led me there, where my lady lay unconscious of the hideous menace that hung over her. At the entrance to the Court a tall, powerful man was lounging against the wall, and he seemed to look at me curiously as I passed; but I hardly noticed him and strode forward into the narrow passage. By the shabby gateway of the house I halted and looked up at such of the windows as I could see over the wall. They were all dark. All the inmates, then, were in bed. Vaguely comforted by this, I walked on to the New Street end of the Court and looked out. Here, too, a man—a tall, thick-set man—was loitering; and as he looked inquisitively into my face I turned and re-entered the Court, slowly retracing my steps. As I again reached the gate of the house I stopped to look once more at the windows, and turning I found the man whom I had last noticed close behind me. Then, in a flash of dreadful comprehension, I understood. These two were plain-clothes policemen.

For a moment a blind fury possessed me. An insane impulse urged me to give battle to this intruder; to avenge upon this person the insult of his presence. Fortunately the impulse was but momentary, and I recovered myself without making any demonstration. But the appearance of those two policemen brought the peril into the immediate present, imparted to it a horrible

actuality. A chilly sweat of terror stood on my forehead, and my ears were ringing when I walked with faltering steps out into Fetter Lane.

CHAPTER XVIII. JOHN BELLINGHAM

THE next few days were a very nightmare of horror and gloom. Of course, I repudiated my acceptance of the decree of banishment that Ruth had passed upon me. I was her friend, at least, and in time of peril my place was at her side. Tacitly—though thankfully enough, poor girl!—she had recognised the fact and made me once more free of the house.

For there was no disguising the situation. Newspaper boys yelled the news up and down Fleet Street from morning to night; soul-shaking posters grinned on gaping crowds; and the newspapers fairly wallowed in the 'Shocking details.'

It is true that no direct accusations were made; but the original reports of the disappearance were reprinted with such comments as made me gnash my teeth with fury.

The wretchedness of those days will live in my memory until my dying day. Never can I forget the dread that weighed me down, the horrible suspense, the fear that clutched at my heart as I furtively scanned the posters in the streets. Even the wretched detectives who prowled about the entrances to Nevill's Court became grateful to my eyes, for, embodying as they did the hideous menace that hung over my dear lady, their presence at least told me that the blow had not yet fallen. Indeed, we came, after a time, to exchange glances of mutual recognition, and I thought that they seemed to be sorry for her and for me, and had no great liking for their task. Of course, I spent most of my leisure at the old house, though my heart ached more there than elsewhere; and I tried, with but poor success, I fear to maintain a cheerful, confident manner, cracking my little jokes as of old, and even essaying to skirmish with Miss Oman. But this last experiment was a dead failure; and when she had suddenly broken down in a stream of brilliant repartee to weep hysterically on my breast, I abandoned the attempt and did not repeat it.

A dreadful gloom had settled down upon the old house. Poor Miss Oman crept silently but restlessly up and down the ancient stairs with dim eyes and a tremulous chin, or moped in her room with a parliamentary petition (demanding, if I remember rightly, the appointment of a female judge to deal with divorce and matrimonial causes) which lay on her table languidly awaiting signatures that never came. Mr. Bellingham, whose mental condition at first alternated between furious anger and absolute panic, was fast sinking into a state of nervous prostration that I viewed with no little alarm. In fact, the only really self-possessed person in the entire household was Ruth herself, and even she could not conceal the ravages of sorrow and suspense and overshadowing peril. Her manner was almost unchanged; or rather, I should say, she had gone back to that which I had first known—quiet, reserved, taciturn, with a certain bitter humour showing through her unvarying amiability. When she and I were alone, indeed, her reserve melted away and she was all sweetness and gentleness. But it wrung my heart to look at her, to see how, day by day, she grew ever more thin and haggard; to watch the growing pallor of her cheek; to look into her solemn grey eyes, so sad and tragic and yet so brave and defiant of fate.

It was a terrible time; and through it all the dreadful questions haunted me continually: When will the blow fall? What is it that the police are waiting for? And when they do strike, what will Thorndyke have to say?

So things went on for four dreadful days. But on the fourth day, just as the evening consultations were beginning and the surgery was filled with waiting patients, Polton appeared with a note,

which he insisted, to the indignation of Adolphus, on delivering into my own hands. It was from Thorndyke, and was to the following effect:

'I learn from Dr. Norbury that he has recently heard from Hen Lederbogen, of Berlin—a learned authority on Oriental antiquities—who makes some reference to an English Egyptologist whom he met in Vienna about a year ago. He cannot recall the Englishman's name, but there are certain expressions in the letter which make Dr. Norbury suspect that he is referring to John Bellingham.'

'I want you to bring Mr. and Miss Bellingham to my chambers this evening at 8.30, to meet Dr. Norbury and talk over his letter; and in view of the importance of the matter, I look to you not to fail me.'

A wave of hope and relief swept over me. It was still possible that this Gordian knot might be cut; that the deliverance might not come before it was too late. I wrote a hasty note to Thorndyke and another to Ruth, making the appointment; and having given them both to the trusty Polton, returned somewhat feverishly to my professional duties. To my profound relief, the influx of patients ceased, and the practice sank into its accustomed torpor; whereby I was able without base and mendacious subterfuge to escape in good time to my tryst.

It was near upon eight o'clock when I passed through the archway into Nevill's Court. The warm afternoon light had died away, for the summer was running out apace. The last red glow of the setting sun had faded from the ancient roofs and chimney stacks, and down in the narrow court the shades of evening had begun to gather in nooks and corners. I was due at eight, and, as it still wanted some minutes to the hour, I sauntered slowly down the Court, looking reflectively on the familiar scene and the well-known friendly faces.

The day's work was drawing to a close. The little shops were putting up their shutters; lights were beginning to twinkle in parlour windows; a solemn hymn arose in the old Moravian chapel, and its echoes stole out through the dark entry that opens into the court under the archway.

Here was Mr. Finneymore (a man of versatile gifts, with a leaning towards paint and varnish) sitting, white-aproned and shirt-sleeved, on a chair in his garden, smoking his pipe with a complacent eye on his dahlias. There at an open window a young man, with a brush in his hand and another behind his ear, stood up and stretched himself while an older lady deftly rolled up a large map. The barber was turning out the gas in his little saloon; the greengrocer was emerging with a cigarette in his mouth and an aster in his button-hole, and a group of children were escorting the lamp-lighter on his rounds.

All these good, homely folk were Nevill's Courtiers of the genuine breed' born in the court, as had been their fathers before them for generations. And of such to a great extent was the population of the place. Miss Oman herself claimed aboriginal descent and so did the sweet-faced Moravian lady next door—a connection of the famous La Trobes of the old Conventicle, whose history went back to the Gordon Riots; and as to the gentleman who lived in the ancient timber-and-plaster house at the bottom of the court, it was reported that his ancestors had dwelt in that very house since the days of James the First.

On these facts I reflected as I sauntered down the court, on the strange phenomenon of an old-world hamlet with its ancient population lingering in the very heart of the noisy city; an island of peace set in an ocean of unrest, an oasis in a desert of change and ferment.

My meditations brought me to the shabby gate in the high wall, and as I raised the latch and pushed it open, I saw Ruth standing at the door of the house talking to Miss Oman. She was evidently waiting for me, for she wore her sombre black coat and hat and a black veil, and when she saw me she came out, closing the door after her, and holding out her hand.

'You are punctual,' said she. 'St Dunstan's clock is striking now.'

'Yes,' I answered. 'But where is your father?'

'He has gone to bed, poor old dear. He didn't feel well enough to come, and I did not urge him. He is really very ill. This dreadful suspense will kill him if it goes on much longer.'

'Let us hope it won't,' I said, but with little conviction, I fear, in my tone.

It was harrowing to see her torn by anxiety for her father, and I yearned to comfort her. But what was there to say? Mr. Bellingham was breaking up visibly under the stress of the terrible menace that hung over his daughter, and no words of mine could make the fact less manifest.

We walked silently up the court. The lady at the window greeted us with a smiling salutation, Mr. Finneymore removed his pipe and raised his cap, receiving a gracious bow from Ruth in return, and then we passed through the covered way into Fetter Lane, where my companion paused and looked about her.

'What are you looking for?' I asked.

'The detective,' she answered quietly. 'It would be a pity if the poor man should miss me after waiting so long. However, I don't see him.' And she turned away towards Fleet Street. It was an unpleasant surprise to me that her sharp eyes detected the secret spy upon her movements; and the dry, sardonic tone of her remark pained me too, recalling, as it did, the frigid self-possession that had so repelled me in the early days of our acquaintance. And yet I could not but admire the cool unconcern with which she faced her horrible peril.

'Tell me a little more about this conference,' she said, as we walked down Fetter Lane. 'Your note was rather more concise than lucid; but I suppose you wrote it in a hurry.'

'Yes, I did. And I can't give you any details now. All I know is that Doctor Norbury has had a letter from a friend of his in Berlin, an Egyptologist, as I understand, named Lederbogen, who refers to an English acquaintance of his and Norbury's whom he saw in Vienna about a year ago. He cannot remember the Englishman's name, but from some of the circumstances Norbury seems to think that he is referring to your Uncle John. Of course, if this should turn out to be really the case, it would set everything straight; so Thorndyke was anxious that you and your father should meet Norbury and talk it over.'

'I see,' said Ruth. Her tone was thoughtful but by no means enthusiastic.

'You don't seem to attach much importance to the matter,' I remarked.

'No. It doesn't seem to fit the circumstances. What is the use of suggesting that poor Uncle John is alive—and behaving like an imbecile, which he certainly was not—when his dead body has actually been found?'

'But,' I suggested lamely, 'there may be some mistake. It may not be his body after all.'

'And the ring?' she asked, with a bitter smile.

'That may be just a coincidence. It was a copy of a well-known form of antique ring. Other people may have had copies made as well as your uncle. Besides,' I added with more conviction, 'we haven't seen the ring. It may not be his at all.'

She shook her head. 'My dear Paul,' she said quietly, 'it is useless to delude ourselves. Every known fact points to the certainty that it is his body. John Bellingham is dead: there can be no doubt of that. And to every one except his unknown murderer and one or two of my own loyal friends, it must seem that his death lies at my door. I realised from the beginning that the suspicion lay between George Hurst and me; and the finding of the ring fixes it definitely on me. I am only surprised that the police have made no move yet.'

The quiet conviction of her tone left me for a while speechless with horror and despair. Then I recalled Thorndyke's calm, even confident, attitude, and I hastened to remind her of it.

'There is one of your friends,' I said, 'who is still undismayed. Thorndyke seems to anticipate no difficulties.'

'And yet,' she replied, 'he is ready to consider a forlorn hope like this. However, we shall see.'

I could think of nothing more to say, and it was in gloomy silence that we pursued our way down Inner Temple Lane and through the dark entries and tunnel-like passages that brought us out, at length, by the Treasury.

'I don't see any light in Thorndyke's chambers,' I said, as we crossed King's Bench Walk; and I pointed out the row of windows all dark and blank.

'No; and yet the shutters are not closed. He must be out.'

'He can't be after making an appointment with you and your father. It is most mysterious. Thorndyke is so very punctilious about his engagements.'

The mystery was solved, when we reached the landing, by a slip of paper fixed by a tack on the iron-bound 'oak.'

'A note for P. B. is on the table,' was the laconic message: on reading which I inserted my key, swung the heavy door outward, and opened the lighter inner door. The note was lying on the table and I brought it out to the landing to read by the light of the staircase lamp.

'Apologise to our friends,' it ran, 'for the slight change of programme. Norbury is anxious that I should get my experiments over before the Director returns, so as to save discussion. He has asked me to begin to-night and says he will see Mr. and Miss Bellingham here, at the Museum. Please bring them along at once. I think some matters of importance may transpire at the interview.—J. E. T.'

'I hope you don't mind,' I said apologetically, when I had read the note to Ruth.

'Of course I don't,' she replied. 'I am rather pleased. We have so many associations with the dear old Museum, haven't we?' She looked at me for a moment with a strange and touching wistfulness and then turned to descend the stone stairs.—|

At the Temple gate I hailed a hansom, and we were soon speeding westward and north to the soft twinkle of the horse's bell.

'What are these experiments that Doctor Thorndyke refers to?' she asked presently.

'I can only answer you vaguely,' I replied. 'Their object, I believe, is to ascertain whether the penetrability of organic substances by the X-rays becomes altered by age; whether, for instance, an ancient block of wood is more or less transparent to the rays than a new block of the same size.'

'And of what use would the knowledge be, if it were obtained?'

'I can't say. Experiments are made to obtain knowledge without regard to its utility. The use appears when the knowledge has been acquired. But in this case, if it should be possible to determine the age of any organic substance by its reaction to X-rays, the discovery might be found of some value in legal practice—as in demonstrating a new seal on an old document, for instance. But I don't know whether Thorndyke has anything definite in view; I only know that the preparations have been on a most portentous scale.'

'How do you mean?'

'In regard to size. When I went into the workshop yesterday morning, I found Polton erecting a kind of portable gallows about nine feet high, and he had just finished varnishing a pair of enormous wooden trays each over six feet long. It looked as if he and Thorndyke were contemplating a few private executions with subsequent post-mortems on the victims.'

'What a horrible suggestion!'

'So Polton said, with his quaint, crinkly smile. But he was mighty close about the use of the apparatus all the same. I wonder if we shall see anything of the experiments, when we get there. This is Museum Street, isn't it?'

'Yes.' As she spoke, she lifted the flap of one of the little windows in the back of the cab and peered out. Then, closing it with a quiet, ironic smile, she said:

'It is all right; he hasn't missed us. It will be quite a nice little change for him.'

The cab swung round into Great Russell Street, and, glancing out as it turned, I saw another hansom following; but before I had time to inspect its solitary passenger, we drew up at the Museum gates.

The gate porter, who seemed to expect us, ushered us up the drive to the great portico and into the Central Hall, where he handed us over to another official.

'Doctor Norbury is in one of the rooms adjoining the Fourth Egyptian Room,' the latter stated in answer to our inquiries: and, providing himself with a wire-guarded lantern, he prepared to escort us thither.

Up the great staircase, now wrapped in mysterious gloom, we passed in silence with bitter-sweet memories of that day of days when we had first trodden its steps together; through the Central Saloon, the Mediaeval Room and the Asiatic Saloon, and so into the long range of the Ethnographical Galleries.

It was a weird journey. The swaying lantern shot its beams abroad into the darkness of the great, dim galleries, casting instantaneous flashes on the objects in the cases, so that they leaped into being and vanished in the twinkling of an eye. Hideous idols with round, staring eyes started forth from the darkness, glared at us for an instant and were gone. Grotesque masks, suddenly revealed by the shimmering light, took on the semblance of demon faces that seemed to mow and gibber at us as we passed. As for the life-sized models—realistic enough by daylight—their aspect was positively alarming; for the moving light and shadow endowed them with life and movement, so that they seemed to watch us furtively, to lie in wait and to hold themselves in readiness to steal out and follow us.

The illusion evidently affected Ruth as well as me, for she drew nearer to me and whispered:

'These figures are quite startling. Did you see that Polynesian? I really felt as if he were going to spring out on us.'

'They are rather uncanny,' I admitted, 'but the danger is over now. We are passing out of their sphere of influence.'

We came out on a landing as I spoke and then turned sharply to the left along the North Gallery, from the centre of which we entered the Fourth Egyptian Room.

Almost immediately, a door in the opposite wall opened; a peculiar, high-pitched humming sound became audible, and Jervis came out on tiptoe with his hand raised.

'Tread as lightly as you can,' he said. 'We are just making an exposure.'

The attendant turned back with his lantern, and we followed Jervis into the room from whence he had come. It was a large room, and little lighter than the galleries, for the single glow-lamp that burned at the end where we entered left the rest of the apartment in almost complete obscurity. We seated ourselves at once on the chairs that had been placed for us, and, when the mutual salutations had been exchanged, I looked about me. There were three people in the room besides Jervis: Thorndyke, who sat with his watch in his hand, a grey-headed gentleman whom I took to be Dr. Norbury, and a smaller person at the dim farther end—undistinguishable, but probably Polton. At our end of the room were the two large trays that I had seen in the workshop, now mounted on trestles and each fitted with a rubber drain-tube leading down to a bucket. At the farther end of the room the sinister shape of the gallows reared itself aloft in the gloom; only now I could see that it was not a gallows at all. For affixed to the top cross-bar was a large, bottomless glass basin, inside which was a glass bulb that glowed with a strange green light; and in the heart of the bulb a bright spot of red.

It was all clear enough so far. The peculiar sound that filled the air was the hum of the interrupter; the bulb was, of course, a Crookes' tube, and the red spot inside it, the glowing red-hot disc of the anti-cathode. Clearly an X-ray photograph was being made; but of what? I strained my eyes, peering into the gloom at the foot of the gallows, but though I could make out an elongated object lying on the floor directly under the bulb, I could not resolve the dimly seen shape into anything recognisable. Presently, however, Dr. Norbury supplied the clue.

'I am rather surprised,' said he, 'that you chose so composite an object as a mummy to begin on. I should have thought that a simpler object, such as a coffin or a wooden figure, would have been more instructive.'

'In some ways it would,' replied Thorndyke, 'but the variety of materials that the mummy gives us has its advantages. I hope your father is not ill, Miss Bellingham.'

'He is not at all well,' said Ruth, 'and we agreed that it was better for me to come alone. I knew Herr Lederbogen quite well. He stayed with us for a time when he was in England.'

'I trust,' said Dr. Norbury, 'that I have not troubled you for nothing. Herr Lederbogen speaks of "our erratic English friend with the long name that I can never remember," and it seemed to me that he might be referring to your uncle.'

'I should have hardly have called my uncle erratic,' said Ruth.

'No, no. Certainly not,' Dr. Norbury agreed hastily. 'However, you shall see the letter presently and judge for yourself. We mustn't introduce irrelevant topics while the experiment is in progress, must we, Doctor?'

'You had better wait until we have finished,' said Thorndyke, 'because I am going to turn out the light. Switch off the current, Polton.'

The green light vanished from the bulb, the hum of the interrupter swept down an octave or two and died away. Then Thorndyke and Dr. Norbury rose from their chairs and went towards the mummy, which they lifted tenderly while Polton drew from beneath it what presently turned out to be a huge black paper envelope. The single glow-lamp was switched off, leaving the room in total darkness until there burst suddenly a bright orange red light immediately above one of the trays.

We all gathered round to watch, as Polton—the high priest of these mysteries—drew from the black envelope a colossal sheet of bromide paper, laid it carefully in the tray and proceeded to wet it with a large brush which he had dipped in a pail of water.

'I thought you always used plates for this kind of work,' said Dr. Norbury.

'We do, by preference; but a six-foot plate would be impossible, so I had a special paper made to the size.'

There is something singularly fascinating in the appearance of a developing photograph; in the gradual, mysterious emergence of the picture from the blank, white surface of plate or paper. But a skiagraph, or X-ray photograph, has a fascination all its own. Unlike the ordinary photograph, which yields a picture of things already seen, it gives a presentment of objects hitherto invisible; and hence, when Polton poured the developer on the already wet paper, we all craned over the tray with the keenest curiosity.

The developer was evidently a very slow one. For fully half a minute no change could be seen in the uniform surface. Then, gradually, almost insensibly, the marginal portion began to darken, leaving the outline of the mummy in pale relief. The change, once started, proceeded apace. Darker and darker grew the margin of the paper until from slate grey it had turned to black; and still the shape of the mummy, now in strong relief, remained an elongated patch of bald white. But not for long. Presently the white shape began to be tinged with grey, and, as the colour deepened,

there grew out of it a paler form that seemed to steal out of the enshrouding grey like an apparition, spectral, awesome, mysterious. The skeleton was coming into view.

'It is rather uncanny,' said Dr. Norbury. 'I feel as if I were assisting at some unholy rite. Just look at it now!'

The grey shadow of the cartonnage, the wrappings and the flesh was fading away into the background and the white skeleton stood out in sharp contrast. And it certainly was rather a weird spectacle.

'You'll lose the bones if you develop much farther,' said Dr. Norbury.

'I must let the bones darken,' Thorndyke replied, 'in case there are any metallic objects. I have three more papers in the envelope.'

The white shape of the skeleton now began to grey over and, as Dr. Norbury had said, its distinctness became less and yet less. Thorndyke leaned over the tray with his eyes fixed on a point in the middle of the breast and we all watched him in silence. Suddenly he rose. 'Now, Polton,' he said sharply, 'get the hypo on as quickly as you can.'

Polton, who had been waiting with his hand on the stop-cock of the drain-tube, rapidly ran off the developer into the bucket and flooded the paper with the fixing solution.

'Now we can look at it at our leisure,' said Thorndyke. After waiting a few seconds, he switched on one of the glow-lamps, and as the flood of light fell on the photograph, he added: 'You see we haven't quite lost the skeleton.'

'No.' Dr. Norbury put on a pair of spectacles and bent down over the tray; and at this moment I felt Ruth's hand touch my arm, lightly, at first, and then with a strong nervous grasp; and I could feel that her hand was trembling. I looked round at her anxiously and saw that she had turned deathly pale.

'Would you rather go out into the gallery?' I asked; for the room with its tightly shut windows was close and hot.

'No,' she replied quietly, 'I will stay here. I am quite well.' But still she kept hold of my arm.

Thorndyke glanced at her keenly and then looked away as Dr. Norbury turned to ask him a question.

'Why is it, think you, that some of the teeth show so much whiter than others?'

'I think the whiteness of the shadows is due to the presence of metal,' Thorndyke replied.

'Do you mean that the teeth have metal fillings?' asked Dr. Norbury.

'Yes.'

'Really! This is very interesting. The use of gold stoppings—and artificial teeth, too—by the ancient Egyptians is well known, but we have no examples in this Museum. This mummy ought to be unrolled. Do you think all those teeth are filled with the same metal? They are not equally white.'

'No,' replied Thorndyke. 'Those teeth that are perfectly white are undoubtedly filled with gold, but that greyish one is probably filled with tin.'

'Very interesting,' said Dr. Norbury. 'Very interesting! And what do you make of that faint mark across the chest, near the top of the sternum?'

It was Ruth who answered his question. 'It is the eye of Osiris!' she exclaimed in a hushed voice.

'Dear me!' exclaimed Dr. Norbury, 'so it is. You are quite right. It is the Utchat—the Eye of Horus—or Osiris, if you prefer to call it so. That, I presume, will be a gilded device on some of the wrappings.'

'No; I should say it is a tattoo mark. It is too indefinite for a gilded device. And I should say further that the tattooing is done in vermilion, as carbon tattooing would cast no visible shadow.'

'I think you must be mistaken about that,' said Dr. Norbury, 'but we shall see, if the Director allows us to unroll the mummy. By the way, those little objects in front of the knees are metallic, I suppose?'

'Yes, they are metallic. But they are not in front of the knees—they are in the knees. They are pieces of silver wire which have been I used to repair fractured kneecaps.'

'Are you sure of that?' exclaimed Dr. Norbury, peering at the little white marks with ecstasy; 'because if you are, and if these objects are what you say they are, the mummy of Sebekhotep is an absolutely unique specimen.'

'I am quite certain of it,' said Thorndyke.

'Then,' said Dr. Norbury, 'we have made a discovery, thanks to your inquiring spirit. Poor John Bellingham! He little knew what a treasure he was giving us! How I wish he could have known! How I wish he could have been here with us to-night!'

He paused once more to gaze in rapture at the photograph. And then Thorndyke, in his quiet, impassive way, said:

'John Bellingham is here, Doctor Norbury. This is John Bellingham.'

Dr Norbury started back and stared at Thorndyke in speechless amazement.

'You don't mean,' he exclaimed, after a long pause, 'that this mummy is the body of John Bellingham!'

'I do indeed. There is no doubt of it.'

'But it is impossible! The mummy was here in the gallery a full three weeks before he disappeared.'

'Not so,' said Thorndyke. 'John Bellingham was last seen alive by you and Mr. Jellicoe on the fourteenth of October, more than three weeks before the mummy left Queen Square. After that date he was never seen alive or dead by any person who knew him and could identify him.'

Dr Norbury reflected awhile in silence. Then, in a faint voice, he asked:

'How do you suggest that John Bellingham's body came to be inside that cartonnage?'

'I think Mr. Jellicoe is the most likely person to be able to answer that question,' Thorndyke replied dryly.

There was another interval of silence, and then Dr. Norbury asked suddenly:

'But what do you suppose has become of Sebekhotep? The real Sebekhotep, I mean?'

'I take it,' said Thorndyke, 'that the remains of Sebekhotep, or at least a portion of them, are at present lying in the Woodford mortuary awaiting an adjourned inquest.'

As Thorndyke made this statement a flash of belated intelligence, mingled with self-contempt, fell on me. Now that the explanation was given, how obvious it was! And yet I, a competent anatomist and physiologist and actually a pupil of Thorndyke's, had mistaken those ancient bones for the remains of a recent body!

Dr Norbury considered the last statement for some time in evident perplexity. 'It is all consistent enough, I must admit,' said he, at length, 'and yet—are you quite sure there is no mistake? It seems so incredible.'

There is no mistake, I assure you,' Thorndyke answered. 'To convince you, I will give you the facts in detail. First, as to the teeth. I have seen John Bellingham's dentist and obtained particulars from his case-book. There were in all five teeth that had been filled. The right upper wisdom-tooth, the molar next to it, and the second lower molar on the left side, had all extensive gold fillings. You can see them all quite plainly in the skiagraph. The left lower lateral incisor had a very small gold filling, which you can see as a nearly circular white dot. In addition to these, a filling of tin amalgam had been inserted while the deceased was abroad, in the second left upper bicuspid, the rather grey spot that we have already noticed. These would, by themselves, furnish ample means of identification. But in addition, there is the tattooed device of the eye of Osiris—-'

'Horus,' murmured Dr. Norbury.

'Horus, then—in the exact locality in which it was borne by the deceased and tattooed, apparently, with the same pigment. There are, further, the suture wires in the knee-caps; Sir Morgan Bennet, having looked up the notes of the operation, informs me that he introduced three suture wires into the left patella and two into the right; which is what the skiagraph shows. Lastly, the deceased had an old Pott's fracture on the left side. It is not very apparent now, but I saw it quite distinctly just now when the shadows of the bones were whiter. I think that you may take it that the identification is beyond all doubt or question.'

'Yes,' agreed Dr. Norbury, with gloomy resignation, 'it sounds, as you say, quite conclusive. Well, well, it is a most horrible affair. Poor old John Bellingham! It looks uncommonly as if he had met with foul play. Don't you think so?'

'I do,' replied Thorndyke. 'There was a mark on the right side of the skull that looked rather like a fracture. It was not very clear, being at the side, but we must develop the negative to show it.'

Dr Norbury drew his breath in sharply through his teeth. 'This is a gruesome business, Doctor,' said he. 'A terrible business. Awkward for our people, too. By the way, what is our position in the matter? What steps ought we to take?'

'You should give notice to the coroner—I will manage the police—and you should communicate with one of the executors of the will.'

'Mr. Jellicoe?'

'No, not Mr. Jellicoe, under the peculiar circumstances. You had better write to Mr. Godfrey Bellingham.'

'But I rather understood that Mr. Hurst was the co-executor,' said Dr. Norbury.

'He is, surely, as matters stand,' said Jervis.

'Not at all,' replied Thorndyke. 'He was as matters stood; but he is not now. You are forgetting the conditions of clause two. That clause sets forth the conditions under which Godfrey Bellingham shall inherit the bulk of the estate and become the co-executor; and those conditions are: "that the body of the testator shall be deposited in some authorised place for the reception of the bodies of the dead, situate within the boundaries of, or appertaining to some place of worship within, the parish of St George, Bloomsbury, and St Giles in the Fields, or St Andrews above the Bars and St George the Martyr." Now Egyptian mummies are bodies of the dead, and this Museum is an authorised place for their reception; and this building is situate within the boundaries of the parish of St George, Bloomsbury. Therefore the provisions of clause two have been duly carried out and therefore Godfrey Bellingham is the principal beneficiary under the will, and the co-executor, in accordance with the wishes of the testator. Is that quite clear?'

'Perfectly,' said Dr. Norbury; 'and a most astonishing coincidence—but, my dear young lady, had you not better sit down? You are looking very ill.'

He glanced anxiously at Ruth, who was pale to the lips and was now leaning heavily on my arm.

'I think, Berkeley,' said Thorndyke, 'you had better take Miss Bellingham out into the gallery, where there is more air. This has been a tremendous climax to all the trials she has borne so bravely. Go out with Berkeley,' he added gently, laying his hand on her shoulder, 'and sit down while we develop the other negatives. You mustn't break down now, you know, when the storm has passed and the sun is beginning to shine.' He held the door open and as we passed out his face softened into a smile of infinite kindness. 'You won't mind my locking you out,' said he; 'this is a photographic dark-room at present.'

The key grated in the lock and we turned away into the dim gallery. It was not quite dark, for a beam of moonlight filtered in here and there through the blinds that covered the sky-lights. We walked on slowly, her arm linked in mine, and for a while neither of us spoke. The great rooms were very silent and peaceful and solemn. The hush, the stillness, the mystery of the half-seen forms in the cases around, were all in harmony with the deeply-felt sense of a great deliverance that filled our hearts.

We had passed through into the next room before either of us broke the silence. Insensibly our hands had crept together, and as they met and clasped with mutual pressure, Ruth exclaimed: 'How dreadful and tragic it is! Poor, poor Uncle John! It seems as if he had come back from the world of shadows to tell us of this awful thing. But, O God! what a relief it is!'

She caught her breath in one or two quick sobs and pressed my hand passionately.

'It is over, dearest,' I said. 'It is gone for ever. Nothing remains but the memory of your sorrow and your noble courage and patience.'

'I can't realise it yet,' she murmured. 'It has been like a frightful, interminable dream.'

'Let us put it away,' said I, 'and think only of the happy life that is opening.'

She made no reply, and only a quick catch in her breath, now and again, told of the long agony that she had endured with such heroic calm.

We walked on slowly, scarcely disturbing the silence with our soft footfalls, through the wide doorway into the second room. The vague shapes of mummy-cases standing erect in the wall-cases, loomed out dim and gigantic, silent watchers keeping their vigil with the memories of untold centuries locked in their shadowy breasts. They were an awesome company. Reverend survivors from a vanished world, they looked out from the gloom of their abiding-place, but with no shade of menace or of malice in their silent presence; rather with a solemn benison on the fleeting creatures of to-day.

Half-way along the room a ghostly figure, somewhat aloof from its companions, showed a dim, pallid blotch where its face would have been. With one accord we halted before it.

'Do you know who this is, Ruth?' I asked.

'Of course I do,' she answered. 'It is Artemidorus.'

We stood, hand in hand, facing the mummy, letting our memories fill in the vague silhouette with its well-remembered details. Presently I drew her nearer to me and whispered:

'Ruth! do you remember when we last stood here?'

'As if I could ever forget!' she answered passionately. 'Oh, Paul! The sorrow of it! The misery! How it wrung my heart to tell you! Were you very unhappy when I left you?'

'Unhappy! I never knew, until then, what real, heart-breaking sorrow was. It seemed as if the light had gone out of my life for ever. But there was just one little spot of brightness left.'

'What was that?'

'You made me a promise, dear—a solemn promise; and I felt—at least I hoped—that the day would come, if I only waited patiently, when you would be able to redeem it.'

She crept closer to me and yet closer, until her head nestled on my shoulder and her soft cheek lay against mine.

'Dear heart,' I whispered, 'is it now? Is the time fulfilled?'

'Yes, dearest,' she murmured softly. 'It is now—and for ever.'

Reverently I folded her in my arms; gathered her to the heart that worshipped her utterly. Henceforth no sorrows could hurt us, no misfortunes vex; for we should walk hand in hand on our earthly pilgrimage and find the way all too short.

Time, whose sands run out with such unequal swiftness for the just and the unjust, the happy and the wretched, lagged, no doubt, with the toilers in the room that we had left. But for us its golden grains trickled out apace, and left the glass empty before we had begun to mark their passage. The turning of a key and the opening of a door aroused us from our dream of perfect happiness. Ruth raised her head to listen, and our lips met for one brief moment. Then, with a silent greeting to the friend who had looked on our grief and witnessed our final happiness, we turned and retraced our steps quickly, filling the great empty rooms with chattering echoes.

'We won't go back into the dark-room—which isn't dark now,' said Ruth.

'Why not?' I asked.

'Because—when I came out I was very pale; and I'm—well, I don't think I am very pale now. Besides, poor Uncle John is in there—and—I should be ashamed to look at him with my selfish heart overflowing with happiness.'

'You needn't be,' said I. 'It is the day of our lives and we have a right to be happy. But you shan't go in, if you don't wish to,' and I accordingly steered her adroitly past the beam of light that streamed from the open door.

'We have developed four negatives,' said Thorndyke, as he emerged with the others, 'and I am leaving them in the custody of Doctor Norbury, who will sign each when they are dry, as they may have to be put in evidence. What are you going to do?'

I looked at Ruth to see what she wished.

'If you won't think me ungrateful,' said she, 'I should rather be alone with my father to-night. He is very weak, and—'

'Yes, I understand,' I said hastily. And I did. Mr. Bellingham was a man of strong emotions and would probably be somewhat overcome by the sudden change of fortune and the news of his brother's tragic death.

'In that case,' said Thorndyke, 'I will bespeak your services. Will you go on and wait for me at my chambers, when you have seen Miss Bellingham home?'

I agreed to this, and we set forth under the guidance of Dr. Norbury (who carried an electric lamp) to return by the way we had come; two of us, at least, in a vastly different frame of mind. The party broke up at the entrance gates, and as Thorndyke wished my companion 'Good-night,' she held his hand and looked up in his face with swimming eyes.

'I haven't thanked you, Doctor Thorndyke,' she said, 'and I don't feel that I ever can. What you have done for me and my father is beyond all thanks. You have saved his life and you have rescued me from the most horrible ignominy. Good-bye! and God bless you!'

The hansom that bowled along eastward—at most unnecessary speed—bore two of the happiest human beings within the wide boundaries of the town. I looked at my companion as the lights of the street shone into the cab, and was astonished at the transformation. The pallor of her cheek had given place to a rosy pink; the hardness, the tension, the haggard self-repression that had aged her face, were all gone, and the girlish sweetness that had so bewitched me in the early days of our love had stolen back. Even the dimple was there when the sweeping lashes lifted and her eyes met mine in a smile of infinite tenderness.

Little was said on that brief journey. It was happiness enough to sit, hand clasped in hand, and know that our time of trial was past; that no cross of Fate could ever part us now.

The astonished cabman set us down, according to instructions, at the entrance to Nevill's Court, and watched us with open mouth as we vanished into the narrow passage. The court had settled down for the night, and no one marked our return; no curious eye looked down on us from the dark house-front as we said 'Good-bye' just inside the gate.

'You will come and see us to-morrow, dear, won't you?' she asked.

'Do you think it possible that I could stay away, then?'

'I hope not, but come as early as you can. My father will be positively frantic to see you; because I shall have told him, you know. And, remember, that it is you who have brought us this great deliverance. Good-night, Paul.'

'Good-night, sweetheart.'

She put up her face frankly to be kissed and then ran up to the ancient door; whence she waved me a last good-bye. The shabby gate in the wall closed behind me and hid her from my sight; but the light of her love went with me and turned the dull street into a path of glory.

CHAPTER XIX. A STRANGE SYMPOSIUM

IT came upon me with something of a shock of surprise to find the scrap of paper still tacked to the oak of Thorndyke's chambers. So much had happened since I had last looked on it that it seemed to belong to another epoch of my life. I removed it thoughtfully and picked out the tack before entering, and then, closing the inner door, but leaving the oak open, I lit the gas and fell to pacing the room.

What a wonderful episode it had been! How the whole aspect of the world had been changed in a moment by Thorndyke's revelation! At another time, curiosity would have led me to endeavour to trace back the train of reasoning by which the subtle brain of my teacher had attained this astonishing conclusion. But now my own happiness held exclusive possession of my thoughts. The image of Ruth filled the field of my mental vision. I saw her again as I had seen her in the cab with her sweet, pensive face and downcast eyes; I felt again the touch of her soft cheek and the parting kiss by the gate, so frank and simple, so intimate and final.

I must have waited quite a long time, though the golden minutes sped unreckoned, for when my two colleagues arrived they tendered needless apologies.

'And I suppose,' said Thorndyke, 'you have been wondering what I wanted you for.'

I had not, as a matter of fact, given the matter a moment's consideration.

'We are going to call on Mr. Jellicoe,' Thorndyke explained. 'There is something behind this affair, and until I have ascertained what it is, the case is not complete from my point of view.'

'Wouldn't it have done as well to-morrow?' I asked.

'It might; and then it might not. There is an old saying as to catching a weasel asleep. Mr. Jellicoe is a somewhat wide-awake person, and I think it best to introduce him to Inspector Badger at the earliest possible moment.'

'The meeting of a weasel and a badger suggests a sporting interview,' remarked Jervis. 'But you don't expect Jellicoe to give himself away, do you?'

'He can hardly do that, seeing that there is nothing to give away. But I think he may make a statement. There were some exceptional circumstances, I feel sure.'

'How long have you known that the body was in the Museum?' I asked.

'About thirty or forty seconds longer than you have, I should say.'

'Do you mean,' I exclaimed, 'that you did not know until the negative was developed?'

'My dear fellow,' he replied, 'do you suppose that, if I had had certain knowledge where the body was, I should have allowed that noble girl to go on dragging out a lingering agony of suspense that I could have cut short in a moment? Or that I should have made these humbugging pretences of scientific experiments if a more dignified course had been open to me?'

'As to the experiments,' said Jervis, 'Norbury could hardly have refused if you had taken him into your confidence.'

'Indeed he could, and probably would. My "confidence" would have involved a charge of murder against a highly respectable gentleman who was well known to him. He would probably have referred me to the police, and then what could I have done? I had plenty of suspicions, but not a single solid fact.'

Our discussion was here interrupted by hurried footsteps on the stairs and a thundering rat-tat on our knocker.

As Jervis opened the door, Inspector Badger burst into the room in a highly excited state.

'What is all this, Doctor Thorndyke?' he asked. 'I see you've sworn an information against Mr. Jellicoe, and I have a warrant to arrest him; but before anything else is done I think it right to tell you that we have more evidence than is generally known pointing to quite a different quarter.'

'Derived from Mr. Jellicoe's information,' said Thorndyke. 'But the fact is that I have just examined and identified the body at the British Museum, where it was deposited by Mr. Jellicoe. I don't say that he murdered John Bellingham—though that is what appearances suggest—but I do say that he will have to account for his secret disposal of the body.'

Inspector Badger was thunderstruck. Also he was visibly annoyed. The salt which Mr. Jellicoe had so adroitly sprinkled on the constabulary tail appeared to develop irritating properties, for when Thorndyke had given him a brief outline of the facts he stuck his hands in his pockets and exclaimed gloomily:

'Well, I'm hanged! And to think of all the time and trouble I've spent on those damned bones! I suppose they were just a plant?'

'Don't let us disparage them,' said Thorndyke. 'They have played a useful part. They represent the inevitable mistake that every criminal makes sooner or later. The murderer will always do a little too much. If he would only lie low and let well alone, the detective might whistle for a clue. But it is time we were starting.'

'Are we all going?' asked the inspector, looking at me in particular with no very gracious recognition.

'We will all come with you,' said Thorndyke; 'but you will, naturally, make the arrest in the way that seems best to you.'

'It's a regular procession,' grumbled the inspector; but he made no more definite objection, and we started forth on our quest.

The distance from the Temple to Lincoln's Inn is not great. In five minutes we were at the gateway in Chancery Lane, and a couple of minutes later saw us gathered round the threshold of the stately old house in New Square.

'Seems to be a light in the first-floor front,' said Badger. 'You'd better move away before I ring the bell.'

But the precaution was unnecessary. As the inspector advanced to the bell-pull a head was thrust out of the open window immediately above the street door.

'Who are you?' inquired the owner of the head in a voice which I recognised as that of Mr. Jellicoe.

'I am Inspector Badger of the Criminal Investigation Department. I wish to see Mr. Arthur Jellicoe.'

'Then look at me. I am Mr. Arthur Jellicoe.'

'I hold a warrant for your arrest, Mr. Jellicoe. You are charged with the murder of Mr. John Bellingham, whose body has been discovered in the British Museum.'

'By whom?'

'By Doctor Thorndyke.'

'Indeed,' said Mr. Jellicoe. 'Is he here?'

'Yes.'

'Ha! and you wish to arrest me, I presume?'

'Yes. That is what I am here for.'

'Well, I will agree to surrender myself subject to certain conditions.'

'I can't make any conditions, Mr. Jellicoe.'

'No, I will make them, and you will accept them. Otherwise you will not arrest me.'

'It's no use for you to talk like that,' said Badger. 'If you don't let me in I shall have to break in. And I may as well tell you,' he added mendaciously, 'that the house is surrounded.'

'You may accept my assurance,' Mr. Jellicoe replied calmly, 'that you will not arrest me if you do not accept my conditions.'

'Well, what are your conditions?' demanded Badger.

'I desire to make a statement,' said Mr. Jellicoe.

'You can do that, but I must caution you that anything you say may be used in evidence against you.'

'Naturally. But I wish to make the statement in the presence of Doctor Thorndyke, and I desire to hear a statement from him of the method of investigation by which he discovered the whereabouts of the body. That is to say, if he is willing.'

'If you mean that we should mutually enlighten one another, I am very willing indeed,' said Thorndyke.

'Very well. Then my conditions, Inspector, are that I shall hear Doctor Thorndyke's statement and that I shall be permitted to make a statement myself, and that until those statements are completed, with any necessary interrogation and discussion, I shall remain at liberty and shall suffer no molestation or interference of any kind. And I agree that, on the conclusion of the said proceedings, I will submit without resistance to any course that you may adopt.'

'I can't agree to that,' said Badger.

'Can't you?' said Mr. Jellicoe coldly; and after a pause he added: 'Don't be hasty. I have given you warning.'

There was something in Mr. Jellicoe's passionless tone that disturbed the inspector exceedingly, for he turned to Thorndyke and said in a low tone:

'I wonder what his game is? He can't get away, you know.'

'There are several possibilities,' said Thorndyke.

'M'm, yes,' said Badger, stroking his chin perplexedly.

'After all, is there any objection? His statement might save trouble, and you'd be on the safe side. It would take you some time to break in.'

'Well,' said Mr. Jellicoe, with his hand on the window, 'do you agree—yes or no?'

'All right,' said Badger sulkily. 'I agree.'

'You promise not to molest me in any way until I have quite finished?'

'I promise.'

Mr. Jellicoe's head disappeared and the window closed. After a short pause we heard the jar of massive bolts and the clank of a chain, and, as the heavy door swung open, Mr. Jellicoe stood revealed, calm and impassive, with an old-fashioned office candlestick in his hand.

Who are the others?' he inquired, peering out sharply through his spectacles.

'Oh, they are nothing to do with me,' replied Badger.

They are Doctor Berkeley and Doctor Jervis,' said Thorndyke.

Ha!' said Mr. Jellicoe; 'very kind and attentive of them to call. Pray, come in, gentlemen. I am sure you will be interested to hear our little discussion.'

He held the door open with a certain stiff courtesy, and we all entered the hall led by Inspector Badger. He closed the door softly and preceded us up the stairs and into the apartment from the window of which he had dictated the terms of surrender. It was a fine old room, spacious, lofty, and dignified, with panelled walls and a carved mantelpiece, the central escutcheon of which bore the initials 'J. W. P.' with the date '1671.' A large writing-table stood at the farther end, and behind it an iron safe.

'I have been expecting this visit,' Mr. Jellicoe remarked tranquilly as he placed four chairs opposite the table. 'Since when?' asked Thorndyke.

'Since last Monday evening, when I had the pleasure of seeing you conversing with my friend Doctor Berkeley at the Inner Temple gate, and then inferred that you were retained in the case. That was a circumstance that had not been fully provided for. May I offer you gentlemen a glass of sherry?'

As he spoke he placed on the table a decanter and a tray of glasses, and looked at us interrogatively with his hand on the stopper.

'Well, I don't mind if I do, Mr. Jellicoe,' said Badger, on whom the lawyer's glance had finally settled. Mr. Jellicoe filled a glass and handed it to him with a stiff bow; then, with the decanter still in his hand, he said persuasively: 'Doctor Thorndyke, pray allow me to fill you a glass?'

'No, thank you,' said Thorndyke, in a tone so decided that the inspector looked round at him quickly. And as Badger caught his eye, the glass which he was about to raise to his lips became suddenly arrested and was slowly returned to the table untasted.

'I don't want to hurry you, Mr. Jellicoe,' said the inspector, 'but it's rather late, and I should like to get this business settled. What is it that you wish to do?'

'I desire,' replied Mr. Jellicoe, 'to make a detailed statement of the events that have happened, and I wish to hear from Doctor Thorndyke precisely how he arrived at his very remarkable conclusion. When this has been done I shall be entirely at your service; and I suggest that it would be more interesting if Doctor Thorndyke would give us his statement before I furnish you with the actual facts.'

'I am entirely of your opinion,' said Thorndyke.—I

'Then in that case,' said Mr. Jellicoe, 'I suggest that you disregard me, and address your remarks to your friends as if I were not present.'

Thorndyke acquiesced with a bow, and Mr. Jellicoe, having seated himself in his elbow-chair behind the table, poured himself out a glass of water, selected a cigarette from a neat silver case, lighted it deliberately, and leaned back to listen at his ease.

'My first acquaintance with this case,' Thorndyke began without preamble, 'was made through the medium of the daily papers about two years ago; and I may say that, although I had no interest in it beyond the purely academic interest of a specialist in a case that lies in his particular speciality, I considered it with deep attention. The newspaper reports contained no particulars of the relations of the parties that could furnish any hints as to motives on the part of any of them, but merely a bare statement of the events. And this was a distinct advantage, inasmuch as it left one to consider the facts of the case without regard to motive—to balance the prima facie probabilities with an open mind. And it may surprise you to learn that those prima facie probabilities pointed from the very first to that solution which has been put to the test of experiment this evening. Hence it will be well for me to begin by giving the conclusions that I reached by reasoning from the facts set forth in the newspapers before any of the further facts came to my knowledge.

'From the facts as stated in the newspaper reports it is obvious that there were four possible explanations of the disappearance.

'1. The man might be alive and in hiding. This was highly improbable, for the reasons that were stated by Mr. Loram at the late hearing of the application, and for a further reason that I shall mention presently.

'2. He might have died by accident or disease, and his body failed to be identified. This was even more improbable, seeing that he carried on his person abundant means of identification, including visiting cards.

'3. He might have been murdered by some stranger for the sake of his portable property. This was highly improbable for the same reason: his body could hardly have failed to be identified.

'These three explanations are what we may call the outside explanations. They touched none of the parties mentioned; they were all obviously improbable on general grounds; and to all of them there was one conclusive answer—the scarab which was found in Godfrey Bellingham's garden. Hence I put them aside and gave my attention to the fourth explanation. This was that the missing man had been made away with by one of the parties mentioned in the report. But, since the reports mentioned three parties, it was evident that there was a choice of three hypotheses namely:

4' (a) That John Bellingham had been made away with by Hurst; or (b) by the Bellinghams; or (c) by Mr. Jellicoe.

'Now, I have constantly impressed on my pupils that the indispensable question that must be asked at the outset of such an inquiry as this is, "When was the missing person last undoubtedly seen or known to be alive?" That is the question that I asked myself after reading the newspaper report; and the answer was, that he was last certainly seen alive on the fourteenth of October, nineteen hundred and two, at 141, Queen Square, Bloomsbury. Of the fact that he was alive at that time and place there could be no doubt whatever; for he was seen at the same moment by two persons, both of whom were intimately acquainted with him, and one of whom, Doctor Norbury, was apparently a disinterested witness. After that date he was never seen, alive or dead, by any person who knew him and was able to identify him. It was stated that he had been seen on the twenty-third of November following by the housemaid of Mr. Hurst; but as this person was unacquainted with him, it was uncertain whether the person whom she saw was or was not John Bellingham.

'Hence the disappearance dated, not from the twenty-third of November, as every one seems to have assumed, but from the fourteenth of October; and the question was not, "What became of John Bellingham after he entered Mr. Hurst's house?" but, "What became of him after his interview in Queen Square?"

'But as soon as I had decided that that interview must form the real starting point of the inquiry, a most striking set of circumstances came into view. It became obvious that if Mr. Jellicoe had had any reason for wishing to make away with John Bellingham, he had such an opportunity as seldom falls to the lot of an intending murderer.

'Just consider the conditions. John Bellingham was known to be setting out alone upon a journey beyond the sea. His exact destination was not stated. He was to be absent for an undetermined period, but at least three weeks. His disappearance would occasion no comment; his absence would lead to no inquiries, at least for several weeks, during which the murderer would have leisure quietly to dispose of the body and conceal all traces of the crime. The conditions were, from a murderer's point of view, ideal.

'But that was not all. During that very period of John Bellingham's absence Mr. Jellicoe was engaged to deliver to the British Museum what was admittedly a dead human body; and that body was to be enclosed in a sealed case. Could any more perfect or secure method of disposing of a body be devised by the most ingenious murderer? The plan would have had only one weak point: the mummy would be known to have left Queen Square after the disappearance of John Bellingham, and suspicion might in the end have arisen. To this point I shall return presently; meanwhile we will consider the second hypothesis—that the missing man was made away with by Mr. Hurst.

'Now, there seemed to be no doubt that some person, purporting to be John Bellingham, did actually visit Mr. Hurst's house; and he must either have left the house or remained in it. If he left, he did so surreptitiously; if he remained, there could be no reasonable doubt that he had been murdered and that his body had been concealed. Let us consider the probabilities in each case.

'Assuming—as every one seems to have done—that the visitor was really John Bellingham, we are dealing with a responsible, middle-aged gentleman, and the idea that such a person would enter a house, announce his intention of staying, and then steal away unobserved is very difficult to accept. Moreover, he would appear to have come down to Eltham by rail immediately on landing in England, leaving his luggage in the cloak-room at Charing Cross. This pointed to a definiteness of purpose quite inconsistent with his casual disappearance from the house.

'On the other hand, the idea that he might have been murdered by Hurst was not inconceivable. The thing was physically possible. If Bellingham had really been in the study when Hurst came home, the murder could have been committed—by appropriate means—and the body temporarily concealed in the cupboard or elsewhere. But, although possible it was not at all probable. There was no real opportunity. The risk and the subsequent difficulties would be very great; there was not a particle of positive evidence that a murder had occurred; and the conduct of Hurst in immediately leaving the house in possession of the servants is quite inconsistent with the supposition that there was a body concealed in it. So that, while it is almost impossible to believe that John Bellingham left the house of his own accord, it is equally difficult to believe that he did not leave it.

'But there is a third possibility, which, strange to say, no one seems to have suggested. Supposing that the visitor was not John Bellingham at all, but some one who was personating him? That would dispose of the difficulties completely. The strange disappearance ceases to be strange, for a

personator would necessarily make off before Mr. Hurst should arrive and discover the imposture. But if we accept this supposition, we raise two further questions: "Who was the personator?" and "What was the object of the personation?"

'Now, the personator was clearly not Hurst himself, for he would have been recognised by his housemaid; he was therefore either Godfrey Bellingham or Mr. Jellicoe or some other person; and as no other person was mentioned in the newspaper reports I confined my speculations to these two.

'And, first, as to Godfrey Bellingham. It did not appear whether he was or was not known to the housemaid, so I assumed—wrongly, as it turns out—that he was not. Then he might have been the personator. But why should he have personated his brother? He could not have already committed the murder. There had not been time enough. He would have had to leave Woodford before John Bellingham had set out from Charing Cross. And even if he had committed the murder, he would have no object in raising this commotion. His cue would have been to remain quiet and know nothing. The probabilities were all against the personator being Godfrey Bellingham.

'Then could it be Mr. Jellicoe? The answer to this question is contained in the answer to the further question: What could have been the object of the personation?

'What motive could this unknown person have had in appearing, announcing himself as John Bellingham, and forthwith vanishing? There could only have been one motive: that, namely, of fixing the date of John Bellingham's disappearance—of furnishing a definite moment at which he was last seen alive.

'But who was likely to have had such a motive? Let us see.

'I said just now that if Mr. Jellicoe had murdered John Bellingham and disposed of the body in the mummy-case, he would have been absolutely safe for the time being. But there would be a weak spot in his armour. For a month or more the disappearance of his client would occasion no remark. But presently, when he failed to return, inquiries would be set on foot; and then it would appear that no one had seen him since he left Queen Square. Then it would be noted that the last person with whom he was seen was Mr. Jellicoe. It might, further, be remembered that the mummy had been delivered to the Museum some time after the missing man was last seen alive. And so suspicion might arise and be followed by disastrous investigations. But supposing it should be made to appear that John Bellingham had been seen alive more than a month after his interview with Mr. Jellicoe and some weeks after the mummy had been deposited in the Museum? Then Mr. Jellicoe would cease to be in any way connected with the disappearance and henceforth would be absolutely safe.

'Hence, after carefully considering this part of the newspaper report, I came to the conclusion that the mysterious occurrence at Mr. Hurst's home had only one reasonable explanation, namely, that the visitor was not John Bellingham, but some one personating him; and that that some one was Mr. Jellicoe.

'It remains to consider the case of Godfrey Bellingham and his daughter, though I cannot understand how any sane person can have seriously suspected either' (here Inspector Badger smiled a sour smile). 'The evidence against them was negligible, for there was nothing to connect them with the affair save the finding of the scarab on their premises; and that event, which might have been highly suspicious under other circumstances, was robbed of any significance by the fact that the scarab was found on a spot which had been passed a few minutes previously by the other suspected party, Hurst. The finding of the scarab did, however, establish two important

conclusions: namely, that John Bellingham had probably met with foul play, and that of the four persons present when it was found, one at least had had possession of the body. As to which of the four was the one, the circumstances furnished only a hint, which was this: If the scarab had been purposely dropped, the most likely person to find it was the one who dropped it. And the person who discovered it was Mr. Jellicoe.

'Following up this hint, if we ask ourselves what motive Mr. Jellicoe could have had for dropping it—assuming him to be the murderer—the answer is obvious. It would not be his policy to fix the crime on any particular person, but rather to set up a complication of conflicting evidence which would occupy the attention of investigators and divert it from himself.

'Of course, if Hurst had been the murderer, he would have had a sufficient motive for dropping the scarab, so that the case against Mr. Jellicoe was not conclusive; but the fact that it was he who found it was highly significant.

'This completes the analysis of the evidence contained in the original newspaper report describing the circumstances of the disappearance. The conclusions that followed from it were, as you will have seen:

'1. That the missing man was almost certainly dead, as proved by the finding of the scarab after his disappearance.

'2. That he had probably been murdered by one or more of four persons, as proved by the finding of the scarab on the premises occupied by two of them and accessible to the others.

'3. That, of those four persons, one—Mr. Jellicoe—was the last person who was known to have been in the company of the missing man; had had an exceptional opportunity for committing the murder; and was known to have delivered a dead body to the Museum subsequently to the disappearance.

'4. That the supposition that Mr. Jellicoe had committed the murder rendered all the other circumstances of the disappearance clearly intelligible, whereas on any other supposition they were quite inexplicable.

'The evidence of the newspaper report, therefore, clearly pointed to the probability that John Bellingham had been murdered by Mr. Jellicoe and his body concealed in the mummy-case.

'I do not wish to give you the impression that I, then and there, believed that Mr. Jellicoe was the murderer. I did not. There was no reason to suppose that the report contained all the essential facts, and I merely considered it speculatively as a study in probabilities. But I did decide that that was the only probable conclusion from the facts that were given.

'Nearly two years had passed before I heard anything more of the case. Then it was brought to my notice by my friend, Doctor Berkeley, and I became acquainted with certain new facts, which I will consider in the order in which they became known to me.

'The first new light on the case came from the will. As soon as I had read the document I felt convinced that there was something wrong. The testator's evident intention was that his brother should inherit the property, whereas the construction of the will was such as almost certainly to defeat that intention. The devolution of the property depended on the burial clause—clause two; but the burial arrangements would ordinarily be decided by the executor, who happened to be Mr.

Jellicoe. Thus the will left the disposition of the property under the control of Mr. Jellicoe, though his action could have been contested.

'Now, this will, although drawn up by John Bellingham, was executed in Mr. Jellicoe's office as is proved by the fact that it was witnessed by two of his clerks. He was the testator's lawyer, and it was his duty to insist on the will being properly drawn. Evidently he did nothing of the kind, and this fact strongly suggested some kind of collusion on his part with Hurst, who stood to benefit by the miscarriage of the will. And this was the odd feature in the case; for whereas the party responsible for the defective provisions was Mr. Jellicoe, the party who benefited was Hurst.

'But the most startling peculiarity of the will was the way in which it fitted the circumstances of the disappearance. It looked as if clause two had been drawn up with those very circumstances in view. Since, however, the will was ten years old, this was impossible. But if clause two could not have been devised to fit the disappearance, could the disappearance have been devised to fit clause two? That was by no means impossible: under the circumstances it looked rather probable. And if it had been so contrived, who was the agent in that contrivance? Hurst stood to benefit, but there was no evidence that he even knew the contents of the will. There only remained Mr. Jellicoe, who had certainly connived at the misdrawing of the will for some purpose of his own—some dishonest purpose.

'The evidence of the will, then, pointed to Mr. Jellicoe as the agent in the disappearance, and, after reading it, I definitely suspected him of the crime.

'Suspicion, however, is one thing and proof is another; I had not nearly enough evidence to justify me in laying an information, and I could not approach the Museum officials without making a definite accusation. The great difficulty of the case was that I could discover no motive. I could not see any way in which Mr. Jellicoe would benefit by the disappearance. His own legacy was secure, whenever and however the testator died. The murder and concealment apparently benefited Hurst alone; and, in the absence of any plausible motive, the facts required to be much more conclusive than they were.'

'Did you form absolutely no opinion as to motive?' asked Mr. Jellicoe.

He put the question in a quiet, passionless tone, as if he were discussing some cause celebre in which he had nothing more than a professional interest. Indeed, the calm, impersonal interest that he displayed in Thorndyke's analysis, his unmoved attention, punctuated by little nods of approval at each telling point in the argument, were the most surprising features of this astounding interview.

'I did form an opinion,' replied Thorndyke, 'but it was merely speculative, and I was never able to confirm it. I discovered that about ten years ago Mr. Hurst had been in difficulties and that he had suddenly raised a considerable sum of money, no one knew how or on what security. I observed that this event coincided with the execution of the will, and I surmised that there might be some connection between them. But that was only a surmise; and, as the proverb has it, "He discovers who proves." I could prove nothing, so that I never discovered Mr. Jellicoe's motive, and I don't know it now.'

'Don't you really?' said Mr. Jellicoe, in something approaching a tone of animation. He laid down the end of his cigarette, and, as he selected another from the silver case, he continued: 'I think that is the most interesting feature of your really remarkable analysis. It does you great credit. The absence of motive would have appeared to most persons a fatal objection to the theory of, what I

may call, the prosecution. Permit me to congratulate you on the consistency and tenacity with which you have pursued the actual, visible facts.'

He bowed stiffly to Thorndyke (who returned his bow with equal stiffness), lighted a fresh cigarette, and once more leaned back in his chair with the calm, attentive manner of a man who is listening to a lecture or a musical performance.

'The evidence, then, being insufficient to act upon,' Thorndyke resumed, 'there was nothing for it but to wait for some new facts. Now, the study of a large series of carefully conducted murders brings into view an almost invariable phenomenon. The cautious murderer, in his anxiety to make himself secure, does too much; and it is this excess of precaution that leads to detection. It happens constantly; indeed, I may say that it always happens—in those murders that are detected; of those that are not we say nothing—and I had strong hopes that it would happen in this case. And it did.

'At the very moment when my client's case seemed almost hopeless, some human remains were discovered at Sidcup. I read the account of the discovery in the evening paper, and, scanty as the report was, it recorded enough facts to convince me that the inevitable mistake had been made.'

'Did it, indeed?' said Mr. Jellicoe. 'A mere, inexpert, hearsay report! I should have supposed it to be quite valueless from a scientific point of view.'

'So it was,' said Thorndyke. 'But it gave the date of the discovery and the locality, and it also mentioned what bones had been found. Which were all vital facts. Take the question of time. These remains, after lying perdu for two years, suddenly come to light just as the parties—who have also been lying perdu—have begun to take action in respect of the will; in fact, within a week or two of the hearing of the application. It was certainly a remarkable coincidence. And when the circumstances that occasioned the discovery were considered, the coincidence became more remarkable still. For these remains were found on land actually belonging to John Bellingham, and their discovery resulted from certain operations (the clearing of the watercress-beds) carried out on behalf of the absent landlord. But by whose orders were those works undertaken? Clearly by the orders of the landlord's agent. But the landlord's agent was known to be Mr. Jellicoe. Therefore these remains were brought to light at this peculiarly opportune moment by the action of Mr. Jellicoe. The coincidence, I say again, was very remarkable.

'But what instantly arrested my attention on reading the newspaper report was the unusual manner in which the arm had been separated; for, beside the bones of the arm proper, there were those of what anatomists call the "shoulder-girdle"—the shoulder-blade and collar-bone. This was very remarkable. It seemed to suggest a knowledge of anatomy, and yet no murderer, even if he possessed such knowledge, would make a display of it on such an occasion. It seemed to me that there must be some other explanation. Accordingly, when other remains had come to light and all had been collected at Woodford, I asked my friend Berkeley to go down there and inspect them. He did so, and this is what he found:

'Both arms had been detached in the same peculiar manner; both were complete, and all the bones were from the same body. The bones were quite clean—of soft structures, I mean. There were no cuts, scratches or marks on them. There was not a trace of adipocere—the peculiar waxy soap that forms in bodies that decay in water or in a damp situation. The right hand had been detached at the time the arm was thrown into the pond, and the left ring finger had been separated and had vanished. This latter fact had attracted my attention from the first, but I will leave its consideration for the moment and return to it later.'

'How did you discover that the hand had been detached?' Mr. Jellicoe asked.

'By the submersion marks,' replied Thorndyke. 'It was lying on the bottom of the pond in a position which would have been impossible if it had been attached to the arm.'

'You interest me exceedingly,' said Mr. Jellicoe. 'It appears that a medico-legal expert finds "books in the running brooks, sermons in bones, and evidence in everything." But don't let me interrupt you.'

'Doctor Berkeley's observations,' Thorndyke resumed, 'together with the medical evidence at the inquest, led me to certain conclusions.

'Let me state the facts which were disclosed.

'The remains which had been assembled formed a complete human skeleton with the exception of the skull, one finger, and the legs from the knee to the ankle, including both knee-caps. This was a very impressive fact; for the bones that were missing included all those which could have been identified as belonging or not belonging to John Bellingham; and the bones that were present were the unidentifiable remainder.

'It had a suspicious appearance of selection.

'But the parts that were present were also curiously suggestive. In all cases the mode of dismemberment was peculiar; for an ordinary person would have divided the knee-joint leaving the kneecap attached to the thigh, whereas it had evidently been left attached to the shin-bone; and the head would most probably have been removed by cutting through the neck instead of being neatly detached from the spine. And all these bones were almost entirely free from marks or scratches such as would naturally occur in an ordinary dismemberment, and all were quite free from adipocere. And now as to the conclusions which I drew from these facts. First, there was the peculiar grouping of the bones. What was the meaning of that? Well, the idea of a punctilious anatomist was obviously absurd, and I put it aside. But was there any other explanation? Yes, there was. The bones had appeared in the natural groups that are held together by ligaments; and they had separated at points where they were attached principally by muscles. The knee-cap, for instance, which really belongs to the thigh, is attached to it by muscle, but to the shin-bone by a stout ligament. And so with the bones of the arm; they are connected to one another by ligaments; but to the trunk only by muscle, excepting at one end of the collarbone.

But this was a very significant fact. Ligament decays much more slowly than muscle, so that in a body of which the muscles had largely decayed the bones might still be held together by ligament. The peculiar grouping therefore suggested that the body had been partly reduced to a skeleton before it was dismembered; that it had then been merely pulled apart and not divided with a knife.

'This suggestion was remarkably confirmed by the total absence of knife-cuts or scratches.

'Then there was the fact that all the bones were quite free from adipocere. Now, if an arm or a thigh should be deposited in water and left undisturbed to decay, it is certain that large masses of adipocere would be formed. Probably more than half of the flesh would be converted into this substance. The absence of adipocere therefore proved that the bulk of the flesh had disappeared or been removed from the bones before they were deposited in the pond. That, in fact, it was not a body, but a skeleton, that had been deposited.

'But what kind of skeleton? If it was the recent skeleton of a murdered man, then the bones had been carefully stripped of flesh so as to leave the ligaments intact. But this was highly improbable;

for there could be no object in preserving the ligaments. And the absence of scratches was against this view.

'Then they did not appear to be graveyard bones. The collection was too complete. It is very rare to find a graveyard skeleton of which many of the small bones are not missing. And such bones are usually more or less weathered or friable.

'They did not appear to be bones such as may be bought at an osteological dealer's, for these usually have perforations to admit the macerating fluid to the marrow cavities. Dealers' bones, too, are very seldom all from the same body; and the small bones of the hand are drilled with holes to enable them to be strung on catgut.

'They were not dissecting-room bones, as there was no trace of red lead in the openings for the nutrient arteries.

'What the appearances did suggest was that these were parts of a body which had decayed in a very dry atmosphere (in which no adipocere would be formed), and which had been pulled or broken apart. Also that the ligaments which held the body—or rather skeleton—together were brittle and friable as suggested by the detached hand, which had probably broken off accidentally. But the only kind of body that completely answered this description is an Egyptian mummy. A mummy, it is true, has been more or less preserved; but on exposure to the air of such a climate as ours it perishes rapidly, the ligaments being the last of the soft parts to disappear.

'The hypothesis that these bones were parts of a mummy naturally suggested Mr. Jellicoe. If he had murdered John Bellingham and concealed his body in the mummy-case, he would have a spare mummy on his hands, and that mummy would have been exposed to the air and to somewhat rough handling.

'A very interesting circumstance connected with these remains was that the ring finger was missing. Now, fingers have on sundry occasions been detached from dead hands for the sake of the rings on them. But in such cases the object has been to secure a valuable ring uninjured. If this hand was the hand of John Bellingham, there was no such object. The purpose was to prevent identification; and that purpose would have been more easily, and much more completely, achieved by sacrificing the ring, by filing through it or breaking it off the finger. The appearances, therefore, did not quite agree with the apparent purpose.

'Then, could there be any other purpose with which they agreed better? Yes, there could.

'If it had happened that John Bellingham were known to have worn a ring on that finger, and especially if that ring fitted tightly, the removal of the finger would serve a very useful purpose. It would create an impression that the finger had been removed on account of a ring, to prevent identification; which impression would, in turn, produce a suspicion that the hand was that of John Bellingham. And yet it would not be evidence that could be used to establish identity. Now, if Mr. Jellicoe were the murderer and had the body hidden elsewhere, vague suspicion would be precisely what he would desire, and positive evidence what he would wish to avoid.

'It transpired later that John Bellingham did wear a ring on that finger and that the ring fitted very tightly. Whence it followed that the absence of the finger was an additional point tending to implicate Mr. Jellicoe.

'And now let us briefly review this mass of evidence. You will see that it consists of a multitude of items, each either trivial or speculative. Up to the time of the actual discovery I had not a single

crucial fact, nor any clue as to motive. But, slight as the individual points of evidence were, they pointed with impressive unanimity to one person—Mr. Jellicoe. Thus:

'The person who had the opportunity to commit murder and dispose of the body was Mr. Jellicoe.

'The deceased was last certainly seen alive with Mr. Jellicoe.

'An unidentified human body was delivered to the Museum by Mr. Jellicoe.

'The only person who could have a motive for personating the deceased was Mr. Jellicoe.

'The only known person who could possibly have done so was Mr. Jellicoe.

'One of the two persons who could have had a motive for dropping the scarab was Mr. Jellicoe. The person who found that scarab was Mr. Jellicoe, although, owing to his defective eyesight and his spectacles, he was the most unlikely person of those present to find it.

'The person who was responsible for the execution of the defective will was Mr. Jellicoe.

'Then as to the remains. They were apparently not those of John Bellingham, but parts of a particular kind of body. But the only person who was known to have had such a body in his possession was Mr. Jellicoe.

'The only person who could have had any motive for substituting those remains for the remains of the deceased was Mr. Jellicoe.

'Finally, the person who caused the discovery of those remains at that singularly opportune moment was Mr. Jellicoe.

'This was the sum of the evidence that was in my possession up to the time of the hearing and, indeed, for some time after, and it was not enough to act upon. But when the case had been heard in Court, it was evident either that the proceedings would be abandoned—which was unlikely—or that there would be new developments.

'I watched the progress of events with profound interest. An attempt had been made (by Mr. Jellicoe or some other person) to get the will administered without producing the body of John Bellingham; and that attempt had failed. The coroner's jury had refused to identify the remains; the Probate Court had refused to presume the death of the testator. As affairs stood the will could not be administered.

'What would be the next move?

'It was virtually certain that it would consist in the production of something which would identify the unrecognised remains as those of the testator.

'But what would that something be?

'The answer to that question would contain the answer to another question: Was my solution of the mystery the true solution?

'If I was wrong, it was possible that some of the undoubtedly genuine bones of John Bellingham might presently be discovered; for instance, the skull, the knee-cap, or the left fibula, by any of which the remains could be positively identified.

'If I was right, only one thing could possibly happen. Mr. Jellicoe would have to play the trump card that he had been holding back in case the Court should refuse the application; a card that he was evidently reluctant to play.

'He would have to produce the bones of the mummy's finger, together with John Bellingham's ring. No other course was possible.

'But not only would the bones and the ring have to be found together. They would have to be found in a place which was accessible to Mr. Jellicoe, and so far under his control that he could determine the exact time when the discovery should be made.

'I waited patiently for the answer to my question. Was I right or was I wrong?

'And, in due course, the answer came.

'The bones and the ring were discovered in the well in the grounds of Godfrey Bellingham's late house. That house was the property of John Bellingham. Mr. Jellicoe was John Bellingham's agent. Hence it was practically certain that the date on which the well was emptied was settled by Mr. Jellicoe.

'The oracle had spoken.

'The discovery proved conclusively that the bones were not those of John Bellingham (for if they had been the ring would have been unnecessary for identification). But if the bones were not John Bellingham's, the ring was; from which followed the important corollary that whoever had deposited those bones in the well had had possession of the body of John Bellingham. And there could be no doubt that that person was Mr. Jellicoe.

'On receiving this final confirmation of my conclusions, I applied forthwith to Doctor Norbury for permission to examine the mummy of Sebekhotep, with the result that you are already acquainted with.'

As Thorndyke concluded, Mr. Jellicoe regarded him thoughtfully for a moment and then said: 'You have given us a most complete and lucid exposition of your method of investigation, sir. I have enjoyed it exceedingly, and should have profited by it hereafter—under other circumstances. Are you sure you won't allow me to fill your glass?' He touched the stopper of the decanter, and Inspector Badger ostentatiously consulted his watch.

'Time is running on, I fear,' said Mr. Jellicoe.

'It is, indeed,' Badger assented emphatically.

'Well, I need not detain you long,' said the lawyer. 'My statement is a narration of events. But I desire to make it, and you, no doubt, will be interested to hear it.'

He opened the silver case and selected a fresh cigarette, which, however, he did not light. Inspector Badger produced a funereal notebook, which he laid open on his knee; and the rest of us settled ourselves in our chairs with no little curiosity to hear Mr. Jellicoe's statement.

CHAPTER XX. THE END OF THE CASE

A PROFOUND silence had fallen on the room and its occupants. Mr. Jellicoe sat with his eyes fixed on the table as if deep in thought, the unlighted cigarette in one hand, the other grasping the tumbler of water. Presently Inspector Badger coughed impatiently and he looked up. 'I beg your pardon, gentlemen,' he said. 'I am keeping you waiting.'

He took a sip from the tumbler, opened a match-box and took out a match, but apparently altering his mind, laid it down and commenced:

'The unfortunate affair which has brought you here to-night, had its origin ten years ago. At that time my friend Hurst became suddenly involved in financial difficulties—am I speaking too fast for you, Mr. Badger?'

'No not at all,' replied Badger. 'I am taking it down in shorthand.'

'Thank you,' said Mr. Jellicoe. 'He became involved in serious difficulties and came to me for assistance. He wished to borrow five thousand pounds to enable him to meet his engagements. I had a certain amount of money at my disposal, but I did not consider Hurst's security satisfactory; accordingly I felt compelled to refuse. But on the very next day, John Bellingham called on me with a draft of his will which he wished me to look over before it was executed.

'It was an absurd will, and I nearly told him so; but then an idea occurred to me in connection with Hurst. It was obvious to me, as soon as I glanced through the will, that, if the burial clause was left as the testator had drafted it, Hurst had a very good chance of inheriting the property; and, as I was named as the executor I should be able to give full effect to that clause. Accordingly, I asked for a few days to consider the will, and then I called upon Hurst and made a proposal to him; which was this: That I should advance him five thousand pounds without security; that I should ask for no repayment, but that he should assign to me any interest that he might have or acquire in the estate of John Bellingham up to ten thousand pounds, or two-thirds of any sum that he might inherit if over that amount. He asked if John had yet made any will, and I replied, quite correctly, that he had not. He inquired if I knew what testamentary arrangements John intended to make, and again I answered, quite correctly, that I believed John proposed to devise the bulk of his property to his brother, Godfrey.

'Thereupon, Hurst accepted my proposal; I made him the advance and he executed the assignment. After a few days' delay, I passed the will as satisfactory. The actual document was written from the draft by the testator himself; and a fortnight after Hurst had executed the assignment, John signed the will in my office. By the provisions of that will I stood an excellent chance of becoming virtually the principal beneficiary, unless Godfrey should contest Hurst's claim and the Court should override the conditions of clause two.

'You will now understand the motives which governed my subsequent actions. You will also see, Doctor Thorndyke, how very near to the truth your reasoning carried you; and you will understand, as I wish you to do, that Mr. Hurst was no party to any of those proceedings which I am about to describe.

'Coming now to the interview in Queen Square in October, nineteen hundred and two, you are aware of the general circumstances from my evidence in Court, which was literally correct up to a certain point. The interview took place in a room on the third floor, in which were stored the cases which John had brought with him from Egypt. The mummy was unpacked, as were some other objects that he was not offering to the Museum, but several cases were still unopened. At the

conclusion of the interview I accompanied Doctor Norbury down to the street door, and we stood on the doorstep conversing for perhaps a quarter of an hour. Then Doctor Norbury went away and I returned upstairs.

'Now the house in Queen Square is virtually a museum. The upper part is separated from the lower by a massive door which opens from the hall and gives access to the staircase and which is fitted with a Chubb night-latch. There are two latch-keys, of which John used to keep one and I the other. You will find them both in the safe behind me. The caretaker had no key and no access to the upper part of the house unless admitted by one of us.

'At the time when I came in, after Doctor Norbury had left, the caretaker was in the cellar, where I could hear him breaking coke for the hot-water furnace. I had left John on the third floor opening some of the packing-cases by the light of a lamp with a tool somewhat like a plasterer's hammer; that is, a hammer with a small axe-blade at the reverse of the head. As I stood talking to Doctor Norbury, I could hear him knocking out the nails and wrenching up the lids; and when I entered the doorway leading to the stairs, I could still hear him. Just as I closed the staircase door behind me, I heard a rumbling noise from above; then all was still.

'I went up the stairs to the second floor, where, as the staircase was all in darkness, I stopped to light the gas. As I turned to ascend the next flight, I saw a hand projecting over the edge of the halfway landing. I ran up the stairs, and there, on the landing, I saw John lying huddled up in a heap at the foot of the top flight. There was a wound at the side of his forehead from which a little blood was trickling. The case-opener lay on the floor close by him and there was blood on the axe-blade. When I looked up the stairs I saw a rag of torn matting over the top stair.

'It was quite easy to see what had happened. He had walked quickly out on the landing with the case-opener in his hand. His foot had caught in the torn matting and he had pitched head foremost down the stairs still holding the case-opener. He had fallen so that his head had come down on the upturned edge of the axe-blade; he had then rolled over and the case-opener had dropped from his hand.

'I lit a wax match and stooped down to look at him. His head was in a very peculiar position, which made me suspect that his neck was broken. There was extremely little bleeding from the wound; he was perfectly motionless; I could detect no sign of breathing; and I felt no doubt that he was dead.

'It was an exceedingly regrettable affair, and it placed me, as I perceived at once, in an extremely awkward position. My first impulse was to send the caretaker for a doctor and a policeman; but a moment's reflection convinced me that there were serious objections to this course.

'There was nothing to show that I had not, myself, knocked him down with the case-opener. Of course, there was nothing to show that I had; but we were alone in the house with the exception of the caretaker, who was down in the basement out of earshot.

'There would be an inquest. At the inquest inquiries would be made as to the will which was known to exist. But as soon as the will was produced, Hurst would become suspicious. He would probably make a statement to the coroner and I should be charged with the murder. Or, even if I were not charged, Hurst would suspect me and would probably repudiate the assignment; and, under the circumstances, it would be practically impossible for me to enforce it. He would refuse to pay and I could not take my claim into Court.

I sat down on the stairs just above poor John's body and considered the matter in detail. At the worst, I stood a fair chance of hanging; at the best, I stood to lose close upon fifty thousand pounds. These were not pleasant alternatives.

'Supposing, on the other hand, I concealed the body and gave out that John had gone to Paris. There was, of course, the risk of discovery, in which case I should certainly be convicted of the murder. But if no discovery occurred, I was not only safe from suspicion, but I secured the fifty thousand pounds. In either case there was considerable risk, but in one there was the certainty of loss, whereas in the other there was a material advantage to justify the risk. The question was whether it would be possible to conceal the body. If it were, then the contingent profit was worth the slight additional risk. But a human body is a very difficult thing to dispose of, especially to a person of so little scientific culture as myself.

'It is curious that I considered this question for a quite considerable time before the obvious solution presented itself. I turned over at least a dozen methods of disposing of the body, and rejected them all as impracticable. Then, suddenly, I remembered the mummy upstairs.

'At first it only occurred to me as a fantastic possibility that I could conceal the body in the mummy-case. But as I turned over the idea I began to see that it was really practicable; and not only practicable but easy; and not only easy but eminently safe. If once the mummy-case was in the Museum, I was rid of it for ever.

'The circumstances were, as you, sir, have justly observed, singularly favourable. There would be no hue and cry, no hurry, no anxiety; but ample time for all the necessary preparations. Then the mummy-case itself was curiously suitable. Its length was ample, as I knew from having measured it. It was a cartonnage of rather flexible material and had an opening behind, secured with a lacing so that it could be opened without injury. Nothing need be cut but the lacing, which could be replaced. A little damage might be done in extracting the mummy and in introducing the deceased; but such cracks as might occur would be of no importance. For here again Fortune favoured me. The whole of the back of the mummy-case was coated with bitumen, and it would be easy when once the deceased was safely inside to apply a fresh coat, which would cover up not only the cracks but also the new lacing.

'After careful consideration, I decided to adopt the plan. I went downstairs and sent the caretaker on an errand to the Law Courts. Then I returned and carried the deceased up to one of the third-floor rooms, where I removed his clothes and laid him out on a long packing-case in the position in which he would lie in the mummy-case. I folded his clothes neatly and packed them, with the exception of his boots, in a suit-case that he had been taking to Paris and which contained nothing but his night-clothes, toilet articles, and a change of linen. By the time I had done this and thoroughly washed the oilcloth on the stairs and landing, the caretaker had returned. I informed him that Mr. Bellingham had started for Paris and then I went home. The upper part of the house was, of course, secured by the Chubb lock, but I had also—ex abundantia caulela—locked the door of the room in which I had deposited the deceased.

'I had, of course, some knowledge of the methods of embalming, but principally of those employed by the ancients. Hence, on the following day, I went to the British Museum library and consulted the most recent works on the subject; and exceedingly interesting they were, as showing the remarkable improvements that modern knowledge has effected in this ancient art. I need not trouble you with details that are familiar to you. The process that I selected as the simplest for a beginner was that of formalin injection, and I went straight from the Museum to purchase the necessary materials. I did not, however, buy an embalming syringe: the book stated that an

ordinary anatomical injecting syringe would answer the same purpose, and I thought it a more discreet purchase.

'I fear that I bungled the injection terribly, although I had carefully studied the plates in a treatise on anatomy—Gray's, I think. However, if my methods were clumsy, they were quite effectual. I carried out the process on the evening of the third day; and when I locked up the house that night, I had the satisfaction of knowing that poor John's remains were secure from corruption and decay.

'But this was not enough. The great weight of a fresh body as compared with that of a mummy would be immediately noticed by those who had the handling of the mummy-case. Moreover, the damp from the body would quickly ruin the cartonnage and would cause a steamy film on the inside of the glass case in which it would be exhibited. And this would probably lead to an examination. Clearly, then, it was necessary that the remains of the deceased should be thoroughly dried before they were enclosed in the cartonnage.

'Here my unfortunate deficiency in scientific knowledge was a great drawback. I had no idea how this result would be achieved and, in the end, was compelled to consult a taxidermist, to whom I represented that I wished to collect some small animals and reptiles and rapidly dry them for convenience of transport. By this person I was advised to immerse the dead animals in a jar of methylated spirit for a week and then expose them in a current of warm, dry air.

'But the plan of immersing the remains of the deceased in ajar of methylated spirit was obviously impracticable. However, I bethought me that we had in our collection a porphyry sarcophagus, the cavity of which had been shaped to receive a small mummy in its case. I tried the deceased in the sarcophagus and found that he just fitted the cavity loosely. I obtained a few gallons of methylated spirit, which I poured into the cavity, just covering the body, and then I put on the lid and luted it down air-tight with putty. I trust I do not weary you with these particulars?'

'I'll ask you to cut it as short as you can, Mr. Jellicoe,' said Badger. 'It has been a long yarn and time is running on.'

'For my part,' said Thorndyke, 'I find these details deeply interesting and instructive. They fill in the outline that I had drawn by inference.'

'Precisely,' said Mr. Jellicoe; 'then I will proceed.

'I left the deceased soaking in the spirit for a fortnight and then took him out, wiped him dry, and laid him on four cane-bottomed chairs just over the hot-water pipes, and I let a free current of air pass through the room. The result interested me exceedingly. By the end of the third day the hands and feet had become quite dry and shrivelled and horny—so that the ring actually dropped off the shrunken finger—the nose looked like a fold of parchment; and the skin of the body was so dry and smooth that you could have engrossed a lease on it. For the first day or two I turned the deceased at intervals so that he should dry evenly, and then I proceeded to get the case ready. I divided the lacing and extracted the mummy with great care—with great care as to the case, I mean; for the mummy suffered some injury in the extraction. It was very badly embalmed, and so brittle that it broke in several places while I was getting it out; and when I unrolled it the head separated and both the arms came off.

'On the sixth day after the removal from the sarcophagus, I took the bandages that I had removed from Sebekhotep and very carefully wrapped the deceased in them, sprinkling powdered myrrh and gum benzoin freely on the body and between the folds of the wrappings to disguise the faint odour of the spirit and the formalin that still lingered about the body. When the wrappings had

been applied, the deceased really had a most workmanlike appearance; he would have looked quite well in a glass case even without the cartonnage, and I felt almost regretful at having to put him out of sight for ever.

'It was a difficult business getting him into the case without assistance, and I cracked the cartonnage badly in several places before he was safely enclosed. But I got him in at last, and then, when I had closed up the case with a new lacing, I applied a fresh layer of bitumen which effectually covered up the cracks and the new cord. A dusty cloth dabbed over the bitumen when it was dry disguised its newness, and the cartonnage with its tenant was ready for delivery. I notified Doctor Norbury of the fact, and five days later he came and removed it to the Museum.

'Now that the main difficulty was disposed of, I began to consider the further difficulty to which you, sir, have alluded with such admirable perspicuity. It was necessary that John Bellingham should make one more appearance in public before sinking into final oblivion.

'Accordingly, I devised the visit to Hurst's house, which was calculated to serve two purposes. It created a satisfactory date for the disappearance, eliminating me from any connection with it, and by throwing some suspicion on Hurst it would make him more amenable—less likely to dispute my claim when he learned the provisions of the will.

'The affair was quite simple. I knew that Hurst had changed his servants since I was last at his house, and I knew his habits. On that day I took the suit-case to Charing Cross and deposited it in the cloak-room, called at Hurst's office to make sure that he was there, and went from thence direct to Cannon Street and caught the train to Eltham. On arriving at the house, I took the precaution to remove my spectacles—the only distinctive feature of my exterior—and was duly shown into the study at my request. As soon as the housemaid had left the room I quietly let myself out by the French window, which I closed behind me but could not fasten, went out at the side gate and closed that also behind me, holding the bolt of the latch back with my pocket-knife so that I need not slam the gate to shut it.

'The other events of that day, including the dropping of the scarab, I need not describe, as they are known to you. But I may fitly make a few remarks on the unfortunate tactical error into which I fell in respect of the bones. That error arose, as you have doubtless perceived, from the lawyer's incurable habit of underestimating the scientific expert. I had no idea mere bones were capable of furnishing so much information to a man of science.

'The way in which the affair came about was this: the damaged mummy of Sebekhotep, perishing gradually by exposure to the air, was not only an eyesore to me: it was a definite danger. It was the only remaining link between me and the disappearance. I resolved to be rid of it and cast about for some means of destroying it. And then, in an evil moment, the idea of utilising it occurred to me.

'There was an undoubted danger that the Court might refuse to presume death after so short an interval; and if the permission should be postponed, the will might never be administered during my lifetime. Hence, if these bones of Sebekhotep could be made to simulate the remains of the deceased testator, a definite good would be achieved. But I knew that the entire skeleton could never be mistaken for his. The deceased had broken his knee-caps and damaged his ankle, injuries which I assumed would leave some permanent trace. But if a judicious selection of the bones were deposited in a suitable place, together with some object clearly identifiable as appertaining to the deceased, it seemed to me that the difficulty would be met. I need not trouble you with details. The course which I adopted is known to you with the attendant circumstances, even to the accidental detachment of the right hand—which broke off as I was packing the arm in my handbag.

Erroneous as that course was, it would have been successful but for the unforeseen contingency of your being retained in the case.

'Thus, for nearly two years, I remained in complete security. From time to time I dropped in at the Museum to see if the deceased was keeping in good condition; and on those occasions I used to reflect with satisfaction on the gratifying circumstance—accidental though it was—that his wishes, as expressed (very imperfectly) in clause two, had been fully complied with, and that without prejudice to my interests.

'The awakening came on that evening when I saw you at the Temple gate talking with Doctor Berkeley. I suspected immediately that something was gone amiss and that it was too late to take any useful action. Since then, I have waited here in hourly expectation of this visit. And now the time has come. You have made the winning move and it remains only for me to pay my debts like an honest gambler.'

He paused and quietly lit his cigarette. Inspector Badger yawned and put away his notebook.

'Have you done, Mr. Jellicoe?' the inspector asked. 'I want to carry out my contract to the letter, you know, though it's getting devilish late.'

Mr. Jellicoe took his cigarette from his mouth and drank a glass of water.

'I forgot to ask,' he said, 'whether you unrolled the mummy—if I may apply the term to the imperfectly treated remains of my deceased client.'

'I did not open the mummy-case,' replied Thorndyke.

'You did not!' exclaimed Mr. Jellicoe. 'Then how did you verify your suspicions?'

'I took an X-ray photograph.'

'Ah! Indeed!' Mr. Jellicoe pondered for some moments. 'Astonishing!' he murmured; 'and most ingenious. The resources of science at the present day are truly wonderful.'

'Is there anything more that you want to say?' asked Badger; 'because if you don't, time's up.'

'Anything more?' Mr. Jellicoe repeated slowly; 'anything more? No—I—think—think—the time—is—up. Yes—the—the—time—'

He broke off and sat with a strange look fixed on Thorndyke.

His face had suddenly undergone a curious change. It looked shrunken and cadaverous and his lips had assumed a peculiar cherry-red colour.

'Is anything the matter, Mr. Jellicoe?' Badger asked uneasily. 'Are you not feeling well, sir?'

Mr. Jellicoe did not appear to have heard the question, for he returned no answer, but sat motionless, leaning back in his chair, with his hands spread out on the table and his strangely intent gaze bent on Thorndyke.

Suddenly his head dropped on his breast and his body seemed to collapse; and as with one accord we sprang to our feet, he slid forward off his chair and disappeared under the table.

'Good Lord! The man's fainted!' exclaimed Badger.

In a moment he was down on his hands and knees, trembling with excitement, groping under the table. He dragged the unconscious lawyer out into the light and knelt over him, staring into his face.

'What's the matter with him, Doctor?' he asked, looking up at Thorndyke. 'Is it apoplexy? Or is it a heart attack, think you?'

Thorndyke shook his head, though he stooped and put his fingers on the unconscious man's wrist.

'Prussic acid or potassium cyanide is what the appearances suggest,' he replied.

'But can't you do anything?' demanded the inspector.

Thorndyke dropped the arm, which fell limply to the floor.

'You can't do much for a dead man,' he said.

'Dead! Then he has slipped through our fingers after all!'

'He has anticipated the sentence. That is all.' Thorndyke spoke in an even, impassive tone which struck me as rather strange, considering the suddenness of the tragedy, as did also the complete absence of surprise in his manner. He seemed to treat the occurrence as a perfectly natural one.

Not so Inspector Badger; who rose to his feet and stood with his hands thrust into his pockets scowling sullenly down at the dead lawyer.

'I was an infernal fool to agree to his blasted conditions,' he growled savagely.

'Nonsense,' said Thorndyke. 'If you had broken in you would have found a dead man. As it was you found a live man and obtained an important statement. You acted quite properly.'

'How do you suppose he managed it?' asked Badger.

Thorndyke held out his hand.

'Let us look at his cigarette case,' said he.

Badger extracted the little silver case from the dead man's pocket and opened it. There were five cigarettes in it, two of which were plain, while the other three were gold-tipped. Thorndyke took out one of each kind and gently pinched their ends. The gold-tipped one he returned; the plain one he tore through, about a quarter of an inch from the end; when two little black tabloids dropped out on to the table. Badger eagerly picked one up and was about to smell it when Thorndyke grasped his wrist. 'Be careful,' said he; and when he had cautiously sniffed at the tabloid—held at a safe distance from his nose—he added: 'Yes, potassium cyanide. I thought so when his lips turned that queer colour. It was in that last cigarette; you can see that he has bitten the end off.'

For some time we stood silently looking down at the still form stretched on the floor. Presently Badger looked up.

'As you pass the porter's lodge on your way out,' said he, 'you might just drop in and tell him to send a constable to me.'

'Very well,' said Thorndyke. 'And by the way, Badger, you had better tip that sherry back into the decanter and put it under lock and key, or else pour it out of the window.'

'Gad, yes!' exclaimed the inspector. 'I'm glad you mentioned it. We might have had an inquest on a constable as well as a lawyer. Good-night, gentlemen, if you are off.'

We went out and left him with his prisoner—passive enough, indeed, according to his ambiguously worded promise. As we passed through the gateway Thorndyke gave the inspector's message, curtly and without comment, to the gaping porter, and then we issued forth into Chancery Lane.

We were all silent and very grave, and I thought that Thorndyke seemed somewhat moved. Perhaps Mr. Jellicoe's last intent look—which I suspect he knew to be the look of a dying man—lingered in his memory as it did in mine. Half-way down Chancery Lane he spoke for the first time; and then it was only to ejaculate, 'Poor devil!'

Jervis took him up. 'He was a consummate villain, Thorndyke.'

'Hardly that,' was the reply. 'I should rather say that he was non-moral. He acted without malice and without scruple or remorse. His conduct exhibited a passionateless expediency which was dreadful because utterly unhuman. But he was a strong man—a courageous, self-contained man, and I had been better pleased if it could have been ordained that some other hand than mine should let the axe fall.'

Thorndyke's compunction may appear strange and inconsistent, but yet his feeling was also my own. Great as was the misery and suffering that this inscrutable man had brought into the lives of those I loved, I forgave him; and in his downfall forgot the callous relentlessness with which he had pursued his evil purpose. For it was he who had brought Ruth into my life; who had opened for me the Paradise of Love into which I had just entered. And so my thoughts turned away from the still shape that lay on the floor of the stately old room in Lincoln's Inn, away to the sunny vista of the future, where I should walk hand in hand with Ruth until my time, too, should come; until I, too, like the grim lawyer, should hear the solemn evening bell bidding me put out into the darkness of the silent sea.

III. — THE ART OF THE DETECTIVE STORY

THE status in the world of letters of that type of fiction which finds its principal motive in the unravelment of crimes or similar intricate mysteries presents certain anomalies. By the critic and the professedly literary person the detective story—to adopt the unprepossessing name by which this class of fiction is now universally known—is apt to be dismissed contemptuously as outside the pale of literature, to be conceived of as a type of work produced by half-educated and wholly incompetent writers for consumption by office boys, factory girls, and other persons devoid of culture and literary taste.

That such works are produced by such writers for such readers is an undeniable truth; but in mere badness of quality the detective story holds no monopoly. By similar writers and for similar

readers there are produced love stories, romances, and even historical tales of no better quality. But there is this difference: that, whereas the place in literature of the love story or the romance has been determined by the consideration of the masterpieces of each type, the detective story appears to have been judged by its failures. The status of the whole class has been fixed by an estimate formed from inferior samples.

What is the explanation of this discrepancy? Why is it that, whereas a bad love story or romance is condemned merely on its merits as a defective specimen of a respectable class, a detective story is apt to be condemned without trial in virtue of some sort of assumed original sin? The assumption as to the class of reader is manifestly untrue. There is no type of fiction that is more universally popular than the detective story. It is a familiar fact that many famous men have found in this kind of reading their favourite recreation, and that it is consumed with pleasure, and even with enthusiasm, by many learned and intellectual men, not infrequently in preference to any other form of fiction.

This being the case, I again ask for an explanation of the contempt in which the whole genus of detective fiction is held by the professedly literary. Clearly, a form of literature which arouses the enthusiasm of men of intellect and culture can be affected by no inherently base quality. It cannot be foolish, and is unlikely to be immoral. As a matter of fact, it is neither. The explanation is probably to be found in the great proportion of failures; in the tendency of the tyro and the amateur perversely to adopt this difficult and intricate form for their 'prentice efforts; in the crude literary technique often associated with otherwise satisfactory productions; and perhaps in the falling off in quality of the work of regular novelists when they experiment in this department of fiction, to which they may be adapted neither by temperament nor by training.

Thus critical judgment has been formed, not on what the detective story can be and should be, but on what it too frequently was in the past when crudely and incompetently done. Unfortunately, this type of work is still prevalent; but it is not representative. In late years there has arisen a new school of writers who, taking the detective story seriously, have set a more exacting standard, and whose work, admirable alike in construction and execution, probably accounts for the recent growth in popularity of this class of fiction. But, though representative, they are a minority; and it is still true that a detective story which fully develops the distinctive qualities proper to its genus, and is, in addition, satisfactory in diction, in background treatment, in characterization, and in general literary workmanship is probably the rarest of all forms of fiction.

The rarity of good detective fiction is to be explained by a fact which appears to be little recognized either by critics or by authors; the fact, namely, that a completely executed detective story is a very difficult and highly technical work, a work demanding in its creator the union of qualities which, if not mutually antagonistic, are at least seldom met with united in a single individual. On the one hand, it is a work of imagination, demanding the creative, artistic faculty; on the other, it is a work of ratiocination, demanding the power of logical analysis and subtle and acute reasoning; and, added to these inherent qualities, there must be a somewhat extensive outfit of special knowledge. Evidence alike of the difficulty of the work and the failure to realize it is furnished by those occasional experiments of novelists of the orthodox kind which have been referred to, experiments which commonly fail by reason of a complete misunderstanding of the nature of the work and the qualities that it should possess.

A widely prevailing error is that a detective story needs to be highly sensational. It tends to be confused with the mere crime story, in which the incidents—tragic, horrible, even repulsive—form the actual theme, and the quality aimed at is horror—crude and pungent sensationalism. Here the writer's object is to make the reader's flesh creep; and since that reader has probably, by a course of similar reading, acquired a somewhat extreme degree of obtuseness, the violence of the means has

to be progressively increased in proportion to the insensitiveness of the subject. The sportsman in the juvenile verse sings:

I shoot the hippopotamus with bullets made of platinum
Because if I use leaden ones his hide is sure to flatten 'em;

and that, in effect, is the position of the purveyor of gross sensationalism. His purpose is, at all costs, to penetrate his reader's mental epidermis, to the density of which he must needs adjust the weight and velocity of his literary projectile.

Now no serious author will complain of the critic's antipathy to mere sensationalism. It is a quality that is attainable by the least gifted writer and acceptable to the least critical reader; and, unlike the higher qualities of literature, which beget in the reader an increased receptiveness and more subtle appreciation, it creates, as do drugs and stimulants, a tolerance which has to be met by an increase of the dose. The entertainments of the cinema have to be conducted on a scale of continually increasing sensationalism. The wonders that thrilled at first become commonplace, and must be reinforced by marvels yet more astonishing. Incident must be piled on incident, climax on climax, until any kind of construction becomes impossible. So, too, in literature. In the newspaper serial of the conventional type, each instalment of a couple of thousand words, or less, must wind up with a thrilling climax, blandly ignored at the opening of the next instalment; while that ne plus ultra of wild sensationalism, the film novel, in its extreme form is no more than a string of astonishing incidents, unconnected by any intelligible scheme, each incident an independent "thrill," unexplained, unprepared for, devoid alike of antecedents and consequences.

Some productions of the latter type are put forth in the guise of detective stories, with which they apparently tend to be confused by some critics. They are then characterized by the presentation of a crime—often in impossible circumstances which are never accounted for—followed by a vast amount of rushing to and fro of detectives or unofficial investigators in motor cars, aeroplanes, or motor boats, with a liberal display of revolvers or automatic pistols and a succession of hair-raising adventures. If any conclusion is reached, it is quite unconvincing, and the interest of the story to its appropriate reader is in the incidental matter, and not in the plot. But the application of the term "detective story" to works of this kind is misleading, for in the essential qualities of the type of fiction properly so designated they are entirely deficient. Let us now consider what those qualities are.

The distinctive quality of a detective story, in which it differs from all other types of fiction, is that the satisfaction that it offers to the reader is primarily an intellectual satisfaction. This is not to say that it need be deficient in the other qualities appertaining to good fiction: in grace of diction, in humour, in interesting characterization, in picturesqueness of setting or in emotional presentation. On the contrary, it should possess all these qualities. It should be an interesting story, well and vivaciously told. But whereas in other fiction these are the primary, paramount qualities, in detective fiction they are secondary and subordinate to the intellectual interest, to which they must be, if necessary, sacrificed. The entertainment that the connoisseur looks for is an exhibition of mental gymnastics in which he is invited to take part; and the excellence of the entertainment must be judged by the completeness with which it satisfies the expectations of the type of reader to whom it is addressed.

Thus, assuming that good detective fiction must be good fiction in general terms, we may dismiss those qualities which it should possess in common with all other works of imagination and give our attention to those qualities in which it differs from them and which give to it its special character. I have said that the satisfaction which it is designed to yield to the reader is primarily intellectual, and we may now consider in somewhat more detail the exact nature of the satisfaction

demanded and the way in which it can best be supplied. And first we may ask: What are the characteristics of the representative reader? To what kind of person is a carefully constructed detective story especially addressed?

We have seen that detective fiction has a wide popularity. The general reader, however, is apt to be uncritical. He reads impartially the bad and the good, with no very clear perception of the difference, at least in the technical construction. The real connoisseurs, who avowedly prefer this type of fiction to all others, and who read it with close and critical attention, are to be found among men of the definitely intellectual class: theologians, scholars, lawyers, and to a less extent, perhaps, doctors and men of science. Judging by the letters which I have received from time to time, the enthusiast par excellence is the clergyman of a studious and scholarly habit.

Now the theologian, the scholar and the lawyer have a common characteristic: they are all men of a subtle type of mind. They find a pleasure in intricate arguments, in dialectical contests, in which the matter to be proved is usually of less consideration than the method of proving it. The pleasure is yielded by the argument itself and tends to be proportionate to the intricacy of the proof. The disputant enjoys the mental exercise, just as a muscular man enjoys particular kinds of physical exertion. But the satisfaction yielded by an argument is dependent upon a strict conformity with logical methods, upon freedom from fallacies of reasoning, and especially upon freedom from any ambiguities as to the data.

By schoolboys, street-corner debaters, and other persons who are ignorant of the principles of discussion, debates are commonly conducted by means of what we may call "argument by assertion." Each disputant seeks to overwhelm his opponent by pelting him with statements of alleged fact, each of which the other disputes, and replies by discharging a volley of counterstatements, the truth of which is promptly denied. Thus the argument collapses in a chaos of conflicting assertions. The method of the skilled dialectician is exactly the opposite of this. He begins by making sure of the matter in dispute and by establishing agreement with his adversary on the fundamental data. Theological arguments are usually based upon propositions admitted as true by both parties; and the arguments of counsel are commonly concerned, not with questions of fact, but with the consequences deducible from evidence admitted equally by both sides.

Thus the intellectual satisfaction of an argument is conditional on the complete establishment of the data. Disputes on questions of fact are of little, if any, intellectual interest; but in any case an argument—an orderly train of reasoning—cannot begin until the data have been clearly set forth and agreed upon by both parties. This very obvious truth is continually lost sight of by authors. Plots, i.e., arguments, are frequently based upon alleged "facts"—physical, chemical, and other—which the educated reader knows to be untrue, and of which the untruth totally invalidates conclusions drawn from them and thus destroys the intellectual interest of the argument.

The other indispensable factor is freedom from fallacies of reasoning. The conclusion must emerge truly and inevitably from the premises; it must be the only possible conclusion, and must leave the competent reader in no doubt as to its unimpeachable truth.

It is here that detective stories most commonly fail. They tend to be pervaded by logical fallacies, and especially by the fallacy of the undistributed middle term. The conclusion reached by the gifted investigator, and offered by him as inevitable, is seen by the reader to be merely one of a number of possible alternatives. The effect when the author's "must have been" has to be corrected by the reader into "might have been" is one of anti-climax. The promised and anticipated demonstration peters out into a mere suggestion; the argument is left in the air and the reader is balked of the intellectual satisfaction which he was seeking.

Having glanced at the nature of the satisfaction sought by the reader, we may now examine the structure of a detective story and observe the means employed to furnish that satisfaction. On the general fictional qualities of such a story we need not enlarge excepting to contest the prevalent belief that detective fiction possesses no such qualities. Apart from a sustained love interest—for which there is usually no room—a detective novel need not, and should not, be inferior in narrative interest or literary workmanship to any other work of fiction. Interests which conflict with the main theme and hinder its clear exposition are evidently inadmissible; but humour, picturesque setting, vivid characterization and even emotional episodes are not only desirable on aesthetic grounds, but, if skilfully used, may be employed to distract the reader's attention at critical moments in place of the nonsensical "false clues" and other exasperating devices by which writers too often seek to confuse the issues. The Mystery of Edwin Drood shows us the superb fictional quality that is possible in a detective story from the hand of a master.

Turning now to the technical side, we note that the plot of a detective novel is, in effect, an argument conducted under the guise of fiction. But it is a peculiar form of argument. The problem having been stated, the data for its solution are presented inconspicuously and in a sequence purposely dislocated so as to conceal their connexion; and the reader's task is to collect the data, to rearrange them in their correct logical sequence and ascertain their relations, when the solution of the problem should at once become obvious. The construction thus tends to fall into four stages: (1) statement of the problem; (2) production of the data for its solution ("clues"); (3) the discovery, i.e., completion of the inquiry by the investigator and declaration by him of the solution; (4) proof of the solution by an exposition of the evidence.

1. The problem is usually concerned with a crime, not because a crime is an attractive subject, but because it forms the most natural occasion for an investigation of the kind required. For the same reason—suitability—crime against the person is more commonly adopted than crime against property; and murder—actual, attempted or suspected—is usually the most suitable of all. For the villain is the player on the other side; and since we want him to be a desperate player, the stakes must be appropriately high. A capital crime gives us an adversary who is playing for his life, and who consequently furnishes the best subject for dramatic treatment.

2. The body of the work should be occupied with the telling of the story, in the course of which the data, or "clues," should be produced as inconspicuously as possible, but clearly and without ambiguity in regard to their essentials. The author should be scrupulously fair in his conduct of the game. Each card as it is played should be set down squarely, face upwards, in full view of the reader. Under no circumstances should there be any deception as to the facts. The reader should be quite clear as to what he may expect as true. In stories of the older type, the middle action is filled out with a succession of false clues and with the fixing of suspicion first on one character, then on another, and again on a third, and so on. The clues are patiently followed, one after another, and found to lead nowhere. There is feverish activity, but no result. All this is wearisome to the reader and is, in my opinion, bad technique. My practice is to avoid false clues entirely and to depend on keeping the reader occupied with the narrative. If the ice should become uncomfortably thin, a dramatic episode will distract the reader's attention and carry him safely over the perilous spot. Devices to confuse and mislead the reader are bad practice. They deaden the interest, and they are quite unnecessary; the reader can always be trusted to mislead himself, no matter how plainly the data are given. Some years ago I devised, as an experiment, an inverted detective story in two parts ["The Case of Oscar Brodski"]. The first part was a minute and detailed description of a crime, setting forth the antecedents, motives, and all attendant circumstances. The reader had seen the crime committed, knew all about the criminal, and was in possession of all the facts. It would have seemed that there was nothing left to tell. But I calculated that the reader would be so occupied with the crime that he would overlook the evidence. And so it turned out. The second part, which

described the investigation of the crime, had to most readers the effect of new matter. All the facts were known; but their evidential quality had not been recognized.

This failure of the reader to perceive the evidential value of facts is the foundation on which detective fiction is built. It may generally be taken that the author may exhibit his facts fearlessly provided only that he exhibits them separately and unconnected. And the more boldly he displays the data, the greater will be the intellectual interest of the story. For the tacit understanding of the author with the reader is that the problem is susceptible of solution by the latter by reasoning from the facts given; and such solution should be actually possible. Then the data should be produced as early in the story as is practicable. The reader should have a body of evidence to consider while the tale is telling. The production of a leading fact near the end of the book is unfair to the reader, while the introduction of capital evidence—such as that of an eye-witness—at the extreme end is radically bad technique, amounting to a breach of the implied covenant with the reader.

3. The "discovery," i.e., the announcement by the investigator of the conclusion reached by him, brings the inquiry formally to an end. It is totally inadmissible thereafter to introduce any new matter. The reader is given to understand that he now has before him the evidence and the conclusion, and that the latter is contained in the former. If it is not, the construction has failed, and the reader has been cheated. The "discovery" will usually come as a surprise to the reader and will thus form the dramatic climax of the story, but it is to be noted that the dramatic quality of the climax is strictly dependent on the intellectual conviction which accompanies it. This is frequently overlooked, especially by general novelists who experiment in detective fiction. In their eagerness to surprise the reader, they forget that he has also to be convinced. A literary friend of mine, commenting on a particularly conclusive detective story, declared that "the rigid demonstration destroyed the artistic effect." But the rigid demonstration was the artistic effect. The entire dramatic effect of the climax of a detective story is due to the sudden recognition by the reader of the significance of a number of hitherto uncomprehended facts; or if such recognition should not immediately occur, the effect of the climax becomes suspended until it is completed in the final stage.

4. Proof of the solution. This is peculiar to "detective" construction. In all ordinary novels, the climax, or denouement, finishes the story, and any continuation is anti-climax. But a detective story has a dual character. There is the story, with its dramatic interest, and enclosed in it, so to speak, is the logical problem; and the climax of the former may leave the latter apparently unsolved. It is then the duty of the author, through the medium of the investigator, to prove the solution by an analysis and exposition of the evidence. He has to demonstrate to the reader that the conclusion emerged naturally and reasonably from the facts known to him, and that no other conclusion was possible.

If it is satisfactorily done, this is to the critical reader usually the most interesting part of the book; and it is the part by which he—very properly—judges the quality of the whole work. Too often it yields nothing but disappointment and a sense of anticlimax. The author is unable to solve his own problem. Acting on the pernicious advice of the pilot in the old song to "Fear not, but trust in Providence," he has piled up his mysteries in the hope of being able to find a plausible explanation; and now, when he comes to settle his account with the reader, his logical assets are nil. What claims to be a demonstration turns out to be a mere specious attempt to persuade the reader that the inexplicable has been explained; that the fortunate guesses of an inspired investigator are examples of genuine reasoning. A typical instance of this kind of anti-climax occurs in Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" when Dupin follows the unspoken thoughts of his companion and joins in at the appropriate moment. The reader is astonished and marvels how such an apparently impossible feat could have been performed. Then Dupin explains; but his explanation is totally unconvincing, and the impossibility remains. The reader has had his

astonishment for nothing. It cannot be too much emphasized that to the critical reader the quality in a detective story which takes precedence of all others is conclusiveness. It is the quality which, above all others, yields that intellectual satisfaction that the reader seeks; and it is the quality which is the most difficult to attain, and which costs more than any other in care and labour to the author.

IV. — THE MYSTERY OF ANGELINA FROOD

CHAPTER I—THE DOPER'S WIFE

It takes a good deal to surprise a really seasoned medical practitioner, and still more to arouse in him an abiding curiosity. But at the time when I took charge of Dr. Humphrey's practice in Osnaburgh-street, Regent's Park, I was far from being a seasoned practitioner, having, in fact, been qualified little more than a year, in which short period I had not yet developed the professional immunity from either of the above mental states. Hence the singular experience which I am about to relate not only made a deep impression on me at the time, but remained with me for long after as a matter of curious speculation.

It was close upon midnight, indeed an adjacent church clock had already struck the third quarter, when I laid aside my book and yawned profoundly, without prejudice to the author who had kept me so long from my bed. Then I rose and stretched myself, and was in the act of knocking the long-extinct ashes out of my pipe when the bell rang. As the servants had gone to bed, I went out to the door, congratulating myself on having stayed up beyond my usual bedtime, but wishing the visitor at the devil all the same. The opening of the door gave me a view of a wet street with a drizzle of rain falling, a large closed car by the kerb, and a tallish man on the doorstep, apparently about to renew his attack on the bell.

"Dr. Pumphrey?" he asked; and by that token I gathered that he was a stranger.

"No," I answered; "he is out of town, but I am looking after his practice."

"Very well," he said, somewhat brusquely. "I want you to come and see a lady who has been suddenly taken ill. She has had a rather severe shock."

"Do you mean a mental or a physical shock?" I asked.

"Well, I should say mental," he replied, but so inconclusively that I pressed him for more definite particulars.

"Has she sustained any injuries?" I inquired.

"No," he answered, but still indecisively. "No; that is, so far as I know. I think not."

"No wound, for instance?"

"No," he replied, promptly and very definitely, from which I was disposed to suspect that there was an injury of some other kind. But it was of no use guessing. I hurried back into the surgery, and, having snatched up the emergency bag and my stethoscope, rejoined my visitor, who

forthwith hustled me into the car. The door slammed, and the vehicle moved off with the silent, easy motion of a powerful engine.

We started towards Marylebone-road and swept round into Albany-street, but after that I lost my bearings: for the fine rain had settled on the windows so that it was difficult to see through them, and I was not very familiar with the neighbourhood. It seemed quite a short journey, but a big car is very deceptive as to distance. At any rate, it occupied but a few minutes, and during that time my companion and I exchanged hardly a word. As the car slowed down I asked:

"What is this lady's name?"

"Her name," he replied, in a somewhat hesitating manner, "is—she is a Mrs. Johnson."

The manner of the reply suggested a not very intimate acquaintance, which seemed odd under the circumstances, and I reflected on it rapidly as I got out of the car and followed my conductor. We seemed to be in a quiet bystreet of the better class, but it was very dark, and I had but a glimpse as I stepped from the car to the gate of the house. Of the latter, all that I was able to note was that it appeared to be of a decent, rather old-fashioned type, standing behind a small front garden, that the windows were fitted with jalousie shutters, and that the number on the door was 43.

As we ascended the steps the door opened, and a woman was dimly discernible behind it. A lighted candle was on the hall table, and this my conductor picked up, requesting me to follow him up the stairs. When we arrived at the first floor landing, he halted and indicated a door which was slightly ajar.

"That is the room," said he; and with that he turned and retired down the stairs.

I stood for a few moments on the dark landing, deeply impressed by the oddity of the whole affair, and sensible of a growing suspicion, which was not lessened when, by the thin line of light from within the room, I observed on the door-jamb one or two bruises as if the door had been forced from without. However, this was none of my business, and thus reflecting, I was about to knock at the door when four fingers appeared round the edge of it and drew it further open, and a man's head became visible in the opening.

The fingers and the head were alike such as instantly to rivet the attention of a doctor. The former were of the kind known as "clubbed fingers," fingers with bulbous ends, of which the nails curved over like nut-shells. The head, in form like a great William pear, presented a long, coffin-shaped face with high cheek-bones, deep-set eyes with narrow, slanting eye-slits, and a lofty, square forehead surmounted by a most singular mop of mouse-coloured hair which stood straight up like the fur of a mole.

"I am the doctor," said I, having taken in these particulars in an instantaneous glance, and having further noted that the man's eyes were reddened and wet. He made no reply, but drew the door open and retired, whereupon I entered the room, closing the door behind me, and thereby becoming aware that there was something amiss with the latch.

The room was a bed-room, and on the bed lay a woman, fully clothed, and apparently in evening dress, though the upper part of her person was concealed by a cloak which was drawn up to her chin. She was a young woman—about twenty-eight, I judged—comely, and, in fact, rather handsome, but deadly pale. She was not, however, unconscious, for she looked at me listlessly, though with a certain attention. In some slight embarrassment, I approached the bed, and, as the man had subsided into a chair in a corner of the room, I addressed myself to the patient.

"Good evening, Mrs. Johnson. I am sorry to see you looking so ill. What is the matter? I understand that you have had some kind of shock."

As I addressed her, I seemed to detect a faint expression of surprise, but she replied at once, in a weak voice that was little more than a whisper: "Yes. I have had rather an upset. That is all. They need not really have troubled you."

"Well, you don't look very flourishing," said I, taking the wrist that was uncovered by her mantle, "and your hand is as cold as a fish."

I felt her pulse, checking it by my watch, and meanwhile looking her over critically. And not her alone. For on the wall opposite me was a mirror in which, by a little judicious adjustment of position, I was able to observe the other occupant of the room while keeping my back towards him; and what I observed was that he was sitting with his elbows on his knees, and his face buried in his hands.

"Might one inquire," I asked, as I put away my watch, "what kind of shock it is that you are suffering from?"

The faintest trace of a smile stole across her pale face as she answered: "That isn't really a medical question, Doctor, is it?"

"Perhaps it isn't," I replied, though, of course, it was.

But I thought it best to waive the question, as there seemed to be some reservation; and, noting this latter fact, I again considered her attentively. Whatever her condition was, and whatever it might be due to, I had to form my opinion unassisted, for I could see that no information would be furnished; and the question that I had to settle was whether her state was purely mental, or whether it was complicated by any kind of physical injury. The waxen pallor of her face made me uneasy, and I found it difficult to interpret the expression of the set features. Some strong emotion had left its traces; but whether that emotion was grief, horror, or fear, or whether the expression denoted bodily pain, I could not determine. She had closed her eyes, and her face was like a death mask, save that it lacked the serenity of a dead face.

"Are you in any pain!" I asked, with my fingers still on the thready pulse. But she merely shook her head wearily, without opening her eyes.

It was very unsatisfactory. Her appearance was consistent with all kinds of unpleasant possibilities, as was also the strange atmosphere of secrecy about the whole affair. Nor was the attitude of that ill-favoured man whom I could see in the glass, still sitting hunched up with his face buried in his hands, at all reassuring. And gradually my attention began to focus itself upon the cloak which covered the woman's body and was drawn around her neck up to her chin. Did that cloak conceal anything? It seemed incredible, seeing that they had sent for a doctor. But the behaviour of everybody concerned was incredibly irrational. I produced my stethoscope, which was fitted with a diaphragm that enabled one to hear through the clothing, and, drawing the cloak partly aside, applied the chest-piece over the heart. On this the patient opened her eyes and made a movement of her hand towards the upper part of the cloak. I listened carefully to her heart—which was organically sound, though a good deal disordered in action—and moved the stethoscope once or twice, drawing aside the cloak by degrees. Finally, with a somewhat quick movement, I turned it back completely.

"Why," I exclaimed, "what on earth have you been doing to your neck?"

"That mark?" she said in a half-whisper. "It is nothing. It was made by a gold collar that I wore yesterday. It was rather tight."

"I see," said I, truthfully enough; for the explanation of her condition was now pretty clear up to a certain point.

Of course, I did not believe her. I did not suppose that she expected me to. But it was evidently useless to dispute her statement or make any comment. The mark upon her neck was a livid bruise made by some cord or band that had been drawn tight with considerable force; and it was not more than an hour old. How or by whom the injury had been inflicted was not, in a medical sense, my concern. But I was by no means clear that I had not some responsibilities in the case other than the professional ones.

At this moment the man in the corner uttered a deep groan and exclaimed in low, intense tones, "My God! My God!" Then, to my extreme embarrassment, he began to sob audibly.

It was excessively uncomfortable. I looked from the woman—into whose ghastly face an expression of something like disgust and contempt had stolen—to the huddled figure in the glass. And as I looked, the man plunged one hand into his pocket and dragged out a handkerchief, bringing with it a little paper packet that fell to the floor. Something in the appearance of that packet, and especially in the hasty grab to recover it and the quick, furtive glance towards me that accompanied the action, made a new and sinister suggestion—a suggestion that the man's emotional, almost hysterical state supported, and that lent a certain unpleasant congruity to the otherwise inexplicable circumstances. That packet, I had little doubt, contained cocaine. The question was how did that fact—if it were a fact—bear on my patient's condition.

I inspected her afresh, and felt her pulse again. In the man's case the appearances were distinctive enough. His nerves were in rags, and even across the room I could see that the hand that held the handkerchief shook as if with a palsy. But in the woman's condition there was no positive suggestion of drugs; and something in her face—a strong, resolute face despite its expression of suffering—and her quiet, composed manner when she spoke, seemed to exclude the idea. However, there was no use in speculating. I had got all the information I was likely to get, and all that remained for me to do was to administer such treatment as my imperfect understanding of the case indicated. Accordingly I opened my emergency bag, and, taking out a couple of little bottles and a measure-glass, went over to the washstand and mixed a draught in the tumbler, diluting it from the water-bottle.

In crossing the room, I passed the fire-place, where, on and above the mantelpiece, I observed a number of signed photographs, apparently of actors and actresses, including two of my patient, both of which were in character costume and unsigned. From which it seemed probable that my patient was an actress; a probability that was strengthened by the hour at which I had been summoned and by certain other appearances in the room with which Dr. Pumphrey's largely theatrical practice had made me familiar. But, as my patient would have remarked, this was not a medical question.

"Now, Mrs. Johnson," I said, when I had prepared the draught—and as I spoke she opened her eyes and looked at me with a slightly puzzled expression—"I want you to drink this."

She allowed me to sit her up enough to enable her to swallow the draught; and as her head was raised, I took the opportunity to glance at the back of her neck, where I thought I could distinctly trace the crossing of the cord or band that had been drawn round it. She sank back with a sigh, but remained with her eyes open, looking at me as I repacked my bag.

"I shall send you some medicine," I said, "which you must take regularly. It is unnecessary for me to say," I added, addressing the man, "that Mrs. Johnson must be kept very quiet, and in no way agitated."

He bowed, but made no reply; and I then took my leave.

"Good night, Mrs. Johnson," I said, shaking her cold hand gently. "I hope you will be very much better in an hour or two. I think you will if you keep quite quiet and take your medicine."

She thanked me in a few softly spoken words and with a very sweet smile, of which the sad wistfulness went to my heart. I was loath to leave her, in her weak and helpless state, to the care of her unprepossessing companion, encompassed by I knew not what perils. But I was only a passing stranger, and could do no more than my professional office.

As I approached the door—with an inquisitive eye on its disordered lock and loosened striking-box—the man rose, and made as if to let me out. I wished him good-night, and he returned the salutation in a pleasant voice, and with a distinctly refined accent, quite out of character with his uncouth appearance. Feeling my way down the dark staircase, I presently encountered my first acquaintance, who came to the foot of the stairs with the candle.

"'Well," he said, in his brusque way, "how is she?"

"She is very weak and shaken," I replied. "I want to send her some medicine. Shall I take the address, or are you driving me back?"

"I will take you back in the car," said he, "and you can give me the medicine."

The car was waiting at the gate, and we went out together. As I turned to close the gate after me, I cast a quick glance at the house and its surroundings, searching for some distinctive feature in case recognition of the place should be necessary later. But it was a dark night, though the rain had now ceased, and I could see no more than that the adjoining house seemed to have a sort of corner turret, crowned with a small cupola, and surmounted by a weather-vane.

During the short journey home not a word was spoken, and when the car drew up at Dr. Pumphrey's door and I let myself in with the key, my companion silently followed me in. I prepared the medicine at once, and handed it to him with a few brief instructions. He took it from me, and then asked what my fee was.

"Do I understand that I am not required to continue the attendance?" I asked.

"They will send for you, I suppose, if they want you," he replied. "But I had better pay your fee for this visit as I came for you."

I named the fee, and, when he had paid it, I said: "You understand that she will require very careful and tender treatment while she is so weak?"

"I do," he answered; "but I am not a member of the household. Did you make it clear to Mr.—her husband?"

I noted the significant hesitation, and replied: "I told him, but as to making it clear to him, I can't say. His mental condition was none of the most lucid. I hope she has someone more responsible to look after her."

"She has," he replied; and then he asked: "You don't think she is in any danger, I hope?"

"In a medical sense," I answered, "I think not. In other respects you know better than I do."

He gave me a quick look, and nodded slightly. Then, with a curt "good-night," he turned and went out to the car.

When he was gone, I made a brief record of the visit in the day-book, and entered the fee in the cash column. In the case of the experienced Dr. Pumphrey, this would have been the end of the transaction. But, new as I was to medical practice, I was unable to take this matter-of-fact view of its incidents. My mind still surged with surprise, curiosity, and a deep concern for my fair patient. Filling my pipe, I sat down before the gas fire to think over the mystery to which I had suddenly become a party.

What was it that had happened in that house T Obviously, something scandalous and sinister. The secrecy alone made that manifest. Not only had the whereabouts of the house been withheld from me, but a false name had been given. I realized that when my late visitor stumbled over the name and substituted "her husband," He had forgotten what name it was that he had given on the spur of the moment. I understood, too, the look of surprise that my patient had given when I addressed her by that false name. Clearly, something had happened which had to be hushed up if possible.

What was it? The elements of the problem, and the material for solving it, were the mark on the woman's neck, the condition of the door, and a packet which I felt morally certain contained cocaine. I considered these three factors separately and together.

The mark on the neck was quite recent. Its character was unmistakable. A cord or band had been drawn tight and with considerable violence, either by the woman herself, or by some other person: that is to say, it was a case either of attempted suicide or attempted murder. To which of these alternatives did the circumstances point?

There was the door. It had been broken in, and had therefore been locked on the inside. That was consistent with suicide, but not inconsistent with murder. Then, by whom had it been broken in? By a murderer to get at his victim? Or by a rescuer? And if the latter, was it to avert suicide or murder?

Again, there was the drug—assumed, but almost certain.

What was the bearing of that? Could these three persons be a party of "dopers," and the tragedy the outcome of an orgy of drug-taking? I rejected this possibility at once. It was not consistent with the patient's condition nor with her appearance or manner; and the man who had fetched me and brought me back was a robust, sane-looking man who seemed quite beyond suspicion.

I next considered the persons. There were three of them: two men and a woman. Of the men, one was a virile, fairly good-looking man of perhaps forty; the other—the husband—was conspicuously unprepossessing, physically degenerate and mentally, as I judged, a hysterical poltroon. Here there seemed to be the making of trouble, especially when one considered the personal attractiveness of the woman.

I recalled her appearance very vividly. A handsome woman, not, perhaps, actually beautiful—though she might have been that if the roses of youth and health had bloomed in those cheeks that I had seen blanched with that ghastly pallor. But apart from mere comeliness, there was a suggestion of a pleasing, gracious personality. I don't know how it had been conveyed to me,

excepting by the smile with which she had thanked me and bidden me farewell: a smile that had imparted a singular sweetness to her face. But I had received that impression, and also that she was a woman of decided character and intelligence.

Her appearance was rather striking. She had a great mass of dark hair, parted in the middle, and drawn down over the temples, nearly covering the ears; darkish grey eyes, and unusually strong, black, level eyebrows, that almost met above the straight, shapely nose. Perhaps it was those eyebrows that gave the strength and intensity to her expression, aided by the compressed lips—though this was probably a passing condition due to her mental state.

My cogitations were prolonged well into the small hours, but they led to nothing but an open verdict. At length I rose with a slight shiver, and, dismissing the topic from my mind, crept up to bed.

But both the persons and the incident refused to accept their dismissal. For many days afterwards I was haunted by two faces; the one, ugly, coffin-shaped, surmounted by a shock of soft, furry, mouse-coloured hair; the other, sweet, appealing, mutely eloquent of tragedy and sorrow. Of course, I received no further summons; and the whereabouts of the house of mystery remained a secret until almost the end of my stay in Osnaburgh-street. Indeed, it was on the very day before Dr. Pumphrey's return that I made the discovery.

I had been making a visit to a patient who lived near Regent's Park, and on my way back had taken what I assumed to be a short cut. This led me into a quiet, old fashioned residential street, of which the houses stood back behind small front gardens. As I walked along the street I seemed to be aware of a faint sense of familiarity which caused me to observe the houses with more than usual attention. Presently I observed a little way ahead on the opposite side a house with a corner turret topped by a cupola, which bore above it a weather-vane. I crossed the road as I approached it, and looked eagerly at the next house. Its identity was unmistakable. My attention was immediately attracted by the jalousies with which the windows were fitted, and on looking at the front door I observed that the number was forty-three.

This, then, was the house of mystery, perhaps of crime.

But whatever that tragedy had been, its actors were there no longer. The windows were curtainless and blank; an air of Spring-cleaning and preparation pervaded the premises, and a bill on a little notice-board announced a furnished house to let, and invited inquiries. For a moment, I was tempted to accept that invitation. But I was restrained by a feeling that it would be in a way a breach of confidence. The names of those persons had been purposely withheld from me, doubtless for excellent reasons, and professional ethics seemed to forbid any unauthorized pryings into their private affairs. Wherefore, with a valedictory glance at the first-floor window, which I assumed to be that of the room that I had entered, I went on my way, telling myself that, now, the incident was really closed, and that I had looked my last on the persons who had enacted their parts in it.

In which, however, I was mistaken. The curtain was down on the first act, but the play was not over. Only the succeeding acts were yet in the unfathomed future. "Coming events cast their shadows before them"; but who can interpret those shadows, until the shapes which cast them loom up, plain and palpable, to mock at their own unheeded premonitions?

CHAPTER II—RE-ENTER "MR. JOHNSON"

It was a good many months before the curtain rose on the second act of the drama of which this narrative is the record. Rather more than a year had passed, and in that time certain changes had

taken place in my condition, of which I need refer only to the one that, indirectly, operated as the cause of my becoming once more a party to the drama aforesaid. I had come into a small property, just barely sufficient to render me independent, and to enable me to live in idleness, if idleness had been my hobby. As it was not, I betook myself to Adam-street, Adelphi, to confer with my trusty medical agent, Mr. Turcival, and from that conference was born my connexion with the strange events which will be hereafter related.

Mr. Turcival had several practices to sell, but only one that he thought quite suitable. "It is a death vacancy," said he, "at Rochester. A very small practice, and you won't get much out of it, as the late incumbent was an old man and you are a young man—and you look ten years younger since you shaved off that fine beard and moustache. But it is going for a song, and you can afford to wait; and you couldn't have a more pleasant place to wait in than Rochester. Better go down and have a look at it. I'll write to the local agents, Japp and Bundy, and they will show you the house and effects. What do you say?"

I said "yes"; and so favourably was I impressed that the very next day found me in a first-class compartment en route for Rochester, with a substantial portmanteau in the guard's van.

At Dartford it became necessary to change, and as I sauntered on the platform, waiting for the Rochester train, my attention was attracted to a man who sat, somewhat wearily and dejectedly, on a bench, rolling a cigarette. I was impressed by the swift dexterity with which he handled the paper and tobacco, a dexterity that was explained by the colour of his fingers, which were stained to the hue of mahogany. But my attention was quickly diverted from the colour of the fingers to their shape. They were clubbed fingers. At the moment when I observed the fact I was looking over his shoulder from behind, and could not see his face. But I could see that he had a large, pear-shaped head, surmounted by an enormous cap, from beneath which a mass of mouse-coloured hair stuck out like untidy thatch.

I suppose I must have halted unconsciously, for he suddenly looked round, casting at me a curious, quick, furtive, suspicious glance. He evidently did not recognize me—naturally, since my appearance was so much changed; but I recognized him instantly. He was "Mr.—, her husband." And his appearance was not improved since I had last seen him. Inspecting him from the front, I observed that he was sordidly shabby and none too clean, and that his large, rough boots were white with dust as if from a long tramp on the chalky Kentish roads.

When the train came in, I watched him saunter to a compartment a few doors from my own, rolling a fresh cigarette as he went: and at each station when we stopped, I looked out of the window to see where he got out. But he made no appearance until the train slowed down at Rochester when I alighted quickly and strolled towards his compartment. It had evidently been well filled, for a number of passengers emerged before he appeared, contesting the narrow doorway with a stout workman. As he squeezed past, the skirt of his coat caught and was drawn back, revealing a sheath-knife of the kind known to seamen as "Green River," attached to a narrow leather belt. I did not like the look of that knife. No landsman has any legitimate use for such a weapon. And the fact that this man habitually carried about him the means of inflicting lethal injuries—for it had no other purpose—threw a fresh light, if any were needed, on the sinister events of that memorable night in the quiet house near Regent's Park.

As I had to look after my luggage, I lost sight of him; and when having deposited my portmanteau in the cloak room, I walked out across the station approach and looked up and down the street, he was nowhere to be seen. Dimly wondering what this man might be doing in Rochester, and whether his handsome wife were here, too—assuming her to be still in existence—I turned and began to saunter slowly westward. I had walked but two or three hundred yards when the door of a

tavern which I was approaching opened, and a man emerged, licking his lips with uncommon satisfaction, and rolling a cigarette. It was my late fellow-traveller. He stood by the tavern door, looking about him, and glancing at the people on the footway. Just as I was passing him, he approached me and spoke.

"I wonder," said he, "if you happen to know a Mrs. Frood who lives somewhere about here."

"I am afraid I don't," I replied, thankful to be able to tell the truth—for I should have denied knowledge of her in any case. "I am a stranger to the town at present."

He thanked me and turned away, and I walked on, but no longer at a saunter, wondering who Mrs. Frood might be and keeping an eye on the numbers of the houses on the opposite side of the street.

A few minutes walk brought into view the number I was seeking, painted in the tympanum of a handsome Georgian portico appertaining to one of a pair of pleasant old redbrick houses. I halted to inspect these architectural twins before crossing the road. Old houses always interest me, and these two were particularly engaging, as their owners apparently realized, for they were in the pink of condition, and the harmony of the quiet green woodwork and the sober red brick was no chance effect. Moreover they were painted alike to carry out the intention of the architect, who had evidently designed them to form a single composition; to which end he had very effectively placed, between the twin porticoes, a central door which gave access to a passage common to the two houses and leading, no doubt, to the back premises.

Having noted these particulars, I crossed the road and approached the twin which bore beside its doorway a brass plate, inscribed "Japp and Bundy, Architects and Surveyors." In the adjoining bay window, in front of a green curtain, was a list of houses to let; and as I paused for a moment to glance at this, a face decorated with a pair of colossal tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles, rose slowly above the curtain, and then, catching my eye, popped down again with some suddenness.

I ascended the short flight of steps to the open street door, and entering the hall, opened the office door and walked in. The owner of the spectacles was perched on a high stool at a higher desk with his back to me, writing in a large book. The other occupant of the office was a small, spare, elderly man, with a pleasant wrinkly face and a cockatoo-like crest of white hair, who confronted me across a large table on which a plan was spread out. He looked up interrogatively as I entered, and I proceeded at once to announce myself.

"I am Dr. Strangeways," said I, drawing a bundle of papers from my pocket. "Mr. Turcival—the medical agent, you know—thought I had better come down and settle things up on the spot. So here I am."

"Precisely," said my new acquaintance, motioning me to a chair—it was a shield-back Heppelwhite, I noticed—"I agree with Mr. Turcival. It is all quite plain sailing. The position is this: Old Dr. Partridge died about three weeks ago, and the executor of his will, who lives in Northumberland, has instructed us to realize his estate. We have valued the furniture, fittings, and effects, have added a small amount to cover the drugs and instruments and the goodwill of the practice, and this is the premium. It is practically just the value of the effects."

"And the lease of the house?"

"Expired some years ago and we allowed Dr. Partridge to remain as a yearly tenant, which he preferred. You could do the same or you could have a lease, if you wished."

"Is the house your property?" I asked.

"No; but we manage it for the owner, a Mrs. Frood."

"Oh, it belongs to Mrs. Frood, does it?"

He looked up at me quickly, and I noticed that the gentleman at the desk had stopped writing. "Do you know Mrs. Frood?" he asked.

"No; but it happens that a man who came down by my train asked me a few minutes ago if I could give him her address. Fortunately I couldn't."

"Why fortunately?"

The question brought me, up short. My prejudice against the man was due to my knowledge of his antecedents, which I was not prepared to disclose. I therefore replied evasively:

"Well, I wasn't very favourably impressed by his appearance. He was a shabby-looking customer. I suspected that he was a cadger of some kind."

"Indeed! Now, what sort of a person was he? Could you describe him?"

"He was a youngish man—from thirty-five to forty, I should say—apparently well educated but very seedy and not particularly clean. A queer-looking man, with a big, pear-shaped head and a mop of hair like the fur of a Persian cat. His fingers are clubbed at the ends, and stained with tobacco to the knuckles. Do you know him?"

"I rather suspect I do. What do you say, Bundy?"

Mr. Bundy grunted. "Hubby, I ween," said he.

"You don't mean Mrs. Frood's husband?" I exclaimed.

"I do. And it is, as you said, very fortunate that you were not able to give him her address, as she is unable to live with him and is at present unwilling to let him know her whereabouts. It is an unfortunate affair. However, to return to your business; you had better go up and have a look at the house and see what you think of it. You might just walk up with Dr. Strangeways, Bundy."

Mr. Bundy swung round on his stool, and, taking off his spectacles, stuck in his right eye a gold-rimmed monocle, through which he inspected me critically. Then he hopped off the stool, and, lifting the lid of the desk, took out a velour hat and a pair of chamois gloves, the former of which he adjusted carefully on his head before a small mirror, and, having taken down a labelled key from a key-board and provided himself with a smart, silver-mounted cane, announced that he was ready.

As I walked along the picturesque old street at Mr. Bundy's side, I reverted to my late fellow passenger and my prospective landlady.

"I gather," said I, "that Mrs. Frood's matrimonial affairs are somewhat involved."

"So do I." said Bundy. "Seems to have made a regular mucker of it. I don't know much about her, myself, but Japp knows the whole story. He's some sort of relative of hers; uncle or second cousin or something of the kind. But Japp is a bit like the sailor's parrot: he doesn't let on unnecessarily."

"'What sort of a woman is Mrs. Frood?" I asked.

"Oh, quite a tidy sort of body. I've only seen her once or twice; haven't been here long myself: tallish woman, lot of black hair; thick eye-brows; rather squeaky voice. Not exactly my idea of a beauty, but Frood seems quite keen on her."

"By the way, how comes it that he doesn't know her address? She's a Rochester woman, isn't she?"

"No. I don't know where she comes from. London, I think. This property was left to her by an aunt who lived here: a cousin of Japp's. Angelina came down here a few weeks ago on the q.t. to get away from hubby, and I fancy she's been keeping pretty close."

"She's living in lodgings, then, I suppose?"

"Yes; at least she lives in a set of offices that Japp furnished for her, and the lady who rents the rest of the house looks after her. As a matter of fact, the offices are next door to ours; but you had better consider that information as confidential, at any rate while hubby is in the neighbourhood. This is your shanty."

He halted at the door of a rather small, red brick house, and while I was examining the half-obliterated inscription on the brass plate, he thrust the key into the lock and made ineffectual efforts to turn it. Suddenly there was a loud click from within, followed by the clanking of a chain and the drawing of bolts. Then the door opened slowly, and a long-faced, heavy-browed, elderly woman surveyed us with a gloomy stare.

"Why didn't you ring the bell?" she demanded, gruffly. "Had a key," replied Bundy, extracting it, and flourishing it before her face.

"And what's the good of a key when the door was bolted and chained?"

"But, naturally, I couldn't see that the door was bolted and chained."

"I suppose you couldn't with that thing stuck in your eye. Well, what do you want?"

"I have brought this gentleman, Dr. Strangeways, to see you. He has seen your portraits in the shop windows and wished to be introduced. Also he wants to look over the house. He thinks of taking the practice."

"Well, why couldn't you say that before?" she demanded.

"Before what?" he inquired blandly.

She made no reply other than a low growl, and Bundy continued:

"This lady, Dr. Strangeways, is the renowned Mrs. Dunk, more familiarly known as La Giaconda, who administered the domestic affairs of the late Dr. Partridge, and is at present functioning as custodian of the premises." He concluded the presentation by a ceremonious bow and a sweep of

his hat, which Mrs. Dunk acknowledged by turning her back on him and producing a large bunch of keys, with which she proceeded to unlock the doors that opened on the hall.

"The upstairs rooms are unlocked," she said, adding: "If you want me you can ring the bell," and with this she retired to the basement stairs and vanished.

My examination of the rooms was rather perfunctory, for I had made up my mind already. The premium was absurdly small, and I could see that the house was furnished well enough for my immediate needs. As to the practice, I had no particular expectations.

"Better have a look at the books," said Bundy when we went into the little surgery, "though Mr. Turcival has been through them, and I daresay he has told you all about the practice."

"Yes," I answered, "he told me that the practice was very small and that I probably shouldn't get much of it, as Partridge was an old man and I am a young one. Still, I may as well glance through the books."

Bundy laid the day book and ledger on the desk and placed a stool by the latter, and I seated myself and began to turn over the leaves and note down a few figures on a slip of paper, while my companion beguiled the time by browsing round the surgery, taking down bottles and sniffing at their contents, pulling out drawers and inspecting the instruments and appliances. A very brief examination of the books served to confirm Mr. Turcival's modest estimate of the practice, and when I had finished, I closed them and turned round to report to Mr. Bundy, who was, at the moment, engaged in "sounding" the surgery clock with the late Dr. Partridge's stethoscope.

"I think it will do," said I. "The practice is negligible, but the furniture and fittings are worth the money, and I daresay I shall get some patients in time. At any rate, the premises are all in going order."

"You are not dependent on the practice, then?" said he.

"No. I have enough just barely to exist on until the patients begin to arrive. But what about the house?"

"You can have a lease if you like, or you can go on with the arrangement that Partridge had. If I were you, I should take the house on a three years' agreement with the option of a lease later if you find that the venture turns out satisfactorily."

"Yes," I agreed, "that seems a good arrangement. And when could I have possession?"

"You've got possession now if you agree to the terms. Say yes, and I'll draft out the agreement when I get back. You and Mrs. Frood can sign it this evening. You give us a cheque and we give you your copy of the document, and the thing is d-u-n, done."

"And what about this old woman?"

"La Giaconda Dunkibus? I should keep her if I were you. She looks an old devil, but she's a good servant. Partridge had a great opinion of her, so Japp tells me, and you can see for yourself that the house is in apple-pie order and as clean as a new pin."

"You think she would be willing to stay?"

Bundy grinned (he was a good deal given to grinning, and he certainly had a magnificent set of teeth). "Willing?" he exclaimed. "She's going to stay whether you want her or not. She has been here the best part of her life and nothing short of a torpedo would shift her. You'll have to take her with the fixtures, but I don't think you'll regret it."

As Bundy was speaking, I had been, half-unconsciously, looking him over, interested in the queer contrast between his almost boyish appearance and gay irresponsible manner on the one hand, and, on the other, his shrewdness, his business capacity, and his quick, decisive, evidently forceful character.

To look at, he was just a young "nut," small, spruce, dandified, and apparently not displeased with himself. His age I judged to be about twenty-five, his height about five feet six. In figure, he was slight, but well set-up, and he seemed active and full of life and energy. He was extraordinarily well turned-out. From his close-cropped head, with the fore-lock "smarmed" back in the correct "nuttish" fashion, so that his cranium resembled a large black-topped filbert, to his immaculately polished and remarkably small shoes, there was not an inch of his person that had not received the most careful attention. He was clean-shaved; so clean that on the smooth skin nothing but the faint blue tinge on cheek and chin remained to suggest the coarse and horrid possibilities of whiskers. And his hands had evidently received the same careful attention as his face; indeed, even as he was talking to me, he produced from his pocket some kind of ridiculous little instrument with which he proceeded to polish his finger-nails.

"Shall I ring the bell?" he asked after a short pause, "and call up the spirit of the Dunklett from the vasty deep? May as well let her know her luck."

As I assented he pressed the bell-push, and in less than a minute Mrs. Dunk made her appearance and stood in the doorway, looking inquiringly at Bundy, but uttering no sound.

"Dr. Strangeways is going to take the practice, Mrs. Dunk," said Bundy, "inclusive of the house, furniture, and all effects, and he is also prepared to take you at a valuation."

As the light of battle began to gleam in Mrs. Dunk's eyes, I thought it best to intervene and conduct the negotiations myself.

"I understand from Mr. Bundy," said I, "that you were Dr. Partridge's housekeeper for many years, and it occurred to me that you might be willing to act in the same capacity for me. What do you say?"

"Very well," she replied. "When do you want to move in?"

"I propose to move in at once. My luggage is at the station."

"Have you checked the inventory?" she asked.

"No, I haven't, but I suppose nothing has been taken away?"

"No," she answered. "Everything is as it was when Dr. Partridge died."

"Then we can go over the inventory later. I will have my things sent up from the station, and I shall come in during the afternoon to unpack."

She agreed concisely to this arrangement, and, when we had settled a few minor details, I departed with Bundy to make my way to the station and thereafter to go in search of lunch.

"You think," said I, as we halted opposite the station approach, "that we can get everything completed today?"

"Yes," he replied, "I will get the agreement drawn up in the terms that we have just settled on, and will make an appointment with Mrs. Frood. You had better look in at the office about half-past six."

He turned away with a friendly nod and a flash of his white teeth, and bustled off up the street, swinging his smart cane jauntily, and looking, with his trim, well-cut clothes, his primrose-coloured gloves, and his glistening shoes, the very type of cheerful, prosperous, self-respecting and self-satisfied youth.

CHAPTER III—ANGELINA FROOD

Punctually at half-past six I presented myself at the office of Messrs. Japp and Bundy. The senior partner was seated at a writing-table covered with legal-looking documents, and, as I entered, he looked up with a genial, wrinkly smile of recognition, and then turned to his junior.

"You've got Dr. Strangeways's agreement ready, haven't you, Bundy?" he asked.

"Just finished it five minutes ago," was the reply. "Here you are."

Bundy swung round on his stool and held out the two copies. "Would you mind going through it with Dr. Strangeways?" said Japp. "And then you might go with him to Mrs. Frood's and witness the signatures. I told her you were coming."

Bundy pulled out his watch, and glared at it through his great spectacles.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "I'm afraid I can't. There's old Baldwin, you know. I've got to be there at a quarter to seven."

"So you have," said Japp, "I had forgotten that. You had better be off now. I'll see to Dr. Strangeways, if he isn't in a hurry for a minute or two."

"I'm not in a hurry at all," said I. "Don't put yourself out for me."

"Well, if you really are not," said Japp, "I'll just finish what I am doing, and then I'll run in with you and get the agreement completed. You might look through it while you are waiting and see that it is all in order."

Bundy handed me the agreement, and, as I sat down to study it, he removed his spectacles, stuck his eye-glass in his eye, hopped off his perch, brought forth his hat, gloves, and stick, and, having presented his teeth for my inspection, took his departure.

I read through the agreement carefully to ascertain that it embodied the terms agreed on verbally and compared the two copies. Then, while Mr. Japp continued to turn over the leaves of his documents, I let my thoughts stray from the trim, orderly office to the house of mystery in London and the strange events that had befallen there on that rainy night more than a year ago. Once more

I called up before the eyes of memory the face of my mysterious patient, sweet and gracious in spite of its deathly pallor. Many a time, in the months that had passed, had I recalled it: so often that it seemed, in a way, to have become familiar. In a few minutes I was going to look upon that face again—for there could be no reasonable doubt that my prospective landlady was she. I looked forward expectantly, almost with excitement, to the meeting. Would she recognize me? I wondered. And if she did not, should I make myself known? This was a difficult question, and I had come to no decision upon it when I was aroused from my reverie by a movement on the part of Mr. Japp, whose labours had apparently come to an end. Folding up the documents and securing them in little bundles with red tape, he deposited them in a cupboard with his notes, and from the same receptacle took out his hat.

"Now," said he, "if you find the agreement in order, we will proceed to execute it. Are you going to pay the premium now'"

"I have my cheque-book with me," I replied. "When we have signed the agreement, I will settle up for everything."

"Thank you," said he. "I have prepared a receipt which is, practically, an assignment of the furniture and effects and of all rights in the practice."

He held the door open and I passed out. We descended the steps, and passing the central door common to the two houses, ascended to that of the adjoining house, where Mr. Japp executed a flourish on a handsome brass knocker. In a few moments the door was opened by a woman whom I couldn't see very distinctly in the dim hall, especially as she turned about and retired up the stairs. Mr. Japp advanced to the door of the front room and rapped with his knuckles, whereupon a high, clear, feminine voice bade him come in. He accordingly entered, and I followed.

The first glance disposed of any doubts that I might have had. The lady who stood up to receive us was unquestionably my late patient, though she looked taller than I had expected. But it was the well-remembered face, less changed, indeed, than I could have wished, for it was still pale, drawn, and weary, as I could see plainly enough in spite of the rather dim light; for, although it was not yet quite dark, the curtains were drawn and a lamp lighted on a small table, beside which was a low easy-chair, on which some needlework had been thrown down.

Mr. Japp introduced me to my future landlady, who bowed, and having invited us to be seated, took up her needlework and sat down in the easy-chair.

"You are not looking quite up to the mark," Japp observed, regarding her critically, as he turned over the papers.

"No," she admitted, "I think I am a little run down."

"H'm," said Japp. "Oughtn't to get run down at your age. Why, you are only just wound up. However, you've got a doctor for a tenant, so you will be able to take out some of the rent in medical advice. Let me see, I told you what the terms of the agreement were, but you had better look through it before you sign."

He handed her one of the documents, which she took from him, and, dropping her needlework in her lap, leaned back in her chair to read it. Meanwhile, I examined her with a good deal of interest and curiosity, wondering how she had fared and what had happened to her in the months that had elapsed since I had last seen her. The light was not very favourable for a minute inspection, for the lamp on the table was the sole luminary, and that was covered by a red silk shade. But I was

confirmed in my original impression of her. She was more than ordinarily good-looking, and rather striking in appearance, and I judged that under happier conditions she might have appeared even more attractive. As, it was, the formally parted dark hair, the strongly marked, straight eyebrows, the firm mouth, rather compressed and a little drawn down at the corners, and the pale complexion imparted to her face a character that was somewhat intense, sombre, and even troubled. But, for this I could fully account from my knowledge of her circumstances, and I was conscious of looking on her with a very sympathetic and friendly eye.

"This is quite satisfactory to me," she said at length, in the clear, high-pitched voice to which Bundy had objected, "and if it is equally so to Dr. Strangeways, I suppose I had better sign."

She laid the paper on the table, and, taking the fountain-pen that Japp proffered, signed her name, Angelina Frood, in a bold, legible hand, and then returned the pen to its owner; who forthwith affixed his signature as witness and spread out the duplicate for me to sign. When this also was completed, he handed me the copy signed by Mrs. Frood and the receipt for the premium, and I drew a cheque for the amount and delivered it to him.

"Many thanks," said he, slipping it into a wallet and pocketing it. "That concludes our business and puts you finally in possession. I wish you every success in your practice. By the way, I mentioned to Mrs. Frood that you had seen her husband and that you know how she is placed; and she agreed with me that it was best that you should understand the position in case you should meet him again."

"Certainly," Mrs. Frood agreed. "There is no use in trying to make a secret of it. He came down with you from London, Mr. Japp tells me."

"Not from London," said I. "He got in at Dartford." Here Mr. Japp rose and stole towards the door. "Don't let me interrupt you," said he, "but I must get back to the office and hear what Bundy has to report. Don't get up. I can let myself out."

He made his exit quietly, shutting the door after him, and as soon as he was gone Mrs. Frood asked:

"Do you mean that he changed into your train at Dartford?"

"No," I answered. "I think he came to Dartford on foot. He looked tired and his boots were covered with white dust."

"You are very observant, Dr. Strangeways," she said.

"I wonder what made you notice him so particularly?"

"He is rather a noticeable man," I said, and then, deciding that it was better to be quite frank, I added: "But the fact is I had seen him before."

"Indeed!" said she. "Would you think me very inquisitive if I asked where you had seen him?"

"Not at all," I answered. "It was a little more than a year ago, about twelve o'clock at night, in a house near Regent's Park, to which I was taken in a closed car to see a lady."

As I spoke she dropped her needlework and sat up, gazing at me with a startled and rather puzzled expression. "But," she said, "you are not the doctor who came to see me that night?"

"I am, indeed," said I.

"Now," she exclaimed, "isn't that an extraordinary thing? I had a feeling that I had seen you somewhere before. I seemed to recognize your voice. But you don't look the same. Hadn't you a beard then?"

"Yes, I am but the shaven and shorn remnant of my former self, but I am your late medical attendant."

She looked at me with an odd, reflective, questioning expression, but without making any further comment. Presently she said:

"You were very kind and sympathetic though you were so quiet. I wonder what you thought of it all."

"I hadn't much to go on beyond the medical facts," I replied evasively.

"Oh, you needn't be so cautious," said she, "now that the cat is out of the bag."

"Well," I said, "it was pretty obvious that there had been trouble of some kind. The door had been broken open, there was one man in a state of hysterics, another man considerably upset and rather angry, and a woman with the mark on her neck of a cord or band—"

"It was a knitted silk neck-tie, to be accurate. But you put the matter in a nut-shell very neatly; and I see that you diagnosed what novelists call 'the eternal triangle.' And to a certain extent you were right; only the triangle was imaginary. If you don't mind, I will tell you just what did happen. The gentleman who came for you was a Mr. Fordyce, the lessee of one or two provincial theatres—I was on the stage then; but perhaps you guessed that."

"As a matter of fact, I did."

"Well, Mr. Fordyce had an idea of producing a play at one of his houses, and was going to give me a leading part. He had been to our house once or twice to talk the matter over with Nicholas (my husband) and me, and we were more or less friendly. He was quite a nice, sober kind of man, and perfectly proper and respectful. On this night he had been at the theatre where I had an engagement, and, as it was a wet night, he drove me home in his car, and was coming in to have a few words with us about our business. He wanted to see a photograph of me in a particular costume, and when we arrived home I ran upstairs to fetch it. There I found Nicholas, who had seen our arrival from the window, and was in a state of furious jealousy. Directly I entered the room, he locked the door and flew at me like a wild beast. As to what followed, I think you know as much as I do, for I fainted, and when I recovered Nicholas was sobbing in a corner, and Mr. Fordyce was standing by the door, looking as black as thunder."

"Had your husband been jealous of Mr. Fordyce previously?"

"Not a bit. But on this occasion he was in a very queer state. I think he had been drinking, and taking some other things that were bad for him—"

"Such as cocaine," I suggested.

"Yes. But, dear me! What a very noticing person you are, Dr. Strangeways! But you are quite right. It was the cocaine that was the cause of the trouble. He was always a difficult man;

emotional, excitable, eccentric, and not very temperate, but after he had acquired the drug habit he went to the bad completely. He became slovenly, and even dirty in his person, frightfully emotional, and gave up work of all kind, so that but for my tiny income and my small earnings we should have starved."

"So you actually supported him?"

"Latterly I did. And I daresay, if I had remained on the stage, we should have done fairly well, as I was supposed to have some talent, though I didn't like the life. But, of course, after this affair, I didn't dare to live with him. He wasn't safe. I should have been constantly in fear of my life."

"Had he ever been violent before'"

"Not seriously. He had often threatened horrible things, and I had looked on his threats as mere vapourings, but this was a different affair. I must have had a really narrow escape. So the very next day, I went into lodgings. But that didn't answer. He wouldn't agree to the separation, and was continually dogging me and making a disturbance. In the end, I had to give up my engagement and go off, leaving no address."

"I suppose you went back to your people?"

"No," she replied. "As a matter of fact, I haven't any people. My mother died when I was quite a child, and I lost my father when I was about seventeen. He died on the Gold Coast, where he held an appointment as District Commissioner."

"Ah," said I, "I thought you were in some way connected with West Africa. I noticed the zodiac ring on your finger when you were signing the agreement. When I was newly qualified I took a trip down the West Coast as a ship's surgeon, and bought one of those rings at Cape Coast."

"They are quaint little things, aren't they?" she remarked, slipping the ring off her finger and handing it to me. "I don't often wear it, though. It is rather clumsy, and it doesn't fit very well; and I don't care much for rings."

I turned the little trinket over in my hand and examined it with reminiscent interest. It was a roughly wrought band of yellow native gold, with the conventional signs of the zodiac worked round it in raised figures. Inside I noticed that the letters A. C. had been engraved.

"It was given to you before you were married, I presume," said I, as I returned it to her.

"Yes," she replied, "those are the initials of my maiden name—Angelina Carthew." She took the ring from me, but instead of replacing it on her finger, dropped it into a little pouch-like purse with metal jaws, which she had taken from her pocket.

"Your position is a very disagreeable one," said I, reverting to the main topic. "I wonder that you haven't applied for a judicial separation. There are ample grounds for making the application."

"I suppose there are. But it wouldn't help me really, even if it were granted. I shouldn't get rid of him."

"You could apply to the police if he molested you."

"No doubt. But that doesn't sound very restful, does it?"

"I am afraid it doesn't. But it would be better than being constantly molested without having any remedy or refuge."

"Perhaps it would," she agreed doubtfully, and then, with a faint smile, she added: "I suppose you are wondering what on earth made me marry him?"

"Well," I replied, "it appears to me that his good fortune was more remarkable than his personal attractions."

"He wasn't always like he is now," said she. "I married him nearly ten years ago, and he was fairly presentable then. His manners were quite nice and he had certain accomplishments that rather appealed to a young girl—I was only eighteen and rather impressionable. He was then getting a living by writing magazine stories—love stories, they were, of a highly emotional type—and occasional verses. They were second-rate stuff, really, but to me he seemed a budding genius. It was not until after we were married that the disillusionment came, and then only gradually as his bad habits developed."

"By the way, what do you suppose he has come down here for? What does he want? I suppose he wishes you to go back to him?"

"I suppose he does. But, primarily, I expect he wants money. It is a horrible position," she added, with sudden passion. "I hate the idea of hiding away from him when I suspect that the poor wretch has come down to his last few shillings. After all, he is my husband; and I am not so deadly poor now."

"He seemed to have the wherewith to provide a fair supply of tobacco, to say nothing of the cocaine and a 'modest quencher' at the tavern," I remarked drily. "At any rate, I hope he won't succeed in finding out where you live."

"I hope not," said she. "If he does, I shall have to move on, as I have had to do several times already, and I don't want to do that. I have only been here a little over two months, and it has been very pleasant and peaceful. But you see, Dr. Strangeways, that, if I am to follow Mr. Japp's advice, I shall inflict on you a very unpromising patient. There is no medical treatment for matrimonial troubles."

"No," I agreed, rising and taking up my hat, "but the physical effects may be dealt with. If I am appointed your medical advisor, I shall send you a tonic, and if I may look in now and again to see how you are getting on, I may be able to help you over some of your difficulties."

"It is very kind of you," she said, rising and shaking my hand warmly; and, accepting my suggestion that she had better not come to the street door, she showed me out into the hall and dismissed me with a smile and a little bow.

When I reached the bottom of the steps, I stood irresolutely for a few moments and then, instead of making my way homeward, turned up the street towards the cathedral and the bridge, walking slowly and reflecting profoundly on the story I had just heard. It was a pitiful story; and the quiet, restrained manner of the telling made it the more impressive. All that was masculine in me rose in revolt against the useless, inexcusable wrecking of this poor woman's life. As to the man, he was, no doubt, to be pitied for being the miserable, degenerate wretch that he was. But he was doomed beyond any hope of salvation. Such wretches as he are condemned in the moment of their birth; they are born to an inheritance of misery and dishonour. But it is infamous that in their inevitable descent into the abyss—from which no one can save them—they should have the power to drag

down with them sane and healthy human beings who were destined by nature to a life of happiness, of usefulness, and honour. I thought of the woman I had just left—comely, dignified, energetic, probably even talented. What was her future to be? So far as I could see, the upas shadow of this drug-sodden wastrel had fallen upon her, never to be lifted until merciful death should dissolve the ill-omened union.

This last reflection gave my thoughts a new turn. What was this man's purpose in pursuing her? Was he bent merely on extorting money or on sharing her modest income? Or was there some more sinister motive? I recalled his face; an evil, sly, vindictive face. I considered what I knew of him; that he had undoubtedly made one attempt to murder this woman, and that, to my knowledge, he carried about his person the means of committing murder. For what purpose could he have provided himself with that formidable weapon? It might be merely as a means of coercion, or it might be as a means of revenge.

Thus meditating, I had proceeded some distance along the street when I observed, on the opposite side, an old, three-gabled house which looked like some kind of institution. A lamp above the doorway threw its light on a stone tablet on which I could see an inscription of some length, and, judging this to be an ancient almshouse, I crossed the road to inspect it more closely. A glance at the tablet told me that this was the famous rest-house established in the sixteenth century by worthy Richard Watts, to give a night's lodging and entertainment to six poor travellers, with the express proviso that the said travellers must be neither rogues nor proctors. I had read through the quaint inscription and was speculating, as many others have speculated, on the nature of Richard Watts's grievance against proctors as a class, when the door opened suddenly and a man rushed out with such impetuosity that he nearly collided with me. I had moved out of his way when he halted and addressed me excitedly.

"I say, governor, can you tell me where I can find a doctor?"

"You have found one," I replied. "I am a doctor. What is the matter?"

"There's a bloke in here throwing a fit," he answered, backing into the doorway and holding the door open for me. I entered, and followed him down a passage to a largish, barely furnished room, where I found four men and a woman, who looked like a hospital nurse, standing around and watching anxiously a man who lay on the floor.

"Here's a doctor, matron," said my conductor, as he ushered me in.

"Well, Simmonds," said the matron, "you haven't wasted much time."

"No, mum," replied Simmonds, "I struck it lucky. Caught him just outside."

Meanwhile I had stepped up to the prostrate man, and at the first glance I recognized him. He was Mrs. Frood's husband. And, whatever he might be "throwing," it was not a fit—in the ordinary medical sense; that is to say, it was not epilepsy or apoplexy; nor was it a fainting fit of an orthodox kind. If the patient had been a woman one would have called it a hysterical seizure, and I could give it no other name, though I was not unmindful of the paper packet that I had seen on that former occasion. But the emotional element was obvious. The man purported to be insensible, and manifestly was not. The tightly closed eyes, the everted lips—showing a row of blackened teeth—the clutching movements of the clawlike hands—all were suggestive of at least half-conscious simulation. I stood for a while, stooping over him and watching him intently, and as I did so the bystanders watched me. Then I felt his pulse, and found it, as I had expected, quick, feeble, and

irregular; and finally, producing my stethoscope, listened to his heart with as little disturbance of his clothing as possible.

"Well, doctor," said the matron, "what do you think of him?"

"He is decidedly ill," I replied. "His heart is rather jumpy, and not very strong. Too much tobacco, I fancy, and perhaps some other things that are not very good, and possibly insufficient food."

"He told me, when he came in," said the matron, "that he was practically destitute."

"Ah," murmured Simmonds, "I expect he's been blowing all his money on Turkish baths," whereupon the other poor travellers sniggered softly, and were immediately extinguished by a reproving glance from the matron.

"Do you know what brought this attack on?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied; "he had a little dispute with Simmonds, here, and suddenly became violently excited, and then he fell down insensible, as you see him. It was all about nothing."

"I jest arsked 'im," said Simmonds, "if 'e could give me the name of the cove what done 'is 'air, 'cos I thought I'd like to 'ave mine done in the same fashionable style. That seemed to give 'im the fair pip. 'E jawed me something chronic, until I got shirty and told 'im if 'e didn't shut 'is face I'd give 'im a wipe acrost the snout. Then blow me if 'e didn't start to throw a fit."

While this lucid explanation was proceeding I noticed that the patient was evidently listening intently, though he continued to twitch his face, exhibit his unlovely teeth, and wriggle his fingers. He was apparently waiting for my verdict with some anxiety.

"The question is," said the matron, "what is to be done with him? Do you think he is in any danger?"

As she spoke, we drifted towards the door, and when we were in the passage, out of earshot, I said:

"The best place for that man is the infirmary. There is nothing much the matter with him but dope. He has been dosing himself with cocaine, and he has probably got some more of the stuff about him. He is in no danger now, but if he takes any more he may upset himself badly."

"It is rather late to send him to the infirmary," she said, "and I don't quite like to do it. Poor fellow, he seems fearfully down on his luck, and he is quite a superior kind of man. Do you think it would be safe for him to stay here for the night if he had a little medicine of some kind?"

"It would be safe enough," I replied, "if you could get possession of his coat and waistcoat and lock them up until the morning."

"Oh, I'll manage that," said she; "and about the medicine?"

"Let Simmonds walk up with me—I have taken Dr. Partridge's practice—and I will give it to him."

We re-entered the supper-room and found the conditions somewhat changed. Whether it was that the word "infirmary" had been wafted to the patient's attentive ears, I cannot say; but there were evident signs of recovery. Our friend was sitting up, glaring wildly about him, and inquiring where he was; to which questions Simmonds was furnishing answers of a luridly inaccurate character.

When I had taken another look at the patient, and received a vacant stare of almost aggressive unrecognition, I took possession of the facetious Simmonds, and, having promised to look in in the morning, wished the matron good-night and departed with my escort; who entertained me on the way home with picturesque, unflattering, and remarkably shrewd comments on the sufferer.

I had made up a stimulant mixture, and handed it to Simmonds when I remembered Mrs. Frood and that Simmonds would pass her house on his way back. For an instant, I thought of asking him to deliver her medicine for me; and then, with quite a shock, I realized what a hideous blunder it would have been. Evidently, the poor travellers gave their names, and if the man, Frood, had given his correctly, the coincidence of the names would have impressed Simmonds instantly, and then the murder would have been out, and the fat would have been in the fire properly. It was a narrow escape, and it made me realize how insecure was that unfortunate lady's position with this man lurking in the town. And, realizing this, I determined to trust the addressed bottle to nobody, but to leave it at the house myself. Accordingly, having made up the medicine and wrapped it neatly in paper, I thrust it into my pocket, and, calling out to Mrs. Dunk that I should be back to supper in about half an hour, I set forth, and in a few minutes arrived at the little Georgian doorway and plied the elegant brass knocker. The door was opened—rather incautiously, I thought—by Mrs. Frood herself.

"I am my own bottle-boy, you see, Mrs. Frood," said I, handing her the medicine. "I thought it safer not to send an addressed packet under the circumstances."

"But how good of you!" she exclaimed. "How kind and thoughtful! But you shouldn't have troubled about it tonight."

"It was only a matter of five minutes' walk," said I, "and besides, there was something that I thought you had better know," and hereupon I proceeded to give her a brief account of my recent adventures and the condition of her precious husband. "Is he subject to attacks of this kind?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered. "When he is put out about anything in some ways he is rather like a hysterical woman. But, you see, I was right. He is penniless. And that—now I come to think of it—makes it rather odd that he should be here. But won't you come in for a moment?"

I entered and shut the door. "Why is it odd?" I asked.

"Because he would be getting some money tomorrow. I make him a small allowance; it is very little, but it is as much as I can possibly manage; and it is paid monthly, on the fifteenth of the month. But he has to apply for it personally at the bank or send an accredited messenger with a receipt; and as tomorrow is the fifteenth, the question is, why on earth is he down here now? I mean that it is odd that he should not have waited to collect the allowance before coming to hunt me up."

"If he is in communication with your banker," said I, "he could, I suppose, get a letter forwarded to you?"

"No," she replied; "the banker who pays him is the London agent of Mr. Japp's banker, and he doesn't know on whose behalf the payments are made. I had to make that arrangement, or he would have bombarded me with letters."

"Well," I said, "you had better keep close for a day or two. If his search for you is unsuccessful, he may get discouraged and raise the siege. I will let you know what his movements are, so far as I can."

She thanked me once more with most evident sincerity, and as I made my way to the door, she let me out with a cordial and friendly shake of the hand.

CHAPTER IV—DEALS WITH CHARITY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Immediately after breakfast on the following morning I made my way to Mr. Richard Watts's establishment, where I learned that all the poor travellers had departed with the exception of my patient, who had been allowed to stay pending my report on him.

"I shall be glad to see the back of him, poor fellow," said the matron, "for, of course, we have no arrangements for dealing with sick men."

"Do you often get cases of illness here?" I asked.

"I really don't know," she answered. "You see, I am only doing temporary duty here while the regular matron is away. But I should think not, though little ailments are apt to occur in the case of a poor man who has been on the road for a week or so."

"This man is on tramp, is he'" said I.

"Well, no," she replied. "It seems, from what he tells me, that his wife has left him, and he had reason to believe that she was staying in this town. So he came down here to try to find her. He supposed that Rochester was a little place where everybody knew everybody else, and that he would have no difficulty in discovering her whereabouts. But all his inquiries have come to nothing. Nobody seems to have heard of her. I suppose you don't happen to know the name—Frood?"

"I only came here yesterday, myself," was my evasive reply. "I am a stranger to the town. But is he certain that she is here?"

"I don't think he is. At any rate, he seems inclined to give up the search for the present, and he is very anxious to get back to London. But I don't know how he is going to manage it. He isn't fit to walk."

"Well," I said, "if it is only the railway fare that stands in the way, that difficulty can be got over. I will pay for his ticket; but I should like to be sure that he really goes."

"Oh, I'll see to that," she said, with evident relief. "I will go with him to the station, and get his ticket and see him into the train. But you had better just have a look at him, and see that he is fit to go."

She conducted me to the supper-room, where our friend was sitting in a Windsor armchair, looking the very picture of misery and dejection.

"Here is the doctor come to see you, Mr. Frood," the matron said cheerfully, "and he is kind enough to say that, if you are well enough to travel, he will pay your fare to London. So there's an end of your difficulties."

The poor devil glanced at me for an instant, and then looked away; and, to my intense discomfort, I saw that his eyes were filling.

"It is indeed good of you, Sir," he murmured, shakily, but in a very pleasant voice and with a refined accent; "most good and kind to help a lame dog over a stile in this way. I don't know how to thank you."

Here, as he showed a distinct tendency to weep, I replied hastily:

"Not at all. We've all got to help one another in this world. And how are you feeling? Hand is still a little bit shaky, I see."

I put my finger on his wrist and then looked him over generally. He was a miserable wreck, but I judged that he was as well as he was ever likely to be.

"Well," I said, "you are not in first-class form, but you are up to a short railway journey. I suppose you have somewhere to go to in London?"

"Yes," he replied, dismally, "I have a room. It isn't in the Albany, but it is a shelter from the weather."

"Never mind," said I. "We must hope for better times. The matron is going to see you safely to the station and comfortably settled in the train—and"—here I handed her a ten shilling note—"you will get Mr. Frood's ticket, matron, and you had better give him the change. He may want a cab when he gets to town."

He glowered sulkily at this arrangement—I suspect he had run out of cigarettes—but he thanked me again, and, when I had privately ascertained the time of the train which was to bear him away, I wished him adieu.

"I suppose," said I, "there is no likelihood of his hopping out at Strood to get a drink and losing the train?"

The matron smiled knowingly. "He will start from Strood," said she. "I shall take him over the bridge in the tram and put him into the London express there. We don't want him back here tonight."

Much relieved by the good lady's evident grasp of the situation, I turned away up the street and began to consider my next move. I had nothing to do this morning, for at present there was not a single patient on my books with the exception of Mrs. Frood; and it may have been in accordance with the prevailing belief that to persons in my condition, an individual, familiarly known as "the old gentleman," obligingly functions as employment agent, that my thoughts turned to that solitary patient. At any rate they did. Suddenly, it was borne in on me that I ought, without delay, to convey to her the glad tidings of her husband's departure. Whether the necessity would have appeared as urgent if her personal attractions had been less, I will not presume to say; nor whether had I been more self-critical, I should not have looked with some suspicion on this intense concern respecting the welfare of a woman who was almost a stranger to me. As it was, it appeared to me that I was but discharging a neighbourly duty when I executed an insinuating rat-tat on the handsome brass knocker which was adorned—somewhat inappropriately, under the circumstances—with a mask of Hypnos.

After a short interval, the door was opened by a spare, middle-aged woman of melancholic aspect, with tow-coloured hair and a somewhat anemic complexion, who regarded me inquiringly with a faded blue eye.

"Is Mrs. Frood at home?" I asked briskly.

"I am afraid she is not," was the reply, uttered in a dejected tone. "I saw her go out some time ago, and I haven't heard her come back. But I'll just see, if you will come in a moment."

I entered the hall and listened with an unaccountable feeling of disappointment as she rapped on the door first of the front room, and then of the back.

"She isn't in her rooms there," was the dispirited report, "but she may be in the basement. I'll call out and ask."

She retired to the inner hall and gave utterance to a wail like that of an afflicted sea-gull. But there was no response; and I began to feel myself infected by her melancholy.

"I am sorry you have missed her, Sir," said she; and then she asked: "Are you her doctor, Sir?"

I felt myself justified in affirming that I was, whereupon she exclaimed:

"Ah, poor thing! It is a comfort to know that she has someone to look after her. She has been looking very sadly of late. Very sadly, she has."

I began to back cautiously towards the door, but she followed me up and continued: "I am afraid she has had a deal of trouble; a deal of trouble, poor dear. Not that she ever speaks of it to me. But I know. I can see the lines of grief and sorrow—like a worm in the bud, so to speak, Sir—and it makes my heart ache. It does, indeed."

I mumbled sympathetically and continued to back towards the door.

"I don't see very much of her," she continued in a plaintive tone. "She keeps herself very close. Too close, I think. You see, she does for herself entirely. Now and again, when she asks me, which is very seldom, I put a bit of supper in her room. That is all. And I do think that it isn't good for a young woman to live so solitary; and I do hope you'll make her take a little more change."

"I suppose she goes out sometimes," said I, noting that she was out at the present moment.

"Oh, yes," was the reply. "She goes out a good deal. But always alone. She never has any society."

"And what time does she usually come in?" I asked, with a view to a later call.

"About six; or between that and seven. Then she has her supper and puts the things out on the hall table. And that is the last I usually see of her."

By this time I had reached the door and softly unfastened the latch.

"If you should see her," I said, "you might tell her that I shall look in this evening about half-past seven."

"Certainly, Sir," she replied. "I shall see her at lunch-time, and I will give her your message."

I thanked her, and, having now got the door open, I wished her good morning, and retreated down the steps.

As I was in the act of turning away, my eye lighted on the adjacent bay window, appertaining to the office of Messrs. Japp and Bundy, and I then perceived' above the green curtain the upper half of a human face, including a pair of tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles; an apparition which informed me that Mr. Bundy had been—to use Sam Weller's expression—"a-twigging of me." On catching my eye, the face rose higher, disclosing a broad grin; whereupon, without any apparent reason, I felt myself turning somewhat red. However, I mounted the official steps, and, opening the office door, confronted the smiler and his more sedate partner.

"Ha!" said the former, "you drew a blank, doctor. I saw the lovely Angelina go out about an hour ago. Whom did you see?"

"The lady of the house, I presume; a pale, depressed female."

"I know," said Bundy. "Looks like an undertaker's widow. That's Mrs. Gillow. Rhymes with willow—very appropriate, too," and he began to chant in an absurd, Punch-like voice: "Oh, all round my hat I'll wear the green—"

"Be quiet, Bundy," said Mr. Japp, regarding his partner with a wrinkly and indulgent smile.

Bundy clapped his hand over his mouth and blew out his cheeks, and I took the opportunity to explain: "I called on Mrs. Frood to let her know that her husband is leaving the town."

"Leaving the town, is he?" said Mr. Japp, elevating his eyebrows and thereby causing his forehead to resemble a small Venetian blind. "Do you know when?"

"He goes this morning by the ten-thirty express to London."

"Hooray!" ejaculated Bundy, with a flourish of his arms that nearly capsized his stool. He recovered himself with an effort, and then, fixing his eyes on me, proceeded to whistle the opening bars of "O! Thou that tellest good tidings to Zion!"

"That'll do, Bundy," said Mr. Japp. Then turning to me, he asked: "Where did you learn these good tidings, Doctor'"

I gave them a brief account of the happenings of the previous night and this morning's sequel, to which they listened with deep attention. When I had finished Mr. Japp said: "You have done a very great kindness to my friend Mrs. Frood. It will be an immense relief to her to know that she can walk abroad without the danger of encountering this man. Besides, if he had stayed here he would probably have found her out."

"He might even have found her at home," said Bundy, "and that would have been worse. So I propose a vote of thanks to the doctor—with musical honours. For-hor he's a jolly good fell—"

"There, that'll do, Bundy, that'll do," said Mr. Japp. "I never saw such a fellow. You'll have the neighbours complaining."

Bundy leaned towards me confidentially and remarked in a stage whisper, glancing at his partner: "Fidgetty old cove; regular old killjoy." Then, with a sudden change of manner, he asked: "What about that wall job, Japp? Are you going to have a look at them?"

"I can't go at present," said Japp. "Bulford will be coming in presently and I must see him. Have you got anything special to do?"

"Only old Jeff'son's lease, and that can wait. Shall I trot over and see what sort of mess they are making of things?"

"I wish you would," said Japp; whereupon Mr. Bundy removed his spectacles, stuck in his eye-glass, extracted from the desk his hat and gloves which he assumed with the aid of the looking-glass, and took his stick from the corner. Then he looked at me reflectively and asked:

"Are you interested in archaeology, Doctor?"

"Somewhat," I replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Because we are putting some patches in the remains of the city wall. It isn't much to look at, and there isn't a great deal of the original Roman work left; but if you would care to have a look at it you might walk up there with me."

I agreed readily, being, as I have said, somewhat at a loose end, and we set forth together, Bundy babbling cheerfully as we went.

"I have often thought," said he, "that there must have been something rather pleasant and restful about the old walled cities, particularly after curfew when the gates were shut—that is, provided you were inside at the time."

"Yes," said I. "An enclosed precinct has a certain agreeable quality of seclusion that you can't get in an open town or village. When I was a student, I lived for a time in chambers in Staple Inn, and it was, as you say, rather pleasant, when one came home at night, and the porter had let one in at the wicket, to enter and find the gates closed, the courts all quiet and empty, and to know that all traffic was stopped and all strangers shut out until the morning. But it doesn't appear to be in accordance with modern taste, for those old Chancery Inns have nearly all gone, and there is no tendency to replace them with anything similar."

"No," Bundy agreed, stopping to look up at an old timber house, "taste in regard to buildings, if there is any—Japp says there isn't—has changed completely in the last hundred years or so. Look at this alley we are in now. Every house has got a physiognomy of its own. But when we rebuild it, we shall fill it up with houses that will look as if they had been bought in packets like match-boxes."

Gossiping thus, we threaded our way through all sorts of queer little alleys and passages. At length Bundy stopped at a wooden gate in a high fence, and, pushing it open, motioned for me to enter; and as I did so he drew out the key which was in the lock and put it in his pocket.

The place which we had entered was a space of waste land, littered with the remains of some old houses that had been demolished and enclosed on three sides by high fences. The fourth side was formed by a great mass of crumbling rubble, patched in places with rough masonry and brickwork, and showing in its lower part the remains of courses of Roman bricks. It rose to a considerable height, and was evidently of enormous thickness, as could be seen where large areas of the face

had crumbled away, exposing great cavities, in which wall-flowers, valerian and other rock-haunting plants, had taken up their abode. On one of these a small gang of men were at work, and it was evident that repairs on a considerable scale were contemplated, for there were several large heaps of rough stone and old bricks, and in a cart-shed in a corner of the space were a large number of barrels of lime.

As we entered, the foreman came forward to meet us, and Bundy handed him the key from the gate.

"Better keep it in your pocket," said he. "Mr. Japp is rather particular about keys that he has charge of. He doesn't like them left in doors or gates. How are the men getting on?"

"As well as you can expect of a lot of casuals like these," was the reply. "There isn't a mason or a bricklayer among them, excepting that old chap that's mixing the mortar. However, it's only a rough job."

We walked over to the part of the old wall where the men were at work, and the appearances certainly justified the foreman's last remark. It was a very rough job. The method appeared to consist in building up outside the cavity a primitive wall of unhewn stone with plenty of mortar, and, when it had risen a foot or two, filling up the cavity inside with loose bricks, lumps of stone, shovelfuls of liquid mortar, and chunks of lime.

I ventured to remark that it did not look a very secure method of building, upon which Bundy turned his eyeglass on me and smiled knowingly.

"My dear Doctor," said he, "you don't appear to appreciate the subtlety of the method. The purpose of these activities is to create employment. That has been clearly stated by the town council. But if you want to create employment you build a wall that will tumble down and give somebody else the job of putting it up again."

Here, as a man suddenly bore down on us with a bucket of mortar, Bundy hopped back to avoid the unclean contact, and nearly sat down on a heap of smoking lime.

"You had a narrow escape that time, mister," remarked the old gentleman who presided over the mortar department, as Bundy carefully dusted his delicate shoes with his handkerchief; "that stuff would 'ave made short work of them fine clothes of yourn."

"Would it?" said Bundy, dusting his shoes yet more carefully and wiping the soles on the turf.

"Ah," rejoined the old man; "terrible stuff is quicklime. Eats up everything same as what fire does." He rested his hands on his shovel, and, assuming a reminiscent air, continued: "There was a pal o' mine what was skipper of a barge. A iron barge, she was, and he had to take on a lading of lime from some kilns. The stuff was put aboard with a shoot. Well, my pal, he gets 'is barge under the shoot and then 'e goes off, leavin' 'is mate to see the lime shot into the hold. Well, it seems the mate had been takin' some stuff aboard, too. Beer, or p'raps whisky. At any rate, he'd got a skinful. Well, presently the skipper comes back, and he sees 'em a-tippin' the trucks of lime on to the shoot, and he sees the barge's hold beginning to fill, but 'e don't see 'is mate nowhere. He goes aboard, down to the cabin, but there ain't no signs of the mate there, nor yet anywheres else. Well, they gets the barge loaded and the hatch-covers on, and everything ready for sea; and still there ain't no signs of the mate. So my pal, rememberin' that the mate—his name was Bill—rememberin' that Bill seemed a bit squiffy, supposed he must 'ave gone overboard. So 'e takes on a fresh hand temporary and off 'e goes on 'is trip.

"Well, they makes their port all right and brings up alongside the wharf, but owing to a strike among the transport men they can't unload for about three weeks. However, when the strike is over, they rigs a whip and a basket and begins to get the stuff out. All goes well until they get down to the bottom tier. Then one of the men brings upa bone on his shovel. 'Hallo!' says the skipper, 'what's bones a-doin' in a cargo of fresh lime?' He rakes over the stuff on the floor and up comes a skull with a hole in the top of it. 'Why, blow me,' says the skipper, 'if that don't look like Bill. He warn't as thin in the face as all that, but I seem to know them teeth.' Just then one of the men finds a clay pipe—a nigger's head, it was—and the skipper reckernizes it at once. 'That there's Bill's pipe,' sez he, 'and them bones is Bill's bones,' 'e sez. And so they were. They found 'is belt-buckle and 'is knife, and 'is trouser buttons and the nails out of 'is boots. And that's all there was left of Bill. He must have tumbled down into the hold and cracked his nut, and then the first truckful of lime must 'ave covered 'im up. So, if you sets any value on them 'andsome shoes o' yourn, don't you go a-treadin' in quick lime."

Bundy looked down anxiously at his shoes, and, having given them an additional wipe, he moved away from the dangerous neighbourhood of the lime and we went together to examine the ancient wall.

"That was rather a tall yarn of the old man's," remarked Bundy. "Is it a fact that lime is as corrosive as he made out?"

"I don't really know very much about it," I replied. "There is a general belief that it will consume almost anything but metal. How true that is I can't say, but I remember that at the Crippen trial one of the medical experts—I think it was Pepper—said that if the body had been buried in quicklime it would have been entirely consumed—excepting the bones, of course. But it is difficult to believe that a body could disappear completely in three weeks, or thereabouts, as our friend said. How fine this old wall looks with those clumps of valerian and wallflowers growing on it! I suppose it encircled the town completely at one time?"

"Yes," he replied, "and it is a pity there isn't more of it left, or at least one or two of the gateways. A city gate is such a magnificent adornment. Think of the gates of Canterbury and Rye, and especially at Sandwich, where you actually enter the town through the barbican; and think of what Rochester must have been before all the gates were pulled down. But you must hear Japp on the subject. He's a regular architectural Jeremiah. By the way, what did you think of Mrs. Frood? You saw her last night, didn't you?"

"Yes. I was rather taken with her. She is very nice and friendly and unaffected, and good-looking, too. I thought her distinctly handsome."

"She isn't bad-looking," Bundy admitted. "But I can't stand her voice. It gets on my nerves. I hate a squeaky voice."

"I shouldn't call it squeaky," said I. "It is a high voice, and rather sing-song; and it isn't, somehow, quite in keeping with her appearance and manner."

"No," said Bundy, "that's what it is. She's too big for a voice like that."

I laughed at the quaint expression. "People's voices," said I, "are not like steamers' whistles, graduated in pitch according to their tonnage. Besides, Mrs. Frood is not such a very big woman."

"She is a good size," said he. "I should call her rather tall. At any rate, she is taller than I am. But I suppose you will say that she might be that without competing with the late Mrs. Bates."

"Comparisons between the heights of men and women," I said cautiously, "are rather misleading," and here I changed the subject, though I judged that Bundy was not sensitive in regard to his stature, for while he was cleaning the lime from his shoes I had noticed that he wore unusually low heels. Nor need he have been, for though on a small scale, he was quite an important-looking person.

"Don't you think," he asked, after a pause, "that it is rather queer that the man Frood should have gone off so soon T He only came down yesterday, and he can't have made much of a search for Madame."

"The queer thing is that he should have come down on that particular day," I replied. "It seems that he draws a monthly allowance on the fifteenth. That was what made him so anxious to get back; but it is odd that he didn't put off his visit here until he had collected the money."

"If he had run his wife to earth, he could have collected it from her," said Bundy. "I wonder how he found out that she was here."

"He evidently hadn't very exact information," I said, "nor did he seem quite certain that she really was here. And his failure to get any news of her appears to have discouraged him considerably. It is just possible that he has gone back to get more precise information if he can, when he has drawn his allowance."

"That is very likely," Bundy agreed; "and it is probable that we haven't seen the last of him yet."

"I have a strong suspicion that we haven't," said I.

"If he is sure she is here, and can get enough money together to come and spend a week here, he will be pretty certain to discover her whereabouts. It is a dreadful position for her. She ought to get a judicial separation."

"I doubt if she could," said he. "You may be sure he would contest that application pretty strongly, and what case would she have in support of it? He is an unclean blighter; he doesn't work; he smokes and drinks too much, and you say he takes drugs. But he doesn't seem to be violent or dangerous or threatening, or to be on questionable terms with other women-at least, I have never heard anything to that effect. Have you?"

"No," I answered—I had said nothing to him or Japp about the London incident. "He seems to have married the only woman in the world who would look at him."

Bundy grinned. "An unkind cut, that, Doctor," said he; "but I believe you're right. And here we are, back at the official premises. Are you coming in?"

I declined the invitation, and as he skipped up the steps I turned my face homewards.

CHAPTER V—JOHN THORNDYKE

The sexual preferences or affinities of men and women have always impressed me as very mysterious and inexplicable. I am referring to the selective choice of individuals, not to the general attraction of the sexes for one another. Why should a particular pair of human beings single one another out from the mass of their fellows as preferable to all others? Why to one particular man does one particular woman and no other become the exciting cause of the emotion of love? It is not

a matter of mere physical beauty or mental excellence, for if it were men and women would be simply classifiable into the attractive and the non-attractive; whereas we find in practice that a woman who may be to the majority of men an object of indifference, is to some one man an object of passionate love; and vice-versa. Nor is love necessarily accompanied by any delusions as to the worth of its object, for it will persist in spite of the clear recognition of personal defects and in conscious conflict with judgment and reason.

The above reflections, with others equally profound, occupied my mind as I sat on a rather uncomfortable little rush-seated chair in the nave of Rochester Cathedral; whither I had proceeded in obedience to orders from Mrs. Dunk, to attend the choral afternoon service; and they were occasioned by the sudden recognition—not without surprise—of the very deep impression that had been made on me by my patient, Mrs. Frood. For the intensity of that impression I could not satisfactorily account. It is true that her circumstances were interesting and provocative of sympathy. But that was no reason for the haunting of my thoughts by her, of which I was conscious. She was not a really beautiful woman, though I thought her more than commonly good-looking; and she had evidently made no particular impression on Bundy. Yet, though I had seen her but three times, including my first meeting with her a year ago, I had to recognize that she had hardly been out of my thoughts since, and I was aware of looking forward with ridiculous expectancy to my proposed visit to her this evening.

Thus, speculations on the meaning of this preoccupation mingled themselves with other speculations, as, for instance, on the abrupt changes of intention suggested by half of an Early English arch clapped up against a Norman pier; and as my thoughts rambled on, undisturbed by a pleasant voice, intoning with soothing unintelligibility somewhere beyond the stone screen, I watched with languid curiosity the strangers who entered and stole on tiptoe to the nearest vacant chair. Presently, however, as the intoning voice gave place to the deep, pervading hum of the organ, a visitor entered who instantly attracted my attention.

He was obviously a personage—a real personage; not one of those who have achieved greatness by the free use of their elbows, or have had it thrust upon them by influential friends. This was an unmistakable thoroughbred. He was a tall man, very erect and dignified in carriage, and in spite of his iron-grey hair, evidently strong, active, and athletic. But it was his face that specially riveted my attention: not merely by reason that it was a handsome, symmetrical face, inclining to the Greek type, with level brows, a fine, straight nose, and a shapely mouth, but rather on account of its suggestion of commanding strength and intelligence. It was a strangely calm—even immobile—face; but yet it conveyed a feeling of attentiveness and concentration, and especially of power.

I watched the stranger curiously as he stepped quietly to a seat not far from me, noting how he seemed to stand out from the ordinary men who surrounded him, and wondering who he was. But I was not left to wonder very long. A few moments later another visitor arrived, but not a stranger this time; for in this newcomer I recognized an old acquaintance, a Dr. Jervis, whom I had known when I was a student and when he had taken temporary charge of my uncle's practise. Since then, as I had learned, he had qualified as a barrister and specialized in legal medicine as the coadjutor of the famous medical jurist, Dr. John Thorndyke.

For a few moments Jervis stood near the entrance looking about the nave, as if in search of someone. Then, suddenly, his eye lighted on the distinguished stranger, and he walked straight over to him and sat down by his side; from which, and from the smile of recognition with which he was greeted, I inferred that the stranger was none other than Dr. Thorndyke himself.

Jervis had apparently not seen, or at least not recognized me, but, as I observed that there was a vacant chair by his side, I determined to renew our acquaintance and secure, if possible, a presentation to his eminent colleague. Accordingly, I crossed the nave, and, taking the vacant chair, introduced myself, and was greeted with a cordial hand-shake.

The circumstances did not admit of conversation, but presently, when the anthem appeared to be drawing to a close, Jervis glanced at his watch and whispered to me: "I want to hear all your news, Strangeways, and to introduce you to Thorndyke; and we must get some tea before we go to the station. Shall we clear out now?"

As I assented he whispered to Thorndyke, and we all rose and filed silently towards the door, our exit covered by the concluding strains of the anthem. As soon as we were outside Jervis presented me to his colleague, and suggested an immediate adjournment to some place of refreshment. I proposed that they should come and have tea with me, but Jervis replied: "I'm afraid we haven't time today. There is a very comfortable teashop close to the Jasperian gate-house. You had better come there and then perhaps you can walk to the station with us."

We adopted this plan, and when we had established ourselves on a settle by the window of the ancient, low-ceiled room and given our orders to a young lady in a becoming brown costume, Jervis proceeded to interrogate.

"And what might you be doing in Rochester, Strangeways?"

"Nominally," I replied, "I am engaged in medical practice. Actually, I am a gentleman at large. I have taken a death vacancy here, and I arrived yesterday morning."

"Any patients?" he inquired.

"Two at present," I answered. "One I brought down with me and returned empty this morning. The other is his wife."

"Ha," said Jervis, "a concise statement, but obscure. It seems to require amplification."

I accordingly proceeded to amplify, describing in detail my journey from town and my subsequent dealings with my fellow-traveller. The circumstances of Mrs. Frood, being matters of professional confidence, I was at first disposed to suppress; but then, reflecting that my two friends were in a position to give expert opinions and advice, I put them in possession of all the facts that were known to me, excepting the Regent's Park incident, which I felt hardly at liberty to disclose.

"Well," said Jervis, when I had finished, "if the rest of your practice develops on similar lines, we shall have to set up a branch establishment in your neighbourhood. There are all sorts of possibilities in this case. Don't you think so, Thorndyke?"

"I should hardly say 'all sorts,'" was the reply. "The possibilities seem to me to be principally of one sort; extremely disagreeable for the poor lady. She has the alternatives of allowing herself to be associated with this man—which seems to be impossible—or of spending the remainder of her life in a perpetual effort to escape from him; which is an appalling prospect for a young woman."

"Yes," agreed Jervis, "it is bad enough. But there seems to me worse possibilities with a fellow of this kind; a drinking, drug-swallowing, hysterical degenerate. You never know what a man of that type will do."

"You always hope that he will commit suicide," said Thorndyke; "and to do him justice, he does fairly often show that much perception of his proper place in nature. But, as you say, the actions of a mentally and morally abnormal man are incalculable. He may kill himself or he may kill somebody else, or he may join with other abnormals to commit incomprehensible and apparently motiveless political crimes. But we will hope that Mr. Frood will limit his activities to sponging on his wife."

The conversation now turned from my affairs to those of my friends, and I ventured to inquire what had brought them to Rochester.

"We came down," said Jervis, "to watch an inquest for one of our insurance clients. But after all it has had to be adjourned for a fortnight. So we may have the pleasure of seeing you again."

"We won't leave it to chance," said I. "Let us settle that you come to lunch with me, if that will be convenient. You can fix your own time."

My two friends consulted, and, having referred to their time-table, accepted the invitation for one o'clock on that day fortnight; and when I had "booked the appointment," we finished our tea and sallied forth, making our way over the bridge to Strood Station, at the main entrance to which I wished them adieu.

As I turned away from the station and sauntered slowly along the shore before recrossing the bridge, I recalled the conversation of my two colleagues with a certain vague discomfort. To both of them, it was evident, the relations of my fair patient and her husband presented sinister possibilities, although I had not informed them of the actual murderous attack; and though the more cautious reticent Thorndyke had seemed to minimize them, his remarks had expressed what was already in my own mind, accentuated by what I knew. These nervy, abnormal men are never safe to deal with. Their unstable emotions may be upset in a moment and then no one can tell what will happen. It was quite possible that Frood had come to Rochester with the perfectly peaceable intention of inducing his wife to return to him. But this was far from certain, and I shuddered to think of what might follow a refusal on her part. I did not like that knife. I have a sane man's dislike of lethal weapons of all kinds; but especially do I dislike them in the hands of those whose self-control is liable to break down suddenly.

It was true that this man had not succeeded in finding his wife, and even seemed to have given up the search. But I felt pretty certain that he had not. Somehow, he had discovered that she was in the town, and from the same source he might get further information; and, in any case, I felt no doubt that he would renew the pursuit, and that, in the end, he would find her. And then—but at this point I found myself opposite the house and observed Mrs. Gillow standing on the doorstep, fumbling in her pocket for the latch-key. She had just extracted it, and was in the act of inserting it into the latch when I crossed the road and made my presence known. She greeted me with a wan smile as I ascended the steps, and, having by this time got the door open, admitted me to the hall.

"I gave Mrs. Frood your message at lunch-time, sir," said she, in a depressed tone, "and I believe she has come in." Here, having closed the street door, she rapped softly with her knuckles at that of the front room, whereupon the voice to which Bundy objected so much called out: "Come in, Mrs. Gillow."

The latter threw the door open. "It is the doctor, Madam," said she; and on this announcement, I walked in.

"I didn't hear you knock," said Mrs. Frood, rising, and holding out her hand.

"I didn't knock," I replied. "I sneaked in under cover of Mrs. Gillow."

"That was very secret and cautious of you," said she.

"You make me feel like a sort of feminine Prince Charlie, lying perdu in the robbers' cavern; whereas, I have actually been taking my walks abroad and brazenly looking in the shop windows. But I have kept a sharp lookout, all the same."

"There really wasn't any need," said I. "The siege is raised.

"You don't mean that my husband has gone?" she exclaimed.

"I do, indeed," I answered; and I gave her a brief account of the events of the morning, suppressing my unofficial part in the transaction.

"Do you think," she asked, "that the matron paid his fare out of her own pocket?"

"I am sure she didn't," I answered hastily. "She touched some local altruist for the amount; it was only a few shillings, you know."

"Still," she said, "I feel that I ought to refund those few shillings. They were really expended for my benefit."

"Well, you can't," I said with some emphasis. "You couldn't do it without disclosing your identity, and then you would have some philanthropist trying to effect a reconciliation. Your cue is to keep yourself to yourself for the present."

"For the present!" she echoed. "It seems to me that I have got to be a fugitive for the rest of my natural life. It is a horrible position, to have to live in a state of perpetual concealment, like a criminal, and never dare to make an acquaintance."

"Don't you know anyone in Rochester?" I asked.

"Not a soul," she replied, "excepting Mr. Japp, who is a relative by marriage—he was my aunt's brother-in-law—his partner, and Mrs. Gillow and you. And you all know my position."

"Does Mrs. Gillow know the state of affairs?" I asked in some surprise.

"Yes," she answered, "I thought it best to tell her, in confidence, so that she should understand that I want to live a quiet life."

"I suppose you haven't cut yourself off completely from all your friends?" said I.

"Very nearly. I haven't many friends that I really care about much, but I keep in touch with one or two of my old comrades. But I have had to swear them to secrecy—though it looks as if the secret had leaked out in some way. Of course they all know Nicholas—my husband."

"And I suppose you have been able to learn from them how your husband views the separation?"

"Yes. Of course he thinks I have treated him abominably, and he evidently suspects that I have some motive for leaving him other than mere dislike of his unpleasant habits. The usual motive, in fact."

"What Sam Weller would call a 'priory attachment'?" I suggested.

"Yes. He is a jealous and suspicious man by nature. I had quite a lot of trouble with him in that way before that final outbreak, though I have always been most circumspect in my relations with other men. Still, a woman doesn't complain of a little jealousy. Within reason, it is a natural, masculine failing."

"I should consider a tendency to use a knitted silk necktie for purposes which I need not specify as going rather beyond ordinary masculine failings," I remarked drily; on which she laughed and admitted that perhaps it was so. There was a short pause; then, turning to a fresh subject, she asked: "Do you think you will get any of Dr. Partridge's practice?"

"I suspect not, or at any rate very little; and that reminds me that I have not yet inquired as to my patient's condition. Are you any better?"

As I asked the question, I looked at her attentively, and noted that she was still rather pale and haggard, so far as I could judge by the subdued light of the shaded lamp, and that the darkness under the eyes remained undiminished.

"I am afraid I am not doing you much credit," she replied, with a faint smile. "But you can't expect any improvement while these unsettled conditions exist. If you could induce my respected husband to elope with another woman you would effect an immediate cure."

"I am afraid," said I, "that is beyond my powers, to say nothing of the inhumanity to the other woman. But we must persevere. You must let me look in on you from time to time, just to keep an eye on you."

"I hope you will," she replied, energetically. "If it doesn't weary you to listen to my complaints and gossip a little, please keep me on your visiting list. With the exception of Mr. Japp, you are the only human creature that I hold converse with. Mrs. Gillow is a dear, good creature, but instinct warns me not to get on conversational terms with her. She's rather lonely, too."

"Yes; you might find it difficult to turn the tap off. I am always very cautious with housekeepers and landladies."

She darted a mischievous glance at me. "Even if your landlady happens to be your patient?" she asked.

I chuckled as I remembered our dual relationship.

"That," said I "is an exceptional case. The landlady becomes merged in the patient, and the patient tends to become a friend."

"The doctor," she retorted, "tends very strongly to become a friend, and a very kind and helpful friend. I think you have been exceedingly good to me—a mere waif who has drifted across your horizon."

"Well," I said, "if you think so, far be it from me to contradict you. One may as well pick up gratefully a stray crumb of commendation that one doesn't deserve to set off against the deserved credit that one doesn't get. But I should like to think that all my good deeds in the future will be as agreeable in the doing."

She gave me a prim little smile. "We are getting monstrously polite," she remarked, upon which we both laughed.

"However," said I, "the moral of it all is that you ought to have a friendly medical eye kept on you, and, as mine is the eye that happens to be available, and as you are kind enough to accept the optical supervision, I shall give myself the pleasure of looking in on you from time to time to see how you are and to hear how the world wags. What is the best time to find you at home'"

"I am nearly always at home after seven o'clock, but perhaps that is not very convenient for you. I don't know how you manage your practice."

"The fact is," said I, "that at present you are my practice, so I shall adapt my visiting round to your circumstances, and make my call at, or after, seven. I suppose you get some exercise?"

"Oh, yes. Quite a lot. I walk out in the country, and wander about Chatham and Gillingham and out to Frindsbury. I have been along the Watling Street as far as Cobham. Rochester itself I rather avoid for fear of making acquaintances, though it is a pleasant old town in spite of the improvements."

As she spoke of these solitary rambles the idea floated into my mind that, later on, I might perchance offer to diminish their solitude. But I quickly dismissed it. Her position was, in any case, one of some delicacy—that of a young woman living apart from her husband. It would be an act the very reverse of friendly to compromise her in any way; nor would it tend at all to my own professional credit. A doctor's reputation is nearly as tender as a woman's.

Our conversation had occupied nearly three quarters of an hour, and, although I would willingly have lingered, it appeared to me that I had made as long a visit as was permissible. I accordingly rose, and, having given a few words of somewhat perfunctory professional advice, shook hands with my patient and let myself out.

CHAPTER VI—THE SHADOWS DEEPEN

The coming events, whose premonitory shadows had been falling upon me unnoted since I came to Rochester, were daily drawing nearer. Perhaps it may have been that the deepening shadows began dimly to make themselves felt; that some indistinct sense of instability and insecurity had begun to steal into my consciousness. It may have been so. But, nevertheless, looking back, I can see that when the catastrophe burst upon me it found me all unsuspicious and unprepared.

Nearly a fortnight had passed since my meeting with my two friends in the Cathedral, and I was looking forward with some eagerness to their impending visit. During that fortnight little seemed to have happened, though the trivial daily occurrences were beginning to acquire a cumulative significance not entirely unperceived by me. My promise to Mrs. Frood had been carried out very thoroughly: for at least every alternate evening had found me seated by the little table with the red-shaded lamp, making the best pretence I could of being there in a professional capacity.

It was unquestionably indiscreet. The instant liking that I had taken to this woman should have warned me that here was one of those unaccountable "affinities" that are charged with such immense potentialities of blessing or disaster. The first impression should have made it clear to me that I could not safely spend much time in her society. But unfortunately the very circumstance that should have warned me to keep away was the magnet that drew me to her side.

However, there was one consoling fact: if the indiscretion was mine, so by me alone were the consequences supported. Our relations were of the most unexceptionable kind; indeed, she was not the sort of woman with whom any man would have taken a liberty. As to my feelings towards her, I could not pretend to deceive myself, but similarly, I had no delusions as to her feelings towards me. She welcomed my visits with that frank simplicity that is delightful to a friend and hopeless to a lover. It was plain to me that the bare possibility of anything beyond straightforward, honest friendship never entered her head. But this very innocence and purity, while at once a rebuke and a reassurance, but riveted my fetters the more firmly.

Such as our friendship was (and disregarding the secret reservation on my side), it grew apace; indeed, it sprang into existence at our first meeting. There was between us that ease and absence of reserve that distinguishes the intercourse of those who like and understand one another. I never had any fear of unwittingly giving offence. In our long talks and discussions, we had no need of choosing our words or phrases or of making allowances for possible prejudices. We could say plainly what we meant with the perfect assurance that it would be neither misunderstood nor resented. In short, if my feelings towards her could only have been kept at the same level as hers towards me, our friendship would have been perfect.

In the course of these long and pleasant gossiping visits, I observed my patient somewhat closely, and, quite apart from the personal affinity, I became more and more favourably impressed. She was a clever woman, quick and alert in mind, and evidently well informed. She seemed to be kindly, and was certainly amiable and even-tempered, though not in the least weak or deficient in character. Probably, in happier circumstances, she would have been more gay and vivacious, for, though she was habitually rather grave and even sombre, there were occasional flashes of wit that suggested a naturally lively temperament.

As to her appearance—to repeat in more detail what I have already said—she was a rather large woman, very erect and somewhat stately in bearing; distinctly good-looking (though of this I was not, perhaps, a very good judge). Her features were regular, but not in any way striking. Her expression was, as I have said, a little sombre and severe, the mouth firmly set and slightly depressed at the corners, the eyebrows black, straight, and unusually well-marked and nearly meeting above the nose. She had an abundance of black, or nearly black, hair, parted low on the forehead and drawn back loosely, covering the ears and temples, and she wore a largish coil nearly on the top of the head; a formal, matronly style that accentuated the gravity of her expression.

Such was Angelina Frood as I looked on her in those never-to-be-forgotten evenings; as she rises before the eyes of memory as I write, and as she will remain in my recollection so long as I live.

In this fortnight one really arresting incident had occurred. It was just a week after my meeting with Dr. Thorndyke, when, returning from a walk along the London Road as far as Gad's Hill, I stopped on Rochester Bridge to watch a barge which had just passed under, and was rehoisting her lowered mast. As I was leaning on the parapet, a man brushed past me, and I turned my head idly to look at him. Then, in an instant, I started up; for though the man's back was towards me, there was something unmistakably familiar in the gaunt figure, the seedy clothes, the great cloth cap, the shock of mouse-coloured hair, and the thick oaken stick that he swung in his hand. But I was not going to leave myself in any doubt on the subject. Cautiously I began to retrace my steps, keeping

him in view but avoiding overtaking him, until he reached the western end of the bridge, when he halted and looked back. Then any possible doubt was set at rest. The man was Nicholas Frood. I don't know whether he saw me; he made no sign of recognition; and when he turned and walked on, I continued to follow, determined to make sure of his destination.

As I had hoped and expected, he took the road to the right, leading to the river bank and the station. Still following him, I noted that he walked at a fairly brisk pace and seemed to have recovered completely from his debility—if that debility had not been entirely counterfeit. Opposite the pier he turned into the station approach, and when from the corner I had watched him enter the station, I gave up the pursuit, assuming that he was returning to London.

But how long had he been in Rochester? What had he been doing, and what success had he had in his search? These were the questions that I asked myself as I walked back over the bridge. Probably he had come down for the day; and since he was returning, it was reasonable to infer that he had had no luck. As I entered the town and glanced up at the great clock that hangs out across the street from the Corn Exchange, like a sort of horological warming-pan, I saw that it was close upon eight. It was a good deal after my usual time for calling on Mrs. Frood, but the circumstances were exceptional and I felt that it was necessary to ascertain whether anything untoward had occurred. I was still debating what I should do when, as I came opposite the house, I saw Mrs. Gillow coming out of the door. Immediately I crossed the road and accosted her.

"Have you seen Mrs. Frood this evening, Mrs. Gillow?" I asked, after passing the usual compliments.

"Yes, sir," was the reply. "I left her only a few minutes ago working at one of the drawings that she does for Mr. Japp. She seems better this evening—brighter and more cheerful. I think your visits have done her good, sir. It is a lonely life for a young woman—having no one to talk to all through the long evenings. I'm always glad to hear your knock, and so, I think, is she."

"I'm pleased to hear you say so, Mrs. Gillow," said I. "However, as it is rather late, and she has something to occupy her, I don't think I will call this evening."

With this I took my leave and went on my way in better spirits. Evidently all was well so far. Nevertheless, the reappearance of this man was an uncomfortable incident. It was clear that he had not given up the pursuit, and, seeing that Rochester was only some thirty miles from London, it would be quite easy for him to make periodical descents on the place to continue the search. There was no denying that Mrs. Frood's position was extremely insecure, and I could think of no plan for making it less so, excepting that of leaving Rochester, for a time at least, a solution which ought to have commended itself to me, but did not.

Perhaps it was this fact that decided me not to say anything about the incident. The obvious thing was to have told her and put her on her guard. But I persuaded myself that it would only make her anxious to no purpose; that she could not prevent him from coming nor could she take any further measures for concealment. And then there was the possibility that he might never come again.

So far as I know, he never did. During the rest of the week I perambulated the town hour after hour, looking into the shops, scanning the faces of the wayfarers in the streets and even visiting the stations at the times when the London trains were due; but never a glimpse did I catch of that ill-omened figure.

And all the time, the shadows were deepening, and that which cast them was drawing nearer.

It was nearly a week after my meeting with Nicholas Frood that an event befell at which I looked askance at the time and which was, as it turned out, the opening scene of a new act. It was on the Saturday. I am able to fix the date by an incident, trivial enough in itself, but important by reason of its forming thus a definite point of departure. My visitors were due on the following Monday, and it had occurred to me that I had better lay in a little stock of wine; and as Mr. Japp was an old resident who knew everybody in the town, I decided to consult him as to the choice of a wine merchant.

It was a little past mid-day when I arrived at the office, and as I entered I observed that some kind of conference was in progress. A man, whom I recognized as the foreman of the gang who were working on the old wall, was standing sheepishly with his knuckles resting on the table; Bundy had swung round on his stool and was glaring owlishly through his great spectacles, while Mr. Japp was sitting bolt upright, his forehead in a state of extreme corrugation and his eyes fixed severely on the foreman.

"I suppose," said Bundy, "you left it in the gate?"

"I expect Evans did," replied the foreman. "You see, I had to call in at the office, so I gave the key to Evans and told him to go on with the other men and let them in. When I got there the gate was open and the men were at work, and I forgot all about the key until it was time to come away and lock up. Then I asked Evans for it, and he said he'd left it in the gate. But when I went to look for it it wasn't there. Someone must have took it out."

"Doesn't seem very likely," said Bundy. "However, I suppose it will turn up. It had one of our wooden labels tied to it. Shall I give him the duplicate to lock up the place?"

"You must, I suppose," said Japp; "but it must be brought straight back and given to me. You understand, Smith? Bring it back at once, and deliver it to me or to Mr. Bundy. And look here, Smith. I shall offer ten shillings reward for that key; and if it is brought back and I have to pay the reward you will have to make it up among you. You understand that?"

Smith indicated grumpily that he understood; and when Bundy had handed him the duplicate key, he took his departure in dudgeon.

When he had gone I stated my business, and Bundy pricked up his ears.

"Wine, hey?" said he, removing his spectacles and assuming his eyeglass. "Tucker will be the man for him, won't he, Japp? Very superior wine merchant is Tucker. Old and crusted; round and soft; rare and curious. I'd better pop round with him and introduce him, hadn't I? You'll want to taste a few samples, I presume, Doctor?"

"I'm not giving a wholesale order," said I, smiling at his enthusiasm. "A dozen or so of claret and one or two bottles of port is all I want."

"Still," said Bundy, "you want to know what the stuff's like. Not going to buy a pig in a poke. You'll have to taste it, of course. I'll help you. Two heads are better than one. Come on. You said Tucker, didn't you, Japp?"

"As a matter of fact," said Japp, wrinkling his face up into an appreciative smile, "I didn't say anything. But Tucker will do; only he won't let you taste anything until you have bought it."

"Won't he!" said Bundy. "We shall see. Come along, Doctor."

He dragged me out of the office and down the steps, and we set forth towards the bridge; but we had not walked more than a couple of hundred yards when he suddenly shot up a narrow alley and beckoned to me mysteriously. I followed him up the alley, and as he halted I asked:

"What have you come here for?"

"I want you," he replied impressively, "to take a look at this wall."

I scrutinized the wall with minute attention but failed to discover any noteworthy peculiarities in it.

"Well," I said, at length, "I don't see anything unusual about this wall."

"Neither do I," he replied, looking furtively down the alley.

"Then, what the deuce—" I began.

"It's all right," said he. "She's gone. That damsel in the pink hat. I just popped up here to let her pass. The fact is," he explained, as he emerged cautiously into the High Street, glancing up and down like an Indian on the war-path, "these women are the plague of my life; always trying to hook me for teas or bazaars or garden fetes or some sort of confounded foolishness; and that pink-hatted lady is a regular sleuth-hound."

We walked quickly along the narrow pavement, Bundy looking about him warily, until we reached the wine-merchant's premises, into which my companion dived like a harlequin and forthwith proceeded to introduce me and my requirements. Mr. Tucker was a small, elderly man; old and crusted and as dry as his own Amontillado; but he was not proof against Bundy's blandishments. Before I had had time to utter a protest, I found myself in a dark cavern at the rear of the shop, watching Mr. Tucker fill a couple of glasses from a mouldy-looking cask.

"Ha!" said Bundy, sipping the wine with a judicial air. "H'm. Yes. Not so bad. Slightly corked, perhaps."

"Corked!" exclaimed Tucker, staring at Bundy in amazement. "How can it be corked when it is just out of the cask?"

"Well, bunged, then," Bundy corrected.

"I never heard of wine being bunged," said Tucker. "There's no such thing."

"Isn't there? Well, then, it can't be. Must be my fancy. What do you think of it, Doctor?"

"It seems quite a sound claret," said I, inwardly wishing my volatile friend at the devil, for I felt compelled, by way of soothing the wine merchant's wounded feelings, to order twice the quantity that I had intended. We had just completed the transaction, and were crossing the outer shop when the doorway became occluded by two female figures, and Bundy uttered a half-suppressed groan. I drew aside to make way for the newcomers—two ladies whom polite persons would have described as middle-aged, on the assumption that they contemplated a somewhat extreme degree of longevity—and I was aware that Bundy was endeavouring to take cover behind me. But it was of no use. One of them espied him instantly and announced her discovery with a little squeak of ecstasy.

"Why, it's Mr. Bundy. I do declare! Now, where *have* you been all this long time? It's ages and ages and ages since you came to see us, isn't it, Martha? Let me see, now, when was it?" She fixed a reflective eye on her companion, while Bundy smiled a sickly smile and glanced wistfully at the open door.

"I know," she exclaimed, triumphantly. "It was when we had the feeble-minded children to tea, and Mr. Blote showed them the gold fish trick—at least he tried to, but the glass bowl stuck in the bag under his coat-tails and wouldn't come out; and when he tried to pull it out it broke—"

"I think you are mistaken, Marian," the other lady interrupted. "It wasn't the feeble-minded tea. It was after that, when we helped the Jewbury-Browns to get up that rumble sale—"

"Jumble sale, you mean, dear," her companion corrected.

"I mean rummage sale," the lady called Martha insisted, severely. "If you will try to recall the circumstances, you will remember that the jumble sale took place after—"

"Not after," the other lady corrected. "It was before—several days before, I should say, speaking from a somewhat imperfect memory. If you will try to recollect, Martha, dear—"

"I recollect quite distinctly," the lady called Martha interposed, a little haughtily. "There was the feeble-minded tea—that was on a Tuesday—or was it a Thursday—no, it was a Tuesday, or at least—well, at any rate, it was some days before the jum—rum—"

"Not at all," the other lady dissented emphatically. At this point, catching the eye of the lady called Marian, I crept by slow degrees out on the threshold and turned an expectant eye on Bundy. The rather broad hint took immediate effect, for the lady said to her companion: "I am afraid, Martha, dear, you are detaining Mr. Bundy and his friend. *Good-bye*, Mr. Bundy. Shall we see you next Friday evening? We are giving a little entertainment to the barge-boys. We are inviting them to come and bring their mouth-organs and get up a little informal concert. *Do* come if you can. We shall be *so* delighted. *Good-bye*."

Bundy shook hands effusively with the two ladies and darted out after me, seizing my arm and hurrying me along the pavement.

"Bit of luck for me, Doctor, having you with me. If I had been alone and unprotected I shouldn't have escaped for half-an-hour; and I should have been definitely booked for the barge-boys' pandemonium. Hallo! What's Japp up to? Oh, I see. He's sticking up the notice about that key. I ought to have done that. Japp writes a shocking fist. I must see if it is possible to make it out."

As we approached the office I glanced at the sheet of paper which Mr. Japp had just affixed to the window, and was able to read the rather crabbed heading, "Ten Shillings Reward." The rest of the inscription being of no interest to me, I wished Bundy adieu and went on my way, leaving him engaged in a critical inspection of the notice. Happening to look back a few moments later, I saw him still gazing earnestly at the paper, all unconscious of a lady in a pink hat who was tripping lightly across the road and bearing down on him with an alluring smile.

Threading my way among the foot-passengers who filled the narrow pavements, I let my thoughts ramble idly from subject to subject; from the expected visit of my two friends on the following Monday to the alarming character of the local feminine population. But always they tended to come back to my patient, Mrs. Frood. I had seen her on the preceding night and had been very ill-satisfied with her appearance. She had been paler than usual—more heavy-eyed and weary-

looking; and she had impressed me as being decidedly low-spirited. It seemed as though the continual uncertainty and unrest, the abiding threat of some intolerable action on the part of her worthless husband, were becoming more than she could endure; and unwillingly I was beginning to recognize that it was my duty, both as her doctor and as her friend, to advise her to move, at least for a time, to some locality where she would be free from the constant fear of molestation.

The question was: when should I broach the subject?

And that involved the further question: when should I make my next visit? Inclination suggested the present evening, but discretion hinted that I ought to allow a decent interval between my calls; and thus oscillating between the two, I found myself in a state of indecision which lasted for the rest of the day. Eventually discretion conquered, and I decided to postpone the visit and the proposal until the following evening.

The decision was reached about the time I should have been setting forth to make the visit, and no sooner had that time definitely passed than I began to regret my resolution and to be possessed by a causeless anxiety. Restlessly I wandered from room to room; taking up books, opening them and putting them down again, and generally displaying the typical symptoms of an acute attack of fidgets until Mrs. Dunk proceeded with a determined air to lay the supper, and drew my attention to it with an emphasis which it was impossible to disregard.

I had just drawn the cork of a bottle of Mr. Tucker's claret when the door-bell rang, an event without precedent in my experience. Silently I replaced the newly-extracted cork and listened. Apparently it was a patient, for I heard the street door close and footsteps proceed to the consulting-room. A minute later Mrs. Dunk opened the dining-room door and announced:

"Mrs. Frood to see you, sir."

With a slight thrill of anxiety at this unexpected visit, I strode out, and, crossing the hall, entered the somewhat dingy and ill-lighted consulting-room. Mrs. Frood was seated in the patients' chair, but she rose as I entered and held out her hand; and as I grasped it, I noticed how tall she looked in her outdoor clothes. But I also noticed that she was looking even more pale and haggard than when I had seen her last.

"There is nothing the matter, I hope?" said I.

"No," she answered; "nothing much more than usual; but I have come to present a petition."

I looked at her inquiringly, and she continued:

"I have been sleeping very badly, as you know. Last night I had practically no sleep at all, and very little the night before; and I feel that I really can't face the prospect of another sleepless night. Would you think it very immoral if I were to ask you for something that would give me a few hours' rest?"

"Certainly not," I answered, though with no great enthusiasm, for I am disposed to take hypnotics somewhat seriously. "You can't go on without sleep. I will give you one or two tablets to take before you go to bed. They will secure you a decent night's rest, and then I hope you will feel a little brighter."

"I hope so," she said, with a weary sigh.

I looked at her critically. She was, as I have said, pale and haggard; but there seemed to be something more; a certain wildness in her eyes and a suggestion or fear.

"You are not looking yourself at all to-night," I said. "What is it?"

"I don't know," she answered. "The same old thing, I suppose. But I do feel rather miserable. I seem to have come to the end of my' endurance. I look into the future and it all seems dark. I am afraid of it. In fact, I seem to have—you'll think me very silly, I know—but I have a sort of presentiment of evil. Of course, it's all nonsense. But that is what I feel."

"Is there any reason for this presentiment?" I asked uneasily; for my thoughts flew at once to that ill-omened figure that I had seen on the bridge. "Has anything happened to occasion these forebodings?"

"Oh, nothing in particular," she replied. But she spoke without looking at me—an unusual thing for her to do—and I found in her answer something ambiguous and rather evasive. Could it be that she had seen her husband on that day when I had followed him? Or had he been in the town again-this very day, perhaps? Or was there something yet more significant, something even more menacing? That this deep depression of spirits, these forebodings, were not without some exciting cause I felt the strongest suspicion. But whatever the cause might be, she was evidently unwilling to speak about it.

While I was speculating thus, I found myself looking her over with a minute attention of which I was not conscious at the time; noting little trivial details of her appearance and belongings with an odd exactness of observation. My eyes travelled over the little hand-bag, stamped with her initials, that rested on her lap; her dainty, high-heeled shoes with their little oval buckles of darkened bronze; the small brooch at her throat with the large opal in the middle and the surrounding circle of little pearls, and even noted that one of the pearls was missing and that the vacant place corresponded to the figure three on a clock-dial. And then they would come back to her face; to the set mouth and the downcast eyes with their expression of gloomy reverie.

I was profoundly uneasy and was on the point of opening the subject of her leaving the town. Then I decided that I would see her on the morrow and would go into the matter then. Accordingly I went into the surgery and put a few tablets of sulphonal into a little box, and having stuck one of Dr. Partridge's labels on it, wrote the directions and then wrapped it up and sealed it.

"There," I said, giving it to her, "take a couple of those tablets and go to bed early, and let me find you looking a little more cheerful to-morrow."

She took the packet and dropped it into her bag. "It is very good of you," she said warmly. "I know you don't like doing it, and that makes it the more kind. But I will do as you tell me. I have just to go in to Chatham, but when I get back I will go to bed quite early."

I walked with her to the door, and when I had opened it she stopped and held out her hand. "Good night," she said, "and thank you so very much. I expect you will find me a great deal better to-morrow." She pressed my hand slightly, made me a little bow, smiled, and, turning away, passed out; and I now noticed that the haze which had hung over the town all the afternoon had thickened into a definite fog. I stepped out on to the threshold and watched her as she walked quickly down the street, following the erect, dignified figure wistfully with my eyes as it grew more and more shadowy and unsubstantial until it faded into the fog and vanished. Then I went in to my solitary supper, with an unwonted sense of loneliness; and throughout the long evening I turned over again

and again our unsatisfying talk and wondered afresh whether that presentiment of evil was but the product of insomnia and mental fatigue, or whether behind it was some sinister reality.

CHAPTER VII—MRS. GILLOW SOUNDS THE ALARM

Nine o'clock on the following morning found me still seated at the breakfast table, with the debris of the meal before me and the Sunday paper propped up against the coffee-pot. It was a pleasant, sunny morning at the end of April. The birds were twittering joyously in the trees at the back of the house, a premature bluebottle perambulated the window-pane, after an unsuccessful attempt to crawl under the dish-cover, and somewhere in the town an optimistic bell-ringer was endeavouring to lure unwary loiterers out of the sunshine into the shadow of the sanctuary.

It was all very agreeable and soothing. The birds were delightful in the exuberance of their spirits; even the bluebottle was a harbinger of summer; and the solo of the bellringer, softened by distance, impinged gently on the appreciative ear, awakening a grateful sense of immunity. The sunshine and the placid sounds were favourable to reflection, which the Sunday paper was powerless to disturb. As my eye roamed inattentively down the inconsequent column of printers' errors, my mind flitted, beelike, from topic to topic; from my vague professional prospects to the visitors whom I was expecting on the morrow and from them to the rather disturbing incident of the previous evening. But here my thoughts had a tendency to stick; and I was just considering whether the proprieties admitted of my making a morning call on Mrs. Frood, with a view to clearing up the obscurity, when the street-door bell rang. The unusual sound at such an unlikely time caused me to sit up and listen with just a tinge of uneasy expectancy. A few moments later Mrs. Dunk opened the door, and having stated concisely and impassively, "Mrs. Gillow," retired, leaving the door ajar. I started up in something approaching alarm, and hurried across to the consulting-room, where I found Mrs. Gillow standing by the chair with anxiety writ large on her melancholy face.

"There's nothing amiss, I hope, Mrs. Gillow?" said I.

"I am sorry to say there is, sir," she replied. "I hope you'll excuse me for disturbing you on a Sunday morning, but I thought, as you were her doctor, and a friend, too, and I may say—"

"But what has happened?" I interrupted impatiently.

"Why, sir, the fact is that she went out last night and she hasn't come back."

"You are quite sure she hasn't come back?"

"Perfectly. I saw her just before she went out, and she said she was coming to see you, to get something to make her sleep, and then she was just going into Chatham, and that she would be back soon, so that she could go to bed early. I sat up quite late listening for her, and before I went to bed I went down and knocked at both her doors, and as I didn't get any answer, I looked into both rooms. But she wasn't in either, and her little supper was untouched on the table in the sitting-room. I couldn't sleep a wink all night for worrying about her, and the first thing this morning I went down, and, when I found the door unbolted and unchained, I went into her rooms again. But there was no sign of her. Her supper was still there, untouched, and her bed had not been slept in."

"Did you look downstairs?" I asked.

"Yes. She usually kept the door of the basement stairs locked, I think, but it was unlocked this morning, so I went down and searched all over the basement; but she wasn't there."

"It is very extraordinary, Mrs. Gillow," I said, "and rather alarming. I certainly understood that she was going home as soon as she had been to Chatham. By the way, do you know what she was going to Chatham for?"

"I don't, sir. She might have been going there to do some shopping, but it was rather late, though it was Saturday night."

"You don't know, I suppose, whether she took any things with her—though she couldn't have taken much, as she had only a little handbag with her when she came here."

"She hasn't taken any of her toilet things," said Mrs. Gillow, "because I looked over her dressing-table, and all her brushes and things were there; and, as you say, she couldn't have taken much in that little bag. What do you think we had better do, sir?"

"I think," said I, "that, in the first place, I will go and see Mr. Japp. He is a relative and knows more about her than we do, and, of course, it will be for him to take any measures that may seem necessary. At any rate, I will see him and hear what he says."

"Don't you think we ought to let the police know?" she asked.

"Well, Mrs. Gillow," I said, "we mustn't be too hasty. Mrs. Frood had reasons for avoiding publicity. Perhaps we had better not busy ourselves too much until we are quite certain that she has gone. She may possibly return in the course of the day."

"I am sure I hope so," she replied despondently. "But I am very much afraid she won't. I have a presentiment that something dreadful has happened to her."

"Why do you say that?" I asked. "Have you any reason for thinking so?"

"I have no actual reason," she answered, "but I have always thought that there was something behind her fear of meeting her husband."

Having no desire to discuss speculative opinions, I made no direct reply to this. Apparently Mrs. Gillow had no more to tell, and as I was anxious to see Mr. Japp and hear if he could throw any light on the mystery, I adjourned the discussion on which she would have embarked and piloted her persuasively towards the door. "I shall see you again later, Mrs. Gillow," I said, "and will let you know if I hear anything. Meanwhile, I think you had better not speak of the matter to anybody."

As soon as she was gone I made rapid preparations to go forth on my errand, and a couple of minutes later was speeding down the street at a pace dictated rather by the agitation of my mind than by any urgency of purpose. Although, by an effort of will, I had preserved a quiet, matter-of-fact demeanour while I was talking to Mrs. Gillow, her alarming news had fallen on me like a thunderbolt; and even now, as I strode forward swiftly, my thoughts seemed numbed by the suddenness of the catastrophe. That something terrible had happened I had little more doubt than had Mrs. Gillow, and a good deal more reason for my fears; for that last interview with the missing woman, looked back upon by the light of her unaccountable disappearance, now appeared full of dreadful suggestions. I had thought that she looked frightened, and she admitted to a presentiment of evil. Of whom or of what was she afraid? And what did she mean by a presentiment?

Reasonable people do not have gratuitous presentiments; and I recalled her evasive reply when I asked if she had any reasons for her foreboding of evil. Now, there was little doubt that she had; that the shadow of some impending danger had fallen on her and that she knew it.

As I approached the premises of Japp and Bundy, I was assailed by a sudden doubt as to whether Mr. Japp lived there; and this doubt increased when I had executed two loud knocks at the door without eliciting any response. I was just raising my hand to make a third attack when I became aware of Bundy's head rising above the curtain of the office window; and even in my agitation I could not but notice its extremely dishevelled state. His hair—usually "smarmed" back neatly from the forehead and brushed over the crown of his head—now hung down untidily over his face like a bunch of rat's tails, and the unusualness of his appearance was increased by the fact that he wore neither spectacles nor the indispensable eyeglass. The apparition, however, was visible but for a moment, for even as I glanced at him he made a sign to me to wait and forthwith vanished.

There followed an interval of about a minute, at the end of which the door opened and I entered, discovering Bundy behind it in a dressing-gown and pyjamas, but with his hair neatly brushed and his eye-glass duly adjusted.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Doc." said he. "Fact is, your knock woke me. The early bird catches the worm in his pyjamas."

"I apologize for disturbing your slumbers," said I, "but I wanted to see Japp. Isn't he in?"

"Japp doesn't live here," said Bundy, motioning to me to follow him upstairs. "He used to, but the house began to fill up with the business stuff and we had to make a drawing office and a store-room, so he moved off to a house on Boley Hill, and now I live here like Robinson Crusoe."

"Do you mean that you do your own cooking and housework?"

"Lord, no," he replied. "I get most of my meals at Japp's place. Prepare my own breakfast sometimes—I'm going to now: and I make tea for us both. Got a little gas-stove in the kitchen. And a charlady comes in every day to wash up and do my rooms. If you are not in a hurry, I'll walk round with you to Japp's house."

"I am in rather a hurry," said I; "at least—well, I don't know why I should be; but I am rather upset. The fact is, a very alarming thing has happened. I have just heard of it from Mrs. Gillow. It seems that Mrs. Frood went out last evening and has not come back."

Bundy whistled. "She's done a bolt," said he. "I wonder why. Do you think she can have run up against hubby in the town?"

"I don't believe for a moment that she has gone away voluntarily," said I. "She came to see me last night to get a sedative because she couldn't sleep, and she said that she was going home as soon as she had been to Chatham, and that she was going to take her medicine and go to bed early."

"That might have been a blind," suggested Bundy; "or she might have run up against her husband in Chatham."

I shook my head impatiently. "That is all nonsense, Bundy. A woman doesn't walk off into space in that fashion. Something has happened to her, I feel sure. I only hope it isn't something horrible; one doesn't dare to think of the possibilities that the circumstances suggest."

"No," said Bundy, "and it's better not to. Great mistake to let your imagination run away with you. Don't you worry, Doc. She'll probably turn up all right, or send Japp a line to say where she has gone to."

"Devil take it, Bundy!" I exclaimed irritably, "you are talking as if she were just a cat that had strayed away. If you don't care a hang what becomes of her, I do. I am extremely alarmed about her. How soon will you be ready?"

"I'll run and get on my things at once," he replied, with a sudden change of manner. "You must excuse me, old chap. I didn't realize that you were so upset. I'll be with you in a few minutes and then we will start. Japp will be able to give me some breakfast."

He bustled off—to the next room, as I gathered from the sound—and left me to work off my impatience by gazing out of the window and pacing restlessly up and down the barely-furnished sitting-room. But, impatient as I was, the rapidity with which he made his toilet surprised me, for in less than ten minutes he reappeared, spick and span, complete with hat, gloves, and stick, and announced that he was ready.

"I am not usually such a sluggard," he said, as we walked quickly along the street, "but yesterday evening I got a novel. I ought not to read novels. When I do, I am apt to make a single mouthful of it; and that is what I did last night. I started the book at nine and finished it at two this morning; and the result is that I am as sleepy as an owl even now."

In illustration of this statement he gave a prodigious yawn and then turned up the steep little thoroughfare, where be presently halted at the door of a small, old-fashioned house and rang the bell. The door was opened by a middle-aged servant, from whom he learned that Mr. Japp was at home, and to whom Bundy communicated his needs in the matter of breakfast. We found Mr. Japp seated by the dining-room window, studying a newspaper with the aid of a large pipe, and Bundy proceeded to introduce me and the occasion of my visit in a few crisp sentences.

Mr. Japp's reception of the news was very different from his partner's. Starting up from his chair and taking his pipe from his mouth, he gazed at me for some seconds in silent dismay.

"I suppose," he said at length, "there is no mistake. It is really certain that she did not come back last night?"

"I am afraid there is no doubt of the fact," I replied, and I gave him the details with which Mrs. Gillow had furnished me.

"Dear! dear!" he exclaimed. "I don't like the look of this at all. What the deuce can have happened to her?"

Here Bundy repeated the suggestion that he had made to me, but Japp shook his head. "She wouldn't have gone off without letting me or the doctor know. Why should she? We are friends, and she knew she could trust us. Besides, the thing isn't possible. A middle-class woman can't set out like a tramp without any luggage or common necessaries. There's only one possibility," he added after a pause. "She might have seen Nicholas prowling about and gone straight to the station and taken a train to London. One of her woman friends would have been able to put her up for the night."

"Or," suggested Bundy, "she might even have gone up to town with Nick himself if he met her and threatened to make a scene."

"Yes," said Japp doubtfully, "that is, I suppose, possible. But it isn't in the least likely. For that matter, nothing is likely. It is a most mysterious affair, and very disturbing, very disturbing, indeed."

"The question is," said I, "what is to be done? Do you think we ought to communicate with the police?"

"Well, no," he replied; "not immediately. If we don't hear anything, say to-morrow, I suppose we shall have to. But we had better not be precipitate. If we go to the police, we shall have to tell them everything. Let us give her time to communicate, in case she has had to make a sudden retirement—a clear forty-eight hours, as it is a week-end. But we had better make some cautious inquiries meanwhile. I suggest that we walk up to the hospital. They know me pretty well there, and I could just informally ascertain whether any accidents had been admitted, without giving any detailed reasons for the inquiry. Are you coming with us, Bundy?"

"Yes," replied Bundy, who, having been provided with a light breakfast, was despatching it with lightning speed; "I shall be ready by the time you have got your boots on."

A few minutes later we set forth together, and made our way straight to the hospital. Bundy and I waited outside while Japp went in to make his inquiries; and, as we walked up and down, my imagination busied itself in picturing the hideous possibilities suggested by a somewhat extensive experience of the casualty department of a general hospital. Presently Japp emerged, shaking his head.

"She is not there," said he. "There were no casualties of any kind admitted last night or since."

"Is there no other hospital?" I asked.

"None but the military hospital," he replied. "All the casualties from the district would be brought here. So we seem to be at the end of our resources, short of inquiring at the police-station; and even if that were advisable, it would be useless, for if—anything had happened—anything, I mean, that we hope has not happened—Mrs. Gillow would have heard. She will be sure to have had something about her by which she could have been identified."

"She had," said I. "The little box that I gave her had her name and my address on it."

"Then," said Japp. "I don't see that we can do anything more. We can only wait until to-morrow evening or Tuesday morning, and if we don't get any news of her by then, notify the police."

Unwillingly I had to admit that this was so; and when I had walked back with the partners to Mr. Japp's house, I left them and proceeded to report to Mrs. Gillow and to ascertain whether, in the meantime, she had received any tidings of her missing tenant.

It was with more of fear than hope that I plied the familiar knocker, but the eager, expectant face that greeted me when the door opened, while it relieved the one, banished the other. She had heard nothing, and when I had communicated my own unsatisfactory report she groaned and shook her head.

"You are quite sure," I said, after an interval of silence, "that she did not return from Chatham?"

"I don't see how she could have done," was the reply.

"You see, it was like this: I was going to see my sister at Frindsbury, and as I came down to the hall, Mrs. Frood opened her door and spoke to me. She had her hat on then, and she told me she was coming to you, and then going on to Chatham, but that she would be back pretty soon, and was going to bed early. I went out, leaving her at her room door, and took the tram to Frindsbury, and I got back home about a quarter to ten. Her sitting-room door was open, and I could see that she hadn't gone to bed, because her lamp was alight and her supper tray was on the table and hadn't been touched. I knocked at her bedroom door, but there was no answer, so I went upstairs and sat up listening for her, and before I went to bed I went down again, as I told you."

"What time was it when you went out?" I asked.

"About a quarter past eight. I told her I was going to Frindsbury, and that I should be home before ten, and I asked her not to bolt the door if she came in before me."

"Then," said I, "she must have gone out directly after you, because it was only a little after half-past eight when she called on me; and presumably she went straight on to Chatham. If we only knew what she was going there for we might be able to trace her. Did she know anybody at Chatham?"

"So far as I know," replied Mrs. Gillow, "she didn't know anybody here but you and Mr. Japp. I can't imagine what she could have been going to Chatham for."

After a little further talk, I took my leave and walked homeward in a very wretched frame of mind. Tormented as I was with a gnawing anxiety, inaction was intolerable. Yet there was nothing to be done; nothing but to wait in the feeble hope that the morning might bring some message of relief, and with a heavy foreboding that the tidings, when they came, would be evil tidings. But I found it impossible to wait passively at home. At intervals during the day I went forth to wander up and down the streets; and some impulse which I hardly dared to recognize directed my steps again and again to the wharves and foreshore that lie by the bend of the river between Rochester and Chatham.

On the following morning I betook myself as early as I decently could to the office of Japp and Bundy. No letter had arrived by the early post, nor, when I repeated my visit later, was there any news, either by post or telegram, or from Mrs. Gillow. I paid a furtive visit to the police-station and glanced nervously over the bills on the notice-board, and I made another perambulation of the waterside districts, which occupied me until it was time for me to repair to the station to meet the train by which my friends were expected to arrive, and did, in fact, arrive.

As we walked from the station to my house Jervis looked at me critically from time to time. After one of these inspections he remarked:

"I don't know whether it is my fancy, Strangeways, but it seems to me that the cares of medical practice are affecting your spirits. You look worried."

"I am worried," I replied. "There has been a very disturbing development of that case that I was telling you about."

"The doper, you mean?"

"His wife. She has disappeared. She went out on Saturday night and has not been seen since."

"That sounds rather ominous," said Jervis. "I presume the circumstances—if you know them—could be communicated without any breach of confidence."

"They will have to be made fully public if she doesn't turn up by this evening," I replied, "and I am only too glad of the chance to talk the matter over with you," and forthwith I proceeded to give a circumstantial account of the events connected with the disappearance, not omitting any detail that seemed to have the slightest bearing. And I now felt justified in relating my experience when I was acting for Dr. Pumphrey. The narrative was interrupted by our arrival at my house, but when we had taken our places at the table it was continued and listened to with intense interest by my two friends.

"Well," said Jervis, when I had finished, "it has an ugly look, especially when one considers it in connexion with that affair in London. But there is something to be said for your friend Bundy's suggestion. Don't you think so, Thorndyke?"

"Something, perhaps," Thorndyke agreed, "but not much; and if no letter arrives to-night or to-morrow morning, I should say it is excluded. This lady seems to have had complete confidence in Strangeways and in Mr. Japp. She could depend on their secrecy if she had to move suddenly to a fresh locality; and she seems to have been a responsible person who would not unnecessarily expose them to anxiety about her safety. Moreover, she would know that, if she kept them in the dark, they must unavoidably put the police on her track, which would be the last thing that she would wish."

"Can you make any suggestion as to what has probably happened?" I asked.

"It is not of much use to speculate," replied Thorndyke.

"If we exclude a voluntary disappearance, an accident or sudden illness, as we apparently can, there seems to remain only the possibility of crime. But to the theory of crime—of murder, to put it bluntly—there is a manifest objection. So far as the circumstances are known to us, a murder, if it had occurred, would have been an impromptu murder, committed in a more or less public place. But the first indication of a murder of that kind is usually—the discovery of the body. Here, however, thirty-six hours have elapsed, and no body has come to light. On the other hand, we have to bear in mind that there is a large, tidal river skirting the town. Into that river the missing lady might have fallen accidentally, or have been thrown, dead or alive. But it is not very profitable to speculate. We can neither form any opinion nor take any action until we have some further facts."

I must confess that, as I listened to Thorndyke thus calmly comparing the horrible possibilities, I experienced a dreadful sinking of the heart, but yet I realized that this passionless consideration of the essential evidence was more to the point, and promised more result than any amount of unskilful groping under the urge of emotion and personal feeling. And, realizing this, I formed the bold resolution of enlisting Thorndyke's aid in a regular, professional capacity, and began to cast about for the means of introducing the rather delicate subject. But while I was reflecting, the opportunity, was gone, at least for the present. Lunch had virtually come to an end, for Mrs. Dunk had silently and with iron visage just placed the port and the coffee on the table and retired, when, Jervis, who had observed her with evident interest, inquired: "Does that old Sphinx do the cooking, Strangeways?"

"She does everything," I answered. "I have suggested that she should get some help, but she just growled and ignored the suggestion."

"Well," said Jervis, "she doesn't give you much excuse for growling. She has turned out a lunch that would have done credit to Delmonico's. Are you coming to the inquest with us? We shall have to be starting in a few minutes."

"I may as well," said I. "Then I can bring you back to tea. And I want to make a proposal, which we can discuss as we go along. It is with regard to the case of Mrs. Frood."

As my two friends looked at me inquiringly but made no remark, I poured out the coffee and continued: "You see, Mrs. Frood was my patient, and, in a way, my friend; in fact, with the exception of Japp, I was the only friend she had in the place. Consequently I take it as my duty to ascertain what has happened to her, and, if she has come to any harm, to see that the wrongdoers are brought to account. Of course, I am not competent to investigate the case myself, but I am in the position to bear any costs that the investigation would entail."

"Lucky man," said Jervis. "And what is the proposal?"

"I was wondering," I replied, a little nervously, "whether I could prevail on you to undertake the case."

Jervis glanced at his senior, and the latter replied:

"It is just a little premature to speak of a 'case.' The missing lady may return or communicate with her friends. If she does not, the inquiry will fall into the hands of the police; and there is no reason to suppose that they will not be fully competent to deal with it. They have more means and facilities than we have. But if the inquiry should become necessary, and the police should be unsuccessful, Jervis and I would be prepared to render you any assistance that we could."

"On professional terms," I stipulated.

Thorndyke smiled. "The financial aspects of the case," said he, "can be considered when they arise. Now, I think, it is time for us to start."

As we walked down to the building where the inquest was to be held, we pursued the topic, and Thorndyke pointed out my position in the case.

"You notice, Strangeways," said he, "that you are the principal witness. You are the last person who saw Mrs. Frood before her disappearance, you heard her state her intended movements, you knew her circumstances, you saw and examined her husband, and you alone can give an exact description of her as she was at the time when she disappeared. I would suggest that, during the inquest, which will not interest you, you might usefully try to reconstitute that last interview and make full notes in writing of all that occurred with a very careful and detailed description of the person, clothing, and belongings of the missing lady. The police will want this information, and so shall I, if I am to give any consideration to the case."

On this suggestion I proceeded to act as soon as we had taken our places at the foot of the long table occupied by the coroner and the jury, detaching myself as well as I could from the matter of the inquest; and by the time that the deliberations were at an end and the verdict agreed upon, I had drafted out a complete set of notes and made two copies, one for the police and one for Thorndyke.

As soon as we were outside the court I presented the latter copy, which Thorndyke read through.

"This is *admirable*, Strangeways," said he, as he placed it in his note-case. "I must compliment you upon your powers of observation. The description of the missing lady is remarkably clear and exhaustive. And now I would suggest that you call in at Mr. Japp's office on our way back, and ascertain whether any letter has been received. If there has been no communication we shall have to regard the appearances as suspicious, and calling for investigation."

Secretly gratified at the interest which Thorndyke seemed to be developing in the mystery, I conducted my friends up the High-street until we reached the office, which I entered, leaving my colleagues outside. Mr. Japp looked up from a letter which he was writing, and Bundy, who had been peeping over the curtain, revolved on his stool and faced me.

"Any news?" I asked.

Japp shook his head gloomily. "Not a sign," said he.

"I shall wait until the first post is in to-morrow morning, and then, if there are no tidings of her, I shall go across to the police station. Perhaps you had better come with me, as you are able to give the particulars that they will want."

"Very well," I said, "I will look in at half-past nine"; and with this I was turning away when Bundy inquired: "Are those two toffs outside friends of yours?" and, on my replying in the affirmative, he continued: "They seem to be taking a deuce of an interest in Japp's proclamation. You might tell them that if they happen to have found that key, the money is quite safe. I will see that Japp pays up."

I promised to deliver the message, and, as Bundy craned up to make a further inspection of my colleagues, I departed to join the latter.

"There is no news up to the present," I said, "but Japp proposes to wait until to-morrow morning for a last chance before applying to the police."

"Was that Japp who was inspecting us through that preposterous pair of barnacles?" Jervis asked.

"No," I answered. "That was Bundy. He suspects you of having found that key and of holding on to it until you are sure of the reward."

"What key is it?" asked Jervis. "The key of the strong-room? They seem to be in a rare twitter about it."

"No; it is just a gate-key belonging to a piece of waste land where they are doing some repairs to the old city wall. And, by the way, thereby hangs a tale; a horrible and tragic tale of a convivial bargee, which ought to have a special interest for a pair of medical jurists"—and here I related to them the gruesome story that was told to Bundy and me by the old mortar-mixer.

They both chuckled appreciatively at the denouement, and Jervis remarked:

"It would seem that the late Bill was a rather inflammable gentleman. The yarn recalls the tragic end of Mr. Krook in 'Bleak House,' only that Krook went one better than Bill, for he managed to combust himself in an hour or two without any lime at all."

The story and the comment brought us to my house, which we had no sooner entered than Mrs. Dunk, who seemed to have been lying in wait for us, made her appearance with the tea; and while we were disposing of this refreshment Thorndyke reverted to the case of my missing patient.

"As I am to keep an eye on this ease," said he, "I shall want to be kept in touch with it. Of course, the actual investigation—if there has to be one—will need to be conducted on the spot, which is not possible to me. What I suggest is that you write out a detailed account of everything that is known to you in connexion with it. Don't select your facts. Put down everything in any way connected with the case and say all you know about the person concerned—Mrs. Frood herself and everybody who was acquainted with her. Send this statement to me and keep a copy. Then, if any new fact becomes known, let me have it and make a note of it for your own information. You are on the spot and I shall look to you for the data; and if I want any of them amplified or confirmed I shall communicate with you.

"There is one other matter. Do not confide to anyone that you have consulted me or that I am interested in the case; neither to Mr. Japp, to the police, nor to anybody else whatsoever; and I advise you to keep your own interest in the mystery to yourself as far as possible."

"What is the need of this secrecy?" I asked, in some surprise.

"The point is," replied Thorndyke, "that when you are investigating a crime you are playing against the criminal. But if the criminal is unknown to you, you are playing against an unseen adversary. If you are visible to him he can watch your moves and reply to them. Obviously your policy is to keep out of sight and make your moves unseen. And remember that as long as you do not know who the criminal is, you don't know who he is not. Anyone may be the criminal, or may be his unconscious agent or coadjutor. If you make confidences they may be innocently passed on to the guilty parties. So keep your own counsel rigorously. If there has been a crime, that crime has local connexions and probably a local origin. The solution of the mystery will probably be discovered here. And if you intend to take a hand in the solution let it be a lone hand; and keep me informed of everything that you do or observe; and for my part, I will give you all the help I can."

By the time we had finished our tea and our discussion the hour of my friends' departure was drawing nigh. I walked with them to the station, and when I bade them farewell I received a warm invitation to visit them at their chambers in the Temple; an invitation of which I determined to avail myself on the first favourable opportunity.

CHAPTER VIII—SERGEANT COBBLEDICK TAKES A HAND

Punctually at half-past nine on the following morning I presented myself at the office, and, if I had indulged in any hopes of favourable news—which I had not—they would have been dispelled by a glance at Mr. Japp's troubled face.

"I suppose you have heard nothing?" I said, when we had exchanged brief greetings.

He shook his head gloomily as he opened the cupboard and took out his hat.

"No," he answered, "and I am afraid we never shall."

He sighed heavily, and, putting on his hat, walked slowly to the door. "It is a dreadful affair," he continued, as we went out together. "How she would have hated the idea of it, poor girl! All the horrid publicity, the posters, the sensational newspaper paragraphs, the descriptions of her person

and belongings. And then, at the end of it all, God knows what horror may come to light. It won't bear thinking of."

He trudged along at my side with bent head and eyes cast down, and for the remainder of the short journey neither of us spoke. On reaching the police-station we made our way into a small, quiet office, the only tenant of which was a benevolent-looking, bald-headed sergeant, who was seated at a high desk, and, who presented that peculiar, decapitated aspect that appertains to a police officer minus his helmet. As we entered the sergeant laid down his pen and turned to us with a benign smile.

"Good morning, Mr. Japp," said he. "What can I have the pleasure of doing for you?"

"I am sorry to say, Sergeant," replied Japp, "that I have come here on very unpleasant business," and he proceeded to give the officer a concise summary of the facts, to which our friend listened with close attention. When it was finished, the sergeant produced a sheet of blue foolscap, and, having folded a wide margin on it, dipped his pen in the ink and began his examination.

"I'd better take the doctor's statement first," said he. "The lady's name is Angelina Frood, married, living apart from husband—I shall want his address presently—last seen alive by—"

"John Strangeways, M.D.," said I, "of Maidstone-road, Rochester."

The sergeant wrote this down, and continued: "Last seen at about 8.30 P.M. on Saturday, 26th April, proceeding towards Chatham, on unknown business. Can you give me a description of her?"

I described her person, assisted by Japp, and the sergeant, having committed the particulars to writing, read them out:

"'Age 28, height 5 ft. 7 in., complexion medium, hazel eyes, abundant dark brown hair, strongly marked black eyebrows, nearly meeting over nose.'"

"No special marks that you know of?"

"No."

"Now, doctor, can you tell us how she was dressed?"

"She was wearing a snuff-brown coat and skirt," I replied, "and a straw hat of the same colour with a broad, dull green band. The hat was fixed on by two hat-pins with silver heads shaped like poppy-capsules. The coat had six buttons, smallish, bronze buttons—about half an inch in diameter—with a Tudor rose embossed on each. Brown suede gloves with fasteners—no buttons—brown silk stockings, and brown suede shoes with small, oval bronze buckles. She had a narrow silk scarf, dull green, with three purple bands at each end—one broad band and two narrow—and knotted fringe at the ends. She wore a small circular brooch with a largish opal in the centre and a border of small pearls, of which one was missing. The missing pearl was in the position of the figure three on a clock dial. She carried a small morocco hand-bag with the initials A. F. stamped on it, which contained a little cardboard box, in which were six white tablets; the box was labelled with one of Dr. Partridge's labels, on which her name was written, and it was wrapped in white paper and sealed with sealing-wax. That is all I can say for certain. But she always wore a wedding-ring, and occasionally an African Zodiac ring; but sometimes she carried this ring in a small purse with metal jaws and a ball fastening. I believe she always carried the purse."

As I gave this description, the sergeant wrote furiously, glancing at me from time to time with an expression of surprise, while Japp sat and stared at me open-mouthed.

"Well, doctor," said the sergeant, when he had taken down my statement and read it out, "if I find myself ailing I'm going to pop along and consult you. I reckon there isn't much that escapes your notice. With regard to that African ring now, I daresay you cart tell us what it is like."

I was, of course, able to describe it in detail, including the initials A. C. inside, and even to give a rough sketch of some of the signs embossed on it, upon which the sergeant chuckled admiringly and wagged his head as he wrote down the description and pinned the sketch on the margin of his paper. The rest of my statement dealt with the last interview and the incidents connected with Nicholas Frood's visits to Rochester, all of which the sergeant listened to with deep interest and committed to writing.

Finally, I recounted the sinister incident—now more sinister than ever—of the murderous assault in the house near Regent's Park, whereat the sergeant looked uncommonly serious and took down the statement verbatim.

"Did you know about this, Mr. Japp?" he asked.

"I knew that something unpleasant had happened," was the reply, "but I didn't know that it was as bad as this."

"Well," said the sergeant, "it gives the present affair rather an ugly look. We shall have to make some inquiries about that gentleman."

Having squeezed me dry, he turned his attention to Japp, from whom he extracted a variety of information, including the address of the banker who paid the allowance to Nicholas Frood, and that of a lady who had formerly been a theatrical colleague of Mrs. Frood's, and with whom Mr. Japp believed the latter had kept up a correspondence.

"You haven't a photograph of the missing lady, I suppose?" said the sergeant.

With evident reluctance Japp drew from his pocket an envelope and produced from it a cabinet photograph, which he looked at sadly for a few moments and then handed to me.

"I brought this photograph with me," he said, "as I knew you would want it, but I rather hope that you won't want to publish it."

"Now, why do you hope that?" the sergeant asked in a soothing and persuasive tone. "You want this lady found—or, at any rate, traced. But what better means can you suggest than publishing her portrait?"

"I suppose you are right," said Japp; "but it is a horrible thing to think of the poor girl's face looking out from posters and newspaper pages."

"It is," the sergeant agreed. "But, you see, if she is alive it is her own doing, and if she is dead it won't affect her."

While they were talking I had been looking earnestly at the beloved face, which I now felt I should never look upon again. It was an excellent likeness, showing her just as I had known her, excepting that it was free from the cloud of trouble that had saddened her expression in these latter days. As

the sergeant held out his hand for it, I turned it over and read the photographer's name and address and the register number, and, having made a mental note of them, I surrendered it with a sigh.

Our business was now practically concluded. When we had each read over the statements and added our respective signatures, the sergeant attested them and, having added the date, placed the documents in his desk and rose.

"I am much obliged to you, gentlemen," said he as he escorted us to the door. "If I hear anything that will interest you I will let you know, and if I should want any further information I shall take the liberty of calling on you."

"Well," said Japp, as we turned to walk back, "the fat's in the fire now. I mean to say," he added quickly, "that we've fairly committed ourselves. I hope we haven't been too precipitate. We should catch it if she came back and found that we had raised the hue and cry and set the whole town agog."

"I am afraid there is no hope of that," said I. "At any rate, we had no choice or discretion in the matter. A suspected crime is the business of the police."

Mr. Japp agreed that this was so; and having by this time arrived at the office, we separated, he to enter his premises and I to betake myself to Chatham with no very, defined purpose, but lured thither by a vague attraction.

As I walked along the High-street, making occasional digressions into narrow alleys to explore wharves and water-side premises, I turned over the statements that had been given to the police and wondered what they conveyed to our friend, the sergeant, with his presumably extensive experience of obscure crime. To me they seemed to furnish no means whatever of starting an investigation, excepting by inquiring as to the movements of Nicholas Frood, by communicating with Angelina's late colleague or by publishing the photograph. And here I halted to write down in my notebook before I should forget them the name and address of that lady—Miss Cumbers—and of the photographers, together with the number of the photograph; for I had decided to obtain a copy of the latter for myself, and it now occurred to me that I had better get one also for Thorndyke. And this latter reflection reminded me that I had to prepare my précis of the facts for him, and that I should do well to get this done at once while the matter of the two statements was fresh in my mind. Accordingly, as I paced the deck of the Sun Pier, looking up and down the busy river, with its endless procession of barges, bawleys, tugs, and cargo boats, striving ineffectually to banish the dreadful thought that, perchance, somewhere, at this very moment there was floating on its turbid waters the corpse of my dear, lost friend: I tried to recall and write down the substance of Japp's statement, as I had heard it made and had afterwards read it. At length, finding the neighbourhood of the river too disturbing, I left the pier and took my way homewards, calling in at a stationer's on the way to provide myself with a packet of sermon paper on which to write out my summary.

When Thorndyke had given me my instructions, they had appeared to me a little pedantic. The full narrative which he asked for of all the events, without selection as to relevancy, and the account of what I knew of all the persons concerned in the case, seemed an excessive formality. But when I came to write the case out the excellence of his method became apparent in two respects. In the first place, the ordered narrative put the events in their proper sequence and exhibited their connexions; and in the second, the endeavour to state all that I knew, particularly of the persons, showed me how very little that was. Of the persons in any way concerned in the case there were but five: Angelina herself, her husband, Mrs. Gillow, Mr. Japp, and Bundy. Of the first two I knew no more than what I had observed myself and what Angelina had told me; of the last three I knew

practically nothing. Not that this appeared to me of the slightest importance, but I had my instructions, and in compliance with them I determined to make such cautious inquiries as would enable me to give Thorndyke at least a few particulars of them. And this during the next few days I did; and I may as well set down here the scanty and rather trivial information that my inquiries elicited, and which I duly sent on to Thorndyke in a supplementary report.

Mrs. Gillow was the wife of a mariner who was the second mate of a sailing ship that plied to Australia, who had now been away about four months and was expected home shortly. She was a native of the locality and had known Mr. Japp for several years. She occupied the part of the house above the ground floor and kept no servant or dependent, living quite alone when her husband was at sea. She had no children. Her acquaintance with Angelina began when the latter became the tenant of the ground floor and basement; it was but a slight acquaintance, and she knew nothing of Angelina's antecedents or affairs excepting that she had left her husband.

Mr. Japp was a native of Rochester and had lived in the town all his life, having taken over his business establishment from his late partner, a Mr. Borden. He was a bachelor and was related to Angelina by marriage, his brother—now deceased—having married Angelina's aunt.

As to Bundy, he was hardly connected with the case at all, since he had seen Angelina only once or twice and had scarcely exchanged a dozen words with her. Moreover, he had but recently come to Rochester—about six weeks ago, I gathered—having answered an advertisement of Japp's for an assistant with a view to partnership; and the actual deed had not yet been executed, though the two partners were evidently quite well satisfied with one another.

That was all the information that I had to give Thorndyke; and with the exception of the London incident it amounted to nothing. Nevertheless, it was as well to have established the fact that if anyone were concerned in Angelina's disappearance, that person would have to be sought elsewhere than in Rochester.

Having sent off my summary and read over again and again the copy which I had kept, I began to realize the justice of Thorndyke's observation that the inquiry was essentially a matter for the police, who had both the experience and the necessary facilities; for whenever I tried to think of some plan for tracing my lost friend, I was brought up against the facts that I had, nothing whatever to go on and no idea how to make a start. As to Thorndyke, he had no data but those that I had given him, and I realized clearly that these were utterly insufficient to form the basis of any investigation; and I found myself looking expectantly to the police to produce some new facts that might throw at least a glimmer of light on this dreadful and baffling mystery.

I had not very long to wait. On the Friday after our call on the sergeant, I was sitting after lunch in my dining-room with a book in my hand, while my thoughts strayed back to those memorable evenings of pleasant converse with the sweet friend who, I felt, had gone from me for ever, when the door bell rang, and Mrs. Dunk presently announced:

"Sergeant Cobbledick."

"Show him in here, Mrs. Dunk," said I, laying aside my book, and rising to receive my visitor; who proved to be, as I had expected, the officer who had taken our statements. He entered with his helmet in his hand, and greeted me with a smile of concentrated benevolence.

"Sit down, Sergeant," said I, offering him an easy chair. "I hope you have some news for us."

"Yes," he replied, beaming on me. "I am glad to say we are getting on as well as we can expect. We have made quite a nice little start."

He spoke as if he had something particularly gratifying to communicate, and, having carefully placed his helmet on the table, he drew from his pocket a small paper packet, which he opened with great deliberation, extracting from it a small object, which he held out in the palm of his hand.

"There, Doctor," said he, complacently; "what do you say to that?"

I looked at the object, and my heart seemed to stand still. It was Angelina's brooch! I stared at it in speechless dismay for some moments. At length I asked, huskily:

"Where did you get it?"

"I found it," said the sergeant, gazing fondly at the little trinket, "where I hardly hoped to find it—in a pawnbroker's shop in Chatham."

"Did you discover who pawned it?" I asked.

"In a sense, yes," the sergeant replied with a bland smile.

"How do you mean—in a sense?" I inquired.

"I mean that his name was John Smith—only, of course, it wasn't; and that his address was 26, Swoffer's-alley, Chatham—only he didn't live there, because there is no such number. You see, Doctor, John Smith is the name of nearly every man who gives a false description of himself; and I went straight off to Swoffer's-alley—it was close by—and found that there wasn't any number 26."

"Then you really don't know who pawned it?"

"We won't exactly say that," he replied. "I got a fair description of the man from the pawnbroker's wife, who made out the ticket and says she could swear to the man if she saw him. He was a seafaring man, dressed in sailor's clothes—a peaked cap and pea-jacket—a shortish fellow, rather sunburnt, with a small, stubby, dark moustache and dark hair, and a mole or wart on the left side of his nose, near the tip. She asked him where he had got the brooch, and he said it had belonged to his old woman. I should say he probably picked it up."

"Why do you think so?" I asked.

"Well, if he had-er-got it in any other way, he would hardly have popped it in Chatham forty-eight hours after the—after it was lost, with the chance that the pawnbrokers had already been notified-he pawned it on Monday night."

"Then," said I, "if he picked it up, he isn't of much importance; and in any case you don't know who he is."

"Oh, but he is of a good deal of importance," said the sergeant. "I've no doubt he picked it up, but that is only a guess. He may have got it the other way. But at any rate, he had it in his possession and he will have to give an account of how he obtained it. The importance of it is this: taken with the disappearance, the finding of this brooch raises a strong suspicion that a crime has been committed, and if we could find out where it was picked up, we should have a clue to the place

where the affair took place. I want that man very badly, and I'm going to have a good try to get him."

"I don't quite see how," said I. "You haven't much to go on."

"I've got his nose to go on," replied the sergeant.

"But there must be plenty of other men with moles on their noses."

"That's their look-out," he retorted. "If I come across a man who answers the description, I shall hang on to him until Mrs. Pawnbroker has had a look at him. Of course, if she says he's not the man, he'll be released."

"But she won't," said I. "If he has a mole on his nose, she will be perfectly certain that he is the man."

The sergeant smiled benignly. "There's something in that," he admitted. "Ladies are a bit cock-sure when it comes to identification. But you can generally check 'em by other evidence. And if this chap picked the brooch up, he would be pretty certain to tell us all about it when he heard where it came from. Still, we haven't got him yet."

For a while we sat, without speaking, each pursuing his own thoughts. To me, this dreadful discovery, though it did but materialize the vague fears that had been surging through my mind, had fallen like a thunderbolt. For, behind those fears, I now realized that there had lurked a hope that the mystery might presently be resolved by the return of the lost one. Now that hope had suddenly become extinct. I knew that she had gone out of my life for ever. She was dead. This poor little waif that had drifted back into our hands brought the unmistakable message of her death, with horrible suggestions of hideous and sordid tragedy. I shuddered at the thought; and in that moment, from the grief and horror that possessed my soul, there was born a passion of hatred for the wretch who had done this thing and a craving for revenge.

"There's another queer thing that has come to light," the sergeant resumed at length. "There may be nothing in it, but it's a little queer. About the husband, Nicholas Frood."

"What about him?" I asked, eagerly.

"Why, he seems to have disappeared, too. Of course, you understand, Doctor, that what I'm telling you is confidential. We are not talking about this affair outside, and we aren't telling the Press much, at present."

"Naturally," said I. "You can trust me to keep my own counsel, and yours, too."

"I'm sure I can. Well, about this man, Frood. It seems that last Friday he went away from his lodgings for a couple of days; but he hasn't come back, and nobody knows what has become of him. He was supposed to be going to Brighton, where he has some relatives from whom he gets a little assistance occasionally, but they have seen or heard nothing of him. Quaint, isn't it? You said you saw him here on the Monday."

"Yes, and I haven't seen him since, though I have kept a look-out for him. But he may have been here, all the same. It looks decidedly suspicious."

"It is queer," the sergeant agreed, "but we've no evidence that he has been in this neighbourhood."

"Have you made any other inquiries?" I asked.

"We looked up that lady, Miss Cumbers, but we got nothing out of her. She had had a letter from Mrs. Frood on the 24th-yesterday week—quite an ordinary letter, giving no hint of any intention to go away from Rochester. So there you are. The mystery seems to be concerned entirely with this neighbourhood, and I expect we shall have to solve it on the spot."

This last observation impressed me strongly. The sergeant's view of the case was the same as Thorndyke's, and expressed in almost the same words.

"Have you any theory as to what has actually happened?" I asked.

The sergeant smiled in his benignant fashion. "It isn't much use inventing theories," said he. "We've got to get the facts before we can do anything. Still, looking at the case as we find it, there are two or three things that hit us in the face. There is a strong suspicion of murder, there is no trace of the body, and there is a big tidal river close at hand. On Saturday night it was high water at half-past eleven, so there wouldn't have been much of the shore uncovered at, say, half-past nine, and there would have been plenty of water at any of the piers or causeways."

"Then you think it probable that she was murdered and her body flung into the river?"

"It is the likeliest thing, so far as we can judge. There is the river, and there is no sign of the body on shore. But, as I say, it is no use guessing. We've got people watching the river from Allington Lock to Sheerness, and that's all we can do in that line. The body is pretty certain to turn up, sooner or later. Of course, until it does, there is no real criminal case; and even when we've got the body, we may not be much nearer getting the murderer. Excepting the man Frood, there is no one who seems to have had any motive for making away with her; and if it was just a casual robbery with murder it is unlikely that we shall ever spot the man at all."

Having given expression to this rather pessimistic view, the sergeant rose, and, picking up his helmet, took his departure, after promising to let me know of any further developments.

As soon as he was gone, I wrote down the substance of what he had said, and then embodied it in a report for Thorndyke. While I was thus occupied, the afternoon post was delivered, and included a packet from the London photographer, to whom I had written, enclosing two copies of the photograph of Angelina that Mr. Japp had handed to the sergeant. Of these, I enclosed one copy in my communication to Thorndyke, on the bare chance that it might be of some assistance to him, and, having closed up the large envelope and stamped it, I went forth to drop it into the post-box.

CHAPTER IX—JETSAM

That portion of Chatham High-street which lies adjacent to the River Medway presents a feature that is characteristic of old riverside towns in the multitude of communications between the street and the shore. Some of these are undisguised entrances to wharves, some are courts or small thoroughfares lined with houses and leading to landing-stages, while others are mere passages or flights of steps, opening obscurely and inconspicuously on the street by narrow apertures, unnoticed by the ordinary wayfarer and suggesting the burrows of some kind of human water-rat.

In the days that followed the sergeant's visit to me I made the acquaintance of all of them. Now I would wander down the cobbled cartway that led to a wharf, there to cast a searching eye over the muddy fore-shore or scan the turbid water at high tide as it eddied between the barges and around

the piles. Or I would dive into the mouths of the burrows, creeping down slimy steps and pursuing the tortuous passages through a world of uncleanness until I came out upon the shore, where the fresh smell of seaweed mingled with odours indescribable. I began to be an object of curiosity—and perhaps of some suspicion—to the denizens of the little, ruinous, timber houses that lined these alleys, and of frank interest to the children who played around the rubbish heaps or dabbled in the grey mud. But never did my roving eye light upon that which it sought with such dreadful expectation.

One afternoon, about a week after the sergeant's visit, when I was returning home from one of these explorations, I observed a man on my doorstep as I approached the house. His appearance instantly aroused my attention, for he was dressed in the amphibious style adopted by waterside dwellers, and he held something in his hand at which he looked from time to time. Before I reached the door it had opened and admitted him, and when I arrived I found him in the hall nervously explaining his business to Mrs. Dunk.

"Here is the doctor," said the latter; "you'd better tell him about it."

The man turned to me and held out an amazingly dirty fist. "I've got something here, sir," said he, "what belongs to you, I think." Here he unclosed his hand and exhibited a little cardboard box bearing one of Dr. Partridge's labels. It was smeared with mud and grime, but I recognized it instantly; indeed, when I took it with trembling fingers from his palm and looked at it closely, the name, "Mrs. Frood," was still decipherable under the smears of dirt.

"Where did you find this?" I asked.

"I picked it up on the strand," he replied, "about halfway betwixt the Sun Pier and the end of Ship Alley, and just below spring tide high-water mark. Is it any good?"

"Yes," I answered; "it is very important. I will get you to walk along with me to the police station."

"What for?" he demanded suspiciously. "I don't want no police stations. If it's any good, give us what you think it's worth, and have done with it."

I gave him half-a-crown to allay his suspicions, and then said: "You had better come with me to the station. I expect the police will want you to show them exactly where you found this box and help them to search the place; and I will see that you are paid for your trouble."

"But look 'ere, mister," he objected; "what's the police got to do with this 'ere box?"

I explained the position to him briefly, and then, suddenly, his face lit up. "I know," he said excitedly. "I seen the bills stuck up on the dead-'ouse door. And d'you mean to say as this 'ere box was 'ers? Cos if it was it's worth more 'n 'arf-a-crown."

"Perhaps it is," said I. "We will hear what the sergeant thinks," and with this I opened the door and went out, and my new acquaintance now followed with the greatest alacrity, taking the opportunity, as we walked along, to remind me of my promise and to offer tentative suggestions as to the scale of remuneration for his services.

Our progress along the High-street was not unnoticed. Doubtless, we appeared a somewhat ill-assorted pair, for I observed a good many persons turn to look at us curiously, and when we passed the office, on the opposite side of the road, I saw Bundy's face rise above the curtain with an expression of undissembled curiosity.

On arriving at the station, I inquired for Sergeant Cobbledick, and was fortunate enough to find him in his office. As I entered with my companion, he bestowed on the latter a quick glance of professional interest and then greeted me with a genial smile. It was hardly necessary for me to state my business, for the single quick glance of his experienced eye at my companion had furnished the diagnosis. I had only to produce the box and indicate the finder.

"This looks like a lead," said he, reaching his helmet down from a peg. "What's your name, sonny, and where do you live?"

Sonny affirmed, with apparent reluctance, that his name was Samuel Hooper and that his abode was situated in Foul Anchor Alley; and when these facts had been committed to writing by the sergeant, the latter put on his helmet and invited the said Hooper to "come along," evidently assuming that I was to form one of the party.

As we approached the office this time I saw Bundy from afar off; and by the time we were abreast of the house he was joined by Japp, who must have stood upon tip-toe to bring his eyes above the curtain. Both men watched us with intense interest, and we had barely passed the house when Bundy's head suddenly disappeared, and a few moments later its owner emerged from the doorway and hurriedly crossed the road.

"What is in the wind, Doctor?" he asked, as he came up with us. "Japp is in a rare twitter. Have they found the body?"

"No," I answered; "only the little box that was in her hand-bag. We are going to have a look at the place where it was found."

"To see if the bag is there, too?" said he. "It probably is, unless it has been picked up already. I think I'll come along with you, if you don't object. Then I can give Japp all the news."

I did not object, nor did the sergeant—verbally; but his expression conveyed to me that he would willingly have dispensed with Mr. Bundy's society. However, he was a suave and tactful man, and he made the best of the unwelcome addition to the party, even going so far as to offer the box for Bundy's inspection.

"It is pretty dirty," the latter observed, holding it delicately in his fingers. "Wasn't it wrapped in paper when you gave it to her, Doctor?"

"It was wrapped up in paper when I found it," said Hooper, "but I took off the paper to see what was inside, and, yer see, my 'ands wasn't very clean, a-grubbin' about in the mud." In conclusive confirmation of this statement, he exhibited them to us, and then gave them a perfunctory wipe on his trousers.

"What struck me," said Bundy, "was that it doesn't seem to have been in the water."

"It hadn't," said Hooper. "The outside paper was quite clean when I picked it up."

"It looks," observed the sergeant, "as if they had turned out the bag and thrown away what they didn't want; and then they probably threw away the bag, too. It is ten chances to one that it has been picked up, but if it hasn't it will probably be somewhere along the high-water mark. How are the tides, Hooper?"

"Just past the bottom of the nips," was the reply; and a few moments later our guide added; "It's down here," and plunged into what looked like an open doorway. We followed, one at a time, cautiously descending a flight of very filthy stone steps and stooping to avoid knocking our heads against the overhanging story of an ancient timber house. At the bottom we proceeded, still in single file, along a narrow, crooked passage between grimy walls and ruinous tarred fences until, after many twistings and turnings, we came to a flight of rough wooden steps, thickly coated with yellow mud and slimy sea-grass, which led down to the shore.

"Now," said the sergeant, turning up the bottoms or his trousers, "show us exactly where you picked the box up."

"It was just oppersight that there schooner," said our guide, taking his way along the muddy streak between the two lines of jetsam that corresponded to the springtide and neap-tide high-water marks; "betwixt her and the wharf."

We followed him, picking our way daintly, and, having inspected the spot that he indicated, squeezed in between the schooner's bilge and the piles and raked over the rubbish that the tide had deposited on the shore.

"Was you looking for anything in partickler?" Hooper asked.

"We are looking for a small leather handbag," replied the sergeant, "or anything else we can find."

"A 'and-bag wouldn't 'ave been 'ere long," Hooper remarked. "Somebody would 'ave twigged it pretty quick, unless it got hidden under something big." He straightened himself up and gave a searching look up and down the shore; and then suddenly he started off with an air of definite purpose. Glancing in the direction towards which he was shaping his course, I observed, in the corner of a stage that jutted out from the quay, a heap of miscellaneous rubbish surmounted by the mortal remains of a large hamper. It looked a likely spot and we all followed, though not at his pace, being somewhat more fastidious as to where we stepped. Consequently he arrived considerably before us, and having flung away the hamper, began eagerly to grub among the underlying raffle. Just as we had come within a dozen yards of him, anxiously making the perilous passage over a stretch of peculiarly slimy mud, he stood up with a howl of triumph, and we all stopped to look at him. His arm was raised above his head, and from his hand hung by its handle a little morocco bag.

"There's no need to ask you to identify it, Doctor," said the sergeant, as he despoiled the water-rat of his prize. "It fits your description to a T."

Nevertheless, he handed it to me, drawing my attention to the initials "A. F." stamped on the leather. I turned it over gloomily, noting that it showed signs of having been in the water—though not, apparently, for any considerable time—and that none of its contents remained excepting a handkerchief tucked into an inner pocket, and returned it to him without remark.

"Now, look here, Hooper," said he, "I want you to stay down here and keep an eye on this shore until I send some of our men up, and then you can stay and help them, if you like. And remember that anything that you find—no matter what it is—you keep and hand over to me or my men; and you will be paid the full value and a reward for finding it as well. Do you understand that?"

"I do," replied Hooper. "That's a fair orfer, and you can depend on me to do the square thing. I'll stay down here until your men come."

Thereupon we left him, pursuing our way along the shore and keeping an attentive eye on all the rubbish and litter that we passed, until we came to a set of rough wooden steps by the Ship Pier.

"I had no authority to offer to pay that chap," said the sergeant, as we walked up Ship Alley, "but the superintendent has put me on to work at this case, and I'm not going to lose any chances for the sake of a few shillings. It is well to keep in with these waterside people."

"Have you published a list of things that are likely to turn up?" Bundy asked.

"We've posted up a description of the missing woman with full details of her dress and belongings," replied the sergeant. "But perhaps a list of the things that might be washed up would be useful. People are such fools. Yes, it's a good idea. I'll have a list printed of everything that might get loose and be picked up, and stick it up on the wharves and waterside premises. Then there will be nothing left to their imagination."

At the top of Ship Alley he halted, and having thanked me warmly for my prompt and timely information, turned towards Chatham Town, leaving me and Bundy to retrace our steps westward.

"That was a bit of luck," the latter remarked, "finding that bag; and he hardly deserved it. He ought to have had that piece of shore under observation from the first. But he was wise to make an acceptable offer to that bodysnatcher, Hooper. I expect he lives on the shore, watching for derelict corpses and any unconsidered trifles that the river may throw up. I see there is a reward of two pounds for the body."

"You have seen the bills, then?"

"Yes. We have got one to stick up in the office window. Rather gruesome, isn't it?"

"Horrible," I said; and for a while we walked on in silence. Presently Bundy exclaimed: "By Jove! I had nearly forgotten. I have a message for you. It is from Japp. He is taking a distinguished American archaeologist for a personally conducted tour round the town to show him the antiquities, and he thought you might like to join the party."

"That is very good of him," said I. "It sounds as if it should be rather interesting."

"It will be," said Bundy. "Japp is an enthusiast in regard to architecture and ancient buildings, and he is quite an authority on the antiquities of this town. You'd better come. The American—his name is Willard—is going to charter a photographer to come round with us and take records of all the objects of interest, and we shall be able to get copies of any photographs that we want. What do you say?"

"When does the demonstration take place?"

"The day after tomorrow. We shall do the Cathedral in the morning and the castle and the town in the afternoon. Shall I tell Japp you will join the merry throng?"

"Yes, please; and convey my very warm thanks for the invitation."

"I will," said he, halting as we arrived at the office, "unless you would like to come in and convey the joyful tidings yourself."

"No," he replied, "I won't come in now. I will get home and change my boots."

"Yes, by Jingo!" Bundy agreed, with a rueful glance at his own delicate shoes. "Mudlarking calls for a special outfit. And I clean my own shoes; but I'd rather do that than face Mrs. Dunk."

With this he retired up the steps, and I turned homeward, deciding to profit by his last remark and forestall unfavourable comment by shedding my boots on the doormat.

CHAPTER X—WHICH DEALS WITH ANCIENT MONUMENTS AND A BLUE BOAR

On arriving home, I found awaiting me a letter from Dr. Thorndyke suggesting—in response to a general invitation that I had given him some time previously—that he should come down on Saturday to spend the week-end with me. Of course, I adopted the suggestion with very great pleasure, not a little flattered at receiving so distinguished a guest; and now I was somewhat disposed to regret my engagement to attend Mr. Japp's demonstration. However, as Thorndyke was not due until lunch time, I should have an opportunity of modifying my arrangement, if necessary.

But, as events turned out, I congratulated myself warmly on not having missed the morning visit to the Cathedral. It was a really remarkable experience; and not the least interesting part of it to me was the revelation of the inner personality of my friend, Mr. Japp. That usually dry and taciturn man of business was transfigured in the presence of the things that he really loved. He glowed with enthusiasm; he exhaled the very spirit of mediaeval romance; at every pore he exuded strange and recondite knowledge. Obedient to his behest, the ancient building told the vivid story of its venerable past, presented itself in its rude and simple beginnings; exhibited the transformations that had marked the passing centuries; peopled itself with the illustrious departed, whose heirs we were and whose resting-places we looked upon; and became to us a living thing whose birth and growth we could watch, whose vicissitudes and changing conditions we could trace until they brought us to its august old age. Under his guidance we looked down the long vista of the past, from the time when simple masons scalloped the Norman capitals within, while illustrious craftsmen fashioned the wonderful west doorway, to that last upheaval that swept away the modern shoddy and restored to the old fabric its modest comeliness.

Architectural antiquities, however, are not the especial concern of this history, though they were not without a certain influence in its unfolding. Accordingly, I shall not follow our progress—attended by the indispensable photographic recording angel—through nave and aisles, form choir to transepts, and from tower to undercroft. At the close of a delightful morning I betook myself homeward, charged with new and varied knowledge, and with a cordial invitation to my guest to join the afternoon's expedition if he were archaeologically inclined.

Apparently he was, for when, shortly after his arrival, I conveyed the invitation to him he accepted at once.

"I always take the opportunity," said he, "of getting what is practically first-hand information. Your friend, Mr. Japp, is evidently an enthusiast; he has expert technical knowledge, and he has apparently filled in his detail by personal investigation. A man like that can tell you more in an hour than guide-books could tell you in a lifetime. We had better get a large-scale map of the town to enable us to follow the description, unless you have one."

"I haven't," said I, "but we can get one on the way to the rendezvous. You got my report, I suppose?"

"Yes," he replied, "I got it yesterday. That, in fact, was what determined me to come down. The discovery of that bag upon the shore dispels to some extent the ambiguity of our data. The finding of the brooch did not enlighten us much. It might simply have been dropped and picked up by some casual wayfarer. In fact, that is what the appearances suggested, for it is manifestly improbable that a person who had committed a crime would take the risk of pawning the product of robbery with violence in the very neighbourhood where the crime had been committed, and after an interval of time which would allow of the hue and cry having already been raised. Your sergeant is probably right in assuming that the man with the mole had nothing to do with the affair. But the finding of this bag is a different matter. It connects that disappearance with the river and it offers a strong suggestion of crime."

"Don't you think it possible that she might have fallen into the river accidentally?" I asked.

"It is possible," he admitted. "But that is where the significance of the brooch comes in. If she had fallen into the river from some wharf or pier, there does not seem to be any reason why the brooch should have become detached and fallen on land—as it apparently did. The finding of the bag where it had been thrown up by the river, and of the brooch on shore, suggests a struggle on land previous to the fall into the water. You don't happen, I suppose, to know what the bag contained?"

"I don't—excepting the packet of tablets that I gave her. When the bag was found, it was empty; at least, it contained only the handkerchief, as I mentioned in my report."

"Yes," he said reflectively. "By the way, I must compliment you on those reports. They are excellent, and with regard to this one, there are two or three rather curious circumstances. First, as to the packet of tablets. You mention that it had not been unwrapped and that, when it was found, the paper was quite clean. Therefore it had never been in the water. Therefore it had been taken out of the bag—by somebody with moderately clean hands—before the latter was dropped into the river; and it must have been thrown away on the shore above highwater mark. Incidentally, since the disappearance occurred—presumably—on the evening of the 26th of April, and the packet was found on the 7th of May, it had been lying on the shore for a full ten days. Perhaps there is nothing very remarkable in that; but the point is that Mrs. Frood was carrying the bag in her hand and she would almost certainly have dropped it if there had been any struggle. How, then, did the bag come to be in the river, and how came some of its contents to be found on the shore clean and free from any traces of submersion?"

"We can only suppose," said I, with an inward shudder—for the discussion of these hideous details made my very flesh creep—"that the murderer picked up the bag when he had thrown the body into the river, took out any articles of value, if there were any, and threw the rest on the shore."

"Yes," agreed Thorndyke, a little doubtfully, "that would seem to be what happened. And in that case, we should have to assume that the place where the packet was found was, approximately, the place where the crime was committed. For, as the packet was never immersed, it could not have been carried to that place by the tide, and one cannot think of any other agency by which it could have been moved. Its clean and unopened condition seems to exclude human agency. The question then naturally arises, Is the place where the packet was found, a place at, or near, which the tragedy could conceivably have occurred? What do you say to that?"

I considered for a few moments, recalling the intricate and obscure approach of the shore and the absence of anything in the nature of a public highway.

"I can only say," I replied at length, "that it seems perfectly inconceivable that Mrs. Frood could have been at that place, or even near it, unless she went there for some specific purpose—unless,

for instance, she were lured there in some way. It is a place that is, I should say, unknown to any but the waterside people."

"We must go there and examine the place carefully," said he, "for if it is, as you say, a place to which no one could imaginably have strayed by chance, that fact has an important evidential bearing."

"Do you think it quite impossible that the package could have been carried to that place and dropped there?"

"Not impossible, of course," he replied, "but I can think of no reasonably probable way in which it could have happened, supposing the murderer to have pocketed it, and afterwards to have thrown it away. That would be a considered and deliberate act; and it is almost inconceivable that he should not have opened the packet to see what was inside, and that he should have dropped it on the dry beach when the river was close at hand. Remember that the bag was found quite near, and that it had been in the water."

"And assuming the crime to have been committed at that place, what would it prove?"

"In the first place," he replied, "it would pretty definitely exclude the theory of accidental death. Then it would suggest at least a certain amount of premeditation, since the victim would have had, as you say, to be enticed to that unlikely spot. And it would suggest that the murderer was a person acquainted with the locality."

"One of the waterside people," said I. "They are a pretty shady lot, but I don't see why any of them should want to murder her."

"It is not impossible," said he. "She was said to be shopping in Chatham, and she might have had a well-filled purse and allowed it to be seen. But that is mere speculation. The fact is that we have no data at present. We know practically nothing about Mrs. Frood. We can't say if she had any secret enemies, or if there was anyone who might have profited by her death or have had any motive for making away with her."

"We know something about her husband," said I, "and that he has disappeared in a rather mysterious fashion; and that his disappearance coincides with that of his wife."

"Yes," Thorndyke agreed, "those are significant facts. But we mustn't lose sight of the legal position. Until the body is recovered, there is no evidence of death. Until the death is proved, no charge of murder can be sustained. When the body is found it will probably furnish some evidence as to bow the death occurred, if it is recovered within a reasonable time. As a matter of fact, it is rather remarkable that it has not yet been found. The death occurred—presumably—nearly a fortnight ago. Considering how very much frequented this river is, it is really rather unaccountable that the body has not come to light. But I suppose it is time that we started for the rendezvous."

I looked at my watch and decided that it was, and we accordingly set forth in the direction of the office, which was the appointed meeting-place, calling at a stationer's to provide ourselves each with a map. We chose the six inch town plan, which contained the whole urban area, including the winding reaches of the river, folding them so as to show at an opening the peninsula on which the city of Rochester is built.

"A curious loop of the river, this," said Thorndyke, scanning the map as we went along. "Rather like that of the Thames at the Isle of Dogs. You notice that there are quite a number of creeks on

the low shore at both sides. Those will be places to watch. A floating body has rather a tendency to get carried into shallow creeks and to stay there. But I have no doubt the longshoremen are keeping an eye on them as a reward has been offered. Perhaps we might be able to go down and have a look at the shore when we have finished our perambulation of the town."

"I don't see why not," I replied, though, to tell the truth, I was not very keen on this particular exploration. To Thorndyke this quest was just an investigation to be pursued with passionless care and method. To me it was a tragedy that would colour my whole life. To him, Angelina was but a missing woman whose disappearance had to be explained by patient inquiry. To me she was a beloved friend whose loss would leave me with a life-long sorrow. Of course, he was not aware of this; he had no suspicion of the shuddering horror that his calm, impersonal examination of the evidential details produced in me. Nor did I intend that he should. It was my duty and my privilege to give him what assistance I could, and keep my emotions to myself.

"You will bear in mind," said he, as we approached the office, "that my connexion with the case of Mrs. Frood is not to be referred to. I am simply a friend staying with you for a day or two."

"I won't forget," said I, "though I don't quite see why it should matter."

"It probably doesn't matter at all," he replied. "But one never knows. Facts which might readily be spoken of before a presumably disinterested person might be withheld from one who was known to be collecting evidence for professional purposes. At any rate, I make it a rule to keep out of sight as far as possible."

These observations brought us to the office, where we found our three friends together with a young man, who was apparently acting as deputy during the absence of the partners, and the photographer. I presented Thorndyke to my friends, and when the introduction had been made Mr. Japp picked up his hat, and turned to the deputy.

"You know where to find me, Stevens," he said, "if I should be really wanted—really, you understand. But I don't particularly want to be found. Shall we start now? I propose to begin at the bridge, follow the Highstreet as far as Eastgate House, visit Restoration House, trace the city wall on the southwest side, and look over the castle. By that time we shall be ready for tea. After tea we can trace the north-east part of the wall and the gates that opened through it, and that will finish our tour of inspection."

Hereupon the procession started, Mr. Japp and his guest leading, Thorndyke, Bundy, and I following, and the photographer bringing up the rear.

"Let me see," said Bundy, looking up at Thorndyke with a sort of pert shyness, "weren't you down here a week or two ago?"

"Yes," replied Thorndyke; "and I think I had the honour of being inspected by you while I was reading your proclamation respecting a certain lost key."

"You had," said Bundy; "in fact, I may say that you raised false hopes in my partner and me. We thought you were going to find it."

"What, for ten shillings!" exclaimed Thorndyke.

"We would have raised the fee if you had made a firm offer," said Bundy, removing his eyeglass to polish it with his handkerchief. "It was a valuable key. Belonged to a gate that encloses part of the city wall."

"Indeed!" said Thorndyke. "I don't wonder you were anxious about it considering what numbers of dishonest persons there are about. Ha! Here is the bridge. Let us hear what Mr. Japp has to say about it."

Mr. Japp's observations were concise. Having cast a venomous glance at the unlovely structure, he turned his back on it and remarked acidly: "That is the new bridge. It is, as you see, composed of iron girders. It is not an antiquity, and I hope it never will be. Let us forget it and go on to the Guildhall." He strode forward doggedly and Bundy turned to us with a grin.

"Poor old Japp," said he, "he does hate that bridge. He has an engraving of the old stone one in his rooms, and I've seen him stand in front of it and groan. And really you can't wonder. It is an awful come-down. Just think what the town must have looked like from across the river when that stone bridge was standing."

Here we halted opposite the Guildhall, and when we had read the inscription, admired the magnificent ship weathercock—said to be a model of the Rodney—and listened to Japp's observations on the architectural features of the building, the photographer was instructed to operate on its exterior while we entered to explore the Justice Room and examine the portraits. From the Guildhall we passed on to the Corn Exchange, the quaint and handsome overhanging clock of which had evidently captured Mr. Willard's fancy.

"That clock," said he, "is a stroke of genius. It gives a character to the whole street. But what in creation induced your City Fathers to allow that charming little building to be turned into a picture theatre?"

Japp shook his head and groaned. "You may well ask that," said he, glaring viciously at the inane posters and the doorway, decorated in the film taste. "If good Sir Cloudesley Shovel, who gave it to the town, could rise from his grave and look at it, now he'd—bah! The crying need of this age is some means of protecting historic buildings from town councils. To these men an ancient building is just old-fashioned—out-of-date; a thing to be pulled down and replaced by something smart and up-to-date in the corrugated iron line." He snorted fiercely, and as the photographer dismounted his camera, he turned and led the way up the street. I lingered to help the photographer with his repacking, and meanwhile Thorndyke and Bundy walked on together, chatting amicably and suggesting to my fancy an amiable mastiff accompanied by a particularly well-groomed fox terrier.

"Do you usually give your patients a week-end holiday?" Bundy was inquiring as I overtook them.

"I haven't any patients," replied Thorndyke. "My medical practice is conducted mostly in the Law Courts."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Bundy. "Do you mean that you live by resuscitating moribund jurymen and fattening up murderers for execution, and that sort of thing?"

"Not at all," replied Thorndyke. "Nothing so harmless. I am what is known as a Medical Expert. I give opinions on medical questions that affect legal issues."

"Then you are really a sort of lawyer?"

"Yes. A medico-legal hybrid; a sort of centaur or merman, with a doctor's head and a lawyer's tail."

"Well," said Bundy, "there are some queer professions; I once knew a chap in the furniture trade who described himself as a 'worm-eater'—drilled worm-holes in faked antiques, you know."

"And what," asked Thorndyke, "might be the analogy that you are suggesting? You don't propose to associate me with the diet of worms, I hope."

"Certainly not," said Bundy, "though I suppose your practice is sometimes connected with exhumations. But I was thinking that you must know quite a lot about crime."

"A good deal of my practice is concerned with criminal cases," Thorndyke admitted.

"Then you will be rather interested in our local mystery. Has the doctor told you about it?"

"You mean the mystery of the disappearing lady? But of what interest should it be to me? I was not acquainted with her."

"I meant a professional interest. But I suppose you are not taking a 'bus-man's holiday': don't want to be bothered with mysteries that don't concern you. Still, I should like to hear your expert opinion on the case."

"You mistake my functions," said Thorndyke. "A common witness testifies to facts known to himself. An expert witness interprets facts presented to him by others. Present me your facts, and I will try to give you an interpretation of them."

"But there are no facts. That is what constitutes the mystery."

"Then there is nothing to interpret. It is a case for the police, and not for the scientific expert."

Here our conversation was interrupted by our arrival at the House of the Six Poor Travellers, and by a learned disquisition by Japp on the connotation of the word Proctor—which, it appeared, was sometimes used in the Middle Ages in the sense of a cadger or swindler. Thence we proceeded to Eastgate House, where Japp mounted his hobby and discoursed impressively on the subject of ceilings, taking as his text a specimen modelled *in situ*, and bearing the date 1590.

"The fellow who put up that ceiling," said he, "took his time about it, no doubt. But his work has lasted three hundred and fifty years. That is the best way to save time. Your modern plasterer will have his ceiling up in a jiffy; and it will be down in a jiffy, and to do all over again. And never worth looking at at all."

Mr. Willard nodded. "It is very true," said he. "What is striking me in looking at all this old work is the great economy of time that is effected by taking pains and using good material, to say nothing of the beauty of the things created."

"If he goes on talking like that," whispered Bundy, "Japp'll kiss him. We must get them out of this."

Mercifully—if such a catastrophe was imminent—the ceiling discourse brought our inspection here to an end. From Eastgate House we went back to the Maidstone-road, and when we had inspected Restoration House, began to trace out the site of the city wall, which Thorndyke carefully marked on his map, to Japp's intense gratification. This perambulation brought us to the

castle—which was dealt with rather summarily, as Mr. Willard had already examined it—and we then returned to the office for tea, which Bundy prepared and served with great success in his own sitting-room, while Japp dotted in with red ink on Thorndyke's map the entire city wall, including the part which we had yet to trace; and ridiculously small the ancient city looked when thus marked out on the modern town.

After tea we retraced our steps to the site of the East Gate, and, having inspected a large fragment of the wall at the end of an alley, traced its line across the Highstreet, and then proceeded down Free School-lane to the fine angle-bastion at the northern corner of the lane. Thence we followed the scanty indications as far as the site of the North Gate, and thereafter through a confused and rather unlovely neighbourhood until, on the edge of the marshes, we struck into a narrow lane, enclosed by a dilapidated tarred fence, a short distance along which we came to a closed gate, which I recognized as the one through which I had passed with Bundy on the day when we were made acquainted with the tragic history of Bill the Bargee. As Japp unlocked the gate and admitted us to the space of waste land, Bundy remarked to Thorndyke: "That is the gate that the missing key belonged to. You see there is no harm done so far. The wall is still there."

"Yes," said Thorndyke, "and not much improved in appearance by your builders' attentions. Those patches suggest the first attempts of an untalented dental student at conservation."

"They are rather a disfigurement," said Japp. "But the men had to have a job found for them, and that is the result. Perhaps they won't show so much in the photograph."

While the photographer was setting up his camera and making the exposure, Japp explained the relation of this piece of wall to the North Gate and the Gate that faced the bridge, and marked its position on Thorndyke's map.

"And that," he continued, "concludes our perambulation. The photographer is chartered by Mr. Willard, but I understand that we are at liberty to secure copies of the photographs, if we want them. Is that not so, Mr. Willard?"

"Surely," was the cordial reply; "only I stipulate that they shall be a gift from me, and I shall ask a favour in return. If there is a plate left, I should like to have a commemorative group taken, so that when I recall this pleasant day, I can also recall the pleasant society in which I spent it."

We all acknowledged the kindly compliment with a bow, and as the photographer announced that he had a spare plate, we grouped ourselves against a portion of undisfigured wall, removed our hats, and took up easy and graceful postures on either side of Mr. Willard. When the exposure had been made, and the photographer proceeded to pack up his apparatus, Thorndyke tendered his very hearty thanks to Mr. Japp and his friend for their hospitality.

"It has been a great privilege," said he, "to be allowed to share in the products of so much study and research, and I assure you it is far from being unappreciated. Whenever I revisit Rochester—which I hope to do before long—I shall think of you gratefully, and of your very kind and generous friend, Mr. Willard."

Our two hosts made suitable acknowledgments; and while these compliments were passing, I turned to Bundy.

"Can we get down to the shore from here?" I asked. "Thorndyke was saying that he would like to have a look at the river. If it is accessible from here we might take it on the way home."

"It isn't difficult to get at," replied Bundy. "If he wants to get a typical view of the river with the below-bridge traffic, by far the best place is Blue Boar Pier. It isn't very far, and it is on your way home-more or less. I'll show you the way there if you like. Japp is dining with Willard, so he won't want me."

I accepted the offer gladly, and as the exchange of compliments seemed to be completed and our party was moving towards the gate, I tendered my thanks for the day's entertainment and bade my hosts farewell, explaining that we were going riverwards. Accordingly we parted at the gate, Japp and Willard turning towards the town, while Thorndyke, Bundy, and I retraced our steps towards the marshes.

At the bottom of the lane Bundy paused to explain the topography. "That path," said he, "leads to Gas House road and the marshes by the North Shore. But there isn't much to see there. If we take this other track we shall strike Blue Boar-lane, which will take us to the pier. From there we can get a view of the whole bend of the river right across to Chatham."

Thorndyke followed the description closely with the aid of his map, marking off our present position with a pencil. Then we struck into a rough cart-track, with the wide stretch of the marshes on our left, and, following this, we presently came out into the lower part of Blue Boar-lane and turned our faces towards the river. We had not gone far when I observed a man approaching whose appearance seemed to be familiar. Bundy also observed him, for he exclaimed: "Why, that is old Cobbledick! Out of uniform, too. Very irregular. I shall have to remonstrate with him. I wonder what he has been up to. Prowling about the river bank in search of clues, I expect. And he'll suspect us of being on the same errand."

Bundy's surmise appeared to be correct, for as the sergeant drew nearer and recognized us, his face took on an expression of shrewd inquiry. But I noticed with some surprise that his curiosity seemed to be principally concerned with Thorndyke, at whom he gazed with something more than common attention. Under the circumstances I should have passed him with a friendly greeting, but he stopped, and, having wished me "Good evening," said: "Could I have a few words with you, Doctor?" upon which I halted, and Thorndyke and Bundy walked on slowly. The sergeant looked after them, and, turning his back to them, drew from his pocket with a mysterious air a small dirty brown bundle, which he handed to me.

"I wanted you just to have a look at that," he said.

I opened out the bundle, though I had already tentatively recognized it. But when it was unrolled it was unmistakable. It was poor Angelina's scarf.

"I thought there couldn't be any doubt about it," the sergeant said cheerfully when I had announced the identification. "Your description was so clear and exact. Well, this gives us a pretty fair kick-off. You can see that it has been in the water-some time, too. So we know where to look for the body. The mysterious thing is, though, that we've still got to look for it. It ought to have come up on the shore days ago. And it hasn't. There isn't a longshoreman for miles up and down that isn't on the look-out for it. You can see them prowling along the seawalls and searching the creeks in their boats. I can't think how they can have missed it. The thing is getting serious."

"Serious?" I repeated.

"Well," he explained, "there's no need for me to point out to a medical gentleman like you that bodies don't last for ever, especially in mild weather such as we've been having, and in a river

where the shore swarms with rats and shore-crabs. Every day that passes is making the identification more difficult."

The horrible suggestions that emerged from his explanation gave me a sensation of physical sickness. I fidgeted uneasily, but still I managed to rejoin huskily: "There's the clothing, you know."

"So there is," he agreed; "and very good means of identification in an ordinary case—accidental drowning, for instance. But this is a criminal case. I don't want to have to depend on the clothing."

"Was the scarf found floating?" I asked, a little anxious to change the subject to one less gruesome.

"No," he replied. "It was on the shore by the small creek just below Blue Boar Pier, under an empty fish-trunk. One of the Customs men from the watch-house found it. He noticed the trunk lying out on the shore as he was walking along and went out to see if there was anything in it. Then, when he found it was empty, he turned it over, and there was the scarf. He recognized it at once—there's a list of the articles stuck up on the watch-house—and kept it to bring to me. But it happened that I came down here—as I do every day—just after he'd found it. But I mustn't keep you here talking, though I'm glad I met you and got your confirmation about this scarf."

He smiled benignly and raised his hat, whereupon I wished him "Good evening" and went on my way with a sigh of relief. He was a pleasant, genial man, but his matter-of-fact way of looking at this tragedy that had eaten so deeply into my peace of mind, was to me positively harrowing. But, of course, he did not understand my position in the case.

"Well," said Bundy, when I hurried up, "what's the news? Old Cobbledick was looking mighty mysterious. And wasn't he interested in us? Why he's gazing after us still. Has he had a bite? Because if he hasn't, I have. Some beastly mosquito."

"Don't rub it." said Thorndyke, as Bundy clapped his hand to his cheek. "Leave it alone. We'll put a spot of ammonia or iodine on it presently."

"Very well," replied Bundy, with a grimace expressive of resignation. "I am in the hands of the Faculty. What sort of fish was it that Isaak Walton Cobbledick had hooked? Or is it a secret?"

"I don't think there is any secrecy about it," said I. "One of the Customs men has found Mrs. Frood's scarf," and I repeated what the sergeant had told me as to the circumstances.

"It is a gruesome affair," said Bundy, "this search for these ghastly relics. Look at those ghouls down on the shore there. I suppose that is the fish-trunk."

As he spoke, we came out on the shore to the right of the pier and halted to survey the rather unlovely prospect. Outside the stunted sea-wall a level stretch of grey-green grass extended to the spring high-water mark, beyond which a smooth sheet of mud—now dry and covered with multitudinous cracks—spread out to the slimy domain of the ordinary tides. At the edge of the dry mud lay a derelict fish-trunk around which a group of bare-legged boys had gathered—and all along the shore, on the faded grass, on the dry mud and wading in the soft slime, the human water-rats were to be seen, turning over drift-rubbish, prying under stranded boats or grubbing in the soft mud. Hard by, on the grass near the sea-wall, an old ship's long-boat had been hauled up above tide-marks to a permanent berth and turned into a habitation by the erection in it of a small house. A short ladder gave access to it from without and the resident had laid down a little causeway of flat stones leading to the wall.

"Mr. Noah seems to be at home," observed Bundy, as we approached the little amphibious residence to inspect it. He pointed to a thin wisp of smoke that issued from the iron chimney; and, almost as he spoke, the door opened and an old man came out into the open stern-sheets of the boat with a steaming tin pannikin in his hand. His appearance fitted his residence to a nicety; for whereas the latter appeared to have been constructed chiefly from driftwood and wreckage, his costume suggested a collection of assorted marine salvage, with a leaning towards oil-skin.

"Mr. Noah" cast a malevolent glance at the searchers; then, having fortified himself with a pull at the pannikin, he turned a filmy blue eye on us.

"Good evening," said Thorndyke. "There seems to be a lot of business-doing here," and he indicated the fish-trunk and the eager searchers.

The old man grunted contemptuously. "Parcel of fules," said he, "a-busyin' theirselves with what don't concern 'em, and lookin' in the wrong place at that."

"Still," said Bundy, "they have found something here."

"Yes," the old man admitted, "they have. And that's why they ain't goin' to find anything more." He refreshed himself with a drink of—presumably—tea, and continued: "But the things is a-beginning to come up. It's about time she come up. But she won't come up here."

"Where do you suppose she will come up?" asked Bundy.

The old man regarded him with a cunning leer. "Never you mind where she'll come up," said he. "It ain't no consarn o' yourn."

"But how do you know where she'll come up?" Bundy persisted.

"I knows," the old scarecrow replied conclusively, "becos I do. Becos I gets my livin' along-shore, and it's my business for to know."

Having made this pronouncement, Mr. Noah looked inquiringly into the pannikin, emptied it at a draught, and, turning abruptly, retired into the ark, shutting the door after him with a care suited to its evident physical infirmity.

"I wonder if he really does know," said Bundy, as we walked away past the Customs watch-house.

"We can fairly take it that he doesn't," said Thorndyke, "seeing that the matter is beyond human calculation. But I have no doubt that he knows the places where bodies and other floating objects are most commonly washed ashore, and we may assume that he is proposing to devote his probably extensive leisure to the exploration of those places. It wouldn't be amiss to put the sergeant in communication with him."

"Probably the sergeant knows him," said I, "but I will mention the matter the next time I see him."

At the top of Blue Boar-lane Bundy halted and held out his hand to Thorndyke. "This is the parting of the ways," said he.

"Oh, no, it isn't," replied Thorndyke. "You've got to have your mosquito-bite treated. Never neglect an insect-bite, especially on the face."

"As a matter of fact," said I, "you have got to come and have dinner with us. We can't let you break up the party in this way."

"It's very nice of you to ask me," he began, hesitatingly, a little shy, as I guessed, of intruding on me and my visitor; but I cut him short, and, hooking my arm through his, led him off, an obviously willing captive. And if his presence hindered me from discussing with Thorndyke the problem that had occasioned his visit, that was of no consequence, since we should have the following day to ourselves; and he certainly contributed not a little to the cheerfulness of the proceedings. Indeed, I seemed to find in his high spirits something a little pathetic; a suggestion that the company or two live men—one of them a man of outstanding intellect—was an unusual treat, and that his life with old Japp and the predatory females might be a trifle dull. He took to Thorndyke amazingly, treating him with a sort of respectful cheekiness, like a schoolboy dining with a favourite head-master; while Thorndyke, fully appreciative of his irresponsible gaiety, developed a quiet humour and playfulness which rather took me by surprise. The solemn farce of the diagnosis and treatment of the mosquito bite was an instance; when Thorndyke, having seated the patient in the surgery chair and invested him with a large towel, covered the table with an assortment of preposterous instruments and bottles of reagents, and proceeded gravely to examine the bite through a lens until Bundy was as nervous as a cat, and then to apply the remedy with meticulous precision on the point of a fine sable brush.

It was a pleasant evening, pervaded by a sense of frivolous gaiety that was felt gratefully by the two elder revellers and was even viewed indulgently by Mrs. Dunk. As to Bundy, his high spirits flowed unceasingly—but, I may add, with faultless good manners—and when, at length, he took his departure, he shook our hands with a warmth which, again, I found slightly pathetic.

"I *have* had a jolly evening!" he exclaimed, looking at me with a queer sort of wistfulness. "It has been a red-letter day"; and with this he turned abruptly and walked away.

We watched him from the threshold, bustling jauntily along the pavement; and as I looked at him, there came unbidden to my mind the recollection of that other figure that I had watched from this same threshold, walking away in the fading light—walking into the fog that was to swallow her up and hide her from my sight for ever.

From these gloomy reflections I was recalled by Thorndyke's voice.

"A nice youngster, that, Strangeways. Gay and sprightly, but not in the least shallow. I often think that there was a great deal of wisdom in that observation of Spencer's, that happy people are the greatest benefactors to mankind. Your friend, Bundy, has helped me to renew my youth; and who could have done one a greater service?"

CHAPTER XI—THE MAN WITH THE MOLE

When I had seen my guest off by the last train on Saturday night, I walked homeward slowly, cogitating on the results of his visit. It seemed to me that they were very insignificant. In the morning we had explored the piece of shore on which the bag and the box of tablets had been found, making our way to it by the narrow and intricate alleys which seemed to be the only approach; and we had reached the same conclusion. It was an impossible place.

"If we assume," said Thorndyke, "as we must, on the apparent probabilities, that the tragedy occurred here, we must assume that there are some significant circumstances that are unknown to us. Mrs. Frood could not have strayed here by chance. We can think of no business that could have brought her here; and since she was neither a child nor a fool, she could not have been enticed into

such an obviously sinister locality without some plausible pretext. There is evidently something more than meets the eye."

"Something, you mean, connected with her past life and the people she knew?"

"Exactly. I am having careful inquiries made on the subject in likely quarters, including the various theatrical photographers. They form quite a promising' source of information, as they are not only able to give addresses but they can furnish us with photographs of members of the companies who would have been colleagues, and, at least, acquaintances."

"If you come across any photographs of Mrs. Frood," I said, "I should like to see them."

"You shall," he replied. "I shall certainly collect all I can get, on the chance that they may help us with the identification of the body; which may possibly present some difficulty."

Here I was reminded of Cobbledick's observations, and, distasteful as they were, I repeated them to Thorndyke.

"The sergeant is quite right," said he. "This is apparently a criminal case, involving a charge of wilful murder. To sustain that charge, the prosecution will have to produce incontestable evidence as to the identity of the deceased. Clothing alone would not be sufficient to secure a conviction. The body would have to be identified. And the sergeant's anxiety is quite justified. Have you had any experiences of bodies recovered from the water?"

"Yes," I replied; "and I don't like to think of them." I shuddered as I spoke, for his question had recalled to my memory the incidents or a professional visit to Poplar Mortuary. There rose before my eyes the picture of a long black, box with a small glass window in the lid, and of a thing that appeared at that window; a huge, bloated, green and purple thing, with groups or radiating wrinkles, and in the middle a button-like object that looked like the tip of a nose. It was a frightful picture; and yet I knew that when the river that we stood by should give up its dead—

I put the thought away with a shiver and asked faintly: "About the man Frood. Don't you think that his disappearance throws some light on the mystery?"

"It doesn't throw much light," replied Thorndyke, "because nothing is known about it. Obviously the coincidence in time of the disappearance, added to the known character of the man and his relations with his wife, make him an object of deep suspicion. His whereabouts will have to be traced and his time accounted for. But I have ascertained that the police know nothing about him, and my own inquiries have come to nothing, so far. He seems to have disappeared without leaving a trace. But I shall persevere. Your object—and mine—is to clear up the mystery, and if a crime has been committed, to bring the criminal to justice."

So that was how the matter stood; and it did not appear to me that much progress had been made towards the elucidation of the mystery. As to the perpetrator or that crime, he remained a totally unknown quantity, unless the deed could be fixed on the missing man, Frood. And so matters remained for some days. Then an event occurred which seemed to promise some illumination of the darkness; a promise that it failed to fulfil.

It was about a week after Thorndyke's visit. I had gone out after lunch to post off to him the set of photographs which had been delivered to me by the photographer with my own set. I went into the post-office to register the package, and here I found Bundy in the act of sending off a parcel. When

we had transacted our business we strolled out together, and he asked: "What are you going to do now, Doctor?"

"I was going to walk down to Blue Boar Pier," said I, "to see if anything further has been discovered."

"Should I be in the way if I walked there with you?" he asked. "I've got nothing to do at the moment. But perhaps you would rather go alone. You've had a good deal of my society lately."

"Not more than I wanted, Bundy," I answered. "You are my only chum here, and you are not unappreciated, I can assure you."

"It's nice of you to say that," he rejoined, with some emotion. "I've sometimes felt that I was rather thrusting my friendship on you."

"Then don't ever feel it again," said I. "It has been a bit of luck for me to find a man here whom I could like and chum in with."

He murmured a few words of thanks, and we walked on for a while without speaking. Presently, as we turned into the lane by the Blue Boar Inn, he said, a little hesitatingly. "Don't you think, Doc, that it is rather a mistake to let your mind run so much on this dreadful affair? It seems to be always in your thoughts. And it isn't good for you to think so much about it. I've noticed you quite a lot, and you haven't been the same since—since it happened. You have looked worried and depressed."

"I haven't felt the same," said I. "It has been a great grief to me."

"But," he urged, "don't you think you should try to forget it? After all, she was little more than an acquaintance."

"She was a great deal more than that, Bundy," said I. "While she was alive, I would not admit even to myself that my feeling towards her was anything more than ordinary friendship. But it was; and now that she is gone, there can be no harm in recognizing the fact, or even in confessing it to you, as we are friends."

"Do you mean, Doc," he said in a low voice, "that you were in love with her?"

"That is what it comes to, I suppose," I answered. "She was the only woman I had ever really cared for."

"And did she know it?" he asked.

"Of course she didn't," I replied indignantly. "She was a lady and a woman of honour. Of course she never dreamed that I cared for her, or she would never have let me visit her."

For a few moments he walked at my side in silence. Then he slipped his arm through mine, and pressing it gently with his hand, said softly and very earnestly: "I'm awfully sorry, Doc. It is frightfully hard luck for you, though it couldn't have been much better even if—but it's no use talking of that. I *am* sorry, old chap. But still, you know, you ought to try to put it away. *She* wouldn't have wished you to make yourself unhappy about her."

"I know," said I. "But I feel that the office belongs to me, who cared most for her, to see that the mystery of her death is cleared up and that whoever wronged her is brought to justice."

He made no reply to this but walked at my side with his arm linked in mine, meditating with an air of unwonted gravity.

When we reached the head of the pier the place was deserted excepting for one man; a sea-faring person, apparently, who was standing with his back to us, studying intently the bills that were stuck on the wall of the lookout. As we were passing, my eye caught the word "Wanted" on a new bill, and pausing to read it over the man's shoulder, I found that it was a description of the unknown man—"with a mole on the left side of his nose"—who had pawned the opal brooch. Bundy read it, too, and as we walked away he remarked: "They are rather late in putting out those bills. I should think that gentleman will have left the locality long ago, unless he was a local person"; an opinion with which I was disposed to agree.

After a glance round the shore and at "the Ark"—which was closed but of which the chimney emitted a cheerful smoke suggestive of culinary activities on the part of "Mr. Noah "—we sauntered up past the head of the creek, along the rough path by the foundry, and out upon the upper shore.

"Well, I'm hanged!" exclaimed Bundy, glancing back at the watch-house, "that chap is still reading that bill. He must be a mighty slow reader, or he must find it more thrilling than I did. Perhaps he knows somebody with a mole on his nose."

I looked back at the motionless figure; and at that moment another figure appeared and advanced, as we had done, to look over the reader's shoulder.

"Why, that looks like old Cobbledick—come to admire his own literary productions. There's vanity for you. Hallo! What's up now?"

As Bundy spoke, the reader had turned to move away and had come face to face with the sergeant. For a moment both men had stood stock still; then there was a sudden, confused movement on both sides, with the final result that the sergeant fell, or was knocked, down and that the stranger raced off, apparently in our direction. He disappeared at once, being hidden from us by the foundry buildings, and we advanced towards the end of the fenced lane by which we had come, to intercept him, waiting by the edge of a trench or dry ditch.

"Here he comes," said Bundy, a trifle nervously, as rapid footfalls became audible in the narrow, crooked lane. Suddenly the man appeared, running furiously, and as he caught sight of us, he whipped out a large knife, and, flourishing it with a menacing air, charged straight at us. I watched an opportunity to trip him up; but as he approached Bundy pulled me back with such energy that he and I staggered on the brink of the ditch, capsized, and rolled together to the bottom. By the time we had managed to scramble up, the man had disappeared into the wilderness of sheds, scrap-heaps, derelict boilers, and stray railway-waggons that filled the area of land between the foundry and the coal-wharves and jetties.

"Come on, Bundy," said I, as my companion stood tenderly rubbing various projecting portions of his person; "we mustn't lose sight of him."

But Bundy showed no enthusiasm; and at this moment a rapid crescendo of heavy foot-falls was followed by the emergence of the sergeant, purple-faced and panting, from the end of the lane.

"Which way did he go?" gasped Cobbledick.

I indicated the wilderness, briefly explaining how the fugitive had escaped us, whereupon the sergeant started forward at a lumbering trot and we followed. But it was an unfavourable hunting-ground, for the bulky litter—the heaps of coal-dust, the wagons, the cranes, the piles of condemned machinery, mingled with clumps of bushes—gave the fugitive every opportunity to disappear. And, in fact, he had disappeared without leaving a trace. Presently we came out on a wharf beside which a schooner was berthed; a trim-looking little craft with a white under-body and black top-sides, bearing a single big yard on her fore-mast and the name Anna on her counter. She was all ready for sea and was apparently waiting for high water, for her deck was all clear and a man on it was engaged in placidly coiling a rope on the battened hatch while another watched him from the door of the deckhouse. On this peaceful scene the sergeant burst suddenly and hailing the rope-coiler demanded:

"Have you seen a man run past here?"

The mariner dropped the rope, and looking up drowsily, repeated: "Have I seen a mahn?"

"Yes, a sea-faring man with a mole on his nose."

The mariner brightened up perceptibly. "Please?" said he.

"A sailor-man with a mole on his nose."

"Ach!" exclaimed the mariner. "Vos it tied on?"

"Tied on!" the sergeant snorted impatiently. "Of course it wasn't. It grew there."

Here the second mariner apparently asked some question, for our friend turned to him and replied: "*Ja. Maulwurf*"; on which I heard Bundy snigger softly.

"No, no," I interposed; "not that sort of mole. A kind of wart, you know. *Das Mal*."

On this the second mariner fell out of the deckhouse door, and the pair burst into yells of laughter, rolling about the deck in agonies of mirth, wiping their eyes, muttering *Maulwurf, Maulwurf,* and screeching like demented hyenas.

"Well," Cobbledick demanded impatiently, "have you seen him '"

The mariner shook his head. "No," he replied, shakily. "I have not any mahn seen."

"Well, why couldn't you say so at first" the sergeant growled.

"I vos zo zubbraised," the mariner explained, glancing at his shipmate; and the pair burst out into fresh howls of laughter.

The sergant turned away with a sort of benevolent contempt and ran his eye despairingly over the wilderness. "I suppose we had better search this place," said he, "though he is pretty certain to have got away."

At his suggestion we separated and examined the possible hiding-places systematically, but, of course, with no result. Once only I had a momentary hope that we had not lost our quarry, when

the sergeant suddenly stooped and began cautiously to stalk an abandoned boiler surrounded by a clump of bushes; but when the grinning countenance of Bundy appeared at the opposite end and that reprobate crept out stealthily and proceeded to stalk the sergeant, the last hope faded.

"I certainly thought I saw someone moving in those bushes," said Cobbledick, with a disappointed air.

"So did Mr. Bundy," said I "You must have seen one another."

The sergeant glanced suspiciously at our colleague, but made no remark; and we continued our rather perfunctory search. At length we gave it up and slowly returned to the neighbourhood of the pier. By this time the tide had turned, and a few loiterers were standing about watching the procession of barges moving downstream on the ebb. Among them was a grave-looking, sandy-haired man who leaned against the watch-house, smoking reflectively as he surveyed the river. To this philosopher Cobbledick addressed himself, explaining, as he was in plain clothes:

"Good afternoon. I am a police officer and I am looking for a man who is described on that bill." Here he indicated the poster.

The philosopher turned a pale grey, and somewhat suspicious eye on him, and having removed his pipe, expectorated thoughtfully but made no comment on the statement.

"A sea-faring man," continued the sergeant, "with a mole on the left side of his nose." He looked enquiringly at the philosopher, who replied impassively:

"Nhm—nhm."

"Do you happen to have seen a man answering that description?"

"Nhm—nhm," was the slightly ambiguous reply.

"You *have* seen him?" the sergeant asked, eagerly.

"Aye."

"Do you know if he belongs to any of the craft that trade here?"

"Nhm—nhm."

"Do you happen to know which particular vessel he belongs to?"

"Aye," was the answer, accompanied by a grave nod.

"Can you tell me," the sergeant asked patiently, "which vessel that is, and where she is at present?"

Our friend replaced his pipe and took a long draw at it, gazing meditatively at a schooner which was moving swiftly down the river under the power of an auxiliary motor, and setting her sails as she went. I had noticed her already, and observed that she had a white underbody and black top-sides, and that she carried a single long yard on her fore-mast. At length our friend removed his pipe, expectorated, and nodded gravely at the schooner.

"Yon," said he, and replaced his pipe, as a precaution, I supposed, against unnecessary loquacity.

Cobbledick gazed wistfully at the receding schooner. "Pity," said he. "I should have liked to have a look at that fellow."

"You could get the schooner held up at Sheerness, couldn't you?" I asked.

"Yes; I could send a 'phone message to Garrison Point Fort. But, you see, she's a foreigner. Might make trouble. And he is probably not the man we want. After all, it's only a matter of a mole."

"Maulwurf," murmured Bundy.

"Yes," said the sergeant, with a faint grin; "those beggars were laughing at us. Well, it can't be helped."

We stood for a moment or two watching the schooner set one sail after another. Presently Bundy observed:

"Methinks, Sergeant, that Mr. Noah is trying to attract your attention."

We glanced towards the Ark, the tenant of which was seated in the stern-sheets, scrubbing a length of rusty chain. As he caught the sergeant's eye, he beckoned mysteriously, whereupon we descended the bank, and, picking our way across the muddy grass by his little causeway of stepping-stones, approached the foot of the short ladder.

"Well, Israel," said the sergeant, resting his hands on the gunwale of the old boat as he made a rapid survey of the interior, "giving the family plate a bit of a polish, eh?"

"Plate!" exclaimed the old man, holding up the chain, which, as I now saw, had a number of double hooks linked to it, "this ain't plate. 'Tis what we calls a creeper."

"A creeper," repeated the sergeant, looking at it with renewed interest. "Ha, yes, hm. A creeper, hey? Well, Israel, what's a-doing? Have you got something to show us?"

The old man laid down the creeper and the scrubbing-brush—which had a strong suggestion of salvage in its appearance—and moved towards the door of the Ark. "Come along inside," said he.

Cobbledick mounted the ladder and motioned me to follow, which I did, while Bundy discretely sauntered away and sat down on the bank. On entering, I observed that the Ark followed closely the constructional traditions. Like its classical prototype, it was "pitched with pitch, within and without," and was furnished with a single small window, let into the door and hermetically sealed.

Seeing that our host looked at me with some disfavour, the tactful sergeant hastened to make us known to one another.

"This is Dr. Strangeways, Israel. He was Mrs. Frood's doctor, and he knows all about this affair. This, Doctor, is Mr. Israel Bangs, the eminent long-shoreman, a sort of hereditary Grand Duke of the Rochester foreshore."

I bowed ceremoniously, and the Grand Duke acknowledged the introduction with a sour grin. Then, lifting the greasy lid of a locker, he dived into it and came to the surface, as it were, with a small shoe in his hand.

"What do you say to that?" he demanded, holding the shoe under the sergeant's nose. The sergeant said nothing, but looked at me; and I, suddenly conscious of the familiar sickening sensation, could do no more than nod in reply. Soiled, muddy and sodden as it was, the poor little relic instantly and vividly recalled the occasion when I had last seen it, then all trim and smart, peeping coyly beneath the hem of the neat brown skirt.

"Where did you find it, Israel?" asked Cobbledick.

"Ah," said Bangs, with a sly leer, "that's tellin', that is. Never you mind where I found it. There's the shoe."

"Don't be a fool, Israel," said the sergeant.' "What use do you suppose the shoe is to me if I don't know where you found it? I've got to put it in evidence, you know."

"You can put it where you like, so long as you pays for it," the old rascal replied, doggedly. "The findin' of it's my business."

There ensued a lengthy wrangle, but the sergeant, though patient and polite, was firm. Eventually Israel gave way.

"Well," he said, "if you undertakes not to let on to Sam Hooper or any of his lot, I'll tell you. I found it on the mud, side of the long crik betwixt Blue Boar Head and Gas-'us Point."

The sergeant made a note of the locality, and, after having sworn not to divulge the secret to Sam Hooper or any other of the shore-rat fraternity, and having ascertained that Israel had no further information to dispose of, rose to depart; and, I noticed that, as we passed out towards the ladder, he seemed to bestow a glance of friendly recognition on the creeper.

"Well," said Bundy, when we rejoined him, "what had Mr. Noah to say? I hope you remembered me kindly to my old friends, Shem, Ham, and Japhet."

"He has found one of Mrs. Frood's shoes," answered the sergeant, producing it from his pocket and offering it for inspection. Bundy glanced at it indifferently, and then remarked: "It seems to answer the description, but, for my part, I don't quite see the use of all this searching and prying. It only proves what we all know. There's no doubt that she fell into the river. The question is, how did she get there? It is not likely that it was an accident, and, if it wasn't, it must have been a crime. What we want to know is, who is the criminal?"

Cobbledick pocketed the shoe with an impatient gesture. "That's the way they always talk," said he. "They will always begin at the wrong end. The question, 'Who is the murderer?' does not arise until it is certain that there has been a murder; and it can't be certain that there has been a murder until it is certain that the missing person is dead. And that certainty can hardly be established until the body is found. But, in the meantime, these articles are evidence enough to justify us in making other inquiries, and they may give us a hint where to look for the body. They do, in fact. They suggest that the body is probably not very far away, and more likely to be up-stream than down."

"I don't see how they do," said Bundy.

"I do," retorted the sergeant, "and that's enough for me."

Bundy, with his customary discretion, took this as closing the discussion, and further—as I guessed—surmising that the sergeant might wish to have a few words with me alone, took his leave of us when we reached the vicinity of the office.

"That is not a bad idea of old Israel's," said Cobbledick, when Bundy had gone. "The, creeper, I mean."

"What about it?" I asked.

"You know what a creeper is used for, I suppose," said he. "In the old days, the revenue boats used to trail them along over the bottom in shallow water where they suspected that the smugglers had sunk their tubs. You see they couldn't always get a chance to land the stuff. Then they used to fill the spirits into a lot of little ankers or tubs, lash them together into a sort of raft and sink the raft close in-shore, on a dark night, in a marked place where their pals could go some other night and fish them up. Well the revenue cutters knew most of those places and used to go there and drift over them trailing creepers. Of course, if there were any tubs there, the creepers hooked on to the lashings and up they came."

"But what do you suppose is Israel's idea?" I asked. "Why, as the body ought to have come up long before this, and it hasn't, he thinks it has been sunk. It might have been taken up the river in a boat, and sunk in mid-stream with a weight of some sort. Or it might have got caught by a lost anchor or on some old moorings. That would account for its not coming up and for these odd-ments getting detached and drifting ashore. So old Israel is going to get to work with a creeper. I expect he spends his nights creeping over the likely spots, and that is what makes him so deuced secret about the place where he found that shoe. He reckons that the body is somewhere thereabouts."

I made no comment on this rather horrible communication. Of course, it was necessary that the body should be searched for, since its discovery was the indispensable condition of the search for the murderer. But I did not want to hear more of the dreadful details than was absolutely unavoidable.

When we reached the Guildhall, I halted and was about to take leave of the sergeant when he said, somewhat hesitatingly:

"Do you remember, Doctor, when you met me last Saturday, you had a gentleman with you?"

"I remember," said I.

"Now, I wonder if you would think I was taking a liberty if I were to ask what that gentleman's name was. I had an idea that I knew his face."

"Of course it wouldn't be a liberty," I replied. "His name is Thorndyke; Dr. John Thorndyke."

"Ah!" exclaimed Cobbledick, "I thought I couldn't be mistaken. It isn't the sort of face that one would forget. I once heard him give evidence at the Old Bailey. Wonderful evidence it was, too. Since then I've read reports of his investigations from time to time. He's a marvellous man. The way he has of raking up evidence from nowhere is perfectly astonishing. Did you happen to talk to him about this case at all?"

"Well, you see, Sergeant," I answered, rather evasively, "he had come down here for the week-end as my guest—"

"Exactly, exactly," Cobbledick interrupted, unconsciously helping me to avoid answering his question, "he came down for a rest and a change, and wouldn't want to be bothered with professional matters. Still, you know, I think he would be interested in this case. It is quite in his own line. It is a queer case; a very queer case in some respects."

"In what respects?" I asked.

It was Cobbledick's turn to be evasive. He had apparently said more than he had intended, and now drew in his horns perceptibly.

"Why," he replied, "when you come to think of—of the—er—the character of the lady, for instance. Why should anyone want to do her any harm? And then there is the mystery as to how it happened, and the place, and—in fact, there are a number of things that are difficult to understand. But I mustn't keep you standing here. If you should happen to see Dr. Thorndyke again, it might be as well to tell him about the case. It would be sure to interest him; and if he should, by any chance, want to know anything that you are not in a position to tell him, why, you know where I am to be found. I shouldn't want to make any secrets with him. And he might spot something that we haven't noticed."

I promised to follow the sergeant's advice, and, having bid him adieu, turned back, and walked slowly homeward. As I went I reflected profoundly on my conversation with Cobbledick; from which, as it seemed to me, two conclusions emerged. First, there were elements in this mystery that were unknown to me. I had supposed that the essence of the mystery was the mere absence of data. But it now appeared from the sergeant's utterances, and still more from his evasions, that he saw farther into the affair than I did; either because he had more facts, or because, by reason of his greater experience, the facts meant more to him than they did to me. The second conclusion was that he was in some way in difficulties; that he was conscious of an inability to interpret satisfactorily the facts that were known to him. His evident eagerness to get into touch with Thorndyke made this pretty clear; and the two conclusions together suggested a further question. How much did Thorndyke know? Did he know all that the sergeant knew? Did he perchance know more? From the scanty data with which I had supplied him, might he possibly have drawn some illuminating inferences that had carried his understanding of the case beyond either mine or Cobbledick's? It was quite possible. Thorndyke's great reputation rested upon his extraordinary power of inference and constructive reasoning from apparently unilluminating facts. The facts in this case seemed unilluminating enough. But they might not be so to him. And again I recalled how both he and the sergeant seemed to look to the finding of the body as probably furnishing the solution of the mystery.

CHAPTER XII—THE PRINTS OF A VANISHED HAND

Mr. Bundy's opinion that no particular significance attached to the finding of further relics of the missing woman was one that I was myself disposed to adopt. The disappearance of poor Angelina was an undeniable fact, and there seemed to be no doubt that her body had fallen, or been cast, into the river. On these facts, the recovery of further articles belonging to her, and presumably detached from the body, shed no additional light. From the body itself, whenever it should be surrendered by the river, one hoped that something fresh might be learned. But all that anyone could say was that Angelina Frood had disappeared, that her disappearance was almost certainly connected with a crime, and that the agents of that crime and their motives for committing it were alike an impenetrable mystery, a mystery that the finding of further detached articles tended in no way to solve.

I shall, therefore, pass somewhat lightly over the incidents of the succeeding discoveries, notwithstanding the keen interest in them displayed by Sergeant Cobbledick and even by Thorndyke. On Monday, the 25th of May, the second shoe was found (to Israel Bangs' unspeakable indignation) by Samuel Hooper of Foul Anchor Alley, who discovered it shortly after high-water, lying on the gridiron close to Gas-house Point, and brought it in triumph to the police station.

After this, there followed a long interval, occupied by a feverish contest between Israel Bangs and Samuel Hooper. But the luck fell to the experienced Israel. On Saturday, the 20th of June, that investigator, having grounded his boat below a wharf between Gas-house Point and the bridge, discovered a silver-headed hat-pin lying on the shore between two of the piles of the wharf. Its identity was unmistakable. The silver poppy-head that crowned the pin was no trade production that might have had thousands of indistinguishable fellows. It was an individual work wrought by an artist in metal, and excepting its fellow, there was probably not another like it in the world.

The discovery of this object roused a positive frenzy of search. The stretch of muddy shore between Gas-house Point and the bridge literally swarmed with human shore-rats, male and female, adult and juvenile. Every day, and all the day, excepting at high-water, Israel Bangs hovered in his oozy little basket of a boat on the extreme edge of the mud, scanning every inch of slime, and glowering fiercely at the poachers ashore who were raking over his preserves. But nothing came of it. Day after day passed. The black and odorous mud was churned up by countless feet; the pebbles were sorted out severally by innumerable filthy hands; every derelict pot, pan, box, or meat-tin was picked up again and again, and explored to its inmost recesses. But in vain. Not a single relic of any kind was brought to light by' all those searchings and grubbings in the mud. Presently the searchers began to grow discouraged. Some of them gave up the search; others migrated to the shore beyond the bridge, and were to be seen wading in the mud below the Esplanade, the cricket-ground, or the boat-building yards. So the month of June ran out, and the third month began. And still there was no sign of the body.

Meanwhile I watched the two professional investigators, and noted a certain similarity in their outlook and methods. Both were keenly interested in the discoveries; and both, I observed, personally examined the localities of the finds. The sergeant conducted me to each spot in turn, making appropriate, but not very illuminating, comments; and I perceived that he was keeping a careful account of time and place. So, too, with Thorndyke, who had now taken to coming down regularly each week-end. He visited each spot where anything had been found, marking it carefully on his map, together with a reference number, and inquiring minutely as to the character of the object, its condition, and the state of the tide and the hour of the day when it was discovered; all of which particulars he entered in his note-book under the appropriate reference number.

Both of my friends, too, expressed increasing surprise and uneasiness at the non-appearance of the body. The sergeant was really worried, and he expressed his sentiments in a tone of complaint as if he felt that he was not being fairly treated.

"It's getting very serious, Doctor," he protested.

"Nearly three months gone—three summer months, mind you—and not a sign of it. I don't like the look of things at all. This case means a lot to me. It's my chance. It's a detective-inspector's job, and if I bring it off it'll be a big feather in my cap. I want to get a conviction, and so far I haven't got the material for a coroner's verdict. I've half a mind to do a bit of creeping myself."

Thorndyke's observations on the case were much to the same effect. Discussing it one Saturday afternoon at the beginning of July, when I had met him at Strood Station and was walking with him into Rochester, he said:

"My feeling is that the crux of this case is going to be the question of identity—if the body ever comes to light. Of course, if it doesn't, there is no case: it is simply an unexplained disappearance. But if the body is found and is unrecognizable excepting by clothing and other extrinsic evidence, it will be hard to get a conviction even if the unrecognizable corpse should give some clue to the circumstances of death."

"I suppose," said I, "the police are searching for Nicholas Frood."

"I doubt it," he replied. "They are not likely to be wasting efforts to find a murderer when there is no evidence that a murder has been committed. What could they do if they did find him? The woman was not in his custody or even living with him. And his previous conduct is not relevant in the absence of evidence of his wife's death."

"You said you were making some inquiries yourself."

"So I am. And I am not without hopes of picking up his tracks. But that is a secondary matter. What we have to settle beyond the shadow of a doubt is the question, 'What has become of Angelina Frood? Is she dead' And, if she is, what was the cause and what were the circumstances of her death?' The evidence in our possession points to the conclusion that she is dead, and that she met her death by foul means. That is the belief that the known facts produce. But we have got to turn that belief into certainty. Then it will be time to inquire as to the identity of the criminal."

"Do you suppose the body would be unrecognizable now?"

"I feel no doubt that it would be quite unrecognizable by ordinary means if it has been in the water all this time. But it would still be identifiable in the scientific sense, if we could only obtain the necessary data. It could, for instance, be tested by the Bertillon measurements, if we had them; and it would probably yield finger-prints, clear enough to recognize, long after the disappearance of all facial character or bodily traits."

"Would it really?" I exclaimed.

"Certainly," he replied. "Even if the whole outer skin of the hand had come off bodily, like a glove, as it commonly does in long-submerged bodies, that glove-like cast would yield fairly clear finger-prints if property treated—with dilute formalin, for instance. And then the fingers from which the outer skin had become detached would still yield recognizable finger-prints, if similarly treated; for you must remember that the papillary ridges which form the finger-print pattern, are in the true skin. The outer skin is merely moulded on them. But, unfortunately, the question is one of merely academic interest to us as we have no original finger-prints of Mrs. Frood's by which to test the body. The only method of scientific identification that seems to be available is that of anthropometric measurements, as employed by Bertillon."

"But," I objected, "the Bertillon system is based on the existence of a record of the measurements of the person to be identified. We have no record of the measurements of Mrs. Frood."

"True," he agreed. "But you may remember that Dr. George Bertillon was accustomed to apply his system, not only to suspected persons who had been arrested, but also to stray garments, hat, gloves, shoes, and so forth, that came into the possession of the police. But it is clear that, if such

garments can be compared with a table of recorded measurements, they can be used as standards of comparison to determine the identity of a dead body. Of course, the measurements would have to be taken, both of the garments and of the body, by someone having an expert knowledge of anthropometrical methods."

"Of course," I agreed. "But it seems a sound method. I must mention it to Cobbledick. He has the undoubted shoes, and I have no doubt that he could get a supply of worn garments from Mrs. Gillow."

"Yes," said Thorndyke. "And, speaking of Mrs. Gillow reminds me of another point that I have been intending to inquire into. You mentioned to me that Mrs. Gillow told you, at the time of the disappearance, that she had been expecting a tragedy of some kind. She must have had some grounds for that expectation."

"She said it was nothing but a vague, general impression."

"Still, there must have been something that gave her that impression. Don't you think it would be well to question her a little more closely?"

"Perhaps it might," said I, not very enthusiastically. "We are close to the house now. We can call in and see her, if you like."

"I think we ought to leave no stone unturned," said he; and a minute or two later, when we arrived opposite the office, he remarked, looking across attentively at the two houses: "I don't see our friend Bundy's face at the window."

"No," I replied, "he is playing tennis somewhere up at the Vines. But here is Mrs. Gillow, herself, all dressed up and evidently going out visiting."

The landlady had appeared at the door just as we were crossing the road. Perceiving that we were bearing down on her, she paused, holding the door ajar. I ran up the steps, and having wished her "good afternoon" asked if she had time to answer one or two questions.

"Certainly," she replied, "though I mustn't stay long because I have promised to go to tea with my sister at Frinsbury. I usually go there on a Saturday. Perhaps we had better go into poor Mrs. Frood's room."

She opened the door of the sitting-room, and we all went in and sat down.

"I have been talking over this mysterious affair, Mrs. Gillow," said I, "with my friend, Dr. Thorndyke, who is a lawyer, and he suggested that you might be able to throw some light on it. You remember that you had had some forebodings of some sort of trouble or disaster."

"I had," she replied, dismally, "but that was only because she always seemed so worried and depressed, poor dear. And, of course, I knew about that good-for-nothing husband of hers. That was all. Sergeant Cobbledick asked me the same question, but I had nothing to tell him."

"Did the sergeant examine the rooms?" asked Thorndyke.

"Yes, he looked over the place, and he opened her little davenport—it isn't locked—and read through one or two letters that he found there, but he didn't take them away. All he took with him was a few torn-up letters that he found in the waste-paper basket."

"If those other letters are still in the davenport," said Thorndyke, "I think it would be well for us to look through them carefully, if you don't mind, Mrs. Gillow."

"I don't see that there could be any harm in it," she replied. "I've never touched anything in her rooms, myself, since she went away. I thought it better not to. I haven't even washed up her tea-things. There they are, just as she left them, poor lamb. But if you are going to look through those letters, I will ask you to excuse me, or I shall keep my sister waiting for tea."

"Certainly, Mrs. Gillow," said I. "Don't let us detain you. And, by the way," I added, as I walked with her to the door, "it would be as well not to say anything to anybody about my having come here with my friend."

"Very well, sir," she replied. "I think you are right. The least said, the soonest mended"; and with this profound generalization she went out and I shut the street door after her.

When I returned to the sitting-room I found Thorndyke engaged in a minute examination of the tea-things, and in particular of the spoon. I proceeded at once to the davenport, and, finding it unlocked, lifted the desk-lid and peered into the interior. It contained a supply of papers and envelopes, neatly stacked, and one or two letters, which I took out. They all appeared to be from the same person—the Miss Cumbers, of whom I had heard—and a rapid glance at the contents showed that they were of no use as a source of information. I passed them to Thorndyke—who had laid down the spoon and was now looking inquisitively about the room—who scanned them rapidly and returned them to me.

"There is nothing in them," said he. "Possibly the contents of the waste-paper basket were more illuminating. But I suspect not, as the sergeant appears to be as much in the dark as we are. Shall we have a look at the bedroom before we go?"

I saw no particular reason for doing so, but, assuming that he knew best, I made no objection. Going out into the hall, we entered the deserted bed-room, the door of which was locked, though the key had not been removed. At the threshold Thorndyke paused and stood for nearly half a minute looking about the room in the same queer, inquisitive way that I had noticed in the other room, as if he were trying to fix a mental picture of it. Meanwhile, full of the Bertillon system, I had walked across to the wardrobe to see what garments were available for measurement. I had my hand on the knob of the door when my glance fell on two objects on the dressing-table; an empty tumbler and a small water-bottle, half-full. There was nothing very remarkable about these objects, taken by themselves, but, even from where I stood, I could see that both bore a number of finger-marks which stood out conspicuously on the plain glass.

"By Jove!" I exclaimed. "Here is the very thing that you were speaking of. Do you see what it is?"

Apparently he had, for he had already taken his gloves out of his pocket and was putting them on.

"Don't touch them, Strangeways," said he, as I was approaching to inspect them more closely. "If these are Mrs. Frood's finger-prints they may be invaluable. We mustn't confuse them by adding our own."

"Whose else could they be?" I asked.

"They might be Sergeant Cobbledick's," he replied. "The sergeant has been in here." He drew a chair up to the table, and, taking a lens from his pocket, began systematically to examine the markings.

"They are a remarkably fine set," he remarked, "and a complete set—the whole ten digits. Whoever made them held the bottle in the right hand and the tumbler in the left. And I don't think they are the sergeant's. They are too small and too clear and delicate."

"No," I agreed, "and the probabilities are against their being his. There is no reason why he should have wanted to take a drink of water during the few minutes that he spent here. It would have been different if it had been a beer bottle. But it would have been quite natural for Mrs. Frood to drink a glass of water while she was dressing or before she started out."

"Yes," said he. "Those are the obvious probabilities. But we must turn them into certainties if we can. Probabilities are not good data to work from. But the question is now, what are we to do? I have a small camera with me, but it would not be very convenient to take the photographs here, and it would occupy a good deal of time. On the other hand, these things would be difficult to pack without smearing the finger-prints. We want a couple of small boxes."

"Perhaps," said I, "we may find something that will do if we take a look round."

"Yes," he agreed, "we must explore the place. Meanwhile, I think I will develop up these prints for our immediate information, as we have to try to find some others to verify them."

He went back to the sitting-room, where he had put down the two cases that he always brought with him: a small suit-case that contained his toilet necessaries and a similar-sized case covered with green canvas which had been rather a mystery to me. I had never seen it open, and had occasionally speculated on the nature of its contents. My curiosity was now to be satisfied, for, when he returned with it in his hand he explained: "This is what I call my research-case. It contains the materials and appliances for nearly every kind of medico-legal investigation, and I hardly ever travel without it."

He placed it on a chair and opened it, when I saw that it formed a complete portable laboratory, containing, among other things a diminutive microscope, a little folding camera, and an insufflator, or powder-spray. The latter he now took from its compartment, and, lifting the tumbler with his gloved hand, stood it on a corner of the mantelpiece and blew over it with the insufflator a cloud of impalpably fine white powder, which settled evenly on the surface of the glass. He then tapped the tumbler gently once or twice with a lead pencil, when most of the powder coating either jarred off or crept down the surface. Finally, he blew at it lightly, which removed the rest of the powder, leaving the finger-prints standing out on the clear glass as if they had been painted on with Chinese white.

While he was operating in the same manner on the water-bottle—having first emptied it into the ewer—I examined the tumbler with the aid of his lens. The markings were amazingly clear and distinct. Through the lens I could see, not only the whole of the curious, complicated ridge-pattern, but even the rows of little round spots that marked the orifices of the sweat glands. For the first time, I realized what a perfect means of identification these remarkable imprints furnished.

"Now," said Thorndyke, when he had finished with the bottle, "the two questions are, where shall we look for confirmatory finger-prints, and where are we to get the boxes that we want for packing these things? You said that Mrs. Frood had a kitchen."

"Yes. But won't you try the furniture here; the wardrobe door, for instance. The dark, polished mahogany ought to give good prints."

"An excellent suggestion, Strangeways," said he. "We might even find the sergeant's finger-prints, as he has probably had the wardrobe open."

He sprayed the three doors of the wardrobe, and when he had tapped them and blown away the surplus powder, there appeared near the edge of each a number of finger-marks, mostly rather indistinct, and none of them nearly so clear as those on the glass.

"This is very satisfactory," said Thorndyke. "They are poor prints, but you can see quite plainly that there are two pairs of hands, one pair much larger than the other; and the prints of the larger hands are evidently not the same pattern as those on the glass, whereas those of the smaller ones are quite recognizable as the same, in spite of their indistinctness. As the large ones are almost certainly Cobbledick's, the small ones are pretty certainly Mrs. Frood's. But we mustn't take anything for granted. Let us go down to the kitchen. We shall have a better chance there."

The door of the basement staircase was still unlocked, as Mrs. Gillow had described it. I threw it open, and we descended together, I carrying the insufflator and he bearing the tumbler and bottle in his gloved hands. When he had put the two articles down on the kitchen table, he proceeded to powder first the kitchen door and then the side-door that gave on to the passage between the two houses. Both of them were painted a dark green and both yielded obvious finger-marks, and though these were mere oval smudges, devoid of any trace of pattern, their size and their groupings showed clearly enough that they appertained to a small hand. But we got more conclusive confirmation from a small aluminium frying-pan that had been left on the gas stove; for, on powdering the handle, Thorndyke brought into view a remarkably clear thumbprint, which was obviously identical with that on the water-bottle.

"I think," said he, "that settles the question. If Mrs. Gillow has not touched anything in these premises—as she assures us that she has not—then we can safely assume that these are Mrs. Frood's finger-prints."

"Are you going to annex the frying-pan to produce in evidence?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "This verification is for our own information: to secure us against the chance of producing Cobbledick's finger-prints to identify the body. I propose, for the present, to say nothing to anyone as to our possessing this knowledge. When the time comes we can tell what we know. Until then we shall keep our own counsel."

Once more I found myself dimly surprised at my friend's apparently unnecessary secrecy, but, assuming that he knew best, I made no comment, but watched with somewhat puzzled curiosity his further proceedings. His interest in the place was extraordinary. In a queer, catlike fashion he prowled about the premises, examining the most trivial objects with almost ludicrous attention. He went carefully through the cooking appliances and the glass and china; he peered into cupboards, particularly into a large, deep cupboard in which spare crockery was stored, and which was, oddly enough, provided with a Yale lock; he sorted out the meagre contents of the refuse-bin, and incidentally salved from it a couple of cardboard boxes that had originally contained groceries, and he explored the, now somewhat unsavoury, larder.

"I suppose," he said reflectively, "the dustman must have used the side door. Do you happen to know?"

"I don't," said I, inwardly wondering what the deuce the dustman had to do with the case. "I understand that the door of the passage was not used."

"But she couldn't have had the dust-bin carried up the stairs and out at the front door," he objected.

"I should think not," said I. "Perhaps we could judge better if we had a look at the passage."

He adopted the suggestion and we opened the side-door—which had a Yale night-latch—and went out into the covered passage that was common to the two houses. The door that opened on to the street was bolted on the inside, but the bolts were in good working order, as we ascertained by drawing them gently; so this gave no evidence one way or the other. Then Thorndyke carefully examined the hard gravel floor of the passage, apparently searching for dropped fragments, or the dustman's foot-prints; but though there were traces suggesting that the side-doors had been used, there were no perceptible tracks leading to the street or in any way specifically suggestive of dustmen.

"Japp seems fond of Yale locks," observed Thorndyke, indicating the second side-door, which was also fitted with one. "I wonder where he keeps his dust-bin."

"Would it be worth while to ask him?" said I, more and more mystified by this extraordinary investigation.

"No," he replied, very definitely. "A question often gives more information than it elicits."

"It might easily do that in my case," I remarked with a grin; upon which he laughed softly and led the way back into the house. There I gathered up the two boxes and the insufflator and made my way up to the bed-room, he following with the tumbler and the water-bottle. Then came the critical business of packing these two precious objects in the boxes in such a way as to protect the finger-prints from contact with the sides; which was accomplished very neatly with the aid of a number of balls or plasticine from the inexhaustible research-case.

"This is a little disappointing," said Thorndyke, looking at the hair-brush and comb as he took off his gloves. "I had hoped to collect a useful sample of hair. But her excessive tidiness defeats us. There seems to be only one or two short hairs and one full length. However, we may as well have them. They won't be of much use for comparison with the naked eye, but even a single hair can be used as a colour control under the microscope."

He combed the brush until the last hair was extracted from it, and then drew the little collection from the comb and arranged it on a sheet of paper. There were six short hairs, from two to four inches long, and one long hair, which seemed to have been broken off, as it had no bulb.

"Many ladies keep a combing-bag," he remarked, as; he bestowed the collection in a seed-envelope from the: research-case; "but I gather from your description that Mrs. Frood's hair was luxuriant enough to render that economy unnecessary. At any rate, there doesn't seem to be such a bag. And now I think we have finished, and we haven't done so badly."

"We have certainly got an excellent set of fingerprints," said I. "But it seems rather doubtful whether there will ever be an opportunity of using them; and if there isn't, we shan't be much more forward for our exploration. Of course, there is the hair."

"Yes," said Thorndyke, "there is the hair. That may be quite valuable. And perhaps there are some other matters—but time will show."

With this somewhat cryptic conclusion he proceeded with great care to pack the two boxes in his suit-case, wedging them with his pyjamas so that they should not get shaken in transit.

As we walked home I reflected on Thorndyke's last remark. It seemed to contain a suggestion that the mystery of Angelina's death was not so complete to him as it was to me. For my own part, I could see no glimmer of light in any direction. She seemed to have vanished without leaving a trace excepting those few derelict objects which had been washed ashore and which told us nothing. But was it possible that those objects bore some significance that I had overlooked? That they were charged with some message that I had failed to decipher? I recalled a certain reticence on the part of Cobbledick which had made me suspect him of concealing from me some knowledge that he held or some inferences that he had drawn; and now there was this cryptic remark of Thorndyke's, offering the same suggestion. Might it possibly be that the profound obscurity was only in my own mind, the product of my inexperience, and that to these skilled investigators the problem presented a more intelligible aspect? It might easily be. I determined cautiously to approach the question.

"You seemed," said I, "to imply, just now, that there are certain data for forming hypotheses as to the solution of this mystery that envelops the disappearance of Mrs. Frood. But I am not aware of any such data. Are you?"

"Your question, Strangeways," he replied, "turns on the meaning of the word 'aware.' If two men, one literate and the other illiterate, look at a page of a printed book, both may be said to be aware of it; that is to say that in both it produces a retinal image which makes them conscious of it as a visible object having certain optical properties. In the case of the illiterate man the perception of the optical properties is the total effect. But the literate man has something in his consciousness already, and this something combines, as it were, with the optical perception, and makes him aware of certain secondary properties of the printed characters. To both, the page yields a visual impression; but to one only does it yield what we may call a psychical impression. Are they both aware of the page?"

"I appreciate your point," said I, with a sour smile, "and I seem to be aware of a rather skilful evasion of my question."

He smiled in his turn and rejoined: "Your question was a little indirect. Shall we have it in a more direct form?"

"What I wanted to know," said I, "though I suppose I have no right to ask, is whether there appears to you to be any prospect whatever of finding any solution of the mystery of Mrs. Frood's death."

"The answer to that question," he replied, "is furnished by my own proceedings. I am not a communicative man, as you may have noticed, but I will say this much: that I have taken, and am taking, a good deal of trouble with this case, and am prepared to take more, and that I do not usually waste my efforts on problems that appear to be unsolvable. I am not disposed to say more than that, excepting to refer you again to the instance of the printed page and to remind you that whatever I know I have either learned from you or from the observation, in your company, of objects equally visible to both of us."

This reply, if not very illuminating, at least answered my question, as it conveyed to me that I was not likely to get much more information out of my secretive friend. Nevertheless, I asked: "About the man Frood: you were saying that you had some hopes of running him to earth."

"Yes, I have made a start. I have ascertained that he did apparently set out for Brighton the day before Mrs. Frood's disappearance, but he never arrived there. That is all I know at present. He was seen getting into the Brighton train, but he did not appear at the Brighton barrier—my informant had the curiosity to watch all the passengers go through—and he never made the visit which was

the ostensible object of his journey. So he must have got out at an intermediate station. It may he difficult to trace him, but I am not without hope of succeeding eventually. Obviously, his whereabouts on the fatal day is a matter that has to be settled. At present he is the obvious suspect; but if an alibi should be proved in his case, a search would have to be initiated in some other direction."

This conversation brought us to my house in time to relieve Mrs. Dunk's anxieties on the subject of dinner; and as the daylight was already gone, the photographic operations were postponed until the following morning. Indeed, Thorndyke had thought of taking the objects to his chambers, where a more efficient outfit was available, but, on reflection, he decided to take the photographs in my presence so that I could, if necessary, attest their genuineness on oath. Accordingly, on the following morning, we very carefully extracted the tumbler and the bottle from their respective boxes and set them up, with a black coat of mine for a background, at the end of a table. Then Thorndyke produced his small folding camera—which pulled out to a surprising length—and, having fitted it with a short-focus objective, made the exposures, and developed the plates in a dark cupboard by the light of a little red lamp from the research case. When the plates were dry we inspected them through a lens, and found them microscopically sharp. Finally, at Thorndyke's suggestion, I scratched my initials with a needle in the corner of each plate.

"Well," I said, when he had finished, "you have got the evidence that you wanted, and in a very complete form. It remains to be seen now whether you will ever get an opportunity to use it."

"Don't be pessimistic, Strangeways," said he. "We have had exceptional luck in getting this splendid series of finger-prints. Let us hope that Fortune will not desert us after making us these gifts."

"What is to be done with the originals?" I asked.

"Shall I put them back where we found them?"

"I think not," he replied. "If you have a safe or a secure lock-up cupboard, where they could be put away, out of sight, and from whence they could be produced if necessary, I will ask you to take charge of them."

There was a cupboard with a good lock in the old bureau that I had found in my bedroom, and to this I conveyed the precious objects and locked them in. And so ended—at least, for the present—the episode of our raid on poor Angelina's abode.

CHAPTER XIII—THE DISCOVERY IN BLACK BOY-LANE

On a fine, sunny afternoon, about ten days after our raid on Angelina's rooms (it was Tuesday, the 14th of July, to be exact), I was sitting in my dining-room, from which the traces of lunch had just been removed, idly glancing over the paper, and considering the advisability of taking a walk, when I heard the door-bell ring. There was a short interval; then the door was opened, and the sounds of strife and wrangling that followed this phenomenon informed me that the visitor was Mr. Bundy, between whom and Mrs. Dunk there existed a state of chronic warfare. Presently the dining-room door opened—in time for me to catch a concluding growl of defiance from Mrs. Dunk—and that lady announced gruffly: "Mr. Bundy."

My visitor tripped in smilingly, "all teeth and eyeglass," as his inveterate enemy had once expressed it, holding a Panama hat, which had temporarily superseded the velour.

"Well, John," said he, "coming out to play?" He had lately taken to calling me John; in fact, a very close and pleasant intimacy had sprung up between us. It dated from the occasion when I had confided to him my unfortunate passion for poor Angelina. That confidence he had evidently taken as a great compliment, and the matter of it had struck a sympathetic chord in his kindly nature. From that moment there had been a sensible change in his manner towards me. Beneath his habitual flippancy there was an undertone of gentleness and sympathy, and even of affection. Nor had I been unresponsive. Like Thorndyke, I found in his sunny temperament, his invariable cheerfulness and high spirits, a communicable quality that took effect on my own state of mind. And then I had early recognized that, in spite of his apparent giddiness, Bundy was a man of excellent intelligence and considerable strength of character. So the friendship had ripened naturally enough.

I rose from my chair and, dropping the paper, stretched myself. "You are an idle young dog," said I. "Why aren't you at work?"

"Nothing doing at the office except some specifications. Japp is doing them. Come out and have a roll round."

"Well, Jimmy," said I. "Your name is Jimmy, isn't it?"

"No, it is not," he replied with dignity. "I am called Peter—like the Bishop of Rumtifoo, and, by a curious coincidence, for the very same reason."

"Let me see," said I, falling instantly into the trap, "what was that reason?"

"Why, you see," he replied impressively, "the Bishop was called Peter because that was his name."

"Look here, young fellow my lad," said I, "you'll get yourself into trouble if you come up here pulling your elder's legs."

"It was only a gentle tweak, old chap," said he. "Besides, you aren't so blooming senile, after all. You are only cutting your first crop of whiskers. Are you coming out? I saw old Cobble dick just now, turning down Blue Boar Lane and looking as miserable as a wet cat."

"What was he looking miserable about?"

"The slump in relics, I expect. He is making no head way with his investigation. I fancy he had reckoned on getting an inspectorship out of this case, whereas, if he doesn't reach some sort of conclusion, he is likely to get his rapples knucked, as old Miss Barman would say. I suspect he was on his way to the Ark to confer with Mr. Noah. What do you say to a stroll in the direction of Mount Ararat?"

It was a cunning suggestion on the part of Bundy, for it drew me instantly. Repulsive as old Israel's activities were to me, the presence of those finger-prints, securely locked up in my bureau, had created in me a fresh anxiety to see the first state of the investigation completed so that the search for the murderer could be commenced in earnest. Not that my presence would help the sergeant, but that I was eager to hear the tidings of any new discovery.

Bundy's inference had been quite correct. We arrived at the head of the Blue Boar pier just in time to see the sergeant slowly descending the ladder, watched gloomily by Israel Bangs. As the former reached terra firma he turned round and then observed us.

"Any news, Sergeant?" I asked, as he approached across the grass.

He shook his head discontentedly. "No," he replied, "not a sign; not a vestige. It's a most mysterious affair. The things seemed to be coming up quite regularly until that hatpin was found. Then everything came to an end. Not a trace of anything for nigh upon a month. And what, in the name of Fortune, can have become of the body? That's what I can't make out. If this goes on much longer, there won't be any body: and then we shall be done. The case will have to be dropped."

He took off his hat (he was in plain clothes as usual) and wiped his forehead, looking blankly first at me and then at Bundy. The latter also took off his hat and whisked out his handkerchief, bringing with it a little telescope which fell to the ground and was immediately picked up by the sergeant. "Neat little glass, this," he remarked, dusting it with his handkerchief. "It's lucky it fell on the turf." He took off the cap, and pulling out the tubes, peered vaguely through it up and down the river. Presently he handed it to me. "Look at those craft down below the dockyard," said he.

I took the little instrument from him and pointed it at the group of small, cutter-rigged vessels that he had indicated, of which the telescope, small as it was, gave a brilliantly sharp picture.

"What are they?" I asked. "Oyster dredgers?"

"No," he replied. "They are bawleys with their shrimp-trawls down. But there are plenty of oyster dredgers in the lower river and out in the estuary, and what beats me is why none of them ever brings up anything in the trawls or dredges—anything in our line, I mean."

"What did you expect them to bring up?" Bundy asked.

"Well, there are the things that have washed ashore, and there are the other things that haven't washed ashore yet. And then there is the body."

"Mr. Noah would have something to say if they brought that up," said Bundy. "By the way, what had he got to say when you called on him?"

"Old Bangs? Why he is getting a bit shirty. Wants me to pay him for all the time he has lost on creeping and searching. Of course, I can't do that, I didn't employ him."

"Did he find the hat-pin that you spoke of?" Bundy asked.

"Yes; and he has been grubbing round the place where he found it ever since, as if he thought hat-pins grew there."

"Still," said Bundy, "it is not so unreasonable. A hatpin couldn't have floated ashore. If the hat came off, the two hat-pins must have fallen out at pretty much the same time and place."

"Yes," the sergeant agreed, reflectively, "that seems to be common sense; and, if it is, the other hat-pin ought to be lying somewhere close by. I must go and have a look there myself." He again reflected for a few moments and then asked: "Would you like to see the place where Israel found the pin?"

As I had seen the place already and had shown it to Thorndyke, I left Bundy to answer.

"Why not?" he assented, rather, I suspected, to humour the sergeant than because he felt any particular interest in the place. Thereupon Cobbledick, whose enthusiasm appeared to have been

revived by Bundy's remark, led the way briskly towards the wilderness by the coal-wharves, through that desolate region and along a cart-track that skirted the marshes until we came out into a sort of lesser wilderness to the west of Gas-House Road. Here the sergeant slipped through a large hole in a corrugated iron fence which gave access to a wharf littered with the unpresentable debris resulting from the activities of a firm of ship-knackers. Advancing to the edge of the wharf, Cobbledick stood for a while looking down wistfully at the expanse of unspeakable mud that the receding tide had uncovered.

"I suppose it is too dirty to go down," he said in a regretful tone.

Bundy's assent to this proposition was most emphatic and unqualified, and the sergeant had to content himself with a bird's-eye view. But he made a very thorough inspection, walking along the edge of the wharf, scrutinizing its base, pile by pile, and giving separate attention to each pot, tin, or scrap of driftwood on the slimy surface. He even borrowed Bundy's telescope to enable him to examine the more distant parts of the mud, until the owner of the instrument was reduced to the necessity of standing behind him, for politeness' sake, to get a comfortable yawn.

"Well," said Cobbledick, at long last, handing back the telescope, "I suppose we must give it up. But it's disappointing."

"I don't quite see why," said Bundy. "You have found enough to prove that the body is in the river, and no number of further relics would prove any more."

"No, there's some truth in that," Cobbledick agreed. "But I don't like the way that everything seems to have come to a stop." He crawled dejectedly through the hole in the fence and walked on for a minute or two without speaking. Presently he halted and looked about him. "I suppose Black Boy-lane will be our best way," he remarked.

"Which is Black Boy-lane?" I asked.

"It is the lane we came down after we left Japp and Willard that day," Bundy explained.

"I remember," said I, "but I didn't know it had a name."

"It was named after a little inn that used to stand somewhere near the top; but it was pulled down years ago. Here's the lane."

We entered the little, tortuous alley that wound between the high, tarred fences, and as it was too narrow for us to walk abreast, Bundy dropped behind. A little way up the lane I noticed an old hat lying on the high grass at the foot of the fence. Bundy apparently noticed it, too, for just after we had passed it I heard the sound of a kick, and the hat flew over my shoulder. At the same moment, and impelled by the same kick, a small object, which I at first thought to be a pebble, hopped swiftly along the ground in front of us, then rolled a little way, and finally came to rest, when I saw that it was a button. I should probably have passed it without further notice, having no use for stray buttons. But the more thrifty sergeant stooped and picked it up; and the instant that he looked at it he stopped dead.

"My God! Doctor," he exclaimed, holding it out towards me. "Look at this!"

I took it from him, though I had recognized it at a glance. It was a small bronze button with a Tudor Rose embossed on it.

"This is a most amazing thing," said Cobbledick.

"There can't be any doubt as to what it is."

"Not the slightest," I agreed. "It is certainly one of the buttons from Mrs. Frood's coat. The question is, how on earth did it get here?"

"Yes," said the sergeant, "that is the question; and a very difficult question, too."

"Aren't you taking rather a lot for granted?" suggested Bundy, to whom I had passed the little object for inspection. "It doesn't do to jump at conclusions too much. Mrs. Frood isn't likely to have had her buttons made to order. She must have bought them somewhere. She might even have bought them in Rochester. In any case, there must be thousands of others like them."

"I suppose there must be," I admitted, "though I have never seen any buttons like them."

"Neither have I," said Cobbledick, "and I am going to stick to the obvious probabilities. The missing woman wore buttons like this, and I shall assume that this is one of her buttons unless someone can prove that it isn't."

"But how do you account for one of her buttons being here?" Bundy objected.

"I don't account for it," retorted Cobbledick. "It's a regular puzzle. Of course, someone—a child, for instance—might have picked it up on the shore and dropped it here. But that is a mere guess, and not a very likely one. The obvious thing to do is to search this lane thoroughly and see if there are any other traces; and that is what I am going to do now. But don't let me detain you two gentlemen if you had rather not stay."

"I shall certainly stay and help you, Sergeant," said I; and Bundy, assuming the virtue of enthusiasm, if he had it not, elected also to stay and join in the search.

"We had better go back to the bottom of the lane," said Cobbledick, "and go through the grass at the foot of the fence from end to end. I will take the right hand side and you take the left."

We retraced our steps to the bottom of the lane and began a systematic search, turning over the grass and weeds and exposing the earth inch by inch. It was a slow process and would have appeared a singular proceeding had any wayfarer passed through and observed us, but fortunately it was an unfrequented place, and no one came to spy upon us. We had traversed nearly half the lane when Bundy stood up and stretched himself. "I don't know what your back is made of, John," said he. "Mine feels as if it was made of broken bottles. How much more have we got to do?"

"We haven't done half yet," I replied, also standing up and rubbing my lumbar region; and at this moment the sergeant, who was a few yards ahead, hailed us with a triumphant shout. We both turned quickly and beheld him standing with one arm raised aloft and the hand grasping a silver-topped hat-pin.

"What do you say to that, Mr. Bundy?" he demanded as we hurried forward to examine the new "find." 'Shall we be jumping at conclusions if we say that this hat-pin is Mrs. Frood's?"

"No," Bundy admitted after a glance at the silver poppy-head. "This seems quite distinctive, and, of course, it confirms the button. But I don't understand it in the least. How can they have come here?"

"We won't go into that," said the sergeant, in a tone of suppressed excitement that showed me pretty clearly that he had already gone into it. "They are here. And now the question arises, what became of the hat? It couldn't have dropped off down at the wharf, or this hat-pin wouldn't be here; but it must have fallen off when both hat-pins were gone. Now what can have become of it?"

"It might have been picked up and taken possession of by some woman," I suggested. "It was a good hat, and if the body was brought here soon after the crime, as it must have been, it wouldn't have been much damaged. But why trouble about the hat? Appearances suggest that the body was either brought up or taken down this lane. That is the new and astonishing fact that needs explaining."

"We don't want to do any explaining now," said Cobbledick. "We are here to collect facts. If we can find out what became of the hat, that may help us when we come to consider the explanations."

"Well, it obviously isn't here," said I.

"No," he agreed, "and it wouldn't have been left here. A murderer mightn't have noticed the button, or even the hat-pin, on a dark, foggy night. But he'd have noticed the hat; and he wouldn't have left it where it must have been seen, and probably led to inquiries. He might have taken it with him, or he might have got rid of it. I should say he would have got rid of it. What is on the other side of these fences?"

We all hitched ourselves up the respective fences far enough to look over. On the one side was a space of bare, gravelly ground with thin patches of grass and numerous heaps of cinder; on the other was an area of old waste land thickly covered with thistles, ragwort, and other weeds. The sergeant elected to begin with the latter, as the less frequented and therefore more probably undisturbed. Setting his foot on the buttress of a post, he went over the fence with surprising agility, considering his figure, and was lost to view; but we could hear him raking about among the herbage close to the fence, and from time to time I stood on the buttress and was able to witness his proceedings. First he went to the bottom of the lane and from that point returned by the fence, searching eagerly among the high weeds. I saw him thus proceed, apparently to the top of the lane in the neighbourhood of the remains of the city wall. Thence he came back, but now at a greater distance from the fence, and as he was still eagerly peering and probing amongst the weeds, it was evident that he had had no success. Suddenly, when he was but a few yards away, he uttered an exclamation and ran forward. Then I saw him stoop, and the next moment he fairly ran towards me holding the unmistakable brown straw hat with the dull green ribbon.

"That tells us what we wanted to know," he said breathlessly, handing the hat to me as he climbed over the fence; "at least, I think it does. I'll tell you what I mean—but not now," he added in a lower tone, though not unheard by Bundy, as I inferred later.

"I suppose we need hardly go on with the search any further?" I suggested, having had enough of groping amongst the grass.

"Well, no," he replied. "I shall go over it again later on, but we've got enough to think about for the present. By the way, Mr. Bundy, I've found something belonging to you. Isn't this your property?"

He produced from his pocket a largish key, to which was attached a wooden label legibly inscribed "Japp and Bundy, High-street, Rochester."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Bundy, "it is Japp's precious key! Where on earth did you find it, Sergeant?"

"Right up at the top," was the reply. "Close to the old wall."

"Now, I wonder how the deuce it got there," said Bundy. "Some fool must have thrown it over the fence from pure mischief. However, here it is. You know there was a reward of ten shillings for finding it, Sergeant. I had better settle up at once. You needn't make any difficulties about it," he added, as the sergeant seemed disposed to decline the payment. "It won't come out of my pocket. It is the firm's business."

On this understanding Cobbledick pocketed the proffered note and we walked on up the lane, the sergeant slightly embarrassed, as we approached the town, by the palpably unconcealable hat. Very little was said by any of us, for these new discoveries, with the amazing inferences that they suggested, gave us all abundant material for thought. The sergeant walked with eyes bent on the ground, evidently cogitating profoundly; my mind surged with new speculations and hypotheses, while Bundy, if not similarly preoccupied, refrained from breaking in on our meditations.

When, at length, by devious ways, we reached the Highstreet in the neighbourhood of the Corn Exchange, we halted, and the sergeant looked at me as if framing a question. Bundy glanced up at the quaint old clock, and remarked:

"It is about time I got back to the office. Mustn't leave poor old Japp to do all the work, though he never grumbles. So I will leave you here."

I realized that this was only a polite excuse to enable the sergeant to have a few words with me alone, and I accepted it as such.

"Good-bye, then," said I, "if you must be off, and in case I don't see you before, I shall expect you to dinner on Saturday if you've got the evening free. Dr. Thorndyke is coming down for the week-end, and I know you enjoy ragging him."

"He is pretty difficult to get a rise out of, all the same," said Bundy, brightening up perceptibly at the invitation. "But I shall turn up with very great pleasure." He bestowed a mock ceremonious salute on me and the sergeant, and, turning away, bustled off in the direction of the office. As soon as he was out of earshot Cobbledick opened the subject of the new discoveries.

"This is an extraordinary development of our case, Doctor," said he. "I didn't want to discuss it before Mr. Bundy, though he is really quite a discreet gentleman, and pretty much on the spot, too. But he isn't a party to the case, and it is better not to talk too freely. You see the points that these fresh finds raise?"

"I see that they put a new complexion on the affair, but to me they only make the mystery deeper and more incomprehensible."

"In a way they do," Cobbledick agreed, "but, on the other hand, they put the case on a more satisfactory footing. For instance, we understand now why the body has never come to light. It was never in the river at all. Then as to the perpetrator; he was a local man—or, at least, there was a local man in it; a man who knew the town and the waterside neighbourhood thoroughly. No stranger would have found Black Boy-lane. Very few Rochester people know it."

"But," I asked, "what does the finding of these things suggest to you?"

"Well," he replied, "it suggests several questions. Let me just put these things away in my office, and then we can talk the matter over." He went into his office, and shortly returned relieved—very

much relieved—of the conspicuous hat. We turned towards the bridge, and he resumed: "The first question and the most important one is, which way was the body travelling? It is obvious that it was carried through Black Boy-lane. But in which direction? Towards the town or towards the river? When you think of the circumstances; when you recall that it was a foggy night when she disappeared; it seems at first more probable that the crime might have been committed in, or near, the lane, and the body carried down to the river. But when you consider all the facts, that doesn't seem possible. There is that box of tablets, picked up dry and clean on Chatham Hard. That seems to fix the locality where the crime occurred."

"And there is the brooch," said I.

"I don't attach much importance to that," he replied. "It might have been picked up anywhere. But the box of tablets couldn't have got from Black Boy-lane to Chatham except by the river, and it hadn't been in the river. But the hat seems to me to settle the question. You see, one hat-pin was found on the shore and the other in the lane near the hat. Now, one hat-pin might have dropped out and left the hat still fixed on the head. But when the hat came off, the pins must have come off with it. The hat came off near the top of the lane. If both the pins had been in it they would both have come out there.

"But one pin was found on the shore; therefore when the body was at the shore the hat must have been still on the head, though it had probably got loosened by all the dragging about in the boat and in landing the body. You agree to that, Doctor?"

"Yes, it seems undeniable," I answered.

"Very well," said he. "Then the body was being carried up the lane. The next question is: was it being carried by one person or by more than one? Well, I think you will agree with me, Doctor, that it could hardly have been done by one man. It is quite a considerable distance from the shore to the top of the lane. She was a goodsized woman, and a dead body is a mighty awkward thing to carry at the best of times. I should say there must have been at least two men."

"It certainly does seem probable," I admitted.

"I think so," said he. "Then we come to another question. Was it really a dead body? Or might the woman have been merely insensible?"

"Good God, Sergeant!" I exclaimed. "You don't think it possible that it could have been a case of forcible abduction, and that Mrs. Frood is still alive?"

"I wouldn't say it was impossible," he replied, "but I certainly don't think it is the case. You see, nearly three months have passed and there is no sign of her. But in modern England you can't hide a full-grown, able-bodied woman who has got all her wits about her. No, Doctor, I am afraid we must take the view that the woman who was carried up Black Boy-lane was a dead woman. All I want to point out is that the other view is a bare possibility, and that we mustn't forget it."

"But," I urged, "don't you think that the fact that she was being carried towards the town strongly suggests that she was alive? Why on earth should a murderer bring a body, at great risk of discovery, from the river, where it could easily have been disposed of, up into the town? It seems incredible."

"It does," he agreed. "It's a regular facer. But, on the other hand, suppose she was alive. What could they have done with her? How could they have kept her out of sight all this time? And why should they have done it?"

"As to the motive," said I, "that is incomprehensible in any case. But what do you suppose actually happened?"

"My theory of it is," he replied, "that two men, at least, did the job. Both may have been local waterside men, or there may have been a stranger with a water-rat in his pay. I imagine the crime was committed at Chatham, somewhere near the Sun Pier, and that the body was put in a boat and brought up here. It was a densely foggy night, you remember, so there would have been no great difficulty; and there wouldn't be many people about. The part of it that beats me is what they meant to do with the body. They seem to have brought it deliberately from Chatham right up into Rochester Town; and they have got rid of it somehow. They must have had some place ready to stow it in, but what that place can have been, I can't form the ghost of a guess. It's a fair knock-out."

"You don't suppose old Israel Bangs knows anything about it?" I suggested.

The sergeant shook his head. "I've no reason to suppose he does," he replied. "And it is a bad plan to make guesses and name names."

We walked up and down the Esplanade for nearly an hour, discussing various possibilities; but we could make nothing of the incredible thing that seemed to have happened in spite of its incredibility. At last we gave it up and returned to the Guildhall, where, as we parted, he said a little hesitatingly: "I heard you tell Mr. Bundy that Dr. Thorndyke was coming down for the week-end. It wouldn't be amiss if you were to put the facts of the case before him. It's quite in his line, and I think he would be interested to hear about it; and he might see something that I have missed. But, of course, it must be in strict confidence."

I promised to try to find an opportunity to get Thorndyke's opinion on the case, and with this we separated, the sergeant retiring to his office and I making my way homeward to prepare a report for dispatch by the last post.

CHAPTER XIV—SERGEANT COBBLEDICK IS ENLIGHTENED

The custom which had grown upon my part of meeting Thorndyke at the station on the occasion of his visits was duly honoured on the present occasion, for the surprising discoveries in Black Boy-lane, which I had described in my report to him, made me eager to hear his comments. Unfortunately, on this occasion, he had come down by an unusually late train, and the opportunity for discussion was limited to the time occupied by the short walk from Rochester Station to my house. For it was close upon dinner time, and I rather expected to find Bundy awaiting us.

"Your report was quite a thrilling document," he remarked, as we came out of the station approach. "These new discoveries seem to launch us on a fresh phase of the investigation."

"Do they seem to you to offer any intelligible suggestions?" I asked.

"There is no lack of suggestions," he replied. "To a person of ordinary powers of imagination, a number of hypotheses must present themselves. But, of course, the first thing to consider is not what might have happened, but what did happen, and what we can safely infer from those

happenings. We can apparently take it as proved that the body was carried through the lane; and everything goes to show that it was carried from the river towards the town. The first clear inference is that we can completely exclude accident, pure and simple. The body—living or dead—may be assumed to have been carried by some person or persons. We can dismiss the idea that the woman walked up the lane. But if someone carried the body, someone is definitely implicated. The affair comes unquestionably into the category of crime."

"That doesn't carry us very far," I said, with a sense of disappointment.

"It carries us a stage farther than our previous data did, for it excludes accident, which they did not. Then it suggests not only premeditation, but arrangement. If the body was brought up from the river, there must have been some place known to, and probably prepared by, those who brought it, in which it could be deposited; and that place must have been more secure than the river from which it was brought. But the river, itself, was a very secure hiding-place, especially if the body had been sunk with weights. Now, this is all very remarkable. If you consider the extraordinary procedure; the seizure of the victim at Chatham; the conveyance of the body from thence to this considerable distance; the landing of it at the wharf; the conveyance of it by an apparently selected route—at enormous risk of discovery, in spite of the fog to an appointed destination: I say, Strangeways, that if you consider this astounding procedure, you cannot fail to be convinced that there was some definite purpose behind it."

"Yes," I agreed, "that seems to be so. But what could the purpose be? It appears perfectly incomprehensible. It only makes the mystery more unsolvable than ever."

"Not at all," he rejoined. "There is nothing so hopeless to investigate as the perfectly obvious and commonplace. As soon as an apparently incomprehensible motive appears, we are within sight of a solution. There may be innumerable explanations of a common-place action; but an outrageously unreasonable action; pursued with definite and considered purpose, can admit of but one or two. The action, with its underlying purpose, must be adjusted to some unusual conditions. We have only to consider to what conditions it could be adjusted, and which, if any, of those conditions actually exist, and the explanation of the apparently incomprehensible action comes into view. But here we are at our destination, and there is our friend, Bundy, standing on the doorstep. By the way, I have brought one or two photographs of Mrs. Frood for you to look at."

We arrived in time to intervene and put an end to a preliminary skirmish between the irrepressible Bundy and Mrs. Dunk, and when greetings had been exchanged, Thorndyke went up to his room to wash and deposit his luggage.

"Well, John," said Bundy, when he had hung up his hat, "it is very pleasant to see my old friend after this long separation. Very good of him, too, to invite an insignificant outsider like me to meet his distinguished colleague. You are a benefactor to me, John."

"Don't talk nonsense, Peterkin," said I. "You know we are always glad to see you. I invite you for my own pleasure and Thorndyke's, not for yours."

Bundy gave my arm a grateful squeeze. "Good old John," said he. "Nothing like doing it handsomely. But here is the great man himself," he added, as Thorndyke entered the dining-room, carrying a cardboard box, "with instruments of magic. He's going to do a conjuring trick."

Thorndyke opened the box and delicately picked out four photographs, all mounted and all of cabinet size, which he stood up in a row on the mantelpiece. Two of them were from the same

negative, one being printed in red carbon, the other in sepia. The remaining two were ordinary silver prints of the conventional trade type.

Bundy looked at the collection with not unnatural surprise.

"Where did these, things come from?" he asked.

"They came from London," replied Thorndyke, "where things of this kind grow. Strangeways asked me to get him some samples. How do you like them? My own preference is for the carbons, and of the two I think I like the red chalk print the better."

I ran my eye along the row and found myself in strong agreement with Thorndyke. It was not only that the carbon prints had the advantage of the finer medium. The treatment was altogether more artistic, and the likeness seemed better, in spite of a rather over-strong top-lighting.

"Yes," I said, "the carbons are infinitely superior to the silver prints, and of the two I think the red is the better because it emphasises the shadows less."

"Is the likeness as good as in the silver prints?" Thorndyke asked.

"Better, I think. The expression is more natural and spontaneous. What do you say, Peter?"

As I spoke I looked at him, not for the first time, for I had already been struck by the intense concentration with which he had been examining the two carbons. And it was not only concentration. There was a curious expression of surprise, as if something in the appearance of the portraits puzzled him.

He looked up with a perplexed frown. "As to the likeness," said he, "I don't know that I am a particularly good judge. I only saw her once or twice. But, as far as I remember, it seems to be quite a good likeness, and there can be no question as to the superiority, in an artistic sense, of the carbons. And I agree with you that the shadows are less harsh in the red than in the sepia. Who is the photographer?"

He picked up the red print and, turning it over, looked at the back. Then, finding that the back of the card was blank, he picked up the sepia print and inspected it in the same way, but with the same result. There was no photographer's name either on the back or front.

"I have an impression," said Thorndyke, "that the carbons were done a City photographer. But my man will know. He got them for me."

Bundy set the two photographs back in their places, still, as it seemed to me, with the air of a man who is trying vainly to remember something. But, at this moment, Mrs. Dunk entered with the soup tureen, and we forthwith took our places at the table.

We had finished our soup, and I was proceeding to effect the dismemberment of an enormous sole, when Bundy, having fortified himself with a sip of Chablis, cast a malignant glance at Thorndyke.

"I have got some bad news for you, Doctor," said he.

"Which doctor are you addressing?" Thorndyke asked. "There's only one now," replied Bundy. "T'other one has been degraded to the rank of John."

"That happens to be my rank, too," observed Thorndyke.

"Oh, but I couldn't think of taking such a liberty," Bundy protested, "though it is very gracious and condescending of you to suggest it. No, your rank and tine will continue to be that of doctor."

"And what is your bad news??'

"It is a case of a lost opportunity," said Bundy. "'Of all the sad words of tongue or pen,' and so on. It might have been ten shillings. But it never will now. Cobbledick has got your ten bob."

"Do you mean that Cobbledick has found the missing key?"

"Even so, alackaday! The chance is gone for ever."

"Where did he find it?" Thorndyke asked.

"Ah!" exclaimed Bundy. "There it is again. The tragedy of it! He wasn't looking for it at all. He just fell over it in a field where he was searching for relics of Mrs. Frood."

"Your description," said Thorndyke "is deficient in geographical exactitude. Could you bring your ideas of locality to a somewhat sharper focus? There are probably several fields in the neighbourhood of Rochester."

"So there are," said Bundy. "Quite a lot. But this particular field lies on the right, or starboard, side of a small thoroughfare called Black Boy-lane."

"Let me see," said Thorndyke. "Isn't that the lane that we went down after leaving our friends on the day of the Great Perambulation?"

"Yes," replied Bundy, looking at him in astonishment, "but how did you know its name?" (He was, of course, not aware of my report to Thorndyke describing the discoveries and the place.)

"That," said Thorndyke "is an irrelevant question. Now when you say 'the right-hand side'—"

"I mean the right-hand side looking towards the town, of course. As a matter of fact, Cobbledick found the key among the thistles near to the fence, and quite close to the outside of the city wall."

"How do you suppose it got there?" Thorndyke asked.

"I've no idea. Someone must have taken it out of the gate and thrown it over the fence. That is obvious. But who could have done it I can't imagine. Of course, you suspect Cobbledick, but that is only jealousy."

The exchange of schoolboy repartee continued without a sensible pause on either side. But yet I seemed to detect in Thorndyke's manner a certain reflectiveness underlying the levity of his verbal conflict with Bundy; a reflectiveness that seemed to have had its origin in the "news" that the latter had communicated. Of course, I had said nothing, in my report, about the finding of the key. Why *should* I? Those reports referred exclusively to matters connected with the disappearance of poor Angelina. The loss and the recovery of the key were items of mere local gossip with which Thorndyke could have no concern excepting in connexion with Bundy's facetious fiction. And yet it had seemed to me that Thorndyke showed quite a serious interest in the announcement. However, he made no further reference to the matter, and the conversation drifted to other topics.

It was almost inevitable that, sooner or later, some reference should be made to the discoveries in the lane. It was Bundy, of course, who introduced the subject; and I was amazed by the adroit way in which Thorndyke conveyed the impression of complete ignorance, without making any statement, and the patient manner in which he listened to the account of the adventure, and even elicited amplified details by judicious questions. But he eluded all Bundy's efforts to extract an opinion on the significance of the discoveries.

"But," the latter protested, "you said that if I would give you the facts, you would give me the explanation."

"The explanation is obvious," said Thorndyke. "If you found these objects in the lane, they must have been dropped there."

"Well, of course they must," said Bundy. "That is quite obvious."

"Exactly," agreed Thorndyke. "That is what I am pointing out."

"But why was the body being carried up the lane? And where was it being carried to?"

"Ah," protested Thorndyke, "but now you are going beyond your facts. You haven't proved that there was any body there at all."

"But there must have been, or the things couldn't have dropped off it."

"But you haven't proved that they did drop off it. They may have, or they may not. That is a question of fact; and as I impressed on you on a previous occasion, evidence as to fact is the function of the common witness. The expert witness explains the significance of facts furnished by others. I have explained the facts that you have produced, and now you ask me to explain something that isn't a fact at all. But that is not my function. I am an expert."

"I see," said Bundy; "and now I understand why judges are so down on expert witnesses. It is my belief that they are a parcel of impostors. Wasn't Captain Bunsby an expert witness? Or was he only an oracle?"

"It is a distinction without a difference," replied Thorndyke. "Captain Bunsby is the classical instance of oracular safety. It was impossible to dispute the correctness of his pronouncements."

"Principally," said I, "because no one could make head or tail of them."

"But that was the subtlety of the method," said Thorndyke. "A statement cannot be contested until it is understood. From which it follows that if you would deliver a judgment that cannot be disputed, you must take proper precautions against the risk of being understood."

Bundy adjusted his eye-glass and fixed on Thorndyke a glare of counterfeit defiance. "I am going to take an early opportunity of seeing you in the witness-box," said he. "It will be the treat of my life."

"I must try to give you that treat," replied Thorndyke. "I am sure you will be highly entertained, but I don't think you will be able to dispute my evidence."

"I don't suppose I shall," Bundy retorted with a grin, "if it is of the same brand as the sample that I have heard."

Here the arrival of Mrs. Dunk with the coffee ushered in a truce between the disputants, and when I had filled the cups Thorndyke changed the subject by recalling the incidents of our perambulation with Japp and Mr. Willard; and Bundy, apparently considering that enough chaff had been cut for one evening, entered into a discussion on the conditions of life in mediaeval Rochester with a zest and earnestness that came as a refreshing change, after so much frivolity. So the evening passed pleasantly away until ten o'clock, when Bundy rose to depart.

"Shall we see him home, Thorndyke?" said I. "We can do with a walk after our pow-wow."

"Somebody ought to see him home," said Thorndyke. "He looks comparatively sober now, but wait till he gets out into the air." (Bundy's almost ascetic abstemiousness in respect of wine, I should explain, had become a mild joke between us.) "But I think I won't join the bacchanalian procession. I have a letter to write, and I can get it done and posted by the time you come back."

As we walked towards the office arm-in-arm—Bundy keeping up the fiction of a slight unsteadiness of gait—my guest once more expressed enjoyment of our little festivals.

"I suppose," said he, "Dr. Thorndyke is really quite a big bug in his way."

"Yes," I replied; "he is in the very front rank; in fact, I should say that he is the greatest living authority on his subject."

"Yes," said Bundy, thoughtfully, "one feels that he is a great man, although he is so friendly and so perfectly free from side. I hope I don't cheek him too much."

"He doesn't seem to resent it," I answered, "and he certainly doesn't object to your society. He expressly said, when he wrote last, that he hoped to see something of you."

"That was awfully nice of him," Bundy said with very evident gratification; and he added, after a pause: "Lord! John, what a windfall it was for me when you came down with that letter from old Turcival. It has made life a different thing for me."

"I am glad to hear it, Peter," said I; "but you haven't got all the benefit. It was a bit of luck for me to strike a live bishop in my new habitat, and a Rumtifoozlish one at that. But here we are at the episcopal palace. Shall I assist your lordship up the steps?"

We carried out the farce to its foolish end, staggering together up the steps, at the top of which I propped him securely against the door and rang the bell, with the comfortable certainty that there was no one in the house to disturb.

"Good night, John, old chap," he said cordially, as I retired.

"Good night, Peter, my child," I responded; and so took my way homeward to my other guest.

I arrived at my house in time to meet Thorndyke returning from the adjacent pillar-box, and we went in together.

"Well," said he, "I suppose we had better turn in, according to what is, I believe, the custom of this household, and turn out betimes in the morning, for a visit, perhaps, to Black Boy-lane."

"Yes," I replied, "we may as well turn in now. You are not going to leave these photographs there, are you?"

"They are your photographs," he replied; "that is, if you care to have them. I brought them down for you."

I thanked him very warmly for the gift, and gathered up the portraits carefully, replacing them, for the present, in their box. Then we turned out the lights and made our way up to our respective bedrooms.

At breakfast on the following morning Thorndyke opened the subject of our investigation by cross-examining me on the matter of my report, and the more detailed account that Bundy had given.

"What does Sergeant Cobbledick think of the new developments?" he asked, when I had given him all the detail that I could.

"In a way he is encouraged. He is glad to get something more definite to work on. But for the present he seems to be high and dry. He gave me quite a learned exposition of the possibilities of the case, but he had to admit when he had finished that he was still in the dark so far as any final conclusion was concerned. He even suggested that I should put the facts before you—he recognized you when we met him on the road near Blue Boar Pier—and ask if you could make any suggestion."

"Can you recall the sergeant's exposition of the case?"

"I think so. It made rather an impression on me at the time," and here I repeated, as well as I could remember them, the various inferences that Cobbledick had drawn from the presence in the lane of the things that we had found. Thorndyke listened with deep attention, nodding his head approvingly as each point was made.

"A very admirable analysis, Strangeways," he said when I had finished. "It does the sergeant great credit. So far as it goes, it is an excellent interpretation of the facts that are in his possession. There are, perhaps, one or two points that he has overlooked."

"If there are," said I, "it would be a great kindness to draw his attention to them. He is naturally anxious to get on with the case, and he has taken endless trouble over it."

"I shall be very glad to give him a hint or two," said Thorndyke. "After breakfast I should like to go over the ground with you, and then we might go along to the station and see if he is in his office."

I agreed to this program, and as soon as we had finished our breakfast we went forth, making our way by Free School-lane and The Common to the marshes west of Gas House-road. From there we entered Black Boy-lane at the lower end, and slowly followed its windings, Thorndyke looking about him attentively, and occasionally peering over the fences, which his stature enabled him to do without climbing. At the top of the lane, where it opened into a paved thoroughfare, we observed no less a personage than Sergeant Cobbledick, standing on the pavement and looking at the few adjacent houses with an expression of profound speculation. His speculative attitude changed suddenly to one of eager interest when he saw us; and on my presenting him to Thorndyke, he stood stiffly at "attention" and raised his hat with an air that I can only describe as reverent.

"Dr. Strangeways was telling me, just now," said Thorndyke, "of your very interesting observations on these new developments. He also said that you would like to talk the matter over with me."

"I should, indeed, sir," the sergeant said, earnestly; "and if I might suggest it, my office will be very quiet, being Sunday, and I could show you the things that have been found, if you would like to see them."

"As to the things that have been found," said Thorndyke, "I am prepared to take them as read. They have been properly identified. But we could certainly talk more conveniently in your office."

In a few minutes we turned into a narrow street which brought us to the side of the Guildhall, and the sergeant, having shown us into his office and given some instructions to a constable, entered and locked the door.

"Now, Sergeant," said Thorndyke, "tell us what your difficulty is."

"I've got several difficulties, Sir," replied Cobbledick. "In the first place, here is a body being carried up the lane. You agree with me, Sir, that it was going up and not down?"

"Yes; your reasons seem quite conclusive."

"Well, then, Sir, the next question is, was this a dead body, or was the woman drugged or insensible? The fact that she was being taken from the river towards the town suggests that she was alive and being taken to some house where she could be hidden; but, of course, a dead body might be taken to a house to be destroyed by burning or to be dismembered or even buried, say under the cellar. I must say my own feeling is that it was a dead body."

"The reasons you gave Dr. Strangeways for thinking so seem to be quite sound. Let us proceed on the assumption that it was a dead body."

"Well, Sir," said Cobble dick, gloomily, "there you are. That's all. We have got a body brought up from the river. We can trace it up to near the top of the lane. But there we lose it. It seems to have vanished into smoke. It was being taken up into the town; but where? There's nothing to show. We come out into the paved streets, and, of course, there isn't a trace. We seem to have come to the end of our clues; and I am very much afraid that we shan't get any more."

"There," said Thorndyke, "I am inclined to agree with you, Sergeant. You won't get any more clues for the simple reason that you have got them all."

"Got them all!" exclaimed Cobbledick, staring in amazement at Thorndyke.

"Yes," was the calm reply; "at least, that is how it appears to me. Your business now is not to search for more clues but to extract the meaning from the facts that you possess. Come, now, Sergeant," he continued, "let us take a bird's-eye view of the case, as it were, reconstructing the investigation in a sort of synopsis. I will read the entries from my note-book."

"On Saturday, the 26th of April, Mrs. Frood disappeared. On the 1st of May the brooch was found at the pawn-brokers. On the 7th of May the box of tablets and the bag were found on the shore at Chatham, apparently fixing the place of the crime. On the 9th of May the scarf was found at Blue Boar Head. On the 15th of May a shoe was found in the creek between Blue Boar Head and Gas House Point. On the 25th of May the second shoe was found on the gridiron near Gas House Point. On the 20th of June a hat-pin was found on the shore a little west of the last spot; always creeping steadily up the river, you notice."

"Yes," said Cobbledick, "I noticed that, and I'm hanged if I can account for it in any way,"

"Never mind," said Thorndyke. "Just note the fact. Then on the 14th of July four articles were found; near the bottom of the lane a button; near the middle of the lane a hat-pin, and, abreast of it in the field, the hat, itself. Finally, at the top of the lane, in the field, you found the missing key."

"I don't see what the key has got to do with it," said the sergeant. "It don't seem to me to be in the picture."

"Doesn't it?" said Thorndyke. "Just consider a moment, Sergeant. But perhaps you have forgotten the date on which the key disappeared?"

"I don't know that I ever noticed when it was lost."

"It wasn't lost," said Thorndyke. "It was taken away—probably out of the gate—and afterwards thrown over the fence. But I daresay Dr. Strangeways can give you the date."

I reflected for a few moments. "Let me see," said I. "It was a good while ago, and I remember that it was a Saturday, because the men who were filling the holes in the city wall had knocked off at noon for a week-end. Now when was it? I went to the wine merchant's that day, and—". I paused with a sudden shock of recollection. "Why!" I exclaimed. "It was *the* Saturday; the day Mrs. Frood disappeared!"

Cobbledick seemed to stiffen in his chair as he suddenly turned a startled look at Thorndyke.

"Yes," agreed the latter; "the key disappeared during the morning of the 26th of April and Mrs. Frood disappeared on the evening of the same day. That is a coincidence in time. And if you consider what gate it was that this key unlocked; that it gave entrance—and also excluded entrance—to an isolated, enclosed area of waste land in which excavations and fillings-in are actually taking place; I think you will agree that there is matter for investigation."

As Thorndyke was speaking Cobbledick's eyes opened wider and wider, and his mouth exhibited a like change.

"Good Lord, Sir!" he exclaimed at length, "you mean to say—"

"No, I don't," Thorndyke interrupted with a smile. "I am merely drawing your attention to certain facts which seem to have escaped it. You said that there was no hint of a place to which the body could have been conveyed. I point out a hint which you have overlooked. That is all."

"It is a pretty broad hint, too," said Cobbledick, "and I am going to lose no time in acting on it. Do you happen to know, Doctor, who employed the workmen?"

"I gathered that Japp and Bundy had the contract to repair the wall. At any rate, they were supervising the work, and they will be able to tell you where to find the foreman. Probably they have a complete record of the progress of the work. You know Mr. Japp's address on Boley Hill, I suppose, and Mr. Bundy lives over the office."

"I'll call on him at once," said Cobbledick, "and see if he can give me the particulars, and I'll get him to lend me the key. I suppose you two gentlemen wouldn't care to come and have a look at the place with me?"

"I don't see why not," said Thorndyke. "But I particularly wish not to appear in connexion with the case, so I will ask you to say nothing to anyone of your having spoken to me about it, and, of course, we go to the place alone."

"Certainly," the sergeant agreed emphatically. "We don't want any outsiders with us. Then if you will wait for me here I will get back as quickly as I can. I hope Mr. Bundy is at home."

He snatched up his hat and darted out of the office, full of hope and high spirits. Thorndyke's suggestion had rejuvenated him.

"It seems to me," I said, when he had gone, "a rather remarkable thing that you should have remembered all the circumstances of the loss of this key."

"It isn't really remarkable at all," he replied. "I heard of it after the woman had disappeared. But as soon as she had disappeared, the loss of this particular key at this particular time became a fact of possible evidential importance. It was a fact that had to be noted and remembered. The connexion of the tragedy with the river seemed to exclude it for a time; but the discoveries in the lane at once revived its importance. The fundamental rule, Strangeways, of all criminal investigation is to note everything, relevant or irrelevant, and forget nothing."

"It is an excellent rule," said I, "but it must be a mighty difficult one to carry out"; and for a while we sat, each immersed in his own reflections.

The sergeant returned in an incredibly short space of time, and he burst into the office with a beaming face, flourishing the key. "I found him at home," said he, "and I've got all the necessary particulars, so we can take a preliminary look round." He held the door open, and when we had passed out, he led the way down the little street at a pace that would have done credit to a sporting lamp-lighter. A. very few minutes brought us to the gate, and when he had opened it and locked it behind us, he stood looking round the weed-grown enclosure as if doubtful where to begin.

"Which patch in the wall is the one they were working at when the key disappeared?" Thorndyke asked.

"The last but one to the left," was the reply.

"Then we had better have a look at that, first," said Thorndyke. "It was a ready-made excavation."

We advanced towards the ragged patch in the wall, and as we drew near I looked at it with a tumult of emotions that swamped mere anxiety and expectation. I could see what Thorndyke thought, and that perception amounted almost to conviction. Meanwhile, my colleague and the sergeant stepped close up to the patch and minutely examined the rough and slovenly joints of the stonework.

"There is no trace of its having been opened," said Thorndyke. "But there wouldn't be. I think we had better scrape up the earth at the foot of the wall. Something might easily have been dropped and trodden in in the darkness." He looked towards the shed, in which a couple of empty lime barrels still remained, and, perceiving there a decrepit shovel, he went and fetched it. Returning with it, he proceeded to turn up the surface of the ground at the foot of the wall, depositing each shovelful of earth on a bare spot, and spreading it out carefully. For some time there was no result, but he continued methodically, working from one end of the patch towards the other. Suddenly Cobbledick uttered an exclamation and stooped over a freshly deposited shovelful.

"By the Lord!" he ejaculated, "it is a true bill! You were quite right, sir." He stood up, holding out between his finger and thumb a small bronze button bearing an embossed Tudor Rose. Thorndyke glanced at me as I took the button from the sergeant and examined it.

"Yes," I said, "it is unquestionably one of her buttons."

"Then," said he, "we have got our answer. The solution of the mystery is contained in that patch of new rubble."

The sergeant's delight and gratitude were quite pathetic. Again and again he reiterated his thanks, regardless of Thorndyke's disclaimers and commendations of the officer's own skilful and patient investigation.

"All the same," said Cobbledick, as he locked the gate and pocketed the key, "we haven't solved the whole problem. We may say that we have found the body; but the problem of the crime and the criminal remains. I suppose, sir, you don't see any glimmer of light in that direction?"

"A glimmer, perhaps," replied Thorndyke, "but it may turn out to be but a mirage. Let us see the body. It may have a clearer message for us than we expect."

Beyond this rather cryptic suggestion he refused to commit himself; nor, when we had parted from the sergeant, could I get anything more definite out of him.

"It is useless to speculate," he said, by way of closing the subject. "We think that we know what is inside that wall. We may be right, but we may possibly be wrong. A few hours will settle our doubts. If the body is there, it may tell us all that we want to know."

This last observation left me more puzzled than ever.

The condition of the body might, and probably would, reveal the cause of death and the nature of the crime; but it was difficult to see how it could point out the identity of the murderer. However, the subject was closed for the time being, and Thorndyke resolutely refused to reopen it until the fresh data were available.

CHAPTER XV—THE END OF THE TRAIL

Shortly after breakfast on the following morning Sergeant Cobbledick made his appearance at my house. I found him in the consulting-room, walking about on tip-toe with his hat balanced in his hands, and evidently in a state of extreme nervous tension.

"I have got everything in train, Doctor," said he, declining a seat. "I dug up the foreman yesterday evening and he dug up one of his mates to give him a hand, if necessary; and I have the authority to open the wall. So we are all ready to begin. The two men have gone down to the place with their tools, and Mr. Bundy has gone with them to let them in. He didn't much want to go, but I thought it best that either he or Mr. Japp should be present. It is their wall, so to speak. I suppose you are coming to see the job done."

"Is there any need for me to be there?" I asked. Cobbledick looked at me in surprise. He had evidently assumed that I should be eager to see what happened. "Well," he replied, "you are the principal witness to the identity of the remains. You saw her last, you know. What is your objection, Doctor?"

I was not in a position to answer this question. I could not tell him what this last and most horrible search meant to me; and apart from my personal feelings in regard to poor Angelina, there was no objection at all, but, on the contrary, every reason why I should be present.

"It isn't a very pleasant affair," I replied, "seeing that I knew the lady rather well. However, if you think I had better be there, I will come down with you."

"I certainly think your presence would be a help," said he. "We don't know what may turn up, and you know more about her than anybody else."

Accordingly, I walked down with him, and when he had admitted me with his key—Bundy had presumably used the duplicate—he closed the gate and locked it from within. The actual operations had not yet commenced, but the foreman and his mate were standing by the wall, conversing affably with Bundy, who looked nervous and uncomfortable, evidently relishing his position no more than I did mine.

"This is a gruesome affair, John, isn't it?" he said in a low voice. "I don't see why old Cobbledick wanted to drag us into it. It will be an awful moment when they uncover her, if she is really there. I'm frightfully sorry for you, old chap."

"I should have had to see the body in any case," said I; "and this is less horrible than the river."

Here my attention was attracted by the foreman, who had just drawn a long-, horizontal chalk line across the patch of new rubble, a little below the middle.

"That's about the place where we left off that Saturday, so far as I remember," he said. "We had built up the outer case, and we filled in the hollow with loose bricks and stones, but we didn't put any mortar to them until Monday morning. Then we mixed up a lot of mortar, quite thin, so that it would run, and poured it on top of the loose stuff."

"Rum way of building a wall isn't it?" observed Cobbledick.

The foreman grinned. "It ain't what you'd call the highest class of masonry," he admitted. "But what can you expect to do with a gang of corner-boys who've never done a job of real work in their lives?"

"No, that's true," said the Sergeant. "But you made a soft job for the grave-diggers, didn't you? Why they'd only got to pick out the loose stuff and then dump it back on top when they'd put the body in. Then you came along on Monday morning and finished the job for them with one or two bucketsful of liquid mortar. How long would it have taken to pick out that loose stuff?"

"Lord bless yer," was the answer, "one man who meant business could have picked the whole lot out by hand in an hour; and he could have chucked it back in less. As you say, Sergeant, it was a soft job."

While they had been talking, the foreman's familiar demon had been making a tentative attack on the outer casing with a great, chisel-ended steel bar and a mason's hammer. The foreman now came to his aid with a sledge hammer, the first stroke of which caused the shoddy masonry to crack in all directions like pie-crust. Then the fractured pieces of the outer shell were prised off, revealing the "loose stuff" within. And uncommonly loose it was; so loose that the unjoined bricks and stones, with their adherent gouts of mortar, came away at the lightest touch of the great crow-bar.

As soon as a breach had been made at the top of the patch, the labourer climbed up and began flinging out the separated bricks and stones. Then he attacked a fresh course of the outer shell with a pick, and so exposed a fresh layer of the loose filling.

"There'll be a fresh job for the unemployed to build this up again," the sergeant observed with a sardonic smile.

"Ah," replied the foreman, "there generally is a fresh job when you take on a crowd of casuals. Wonderful provident men are casuals. Don't they take no thought for the morrow! What O!"

At this moment the labourer stood upright on his perch and laid down his pick. "Well, I'm blowed!" he exclaimed. "This is a rum go, this is."

"What's a rum go?" demanded the foreman.

"Why, here's a whole bed of dry quick-lime," was the reply.

"Ha !" exclaimed the sergeant, knitting his brows anxiously.

The foreman scrambled up, and after a brief inspection confirmed the man's statement. "Quick-lime it is, sure enough. Just hand me up that shovel, Sergeant."

"Be careful," Cobbledick admonished, as he passed the shovel up. "Don't forget what there probably is underneath."

The foreman took the shovel and began very cautiously to scrape away the surface, flinging the scrapings of lime out on to the ground, where they were eagerly scrutinized by the sergeant, while the labourer picked out the larger lumps and cast them down. Thus the work went on for about a quarter of an hour, without any result beyond the accumulation on the ground below of a small heap of lime. At length I noticed the foreman pause and look attentively at the lime that he had just scraped up in his shovel.

"Here's something that I don't fancy any of our men put in," he said, picking the object out and handing it down to the Sergeant. The latter took it from him and held it out for me to see. It was another of Angelina's coat buttons.

In the course of the next few minutes two more buttons came to light, and almost immediately afterwards I saw the labourer stoop suddenly and stare down at the lime with an expression that made my flesh creep, as he pointed something out to the foreman.

"Ah!" the latter exclaimed. "Here she is! But, my word! There ain't much left of her. Look at this, Sergeant."

Very gingerly, and with an air of shuddering distaste, he picked something out of the lime and held it up; and even at that distance I could see that it was a human ulna. Cobbledick took it from him with the same distasteful and almost fearful manner, and held it towards me for inspection. I glanced at it and looked away. "Yes," I said. "It is a human arm bone."

On this, Cobbledick beckoned for the labourer to come down, and, taking out his official note-book, wrote something in pencil and tore out the leaf.

"Take this down to the station and give it to Sergeant Brown. He will tell you what else to do." He gave the paper to the man, and having let him out of the gate, came back and climbed up to the exposed surface of the excavation, where I saw him draw on a pair of gloves and then stoop and begin to pick over the lime.

"This is a horrid business, isn't it?" said Bundy. "Why the deuce couldn't Cobbledick carry on by himself? I don't see that it is our affair. Do you think we need stay?"

"I don't see why you need. You have finished your part of the business. You have seen the wall opened. I am afraid I must stay a little longer, as Cobbledick may want me to identify some of the other objects that may be found. But I shan't stay very long. There is really no question of the identity of the body, and there is no doubt now that the body is there. Detailed identification is a matter for the coroner."

As we were speaking, we walked slowly away from the wall among the mounds of rubbish, now beginning to be hidden under a dense growth of nettles, ragwort and thistles. It was a desolate, neglected place, sordid of aspect and contrasting unpleasantly in its modern squalor with the dignified decay of the ancient wall. We had reached the further fence and were just turning about, when the sergeant hailed me with a note of excitement in his voice. I hurried across and found him standing up with his eyes fixed on something that lay in the palm of his gloved hand.

"This seems to be the ring that you described to me, Doctor," said he. "Will you just take a look at it?"

He reached down and I received in my hand the little trinket of deep-toned, yellow gold that I remembered so well. I turned it over in my palm, and as I looked on its mystical signs, its crude, barbaric workmanship and the initials "A. C." scratched inside, the scene in that dimly lighted room—years ago, it seemed to me now—rose before me like a vision. I saw the gracious figure in the red glow of the lamp and heard the voice that was never again to sound in my ears, telling the story of the little bauble, and for a few moments, the dreadful present faded into the irredeemable past.

"There isn't any doubt about it, is there, Doctor?" the sergeant asked anxiously.

"None, whatever," I replied. "It is unquestionably Mrs. Frood's ring."

"That's a mercy," said Cobbledick; "because we shall want every atom of identification that we can get. The body isn't going to help us much. This lime has done its work to a finish. There's nothing left, so far as I can see, but the skeleton and the bits of metal belonging to the clothing. Would you like to come up and have a look, Doctor? There isn't much to see yet, but I have uncovered some of the bones."

"I don't think I will come up, Sergeant, thank you," said I. "When you have finished, I shall have to look over what has been found, as I shall have to give evidence at the inquest. And I think I need hardly stay any longer. There is no doubt now about the identity, so far as we are concerned, at any rate."

"No," he agreed. "There is no doubt in my mind, so I need not keep you any longer if you want to be off. But, before you go, there is one little matter that I should like to speak to you about." He climbed down to the ground, and, walking away with me a little distance, continued:

"You see, Doctor, some medical man will have to examine the remains, so as to give evidence before the coroner. If it is impossible to identify them as the remains of Mrs. Frood, it will have to be given in evidence that they are the remains of a person who might have been Mrs. Frood; that they are the remains of a woman of about her size and age, I mean. Of course, the choice of the medical witness doesn't rest with the police, but if you would care to take on the job, our recommendation would have weight with the coroner. You see, you are the most suitable person to make the examination, as you actually knew her."

I shook my head emphatically. "For that very reason, Sergeant, I couldn't possibly undertake the duty. Even doctors have feelings, you know. Just imagine how you would feel, yourself, pawing over the bones of a woman who had once been your friend."

Cobbledick looked disappointed. "Yes," he admitted, "I suppose there is something in what you say. But I didn't think doctors troubled about such things very much; and you have got such an eye for detail—and such a memory. However, if you'd rather not, there is an end of the matter."

He climbed back regretfully to the opening in the wall, and I rejoined Bundy. "I have finished here now," said I. "That was a ring of hers that Cobbledick had found. Are you staying any longer?"

"Not if you are going away," he replied. "I am not wanted now, and I can't stick this charnel-house atmosphere; it is getting on my nerves. Let us clear out."

We walked towards the entrance with a feeling of relief at escaping from the gruesome place, and had arrived within a few yards of it when there came a loud knocking at the gate, at which Bundy started visibly.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, "it's like Macbeth. Here, take my key and let the beggars in, whoever they are."

I unlocked the gate and threw it open, when I saw, standing in the lane, two men, bearing on their shoulders a rough, unpainted coffin, and accompanied by the labourer, who carried a large sieve. I stood aside to let them pass in, and when they had entered, Bundy and I walked out, shutting and locking the gate after us. We made our way up the lane in silence, for there was little to say but much to think about; indeed, I would sooner have been alone, but the gruesome atmosphere of the place we had come from seemed to have affected Bundy's spirits so much that I thought it only kind to ask him to come back to lunch with me; an invitation that he accepted with avidity.

During lunch we discussed the tragic discovery, and Bundy, now that he had escaped from physical contact with the relics of mortality, showed his usual shrewd common sense.

"Well;" he said, "the mystery of poor Angelina Frood is solved at last—at least, so far as it is ever likely to be."

"I hope not," I replied, "for the essential point of the mystery is not solved at all. It has only just been completely propounded. We now know beyond a doubt that she was murdered, and that the murder was a deliberate crime, planned in advance. What we want to know—at least, what I want to know, and shall never rest until I do know—is, who committed this diabolical crime?"

"I am afraid you never will know, John," said he. "There doesn't seem to be the faintest clue."

"What do you mean?" I demanded. "You seem to have forgotten Nicholas Frood."

Bundy shook his head. "You are deluding yourself, John. Nicholas seems, from your account of him, to be quite capable of having murdered his wife. But is there anything to connect him with the crime? If there is, you have never told me of it. And the law demands positive evidence. You can't charge a man with murder because he seems a likely person and you don't know of anybody else. What have you got against him in connexion with this present affair?"

"Well, for instance, I know that he was prowling about this town, and that he was trying to find out where she lived."

"But why not?" demanded Bundy. "She was a runaway wife, and he was her husband."

"Then I happen to have noticed that he carried a sheath-knife."

"But do you know that she was killed with a sheath-knife?"

"No, I don't," I answered savagely. "But I say again that I shall never rest until the price of her death has been paid. There must be some clue. The murder could not have been committed without a motive, and it must be possible to discover what that motive was. Somebody must have stood to benefit in some way by her death; and I am going to find that person, or those persons, if I give up the rest of my life to the search."

"I am sorry to hear you say that, John," he said as he rose to depart. "It sounds as if you were prepared to spend the rest of your life chasing a will-o'-the-wisp. But we are premature. The inquest may bring to light some new evidence that will put the police on the murderer's track. You must remember that they have been engaged in tracing the body up to now. When the inquest has been held and the facts are known they will be able to begin the search for the murderers. And I wish them and you good luck."

I was rather glad when he was gone, for his dispassionate estimate of the difficulties of the case only served to confirm my own secret hopelessness. For I could not deny that these wretches seemed to have covered up their tracks completely. In the three months that had passed no whisper of any suspicious circumstance had been heard.

From the moment when poor Angelina had faded from my sight into the fog to that of her dreadful reappearance in the old wall, no human eye seemed to have seen her. And now that she had come back, what had she to tell us of the events of that awful night? The very body, on which Thorndyke had relied for evidence, at least, of the manner of the crime, had dwindled to a mere skeleton such as might have been exhumed from some ancient tomb. The cunning of the murderer had outwitted even Thorndyke.

The thought of my friend reminded me that I had to report to him the results of the opening of the wall; results very different from what he had anticipated when he had given the sergeant the too-fruitful hint. I accordingly wrote out a detailed report, so far as my information went; but I held it back until the last post in case anything further should come to my knowledge. And it was just as well that I did; for about eight o'clock, Cobbledick called to give me the latest tidings.

"Well, Doctor," he said, with a smile of concentrated benevolence, "I have got everything in going order. I have seen the coroner and made out a list of witnesses. You are one of them, of course; in fact, you are the star witness. You were the last person to see her alive, and you were present at the exhumation. Dr. Baines—he's rather a scientific gentleman—is to make the post-mortem examination, and tell us the cause of death, if he can. He won't have much to go on. The lime has

eaten up everything—it would, naturally, after three months—but the bones look quite uninjured, so far as I could judge."

"When does the inquest open?" I asked.

"The day after to-morrow. I've got your summons with me, and I may as well give it to you now."

I looked at the little blue paper and put it in my pocketbook. "Do you think the coroner will get through the case in one day?" I asked.

"No, I am sure he won't," replied Cobbledick. "It is an important case, and there will be a lot of witnesses. There will be the evidence as to the building of the wall; then the opening of it and the description of what we found in it; then the identification of the remains—that is you, principally; and then there will be all the other evidence, the pawnbroker, Israel Bangs, Hooper, and the others. And then, of course, there will be the question as to the guilty parties. That is the most important of all."

"I didn't know you had any evidence on that subject," said I.

"I haven't much," he replied. "From the time when she disappeared nobody saw her alive or dead, and, of course, nothing has ever been heard of any occurrence that might indicate a crime. All we have to go on—and it is mighty little—is the fact that she was hiding from her husband, and that he was trying to find her. Also that he had made one attempt on her life. That is where your evidence will come in, and that of the matron at the 'Poor Travellers.' I've had a talk with her."

"Do you know anything of Frood's movements about the time of the disappearance?"

"Practically nothing, excepting that he went away from his lodgings the day before. You see, we were not in a position to start tracing possible criminals. We had no real evidence of any crime. We knew that the woman had disappeared, and she appeared to have got into the river. But there was nothing to show how. It looked suspicious, but it wasn't a case. So long as no body was forthcoming there was no evidence of death, and nobody could have been charged. Even if we had found the body in the river, unless there had been distinct traces of violence, it would have been merely a case of 'found dead,' or 'found drowned.' But now the affair is on a different footing entirely. The body has been discovered under conditions which furnish prima facie evidence of murder, whatever the cause of death may turn out to have been. There is sure to be a verdict of wilful murder—not that the police are dependent on the coroner's verdict. So now we can get a move on and look for the murderer."

"What chance do you think there is of finding him?" I asked.

"Well," said Cobbledick with a benevolent smile, "we mustn't be too cock-sure. But, leaving the husband out of the question and taking the broad facts, it doesn't look so unpromising. This wasn't a casual crime—fortunately. There's nothing so hopeless as a casual crime, done for mere petty robbery. But this crime was thought out. The place of burial was selected in advance. The key of the place was obtained, so that the murderer could not only get in but could lock himself—or more probably themselves—in and work secure from chance disturbance. And the time seems to have been selected; a week-end, with two whole nights to do the job in. All this points to very definite premeditation; and that points to a very definite motive. The person who planned this crime had something considerable to gain by Mrs. Frood's death; it may have been profit or it may have been the satisfaction of revenge.

"Well, that is a pretty good start. When we know what property she had, who comes into it at her death, if any of it is missing, and if so, what has become of it; we can judge concerning the first case. And if we find that she had any enemies besides her husband; anyone whom she had injured or who owed her a grudge; then we can judge of the second case.

"Then there is another set of facts. This murderer couldn't have been a complete stranger to the place. He knew about the wall and what was going on there. He knew the river and he possessed, or had command of, a boat. He knew the waterside premises and he knew his way—or had someone to show him the way—across the marshes and up Black Boy-lane. One, at least, of the persons concerned in this affair was a local man who knew the place well. So you see, Doctor, we have got something to go on, after all."

I listened to the sergeant's exposition with deep interest and no little revival of my drooping hopes. It was a most able summary of the case, and I felt that I should have liked Thorndyke to hear it; in fact, I determined to embody it in the amplification of my report. With the facts thus fully and lucidly collated, it did really seem as though the perpetrator of this foul crime must inevitably fall into our hands. Having refreshed the sergeant with a couple of glasses of port, I shook his hand warmly and wished him the best of success in the investigation that he was conducting with so much ability.

When he had gone I wrote a full account of our interview to add to my previous report, and expressed the hope that Thorndyke would be able to be present at the inquest, when I myself should "be and appear" at the appointed place to give evidence on the day after the morrow.

CHAPTER XVI—THE INQUIRY AND A SURPRISE

On the morning of the inquest I started from my house well in advance of time, and in a distinctly uncomfortable frame of mind. Perhaps it was that the formal inquiry brought home to me with extra vividness the certainty that my beloved friend was gone from me for ever, and that she had died in circumstances of tragedy and horror. Not that I had ever had any doubt, but now the realization was more intense. Again, I should have to give evidence. I should have to reconstitute for the information of strangers scenes and events that had for me a certain sacred intimacy. And then, above all, I should have to view—and that not cursorily—the decayed remains of the woman who had been so much to me. That would be naturally expected from a medical man and no one would guess at what it would cost me to bring myself to this last dreadful meeting.

Walking down the High-street thus wrapped in gloomy reflections, it was with mixed feelings that I observed Bundy advancing slowly towards me, having evidently awaited my arrival. In some respects I would sooner have been alone, and yet his kindly, sympathetic companionship was not altogether unwelcome.

"Good morning, John," said he. "I hope I am not *de trop*. It is a melancholy errand for you, poor old chap, and I can't do much to make it less so, but I thought we might walk down together. You know how sorry I am for you, John."

"Yes, I know and appreciate, and I am always glad to see you, Peter. But why are you going there! Have you had a summons?"

"No, I have no information to give. But I am interested in the case, of course, so I am going to attend as a spectator. So is Japp, though he is really a legitimately interested party. In fact, I am rather surprised they didn't summon him as a witness."

"So am I. He really knows more about the poor girl than I do. But, of course, he knows nothing of the circumstances of her death."

By this time we had arrived at the Guildhall, and here we encountered Sergeant Cobbledick, who was evidently on the look-out for me.

"I am glad you came early, Doctor," said he. "I want you just to pop round to the mortuary. You know the way. There's a tray by the side of the coffin with all her belongings on it. I'll get you to take a careful look at them, so that you can tell the jury that they are really her things. And you had better run your eye over the remains. You might be able to spot something of importance. At any rate, they will expect you to have viewed the body, as you are the principal witness to its identity. I've told the constable on duty to let you in. And, of course, you can go in, too, Mr. Bundy, if you want to."

"I don't think I do, thank you," replied Bundy. But he walked round with me to the mortuary, where the constable unlocked the door as he saw us approaching. I mentioned my name to the officer, but he knew me by sight, and now held the door open and followed me in, while Bundy halted at the threshold, and stood, rather pale and awe-stricken, looking in at the long table and its gruesome burden.

The tray of which Cobbledick had spoken was covered with a white table-cloth, and on this the various objects were arranged symmetrically like the exhibits in a museum. At the top was the hat, flanked on either side by a silver-headed hat-pin. The carefully smoothed scarf was spread across horizontally, the six coat-buttons were arranged in a straight vertical line, and the two shoes were placed at the bottom centre. At one side was the hand-bag, and at the other, to balance it, the handkerchief with its neatly embroidered initials; and on this were placed the Zodiac ring, the wedding ring, the box of tablets, and the brooch. On the lateral spaces the various other objects were arranged with the same meticulous care for symmetrical effect: a neat row of hair pins, a row of hooks and eyes, one or two rows of buttons from the dress and under garments, the little metal jaws of the purse, two rows of coins, silver and bronze, a pair of glove-fasteners with scorched fragments of leather adhering, a little pearl handled knife, a number of metal clasps and fastenings and other small metallic objects derived from the various garments, and a few fragments of textiles, scorched as if by fire; a couple of brown shreds, apparently from the stockings, a cindery fragment of the brown coat, and a few charred and brittle tatters of linen.

I looked over the pitiful collection while the constable stood near the door and probably watched me. There was something unspeakably pathetic in the spectacle of these poor fragments of wreckage, thus laid out, and seeming, in the almost grotesque symmetry of their disposal, to make a mute appeal for remembrance and justice. This was all that was left of her; this and what was in the coffin.

So moved was I by the fight of these relics, thus assembled and presented in a sort of tragic synopsis, that it was some time before I could summon the resolution to look upon her very self, or at least upon such vestiges of her as had survived the touch of "decay's effacing fingers." But the time was passing, and it had to be. At last I turned to the coffin, and, lifting the unfastened lid, looked in.

It could have been no different from what I had expected; but yet the shock of its appearance seemed to strike me a palpable blow. Someone had arranged the bones in their anatomical order; and there the skeleton lay on the bottom of the coffin, dry, dusty, whitened with the powder of lime, such a relic as might have been brought to light by the spade of some excavator in an ancient barrow or prehistoric tomb. And yet this thing was she—Angelina! That grisly skull had once been

clothed by her rich, abundant hair! That grinning range of long white teeth had once sustained the sweet, pensive mouth that I remembered so well. It was incredible. It was horrible. And yet it was true.

For some moments I stood as if petrified, holding up the coffin lid and gazing at the fearful shape in a trance of horror. And then suddenly I felt, as it were, a clutching at my throat and the vision faded into a blur as my eyes filled. Hastily I clapped down the coffin lid and strode towards the door with the tears streaming down my face.

Vaguely I was aware of Bundy taking my arm and pressing it to his side, of his voice as he murmured shakily, "Poor old John!" Passively I allowed him to lead me to a quiet corner above a flight of steps leading down to the river, where I halted to wipe my eyes, faintly surprised to note that he was wiping his eyes too; and that his face was pale and troubled. But if I was surprised, I was grateful, too; and never had my heart inclined more affectionately towards him than in this moment of trial that had been lightened by his unobtrusive sympathy and perfect understanding.

We stayed for a few minutes, looking down on the river and talking of the dead woman and the sad and troubled life from which this hideous crime had snatched her; then, as the appointed time approached, we made our way to the room in which the inquiry was to be held. As we entered, a pleasant-looking, shrewd-faced man, who looked like a barrister and who had been standing by a constable, approached and accosted me.

"Dr. Strangeways? My name is Anstey. I do most of the court work in connexion with Thorndyke's cases, and I am representing him here to-day. He had hoped to come down, himself, but he had to go into the country on some important business, so I have to come to keep the nest warm—to watch the proceedings and make a summary of the evidence. You mentioned to him that the case would take more than one day."

"Yes," I answered, "that is what I understand. Will Dr. Thorndyke be here to-morrow?"

"Yes; he has arranged definitely to attend to-morrow. And I think he expects by then to have some information of importance to communicate."

"Indeed!" I said eagerly. "Do you happen to know the nature of it?"

Anstey laughed. "My dear Doctor," said he, "you have met Thorndyke, and you must know by now that he is about as communicative as a Whitstable native. No one ever knows what cards he holds."

"Yes," I agreed, "he is extraordinarily secretive. Unnecessarily so, it has seemed to me."

Anstey shook his head. "He is perfectly right, Doctor. He knows his own peculiar job to a finish. He is, in a way, like some highly-specialized animal, such as the three-toed sloth, for instance, which seems an abnormal sort of beast until you see it doing, with unapproachable perfection, the thing that nature intended it to do. Thorndyke is a case of perfect adaptation to a special environment."

"Still," I objected, "I don't see the use of such extreme secrecy."

"You would if you followed his cases. A secret move is a move against which the other player—if there is one—can make no provision or defence or counter-move. Thorndyke plays with a wooden

face and without speaking. No one knows what his next move will be. But when it comes, he puts down his piece and says 'check'; and you'll find it is mate."

"But," I still objected, "you are talking of an adversary and of counter-moves. Is there any adversary in this case?"

"Well, isn't there?" said he. "There has been a crime committed. Someone has committed it; and that someone is not advertising his identity. But you can take it that he has been keeping a watchful eye on his pursuers, ready, if necessary, to give them a lead in the wrong direction. But it is time for us to take our places. I see the jury have come back from viewing the body."

We took our places at the long table, one side of which was allocated to the jury and the other to witnesses in waiting, the police officers, the press-men, and other persons interested in the case. A few minutes later, the coroner opened the proceedings by giving a very brief statement of the circumstances which had occasioned the inquiry, and then proceeded to call the witnesses.

The first witness was Sergeant Cobbledick, whose evidence took the form of a statement covering the whole history of the case, beginning with Mr. Japp's notification of the disappearance of Mrs. Frood and ending with the opening of the wall and the discovery of the remains. The latter part of the evidence was given in minute detail and included a complete list of the objects found with the remains.

"Does any juryman wish to ask the witness any questions?" the Coroner inquired when the lengthy statement was concluded. He looked from one to the other, and when nobody answered he called the next witness. This was Dr. Baines, a somewhat dry-looking gentleman, who gave his evidence clearly, concisely, and with due scientific caution.

"You have examined the remains which form the subject of this inquiry?" the coroner asked.

"Yes. I have examined the skeleton which is now lying in the mortuary. It is that of a rather strongly-built woman, five feet seven inches in height, and about thirty years of age."

"Were you able to form any opinion as to the cause of death?"

"No; there were no signs of any injury nor of disease."

"Are we to understand," asked one of the jurymen, "that you consider deceased to have died a natural death?"

"I have no means of forming any opinion on the subject."

"But if she died from violence, wouldn't there be some signs of it?"

"That would depend on the nature of the violence."

"Supposing she had been shot with a revolver."

"In that case there might be a fracture of one or more bones, but there might be no fracture at all. Of course, there would be a bullet."

"Did you find a bullet?"

"No. I did not see the bones until they had been brought to the mortuary."

"There has been no mention of a bullet having been found," the coroner interposed, "and you heard Sergeant Cobbledick say that the lime had all been sifted through a fine sieve. We must take it that there was no bullet. But," he continued, addressing the witness, "the conditions that you found would not exclude violence, I presume?"

"Not at all. Only violence that would cause injury to the bones."

"What kinds of violence would be unaccompanied by injury to the bones?"

"Drowning, hanging, strangling, suffocation, stabbing; and, of course, poisoning usually leaves no traces on the bones."

"Can you give us no suggestion as to the cause of death?"

"None whatever," was the firm reply.

"You have heard the description of the missing woman, Mrs. Frood. Do these remains correspond with that description?"

"They are the remains of a woman of similar stature and age to Mrs. Frood, so far as I can judge. I can't say more than that. The description of Mrs. Frood was only approximate; and the estimate of the stature, and especially the age, of a skeleton can only be approximate."

This being all that could be got out of the witness, who was concerned only with the skeleton, and naturally refused to budge from that position, the coroner glanced at his list and then called my name. I rose and took my place at the top corner of the table, when I was duly sworn, and gave my name and description.

"You heard Sergeant Cobbledick's description of the articles which have been found, and which are now lying in the mortuary?" the coroner began.

I replied "Yes," and he continued: "Have you examined those articles, and, if so, can you tell us anything about them?"

"I have examined the articles in the mortuary, and I recognized them as things I know to have been the property of Mrs. Angelina Frood."

Here I described the articles in detail, and stated when and where I had seen them in her possession.

"You have inspected the remains of deceased in the mortuary. Can you identify them as the remains of any particular person?"

"No. They are quite unrecognizable."

"Have you any doubt as to whose remains they are?" asked the juryman who had spoken before.

"That question, Mr. Pilley," said the coroner "is not quite in order. The witness has said that he was not able to identify the remains. Inferences as to the identity of deceased, drawn from the evidence,

are for the jury. We must not ask witnesses to interpret the evidence. When did you last see Mrs. Frood alive, Doctor?"

"On the 26th of April," I replied; and here I described that last interview, recalling our conversation almost verbatim. When I came to her expressions of uneasiness and foreboding, the attention of the listeners became more and more intense, and it was evident that they were deeply impressed. Particularly attentive was the foreman of the jury, a keen-faced, alert-looking man, who kept his eyes riveted on me, and, when I had finished this part of my evidence, asked: "So far as you know, Doctor, had Mrs. Frood any enemies? Was there anyone whom she had reason to be afraid of?"

This was a rather awkward question. It is one thing to entertain a suspicion privately, but quite another thing to give public expression to it. Besides, I was giving sworn evidence as to facts actually within my knowledge.

"I can't say, positively," I replied after some hesitation, "that I know of any enemy or anyone whom she had reason to fear."

The coroner saw the difficulty, and interposed with a discreet question.

"What do you know of her domestic affairs, of her relations with her husband, for instance?"

This put the matter on the basis of fact, and I was able to state what I knew of her unhappy married life in Rochester and previously in London; and further questions elicited my personal observations as to the character and personality of her husband. My meeting with him at Dartford Station, the incidents in the Poor Travellers' rest-house, the meeting with him on the bridge; all were given in full detail and devoured eagerly by the jury. And from their questions and their demeanour it became clear to me that they were in full cry after Nicholas Frood.

The conclusion of my evidence brought us to the luncheon hour. I had, of course, to take Mr. Anstey back to lunch with me, and a certain wistfulness in Bundy's face made me feel that I ought to ask him, too. I accordingly presented them to one another and issued the invitation.

"I am delighted to meet you, Mr. Bundy," Anstey said heartily. "I have heard of you from my friend Thorndyke, who regards you with respectful admiration."

"Does he?" said Bundy, blushing with pleasure, but looking somewhat surprised. "I can't imagine why. But are you an expert, too?"

"Bless you, no," laughed Anstey. "I am a mere lawyer, and, on this occasion, what is known technically as a devil—technically, you understand. I am watching this case for Thorndyke."

"But I didn't know that Dr. Thorndyke was interested in the case," said Bundy, in evident perplexity.

"He is interested in everything of a criminal and horrid nature," replied Anstey. "He never lets a really juicy crime mystery pass without getting all the details, if possible. You see, they are his stock in trade."

"But he never would discuss this case—not seriously," objected Bundy.

"Probably not," said Anstey. "Perhaps there wasn't much to discuss. But wait till the case is finished. Then he will tell you all about it."

"I see," said Bundy. "He is one of those prophets who predict after the event."

"And the proper time, too," retorted Anstey. "It is no use being premature."

The conversation proceeded on this plane of playful repartee until we arrived at my house, where Mrs. Dunk, having bestowed a wooden glance of curiosity at Anstey and a glare of defiance at Bundy, handed me a telegram addressed to R. Anstey, K.C., care of Dr. Strangeways. I passed it to Anstey, who opened it and glanced through it.

"What shall I say in answer?" he asked, placing it in my hand.

I read the message and was not a little puzzled by it.

"Ask Strangeways come back with you to-night. Very urgent. Reply time and place."

"What do you suppose he wants me for?" I asked.

"I never suppose in regard to Thorndyke," he replied.

"But if he says it is urgent, it is urgent. Can you come up with me?"

"Yes, if it is necessary."

"It is. Then I'll say yes. And you had better arrange to stay the night—there is a spare bedroom at his chambers—and come down with him in the morning. Can you manage that?"

"Yes," I replied; "and you can say that we shall be at Charing Cross by seven-fifteen."

I could see that this transaction was as surprising to Bundy as it was to me. But, of course, he asked no questions, nor could I have answered them if he had. Moreover, there was not much time for discussion as we had to be back in the court room by two o'clock, and what talk there was consisted mainly of humorous comments by Anstey on the witnesses and the jury.

Having sent off the telegram on our way down, we took our places once more, and the proceedings were resumed punctually by the calling of the foreman of the repairing gang; who deposed to the date on which the particular patch of rubble was commenced and finished and its condition when the men knocked off work on Saturday, the 26th of April. He also mentioned the loss of the key, but could give no particulars. The cross-examination elicited the facts that he had communicated to Cobbledick and me as to the state of the loose filling.

"How many men," the coroner asked, "would it have taken to bury the body in the way in which it was buried; and how long?"

"One man could have done it easily in one night, if he could have got the body there. The stuff in the wall was all loose, and it was small stuff, easy to handle. No building had to be done. It was just a matter of shovelling the lime in and then chucking the loose stuff in on top. And the lime was handy to get at in the shed, and one of the barrels was open."

"Can you say certainly when the body was buried?"

"It must have been buried on the night of the 26th of April or on the 27th, because on Monday morning, the 28th, we ran the mortar in, and by that evening we had got the patch finished."

The next witness was the labourer, Thomas Evans, who had lost the key. His account of the affair was as follows:

"On the morning of Saturday, the 26th of April, the foreman gave me the key, because he had to go to the office. I took the key and opened the gate, and I left the key in the lock for him to take when he came. Then I forgot all about it, and I suppose he did, too, because he didn't say anything about it until we had knocked off work and were going out. Then he asks me where the key was, and I said it was in the gate. Then he went and looked but it wasn't there. So we searched about a bit in the grounds and out in the lane; but we couldn't see nothing of it nowhere."

"When you let yourself in, did you leave the gate open or shut it?"

"I shut the gate, but, of course, it was unlocked. The key was outside."

"So that anyone passing up the lane could have taken it out without your noticing?"

"Yes. We was working the other side of the grounds, so we shouldn't have heard anything if anybody had took it."

That completed the evidence as to the key, and when Evans was dismissed the matron of the Poor Travellers was called. As she took her place, a general straightening of backs and air of expectancy on the part of the jury suggested that her evidence was looked forward to with more than common interest. And so it turned out to be. Her admirably clear and vivid presentment of the man, Nicholas Frood; his quarrelsome, emotional temperament, his shabby condition, his abnormal appearance, the evidences of his addiction to drink and drugs, his apparently destitute state, and, above all, the formidable sheath-knife that he wore under his coat; were listened to with breathless attention, and followed by a fusilade of eager, and often highly improper, questions. But the coroner was a wise and tactful man, and he unobtrusively intervened to prevent any irregularities; as, for instance, "It is not permissible," he observed, blandly, "to ask a witness if a certain individual seemed to be a likely person to commit a crime. And a coroner's court is not a criminal court. It is not our function to establish any person's guilt, but to ascertain how deceased met with her death. If the evidence shows that she was murdered, we shall say so in our verdict. If the evidence points clearly to a particular person as the murderer, we shall name that person in the verdict. But we are not primarily investigating a crime; we are investigating a death. The criminal investigation is for the police."

This reminder cooled the ardour of the criminal investigators somewhat, but there were signs of a fresh outbreak when Mrs. Gillow gave her evidence, for that lady having a somewhat more lively imagination than the matron, tended to lure enterprising jurymen on to fresh indiscretions. She certainly enjoyed herself amazingly, and occupied a most unnecessary amount of time before she at length retired, dejected but triumphant, to the manifest relief of the coroner.

This brought the day's proceedings to a close. There were a few more witnesses on the list, and the coroner hoped to take their evidence and complete the inquiry on the following day. As soon as the court rose, Anstey and I with Bundy proceeded to a tea-shop hard by and, having refreshed ourselves with a light tea, set forth to catch our train at Strood Station. Thither Bundy accompanied us at my invitation, but though I suspected that he was bursting with curiosity as to the object of my mysterious journey, he made no reference to it, nor did I or Anstey.

At the barrier at Charing Cross we found Thorndyke awaiting us, and Anstey, having delivered me into his custody and seen us into a taxi-cab that had already been chartered, wished us success and took his leave. Then the driver, who apparently had his instructions, started and moved out of the station.

"I don't know," said I, "whether I may now ask what I am wanted for."

"I should rather not go into particulars," he replied. "I want your opinion on something that I am going to show you, and I especially want it to be an impromptu opinion. Previous consideration might create a bias which would detract from the conclusiveness of your decision. However, you have only a few minutes to wait."

In those few minutes I could not refrain from cudgelling my brains, even at the risk of creating a bias, and was still doing so—quite unproductively—when the cab approached the hospital of St. Barnabas and gave me a hint. But it swept past the main, entrance, and, turning up a side street, slowed down and stopped opposite the entrance of the medical school. Here we got out, and, leaving the cab waiting, entered the hall, where Thorndyke inquired for a person of the name of Farrow. In a minute or two this individual made his appearance in the form of a somewhat frowsy, elderly man, whom, from the multitude of warts on his hands, I inferred to be the post-mortem porter or dissecting-room attendant. He appeared to be a taciturn man, and he, too, evidently had his instructions, for he merely looked at us and then walked away slowly, leaving us to follow. Thus silently he conducted us down a long corridor, across a quadrangle beyond which rose the conical roof of a theatre, along a curved passage which followed the wall of the circular building and down a flight of stone steps which let into a dim, cement-floored basement, lighted by sparse electric bulbs and pervaded by a faint, distinctive odour that memory associated with the science of anatomy. From the main basement room Farrow turned into a short passage, where he stopped at a door, and, having unlocked it, threw it open and switched on the light, when we entered and I looked around. It was a large, cellar-like room, lighted by a single powerful electric bulb fitted with a basin-like metal reflector and attached to a long, movable arm. The activities usually carried on in it were evident from the great tins of red lead on the shelves, from a large brass syringe fitted with a stop-cock and smeared with red paint, and from a range of oblong slate tanks or coffers furnished with massive wooden lids.

Still without uttering a word, the taciturn Farrow swung the powerful lamp over one of the coffers, and then drew off the lid. I stepped forward and looked in. The coffer was occupied by the body of a man, evidently—from the shaven head and the traces of red paint—prepared as an anatomical "subject." I looked at it curiously, thinking how unhuman, how artificial it seemed; how like to a somewhat dingy waxwork figure. But as I looked I was dimly conscious of some sense of familiarity stealing into my mind. Some chord of memory seemed to be touched. I stooped and looked more closely; and then, suddenly, I started up.

"Good God!" I exclaimed. "It is Nicholas Frood!"

"Are you sure?" asked Thorndyke.

"Yes, quite," I answered. "It was the shaved head that put me off: the absence of that mop of hair. I have no doubt at all. Still—let us have a look at the hands."

Farrow lifted up the hands one after the other; and then, if there could have been any doubt, it was set at rest. The mahogany-coloured stain was still visible; but much more conclusive were the bulbous finger-tips and the misshapen, nutshell-like nails. There could be no possible doubt.

"This is certainly the man I saw at Rochester," said I. "I am fully prepared to swear to that. But oughtn't he to have been identified by somebody who knew him better?"

"The body has been identified this afternoon by his late landlady," replied Thorndyke, "but I wanted your confirmation, and I wanted you as a witness at the inquest. The identification is important in relation to the inquiry and the possible verdict."

"Yes, by Jove!" I agreed, with a vivid recollection of the questions put to Mrs. Gillow. "This will come as a thunder-bolt to the jury. But how, in the name of Fortune, did he come here?"

"I'll tell you about that presently," replied Thorndyke.

He tendered a fee to the exhibitor, and when the latter had replaced the lid of the coffer, he conducted us back to our starting-point, and saw us into the waiting cab.

"5A, King's Bench Walk," Thorndyke instructed the driver, and as the cab started, he began his explanation.

"This has been a long and weary search, with a stroke of unexpected good luck at the end. We have had to go through endless records of hospitals, police-courts, poorhouses, infirmaries, and inquests. It was the records of an inquest that put us at last on the track; an inquest on an unknown man, supposed to be a tramp. Roughly, the history of the affair is this:

"Frood seems to have started for Brighton on the 25th of April, but for some unexplained reason, he broke his journey and got out at Horwell. What happened to him there is not clear. He may have over-dosed himself with cocaine; but at any rate, he was found dead in a meadow, close to a hedge, on the morning of the 26th. He was therefore dead before his wife disappeared. The body was taken to the mortuary and there carefully examined. But there was not the faintest clue to his identity. His pockets were searched, but there was not a vestige of property of any kind about him, not even the knife of which you have spoken. The probability is that he had been robbed by some tramp of everything that he had about him, either while he was insensible or after he was dead. In any case he appeared to be completely destitute, and this fact, together with his decidedly dirty and neglected condition, led naturally to the conclusion that he was a tramp. An inquest was held, but of course, no expensive and troublesome measures were taken to trace his identity. Examinations showed that he had not died from the effects of violence, so it was assumed that he had died from exposure, and a verdict to that effect was returned. He was about to be given a pauper's funeral when Providence intervened on our behalf. It happened that the Demonstrator of Anatomy at St. Barnabas resides at Horwell; and it happened that the presence of an unclaimed body in the mortuary came to his knowledge. Thereupon he applied to the authorities, on behalf of his school, for the use of it as an anatomical subject. His application was granted and the body was conveyed to St. Barnabas, where it was at once embalmed and prepared and then put aside for use during the next winter session."

"Was that quite in order—legally, I mean?"

"That is not for us to ask," he replied. "It was not in any way contrary to public policy, and it has been our salvation in respect of our particular inquiry."

"I suppose it has," I said, not, however, quite seeing it in that light. "Of course, it disposes of the question of his guilt."

"It does a good deal more than that as matters have turned out," said he. "However, here we are in the precincts of the Temple. Let us dismiss Nicholas Frood from our minds for the time being, and turn our attention to the more attractive subject of dinner."

The cab stopped opposite a tall house with a fine carved-brick portico, and, when Thorndyke had paid the driver, we ascended the steps and made our way up a couple of flights of oaken stairs to the first floor. Here, at the door of my friend's chambers, we encountered a small, clerical-looking gentleman with an extremely wrinkly, smiling face, who reminded me somewhat of Mr. Japp. "This is Mr. Polton, Strangeways," said Thorndyke, presenting him to me, "who relieves me of all the physical labour of laboratory work. He is a specialist in everything, including cookery, and if my nose does not mislead me—ha! Does it, Polton?"

"That depends, sir, on which way you follow it," replied Polton, with a smile of labyrinthine wrinkliness. "But you will want to wash, and Dr. Strangeways's room is ready for him."

On this hint, Thorndyke conducted me to an upper floor, and to a pleasant bedroom with an outlook on plane trees and ancient, red-tiled roofs, where I washed and brushed up, and from whence I presently descended to the sitting-room, whither Thorndyke's nose had already led him—and to good purpose, too.

"Mr. Polton has missed his vocation," I remarked, as I attacked his productions with appreciative gusto. "He ought to have been the manager of a West End club or a high-class restaurant."

Thorndyke regarded me severely. "I am shocked at you, Strangeways," he said. "Do you suggest that a man who can make anything from an astronomical clock to a microscope objective, who is an expert in every branch of photographic technique, a fair analytical chemist, a microscopist, and general handicraftsman, should be degraded to the office of a mere superintendent cook? It is a dreadful thought!"

"I didn't understand that he was a man of so many talents and accomplishments," I said apologetically.

"He is a most remarkable man," said Thorndyke, "and I take it as a great condescension that he is willing to prepare my meals. It is his own choice—an expression of personal devotion. He doesn't like me to take my food at restaurants or clubs. And, of course, he does it well because he is incapable of doing anything otherwise than well. You must come up and see the laboratories and workshop after dinner."

We went up when we had finished our meal and discovered Polton in the act of cutting transverse sections of hairs and mounting them to add to the great collection of microscopic objects that Thorndyke had accumulated. He left this occupation to show me the great standing camera for copying, enlarging, reducing and microphotography, to demonstrate the capabilities of a fine back-geared lathe and to exhibit the elaborate outfit for analysis and assay work.

"I had no idea," said I, as we returned to the sitting room, "that medico-legal practice involved the use of all these complicated appliances."

"The truth is," Thorndyke replied, "that Medical Jurisprudence is not a single subject, concerned with one order of knowledge. It represents the application of every kind of knowledge to the solution of an infinite variety of legal problems. And that reminds me that I haven't yet looked through Anstey's abstract of the evidence at the inquest, which I saw that he had left for me. Shall

we go through it now? It won't take us very long. Then we can have a stroll round the Temple or on the Embankment before we turn in."

"You are coming down to Rochester to-morrow?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "The facts concerning Nicholas Frood will have to be communicated to the coroner; and it is possible that some other points may arise."

"Now that Frood is definitely out of the picture," said I, "do you see any possibility of solving the mystery of this crime? I mean as to the identity of the guilty parties?"

He reflected awhile. "I am inclined to think," he replied, at length, "that I may be able to offer a suggestion. But, of course, I have not yet seen the remains."

"There isn't much to be gleaned from them, I am afraid," said I.

"Perhaps not," he answered. "But we shall be able to judge better when we have read the evidence of the medical witness."

"He wasn't able to offer any opinion as to the cause of death," I said.

"Then," he replied, "we may take it that there are no obvious signs. However, it is useless to speculate. We must suspend our judgment until to-morrow"; and with this he opened Anstey's summary, and read through it rapidly, asking me a question now and again to amplify some point. When he had finished the abstract—which appeared to be very brief and condensed—he put it in his pocket and suggested that we should start for our proposed walk; and, though I made one or two attempts to reopen the subject of the inquiry, he was not to be drawn into any further statements. Apparently there was some point that he hoped to clear up by personal observation, and meanwhile he held his judgment in suspense.

CHAPTER XVII—THORNDYKE PUTS DOWN HIS PIECE

The journey down to Rochester would have been more agreeable and interesting under different circumstances. Thorndyke kept up a flow of lively conversation to which I should ordinarily have listened with the keenest pleasure. But he persistently avoided any reference to the object of our journey; and as this was the subject that engrossed my thoughts and from which I was unable to detach them, his conversational efforts were expended on somewhat inattentive ears. In common politeness I tried to make a show of listening and even of some sort of response; but the instant a pause occurred, my thoughts flew back to the engrossing subject and the round of fruitless speculation begun again.

What was it that Thorndyke had in his mind? He was not making this journey to inform the coroner of Frood's death. That could have been done by letter; and, moreover, I was the actual witness to the dead man's identity. There was some point that he expected to be able to elucidate; some evidence that had been overlooked. And that evidence seemed to be connected with that dreadful, pitiful thing that lay in the coffin—crying out, indeed, to Heaven for retribution, but crying in a voice all inarticulate. But would it be inarticulate to him? He had seemed to imply an expectation of being able to infer from the appearance of those mouldering bones the cause and manner of death, and even—so it had appeared to me—the very identity of the murderer. But how could this be possible? Dr. Baines had said that the bones showed no signs of injury. The soft structures of the body had disappeared utterly. What suggestion as to the cause of death could the

bones offer? Chronic mineral poisoning might be ascertainable from examination of the skeleton, but not from a mere ocular inspection; and the question of chronic poisoning did not arise. Angelina was alive on the Saturday evening; before the Monday morning her body was in the wall. Again and again I dismissed the problem as an impenetrable mystery; and still it presented itself afresh for consideration.

A few words of explanation to the constable on duty at the mortuary secured our admission, or, rather Thorndyke's; for I did not go in, but stood in the doorway, watching him inquisitively. He looked over the objects set out on the tray and seemed to be mentally checking them. Then he put on a pair of pince-nez and examined some of them more closely. From the tray he presently turned to the coffin, and, lifting off the lid, stood for a while, with his pince-nez in his hand, looking intently at the awful relics of the dead woman. From his face I could gather nothing. It was at all times a rather immobile face, in accordance with his calm, even temperament. Now it expressed nothing but interest and close attention. He inspected the whole skeleton methodically, as I could see by the way his eyes travelled slowly from the head to the foot of the coffin. Then, once more, he put on his reading-glasses, and stooped to examine more I closely something in the upper part of the coffin—I judged it to be the skull. At length he stood up, put away his I glasses, replaced the coffin-lid, and rejoined me.

"Has the sitting of the Court begun yet?" he asked the constable.

"They began about five minutes ago, sir," was the reply; on which we made our way to the court-room, where Thorndyke, having secured a place at the table, beckoned to the coroner's officer.

"Will you hand that to the coroner, please?" said he, producing from his pocket a note in an official-looking blue envelope. The officer took the note and laid it down before the coroner, who glanced at it and nodded and then looked with sudden interest at Thorndyke. The witness who was being examined at the moment was the pawnbroker's daughter, and her account of the mysterious man with the mole on his nose was engaging the attention of the jury. While the examination was proceeding, the coroner glanced from time to time at the note. Presently he took it up and opened the envelope, and in a pause in the evidence, took out the note and turned it over to look at the signature. Then he ran his eyes over the contents, and I saw his eyebrows go up. But at that moment one of the jurymen asked a question and the note was laid down while the answer was entered in the depositions. At length the evidence of this witness was completed, and the witness dismissed, when the coroner took up the note and read it through carefully.

"Before we take the evidence of Israel Bangs, gentlemen," said he, "we had better consider some new facts which I think you will regard as highly important. I have just received a communication from Dr. John Thorndyke, who is a very eminent authority on medico-legal evidence. He informs me that the husband of the deceased, Nicholas Frood, is dead. It appears that he died about three months ago, but his body was not identified until yesterday, when it was seen by Frood's landlady and by Dr. Strangeways, who is here and can give evidence as to the identity. I propose that we first recall Dr. Strangeways and then ask Dr. Thorndyke, who is also present, to give us the further particulars."

The jury agreed warmly to the suggestion, and I was at once recalled, and as I took my place at the coroner's left hand I felt that I was fully justifying Cobbledick's description of me as the "star witness," for not only was I the object of eager interest on the part of the jury and the sergeant himself, but also of Bundy, whose eyes were riveted on me with devouring curiosity.

There is no need for me to repeat my evidence. It was quite short. I just briefly described the body and its situation. As to how it came to the hospital, I had no personal knowledge, but I affirmed that it was undoubtedly the body of Nicholas Frood. Of that I was quite certain.

No questions were asked. There was a good deal of whispered comment, and one indiscreet juryman remarked audibly that "this fellow seemed to have cheated the hangman." Then the coroner deferentially requested Thorndyke to give the Court any information that was available, and my friend advanced to the head of the table, where the coroner's officer placed a chair for him, and took the oath.

"What a perfectly awful thing this is about poor old Nicholas!" whispered Bundy, who had crept into the chair that Thorndyke had just vacated. "It makes one's flesh creep to think of it."

"It *was* rather horrible," I agreed, noting that my description of the scene had evidently made *his* flesh creep, for he was as pale as a ghost. But there was no time to discuss the matter further, for Thorndyke, having been sworn, and started by a general question from the coroner, now began to give his evidence, in the form of a narrative similar to that which I had heard from him, and accompanied by the production of documents relating to the inquest and the transfer of the body of the unknown deceased to the medical school.

"There is no doubt, I suppose, as to the date of this man's death?" the coroner asked.

"Practically none. He was seen alive on the 25th of April, and he was found dead on the morning of the 26th. I have put in a copy of the depositions at the inquest, which give the date and time of the finding of the body."

"Then, as his death occurred before the disappearance of his wife, this inquiry is not concerned with him any further."

Here the foreman of the jury interposed with a question. "It seems that Dr. Thorndyke took a great deal of trouble to trace this man, Frood. Was he acting for the police?"

"I don't know that that is strictly our concern," said the coroner, looking at Thorndyke, nevertheless, with a somewhat inquiring expression.

"I was acting," said Thorndyke, "in pursuance of instructions from a private client to investigate the circumstances of Mrs. Frood's disappearance, to ascertain whether a crime had been committed and, if so, to endeavour to find the guilty party or parties."

"He never told us that," murmured Bundy; "at least—did you know, John?"

"I did, as a matter of fact, but I was sworn to secrecy." Bundy looked at me a little reproachfully, I thought, and I caught a queer glance from Cobbledick. But just then the coroner spoke again.

"Have you seen the evidence that was given yesterday?"

"Yes, I have a summary of it, which I have read."

"Can you, from your investigations, tell us anything that was not disclosed by that evidence?"

"Yes. I have just examined the remains of the deceased and the articles which have been found from time to time. I think I can give some additional information concerning them."

"From your examination of the remains," the coroner said somewhat eagerly, "can you give any opinion as to the cause of death?"

"No," replied Thorndyke. "My examination had reference chiefly to the identity of the remains."

The coroner looked disappointed. "The identity of the remains," said he, "is not in question. They have been clearly identified as those of Angelina Frood."

"Then," said Thorndyke, "they have been wrongly identified. I can swear positively that they are not the remains of Angelina Frood."

At this statement a sudden hush fell on the Court, broken incongruously by an audible whistle from Sergeant Cobbledick. On me the declaration fell like a thunderbolt, and, on looking round at Bundy, I could see that he was petrified with astonishment. There was a silence of some seconds' duration. Then the coroner said, with a distinctly puzzled air: "This is a very remarkable statement, Dr. Thorndyke. It seems to be quite at variance with all the facts: and it appears almost incredible that you should be able to speak with such certainty, having regard to the condition of the remains and in spite of the extraordinary effect of the lime."

"It is on account of the effect of the lime that I am able to speak with so much certainty and confidence," Thorndyke replied.

"I don't quite follow that," said the coroner. "Would you kindly tell us how you were able to determine that these remains are not those of Angelina Frood?"

"It is a matter of simple inference," replied Thorndyke. "On the 26th of April last Mrs. Frood is known to have been alive. It has been assumed that on that night or the next her body was built up in the wall. If that had really happened, when the wall was opened on the 20th of July, the body would have been found intact and perfectly recognizable!"

"You are not overlooking the circumstance that it was buried in a bed of quick-lime?" said the coroner.

"No," replied Thorndyke; "in fact that is the circumstance that makes it quite certain that these remains are not those of Angelina Frood. There is," he continued, "a widely prevalent belief that quick-lime has the property of completely consuming and destroying organic substances such as a dead human body. But that belief is quite erroneous. Quick-lime has no such properties. On the contrary, it has a strongly preservative effect on organic matter. Putrefaction is a change in organic matter which occurs only when that matter is more or less moist. If such matter is completely dried, putrefaction is prevented or arrested, and such dried, or mummified, matter will remain undecomposed almost indefinitely, as we see in the case of Egyptian mummies. But quick-lime has the property of abstracting the water from organic substances with which it is in contact; of rendering them completely dry. It thus acts as a very efficient preservative. If Mrs. Frood's body had been buried, when recently dead, three months ago in fresh quick-lime, it would by now have been reduced more or less to the condition of a mummy. It would not have been even partially destroyed, and it would have been easily recognizable."

To this statement everyone present listened with profound attention and equally profound surprise; and a glance at the faces of the jurymen was sufficient to show that it had failed utterly to produce conviction. Even the coroner was evidently not satisfied, and, after a few moments' reflection with knitted brows, he stated his objection.

"The belief in the destructive properties of lime," he said, "can hardly be accepted as a mere popular error. In the Crippen trial, you may remember that the question was raised, and one of the expert witnesses—no less an authority than Professor Pepper—gave it as his considered opinion that quick-lime has these destructive properties, and that if a body were buried in a sufficient quantity of quick-lime, that body would be entirely destroyed. You will agree, I think, that great weight attaches to the opinion of a man of Professor Pepper's great reputation."

"Undoubtedly," Thorndyke agreed. "He was one of our greatest medico-legal authorities, though, on this subject, I think, his views differed from those generally held by medical jurists. But the point is that this was an opinion, and that no undeniable facts were then available. But since that time, the matter has been put to the test of actual experiment, and the results of those experiments are definite facts. It is no longer a matter of opinion but one of incontestable fact."

"What are the experiments that you refer to'"

"The first practical investigation was carried out by Mr. A. Lucas, the Director of the Government Analytical Laboratory and Assay Office at Cairo. He felt that the question was one of great medico-legal importance, and that it ought to be settled definitely. He accordingly carried out a number of experiments, of which he published the particulars in his treatise on 'Forensic Chemistry.' I produce a copy of this book, with your permission."

"Is this evidence admissible?" the foreman asked. "The witness can't swear to another man's experiments."

"It is admissible in a coroner's court," was the reply.

"We are not bound as rigidly by the rules of evidence as a criminal court, for instance. It is relevant to the inquiry, and I think we had better hear it."

"I may say," said Thorndyke, "that I have repeated and confirmed these experiments; but I suggest that, as the published cases are the recognized authority, I be allowed to quote them before describing my confirmatory experiments."

The coroner having agreed to this course, he continued: "The tests were made with the fresh bodies of young pigeons, which were plucked but not opened, and which were buried in boxes with loosely-fitted covers, filled respectively with dry earth, slaked lime, chlorinated lime, quick-lime, and quick-lime suddenly slaked with water. These bodies were left thus buried for six months, the boxes being placed on the laboratory roof at Cairo. At the end of that period the bodies were disinterred and examined with the following results: The body which had been buried in dry earth was found to be in a very bad condition. There was a considerable smell of putrefaction and a large part of the flesh had disappeared. The body which had been buried in quick-lime was found to be in good condition; it was dry and hard, the skin was unbroken, but the body was naturally shrunken. The other three bodies do not concern us, but I may say that none of them was as completely preserved as the one that was buried in quick-lime.

"On reading the account of these experiments I decided to repeat them, partly for confirmation and partly to enable me to give direct evidence as to the effect of lime on dead bodies. I used freshly-killed rabbits from which the fur was removed by shaving, and buried them in roomy boxes in the same materials as were used in the published experiments. They were left undisturbed during the six summer months, and were then exhumed and examined. The rabbit which had been buried in dry earth was in an advanced stage of putrefaction; the one which had been buried in quick-lime was free from any odour of decomposition, the skin was intact, and the body unaltered excepting

that it was dry and rather shrivelled—mummified, in fact. It was more completely preserved than any of the others."

The conclusion of this statement was followed by a slightly uncomfortable silence. The coroner stroked his chin reflectively, and the jurymen looked at one another with obvious doubt and distrust. At length Mr. Pilley gave voice to the collective sentiments.

"It's all very well, sir, for this learned gentleman to explain to us that the lime couldn't have eaten up the body of the deceased. But it has. We've seen the bare bones with our own eyes. What's the use of saying a thing is impossible when it has happened?"

Here Thorndyke produced from his pocket a sheet of notepaper and a fountain pen, and began to write rapidly, noting down, as I supposed, the jurymen's objections; which, however, the coroner proceeded to answer.

"Dr. Thorndyke's statement was that these bones are not the bones of Angelina Frood. That the body was not her body."

"Still," said the foreman, "it was somebody's body, you know. And the lime seems to have eaten it up pretty clean, possible or impossible."

"Exactly," said the coroner. "The destruction of this particular body appears to be an undeniable fact; and we may assume that one body is very much like another—in a chemical sense, at least. What do you say, doctor?"

"My statement," replied Thorndyke, "had reference to Angelina Frood, who is known to have been alive on a certain date. Of the condition of the unknown body that was buried in the wall, I can give no opinion."

Again there was an uncomfortable silence, during which Thorndyke, having finished writing, folded the sheet of notepaper, tucked the end in securely, and wrote an address on the back. Then he handed it to his neighbour, who passed it on until it reached me. I was on the point of opening it when I observed with astonishment that it was addressed to Peter Bundy, Esq., to whom I immediately handed it. But my astonishment was nothing to Bundy's. He seemed positively thunderstruck. Indeed, his aspect was so extraordinary as he sat gazing wildly at the opened note, that I forgot my manners and frankly stared at him. First he turned scarlet; then he grew deathly pale; and then he turned scarlet again. And, for the first and only time in my life, I saw him look really angry. But this was only a passing manifestation. For a few moments his eyes flashed and his mouth set hard. Then, quite suddenly, the wrath faded from his face and gave place to a whimsical smile. He tore off the fly-leaf of the note, and, scribbling a few words on it, folded it up small, addressed it to Dr. Thorndyke, and handed it to me for transmission by the return route.

When it reached Thorndyke, he opened it, and, having read the brief message, nodded gravely to Bundy, and once more turned his attention to the foreman, who was addressing the coroner at greater length.

"The jury wish to say, sir, that this evidence is not satisfactory. It can't be reconciled with the other evidence. The facts before the jury are these: On the 26th of April Angelina Frood disappeared, and was never afterwards seen alive. On the night that she disappeared, or on the next night, a dead body was buried in the wall. Three months later that body was found in the wall, packed in quick-lime, and eaten away to a skeleton. That skeleton has been examined by an expert, and found to be that of a woman of similar size and age to Angelina Frood. With that skeleton were found articles

of clothing, jewellery, and ornaments which have been proved to have been the clothing and property of Angelina Frood. Other articles of clothing have been recovered from the river; and those articles were missing from the body when it was found in the wall. On these facts, the jury feel that it is impossible to doubt that the remains found in the wall are the remains of Angelina Frood."

As the foreman concluded the coroner turned to Thorndyke with a slightly puzzled smile. "Of course, Doctor," said he, "you have considered those facts that the foreman has summarized so admirably. What do you say to his conclusion?"

"I must still contest it," replied Thorndyke. "The foreman's summary of the evidence, masterly as it was, furnishes no answer to the objection—based on established chemical facts—that the condition of the remains when found is irreconcilable with the alleged circumstances of the burial."

The coroner raised his eyebrows and pursed up his lips.

"I appreciate your point, Doctor," said he. "But we are on the horns of a dilemma. We are between the Devil of observed fact and the Deep Sea of scientific demonstration. Can you suggest any way out of the difficulty?"

"I think," said Thorndyke, "that if you were to call Mr. Bundy, he might be able to help you out of your dilemma."

"Mr. Bundy!" exclaimed the coroner. "I didn't know he was concerned in the case. Can you give us any information, Mr. Bundy?"

"Yes," replied Bundy, looking somewhat shy and nervous. "I think I could throw a little light on the case."

"I wish to goodness you had said so before. However, better late than never. We will take your evidence at once."

On this Thorndyke returned to his seat at the table and Bundy took his place, standing by the chair which Thorndyke had resigned.

"Let me see, Mr. Bundy," said the coroner, "your Christian name is—"

"The witness has not been sworn," interrupted Thorndyke.

The coroner smiled. "We are in the hands of the regular practitioners," he chuckled. "We must mind our p's and q's. Still you are quite right, Doctor. The name is part of the evidence."

The witness was accordingly sworn, and the coroner then proceeded, smilingly: "Now, Mr. Bundy, be very careful. You are making a sworn statement, remember. What is your Christian name?"

"Angelina," was the astounding reply.

"Angelina!" bawled Pilley. "It can't be. Why, it's a woman's name."

"We must presume that the witness knows his own name," said the coroner, writing it down. "Angelina Bundy."

"No, Sir," said the witness. "Angelina Frood."

The coroner suddenly stiffened with the upraised pen poised in the air; and so everyone in the room, including myself, underwent an instantaneous arrest of movement as if we had been turned into stone; and I noticed that the process of petrifaction had caught us all with our mouths open. But whereas the fixed faces on which I looked, expressed amazement qualified by incredulity, my own astonishment was coupled with conviction. Astounding as the statement was, the moment that it was made I knew that it was true. In spite of the discrepancies of appearance, I realized in a flash of enlightenment, the nature of that subtle influence that had drawn me to Bundy with a tenderness hardly congruous with mere male friendship. Outwardly I had been deceived, but my sub-conscious self had recognized Angelina all the time.

The interval of breathless silence, during which the witness calmly surveyed the court through his—or rather her—eyeglass, was at length broken by the coroner, who asked gravely: "This is not a joke? You affirm seriously that you are Angelina Frood?"

"Yes; I am Angelina Frood," was the reply.

Here Mr. Pilley recovered himself and demanded excitedly: "Do we understand this gentleman to say that he is the deceased?"

"Well," replied the coroner, "he is obviously not deceased, and he states that he is not a gentleman. He has declared that he is a lady."

"But," protested Pilley, "he says that she—at least she says that he—"

"You are getting mixed, Pilley," interrupted the foreman. "This appears to be a woman masquerading as a man and playing practical jokes on a coroner's jury. I suggest, sir, that we ought to have evidence of identity."

"I agree with you, emphatically," said the coroner.

"The identification is indispensable. Is there anyone present who can swear to the identity of this-er-person! Mr. Japp, for instance?"

"I'd rather you didn't bring Mr. Japp into it," said Angelina, hastily. "It isn't really necessary. If you will allow me to run home and change my clothes, Mrs. Gillow and Dr. Strangeways will be able to identify me. And I can bring some photographs to show the jury."

"That seems quite a good suggestion," said the coroner.

"Don't you think so, gentlemen?"

"It is a very proper suggestion," said the foreman, severely. "Let her go away and clothe herself decently. How long will she be gone?"

"I shall be back in less than half an hour,'" said Angelina; and on this understanding she was given permission to retire. I watched her with a tumult of mixed emotions as she took up her hat, gloves, and stick, and strolled jauntily towards the door. There she paused for an instant and shot at me a single, swift, whimsical glance through her monocle. Then she went out; and with her disappeared for ever the familiar figure of Peter Bundy.

CHAPTER XVIII—THE UNCONTRITE PENITENT

As the door closed on Angelina, a buzz of excited talk broke out. The astonished jurymen put their heads together and eagerly discussed the new turn of events, while the coroner sat with a deeply cogitative expression, evidently thinking hard and casting an occasional speculative glance in Thorndyke's direction. Meanwhile Cobbledick edged up to my side and presented his views in a soft undertone.

"This is a facer, Doctor, isn't it? Regular do. My word! Just think of the artfulness of that young woman, toting us round and helping us to find the things that she had just popped down for us to find. I call it a masterpiece." He chuckled admiringly, and added in a lower tone, "I hope she hasn't got herself into any kind of mess."

I looked at Cobbledick with renewed appreciation. I had always liked the sergeant. He was a capable man and a kindly one; and now he was showing a largeness of soul that won my respect and my gratitude, too. A small man would have been furious with Angelina, but Cobbledick took her performances in a proper sporting spirit. He was only amused and admiring. Not for nothing had Nature imprinted on his face that benevolent smile.

Presently Mr. Pilley, who seemed to have a special gift for the expression of erroneous opinions, addressed himself to the coroner.

"Well, Mr. Chairman," he said cheerfully, "I suppose we can consider the inquest practically over."

"Over!" exclaimed the astonished coroner.

"Yes. We were inquiring into the death of Angelina Frood. But if Mrs. Frood is alive after all, why, there's an end to the matter."

"What about the body in the mortuary?" demanded the foreman.

"Oh, ah," said Pilley. "I had forgotten about that." He looked owlishly at the coroner and then exclaimed:

"But that is the body of Mrs. Frood!"

"It can't be if Mrs. Frood is alive," the coroner reminded him.

"But it must be," persisted Pilley. "It has been identified as her, and it had her clothes and ring on. Mr. Bundy must have been pulling our legs."

"There is certainly something very mysterious about that body," said the coroner. "It was dressed in Mrs. Frood's clothes, as Mr. Pilley points out, and it appears that Mrs. Frood must be in some way connected with it."

"There's no doubt about that," agreed the foreman.

"She must know who that dead person is and how the body came to be in the place where it was found, and she will have to give an account of it."

"Yes," said the coroner. "But it is a mysterious affair. I wonder if Dr. Thorndyke could enlighten us. He seems to know more about the matter than anybody else."

But Thorndyke was not to be drawn into any statement.

"It would be merely a conjecture on my part," he said. "Presumably Mrs. Frood knows how the remains got into the wall, and I must leave her to give the necessary explanations."

"I don't see what explanations she can give," said the foreman. "It looks like a clear case of wilful murder. And it is against her."

To this view the coroner gave a guarded assent; and indeed it was the obvious view. There was the body, in Angelina's clothing, and everything pointed clearly to Angelina's complicity in the crime, if there had really been a crime committed. And what other explanation was possible?

As I reflected on the foreman's ominous words, I was sensible of a growing alarm. What if Angelina had been, as it were, snatched from the grave only to be placed in the dock on a charge of murder? That she could possibly be guilty of a crime did not enter my mind. But there was evidently some sort of criminal entanglement from which she might find it hard to escape. The appearances were sinister in the extreme; her simulated disappearance, her disguise, her suspicious silence during the inquiry; to any eye but mine they were conclusive evidence of her guilt. And the more I thought about it, the more deadly did the sum of that evidence appear, until, as the time ran on, I became positively sick with terror.

The opening of a door and a sudden murmur of surprise caused me to turn; and there was Angelina herself. But not quite the Angelina that I remembered. Gone were the pallid complexion, the weary, dark-circled eyes, the down-cast mouth, the sad and pensive countenance, the dark, strong eye-brows. Rosy-cheeked, smiling, confident, and looking strangely tall and imposing, she stepped composedly over to the head of the table, and stood there gazing with calm self-possession, and the trace of a smile at the stupefied jurymen.

"Your name is—?" said the coroner, gazing at her in astonishment.

"Angelina Frood," was the quiet reply; and the voice was Bundy's voice.

Here Pilley rose, bubbling with excitement. "This isn't the same person!" he exclaimed. "Why, he was a little man, and she's a tall woman. And his hair was short, and just look at hers! You .can't grow a head of hair like that in twenty minutes."

"No," Angelina agreed, suavely. "I wish you could."

"The objection is not relevant, Mr. Pilley," said the coroner, suppressing a smile. "We are not concerned with the identity of Mr. Bundy but with that of Angelina Frood. Can anyone identify this lady?"

"I can," said I. "I swear that she is .Angelina Frood."

"And Mrs. Gillow?"

Mrs. Gillow could and did identify her late lodger, and furthermore, burst into tears and filled the court-room with "yoops" of hysterical joy. When she had been pacified and gently restrained by the coroner's officer from an attempt to embrace the witness, the coroner proceeded:

"Now, Mrs. Frood, the jury require certain explanations from you, in regard to the body of a woman which is at present lying in the mortuary and which was found buried in the city wall with certain articles of clothing and jewellery which have been identified as your property. Did you know that that body had been buried in the wall?"

"Yes," replied Angelina.

"Do you know how it came to be in the wall?"

"Yes. I put it there."

"You put it there!" roared Pilley, amidst a chorus of exclamations from the jurymen. The coroner held up his hand to enjoin silence and asked, as he gazed in astonishment at Angelina.

"Can you tell us who this deceased person was?"

"I'm afraid I can't," Angelina replied, apologetically. "I don't think her name was known."

"But-er-" the astounded coroner inquired, "how did she come by her death?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that either," replied Angelina. "The fact is, I never asked."

"You never asked!" the coroner repeated, in a tone of bewilderment. "But-er-are we to understand that in short, did you or did you not cause the death of this person by your own act? Of course," he added hastily, "you are not bound to answer that question."

Angelina smiled at him engagingly. "I will answer with pleasure. I did not cause the death of this person."

"Then are we to understand that she was already dead when you found her'"

"I didn't find her. I bought her; at a shop in Great St. Andrew-street. I gave four pounds, fourteen and three-pence for her, including two and three-pence to Carter Paterson's. I've brought the bill with me."

She produced the bill from her pocket and handed it to the coroner, who read it with a portentous frown and a perceptible twitching at the corners of his mouth.

"I will read this document to you, gentlemen," he said in a slightly unsteady voice. "It is dated the 19th of April, and reads: 'Bought of Oscar Hammerstein, Dealer in Human and Comparative Osteology, Great St. Andrew-street, London, W. C., one complete set superfine human osteology, disarticulated and unbleached (female), as selected by purchaser, four pounds eight shillings and sixpence. Replacing and cementing missing teeth, one shilling and sixpence. Packing case, two shillings. Carriage, two and three pence. Total, four pounds, fourteen and three-pence. Received with thanks, O. Hammerstein.' Perhaps you would like to see the bill, yourselves, gentlemen."

He passed it to the foreman, taking a quick glance out of the corners of his eyes at the bland and impassive Angelina, and the jury studied it in a deep silence, which was broken only by a soft, gurgling sound, from somewhere behind me, which, I discovered, on looking round, to proceed from Sergeant Cobbledick, whose crimsoned face was partly hidden by a large handkerchief and whose shoulders moved convulsively.

Presently the coroner addressed Thorndyke. "In continuation of your evidence, Doctor, does Mrs. Frood's explanation agree with any conclusions that you had arrived at from your inspection of the remains?"

"It agrees with them completely," Thorndyke replied with a grim smile.

The coroner entered the answer in the depositions, and then turned once more to Angelina.

"With regard to the objects that were found with the skeleton; did you put them there?"

"Yes. I put in the metal things and a few pieces of scorched rag to give a realistic effect—on account of the lime, you know."

"And the articles that were recovered from the river, too, I suppose?"

"Yes, I put them down—with proper precautions, of course."

"What do you mean by proper precautions?"

"Well, I couldn't afford to waste any of the things, so I used to keep a lookout with a telescope, and then, when I saw a likely person coming along, I put one of the things down where it could be seen."

"And were they always seen?"

"No. Some people are very unobservant. In that case I picked it up when the coast was clear and saved it for another time."

The coroner chuckled. "It was all very ingenious and complete. But now, Mrs. Frood, we have to ask you what was the object of these extraordinary proceedings. It was not a joke, I presume?"

"Oh, not at all," replied Angelina. "It was a perfectly serious affair. You have heard what sort of husband I had. I couldn't possibly live with him. I made several attempts to get away and live by myself, but he always followed me and found me out. So I determined to disappear altogether."

"You could have applied for a separation," said the coroner.

"I shouldn't have got it," replied Angelina, "and even if I had, of what use would it have been? I should have been bound to him for life. I couldn't have married anyone else. My whole life would have been spoilt. So I decided to disappear completely and for good, and start life afresh in a new place and under a new name. And in order that there should be no mistake about it, I thought I would leave the-er-the material for a coroner's inquest and a will directing that a suitable monument should be put up over my grave. Then, if I had ever married again, there would have been no danger of a charge of bigamy. If anyone had made any such suggestion, I could have referred them to the registrar of deaths and to the tombstone of Angelina Frood in Rochester churchyard."

"And as to a birth certificate under your new name?" the coroner asked with a twinkle of his eye.

Angelina smiled a prim little smile. "I think that could have been managed," she said.

"Well," said the coroner, "it was an ingenious scheme. But apparently Dr. Thorndyke knew who Mr. Bundy was. How do you suppose he discovered your identity?"

"That is just what I should like to know," she replied.

"So should I," said the coroner, with a broad smile; "but, of course, it isn't my affair or that of the jury. We are concerned with this skeleton that you have planted on us. I suppose you can give us no idea as to where it came from originally?"

"The dealer said it had been found in a barrow-not a wheel-barrow, you know; an ancient burial-place. Of course, I don't know whether he was speaking the truth."

"What do you think, Dr. Thorndyke?" the coroner asked.

"I think it is an ancient skeleton, though very well preserved. Some of the teeth—the original ones—show more wear than one expects to find in a modern skull. But I only made a cursory inspection."

"I think the evidence is sufficient for our purpose," said the coroner; "and that really concludes the case, so we need not detain you any longer, Mrs. Frood. I don't know exactly what your legal position is; whether you have committed any legal offence. If you have, it is not our business; and I think I am expressing the sentiments of the jury if I say that I hope that the authorities will not make it their business. No one has been injured, and no action seems to be called for."

With these sentiments the jury concurred warmly, as also did Sergeant Cobbledick, who was heard, very audibly and regardless of the proprieties, to murmur "Hear, hear." We waited to learn the nature of the verdict, and when this had been pronounced (to the effect that the skeleton was that of an unknown woman, concerning the circumstances of whose death no evidence was available), the court rose and we prepared to depart.

"You are coming back to lunch with us, Angelina?" said I.

"I should love to," she replied, "but there is Mr. Japp. Do you think you could ask him, too?"

"Of course," I replied, with a sudden perception of the advantage of even numbers. "We shouldn't be complete without him."

Japp accepted with enthusiasm, and, after a hasty farewell to Cobbledick, we went forth into the High Street, by no means unobserved of the populace. As we approached the neighbourhood of the office Angelina said:

"I must run into my rooms for a few moments just to tidy myself up a little. It was such a very hurried toilette. I won't be more than a few minutes. You needn't wait for me."

"I suggest," said Thorndyke, "that Mr. Japp and I go on and break the news to Mrs. Dunk that there is a lady guest, and that Strangeways remains behind to escort the prisoner."

I fell in readily with this admirable suggestion, and as the two men walked on, I followed Angelina up the steps and waited while she plied her latch-key. We entered the hall together and then went into the sitting-room, where she stood for a moment, looking round with deep satisfaction.

"It's nice to be home again," she said, "and to feel that all that fuss is over."

"I daresay it is," said I. "But now that you are home, what have you got to say for yourself? You are a nice little baggage, aren't you?"

"I am a little beast, John," she replied. "I've been a perfect pig to you. But I didn't mean to be, and I really couldn't help it. You'll try to forgive me, won't you?"

"The fact is, Angelina," I said, "I am afraid I am in love with you."

"Oh, I hope to goodness you are, John," she exclaimed. "If I thought you weren't I should wish myself a skeleton again. Do you think you really are?"

She crept closer to me with such a sweet, wheedlesome air that I suddenly caught her in my arms and kissed her.

"It does seem as if you were," she admitted with a roguish smile; and then—such unaccountable creatures are women—she laid her head on my shoulder and began to sob. But this was only a passing shower. Another kiss brought back the sunshine and then she tripped away to spread fresh entanglements for the masculine heart.

In a few minutes she returned, further adorned and looking to my eyes the very picture of womanly sweetness and grace. When I had given confirmatory evidence of my sentiments towards her, we went out, just in time to encounter Mrs. Gillow and acquaint her with the program.

"I suppose," said Angelina, glancing furtively at a little party of women who were glancing, not at all furtively, at her, "one should be gratified at the interest shown by one's fellow towns-people; but don't you think the back streets would be preferable to the High-street?"

"It is no use, my dear," I replied. "We've got to face it. Take no notice. Regard these bipeds that infest the footways as mere samples of the local fauna. Let them stare and ignore them. For my part, I rather like them. They impress on me the admirable bargain that I have made in swapping Peter Bundy for a beautiful lady."

"Poor Peter," she said, pensively. "He was a sad boy sometimes when he looked at his big, handsome John and thought that mere friendship was all that he could hope for when his poor little heart was starving for love. Your deal isn't the only successful one, John, so you needn't be so conceited. But here we are home—really home, this time, for this has been my real home, John, dear. And there—Oh! Moses I—there is Mrs. Dunk, waiting to receive us!"

"What used you to do to Mrs. Dunk," I asked, "to make her so furious?"

"I only used to inquire after her health," Angelina replied plaintively. "But mum's the word. She'll spot my voice as soon as I speak."

Mrs. Dunk held the door open ceremoniously and curtsied as we entered. She was a gruff old woman, but she had a deep respect for "gentlefolk," as is apt to be the way with old servants. Angelina acknowledged her salutation with a gracious smile and followed her meekly up the stairs to the room that Mrs. Dunk had allotted to her.

I found Thorndyke and Japp established in the library—Dr. Partridge had dispensed with a drawing-room and I followed his excellent example—and here presently Angelina joined us, sailing majestically into the room and marching up to Thorndyke with an air at once hostile and defiant.

"Serpent," said Angelina.

"Not at all," Thorndyke dissented with a smile. "You should be grateful to me for having rescued you from your own barbed-wire entanglements."

"Serpent, I repeat," persisted Angelina. "To let me sit in that court-room watching all the innocents walking into my trap one after another, and then, just as I thought they were all inside, to hand me a thing like that!" and she produced, dramatically, a small sheet of paper, which I recognized as the remainder of Thorndyke's note. I took it from her, and read: "You see whither the evidence is leading. The deception cannot be maintained, nor is there any need, now that your husband is dead. Explanations must be given either by you or by me. For your own sake I urge you to explain everything and clear yourself. Let me know what you will do."

"This is an extraordinary document," I said, passing it to Japp. "How in the name of Fortune did you know that Bundy was Angelina?"

"Yes, how did you?" the latter demanded. "It is for you to give an explanation now."

"We will have the explanations after lunch," said he; "mutual explanations. I want to hear how far I was correct in details."

"Very well," agreed Angelina, "we will both explain. But you will have the first innings. You are not going to listen to my explanation and then say you knew all about it. And that reminds me, John, that you had better tell Mrs. Dunk. She is sure to recognize my voice."

I quite agreed with Angelina and hurried away to intercept Mrs. Dunk and let her know the position. She was at first decidedly shocked, but a vivid and detailed description of the late Mr. Frood produced a complete revulsion; so complete, in fact, as to lead me to speculate on the personal characteristics of the late Mr. Dunk. But her curiosity was aroused to such an extent that, while waiting at table, she hardly removed her eyes from Angelina, until the latter, finding the scrutiny unbearable, suddenly produced the hated eye-glass, and, sticking it in her eye, directed a stern glance at the old woman, who instantly backed towards the door with a growl of alarm, and then sniggered hoarsely.

It was a festive occasion, for we were all in exuberant spirits, including Mr. Japp, who, if he said little, made up the deficiency in smiles of forty-wrinkle power, which, together with his upstanding tuft of white hair, made him look like a convivial cockatoo.

"Do you remember our last meeting at this table'" said Angelina, "when I jeered at the famous expert and pulled his reverend leg, thinking what a smart young fellow I was, and how beautifully I was bamboozling him? And all the while he knew! He knew! And 'Not a word said the hard-boiled egg.' Oh, serpent! serpent!"

Thorndyke chuckled. "You didn't leave the hardboiled egg much to say," he observed.

"No. But why were you so secret? Why didn't you let on, just a little, to give poor Bundy a hint as to where he was plunging?"

"My dear Mrs. Frood—"

"Oh, call me Angelina," she interrupted.

"Thank you," said he. "Well, my dear Angelina, you are forgetting that I didn't know what was in the wall."

"My goodness!" she exclaimed. "I had overlooked that. Of course, it might have been—Good gracious! How awful!" She paused with her eyes fixed on Thorndyke, and then asked: "Supposing it had been?"

"I refuse to suppose anything of the kind," he replied. "My explanations will deal with the actual, not with the hypothetical."

There was silence for a minute or two. Like Angelina, I was speculating on what Thorndyke would have done if the remains had been real remains—and those of a man. He had evidently sympathized warmly with the hunted wife; but if her defence had taken the form of a crime, would he have exposed her? It was useless to ask him. I have often thought about it since, but have never reached a conclusion.

"You will have to answer questions better than that presently," said Angelina; "but I won't ask you any more now. You shall finish your lunch in peace, and then—into the witness-box you go. I am going to have satisfaction for that note."

The little festival went on, unhurried, with an abundance of cheerful and rather frivolous talk. But at last, like all fugitive things, it came to an end. The table was cleared, and garnished with the port decanter and the coffee service, and Mrs. Dunk, with a final glower, half-defiant and half-admiring, at Angelina, took her departure.

"Now," said Angelina, as I poured out the coffee, "the time has come to talk of many things, but especially of expert investigations into the identity of Peter Bundy. Your lead, Sir."

CHAPTER XIX—EXPLANATIONS

"The investigation of this case," Thorndyke began, "falls naturally into two separate inquiries: that relating to the crime and that which is concerned with what we may conveniently call the personation. They make certain contacts, but they are best considered separately. Let us begin with the crime.

"Now, to a person having experience of real crime, there was, in this case, from the very beginning, something rather abnormal. A woman of good social position had disappeared. There was a suggestion that she had been murdered; and the murder had apparently been committed in some public place, that is to say, not in a house. But in such cases, normally, the first evidence of the crime is furnished by the discovery of the body. It is true that, in this case, there was a suggestion that the body had been flung into the river, and this, at first, masked the abnormality to some extent. But even then there was the discrepancy that the brooch, which was attached to the person, appeared to have been found on land, while the bag, which was not attached to the person, was picked up at the water's edge. The bag itself, and the box which had been in it, presented several inconsistencies.

"They had apparently been lying unnoticed for eleven days on a piece of shore that was crowded with small craft and frequently by numbers of seamen and labourers, and that formed a play-ground for the waterside children. The clean state of the box when found showed that it had neither been handled nor immersed, and as the wrapping-paper was intact, the person who had taken it out of the bag must have thrown it away without opening it to see what it contained. The bag was

found under some light rubbish. That rubbish had not been thrown on it by the water, or the bag would have been soaked; and no one could have thrown the rubbish on it without seeing the bag, which was an article of some value. Again, the bag had not been carried to this place by the water, as was proved by its condition.

"Therefore, either this was the place where the crime had been committed, or someone had brought the bag to this place and thrown it away. But neither supposition was reasonably probable. It was inconceivable that a person like Mrs. Frood should have been in this remote, inaccessible, disreputable place at such an hour. The bag could not have been brought here by an innocent person, for no such person would have thrown it away. It was quite a valuable bag. And a guilty person would have thrown it in the river, and probably put a stone in it to sink it. So you see that these first clues were strikingly abnormal. They prepared one to consider the possibility of false tracks. Even the brooch incident had a faint suggestion of the same kind when considered with the other clues. The man who pawned the brooch had a mole on his nose. Such an adornment can be easily produced artificially. It is highly distinctive of the person who possesses it, and it is equally distinctive—negatively—of the person who does not possess it. Then there was the character of the person who had disappeared. She was a woman who was seeking to escape from her husband; and hitherto she had not succeeded because she had not hidden herself securely enough. She was a person of a somewhat disappearing tendency. She had an understandable motive for disappearing.

"From the very beginning, therefore, the possibility of voluntary disappearance had to be borne in mind. And when it was, each new clue seemed to support it. There was the scarf, for instance. It was found under a fish-trunk; an unlikely place for it to have got by chance, but an excellent one for a 'plant.' The scarf was not baldly exposed, but someone was sure to turn the trunk over and find it. And at this point another peculiarity began to develop. There was a noticeable tendency for the successive 'finds' to creep up the river from Chatham towards Rochester Bridge. It was not yet very remarkable, but I noticed it, as I entered each find on my map. The brooch was associated with Chatham, the bag and box with the Chatham shore a little farther up, the scarf with the Rochester shore at Blue Boar Head. As I say, it attracted my attention; and when the first shoe was found above Blue Boar Head, the second shoe farther up still, and the hat-pin yet farther up towards the bridge, it became impossible to ignore it. There was no natural explanation. Whether the body were floating or stationary, the constancy of direction was inexplicable; for the tide sweeps up and down twice daily, and objects detached from the body would be carried up or down stream, according to the direction of the tide when they became detached. This regular order was a most suspicious circumstance. Later, when the objects were found in Black Boy-lane, it became absurd. It was a mere paper-chase. Just look at my map."

He exhibited the large-scale map, on which each "find" was marked by a small circle. The series of circles, joined by a connecting line, proceeded directly from near Sun Pier, Chatham, along the shore, and up Black Boy-lane to the gate of the waste ground, and across it to the wall.

Angelina giggled. "You can't say I didn't make it as easy as I could for poor old Cobbledick," she said. "Of course, I never reckoned on anyone bringing up the heavy guns. By the way, I wonder who your private client was. Do you know, John'" she added, with a sudden glance of suspicion; and, as I grinned sheepishly, she exclaimed: "Well! I wouldn't have believed it. It was a regular conspiracy. But I am interrupting the expert. Proceed, my lord."

"Well," Thorndyke resumed, "we have considered the aspect of the crime problem taken by itself, as it appeared to an experienced investigator. From the first there was a suspicion that the clues were counterfeit, and with each new clue this suspicion deepened. And you will notice an important corollary. If the case was a fraud, that fraud was being worked by someone on the spot. Keep that point in mind, for it has a most significant bearing on the other problem, that of the

personation, to which we will now turn our attention. But before we go into details, there are certain general considerations that we ought to note, in order that we may understand more clearly how the deception became possible.

"The subject of personation and disguise is often misunderstood. It is apt to be supposed that a disguise effects a complete transformation resulting in a complete resemblance to the individual personated—or, as in this case, a complete disappearance of the identity of the disguised person. But no such transformation is possible. All disguise is a form of bluff. It acts by suggestion. And the suggestion is effected by a set of misleading circumstances which produce in the dupe a state of mind in which a very imperfect disguise serves to produce conviction. That is the psychology of personation, and I can only express my admiration of the way in which Angelina had grasped it. Her conduct of this delicate deception was really masterly. Let us consider it in more detail.

"Mr. Bundy was ostensibly a man. But if he had been put in a room with a dozen moderately intelligent persons, and those persons had been asked, 'Is this individual a man? or is he a woman with short hair and dressed in man's clothing?' they would probably have decided unanimously that he was a woman. But the question never was asked. The issue was never raised. He was Mr. Bundy. One doesn't look at young men to see if they are women in disguise.

"Then consider the position of Strangeways—the chosen victim. He comes to a strange town to transact business with a firm of land agents. He goes into the office, and finds the partners—whose names are on the plate outside, and to whom he has been sent by his London agent-engaged in their normal avocations. He transacts his business with them in a normal way, and Mr. Bundy seems to be an ordinary, capable young man. He goes back later and interviews Mr. Bundy, who is just on the point of taking him to introduce him to Mrs. Frood, when he is called away. Then, within a few minutes, he is taken to Mrs. Frood's house, where he finds that lady calmly engaged in needlework. Supposing Mrs. Frood had been extremely like Bundy, could it possibly have entered Strangeways's head that they might be one and the same person? Remember that he had left Bundy in another place only a few minutes before; and here was Mrs. Frood in her own apartments, with the appearance of having been there for hours. Obviously no such thought could have occurred to any man. There was nothing to suggest it.

"But, in fact, Angelina was not perceptibly like Bundy on cursory inspection. They were markedly different in size. A woman always looks bigger than a man of the same height. Bundy was a little man and looked smaller than he was by reason of his very low heels; Angelina was a biggish woman and looked taller than she was by reason of her high heels and her hair. Disregarding her hair, she was fully two inches taller than Bundy.

"Then the facial resemblance must have been slight. Angelina had a mass of hair and wore it low down on her brows and temples; Bundy's hair was short and was brushed back from his forehead. Angelina had strong, black eyebrows; Bundy's eyebrows were thin, or rather, cut off short. Angelina was pale, careworn, dark under the eyes, with drooping mouth, melancholy expression and depressed in manner; Bundy was fresh-coloured, smiling, gay and sprightly in manner and he wore an eye-glass—which has a surprising effect on facial expression. Their voices and intonation were strikingly different. Finally, Strangeways never saw Angelina excepting in a very subdued light in which any small resemblances in features would be unnoticeable.

"And now observe another effect of suggestion. Strangeways had made the acquaintance of Mr. Bundy. Then he had made the acquaintance of Mrs. Frood. They were two separate persons; they were practically strangers to one another; they belonged to different sets of surroundings. He would never think of them in connexion with one another. They were two of his friends, mutually unacquainted. In this condition of separateness they would become established in his mind, and the

conception of them as different persons would become confirmed by habit. It would be a permanent suggestion that would offer an obstacle to any future suggestion that they were the same. That was the advantage of introducing Bundy first, for if he had appeared only after Angelina had disappeared, there would have been no such opposing suggestion. The resemblances might have been noticed, and he might have been detected.

"In passing I may remark upon the tact and judgment that were shown in the disguise. The troublesome makeup, the wig, the false eyebrows, the grease-paint, the false voice, all were concentrated on the temporary Mrs. Frood, who was to disappear. Bundy was not disguised at all, excepting for the eye-glass. He was simply Angelina with her hair cut short and dressed as a man. He hadn't even an assumed voice; for as Angelina is a contralto, and habitually speaks in the lower register, her voice would pass quite well as a light tenor, so long as she kept off the 'head notes.'

"So much for the general aspects of the case. And now as to my own position. As I had never seen Angelina, I naturally should not perceive any resemblance to her in Bundy; but, equally with Strangeways, I was subject to the suggestion that Bundy was a man. The personal equation, however, was different. It is my professional habit to reject all mental suggestion so far as is possible; to sift out the facts and consider them with an open mind regardless of what they appear to suggest. And then you are to remember that when I first met Mr. Bundy, there was already in my mind a faint suspicion that this was not a genuine crime; that things were not quite what they appeared; and that if this were the case, the clues were being manipulated by somebody on the spot.

"When I met Mr. Bundy, I looked him over as I look over every person whom I meet for the first time; and that inspection yielded one or two rather remarkable facts. I noticed that he wore exceptionally low heels and that he had several physical characteristics that were distinctively feminine. The very low heels puzzled me somewhat. If they had been exceptionally high there would have been nothing in it. But why should a noticeably short man wear almost abnormally low heels? I could think of no reason, unless he wore them for greater comfort, but I noted the fact and reserved it for further consideration.

"Of his physical peculiarities, the first that attracted my attention was the shape of his hands. They were quite of the feminine type. Of course, hands vary, but still it was a fact to be noted, and the observation caused me to look him over a little more critically; and then I discovered a number of other feminine characteristics.

"Perhaps it may be useful to consider briefly the less obvious differences between the sexes—the more obvious ones would, of course, be provided for by the disguise. There are two principal groups of such differences; the one has reference to the distribution of bulk, the other to the direction of certain lines. Let us take the distribution of bulk. This exhibits opposite tendencies in the two sexes. In the female, the great mass is central—the hip region; and from this the form diminishes in both directions. The whole figure, including the arms, is contained in an elongated ellipse. And the tendency affects the individual members. The limbs are bulky where they join the trunk, they taper pretty regularly towards the extremities, and they terminate in relatively small hands and feet. The hands themselves taper as a whole, and the individual fingers taper markedly from a comparatively thick base to a pointed tip.

"In the male figure the opposite condition prevails; it tends to be acromegalous. The central mass is relatively small, the peripheral masses is relatively large. The hip region is narrow, and there is a great widening towards the shoulders. The limbs taper much less towards the extremities, and they terminate in relatively large hands and feet. So, too, with the hands; they tend to be square in

shape, and the individual fingers—excepting the index finger—are nearly as broad at the tips as at the base.

"Of the second group of differences we need consider only one or two instances. The general rule is that certain contour lines tend in the male to be vertical or horizontal in direction and in the female to be oblique. A man's neck, at the back, is nearly straight and vertical; a woman's shows a sweeping oblique curve. The angle of a man's lower jaw is nearly a right angle; there is a vertical and a horizontal ramus. A woman's lower jaw has an open angle and its contour forms an oblique line from the ear to the chin. But the most distinctive difference is in the ear itself. A man's ear has its long diameter vertical; a woman's has the long diameter oblique; and the obliquity is usually very marked.

"Bearing these differences in mind, and remembering that they are subject to variation in individual cases, let us now return to Mr. Bundy. His hands, as I have said, had the feminine character. His feet were small even for a small man; his ears were set obliquely and the line of his jaw was oblique with an open angle. His shoulders had evidently been made up by the tailor, and he seemed rather wide across the hips for a man. In short, all those bodily characteristics which were not concealed or disguised by the clothing were feminine. It was a rather remarkable fact; so much so that I began to ask myself if it were possible that he might actually be a woman in disguise.

"I watched him narrowly. There was nothing distinctive in his walk, but there was in the movements of the arms. He flourished his stick jauntily enough, but he had not that 'nice conduct of a clouded cane' that is as much a social cachet in our day as it was in the days of good Queen Anne. It needs a skill born of years of practice to manage a stick properly, as one realizes when one sees the working man taking his Malacca for its Sunday morning walk. Mr. Bundy had not that skill. His stick was a thing consciously carried; it was not a part of himself. Then the movement of the free arm was feminine. When a woman swings her arm she swings it through a large arc, especially in the backward direction—probably to avoid her hip—and the palm of the hand tends to be turned backward. A man's free arm either hangs motionless or swings slightly, unless he is walking very fast; it swings principally forward, and the palm of his hand inclines inwards. These are small matters, but their cumulative significance is great.

"Further, there was the mental habit. Bundy was jocose and playfully ironic. But a gentleman of twenty-five doesn't 'pull the leg' of a gentleman of fifty whom he knows but slightly; whereas a lady of twenty-five does. And very properly," he added, seeing that Angelina had turned rather pink. "That is a compliment in a young lady which would be an impertinence in a young man. No doubt, when the equality of the sexes is an accomplished fact, things will be different."

"It will never be an accomplished fact;" said Angelina. "The equality of the sexes is like the equality of the classes. The people who roar for social equality are the under-dogs; and the women who shout for sex equality are the under-cats. Normal women are satisfied with things as they are."

"Hearken unto the wisdom of Angelina," said Thorndyke, with a smile. "But perhaps she is right. It may be that the women who are so eager to compete with men are those who can't compete with women. I can't say. I have never been a woman: whereas Angelina has the advantage of being able to view the question from both sides.

"The *prima facie* evidence, then, suggested that Mr. Bundy was a woman. But as this was a *prima facie* improbability, the matter had to be gone into further. On Mr. Bundy's cheeks and chin was a faint blue colouration, suggestive of such a growth of whiskers and beard as would be appropriate to his age. Now if those whiskers and that beard were genuine, the other signs were fallacious. Mr.

Bundy must be a man. But his cheeks looked perfectly smooth and clean; and it was about seven o'clock in the evening. My own cheeks and Strangeways' were by this time visibly prickly; and as he had been with us all day, Mr. Bundy could not have shaved since the morning. I tried vainly to get a closer view, and was considering how it could be managed when Providence intervened."

"I know," said Angelina; "It was that beastly mosquito."

"Yes," agreed Thorndyke. "But even then I could not get a chance to look at the skin closely. But when we got Mr. Bundy into the surgery, and examined the bite through a lens, the murder was out."

"You could see there were no whiskers?" said Angelina.

"It wasn't that," replied Thorndyke. "It was something much more conclusive. You may know that the whole of the human body excepting the palms of the hands, the soles of the feet, and the eyelids, is covered with a fine down, technically called the lanugo. It consists of minute, nearly colourless hairs set quite closely together, and may be seen as a sort of halo on the face of a woman or child when the edge of the contour is against the light. On the face of a clean-shaved man it is, of course, absent, as it is shaved off with the whiskers. Now on Mr. Bundy's face the lanugo was intact all over the blue area. It followed that he had never been shaved. It further followed that the blue colouration was an artificial stain. But this made it practically a certainty that Mr. Bundy was a woman.

"The question now was: If Mr. Bundy was a woman, what woman was he? The obvious answer seemed to be, Angelina Frood. She was missing; but if the disappearance was an imposture, someone on the spot was planting the clues. That someone would most probably be Mrs. Frood, herself. But if she were lurking in the neighbourhood, she must be disguised; and here was a disguised woman. Nevertheless, obvious as the suggestion was, the thing suggested seemed to be impossible. Strangeways knew both Angelina and Bundy and he had not recognized the latter; and I had a vague impression that he had seen them together, which, of course, would absolutely exclude their identity. A little judicious conversation with him, however, showed that neither objection had any weight. He had never seen them both at one time; and his description of Mrs. Frood made it clear that she had appeared to him totally unlike Bundy.

"The next thing was to ascertain definitely if this woman really was Mrs. Frood, and fortunately I had the means of making a very simple test. Strangeways had given me a photograph of Angelina bearing the address of a theatrical photographer, and from him I obtained seven different photographs in various poses. Then I received from Strangeways the group-photograph that was taken of us by the city wall, which contained an excellent portrait of Mr. Bundy. Out of this photograph I cut a small square containing Bundy's head, soaked it in oil of bergamot, and mounted it in Canada balsam on a glass plate. This made the paper quite transparent, so I now had a transparent positive. I selected from the photographs of Angelina one that was in a pose exactly similar to the portrait, of Bundy—practically full face—and treated it in the same way. Then I handed the two transparencies to my assistant, and he, by means of our big copying camera, produced two life-sized negatives, exactly alike in dimensions. With prints from these negatives we were able to perform some experiments. From Angelina's portrait I carefully cut out the face, leaving the hair and neck, and slipped Bundy's portrait behind it, so that his face appeared through the hole. We could now see how Bundy looked with Angelina's hair, and, on putting it beside an untouched portrait of Angelina, it was obvious, in spite of the eye-glass, that it was the same face. For you must remember that the Angelina that we had was the real person, not the made-up Angelina whom Strangeways had seen.

"This success encouraged us to take a little more trouble. My man, Polton, made some black paper masks, with the aid of which he produced two composite photographs, one of which had Bundy's face and Angelina's hair, neck, and bust, while the other had Angelina's face and Bundy's hair, forehead, neck, and bust. The eye-glass was the disturbing factor, though it showed very little, and Bundy managed it so skilfully that it hardly affected the shape of the eye and the set of the brow. Still, it was necessary to eliminate it, and as painting was out of our province, we invoked the aid of Mrs. Anstey, who is a very talented portrait painter and miniaturist. She touched out the joins in the composites, painted out the eye-glass in the one and painted an eye-glass into the other. And now the identity was complete. The Bundy-Angelina portrait was identical with the photographer's portrait, and the Angelina-Bundy photograph was Mr. Bundy to the life.

"However, we made a final test. Polton reduced the Bundy-Angelina portrait to cabinet size, and made a couple of carbon prints, which I brought down here and exhibited; and as Strangeways accepted them as portraits of Angelina, I considered the proof complete."

Here Angelina interrupted: "But what about that brooch? I never had a brooch like that."

Thorndyke smiled a grim smile. "I asked Mrs. Anstey to paint in a brooch of a characteristic design."

"What for?" asked Angelina.

"Ah!" said Thorndyke, "thereby hangs a tale."

"Oh! a serpent's tail, I suppose," said Angelina.

"You will be able to judge presently," he replied. "The brooch had its uses. Well, to continue: The identity of Mr. Bundy was now established as a moral certainty. But it was not certain enough for legal purposes. I wanted conclusive evidence; and I wanted to ascertain exactly how the transformation effects were worked. I had noted that Bundy and Angelina occupied adjoining houses which were virtually the two moieties of a double house with a common covered passageway. I assumed that the two houses communicated, but it was necessary to ascertain if they really did. The only way to establish the facts was to inspect the house in which Angelina had lived, and this I determined to do, in the very faint hope that I might be able, at the same time, to get one or more of Angelina's finger-prints. I made a pretext for visiting the house with Strangeways, and we had the extraordinary good luck to find Mrs. Gillow just going out, so we had the house to ourselves. But this was not the only piece of luck, for we found that Angelina had taken a drink from the bedroom tumbler and water-bottle before going out, and had left on them a complete set of beautiful fingerprints, of which I secured a number of admirable photographs.

"Examination of the basement showed that I was right as to the communication. Both houses had a side door opening into the passage-way, and both doors were fitted with Yale latches which looked as if they were opened with the same key. The passage was little used, but the gravel between the two doors was a good deal trodden, and there were numerous finger-prints on Angelina's side-door. In the kitchen was a large cupboard fitted with a Yale lock on the door and pegs inside. I assumed that when Angelina was at home that cupboard contained a suit of Mr. Bundy's clothes, and that when Mr. Bundy was in the office it contained a wig and a dress and a pair of lady's shoes.

"Well, that made the evidence fairly complete with one exception. We had to get a set of Bundy's finger-prints to compare with Angelina's. That was where the brooch came in. I knew that when Mr. Bundy saw a portrait of his former self with a brooch that he had never possessed, his curiosity

would be aroused, and he would examine that portrait closely. And so he did. And on my asking him to compare the two prints, he took the opportunity to pick them both up, one in each hand, to scrutinize them more minutely, and find out who the photographer was. When he put them down, they bore a complete, though invisible, set of his finger-prints. Later, Mr. Bundy went home, escorted by Strangeways. As soon as they were gone, I took the photographs up to my room, developed up the finger-prints with powder, and compared them minutely, line by line, with the photographs of those on the tumbler and bottle. They were identical. The finger-prints of Bundy were the finger-prints of Angelina Frood.

"That completed the case; and if I had known what Angelina's intentions were I should have notified Bundy that 'the game was up.' But I was in the dark. I could do nothing until I knew whether she was going to produce a body, and if so, whose body it would be. The City wall was in my mind as a possibility, since I had noted the curious disappearance of the gate-key on that significant date and I had heard of the story of Bill the bargee and knew that Bundy had heard it, and apparently taken it seriously. But one can't act on conjecture. I could only watch Angelina play her game and try to follow the moves. When the paper-chase turned up Black Boy-lane, I knew that the wall-burial was intended to be discovered. But I didn't know what was in the wall, and I may say that I was rather alarmed. For if Angelina had taken the story of Bill as a reliable precedent and had buried a real body in quicklime, there was going to be a catastrophe. It was an immense relief to me when I got Strangeways' report that only a skeleton had been found; for I knew then that only a skeleton had been buried and that no crime had been committed. That is all I have to tell; and now it is Angelina's turn to enter the confessional."

"You haven't left me much to tell," said Angelina. "I feel as if I had been doing the thimble and pea trick with glass thimbles. However, I will fill in a few details. This scheme first occurred to me when I came down here to take over the property that had been left to me. I put it confidentially to Uncle Japp, but he was so shocked that he has never been able to get his hair to lie down since. He wouldn't hear of it. So I asked him to lunch with poor Nicholas; and after that he was ready to agree to anything. Accordingly I made my preparations. I got a theatrical wig-maker to cut off my hair and make it into a wig (I told him I had a man's part and it was expected to be a long run), got a suit made by a theatrical costumier, and down I came as Mr. Bundy. Uncle J. had already had the new plate put up. The next door offices and basement were empty, so we got them furnished for Angelina, and as soon as the wig was ready, down she came and took possession.

"Up to this time the third act was a bit sketchy. I had arranged the disappearance, and the recovery of the clues from the river, and I had a plan of buying a mummy, dressing it in my clothes, and burying it in the marshes close to the shore, where I could discover it when it had matured sufficiently. But I didn't much like the plan. I didn't know enough about mummies, and some other people might know too much. It looked as if I should have to do without a body, and leave my death to mere rumour; which would be unsatisfactory. I did want a tombstone.

"About this time an angel of the name of Turcival—he lives in Adam and Eve-street, Adelphi, bless him!—sent a Dr. Strangeways down here. He was a regular windfall—a new doctor—and I gave him my entire attention. I took him to his own proposed premises, and kept him in conversation, to let my personality soak well in. That evening I interviewed him in the office, and let him suppose that I was going to take him to Mrs. Frood's house and introduce him to her. Then, when I suddenly remembered an engagement elsewhere, I went out, and as soon as the office door was shut, down I darted into our basement, out at the side door, in at the other side door, and into Mrs. Frood's kitchen. There I did a lightning change; slipped on my dress and wig, stuck on my eyebrows, and made up my complexion; flew up the stairs, lighted the lamp in the sitting-room, and spread myself out with my needle-work. But I hadn't been settled more than two or three minutes when Uncle Japp arrived, leading the lamb to the slaughter.

"Then it turned out that I had struck a bit of luck that I hadn't bargained for. John had attended me in London and knew something of my affairs; so I appointed him my physician in ordinary on the spot. It was rare sport. The concern poor old John showed for my grease-paint was quite touching. I sat there squeaking complaints to him and receiving his sympathy until I was ready to screech with laughter. But I felt rather a pig all the same, for John was so sweet, and he was such a man and such a gentleman. However, I had to go on when once I had begun.

"But it was a troublesome business, worse than any stage job I ever had, to keep these two people going. I had to rush through from the office into the kitchen and cook things that I didn't want, just to make a noise and a smell of cooking, and listen to Mrs. Gillow so that I could pop up the stairs at the psychological moment and remind her that I lived there; and then to fly down and change and dart through into the office, so that people could see that I was occupied there. It was frightfully hard work, and anxious, too. I can tell you, it was a relief when I heard from Miss Cumbers that Nicholas was starting for Brighton, and that I could disappear without implicating him. However, there is no need for me to go into any more details. Your imaginations can fill those in."

"The man with the mole, I take it," said Thorndyke, "was—"

"Yes. I got a suit of slops in the Minories. The mole, of course, was built up, with toupee-paste."

"By the way," said Thorndyke, "was there any necessity for Bundy at all?"

"Well, I had to be somebody, you know, and I had to stay on the spot to work the clues and keep an eye on the developments. I couldn't be a woman because that would have required a heavy make-up that would almost certainly have been spotted, and would have been an intolerable bore; whereas Bundy, as you have pointed out, was not a disguise at all. When once I had got my hair cut and had provided myself with the clothes and eye-glass, there was no further trouble. I could have lived comfortably as Bundy for the rest of my life.

"So that is my story," Angelina concluded; "and," she added, with a sudden change of manner, "I am your grateful debtor for ever. You have done far more for me even than you know. Only this morning, poor Peter Bundy was a forlorn little wretch, miserably anxious about the present and looking to a future that had nothing but empty freedom to offer. And now I am the happiest of women—for I should be a hypocrite if I pretended to have any regrets for poor Nicholas. I will say good-bye to him in his coffin and give him a decent funeral, and try to think of him as he was before he sank into the depths. But I am frankly glad that he is gone out of his own miserable life and out of mine. And his going, which would never have been known but for the wisdom of the benevolent serpent, has left me free, With a promise of a happiness that even he does not guess."

"I am not so sure of that," said Thorndyke, with a sly smile.

"Well, neither am I, now you come to mention it," said she, smiling at him in return. "He is an inquiring and observant serpent, with a way of nosing out all sorts of things that he is not supposed to be aware of. And. after all, perhaps he has a right to know. It is proper that the giver should have the satisfaction of realizing the preciousness of that which he has given."

Here endeth the Mystery of Angelina Frood. And yet it is not quite the end. Indeed, the end is not yet; for the blessed consequences still continue to develop like the growth of a fair tree. The story has dwindled to a legend, whose harmless whispers call but a mischievous smile to that face that, like the dial in our garden, acknowledges only the sunshine. Mrs. Dunk, it is true, still wages public war, but it is tempered by private adoration; and almost daily baskets of flowers, and even

tomatoes and summer cabbages, arrive at our house accompanied by the beaming smile and portly person of Inspector Cobbledick.

V. — 5A KING'S BENCH WALK

by Percival M Stone

Amid the vast Literature which surrounds the Sherlock Holmes cycle one finds innumerable, carefully documented references to the Baker Street ménage which has been invested with an atmosphere of romance surpassing that of any domicile presented in the pages of modern fiction.

Through the exhaustive studies of such experts as Vincent Starrett, Ronald Knox, H. W. Bell, C. S. Roberts, and Thomas Blakeney, the famous lodgings, where the great detective was so faithfully ministered to by Watson and Mrs. Hudson, have long since passed from the realm of fancy to one of vivid reality and every incident pertaining to Holmes' existence within those magic portals is now accepted as belonging to an actual chronology of crime investigation.

With no purpose in mind to strip these hallowed regions of their glamour, for that way lies sacrilege, let us now consider, in a quarter of London far removed from Baker Street, another familiar residence which is closely associated with the private life and investigations of a distinguished Holmes contemporary.

For it is undeniably a fact that only six years after Holmes stages his astounding "Return" in *The Adventure of the Empty House,* one finds John Evelyn Thorndyke completing his course of hospital training and about to engage lodgings in King's Bench Walk. There, accompanied and supported by the twin satellites, Polton and Jervis, the eminent medico-jurist is drawn into a remarkable series of investigations, the engaging chronology of which, presented with such convincing skill by Dr. R. Austin Freeman stands,—in the judgment of discriminating students of the genre,—as the most notable contribution to modern detective fiction.

Since one or two discrepancies appear in the author's narrative pertaining to that quarter of The Temple where Thorndyke lodges, it appears advisable to subject that fascinating area, and Dr. Freeman's allusions, to careful survey. The Temple, comprising two famous Inns of Court (The Middle and Inner Temple), extends from Fleet Street to the Thames Embankment, and as one enters its peaceful, entrancing precincts by way of Wren's noble Gate-house at the upper end of Middle Temple Lane, "Time stands still," for the fortunate visitor is transported at each stage of his wandering to the mellowed atmosphere of an age long since gone.

Ben Jonson referred to the Inns of Court as "the noblest nurseries of humanity and liberty in the kingdom," and amid the diadems crowning the brow of legal London the area immediately adjoining Thorndyke's lodgings has been judged a gem of unsurpassed charm and radiance. Here within short walking distance, one is confronted with that ancient round basilica, The Temple Church, to the north of which, in a spot never actually determined, lies Oliver Goldsmith; Middle Temple Hall, dating back to Elizabeth; Crown Office Row with Brick Court, abundantly remindful of Lamb, Dr. Johnson and Blackstone;—not o'erlooking Fountain Court, indissolubly associated with Ruth Pinch.

But our study lies not in contemplation of these ancient landmarks which only serve as a brilliant back-drop to one particular residence in the thoroughfare known as "King's Bench Walk." "There,"

Loftie states in his admirable work on The Temple, "beauty of architectural design reaches its highest level," and the rich setting is further enhanced as one gazes down past the arched doorways, approached by broad stone steps, to the Thames visible across the Embankment roadway.

We have stated that Thorndyke's creator has made confusing references to the exact location of the doctor's lodgings. Let us see, however, if we can determine with some degree of exactitude just where along the "Walk" one finds his familiar name inscribed as occupant of the "1st Pair."

In that first chronicle of Dr. Christopher Jervis, *The Red Thumb Mark* (1907) which, by the way, introduces us to the most distinguished recorder among Thorndyke's several Boswells, we are informed, "my chambers are some doors further down,—6A," whereas in the author's own account of the medico-jurist's origin (Refer to *Meet the Detective*), one reads, "when he (Thorndyke) first made his bow to the reading public from the doorway to #4 King's Bench Walk."

Nevertheless, despite these confused references, the first of which was made before Thorndyke's eventful career gains its stride, we have, by common assent, long looked upon 5A as the correct postal address. In *The D'Arblay Mystery*, Chapter II, we find the following very significant passage, "Thorndyke's number was 5A which I presently discovered inscribed on the keystone of a fine dignified brick portico of the *seventeenth* century, on the jamb whereof was painted his name as occupant of the '1st Pair.'"

Now Muirhead in his very excellent *London Guide Book* ascribes only two houses in King's Bench Walk, numbers 4 and 5, to Christopher Wren (seventeenth century); consequently we must conclude that Jervis' very first reference to the lodgings as # 6, is erroneous and that number does not appear elsewhere in the chronicles.

At the opening of Chapter VII, *Shadow of the Wolf*, we find another reference to Wren as Supt. Miller of Scotland Yard wanders down the "Walk" in search of Thorndyke's residence.

We may assume, then, that the precise location of the famous chambers, to which we shall presently be admitted, has now been closely determined (the author's one reference to 4A was manifestly a slip of the pen), and our next step is to consider and admire at closer range the entrance to Thorndyke's inner sanctum where have been staged for our delight, and oft-times to our bewilderment, those absorbing problems in deduction in the solution of which #5A stands as a veritable dynamo room of research.

If one crosses the Terrace eastward from the direction of Crown Office Row an admirable view is gained of "the dignified brick porticos" along King's Bench Walk; and as we draw closer one observes, also, the rich architectural design of the graceful supporting pillars on either side of the entrances. Light iron railings border the five broad stone steps and directly over the centre of the arch a lamp of ancient pattern sheds welcome light into the fastnesses of the inner corridors.

Presently, as we reach the paved "Walk" to turn our steps eagerly towards the portal of #5, one recalls that here formerly resided William Murray, later Earl of Mansfield. The story persists that his chambers were once visited by the Duchess of Marlborough. "She would not tell me her name," the servant reported later to Murray, "but she swore so dreadfully I'm sure she must be a lady of quality."

We have now reached the most difficult stage of our task, that of depicting accurately and comprehensively, the inner details of arrangement which pertain to Thorndyke's lodgings. It is, in fact, at this point that one leaves the world of reality, and pieces together from Dr. Freeman's

innumerable careful references the floor plan and domestic facilities on the "first floor" at 5A King's Bench Walk.

To American readers it should be clearly pointed out that in England the "first floor" is synonymous with our own "second story," and never refers to the ground level area. Thus, "1st Pair" signifies a flight of stairs (probably divided midway by a landing) which brings one speedily to "The Oak," that outer formidable barricade to Thorndyke's chambers. An electric bell button is visible and on the inner door which admits to the living room we observe that familiar brass knocker which Mr. Brodribb usually manipulated "with a flourish."

"You will find my chambers an odd mixture," Thorndyke observes to Jervis in *The Red Thumb Mark*, "for they combine the attractions of an office, a museum, a laboratory and a workshop."

The living room, where so many important conferences are held in the course of the chronicles, is,—one finds stated in *The Eye of Osiris*,—"fine, spacious and panelled." It is, indeed in this large chamber o'erlooking the broad Terrace by means of two wide windows that we meet many of the dominant characters in the Thorndyke cycle of crime solution, and it would be well, perhaps, if we elaborate somewhat upon its detailed arrangements and atmosphere.

Opposite the entrance one observes with keen interest the deep fireplace, flanked by two capacious arm chairs and a smoking stand, before which Thorndyke and Jervis frequently enjoyed a final pipe before retirement. Over the hearth stretches a broad mantel-piece upon which are visible, one presumes, a clock, several tobacco jars, a book or two, and possibly the famous box of Trichinopoly cheroots which Thorndyke invariably resorts to upon reaching the solution to a puzzling case. Anstey, a medical confrère, once remarked that "I'd sooner smoke my own wig;" and we find no reference to an occasion when these East Indian delicacies were distributed lavishly among the fireside gatherings.

No reference appears to Thorndyke's private chamber which is probably reached through a doorway at one side of the fireplace. Such a room undoubtedly exists in close proximity to the living room, and we find also brief comment as to an "office" in *31 New Inn*. More extended sleeping quarters are described when we arrive later at consideration of the upper floor facilities.

Along at least one wall surface there extends, we know, a well-stocked bookcase ample space being devoted to those extremely useful reference works, recourse to which has in more than one instance led to rapid advancement in the particular inquiry at hand. Included among these appear innumerable standard medical works, treatises on toxicology, directories,—these covering a vast field,—atlases, ordnance maps, and a selected group of studies in criminology based upon on the observations of English, French and German experts.

In Chapter XII, *Pontifex, Son & Thorndyke*, Jervis remarks, "The Post Office directory was one of Thorndyke's most potent instruments of research—it was capable of throwing the most surprising amount and kind of illumination on obscure cases."

Other reference files of even more intimate nature are, we learn from the chronicles, stored upon shelves or in locked cupboards about the large living room; old newspapers, portfolios containing clippings devoted to odd cases, and a voluminous compilation based upon a study of strange wills which play such an important role during the career of a medico-jurist.

Jervis states in *The Eye of Osiris*, "To him (Thorndyke) a perfectly unintelligible will is a thing of beauty and a joy forever."

Of rugs, pictures and other decorations within this principal chamber of the Thorndyke establishment we receive but meagre description from the author, but it may be safely inferred that they exemplify an excellence of taste and arrangement wholly compatible with their owner's character.

At one corner, at a position which draws good light from the window, stands the doctor's flat-topped writing table upon a corner of which rests a metal cabinet containing his card reference files, and in the deep alcove between the windows a smaller dining table is visible with two oaken high-backed chairs set in position for the next meal.

We now propose to ascend to the second floor which is devoted to Polton's quarters, the laboratories and two small chambers. It requires careful research, indeed, to gain a clear comprehension of these august regions where so many vital matters associated with Thorndyke's investigations are concluded. The main laboratory is reached by means of a narrow, winding stairway leading from the living room, but we are also informed in *The Eye of Osiris* that another doorway opens upon the main, outer staircase of the building.

One smaller room has been set apart for bacteriological and microscopic research; the two other adjoining chambers being reserved for Jervis, at such times when he is "in residence" and for occasional overnight guests. Moreover, there exists at least one room on the third floor, reference being found to it in Chapter X of A *Thief in the Night*. From the windows of these upper quarters one looks out upon "plane trees and ancient red-tiled roofs" beyond which one can, no doubt, gaze with wonder and delight at the great dome of St. Paul's "floating" over London. It is, however, with the main laboratory that we are chiefly concerned and one finds elaborate description of its complicated, fascinating equipment throughout Dr. Freeman's several works. "One side of the spacious chamber," we learn from *A Thief in the Night*, "is occupied by a huge copying camera, the other by a joiner's bench. A powerful back-geared lathe stands against one window, a jeweller's bench against the other, and the walls are covered with shelves and tool racks filled with all sorts of strange implements."

It is not surprising that the author of these absorbingly interesting chronicles has overlooked once or twice confusing discrepancies which have crept into the stream of his narrative; one finds these particularly with reference to these upper floor regions of the King's Bench Walk domicile, but they do not in any sense detract from the record's superlative merits.

Space does not permit an extended account of the several astounding revelations which come to pass within these chambers of intensive scientific research. It is there that Thorndyke and Polton unmask Varney's vain efforts to improvise a fraudulent post mark on the letter dropped into Penfield's mail box (*Shadow of the Wolf*); there we witness the ingenious method of opening an infernal machine (*A Thief in the Night*); on another momentous occasion we find a coffin placed upon two trestles in the upper chamber where a unique identification test is staged *(The D'Arblay Mystery)*, and in *The Silent Witness*, which by the way, offers one of the most extended descriptions of the laboratory, we are present when a remarkable yet utterly convincing analysis is presented of ash and bone fragments resulting from cremation.

It is, indeed, this complicated, fascinating machinery of the scientist, together with sound deductive reasoning, which raise Dr. Freeman's detective novels far above the average level of contemporary achievement. E. A. Seaborne in *The Detective in Fiction* refers to "Thorndyke, the greatest of fictional scientific detectives;" "Thomson in *Masters of Mystery* calls the author "a great master of the genre," and E. M. Wrong in that admirable introduction to *Stories of Crime and Detection* states: "Holmes dabbled in science, but his knowledge therein bears the same relation to Thorndyke's as his pocket magnifying glass to the latter's research case. In Thorndyke we have

complete use of all the resources of the laboratory, coupled with a logic that is safer than that of Holmes, because it is less cock-sure."

And now what manner of men are they; these immortal, engaging figures projected for us, against a background of baffling enigma at times, in the Thorndyke gallery of living portraits?

John Evelyn Thorndyke's antecedents are, strangely enough, veiled in obscurity for we know practically nothing of his progenitors, his boyhood training or the location of the family homestead. The author, Dr. R. Austin Freeman, created him more than a quarter of a century ago at a time when an illustrious confrère, A. Conan Doyle, was engaged in presenting a fresh series of exploits around the famed lodgings of another private investigator in Baker Street. But Dr. Freeman's skilfully fashioned chronicles are based upon a profound knowledge, and respect, for the new science of medical jurisprudence of which he states: "by the sacrifice of a certain amount of dramatic effect one could keep entirely within the facts of real life."

The author proceeds to state: "As Thorndyke was a man of acute intellect and sound judgment I decided to keep him free from eccentricities, and endow him with the dignity of presence, appearance and manner appropriate to a high professional and social standing." A more extended revealing portrait of the great detective will be found in *Meet the Detective,* an entertaining work published in 1935 by George Allen & Unwin, London. As to age, we find, "I need not saddle him with the infirmities of age, and I can (in his case) put the brakes on the passing years. Probably he is not more than fifty after all!"

Through the eyes of Thorndyke's closest associates we secure, however, a more varied series of appraisements relating intimately to his personal character. Polton, who knows him better than any other individual and who idolizes his very foot steps, makes the statement in *The Silent Witness,* "He doesn't think like any other man. Ordinary men's brains are turned out pretty much alike from a single mould like a batch of pottery. But the doctor's brain was a special order, and if there was a mould at all it was broken up when the job was finished." And again, "he reasons from facts which his imagination tells him exist, but which nobody else can see."

Robert Anstey, K.C., a professional confrère, observes during the progress of events in *The Mystery of Angelina Frood:* "You must know that he is about as communicative as a Whitstable native. No one ever knows what cards he holds." And at the opening of Chapter XIII, in *Mystery of 31 New* Inn Jervis notes that "Thorndyke's brain was not of ordinary type. Facts of which his mind instantly perceived the relation remained to other people unconnected and without meaning."

To gain a firm comprehension of Thorndyke's abnormal reasoning powers and his insistence upon neglecting no thread of evidence, even though it be of trivial scope, one would do well to read Chapter VIII, *Shadow of the Wolf,* wherein the entire fabric of Varney's duplicity is laid bare. The story presents a remarkable portrayal of sound deduction and lays emphasis upon the medico-jurist's cardinal injunction: "In the estimation of evidence there is no such thing as a commonplace fact or object."

Of Thorndyke's associations outside the immediate realm of his profession, and of his social contacts beyond the confines of The Temple, we hold but extremely meagre reports. Some of his time is devoted to lectures on Medical Jurisprudence at St. Margaret's Hospital and he has long been attached to the staff of the South London Hospital where he conducts classes in the Science of Toxicology. Occasionally, too, we find brief references to his affiliations as a Director with the Griffin Life Company of which concern Stalker was once the managing head.

Again, we find mention in *31 New Inn* of a Club to which Thorndyke belongs, but far more often on the occasion of his dining out does he prefer the less formal atmosphere of "The Cheshire Cheese" or "The Bell" in Holborn.

Meals at 5A King's Bench Walk are sometimes served in a small chamber on the second floor but more often, and always when guests are present, in the living room alcove where Polton superintends the arrangements. Which brings us at last to a closer observance of one of the most lovable, finely etched, and utterly convincing figures within the Thorndyke circle.

Nathaniel Polton, confidential servant and laboratory assistant, is a small, elderly man, "like a rural dean or a chancery judge." Dr. Freeman writes of his "collateral relatives" in *Meet the Detective*: "They were Mr. Pollard, associated with the hospital museum, and a watch and clock maker named Parsons who was a man of boundless ingenuity and technical resource. His crinkly countenance," Freeman concludes, "is strictly his own copyright."

Dr. John Thorndyke first met Polton as "in-patient at a hospital,—ill and broken, a victim of poverty." The doctor gave him one or two jobs and then engaged him permanently. The relationship between master and servant is one of mutual admiration and respect, for Thorndyke says of Polton in *The Cat's Eye*: "He is a shining example of the social virtues; industry,—loyalty,—integrity, and contentment; moreover, as an artificer, he is a positive genius."

As there is no mention in the narratives of a "char" or a "Mrs. Hudson" the various household duties devolve, one presumes, upon Polton who is, in fact, a very model of versatility and shows an infinite capacity for providing the doctor, at a moment's notice, with such equipment of highly technical order as may be required for a fresh stage of investigation in the particular case at hand.

Of his qualities as cook and general provider of domestic comforts we find abundant commendation, but it is within the realm of technical assistant that we are impressed most forcibly with Polton's unique capacity for lending material aid at a crucial moment. Innumerable references may be found concerning his skill as an inventor, as witness the periscope cane in *Mr. Pottermack's Oversight*; the all-seeing magic spectacle lenses in *The Cat's Eye*, and the complicated device for keyhole photography in *Dr. Thorndyke's Discovery*.

Polton is acutely aware of the peculiar qualities appertaining to all of the doctor's visitors, and should one of them arrive during Thorndyke's absence he is well assured of a courteous, genial welcome by this "crinkly" visaged guardian of the premises. Brodribb, a legal associate, is a frequent caller at 5A King's Bench Walk,—his particular fancy there is a bottle of port which his host never fails to bring forth as the two men settle themselves by the fireside, "Brodribb," exclaims Polton on occasion of the lawyer's arrival during the *Cat's Eye* investigations, "let me see, it's the sixty-three that he likes. Yes, and Lord, he does love it. It's a pleasure to see him drink."

We now turn to Doctor Christopher Jervis who serves so faithfully as the all-observing Boswell in several of the Thorndyke chronicles. He is, to use his own phrase in *The Silent Witness*, "second violin in the Thorndyke orchestra," and during the progress of stirring events in *31 New Inn* he takes up permanent residence at 5A, from that time on participating intimately in the solution of those problems in deduction which his distinguished associate has been instructed to unravel. Dr. Freeman, writing of Jervis in *Meet the Detective*, states: "He is the expert misunderstander. His job is to observe and record all the facts and to fail completely to perceive their significance."

Nevertheless, Jervis is an ingratiating, convincing figure in our select group about the fireside at 5A and as Thorndyke's growing fame brings to them problems of deeper complexity this self-

styled "second violin" assumes a more mellow resonance wholly in tune with the major symphony upon which both men are so earnestly engaged.

Jervis follows a curious custom of disappearing wholly from the scene of action in some of the investigations presented; in others, he plays an extremely minor role as a mere lay figure, but we have long accepted him as Thorndyke's closest confidant and look eagerly for further extracts from his voluminous records which are in due course, one fervently trusts, to reveal more details of the doctor's astonishing career.

We must pass lightly over the group of professional confrères and other visitors who arrive from time to time before "The Oak" and are courteously ushered by the discreet Polton into the doctor's presence. Superintendent Miller (curiously remindful, at times, of our old friend, Lestrade) is a welcome guest for almost invariably he casts into Thorndyke's lap a tangled skein involving some capital crime which has already bewildered the high command at "The Yard." Of the legal fraternity, the most familiar figures are, of course, good old Brodribb (at whose entrance Polton coughs discreetly and casts a knowing wink at his master); Penfield, who was introduced to us in *Shadow of the Wolf*; Marchmont and Stalker, the latter now associated with The Griffin Company. Anstey, who directs so ably the doctor's Court cases, must also drop in frequently during the evening to draw a chair before the blazing hearth, for he occupies chambers at #8 close by, and Mayfield too has quarters in Fig Tree Court across the Terrace.

Inspector Badger, alas, will not again announce his arrival by a characteristic rattle of the door knocker for he met an untimely demise in the course of *Dr. Thorndyke's Discovery*, one of the rare instances when the author removes from the stage a familiar and highly respected figure. Badger, it will be recalled, was first introduced to us in *The Red Thumb Mark* and it is the same Walter Hornby who so callously disposes of the Inspector in a much later chronicle.

Among the occasional visitors may be mentioned Doctor Humphrey Jardine; Doctor Paul Berkeley; Mr. Elmhurst, the eminent archaeologist—Professor D'Arcy of the Royal College of Surgeons, whose advice is earnestly sought in the development of certain baffling cases; Mr. Burston the geological expert; Holman, who acts as Thorndyke's shorthand reporter, and Juliet Gibson who holds, we understand, for Dr. Jervis slightly more than a fleeting attachment.

Thus we leave them all amid the engaging environments of The Temple, than which there exists no more fascinating, historic quarter throughout the enormous expanse of London. The shades are drawn; Polton, whose crinkly countenance resembles nothing more than a ripe, benevolent walnut, steps to the fireside with a tray bearing decanter and glasses; Brodribb casts swift inquiring glances at the cupboard where the "63" is stored; Jervis rises from the desk where he has been engaged in writing up the day's developments, and as "the gentle undertones of the Treasury Clock" announce the half hour, Dr. John Thorndyke swiftly descends the stairs from the laboratory ready to join the friendly, familiar associates who have eagerly awaited his inspiring companionship by the blazing hearth.

One cannot do better than close this brief sketch of 5A King's Bench Walk, one of the most famous domiciles found in fiction, by quoting a short passage found in the extremely interesting booklet recently issued by the author's American publishers: "Perhaps R. Austin Freeman's greatest achievement is not his original concept of a medical legal sleuth, or his careful science, or his charm of style and pleasantness of manner. His greatest triumph lies in the one great essential without which no detective story can endure,—the creation of a dominant living character."

VI. — MR. POTTERMACK'S OVERSIGHT

PROLOGUE

The afternoon of a sultry day near the end of July was beginning to merge into evening. The crimson eye of the declining sun peered out through chinks in a bank of slaty cloud as if taking a last look at the great level of land and water before retiring for the night; while already, in the soft, greenish grey of the eastern sky, the new-risen moon hung like a globe of pearl.

It was a solitary scene; desolate, if you will, or peaceful. On the one hand the quiet waters of a broad estuary; on the other a great stretch of marshes; and between them the sea wall, following faithfully the curves and indentations of the shore and fading away at either end into invisibility.

A great stillness brooded over the place. On the calm water, far out beyond the shallows, one or two coasting craft lay at anchor, and yet farther out a schooner and a couple of barges crept up on the flood tide. On the land side in the marshy meadows a few sheep grazed sedately, and in the ditch that bordered the sea wall the water-voles swam to and fro or sat on the banks and combed their hair. Sound there was none save the half-audible wash of the little waves upon the shore and now and again the querulous call of a sea-gull.

In strange contrast to the peaceful stillness that prevailed around was the aspect of the one human creature that was visible. Tragedy was written in every line of his figure; tragedy and fear and breathless haste. He was running—so far as it was possible to run among the rough stones and the high grass—at the foot of the sea wall on the seaward side; stumbling onward desperately, breathing hard, and constantly brushing away with his hand the sweat that streamed down his forehead into his eyes. At intervals he paused to scramble up the slope of the wall among the thistles and ragwort, and with infinite caution, to avoid even showing his head on the skyline, peered over the top backwards and forwards, but especially backwards where, in the far distance, the grey mass of a town loomed beyond the marshes.

There was no mystery about the man's movements. A glance at his clothing explained everything. For he was dressed in prison grey, branded with the broad arrow and still bearing the cell number. Obviously, he was an escaped convict.

Criminologists of certain Continental schools are able to give us with remarkable exactness the facial and other characteristics by which the criminal may be infallibly recognized. Possibly these convenient "stigmata" may actually occur in the criminals of those favoured regions. But in this backward country it is otherwise; and we have to admit the regrettable fact that the British criminal inconsiderately persists in being a good deal like other people. Not that the criminal class is, even here, distinguished by personal beauty or fine physique. The criminal is a low-grade man; but he is not markedly different from other low-grade men.

But the fugitive whose flight in the shelter of the sea wall we are watching did not conform even to the more generalized type. On the contrary, he was a definitely good-looking young man rather small and slight yet athletic and well-knit, with a face not only intelligent and refined but, despite his anxious and even terrified expression, suggestive of a courageous, resolute personality. Whatever had brought him to a convict prison, he was not of the rank and file of its inmates.

Presently, as he approached a bluff which concealed a stretch of the sea wall ahead, he slowed down into a quick walk, stooping slightly and peering forward cautiously to get a view of the shore beyond the promontory, until, as he reached the most projecting point of the wall, he paused for a

moment and then crept stealthily forward, alert and watchful for any unexpected thing that might be lurking round the promontory.

Suddenly he stopped dead and then drew back a pace, craning up to peer over the high, rushy grass, and casting a glance of intense scrutiny along the stretch of shore that had come into view. After a few moments he again crept forward slowly and silently, still gazing intently along the shore and the face of the sea wall that was now visible for nearly a mile ahead. And still he could see nothing but that which had met his eyes as he crept round the bluff. He drew himself up and looked down at it with eager interest.

A little heap of clothes; evidently the shed raiment of a bather, as the completeness of the outfit testified. And in confirmation, just across the narrow strip of "saltings," on the smooth expanse of muddy sand the prints of a pair of naked feet extended in a line towards the water. But where was the bather? There was only a single set of footprints, so that he must be still in the water or have come ashore farther down. Yet neither on the calm water nor on the open, solitary shore was any sign of him to be seen.

It was very strange. On that smooth water a man swimming would be a conspicuous object, and a naked man on that low, open shore would be still more conspicuous. The fugitive looked around with growing agitation. From the shore and the water his glance came back to the line of footprints; and now, for the first time, he noticed something very remarkable about them. They did not extend to the water. Starting from the edge of the saltings, they took a straight line across the sand, every footprint deep and distinct, to within twenty yards of the water's edge; and there they ended abruptly. Between the last footprint and the little waves that broke on the shore was a space of sand perfectly smooth and untouched.

What could be the meaning of this? The fugitive gazed with knitted brows at that space of smooth sand; and even as he gazed, the explanation flashed upon him. The tide was now coming in, as he could see by the anchored vessels. But when these footprints were made, the tide was going out. The spot where the footprints ended was the spot where the bather had entered the water. Then—since the tide had gone out to the low-water mark and had risen again to nearly half-tide—some five hours must have passed since that man had walked down into the water.

All this flashed through the fugitive's brain in a matter of seconds. In those seconds he realized that the priceless heap of clothing was derelict. As to what had become of the owner, he gave no thought but that in some mysterious way he had apparently vanished for good. Scrambling up the slope of the sea wall, he once more scanned the path on its summit in both directions; and still there was not a living soul in sight. Then he slid down, and breathlessly and with trembling hands stripped off the hated livery of dishonour and, not without a certain incongruous distaste, struggled into the derelict garments.

A good deal has been said—with somewhat obvious truth—about the influence of clothes upon the self-respect of the wearer. But surely there could be no more extreme instance than the present one, which, in less than one brief minute, transformed a manifest convict into a respectable artisan. The change took effect immediately. As the fugitive resumed his flight he still kept off the skyline; but he no longer hugged the base of the wall, he no longer crouched nor did he run. He walked upright out on the more or less level saltings, swinging along at a good pace but without excessive haste. And as he went he explored the pockets of the strange clothes to ascertain what bequests the late owner had made to him, and brought up at the first cast a pipe, a tobacco-pouch, and a box of matches. At the first he looked a little dubiously, but could not resist the temptation; and when he had dipped the mouthpiece in a little salt pool and scrubbed it with a handful of grass, he charged

the bowl from the well-filled pouch, lighted it and smoked with an ecstasy of pleasure born of long deprivation.

Next, his eye began to travel over the abundant jetsam that the last spring-tide had strewn upon the saltings. He found a short length of old rope, and then he picked up from time to time a scrap of driftwood. Not that he wanted the fuel, but that a bundle of driftwood seemed a convincing addition to his make-up and would explain his presence on the shore if he should be seen. When he had made up a small bundle with the aid of the rope, he swung it over his shoulder and collected no more.

He still climbed up the wall now and again to keep a look-out for possible pursuers, and at length, in the course of one of these observations, he espied a stout plank set across the ditch and connected with a footpath that meandered away across the marshes. In an instant he decided to follow that path, whithersoever it might lead. With a last glance towards the town, he boldly stepped up to the top of the wall, crossed the path at its summit, descended the landward side, walked across the little bridge and strode away swiftly along the footpath across the marshes.

He was none too soon. At the moment when he stepped off the bridge, three men emerged from the waterside alley that led to the sea wall and began to move rapidly along the rough path. Two of them were prison warders, and the third, who trundled a bicycle, was a police patrol.

"Pity we didn't get the tip a bit sooner," grumbled one of the warders. "The daylight's going fast, and he's got a devil of a start."

"Still," said the constable cheerfully, "it isn't much of a place to hide in. The wall's a regular trap; sea one side and a deep ditch the other. We shall get him all right, or else the patrol from Clifton will. I expect he has started by now."

"What did you tell the sergeant when you spoke to him on the 'phone?"

"I told him there was a runaway coming along the wall. He said he would send a cyclist patrol along to meet us."

The warder grunted. "A cyclist might easily miss him if he was hiding in the grass or in the rushes by the ditch. But we must see that we don't miss him. Two of us had better take the two sides of the wall so as to get a clear view."

His suggestion was adopted at once. One warder climbed down and marched along the saltings, the other followed a sort of sheep-track by the side of the ditch, while the constable wheeled his bicycle along the top of the wall. In this way they advanced as quickly as was possible to the two men stumbling over the rough ground at the base of the wall, searching the steep sides, with their rank vegetation, for any trace of the lost sheep, and making as little noise as they could. So for over a mile they toiled on, scanning every foot of the rough ground as they passed but uttering no word. Each of the warders could see the constable on the path above, and thus the party was enabled to keep together.

Suddenly the warder on the saltings stopped dead and emitted a shout of triumph. Instantly the constable laid his bicycle on the path and slithered down the bank, while the other warder came scrambling over the wall, twittering with excitement. Then the three men gathered together and looked down at the little heap of clothes, from which the discoverer had already detached the jacket and was inspecting it.

"They're his duds all right," said he. "Of course, they couldn't be anybody else's. But here's his number. So that's that."

"Yes," agreed the other, "they're his clothes right enough. But the question is, Where's my nabs himself?"

They stepped over to the edge of the saltings and gazed at the line of footprints. By this time the rising tide had covered up the strip of smooth, unmarked sand and was already eating away the footprints, which now led directly to the water's edge.

"Rum go," commented the constable, looking steadily over the waste of smooth water. "He isn't out there. If he was, you'd see him easily, even in this light. The water's as smooth as oil."

"Perhaps he's landed farther down," suggested the younger warder.

"What for?" demanded the constable.

"Might mean to cross the ditch and get away over the marshes."

The constable laughed scornfully. "What, in his birthday suit? I don't think. No, I reckon he had his reasons for taking to the water, and those reasons would probably be a barge sailing fairly close inshore. They'd have to take him on board, you know; and from my experience of bargees, I should say they'd probably give him a suit of togs and keep their mouths shut."

The elder warder looked meditatively across the water.

"Maybe you are right," said he, "but barges don't usually come in here very close. The fairway is right out the other side. And, for my part, I should be mighty sorry to start on a swim out to a sailing vessel."

"You might think differently if you'd just hopped out of the jug," the constable remarked as he lit a cigarette.

"Yes, I suppose I should be ready to take a bit of a risk. Well," he concluded, "if that was his lay, I hope he got picked up. I shouldn't like to think of the poor beggar drifting about the bottom of the river. He was a decent, civil little chap."

There was silence for a minute or two as the three men smoked reflectively. Then the constable proposed, as a matter of form, to cycle along the wall and make sure that the fugitive was not lurking farther down. But before he had time to start, a figure appeared in the distance, apparently mounted on a bicycle and advancing rapidly towards them. In a few minutes he arrived and dismounted on the path above them glancing down curiously at the jacket which the warder still held.

"Those his togs?" he asked.

"Yes," replied the constable. "I suppose you haven't seen a gent bathing anywhere along here?"

The newcomer shook his head. "No," said he. "I have patrolled the whole wall from Clifton to here and I haven't seen a soul excepting old Barnett, the shepherd."

The elder warder gathered up the rest of the clothes and handed them to his junior. "Well," he said, "we must take it that he's gone to sea. All that we can do is to get the Customs people to give us a passage on their launch to make the round of all the vessels anchored about here. And if we don't find him on any of them, we shall have to hand the case over to the police."

The three men climbed to the top of the wall and turned their faces towards the town; and the Clifton patrol, having turned his bicycle about, mounted expertly and pedalled away at a smart pace to get back to his station before the twilight merged into night.

At that very moment, the fugitive was stepping over a stile that gave access from the marshes to a narrow, tree-shaded lane. Here he paused for a few moments to fling away the bundle of driftwood into the hedge and refill and light his pipe. Then, with a springy step, he strode away into the gathering moonlit dusk.

CHAPTER I—MR. POTTERMACK MAKES A DISCOVERY

A conscientious desire on the part of the present historian to tell his story in a complete and workmanlike fashion from the very beginning raises the inevitable question. What was the beginning? Not always an easy question to answer offhand; for if we reflect upon certain episodes in our lives and try to track them to their beginnings, we are apt, on further cogitation, to discover behind those beginnings antecedents yet more remote which have played an indispensable part in the evolution of events.

As to this present history the whole train of cause and consequence might fairly be supposed to have been started by Mr. Pottermack's singular discovery in his garden. Yet, when we consider the matter more closely, we may doubt if that discovery would ever have been made if it had not been for the sun-dial. Certainly it would not have been made at that critical point in Mr. Pottermack's life; and if it had not—but we will not waste our energies on vain speculations. We will take the safe and simple course. We will begin with the sun-dial.

It stood, when Mr. Pottermack's eyes first beheld it, in a mason's yard at the outskirts of the town. It was obviously of some age, and therefore could not have been the production of Mr. Gallett, the owner of the yard; and standing amidst the almost garishly new monuments and blocks of freshly hewn stone, it had in its aspect something rather downfallen and forlorn. Now Mr. Pottermack had often had secret hankerings for a sun-dial. His big walled garden seemed to cry out for some central feature: and what more charming ornament could there be than a dial which like the flowers and trees amidst which it would stand lived and had its being solely by virtue of the golden sunshine?

Mr. Pottermack halted at the wide-open gate and looked at the dial (I use the word, for convenience to include the stone support). It was a graceful structure with a twisted shaft like that of a Norman column, a broad base and a square capital. It was nicely lichened and weathered, and yet in quite good condition. Mr. Pottermack found something very prepossessing in its comely antiquity. It had a motto, too, incised on the sides of the capital; and when he had strolled into the yard, and, circumnavigating the sun-dial, had read it, he was more than ever pleased. He liked the motto. It struck a sympathetic chord. Sole orto: spes: decedente pax. It might have been his own personal motto. At the rising of the sun; hope: at the going down thereof, peace. On his life the sun had risen in hope: and peace at eventide was his chief desire. And the motto was discreetly reticent about the intervening period. So, too, were there passages in the past which he was very willing to forget so that the hope of the morning might be crowned by peace when the shadows of life were lengthening.

"Having a look at the old dial, Mr. Pottermack?" said the mason, crossing the yard and disposing himself for conversation. "Nice bit of carving, that, and wonderful well preserved. He's counted out a good many hours in his time, he has. Seventeen thirty-four. And ready to count out as many again. No wheels to go rusty. All done with a shadder. No wear and tear about a shadder. And never runs down and never wants winding up. There's points about a sun-dial."

"Where did it come from?"

"I took it from the garden of Apsley Manor House, what's being rebuilt and brought up to date. New owner told me to take it away. Hadn't any use for sun-dials in these days, he said. More hasn't anybody else. So I've got him on my hands. Wouldn't like him for your garden, I suppose? He's going cheap."

It appeared, on enquiry, that he was going ridiculously cheap. So cheap that Mr. Pottermack closed with the offer there and then,

"You will bring it along and fix it for me?" said he.

"I will, sir. Don't want much fixing. If you will settle where he is to stand, I'll bring him and set him up. But you'd better prepare the site. Dig well down into the subsoil and make a level surface. Then I can put a brick foundation and there will be no fear of his settling out of the upright."

That was how it began. And on the knife-edge of such trivial chances is human destiny balanced. From the mason's yard Mr. Pottermack sped homeward with springy step, visualizing the ground-plan of his garden as he went; and by the time that he let himself into his house by the front door within the rose-embowered porch he was ready to make a bee-line for the site of his proposed excavation.

He did not, however; for, as he opened the door, he became aware of voices in the adjacent room and his housekeeper came forth to inform him that Mrs. Bellard had called to see him, and was waiting within. Apparently the announcement was not unwelcome, for Mr. Pottermack's cheerfulness was in nowise clouded thereby. We might even go far as to say that his countenance brightened.

Mrs. Bellard was obviously a widow. That is not to say that she was arrayed in the hideous "weeds" with which, a generation ago, women used to make their persons revolting and insult the memory of the deceased. But she was obviously a widow. More obviously than is usual in these latter days. Nevertheless her sombre raiment was well-considered, tasteful and becoming; indeed the severity of her dress seemed rather to enhance her quiet, dignified comeliness. She greeted Mr. Pottermack with a frank smile, and as they shook hands she said in a singularly pleasant, musical voice:

"It is too bad of me to come worrying you like this. But you said I was to."

"Of course I did," was the hearty response; and as the lady produced from her basket a small tin box, he enquired: "Snails?"

"Snails," she replied; and they both laughed.

"I know," she continued, "it is very silly of me. I quite believe that, as you say, they die instantaneously when you drop them into boiling water. But I really can't bring myself to do it."

"Very natural, too," said Pottermack. "Why should you, when you have a fellow conchologist to do it for you? I will slaughter them this evening and extract them from their shells, and you shall have their empty residences to-morrow. Shall I leave them at your house?"

"You needn't trouble to do that. Give them to your housekeeper and I will call for them on my way home from the shops. But I really do impose on you most shamefully. You kill the poor little beasts, you clean out the shells, you find out their names and you leave me nothing to do but stick them on card, write their names under them, and put them in the cabinet. I feel a most horrid impostor when I show them at the Naturalists' Club as my own specimens."

"But, my dear Mrs. Bellard," protested Pottermack, "you are forgetting that you collect them, that you discover them in their secret haunts and drag them out to the light of day. That is the really scientific part of conchology. The preparation of the shells and their identification are mere journeyman's work. The real naturalist's job is the field work; and you are a positive genius in finding these minute shells—the pupas and cochlicopas and such like."

The lady rewarded him with a grateful and gratified smile, and, opening the little box, exhibited her "catch" and recounted some of the thrilling incidents of the chase, to which Pottermack listened with eager interest. And as they chatted, but half seriously, an observer would have noted that they were obviously the best of friends, and might have suspected that the natural history researches were, perhaps, somewhat in the nature of a plausible and convenient pretext for their enjoying a good deal of each other's society. These little precautions are sometimes necessary in a country district where people take an exaggerated interest in one another and tongues are apt to wag rather freely.

But a close observer would have noted certain other facts. For instance, these two persons were curiously alike in one respect: they both looked older to the casual stranger than they appeared on closer inspection. At a first glance, Mr. Pottermack, spectacled, bearded, and grave, seemed not far short of fifty. But a more critical examination showed that first impression to be erroneous. The quick, easy movements and the supple strength that they implied in the rather small figure, as well as the brightness of the alert, attentive eyes behind the spectacles, suggested that the lines upon the face and the white powdering of the hair owed their existence to something other than the mere effluxion of time. So, too, with Mrs. Bollard. On a chance meeting she would have passed for a well-preserved middle-aged woman. But now, as she chatted smilingly with her friend, the years dropped from her until, despite the white hairs that gleamed among the brown and a faint hint of crow's-feet, she seemed almost girlish.

But there was something else; something really rather odd. Each of the two cronies seemed to have a way of furtively examining the other. There was nothing unfriendly or suspicious in these regards. Quite the contrary, indeed. But they conveyed a queer impression of curiosity and doubt, differently manifested, however, in each. In Mr. Pottermack's expression there was something expectant. He had the air of waiting for some anticipated word or action; but the expression vanished instantly when his companion looked in his direction. The widow's manner was different, but it had the same curious furtive quality. When Pottermack's attention was occupied, she would cast a steady glance at him; and then the lines would come back upon her forehead, her lips would set, and there would steal across her face a look at once sad, anxious, and puzzled. Especially puzzled. And if the direction of her glance had been followed, it would have been traced more particularly to his profile and his right ear. It is true that both these features were a little unusual. The profile was almost the conventional profile of the Greek sculptors—the nose continuing the line of the forehead with no appreciable notch—a character very seldom seen in real persons. As to the ear, it was a perfectly well-shaped, proportionate ear. It would have been of no interest to Lombroso. But it had one remarkable peculiarity: on its lobule was what doctors call a "diffuse

naevus" and common folk describe as a "port-wine mark." It was quite small, but very distinct; as if the lobule had been dipped into damson juice. Still, it hardly seemed to justify such anxious and puzzled consideration.

"What a dreadful pair of gossips we are!" Mrs. Bellard exclaimed, taking her basket up from the table. "I've been here half an hour by the clock, and I know I have been hindering you from some important work. You looked full of business as you came up the garden path."

"I have been full of business ever since—land and fresh-water mollusca. We have had a most instructive talk."

"So we have," she agreed, with a smile. "We are always instructive; especially you. But I must really take myself off now and leave you to your other business."

Mr. Pottermack held the door open for her and followed her down the hall to the garden path, delaying her for a few moments to fill her basket with roses from the porch. When he had let her out at the gate, he lingered to watch her as she walked away towards the village; noting how the dignified, matronly bearing seemed to contrast with the springy tread and youthful lissomness of movement.

As he turned away to re-enter the house he saw the postman approaching; but as he was not expecting any letters, and his mind was still occupied with his late visitor, he did not wait. Nor when, a minute later, he heard the characteristic knock, did he return to inspect the letter-box; which was, just as well in the circumstances. Instead, he made his way out by the back door into the large kitchen garden and orchard and followed the long, central path which brought him at length to a high red brick wall, in which was a door furnished with a knocker and flanked by an electric bell. This he opened with a latchkey of the Yale pattern, and, having passed through, carefully shut it behind him.

He was now in what had probably been originally the orchard and kitchen garden of the old house in which he lived, but which had since been converted into a flower garden, though many of the old fruit trees still remained. It was a large oblong space, more than a quarter of an acre in extent, and enclosed on all sides by a massive old wall nearly seven feet high, in which were only two openings: the door by which he had just entered and another door at one side, also fitted with a Yale lock and guarded, in addition, by two bolts.

It was a pleasant place if quiet and seclusion were the chief desire of the occupant—as they apparently were, to judge by Mr. Pottermack's arrangements. The central space was occupied by a large, smooth grass plot, surrounded by well-made paths, between which and the wall were wide flower borders. In one corner was a brick-built summer-house; quite a commodious affair, with a good tiled roof, a boarded floor, and space enough inside for a couple of armchairs and a fair-sized table. Against the wall opposite to the summer-house was a long shed or outhouse with glass lights in the roof, evidently a recently built structure and just a little unsightly—but that would be remedied when the yew hedge that had been planted before it grew high enough to screen it from view. This was the workshop, or rather a range of workshops; for Mr. Pottermack was a man of many occupations, and, being also a tidy, methodical man, he liked to keep the premises appertaining to those occupations separate.

On the present occasion he made his way to the end compartment, in which were kept the gardening tools and appliances, and having provided himself with a spade, a mallet, a long length of cord, and a half-dozen pointed stakes, walked out to the grass plot and looked about him. He was quite clear in his mind as to where the sun-dial was to stand, but it was necessary to fix the

spot with precision. Hence the stakes and the measuring-line, which came into use when he had paced out the distances approximately and enabled him, at length, to drive a stake into the ground and thereby mark the exact spot which would be occupied by the centre of the dial.

From this centre, with the aid of the cord, he drew a circle some four yards in diameter and began at once to take up the turf, rolling it up tidily and setting it apart ready for relaying. And now he came to the real job. He had to dig right down to the subsoil. Well, how far down was that? He took off his coat, and, grasping the spade with a resolute air, gave a vigorous drive into the soil at the edge of the circle. That carried him through the garden mould down into a fine, yellowish, sandy loam, a small quantity of which came up on the spade. He noted its appearance with some interest but went on digging, opening up a shallow trench round the circumference of the circle.

By the time that he had made a second complete circuit and carried his trench to a depth of some eight inches, the circle was surrounded by a ring of the yellow loam, surprisingly bulky in proportion to the shallow cavity from which it had been derived. And once more his attention was attracted by its appearance. For Mr. Pottermack amongst his various occupations included occasionally that of sand-casting. Hitherto he had been in the habit of buying his casting-sand by the bag. But this loam, judging by the sharp impressions of his feet where he had trodden in it, was a perfect casting-sand, and to be had for the taking at his very door. By way of testing its cohesiveness, he took up a large handful and squeezed it tightly. When he opened his hand the mass remained hard and firm and showed the impressions of his fingers perfectly to the very creases of the skin.

Very pleased with his discovery, and resolving to secure a supply of the loam for his workshop, he resumed his digging, and presently came down to a stratum where the loam was quite dense and solid and came up on the spade in definite coherent lumps like pieces of a soft rock. This, he decided, was the true subsoil and was as deep as he need go; and having decided this, he proceeded to dig out the rest of the circle to the same depth.

The work was hard and, after a time, extremely monotonous. Still Mr. Pottermack laboured steadily with no tendency to slacking. But the monotony exhausted his attention, and while he worked on mechanically with unabated vigour his thoughts wandered away from his task; now in the direction of the sun-dial, and now—at, perhaps, rather more length—in that of his pretty neighbour and her spoils, which were still awaiting his attentions in the tin box.

He was getting near the centre of the circle when his spade cut through and brought up a piece of spongy, fungus-eaten wood. He glanced at it absently, and having flung it outside the circle, entered his spade at the same spot and gave a vigorous drive. As the spade met with more than usual resistance, he threw a little extra weight on it. And then, suddenly, the resistance gave way; the spade drove through, apparently into vacant space. Mr. Pottermack uttered a startled cry, and after an instant's precarious balancing saved himself by a hair's breadth from going through after it.

For a moment he was quite shaken—and no wonder. He had staggered back a pace or two and now stood, still grasping the spade, and gazing with horror at the black, yawning hole that had so nearly swallowed him up. But as, after all, it had not, he presently pulled himself together and began cautiously to investigate. A very little tentative probing with the spade made everything clear. The hole which he had uncovered was the mouth of an old well: one of those pernicious wells which have no protective coping but of which the opening, flush with the surface of the ground, is ordinarily closed by a hinged flap. The rotten timber that he had struck was part of this flap, and he could now see the rusty remains of the hinges. When the well had gone out of use, some one, with incredible folly, had simply covered it up by heaping earth on the closed flap.

Mr. Pottermack, having made these observations, proceeded methodically to clear away the soil until the entire mouth of the well was exposed. Then, going down on hands and knees, he approached, and cautiously advancing his head over the edge, peered down into the dark cavity. It was not quite dark, however, for though the slimy brick cylinder faded after a few feet into profound gloom, Mr. Pottermack could see, far down, as it seemed in the very bowels of the earth, a little circular spot of light on which was the dark silhouette of a tiny head. He picked up a pebble, and, holding it at the centre of the opening, let it drop. After a brief interval the bright spot grew suddenly dim and the little head vanished: and after another brief interval there came up to his ear a hollow "plop" followed by a faint, sepulchral splash.

There was, then, water in the well; not that it mattered to him, as he was going to cover it up again. But he was a man with a healthy curiosity and he felt that he would like to know all about this well before he once more consigned it to oblivion. Walking across to the workshop, he entered the metalwork section and cast his eye around for a suitable sinker. Presently, in the "oddments" drawer, he found a big iron clock-weight. It was heavier than was necessary, but he took it in default of anything more suitable, and going back to the well, he tied it to one end of the measuring-cord. The latter, being already marked in fathoms by means of a series of knots, required no further preparation. Lying full-length by the brink of the well, Mr. Pottermack dropped the weight over and let the cord slip through his hands, counting the knots as it ran out and moving it up and down as the weight neared the water.

The hollow splash for which he was listening came to his ear when the hand that grasped the cord was between the fourth and fifth knots. The depth, therefore, of the well to the surface of the water was about twenty-seven feet. He made a mental note of the number and then let the cord slip more rapidly through his hands. It was just after the seventh knot had passed that the tension of the cord suddenly relaxed, telling him that the weight now rested on the bottom. This gave a depth of sixteen feet of water and a total depth of about forty-three feet. And to think that, but for the merest chance, he would now have been down there where the clock-weight was resting!

With a slight shudder he rose, and, hauling up the cord, coiled it neatly and laid it down, with the weight still attached, a few feet away on the cleared ground. The question that he now had to settle was how far the existence of the well would interfere with the placing of the sun-dial. It did not seem to him that it interfered at all. On the contrary; the well had to be securely covered up in any case, and the sun-dial on top of the covering would make it safe for ever. For it happened that the position of the well coincided within a foot with the chosen site of the dial; which seemed quite an odd coincidence until one remembered that the position of both had probably been determined by identical sets of measurements, based on the ground-plan of the garden.

One thing, however, was obvious. Mr. Gallett would have to be informed of the discovery without delay, for something different from the proposed brickwork foundation would be required. Accordingly, Mr. Pottermack slipped on his coat, and, having sought out a hurdle and laid it over the well—for you can't be too careful in such a case—set off without delay for the mason's yard. As he opened the front door, he observed the letter still lying in the wire basket under the letter-slit. But he did not take it out. It could wait until he came back.

Mr. Gallett was deeply interested, but he was also a little regretful. The altered arrangements would cause delay and increase the cost of the job. He would want two biggish slabs of stone, which would take some time to prepare.

"But why cover the well at all?" said he. "A good well with sixteen feet of water in it is not to be sneezed at if you gets a hard frost and all the pipes is bunged up and busted."

But Mr. Pottermack shook his head. Like most town-bred men, he had rather a dislike to wells, and his own recent narrow escape had done nothing to diminish his prejudice. He would have no open well in his garden.

"The only question is," he concluded, "whether the sun-dial will be safe right over the well. Will a stone slab bear the weight?"

"Lor' bless you," replied Gallett, "a good thick slab of flagstone would bear St. Paul's Cathedral. And we are going to put two, one on top of the other to form a step; and the base of the dial itself a good two foot wide. It will be as strong as a house."

"And when do you think you'll be able to fix it?"

Mr. Gallett reflected. "Let's see. To-day's Toos-day. It will take a full day to get them two slabs sawn off the block and trimmed to shape. Shall we say Friday?"

"Friday will do perfectly. There is really no hurry, though I shall be glad to get the well covered and made safe. But don't put yourself out."

Mr. Gallett promised that he would not, and Pottermack then departed homeward to resume his labours.

As he re-entered his house, he picked the letter out of the letter-cage, and, holding it unopened in his hand, walked through to the garden. Emerging into the open air, he turned the letter over and glanced at the address; and in an instant a most remarkable change came over him. The quiet gaiety faded from his face and he stopped dead, gazing at the superscription with a frown of angry apprehension. Tearing open the envelope, he drew out the letter, unfolded it and glanced quickly through the contents. Apparently it was quite short, for, almost immediately, he refolded it, returned it to its envelope and slipped the latter into his pocket.

Passing through into the walled garden, he took off his coat, laid it down in the summer-house and fell to work on the excavation, extending the circle into a square and levelling the space around the well to make a bed for the stone slab. But all his enthusiasm had evaporated. He worked steadily and with care; but his usually cheerful face was gloomy and stern, and a certain faraway look in his eyes hinted that his thoughts were not on what he was doing but on something suggested by the ill-omened missive.

When the light failed, he replaced the hurdle, cleaned and put away the spade, and then went indoors with his coat on his arm to wash and take his solitary supper; of which he made short work, eating and drinking mechanically and gazing before him with gloomy preoccupation. Supper being finished and cleared away, he called for a kettle of boiling water and a basin, and, taking from a cupboard a handled needle, a pair of fine forceps, and a sheet of blotting-paper, laid them on the table with Mrs. Bellard's tin box. The latter he opened and very carefully transferred the imprisoned snails to the basin, which he then filled with boiling water; whereupon the unfortunate molluscs each emitted a stream of bubbles and shrank instantly into the recesses of its shell.

Having deposited the kettle in the fireplace, Mr. Pottermack drew a chair up to the table and seated himself with the basin before him and the blotting-paper at his right hand. But before beginning his work he drew forth the letter, straightened it out and, laying it on the table, read it through slowly. It bore no address and no signature; and though the envelope was addressed to Marcus Pottermack, Esq., it began, oddly enough, "Dear Jeff."

"I send you this little billy doo," it ran on, "with deep regret, which I know you will share. But it can't be helped. I had hoped that the last one would be in fact, the last one, whereas it turns out to have been the last but one. This is positively my final effort, so keep up your pecker. And it is only a small affair this time. A hundred—in notes, of course. Fivers are safest. I shall call at the usual place on Wednesday at 8 p.m. ('in the gloaming, O! my darling!') This will give you time to hop up to town in the morning to collect the rhino. And mind I've got to have it. No need to dwell on unpleasant alternatives. Necessity knows no law. I am in a devil of a tight corner and you have got to help me out. So adieu until Wednesday evening."

Mr. Pottermack turned from the letter, and, taking up the mounted needle, with the other hand picked out of the basin a snail with a delicate yellow shell (Helix hortensis, var. arenicola) and, regarding it reflectively, proceeded with expert care to extract the shrivelled body of the mollusc. But though his attention seemed to be concentrated on his task, his thoughts were far away, and his eyes strayed now and again to the letter at his side.

"I am in a devil of a tight corner." Of course he was. The incurable plunger is always getting into tight corners. "And you have got to help me out." Exactly. In effect, the money that you have earned by unstinted labour and saved by self-denial has got to be handed to me that I may drop it into the bottomless pit that swallows up the gambler's losings. "This is positively my final effort." Yes. So was the last one, and the one before that; and so would be the next, and the one that would follow it, and so on without end. Mr. Pottermack saw it all clearly; realized, as so many other sufferers have realized, that there is about a blackmailer something hopelessly elusive. No transaction with him has any finality. He has something to sell, and he sells it; but behold! even as the money passes the thing sold is back in the hand of the vendor, to be sold again and yet again. No covenant with him is binding; no agreement can be enforced. There can be no question of cutting a loss, for, no matter how drastic the sacrifice, it is no sooner made than the status quo ante reappears.

On these truths Mr. Pottermack cogitated gloomily and asked himself, as such victims often do, whether it would not have been better in the first place to tell this ruffian to go to the devil and do his worst. Yet that had hardly seemed practicable. For the fellow would probably have done his worst:-and his worst was so extremely bad. On the other hand, it was impossible that this state of affairs should be allowed to go on indefinitely. He was not by any means a rich man, though this parasite persisted in assuming that he was. At the present rate he would soon be sucked dry—reduced to stark poverty. And even then he would be no safer.

The intensity of his revolt against his intolerable position was emphasized by his very occupation. The woman for whom he was preparing these specimens was very dear to him. In any pictures that his fancy painted of the hoped-for future, hers was the principal figure. His fondest wish was to ask her to be his wife, and he felt a modest confidence that she would not say him nay. But how could he ask any woman to marry him while this vampire clung to his body? Marriage was not for him—a slave to-day, a pauper to-morrow, at the best; and at the worst—

The evening had lapsed into night by the time that all the specimens had been made presentable for the cabinet. It remained to write a little name-ticket for each with the aid, when necessary, of a handbook of the British Mollusca, and then to wrap each separate shell, with its ticket, in tissue paper and pack it tenderly in the small tin box. Thus was he occupied when his housekeeper, Mrs. Gadby, "reported off duty" and retired; and the clock in the hall was striking eleven when, having

packed the last of the shells, he made the tin box into a neat little parcel with the consignee's name legibly written on the cover.

The house was profoundly quiet. Usually Mr. Pottermack was deeply appreciative of the restful silence that settles down upon the haunts of men when darkness has fallen upon field and hedgerow and the village has gone to sleep. Very pleasant it was then to reach down from the bookshelves some trusty companion and draw the big easy-chair up to the fireplace, even though, as to-night, the night was warm and the grate empty. The force of habit did, indeed, even now, lead him to the bookshelves. But no book was taken down. He had no inclination for reading to-night. Neither had he any inclination for sleep. Instead, he lit a pipe and walked softly up and down the room, stem and gloomy of face, yet with a look of concentration as if he were considering a difficult problem.

Up and down, up and down he paced, hardly making a sound. And as the time passed, the expression of his face underwent a subtle change. It lost none of its sternness, but yet it seemed to clear, as if a solution of the problem were coming into sight.

The striking of the clock in the hall, proclaiming the end of the day, brought him to a halt. He glanced at his watch, knocked out his empty pipe, lit a candle and blew out the lamp. As he turned to pass out to the stairs, something in his expression seemed to hint at a conclusion reached. All the anxiety and bewilderment had passed out of his face. Stern it was still; but there had come into it a certain resolute calm; the calm of a man who has made up his mind.

CHAPTER II—THE SECRET VISITOR

The following morning found Mr. Pottermack in an undeniably restless mood. For a time he could settle down to no occupation, but strayed about the house and garden with an air of such gravity and abstraction that Mrs. Gadby looked at him askance and inwardly wondered what had come over her usually buoyant and cheerful employer.

One thing, however, was clear. He was not going to "hop up to town." Of the previous expeditions of that kind he had a vivid and unpleasant recollection; the big "bearer" cheque sheepishly pushed across the counter, the cashier's astonished glance at it, the careful examination of books, and then the great bundle of five-pound notes, which he counted, at the cashier's request, with burning cheeks; and his ignominious departure with the notes buttoned into an inside pocket and an uncomfortable suspicion in his mind that the ostentatiously unobservant cashier had guessed at once the nature of the transaction. Well, that experience was not going to be repeated on this occasion. There was going to be a change of procedure.

As he could fix his mind at nothing more definite, he decided to devote the day to a thorough clear-up of his workshops: a useful and necessary work, which had the added advantage of refreshing his memory as to the abiding-places of rarely used appliances and materials. And an excellent distraction he found it; so much so that several times, in the interest of rediscovering some long-forgotten tool or stock of material, he was able to forget for a while the critical interview that loomed before him.

So the day passed. The mid-day meal was consumed mechanically—under the furtive and disapproving observation of Mrs. Gadby—and dispatched with indecent haste. He was conscious of an inclination to lurk about the house on the chance of a brief gossip with his fair friend; but he resisted it, and, when he came in to tea, the housekeeper reported that the little package had been duly collected.

He lingered over his tea as if he were purposely consuming time, and when at last he rose from the table, he informed Mrs. Gadby that he had some important work to do and was under no circumstances to be disturbed. Then once more he retired to the walled garden, and having shut himself in, dropped the key into his pocket. He did not, however, resume his labours in the workshop. He merely called in there for an eight-inch steel bolt and a small electric lamp, both of which he bestowed in his pockets. Then he came out and walked slowly up and down the grass plot with his hands behind him and his chin on his breast as if immersed in thought, but glancing from time to time at his watch. At a quarter to eight he took off his spectacles and put them in his pocket, stepped across to the well, and picking up the hurdle that still lay over the dark cavity, carried it away and stood it against the wall. Then he softly unbolted the side gate, turned the handle of the latch, drew the gate open a bare inch, and, leaving it thus ajar, walked to the summer-house, and, entering it, sat down in one of the chairs.

His visitor, if deficient in some of the virtues, had at least that of punctuality; for the clock of the village church had barely finished striking the hour when the gate opened noiselessly and the watcher in the summer-house saw, through the gathering gloom, a large, portly man enter with stealthy step, close the gate silently behind him and softly shoot the upper bolt.

Pottermack rose as his visitor approached, and the two men met just outside the summer-house. There was a striking contrast between them in every respect, in build, in countenance, and in manner. The newcomer was a big, powerful man, heavy and distinctly over-fat, whose sly, shifty face—at present exhibiting an uneasy smile—showed evident traces of what is commonly miscalled "good living," especially as to the liquid element thereof; whereas his host, smallish, light, spare, with clean-cut features expressive of lively intelligence, preserved a stony calm as he looked steadily into his visitor's evasive eyes.

"Well, Jeff," the latter began in a deprecating tone, "you don't seem overjoyed to see me. Not an effusive welcome. Aren't you going to shake hands with an old pal?"

"It doesn't seem necessary," Pottermack replied coldly.

"Oh, very well," the other retorted. "Perhaps you'd like to kiss me instead." He sniggered foolishly, and, entering the summer-house, dropped into one of the armchairs and continued: "What about a mild refresher while we discuss our little business? Looks like being a dry job, to judge by your mug."

Without replying, Pottermack opened a small cupboard, and taking out a decanter, a siphon, and a tumbler, placed them on the table by his guest. It was not difficult to see that the latter had already fortified himself with one or two refreshers, mild or otherwise, but that was not Pottermack's affair. He was going to keep his own brain clear. The other might do as he pleased.

"Not going to join me, Jeff?" the visitor protested. "Oh, buck up, old chap! It's no use getting peevish about parting with a few pounds. You won't miss a little donation to help a pal out of a difficulty."

As Pottermack made no reply but sat down and gazed stonily before him, the other poured out half a tumblerful of whisky, filled up with soda, and took a substantial gulp. Then he, too, sat silent for a time, gazing out into the darkening garden. And gradually the smile faded from his face, leaving it sullen and a little anxious.

"So you've been digging up your lawn," he remarked presently. What's the game? Going to set up a flagstaff?"

"No. I am going to have a sun-dial there."

"A sun-dial, hey? Going to get your time on the cheap? Good. I like sun-dials. Do their job without ticking. Suppose you'll have a motto on it. Tempus fugit is the usual thing. Always appropriate, but especially so in the case of a man who has 'done time' and fugitted. It will help to remind you of olden days, 'the days that are no more.'" He finished with a mirthless cackle and cast a malignant glance at the silent and wooden-faced Pottermack. There was another interval of strained, uncomfortable silence, during which the visitor took periodic gulps from his tumbler and eyed his companion with sullen perplexity. At length, having finished his liquor, he set down the empty tumbler and turned towards Pottermack. "You got my letter, I suppose, as you left the gate ajar?"

"Yes," was the laconic reply.

"Been up to town to-day?"

"No."

"Well, I suppose you have got the money?"

"No, I have not."

The big man sat up stiffly and stared at his companion in dismay.

"But, damn it, man!" he exclaimed, "didn't I tell you it was urgent? I'm in a devil of a fix. I've got to pay that hundred to-morrow. Must pay it, you understand. I'm going up to town in the morning to pay. As I hadn't got the money myself, I've had to borrow it from—you know where; and I was looking to you to enable me to put it back at once. I must have that money to-morrow at the latest. You'd better run up to town in the morning and I'll meet you outside your bank."

Pottermack shook his head. "It can't be done, Lewson. You'll have to make some other arrangements."

Lewson stared at him in mingled amazement and fury. For a moment he was too astonished for speech. At length he burst out:

"Can't be done! What the devil do you mean? You've got the money in your bank and you are going to hand it over, or I'll know the reason why. What do you imagine you are going to do?"

"I am going," said Pottermack, "to hold you to your agreement, or at least to part of it. You demanded a sum of money—a large sum—as the price of your silence. It was to be a single payment, once for all, and I paid it. You promised solemnly to make no further demands; yet, within a couple of months, you did make further demands, and I paid again. Since then you have made demands at intervals, regardless of your solemn undertaking. Now this has got to stop. There must be an end to it, and this has got to be the end."

As he spoke, quietly but firmly, Lewson gazed at him as if he could not trust the evidence of his senses. This was quite a new Pottermack. At length, suppressing his anger, he replied in a conciliatory tone:

"Very well, Jeff. It shall be the end. Help me out just this time and you shall hear no more from me. I promise you that on my word of honour."

At this last word Pottermack smiled grimly. But he answered in the same quiet, resolute manner:

"It is no use, Lewson. You said that last time and the time before that, and, in fact, time after time. You have always sworn that each demand should be positively the last. And so you will go on, if I let you, until you have squeezed me dry."

On this Lewson threw off all disguise. Thrusting out his chin at Pottermack, he exclaimed furiously: "If you let me! And how do you think you are going to prevent me? You are quite right. I've got you, and I'm going to squeeze you, so now you know. And look here, young fellow, if that money isn't handed out to me to-morrow morning, something is going to happen. A very surprised gentleman at Scotland Yard will get a letter informing him that the late Jeffrey Brandon, runaway convict, is not the late J.B. but is alive and kicking, and that his present name and address is Marcus Pottermack, Esquire, of 'The Chestnuts,' Borley, Bucks. How will that suit you?"

"It wouldn't suit me at all," Mr. Pottermack replied, with unruffled calm; "but before you do it, let me remind you of one or two facts. First, the run-away convict, once your closest friend, was to your knowledge an innocent man—"

"That's no affair of mine," Lewson interrupted. "He was a convict, and is one still. Besides, how do I know he was innocent? A jury of his fellow-countrymen found him guilty—"

"Don't talk rubbish, Lewson," Pottermack broke in impatiently. "There is no one here but ourselves. We both know that I didn't do those forgeries and we both know who did."

Lewson grinned as he reached out for the decanter and poured out another half-tumblerful of whisky. "If you knew who did it," he chuckled, "you must have been a blooming mug not to say."

"I didn't know then," Pottermack rejoined bitterly. "I thought you were a decent, honest fellow, fool that I was."

"Yes," Lewson agreed, with a low, cackling laugh, "you were a blooming mug and that's a fact. Well, well; we live and learn."

Still sniggering foolishly, he took a long pull at the tumbler, leering into the flushed, angry face that confronted him across the table. Suddenly Pottermack rose from his chair, and, striding out into the garden, halted some dozen paces away and stood with his back to the summer-house, looking steadily across the lawn. It was now quite dark, though the moon showed dimly from time to time through a thinning of the overcast sky; but still, through the gloom, he could make out faintly the glimmer of lighter-coloured soil where it had been turned up to level the ground for the sun-dial. The well was invisible, but he knew exactly where the black cavity yawned, and his eye, locating the spot, rested on it with gloomy fixity.

His reverie was interrupted by Lewson's voice, now pitched in a more ingratiating key.

"Well, Jeff; thinking it over? That's right, old chap. No use getting pippy."

He paused, and as there was no reply he continued:

"Come now, dear boy, let's settle the business amicably as old pals should. Pity for you to go back to the jug when there's no need. You just help me out of this hole, and I will give you my solemn word of honour that it shall be the very last time. Won't that satisfy you?"

Pottermack turned his head slightly, and speaking over his shoulder, replied; "Your word of honour! The honour of a blackmailer, a thief and a liar. It isn't exactly what you would call a gilt-edged security."

"Well," the other retorted thickly, "gilt-edged or not, you had better take it and shell out. Now, what do you say?"

"I say," Pottermack replied with quiet decision, "that I am not going to give you another farthing on any condition whatever."

For several seconds Lewson gazed in silent dismay at the shadowy figure on the lawn. This final, definite refusal was a contingency that he had never dreamed of, and was utterly unprovided for, and it filled him, for the moment, with consternation. Then, suddenly, his dismay changed to fury. Starting up from his chair, he shouted huskily:

"Oh, you won't, won't you? We'll see about that! You'll either pay up or I'll give you the finest hammering that you've ever had in your life. When I've done with you, they'll want your finger-prints to find out who you are."

He paused to watch the effect of this terrifying proposal and to listen for a reply. Then, as the dim figure remained unmoved and no answer came, he bellowed: "D' you hear? Are you going to pay up or take a hammering?"

Pottermack turned his head slightly and replied in a quiet, almost a gentle tone: "I don't think I'm going to do either."

The reply and the quiet, unalarmed tone were not quite what Lewson had expected. Trusting to the moral effect of his greatly superior size and weight, he had bluffed confidently. Now it seemed that he had got to make good his threat, and the truth is that he was not eager for the fray. However, it had to be done, and done as impressively as possible. After pausing for another couple of seconds, he proceeded, with a formidable air (but unobserved by Pottermack, whose back was still turned to him), to take off his coat and fling it on the table, whence it slipped down on to the floor. Then, stepping outside the summer-house, he bent forward, and, with an intimidating roar, charged like an angry rhinoceros.

At the sound of his stamping feet Pottermack spun round and faced him, but then stood motionless until his assailant was within a yard of him, when he sprang lightly aside, and as the big, unwieldy bully lumbered past him, he followed him closely. As soon as Lewson could overcome the momentum of his charge, he halted and turned; and instantly a smart left-hander alighted on his cheek and a heavy right-hander impinged on his ribs just below the armpit. Furious with the pain, and utterly taken aback, he cursed and grunted, hitting out wildly with all the viciousness of mingled rage and fear for now he realized with amazement that he was hopelessly outclassed by his intended victim. Not one of his sledge-hammer blows took effect on that agile adversary, whereas his own person seemed to be but an unprotected target on which the stinging blows fell in endless and intolerable succession. Slowly at first, and then more quickly, he backed away from that terrific bombardment, followed inexorably by the calm and scientific Pottermack, who seemed to guide and direct his backward course as a skilful drover directs the movements of a refractory bullock.

Gradually the pair moved away from the vicinity of the summer-house across the dark lawn, the demoralized bully, breathing hard and sweating profusely, reduced to mere defence and evasion while his light-footed antagonist plied him unceasingly with feint or blow. Presently Lewson

stumbled backwards as his foot sank into the loose, heaped earth at the margin of the cleared space; but Pottermack did not press his advantage, renewing his attack only when Lewson had recovered his balance. Then the movement began again, growing faster as the big man became more and more terrified and his evasion passed into undissembled retreat; deviously and with many a zig-zag but always tending towards the centre of the cleared area. Suddenly Pottermack's tactics changed. The rapid succession of light blows ceased for an instant and he seemed to gather himself up as if for a decisive effort. There was a quick feint with the left; then his right fist shot out like lightning and drove straight on to the point of the other man's jaw, and as his teeth clicked together with an audible snap, Lewson dropped like a pole-axed ox, falling with his body from the waist upwards across the mouth of the well and his head on the brick edge, on which it struck with a sickening thud.

So he lay for a second or two until the limp trunk began to sag and the chin came forward on to the breast. Suddenly the head slipped off the brick edge and dropped into the cavity, shedding its cap and carrying the trunk with it. The heavy jerk started the rest of the body sliding forward, slowly at first, then with increasing swiftness until the feet rose for an instant, kicked at the farther edge and were gone. From the black pit issued vague, echoing murmurs, followed presently by a hollow, reverberating splash; and after that, silence.

It had been but a matter of seconds. Even as those cavernous echoes were muttering in the unseen depths, Pottermack's knuckles were still tingling from the final blow. From the moment when that blow had been struck he had made no move. He had seen his enemy fall, had heard the impact of the head on the brick edge, and had stood looking down with grim composure on the body as it sagged, slid forward, and at last made its dreadful dive down into the depths of its sepulchre. But he had moved not a muscle. It was a horrible affair. But it had to be. Not he, but Lewson had made the decision.

As the last reverberations died away he approached the forbidding circle of blackness, and kneeling down at its edge, peered into the void. Of course, he could see nothing; and when he listened intently, not a sound came to his ear. From his pocket he brought out his little electric lamp and threw a beam of light down into the dark cavity. The effect was very strange and uncanny. He found himself looking down a tube of seemingly interminable length while from somewhere far away, down in the very bowels of the earth, a tiny spark of light glowed steadily. So even the last ripples had died away and all was still down in that underworld.

He replaced the lamp in his pocket, but nevertheless he remained kneeling by the well-mouth, resting on one hand, gazing down into the black void and unconsciously listening for some sound from below. Despite his outward composure, he was severely shaken. His heart still raced, his forehead was damp with sweat, his body and limbs were pervaded by a fine, nervous tremor.

Yet he was sensible of a feeling of relief. The dreadful thing that he had nerved himself to do, that he had looked forward to with shuddering horror, was done. And the doing of it might have been so much worse. He was relieved to feel the screw-bolt in his pocket—unused; to think that the body had slipped down into its grave without the need of any hideous dragging or thrusting. Almost, he began to persuade himself that it had been more or less of an accident. At any rate, it was over and done with. His merciless enemy was gone. The menace to his liberty, the constant fear that had haunted him were no more. At last—at long last—he was free.

Fear of discovery he had none; for Lewson, in his own interests, had insisted on strict secrecy as to their acquaintance with each other. In his own words, "he preferred to sit on his own nest-egg." Hence to all the world they were strangers, not necessarily even aware of each other's existence.

And the blackmailer's stealthy arrival and his care in silently shutting the gate gave a guarantee that no one had seen him enter.

While these thoughts passed somewhat confusedly through his mind, he remained in the same posture; still unconsciously listening and still gazing, as if with a certain expectancy, into the black hole before him, or letting his eyes travel, now and again, round the dark garden. Presently an opening in the dense pall of cloud that obscured the sky uncovered the moon and flooded the garden with light. The transition from darkness to brilliant light—for it was full moon—was so sudden that Pottermack looked up with a nervous start, as though to see who had thrown the light on him; and in his overwrought state he even found something disquieting in the pale, bright disc with its queer, dim, impassive face that seemed to be looking down on him through the rent in the cloud like some secret watcher peeping from behind a curtain. He rose to his feet, and, drawing a deep breath, looked around him; and then his glance fell on something more real and more justly disquieting. From the edge of the grass to the brink of the well was a double track of footprints, meandering to and fro, zig-zagging hither and thither, but undeniably ending at the well.

Their appearance was sinister in the extreme. In the bright moonlight they stared up from the pale buff soil, and they shouted of tragedy. To the police eye they would have been the typical "signs of a struggle"; the tracks of two men facing one another and moving towards the well with, presently, a single track coming away from it. No one could mistake the meaning of those tracks; nothing could explain them away—especially in view of what was at the bottom of the well.

The first glance at those tracks gave Pottermack a severe shock. But he recovered from it in a moment. For they were mere transitory marks that could be obliterated in a minute or two by a few strokes of a rake and a few sweeps of a besom; and meanwhile he stooped over them, examining them with a curious interest not unmixed with a certain vague uneasiness. They were very remarkable impressions. He had already noted the peculiar quality of this loamy soil; its extraordinary suitability for making casting-moulds. And here was a most striking illustration of this property. The prints of his own feet were so perfect that the very brads in his soles were quite clear and distinct, while as to Lewson's, they were positively ridiculous. Every detail of the rubber soles and the circular rubber heels came out as sharply as if the impressions had been taken in moulding-wax. There was the prancing horse of Kent—the soles were of the Invicta brand and practically new—with the appropriate legend and the manufacturers' name, and in the central star-shaped space of the heels was the perfect impression of the screw. No doubt the singular sharpness of the prints was due to the fact that a heavy shower in the previous night had brought the loam to that particular state of dampness that the professional moulder seeks to produce with his watering-pot.

However, interesting as the prints were to the mechanic's eye, the sooner they were got rid of the better. Thus reflecting, Pottermack strode away towards the workshop in quest of a rake and a besom; and he was, in fact, reaching out to grasp the handle of the door when he stopped dead and stood for some seconds rigid and still with outstretched arm and dropped jaw. For in that moment a thought which had, no doubt, been stirring in his subconscious mind had come to the surface, and for the first time the chill of real terror came over him. Suddenly he realized that he had no monopoly of this remarkable loam. It was the soil of the neighbourhood—and incidentally of the little lane that led from the town and passed along beside his wall. In that lane there must be a single track of footprints—big, staring footprints, and every one of them as good as a signature of James Lewson—leading from the town and stopping at his gate!

After a few moments of horror-stricken reflection he darted into the tool-house and brought out a short ladder. His first impulse had been to open the gate and peer out, but an instant's reflection had shown him the folly of exposing himself to the risk of being seen—especially at the very gate

to which the tracks led. He now carried the ladder across to an old pear tree which thrust its branches over the wall, and, planting it silently where the foliage was densest, crept softly up and listened awhile. As no sound of footsteps was audible, and as the moon had for the moment retired behind the bank of cloud, he cautiously advanced his head over the wall and looked down into the lane. It was too dark to see far in either direction, but apparently there was no one about; and as the country quiet was unbroken by any sound, he ventured to crane farther forward to inspect the path below.

The light was very dim; but even so he could make out faintly a single track of footprints—large footprints, widely spaced, the footprints of a tall man. But even as he was peering down at them through the darkness, trying to distinguish in the vaguely seen shapes some recognizable features, the moon burst forth again and the light became almost as that of broad day. Instantly the half-seen shapes started up with a horrid distinctness that made him catch his breath. There was the preposterous prancing horse with the legend "Invicta," there was the makers' name, actually legible from the height of the wall, and there were the circular heels with their raised central stars and the very screws clearly visible even to their slots!

Pottermack was profoundly alarmed. But he was not a panicky man. There, in those footprints, was evidence enough to hang him. But he was not hanged yet; and he did not mean to be, if the unpleasantness could be avoided. Perched on the ladder, with his eyes riveted on the tracks of the man who had come to "squeeze" him, he reviewed the situation with cool concentration, and considered the best way to deal with it.

The obvious thing was to go out and trample on those footprints until they were quite obliterated. But to this plan there were several objections. In the first place, those enormous impressions would take a deal of trampling out. Walking over them once would be quite useless, for his own feet were comparatively small, and even a fragment of one of Lewson's footprints would be easily recognizable. Moreover, the trampling process would involve the leaving of his own footprints in evidence; which might be disastrous if it should happen—as it easily might—that Lewson had been seen starting along the footpath. For this path, unfrequented as it was, turned off from the main road at the outskirts of the town where wayfarers were numerous enough. The reason that it was unfrequented was that it led only to a wood and a stretch of heath which were more easily approached by a by-road. Finally, he himself might quite possibly be seen performing the trampling operations, and that would never do. In short, the trampling scheme was not practicable at all.

But what alternative was there? Something must be done. Very soon the man would be missed and there would be a search for him; and as things stood there was a set of tracks ready to guide the searchers from the town to his—Pottermack's—very gate. And inside the gate was the open well. Clearly, something must be done, and done at once. But what?

As he asked himself this question again and again he was half-consciously noting the conditions. Hitherto, no one had seen Lewson's footprints at this part of the path. That was evident from the fact that there were no other fresh footprints—none that trod on Lewson's. Then, in half an hour at the most, the shadow of the wall would be thrown over the path and the tracks would then be quite inconspicuous. And, again, it was now past nine o'clock and his neighbours were early folk. It was extremely unlikely that any one would pass along that path until the morning. So there was still time. But time for what?

One excellent plan occurred to him, but, alas! he had not the means to carry it out. If only he had possession of Lewson's shoes he could put them on, slip out at the gate and continue the tracks to some distant spot well out of his neighbourhood. That would be a perfect solution of the problem.

But Lewson's shoes had vanished for ever from human ken—at least, he hoped they had. So that plan was impracticable.

And yet, was it? As he put the question to himself his whole demeanour changed. He stood up on his perch with a new eagerness in his face; the eagerness of a man who has struck a brilliant idea. For that was what he had done. This excellent plan, which yielded the perfect solution, was practicable after all. Lewson's shoes were indeed beyond his reach. But he had a fine assortment of Lewson's footprints. Now footprints are made by the soles of shoes. That is the normal process. But by the exercise of a little ingenuity the process could be reversed; shoe-soles could be made from footprints.

He descended the ladder, thinking hard; and as the cloud once more closed over the moon, he fetched the hurdle and placed it carefully over the mouth of the well. Then he walked slowly towards the workshop—avoiding the now invaluable footprints—shaping his plan as he went.

CHAPTER III—MR. POTTERMACK GOES A-SUGARING

The efficient workman saves a vast amount of time by so planning out his job in advance that intervals of waiting are eliminated. Now Mr. Pottermack was an eminently methodical man and he was very sensible that, in the existing circumstances, time was precious. Accordingly, although his plan was but roughly sketched out in his mind, he proceeded forthwith to execute that part of it which could be clearly visualized, filling in the further details mentally as he worked.

The first thing to be done was, obviously, to convert the perishable, ephemeral footprints, which a light shower would destroy, into solid, durable models. To this end, he fetched from the workshop the tin of fine plaster of Paris which he kept for making small or delicate moulds. By the aid of his little lamp he selected a specially deep and perfect impression of Lewson's right foot, and into this he lightly dusted the fine powder, continuing the process until the surface was covered with an even layer of about half an inch thick. This he pressed down very gently with the flat end of the lamp, and then went in search of a suitable impression of the left foot, which he treated in like manner. He next selected a second pair of prints, but instead of dusting the dry plaster into them he merely dropped into each a pinch to serve as a mark for identifying it. His reason for thus varying the method was that he was doubtful whether it was possible to pour liquid plaster into a loam mould (for that was what the footprint actually was) without disturbing the surface and injuring the pattern.

Returning to the workshop, he mixed a good-sized bowl of plaster, stirring and beating the creamy liquid with a large spoon. Still stirring, he carried it out, and, going first to the prints which contained the dry plaster, he carefully ladled into them with the spoon small quantities of the liquid plaster until they were well filled. By this time the liquid was growing appreciably thicker and more suitable for the unprotected prints, to which he accordingly hastened, and proceeded quickly, but with extreme care, to fill them until the now rapidly thickening plaster was well heaped up above the surface.

He had now at least, a quarter of an hour to wait while the plaster was setting, but this he occupied in cleaning out the bowl and spoon ready for the next mixing, placing the brush and plaster tools in readiness and pouring out a saucerful of soap-size. When he had made these preparations, he filled a small jug with water, and making his way to the first two impressions, poured the water on to them to make up for that which would have been absorbed by the dry plaster underneath. In the second pair of impressions, which he ventured to test by a light touch of the finger, the plaster was already quite solid, and he was strongly tempted to raise them and see what luck he had had; but he resisted the temptation and went back to the workshop, leaving them to harden completely.

All this time, although he had given the closest attention to what he was doing, his mind had been working actively, and already the sketch-plan was beginning to shape into a complete and detailed scheme; for he had suddenly remembered a supply of sheet gutta-percha which he had unearthed when he turned out the workshop, and this discovery disposed of what had been his chief difficulty. Now, in readiness for a later stage of his work, he lighted his Primus stove, and having filled a good-sized saucepan with water, placed it on the stove to heat. This consumed the rest of the time that he had allotted for the hardening of the plaster, and he now went forth with no little anxiety to see what the casts were like. For they were the really essential element of his plan on which success or failure depended. If he could get a perfect reproduction of the footprints, the rest of his task, troublesome as it promised to be, would be plain sailing.

Very gingerly he insinuated his finger under one of the casts of the second pair and gently turned it over. And then, as he threw the light of his lamp on it, all his misgivings vanished in respect of that foot—the right. The aspect of the cast was positively ridiculous. It was just the sole of a shoe; snow-white, but otherwise completely realistic, and perfect in every detail and marking, even to the makers' name. And the second cast was equally good; so his special precautions had been unnecessary. Nevertheless, he went on to the first pair, and they proved to be, if anything, sharper and cleaner, more free from adherent particles of earth than the others. With a sigh of relief he picked up the four casts and bore them tenderly to the workshop, where he deposited them on the bench. There, under the bright electric light, their appearance was even more striking. But he did not stop to gloat. He could do that while he was working.

The first proceeding was to trim off the ragged edges with a scraper, and then came the process of "sizing"—painting with a boiled solution of soft soap—which also cleaned away the adherent particles of loam. When the soap had soaked in and "stopped" the surface, the surplus was washed away under the tap, and then, with a soft brush, an infinitesimal coating of olive oil was applied. The casts were now ready for the next stage—the making of the moulds. First, Pottermack filled a shallow tray with loam from the garden, striking the surface level with a straight-edge. On this surface the two best casts were laid, sole upwards, and pressed down until they were slightly embedded. Then came the mixing of another bowl of plaster, and this was "gauged" extra stiff in order that it should set quickly and set hard. By the time this had been poured on—rapidly, but with infinite care to avoid bubbles, which would have marred the perfection of the moulds—the water in the saucepan was boiling. Having cleaned out the bowl and spoon, Pottermack fetched the pieces of gutta-percha from their drawer and dropped them into the saucepan, replacing the lid. Then he put on his spectacles, extinguished the lamp, switched off the light, and, passing out of the workshop, walked quickly towards the house.

As he let himself out of the walled garden and closed the door behind him, he had a strange feeling as of one awakening from a dream. The familiar orchard and kitchen garden through which he was now passing, and the lighted windows of the house which twinkled through the trees, brought him back to the realities of his quiet, usually uneventful life and made the tragic interlude of the past hour seem incredible and unreal. He pondered on it with a sort of dull surprise as he walked up the long path; on all that had happened since he had last walked along it a few hours ago. How changed since then was his world—and himself! Then, he was an innocent man over whom yet hung the menace of the convict prison. Now, that menace was lifted, but he was an innocent man no more. Legally—technically, he put it to himself—he was a murderer; and the menace of the prison was exchanged for that of the rope. But there was this difference: the one had been an abiding menace that had been with him for the term of his life; the other was a temporary peril from which, when he had once freed himself, he would be free for ever.

His appearance in the house was hailed by Mrs. Gadby with a sigh of relief. It seemed that she had made a special effort in the matter of supper and had feared lest her trouble should be wasted after

all. Very complacently she inducted him into the dining-room and awaited, with confidence born of much experience, his appreciative comments.

"Why, bless my soul, Mrs. Gadby!" he exclaimed, gazing at the display on the table, "it's a regular banquet! Roses, too! And do I see a bottle under that shawl?"

Mrs. Gadby smilingly raised the shawl, revealing a small wooden tub in which a bottle of white wine stood embedded in ice. "I thought," she explained, "that a glass of Chablis would go rather well with the lobster."

"Rather well!" exclaimed Pottermack. "I should think it will. But why these extraordinary festivities?"

"Well, sir," said Mrs. Gadby, "you haven't seemed to be quite yourself the last day or two. Not in your usual spirits. So I thought a nice little supper and a glass of wine might pick you up a bit."

"And so it will, I am sure," affirmed Pottermack. "To-morrow you will find me as lively as a cricket and as gay as a lark. And, by the way, Mrs. Gadby, don't clear the table to-night. I am going out sugaring presently, and as I may be late getting back I shall probably be ready for another little meal before turning in. And of course you won't bolt the door—but I expect you will have gone to bed before I start."

Mrs. Gadby acknowledged these instructions and retired in sedate triumph. Particularly gratified was she at the evident satisfaction with which her employer had regarded the Chablis. A happy thought of hers, that had been. In which she was right in general though mistaken in one particular. For it was not the wine that had brought that look of satisfaction to Pottermack's face. It was the ice. Mrs. Gadby's kindly forethought had disposed of the last of his difficulties.

Before sitting down to supper, he ran up to his bedroom, ostensibly for the necessary wash and brush up; but first he visited a spacious cupboard from the ground floor of which he presently took a pair of over-shoes that he was accustomed to wear in very rainy or snowy weather. Their upper parts were of strong waterproof cloth and their soles of balata,[also batata] cemented on to leather inner soles. He had, in fact, cemented them on himself when the original soles had worn through, and he still had, in the workshop, a large tin nearly full of the cement. He now inspected the soles critically, and when, after having washed and made himself tidy, he went down to the dining-room, he carried the over-shoes down with him and slipped them out of sight under the table.

Although he was pretty sharp-set after his strenuous and laborious evening, he made but a hasty meal; for time was precious and he could dispose of the balance of the feast when he had finished his task. Rising from the table, he picked up the over-shoes, and, stealing softly out into the garden, laid them down beside the path. Then he stole back to the dining-room, whence he walked briskly to the kitchen and tapped at the door.

"Good-night, Mrs. Gadby," he called out cheerfully. "I shall be starting when I've got my traps together. Leave everything as it is in the dining-room so that I can have a snack when I come in. Good-night!"

"Good-night, sir," the housekeeper responded cordially, presenting a smiling countenance at the door, "and good luck with the moths, though I must admit, sir, that they don't seem to me worth all the trouble of catching them."

"Ah, Mrs. Gadby," said Pottermack, "but you see you are not a naturalist. You would think better of the moths, I expect, if they were good to eat." With this and a chuckle, in which the housekeeper joined, he turned away and went forth into the garden, where, having picked up the over-shoes, he made his way up the long path to the door of the walled garden. As he unlocked the door and let himself into the enclosure, he was again sensible of a change of atmosphere. The vision of that fatal combat rose before him with horrid vividness and once more he felt the menace of the rope hanging over him. He went to the ladder and looked over the wall to see if any new tracks had appeared on the path to tell of some wayfarer who might hereafter become a witness. But the path was shrouded in darkness so profound that he could not even see the tracks that he knew were there; so he descended, and, crossing the lawn by the well—where some unaccountable impulse led him to stop for a while and listen—re-entered the workshop, switched on the light and laid the over-shoes on the bench.

First, he assured himself by a touch that the saucepan was still hot. Then he turned his attention to the moulds. They were as hard as stone, and, as he had made them thick and solid, he ventured to use some little force in trying to separate them from the casts; but all his efforts failed. Then, since he could not prise them open with a knife for fear of marking them, he filled a bucket with water and in this immersed each of the moulds with its adherent cast, when, after a few seconds' soaking, they came apart quite easily.

He stood for a few moments with the cast of the right foot in one hand and its mould in the other, looking at them with a sort of amused surprise. They were so absurdly realistic in spite of their staring whiteness. The cast was simply a white shoe-sole; the mould an exact reproduction of the original footprint; and both were preposterously complete, not only in respect of the actual pattern and lettering but even of the little trivial accidental characters such as a clean cut—probably made by a sharp stone—across the neck of the prancing horse and a tiny angular fragment of gravel which had become embedded in the rubber heel. However, this was no time for contemplation. The important fact was that both the moulds appeared to be quite perfect. If the rest of the operations should be as successful, he would be in a fair way of winning through this present danger to find a permanent security.

He began with the right mould. Having first poured into it a little of the hot water from the saucepan, to take the chill off the surface, he laid it on a carefully folded towel, spread on the bench. Then with a pair of tongs he picked out of the saucepan one of the pieces of gutta-percha—now quite soft and plastic—and laid it in the mould, which it filled completely, with some overlap. As it was, at the moment, too hot to work comfortably with the fingers, he pressed it into the mould with a wet file-handle, replacing this as soon as possible with the infinitely more efficient thumb. It was a somewhat tedious process, for every part of the surface had to be pressed into the mould so that no detail should be missed; but it was not until the hardening of the gutta-percha as it cooled rendered further manipulation useless that Pottermack laid it aside as finished and proceeded to operate in like manner on the other mould.

When both moulds were filled, he immersed them in the cold water in the bucket in order to cool and harden the gutta-percha more quickly, and leaving them there, he turned his attention to the over-shoes. The important question was as to their size. How did they compare with Lewson's shoes? He had assumed that they were as nearly as possible alike in size, but now, when he placed one of the over-shoes, sole upwards, beside the corresponding cast, he felt some misgivings. However, a few careful measurements with a tape-measure reassured him. The over-shoes were a trifle larger—an eighth of an inch wider and nearly a quarter of an inch longer than the casts, so that there would be a sixteenth overlap at the sides and an eighth at the toe and heel. That would be of no importance; or if it were, he could pare off the overlap.

Much encouraged, he fell to work on the over-shoes. He knew all about batata soles. The present ones—which were of one piece with the flat heels—he had stuck on with a powerful fusible cement. All that he had to do now was to warm them cautiously over the Primus stove until the cement was softened and then peel them off; and when he had done this, there were the flat leather soles, covered with the sticky cement, all ready for the attachment of the gutta-percha "squeezes."

There was still one possible snag ahead. The squeezes might have stuck to the moulds; for gutta-percha is a sticky material when hot. However, the moulds had been saturated with water and usually gutta-percha will not stick to a wet surface, so he hoped for the best. Nevertheless it was with some anxiety that he fished one of the moulds out of the bucket, and, grasping an overlapping edge of the squeeze with a pair of flat-nosed pliers, gave a cautious and tentative pull. As it showed no sign of yielding, he shifted to another part of the overlap and made gentle traction on that, with no better result. He then tried the piece of overlap that projected beyond the toe, and here he had better luck; for, as he gave a firm, steady pull, the squeeze separated visibly from the mould, and, with a little coaxing, came out bodily.

Pottermack turned it over eagerly to see what result his labours had yielded, and as his glance fell on the smooth, brown surface he breathed a sigh of deep satisfaction. He could have asked for no better result. The squeeze had not failed at a single point. There was the horse with the little gash in its neck, the inscription and the makers' mark; the circular heel with its sunk, five-pointed star, the little marks of wear, and the central screw showing its slot quite distinctly. Even the little grain of embedded gravel was there. The impression was perfect. He had never seen the soles of Lewson's shoes, but he knew now exactly what they looked like. For here before him was an absolutely faithful facsimile.

Handling it with infinite tenderness—for gutta-percha, when once softened, is slow to harden completely—he replaced it in the bucket, and taking out the other mould, repeated the extracting operation with the same patient care and with a similar happy result. It remained now only to pare off the overlap round the edges, shave off with a sharp knife one or two slight projections on the upper surface and wipe the latter perfectly dry. When this was done, the soles were ready for fixing on the over-shoes.

Placing the invaluable tin of cement on the bench near the Primus, Pottermack proceeded to warm the sole of one of the over-shoes over the flame. Then, scooping out a lump of tough cement, he transferred it to the warmed sole and spread it out evenly with a hot spatula. The next operation was more delicate and rather risky; for the upper surface of the gutta-percha sole had to be coated with cement without warming the mass of the sole enough to endanger the impression on its under surface. However, by loading the spatula with melted cement and wiping it swiftly over the surface, the perilous operation was completed without mishap. And now came the final stage. Fixing the over-shoe in the bench-vice, and once more passing the hot spatula over its cemented sole, Pottermack picked up the gutta-percha sole and carefully placed it in position on the over-shoe, adjusting it so that the overlaps at the sides and the toe were practically equal, the larger overlap at the heel being—by reason of the thickness of the latter—of no consequence.

When the second shoe had been dealt with in a similar manner and with a like success, and the pair placed on the bench, soles upward, to cool and harden, Pottermack emptied the bucket, and, carrying it in his hand, stole out of the workshop and made his way out of the walled garden into the orchard, where he advanced cautiously along the path. Presently the house came into view and he saw with satisfaction that the lower part was in darkness whereas lights were visible at two of the upper windows—those of the respective bedrooms of Mrs. Gadby and the maid. Thereupon he walked forward boldly, let himself silently into the house and tiptoed to the dining-room, where, having closed the door, he proceeded at once to transfer the ice and the ice-cold water from the tub

to the bucket. Then, in the same silent manner, he went out into the garden, softly closing the door after him, and took his way back to the workshop.

Here his first proceeding was to take down from a shelf a large, deep porcelain dish, such as photographers use. This he placed on the bench and poured into it the iced water from the bucket. Then, taking up the shoes, one at a time, he lowered them slowly and carefully, soles downward, into the iced water and finished by packing the ice round them. And there he left them to cool and harden completely while he attended to one or two other important matters.

The first of these was the line of tell-tale footprints leading to the well. They had served their invaluable purpose and now it was time to get rid of them; which he did forthwith with the aid of a rake and a hard broom. Then there must be one or two footprints outside the gate that would need to be obliterated. He took the broom and rake, and, crossing to the gate, listened awhile, then softly opened it, listened again and peered out. Having satisfied himself that there was no one in sight, he stooped to scrutinize the ground and finally went down on his hands and knees. Sure enough, there were four footprints that told the story much too plainly for safety: two diverging from the main track towards the gate and two more pointing directly towards it. Their existence was a little disquieting at the first glance, for they might already have been seen; but a close scrutiny of the ground for signs of any more recent footprints reassured him. Evidently Lewson was the last person who had trodden that path. Having established this encouraging fact, Pottermack, still keeping inside his gate, passed the rake lightly over the four footprints and then smoothed the surface with the broom.

His preparations were now nearly complete. Re-closing the gate, he went back to the workshop to prepare his outfit. For though the "sugaring" expedition was but a pretext, he intended to carry it through with completely convincing realism. On that realism it was quite conceivable that his future safety might depend. Accordingly he proceeded to pack the large rucksack that he usually carried on these expeditions with the necessary appliances: a store of collecting-boxes, the killing-jar, a supply of pins, the folding-net, an air-tight metal pot which he filled with pieces of rag previously dipped into the sugaring mixture and reeking of beer and rum, and an electric inspection-lamp. When he had packed it, he laid the net-stick by its side and then turned his attention to the shoes.

The gutta-percha soles were now quite cold and hard. He dried them carefully with a soft rag, and as he did so, the little surrounding overlap caught his eye. It seemed to be of no consequence. It was very unlikely that it would leave any mark on the ground, unless he should meet with an exceptionally soft patch. Still, there had been no overlap on Lewson's shoes, and it was better to be on the safe side. Thus reflecting, he took from the tool-rack a shoemaker's knife, and having given it a rub or two on the emery board, neatly shaved away the overlap on each sole to a steep bevel. Now the impression would be perfect no matter what kind of ground he met with.

This was the finishing touch, and he was now ready to go forth. Slipping his arms through the straps of the rucksack, he picked up the net-stick, took down from a peg his working apron, tucked the shoes under his arm, switched off the light and went out, crossing the lawn direct to the side gate. Here he spread the apron on the ground, and, stepping on to it, listened for a few moments and then softly opened the gate. Having taken a cautious peep out to assure himself that there was no one in sight, he slipped on and fastened the over-shoes, and, taking the inspection-lamp from the rucksack, dropped the battery into his coat pocket and hooked the bull's-eye into a button-hole. Then, throwing the light for an instant on the path and marking the correct spot by his eye, he stepped out sideways, planting his right foot on the smoothly swept ground a pace in front of the last impression of Lewson's left foot.

Steadying himself with the net-stick, he pulled the gate to until the latch clicked; then he put down his left foot a good pace in advance and set forth on his pilgrimage, carefully adapting the length of his stride to match, as well as he could judge, that of his long-legged predecessor.

The country was profoundly quiet, and, though the moon peeped out now and again, the night was for the most part so dark that he had occasionally to switch on his lamp to make sure that he was keeping to the path. The state of affairs, however, that these occasional flashes revealed was highly encouraging, for though the beaten surface of the path showed numerous traces of human feet, these were mostly faint and ill-defined, and none of them looked very recent. They suggested that few wayfarers used this path, and that the very striking tracks that he was laying down might remain undisturbed and plainly visible for many days unless a heavy rain should fall and wash them away.

So Pottermack trudged on, stepping out with conscious effort and keeping his attention fixed on the regulation of his stride. About half a mile from home the path entered a small wood, and here the aid of the lamp was needed continuously. Here, too, the sodden state of the path caused Pottermack to congratulate himself on his wise caution in shaving off the overlaps. For in this soft earth they would have shown distinctly and might have attracted undesirable notice—that is, if any one should give the footprints more than the passing glance that would suffice for recognition; which was in the highest degree unlikely.

Presently the path emerged from the wood and meandered across a rough common, covered with gorse and heather. Eventually, as Pottermack knew, it joined, nearly at a right angle, a by-road, which in its turn opened on the main London road. Here, he decided, the tracks could plausibly be lost; and as he drew near to the neighbourhood of the by-road he kept a sharp look-out for some indication of its whereabouts. At length he made out dimly a gate which he recognized as marking a little bridge across the roadside ditch. At once he stepped off the path into the heather, and, after walking on some twenty paces, halted, and unfastening the over-shoes, slipped them off. Then he took off the rucksack, turned out its contents, and having stowed the shoes at the bottom, repacked it and put it on again.

Hitherto he had not met or seen a soul since he started, and he was rather anxious not to meet any one until he was clear of this neighbourhood. His recent activities had perhaps made him a little over-conscious. Still, this was the night of the disappearance and here the tracks faded into the heather. If he were seen hereabouts, he might hereafter be questioned as to whether he had seen the missing man. No great harm in that, perhaps; but he had the feeling that it were much better for him not to be associated with the affair in any way. There were all sorts of possible snags. For instance, how did he get here without leaving any footprints on the path by which he would naturally have come? From which it will be seen that, if conscience was not making a coward of Mr. Pottermack, it was at least a little unduly stimulating his imagination. And yet it was as well to err on the right side.

Turning back, he strode on through the heather until he came once more to the path, which he crossed by a long jump that landed him in the heather on the farther side. He now struck across the common, making for a detached coppice that formed an outlier of the wood. As soon as he reached it he fell to work without delay on the completion of his programme, pinning the pieces of sugared rag on the trunks of half a dozen trees. Usually he gave the moths ample time to find the bait and assemble round it. But to-night, with that incriminating pair of shoes in his rucksack, his methods were more summary. By the time that he had pinned on the last rag, one or two moths had begun to flutter round the first, easily visible in the darkness by the uncanny, phosphorescent glow of their eyes. Pottermack unfolded his net, and, screwing it on to the stick switched on his lamp and

proceeded to make one or two captures, transferring the captives from the net to the killing-jar, and, after the necessary interval, thence to the collecting-boxes.

He was not feeling avaricious to-night. He wanted to get home and bring his task definitely to an end. He was even disposed to resent the indecent way in which the moths began to swarm round the rags. They seemed to be inviting him to make a night of it, as they were doing amidst the fumes of the rum. But he was not to be tempted. When he had pinned a dozen specimens in his collecting-box and put a few more in the lethal jar, he considered that he had done enough to account plausibly for his nocturnal expedition. Thereupon he packed up, and, leaving the lepidopterous revellers to the joys of intoxication, he turned away and strode off briskly in the direction of the by-road, carrying the net still screwed to the stick. A few minutes' rough walking brought him to the road, down which he turned in the direction of the town. In another ten minutes he reached the outskirts of the town and the road on which his house fronted. At this late hour it was as deserted as the country; indeed in its whole length he encountered but a single person—a jovial constable who greeted him with an indulgent smile as he fixed a twinkling eye on the butterfly net, and, having playfully enquired what Mr. Pottermack had got in that bag, hoped that he had had good sport, and wished him good-night. So Pottermack went on his way, faintly amused at the flutter into which the constable's facetious question had put him. For if it had chanced that the guardian of the law had been a stranger and had insisted on examining the bag, nothing could have been more apparently innocent than its contents. But the guilty man finds it hard to avoid projecting into the minds of others the secret knowledge that his own mind harbours.

When Pottermack at last let himself in at his front door and secured it with bolt and chain, he breathed a sigh of relief. The horrible chapter was closed. Tomorrow he could clear away the last souvenirs of that hideous scene in the garden and then, in the peace and security of his new life, try to forget the price that he had paid for it. So he reflected as he carried the tub to the scullery and drew into it enough water to account for the vanished ice; as he washed at the sink, as he sat at the table consuming the arrears of his supper, and as, at length, he went up to bed, carrying the rucksack with him.

CHAPTER IV—THE PLACING OF THE SUN-DIAL

When, after breakfast on the following morning, Mr. Pottermack betook himself, rucksack in hand, to the walled garden, he experienced, as he closed the door behind him and glanced round the enclosure, curiously mixed feelings. He was still shaken by the terrific events of the previous night, and, in his disturbed state, disposed to be pessimistic and vaguely apprehensive. Not that he regretted what he had done. Lewson had elected to make his life insupportable, and a man who does that, does it at his own risk. So Pottermack argued, and he reviewed the circumstances without the slightest twinge of remorse. Repugnant as the deed had been to him, and horrible as it had been in the doing—for he was by temperament a humane and kindly man—he had no sense of guilt. He had merely the feeling that he had been forced to do something extremely unpleasant.

When, however, he came to review the new circumstances, he was conscious of a vague uneasiness. Considered in advance, the making away with Lewson had been a dreadful necessity, accepted for the sake of the peace and security that it would purchase. But had that security been attained? The blackmailer, indeed, had gone for ever with his threats and his exactions. But that thing in the well—It was actually possible that Lewson dead might prove more formidable even than Lewson living. It was true that everything seemed to be quite safe and secret. He, Pottermack, had taken every possible precaution. But supposing that he had forgotten something; that he had overlooked some small but vital detail. It was quite conceivable. The thing had frequently happened. The annals of crime, and especially of murder, were full of fatal oversights.

So Mr. Pottermack cogitated as, having picked up the apron, he made his way to the workshop, where he set to work at once on the tasks that remained to be done. First he dealt with the shoes. As it would have been difficult and was quite unnecessary to remove the gutta-percha soles, he simply shaved off the heels, heated the surface and then stuck on the original soles of balata.

Next he broke up the plaster moulds and casts into small fragments, which he carried out in the bucket and shot down the well. Those, he reflected with a sense of relief as he replaced the hurdle, were the last visible traces of the tragedy; but even as he turned away from the well, he saw that they were not. For, glancing at the summer-house, he observed the decanter, the siphon, and the tumbler still on the table. Of course, to no eye but his was there anything suspicious or unusual in their presence there. But the sight of them affected him disagreeably. Not only were they a vivid and unpleasant reminder of events which he wished to forget. They revived the doubts that had tended to fade away under the exhilarating influence of work. For here was something that he had overlooked. A thing of no importance, indeed, but still a detail that he had forgotten. Trivial as the oversight was, he felt his confidence in his foresight shaken.

He walked to the summer-house, and, setting down the bucket outside, entered and proceeded to clear away these traces. Opening the cupboard, he caught up the siphon and the decanter and stepped behind the table to put them on the shelves. As he did so, he felt something soft under his foot, and when he had closed the cupboard door he looked down to see what it was. And then his heart seemed to stand still. For the thing under his foot was a coat—and it was not his coat.

There is a very curious phenomenon which we may describe as deferred visual sensation. We see something which is plainly before our eyes, but yet, owing to mental preoccupation, we are unaware of it. The image is duly registered on the retina; the retina passes on its record to the brain; but there the impression remains latent until some association brings it to the surface of consciousness.

Now, this was what had happened to Pottermack. In the moment in which his glance fell on the coat there started up before him the vision of a bulky figure flourishing its fists and staggering backwards towards the well—the figure of a man in shirt-sleeves. In spite of the darkness, he had seen that figure quite distinctly; he even recalled that the shirt-sleeves were of a dark grey. But so intense had been his preoccupation with the dreadful business of the moment that the detail, physically seen, had passed into his memory without conscious recognition.

He was literally appalled. Here, already, was a second oversight; and this time it was one of vital importance. Had any one who knew Lewson been present when the coat was discovered, recognition would have been almost certain; for the material was of a strikingly conspicuous and distinctive pattern. Then the murder would have been out, and all his ingenious precautions against discovery would have risen up to testify to his guilt.

All his confidence, all of the sense of security that he had felt on his return home on the previous night, had evaporated in an instant. Two obvious things he had forgotten, and one of them might have been fatal. Indeed, there were three; for he had been within an ace of overlooking those incriminating footprints that might have led the searchers to his very gate. Was it possible that there was yet some other important fact that he had failed to take into account? He realized that it was very possible indeed; that it might easily be that he should add yet another instance to the abundant records of murderers who, covering up their tracks with elaborate ingenuity, have yet left damning evidence plain for any investigator to see.

He picked up the coat, and, rolling it up loosely, considered what he should do with it. His first impulse was to drop it in the well. But he rejected the idea for several reasons. It would certainly

float, and might possibly be seen by the mason when the sun-dial was fixed, especially if he should throw a light down. And then, if the well should, after all, be searched, the presence of a separate coat would be against the suggestion of accident. And it would be quite easy to burn it in the rubbish destructor. Moreover, in rolling the coat he had become aware of a bulky object in one of the pockets which recalled certain statements that Lewson had made. In the end, he tucked the coat under his arm and, catching up the bucket, took his way back to the workshop.

It was significant of Pottermack's state of mind that as soon as he was inside he locked the door; notwithstanding that he was alone in the walled garden and that both the gates were securely fastened. Moreover, before he began his inspection he unlocked a large drawer and left it open with the key in the lock, ready to thrust the coat out of sight in a moment. Then he unrolled the coat on the bench, and, putting his hand into the inside breast pocket, drew out a leather wallet. It bulged with papers of various kinds, mostly bills and letters, but to these Pottermack gave no attention. The one item in the contents that interested him was a compact bundle of banknotes. There were twenty of them, all five-pound notes, as he ascertained by going through the bundle; a hundred pounds in all—the exact sum that had been demanded of him. In fact, these notes were understudies of his expected contribution. They had been "borrowed" by Lewson out of the current cash to meet some sudden call, and his, Pottermack's, notes were to have been either paid in place of them or to have enabled Lewson to make good his loan in the morning.

It seemed a queer proceeding, and to Mr. Pottermack it was not very intelligible. But the motive was no concern of his; what was his concern was the train of consequences that would be set going. The obvious fact was that the little branch bank of which Lewson had had sole charge was now minus a hundred pounds in five-pound notes. That fact must inevitably come to light within a day or two; most probably this very day. Then the hue and cry would be out for the missing manager.

Well, that was all to the good. There would certainly be a hot search for Lewson. But the searchers would not be seeking the body of a murdered man. They would be on the look-out for an exceedingly live gentleman with a bundle of stolen notes in his pocket. As he considered the almost inevitable course of events, Pottermack's spirits rose appreciably. The borrowing of those notes had been most fortunate for him, for it turned what would have been an unaccountable disappearance into a perfectly accountable flight. It seemed an incredibly stupid proceeding, for if Pottermack had paid up, the borrowing would have been unnecessary; if he had not paid up, the "loan" could not have been made good. However, stupid or not, it had been done; and in the doing it Lewson had, for the first and last time, rendered his victim a real service.

When he had inspected the notes, Pottermack replaced them in the wallet, returned the latter to the pocket whence it had come, rolled up the coat and bestowed it in the drawer, which he closed and locked. The consumption of it in the rubbish destructor could be postponed for a time; and perhaps it might not come to that at all. For the finding of the notes had, to a great extent, restored Pottermack's confidence; and already there had appeared in his mind the germ of an idea—vague and formless at present—that the notes, and perhaps even the coat, might yet have further useful offices to perform.

As he had now completed his tasks and cleared away—as he hoped—the last traces of the previous night's doings, he thought it time that he should show himself to Mrs. Gadby in his normal, everyday aspect. Accordingly he took the rucksack, a setting-board, and a few other necessary appliances and made his way to the house, where he established himself in the dining-room at a table by the window and occupied the time in setting the moths which he had captured on the previous night. They were but a poor collection, with an unconscionable proportion of duplicates, but Pottermack pinned them all out impartially—even the damaged ones—on the setting-board. It

was their number, not their quality, that would produce the necessary moral effect on Mrs. Gadby when she came in to lay the table for his mid-day dinner. So he worked away placidly with an outward air of complete absorption in his task; but all the while there kept recurring in his mind, like some infernal refrain, the disturbing question: Was there even now something that he had forgotten: something that his eye had missed but that other eyes might detect?

In the afternoon he strolled round to Mr. Gallett's yard to see if all was going well in regard to the preparations for setting up the sun-dial. He was anxious that there should be no delay, for though the presence of the dial would afford him no added security, he had an unreasonable feeling that the fixing of it would close the horrible incident. And he did very much want that sinister black hole hidden from sight for ever. Great therefore, was his relief when he discovered Mr. Gallett and two of his men in the very act of loading a low cart with what was obviously the material for the job.

The jovial mason greeted him with a smile and a nod. "All ready, you see, Mr. Pottermack," said he, indicating the dial-pillar, now swathed in a canvas wrapping, and slapping one of the stone slabs that stood on edge by its side. "Could almost have done it to-day, but it's getting a bit late and we've got one or two other jobs to finish up here. But we'll have him round by nine o'clock to-morrow morning, if that will do."

It would do admirably, Mr. Pottermack assured him, adding: "You will have to bring it in at the side gate. Do you know whereabouts that is?"

"I can't say as I do exactly," replied Gallett. "But I'll bring him to the front gate and then you can show me where he is to go."

To this Pottermack agreed, and they then strolled together to the gate, where Mr. Gallett halted, and, having looked up and down the street with a precautionary air, said in what he meant to be a low tone:

"Rummy report going round the town. Have you heard anything of it?"

"No," replied Pottermack, all agog in a moment.

"What is it?"

"Why, they say that the manager of Perkins's Bank has hopped it. That's what they say, and I fancy there must be something in it, because I went there this morning to pay in a cheque and I found the place closed. Give me a rare turn, because I've got an account there. So I rang the bell and the caretaker he come and tells me that Mr. Lewson wasn't able to attend to-day but that there would be some one there later to carry on till he came back. And so there was, for I went round a couple of hours later and found the place open and business going on as usual. There was a youngish fellow at the counter, but there was an elderly gent—rather a foxy-looking customer—who seemed to be smelling round, taking down the books and looking into the drawers and cupboards. Looks a bit queer, don't you think?"

"It really does," Pottermack admitted. "The fact of the bank not being open at the usual time suggests that Mr. Lewisham—"

"Lewson is his name," Mr. Gallett corrected.

"Mr. Lewson. It suggests that he had absented himself without giving notice, which is really rather a remarkable thing for a manager to do."

"It is," said Gallett; "particularly as he lived on the premises."

"Did he, indeed?" exclaimed Pottermack. "That makes it still more remarkable. Quite mysterious, in fact."

"Very mysterious," said Gallett. "Looks as if he had mizzled; and if he has, why, he probably didn't go away with his pockets empty."

Pottermack shook his head gravely. "Still," he urged, "it is early to raise suspicions. He may possibly have been detained somewhere. He was at the bank yesterday?"

"Oh, yes; and seen in the town yesterday evening. Old Keeling, the postman, saw him about half-past seven and wished him good-night. Says he saw him turn into the footpath that leads through Potter's Wood."

"Ha," said Pottermack. "Well, he may have lost his way in the wood, or been taken ill. Who knows? It is best not to jump at conclusions too hastily."

With this and a friendly nod he turned out of the yard and took his way homeward, cogitating profoundly. Events were moving even more quickly than he had anticipated, but they were moving in the right direction. Nevertheless, he recognized with something like a shudder how near he had been to disaster. But for the chance moonbeam that had lighted up the footprints in his garden, he would have overlooked those other tell-tale tracks outside. And again he asked himself uneasily if there could be something else that he had overlooked. He was tempted to take a walk into the country in the direction of the wood to see if there were yet any signs of a search; for, by Gallett's report, it appeared that the direction in which Lewson had gone, and even his route, was already known. But prudence bade him keep aloof and show no more than a stranger's interest in the affair. Accordingly he went straight home; and since in his restless state he could not settle down to read, he betook himself to his workshop and spent the rest of the day in sharpening chisels and plane-irons and doing other useful, time-consuming jobs.

True to his word, Mr. Gallett appeared on the following morning almost on the stroke of nine. Pottermack himself opened the door to him and at once conducted him through the house out into the orchard and thence to the walled garden. It was not without a certain vague apprehensiveness that he unlocked the gate and admitted his visitor, for since that fatal night no eye but his had looked on that enclosure. It is true that on this very morning he had made a careful tour of inspection and had satisfied himself that nothing was visible that all the world might not see. Nevertheless, he was conscious of a distinct sense of discomfort as he let the mason in, and still more when he led him to the well.

"So this is where you wants him planted?" said Mr. Gallett, stepping up to the brink of the well and looking down it reflectively. "It do seem a pity for to bung up a good well. And you say there's a tidy depth of water in him."

"Yes," said Pottermack; "a fair depth. But it's a long way down to it."

"So 'tis, seemingly," Gallett agreed. "The bucket would take a bit of histing up." As he spoke, he felt in his pocket and drew out a folded newspaper, and from another pocket he produced a box of matches. In leisurely fashion he tore off a sheet of the paper, struck a match, and, lighting a corner

of the paper, let it fall, craning over to watch its descent. Pottermack also craned over, with his heart in his mouth, staring breathlessly at the flaming mass as it sank slowly, lighting up the slimy walls of the well, growing smaller and fainter as it descended, while a smaller, fainter spark rose from the depths to meet it. At length they met and were in an instant extinguished; and Pottermack breathed again. What a mercy he had not thrown the coat down!

"We'll have to bank up the earth a bit," said Mr. Gallett, "for the slabs to bed on. Don't want 'em to rest on the brickwork of the well or they may settle out of the level after a time. And if you've got a spade handy, we may as well do it now, 'cause we can't get to the side gate for a few minutes. There's a gent out there a-takin' photographs of the ground."

"Of the ground!" gasped Pottermack.

"Ay. The path, you know. Seems as there's some footmarks there—pretty plain ones they looked to me without a-photographin' of em. Well, it's them footmarks as he's a-takin'."

"But what for?" demanded Pottermack.

"Ah," said Mr. Gallett. "There you are. I don't know, but I've got my ideas. I see the police inspector a-watchin' of him—all on the broad grin he was too—and I suspect it's got something to do with that bank manager that I was tellin' you about."

"Ah, Mr. Lewis?"

"Lewson is his name. There's no news of him and he was seen coming this way on Wednesday night. Why, he must have passed this very gate."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Pottermack. "And as to his reasons for going away so suddenly. Is anything—er—?"

"Well, no," replied Gallett. "Nothing is known for certain. Of course, the bank people don't let on. But there's some talk in the town about some cash that is missing. May be all bunkum, though it's what you'd expect. Now, about that spade. Shall I call in my men or can we do it ourselves?"

Pottermack decided that they could do it themselves, and, having produced a couple of spades, he fell to work under Gallett's direction, raising a low platform for the stone slabs to rest on. A few minutes' work saw it finished to the mason's satisfaction, and all was now ready for the fixing of the dial.

"I wonder if that photographer chap has finished," said Mr. Gallett. "Shall we go and have a look?"

This was what Pottermack had been bursting to do, though he had heroically suppressed his curiosity; and even now he strolled indifferently to the gate and held it open for the mason to go out first.

"There he is," said Gallett, "and blow me if he isn't a-takin' of 'em all the way along. What can he be doing that for? The cove had only got two feet."

Mr. Pottermack looked out and was no less surprised than the worthy mason. But he did not share the latter's purely impersonal interest. On the contrary, what he saw occasioned certain uncomfortable stirrings in the depths of his consciousness. Some little distance up the path a spectacled youth of sage and sober aspect had set up a tripod to which a rather large camera of the

box type was attached by a goose-neck bracket. The lens was directed towards the ground, and when the young man had made his exposure by means of a wire release, he opened a portfolio and made a mark or entry of some kind on what looked like a folded map. Then he turned a key on the camera, and, lifting it with its tripod, walked away briskly for some twenty or thirty yards, when he halted, fixed the tripod and repeated the operation. It really was a most astonishing performance.

"Well," said Mr. Gallett, "he's finished here, at any rate, so we can get on with our business now. I'll just run round and fetch the cart along."

He sauntered away towards the road, and Pottermack, left alone, resumed his observation of the photographer. The proceedings of that mysterious individual puzzled him not a little. Apparently he was taking a sample footprint about every twenty yards, no doubt selecting specially distinct impressions. But to what purpose? One or two photographs would have been understandable as permanent records of marks that a heavy shower might wash away and that would, in any case, soon disappear. But a series, running to a hundred or more, could have no ordinary utility. And, yet it was not possible that that solemn young man could be taking all this trouble without some definite object. Now, what could that object be?

Pottermack was profoundly puzzled. Moreover, he was more than a little disturbed. Hitherto his chief anxiety had been lest the footprints should never be observed. Then he would have had all his trouble for nothing, and those invaluable tracks, leading suspicion far away from his own neighbourhood to an unascertainable destination, would have been lost. Well, there was no fear of that now. The footprints had not only been observed and identified, they were going to be submitted to minute scrutiny. He had not bargained for that. He had laid down his tracks expecting them to be scanned by the police or the members of a search party, to whom they would have been perfectly convincing. But how would they look in a photograph? Pottermack knew that photographs have an uncanny way of bringing out features that are invisible to the eye. Now could there be any such features in those counterfeit footprints? He could not imagine any. But then why was this young man taking all those photographs? With his secret knowledge of the real facts, Pottermack could not shake off an unreasoning fear that his ruse had been already discovered, or at least suspected.

His cogitations were interrupted by the arrival of the cart, which was halted and backed up against his gateway. Then there came the laying down of planks to enable the larger slab to be trundled on rollers to the edge of the platform. Pottermack stood by, anxious and restless, inwardly anathematizing the conscientious mason as he tried the surface of the platform again and again with his level. At last he was satisfied. Then the big base slab was brought on edge to the platform, adjusted with minute care and finally let down slowly into its place; and as it dropped the last inch with a gentle thud, Pottermack drew a deep breath and felt as if a weight, greater far than that of the slab, had been lifted from his heart.

In the remaining operations he had to feign an interest that he ought to have felt but did not. For him, the big base slab was what mattered. It shut that dreadful, yawning, black hole from his sight, as he hoped, for ever. The rest was mere accessory detail. But, as it would not do for him to let this appear, he assumed an earnest and critical attitude, particularly when it came to the setting up of the pillar on the centre of the upper slab.

"Now then," said Mr. Gallett as he spread out a thin bed of mortar on the marked centre, "how will you have him? Will you have the plinth parallel to the base or diagonal?"

"Oh, parallel, I think," replied Pottermack; "and I should like to have the word 'spes' on the eastern side, which will bring the word 'pax' to the western."

Mr. Gallett looked slightly dubious. "If you was thinking of setting him to the right time," said he, "you won't do it that way. You'll have to unscrew the dial-plate from the lead bed and have him fixed correct to time. But never mind about him now. We're a-dealing with the stone pillar."

"Yes," said Pottermack, "but I was considering the inscription. That is the way in which it was meant to be placed, I think"; and here he explained the significance of the motto.

"There now," said Mr. Gallett, "see what it is to be a scholar. And you're quite right too, sir: you can see by the way the lichen grew on it that this here 'sole orto' was the north side. So we'll put him round to the north again, and then I expect the dial will be about right, if you aren't partickler to a quarter of an hour or so."

Accordingly the pillar was set up in its place and centred with elaborate care. Then, when the level of the slabs had been tested and a few slight adjustments made, the pillar was tried on all sides with the plumb-line and corrected to a hair's breadth.

"There you are, Mr. Pottermack," said Mr. Gallett, as he put the last touch to the mortar joint and stepped back to view the general effect of his work; "see that he isn't disturbed until the mortar has had time to set and he won't want touching again for a century or two. And an uncommon nice finish he'll give to the garden when you get a bit of smooth turf round him and a few flowers."

"Yes," said Pottermack, "you've made an extremely neat job of it, Mr. Gallett, and I'm very much obliged to you. When I get the turf laid and the flower borders set out, you must drop in and have a look at it."

The gratified mason, having suitably acknowledged these commendations of his work, gathered up his tools and appliances and departed with his myrmidons. Pottermack followed them out into the lane and watched the cart as it retired, obliterating the footprints which had given him so much occupation. When it had gone, he strolled up the path in the direction in which the photographer had gone, unconsciously keeping to the edge and noting with a sort of odd self-complacency the striking distinctness of the impressions of his gutta-percha soles. The mysterious operator was now out of sight, but he, too, had left his traces on the path, and these Pottermack studied with mingled curiosity and uneasiness. It was easy to see, by the marks of the tripod, which footprints had been photographed, and it was evident that care had been taken to select the sharpest and most perfect impressions. Pottermack had noticed, when he first looked out of the gate with Mr. Gallett, that the tripod had been set up exactly opposite the gateway and that the three marks surrounded the particularly fine impression that he had made when he stepped out sideways on to the smooth-swept path.

On these facts he reflected as he sauntered back to the gate, and entering, closed it behind him. What could be that photographer's object in his laborious proceeding? Who could it be that had set him to work? And what was it possible for a photograph to show that the eye might fail to see? These were the questions that he turned over uncomfortably in his mind and to which he could find no answer. Then his glance fell on the dial, resting immovable on its massive base, covering up the only visible reminder of the past, standing there to guard for ever his secret from the eyes of man. And at the sight of it he was comforted. With an effort he shook off his apprehensions and summoned his courage afresh. After all, what was there to fear? What could these photographs show that was not plainly visible? Nothing. There was nothing to show. The footprints were, it is true, counterfeits in a sense. But they were not imitations in the sense that a forged writing is an

imitation. They were mechanical reproductions, necessarily true in every particular. In fact, they were actually Lewson's own footprints, though it happened that other feet than his were in the shoes. No. Nothing could be discovered for the simple reason that there was nothing to discover.

So Mr. Pottermack, with restored tranquillity and confidence, betook himself to the summer-house, and sitting down, looked out upon the garden and let his thoughts dwell upon what it should be when the little island of stone should be girt by a plot of emerald turf. As he sat, two sides of the sun-dial were visible to him, and on them he read the words "decedente pax." He repeated them to himself, drawing from them a new confidence and encouragement. Why should it not be so? The storms that had scattered the hopes of his youth had surely blown themselves out. His evil genius, who had first betrayed him and then threatened to destroy utterly his hardly earned prosperity and security; who had cast him into the depths and had fastened upon him when he struggled to the surface; the evil genius, the active cause of all his misfortunes, was gone for ever and would certainly trouble him no more.

Then why should the autumn of his life not be an Indian summer of peace and tranquil happiness? Why not?

CHAPTER V—DR. THORNDYKE LISTENS TO A STRANGE STORY

"And that," said Mr. Stalker, picking up a well-worn attache-case and opening it on his knees, "finishes our little business and relieves you of my society."

"Say 'deprives'," Thorndyke corrected. "That is, if you must really go."

"That is very delicate of you, doctor," Stalker replied as he stuffed a bundle of documents into the attache-case; "and, by the way, it isn't quite the finish. There is another small matter which I had nearly forgotten; something that my nephew, Harold, asked me to hand to you. You have heard me speak of Harold—my sister's boy?"

"The inventive genius? Yes, I remember your telling me about him."

"Well, he asked me to pass this on to you; thought it might interest you."

He took from his case a flat disc which looked like a closely rolled coil of paper tape, secured with a rubber band, and passed it to Thorndyke, who took it, and, unrolling a few inches, glanced at it with a slightly puzzled smile.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I had better explain," replied Stalker. "You see, Harold has invented a recording camera which will take small photographs in a series and mark each one with its serial number, so that there can be no mistake about the sequence. It is a box camera and it takes quite a big roll of kinematograph film with a capacity of something like five hundred exposures. And the mechanism not only marks each negative with its number but also shows the number which is being exposed on a little dial on the outside of the camera. Quite a useful instrument, I should think, for certain purposes, though I can't, at the moment, think of a case to which it would be applicable."

"I can imagine certain cases, however," said Thorndyke, "in which it would be quite valuable. But with regard to these particular photographs?"

"They are, as you see, a series of footprints—the footprints of a man who absconded from a country bank and has not been seen since."

"But why did Harold take so many? There must be about a couple of hundred on this strip."

Stalker chuckled. "I don't think," said he, "that we need go far for the reason. Harold had got a camera that would take a numbered series and he had never had a chance to try it. Now here was an undoubted series of footprints on a footpath and they were those of an absconding man. It was a chance to show what the camera would do, and he took it. He professes to believe that these photographs might furnish an important clue to an investigator like yourself. But, of course, that is all nonsense. He just wanted to try his new camera. Still, he did the job quite thoroughly. He took a twenty-five-inch ordnance map with him and marked each exposure on it, showing the exact position of that particular footprint. He made an exposure about every twenty yards. You will see, if you look at the map. I have the three sheets here. He told me to give them to you with the photographs, so that you could examine them together if you wanted to—which I imagine you won't. Of course, the information they give is quite valueless. One or two photographs would have shown all that there was to show."

"I wouldn't say that," Thorndyke dissented. "The application of the method to the present case is, I must admit, not at all evident. One or two photographs would have been enough for simple identification. But I can imagine a case in which it might be of the highest importance to be able to prove that a man did actually follow a particular route, especially if a time factor were also available."

"Which it is, approximately, in the present instance. But it was already known that the man went that way at that time, so all this elaborate detail is merely flogging a dead horse. The problem is not which way did he go, but where is he now? Not that we care a great deal. He only took a hundred pounds with him—so far as we know at present—so the bank is not particularly interested in him. Nor am I, officially, though I must confess to some curiosity about him. There are some rather odd features in the case. I am quite sorry that we can't afford to call you in to investigate them."

"I expect you are more competent than I am," said Thorndyke. "Banking affairs are rather out of my province."

"It isn't the banking aspect that I am thinking of," replied Stalker. "Our own accountants can deal with that. But there are some other queer features, and about one of them I am a little uncomfortable. It seems to suggest a miscarriage of justice in another case. But I mustn't take up your time with irrelevant gossip."

"But indeed you must," Thorndyke rejoined. "If you have got a queer case, I want to hear it. Remember, I live by queer cases."

"It is rather a long story," objected Stalker, evidently bursting to tell it nevertheless.

"So much the better," said Thorndyke. "We will have a bottle of wine and make an entertainment of it."

He retired from the room and presently reappeared with a bottle of Chambertin and a couple of glasses; and having, filled the latter, he provided himself with a writing-pad, resumed his armchair and disposed himself to listen at his ease.

"I had better begin," said Stalker, "with an account of this present affair. The man who has absconded is a certain James Lewson, who was the manager of a little branch of Perkins's Bank down at Borley. He ran it by himself, living on the premises and being looked after by the caretaker's wife. It is quite a small affair—just a nucleus with an eye for the future, for Meux's do most of the business at Borley, such as it is—and easily run by one man; and everything has gone on quite smoothly there until last Wednesday week. On that day Lewson went out at about a quarter-past seven in the evening. The caretaker saw him go out at the back gate and thought that he looked as if he had been drinking, and on that account he sat up until past twelve o'clock to see him in safely. But he never came home, and as he had not returned by the morning, the caretaker telegraphed up to headquarters.

"Now I happened to be there when the telegram arrived—for I am still on the board of directors and do a bit of work there—and I suggested that old Jewsbury should go down to see what had been happening and take a young man with him to do the routine work while he was going through the books. And as Harold was the only one that could be spared, he was told off for the job. Of course, he fell in with it joyfully, for he thought he saw a possible chance of giving his camera a trial. Accordingly, down he went, with the camera in his trunk, all agog to find a series of some kind that wanted photographing. As soon as they arrived, Jewsbury saw at a glance that some of the cash was missing—a hundred pounds in five-pound Bank of England notes."

"And the keys?" asked Thorndyke.

"The safe key was missing too. But that had been anticipated, so Jewsbury had been provided with a master-key. The other keys were in the safe.

"Well, as soon as the robbery was discovered, Jewsbury had a talk with the caretaker and the police inspector, who had called to see him. From the caretaker, a steady old retired police sergeant, Jewsbury gathered that Lewson had been going to the bad for some time, taking a good deal more whisky than was good for him. But we needn't go into that. The police inspector reported that Lewson had been seen at about seven-thirty—that is, within a quarter of an hour of his leaving the bank—turning into a footpath that leads out into the country and eventually to the main London road. The inspector had examined the path and found on it a track of very distinct and characteristic footprints, which he was able to identify as Lewson's, not only by the description given by the caretaker, who usually cleaned Lewson's shoes, but by one or two fairly clear footprints in the garden near the back gate, by which Lewson went out. Thereupon, he returned to the footpath and followed the tracks out into the country, through a wood and across a heath until he came to a place where Lewson had left the path and gone off through the heather; and there, of course all traces of him were lost. The inspector went on and searched a by-road and went on to the London road, but not a single trace of him could he discover. At that point where he stepped off the footpath into the heather James Lewson vanished into thin air."

"Where is the railway station?" Thorndyke asked.

"In the town. There is a little branch station by the London road, but it is certain that Lewson did not go there, for there were no passengers at all on that evening. He must have gone off along the road on foot.

"Now, as soon as Harold heard of those footprints, he decided that his chance had come. The footprints would soon be trodden out or washed away by rain, and they ought to be recorded permanently. That was his view."

"And a perfectly sound one, too," remarked Thorndyke.

"Quite. But there was no need for a couple of hundred repetitions."

"Apparently not," Thorndyke agreed, "though it is impossible to be certain even of that. At any rate, a superabundance of evidence is a good deal better than a deficiency."

"Well, that is what Harold thought, or pretended to think, and in effect, he nipped off to the Post Office and got the large-scale ordnance maps that contained his field of operations. Then on the following morning he set to work, leaving Jewsbury to carry on. He began by photographing a pair of the footprints in the garden—they are numbers 1 and 2—and marking them on the map. Then he went off to the footpath and took a photograph about every twenty yards, selecting the most distinct footprints and writing down the number of the exposure on the map at the exact spot on which it was made. And so he followed the track into the country, through the wood, across the heath to what we may call the vanishing point. Number 197 is the last footprint that Lewson made before he turned off into the heather.

"So much for Harold and his doings. Now we come to the queer features of the case, and the first of them is the amount taken. A hundred pounds! Can you imagine a sane man, with a salary of six hundred a year, absconding with such a sum? The equivalent of two months' salary. The thing seems incredible. And why a hundred pounds only? Why didn't he take, at least, the whole of the available cash? It is incomprehensible. And in a few days his monthly salary would have been due. Why didn't he wait to collect that?

"But there is a partial explanation. Only the explanation is more incomprehensible than what it explains. By the evening post on the day on which Jewsbury arrived a letter was delivered, addressed to Lewson, and, under the circumstances, Jewsbury felt justified in opening it. Its contents were to this effect:

"Dear Lewson,—I expected you to come round last night, as you promised, to settle up. As you didn't come and have not written, I think it necessary to tell you plainly that this can't be allowed to go on. If the amount (£97 13s 4d.) is not paid within the next forty-eight hours, I shall have to take measures that will be unpleasant to both of us.—Yours faithfully,

"Lewis Bateman

"Now this letter seemed to explain the small amount taken. It suggested that Lewson was being pressed for payment and that, as he had not got the wherewith to pay, he had taken the amount out of the cash, trusting to be able to replace it before the periodical audit. But if so, why had he not paid Bateman? And why had he absconded? The letter only deepens the mystery."

"Is it an ascertained fact that he had not the wherewithal to pay?"

"I think I may say that it is. His own current account at the bank showed a balance of about thirty shillings and he had no deposit account. Looking over his account, Jewsbury noticed that he seemed to spend the whole of his income and was often overdrawn at the end of the month.

"But this letter brought into view another queer feature of the case. On enquiring of the police inspector, Jewsbury found that the man, Bateman, is a member of a firm of outside brokers who have offices in Moorgate Street. Bateman lives at Borley, and he and Lewson seemed to have been

on more or less friendly terms. Accordingly, Jewsbury and the inspector called on him, and, under some pressure, he disclosed the nature of Lewson's dealing with his firm. It appeared that Lewson was a regular 'operator,' and that he was singularly unfortunate in his speculations and that he had a fatal habit of carrying over when he ought to have cut his loss and got out. As a result, he dropped quite large sums of money from time to time, and had lost heavily during the last few months. On the transactions of the last twelve months, Bateman reckoned—he hadn't his books with him, of course, at Borley—that Lewson had dropped over six hundred pounds; and in addition, he happened to know that Lewson had been plunging and losing on the turf.

"Now, where did Lewson get all this money? His account shows no income beyond his salary, and the debit side shows only his ordinary domestic expenditure. There are a good many cash drafts, some of which may have represented betting losses, but they couldn't represent the big sums that he lost through the bucket shop."

"He didn't pay the brokers by cheque, then?"

"No. Always in notes—five-pound notes; not that there is anything abnormal in that. As a bank manager, he would naturally wish to keep these transactions secret. It is the amount that creates the mystery. He spent the whole of his income in a normal though extravagant fashion, and he dropped over six hundred pounds in addition. Now, where did he get that six hundred pounds?"

"Is it certain that he had no outside source of income?" Thorndyke asked.

"Obviously he had. But since there is no sign of it on the credit side of his account, he must have received it in cash; which is a mighty queer circumstance when you consider the amount. Jewsbury is convinced that he must have been carrying on some kind of embezzlement, and I don't see what other explanation there can be. But if so, it has been done with extraordinary skill. Jewsbury has been through the books with the utmost rigour and with this suspicion in his mind, but he can't discover the slightest trace of any falsification. And mind you, Jewsbury is a first-class accountant and as sharp as a needle. So that is how the matter stands, and I must confess that I can make nothing of it."

Mr. Stalker paused, and, with a profoundly reflective air, took a sip from his glass, which Thorndyke had just refilled. The latter waited for some time with an expectant eye upon his guest and at length remarked: "You were saying something about a miscarriage of justice."

"So I was," said Stalker. "But that is another story—unless it is a part of this story, which I begin to be afraid it is. However, you shall judge. I should like to hear what you think. It carries us back some fifteen years; that was before I took up the 'Griffin' company, and I was then assistant manager of Perkins', at the Cornhill office. About that time it was discovered that quite a long series of forgeries had been committed. They were very skilfully done and very cleverly managed, evidently by somebody who knew what customers' accounts it would be safe to operate on. It was found that a number of forged bearer cheques had been presented and paid over the counter; and it was further found that nearly all of them had been presented and paid at the counter of one man, a young fellow named Jeffrey Brandon. As soon as the discovery was made it was decided—seeing that the forger was almost certainly an employee of the bank—to muster the staff and invite them all to turn out their pockets. And this was done on the following morning. When they had all arrived, and before the bank opened, they were mustered in the hall and the position of affairs explained to them; whereupon all of them, without being invited, expressed the wish to be searched. Accordingly, a detective officer who was in attendance searched each of them in turn, without any result. Then the detective suggested that the office coats, which most of them used and which were hanging in the lobby, should be fetched by the detective and the porter and searched in

the presence of their owners. This also was done. Each man identified his own coat, and the detective searched it in his presence. All went well until we came to nearly the last coat—that belonging to Jeffrey Brandon and identified by him as his. When the detective put his hand into the inside breast pocket, he found in it a letter-case; and on opening this and turning out its contents, he discovered in an inner compartment three bearer cheques. They were payable to three different—presumably fictitious—persons and were endorsed in the names of the payees in three apparently different handwritings.

"On the production of those cheques, Brandon showed the utmost astonishment. He admitted that the letter-case was his, but denied any knowledge of the cheques, declaring that they must have been put into the case by someone else—presumably the forger—while the coat was hanging in the lobby. Of course, this could not be accepted. No one but the senior staff knew even of the discovery of the forgery—at least, that was our belief at the time. And the search had been sprung on the staff without a moment's warning. Furthermore, there was the fact that nearly all the forged cheques had been paid at Brandon's counter. What followed was inevitable. Brandon was kept under observation at the bank until the ostensible drawers of the cheques had been communicated with by telegram or telephone; and when they had all denied having drawn any such cheques, he was arrested and charged before a magistrate. Of course, he was committed for trial; and when he was put in the dock at the Old Bailey the only defence he had to offer was a complete denial of any knowledge of the cheques and a repetition of his statement that they must have been put into his pocket by some other person for the purpose of incriminating him. It was not a very convincing defence, and it is not surprising that the jury would not accept it."

"And yet," Thorndyke remarked, "it was the only defence that was possible if he was innocent. And there was nothing inherently improbable in it."

"No. That was what I felt; and when he was found guilty and sentenced to five years' penal servitude, I was decidedly unhappy about the affair. For Brandon was a nice, bright, prepossessing youngster, and there was nothing whatever against him but this charge. And, later, I was made still more uncomfortable when I had reason to believe that the discovery of the forgeries had in some way become known, on the day before the search, to some members of the junior staff. So that what Brandon had said might easily have been true.

"However, that is the old story. And now as to its connection with the present one. Brandon had one specially intimate friend at the bank, and that friend's name was James Lewson. Now, we have never had anything against Lewson in all these years, or he would never have been a branch manager. But, from what we know of him now, he is, at least, an unscrupulous rascal and, if Jewsbury is right, he is an embezzler and a thief. I can't rid myself of a horrible suspicion that James Lewson put those forged cheques into Brandon's pocket."

"If he did," said Thorndyke, "hanging would be a great deal too good for him."

"I quite agree with you," Stalker declared emphatically. "It would have been a dastardly crime. But I can't help suspecting him very gravely. I recall the look of absolute amazement on poor Brandon's face when those cheques were produced. It impressed me deeply at the time, but the recollection of it impresses me still more now. If Brandon was innocent, it was a truly shocking affair. It won't bear thinking of."

"No," Thorndyke agreed. "There is no tragedy more dreadful than the conviction of an innocent man. By the way, do you know what became of Brandon?"

"Indeed I do," replied Stalker. "The poor fellow is beyond the reach of any possible reparation, even if his innocence could be proved. He died in an attempt to escape from prison. I remember the circumstances only too clearly. Soon after his conviction he was sent to the convict prison at Colport. There, while he was working outside with a gang, he slipped past the civil guard and made off along the sea wall. He got quite a good start while they were searching for him in the wrong direction, but at last they picked up his tracks and set off in pursuit. And presently, on the seaward face of the wall, they found his clothes and the marks of his feet where he had walked out across the mud to the sea. They assumed that he had swum out to some passing vessel, and that is probably what he tried to do. But no tidings of him could be obtained from any of the anchored vessels or those that had passed up or down. Then, about six weeks later, the mystery was solved; for his body was found on the mud in a creek some miles farther down."

"About six weeks later," Thorndyke repeated. "What time of year was it?"

"He was found about the middle of August. Yes, I know what you are thinking. But, really, the question of identity hardly arose, although, no doubt, the corpse was examined as far as was possible. Still, the obvious facts were enough. A naked man was missing and the body of a nude man was found just where it was expected to wash ashore. I think we may take it that the body was Brandon's body. I only wish I could think otherwise."

"Yes," said Thorndyke. "It is a melancholy end to what sounds like a very tragic story. But I am afraid you are right. The body was almost certainly his."

"I think so," agreed Stalker. "And now, I hope I haven't taken up your time for nothing. You will admit that this Lewson case has some rather queer features."

"It certainly has," said Thorndyke. "It is most anomalous and puzzling from beginning to end."

"I suppose," said Stalker, "it would be hardly fair to ask for a few comments?"

"Why not?" demanded Thorndyke. "This is an entertainment, not a professional conference. If you want my views on the case, you are welcome to them and I may say, in the first place, that I do not find myself quite in agreement with Jewsbury in regard to the embezzlement—of which, you notice, he can find no evidence. To me there is a strong suggestion of some outside source of income. We note that Lewson paid these large sums of money in cash—in five-pound notes. Now that may have been for secrecy. But where did he get all those notes? He paid no cheques into his account. He couldn't have stolen the notes from the bank's cash. There is a distinct suggestion that he received the money in the same form in which he paid it away. And his conduct on this occasion supports that view. He just baldly took a hundred pounds out of cash—in five-pound notes—to meet a sudden urgent call. One feels that he must have expected to be able to replace it almost at once. The idea that a man of his experience should have committed a simple, crude robbery like this is untenable. And then there is the amount: taken, almost certainly, for this specific purpose. The irresistible suggestion is that he merely borrowed this money in the confident expectation of obtaining the wherewith to put it back before it should be missed.

"Then there is the singular suggestion of a change of purpose. Apparently he started out to pay Bateman. Then why did he not pay him? He had the money. Instead, he suddenly turns off and walks out into the country. Why this change of plan? What had happened in the interval to cause him to change his plans in this remarkable manner? Had he discovered that he would not be able to replace the money? Even that would not explain his proceedings, for the natural thing would have been to return to the bank and put the notes back.

"Again, if he intended to abscond, why go away across the country on foot? He could easily have taken the train to town and disappeared there. But the idea of his absconding with that small amount of money is difficult to accept: and yet he undoubtedly did walk out into the country. And he has disappeared in a manner which is rather remarkable when one considers how easy a solitary pedestrian is to trace in the country. There is even something rather odd in his leaving the footpath and plunging into the heather, which must have been very inconvenient walking for a fugitive. Taking the case as a whole, I feel that I cannot accept the idea that he simply absconded with stolen money. Why he suddenly changed his plans and made off I am unable to guess, but I am certain that behind his extraordinary proceedings there is something more than meets the eye."

"That is precisely my feeling,'" said Stalker, and the more so now that I have heard your summing-up of the case. I don't believe the man set out from home with the idea of absconding. I suspect that something happened after he left the house; that he got some sudden scare that sent him off into the country in that singular fashion. And now I must really take myself off. It has been a great pleasure to talk this case over with you. What about those things of Harold's? Shall I relieve you of them, now that you have seen them?"

"No," replied Thorndyke. "Leave them with me for the present. I should like to look them over before I hand them back."

"You don't imagine that Harold is right, do you? That these footprints may yield a clue to the man's disappearance?"

"No. I was not thinking of them in relation to the present case, but in regard to their general evidential bearing. As you know, I have given a great deal of attention and study to footprints. They sometimes yield a surprising amount of information, and as they can be accurately reproduced in the form of plaster casts, or even photographs, they can be produced in court and shown to the judge and the jury, who are thus able to observe for themselves instead of having to rely on the mere statements of witnesses.

"But footprints, as one meets with them in practice, have this peculiarity: that, although they are made in a series, they have to be examined separately as individual things. If we try to examine them on the ground as a series, we have to walk from one to another and trust largely to memory. But in these photographs of Harold's we can take in a whole series at a glance and compare any one specimen with any other. So what I propose to do is to look over these photographs and see if, apart from the individual characters which identify a footprint, there are any periodic or recurring characters which would make it worth while to use a camera of this type in practice. I want to ascertain, in fact, whether a consecutive series of footprints is anything more than a number of repetitions of a given footprint."

"I see. Of course, this is not a continuous series. There are long intervals."

"Yes. That is a disadvantage. Still, it is a series of a kind."

"True. And the maps?"

"I may as well keep them too. They show the distances between the successive footprints, which may be relevant, since the intervals are not all equal."

"Very well," said Stalker, picking up his attache-case. "I admire your enthusiasm and the trouble you take, and I will tell Harold how seriously you take his productions. He will be deeply gratified."

"It was very good of him to send them, and you must thank him for me."

The two men shook hands, and when Thorndyke had escorted his guest to the landing and watched him disappear down the stairs, he returned to his chambers, closing the "oak" behind him and thereby secluding himself from the outer world.

CHAPTER VI—DR. THORNDYKE BECOMES INQUISITIVE

Temperamentally, Dr. John Thorndyke presented a peculiarity which, at the first glance, seemed to involve a contradiction. He was an eminently friendly man; courteous, kindly and even genial in his intercourse with his fellow-creatures. Nor was his suave, amicable manner in any way artificial or consciously assumed. To every man his attitude of mind was instinctively friendly, and if he did not suffer fools gladly, he could, on occasion, endure them with almost inexhaustible patience.

And yet, with all his pleasant exterior and his really kindly nature, he was at heart a confirmed solitary. Of all company, his own thoughts were to him the most acceptable. After all, his case was not singular. To every intellectual man, solitude is not only a necessity, it is the condition to which his mental qualities are subject; and the man who cannot endure his own sole society has usually excellent reasons for his objection to it.

Hence, when Thorndyke closed the massive outer door and connected the bell-push with the laboratory floor above, there might have been detected in his manner a certain restfulness. He had enjoyed Stalker's visit. Particularly had he enjoyed the "queer case," which was to him what a problem is to an ardent chess player. But still, that was only speculation, whereas with the aid of Harold's photographs he hoped to settle one or two doubtful points relating to the characters of footprints which had from time to time arisen in his mind, and thereby to extend his actual knowledge.

With a leisurely and thoughtful air he moved a few things on the table to make a clear space, took out from a cupboard a surveyor's boxwood scale, a pair of needle-pointed spring dividers, a set of paper-weights, a note-block, and a simple microscope (formed of a watchmaker's doublet mounted on three legs) which he used for examining documents. Then he laid the three sheets of the ordnance map in their proper sequence on the table, with the roll of photographs by their side, drew up a chair and sat down to his task.

He began by running his eye along the path traversed by the fugitive, which was plainly marked by a row of dots, each dot having above it a microscopic number. Dots and numbers had originally been marked with a sharp-pointed pencil, but they had subsequently been inked in with red ink and a fine-pointed pen. From the maps he turned his attention to the photographs, unrolling a length of about nine inches and fixing the strip with a paper-weight at each end. The strip itself was an inch wide, and each photograph was an inch and a half long, and every one of the little oblongs contained the image of a footprint which occupied almost its entire length and which measured—as Thorndyke ascertained by taking the dimensions with his dividers—one inch and three-eighths. Small as the photographs were, they were microscopically sharp in definition, having evidently been taken with a lens of very fine quality; and in the corner of each picture was a minute number in white, which stood out clearly against the rather dark background.

Sliding the little microscope over one of the prints, Thorndyke examined it with slightly amused interest. For a fugitive's footprint it was a frank absurdity, so strikingly conspicuous and characteristic was it. If Mr. Lewson had had his name printed large upon the soles of his shoes he could hardly have given more assistance to his pursuers. The impression was that of a rubber sole on which, near the toe, was a framed label containing the makers' name, J. Dell and Co. Behind

this was a panel, occupied by a prancing horse, and the Kentish motto, "Invicta," beneath the panel, implied that this was the prancing horse of Kent. The circular rubber heel was less distinctive, though even this was a little unusual, for its central device was a five-pointed star, whereas most star-pattern heels present six points. But not only were all the details of the pattern distinctly visible; even the little accidental markings, due to wear and damage, could be plainly made out. For instance, a little ridge could be seen across the horse's neck, corresponding to a cut or split in the rubber sole, and a tiny speck on the heel, which seemed to represent a particle of gravel embedded in the rubber.

When he had made an exhaustive examination of the one photograph, he went back to numbers 1 and 2 which represented the footprints near the back gate of the bank, and which were not for his purpose part of the series. After a brief inspection of them, he placed one of the paper-weights on them, and, by means of another, exposed about eighteen inches of the strip. Next, he drew a vertical line down the middle of the note-block, dividing it into two parts, which he headed respectively "Right" and "Left." Then he began his comparative study with a careful examination of number 3, the first print photographed on the footpath.

Having finished with number 3, which was a right foot, he wrote down the number at the top of the "Right" column, in the middle of the space. Then he passed to number 5—the next right foot—and having examined it, wrote down its number. Next, he took, with the dividers, the distance between the dots marked 3 and 5 on the map, and, transferring the dividers to the boxwood scale, took off the distance in yards—forty-three yards—and wrote this down on the note-block opposite and at the left side of the number 5. From 5 he passed on to 7, 9,11, 13, and so on, following the right foot along the strip until he had dealt with a couple of yards (the total length of the strip was a little over twenty-four feet), occasionally turning back to verify his comparisons, writing down the numbers in the middle of the column with the distances opposite to them on the left and jotting down in the space at the right a few brief notes embodying his observations. Then he returned to the beginning of the strip and dealt with the prints of the left foot in the same manner and for the same distance along the strip.

One would not have regarded it as a thrilling occupation. Indeed there was rather a suggestion of monotony in the endless recurrence of examination, comparison, and measurements of things which appeared to be merely mechanical repetitions of one another. Nor did the brief and scanty jottings in the "notes" column suggest that this tedious procedure was yielding any great wealth of information. Nevertheless, Thorndyke continued to work at his task methodically, attentively, and without any symptoms of boredom, until he had dealt with nearly half of the strip. But at this point his manner underwent a sudden and remarkable change. Hitherto he had carried on his work with the placid air of one who is engaged on a mildly interesting piece of routine work. Now he sat up stiffly, gazing at the strip of photographs before him with a frown of perplexity, even of incredulity. With intense attention, he re-examined the last half-dozen prints that he had dealt with; then, taking a right foot as a starting-point, he followed the strip rapidly, taking no measurements and making no notes, until he reached the end, where he found a slip of paper pasted to the strip and bearing the note: "Footprints cease here. Track turned off to left into heather. Length of foot, 12 inches. Length of stride from heel to heel, 34 inches."

Having rapidly copied this note on to his block, Thorndyke resumed his examination with eager interest. Returning to the starting-point, he again examined a print of the left foot and then followed its successive prints to the final one at the end of the strip. Again he came back to the starting-point; but now, taking this as a centre, he began to move backwards and forwards, at first taking a dozen prints in each direction, then, by degrees, reducing the distance of his excursions until he came down to a single print of the right foot—a specially clear impression, marked with the number 93. This he again examined through the little microscope with the most intense

scrutiny. Then, with a like concentrated attention, he examined first the preceding right-foot print, 91, and then the succeeding one, 95. Finally, he turned to the map to locate number 93, which he found near the middle of a wall—apparently the enclosing wall of a large garden or plantation—and exactly opposite a gate in that wall.

From this moment Thorndyke's interest in his original investigations seemed to become extinct. The little microscope, the scale, even the photographs themselves, were neglected and unnoticed, while he sat with his eyes fixed on the map—yet seeming to look through it rather than at it—evidently immersed in profound thought. For a long time he sat thus, immovable as a seated statue. At length he rose from his chair, and, mechanically filling his pipe, began slowly to pace up and down the room, and to any observer who knew him, had there been one, the intense gravity of his expression, the slight frown, the compressed lips, the downcast eyes, as well as the unlighted pipe that he grasped in his hand, would have testified that some problem of more than common intricacy was being turned over in his mind and its factors sorted out and collated.

He had been pacing the room for nearly half an hour when a key was softly inserted into the latch of the outer door. The door opened and closed quietly, and then a gentle tap on the knocker of the inner door heralded the entry of a small gentleman of somewhat clerical aspect and uncommon crinkliness of countenance, who greeted Thorndyke with a deprecating smile.

"I hope, sir," said he, "that I am not disturbing you, but I thought that I had better remind you that you have not had any supper."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Thorndyke. "What a memory you have, Polton. And to think that I, who am really the interested party, should have overlooked the fact. Well, what do you propose?"

Polton glanced at the table with a sympathetic eye. "You won't want your things disturbed, I expect, if you have got a job on hand. I had better put your supper in the little laboratory. It won't take more than five minutes."

"That will do admirably," said Thorndyke. "And, by the way, I think that adjourned inquest at Aylesbury is the day after to-morrow, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir, Thursday. I fixed the letter on the appointment board."

"Well, as there is nothing pressing on Friday, I think I will stay the night there and come back on Friday evening if nothing urgent turns up in the interval."

"Yes, sir. Will you want anything special in the research case?"

"I shall not take the research case," replied Thorndyke; "in fact, I don't know that I want anything excepting the one-inch ordnance map, unless I take that stick of yours."

Polton's face brightened. "I wish you would, sir," he said persuasively. "You have never tried it since I made it, and I am sure you will find it a most useful instrument."

"I am sure I shall," said Thorndyke; "and perhaps I might as well take the little telephoto camera, if you will have it charged."

"I will charge it to-night, sir, and overhaul the stick. And your supper will be ready in five minutes."

With this Polton disappeared as silently as he had come, leaving his principal to his meditations.

On the following Friday morning, at about half-past ten. Dr. John Thorndyke might have been seen—if there had been any one to see him, which there was not—seated in a first-class smoking-compartment in the Aylesbury to London train. But he was evidently not going to London, for, as the train slowed down on approaching Borley station, he pocketed the folded ordnance map which he had been studying, stood up and took his stick down from the rack.

Now this stick was the only blot on Thorndyke's appearance. Apart from it his "turn-out" was entirely satisfactory and appropriate to his country surroundings without being either rustic or sporting. But that stick, with a tweed suit and a soft hat, struck a note of deepest discord. With a frock-coat and a top-hat it might have passed, though even then it would have called for a Falstaffian bearer. But as a country stick it really wouldn't do at all.

In the first place it was offensively straight—as straight as a length of metal tube. It was of an uncomely thickness, a full inch in diameter. As to the material, it might, by an exceedingly bad judge, have been mistaken for ebony. In fact, it was, as to its surface, strongly reminiscent of optician's black enamel. And the handle was no better. Of the same funereal hue and an unreasonable thickness, it had the stark mechanical regularity of an elbow-joint on a gas pipe, and, to make it worse, its end was finished by a sort of terminal cap. Moreover, on looking down the shaft of the stick, a close observer would have detected, about fifteen inches from the handle, a fine transverse crack, suggestive of a concealed joint. A sharp-eyed rural constable would have "spotted" it at a glance as a walking-stick gun; and he would have been wrong.

However, despite its aesthetic shortcomings, Thorndyke seemed to set some store by it, for he lifted it from the rack with evident care, and with the manner of lifting something heavier than an ordinary walking-stick; and when he stepped forth from the station, instead of holding it by its unlovely handle with its ferrule on the ground, he carried it "at the trail," grasping it by its middle.

On leaving the station precincts, Thorndyke set forth with the confident air of one who is on familiar ground, though, as a matter of fact, he had never been in the district before; but he had that power, which comes by practice, of memorizing a map that makes unvisited regions familiar and is apt to cause astonishment to the aboriginal inhabitants. Swinging along at an easy but rapid pace, he presently entered a quiet, semi-suburban road which he followed for a quarter of a mile, looking about him keenly, and identifying the features of the map as he went. At length he came to a kissing-gate which gave access to a footpath, and, turning into this, he strode away along the path, looking closely at its surface and once stopping and retracing his steps for a few yards to examine his own footprints.

A few hundred yards farther on he crossed another road, more definitely rural in character, and noted at the corner a pleasant-looking house of some age, standing back behind a well-kept garden, its front entrance sheltered by a wooden porch which was now almost hidden by a mass of climbing roses. The side wall of the garden abutted on the footpath and extended along it for a distance that suggested somewhat extensive grounds. At this point he reduced his pace to a slow walk, scrutinizing the ground—on which he could detect, even now, occasional fragmentary traces of the familiar footprints of Harold's photographs—and noting how, since crossing the road, he had passed completely out of the last vestiges of the town into the open country.

He had traversed rather more than half the length of the wall when he came to a green-painted wooden gate, before which he halted for a few moments. There were, however, no features of interest to note beyond the facts that its loop handle was unprovided with a latch and that it was secured with a Yale lock. But as he stood looking at it with a deeply reflective air, he was aware of

a sound proceeding from within—a pleasant sound, though curiously out of key with his own thoughts—the sound of some one whistling, very skilfully and melodiously, the old-fashioned air, "Alice, where art thou?" He smiled grimly, keenly appreciative of the whimsical incongruity of these cheerful, innocent strains with the circumstances that had brought him thither; then he turned away and walked slowly to the end of the wall where it was joined by another, which enclosed the end of the grounds. Here he halted and looked along the path towards a wood which was visible in the distance; then, turning, he looked back along the way by which he had come. In neither direction was there any one in sight, and Thorndyke noted that he had not met a single person since he had passed through the kissing-gate. Apparently this path was quite extraordinarily unfrequented.

Having made this observation, Thorndyke stepped off the path and walked a few paces along the end wall—which abutted on a field—to a spot where an apple tree in the grounds rose above the summit. Here he stopped, and, having glanced up at the wall—which was nearly seven feet high—grasped the uncomely stick with both hands, one on either side of the concealed joint, and gave a sharp twist. Immediately the stick became divided into two parts, the lower of which—that bearing the ferrule—Thorndyke stood against the wall. It could now be seen that the upper part terminated in a blackened brass half-cylinder, the flat face of which was occupied by a little circular glass window, and when Thorndyke had unscrewed the cap from the end of the handle, the latter was seen to be a metal tube, within which was another little glass window—the eye-piece. In effect, Polton's hideous walking-stick was a disguised periscope.

Taking up a position close to the wall, Thorndyke slowly raised the periscope until its end stood an inch or so above the top of the wall, with the little window looking into the enclosure. The eye-piece being now at a convenient level, he applied his eye to it, and immediately had the sensation of looking through a circular hole in the wall. Through this aperture (which was, of course, the aperture of the object-glass above him, reflected by a pair of prisms) he looked into a large garden, enclosed on all sides by the high wall and having apparently only two doors or gates, the one at the side, which he had already seen, and another which appeared to open into another garden nearer the house, and which, like the side gate, seemed to be fitted with a night-latch of the Yale type. On one side, partly concealed by a half-grown yew hedge, was a long, low building which, by the windows in its roof, appeared to be some kind of workshop; and by rotating the periscope it was possible to catch a glimpse of part of what seemed to be a summer-house in the corner opposite the workshop. Otherwise, excepting a narrow flower border and a few fruit trees ranged along the wall, the whole of the enclosure was occupied by a large lawn, the wide expanse of which was broken only by a sun-dial beside which, at the moment, a man was standing and on man and sun-dial, Thorndyke, after his swift preliminary survey, concentrated his attention.

The stone pillar of the dial was obviously ancient. Equally obviously the stone base on which it stood was brand new. Moreover, the part of the lawn immediately surrounding the base was yellow and faded as if it had been recently raised and relaid. The manifest inference was that the dial had but lately been placed in its present position; and this inference was supported by the occupation in which the man was engaged. On the stone base stood a Windsor chair, the seat of which bore one or two tools and a pair of spectacles. Thorndyke noted the spectacles with interest, observing that they had "curl sides" and were therefore habitually worn; and since they had been discarded while their owner consulted a book that he held, it seemed to follow that he must be near-sighted.

As Thorndyke watched, the man closed the book and laid it on the chair, when by its shape and size, its scarlet back and apple-green sides, it was easily recognizable as Whitaker's Almanack. Having laid down the book, the man drew out his watch, and, holding it in his hand, approached the pillar and grasped the gnomon of the dial; and now Thorndyke could see that the dial-plate had

been unfixed from its bed, for it moved visibly as the gnomon was grasped. The nature of the operation was now quite dear. The man was re-setting the dial. He had taken out the Equation of Time from Whitaker and was now adjusting the dial-plate by means of his watch to show the correct Apparent Solar Time.

At this point—leaving the man standing beside the pillar, watch in hand—Thorndyke picked up the detached portion of the stick, and stepping along the wall, glanced up and down the path. So far as he could see—nearly a quarter of a mile in each direction—he had the path to himself; and, noting with some surprise and no little interest the remarkable paucity of wayfarers, he returned to his post and resumed his observations.

The man had now put away his watch and taken up a hammer and bradawl. Thorndyke noted the workmanlike character of the former—a rather heavy ball-peen hammer such as engineers use—and when the bradawl was inserted into one of the screw-holes of the dial-plate and driven home into the lead bed with a single tap, he observed the deftness with which the gentle, calculated blow was delivered with the rather ponderous tool. So, too, with the driving of the screw; it was done with the unmistakable ease and readiness of the skilled workman.

Having rapidly made these observations, Thorndyke drew from his hip pocket the little camera and opened it, setting the focus by the scale to the assumed distance—about sixty feet—fixing the wire release and setting the shutter to half a second—the shortest exposure that was advisable with a telephoto lens. Another peep through the periscope showed the man in the act of again inserting the bradawl, and, incidentally, presenting a well-lighted right profile; whereupon Thorndyke raised the camera and placed it on the top of the wall with the wire release hanging down and the lens pointed, as well as he could judge, at the sun-dial. Then, as the man poised the hammer preparatory to striking, he pressed the button of the release and immediately took down the camera and changed the film.

Once more he went to the corner of the wall and looked up and down the path. This time a man was visible—apparently a labourer—coming from the direction of the town. But he was a long distance away and was advancing at a pace so leisurely that Thorndyke decided to complete his business, if possible, before he should arrive. A glance through the periscope showed the man in the garden driving another screw. When he had driven it home, he stepped round the pillar to deal with the screws on the other side. As he inserted the bradawl and balanced the hammer, presenting now his left profile, Thorndyke lifted the camera to the top of the wall, made the exposure, took down the camera, and having changed the film, closed it and put it in his pocket. Then he joined up the two parts of the stick, fixed the cap on the eye-piece and came out on to the path, turning towards the town to meet the labourer. But the latter had now disappeared, having apparently turned into the road on which the house fronted. Having the path once more to himself, Thorndyke walked along it to the gate, where he paused and rapped on it smartly with his knuckles.

After a short interval, during which he repeated the summons, the gate was opened a few inches and the man whom he had seen within looked out with an air of slightly irritable enquiry.

"I must apologize for disturbing you," Thorndyke said with disarming suavity, "but I heard some one within, and there was no one about from whom I could make my enquiry."

"You are not disturbing me in the least," the other replied, not less suavely. "I shall be most happy to give you any information that I can. What was the enquiry that you wished to make?"

As he asked the question, the stranger stepped out on the path, drawing the gate to after him, and looked inquisitively at Thorndyke.

"I wanted to know," the latter replied, "whether this footpath leads to a wood—Potter's Wood, I think it is called. You see, I am a stranger to this neighbourhood."

On this the man seemed to look at him with heightened interest as he replied:

"Yes, it leads through the wood about half a mile farther on."

"And where does it lead to eventually?"

"It crosses a patch of heath and joins a by-road that runs from the town to the main London road. Was that where you wanted to go?"

"No," replied Thorndyke. "It is the path itself that I am concerned with. The fact is, I am making a sort of informal inspection in connection with the case of a man who disappeared a short time ago—the manager of a local branch of Perkins's Bank. I understand that he was last seen walking along this path."

"Ah," said the other, "I remember the affair. And is he still missing?"

"Yes. He has never been seen or heard of since he started along this path. What is the wood like? Is it a place in which a man might lose himself?"

The other shook his head. "No, it is only a small wood. A sound and sober man could not get lost in it. Of course, if a man were taken ill and strayed into the wood, he might die and lie hidden for months. Has the wood been searched?"

"I really can't say. It ought to have been."

"I thought," said the stranger, "that you might, perhaps, be connected with the police."

"No," replied Thorndyke. "I am a lawyer and I look after some of the affairs of the bank. One of the directors mentioned this disappearance to me a few days ago, and as I happened to be in the neighbourhood to-day, I thought I would come and take a look round. Perhaps you could show me where we are on my map. It is a little confusing to a stranger."

He drew out the folded map and handed it to his new acquaintance, who took it and pored over it as if he found it difficult to decipher. As he did so, Thorndyke took the opportunity to look him over with the most searching scrutiny; his face, his hair, his spectacles, his hands and his feet; and when he had inspected the left side of the face which was the one presented to him—he crossed as if to took over the man's right shoulder and examined the face from that side.

"This dotted line seems to be the footpath," said the stranger, tracing it with the point of a pencil. "This black dot must be my house, and here is the wood with the dotted line running through it. I think that is quite clear."

"Perfectly clear, thank you," said Thorndyke, as the other handed him back the map. "I am very greatly obliged to you and I must again apologize for having disturbed you."

"Not at all," the stranger returned genially; "and I hope your inspection may be successful."

Thorndyke thanked him again, and with mutual bows they separated, the one retiring into his domain, the other setting forth in the direction of the wood.

For some minutes Thorndyke continued to walk at a rapid pace along the path. Only when a sharp turn carried him out of sight of the walled garden did he halt to jot down in his note-book a brief summary of his observations while they were fresh in his mind. Not that the notes were really necessary, for, even as he had made those observations, the significance of the facts that they supplied became apparent. Now, as he walked, he turned them over again and again.

What had he observed? Nothing very sensational, to be sure. He had seen a man who had recently set up in his garden a pillar dial on a broad stone base. The dial was old, but the base was new and seemed to have been specially constructed for its present purpose. The garden in which it had been set up was completely enclosed, was extremely secluded, was remote from its own or any other house, and was very thoroughly secured against any possible intrusion by two locked gates. The man himself was a skilled workman, or at least a very handy man; ingenious and resourceful, too, for he could time a sun-dial, a thing that not every handy man could do. Then he appeared to have some kind of workshop of a size suggesting good accommodation and facilities for work, and this workshop was in a secluded situation, very secure from observation. But in these facts there would seem to be nothing remarkable; only they were in singular harmony with certain other facts—very remarkable facts indeed—that Thorndyke had gleaned from an examination of Harold's absurd photographs.

And there was the man himself, and especially his spectacles. When Thorndyke had seen those spectacles lying on the chair while their owner drove in the screws, looked at his watch, and scrutinized the shadow on the dial, he had naturally assumed that the man was near-sighted; that he had taken off his "distance" glasses to get the advantage of his near sight for the near work. But when the man appeared at the gate, it was immediately evident that he was not near-sighted. The spectacles were convex bi-focal glasses, with an upper half of nearly plain glass and a lower segment distinctly convex, suited for long sight or "old sight." A near-sighted man could not have seen through them. But neither did their owner seem to need them, since he had taken them off just when they should have been most useful—for near work. Moreover, when Thorndyke had presented the map, the man had looked at it, not through the lower "reading" segment, but through the weak, upper, "distance" segment. In short, the man did not need those spectacles at all. So far from being a convenience, they were a positive inconvenience. Then, why did he wear them? Why had he put them on to come to the gate? There could be only one answer. People who wear useless and inconvenient spectacles do so in order to alter their appearance; as a species of disguise, in fact. Then it seemed as if this man had some reason for wishing to conceal his identity. But what could that reason be?

As to his appearance, he was a decidedly good-looking man, with an alert, intelligent face that was in harmony with his speech and bearing. His mouth and chin were concealed by a moustache and a short beard, but his nose was rather handsome and very striking, for it was of that rare type which is seen in the classical Greek sculptures. His ears were both well-shaped, but one of them—the right—was somewhat disfigured by a small "port-wine mark," which stained the lobule a deep purple. But it was quite small and really inconspicuous.

This was the sum of Thorndyke's observations, to which may be added that the man appeared to be prematurely grey and that his face, despite its cheerful geniality, had that indefinable character that may be detected in the faces of men who have passed through long periods of stress and mental suffering. Only one datum remained unascertained, and Thorndyke added it to his collection when, having traversed the wood and the heath, he returned to the town by way of the by-road. Encountering a postman on his round, he stopped him and enquired:

"I wonder if you can tell me who is living at 'The Chestnuts' now? You know the house I mean. It stands at the corner—"

"Oh, I know 'The Chestnuts,' sir. Colonel Barnett used to live there. But he went away nigh upon two years ago, and, after it had been empty for a month or two, it was bought by the gentleman who lives there now, Mr. Pottermack."

"That is a queer name," said Thorndyke. "How does he spell it?"

"P.o.t.t.e.r.m.a.c.k," the postman replied. "Marcus Pottermack, Esq. It is a queer name, sir. I've never met with it before. But he is a very pleasant gentleman, all the same."

Thorndyke thanked the postman for his information, on which he pondered as he made his way to the station. It was a very queer name. In fact, there was about it something rather artificial; something that was not entirely out of character with the unwanted spectacles.

CHAPTER VII—THE CRIMINAL RECORDS

On each of the two men who parted at the gate the brief interview produced its appropriate effects; in each it generated a certain train of thought which, later, manifested itself in certain actions. In Mr. Pottermack, as he softly reopened the gate to listen to the retreating footsteps, once even venturing to peep out at the tall figure that was striding away up the path, the encounter was productive of a dim uneasiness, a slight disturbance of the sense of security that had been growing on him since the night of the tragedy. For the first few days thereafter he had been on wires. All seemed to be going well, but he was constantly haunted by that ever-recurring question, "Was there anything vital that he had overlooked?"

The mysterious photographer, too, had been a disturbing element, occasioning anxious speculations on the motive or purpose of his inexplicable proceedings and on the possibility of something being brought to light by the photographs that was beyond the scope of human vision. But as the days had passed with no whisper of suspicion, as the local excitement died down and the incident faded into oblivion, his fears subsided, and by degrees he settled down into a feeling of comfortable security.

And after all, why not? In the first few days his own secret knowledge had prevented him from seeing the affair in its true perspective. But now, looking at it calmly with the eyes of those who had not that knowledge, what did Lewson's disappearance amount to? It was a matter of no importance at all. A disreputable rascal had absconded with a hundred pounds that did not belong to him. He had disappeared and no one knew whither he had gone. Nor did any one particularly care. Doubtless the police would keep a look-out for him; but he was only a minor delinquent, and they would assuredly make no extraordinary efforts to trace him.

So Mr. Pottermack argued, and quite justly; and thus arguing came by degrees to the comfortable conclusion that the incident was closed and that he might now take up again the thread of his peaceful life, secure alike from the menace of the law and the abiding fear of impoverishment and treachery.

It was this new and pleasant feeling of security that had been disturbed by his encounter with the strange lawyer. Not that he was seriously alarmed. The man seemed harmless enough. He was not, apparently, making any real investigations but just a casual inspection of the neighbourhood, prompted, as it appeared, by a not very lively curiosity. And as a tracker he seemed to be of no account, since he could not even find his position on a one-inch map.

But for all that, the incident was slightly disquieting. Pottermack had assumed that the Lewson affair was closed. But now it seemed that it was not closed. And it was a curious coincidence that this man should have knocked at his gate, should have selected him for these enquiries. No doubt it was but chance; but still, there was the coincidence. Again, there was the man himself. He had seemed foolish about the map. But he did not look at all like a foolish man. On the contrary, his whole aspect and bearing had a suggestion of power, of acute intellect and quiet strength of character. As Pottermack recalled his appearance and manner he found himself asking again and again: Was there anything behind this seemingly chance encounter? Had this lawyer seen those photographs, and if so, had he found in them anything more than met the eye? Could he have had any special reason for knocking at this particular gate? And what on earth could he be doing with that walking-stick gun?

Reflections such as these pervaded Mr. Pottermack's consciousness as he went about his various occupations. They did not seriously disturb his peace of mind, but still they did create a certain degree of unrest, and this presently revived in his mind certain plans which he had considered and rejected; plans for further establishing his security by shifting the field of possible inquiry yet farther from his own neighbourhood.

On Thorndyke the effects of the meeting were quite different. He had come doubting if a certain surmise that he had formed could possibly be correct. He had gone away with his doubts dispelled and his surmise converted into definite belief. The only unsolved question that remained in his mind was, "Who was Marcus Pottermack?" The answer that suggested itself was improbable in the extreme. But it was the only one that he could produce, and if it were wrong he was at the end of his unassisted resources.

The first necessity, therefore, was to eliminate the improbable—or else to confirm it. Then he would know where he stood and could consider what action he would take. Accordingly he began by working up the scanty material that he had collected. The photographs, when developed and enlarged by Polton, yielded two very fair portraits of Mr. Pottermack showing clearly the right and left profiles respectively; and while Polton was dealing with these, his principal made a systematic, but not very hopeful, inspection of the map in search of possible finger-prints. He had made a mental note of the way in which Pottermack had held the map, and even of the spots which his finger-tips had touched, and on these he now began cautiously to operate with two fine powders, a black and a white, applying each to its appropriate background.

The results were poor enough, but yet they were better than he had expected. Pottermack had held the map in his left hand, the better to manipulate the pencil with which he pointed, and his thumb had been planted on a green patch which represented a wood. Here the white powder settled and showed a print which, poor as it was, would present no difficulties to the experts and which would be more distinct in a photograph, as the background would then appear darker. The prints of the finger-tips which the black powder brought out on the white background were more imperfect and were further confused by the black lettering. Still, Thorndyke had them all carefully photographed and enlarged to twice the natural size, and, having blocked out on the negative the surrounding lettering (to avoid giving any information that might be better withheld), had prints made and mounted on card.

With these in his letter-case and the two portraits in his pocket, he set forth one morning for New Scotland Yard, proposing to seek the assistance of his old friend, Mr. Superintendent Miller, or, if he should not be available, that of the officer in charge of criminal records. However, it happened fortunately that the Superintendent was in his office, and thither Thorndyke, having sent in his card, was presently conducted.

"Well, doctor," said Miller, shaking hands heartily, "here you are, gravelled as usual. Now what sort of mess do you want us to help you out of?"

Thorndyke produced his letter-case, and, extracting the photographs, handed them to the Superintendent.

"Here," he said, "are three finger-prints; apparently the thumb and first two fingers of the left hand."

"Ha," said Miller, inspecting the three photographs critically. "Why 'apparently'?"

"I mean," explained Thorndyke, "that that was what I inferred from their position on the original document."

"Which seems to have been a map," remarked Miller, with a faint grin. "Well, I expect you know. Shall I take it that they are the thumb and index and middle finger of the left hand?"

"I think you may," said Thorndyke.

"I think I may," agreed Miller; "and now the question is: What about it? I suppose you want us to tell you whose finger-prints they are; and you want to gammon us that you don't know already. And I suppose—as I see you have been faking the negative—that you don't want to give us any information?"

"In effect," replied Thorndyke, "you have, with your usual acuteness, diagnosed the position exactly. I don't much want to give any details, but I will tell you this much. If my suspicions are correct, these are the finger-prints of a man who has been dead some years."

"Dead!" exclaimed Miller. "Good Lord, doctor, what a vindictive man you are! But you don't suppose that we follow the criminal class into the next world, do you?"

"I have been assuming that you don't destroy records. If you do, you are unlike any government officials that I have ever met. But I hope I was right."

"In the main, you were. We don't keep the whole set of documents of a dead man, but we have a set of skeleton files on which the personal documents—the finger-prints, photographs and description—are preserved. So I expect we shall be able to tell you what you want to know."

"I am sorry," said Thorndyke, "that they are such wretchedly poor prints. You don't think that they are too imperfect to identify, I hope."

Miller inspected the photographs afresh. "I don't see much amiss with them," said he. "You can't expect a crook to go about with a roller and inking-plate in his pocket so as to give you nice sharp prints. These are better than a good many that our people have to work from. And besides, there are three digits from one hand. That gives you part of the formula straight away. No, the experts won't make any trouble about these. But supposing these prints are not on the file?"

"Then we shall take it that I suspected the wrong man."

"Quite so. But, if I am not mistaken, your concern is to prove whose finger-prints they are in order that you can say whose finger-prints they are not. Now, supposing that we don't find them on the

files of the dead men, would it help you if we tried the current files—the records of the crooks who are still in business? Or would you rather not?"

"If it would not be giving you too much trouble," said Thorndyke, "I should be very much obliged if you would."

"No trouble at all," said Miller, adding with a sly smile: "only it occurred to me that it might be embarrassing to you if we found your respected client's finger-prints on the live register."

"That would be a highly interesting development" said Thorndyke, "though I don't think it a likely one. But it is just as well to exhaust the possibilities."

"Quite," agreed Miller; and thereupon he wrote the brief particulars on a slip of paper which he put into an envelope with the photographs, and, having rung a bell, handed the envelope to the messenger who appeared in response to the summons.

"I don't suppose we shall have to keep you waiting very long," said the Superintendent. "They have an extraordinarily ingenious system of filing. Out of all the thousands of finger-prints that they have, they can pounce on the one that is wanted in the course of a few minutes. It seems incredible, and yet it is essentially simple—just a matter of classification and ringing the changes on different combinations of types."

"You are speaking of completely legible prints?" suggested Thorndyke.

"Yes, the sort of prints that we get sent in from local prisons for identification of a man who has been arrested under a false name. Of course, when we get a single imperfect print found by the police at a place where a crime has been committed, a bit more time has to be spent. Then we have not only got to place the print, but we've got to make mighty sure that it is the right one, because an arrest and a prosecution hangs on it. You don't want to arrest a man and then, when you come to take his finger-prints properly, find that they are the wrong ones. So, in the case of an imperfect print, you have got to do some careful ridge-tracing and counting and systematic checking of individual ridge-characters, such as bifurcations and islands. But, even so, they don't take so very long over it. The practised eye picks out at a glance details that an unpractised eye can hardly recognize even when they are pointed out."

The Superintendent was proceeding to dilate, with professional enthusiasm, on the wonders of finger-print technique and the efficiency of the Department when his eulogies were confirmed by the entrance of an officer carrying a sheaf of papers and Thorndyke's photographs, which he delivered into Miller's hands.

"Well, doctor," said the Superintendent, after a brief glance at the documents, "here is your information. Jeffrey Brandon is the name of the late lamented. Will that do for you?"

"Yes," replied Thorndyke, "that is the name I expected to hear."

"Good," said Miller. "I see they have kept the whole of his papers for some reason. I will just glance through them while you are doing Thomas Didymus with the finger-prints. But it is quite obvious, if you compare your photographs with the rolled impressions, that the ridge-patterns are identical."

He handed Thorndyke the finger-print sheet, to which were attached the photograph and personal description, and sat down at the table to look over the other documents, while Thorndyke walked

over to the window to get a better light. But he did not concern himself with the finger-prints beyond a very brief inspection. It was the photograph that interested him. It showed, on the same print, a right profile and a full face; of which he concentrated his attention on the former. A rather remarkable profile it was, strikingly handsome and curiously classical in outline, rather recalling the head of Antinous in the British Museum. Thorndyke examined it minutely, and then—his back being turned to Miller—he drew from his waistcoat pocket the right profile of Mr. Pottermack and placed it beside the prison photograph.

A single glance made it clear that the two photographs represented the same face. Though one showed a clean-shaven young man with the full lips and strong, rounded chin completely revealed, while the other was a portrait of a bearded, spectacled, middle-aged man, yet they were unmistakably the same. The remarkable nose and brow and the shapely ear were identical in the two photographs; and in both, the lobe of the ear was marked at its tip by a dark spot.

From the photograph he turned to the description. Not that it was necessary to seek further proof; and he did, in fact, merely glance through the particulars. But that rapid glance gathered fresh confirmation. "Height 5 feet 6 inches, hair chestnut, eyes darkish grey, small port-wine mark on lobe of right ear," etc. All the details of Jeffrey Brandon's personal characteristics applied perfectly to Mr. Marcus Pottermack.

"I don't quite see," said Miller, as he took the papers from Thorndyke and laid them on the others, "why they kept all these documents. The conviction doesn't look to me very satisfactory—I don't like these cases where the prosecution has all its eggs in one basket, with the possible chance that they may be bad eggs; and it was a devil of a sentence for a first offence. But as the poor beggar is dead, and no reconsideration of either the conviction or the sentence is possible, there doesn't seem much object in preserving the records. Still, there may have been some reason at the time."

In his own mind, Thorndyke was of opinion that there might have been a very good reason. But he did not communicate this opinion. He had obtained the information that he had sought and was not at all desirous of troubling still waters; and his experience having taught him that Mr. Superintendent Miller was an exceedingly "noticing" gentleman, he thought it best to avoid further discussion and take his departure, after having expressed his appreciation of the assistance that he had received.

Nevertheless, for some time after he had gone, the Superintendent remained wrapped in profound thought; and that his cogitations were in some way concerned with the departed visitor would have been suggested by the circumstance that he sauntered to the window and looked down with a speculative eye on that visitor as he strode across the courtyard towards the Whitehall gate.

Meanwhile Thorndyke's mind was no less busy. As he wended his way Templewards he reviewed the situation in all its bearings. The wildly improbable had turned out to be true. He had made a prodigiously long shot and he had hit the mark: which was gratifying inasmuch as it justified a previous rather hypothetical train of reasoning. Marcus Pottermack, Esq., was undoubtedly the late Jeffrey Brandon. There was now no question about that. The only question that remained was what was to be done in the matter; and that question would have been easier to decide if he had been in possession of more facts. He had heard Mr. Stalker's opinion of the conviction, based on intimate knowledge of the circumstances, and he had heard that of the Superintendent, based on an immense experience of prosecutions. He was inclined to agree with them both; and the more so inasmuch as he had certain knowledge which they had not.

In the end, he decided to take no action at present, but to keep a watchful eye for further developments.

CHAPTER VIII—MR. POTTERMACK SEEKS ADVENTURE

In the last chapter it was stated that one of the effects of Thorndyke's appearance at the side gate of "The Chestnuts," Borley, was to revive in the mind of its tenant certain projects which had been considered and rejected. But perhaps the word "rejected" overstates the case. For the continued existence in a locked drawer in Mr. Pottermack's workshop of a coat which had once been James Lewson's and a bundle of twenty five-pound notes implied a purpose which had been abandoned only conditionally and subject to possible reconsideration.

Again and again, as the destructor which stood in the corner beyond the tool-shed smoked and flared as he fed it with combustible rubbish, had he been on the point of flinging into it the coat and the banknotes and thereby reducing to unrecognizable ash the last visible traces of the tragedy. And every time his hand had been stayed by the thought that possibly, in some circumstances as yet unforeseen, these mementoes of that night of horror might yet be made to play a useful part. So, not without many a twinge of uneasiness, he had let these incriminating objects lie hidden in the locked drawer. And now, as it seemed to him, the circumstances had arisen in which some of them, at least, might be turned to account.

What were those circumstances? Simply the state of mind of the strange lawyer. To the people of Borley, including the police, Lewson was a man who had absconded and vanished. His tracks had shown him striking out across country towards the London road. Those tracks, it is true, broke off short on the heath and had not reappeared elsewhere, but no one doubted that he had gone clear away from the vicinity of Borley and was now in hiding at a safe distance from his old haunts. The natives of the district had never given Mr. Pottermack a moment's anxiety. But with this lawyer the case was different. The disturbing thing about him was that his curiosity, tepid as it was, concerned itself, not with the man who had vanished but with the locality from which he disappeared. But curiosity of that kind, Mr. Pottermack felt, was a thing that was not to be encouraged. On the contrary, it had better be diverted into a more wholesome channel. In short, the time had come when it would be desirable that James Lewson should make his appearance, if only by proxy, in some district as far removed as possible from the neighbourhood of "The Chestnuts," Borley.

So it came about that Mr. Pottermack prepared to set forth along that perilous track beaten smooth by the feet of those who do not know when to let well alone.

For some days after having come to his decision in general terms he was at a loss for a detailed plan. Somehow, the stolen notes had got to be put into circulation. But not by him. The numbers of those notes were known, and, as soon as they began to circulate, some, at least, of them would be identified and would be rigorously traced. The problem was how to get rid of them in a plausible manner without appearing in the transaction; and for some time he could think of no better plan than that of simply dropping them in a quiet London street, a plan which he summarily rejected as not meeting the necessities of the case. The fruitful suggestion eventually came from a newsboy who was roaring "Egbert Bruce's Finals!" outside the station. In an instant, Mr. Pottermack realized that here was the perfect plan, and having purchased a paper, took it home to extract the details on which he proposed to base his strategic scheme.

The "finals" related to a somewhat unselect race-meeting which was to take place in a couple of days' time at Illingham in Surrey, a place conveniently accessible from Borley and yet remote enough to render it unlikely that he would be seen there by any of his fellow-townsmen. Not that his presence there would be in any way suspicious or incriminating, but, still, the less people knew about his movements the better.

On the appointed day he set forth betimes, neatly but I suitably dressed and all agog for the adventure, tame though it promised to be if it worked according to plan. To Mrs. Gadby he had explained—quite truthfully—that he was going to London; and if she had wanted confirmation of the statement, it could have been supplied by sundry natives of the town with whom he exchanged greetings on the platform as he waited for the London train.

But despite his geniality, he made a point of selecting an empty first-class compartment and shutting himself in. He had no hankering for human companionship. For, beneath the exhilaration engendered by this little adventure was an appreciable tinge of nervousness. No foreseeable contingency threatened his safety; but it is an undeniable fact that a man who carries, buttoned up in his inside breast pocket, twenty stolen banknotes, of which the numbers are known to the police, and of his possession of which he could give no credible account, is not without some reason for nervousness. And that was Mr. Pottermack's position. Just before starting, he had disinterred the whole bundle of those fatal notes and stuffed them into a compartment of the letter-case which he usually carried in his breast pocket. He had also hunted up another letter-case, aged, outworn and shabby, into which he had put a half-dozen ten-shilling notes for the day's expenses and stowed it in the outside hip pocket of his jacket.

As soon as the train had fairly started, he proceeded to make certain rearrangements related to his plan of campaign. Taking out the two letter-wallets—which we may distinguish as the inner and the outer—he laid them on the seat beside him. From the inner wallet he took out five of the stolen notes and placed them loosely in a compartment of the other wallet with their ends projecting so that they were plainly visible when it was open; and from the outer wallet he transferred four of the ten-shilling notes to the inner (he had paid for his ticket in silver). Then he returned the two wallets to their respective pockets and buttoned up his coat.

From Marylebone Station he walked to Baker Street, where he took a train for Waterloo and arrived to find the great station filled with a seething crowd of racegoers. Not, on the whole, a prepossessing crowd, though all sorts and conditions of men were represented. But Mr. Pottermack was not hypercritical. At the over-smart, horsey persons, the raffish sporting men with race-glasses slung over their shoulders, the men of mystery with handbags or leather satchels, he glanced with benevolent interest. They had their uses in the economy of nature—in fact, he hoped to make use of some of them himself. So tolerant, indeed, was he that he even greeted with a kindly smile the notices pasted up urging passengers to beware of pickpockets. For in that respect his condition was unique. In spite of the wallet in his outside pocket, he enjoyed complete immunity; and as he joined the queue at the booking-office window, he reflected with grim amusement that, of all that throng, he was probably the only person who had come expressly to have his pocket picked.

As he approached the window he drew the wallet from his outside pocket, and, opening it, inspected its interior with an air of indecision, took out one of the banknotes, put it back, and, finally dipping into the other compartment, fished out a ten-shilling note. Holding this in one hand and the open wallet in the other, he at last came opposite the window, where he purchased his ticket and moved on to make way for a large, red-faced man who seemed to be in a hurry. As he walked on slowly towards the barrier, pocketing the wallet as he went, the crowd surged impatiently past him; but watching that crowd as it swept on ahead, he could see no sign of the red-faced man. That gentleman's hurry seemed suddenly to have evaporated, and it was only when Pottermack was entering his carriage and turned to look back that he observed his roseate friend immediately behind him. Instantly he entered the nearly full compartment, and as he took his seat he was careful to leave a vacant place on his right hand; and when the red-faced man, closely following him, plumped down into the vacant space and at once began to exercise his elbows, he smiled inwardly with the satisfaction of the fortunate angler who "sees his quill or cork down sink." In short, he felt a comfortable certainty that he had "got a bite."

It was now a matter of deep regret to him that he had neglected to provide himself at the bookstall with something to read. A newspaper would have been so helpful to his friend on the right. However, the deficiency was made up to a practicable extent by a couple of men who faced each other from the two corners to his left, and who, having spread a small rug across their joint knees, were good enough to give a demonstration for the benefit of the company at large of the immemorial three-card trick. Towards them Pottermack craned with an expression of eager interest that aroused in them an unjustified optimism. With intense concentration the operator continued over and over again to perform dummy turns, and the professional "mug," who sat opposite to Pottermack, continued with blatant perversity to spot the obviously wrong card every time, and pay up his losses with groans of surprise, while the fourth confederate, on Pottermack's left, nudged him from time to time and solicited in a whisper his opinion as to which was really the right card. It is needless to say that his opinion turned out invariably to be correct, but still he resisted the whispered entreaties of his neighbour to try his luck "seeing that he was such a dab at spotting 'em." Under other circumstances he would have invested the ten-shilling note for the sake of publicity. As things were, he did not dare to touch the wallet, or even put his hand to the pocket wherein it reposed. Premature discovery would have been fatal.

As the train sped on and consumed the miles of the short journey, the operator's invitations to Pottermack to try his luck became more urgent and less polite; until at length, as the destination drew near, they degenerated into mere objurgation and epithets of contempt. At length the train slowed down at the platform. Every one stood up and all together tried to squeeze through the narrow doorway, Pottermack himself emerging with unexpected velocity, propelled by a vigorous shove. At the same moment his hat was lightly flicked off his head and fell among the feet of the crowd. He would have stooped to recover it, but the necessity was forestalled by an expert kick which sent it soaring aloft; and hardly had it descended when it rose again and yet again until, having taken its erratic flight over the fence, it came at last to rest in the station-master's garden. By the time it had been retrieved with the aid of the sympathetic station-master, the last of the passengers had filed through the barrier and Pottermack brought up the extreme rear like a belated straggler.

As soon as he had had time to recover from these agitating experiences his thoughts flew to the wallet and he thrust his hand into his outside pocket. To his unspeakable surprise, the wallet was still there. As he made the discovery he was aware of a pang of disappointment, even of a sense of injury. He had put his trust in the red-faced man, and behold! that rubicund impostor had betrayed him. It looked as if this plan of his was not so easy as it had appeared.

But when he came to the turnstile of the enclosure and drew out the wallet to extract the ten-shilling note—and incidentally to display its other contents—he realized that he had done the red-faced man an injustice. The ten-shilling note, indeed, was there, tucked away at the bottom of its compartment, but otherwise the wallet was empty. Pottermack could hardly believe his eyes. For a few moments he stood staring at it in astonishment until an impatient poke in the back and an imperative command to "pass along, please," recalled him to the present proceedings, when he swept up and pocketed his change and strolled away into the enclosure, meditating respectfully on the skill and tact of his red-faced acquaintance and wishing that he had made the discovery sooner. For, now, the wallet would need to be recharged for the benefit of the next artist. This he could have done easily in the empty station, but in the crowd which surrounded him the matter presented difficulties. He could not do it unobserved, and it would appear a somewhat odd proceeding—especially to the eye of a plain-clothes policeman. There must be a good number of those useful officials in the crowd, and it was of vital importance that he should not attract the attention of any of them.

He looked round in some bewilderment, seeking a secluded spot in which he could refill the outer wallet unnoticed. A vain quest! Every part of the enclosure, excepting the actual course, was filled with a seething multitude, varying in density but all-pervading. Here and there a closely packed mass indicated some juggler, mountebank, thimble artist, or card expert, and some distance away a Punch and Judy show rose above the heads of the crowd, the sound of its drum and Pan's pipes and the unmistakable voice of the hero penetrating the general hubbub. Towards this exhibition Pottermack was directing his course when shouts of laughter proceeding from the interior of a small but dense crowd suggested that something amusing was happening there; whereupon Pottermack, renouncing the delights of Punch and Judy, began cautiously to elbow his way towards the centre of attraction.

At this moment a bell rang in the distance, and instantly the whole crowd was in motion, surging towards the course. And then began a most singular hurly-burly in Pottermack's immediate neighbourhood. An unseen foot trod heavily on his toes, and at the same moment he received a violent shove that sent him staggering to the right against a seedy-looking person who thumped him in the ribs and sent him reeling back to the left. Before he could recover his balance some one butted him in the back with such violence that he flew forward and impinged heavily on a small man in a straw hat—very much in it, in fact, for it had been banged down right over his eyes—who was beginning to protest angrily when some unseen force from behind propelled him towards Pottermack and another violent collision occurred. Thereafter Pottermack had but a confused consciousness of being pushed, pulled, thumped, pinched, and generally hustled until his head swam. And then, quite suddenly, the crowd streamed away towards the course and Pottermack was left alone with the straw-hatted man, who stood a few yards away, struggling to extract himself from his hat and at the same time feverishly searching his pockets. By the well-known process of suggestion, this latter action communicated itself to Mr. Pottermack, who proceeded to make a hasty survey of his own pockets, which resulted in the discovery that, though the inside wallet, securely buttoned in, was still intact, the outside, empty one had this time disappeared, and most of his small change with it.

Strange are the inconsistencies of the human mind. But a little while ago he had been willing to make a free gift of that wallet to his red-faced fellow-traveller. Now that it was gone he was quite appreciably annoyed. He had planned to recharge it with a fresh consignment to be planted in a desirable quarter, and its loss left him with the necessity of making some other plausible arrangements, and at the moment he could not think of any. To put the notes loose in his pocket seemed to be but inviting failure, for, to the sense of touch from without, the pocket would appear to be empty.

As he was thus cogitating, he caught the eye of the straw-hatted gentleman fixed upon him with unmistakable and undissembled suspicion. This was unpleasant, but one must make allowances. The man was, no doubt, rather upset. With a genial smile, Mr. Pottermack approached the stranger and expressed the rather optimistic hope that he had not suffered any loss; but the only reply that his enquiry elicited was an inarticulate grunt.

"They have been through my pockets," said Mr. Pottermack cheerfully, "but I am glad to say that they took nothing of any value."

"Ha," said the straw-hatted gentleman.

"Yes," pursued Pottermack, "they must have found me rather disappointing."

"Oh," said the other in a tone of sour indifference.

"Yes," said Pottermack, "all they got from me was an empty letter-case and a little loose silver."

"Ah," said the straw-hatted man.

"I hope," Pottermack repeated, beginning slightly to lose patience, "that you have not lost anything of considerable value."

For a moment or two the other made no reply. At length, fixing a baleful eye on Pottermack, he answered with significant emphasis: "If you want to know what they took, you'd better ask them"; and with this he turned away.

Pottermack also turned away—in the opposite direction, and some inward voice whispered to him that it were well to evacuate the neighbourhood of the man in the straw hat.

He strolled away, gradually increasing his pace, until he reached the outskirts of the crowd that had gathered at the margin of the course. By a sound of cheering he judged that some ridiculous horses were careering along somewhere beyond the range of his vision. But they were of no interest to him. They did, however, furnish him with a pretext for diving into the crowd and struggling towards the source of the noise, and this he did, regardless of the unseemly comments that he provoked and the thumps and prods that he received in his progress. When, as it seemed, he had become immovably embedded, he drew a deep breath and turned to look back. For a few blissful moments he believed that he had effected a masterly retreat and escaped finally from his suspicious fellow-victim; but suddenly there emerged into view a too-familiar battered straw hat, moving slowly through the resisting multitude, and moving in a bee-line in his direction.

Then it was that Mr. Pottermack became seized with sudden panic. And no wonder. His previous experiences of the law had taught him that mere innocence is of no avail; and now, simply to be charged involved the risk of recognition and inevitable return to a convict prison. But apart from that, his position was one of extreme peril. On his person at this very moment were fifteen stolen notes of which he could give no account, but which connected him with that thing that reposed under the sun-dial. At the best, those notes might fairly send him to penal servitude; at the worst, to the gallows.

It is therefore no matter for surprise that the sight of that ominous straw hat sent a sudden chill down his spine. But Mr. Pottermack was no coward. Unforeseen as the danger was, he kept his nerve and made no outward sign of the terror that was clutching at his heart. Calmly he continued to worm his way through the crowd, glancing back now and again to note his distance from that relentless hat, and ever looking for a chance to get rid of those fatal notes. For, if once he could get clear of those, he would be ready to face with courage and composure the lesser risk. But no chance ever came. Openly to jettison the notes in the midst of the crowd would have been fatal. He would have been instantly written down a detected and pursued pickpocket.

While his mind was busy with these considerations his body was being skilfully piloted along the line of least resistance in the crowd. Now and again he made excursions into the less dense regions on the outskirts, thereby securing a gain in distance, only to plunge once more into the thick of the throng in the faint hope of being lost sight of. But this hope was never realized. On the whole, he maintained his distance from his pursuer and even slightly increased it. Sometimes for the space of a minute or more the absurd sleuth was lost to his view; but just as his hopes were beginning to revive, that accursed hat would make its reappearance and reduce him, if not to despair, at least to the most acute anxiety.

In the course of one of his excursions into the thinner part of the crowd, he noticed that, some distance ahead, a bold curve of the course brought it comparatively near to the entrance to the enclosure. He could see a steady stream of people still pouring in through the entrance turnstile, but that which gave exit from the ground was practically free. No one seemed to be leaving the enclosure at present, so the way out was quite unobstructed. Noting this fact with a new hope, he plunged once more into the dense crowd and set a course through it nearly parallel to the railings. When he had worked his way to a point nearly opposite to the entrance, he looked back to ascertain the whereabouts of his follower. The straw-hatted man was plainly visible, tightly jammed in the thickest part of the crowd and apparently not on amicable terms with his immediate neighbours. Pottermack decided that this was his chance and proceeded to take it. Skilfully extricating himself from the throng, he walked briskly towards the gates and made for the exit turnstile. As there was no one else leaving the ground, he passed out unhindered, pausing only for a moment to take a quick glance back. But what he saw in that glance was by no means reassuring. The straw-hatted man was, indeed, still tightly jammed in the thick of the crowd; but at his side was a policeman to whom he appeared to be making a statement as he pointed excitedly towards the turnstile. And both informer and constable seemed to be watching his departure.

Pottermack waited to see no more. Striding away from the entrance, he came to a road on which was a signpost pointing to the station. The railway being the obvious means of escape, he turned in the opposite direction, which apparently led into the country. A short distance along the road, he encountered an aged man, engaged in trimming the hedge, who officiously wished him good-afternoon and whom he secretly anathematized for being there. A little farther on, round a sharp turn in the road, he came to a stile which gave access to a little-used footpath which crossed a small meadow. Vaulting over the stile, he set out along the footpath at a sharp walk. His impulse was to run, but he restrained it, realizing that a running man would attract attention where a mere walker might pass unobserved, or at least unnoticed. However, he quickly came to the farther side of the meadow, where another stile gave on a narrow by-lane. Here Pottermack paused for a moment, doubtful which way to turn; but the fugitive's instinct to get as far as possible from the pursuers decided the question. He turned in the direction that led away from the race-course.

Walking quickly along the lane for a minute or two, he came to a sudden turn and saw that, a short distance ahead, the lane opened into a road. At the same moment there rose among a group of elms on his right the tower of a church; and here the hedgerow gave place to a brick wall, broken by a wicket-gate, through which he looked into a green and pleasant churchyard. The road before him he surmised to be the one that he had left by the stile, and his surmise received most alarming confirmation. For, even at the very moment when he was entering the wicket, two figures walked rapidly across the end of the lane. One of them was a tall, military-looking man who swung along with easy but enormous strides; the other, who kept up with him with difficulty, was a small man in a battered straw hat.

With a gasp of horror, Pottermack darted in through the wicket and looked round wildly for possible cover. Then he saw that the church door was open, and, impelled, possibly, by some vague idea of sanctuary, bolted in. For a moment he stood at the threshold looking into the peaceful, silent interior, forgetting in his agitation even to take off his hat. There was no one in the church; but immediately confronting the intruder, securely bolted to a stone column, was a small iron-bound chest. On its front were painted the words "Poor Box," and above it, an inscription on a board informed Mr. Pottermack that "The Lord loveth a Cheerful Giver."

Well, He had one that time. No sooner had Mr. Pottermack's eyes lighted on that box than he had whipped out his wallet and extracted the notes. With trembling fingers he folded them up in twos and threes and poked them through the slit; and when the final pair—as if protesting against his extravagant munificence—stuck in the opening and refused to go in, he adroitly persuaded them

with a penny, which he pushed through and dropped in by way of an additional thank-offering. As that penny dropped down with a faint, papery rustle, he put away his wallet and drew a deep breath. Mr. Pottermack was his own man again.

Of course, there was the straw-hatted man. But now that those incriminating notes were gone, so great was the revulsion that he could truly say, in the words of the late S. Pepys—or at least in a polite paraphrase of them—that he "valued him not a straw." The entire conditions were changed. But as he turned with a new buoyancy of spirit to leave the church, there came to him a sudden recollection of the red-faced man's skill and ingenuity which caused him to thrust his hands into his pockets. And it was just as well that he did, for he brought up from his left-hand coat pocket a battered silver pencil-holder that was certainly not his and that advertised the identity of its legitimate owner by three initial letters legibly engraved on its flat end.

On this—having flung the pencil-holder out through the porch doorway into the high grass of the churchyard—he turned back into the building and made a systematic survey of his pockets, emptying each one in turn on to the cushioned seat of a pew. When he had ascertained beyond all doubt that none of them contained any article of property other than his own, he went forth with a light heart and retraced his steps through the wicket out into the lane, and, turning to the right, walked on towards the road. It had been his intention to return along it to the station, but when he came out of the lane, he found himself at the entrance to a village street and quite near to a comfortable-looking inn which hung out the sign of "The Farmer's Boy." The sight of the homely hostelry reminded him that it was now well past his usual luncheon hour and made him aware of a fine, healthy appetite.

It appeared, on enquiry, that there was a cold sirloin in cut and a nice, quiet parlour in which to consume it. Pottermack smiled with anticipatory gusto at the report and gave his orders; and within a few minutes found himself in the parlour aforesaid, seated at a table covered with a clean white cloth on which was an abundant sample of the sirloin, a hunk of bread, a slab of cheese, a plate of biscuits and a jovial, pot-bellied brown jug crowned with a cap of foam.

Mr. Pottermack enjoyed his lunch amazingly. The beef was excellent, the beer was of the best, and their combined effect was further to raise his spirits and lower his estimate of the straw-hatted man. He realized now that his initial panic had been due to those ill-omened notes; to the fact that a false charge might reveal the material for a real one of infinitely greater gravity. Now that he was clear of them, the fact that he was a man of substance and known position would be a sufficient answer to any mere casual suspicion. His confidence was completely restored, and he even speculated with detached interest on the possible chance of encountering his pursuers on his way back to the station.

He had finished the beef to the last morsel and was regarding with tepid interest the slab of high-complexioned cheese when the door opened and revealed two figures at the threshold, both of whom halted with their eyes fixed on him intently. After a moment's inspection, the shorter—who wore a battered straw hat—pointed to him and affirmed in impressive tones:

"That's the man."

On this, the taller stranger took a couple of steps forward and said, as if repeating a formula: "I am a police officer" (it was a perfectly unnecessary statement. No one could have supposed that he was anything else). "This—er—gentleman informs me that you picked his pocket."

"Does he really?" said Pottermack, regarding him with mild surprise and pouring himself out another glass of beer.

"Yes, he does; and the question is, what have you got to say about it? It is my duty to caution you—"

"Not at all," said Pottermack. "The question is, what has he got to say about it? Has he given you any particulars?"

"No. He says you picked his pocket. That's all."

"Did he see me pick his pocket?"

The officer turned to the accuser. "Did you?" he asked.

"No, of course I didn't," snapped the other. "Pickpockets don't usually let you see what they are up to."

"Did he feel me pick his pocket?" Pottermack asked, with the air of a cross-examining counsel.

"Did you?" the officer asked, looking dubiously at the accuser.

"How could I," protested the latter, "when I was being pulled and shoved and hustled in the crowd?"

"Ha," said Pottermack, taking a sip of beer. "He didn't see me pick his pocket, he didn't feel me pick his pocket. Now, how did he arrive at the conclusion that I did pick his pocket?"

The officer turned almost threateningly on the accuser.

"How did you?" he demanded.

"Well," stammered the straw-hatted man, "there was a gang of pickpockets and he was among them."

"But so were you," retorted Pottermack. "How do I know that you didn't pick my pocket? Somebody did."

"Oh!" said the officer. "Had your pocket picked too? What did they take of yours?"

"Mighty little—just a few oddments of small change. I kept my coat buttoned."

There was a slightly embarrassed silence, during which the officer, not for the first time, ran an appraising eye over the accused. His experience of pickpockets was extensive and peculiar, but it did not include any persons of Pottermack's type. He turned and directed a dubious and enquiring look at the accuser.

"Well," said the latter, "here he is. Aren't you going to take him into custody?"

"Not unless you can give me something to go on," replied the officer. "The station inspector wouldn't accept a charge of this sort."

"At any rate," said the accuser, "I suppose you will take his name and address?"

The officer grinned sardonically at the artless suggestion but agreed that it might be as well, and produced a large, funereal note-book.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Marcus Pottermack," the owner of that name replied, adding "my address is 'The Chestnuts' Borley, Buckinghamshire."

The officer wrote down these particulars, and then closing the note-book, put it away with a very definite air of finality, remarking: "That's about all that we can do at present." But this did not at all meet the views of the straw-hatted man, who protested plaintively:

"And you mean to say that you are going to let him walk off with my gold watch and my note-case with five pounds in it? You are not even going to search him?"

"You can't search people who haven't been charged," the officer growled; but here Pottermack interposed.

"There is no need," he said suavely, "for you to be hampered by mere technical difficulties. I know it is quite irregular, but if it would give you any satisfaction just to run through my pockets, I haven't the slightest objection."

The officer was obviously relieved. "Of course, sir, if you volunteer that is a different matter, and it would clear things up."

Accordingly, Pottermack rose and presented himself for the operation, while the straw-hatted man approached and watched with devouring eyes. The officer began with the wallet, noted the initials, M. P., on the cover, opened and considered the orderly arrangement of the stamps, cards and other contents; took out a visiting-card, read it and put it back, and finally laid the wallet on the table. Then he explored all the other pockets systematically and thoroughly, depositing the treasure trove from each on the table beside the wallet. When he had finished, he thanked Mr. Pottermack for his help, and turning to the accuser, demanded gruffly: "Well, are you satisfied now?"

"I should be better satisfied," the other man answered, "if I had got back my watch and my note-case. But I suppose he passed them on to one of his confederates."

Then the officer lost patience. "Look here," said he, "you are behaving like a fool. You come to a race-meeting, like a blooming mug, with a gold watch sticking out, asking for trouble, and when you get what you asked for, you let the crooks hop off with the goods while you go dandering about after a perfectly respectable gentleman. You bring me traipsing out here on a wild goose chase, and when it turns out that there isn't any wild goose, you make silly, insulting remarks. You ought to have more sense at your age. Now, I'll just take your name and address and then you'd better clear off."

Once more he produced the Black Maria note-book, and when he had entered the particulars he dismissed the straw-hatted man, who slunk off, dejected but still muttering.

Left alone with the late accused, the officer became genially and politely apologetic. But Pottermack would have none of his apologies. The affair had gone off to his complete satisfaction, and, in spite of some rather half-hearted protests, he insisted on celebrating the happy conclusion by the replenishment of the brown jug. Finally, the accused and the minion of the law emerged from the inn together and took their way back along the road to the station, beguiling the time by

amicable converse on the subject of crooks and their ways and the peculiar mentality of the straw-hatted man.

It was a triumphant end to what had threatened to be a most disastrous incident. But yet, when he came to consider it at leisure, Pottermack was by no means satisfied. The expedition had been a failure, and he now wished, heartily, that he had left well alone and simply burnt the notes. His intention had been to distribute them in small parcels among various pickpockets, whereby they would have been thrown into circulation with the certainty that it would have been impossible to trace them. That scheme had failed utterly. There they were, fifteen stolen notes, in the poor-box of Illingham church. When the reverend incumbent found them, he would certainly be surprised, and, no doubt, gratified. Of course, he would pay them into his bank; and then the murder would be out. The munificent gift would resolve itself into the dump of a hunted and hard-pressed pickpocket; and Mr. Pottermack's name and address was in the note-book of the plain-clothes constable.

Of course, there was no means of connecting him directly with the dump. But there was the unfortunate coincidence that both he and the stolen notes were connected with Borley, Buckinghamshire. That coincidence could hardly fail to be noticed; and, added to his known proximity to the church, it might create a very awkward situation. In short, Mr. Pottermack had brought his pigs to the wrong market. He had planned to remove the area of investigation from his own neighbourhood to one at a safe and comfortable distance; instead of which, he had laid down a clue leading straight to his own door.

It was a lamentable affair. As he sat in the homeward train with an unread evening paper on his knee, he found himself recalling the refrain of the old revivalist hymn and asking himself "Oh, what shall the harvest be?"

CHAPTER IX—PROVIDENCE INTERVENES

In his capacity of medico-legal adviser to the "Griffin" Life Assurance Company, Thorndyke saw a good deal of Mr. Stalker, who, in addition to his connection with Perkins's Bank, held the post of Managing Director of the "Griffin." For if the bank had but rarely any occasion to seek Thorndyke's advice, the Assurance Office was almost daily confronted with problems which called for expert guidance. It thus happened that, about three weeks after the date of the Illingham Races, Thorndyke looked in at Mr. Stalker's office in response to a telephone message to discuss the discrepancies between a proposal form and the medical evidence given at an inquest on the late proposer. The matter of this discussion does not concern us and need not be detailed here. It occupied some considerable time, and when Thorndyke had stated his conclusions, he rose to take his departure. As he turned towards the door, Mr. Stalker held up a detaining hand.

"By the way, doctor," said he, "I think you were rather interested in that curious case of disappearance that I told you about—one of our branch managers, you may remember."

"I remember," said Thorndyke; "James Lewson of your Borley branch."

"That's the man," Stalker assented, adding: "I believe you keep a card index in your head."

"And the best place to keep it," retorted Thorndyke. "But what about Lewson? Has he been run to earth?"

"No; but the notes that he took with him have. You remember that he went off with a hundred pounds—twenty five-pound notes, of all of which we were able to ascertain the numbers. Now, the

numbers of those notes were at once given to the police, who circulated the information in all the likely quarters and kept a sharp look-out for their appearance. Yet in all this time, up to a week or two ago, there was not a sign of one of them. Then a most odd thing happened. The whole lot of them made their appearance almost simultaneously."

"Very remarkable," commented Thorndyke.

"Very," agreed Stalker. "But there is something still more queer about the affair. Of course, each note, as it was reported, was rigorously traced. As a rule there was no difficulty—up to a certain point. And at that point the trail broke off short, and that point was the possession of the note by a person known to the police. In every case in which tracing was possible, the trail led back to an unquestionable crook."

"And were the crooks unable to say where they got the notes?"

"Oh, not at all. They were able, in every case, to give the most lucid and convincing accounts of the way in which they came into possession of the notes. Only, unfortunately, not one of them could give 'a local habitation and a name.' They had all received the notes from total strangers."

"They probably had," said Thorndyke, "without the stranger's concurrence."

"Exactly. But you see the oddity of the affair—at least, I expect you do. Remember that, although the individual notes were reported at different times, on tracing them to their origin it looks almost as if the whole of them had come into circulation on the same day; about three weeks ago. Now, what does that suggest to you?"

"The obvious suggestion," replied Thorndyke, "seems to be that Lewson had been robbed; that some fortunate thief had managed to relieve him of the whole consignment at one coup. The only other explanation—and it is far less probable—is that Lewson deliberately jettisoned an incriminating cargo."

"Yes," Stalker agreed doubtfully, "that is a possibility; but, as you say, it is very much less probable. For if he had simply thrown them away, there would be no reason why they should have been so invariably traceable to a member of the criminal class; and surely, out of the whole lot, there would have been one or two honest persons who would admit to having found them. No, I feel pretty certain that Lewson has been robbed, and if he has, he must be in a mighty poor way. One is almost tempted to feel sorry for him."

"He has certainly made a terrible hash of his affairs," said Thorndyke; and with this, the subject having been exhausted, he picked up his hat and stick and took his departure.

But as he wended his way back to the Temple he cogitated profoundly on what Stalker had told him; and very surprised would Mr. Stalker have been if he could have been let into the matter of those cogitations. For, as to what had really happened, Thorndyke could make an approximate guess, though guesses were not very satisfying to a man of his exact habit of mind. But he had been expecting those notes to reappear, and he had expected that when they did reappear it would prove impossible to trace them to their real source.

Nevertheless, though events had befallen, so to speak, according to plan, he speculated curiously on the possible circumstances that had determined the issue of the whole consignment at once; and on arrival at his chambers he made certain notes in his private shorthand which he bestowed in a

small portfolio labelled "James Lewson," which, in its turn, reposed, safely under lock and key, in the cabinet in which he kept his confidential documents.

Meanwhile, Mr. Pottermack was passing through a period of tribulation and gnawing anxiety. Again and again did he curse the folly that had impelled him, when everything seemed to have settled down so comfortably, to launch those notes into the world to start a fresh train of trouble. Again and again did he follow in imagination what appeared to be the inevitable course of events. With horrid vividness did his fancy reconstruct the scenes of that calamitous comedy; the astonished parson lifting the treasure with incredulous joy from the poor-box; the local bank manager carrying the notes round to the police station; the plain-clothes constable triumphantly producing his note-book and pointing to the significant word "Borley"; and finally, the wooden-faced detective officer confronting him in his dining-room and asking embarrassing questions. Sometimes his imagination went farther, and, becoming morbid, pictured Mr. Gallett, the mason, volunteering evidence, with a resulting exploration of the well. But this was only when he was unusually depressed.

In his more optimistic moods he presented the other side of the case. If enquiries were made, he would, naturally, deny all knowledge of the notes. And who was to contradict him? There was not a particle of evidence that could connect him with them directly—at least, he believed there was not. But still, deep down in his consciousness was the knowledge that he was connected with them; that he had taken them from the dead man's pocket and he had dumped them in the church. And Mr. Pottermack was no more immune than the rest of us from the truth that "conscience does make cowards of us all."

So, in those troublous times, by day and by night, in his walks abroad and in his solitude at home, he lived in a state of continual apprehension. The fat was in the fire and he waited with constantly strained ears to catch the sound of its sizzling; and though, as the days and then the weeks went by and no sound of sizzling became audible, the acuteness of his anxiety wore off, still his peace of mind was gone utterly and he walked in the shadow of dangers unknown and incalculable. And so he might have gone on indefinitely but for one of those trivial chances that have befallen most of us and that sometimes produce results so absurdly disproportionate to their own insignificance.

The occasion of this fortunate chance was a long, solitary walk through the beautiful Buckinghamshire lanes. Of late, in his disturbed state of mind, which yielded neither to the charms of his garden nor the allurements of his workshop, Mr. Pottermack had developed into an inveterate pedestrian; and on this particular day he had taken a long round, which brought him at length, tired and hungry, to the town of Aylesbury, where, at a frowsy restaurant in a by-street, he sat him down to rest and feed. It was a frugal meal that he ordered, for with the joy of living had gone his zest for food. Indeed, to such depths of despondency had he sunk that he actually scandalized the foreign proprietor by asking for a glass of water.

Now, it happened that on an adjacent chair was an evening paper. It was weeks old, badly crumpled and none too clean. Almost automatically, Mr. Pottermack reached out for it, laid it on the table beside him and smoothed out its crumpled pages. Not that he had any hankering for news; but, like most of us, he had contracted the pernicious habit of miscellaneous reading—which is often but an idle substitute for thought—and he scanned the ill-printed columns in mere boredom. He was not in the least interested in the Hackney Man who had kicked a cat and been fined forty shillings. No doubt it served him right—and the cat too, perhaps—but it was no affair of his, Pottermack's. Nevertheless he let an inattentive eye ramble aimlessly up and down the page, lightly scanning the trivial vulgarities that headed the paragraphs, while in the background of his consciousness, hovering, as it were, about the threshold, lurked the everlasting theme of those accursed notes.

Suddenly his roving eye came to a dead stop, for it had alighted on the word "Illingham." With suddenly sharpened attention, he turned back to the heading and read:

'Sacrilege in a Surrey Church'

'A robbery of a kind that is now becoming increasingly common occurred late in the afternoon of last Tuesday at the picturesque and venerable church of Illingham. This was the day of the races on the adjacent course, and it is believed that the outrage was committed by some of the doubtful characters who are always to be found at race-meetings. At any rate, when the sexton entered to close the church in the evening, he found that the lid of the poor-box had been wrenched open, and, of course, the contents, whatever they may have been, abstracted. The rector is greatly distressed at the occurrence, not on account of what has been stolen—for he remarked, with a pensive smile, that the loss is probably limited to the cost of repairing the box—but because he holds strong opinions on the duty of a clergyman to leave his church open for private prayer and meditation, and he fears that he may be compelled to close it in future, at least on race-days.'

Mr. Pottermack read this paragraph through, first with ravenous haste and then again, slowly and with the minutest attention. It was incredible. He could hardly believe the evidence of his eyes. Yet there it was, a clear and unmistakable message, of which the marvellous significance was to be grasped by him alone of all the world. Providence—which is reported to make some queer selections for its favourites—had stepped in and mercifully repaired his error.

In a moment he was a new man, or rather the old man restored. For he was saved. Now could he go abroad with a confident step and look the world in the face. Now could he take his ease at home in peace and security; could return with gusto to his garden and know once more the joys of labour in his workshop. With a fresh zest he fell to upon the remainder of his meal. He even electrified the proprietor by calling for coffee and a green Chartreuse. And when he at length went forth refreshed, to take the road homeward, he seemed to walk upon air.

CHAPTER X—A RETROSPECT

The fortunate ending of the great note-adventure, which had at one time looked so threatening, had a profound effect on Mr. Pottermack's state of mind, and through this on his subsequent actions. Wherever the notes might be circulating, they were, he felt confident, well out of his neighbourhood; and since they had all fallen into the hands of thieves, he was equally confident that they would prove untraceable. So far as he was concerned, they had served their purpose. The field of inquiry concerning Lewson's disappearance was now shifted from Borley to the localities in which those notes had made their appearance.

Thus, to Mr. Pottermack it appeared that he was finally rid of Lewson, alive or dead. The incident was closed. He could now consign the whole horrible affair to oblivion, forget it if he could, or at least remember it only as a hideous experience which he had passed through and finished with, just as he might remember certain other experiences which belonged to the unhappy past. Now he might give his whole attention to the future. He was still a comparatively young man, despite the grizzled hair upon his temples. And Fortune was deeply in his debt. It was time that he began to collect from her some of the arrears.

Now, whenever Mr. Pottermack let his thoughts stray into the future, the picture that his fancy painted was wont to present a certain constant deviation from the present. It was not that the surroundings were different. Still in imagination he saw himself rambling through the lovely Buckinghamshire lanes, busying himself in his workshop or whiling away the pleasant hours in the walled garden among his flowers and his fruit trees. But in those pictures of the sunny future that

was to indemnify him for the gloomy past there were always two figures; and one of them was that of the comely, gracious young widow who had already brought so much sunshine into his rather solitary life.

During the last few strenuous weeks he had seen little of her, indeed he had hardly seen her at all. Now that he could put behind him for ever the events that had filled those weeks, now that he was free from the haunting menace of the blackmailer's incalculable actions and could settle down to a stable life with his future in his own hands, the time had arrived when he might begin to mould that future in accordance with his heart's desire.

Thus reflecting on the afternoon following his visit to Aylesbury, he proceeded to make the first move. Having smartened himself up in a modest way, he took down from his shelves a favourite volume to serve as a pretext for a call, and set forth with it in his pocket towards the quiet lane on the fringe of the town wherein Mrs. Alice Bellard had her habitation. And a very pleasant habitation it was, though, indeed, it was no more than an old-fashioned country cottage, built to supply the simple needs of some rural worker or village craftsman. But houses, like dogs, have a way of reflecting the personalities of their owners; and this little dwelling, modest as it was, conveyed to the beholder a subtle sense of industry, of ordered care, and a somewhat fastidious taste.

Pottermack stood for a few moments with his hand on the little wooden gate, looking up with an appreciative eye at the ripe red brickwork, the golden tiles of the roof, and the little stone tablet with the initials of the first owners and the date, 1761. Then he opened the latch and walked slowly up the path. Through the open window came the sound of a piano rendering, with no little skill and feeling, one of Chopin's preludes. He waited at the door, listening, until the final notes of the piece were played, when he turned and rapped out a flourish on the brightly burnished brass knocker.

Almost immediately the door opened, revealing a girl of about sixteen, who greeted him with a friendly smile, and forthwith, without question or comment inducted him to the sitting-room, where Mrs. Bellard had just risen from the piano-stool.

"I am afraid," said he, as they shook hands, "that I am interrupting your playing—in fact, I know I am. I was half inclined to wait out in the garden and enjoy your performance without disturbing you."

"That would have been foolish of you," she replied, "when there is a nice, comfortable armchair in which you can sit and smoke your pipe and listen at your ease—if you want to."

"I do, most certainly," said he. "But first, lest I should forget it, let me hand you this book. I mentioned it to you once—'The Harvest of a Quiet Eye.' It is by a nice old west country parson and I think you will like it."

"I am sure I shall if you do," she said. "We seem to agree in most things."

"So we do," assented Pottermack, "even to our favourite brands of snail. Which reminds me that the pleasures of the chase seem to have been rather neglected of late."

"Yes, I have been quite busy lately furbishing up the house. But I have nearly finished. In a few days I shall have everything straight and tidy, and then a-snailing we will go."

"We will," he agreed, "and if we find that we are exhausting the subject of molluscs, we might, perhaps, give a passing thought to the question of beetles. They are practically inexhaustible and

they are not so hackneyed as butterflies and moths, and not so troublesome to keep. And they are really very beautiful and interesting creatures."

"I suppose they are," she said a little doubtfully, "when you have got over your prejudice against their undeniable tendency to crawliness. But I am afraid you will have to do the slaughtering. I really couldn't kill the poor little wretches."

"Oh, I will do that cheerfully," said Pottermack, "if you will make the captures."

"Very well; then, on that understanding I will consider the beetle question. And now, would you really like me to play to you a little?"

"I should like it immensely. I seem to hear so little music nowadays, and you play so delightfully. But are you sure you don't mind?"

She laughed softly as she sat down at the piano. "Mind, indeed!" she exclaimed. "Did you ever know a musician who wasn't only too delighted to play to a sympathetic listener? It is the whole joy and reward of the art. Now, you just sit in that chair and fill your pipe, and I will play to you some of the things that I like playing to myself and that you have got to like too."

Obediently Pottermack seated himself in the easy-chair and reflectively filled his pipe while he watched the skilful hands moving gracefully with effortless precision over the keyboard. At first she kept to regular pianoforte music, mostly that of Chopin: one or two of the shorter nocturnes, a prelude and a polonaise, and a couple of Mendelssohn's "Lieder." But presently she began to ramble away reminiscently among all sorts of unconventional trifles: old-fashioned songs, country dances, scraps of church music, and even one or two time-honoured hymn tunes. And as she played these simple melodies, softly, tastefully, and with infinite feeling, she glanced furtively from time to time at her visitor until, seeing he was no longer looking at her but was gazing dreamily out of the window, she let her eyes rest steadily on his face. There was something very curious in that long, steady look; a strange mingling of sadness, of pity and tenderness and of yearning affection with a certain vague anxiety as if something in his face was puzzling her. The eyes that dwelt on him with such soft regard yet seemed to ask a question.

And Pottermack, sitting motionless as a statue, grasping his unlighted pipe, let the simple, homely melodies filter into his soul and deliver their message of remembrance. His thoughts were at once near and far away; near to the woman at his side, yet far away from the quiet room and the sunlit garden on which his eyes seemed to rest. Let us for a while leave him to his reverie, and if we may not follow his thoughts, at least—in order that we may the better enter into the inwardness of this history—transport ourselves into the scenes that memory is calling up before his eyes.

Fifteen years ago there was no such person as Marcus Pottermack. The sober, middle-aged man, greyheaded, bearded, spectacled, who sits dreaming in the widow's parlour, was a handsome, sprightly youth of twenty-two—Jeffrey Brandon by name—who, with his shapely, clean-shaven face and his striking Grecian nose, had the look and manner of a young Olympian. And his personality matched his appearance. Amiable and kindly by nature, with a gay and buoyant temperament that commended him alike to friends and strangers, his keen intelligence, his industry and energy promised well for his worldly success in the future.

Young as he was, he had been, at this time, engaged for two years. And here again he was more than commonly fortunate. It was not merely that the maiden of his choice was comely, sweet-natured, clever and accomplished; or that she was a girl of character and spirit; or even that she had certain modest expectations. The essence of the good fortune lay in the fact that Jeffrey

Brandon and Alice Bentley were not merely lovers; they were staunch friends and sympathetic companions, with so many interests in common that it was incredible that they should ever tire of each other's society.

One of their chief interests—perhaps the greatest—was music. They were both enthusiasts. But whereas Jeffrey's accomplishments went no farther than a good ear, a pleasant baritone voice and the power of singing a part at sight, Alice was really a musician. Her skill at the piano was of the professional class; she was a fair organist, and in addition she had a good and well-trained contralto voice. Naturally enough, it happened that they drifted into the choir of the little friendly Evangelical church that they attended together, and this gave them a new and delightful occupation. Now and again Alice would take a service at the organ; and then there were practice nights and preparations for special services, musical festivals or informal sacred concerts which kept them busy with the activities that they both loved. And so their lives ran on, serenely, peacefully, filled with quiet enjoyment of the satisfying present, with the promise of a yet more happy future when they should be married and in full possession of each other.

And then, in a moment, the whole fabric of their happiness collapsed like a house of cards. As if in an incomprehensible nightmare, the elements of that tragedy unfolded: the amazing accusation, the still more amazing discovery; the trial at the Old Bailey Sessions, the conviction, the sentence; the bitter, despairing farewell, and, last of all, the frowning portals of the convict prison.

Of course, Alice Bentley scouted the idea of her lover's guilt. She roundly declared that the whole affair was a plot, a wicked and foolish miscarriage of justice, and she announced her intention of meeting him at the prison gate when he should be set free, to claim him as her promised husband, that she might try to make up to him by her devotion and sympathy what he had suffered from the world's injustice. And when it was coldly pointed out to her that he had had a fair trial and had been found guilty by a jury of his fellow-countrymen, she broke away indignantly and thereafter withdrew herself from the society of these fair-weather friends.

Meanwhile, the unfortunate Jeffrey, meditating in his prison cell, had come with no less resolution to his decision. In so far as was possible he would bear the burden of his misfortune alone. Deeply, passionately as he loved the dear girl who, almost alone of all the world, still believed in his innocence, he must cast her out of his life for ever. He gloried in her loyalty, but he could not accept her sacrifice. Alice—his Alice—should never marry a convict. For that was what he was: a convicted thief and forger; and nothing but a miracle could alter his position. The fact that he was innocent was beside the mark, since his innocence was known only to himself and one other—the nameless villain who had set this infamous trap for him. To all the rest of the world he was a guilty man; and the world was right according to the known facts. He had had a fair trial, a perfectly fair trial. The prosecution had not been vindictive, the judge had summed up fairly, and the jury had found him guilty; and the jury had been right. On the evidence before them, they could have found no other verdict. He had no complaint against them. No one could have guessed that all the evidence was false and illusory. From which it followed that he must go through life stamped as a convicted thief, and as such could never be a possible husband for Alice Bentley.

But he realized very clearly that Alice, certain as she was of his innocence, would utterly refuse to accept this view. To her he was a martyr, and as such she would proclaim him before all the world. On his release, she would insist on the restoration of the status quo ante. Of that he felt certain; and hour after hour, in his abundant solitude, he sought vainly a solution of the problem. How should he meet her demand? Letters he knew would be useless. She would wait for the day of his release, and then—The prospect of having, after all, to refuse her love, to repudiate her loyalty, was one that wrung his heart to contemplate.

And then, in the most unforeseen way, the problem was solved. His escape from the gang was totally unpremeditated. He just saw a chance, when the attention of the civil guard was relaxed, and took it instantly. When he found the absent bather's clothes upon the shore and hastily assumed them in place of his prison suit, he suspected that the bather was already dead, and the report which he read in the next day's paper confirmed this belief. But during the next few weeks, as he tramped across country to Liverpool—subsisting, not without qualms, on the little money that he had found in the unknown bather's pockets, eked out by an occasional odd job—he watched the papers eagerly for further news. For six long weeks he found nothing either to alarm or reassure him. Indeed, it was not until he had secured a job as deck-hand on an American tramp steamer and was on the point of departure that he learned the welcome tidings. On the very night before the ship was due to sail, he was sitting in the forecastle, watching an evening paper that was passing round from hand to hand, when the man who was reading it held it towards him, pointing with a grimy forefinger to a particular paragraph.

"I call that damned hard luck, I do," said he. "Just you read it, mate, and see what you think of it."

Jeffrey took the paper, and, glancing at the indicated paragraph, suddenly sat up with a start. It was the report of an inquest on the body of a man who had been found drowned; which body had been identified as that of Jeffrey Brandon, a convict who had recently escaped from Colport Gaol. He read it through slowly, and then, with an inarticulate mumble, handed the paper back to his sympathetic messmate. For some minutes he sat dazed, hardly able to realize this sudden change in his condition. That the bather's body would, sooner or later, be found he had never doubted. But he had expected that the finding of it and its identification would solve the mystery of his escape and immediately give rise to a hue and cry. Never had he dreamed that the body could be identified as his.

But now that this incredible thing had happened, he would be simply written off and forgotten. He was free. And not only was he free; Alice was free too. Now he would quietly pass out of her life without bitterness or misunderstanding; not forgotten, indeed, but cherished only, in the years to come, with loving remembrance.

Nevertheless, when at daybreak on the morrow the good ship Potomac of New Orleans crossed the Mersey bar, the new deck-hand, Joe Watson, looked back at the receding land with a heavy heart and a moistening eye. The world was all before him. But it was an empty world. All that could make life gracious and desirable was slipping away farther with each turn of the propeller, and a waste of waters was stretching out between him and his heart's desire.

His life in America need not be followed in detail. He was of the type that almost inevitably prospers in that country. Energetic, industrious, handy, ready to put his heart into any job that offered; an excellent accountant with a sound knowledge of banking business and general finance, he was not long in finding a position in which he could prove his worth. And he had undeniably good luck. Within a year of his landing, almost penniless, he had managed, by hard work and the most drastic economy, to scrape together a tiny nest-egg of capital. Then he met with a young American, nearly as poor as himself but of the stuff of which millionaires are made; a man of inexhaustible energy, quick, shrewd and resolute, and possessed by a devouring ambition to be rich. But notwithstanding his avidity for wealth, Joseph Walden was singularly free from the vices of his class. He looked to become rich by work, good management, thrift, and a reputation for straight dealing. He was a man of strict integrity, and, if a little blunt and outspoken, was still a good friend and a pleasant companion.

With his shrewd judgment, Walden saw at once that his new friend would make an ideal collaborator in a business venture. Each had special qualifications that the other lacked, and the

two together would form a highly efficient combination. Accordingly the two young men pooled forces and embarked under the style and title of the Walden Pottermack Company. (Jeffrey had abandoned the name of Joe Watson on coming ashore, and, moved by some whimsical sentiment, had adopted as his godparent the ship which had carried him away to freedom and the new life. With a slight variation of spelling, he was now Marcus Pottermack.)

For some time the new firm struggled on under all the difficulties that attend insufficient capital. But the two partners held together in absolute unison. They neglected no chances, they spared no effort, they accepted willingly the barest profits, and they practised thrift to the point of penury. And slowly the tension of poverty relaxed. The little snowball of their capital began to grow, imperceptibly at first, but then with a constantly increasing acceleration—for wealth, like population, tends to increase by geometrical progression. In a year or two the struggles were over and the company was a well-established concern. A few more years and the snowball had rolled up to quite impressive dimensions. The Walden Pottermack Company had become a leading business house, and the partners men of respectable substance.

It was at this point that the difference between the two men began to make itself apparent. To the American, the established prosperity of the firm meant the attainment of the threshold of big business with the prospect of really big money. His fixed intention was to push the success for all that it was worth, to march on to greater and yet greater things, even unto millionairedom. Pottermack, on the other hand, began to feel that he had enough. Great wealth held out no allurements for him. Nor did he, like Walden, enjoy the sport of winning and piling it up. At first he had worked hard for a mere livelihood, then for a competence that should presently enable him to live his own life. And now, as he counted up his savings, it seemed to him that he had achieved his end. With what he had he could purchase all that he desired and that was purchasable.

It was not purchasable in America. Grateful as he was to the country that had sheltered him and taken him to her heart as one of her own sons, yet he found himself from time to time turning a wistful eye towards the land beyond the great ocean. More and more, as the time went on, he was conscious of a hankering for things that America could not give; for the sweet English countryside, the immemorial villages with their ancient churches, their oast-houses and thatched barns, for all the lingering remains of an older civilization.

And there was another element of unrest. All through the years the image of Alice had never ceased to haunt him. At first it was but as the cherished memory of a loved one who had died and passed out of his life for ever. But as the years ran on there came a subtle change. Gradually he began to think of their separation, not as something final and irretrievable but as admitting in a vague and shadowy way of the idea of reunion this side of the grave. It was very nebulous and indefinite, but it clung to him persistently, and ever the idea grew more definite. The circumstances were, indeed, changed utterly. When he left her, he was a convict, infamous in the eyes of all the world. But the convict, Jeffrey Brandon, was dead and forgotten, whereas he, Marcus Pottermack, was a man of position and repute. The case was entirely altered.

So he would argue with himself in moments of expansiveness. And then he would cast away his dreams, chiding himself for his folly and telling himself that doubtless, she had long since married and settled down that dead he was and dead he must remain, and not seek to rise again like some unquiet spirit to trouble the living.

Nevertheless, the leaven continued to work, and the end of it was that Mr. Pottermack wound up his business affairs and made arrangements for his retirement. His partner regretfully agreed to take over his interest in the company—which he did on terms that were not merely just but

generous—and thus his commercial life came to an end. A week or two later he took his passage for England.

Now, nebulous and shadowy as his ideas had been with reference to Alice, partaking rather of the nature of day-dreams than of thoughts implying any settled purpose, no sooner had he landed in the Old Country than he became possessed by a craving, at least to hear of her, to make certain that she was still alive, if possible to see her. He could not conceal from himself some faint hope that she might still be unmarried. And if she were—well, then it would be time for him to consider what he would do.

His first proceeding was to establish himself in lodgings in the old neighbourhood, where he spent his days loitering about the streets that she had been used to frequent. On Sundays he attended the church with scrupulous regularity, modestly occupying a back seat and lingering in the porch as the congregation filed out. Many familiar faces he noted, changed more or less by the passage of time; but no one recognized in the grey-haired, bearded, spectacled stranger the handsome youth whom they had known in the years gone by. Indeed, how should they, when that youth had died, cut off in the midst of his career of crime?

He would have liked to make some discreet enquiries, but no enquiries would have been discreet. Above all things, it was necessary for him to preserve his character as a stranger from America. And so he could do no more than keep his vigil in the streets and at the church, watching with hungry eyes for the beloved face—and watching in vain.

And then at last, after weeks of patient searching with ever-dwindling hope, he had his reward. It was on Easter Sunday, a day which had, in old times, been kept as the chief musical festival of the year. Apparently the custom was still maintained, for the church was unusually full and there was evidently a special choir. Mr. Pottermack's hopes revived, though he braced himself for another disappointment. Surely, he thought, if she ever comes to this church, she will come to-day.

And this time he was not disappointed. He had not long been seated on the modest bench near the door when a woman, soberly dressed in black, entered and walked past him up the aisle, where she paused for a few moments looking about her somewhat with the air of a stranger. He knew her in a moment by her figure, her gait, and the poise of her head. But if he had had any doubt, it would have been instantly dispelled when she entered a pew, and, before sitting down, glanced back quickly at the people behind her.

For Pottermack it was a tremendous moment. It was as if he were looking on the face of one risen from the dead. For some minutes after she had sat down and become hidden from his sight by the people behind her he felt dazed and half-incredulous of the wonderful vision that he had seen. But as the effects of the shock passed, he began to consider the present position. That single instantaneous glance had shown him that she had aged a little more than the lapse of time accounted for. She looked graver than of old, perhaps even a thought sombre, and something matronly and middle-aged in the fashion of her dress made disquieting suggestions.

When the long service was ended, Pottermack waited on his bench watching her come down the aisle and noting that she neither spoke to nor seemed to recognize any one. As soon as she had passed his bench, he rose and joined the throng behind her. His intention was to follow her and discover, if possible, where she lived. But as they came into the crowded porch he heard an elderly woman exclaim in a markedly loud tone:

"Why, surely it is Miss Bentley!"

"Yes," was the reply in the well-remembered voice. "At least, I was Miss Bentley when you knew me. Nowadays I am Mrs. Bellard."

Pottermack, standing close behind her and staring at a notice-board, drew a deep breath. Only in that moment of bitter disappointment did he realize how much he had hoped.

"Oh, indeed," said the loud-spoken woman. "Mrs. Bennett—it was Bennett that you said?"

"No, Bellard—B.e.l.l.a.r.d."

"Oh, Bellard. Yes. And so you are married. I have often wondered what became of you when you stopped coming to the church after—er—all those years ago. I hope your good husband is well."

"I lost my husband four years ago," Mrs. Bellard replied in a somewhat dry, matter-of-fact tone.

Pottermack's heart gave a bound and he listened harder than ever.

"Dear, dear!" exclaimed the other woman. "What a dreadfully sad thing! And are there any children?"

"No; no children."

"Ah, indeed. But perhaps it is as well, though it must be lonely for you. Are you living in London?"

"No," replied Mrs. Bellard, "I have only just come up for the week-end. I live at Borley in Buckinghamshire—not far from Aylesbury."

"Do you? It must be frightfully dull for you living all alone right down in the country. I do hope you have found comfortable lodgings."

Mrs. Bellard laughed softly. "You are pitying me more than you need, Mrs. Goodman. I am not dull at all, and I don't have to live in lodgings. I have a house to myself. It is only a very small one, but it is big enough and it is my own; so I am secure of a shelter for the rest of my life."

Here the two women drifted out of distinct ear-shot, though their voices continued to be audible as they walked away, for they both spoke in raised tones, Mrs. Goodman being, apparently, a little dull of hearing. But Pottermack had heard enough. Drawing out his pocket-book, he carefully entered the name and the address, such as it was, glancing at the notice-board as if he were copying some particulars from it. Then he emerged from the porch and walked after the two women; and when they separated, he followed Mrs. Bellard at a discreet distance, not that he now had any curiosity as to her present place of abode, but merely that he might pleasure his eyes with the sight of her trim figure tripping youthfully along the dull suburban street.

Mr. Pottermack's joy and triumph were tempered with a certain curiosity, especially with regard to the late Mr. Bellard. But his cogitations were not permitted to hinder the necessary action. Having no time-table, it being Sunday, he made his way to Marylebone Station to get a list of the week-day trains; and at that station he presented himself on the following morning at an unearthly hour, suitcase in hand, to catch the first train to Borley. Arrived at the little town, he at once took a room at the Railway Inn, from whence he was able conveniently to issue forth and stroll down the station approach as each of the London trains came in.

It was late in the afternoon when, among the small crowd of passengers who came out of the station, he saw her, stepping forward briskly and carrying a good-sized handbag. He turned, and, walking back slowly up the approach, let her pass him and draw a good distance ahead. He kept her in sight without difficulty in the sparsely peopled streets until, at the outskirts of the town, she turned into a quiet by-lane and disappeared. Thereupon he quickened his pace and entered the lane just in time to see her opening the garden gate of a pleasant-looking cottage, at the open door of which a youthful maidservant stood, greeting her with a welcoming grin. Pottermack walked slowly past the little house, noting the name, "Lavender Cottage," painted on the gate, and went on to the top of the lane, where he turned and retraced his steps, indulging himself as he passed the second time with a long and approving look at the shrine which held the object of his worship.

On his return to the inn he proceeded to make enquiries as to a reliable house-agent, in response to which he was given, not only the name of a recommended agent but certain other more valuable information. For the landlord, interested in a prospective new resident, was questioning Pottermack as to the class of house that he was seeking when the landlady interposed.

"What about 'The Chestnuts,' Tom, where Colonel Barnett used to live? That's empty and for sale—been empty for months. And it's a good house though rather out-of-the-way. Perhaps that might suit this gentleman."

Further details convinced Mr. Pottermack that it would, and the upshot was that on the very next day, after a careful inspection, the deposit was paid to the agents, Messrs. Hook and Walker, and a local solicitor was instructed to carry out the conveyance. Within a week the principal builder of the town had sent in his estimates for repairs and decoration, and Mr. Pottermack was wrestling with the problem of household furnishing amidst a veritable library of catalogues.

But these activities did not distract him from his ultimate object. Realizing that, as a stranger to the town, his chance of getting a regular introduction to Mrs. Bellard was infinitely remote he decided to waive the conventions and take a short-cut. But the vital question was. Would she recognize him? It was a question that perplexed him profoundly and that he debated endlessly without reaching any conclusion. Of course, under normal circumstances there would be no question at all. Obviously, in spite of his beard, his spectacles, and his grey hair, she would recognize him instantly. But the circumstances were very far from normal. To her, he was a person who had died some fifteen years ago. And the news of his death would have come to her, not as a mere rumour or vague report, but as an ascertained fact. He had been found dead and identified by those who knew him well. She could never have had a moment's doubt that he was dead.

How, then, would she react to the conflict between her knowledge and the evidence of her senses? Which of the two alternate possibilities would she accept? That a dead man might come to life again or that one human being might bear so miraculous a resemblance to another? He could form no opinion. But of one thing he felt confident. She would certainly be deeply impressed by the resemblance, and that state of mind would easily cover anything unconventional in the manner of their meeting.

His plan was simple to crudeness. At odd times, in the intervals of his labours, he made it his business to pass the entrance of the lane—Malthouse Lane was its name—from whence he could see her house. For several days no opportunity presented itself. But one morning, a little more than a week after his arrival, on glancing up the lane, he perceived a manifestly feminine hat above the shrubs in her garden. Thereupon he turned boldly into the little thoroughfare and walked on until he was opposite the cottage, when he could see her, equipped with gardening gloves and a rather juvenile fork, tidying up the borders. Unobserved by her, he stepped up to the wooden palings,

and, lifting his hat, enquired apologetically if she could inform him whether, if he followed the lane, he would come to the Aylesbury road.

At the first sound of his voice she started up and gazed at him with an expression of the utmost astonishment; nor was her astonishment diminished when she looked at his face. For an appreciable time she stood quite still and rigid, with her eyes fixed on him and her lips parted as if she had seen a spectre. After an interval, Pottermack—who was more or less prepared, though his heart was thumping almost audibly—repeated his question, with apologies for intruding on her; whereupon, recovering herself with an effort, she came across to the palings and began to give him some directions in a breathless, agitated voice, while the gloved hand that she rested on the palings trembled visibly.

Pottermack listened deferentially and then ventured to explain his position: that he was a stranger, about to settle in the district and anxious to make himself acquainted with his new surroundings. As this was received quite graciously, he went on to comment in admiring terms on the appearance of the cottage and its happy situation in this pleasant leafy lane. Through this channel they drifted into amicable conversation concerning the town and the surrounding country, and as they talked—Pottermack designedly keeping his face partially turned away from her—she continued to watch him with a devouring gaze and with a curious expression of bewilderment and incredulity mingled with something reminiscent, far away and dreamy. Finally, encouraged by his success, Pottermack proceeded to expound the embryonic state of his household, and enquired if by any chance she happened to know of a reliable middle-aged woman who would take charge of it.

"How many are you in family?" Mrs. Bellard asked with ill-concealed eagerness.

"My entire family," he replied, "is covered by one rather shabby hat."

"Then you ought to have no difficulty in finding a housekeeper. I do, in fact," she continued, "know of a woman who might suit you, a middle-aged widow named Gadby—quite a Dickens name, isn't it? I know very little about her abilities, but I do know that she is a pleasant, good-natured, and highly respectable woman. If you like, and will give me your address, I will send her to see you."

Mr. Pottermack jumped at the offer, and having written down his name and his address at the inn (at the former of which she glanced with eager curiosity) he thanked her warmly, and, wishing her good-morning with a flourish of the shabby hat, went on his way rejoicing. That same evening, Mrs. Gadby called at the inn and was promptly engaged; and a very fortunate transaction the engagement proved. For, not only did she turn out to be an incomparable servant, but she constituted herself a link between her employer and her patroness. Not that the link was extremely necessary, for whenever Pottermack chanced to meet Mrs. Bellard—and it was surprising how often it happened—she greeted him frankly as an acknowledged acquaintance; so that gradually—and not so very gradually either—their footing as acquaintances ripened into that of friends. And so, as the weeks passed and their friendship grew up into a pleasant, sympathetic intimacy, Mr. Pottermack felt that all was going well and that the time was at hand when he should collect some of the arrears that were outstanding in his account with Fortune.

But Fortune had not done with him yet. The card that she held up her sleeve was played a few weeks after he had entered into occupation of his new house and was beginning to be comfortably settled. He was standing by the counter of a shop where he had made some purchases when he became aware of some person standing behind him and somewhat to his left. He could not see the person excepting as a vague shadow, but he had the feeling that he was being closely scrutinized. It was not a pleasant feeling, for, altered as he was, some inopportune recognition was always

possible; and when the person moved from the left side to the right, Mr. Pottermack began to grow distinctly apprehensive. His right ear bore a little purple birthmark that was highly distinctive, and the movement of the unknown observer associated itself very disagreeably in his mind with this mark. After enduring the scrutiny for some time with growing uneasiness, he turned and glanced at the face of the scrutinizer. Then he received a very distinct shock, but at the same time was a little reassured. For the stranger was not a stranger at all, but his old friend and fellow-clerk, James Lewson.

Involuntarily his face must have given some sign of recognition, but this he instantly suppressed. He had no fear of his old friend, but still, he had renounced his old identity and had no intention of acknowledging it. He had entered on a new life with a new personality. Accordingly, after a brief glance, as indifferent as he could make it, he turned back to the counter and concluded his business. And Lewson, for his part, made no outward sign of recognition, so that Pottermack began to hope that he had merely noticed an odd resemblance, without any suspicion of actual identity. After all, that was what one would expect, seeing that the Jeffrey Brandon whom he resembled had been dead nearly fifteen years.

But when he left the shop and went his way through the streets on other business, he soon discovered that Lewson was shadowing him closely. Once or twice he put the matter to the test by doubling back or darting through obscure passages and by-ways; and when he still found Lewson doggedly clinging to his skirts, he had to accept the conviction that he had been recognized and deal with the position to the best of his discretion. Accordingly, he made straight for home; but instead of entering by the front door, he took the path that skirted the long wall of his garden and let himself in by the small side gate, which he left unlatched behind him. A minute later, Lewson pushed it open and looked in then, seeing that the garden was unoccupied save by Pottermack, he entered and shut the gate.

"Well, Jeff," he said genially, as he faced Pottermack, "so here you are. A brand—or shall we say a Brandon—snatched from the burning. I always wondered if you had managed to do a mizzle, you are such an uncommonly downy bird."

Pottermack made a last, despairing effort. "Pardon me," said he, "but I fancy you must be mistaking me for—"

"Oh, rats," interrupted Lewson. "Won't do, old chap. Besides, I saw that you recognized me. No use pretending that you don't know your old pal, and certainly no use pretending that he doesn't know you."

Pottermack realised the unwelcome truth and, like a wise man, bowed to the inevitable.

"I suppose it isn't," he admitted, "and, for that matter, I don't know that there is any reason why I should. But you will understand that—"

"Oh, I understand well enough," said Lewson. "Don't imagine that I am offended. Naturally you are not out for digging up your old acquaintances, especially as you seem to have feathered your nest pretty well. Where have you been all these years?"

"In the States. I only came back a few weeks ago."

"Ah, you'd have been wiser to stay there. But I suppose you made a pile and have come home to spend it."

"Well, hardly a pile," said Pottermack, "but I have saved enough to live on in a quiet way. I am not expensive in my habits."

"Lucky beggar!" said Lewson, glancing around with greedy eyes. "Is this your own place?"

"Yes, I have just bought it and moved in. Got it remarkably cheap, too."

"Did you? Well, I say again, lucky beggar. It's quite a lordly little estate."

"Yes, I am very pleased with it. There's a good house and quite a lot of land, as you see. I hope to live very comfortably here."

"You ought to, if you don't get blown on; and you never need be if you are a wise man."

"No, I hope not," said Pottermack, a little uneasily. He had been looking at his old friend and was disagreeably impressed by the change that the years had wrought. He was by no means happy to know that his secret was shared with this unprepossessing stranger—for such he, virtually, was. But still he was totally unprepared for what was to follow.

"It was a lucky chance for me," remarked Lewson, "that I happened to drop in at that shop. Best morning's work that I have done for a long time."

"Indeed!" said Pottermack, looking a little puzzled.

"Yes. I reckon that chance was worth a thousand pounds to me."

"Was it really? I don't quite see how."

"Don't you?" demanded Lewson, with a sudden change of manner. "Then I'll explain. I presume you don't want the Scotland Yard people to know that you are alive and living here like a lord?"

"Naturally I don't."

"Of course you don't. And if you show a proper and liberal spirit towards your old pal, they are never likely to know."

"But," gasped Pottermack, "I don't think I quite understand what you mean."

"You are devilish thick-headed if you don't," said Lewson. "Then I'll put in a nutshell. You hand me over a thousand pounds and I give you a solemn undertaking to keep my mouth shut for ever."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I hop off to Scotland Yard and earn a small gratuity by giving them the straight tip."

Pottermack recoiled from him in horror. He was thunderstruck. It was appalling to find that this man, whom he had known as an apparently decent youth, had sunk so low. He had actually descended to blackmail—the lowest, the meanest, and the shabbiest of crimes. But it was not the blackmail alone that filled Pottermack's soul with loathing of the wretch who stood before him. In the moment in which Lewson made his demand, Pottermack knew the name of the villain who had

forged those cheques and had set the dastardly trap in which he, Pottermack, was, in effect, still held.

For some moments he was too much shocked to reply. When at length he did, it was merely to settle the terms of the transaction. He had no choice. He realized that this was no empty threat. The gleam of malice in Lewson's eye was unmistakable. It expressed the inveterate hatred that a thoroughly base man feels towards one on whom he has inflicted an unforgivable injury.

"Will a crossed cheque do for you?" he asked.

"Good Lord! no!" was the reply; "nor an open one either. No cheques for me. Hard cash is what I should prefer, but as that might be difficult to manage I'll take it in notes—five-pound notes."

"What, a thousand pounds!" exclaimed Pottermack. "What on earth will the people at the bank think?"

Lewson sniggered. "What would they think, old chap, if I turned up with an open cheque for a thousand pounds? Wouldn't they take an interest in the endorsement? No, dear boy, you get the notes—fivers, mind. They know you. And look here. Jeff. This is a strictly private transaction. Neither of us wants it to leak out. It will be much safer for us both if we remain tee-total strangers. If we should meet anywhere, you needn't take off your hat. I shan't. We don't know one another. I don't even know your name. By the way, what is your name?"

"Marcus Pottermack."

"God, what a name! However, I'll forget it if I can. You agree with me?"

"Certainly," replied Pottermack with unmistakable sincerity. "But where and how am I to hand you over the money?"

"I was coming to that," said Lewson. "I will come along here and collect it on Thursday night—that will give you time to get the notes. I shall come after dark, about nine o'clock. You had better leave this gate unlatched, and then, if I see that the coast is clear, I can pop in unobserved. Will that do?"

Pottermack nodded. "But there is one thing more, Lewson," said he. "This is a single, final transaction. I pay you a thousand pounds to purchase your silence and secrecy for ever!"

"That is so. In saecula saeculorum."

"There will be no further demands?"

"Certainly not," Lewson replied indignantly. "Do you think I don't know what a square deal is? I've given you my solemn promise and you can trust me to keep it."

Pottermack pursued the matter no farther; and as the calamitous business was now concluded, he softly opened the gate, and, having ascertained that no one was in sight, he let his visitor out and watched the big burly figure swaggering townwards along the little path that bordered his wall.

Closing the gate, he turned back into the garden, his heart filled with bitterness and despair. His dream was at an end. Never, while this horse-leech hung on to him, could he ask Alice Bellard to be his wife. For his prophetic soul told him only too truly that this was but a beginning; that the

blackmailer would come again and again and yet again, always to go away still holding the thing that he had sold.

And so it befell; and so the pitiless extortion might have gone on to its end in the ruin and impoverishment of the victim but for the timely appearance of the sundial in Mr. Gallett's yard.

CHAPTER XI—MR. POTTERMACK'S DILEMMA

The sound of the piano faded away in a gradual diminuendo and at last stopped. A brief interval of silence followed.

Then Mr. Pottermack, withdrawing his gaze from the infinite distance beyond the garden, turned to look at his hostess and found her regarding him with a slightly quizzical smile.

"You haven't lit your pipe after all, Mr. Pottermack," said she.

"No," he replied. "My savage breast was so effectually soothed by your music that tobacco would have been superfluous. Besides, my pipe would have gone out. It always does when my attention is very completely occupied."

"And was it? I almost thought you were dozing."

"I was dreaming," said he; "day-dreaming; but wide awake and listening. It is curious," he continued after a pause, "what power music has to awaken associations. There is nothing like it, excepting, perhaps, scents. Music and odours, things utterly unlike anything but themselves, seem to have a power of arousing dormant memories that is quite lacking in representative things such as pictures and statues."

"So it would seem," said Mrs. Bellard, "that I have been, in a fashion, performing the function of an opium pipe in successful competition with the tobacco article. But it is too late to mend matters now. I can hear Anne approaching with the tea-things."

Almost as she spoke, the door opened and the maid entered, carrying a tray with anxious care, and proceeded to set out the tea-things with the manner of one performing a solemn rite. When she had gone and the tea was poured out, Mrs. Bellard resumed the conversation.

"I began to think you had struck me off your visiting list. What have you been doing with yourself all this time?"

"Well," Pottermack replied evasively—for, obviously, he could not go into details—"I have been a good deal occupied. There have been a lot of things to do; the sun-dial, for instance. I told you about the sun-dial, didn't I?"

"Yes, but that was a long time ago. You said you were going to show it to me when it was set up, but you never have. You haven't even shown it to Mrs. Gadby. She is quite hurt about it."

"Dear me'" exclaimed Mr. Pottermack; "how self-centred we old bachelors get! But this neglect must be remedied at once. When can you come and see it? Could you come round and have tea with me tomorrow?"

"Yes. I should like to; but I can't come very early. Will a quarter to five do?"

"Of course it will. We can have tea first and then make a leisurely survey of the sun-dial and the various other things that I have to show you."

Thus the arrangement was made, very much to Mr. Pottermack's satisfaction, for it enabled him to postpone to the morrow a certain very momentous question which he had thought of raising this very afternoon, but which now appeared a little inopportune. For a delicate question must be approached cautiously through suitable channels, and no such means of approach had presented themselves or seemed likely to. Accordingly, relieved of the necessity of looking for an opening, Mr. Pottermack was able to give his whole attention to making himself agreeable, and eventually took his departure in the best of spirits, looking forward with confidence to the prospects of the morrow.

The tea, as arranged by Mrs. Gadby in the pleasant dining-room of "The Chestnuts," was a triumphant success. It would have been an even greater success if the fair visitor had happened to have been on short commons for the preceding week. But the preposterous abundance at least furnished the occasion of mirth, besides serving as an outlet for Mrs. Gadby's feelings of regard and admiration towards the guest and a demonstration of welcome.

"It is really very nice of her," said Mrs. Bellard, glancing smilingly round the loaded table, "and tactful too. It is a compliment to us both. It implies that she has cause to be grateful to me for introducing her here, and you are that cause. I expect she has a pretty comfortable time."

"I hope so," said Pottermack. "I have, thanks to her and to you. And she keeps the house in the most perfect order. Would you like to look over it presently?"

"Naturally I should. Did you ever meet a woman who was not devoured by curiosity in regard to a bachelor's household arrangements? But I am really more interested in the part of the premises that is outside Mrs. Gadby's domain; the part that reflects your own personality. I want especially to see your workshop. Am I to be allowed to?"

"Undoubtedly you are; in fact, if we have finished, as it seems we have, you shall be introduced to it forthwith."

They rose, and, passing out at the back door, walked together up the long path through the kitchen garden and orchard until they came to the gate of the walled garden, which Pottermack unlocked with his Yale key.

"This is very impressive and mysterious," said Mrs. Bellard as the gate closed and the spring-latch snapped. "I am quite proud to be admitted into this holy of holies. It is a delightful garden," she continued, letting her eyes travel round the great oblong enclosure, "so perfectly peaceful and quiet and remote. Here one is cut off from all the world, which is rather restful at times."

Mr. Pottermack agreed, and reflected that the present was one of those times. "When I want to be alone," he remarked, "I like to be definitely alone and secure from interruption."

"Well, you are secure enough here, shut in from the sight of any human eye. Why, you might commit a murder and no one would be any the wiser."

"So I might," agreed Mr. Pottermack, rather taken aback. "I hadn't thought of that advantage, and, of course, you understand that the place wasn't laid out with that purpose in view. What do you think of the sun-dial?"

"I was just looking at it and thinking what a charming finish it gives to the garden. It is delightful, and will be still more so when the new stone has weathered down to the tone of the old. And I think you told me that there is a well underneath. That adds a sort of deliciously horrible interest to it."

"Why horrible?" Pottermack enquired uncomfortably.

"Oh, don't you think wells are rather gruesome things? I do. There is one in my garden, and it gives me the creeps whenever I lower the bucket and watch it sinking down, down that black hole and vanishing into the bowels of the earth."

"Yes," said Pottermack, "I have that feeling myself. Probably most town-bred people have. And they are really rather dangerous, especially when they are unguarded as this one was. That was why I took the opportunity to cover it up."

By this time they were close up to the dial, and Mrs. Bellard walked round it to read the motto. "Why do they always write these things in Latin?" she asked.

"Partly for the sake of brevity," he replied. "Here are five Latin words. The equivalent in English is: 'At the rising of the sun, hope: at the going down thereof, peace.'"

"It is a beautiful motto," she said, looking wistfully and a little sadly at the stone pillar. "The first part is what we all know by experience; the second is what we pray for to compensate us for the sorrows and disillusionments of the years that come between. But now let us go and look at the workshop."

Pottermack conducted her behind the yew hedge into the range of well-lighted workrooms, where he exhibited, not without a touch of pride, his very complete outfit. But the fair widow's enthusiastic interest in the tools and appliances rather surprised him; for women are apt to look on the instruments of masculine handicraft with a slightly supercilious eye. No general survey satisfied her. He had to display his "plant" in detail and explain and demonstrate the use of each appliance: the joiner's bench with its quick-grip vice; the metalwork bench with its anvil and stakes and the big brazing-jet; the miniature forge, the lathe, the emery-wheel, and the bench-drill. She examined them all with the closest attention and with a singularly intelligent grasp of their purposes and modes of action. Pottermack became so absorbed in the pleasure of exhibiting his treasures that, for the moment, he almost forgot his main purpose.

"I am glad I have seen the place where you work," she said, as they came out into the garden. "Now I can picture you to myself among your workshop gods, busy and happy. You are happy when you are working there, aren't you?"

She asked the question with so much concern that Pottermack was fain to reply:

"Every workman, I think, is happy when he is working. Of course, I mean a skilled man, working with his hands and his brain, creating something, even if it is only a simple thing. Yes, I am happy when I am doing a job, especially if it is a little difficult."

"I understand; for a little extra planning and thought. But are you, in general, a happy man? Do you find life pleasant? You always seem very cheerful and yet sometimes I wonder if you really enjoy life."

Pottermack reflected a few moments. "You are thinking," said he, "of my solitary and apparently friendless state, though I am not friendless at all, seeing that I have you—the dearest and kindest friend that a man could wish for. But in a sense you are right. My life is an incomplete affair, and these activities of mine, pleasant as they are, serve but as makeshifts to fill a blank. But it could easily be made complete. A word from you would be enough. If you were my wife there would be nothing left in the world for me to covet. I should be a perfectly happy man."

He paused and looked at her, and was a little disconcerted to see that her eyes had filled and that she was looking down with an evident expression of distress. As she made no answer, he continued, more eagerly:

"Why should it not be, Alice? We are the very best of friends—really devoted and affectionate friends. We like the same things and the same ways of life. We have the same interests, the same pleasures. We should try to make one another happy, and I am sure we should succeed. Won't you say the word, dear, and let us join hands to go our ways together for the rest of our lives?"

She turned and looked in his face with brimming eyes and laid her hand on his arm.

"Dear friend," she said, "dearest Marcus, I would say yes, joyfully, thankfully, if only it were possible. I have given you my friendship, my most loving friendship, and that is all I have to give. It is impossible for me to be your wife."

Pottermack gazed at her in dismay. "But," he asked huskily, "why is it impossible? What hinders?"

"My husband hinders," she replied in a low voice.

"Your husband!" gasped Pottermack.

"Yes. You have believed, as every one here believes, that I am a widow. I am not. My husband is still alive. I cannot and will not live with him or even acknowledge him. But he lives, to inflict one more injury on me by standing between you and me. Come," she continued, as Pottermack, numb with amazement, gazed at her in silence, "let us go and sit down in the summer-house and I will tell you the whole pitiful story."

She walked across the lawn, and Pottermack accompanied her with half-unconscious reluctance. Since that fatal night he had made little use of the summer-house. Its associations repelled him. Even now he would, by choice, have avoided it; and it was with a certain vague discomfort that he saw his beloved friend seat herself in the chair that had stood vacant since that night when Lewson had sat in it.

"I will tell you my story," she began, "from the time when I was a girl, or perhaps I should say a young woman. At that time I was engaged to a young man named Jeffrey Brandon. We were devotedly attached to each other. As to Jeffrey, I need say no more than that you are—allowing forthe difference of age—quite extraordinarily like him; like in features, in voice, in tastes, and in nature. If Jeffrey had been alive now, he would have been exactly like you. That is what attracted me to you from the first.

"We were extremely happy—perfectly happy—in our mutual affection, and we were all-sufficient to one another. I thought myself the most fortunate of girls, and so I was; for we were only waiting until I should come into a small property that was likely to fall to me shortly, when we should have had enough to marry upon comfortably. And then, in a moment, our happiness was shattered utterly. A most dreadful thing happened. A series of forgeries was discovered at the bank where

Jeffrey was employed. Suspicion was made to fall upon him. He was prosecuted, convicted—on false evidence, of course—and sentenced to a term of penal servitude.

"As soon as he was convicted, he formally released me from our engagement, but I need not say that I had no intention of giving him up. However, the question never arose. Poor Jeffrey escaped from prison, and in trying to swim out to some ship in the river was drowned. Later, his body was recovered and taken to the prison, where an inquest was held. I went down, and by special permission attended the funeral and laid a wreath on the grave in the prison cemetery. And that was the end of my romance.

"When Jeffrey died, I made up my mind that I was a spinster for life; and so I ought to have been. But things fell out otherwise. Besides me, Jeffrey had one intimate friend, a fellow-clerk at the bank named James Lewson. Of course, I knew him fairly intimately, and after Jeffrey's conviction I saw a good deal of him. Indeed, we became quite friendly—which we had hardly been before—by reason of the firm belief that he expressed in Jeffrey's innocence. Every one else took the poor boy's guilt for granted, so, naturally, I was drawn to the one loyal friend. Then, when Jeffrey died and was lost to me for ever, he took every opportunity of offering me comfort and consolation; and he did it so tactfully, was so filled with grief for our lost friend and so eager to talk of him and keep his memory green between us, that we became greater friends than ever.

"After a time, his friendship took on a more affectionate and demonstrative character, and finally he asked me plainly to marry him. Of course, I said no; in fact, I was rather shocked at the proposal, for I still felt that I belonged to Jeffrey. But he was quietly persistent. He took no offence, but he did not pretend to accept my refusal as final. Especially he urged on me that Jeffrey would have wished that I should not be left to go through life alone, but that I should be cherished and protected by his own loyal and devoted friend.

"Gradually his arguments overcame my repugnance to the idea of the marriage, though it was still distasteful to me, and when he asked for my consent as a recognition and reward of his loyalty to Jeffrey, I at last gave way. It appeared ungrateful to go on refusing him; and after all, nothing seemed to matter much now that Jeffrey was gone. The end of it was that we were married just before he started to take up an appointment in a branch of the bank at Leeds.

"It was not long before the disillusionment came, and when it did come, I was astonished that I could have been so deceived. Very soon I began to realize that it was not love of me that had made him such a persistent suitor. It was the knowledge that he had gathered of the little fortune that was coming to me. His greediness for money was incredible; and yet he was utterly unable to hold it. It ran through his hands like water. He had a fair salary, but yet we were always poor and usually in debt. For he was an inveterate gambler—a gambler of that hopeless type that must inevitably lose. He usually did lose at once, for he was a reckless plunger, but if by chance he made a coup, he immediately plunged with his winnings and lost them. It was no wonder that he was always in difficulties.

"When, at last, my little property came to me, he was deeply disappointed; for it was tied up securely in the form of a trust, and my uncle, who is a solicitor, was the managing trustee. And a very careful trustee he was, and not at all well impressed by my husband. James Lewson had hoped to get control of the entire capital, instead of which he had to apply to me for money when he was in difficulties and I had to manage my trustee as best I could. But in spite of this, most of the income that I received went to pay my husband's debts and losses.

"Meanwhile our relations grew more and more unsatisfactory. The disappointment due to the trust, and the irritation at having to ask me for money and explain the reasons for his need of it, made

him sullen and morose, and even, at times, coarsely abusive. But there was something more. From the first I had been dismayed at his freedom in the matter of drink. But the habit grew upon him rapidly, and it was in connection with this that the climax of our disagreement came about and led to our separation.

"I understand that drink has different effects on different types of men. On James Lewson its effects began with the loss of all traces of refinement and a tendency to coarse facetiousness. The next stage was that of noisy swagger and boasting, and then he soon became quarrelsome and even brutal. There were one or two occasions when he threatened to become actually violent. Now it happened more than once that, when he had drunk himself into a state of boastful exaltation, he spoke of Jeffrey in a tone of such disrespect and even contempt that I had to leave the room to avoid an open, vulgar quarrel. But on the final occasion he went much farther. He began by jeering at my infatuation for 'that nincompoop,' as he called him, and when I, naturally, became furiously angry and was walking out of the room, he called me back, and, laughing in my face, actually boasted to me—to me!—that his was the master mind that had planned and carried out the forgeries and then set up 'that mug, Jeff,' as the man of straw for the lawyers to knock down.

"I was absolutely thunderstruck. At first I thought that it was mere drunken fooling. But then he went on to give corroborative details, chuckling with idiotic self-complacency, until at last I realized that it was true; that this fuddled brute was the dastardly traitor who had sent my Jeffrey to his death.

"Then I left him. At once I packed a small suitcase and went out and took a room at an hotel in the town. The next day I returned and had an interview with him. He was mightily flustered and apologetic. He remembered quite well what he had said, but tried to persuade me that it was a mere drunken joke and that it was all a fabrication, invented to annoy me. But I knew better. In the interval I had thought matters over, and I saw how perfectly his confession explained everything and agreed with what I now knew of him; his insatiable greed for money, his unscrupulousness, his wild gambling, and the reckless way in which he contracted debts. I brushed aside his explanations and denials and presented my ultimatum, of which the terms were these:

"We should separate at once and completely, and henceforth be as total strangers, not recognizing one another if we should ever meet. I should take my mother's maiden name, Bellard, and assume the status of a widow. He should refrain from molesting me or claiming any sort of acquaintance or relationship with me.

"If he agreed to these terms, I undertook to pay him a quarterly allowance and to take no action in respect of what I had learned. If he refused, I should instruct my uncle to commence proceedings to obtain a judicial separation and I should state in open court all that I knew. I should communicate these facts to the directors of the bank; and if, in my uncle's opinion, any prosecution were possible—for perjury or any other offence connected with the forgeries—I should instruct him to prosecute.

"My ultimatum took him aback completely. At first he tried to bluster, then he became pathetic and tried to wheedle. But in the end, when he saw that I was not to be moved from my resolution, he gave way. I could see that my threats had scared him badly, though, in fact, I don't believe that I could have done anything. But perhaps he knew better. There may have been some other matters of which I had no knowledge. At any rate, he agreed, with the one stipulation, that the quarterly allowance should be paid in notes and not by a cheque.

"As soon as I had settled the terms of the separation I moved to Aylesbury, where my mother's people had lived, and stayed there in lodgings while I looked for a small, cheap house. At length I

found the cottage at Borley, and there I have lived ever since, as comfortably as my rather straitened means would let me. For, of course, the allowance has been rather a strain, though I have paid it cheerfully as the price of my freedom; and I may say that James Lewson has kept to the terms of our agreement with one exception—an exception that I expected. He has not been satisfied with the allowance. From time to time, and with increasing frequency, he has applied for loans—which, of course, meant gifts—to help him out of some temporary difficulty; and sometimes—but not always—I have been weak enough to supply him.

"But I was not to be left completely in peace. When I had been settled in Borley for about a year, I received a letter from him informing me that 'by a strange coincidence' he had been appointed to the managership of the Borley branch of the bank. Of course, I knew that it was no coincidence at all. He had engineered the transfer himself."

"With what object, do you suppose?" asked Pottermack.

"It may have been mere malice," she replied, "just to cause me annoyance without breaking the terms of the agreement. But my impression is that it was done with the deliberate purpose of keeping me in a state of nervous unrest so that I should be the more easily prevailed on to comply with his applications for money. At any rate, those applications became more frequent and more urgent after he came to live here, and once he threw out a hint about calling at my house for an answer. But I put a stop to that at once."

"Did you ever meet him in Borley?" Pottermack asked.

"Yes, once or twice. But I passed him in the street without a glance of recognition and he made no attempt to molest me. I think he had a wholesome fear of me. And, of course, I kept out of his way as much as I could. But it was an immense relief to me when he went away. You heard of his disappearance, I suppose? It was the talk of the town at the time."

"Oh yes," replied Pottermack. "My friend, Mr. Gallett, the mason, was the first to announce the discovery. But I little thought when I heard of it how much it meant to you—and to me. What do you suppose has become of him?"

"I can't imagine. It is a most mysterious affair. There is no reason that I can think of why he should have absconded at all. I can only suppose that he had done something which he expected to be found out but which has not come to light. Perhaps the most mysterious thing about it is that he has never applied to me for money. He would know quite well that I should, at least have sent him his allowance, and that he could depend on me not to betray him, profoundly as I detest him."

Mr. Pottermack cogitated anxiously. He loathed the idea of deceiving this noble, loyal-hearted woman. Yet what could he do? He was committed irrevocably to a certain line of action, and in committing himself he had unconsciously committed her. He had embarked on a course of deception and had no choice but to follow it. And with regard to the future, he could honestly assure himself that whatever made for his happiness would make for hers.

"Do you think he may have gone abroad?" he asked.

"It is impossible to say," she replied. "I have no reason to suppose he has, excepting his extraordinary silence."

"It is even possible," Pottermack suggested in a slightly husky voice, "that he may be dead."

"Yes," she admitted, "that is possible, and it would certainly account for his silence. But is it any use guessing?"

"I was only thinking," said Pottermack, "that if he should happen to have died, that would—er—dispose of our difficulties."

"Not unless we knew that he was dead. On the contrary. If he should have died and his death should remain undiscovered, or, what is the same thing, if he should have died without having been identified, then I should be bound to him beyond any possible hope of release."

Pottermack drew a deep breath, and unconsciously his glance fell on the sun-dial.

"But," he asked in a low tone, "if it should ever become known as an ascertained fact that he was dead? Then, dear Alice, would you say yes?"

"But have I not said it already?" she exclaimed. "Did I not tell you that, if I were free, I would gladly, thankfully take you for my husband? Then, if that is not enough, I say it again. Not that it is of much use to say it, seeing that there is no reason to suppose that he is dead or likely to die. I only wish there were. It may sound callous to express such a wish, but it would be mere hypocrisy to pretend to any other feeling. He ruined poor Jeffrey's life and he has ruined mine."

"I wouldn't say that," Pottermack protested gently. "The sands of your life have yet a long time to run. There is still time for us both to salve some happy years from the wreckage of the past."

"So there is," she agreed. "I was wrong. It is only a part of my life that has been utterly spoiled. And if you, too, have been through stormy weather—as I, somehow, think you have—we must join forces and help one another with the salvage work. But we shall have to be content to be friends, since marriage is out of our reach."

"My dear," said Pottermack, "if you say that you would be willing to have me for your husband that is all I ask."

They went forth from the summer-house and walked slowly, hand in hand, round the old garden; and Pottermack, anxious to conceal his bitter disappointment, chatted cheerfully about his fruit trees and the flowers that he meant to plant in the sunny borders. Very soon they seemed to be back on the old footing, only with a new note of affection and intimacy which made itself evident when Pottermack, with his hand on the latch of the gate, drew his companion to him and kissed her before they passed through together into the orchard.

He walked with her back to the cottage and said good-bye at the little wooden gate.

"I hope, dear," she whispered, as she held his hand for a moment, "that you are not very, very disappointed."

"I am not thinking of disappointments," he replied cheerily. "I am gloating over the blessings that I enjoy already and hoping that Fortune may have something to add to them later on."

But despite his assumed cheeriness of manner, Mr. Pottermack took his way homeward in a profoundly depressed state of mind. The dream of settled happiness that had haunted him for years, vague and unreal at first but ever growing more definite and vivid, had been shattered in the very moment when it seemed to have become a reality. He thought bitterly of the later years in America when his purpose of seeking his lost love had been forming, almost unrecognized by

himself as a thing actually intended; of his long search in London with its ultimate triumph; of the patient pursuit of the beloved object to this place and the purchase of his house; of the long untiring effort, always bringing him nearer and nearer to success. And then, when he seemed to have conquered every difficulty, to have his treasure within his very grasp, behold an obstacle undreamed of and apparently insuperable.

It was maddening; and the most exasperating feature of it was that the obstacle was of his own creating. Like most men who have committed a fatal blunder, Mr. Pottermack was impelled to chew the bitter cud of the might-have-been. If he had only known! How easy it would have been to arrange things suitably! Looking back, he now saw how unnecessary had been all that laborious business of the gutta-percha soles. It had been the result of mere panic. He could see that now. And he could have met the conditions so much more simply and satisfactorily. Supposing he had just made a few footprints in the soft earth leading to the well—he could have done that with the plaster casts—flung down the coat by the brink and gone out on the following morning and informed the police. There would have been no risk of suspicion. Why should there have been? He would have told a perfectly convincing story. He could have related how he had gone out in the evening, leaving his gate unlocked, had returned in the dark and found it ajar; had discovered in the morning strange footprints and a coat, suggesting that some stranger had strayed into the garden and, in the darkness, had fallen down the well. It would have been a perfectly natural and straightforward story. Nobody would have doubted it or connected him with the accident. Then the well would have been emptied, the body recovered and the incident closed for ever.

As it was, the situation was one of exasperating irony. He was in a dilemma from which there seemed to be no escape. He alone, of all the world, knew that Alice Bellard was free to marry him; and that knowledge he must carry locked up in his breast for the remainder of his life.

CHAPTER XII—THE UNDERSTUDY

Readers who have followed this history to its present stage will have realized by this time that Mr. Pottermack was a gentleman of uncommon tenacity of purpose. To the weaker vessels the sudden appearance of an apparently insuperable obstacle is the occasion for abandoning hope and throwing up the sponge. But Mr. Pottermack was of a tougher fibre. To him a difficulty was not a matter for wringing of hands but for active search for a solution.

Hence it happened that the black despair that enveloped and pervaded him after his proposal to Alice Bellard soon began to disperse under the influence of his natural resiliency. From profitless reflections on the might-have-been he turned to the consideration of the may-be. He began to examine the obstacle critically, not as a final extinguisher of his hopes, but as a problem to be dealt with.

Now what did that problem amount to? He, Marcus Pottermack, desired to marry Alice Bellard. That had been the darling wish and purpose of his life and he had no intention of abandoning it. She, on her side, wished to marry him, but she believed that her husband was still alive. He, Pottermack, knew that the said husband was dead, but he could not disclose his knowledge. Yet until the fact of the husband's death was disclosed, the marriage was impossible and must remain so for ever. For there is this unsatisfactory peculiarity about a dead man: that it is hopeless to look forward to the possibility of his dying. Thus the problem, put in a nutshell, amounted to this: that James Lewson, being dead de facto, had got to be made dead de jure.

But how was this to be done? It is hardly necessary to say that, at first, a number of wild-cat schemes floated through Mr. Pottermack's mind, though they found no lodgment there. For instance, he actually considered the feasibility of dismounting the sun-dial, fishing up the body and

planting it in some place where it might be found. Of course, the plan was physically impossible even if he could have faced the horrors of its execution.

Then he turned his attention to the now invaluable coat. He conceived the idea of depositing it at the edge of a cliff or on the brink of a river or dock. But this would not have served the required purpose. Doubtless it would have raised a suspicion that the owner was dead. But suspicion was of no use. Absolute certainty was what was needed to turn the wife into a widow. In connection with this idea, he studied the law relating to Presumption of Death; but when he learned that, about 1850, the Court of Queen's Bench had refused to presume the death of a person who was known to have been alive in the year 1027, he decided that the staying power of the law was considerably greater than his own and finally abandoned the idea.

Nevertheless his resolution remained unshaken. Somehow James Lewson would have to be given the proper, recognized status of a dead man. Though no practicable scheme presented itself, the problem was ever present in his mind. By day and by night, in his work in the garden, in his walks through the quiet lanes, even in the fair widow's pleasant sitting-room, his thoughts were constantly busy with the vain search for some solution; and so they might have continued indefinitely but for a chance circumstance that supplied him with a new suggestion. And even then, the suggestion was so indirect and so little related to the nature of his problem that he had nearly missed it.

From time to time, Mr. Pottermack was in the habit of paying a visit to London for the purpose of making various purchases, particularly of tools and materials. On one of these occasions, happening to be in the neighbourhood of Covent Garden, and realizing suddenly that the day was Friday, it occurred to him to, look in at the auction rooms in King Street, hard by and see what was going. For the Friday sales of "miscellaneous property" are of special interest to those who use tools, appliances, or scientific instruments, and Pottermack had on one or two previous occasions picked up some very useful bargains.

But this time he seemed to have drawn a blank; for when he ran his eye over the catalogue which was fixed to the doorpost he found, to his disgust, that the principal feature was "The valuable collection brought together by a well-known Egyptologist, lately deceased." He was on the point of turning away when he noticed, near the end of the catalogue, "another property" consisting of a quantity of model-maker's tools and appliances; whereupon he entered the office, and, having provided himself with a catalogue, made his way to the inner room where the tools were on view. These he looked over critically, marking here and there a "Lot" which might be worth buying if it should go cheaply enough. Then, having finished his actual business, he proceeded rather aimlessly to browse round the room, catalogue in hand, glancing at the various items of the Egyptologist's collection.

There is always something impressive about the relics of Ancient Egypt. Their vast antiquity, the evidence that they present of strange knowledge and a rather uncanny skill, with suggestions of a state of mind by no means primitive, yet utterly unlike our own, gives them a certain weird quality that makes itself felt by most observers. Pottermack was distinctly aware of it. As he looked over the collection of venerable objects—the ushabti figures, the wooden head-rests, the pre-dynastic painted vases, the jar-sealings, the flint implements and copper tools and weapons—he had the feeling that the place was unworthy of them. Particularly in regard to the wooden and stone steles, the portrait statuettes, the canopic jars and other pious memorials of the dead, did he feel that their presence here, offered for sale in the public market, was an affront to their sacred character. As to the coffins, and above all the mummies, their exposure here seemed to him positively indecent. Here were the actual bodies of deceased ladies and gentlemen, persons of rank and station in their

day, as the inscriptions testified, catalogued as mere curios, with the auctioneer's ticket pasted on their very coffins or even on their funeral vesture.

Mr. Pottermack halted by a large open box into which a much-damaged mummy had been crammed and lay, partly doubled up, amidst a litter of broken wood. The ticket, stuck on the linen bandage in which the body was swathed, marked it as "Lot 15"; and reference to the catalogue elicited the further particulars: "Mummy of an official with portions of wooden coffin (a.f.)," while a label attached to the mummy identified the deceased as "Khama-Heru, a libationer of the 19th or 20th dynasty."

Mr. Pottermack stood by the box, looking down distastefully, almost resentfully, at the shapeless figure, wrapped in its bulky swathings, and looking like a gigantic rag doll that had been bundled into a rubbish-box. That great rag doll had once been a respected attendant at feasts and solemn ceremonials. Presently it would be put up "with all faults" and probably knocked down for a few shillings to some speculative curio dealer. And as he reflected thus, the words of Sir Thomas Browne floated through his mind: "The Egyptian mummies which Time or Cambyses hath spared. Avarice now consumeth." Vain, indeed, were the efforts of the pious Mizraim to achieve even physical immortality.

He had turned away and was beginning to move slowly towards the door. And then, suddenly, in a moment of time, two separate ideas, apparently unrelated, linked themselves together and evolved a third. And a very strange one that newly evolved idea was. Mr. Pottermack was quite startled. As it flashed into his mind, he stopped dead, and then, retracing his steps, halted once more beside the box. But now, as he looked down on the great rag doll that had once been Khama-Heru, no distaste or resentment was in his eye, but rather an eager curiosity that estimated and measured and sought for details. He inspected critically the fracture where the brittle corpse had been doubled up to jam it in the box; the spot where part of a shrivelled nose peeped through a hole in the rotten linen. The history of this thing interested him no more. What it had been was no concern of his. Its importance to him was in what it was now. It was a dead body—a dead human body; the body of a man; of a tall man, so far as he could judge.

He made a pencil mark on his catalogue opposite Lot 15, and then, having glanced at his watch, walked out into King Street, there to pace up and down until it should be time for the auction to begin; and meanwhile to try to fashion this startling but rather nebulous idea into a more definite shape; to decide, in short, the part which the late Khama-Heru could be given to play in his slightly involved affairs.

The actual acquirement of the gruesome relic presented no difficulties. It is true that the auctioneer made some conscientious efforts to invest Lot 15 with some semblance of value. But his plausible suggestions as to the "trifling restorations" that might be necessary aroused no enthusiasm. He had to start the bidding himself—at ten shillings; and at fifteen the hammer descended to confirm Mr. Pottermack in the lawful possession of a deceased libationer. Thereupon the money was handed in and the box handed out, and when it had its lid nailed on and a length of cord tied round it, it was conveyed out to the pavement, whence it was presently transferred to the roof of a cab and in due course transported to Marylebone Station to await the next train to Borley.

The advent of Khama-Heru, deceased, to "The Chestnuts," Borley, inaugurated a radical change in Mr. Pottermack's habits and mental state. Gone was the restless indecision that had kept him mooning about, thinking everlastingly and getting nothing done. Now, his mind was, in a measure, at rest. He had a job, and if all the details of that job were not yet clear to him, still he could, as in any other job, get on with the part that he knew while he was planning out the remainder.

The first problem was to dispose of the box—and of the occupant when he should emerge. In the first place, it had been conveyed through the side gate to the workshop, where it at present reposed. But this would never do, especially when the emergence should take place. For, of late, Alice Bellard had taken to bringing him little commissions and sitting by him in the workshop babbling cheerfully while he carried them out. Which was exceedingly pleasant. But two is company, and, assuredly, Khama-Heru would have made a very undesirable third. And there was another point. At present, in his box with the fragments of the coffin and the auctioneer's ticket, K.-H. was harmless enough; a mere fifteen shillings' worth of miscellaneous property. But after a few "trifling restorations" (of a rather different kind from those contemplated by the auctioneer) the said K.-H. would present a highly compromising appearance. Arrangements would have to be made for keeping him in strict retirement.

The conditions were met fairly well by emptying the tool-house. The roller and the lawn-mower could rest safely outside under a tarpaulin, and the garden tools could be stowed at the end of the metal-shop. When this had been done and the tool-house door fitted with a really safe lock, Pottermack dragged the box thither; and having taken off the lid, strengthened it, and fitted it with a pair of stout hinges and a good lever lock, he felt that he had made things secure for the present. The tool-house was furnished with a long bench for the storage of flower-pots, and, as it was lighted only by a window in the roof, he would be able to work there conveniently and safe from observation.

His first proceeding was to unroll the mummy, to unwind the countless yards of rotten linen bandage with which it had been covered. He wanted to see what the mummy itself was like and whether it was complete. But when he had got all the wrappings off and looked at the thing as it lay on the bench, he was appalled at its appearance. In its wrappings it had been gruesome enough—a great, horrible rag doll; but divested of those wrappings it was ghastly. For now it revealed itself frankly for what it was—a dead man; dry, shrivelled, unnatural, but still undeniably the dead body of a man.

Pottermack stood by the bench gazing at it distastefully and with something of the compunction that he had felt in the auction room. But it was of no use being squeamish. He had bought the thing for a specific and most necessary purpose, and that purpose had got to be carried into effect. Gulping down his qualms, therefore, he set himself to make a systematic examination.

Apparently the body was quite complete. The abdomen looked a little queer, but probably that was due to the drying, though there were unmistakable signs of its having been opened. Both legs were partially broken off at the hip-joints, just hanging on loosely by a few strings of dried flesh. But the bones seemed quite uninjured. The head was in the same condition as the legs, detached from the spine save for one or two strands of dry muscle, and at the moment rolled over on its side with its face turned towards Pottermack. And a grisly face it was; for despite the shrivelled nose, the papery ears, the sunken eyes, and the horrid sardonic grin, it had a recognizable human expression. Looking at it with shuddering interest, Pottermack felt that he could form a fairly clear idea as to what Khama-Heru must have looked like when alive.

Careful measurement with a two-foot rule showed that the body was just under five feet nine inches in length. Allowing for shrinkage in drying, his height had probably been well over five feet ten; enough to make him a passable understudy for James Lewson. Unfortunately, there was no facial resemblance whatever, but this, Pottermack hoped, would be of no consequence. The dimensions were what really mattered. But, of course, the body was useless for Pottermack's purpose in its present rigid, brittle state, and the important question was how far it could be softened and rendered flexible. Pottermack decided to make a tentative experiment on one shoulder by leaving it for an hour or two under several thicknesses of wet rag; which he did, with

results that were, on the whole, satisfactory. The moistened flesh and skin swelled up appreciably and took on a much more natural appearance, and the arm now moved freely at the shoulder-joint. But it was evident that this treatment must not be applied prematurely, or other, less desirable changes would set in. He accordingly allowed the moistened area to dry thoroughly and then put the mummy away in its box, there to remain hidden until the other preparations had been completed.

These were of two kinds. First, the understudy had to be provided with a "make-up" which would be perfectly convincing under somewhat rigorous conditions; and secondly, a suitable setting had to be found for the little drama in which the understudy should play his part. Both gave Mr. Pottermack considerable occupation.

In connection with the make-up, it happened most fortunately that he had preserved the copy of the local paper containing the announcement of the disappearance with the description of the missing man issued by the police. With native caution, Mr. Pottermack had used the paper to line a drawer, and he now drew it forth and studied its remarkably full details. The coat was in his possession; most fortunately, since it was of a conspicuous pattern and would have been almost impossible to duplicate. The other clothing—the pin-head worsted waistcoat and trousers, the plain grey cotton shirt, the collar, neck-tie, and underclothing—was all of a kind that could be easily matched from the description, aided in some cases by his own memory; and the shoes, which were described minutely, could be duplicated with ease at any large shoe-retailers, while as to the rubber soles, they were of a pattern that were turned out by the thousand.

Nevertheless, the outfit for the deceased gave him endless trouble and occasioned numerous visits to London. The clothing called for tactful manoeuvring, since it was obviously not for his own wear. The "Invicta" sole manufacturers had to be found through the directory, and the circular heels, with their five-pointed stars, involved a long and troublesome search; for most of the star-pattern heels have six-pointed stars. And even when the outfit had been obtained the work was not at an end. For all the things were new. They had to be "conditioned" before they would be ready for the final act. The garments had to be worn, and worn roughly (in the garden and workshop, since their size made them entirely unpresentable), to produce marks of wear and convincing creases. The shoes, when the soles had been stuck on and a knife-cut made across the neck of the horse on the right sole, had to be taken out for long nocturnal walks on rough roads, having been previously fitted with two pairs of inner cork soles to prevent them from dropping off. The underclothing would require to be marked, but this Pottermack prudently put off until the last moment. Still, all these preparatory activities took up a good deal of time and gave a considerable amount of trouble. Not that time was of any importance. There was no hurry. Now that Pottermack had a plan his mind was at rest.

Moreover, he had certain distractions, besides his frequent visits to Lavender Cottage. For, in addition to these preparations connected with the costume of the actor, there were others concerned with the scene of the drama. A suitable setting had to be found for James Lewson's next—and, as Pottermack devoutly hoped, final—appearance.

The place must of necessity be close at hand and ought to be on the line of Lewson's known route. This left, practically, the choice between the heath and the wood. The former he rejected as too exposed for his purpose and too much frequented to be perfectly convincing. Of the wood he knew little excepting that few persons seemed ever to enter it, probably for the reason that had led him to avoid it; that, owing to its neglected state, it was choked by almost impenetrable undergrowth.

Now he decided to explore it thoroughly, and since the path which meandered through it divided it into two nearly equal parts, he proposed to make a systematic exploration of each part separately.

He began with the part that lay to the left of the path, which was, if possible, less frequented than the other. Choosing a place where the undergrowth was least dense, he plunged in and began to burrow through the bushes, stooping low to avoid the matted twigs and branches and keeping an eye on a pocket-compass that he held in his left hand. It was a wearisome and uncomfortable mode of progression, and had the disadvantage that, doubled up as he was, he could see little but the compass and the ground at his feet. And it nearly brought him to disaster; for he had been blundering along thus for about ten minutes in as near to a straight line as was possible, when he suddenly found himself at the edge of what looked like a low cliff. Another step forward and he would have been over the brink.

He stopped short, and, straightening his back, drew aside the branches of the tall bushes and looked down. Beneath him was what had evidently been a gravel-pit; but it must have been disused for many years, for its floor was covered, not only with bushes but trees of quite a respectable size. It seemed to him that this place was worth a closer examination. And since the pit had been produced by excavation, there must obviously be some passage-way to the bottom, up and down which the carts had passed when the gravel was being dug.

Accordingly he began to make his way cautiously along the brink, keeping a safe distance from the possibly crumbling edge. He had proceeded thus for a couple of hundred yards when he came to the edge of a sunken cart-track, and following this, soon reached the entrance. Walking down the rough track, in which the deep cart-ruts could still be made out, he reached the floor of the pit and paused to look around; but the trees that had grown up and the high bushes made it impossible to see across. He therefore embarked on a circumnavigation of the pit, wading through beds of tall nettles that grew luxuriantly right up to the cliff-like face of the gravel.

He had made nearly half the circuit of the pit when he perceived, some distance ahead, a large wooden gate which guarded the entrance to a tunnel or excavation of some kind. It had two leaves, in which he could see, as he came nearer, a wicket which stood half open. Approaching and peering in through the opening, he found the cavity to be an artificial cave dug in the hard gravel, apparently to serve as a cart-shelter, for the floor was marked by a pair of wide ruts and the remains of a broken sway-bar lay close to one side.

Deeply interested in this excavation, Mr. Pottermack pulled open the wicket-gate—in the lock of which a rusty key still remained—and stepping in through the opening, looked critically around the interior. That it had been for many years disused, so far as its original purpose was concerned, followed from the state of the pit and the absence of any signs of recent digging. But yet the cave itself showed traces of comparatively recent occupation; and those traces threw considerable light on the character of the occupants. A sooty streak up one wall, fading away on the roof, and a heap of wood-ashes mixed with fragments of charcoal, told of not one fire but a series of fires lit on the same spot. Beside the long-extinct embers lay a rusty "billy," originally made from a bully-beef tin fitted with a wire handle; fragments of unsavoury rags and a pair of decayed boots spoke of changes of costume that could certainly not have been premature; while numbers of bird and rabbit bones strewn around hinted at petty poaching, with, perchance, a fortunate snatch now and again in the vicinity of a farmyard.

Mr. Pottermack viewed these relics of the unknown nomad with profound attention. Like most resourceful men, he was quick to take a suggestion. And here, in the pit, the cavern, and these unmistakable relics, was a ready-made story. His own scheme had hardly advanced beyond the stage of sketchy outline. He knew broadly what he intended, but the details had not yet been filled in. Now he could complete the sketch in such detail that nothing would remain but the bare execution; and even that had been robbed of its chief difficulties by the discovery of this cavern.

He paced slowly up and down the echoing chamber, letting his imagination picture the dramatic climax and congratulating himself on this fortunate discovery. How astonishingly well it all came together! The place and the circumstances might have been designed for the very purpose. No need now to puzzle out a plausible cause of death. The empty poison-bottle and the discharged pistol-bullet, which he had considered alternatively, could now be discarded. The cause of death would be obvious. He had nearly broken his own neck coming here in broad daylight. If he had come in the dark, he would have broken it to a certainty.

Then there were the vanished notes and the necessarily empty pockets—necessarily empty, since, as he did not know what they had contained, he would not dare to introduce contents. He had hoped that a reasonable inference would be drawn. But now no inference would be needed. Even the most guileless village constable, when he had seen those fowl and rabbit bones, would understand how deceased's pockets came to be empty.

From reflections on the great denouement Pottermack recalled his thoughts to the practical details of procedure. He proposed forthwith to take over the reversion of the late resident's tenancy. But he could not leave it in its present unguarded state. When the time came for him to occupy it he would require "the use and enjoyment of the said messuage and premises" in the strictest privacy. It would never do to have casual callers dropping in there in his absence. He must see how the place could be made secure.

Inspection of the entrance showed that the large gates were fastened on the inside by massive bars of wood thrust through great iron staples. Consequently, when the wicket-gate was locked the cave was absolutely secure from intrusion. The important question now was as to the lock of the wicket-gate. Was it possible to turn the key? A few strenuous wrenches answered the question in the negative. It is true that, by a strong effort, the rusty key could be made to turn backwards, but by no effort whatever could it be made to shoot the bolt. Key and lock were both encrusted with the rust of years.

There was only one thing to be done. The key must be taken away and scraped clean. Then, with the aid of oil or paraffin, it would probably be possible to make the lock work. By putting out all his strength, Pottermack managed to turn the key backwards far enough to enable him to pull it out of the lock; whereupon, having dropped it in his pocket, he retraced his steps to the entrance to the pit and walked up the sloping cart-track until it emerged on the level, when he halted, and having consulted his compass, set forth, holding it in his hand, and trying by means of the ruts to find the track along which the carts used to pass to and fro across the road.

As the matter was of considerable importance (since the cave was to be the scene of some momentous operations and it was necessary for him to be able to find his way to it with ease and certainty), he took his time over the survey, tracing the ruts until they faded away into the younger undergrowth, and thereafter identifying the overgrown track by the absence of large bushes or trees. From time to time he jotted down a note of the compass-bearing and sliced off with his knife a piece of bark from one of the larger branches of a bush or the trunk of a sapling, and so proceeded methodically, leaving an inconspicuously blazed trail behind him until at last he came out on to the path. Here he paused and looked about him for a landmark, his natural caution restraining him from making an artificial mark; nor was this necessary, for exactly opposite to the point where he had emerged, a good-sized beech tree stood back only a few yards from the path.

Having taken a good look at the tree, that he might recognize it at the next visit, he pocketed his compass and started homewards, counting his paces as he went until he reached the place where the path entered the wood, when he halted and wrote down in his pocket-book the number of paces. That done, his exploration was finished for the time being. The rest of the day he devoted to

cleaning the key, to drawing on a card a little sketch-map of his route from the notes in his pocket-book, and to one or two odd jobs connected with the great scheme.

We need not follow his proceedings in minute detail. On the following day, having furnished himself with the cleaned key, a small spanner, a bottle of paraffin mixed with oil, and one or two feathers, he returned to the cave, finding his way thither without difficulty by the aid of his map. There he made a determined attack on the rusty lock, oiling its interior parts freely and turning the key—also oiled—by means of the spanner. At length its corroded bolt shot out with a reluctant groan; and when this, too, had been oiled and shot back and forth a few times, Pottermack shut the wicket, locked it and carried off the key in his pocket, with the comfortable feeling that he now had a secure place in which the highly compromising final operations could be carried out in reasonable safety.

And now the time drew nigh for those final operations to be proceeded with. The costume was complete and its various items had been brought by wear and rough usage to a suitable condition. The waning summer hinted at the approach of autumn and the weather would presently be such as to render woodland expeditions, especially of a nocturnal kind, disagreeable and difficult. And then Pottermack, though not in any way hustled, was beginning to look forward a little eagerly to the end of this troublesome, secret business. He yearned to feel that the tableau was set and that he could wait quietly for the denouement. Also, he was getting to feel very strongly that he would be glad to be relieved of the society of Khama-Heru.

But meanwhile that ancient libationer became daily a more and more undesirable tenant. For the time had come for the course of treatment that should render him at once more convincing and more portable. His condition when first unrolled from his wrappings was that of a wooden effigy, hard and stiff as a board. In that state he could never be got into his clothes, nor could he be transported to the cave under the necessary conditions of secrecy; nor could he effectively impersonate the late James Lewson. The work that the embalmers had done so well would have to be undone. After all, he had had some four thousand years of physical immortality, so the embalmers' fees would not have been thrown away.

There was no difficulty about the treatment. Pottermack simply wrapped the mummy in several thicknesses of wet rag, poured a can of water over it, and, having enclosed it in an outer covering of tarpaulin, left it to macerate for forty-eight hours. When, at the end of that time, he uncovered it, he was at once encouraged and appalled. The last trace of the museum atmosphere was dissipated. It was a mummy no more but just an unburied corpse. The dry muscles had absorbed the moisture and swelled up to an unexpected bulk; the parchment-like skin had grown soft and sodden, and the skeleton hands had filled out and looked almost natural save for the queer, dirty orange colour of the fingernails. And even that, when Pottermack had observed it with a strong suspicion that it was an artificial stain, disappeared almost completely after a cautious application of chlorinated soda. In short, Khama-Heru seemed already to call aloud for the coroner. All, then, was going well so far. But Pottermack realized only too clearly that the part that was done was the easy part. The real difficulties had now to be faced; and when he considered those difficulties, when he reflected on the hideous risks that he would have to run, the awful consequences of a possible miscarriage of his plans, he stood aghast.

But still with unshaken resolution he set himself to plotting out the details of the next move.

CHAPTER XIII—THE SETTING OF THE TABLEAU

The task which confronted Mr. Pottermack in the immediate future involved a series of operations of greatly varying difficulty. The materials for the "tableau" had to be transported from the

workshop and tool-house to the cave in the gravel-pit. Thither they would be conveyed in instalments and left safely under lock and key until they were all there, ready to be "assembled." In the case of the clothing, the conveyance would be attended by no difficulties and little risk. It could be done quite safely by daylight. But the instalments of Khama-Heru, particularly the larger ones, would have to be transported, not merely after dark, but so late as to make it practically certain that he would have the path and the wood to himself.

The latter fact had been evident from the beginning, and in view of it, Pottermack had provided himself with a night-marching compass (having a two-inch luminous dial and direction-pointer) and an electric lamp of the police pattern; so that he was now ready to begin; and as he had decided to convey the clothing first, he commenced operations by making a careful survey of the separate items and putting the necessary finishing touches to them.

It was now for the first time that he made a thorough examination of Lewson's coat and of the contents of the letter-case. And it was just as well that he did; for among those contents was a recent letter from Alice, refusing a "loan" (probably that letter had precipitated the catastrophe). It was unsigned and bore no address, but still it might have given trouble, even if no one but himself should have been able to identify the very characteristic handwriting. Accordingly he burned it forthwith and went still more carefully through the remaining papers; but there was nothing more that interested him. They consisted chiefly of tradesmen's bills, demands for money owing, notes of racing transactions, a letter from his broker, and a few visiting-cards—his own—all of which Pottermack returned to their receptacle. The other pockets contained only a handkerchief, marked "J. Lewson," a leather cigarette-case, and a loose key which looked like a safe key. The key he transferred to the trousers pocket, the cigarette-case he burned, and the handkerchief he retained as a guide to the next operation, that of marking the underclothing. This he did with great care, following his copy closely and placing the marks in accordance with the particulars in the police description, using a special ink of guaranteed durability.

When the "properties" were ready for removal he considered the question of time. This need not be a nocturnal expedition. There would be nothing suspicious in his appearance, and he had, in fact, during his exploration of the wood, not met or seen a single person. Still, it might be better to make his visit to the pit after dusk, when, even if he should be seen, he would not be recognized, and the nature of his proceedings there would not be clearly observable.

Accordingly he prepared for his start with the first instalment as the sun was getting low in the west. Lewson's coat he put on in lieu of his own, covering it with a roomy showerproof overcoat. The trousers and waistcoat he stowed neatly at the bottom of his rucksack with his moth-collecting kit and folding-net above them. Then, with the net-staff in his hand, he let himself out of the side gate just as the crimson disc of the sun began to dive behind a bank of slaty cloud.

The expedition was quite uneventful. He tramped along the path in the gloaming, a solitary figure in the evening landscape; he followed it into the wood and along to the now familiar beech tree; and in all the way he met not a soul. He turned off on the almost indistinguishable track, finding no need for his sketch-map and only glancing at the inconspicuous blazings on bush and sapling. By the time he reached the entrance to the pit, the dusk had closed in but even now there was light enough for him to find his way down the sloping cart-track, and even to note that apparently since his last visit, inasmuch as he had not noticed it before, a small tree had toppled over the edge of the cliff, bringing down with it a little avalanche of stones and gravel. He looked up and made a slight detour, picking his way cautiously among the fallen stones; and, preoccupied as he was, that fallen tree and those heaped and scattered stones started a train of thought of which he was hardly conscious at the time.

When he had shed Lewson's coat and by the light of a little, dim pocket-lamp unpacked the trousers and waistcoat, he threw them down in a corner at the back of the cave. Apprehensively he glanced round for some trace of recent visitors (though he knew there could have been none); then he extinguished the lamp, passed out through the wicket, shut the little gate, locked it, and, having pocketed the key, turned away with a sigh of relief. The first instalment was delivered. It wasn't much, but still, he had made a beginning.

On his way back through the wood he made use of the night-compass; not that he seemed greatly to need it, for he found his way with an ease that surprised him. But it was obviously a useful instrument and it was well that he should acquire experience in its management, for there were circumstances that might possibly arise in which it would be invaluable. It would be a fearsome experience to be lost at night in the wood—especially with one of the later instalments.

The easy success of this first expedition had a beneficial moral effect, and with each of the succeeding journeys the strangeness of the experience wore off more and more. Even in the twilight he threaded the blazed track through the wood quite readily without reference to the blazings; and the return in the dark, with the glowing compass in his hand, was hardly more difficult. Half a dozen of these evening jaunts found the entire costume—clothes, shoes, cap, socks, underclothing—stored under lock and key in the cave—waiting for the arrival of the wearer.

But now came the really formidable part of the undertaking, and as Pottermack contemplated those next few journeys he quailed. There was now no question of setting forth in the gloaming; these journeys would have to be made in the very dead of night. So he felt; and even as he yielded to the feeling as to something inevitable, he knew that the reason for it was largely psychological; that it was determined by his own mental state rather than by external circumstances. Admittedly, a human head is an awkward thing to pack neatly in a rucksack. Still, it is of no great size. Its longest diameter, including the lower jaw, is no more than nine or ten inches. A half-quartern loaf and a bottle of beer would make a bigger bulge; yet with these, Pottermack would have gone abroad gaily, never dreaming of having his burden challenged.

He knew all this. And yet as he took up the head (it came off in his hands owing to the frayed-out condition of the softened muscle and ligament) a thrill of horror ran through him at the thought of that journey. The thing seemed to grin derisively in his face as he carried it from the tool-house to the workshop; and when he laid it down on the sheet of brown paper on the bench, the jaws fell open as if it were about to utter a yell.

He wrapped it up hastily and thrust it into the rucksack, and then, by way of feeble and futile precaution stuffed the sugaring-tin and collecting-box on top. With creeping flesh he slung the package on his back and, grasping the net-stick, went out across the garden to the gate. He was frankly terrified. When he had passed out of the gate, he stood for some seconds irresolute, unwilling to shut it behind him; and when at last he closed it softly, the click of the spring-latch shutting him out definitely gave him such a qualm that he could hardly resist the impulse to reopen the gate, or, at least, to leave the key in the lock ready for instant use.

Once started, he strode forward at a rapid pace, restraining himself by an effort from breaking into a run. It was a pitch-dark night, near to new moon and overcast as well; so dark that he could barely see the path in the open, and only a slightly intenser gloom told him when he had entered the wood. Here he began to count his paces and strain his eyes into the blackness ahead; for, anticipating some nervousness on this journey, he had taken the precaution when returning from the last to spread a sheet of newspaper at the foot of the beech tree (which formed his "departure" for the cart-track and the gravel-pit) and weight it with a large stone. For this patch of light on the dark background he looked eagerly as he stumbled forward, peering into utter blackness and

feeling his way along the path with his feet; and when he had counted out the distance and still saw no sign of it, he halted, and, listening fearfully to the stealthy night sounds of the wood, looked anxiously both ahead and behind him.

Nothing whatever could be seen. But perhaps it was too dark for even a white object to show. Perhaps he had counted wrong, or possibly in his haste he had "stepped out" or "stepped short." Reluctantly he drew out his little pocket-lamp (he did not dare to use the powerful inspection-lamp, though he had it with him) and let its feeble glimmer travel around him. Somehow the trees and bushes looked unfamiliar; but doubtless everything would look unfamiliar in that deceptive glimmer. Still, he had begun to know this path pretty well, even by night. Eventually he turned back and slowly retraced his steps, throwing the dim lamplight on the path ahead. Presently, out of the greenish gloom with its bewildering shadows there sprang a spot of white; and hurrying forward, he recognized with a sigh of relief the sheet of paper lying at the foot of the beech.

From this point he had no more difficulty. Plunging forward into the cellar-like darkness, he went on confidently, guided by the trusty compass which glowed only the more brightly for the impenetrable gloom around. Now and again he stopped to let the swinging dial come to rest and to verify his position by a momentary flash of the lamp. Soon he felt the familiar ruts beneath his feet and came out into the mitigated obscurity of the open track; then, following it down the slope, found his way through the nettles under the cliff, over the remains of the avalanche, until he reached the gate of the cave. A few minutes more and he had discharged his ghastly cargo, locked it into its new abode, and started, free at last from his horrid incubus, on the homeward journey, noting with a certain exasperation how, now that it was of no consequence, he made his way through the wood almost as easily as he would have done by daylight.

But it had been a harrowing experience. Short as had been the journey and light the burden, he stumbled in at his gate as wearily as if he had tramped a dozen miles with a sack of flour on his back. And yet it was but the first and by far the easiest of these midnight expeditions. He realized that clearly enough as he stole silently into the house while a neighbouring church clock struck two. There were three more instalments; and of the last one he would not allow himself to think.

But events seldom fall out precisely as we forecast them. The next two 'trips' gave Pottermack less trouble than had the first, though they were undeniably more risky. The safe conveyance of the first instalment gave him confidence, and the trifling, but disconcerting, hitch in finding the 'departure' mark suggested measures to prevent its repetition. Still, it was as well that he had transported the easiest load first, for the two succeeding ones made call enough on his courage and resolution. For whereas the head had merely created a conspicuous bulge in the rucksack, the legs refused to be concealed at all. Doubled up as completely as the softened muscles and ligaments permitted, each made an unshapely, elongated parcel over twenty inches in length, of which nearly half projected from the mouth of the rucksack.

However, the two journeys were made without any mishap. As on the previous occasions, Pottermack met nobody either on the path or in the wood, and this circumstance helped him to brace up his nerves for the conveyance of the final instalment. Indeed, the chance of his meeting any person at one or two in the morning in this place, which was unfrequented even by day, was infinitely remote. At those hours one could probably have walked the whole length of the town without encountering a single human being other than the constables on night duty; and it was certain that no constable would be prowling about the deserted countryside or groping his way through the wood.

So Pottermack argued, and reasonably enough; but still he shied at that last instalment. The headless trunk alone was some twenty-six inches long, and, with the attached arms, was a bulky

mass. No disguise was possible in its conveyance. It would have to be put into a sack and frankly carried on his shoulder. Of course, if he met nobody, this was of no consequence apart from the inconvenience and exertion; and again he assured himself that he would meet nobody. There was nobody to meet. But still—well, there was no margin for the unexpected. The appearance of a man carrying a sack at one o'clock in the morning was a good deal more than suspicious. No rural constable or keeper would let him pass. And a single glance into that sack—

However, it was useless to rack his nerves with disquieting suppositions. There was pretty certainly not a human creature abroad in the whole countryside, and at any rate the thing had got to be taken to the cave. Quivering with disgust and apprehension, he persuaded the limp torso into the sack that he had obtained for it, tied up the mouth, and, hoisting it on his shoulder, put out into the darkness.

As soon as he had closed the gate he set off at a quick walk. He had no inclination to run this time, for his burden was of a very substantial weight from the moisture that it had absorbed. From time to time he had to halt and transfer it from one shoulder to the other. He would have liked to put it down and rest for a few moments, but did not dare while he was in the open. An unconquerable terror urged him forward to the shelter of the wood and forbade him to slacken his pace, though his knees were trembling and the sweat trickled down his face. Yet he kept sufficient presence of mind to make sure of his "departure," counting his paces from the entrance to the wood and showing the glimmer of his little lamp as his counting warned him of his approach to the beech tree. Soon its light fell on the sheet of paper, and, with a sigh of relief, he turned off the path into the old cart-track.

Once off the path, his extreme terror subsided and he followed the track confidently with only an occasional flash of his lamp to pick up a blaze on bush or tree and verify his direction. He even contemplated a brief rest, and he had, in fact, halted and was about to lower his burden from his shoulders when his ear seemed to catch a faint sound of movement somewhere within the wood. Instantly all his terrors revived. His limbs trembled and his hair seemed to stir under his cap as he stood stock-still with mouth agape, listening with almost agonized intentness.

Presently he heard the sound again; the sound of something moving through the undergrowth. And then it became quite distinct and clearly recognizable as footfalls—the footsteps of two persons at least, moving rather slowly and stealthily; and by the increasing distinctness of the sounds, it was evident that they were coming in his direction. The instant that he recognized this, Pottermack stole softly off the track into the dense wood until he came to a young beech tree, at the foot of which he silently deposited the sack, leaning it against the bole of the tree. Then in the same stealthy manner he crept away a dozen paces or so and again halted and listened. But now the sounds had unaccountably ceased; and to Pottermack the profound silence that had followed them was sinister and alarming. Suddenly there came to him distinctly a hoarse whisper:

"Joe, there's some one in the wood!"

Again the deathly silence descended. Then the sack, which must have been stood up insecurely, slipped from the bole of the tree and rolled over among the dead leaves.

"J'ear that?" came the hushed voice of the unseen whisperer.

Pottermack listened intently, craning forward in an effort to locate the owner of the voice. In fact, he craned a little too far and had to move one foot to recover his balance. But the toe of that foot caught against a straggling root and tripped him up, so that he staggered forward a couple of paces, not noisily, but still very audibly.

Instantly the silence of the wood was dissipated. A startled voice exclaimed: "Gawd! Look out!" and then Joseph and his companion took to undissembled flight, bursting through the undergrowth and crashing into the bushes like a couple of startled elephants. Pottermack made a noisy pretence of pursuit which accelerated the pace of the fugitives; then he stood still, listening with grateful ears to the hurried tramplings as they gradually grew faint in the distance.

When they had nearly died away, he turned, and re-entering the dense wood, made his way, with the aid of the little lamp, towards the beech where he had put down the sack. But the beech was not exactly where he had supposed it to be, and it took him a couple of minutes of frantic searching to locate it. At last the feeble rays of his lamp fell on the slender trunk, and he hurried forward eagerly to retrieve his treasure. But when he reached the tree and cast the light of his lamp on the buttressed roots, the sack was nowhere to be seen. He gazed in astonishment at the roots and the ground beyond, but the sack was certainly not there. It was very strange. He had heard the sack fall over and roll off the roots, but it could not have rolled out of sight. Was it possible that the poachers, or whatever they were, could have picked it up and carried it away? That seemed quite impossible, for the voice had come from the opposite direction. And then the simple explanation dawned on him. This was the wrong tree.

As he realized this, his self-possession forsook him completely. With frantic haste he began to circle round, thrusting through the undergrowth, peering with starting eyes at the ground carpeted with last year's leaves on which the light fell from his lamp. Again and again a tall, slender trunk lured him on to a fresh disappointment. He seemed to be bewitched. The place appeared to be full of beech trees—as in fact it was, being a beech wood. And with each failure he became more wildly terrified and distraught. All sense of direction and position was gone. He was just blindly seeking an unknown tree in a pitch-dark wood.

Suddenly he realized the horrid truth. He was lost. He had no idea whatever as to his whereabouts. He could not even guess in which direction the track lay, and as to his hideous but precious burden, he might have strayed half a mile away from it. He stopped short and tried to pull himself together. This sort of thing would never do. He might wander on, at this rate, until daylight or topple unawares into the pit and break his neck. There was only one thing to be done. He must get back to the path and take a fresh departure.

As this simple solution occurred to him, his self-possession became somewhat restored and he was able to consider his position more calmly. Producing his compass and opening it, he stood quite still until the dial came to rest. Then he turned slowly, so as not to set it swinging again, until the luminous "lubber-line" pointed due west. He had only to keep it pointing in that direction and it would infallibly lead him to the path, which ran nearly north and south. So, with renewed confidence, he began to walk forward, keeping his eye fixed on that invaluable direction-line.

He had been walking thus some three or four minutes, progressing slowly of necessity since he had to push straight forward through the undergrowth, when he tripped over some bulky object and butted rather heavily into the trunk of a tree. Picking himself up, a little shaken by the impact, he snatched out his lamp and threw its light on the object over which he had stumbled. And then he could hardly repress a shout of joy.

It was the sack.

How differently do we view things under different circumstances. When Pottermack had started, the very touch of that sack with its damp, yielding inmate had sent shudders of loathing down his spine. Now he caught it up joyfully, he could almost have embraced it, and as he set forward in the new direction he steadied it fondly on his shoulder. For he had not only found the sack, he had

recovered his position. A dozen paces to the north brought him to the spot from whence he had stepped off the track into the wood. Now he had but to turn east and resume his interrupted journey.

But the meeting with those two men had shaken his confidence. He stole on nervously along the cart-track, and when he reached the pit, he peered apprehensively into the darkness on every side, half expecting to detect some lurking figure watching him from among the high nettles. Only when he had at last deposited his burden in the cave and locked and tried the wicket was his mind even moderately at rest; and even then throughout the homeward journey his thoughts occupied themselves in picturing, with perverse ingenuity, all the mischances that might possibly have befallen him and that might yet lie in wait to defeat his plans in the very moment of their accomplishment.

He arrived home tired, shaken, and dispirited, inclined rather to let his thoughts dwell on the difficulties and dangers that lay ahead than to congratulate himself on those that he had surmounted. As he crept noiselessly up to bed and thought of the gruesome task that had yet to be accomplished, he resolved to give himself a day or two's rest to steady his nerves before he embarked on it. But the following day saw a change of mind. Refreshed even by the short night's sleep, as soon as he had risen he began to be possessed by a devouring anxiety to finish this horrible business and be done with it. Besides which, common sense told him that the presence of the body and the clothes in the cave constituted a very serious danger. If they should be discovered, very awkward enquiries might be set on foot, and at the best his scheme would be "blown on" and rendered impossible for ever after.

A long nap in the afternoon further revived him, and as the evening wore on he began to be impatient to get on the road. This time there were no special preparations to make and no risks in the actual journeys, either going or returning. The recollection of those two men occasioned some passing thoughts of means of defence, for they had obviously been out for no good, as their precipitate retreat showed. He even considered taking a revolver, but his thorough-going British dislike of lethal weapons, which his long residence in the States had accentuated rather than diminished, made him reject the idea. The net-staff was quite a good weapon, especially in the dark; and, in fact, he was not particularly nervous about those men, or any others, so long as he bore no incriminating burden.

When at last he started, just after midnight, he carried the rucksack slung from his shoulders and the stout net-stick in his hand. But the former contained nothing but a bona fide collecting outfit, including the inspection-lamp, so even a police patrol had no terrors for him. Naturally, it followed that he neither met, saw, nor heard a single person either on the path or in the wood. Swinging easily along the now familiar way, he made his departure almost by instinct and threaded the cart-track with hardly a glance at the compass. And all too soon—as it seemed to him—he found himself at the gate of the cave with the last horrid task immediately confronting him.

It was even worse than he had expected, for he had never dared to let his imagination fill in all the dreadful details. But now, when he had locked himself in and hung the inspection-lamp on a nail in the gate so that a broad beam of light fell on the grisly heap, he stood, shivering and appalled, struggling to brace up his courage to begin. And at last he brought himself to the sticking point and fell to work.

We need not share his agonies. It was a loathly business. The dismembered parts had to be inducted separately into their garments, leaving the "assembling" for a later stage; and the sheer physical difficulty of persuading those limp, flabby, unhelpful members into the closer-fitting articles of clothing was at once an aggravation and a distraction from the horror of the task. And

with it all, it was necessary to keep the attention wide awake. For there must be no mistakes. A time would come when the clothing would be submitted to critical examination and the slightest error might rouse fatal suspicions. So Pottermack told himself as, with trembling fingers, he buttoned the waistcoat on the headless, legless torso; only to discover, as he fastened the last button, that he had forgotten the braces.

At length the actual clothing was completed. The legs, encased in underclothing, trousers, socks and shoes, lay on the floor, sprawling in hideous, unnatural contortion; the trunk, fully dressed even to collar and neck-tie, reposed on its back with its arms flung out and the brown, claw-like hands protruding from the sleeves; while, hard by, the head seemed to grin with sardonic amusement at the cloth cap that sat incongruously on its ancient cranium. All was now ready for the "assembling."

This presented less difficulty, but the result was far from satisfactory. For no kind of fastening was permissible. The legs were joined to the trunk by the trousers only, secured precariously by the braces. As to the head, it admitted of no junction, but would have to be placed in position as best it could. However, bad as the "assemblage" was, it would answer well enough if there were no premature discovery.

Having seen everything ready for the final act, Pottermack switched off the lamp and stood awhile to let his eyes grow accustomed to the darkness before he should venture outside. It was not a situation that was helpful to a man whose nerves were already on edge. All sorts of sinister suggestions awakened in his mind in connection with the ghastly figure that sprawled unseen within a few inches of his feet. And then he became acutely sensible of the sepulchral silence of the place; a silence which was yet penetrated by sounds from without, especially by the hootings of a company of owls, whose derisive "hoo-hoos" seemed particularly addressed to him with something of a menacing quality. At length, finding the suspense unbearable, he unlocked the wicket and looked out. By now his eyes had recovered from the glare of the lamp sufficiently for him to be able to see the nearer objects distinctly and to make out the shadowy mass of the cliff close at hand. He peered into the gloom on all sides and listened intently. Nothing seemed to be moving, nor could his ear detect aught but the natural sounds of the woods.

He turned back into the cave, and, guided by a momentary glimmer of his small lamp, carefully gathered up the limp, headless effigy and lifted it with infinite precaution not to disturb the insecure fastenings that held its parts together. Thus he carried it tenderly out through the wicket, and, stepping cautiously over the rough ground and through the rank vegetation, bore it to "the appointed place"—the place where the fallen tree and the scattered stones and gravel marked the site of the "avalanche." Here, close by the tree, he laid it down, and, having inspected it rapidly by the light of the lamp and made a few readjustments, he went back and fetched out the head. This he laid in position by what was left of the neck and supported it in the chosen posture by packing handfuls of gravel round it. When the arrangement was completed he threw the feeble glimmer of the lamp on it once more and looked it over quickly. Then, satisfied that its appearance was as convincing as he could make it, he gathered a few stones and laid them on it, sprinkled over it a handful or two of gravel, and, finally, pulled the high nettles down over it until it was almost hidden from view.

And with that, his task was finished. Now, all he had to do was to get clear of the neighbourhood and wait for whatever might happen. With a sigh of relief he turned away and re-entered the cave, for the last time, as he hoped. Shutting himself in once more, he made a thorough examination of the place by the light of the inspection-lamp to make sure that he had left no traces of his tenancy. The remains of the tramp's fire, the billy, and the fowl and rabbit bones, he left intact; and, having

satisfied himself that there was nothing else, he slipped on his rucksack, picked up his net-stick and went out, leaving the wicket-gate ajar with the key in the outside of the lock as he had found it.

Very different were his feelings this night as he wended homewards through the woods from what they had been on the night before. Now he cared not whom he might meet—though he was better pleased that he met nobody. His task was done. All the troublesome secrecy and scheming was over, and all the danger was at an end. His premises were purged of every relic of that night of horror and release. Now he could go back to his normal life and resume his normal occupations. And as to the future; at the worst, a premature discovery might expose the fraud and spoil his plans. But no one would connect him with the fraud. He had given no name to the auctioneer. If suspicion fell on any one, it would fall on the fugitive, James Lewson.

But it was infinitely unlikely that the fraud would be detected. And if it were not, if all went well, James Lewson would be given a decent, reasonable death, and, in due course, a suitable burial. And—again in due course—Alice Bellard would become Mrs. Pottermack.

CHAPTER XIV—THE DISCOVERY

It will not appear surprising that for some days after his final expedition Mr. Pottermack's thoughts were almost exclusively occupied by the product of that night's labour. Indeed, his interest in it was so absorbing that on the very next day he was impelled to pay it a visit of inspection. He did not, however, go down to the gravel-pit, but, approaching it from above, found his way easily to that part of the brink from which the tree had fallen, carrying the 'avalanche' with it. Here, going down on hands and knees, he crept to the extreme edge and peered over. There was not much to see. There lay the fallen tree, there was the great bed of nettles, and in the midst of it an obscure shape displaying at one end a pair of shoes and at the other, part of a shabby cap.

It was surprisingly inconspicuous. The tall nettles, which he had pulled down across it, concealed the face and broke the continuity of the figure so that its nature was not evident at the first glance. This was eminently satisfactory, for it multiplied the improbabilities of early discovery. It was unlikely that any one would come here at all, but if some person should chance to stray hither, still it was unlikely that the body would be observed.

Considerably reassured, Mr. Pottermack backed away from the insecure edge and went his way, and thereafter firmly resisted the strong impulse to repeat his visit. But, as we have said, that grim figure, though out of sight, was by no means out of mind; and for the next week or two Mr. Pottermack was uncomfortably on the qui vive for the rumour of discovery. But as the weeks went by and still the body lay undiscovered, his mind settled down more and more to a state of placid expectancy.

The summer came to an end with a month of steady rain that made the woods impossible for wayfarers despite the gravel soil. The autumn set in mild and damp. Hedgerow elms broke out into patches of yellow, and the beeches in the wood, after a few tentative changes, burst out into a glory of scarlet and crimson and orange. But their glory was short-lived. A sudden sharp frost held them in its grip for a day or two; and when it lifted, the trees were bare. Their gay mantles had fallen to form a carpet for the earth at their feet.

Then came the autumn gales, driving the fallen leaves hither and thither, but sooner or later driving most of them into the gravel-pit, whence there was no escape. And there they accumulated in drifts and mounds, moving restlessly round their prison as the winds eddied beneath the cliffs, and piling up in sheltered places, smothering the nettles and flattening them down by their weight.

Once, at this time, Mr. Pottermack was moved to call on the disguised libationer. But when he crawled to the edge of the pit and looked down, the figure was invisible. Even the nettles were hidden. All that was to be seen was a great russet bank, embedding the fallen tree, and revealing to the expert eye a barely perceptible elongated prominence.

These months of waiting were to Pottermack full of peace and quiet happiness. He was not impatient. The future was rich in promise and it was not so far ahead but that it seemed well within reach. He had no present anxieties, for the danger of premature discovery was past, and every month that rolled away added its contribution of security as to the final result. So he went his way and lived his life, care-free and soberly cheerful.

There were, indeed, times when he was troubled with twinges of compunction with regard to his beloved friend, for whom these Titanic labours had been undertaken. For Alice Bellard was acutely aware of the unsatisfactory nature of their relationship. She realized that simple, almost conventional friendship is no sort of answer to passionate love, and she made it clear to Pottermack that it was an abiding grief to her that she had no more to give. He yearned to disillusion her; to let her share his confident hopes that all would yet be well. But how could he? It was unavoidable that, in deceiving all the world, he must deceive her.

But, in fact, he was not deceiving her. He was merely conveying to her the actual truth by an indirect and slightly illusory method. So he argued in regard to his ultimate purpose; and as to this intervening period—well, obviously he could not make her an accessory to his illegal actions. So he had to put up, as best he could, with her grateful acknowledgments of his patience and resignation, his cheerful acceptance of the inevitable; feeling all the time an arrant humbug as he realized how far he had been from any such acceptance.

Thus, in quiet content and with rising hopes, he watched the seasons pass; saw the countryside mantled with snow, heard "the ring of gliding steel" on icebound ponds and streams, and walked with smoking breath on the hard-frozen roads. And still, as the sands of time trickled out slowly, he waited, now hardly expectant and not at all impatient but rather disposed to favour a little further delay. But presently the winter drew off her forces reluctantly, like a defeated army, with rear guard actions of rain and howling gales. And then the days began to lengthen, the sunbeams to shed a sensible warmth; the birds ventured on tentative twitterings and the buds made it clear that they were getting ready for business. In short, the spring was close at hand; and with the coming of spring, Mr. Pottermack's fancy lightly turned to thoughts of inquests.

For the time had come. The long months of waiting had been all to the good. They had given the crude understudy time to mature, to assimilate itself to its setting and to take on the style of the principal actor. But the preparatory stage must not be unduly prolonged or it might defeat its own end. There might come a stage at which the transformation would be so complete as not only to prevent the detection of the imposture but to render identification even of the counterfeit impossible. Hence, as the spring sunshine brightened and the buds began to burst, Mr. Pottermack's expectancy revived, not untinged with anxiety. Hopefully his thoughts dwelt on primrose-gatherers and rambling juveniles in search of birds' nests and eggs; and when still no news was heard from the gravel-pit, he began seriously to consider the abandonment of his purely passive attitude and the adoption of some active measures to bring about the discovery.

It was a difficult problem. The one thing that was quite clear to him was that he must on no account appear personally in the matter. He could not say exactly why. But he had that feeling, and probably he was right. But if he could not appear in it himself, how was the thing to be managed? That was the question that he put to himself a hundred times in a day, but to which he could find

no answer. And as events fell out, no answer had, after all, to be found, for a contingency that he had never contemplated arose and solved his problem for him.

It happened that on a fine sunny day after a spell of wet he was moved to take a walk along the path through the wood, which he had not done for a week or two. He was conscious of a rather strong desire to pay a visit to the pit and see for himself how matters were progressing, but he had no intention of yielding to this weakness; for the nearer the discovery, the more necessary it was for him to keep well in the background. Accordingly he trudged on, propounding to himself again and again that seemingly unanswerable question, and meanwhile picking up half-unconsciously the old landmarks. He had approached within a few yards of the well-remembered "departure" beech tree when he suddenly caught sight of a new feature that brought him instantly to a stand. Right across the path, cutting deep into the soft loam of the surface, was a pair of cart-ruts with a row of large hoof-marks between them. They were obviously quite fresh, and it was clear, by the depth and width of the ruts and by the number of hoof-prints and the fact that they pointed in both directions, that they had been made by more than one cart, or at least by more than one journey to and fro of a single cart.

As he was standing eagerly examining them and speculating on what they portended, a hollow rumbling on his right heralded the approach of an empty cart from the west. A few moments later it came into sight through an opening just beyond the beech, the carter, dismounted, leading his horse by the bridle. Seeing Pottermack, he touched his hat and civilly wished him good morning.

"Now, where might you be off to?" Pottermack enquired genially.

"To the old gravel-pit, sir," was the reply. "'Tis many a year since any gravel was dug there. But Mr. Barber he's a-makin' a lot of this here concrate stuff for to put into the foundations of the new houses what he's buildin', and he thought as it were foolishness to send for gravel to a distance when there's a-plenty close at hand. So we're a-openin' up the old pit."

"Where about is the pit?" asked Pottermack. "Is it far from here?"

"Far! Lor' bless yer, no, sir. Just a matter of a few hundred yards. If you like to walk along with me, I'll show you the place."

Pottermack accepted the offer promptly, and as the man started his horse with a friendly "gee-up," he walked alongside, following the new ruts down the familiar track—less familiar now that the great hoofs and the wide cart wheels had cleared an open space—until they came out at the top of the rough road that led down to the pit. Here Pottermack halted, wishing his friend "good morning," and stood watching the cart as it rumbled down the slope and skirted the floor of the pit towards a spot where a bright-coloured patch on the weathered "face" showed the position of the new working.

Here Pottermack could see two men loosening the gravel with picks and two more shovelling the fallen stuff into a cart that was now nearly full. The place where they were at work was on the right side of the pit, as Pottermack stood, and nearly opposite to the cave, the gates of which he could see somewhat to his left. Standing there, he made a rapid mental note of the relative positions, and then, turning about, made his way back to the path, cogitating profoundly as he went.

How long would it be before one of those men made the momentous discovery? Or was it possible that they might miss it altogether? The British labourer is not by nature highly observant, nor has he an excessively active curiosity. Nearly the whole width of the pit separated them from the

remains. No occasion need arise for them to stray away from the spot where their business lay. But it would be exasperating if they should work there for a week or two and then go away leaving the discovery still to be made.

However, it was of no use to be pessimistic. There was a fair probability that one of them would at least go round to the cave. Quite possibly it might again be put to its original use as a cart-shelter. For his part, he could do no more than wait upon the will of Fortune and meanwhile hold himself prepared for whatever might befall. But in spite of the latter discreet resolution, the discovery, when it came, rather took him by surprise. He was lingering luxuriously over his after-breakfast pipe some four or five days after his meeting with the carter, idly turning over the leaves of a new book, while his thoughts circled about the workers in the pit and balanced the chances of their stumbling upon that gruesome figure under the cliff, when a familiar knock at the front door dispelled his reverie in an instant and turned his thoughts to more pleasant topics. He had risen and was about to go to the door himself, but was anticipated by Mrs. Gadby, who, a few moments later, announced and ushered in Mrs. Bellard.

Pottermack advanced to greet her, but was instantly struck by something strange and disquieting in her appearance and manner. She stopped close by the door until the housekeeper's footsteps had died away, then, coming close to him, exclaimed almost in a whisper:

"Marcus, have you heard—about James, I mean?"

"James!" repeated Pottermack helplessly, his wits for the moment paralysed by the suddenness of the disclosure; then, pulling himself together with a violent effort, he asked: "You don't mean to say that fellow has turned up again?"

"Then you haven't heard. He is dead, Marcus. They found his body yesterday evening. The news is all over the town this morning."

"My word!" exclaimed Pottermack. "This is news with a vengeance! Where was he found?"

"Quite near here. In a gravel-pit in Potter's Wood. He must have fallen into it the very night that he went away."

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Pottermack. "What an astonishing thing! Then he must have been lying there all these months! But—er—I suppose there is no doubt that it is Lewson's body?"

"Oh, not the least. Of course the body itself was quite unrecognizable. They say it actually dropped to pieces when they tried to pick it up. Isn't it horrible? But the police were able to identify it by the clothes and some letters and visiting-cards in the pockets. Otherwise there was practically nothing left but the bones. It makes me shudder to think of it."

"Yes," Pottermack admitted calmly, his self-possession being now restored, "it does sound rather unpleasant. But it might have been worse. He might have turned up alive. Now you are rid of him for good."

"Yes, I know," said she; "and I can't pretend that it isn't a great relief to know that he is dead. But still—what ought I to do, Marcus?"

"Do?" Pottermack repeated in astonishment.

"Yes. I feel that I ought to do something. After all, he was my husband."

"And a shocking bad husband at that. But I don't understand what you mean. What do you suppose you ought to do?"

"Well, don't you think that somebody—somebody belonging to him—ought to come forward to—to identify him?"

"But," exclaimed Pottermack, "you said that there is nothing left of him but his bones. Now, my dear, you know you can't identify his bones. You've never seen them. Besides, he has been identified already."

"Well, say, to acknowledge him."

"But, my dear Alice, why on earth should you acknowledge him, when you had, years ago, repudiated him, and even taken another name to avoid being in any way associated with him? No, no, my dear, you just keep quiet and let things take their course. This is one of those cases in which a still tongue shows a wise head. Think of all the scandal and gossip that you would start if you were to come forward and announce yourself as Mrs. Lewson. You would never be able to go on living here. I take it that no one in this place knows who you are?"

"Not a soul."

"And how many people altogether know that you were married to him?"

"Very few, and those practically all strangers. We lived a very solitary life at Leeds."

"Very well. Then the least said the soonest mended. Besides," he added, as another highly important consideration burst on him, "there is our future to think of. You are still willing to marry me, dear, aren't you?"

"Yes, Marcus, of course I am. But please don't let us talk about it now."

"I don't want to, my dear, but we have to settle this other matter. The position now is that we can get married whenever we please."

"Yes, there is no obstacle now."

"Then, Alice dearest, don't let us make obstacles. But we shall if we make known the fact that you were Lewson's wife. Just think of the position. Here were you and your husband in the same town, posing as total strangers. And here were you and I, intimate friends and generally looked upon almost as an engaged couple. Now, suppose that we marry in the reasonably near future. That alone would occasion a good deal of comment. But suppose that it should turn out that Lewson met his death by foul means. What do you imagine people would say then?"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Alice. "I had never thought of that. Of course, people—or at any rate, some people—would say that we had conspired to get him out of the way. And really, that is what it would look like. I am glad I came and consulted you."

Pottermack drew a deep breath. So that danger was past. Not that it had been a very obvious danger. But instinct warned him—and it was a perfectly sound instinct—to avoid at all costs having his personality in any way connected with that of James Lewson. Now he would be able to watch the course of events at his ease, and to all appearance from the detached standpoint of a total stranger. Nor was Alice less relieved. Some obscure sense of loyalty had seemed to impel her to

proclaim her relationship to the dead wastrel. But she was not unwilling to be convinced of her mistake; and when presently she went away, her heart was all the lighter for feeling herself excused from the necessity of laying bare to the public gaze the sordid details of her domestic tragedy.

When she was gone, Pottermack reflected on the situation and considered what he had better do. Caution conflicted with inclination. He was on the very tiptoe of curiosity, but yet he felt that he must show no undue interest in the affair. Nevertheless, it was desirable that he should know, if possible, what had really happened and what was going to be done about it. Accordingly he decided to go forth and perambulate the town and passively permit the local quidnuncs to supply him with the latest details.

He did not, however, add much to his knowledge excepting in one important respect, which was that the date of the inquest was already fixed. It was to take place at three o'clock in the afternoon on the next day but one; and having regard to the public interest in the case, the inquiry was to be held in the Town Hall. When he had ascertained this fact, and that the public would have free access to the hall during the proceedings, he went home and resolved to manifest no further interest in the case until those proceedings should open.

But the interval was one of intense though suppressed excitement. He could settle to nothing either in the workshop or in the garden. He could only seek relief in interminable tramps along the country roads. His mind seethed with mingled anxiety and hope. For the inquest was the final scene of this strange drama of which he was at once author and stage manager; and it was the goal of all his endeavours. If it went off successfully, James Lewson would be finished with for ever; he would be dead, buried, and duly registered at Somerset House; and Marcus Pottermack could murmur "Nunc dimittis" and go his way in peace.

Naturally enough, he was punctual, and more than punctual, in his attendance at the Town Hall on the appointed day, for he arrived at the entrance nearly half an hour before the time announced for the opening of the inquiry. However, he was not alone. There were others still more punctual and equally anxious to secure good places. In fact, there was quite a substantial crowd of early place-seekers which grew from moment to moment. But their punctuality failed to serve its purpose, since the main doors were still closed and a constable stationed in front of them barred all access. Some of them strayed into the little square or yard adjoining, apparently for the satisfaction of looking at the closed door of the mortuary on its farther side.

Pottermack circulated among the crowd, speaking to no one but listening to the disjointed scraps of conversation that came his way. His state of mind was very peculiar. He was acutely anxious, excited, and expectant. But behind these natural feelings he had a queer sense of aloofness, of superiority to these simple mortals around him, including the coroner and the police. For he knew all about it, whereas they would presently grope their way laboriously to a conclusion, and a wrong conclusion at that. He knew whose were the remains lying in the mortuary. He could have told them that they were about to mistake the scanty vestiges of a libationer of the nineteenth or twentieth dynasty for the body of the late James Lewson. So it was that he listened with a sort of indulgent complacency to the eager discussions concerning the mysterious end of the deceased branch manager.

Presently a report began to circulate that a gentleman had been admitted to the mortuary by the sergeant and, as the crowd forthwith surged along in that direction, he allowed himself willingly to be carried with it. Arrived at the little square, the would-be spectators developed a regular gyratory movement down one side and up the other, being kept on the move by audible requests to "pass along, please." In due course Pottermack came in sight of the mortuary door, now half open and

guarded by a police-sergeant who struggled vainly to combine the incompatible qualities of majestic impassivity and a devouring curiosity as to what was going on inside.

At length Pottermack reached the point at which he could see in through the half-open door, and at the first glance his "superiority complex" underwent sudden dissolution. A tall man, whose back was partly turned towards him, held in his hand a shoe, the sole of which he was examining with concentrated attention. Pottermack stopped dead, gazing at him in consternation. Then the sergeant sang out his oft-repeated command and Pottermack was aware of increasing pressure from behind. But at the very instant when he was complying with the sergeant's injunction to "pass along," the tall man turned his head to look out at the door and their eyes met. And at the sight of the man's face Pottermack could have shrieked aloud.

It was the strange lawyer.

For some moments Pottermack's faculties were completely paralysed by this apparition. He drifted on passively with the crowd in a state of numb dismay. Presently, however, as the effects of the shock passed off and his wits began to revive, some of his confidence revived with them. After all, what was there to be so alarmed about? The man was only a lawyer, and he had seemed harmless enough when they had talked together at the gate. True, he had seemed to be displaying an unholy interest in the soles of those shoes. But what of that? Those soles were all correct, even to the gash in the horse's neck. They were, in fact, the most convincing and unassailable part of the make-up.

But, encourage himself as he would, the unexpected appearance of this lawyer had given his nerves a nasty jar. It suggested a number of rather disquieting questions. For instance, how came this man to turn up at this "psychological moment" like a vulture sniffing from afar a dead camel in the desert? Why was he looking at those soles with such extraordinary interest? Was it possible that he had seen those photographs? And if so, might they have shown something that was invisible to the unaided eye?

These questions came crowding into Mr. Pottermack's mind, each one more disquieting than the others. But always he came back to the most disquieting one of all. How, in the name of Beelzebub, came this lawyer to make his appearance in the Borley mortuary at this critical and most inopportune moment?

It was natural that Mr. Pottermack should ask himself this very pertinent question; for, in truth, it did appear a singular coincidence. And inasmuch as coincidences usually seem to demand some explanation, we may venture to pursue the question that the reader may attain to the enlightenment that was denied to Mr. Pottermack.

CHAPTER XV—DR. THORNDYKE'S CURIOSITY IS AROUSED

The repercussions of Mr. Pottermack's activities made themselves felt at a greater distance than he had bargained for. By the agency of an enterprising local reporter they became communicated to the daily press, and thereby to the world at large, including Number 5A King's Bench Walk, Inner Temple, London, E.C., and the principal occupant thereof. The actual purveyor of intelligence to the latter was Mr. Nathaniel Polton, and the communication took place in the afternoon of the day following the discovery. At this time Dr. Thorndyke was seated at the table with an open brief before him, jotting down a few suggestions for his colleague, Mr. Anstey, when to him entered Nathaniel Polton aforesaid, with a tray of tea-things in one hand and the evening paper in the other. Having set down the tray, he presented the paper, neatly folded into a small oblong, with a few introductory words.

"There is a rather curious case reported in the Evening Post, sir. Looks rather like something in our line. I thought you might be interested to see it, so I've brought you the paper."

"Very good of you, Polton," said Thorndyke, holding out his hand with slightly exaggerated eagerness. "Curious cases are always worth our attention."

Accordingly he proceeded to give his attention to the marked paragraph; but at the first glance at the heading, the interest which he had assumed out of courtesy to his henchman became real and intense. Polton noted the change, and his lined face crinkled up into a smile of satisfaction as he watched his employer reading the paragraph through with a concentration that, even to him, seemed hardly warranted by the matter. For, after all, there was no mystery about the affair, so far as he could see. It was just curious and rather gruesome. And Polton had distinct liking for the gruesome. So, apparently, had the reporter, for he used that very word to lend attraction to his heading. Thus:— 'Gruesome discovery at Borley.'

'Yesterday afternoon some labourers who were digging gravel in a pit in Potter's Wood, Borley, near Aylesbury, made a shocking discovery. When going round the pit to inspect a disused cart-shelter, they were horrified at coming suddenly upon the much-decomposed body of a man lying at the foot of the perpendicular 'face,' down which he had apparently fallen some months previously. Later it was ascertained that the dead man is a certain James Lewson, the late manager of the local branch of Perkins's Bank, who disappeared mysteriously about nine months ago. An inquest on the body is to be held at the Town Hall, Borley, on Thursday next at 3 p.m., when the mystery of the disappearance and death will no doubt be elucidated.'

"A very singular case, Polton," said Thorndyke, as he returned the paper to its owner. "Thank you for drawing my attention to it."

"There doesn't seem to be any mystery as to how the man met his death," remarked Polton, cunningly throwing out this remark in the hope of eliciting some illuminating comments. "He seems to have just tumbled into the pit and broken his neck."

"That is what is suggested," Thorndyke agreed. But there are all sorts of other possibilities. It would be quite interesting to attend the inquest and bear the evidence."

"There is no reason why you shouldn't, sir," said Polton. "You've got no arrangements for Thursday that can't easily be put off."

"No, that is true," Thorndyke rejoined. "I must think it over and consider whether it would be worth giving up the time."

But he did not think it over, for the reason that he had already made up his mind. Even as he read the paragraph, it was clear to him that here was a case that called aloud for investigation.

The call was twofold. In the first place he was profoundly interested in all the circumstances surrounding the disappearance of James Lewson. In any event he would have wished to make his understanding of the case complete. But there was another and a more urgent reason for inquiry. Hitherto his attitude had been simply spectatorial. Neither as a citizen nor as an officer of the law had he felt called upon to interfere. Now it became incumbent on him to test the moral validity of his position; to ascertain whether that detached attitude was admissible in these new circumstances.

The discovery had taken him completely by surprise. Some developments he had rather expected. The appearance of the stolen notes, for instance, had not surprised him at all. It had seemed quite "according to plan"; just a manoeuvre to shift the area of inquiry. But this new development admitted of no such explanation; for if it was an "arrangement" of some kind, what could be the motive? There appeared to be none.

He was profoundly puzzled. If this was really James Lewson's body, then the whole of his elaborate scheme of reasoning was fallacious. But it was not fallacious. For it had led him to the conclusion that Mr. Marcus Pottermack was Jeffrey Brandon, deceased. And investigation had proved beyond a doubt that that conclusion was correct. But a hypothesis which, on being applied, yields a new truth—and one that is conditional upon its very terms—must be true. But again, if his reasoning was correct, this could not be Lewson's body.

But if it was not Lewson's body, whose body was it? And how came it to be dressed in Lewson's clothes—if they really were Lewson's clothes and not a carefully substituted make-up? It was here that the question of public policy arose. For here was undoubtedly a dead person. If that person proved to be James Lewson, there was nothing more to be said. But if he were not James Lewson, then it became his, Thorndyke's, duty as a citizen and a barrister to ascertain who he was and how his body came to be dressed in Lewson's clothes; or, at least, to set going inquiries to that effect.

That evening he rapidly reviewed the material on which his reasoning had been based. Then, unrolling the strip of photographs, he selected a pair of the most distinct—showing a right and a left foot—and, with the aid of the little document microscope, made an enlarged drawing of each on squared paper to a scale of three inches to the foot, i.e. a quarter of the natural size. The drawings, however, were little more than outlines, showing none of the detail of the soles; but the dimensions were accurately rendered, excepting those of the screws which secured the heels, which were drawn disproportionately large and the position of the slots marked in with special care and exactness.

With these drawings in his pocket and the roll of photographs in his attache-case for reference if any unforeseen question should arise, Thorndyke started forth on the Thursday morning en route for Borley. He did not anticipate any difficulties. An inquest which he had attended at Aylesbury some months previously had made him acquainted with the coroner who would probably conduct this inquiry; but in any case, the production of his card would secure him the necessary facilities.

It turned out, however, that his acquaintance was to conduct the proceedings, though he had not yet arrived when Thorndyke presented himself at the Town Hall nearly an hour before the time when the inquest was due to open. But the police officer on duty, after a glance at his card, showed him up to the coroner's room and provided him with a newspaper wherewith to while away the time of waiting; which Thorndyke made a show of reading, as a precaution against possible attempts at conversation, until the officer had retired, when he brought forth the two drawings and occupied himself in memorizing the dimensions and other salient characteristics of the footprints.

He had been waiting close upon twenty minutes when he heard a quick step upon the stair and the coroner entered the room with extended hand.

"How do you do, doctor?" he exclaimed, shaking Thorndyke's hand warmly. "This is indeed an unexpected pleasure. Have you come down to lend us a hand in solving the mystery?"

"Is there a mystery?" Thorndyke asked.

"Well, no, there isn't," was the reply, "excepting how the poor fellow came to be wandering about the wood in the dark. But I take it, from your being here, that you are in some way interested or concerned in the case."

"Not in the case," replied Thorndyke. "Only in the body. And my interest in that is rather academic. I understand that it is known to have been lying exposed in the open for nine months. Now, I have never had an opportunity of inspecting a body that has been exposed completely in the open for so long. Accordingly, as I happened to be in the neighbourhood, I thought that I would ask your kind permission just to look it over and make a few notes as to its condition"

"I see; so that you may know exactly what a nine-months-old exposed body looks like, with a view to due future contingencies. But of course, my dear doctor, I shall be delighted to help you to this modest extent. Would you like to make your inspection now?"

"How will that suit you?"

"Perfectly. The jury will be going in to view the remains in about half an hour, but they won't interfere with your proceedings. But you will probably be finished by then. Are you coming to the inquest?"

"I may as well, as I have nothing special to do for an hour or two; and the evidence may help me to amplify my notes."

"Very well," said the coroner, "then I will see that a chair is kept for you. And now I will tell Sergeant Tatnell to take you to the mortuary and see that you are not disturbed while you are making your notes."

Hereupon, the sergeant, being called in and given his instructions, took Thorndyke in custody and conducted him down a flight of stairs to a side door which opened on a small square, on the opposite side of which was the mortuary. A considerable crowd had already collected here, in front of the Town Hall and at the entrance of the square, and by its members Thorndyke's emergence with the sergeant by no means passed unnoticed; and when the latter proceeded to unlock the mortuary door and admit the former, there was a general movement of the crowd into the square with a tendency to converge on the mortuary door.

The sergeant, having admitted Thorndyke, gazed at him hungrily as he pointed out the rather obvious whereabouts of the corpse and the clothing. Then, with evident reluctance, he retired, leaving the door half open and stationing himself on guard in a position which commanded an unobstructed view of the interior. Thorndyke would rather have had the door closed, but he realized the sergeant's state of mind and viewed it not unsympathetically. And a spectator or two was of no consequence since he was merely making an inspection.

As the sergeant had obligingly explained, the body was in the open shell or coffin which rested on one of the tables, while the clothing was laid out on an adjoining table in a manner slightly reminiscent of a rummage sale or a stall in the Petticoat Lane Market. Having put down his attache-case, Thorndyke began his inspection with the clothing, and, bearing in mind the sergeant's eye, which was following his every movement, he first looked over the garments, one by one, until he came naturally to the shoes. These he inspected from various points of view, and when he had minutely examined the uppers he picked up the right shoe, and, turning it over, looked at the heel. And in the instant that his glance fell on it his question was answered.

It was not Lewson's shoe.

Putting it down, he picked up the left shoe and inspected it in the same manner. It gave the same answer as the right had done, and each confirmed the other with the force of cumulative evidence. These were not James Lewson's shoes. There was no need to apply the measurements that he had marked on his diagrams. The single fact which he had elicited settled the matter.

It was quite a plain and obvious fact, too, though it had escaped the police for the simple reason that they were not looking for a discrepancy in the position of the screws. But it was absolutely conclusive. For the central screw by which a circular rubber heel is secured is of necessity a fixture. When once it is driven in, it remains immovable so long as the heel continues in position. For if the screw turns in the slightest degree, its hold is loosened, it unscrews from its hole and the heel comes off. But these heels had not come off. They were quite firmly attached, as Thorndyke ascertained by grasping them and as was proved by the extent to which they were worn down. Therefore the screws could not have moved. But yet their slots were at a totally different angle from the slots of the screws in Lewson's shoes.

He was standing with the shoe in his hand when a sharply spoken command from the sergeant to "pass along, please" caused him half-unconsciously to turn his head. As he did so, he became aware of Mr. Pottermack gazing at him through the half-open door with an expression of something very like consternation. The glance was only momentary, for, even as their eyes met, Pottermack moved away in obedience to the sergeant's command, reinforced by a vigorous vis a tergo applied by the spectators in his rear.

Thorndyke smiled grimly at the coincidence—which was hardly a coincidence at all—and then returned to the consideration of the shoes. He had thoroughly memorized his drawings, but still, his rigorously exact mind demanded verification. Accordingly he placed both shoes sole uppermost and—with his back to the sergeant—produced the drawings from his pocket for comparison with the shoes. Of course he had made no mistake. In the drawing of the right foot, the slot of the screw was at a right angle to the long axis of the shoe—in the position of the hands of a clock at a quarter to three; in the right shoe before him, the slot was oblique—in the position of the clock-hands at five minutes past seven. So with the left; in the drawing it was in the position of ten minutes to four; in the mortuary shoe it was in that of twenty minutes to two.

The proof was conclusive, and it justified Thorndyke's forecast. For he had assumed that if the shoes on the discovered body were counterfeits, the one detail which the counterfeiter would overlook or neglect would be the position of the screw-slots; while, by the ordinary laws of probability, it was infinitely unlikely that the positions of the slots would happen to match in both feet by mere chance.

But, this point being settled, a more important one arose. If the shoes were not Lewson's shoes, the body was probably not Lewson's body. And if it were not, then it was the body of some other person; which conclusion would raise the further question. How was that body obtained? This was the vitally important issue, for it would appear that the having possession of a dead human body almost necessarily implies the previous perpetration of some highly criminal act.

So Thorndyke reflected, a little anxiously, as he stood by the open shell, looking down on the scanty remains of what had once been a man. His position was somewhat difficult, for, since he had never seen Lewson and knew nothing of his personal characteristics beyond his approximate age and what he had inferred from the footprints—that he was a man approaching six feet in height, which appeared to be also true of the body in the shell—he had no effective means of identification. Nevertheless, it was possible that a careful examination might bring into view some distinctive characters that would furnish a basis for further inquiry when the witnesses should presently be called.

Thus encouraging himself, he began to look over the gruesome occupant of the shell more critically. And now, as his eye travelled over it, he began to be conscious of an indefinite something in its aspect that was not quite congruous with the ostensible circumstances. It seemed to have wasted in a somewhat unusual manner. Then his attention was attracted by the very peculiar appearance of the toe-nails. They showed a distinct orange-yellow coloration which was obviously abnormal, and when he turned for comparison to the finger-nails, traces of the same unnatural colour were detectable though much less distinct.

Here was a definite suggestion. Following it up, he turned his attention to the teeth, and at once the suggestion was confirmed. These were the teeth of no modern civilized European. The crowns of the molars, cuspless and ground down to a level surface, spoke of the gritty meal from a hand-quern and other refractory food-stuffs beyond the powers of degenerate civilized man. Still following the clue, Thorndyke peered into the nasal cavities, the entrance to which had been exposed by the almost complete disappearance of the nose. With the aid of a tiny pocket electric lamp, he was able to make out on both sides extensive fractures of the inner bones—the turbinates and ethmoid. In the language of the children's game, he was "getting warm"; and when he had made a close and prolonged examination of the little that was left of the abdomen, his last lingering doubts were set at rest.

He stood up, at length, with a grim but appreciative smile, and recapitulated his findings. Here was a body, found in a gravel-pit, clothed in the habiliments of one James Lewson. The toe- and finger-nails were stained with henna; the teeth were the characteristic teeth of somewhat primitive man; the ethmoid and turbinate bones were fractured in a manner incomprehensible in connection with any known natural agency but in precisely the manner in which they would have been damaged by the embalmer's hook; there was not the faintest trace of any abdominal viscera, and there did appear to be—though this was not certain, owing to the wasted condition of the remains—some signs of an incision in the abdominal wall; and finally, the hair showed evidence of chemical corrosion, not to be accounted for by any mere exposure to the weather. In short, this body displayed a group of distinctive features which, taken collectively, were characteristic of, and peculiar to, an Egyptian mummy; and that it was an Egyptian mummy he felt no doubt whatever.

He hailed the conclusion with a sigh of relief. He had come here prepared to intervene at the inquest and challenge the identity of the corpse if he had found any evidence of the perpetration of a crime. But he would have been profoundly reluctant to intervene. Now there was no need to intervene, since there was no reason to suppose that any crime had been committed. Possession of an Egyptian mummy does not imply any criminal act. Admittedly, these proceedings of Mr. Pottermack's were highly irregular. But that was a different matter. Allowance had to be made for special circumstances.

Nevertheless, Thorndyke was not a little puzzled. Acting on his invariable principle, he had disregarded the apparent absence of motive and had steadily pursued the visible facts. But now the question of motive arose as a separate problem. What could be the purpose that lay behind this quaint and ingenious personation of a dead man? Some motive there must have been, and a powerful motive too. Its strength could be measured by the enormous amount of patient and laborious preparation that the result must have entailed, to say nothing of the risk. What could that motive have been? It did not, apparently, arise out of the original circumstances. There must be something else that had not yet come into view. Perhaps the evidence at the inquest might throw some light upon it.

At any rate, no crime had been committed, and as to this dummy inquest, there was no harm in it. On the contrary, it was all to the good. For it would establish and put on record a fact which

otherwise would have gone unascertained and unrecorded, but which ought, on public grounds, to be duly certified and recorded.

As Thorndyke reached this comfortable conclusion, the sergeant announced the approach of the jury to view the body; whereupon he picked up his attache-case, and, emerging from the mortuary, made his way to the court-room and took possession of a chair which a constable was holding in reserve for him, close to that which was to be occupied by the coroner.

CHAPTER XVI—EXIT KHAMA-HERU

Having taken his seat—and wished that it had been a little farther from the coroner's—Thorndyke glanced round the large court-room, noting the unusual number of spectators and estimating from it the intense local interest in the inquiry. And as his eye roamed round, it presently alighted on Mr. Pottermack, who had secured a seat in a favourable position near the front and was endeavouring, quite unsuccessfully, to appear unaware of Thorndyke's arrival. So unsuccessful, indeed, were his efforts that inevitably their eyes met, and then there was nothing for it but to acknowledge as graciously as he could the lawyer's friendly nod of recognition.

Pottermack's state of mind was one of agonized expectation. He struggled manfully enough to summon up some sort of confidence. He told himself that this fellow was only a lawyer, and that lawyers know nothing about bodies. Now, if he had been a doctor it might have been a different matter. But there was that accursed shoe. He had certainly looked at that as if he saw something unusual about it; and there was no reason why a lawyer shouldn't know something about shoes. Yet what could he have seen in it? There was nothing to see. It was a genuine shoe, and the soles and heels were unquestionably correct in every detail. He, Pottermack, could hardly have distinguished them from the originals himself.

So his feelings oscillated miserably between unreasonable hope and an all too reasonable alarm. He would have got up and gone out but that even his terrors urged him to stay at all costs and hear what this lawyer should say when his turn came to give evidence. And thus, though he longed to escape, he remained glued to his chair, waiting, waiting for the mine to blow up; and whenever his roving glance fell, as it constantly did from minute to minute, on the sphinx-like countenance of that inopportune lawyer, a cold chill ran down his spine.

Thorndyke, catching from time to time that wandering, apprehensive gaze, was alive to Mr. Pottermack's condition and felt a humane regret that it was impossible to reassure him and put an end to his sufferings. He realized how sinister a significance his unexpected arrival would seem to bear to the eyes of the self-conscious gamester, sitting there trembling for the success of his last venture. And the position was made even worse when the coroner, re-entering with the jury, stopped to confer with him before taking his seat.

"You had a good look at the body, doctor?" he asked, stooping and speaking almost in a whisper. "I wonder if it would be fair for me to ask you a question?"

"Let us hear the question," Thorndyke replied cautiously.

"Well, it is this: the medical witness that I am calling is the police surgeon's locum tenens. I don't know anything about him, but I suspect that he hasn't had much experience. He tells me that he can find nothing definite to indicate the cause of death, but that there are no signs of violence. What do you say to that?"

"It is exactly what I should have said myself if I had been in his place," Thorndyke replied. "I saw nothing that gave any hint as to the cause of death. You will have to settle that question on evidence other than medical."

"Thank you, thank you," said the coroner. "You have set my mind completely at rest. Now I will get on with the inquiry. It needn't take very long."

He retired to his chair at the head of the long table, on one side of which sat the jury and on the other one or two reporters, and having seen that his writing materials were in order, prepared to begin. And Thorndyke, once more meeting Mr. Pottermack's eye, found it fixed on him with an expression of expectant horror.

"The inquiry, gentlemen," the coroner began, "which we are about to conduct concerns the most regrettable death of a fellow-townsman of yours, Mr. James Lewson, who, as you probably know, disappeared rather mysteriously on the night of the 23rd of last July. Quite by chance, his dead body was discovered last Monday afternoon, and it will be our duty to inquire and determine how, when, and where he met with his death. I need not trouble you with a long preliminary statement, as the testimony of the witnesses will supply you with the facts and you will be entitled to put any questions that you may wish to amplify them. We had better begin with the discovery of the body and take events in their chronological order. Joseph Crick."

In response to this summons a massively built labourer rose and advanced sheepishly to the table. Having been sworn, he deposed that his name was Joseph Crick and that he was a labourer in the employ of Mr. Barber, a local builder.

"Well, Crick," said the coroner, "now tell us how you came to discover this body."

The witness cast an embarrassed glance at the eager jurymen, and, having wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, began: "'Twere last Monday afternoon—"

"That was the thirteenth of April," the coroner interposed.

"Maybe 'twere," the witness agreed cautiously, "I dunno. But 'twere last Monday afternoon. Me and Jim Wurdle had been workin' in the pit a-fillin' the carts with gravel. We'd filled the last cart and seen her off, and then, as it were gettin' on for knockin'-off time, we lights our pipes and goes for a stroll round the pit to have a look at the old shelter-place where they used to keep the carts in the winter. We'd got round to the gate and Jim Wurdle was a lookin'-in when I happened to notice a tree that had fell down from the top of the face. And then I see something layin' by the tree what had got a cap at one end and a pair of shoes at the other. Give me a regler start, it did. So I says to Jim Wurdle I says, Jim, I says, that's a funny-lookin' thing over yonder long-side the tree, I says. Looks like some one a-layin' down there, I says. So Jim Wurdle he looks at it and he says, 'right you are, mate,' he says,' so it do, he says. So we walked over to have a look at it and then we see as 'twere a dead man, or leastways a man's skillinton. Give us a rare turn, it did, to see it a-layin' there in its shabby old clothes with the beedles a-crawlin' about on it."

"And what did you do then?" asked the coroner.

"We sung out to the other chaps t'other side of the pit and told them about it, and then we set off for the town as hard as we could go until we come to the police station, where we see Sergeant Tatnell and told him about it; and he sent us back to the pit to wait for him and show him where it were."

When the coroner had written down Crick's statement he glanced at the jury and enquired: "Do you wish to ask the witness any questions, gentlemen?" And as nobody expressed any such wish, he dismissed Crick and called James Wurdle, who, in effect, repeated the evidence of the previous witness and was in his turn dismissed.

The next witness was Inspector Barnaby of the local police force, a shrewd-looking man of about fifty, who gave his evidence in the concise, exact manner proper to a police officer.

"On Monday last, the thirteenth of April, at five twenty-one p.m., it was reported to me by Sergeant Tatnell that the dead body of a man had been discovered in the gravel-pit in Potter's Wood. I obtained an empty shell from the mortuary, and, having put it on a wheeled stretcher, proceeded with Sergeant Tatnell to the gravel-pit, where the previous witnesses showed us the place where the body was lying. We found the body lying at the foot of the gravel-face close to a tree that had fallen from the top. I examined it carefully before moving it. It was lying in a sprawling posture, not like that of a sleeping man but like that of a man who had fallen heavily. There were a few stones and some gravel on the body, but most of the gravel which had come down with the tree was underneath. The body was in an advanced stage of decay; so much so that it began to fall to pieces when we lifted it to put it into the shell. The head actually dropped off, and we had great trouble in preventing the legs from separating."

An audible shudder ran round the court at this description and the coroner murmured, "Horrible! horrible!" But the inspector proceeded in matter-of-fact tones:

"We conveyed the remains to the mortuary, where I removed the clothing from the body and examined it with a view to ascertaining the identity of deceased. The underclothing was marked clearly 'J. Lewson' and in the breast pocket of the coat I found a letter-case with the initials 'J.L.' stamped on the cover. Inside it were a number of visiting-cards bearing the name 'Mr. James Lewson' and the address 'Perkins's Bank, Borley, Bucks,' and some letters addressed to James Lewson, Esquire, at that address. In one of the trousers pockets I found a key, which looked like a safe key, and as there seemed to be no doubt that the body was that of Mr. Lewson, the late manager of the Borley branch of Perkins's Bank, I cleaned the rust off the key and showed it to Mr. Hunt, the present manager, who tried it in the lock of the safe and found that it entered and seemed to fit perfectly."

"Did it shoot the bolt of the lock?" one of the jurors asked.

"No," replied the inspector, "because, after Mr. Lewson went away and took the key with him, the manager had the levers of the lock altered and a pair of new keys made. But the old duplicate key was there, and when we compared it with the key from the body, it was obvious that the two keys were identical in pattern."

"Did you take any other measures to identify the body?" the coroner asked.

"Yes, sir. I checked the clothing carefully, garment by garment, by the description that we issued when Mr. Lewson disappeared, and it corresponded to the description in every respect. Then I got the caretaker from the bank to look it over, and he identified the clothes and shoes as those worn by Mr. Lewson on the night when he disappeared."

"Excellent," said the coroner. "Most thorough and most conclusive. I think, gentlemen, that we can fairly take it as an established fact that the body is that of Mr. James Lewson. And now. Inspector, to return to the clothing; you have mentioned two articles found by you in deceased's pockets. What else did you find?"

"Nothing, sir. With the exception of those two articles—which I handed to you—the pockets were all completely empty."

"And the letter-case?"

"That contained nothing but letters, bills, cards, and a few stamps; nothing but what was in it when I gave it to you."

Here the coroner opened his attache-case, and, taking from it the letter-wallet, the letters, cards, bills, and other contents, placed them, together with the key, on a wooden office tray which he pushed along the table for the jurymen's inspection. While they were curiously poring over the tray, he continued his examination.

"Then you found nothing of value on the person of deceased?"

"With the exception of the stamps, nothing whatsoever. The pockets were absolutely empty."

"Do you happen to know if deceased, at the time of his disappearance, had any valuable property about him?"

"Yes, sir. It is nearly certain that when he went away at about eight o'clock on the night of Wednesday, the twenty-third of last July, he had on his person one hundred pounds in five-pound Bank of England notes."

"When you say that it is nearly certain, what does that certainty amount to?"

"It is based on the fact that after he had gone, banknotes to that amount were found to be missing from the bank."

"And is it known what became of those notes?"

"Yes, sir. Their numbers were known and they have now all been recovered. As soon as they appeared in circulation they were traced; and in nearly every case traced to some person who was known to the police."

"Is it certain that these notes were taken by deceased and not by some other person?"

"Yes, practically certain. Deceased was in sole charge, and he had one key on his person and the other locked in the safe, where it was found when the lock was picked. But, if you will allow me, sir, I should like to say, in justice to deceased, that he had, apparently, no intention of stealing these notes, as was thought at first. Certain facts came to light later which seemed to show that he had merely borrowed this money to meet a sudden urgent call and that he meant to replace it."

"I am sure every one will be very glad to hear that," said the coroner. "We need not go into the circumstances that you mention, as they do not seem relevant to this inquiry. But these notes raise an important point. If they were on his person when he went away and they were not on his body when it was found, and if, moreover, they are known to have been in circulation since his death, the question of robbery arises, and with it the further question of possible murder. Can you give us any help in considering those questions?"

"I have formed certain opinions, sir, but, of course, it is a matter of guesswork."

"Never mind, Inspector. A coroner's court is not bound by the strict rules of evidence; and, besides, yours is an expert opinion. Let us hear what view you take of the matter."

"Well, sir, my opinion is that deceased met his death by accident the night that he went away. I think that he fell into the pit in the dark, dislodging a lot of gravel and pulling the small tree down with him. Both the body and the tree were on top of the heap of gravel, but yet there was a good deal of gravel and some stones on the body."

The coroner nodded and the witness proceeded:

"Then I think that, about a month later, some tramp found the body and went through the pockets, and when he discovered the notes, he cleared off and said nothing about having seen the body."

"Have you any specific reasons for this very definite theory?"

"Yes, sir. First, there is clear evidence that the pit has been frequented by one or more tramps. Quite close to where the body was discovered is an old cart-shelter, dug out of the gravel, and that shelter has been used from time to time by some tramp or tramps as a residence. I found in it a quantity of wood-ashes and charcoal and large sooty deposits on the wall and roof, showing that many fires had been lit there. I also found an old billy, or boiling-can, a lot of rags and tramps' raffle and a quantity of small bones—mostly rabbits' and fowls' bones. So tramps have certainly been there.

"Then the state of deceased's pockets suggests a tramp's robbery. It was not only the valuables that were taken. He had made a clean sweep of everything. Not a thing was left. Not even a pipe or a packet of cigarettes or even a match-box."

"And as to the time that you mentioned?"

"I am judging by the notes. A sharp look-out was kept for them from the first. A very sharp look-out. But for fully a month after the disappearance not one of them came to light. And then, suddenly, they began to come in one after the other and even in batches, as if the whole lot had been thrown into circulation at once. But if it had been a case of robbery with violence, the robber would have got rid of the notes immediately, before the hue and cry started."

"So you consider that the possibility of robbery with murder may be ruled out?"

"On the facts known to me, sir, I do—subject, of course, to the medical evidence."

"Exactly," said the coroner. "But in any case you have given us most valuable assistance. Is there any point, gentlemen, that is not quite clear, or any question that you wish to put to the inspector? No questions? Very well. Thank you, Inspector."

The next witness called was the police surgeon's deputy, a youngish Irishman of somewhat convivial aspect. Having been sworn, he deposed that his name was Desmond M'Alarney, that he was a Doctor of Medicine and at present acting as locum tenens for the police surgeon, who was absent on leave.

"Well, doctor," said the coroner, "I believe that you have made a careful examination of the body of deceased. Is that so?"

"I have made a most careful examination, sir," was the reply, "though as to calling it a body, I would rather describe it as a skeleton."

"Very well!" the coroner agreed good-humouredly, "call it what you like. Perhaps we may refer to it as the remains."

"Ye may," replied the witness, "and mighty small remains, by the same token. But such as they are, I have examined them with the greatest care."

"And did your examination enable you to form any opinion as to the cause of death?"

"It did not."

"Did you find any injuries or signs of violence?"

"I did not."

"Were any of the bones fractured or injured in any way?"

"They were not."

"Can you give us no suggestion as to the probable cause of death?"

"I would suggest, sir, that a twenty-foot drop into a gravel-pit is a mighty probable cause of death."

"No doubt," said the coroner. "But that is hardly a matter of medical evidence."

"'Tis none the worse for that," the witness replied cheerfully.

"Can you say, definitely, that deceased did not meet his death by any kind of homicidal violence?"

"I can not. When a body is rejuiced to a skeleton, all traces of violence are lost so long as there has been no breaking of bones. He might have been strangled or smothered or stabbed or had his throat cut without leaving any marks on the skeleton. I can only say that I found no indications of any kind of homicidal violence or any violence whatsoever."

"The inspector has suggested that deceased met his death by accident—that is by the effects of the fall, and that appears to be your opinion too. Now, if that were the case, what would probably be the immediate cause of death?"

"There are several possible causes, but the most probable would be shock, contusion of the brain, or dislocation of the neck."

"Would any of those conditions leave recognizable traces?"

"Contusion of the brain and dislocation of the neck could be recognized in the fresh body but not in a skeleton like this. Of course, if the dislocation were accompanied—as it very often is—by fracture of the little neck-bone known as the odontoid process of the axis, that could be seen in the skeleton. But there is no such fracture in the skeleton of deceased. I looked for it particularly."

"Then we understand that you found nothing definite to indicate the cause of death?"

"That is so, sir."

"Do you consider that the appearance of the body, in a medical sense, is consistent with a belief that deceased was killed by the effects of the fall?"

"I do, sir."

"Then," said the coroner, "that seems to be about all that we can say as to the cause of death. Do the jury wish to put any questions to the medical witness? If not, we need not detain the doctor any longer."

As Dr. M'Alarney picked up an uncommonly smart hat and retired, the coroner glanced quickly over his notes and then proceeded to address the jury.

"I need not occupy your time, gentlemen, with a long summing-up. You have heard the evidence and probably have already arrived at your conclusions. There are certain mysterious circumstances in the case, as, for instance, how deceased came to be wandering about in the wood at night. But these questions do not concern us. We have to consider only how deceased met his death, and as the doctor justly remarked, the fact that the body was found at the bottom of a gravel-pit, having evidently fallen some eighteen or twenty feet, offers a pretty obvious explanation. The only suspicious circumstance was that deceased had clearly been robbed either before or after death. But you have heard the opinion of a very able and experienced police inspector, and the excellent reasons that he gave for that opinion. So I need say no more, but will now leave you to consider your verdict."

During the short interval occupied by the discussions of the jurymen among themselves, two members of the audience were engaged busily in reviewing the evidence in its relation to the almost inevitable verdict. To Thorndyke the proceedings offered an interesting study in the perverting effect upon the judgment of an unconscious bias, engendered by the suggestive power of a known set of circumstances. All the evidence that had been given was true. All the inferences from that evidence were sound and proper inferences, so far as they went. Yet the final conclusion which was going to be arrived at would be wildly erroneous, for the simple reason that all the parties to the inquiry had come to it already convinced as to the principal fact—the identity of the deceased person—which had accordingly been left unverified.

As to Pottermack, his state of mind at the close of the inquiry was one of astonished relief. All through the proceedings he had sat in tremulous expectancy, with a furtive eye on the strange lawyer, wondering when that lawyer's turn would come to give his evidence and what he would have to say. That the stranger had detected some part, at least, of the fraud he had at first little doubt, and he expected no less than to hear the identity of the body challenged. But, as the time ran on and witness after witness came forward guilelessly and disgorged the bait for the nourishment of the jury, his fears gradually subsided and his confidence began to revive. And now that the inquiry was really over and they had all gobbled the bait and got it comfortably into their gizzards; now that it was evident that this lawyer had nothing to say, after all, in spite of his preposterous porings over those admirable shoes, Mr. Pottermack was disposed just a little to despise himself for having been so easily frightened. The "superiority complex" began to reassert itself. Here he sat, looking upon a thoroughly bamboozled assembly, including a most experienced police inspector, a coroner, a lawyer, and a doctor. He alone of all that assembly, indeed of the whole world, knew all about it.

But perhaps his alarm had been excusable. We get into the habit too much importance to these lawyers and doctors. We credit them with knowing a great deal more than they do. But, at any rate,

in this case it was all to the good. And as Mr. Pottermack summed up in this satisfactory fashion, the foreman of the jury announced that the verdict had been agreed on.

"And what is your finding, gentlemen, on the evidence that you have heard?" the coroner asked.

"We find that the deceased, James Lewson, met his death on the night of the twenty-third of last July by falling into a gravel-pit in Potter's Wood."

"Yes," said the coroner. "That amounts to a verdict of Death by Misadventure. And a very proper verdict, too, in my opinion. I must thank you, gentlemen, for your attendance and for the careful consideration which you have given to this inquiry, and I may take this opportunity of telling you what I am sure you will be glad to hear, that the directors of Perkins's Bank have generously undertaken to have the funeral conducted at their expense."

As the hall slowly emptied, Thorndyke lingered by the table to exchange a few rather colourless comments on the case with the coroner. At length, after a cordial handshake, he took his departure, and, joining the last stragglers, made his way slowly out of the main doorway, glancing among the dispersing crowd as he emerged; and presently his roving glance alighted on Mr. Pottermack at the outskirts of the throng, loitering irresolutely as if undecided which way to go.

The truth is that the elation at the triumphant success of his plan had begotten in that gentleman a spirit of mischief. Under the influence of the "superiority complex" he was possessed with a desire to exchange a few remarks with the strange lawyer; perhaps to "draw" him on the subject of the inquest; possibly even to "pull his leg"—not hard, of course, which would be a liberty, but just a gentle and discreet tweak. Accordingly he hovered about opposite the hall, waiting to see which way the lawyer should go; and as Thorndyke unostentatiously steered in his direction, the meeting came about quite naturally, just as the lawyer was turning—rather to Mr. Pottermack's surprise—away from the direction of the station.

"I don't suppose you remember me," he began.

But Thorndyke interrupted promptly: "Of course I remember you, Mr. Pottermack, and am very pleased to meet you again."

Pottermack, considerably taken aback by the mention of his name, shook the proffered hand and cogitated rapidly. How the deuce did the fellow know that his name was Pottermack? He hadn't told him.

"Thank you," he said. "I am very pleased, too, and rather surprised. But perhaps you are professionally interested in this inquiry."

"Not officially," replied Thorndyke. "I saw a notice in the paper of what looked like an interesting case, and, being in the neighbourhood, I dropped in to see and hear what was going on."

"And did you find it an interesting case?" Pottermack asked.

"Very. Didn't you?"

"Well," replied Pottermack, "I didn't bring an expert eye to it as you did, so I may have missed some of the points. But there did seem to be some rather queer features in it. I wonder which of them in particular you found so interesting?"

This last question he threw out by way of a tentative preliminary to "drawing" the lawyer, and he waited expectantly for the reply.

Thorndyke reflected a few moments before answering it. At length he replied;

"There was such a wealth of curious matter that I find it difficult to single out any one point in particular. The case interested me as a whole, and especially by reason of the singular parallelism that it presented to another most remarkable case which was related to me in great detail by a legal friend of mine, in whose practice it occurred."

"Indeed," said Mr. Pottermack, still intent on tractive operations; "and what were the special features in that case?"

"There were many very curious features in that case," Thorndyke replied in a reminiscent tone. "Perhaps the most remarkable was an ingenious fraud perpetrated by one of the parties, who dressed an Egyptian mummy in a recognizable suit of clothes and deposited it in a gravel-pit."

"Good gracious!" gasped Pottermack, and the "superiority complex" died a sudden death.

"Yes," Thorndyke continued with the same reminiscent air, observing that his companion was for the moment speechless, "it was a most singular case. My legal friend used to refer to it, in a whimsical fashion, as the case of the dead man who was alive and the live man who was dead."

"B-but," Pottermack stammered, with chattering teeth, "that sounds like a c-contradiction."

"It does," Thorndyke agreed, "and of course it is. What he actually meant was that it was a case of a living man who was believed to be dead, and a dead man who was believed to be alive—until the mummy came to light."

Pottermack made no rejoinder. He was still dumb with amazement and consternation. He had a confused feeling of unreality as if he were walking in a dream. With a queer sort of incredulous curiosity he looked up at the calm, inscrutable face of the tall stranger who walked by his side and asked himself who and what this man could be. Was he, in truth, a lawyer—or was he the Devil? Stranger as he certainly was, he had some intimate knowledge of his—Pottermack's—most secret actions; knowledge which could surely be possessed by no mere mortal. It seemed beyond belief.

With a violent effort he pulled himself together and made an attempt to continue the conversation. For it was borne in on him that he must, at all costs, find out what those cryptic phrases meant and how much this person—lawyer or devil—really knew. After all, he did not seem to be a malignant or hostile devil.

"That must have been a most extraordinary case," he observed at length. "I am—er—quite intrigued by what you have told me. Would it be possible or admissible for you to give me a few details?"

"I don't know why not," said Thorndyke, "excepting that it is rather a long story, and I need not say highly confidential. But if you know of some place where we could discuss it in strict privacy, I should be pleased to tell you the story as it was told to me. I am sure it would interest you. But I make one stipulation."

"What is that?" Pottermack asked.

"It is that you, too, shall search your memory, and if you can recall any analogous circumstances as having arisen within your experience or knowledge, you shall produce them so that we can make comparisons."

Pottermack reflected for a few moments, but only a few. For his native common sense told him that neither secrecy nor reservation was going to serve him.

"Very well," he said, "I agree; though until I have heard your story I cannot judge how far I shall be able to match it from my limited experience. But if you will come and take tea with me in my garden, where we shall be quite alone, I will do my best to set my memory to work when I have heard what you have to tell."

"Excellent," said Thorndyke. "I accept your invitation with great pleasure. And I observe that some common impulse seems to have directed us towards your house, and even towards the very gate at which I had the good fortune to make your acquaintance."

In effect, as they had been talking, they had struck into the footpath and now approached the gate of the walled garden.

CHAPTER XVII—DR. THORNDYKE RELATES A QUEER CASE

Mr. Pottermack inserted the small, thin key into the Yale lock of the gate and turned it while Thorndyke watched him with a faint smile.

"Admirable things, these Yale locks," the latter remarked as he followed his host in through the narrow gateway and cast a comprehensive glance round the walled garden, "so long as you don't lose the key. It is a hopeless job trying to pick one."

"Did you ever try?" asked Pottermack.

"Yes, and had to give it up. But I see you appreciate their virtues. That looks like one on the farther gate."

"It is," Pottermack admitted. "I keep this part of the garden for my own sole use and I like to be secure from interruption."

"I sympathize with you," said Thorndyke. "Security from interruption is always pleasant, and there are occasions when it is indispensable."

Pottermack looked at him quickly but did not pursue the topic.

"If you will excuse me for a minute," he said, "I will run and tell my housekeeper to get us some tea. You would rather have it out here than in the house, wouldn't you?"

"Much rather," replied Thorndyke. "We wish to be private, and here we are with two good Yale locks to keep eavesdroppers at bay."

While his host was absent he paced slowly up and down the lawn, observing everything with keen interest but making no particular inspections. Above the yew hedge he could see the skylighted roof of what appeared to be a studio or workshop, and in the opposite corner of the garden a roomy, comfortable summer-house. From these objects he turned his attention to the sun-dial,

looking it over critically and strolling round it to read the motto. He was thus engaged when his host returned with the news that tea was being prepared and would follow almost immediately.

"I was admiring your sun-dial, Mr. Pottermack," said Thorndyke. "It is a great adornment to the garden and a singularly happy and appropriate one; for the flowers, like the dial, number only the sunny hours. And it will look still better when time has softened the contrast between the old pillar and the new base."

"Yes," Pottermack agreed, a trifle uneasily, "the base will be all the better for a little weathering. How do you like the motto?"

"Very much," replied Thorndyke. "A pleasant, optimistic motto, and new to me. I don't think I have ever met with it before. But it is a proper sun-dial motto: 'Hope in the morning, Peace at eventide.' Most of us have known the first and all of us look forward to the last. Should I be wrong if I were to assume that there is a well underneath?"

"N-no," stammered Pottermack, "you would not. It is an old well that had been disused and covered up. I discovered it by accident when I was levelling the ground for the sun-dial and very nearly fell into it. So I decided to put the sun-dial over it to prevent any accidents in the future. And mighty glad I was to see it safely covered up."

"You must have been," said Thorndyke. "While it was uncovered it must have been a constant anxiety to you."

"It was," Pottermack agreed, with a nervous glance at his guest.

"That would be about the latter part of last July," Thorndyke suggested with the air of one recalling a half-forgotten event; and Mr. Pottermack breathlessly admitted that it probably was.

Here they were interrupted by the arrival of Mrs. Gadby, for whom the gate had been left open, followed by a young maid, both laden with the materials for tea on a scale suggestive of a Sunday School treat. The housekeeper glanced curiously at the tall, imposing stranger, wondering inwardly why he could not come to the dining-room like a Christian. In due course the load of provisions was transferred to the somewhat inadequate table in the summer-house and the two servants then retired, Mrs. Gadby ostentatiously shutting the gate behind her. As its lock clicked, Mr. Pottermack ushered his guest into the summer-house, offering him the chair once occupied by James Lewson and since studiously avoided by its owner.

When the hospitable preliminaries had been disposed of and the tea poured out, Thorndyke opened the actual proceedings with only the briefest preamble.

"I expect, Mr. Pottermack, you are impatient to hear about that case which seemed to pique your curiosity so much, and as the shadow is creeping round your dial, we mustn't waste time, especially as there is a good deal to tell. I will begin with an outline sketch of the case, in the form of a plain narrative, which will enable you to judge whether anything at all like it has ever come to your knowledge.

"The story as told to me by my legal friend dealt with the histories of two men, whom we will call respectively Mr. Black and Mr. White. At the beginning of the story they appear to have been rather intimate friends, and both were employed at a bank, which we will call Alsop's Bank. After they had been there some time—I don't know exactly how long—a series of forgeries occurred, evidently committed by some member of the staff of the bank. I need not go into details. For our

purpose the important fact is that suspicion fell upon Mr. White. The evidence against him was striking, and, if genuine, convincing and conclusive. But to my friend it appeared decidedly unsatisfactory. He was strongly disposed to suspect that the crime was actually committed by Mr. Black and that he fabricated the evidence against Mr. White. But, however that may have been, the Court accepted the evidence. The jury found Mr. White guilty and the judge sentenced him to five years' penal servitude.

"It was a harsh sentence, but that does not concern us, as Mr. White did not serve the full term. After about a year of it, he escaped and made his way to the shore of an estuary, and there his clothes were found and a set of footprints across the sand leading into the water. Some six weeks later a nude body was washed up on the shore and was identified as his body. An inquest was held and it was decided that he had been accidentally drowned. Accordingly he was written off the prison books and the records at Scotland Yard as a dead man.

"But he was not dead. The body which was found was probably that of some bather whose clothes Mr. White had appropriated in exchange for his own prison clothes. Thus he was able to get away without hindrance and take up a new life elsewhere, no doubt under an assumed name. Probably he went abroad, but this is only surmise. From the moment of his escape from prison he vanishes from our ken, and for the space of about fifteen years remains invisible, his existence apparently unknown to any of his former friends or acquaintances.

"This closes the first part of the history; the part which deals with the person whom my friend whimsically described as 'the dead man who was alive.' And now, perhaps, Mr. Pottermack, you can tell me whether you have ever heard of a case in any way analogous to this one."

Mr. Pottermack reflected for a few moments. Throughout Thorndyke's recital he had sat with the feeling of one in a dream. The sense of unreality had again taken possession of him. He had listened with a queer sort of incredulous curiosity to the quiet voice of this inscrutable stranger, relating to him with the calm assurance of some wizard or clairvoyant the innermost secrets of his own life; describing actions and events which he, Pottermack, felt certain could not possibly be known to any human creature but himself. It was all so unbelievable that any sense of danger, of imminent disaster, was merged in an absorbing wonder. But one thing was quite clear to him. Any attempt to deceive or mislead this mysterious stranger would be utterly futile. Accordingly he replied:

"By a most strange coincidence it happens that a case came to my knowledge which was point by point almost identical with yours. But there was one difference. In my case, the guilt of the person who corresponds to your Mr. Black was not problematical at all. He admitted it. He even boasted of it and of the clever way in which he had set up Mr. White as the dummy to take all the thumps."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Thorndyke. "That is extremely interesting. We must bear that point in mind when we come to examine the details. Now I go on to the second part of the narrative; the part that deals with the 'live man who was dead.'

"After the lapse of some fifteen years, Mr. White came to the surface, so to speak. He made his appearance in a small country town, and from his apparently comfortable circumstances he seemed to have prospered in the interval. But here he encountered a streak of bad luck. By some malignant chance, it happened that Mr. Black was installed as manager of the branch bank in that very town, and naturally enough they met. Even then all might have been well but for an unaccountable piece of carelessness on Mr. White's part. He had, by growing a beard and taking to the use of spectacles, made a considerable change in his appearance. But he had neglected one point. He had,

it appears, on his right ear a small birth-mark. It was not at all conspicuous, but when once observed it was absolutely distinctive.

"But," exclaimed Pottermack, "I don't understand you. You say he neglected this mark. But what could he possibly have done to conceal it?"

"He could have had it obliterated," replied Thorndyke. "The operation is quite simple in the case of a small mark. The more widespread 'port-wine' mark is less easy to treat; but a small spot, such as I understand that this was, can be dealt with quite easily and effectively. Some skin surgeons specialize in the operation. One of them I happen to know personally: Mr. Julian Parsons, the dermatologist to St. Margaret's Hospital."

"Ha," said Mr. Pottermack.

"But," continued Thorndyke, "to return to our story. Mr. White had left his birth-mark untreated, and that was probably his undoing. Mr. Black would doubtless have been struck by the resemblance, but the birth-mark definitely established the identity. At any rate, Mr. Black recognized him and forthwith began to levy blackmail. Of course, Mr. White was an ideal subject for a blackmailer's operations. He was absolutely defenceless, for he could not invoke the aid of the law by reason of his unexpired sentence. He had to pay, or go back to prison—or take some private measures.

"At first, it appears that he accepted the position and paid. Probably he submitted to be bled repeatedly, for there is reason to believe that quite considerable sums of money passed. But eventually Mr. White must have realized what most blackmailers' victims have to realize: that there is no end to this sort of thing. The blackmailer is always ready to begin over again. At any rate, Mr. White adopted the only practicable alternative to paying out indefinitely. He got Mr. Black alone in a secluded garden in which there was a disused well. Probably Mr. Black came there voluntarily to make fresh demands. But however that may have been, Mr. Black went, dead or alive, down into the well."

"In the case which came to my knowledge," said Pottermack, "it was to some extent accidental. He had become rather violent, and in the course of what amounted to a fight he fell across the opening of the well, striking his head heavily on the brick coping, and dropped down in a state of insensibility."

"Ah," said Thorndyke, "that may be considered, as you say, to some extent accidental. But probably to a rather small extent. I think we may take it that he would have gone down that well in any case. What do you say?"

"I think I am inclined to agree with you," replied Pottermack.

"At all events," said Thorndyke, "down the well he went. And there seemed to be an end of the blackmailer. But it was not quite the end, and the sequel introduces a most interesting feature into the case.

"It appears that the path by which Mr. Black approached Mr. White's premises was an earth path, and owing to the peculiar qualities of the soil in that locality, it took the most extraordinarily clear impressions of the feet that trod on it. Now, it happened that Mr. Black was wearing shoes with rubber soles and heels of a strikingly distinctive pattern, which left on the earth path impressions of the most glaringly conspicuous and distinctive character. The result was a set of footprints, obviously and certainly those of Mr. Black, leading directly to Mr. White's gate and stopping there.

This was a most dangerous state of affairs, for as soon as the hue and cry was raised—which it would be immediately in the case of a bank manager—the missing Black would be traced by his footprints to Mr. White's gate. And then the murder would be out.

"Now what was Mr. White to do? He could not obliterate those footprints in any practicable manner. So he did the next best—or even better—thing. He continued them past his gate, out into the country and across a heath, on the farther side of which he allowed them discreetly to fade away into the heather.

"It was an admirable plan, and it succeeded perfectly. When the hue and cry was raised, the police followed those tracks like bloodhounds until they lost them on the heath. A photographer with a special camera patiently took samples of the footprints along the whole route, from the place where they started to where they were lost on the heath. But no one suspected Mr. White. He did not come into the picture at all. It seemed that he had now nothing to do but to lie low and let the affair pass into oblivion.

"But he did nothing of the kind. Instead, he embarked on a most unaccountable proceeding. Months after the disappearance of Mr. Black, when the affair had become nearly forgotten, he proceeded deliberately to revive it. He obtained an Egyptian mummy, and having dressed it in Mr. Black's clothes, or in clothes that had been specially prepared to counterfeit those of Mr. Black, he deposited it in a gravel-pit. His reasons for doing this are unknown to my legal friend and are difficult to imagine. But whatever the object may have been, it was attained, for in due course the mummy was discovered and identified as the body of Mr. Black, an inquest was held and the mystery of the disappearance finally disposed of.

"That is a bare outline of the case, Mr. Pottermack; just sufficient to enable us to discuss it and compare it with the one that you have in mind."

"It is a very remarkable case," said Pottermack, "and the most remarkable feature in it is its close resemblance to the one of which I came to hear. In fact, they are so much alike that—"

"Exactly," interrupted Thorndyke. "The same thought had occurred to us both—that your case and the one related by my legal friend are in reality one and the same."

"Yes," agreed Pottermack, "I think they must be. But what is puzzling me is how your legal friend came by the knowledge of these facts, which would seem to have been known to no one but the principal actor."

"That is what we are going to consider," said Thorndyke. "But before we begin our analysis, there is one point that I should like to clear up. You said that Mr. Black had explicitly admitted his guilt in regard to those forgeries. To whom did he make that admission?"

"To his wife," replied Pottermack.

"His wife!" exclaimed Thorndyke. "But it was assumed that he was a bachelor."

"The facts," said Pottermack, "are rather singular. I had better fill in this piece of detail, which apparently escaped your legal friend's investigations.

"Mr. White, in the days before his troubles befell, was engaged to be married to a very charming girl to whom he was completely devoted and who was equally devoted to him. After Mr. White's reported death, Mr. Black sought her friendship and later tried to induce her to marry him. He

urged that he had been Mr. White's most intimate friend and that their marriage was what the deceased would have wished. Eventually she yielded to his persuasion and married him, rather reluctantly, since her feeling towards him was merely that of a friend. What his feeling was towards her it is difficult to say. She had some independent means, and it is probable that her property was the principal attraction. That is what the subsequent history suggests.

"The marriage was a failure from the first. Black sponged on his wife, gambled with her money and was constantly in debt and difficulties. Also he drank to an unpleasant extent. But she put up with all this until one day he let out that he had committed the forgeries, and even boasted of his smartness in putting the suspicion on White. Then she left him, and, assuming another name, went away to live by herself, passing herself off as a widow."

"And as to her husband? How came he to allow this?"

"First, she frightened him by threatening to denounce him; but she also made him an allowance on condition that he should not molest her. He seems to have been rather scared by her threats and he wanted the money, so he took the allowance and as much more as he could squeeze out of her, and agreed to her terms.

"Later Mr. White returned to England from America. As he had now quite shed his old identity and was a man of good reputation and comfortably off, he sought her out in the hopes of possibly renewing their old relations. That, in fact, was what brought him to England. Eventually he discovered her, apparently a widow, and had no difficulty in making her acquaintance."

"Did she recognize him?"

"I think we must assume that she did. But nothing was said. They maintained the fiction that they were new acquaintances. So they became friends. Finally he asked her to marry him, and it was then that he learned, to his amazement, that she had married Mr. Black."

Thorndyke's face had suddenly become grave. He cast a searching glance at Mr. Pottermack and demanded: "When was this proposal of marriage made? I mean, was it before or after the incident of the well?"

"Oh, after, of course. No marriage could have been thought of by Mr. White while he was under the thumb of the blackmailer, with the choice of ruin or the prison before him. It was only when the affair was over and everything seemed to be settling down quietly that the marriage seemed to have become possible."

Thorndyke's face cleared and a grim smile spread over it. "I see," he chuckled. "A quaint situation for Mr. White. Now, of course, one understands the mummy. His function was to produce a death certificate. Very ingenious. And now I gather that you would like an exposition of the evidence in this case?"

"Yes," replied Pottermack. "Your legal friend seems to have had knowledge of certain actions of Mr. White's which I should have supposed could not possibly have been known to any person in the world but Mr. White himself. I should like to hear how he came by that knowledge if you would be so kind as to enlighten me."

"Very well," said Thorndyke, "then we will proceed to consider the evidence in this case; and I must impress on you, Mr. Pottermack, the necessity of discriminating clearly between what my

legal friend knew and what he inferred, and of observing the point at which inference becomes converted into knowledge by verification or new matter.

"To begin with what my friend knew, on the authority of a director of Mr. Black's bank. He knew that Mr. Black had disappeared under very mysterious circumstances. That he had received an urgent and threatening demand from a creditor for the payment of a certain sum of money. That before starting that night he had taken from the monies belonging to the bank a sum of money in notes exactly equal to the amount demanded from him. The reasonable inference was that he set out intending to call on that creditor and pay that money; instead of which, he appeared to have walked straight out of the town into the country, where all trace of him was lost.

"Then my friend learned from the director that, whereas the books of the bank showed Mr. Black's known income and ordinary expenditure, there was evidence of his having paid away large sums of money on gambling transactions, always in cash—mostly five-pound notes; that these sums greatly exceeded his known income, and that his account showed no trace of their having been received. Since he must have received that money before he could have paid it away, he must clearly have had some unknown source of income; and since he had paid it away in cash, and there was no trace of his having received any cheques to these amounts, the inference was that he had received it in cash. I need not remind you, Mr. Pottermack, that the receipt of large sums of money in notes or specie is a very significant and rather suspicious circumstance."

"Might not these sums represent his winnings?" Pottermack asked.

"They might, but they did not, for all the transactions that were traced resulted in losses. Apparently he was the type of infatuated gambler who always loses in the end. So much for Mr. Black. Next, my friend learned from the director the circumstances of the forgeries, and he formed the opinion—which was also that of the director—that Mr. White had been a victim of a miscarriage of justice and that the real culprit had been Mr. Black. He also learned the particulars of Mr. White's escape from prison and alleged death. But he differed from the director in that, being a lawyer with special experience, he did not accept that death as an established fact, but only as a probability, reserving in his mind the possibility of a mistaken identity of the body and that Mr. White might have escaped and be still alive.

"Thus, you see, Mr. Pottermack, that my friend started with a good deal of knowledge of this case and the parties to it. And now we come to some facts of another kind which carry us on to the stage of inference. The director who furnished my friend with the information that I have summarized also put into his hands a long series of photographs of the footprints of Mr. Black, taken by an employee of the bank on the second morning after the disappearance."

"For what purpose?" asked Mr. Pottermack.

"Principally, I suspect, to try a new camera of a special type, but ostensibly to help the investigators to discover what had become of the missing man. They were handed to my friend for his inspection and opinion as to their value for this purpose. Of course, at the first glance they appeared to be of no value at all, but as my friend happens to be deeply interested in footprints as material for evidence, he retained them for further examination in relation to a particular point which he wished to clear up. That point was whether a series of footprints is anything more that a mere multiple of a single footprint; whether it might be possible to extract from a series any kind of evidence that would not be famished by an individual footprint.

"Evidently, those photographs offered an exceptional opportunity for settling this question. They were in the form of a long paper ribbon on which were nearly two hundred numbered photographs

of footprints, and they were accompanied by a twenty-five-inch ordnance map on which each footprint was indicated by a numbered dot. The row of dots started at the bank, and then, after a blank interval, entered and followed a footpath which passed along a wall in which was a gate, and which enclosed a large garden or plantation; beyond the wall the dots continued, still on the footpath, between some fields, through a wood and across a heath, on the farther side of which they stopped. A note at the end of the ribbon stated that here the missing man had turned off the path into the heather and that no further traces of him could be found."

"Well," remarked Pottermack. "the police could see all that for themselves. It doesn't seem as if the photographs gave any further information."

"It does not." Thorndyke agreed. "And yet a careful examination of those photographs led my friend to the conviction that the missing man had entered the gate in the wall and had never come out again."

"But," exclaimed Pottermack, "I understood you to say that the footprints continued past the wall, through the wood and out across the heath."

"So they did. But a careful scrutiny of the photographs convinced my friend that this was not a single series of footprints, made by one man but two series, made by two different men. The first series started from the bank and ended at the gate. The second series started from the gate and ended on the heath."

"Then the footprints were not all alike?"

"That," replied Thorndyke, "depends on what we mean by 'alike.' If you had taken any one footprint from any part of the whole series and compared it with any other corresponding footprint—right or left—in any other part of the series, you would have said that they were undoubtedly prints of the same foot."

"Do I understand you to mean that every footprint in the whole series was exactly like every other footprint of the same side?"

"Yes. Every right footprint was exactly like every other right footprint, and the same with the left. That is, considered as individual footprints."

"Then I don't see how your friend could have made out that the whole series of footprints, all indistinguishably alike, consisted of two different series, made by two different men."

Thorndyke chuckled. "It is quite a subtle point," he said, "and yet perfectly simple. I am a little surprised that it had not occurred to Mr. White, who seems to have been an acute and ingenious man. You see, the difference was not between the individual footprints but between certain periodic characters in the two series."

"I don't think I quite follow you," said Pottermack.

"Well, let us follow my legal friend's procedure. I have told you that his object in examining these photographs was to ascertain whether footprints in series present any periodic or recurrent characters that might be of evidential importance. Now, a glance at these photographs showed him that these footprints must almost certainly present at least one such character. They were the prints of shoes with rubber soles of a highly distinctive pattern and circular rubber heels. Now, Mr. Pottermack, why does a man wear circular rubber heels?"

"Usually, I suppose, because if he wears ordinary leather heels he wears them down all on one side."

"And how do the circular heels help him?"

"In the case of circular heels," Pottermack replied promptly, "the wear does not occur all at one point, but is distributed round the whole circumf—"

He stopped abruptly with his mouth slightly open and looked at Thorndyke.

"Exactly," said the latter, "you see the point. A circular heel is secured to the shoe by a single, central screw. But it is not a complete fixture. As the wearer walks, the oblique impact as it meets the ground causes it to creep round; very slowly when the heel is new and tightly screwed on, more rapidly as it wears thinner and the central screw-hole wears larger. Of course, my friend knew this, but he now had an opportunity of making his knowledge more exact and settling certain doubtful points as to rapidity and direction of rotation. Accordingly he proceeded, with the ribbon of photographs and the ordnance map before him, to follow the track methodically, noting down the distances and the rate and direction of rotation of each heel.

"His industry was rewarded and justified within the first dozen observations, for it brought to light a fact of considerable importance, though it does not happen to be relevant to our case. He found that both heels revolved in the same direction—clock-wise—though, of course, since they were in what we may call 'looking-glass' relation, they ought to have revolved in opposite directions."

"Yes," said Pottermack, "it is curious, but I don't see what its importance is."

"Its importance in an evidential sense," replied Thorndyke, "is this: the anomaly of rotation was evidently not due to the shoes but to some peculiarity in the gait of the wearer. The same shoes on the feet of another person would almost certainly have behaved differently. Hence the character of the rotation might become a test point in a question of personal identity. However, that is by the way. What concerns us is that my friend established the fact that both heels were rotating quite regularly and rather rapidly. Each of them made a complete rotation in about a hundred and fifty yards.

"My friend, however, did not accept this result as final, but continued his observations to ascertain if this regular rate of rotation was maintained along the whole of the track. So he went on methodically until he had examined nearly half of the ribbon. And then a most astonishing thing happened. Both the heels suddenly ceased to revolve. They stopped dead, and both at the same place.

"Now, the thing being apparently an impossibility, my friend thought that he must have made some error of observation. Accordingly he went over this part of the ribbon again. But the same result emerged. Then, abandoning his measurements, he went rapidly along the whole remaining length of the ribbon to the very end, but still with the same result. Throughout the whole of that distance, neither heel showed the slightest sign of rotation. So it came to this: the photographs from number 1 to number 92 showed both heels rotating regularly about once in every hundred and fifty yards; from number 93 to number 197 showed the heels completely stationary.

"My friend was profoundly puzzled. On the showing of the photographs, the heels of this man's shoes which had been turning quite freely and regularly as he walked, had, in an instant, become immovably fixed. And both at the same moment. He tried to think of some possible explanation, but he could think of none. The thing was utterly incomprehensible. Then he turned to the

ordnance map to see if anything in the environment could throw any light on the mystery. Searching along the row of dots for number 93 he at length found it—exactly opposite the gate in the wall.

"This was a decidedly startling discovery. It was impossible to ignore the coincidence. The position was that this man's heels had been turning freely until he reached the gate; after passing the gate his heels had become permanently fixed. The obvious suggestion was that this mysterious change in the condition of the heels was in some way connected with the gate. But what could be the nature of the connection? And what could be the nature of the change in the shoes?

"To the first question the suggested answer was that the man might have gone in at the gate; and while he was inside, something might have happened to his shoes which caused the heels to become fixed. But still the difficulty of the shoes remained. What could cause revolving heels to become fixed? To this question my friend could find no answer. The possibility that the heels had been taken off and screwed on again more tightly would not have explained their complete immobility; and, in fact, they had not been. The screws showed plainly in many of the photographs, and the position of their slots in all was identical. The footprints in the second series—those past the gate—were in every respect the exact counterparts of those in the first series—those from the town to the gate. The only condition that my friend could think of as agreeing with the physical facts was that which would have occurred if the prints in the second series had been made, not by the shoes themselves but by some sort of reproductions of them, such as plaster casts or casts in some other material."

"That sounds rather a far-fetched suggestion," remarked Pottermack.

"It does," Thorndyke agreed; "and in fact my friend did not entertain it seriously at first. He merely noted that the appearances were exactly such as would be produced by making impressions with casts; in which, of course, since the soles and heels would be all in one piece, no movement of the heels would be possible. But, Mr. Pottermack, we must bear in mind whose footprints these were. They were the footprints of a man who had disappeared in the most mysterious and unaccountable manner. The whole affair was highly abnormal. No reasonable explanation was possible either of the disappearance or of the singular character of the footprints. But in the absence of a reasonable explanation, it is admissible to consider an unreasonable one, if it agrees with the known facts. The cast theory did agree with the physical facts, and, on reflection, my friend decided to adopt it as a working hypothesis and see what came of it.

"Now, if the footprints from the gate to the heath were counterfeits of Black's footprints, made with shoes the soles and heels of which were mechanical reproductions of the soles and heels of Black's shoes, it followed that the wearer of these shoes was not Black, but some other person, in which case Black's own footprints ended at the gate. This at once got rid of the most unaccountable feature of the disappearance—the nocturnal flight out into the country; for if his footprints ended at the gate he must have gone in. But there was nothing at all abnormal about his calling at a house quite close to, and, in fact, almost in the town, from which he could have easily gone to keep his appointment with his creditor. Thus far, the hypothesis seemed to simplify matters.

"But it not only followed that Black must have gone in at the gate, it followed that he could never have come out. For the footprints that went on were not his, and there were no footprints going back towards the town."

"He might have come out another way; by the front door, for instance," Pottermack suggested.

"So he might," Thorndyke agreed, "under different circumstances. But the counterfeit footprints showed that he did not. For if the continuing footprints were counterfeits, made by some other person, what could have been their purpose? Clearly their purpose could have been no other than that of concealing the fact that Black had gone in at the gate. But if he had come out of the premises, there could have been no reason for concealing the fact that he had gone in.

"If, however, he did not come out, then, obviously, he remained inside. But in what condition? Was he alive and in hiding? Evidently not. In the first place, he had no occasion to hide, since he could have gone back to the bank and replaced the money. But the conclusive evidence that he was not in hiding was the counterfeit footprints. No mechanical reproduction of the shoes would have been necessary if Black had been there. Black's own shoes would have been borrowed and used to make the false footprints. But, obviously, the whole set of circumstances was against the supposition that he could be alive. If the evidence was accepted that he went in and was never seen again, the most obvious inference was that he had been made away with. And this inference was strongly supported by the troublesome and elaborate measures that had been taken to conceal the fact that he had gone in at the gate. Accordingly my friend adopted the view, provisionally, that Mr. Black had been made away with by some person inside the gate, hereinafter referred to as the tenant.

"But the adoption of this view at once raised two questions. First, how came it to be necessary to make reproductions of the dead man's shoes? Why did not the tenant simply take the shoes off the corpse and put them on his own feet? If he had done this, if he had made the false footprints with the dead man's own shoes, the illusion would have been perfect. No detection would have been possible. Why had he not done it? The shoes themselves could have presented no difficulty. They were large shoes, and large shoes can, with suitable preparation, be worn even by a small man.

"The answer that suggested itself was that, for some reason, the shoes were not available; that by the time that the necessity for the false footprints had been perceived, the shoes had in some way become inaccessible. But how could they have become inaccessible? Could the body have been buried? Apparently not. For it would have been much less trouble to dig up a body and recover the shoes than to make a pair of reproductions of them. Could it have been burned? Evidently not. Apart from the extreme difficulty of the operation, there had not been time. The false footprints were made on the very night of the disappearance since they were traced by the police the next morning.

"The possibility that the body might have been conveyed away off the premises had to be borne in mind. But it was highly improbable, for many obvious reasons and it did not dispose of the difficulty. For it would surely have been easier and quicker to go—at night—and retrieve the shoes than to make the counterfeits. Indeed, when my friend considered the immense labour that the making of those reproductions must have entailed, to say nothing of the great expenditure of time, just when every moment was precious, he felt that nothing but the absolute physical impossibility of getting access to the original shoes would explain their having been made.

"Now, what conditions would have rendered those shoes totally inaccessible? Remember the circumstances. Inasmuch as the sham footprints were found on the following morning, they must have been made that night. But before they could be made, the counterfeit soles must have been made, and the making of them must have been a long and tedious piece of work. It therefore followed that the tenant must have begun work on them almost immediately after the death of Mr. Black. From this it followed that the body of Mr. Black must have been immediately disposed of in such a way as at once to become inaccessible.

"What methods of disposing of a body would fulfil these conditions? My friend could think of only three, all very much alike: the dropping of the body down a dene-hole, or into a cess-pit, or into a disused well. Any of these methods would at once put the body completely out of reach. And all these methods had a special probability in this particular case. The great difficulty that confronts the would-be murderer is the disposal of the body. Hence the knowledge that there was available a means of immediately, securely, and permanently hiding the body might be the determining factor of the murder. Accordingly, my friend was strongly inclined to assume that one of these three methods was the one actually employed.

"As to the particular method, the question was of no great importance. Still, my friend considered it. The idea of a dene-hole was at once excluded on geological grounds. Dene-holes are peculiar to the chalk. But this was not a chalk district.

"The cess-pit was possible but not very probable; for if in use, it would be subject to periodical clearance, which would make it quite unsuitable as a hiding-place, while cess-pits which become superseded by drainage are usually filled in and definitely covered up. A well, on the other hand, is often kept open for occasional and special use after the laying on of a pipe service."

"Your friend," remarked Pottermack, "seems to have taken it for granted that a well actually existed."

"Not entirely," said Thorndyke. "He looked up an older map and found that this house had formerly been a farm-house, so that it must once have had a well; and as it now fronts on a road in which other houses have been built and which is virtually a street, it is pretty certainly connected with the water-service. So that it was practically certain that there was a well, and that well would almost certainly be out of use.

"And now, having deduced a reason why the counterfeit soles should have been necessary, he had to consider another question. If the original shoes were inaccessible, how could it have been possible to make the counterfeits, which were, apparently, casts of the originals? At first it looked like an impossibility. But a little reflection showed that the footprints themselves supplied the answer. Mr. Black's own footprints on the path were such perfect impressions that a little good plaster poured into selected samples of them would have furnished casts which would have been exact reproductions of the soles and heels of Mr. Black's shoes. Possibly there were equally good footprints inside the premises, but that is of no consequence. Those on the footpath would have answered the purpose perfectly.

"I may say that my friend tested this conclusion and got some slight confirmation. For if the false footprints were impressions of reproductions, not of the original shoes but of some other footprints, one would expect to find the accidental characters of those particular footprints as well as those of the shoes which produced them. And this appeared to be the case. In one of the points of the star on the left heel a small particle of earth seemed to have adhered. This was not to be found in Black's own footprints, but it was visible in all the footprints of the second series, from the gate to the heath. And the fact that it never changed along the whole series suggested that it was really a part of the cast, due to an imperfection in the footprint from which it was made.

"That brings us to an end of my friend's train of reasoning in regard to the actual events connected with Mr. Black's disappearance. His conclusions were, you observe, that Mr. Black went in at the gate; that he was thereafter made away with by some person inside whom we have called the tenant; that his body was deposited by the tenant in some inaccessible place, probably a disused well; and that the tenant then made a set of false footprints to disguise the fact that Mr. Black had gone in at the gate.

"The questions that remained to be considered were; first. What could be the tenant's motive for making away with Mr. Black? and second, Who was the tenant? But before we deal with his inferences on those points, I should like to hear any observations which you may have to make on what I have told you."

Mr. Pottermack pondered awhile on what he had heard, and as he reflected, he laid a disparaging hand on the teapot.

"It is rather cool," he remarked apologetically; "but such as it is, can I give you another cup?"

"Prolonged exposition," Thorndyke replied with a smile, "is apt to have a cooling effect upon tea. But it also creates a demand for liquid refreshment. Thank you, I think another cup would cheer, and we can dispense with the inebriation."

Mr. Pottermack refilled both the cups and put down the teapot, still cogitating profoundly.

CHAPTER XVIII—THE SUN-DIAL HAS THE LAST WORD

"Your legal friend," Mr. Pottermack said at length, "must be a man of extraordinary subtlety and ingenuity if he deduced all that you have told me from the mere peculiarities of a set of footprints, and only photographs at that. But what strikes me about it is that his reconstruction was, after all, pure speculation. There were too many 'ifs.'"

"But, my dear Mr. Pottermack," exclaimed Thorndyke, "it was all 'ifs.' The whole train of reasoning was on the plane of hypothesis, pure and simple. He did not, at this stage, assume that it was actually true, but merely true conditionally on the facts being what they appeared to be. But what does a scientific man do when he sets up a working hypothesis? He deduces from it its consequences, and he continues to pursue these so long as they are consistent with the facts known to him. Sooner or later, this process brings him either to an impossibility or a contradiction—in which case he abandons the hypothesis—or to a question of fact which is capable of being settled conclusively, yes or no.

"Well, this is what my friend did. So far we have seen him pursuing a particular hypothesis and deducing from it certain consequences. The whole thing might have been fallacious. But it was consistent, and the consequences were compatible with the known facts. Presently we shall come to the question of fact—the crucial experiment which determines yes or no, whether the hypothesis is true or false. But we have to follow the hypothetical method a little farther first.

"The questions that remained to be considered were: first, What could have been the tenant's motive for killing Mr. Black? and second, Who was the tenant? My friend took the questions in this order because the motive might be arrived at by reasoning, and, if so arrived at, might throw light on the personality of the tenant; whereas the identity of the tenant, taken by itself, was a matter of fact capable of being ascertained by enquiry, but not by reasoning apart from the motive.

"Now, what motives suggest themselves? First, we must note that my friend assumed that the homicide was committed by the tenant himself, that is, by the proprietor of the premises and not by a servant or other person. That is a reasonable inference from the facts that the person, whoever he was, appeared to have command of all the means and materials necessary for making the counterfeits, and also that he must have had full control of the premises, both at the time and in the future, in order to hide the body and ensure that it should remain hidden. Well, what motive could a man in this position have had to kill Mr. Black?

"There is the motive of robbery, but the circumstances seem to exclude it as not reasonably probable. It is true that Black had a hundred pounds on his person, but there is no reason to suppose that any one knew that he had; and in any case, so small a sum, relatively, furnishes a quite insufficient motive for murder in the case of an apparently well-to-do man such as the tenant. My friend decided that robbery, though possible, was highly improbable.

"The possibilities that Black's death might have been the result of a quarrel or of some act of private vengeance had to be borne in mind, but there were no means of forming any opinions for or against them. They had to be left as mere speculative possibilities. But there was another possibility which occurred to my friend, the probabilities of which were susceptible of being argued, and to this he turned his attention. It was based upon the application of certain facts actually known and which we will now consider.

"First, he noted that Mr. Black came to this place voluntarily, and that he came expressly to visit the premises within the gate is proved by the fact that this is the last house on that path. Beyond it is the country. There is no other human habitation to which he could have been bound. Now Mr. Black was, at this moment, in acute financial difficulties. He had borrowed a hundred pounds from the bank's money, and this hundred pounds he was about to pay away to meet an urgent demand. But that hundred pounds would have to be replaced, and it was of the utmost importance that it should be replaced without delay. For if a surprise inspection should have occurred before it was replaced, he stood to be charged with robbery. The circumstances, therefore, seemed to suggest that he had taken it with the expectation of being able to replace it almost immediately.

"Now, you will remember that it transpired after his disappearance that Mr. Black had some mysterious unknown source of income; that he had received on several occasions large sums of money, which had apparently come to him in the form of cash and had been paid away in the same form—always in five-pound notes. These monies did not appear in his banking account or in any other account. They were unrecorded—and, consequently, their total amount is not known. But the sums that he is known to have received were ascertained by means of the discovery of certain payments that he had made. I need not point out to you the great and sinister significance of these facts. When a man who has a banking account receives large payments in cash, and when, instead of paying them into his account, he pays them away in cash, it is practically certain that the monies that he has received are connected with some secret transaction, and that transaction is almost certainly an illicit one. But of all such transactions, by far the commonest is blackmail. In fact, one would hardly be exaggerating if one were to say that evidence of secret payments of large sums in coin or notes is presumptive evidence of blackmail. Accordingly my friend strongly suspected Mr. Black of being a blackmailer.

"And now, assuming this to be correct, see how admirably the assumption fits the circumstances. Mr. Black is at the moment financially desperate. He has taken certain money, which is not his, to pay an urgent and threatening creditor. Instead of going direct to that creditor, he comes first to this house. But he does not enter by the front door. He goes to a gate which opens on an unfrequented lane and which gives entrance to a remote part of the grounds, and he does this late in the evening. There is a manifestly secret air about the whole proceeding.

"And now let us make another assumption."

"What, another!" protested Pottermack.

"Yes, another; just to see if it will fit the circumstances as the others have done. Let us assume that the tenant was the person from whom Mr. Black had been extorting those mysterious payments; the victim whom he had been blackmailing. That he had called in on his way to his creditor to see

if he could squeeze him for yet another hundred, so that the notes could be replaced before they could be missed. That the victim, being now at the end of his patience and having an opportunity of safely making away with his persecutor, took that opportunity and made away with him. Is it not obvious that we have a perfectly consistent scheme of the probable course of events?"

"It is all pure conjecture," objected Pottermack.

"It is all pure hypothesis," Thorndyke admitted, "but you see that it all hangs together, it all fits the circumstances completely. We have not come to any inconsistency or impossibility. And it is all intrinsically probable in the special conditions; for you must not forget that we are dealing with a set of circumstances that admits of no normal explanation.

"And now for the last question. Assuming that Mr. Black was a blackmailer and that the tenant was his victim, was it possible to give that victim a name? Here my friend was handicapped by the fact that Mr. Black was a complete stranger, of whose domestic affairs and friends and acquaintances he had no knowledge. With one exception. He had knowledge of one of Mr. Black's friends. That friend, it is true, was alleged to be dead. But it was by no means certain that he was dead. And if he were not dead, he was a perfectly ideal subject for blackmail, for he was an escaped convict with a considerable term of penal servitude still to run. My friend was, of course, thinking of Mr. White. If he should have attained to something approaching affluence and should be living in prosperous and socially desirable circumstances, he would allow himself to be bled to an unlimited extent rather than suffer public disgrace and be sent back to prison. And the person who would be, of all others, the most likely to recognize him and in the best position to blackmail him would be his old friend Mr. Black.

"Bearing these facts in mind, my friend was disposed to waive the prima facie improbability and assume, provisionally, that the tenant was Mr. White. It was certainly rather a long shot."

"It was indeed," said Pottermack. "Your friend was a regular Robin Hood."

"And yet," Thorndyke rejoined, "the balance of probability was in favour of that assumption. For against the various circumstances that suggested that the tenant was Mr. White there was to be set only one single improbability, and that not at all an impressive one: the improbability that a body—found drowned after six weeks' immersion and therefore really unrecognizable—should have been wrongly identified. However, my friend did feel that (to continue the metaphor, since you seem to approve of it) the time had come to step forward and have a look at the target. The long train of hypothetical reasoning had at length brought him to a proposition the truth of which could be definitely tested. The tenant's identity with Mr. White was a matter of fact which could be proved or disproved beyond all doubt. Of course, the test would not be a real experimentum crucis, because it would act in only one direction. If it should turn out that the tenant was not Mr. White, that would not invalidate the other conclusions, but if it should turn out that he was Mr. White, that fact would very strongly confirm those conclusions.

"My friend, then, left his photographs and his ordnance map and made a journey to the scene of these strange events to inspect the place and the man with his own eyes. First he examined the path and the exterior of the premises, and then he made a survey of the grounds enclosed by the wall."

"How did he do that?" enquired Pottermack. "It was a pretty high wall—at least, so I understand."

"He made use of an ancient optical instrument which has been recently revived in an improved form under the name of 'periscope.' The old instrument had two mirrors; the modern one has two total-reflection prisms in a narrow tube. By projecting the upper or objective end of the tube above

the top of the wall, my friend was able, on looking into the eye-piece, to get an excellent view of the premises. What he saw was a large garden, completely enclosed by four high walls in which were two small gates, each provided with a night-latch and therefore capable of being opened only from within or by means of a latchkey. A very secure and secluded garden. On one side of it was a range of out-buildings which, by the glazed lights in their roofs, appeared to be studios or workshops. Near one end of the lawn was a sun-dial on a very wide stone base. The width of the base was rather remarkable, being much greater than is usual in a garden dial. A glance at it showed that the dial had been quite recently set up, for, though the stone pillar was old, the base stones were brand new. Moreover, the turf around it had been very recently laid and some of the earth was still bare. Further proof of its newness was furnished by a gentleman who was, at the moment, engaged, with the aid of Whitaker's Almanack and his watch, in fixing the dial-plate in correct azimuth.

"This gentleman—the mysterious tenant—naturally engaged my friend's attention. There were several interesting points to be noted concerning him. The tools that he used were workmen's tools, not amateurs', and he used them with the unmistakable skill of a man accustomed to tools. Then he had laid aside his spectacles, which were 'curl-sided' and therefore habitually worn. It followed, then, that he was near-sighted; for if he had been old-sighted or long-sighted he would have needed the spectacles especially for the close and minute work that he was doing.

"When he had made these observations, my friend proceeded to take a couple of photographs—a right and a left profile."

"How did he manage that?" demanded the astonished Pottermack.

"By placing his camera on the top of the wall. It was a special, small camera, fitted with a four-point-five Ross-Zeiss lens and a cord release. Of course, he made the exposure with the aid of the periscope.

"When he had exposed the photographs, he decided to have a nearer view of the tenant. Accordingly he went round and knocked at the gate, which was presently opened by the gentleman of the sun-dial, who was now wearing his spectacles. Looking at those spectacles, my friend made a very curious discovery. The man was not near-sighted, for the glasses were convex bi-focals, the upper part nearly plain glass. Now, if he had not needed those spectacles for near work, he certainly could not need them for distance. Then, obviously, he did not need them at all. But, if so, why was he wearing them? The only possible explanation was that they were worn for their effect on his appearance; in short, for the purpose of disguise.

"As this gentleman was answering some questions about the locality my friend handed him a folded map. This he did with two objects: that he might get a good look at him unobserved, and that he might possibly obtain some prints of his finger-tips. As to the first, he was able to make a mental note of the tenant's salient characteristics and to observe, among other peculiarities, a purplish mark on the lobe of the right ear of the kind known to surgeons as a capillary naevus."

"And the finger-prints?" Pottermack asked eagerly.

"They were rather a failure, but not quite. When my friend developed them up, though very poor specimens, they were distinct enough to be recognizable by an expert.

"Now you will have noticed that everything that my friend observed was consistent with, and tended to confirm, the conclusions that he had arrived at by hypothetical reasoning. But the actual test still remained to be applied. Was the tenant Mr. White or was he not? In order to settle this

question, my friend made enlargements of the photographs of the tenant and also of the finger-prints, and, with these in his pocket, paid a visit to Scotland Yard."

At the mention of the ill-omened name, Pottermack started and a sudden pallor spread over his face. But he uttered no sound, and Thorndyke continued:

"There he presented the finger-prints as probably those of a deceased person, photographed from a document, and asked for an expert opinion on them. He gave no particulars and was not asked for any; but the experts made their examination and reported that the finger-prints were those of a convict named White who had died some fifteen years previously. My friend had, further, the opportunity of inspecting the prison photographs of the deceased White and of reading the personal description. Needless to say, they agreed completely in every particular, even to the capillary naevus on the ear.

"Here, then, my legal friend emerged from the region of hypothesis into that of established fact. The position now was that the person whom we have called 'the tenant' was undoubtedly the convict, White, who was universally believed to be dead. And since this fact had been arrived at by the train of reasoning that I have recited, there could be no doubt that the other, intermediate, conclusions were correct; that, in fact, the hypothesis as a whole was substantially true. Do you agree with that view?"

"There seems to be no escape from it," replied Pottermack; and after a brief pause he asked, a little tremulously: "And what action did your legal friend take?"

"In respect of the identity of the tenant? He took no action. He now considered it perfectly clear that Mr. White ought never to have been a convict at all. That unfortunate gentleman had been the victim of a miscarriage of justice. It would have been actually against public policy to disclose his existence and occasion a further miscarriage.

"With regard to the killing of Mr. Black, the position was slightly different. If it comes to the knowledge of any citizen—and especially a barrister, who is an officer of justice—that a crime has been committed, it is the duty of that citizen to communicate his knowledge to the proper authorities. But my friend had not come by any such knowledge. He had formed the opinion—based on certain inferences from certain facts—that Mr. Black had been killed. But a man is not under any obligation to communicate his opinions.

"This may seem a little casuistical. But my friend was a lawyer, and lawyers are perhaps slightly inclined to casuistry. And in this case there were certain features that encouraged this casuistical tendency. We must take it, I think, that a man who suffers a wrong for which the law provides a remedy and in respect of which it offers him protection is morally and legally bound to take the legal remedy and place himself under the protection of the law. But if the law offers him no remedy and no protection, he would appear to be entitled to resume the natural right to protect himself as best he can. That, at any rate, is my friend's view.

"Of course, the discovery of the alleged body of Mr. Black in the gravel-pit seemed to put an entirely new complexion on the affair. My friend was greatly perturbed by the news. It was hardly conceivable that it could really be Mr. Black's body. But it was some person's body, and the deliberate 'planting' of a dead human body seemed almost inevitably to involve a previous crime. Accordingly, my friend started off, hot-foot, to investigate. When the deceased turned out to be a mummy, his concern with the discovery came to an end. There was no need for him to interfere in the case. It was a harmless deception and even useful, for it informed the world at large that Mr. Black was dead.

"That, Mr. Pottermack, is the history of the dead man who was alive and the live man who was dead; and I think you will agree with me and my legal friend that it is a most curious and interesting case."

Pottermack nodded, but for some time remained silent. At length, in a tone the quietness of which failed to disguise the suppressed anxiety, he said:

"But you have not quite finished your story."

"Have I not?" said Thorndyke. "What have I forgotten?"

"You have not told me what became of Mr. White."

"Oh, Mr. White. Well, I think we can read from here upon your sun-dial a few words that put his remaining history in a nutshell. 'Sole decedente pax.' He had the mark removed from his ear, he married his old love and lived happy ever after."

"Thank you," said Mr. Pottermack, and suddenly turned away his head.

THE END
