

**THE CROOKS'
SHEPHERD**

SELDON TRUSS



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THE CROOKS' SHEPHERD

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By

Seldon Truss
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Boston

1936

New York

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THE CROOKS' SHEPHERD

Chapter I

THE HONORABLE PHILADELPHIA HEMSTONE heard the loud trill of the telephone bell at her elbow without moving a muscle of her hard old face. Martha, the general maid, came clumping all the way from the kitchen to answer the summons, for nothing would ever induce Miss Hemstone to do so herself. She regarded the telephone as an essential but menial instrument for the direct use of servants only.

"It's his lordship, ma'am," Martha said, wide-eyed with surprise.

Miss Hemstone's features grew still harder.

"My compliments to Lord Harnley, Martha, and I am unable to speak to him."

The message was duly repeated.

"His lordship says he'd be glad if you'd change your mind, ma'am."

"I am not in the habit," retorted Miss Hemstone grimly, "of changing my mind."

The maid hesitated.

"Sounds 'n a rare to-do, ma'am. Worried about something. I'd say—" She hesitated again.

Miss Hemstone's lips tightened. No further sound issued from them. From her lap she picked up the newspaper she had been reading.

"I see," she remarked with complete detachment, "that another convict has been allowed to escape. The management of our prisons is a national disgrace."

Softly, Martha replaced the telephone receiver and hurried from the room. As the door closed Miss Hemstone laid down the paper and stared through the low latticed window across the village street. The late afternoon sun lent a pleasant hue to the cottage walls opposite, and the old postman's gray beard looked quite golden. It had been a warm day for October, even in Devon, and the tousle-headed school children who romped noisily—too noisily for Miss Hemstone—still wore the print frocks of summer.

Altogether the scene should have been pleasant to Miss Philadelphia Hemstone, spinster of the parish of Bishops Takyll, but her bitterness of soul had long since destroyed the gentler emotions. Her mind saw only the figure of Edward, Lord Harnley, the brother who had frustrated her life, standing like a monstrous shadow in her path. Something grown evil out of the fermentation of hate, although people would describe Lord Harnley as just a bad-tempered misanthrope. People knew that he had discontinued his sister's allowance so that she was forced to leave the Tarn House, her proper habitat, for Delphinium Cottage. But people didn't know why.

Miss Hemstone picked up the newspaper, adjusted the gold-rimmed spectacles firmly on her nose, and began to read. The words: BOSSY PARKWELL ESCAPES FROM PENTONVILLE GAOL stared at her in bold type, but she hardly saw them. Edward had rung up after all these years. He had expected to *speak* to her. It was fantastic. He had intimated that some trouble

threatened him. Nothing new in that. Between his meanness and his great wealth, trouble always threatened him. She recalled those nasty blackmailing cases.

“Following the escape of William Minser last week, it is now reported that Parkwell, the daring safe-breaker, who was recently sentenced to five years’ penal servitude.”

A movement outside the window caught Miss Hemstone’s eye. It was the postman entering her wicket gate. A moment later Martha entered with a seedsman’s catalogue and a letter superscribed in a strangely uncouth hand on an envelope of poor quality. At the sight of this writing Miss Hemstone’s hand tensed slightly, but that was all. She waited till Martha had closed the door before she read the contents of the envelope, and then she rang the bell. Martha re-entered with a patient sigh.

“Light the fire, please,” said Miss Hemstone.

“The fire, ma’am? It’s a nice warm evening—”

“I said,” repeated Miss Hemstone distinctly, “light the fire.”

Martha resignedly applied a match to the tiny grate. It was the first time since spring that this fire had been needed and she had been hoping to defer the need till longer. The paper ignited reluctantly, the wood showing signs of damp. It took patience and trouble to coax a flame.

When Miss Hemstone was alone again she placed her letter on the smoking coals and watched it carefully until only the ashes remained.

Chapter II

AT eleven P.M. silence reigned along the bare passageways and corridors, except for those stirrings and uneasy whisperings that are never entirely absent where misery and bitterness, repressed or inarticulate by day, find their voices in the release of night. In her cell, unlighted save for the glimmer that came through the grating over the door, Number 103 lay sleepless. She was listening to those murmurs as she had listened to them for countless nights in the past and would continue to listen until apathy destroyed her soul. Just now those sounds seemed more desolating, more impossible to bear. She thrust fingers into her ears and turned, praying for the anodyne of sleep.

Then she could hear nothing but the drumming of her pulses and the scrapings of coarse sheets as she moved on the hard bed. She did not even hear the key turning in her cell door. The light streaming in from the passage startled her to alertness.

A wardress entered.

“Too much noise here, 103. You must be quieter!”

The girl stared.

"I—" she began.

"Don't answer me!" said the woman sharply, and then, in a low voice, "Here, take this."

She thrust a tiny folded piece of paper at the girl and turned back through the door.

"No more of that noise, remember, or I shall be obliged to report you."

The girl nodded quickly.

"Yes. I—I am sorry."

The door closed. The key turned. In the dim light the occupant of the cell stared at the scrap in her hand. She knew that some of the women officers could be "sweetened" to bring in messages from outside, but this was the first time anyone had sent *her* a message. Only friends did that. She had no friends.

It was almost impossible to see the writing so she stood up on her bed in order to catch the feeble rays that came through the grid. There was no superscription to the folded and gummed-over scrap of very thin paper—so thin as to be almost tissue. Inside was written:

Within an hour you will be at liberty. Make no preparations. Confide in no one. This paper is soluble. Eat it.

Number 103 gasped, and, for the first time since she could remember, smiled. But it was a travesty of a smile. "Liberty?" She re-read the message and then her lips twisted into perplexity and dull anger. Was this a pitiful hoax designed to get her into trouble? The discovery of this scrap would certainly bring trouble to the woman who had conveyed it too. Trouble all round. But if the sender meant to involve Number 103 in trouble, why these instructions about destroying the paper? The girl stared and stared until her eyes grew weary with the strain in that feeble light. "*Make no preparations. Confide in no*

8 THE CROOKS' SHEPHERD

one." Was that likely! What preparations could she make? In whom confide?

No, she would ignore the thing; dismiss it from her mind. But the paper mustn't be seen, whatever happened. Crumpling it up, she thrust it into her mouth. Almost instantly it began to dissolve, like a flake of gelatine.

The last thing she remembered was hammering with her fists on the cell door with screams of pain.

Her senses came back to her with an aching head and the intolerable glare of an electric light in her eyes. Someone swiveled down the lampshade and there came the sound of outpoured liquid. A man's voice, preceded by a queer little gasp of indrawn breath said:

"Give her this."

She drank because she lacked the will to do otherwise, and the bitter, odd-tasting liquid revived her enormously. Able now to distinguish her surroundings she realized that she lay in a bed. Not the hard couch of her prison cell but luxurious coil springs and down pillows and figured walnut. And the vellum-shaded reading lamp at her side threw its rays on to a silken eiderdown that gleamed opulently. The walls were lost in semi-obscurity but the glow of an electric radiator suffused an ornate ceiling. When, presently, someone moved, the footfalls were deadened by a carpet that was manifestly thick.

The footfalls halted by the bedside and a face gazed down critically. It was a woman of perhaps thirty years of age, very well dressed in outdoor clothes, with the assured carriage that goes with sartorial smartness. The girl returned the gaze with aching, wondering eyes, and the woman smiled.

"You see," she said. "We have done it. Are you feeling better?"

The girl tried to nod but the spears of pain that stabbed

her eyes made the gesture a feeble one. She heard the man's gasping voice again, speaking from the obscurity behind.

"Wait a little, Bernice. Another ten minutes, I think."

The women drew away silently, while the girl tried to force her numbed brain back to clarity. Endless time seemed to elapse before the man's voice sounded again.

"Can you speak now?"

The girl's reply came faintly, but with distinctness. "Yes."

"Excellent! And naturally you would like me to explain your very curious translation to these surroundings when your proper habitat is a—prison cell."

A chuckle followed the hurried words, and then the man drew another breath.

"It is necessary for me to be brief, because I have other calls upon my time." Again there came that curious inhalation. "Briefly, then, we began by administering a non-lethal, but somewhat painful poison. You perhaps recall the little—note we sent you by a wardress who was not too—troubled by the finer scruples?"

The girl turned to face the speaker, but the features were indeterminate in the shadow. An old man, she thought.

"Yes," she said, after a pause. "I remember. It said that I should be at liberty."

"Quite so," the man's voice continued jerkily. "We have—fulfilled that promise, incredible as it seems. The note, of course, was too—dangerous a document for any—convict to possess. Very properly you took our advice to—swallow it. Foreseeing this we impregnated the paper with a—drug which it is unnecessary to—particularize, but which, I fear, caused you some little discomfort and even—pain. As a result you cried out for help. You became insensible. The—prison doctor, summoned from

his well-earned rest at this unreasonable hour, diagnosed—more or less correctly—acute gastritis and ordered you to the hospital building. Having issued his instructions the long-suffering medico proceeded to the hospital in order to—prepare his restoratives. Two orderlies, meanwhile, were detailed with a stretcher to convey you thither. All this we anticipated. Does the matter now become—plainer to you?”

The girl shook her head listlessly, and the speaker went on, his every sentence punctuated by the odd series of in-drawn gulps of air, as though he found the utterance of words veritable agony.

“No? One must make allowances for the sub-normal state of your senses. That is evident. You are aware, however, that in order to reach the hospital building these orderlies would be obliged to cross the—prison yard. The distance is no more than fifty paces—but enough for our—purpose. A car is parked in a convenient, quiet by-street outside the prison wall. The night is dark and the surrounding thoroughfares at that late hour very ill-lit. The orderlies, complete with stretcher, emerge en route for the hospital building. Our emissaries—provided with scarves heavily soaked in ether and chloroform—make short work of the orderlies. They are swiftly conveyed to the boiler house and locked in. You, needless to say, are carried over the wall and—transported here in my car. How much time elapsed before the—prison doctor became impatient of your non-arrival in the ward can only be a matter of conjecture—but it was long enough for our purpose. Even now I imagine the fact of your escape has not been grasped—and will not be grasped until the discovery of the missing stretcher bearers—. In short, a pretty little mystery confronts your late custodians—and if your sense of humor is as acute as mine you will appreciate the situation.”

The voice paused, as if exhausted. But no answer came from the bed. Presently the man continued, in a lower key.

"Human reactions are certainly incalculable. Failing humor one would at least anticipate—some measure of gratitude."

The girl raised herself suddenly on one elbow and gazed in the direction of the voice. "Do you expect that for—for deferring the price I must pay?"

"No. But I expect you to resent—paying the price—of someone else's crime."

A deep sigh came from the girl's lips. She saw him now vaguely, his smooth white face wrinkled round the eyes, under a wide, soft-brimmed hat. He was leaning forward, into the circle of dim light.

"Can you see me, young lady? You have never seen me before. But you will see me again—unless you insist—on paying that price."

From the background a figure moving across the room picked up something from the mantelpiece. There came the click of an automatic lighter and the woman's face was ghostily revealed as she lit a cigarette. The reddened lips curved pleasantly.

"Did you look at me also?" she asked softly, as another click extinguished the little flame. "Do we not inspire confidence? Can you not believe that we are your good friends?"

The girl sank back again wearily, moving her head from side to side on the pillow. "How can I believe—anything? I shall be punished for escaping. It is not friendship to bring that upon me."

"You will not be—punished for escaping," the man retorted with gusty emphasis, "because it is evident that you were a—passive agent during our ingenious maneuvers. You can therefore face the—prospect of returning

to jail with equanimity. But before deciding upon such incredible quixotism you will do me the—favor of hearing still further what I have to say.” He turned for an instant towards the figure in the shadow.

“A little more of that restorative, if you please, Bernice. We shall require the fullest—attention of our guest for the next few minutes.”

Again the bitter liquid was set against the girl's lips. Lethargically she drank, and the odd-tasting drug seemed to stimulate her brain to an acute comprehension.

“Let me very briefly recount certain facts,” proceeded the man's voice. “It is unnecessary for the moment to refer to your identity until you have decided whether or not you will make a—fight to regain it. For the present you are a cipher, a unit, with no individuality—class or division—from those other units who form your only contacts with human beings—if one may employ such a term. As number one hundred and three you have—endured a living death for nearly a year. I believe that the crime for which you—suffer this punishment is a crime you—did not commit. Am I right?”

A barely perceptible nod came from the girl. She did not answer, though it was evident that her whole attention was concentrated on the man who spoke. He had curious, screwed-up eyes, as though he found as much difficulty in focusing them as he found in speech.

“You were employed,” he went on, “as private secretary to—Lord Harnley. You were convicted of an attempt to extort very large sums of money from Lord Harnley—by means of blackmail. It was alleged by the—prosecution that owing to your confidential position certain facts about your employer's—association with a certain woman came to your knowledge—and that you attempted to make use of these facts to your own advantage. Am I still correct?”

Again the girl nodded.

"The principal evidence at the trial—consisted of letters alleged to have been written by you from an accommodation address—and the testimony of Lord Harnley himself. In your defense you denied these charges—declared the letters to be the work of an enemy. You could not, however—indicate any such enemy and you failed—to refute Lord Harnley's evidence. The culmination of a long and apparently fair trial was a sentence of five years'—penal servitude. These are the bare facts of your case. Now we will leave—facts and come to conjecture. I am going to assume that you did not—write those blackmailing letters, and that the actual writer was someone—else. Suppose I offer to assist you to discover the identity of that someone—on a reasonable condition. Would you, Number 103, still prefer to return to jail—and continue the expiation of a crime—which you did not commit?"

The concluding words were jerked out with a final effort at clear enunciation. As the speaker leant back in his chair his face returned to the shadow whence it had come. Beyond him the automatic lighter spluttered again and a fresh cigarette glowed. Silence hung.

The girl never stirred, her eyes staring into the gloom as though at inscrutable fate. Her mind flitted back to that gray horror of stone walls and barred windows and locked doors. Coarse food, coarse clothes and bedding, coarse language. She suffered anew those torments as her body lay at ease in silk. She knew that the trap had been cunningly set and that she would not be able to escape it.

"You speak of a condition. Tell me what that is," she parried.

"I will not tell you—unless you agree."

"I am to do blindly—whatever you wish?"

"Yes."

"To prove my innocence of one crime you will make me commit another?"

"No."

"How am I to believe that? How am I to believe that you have any power to help me?"

"I will answer those questions with another. How am I to know that you will not—play *me* false!" A chuckle followed the words. "You see—there are two sides to every bargain."

For the first time, the girl smiled faintly.

"If I am caught—" she began, and left the sentence unfinished.

"You will not be caught—if you follow my instructions."

"You are very confident."

"Entirely confident. Have I not given you enough proof of my capabilities?"

The girl smiled again.

"Yes, it was wonderful, to pluck me out of prison like that!"

"And comparatively simple, you will understand—to return you there. To save you the fatigue of a journey—we could drive you to the prison gates. I trust, however, that it will not be—necessary."

The man leant forward again. Once more the light touched his smooth features and those curiously screwed-up eyes. Behind him only the glowing tip of a cigarette indicated that a third person was present.

The girl's smile now became transformed into something alive and eager. Her eyes, gentian blue, sparkled like sapphires; excitement danced in her cheeks. She sat up and held out her hands to the man in shadow.

"No," she said. "It will not be necessary!"

Chapter III

MICHAEL CHILLATON unfolded the letter in his hand and held it out to the Assistant-Commissioner. "I think you've met my uncle, Lord Harnley."

The Assistant-Commissioner smiled.

"I have had that pleasure," he answered, and bent his attention to the letter.

"My dear Michael," he read out, "you will be surprised to receive a communication from me, because our relations are not cordial. Whether that regrettable state of affairs is your fault or mine needn't be discussed now, though my opinion about your perverse action in seeking to grab a living in the workshops of Wolverhampton rather than in occupying yourself with matters more suitable to your position as my heir, remains the same—"

"What on earth," queried the Assistant-Commissioner stonily, "has all this to do with me?"

Michael grimaced apologetically.

"If you wouldn't mind reading a bit further, sir—"

The Assistant-Commissioner raised his brows with the exaggerated patience of one who considers his valuable time is being trifled with. He resumed:

"My object in writing to you now, is, incredibly enough, to enlist your assistance, because I believe that my safety is being threatened and because it is obviously futile to expect any intelligent help from the fossilized institution called Scotland Yard, presided over by morons such as Tankerville, who may be an Assistant-Commissioner, but—"

A rich empurplement suffused Colonel Tankerville's face.

"Er—I'm afraid I'd forgotten that part, sir. Better skip it, I think—"

The Assistant-Commissioner's jaw set grimly.

"On the contrary, young man, I now propose to read every word," he answered, and repeated in a voice that cracked slightly, ". . . presided over by MORONS such as Tankerville, who may be an Assistant-Commissioner, but whose natural abilities would better qualify him for the post of doorkeeper at a suburban cinema— Ha! Very nice! I am obliged to you, Mr. Chillaton, for bringing me this enlightening document!"

The harassed Michael blew his nose with unnecessary care.

"At all events, sir, it is obvious that I don't agree with him, or I shouldn't be here," he ventured with belated tact. "Do you mind reading on a bit?"

"Really, I don't see why I *should* read any more of this appalling tosh," commented Colonel Tankerville grimly. But he continued in a sort of snarl:

"The danger that threatens me is something that has been materializing ever since the disgraceful affair of my late secretary, Christine Abbott, who was, as you may recall, sent to penal servitude for blackmailing me, although Scotland Yard, by committing every conceivable blunder, very nearly let her slip through their hands. I am now convinced that that affair was merely the prelude

to an elaborate and carefully laid plot which is actively incubating at this moment, though I do not profess to understand its motive. When I tell you, however, that my house has been broken into, without any apparent robbery taking place you will understand my disquietude. A man of my position has many enemies, and were it not for Stopford who sleeps in an adjoining room with a loaded revolver I might not be writing this now. But although Stopford is a tried and loyal employee, he does not possess the intelligence and subtlety necessary to disclose what is behind these sinister manoeuvres, and I give you credit, at least, for possessing those qualities to some extent. Also I believe that you are honest. Do me the favor, therefore, of taking an early train and acquaint me of your proposed time of arrival at Takyll Place. I ask you, on no account to fail me. Your affectionate uncle,

EDWARD HARNLEY."

The Assistant-Commissioner handed back the letter with a shrug.

"A very hysterical epistle," he commented sourly. "Lord Harnley's eccentricities are well known, I believe. Apparently, they include hallucinations."

Michael Chillaton folded the letter and pocketed it.

"To suggest," the Assistant-Commissioner went on coldly, "that the Abbott blackmailing affair carries any deeper implications, is, in my opinion, arrant nonsense. If Lord Harnley wants protection he will have to persuade the local police that it is justified. *We* cannot intervene without an application through the Home Office from the Chief Constable of the County. It looks more to me as if a male nurse were indicated. No doubt, however, you acted properly in seeking my advice."

Michael nodded uneasily.

"It seemed the obvious thing to do, sir. I knew that

you and my uncle were—er—acquainted, and with an hour or two to spare in town before going down to Bishops Takyll I thought I'd better ask your opinion. Glad you think it's all poppycock, sir. I'd best be getting along."

The door opened and a massively built person with a lugubrious expression and drooping moustache entered. Observing that the Assistant-Commissioner had a young gentleman with him, the person prepared to withdraw, when Colonel Tankerville checked him.

"Come in, Gidleigh. This is Mr. Chillaton, a nephew of Lord Harnley. Mr. Chillaton—Chief-Inspector Gidleigh. You remember that Abbott case, Gidleigh, hey? Well, what is it?"

The newcomer returned Michael's greeting without interest. He laid an open telegram on his chief's desk. The drooping moustache seemed to droop more dourly as he straightened himself. As he read, Colonel Tankerville's eyes bulged a little. Having completed his perusal the Colonel's eyes bulged still more. A burst of consternation came through his pursed lips.

"Good God! Another!"

"Yes, sir," the Chief Inspector nodded with a kind of sad satisfaction. "Another example, sir, of the amazing efficiency of our prison system, sir. The third in a month, sir."

The Assistant-Commissioner breathed heavily.

"Neyland!" he muttered. "Good God, this is monstrous!"

"Yes, sir," the Chief Inspector agreed, still exhibiting a morbid pleasure. "You will recall, sir, that it took a little over a year to pull in Neyland. He was sentenced to seven years' penal servitude. He serves seven months and two days precisely and we are now requested to catch him all over again." The Chief Inspector gulped and shot a resentful glance at Michael as though that young

gentleman must be in some way involved. Michael tactfully rose. The Assistant-Commissioner raised his hand with a gesture of irritation at the movement. Michael sat down again.

"This is really appalling," Colonel Tankerville scowled. "You had better warn all London stations at once, Gidleigh. Neyland is dangerous. He'll make for London, most likely. Either that or one of the ports. He's a much more difficult type to work against than Minser or Parkwell."

The Chief Inspector shrugged. "We're about as near to catching Minser and Parkwell as we were two weeks ago, sir. And that's nowhere at all. Not so much as a smell. But compared with Cliff Neyland, I'd call them child's play. Perhaps we'd better wait until they let out a few more convicts and then we can call in the Army." Gidleigh stared gloomily out of the window. His superior frowned massively.

"There seems no doubt," he said, "that these escapes have some connection. In Paunceforte's opinion—" An inarticulate sound came from his subordinate.

"Well, Gidleigh?" the Assistant-Commissioner demanded ominously.

"Nothing, sir, nothing. Excuse me."

Colonel Tankerville's mustache bristled with annoyance.

"I was about to say that Paunceforte, at my invitation, has been looking into these escapes. It stands to reason that given a clever outside accomplice and the establishment of some means of communication any prospective escaper has a chance of success. When a convict makes his dash for freedom with no one to harbor or disguise him, re-capture is the certain penalty. We must postulate, then, the existence of an extremely well-informed outside accomplice to organize the affair.

Paunceforte takes the view that the organizer of each of these recent escapes is the same individual."

An ostentatious sigh came from Chief Inspector Gidleigh.

"May I be allowed to remark, sir, that nobody at the Yard disputes that suggestion. Also that the existence of this unidentified escape organizer is well known in criminal circles. The Crooks' Shepherd, as they call him, is regarded, sir, with affection and hope by every old lag who does a new stretch."

The Assistant-Commissioner drummed his knuckles on the desk.

"Possibly. You may be right, Gidleigh. It does not alter the fact that Paunceforte arrived at his conclusions quite independently of underworld gossip. He is, I am glad to say, unhampered by the traditional mental processes, let us call them, of too many of our policemen, and he has developed a theory of some interest regarding these escapes." The Assistant-Commissioner warming to his subject, turned to Michael. The movement was subconscious and the young man divined with some amusement that he was about to be regaled with a personal enthusiasm in which the Chief Inspector had no share.

"It is a matter of great regret to me," pursued the Assistant-Commissioner, "that we are unable to avail ourselves officially of this remarkable young man's services. At an unusually early age Paunceforte took his degree as B.A. He has since become a profound student of criminology. Indeed, I doubt whether there is a single work on the subject with which he is unfamiliar. Unfortunately, Paunceforte wears glasses. Unfortunately, also, he is afflicted with distressing handicaps that disqualify him for a regular appointment at Scotland Yard, but I am glad to say I have been able to secure his services as an unofficial auxiliary."

Inspector Gidleigh fidgeted. Michael Chillaton maintained a solemn exterior with difficulty, but he was ready enough to concede the Assistant-Commissioner's point of view. New blood was probably desirable.

"Paunceforte," pursued Colonel Tankerville, tapping his chair arm by way of emphasis, "believes that the organizer of these escapes is a person of unusual ability, with powers that suggest him to be highly educated. In short, of a very superior type to the common run of criminals—Did you speak, Gidleigh?"

"No, sir." The detective forced an unnatural calm to cover his irritation and boredom. "Nothing of any consequence, sir."

Colonel Tankerville leant back in his chair with an urbane smile.

"Let us have your remarks, Gidleigh, by all means. We are anxious to hear other theories."

"Theories, sir? I've no theories. Only these master criminals don't seem to come my way—outside of detective novels. That's only in twenty-five years' experience, sir, of course—"

Colonel Tankerville smiled, a little less urbanely.

"I admit, Gidleigh, that I have also not encountered such a type. That is not to say, however, that it doesn't exist, which is where your too rigid dogmatism may lead you astray. However, do me the favor of listening a little longer. Paunceforte's theory, briefly, is as follows: First, that these escapes, which I will presently enumerate, are the work of one man. Second, that this mysterious organizer has a very good reason for the selection of his subjects." Here the Assistant-Commissioner picked up a type-written sheet from his desk.

"The first of these three escapers—assuming a connection—was William Minser, who has spent about half his long life in prison for forgery. A clever forger, but

not clever enough to remain for long at liberty. He walked clean out of Wandsworth jail in the clothes of a prison visitor, who was subsequently discovered chloroformed in Minser's cell. How the chloroform got there, with other details of this escape, are still the subject of inquiry, but it looks as if a certain amount of bribery were involved, a process which in this country has hitherto been rare.

"The next case is that of Parkwell, who was confined in Pentonville jail. Parkwell is a locksmith by trade and very much a locksmith by profession. That is, a clever safe-breaker. The escape of this man is an example of remarkable daring following a very carefully arranged plot. During exercise in the prison yard a rope-ladder was flung over the wall from the outside and as the convict Parkwell made a dash for it, half a dozen others crowded round in such a manner as to impede the guards, while giving the impression of assisting them. Beyond the wall was a waiting car, into which the fugitive leapt, to be driven away at high speed. By the time the alarm had been given the car was lost sight of. So much for Parkwell."

Colonel Tankerville laid down the list.

"The latest convict to escape is the subject of the telegram just received by Superintendent Gidleigh. Clifford Neyland, an actor, and a man of education, seems to have broken away from a working party during a moor storm. The fact that he got clear proves beyond all doubt the existence of an accomplice, and unless we assume a coincidence it is reasonably certain that the accomplice is our friend the escape organizer."

Colonel Tankerville rapped his desk with sudden anger. He swung round on the Superintendent.

"This is an insupportable state of affairs, Gidleigh! It has got to stop!"

Chief Inspector Gidleigh smiled his sad smile.

“Fortunately, sir, we cannot be held accountable. Perhaps Mr. Paunceforte could stop it.”

The Assistant-Commissioner glared at his subordinate. It was evident that only a very privileged official could behave like Gidleigh and get away with it. Michael concealed a grin.

“I certainly propose to return to Paunceforte’s theory,” retorted Colonel Tankerville sharply. “In these three escaped convicts we have the nucleus of a very formidable gang. Minser, the expert forger, Parkwell, the safe-breaker, whose arrest, I may remind you, was largely due to Paunceforte’s efforts, and, lastly, Clifford Neyland, one of the most ingenious perpetrators of fraud we have ever dealt with. Assuming that these three men are united by the individual who set them at liberty, he is, of course, in a position to command absolute obedience to his orders on pain of exposing them to the police. In Paunceforte’s opinion, the composition of this gang ought to give us a line on their objective. Personally, I agree.—Yes, what is it?”

For the door had opened and a messenger entered.

“Phone call just through, sir, from the Governor of Hollbury.”

Colonel Tankerville’s brows went up.

“Hollbury!”

“Yes, sir. The Governor reports the escape of a convict named Christine Abbott.”

Michael Chillaton glanced quickly at Gidleigh. The Chief-Inspector was no longer yawning.

Chapter IV

SOMEBODY threw a rolled-up scrap of paper—chocolate tinfoil wrappings—out of a window of the Western Express. The paper fell into a certain back garden of the inner London suburbs, where a kindly looking, elderly man was pottering over a row of sooty geranium plants. The man straightened his back and stared reprovingly at the passing train, he failed to recognize the culprit. In a moment the train had curled out of night.

Carefully adjusting a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles the geranium enthusiast unrolled the scrap of paper and discovered that it contained a crumpled fragment of typewritten notepaper. Thoughtfully, he placed the scrap in his dingy waistcoat pocket. Something like a sigh of regret escaped him.

Four hours later the Western Express steamed into Barnborough Junction, whence, divided, it would proceed in the diverse directions of Allenscombe and Mortford. At Barnborough, among other uninteresting passengers, a bespectacled youth, clad as a "hiker," a gray-haired man loosely clad in the country-gentry fashion, and a woman smartly clad, alighted.

The gray-haired man was welcomed by a pretty girl whose physical immaturity was offset by a somewhat staggering poise and assurance. She was leading a remarkably large bloodhound and this trio received a special grin of recognition from the ticket collector as they passed through the gate. The smartly clad lady found her escort in an elegant gentleman in new plus fours and the old school tie. The couple awakened no interest or recognition from the ticket collector. Outside the station they entered a rakish blue and chromium coupe. In a shabby old Buick touring car, the gray-haired man at the wheel, the girl at his side and the bloodhound baying happily on the rear seat, drove away. The blue and chromium owner threw an amused glance at the Buick as he stepped on the starter. At this moment the hiker, unnoticed, and slightly flustered, emerged from the station. He stood irresolutely; then he approached Blue-and-Chromium hesitatingly.

"I say," he spoke with a slight stammer, "I suppose you aren't g-going anywhere near B-Bishops Takyll?"

The man answered promptly.

"Quite right. We're not. Sorry!"

Blue-and-Chromium glided away. The hiker turned his gaze doubtfully to the shabby Buick. After a moment's hesitation he appeared to pluck up courage.

"Eh?" The gray-haired man looked round. "Well—er—as a matter of fact we are. That is, we can drop you within a mile of the village, if that's any use." He jerked his head towards the hound, whose dewlaps glistened wetly. "Better jump in behind!"

The hiker muttered his thanks and gripped the door handle, but a deep growl made him hesitate. He blinked nervously behind his spectacles.

The girl spoke sharply, "Shut up, Hangman! Quiet!" Then she parted her carmined young lips at the young man in a malicious smile.

"He's all right, really. Get in!"

Gingerly, the young man complied, edging as far into the corner as possible. For an unpleasant moment the hound seemed to brood over the bare knees that gleamed so temptingly. With another smothered growl he settled back on his haunches. The Buick lurched forward.

Michael Chillaton approached the village of Bishops Takyll at dusk. The date happened to coincide with the termination of Daylight Saving so that instead of the visual treat he had promised himself after six years of absence he perceived disgustedly that he would arrive in darkness. Only an exile born and brought up in that particular corner of Devon can appreciate Michael's regret.

The road turned and twisted as Devon lanes do, dropping almost sheer to a tiny stone bridge across swift running water. Beyond it climbed steeply, twisting to the right, wriggling to the left. It was already dark under the trees and Michael switched on the headlights. Up a narrow and tortuous acclivity he shot, braking sharply at the summit to veer almost at a right angle. Thence for a mile of incredibly beautiful going he drove until the lane ran into the secondary road that connects Bishops Takyll with Barnborough and beyond that, the broad highway to Exeter. Here Michael stepped on the gas. Three miles more, and he would arrive. An oncoming car sent its headlights blindingly into his eyes; dimming his own lights he slowed down. The other swooped past him leaving Michael blinking angrily at being forced to a snail's pace. For the next two hundred yards he drove slowly, almost missing the little gray lodge beside the tall wrought-iron gates that formed the principal entrance way to Takyll Place.

Swinging the car round he brought it to a standstill and gave a couple of toots on the horn. The summons brought a stout, aproned woman waddling out of the lodge. Shad-

ing her eyes from the car lamps the woman approached Michael.

"His lordship isn't receiving visitors these days, sir. I'm sorry, sir, but that's my orders."

Michael smiled.

"How are the rheumatics, Mrs. Yeo?"

"Eh, sir!" the woman approached closer. "Why, it's Mr. Michael! I could not see you, sir, what with them lights in me eyes! Well, now, it is nice to see you again, Mr. Michael, after all these years. But I'm afraid you'll find his lordship very queer, sir. He don't seem to want no company at all, sir, these days. Barring Major Norton and the vicar—I suppose he'll be expecting you, Mr. Michael? Well now, it'll do him a bit of good, I shouldn't wonder, to have some young company with him."

She waddled to the massive gates and dragged them apart. As Michael drove in she dropped him a quaint, old-fashioned little curtsy.

The drive was the best part of a mile long under densely overhanging trees. Countless rabbits scuttled across the headlights. It was a hauntingly beautiful vista that opened before him with each twist and turn, but Michael found himself wondering how long it would be before he would weary of the inaction that this visit must entail for him. Certainly he wasn't going to dry nurse Uncle Edward Harnley indefinitely. It was difficult, he reflected, to imagine Uncle Edward in need of assistance from anyone. A stiff-necked, damnably intolerant old boy. About as pleasant company as a walrus with indigestion.

The drive curved to its termination in a wide sweep. Bringing the car to rest under an immense stone porch, Michael got out to pull the iron bell handle. The double doors were opened, after an undue delay, only as far as a length of noisy chain would allow them. A man's face peered at him.

"This caution seems a bit overdone," Michael growled. "It is not what I should term a very enthusiastic welcome."

"Beg pardon, sir," said the man in a peculiarly shrill voice. "His lordship's orders, sir. His lordship's instructions are that no one is to be admitted, sir. Not under *no* circumstances, sir. You'll excuse me, I'm sure."

He began to close the doors, but Michael inserted the toe of his right shoe between them.

"Don't be a fool! I'm Lord Harnley's nephew," he snapped. "Go and tell his lordship I'm here, if you won't take my word for it!"

"Beg pardon, sir. His lordship is out."

"Then—curse it! Fetch Stopford!"

"Beg pardon, sir, Mr. Stopford is out."

Michael stared dumbly.

"Has the whole place gone crazy?" he queried presently. "Do you seriously expect me to squat on this confounded doorstep until somebody has the sense to tell the difference between a relative of the family and an armed gangster, or whatever it is you're frightened of? I suppose you don't even know when his lordship is expected back?"

"No, sir. Very sorry, sir."

"Of course not," Michael agreed bitterly. "You wouldn't. What's your confounded name?"

"Orson, sir. A bit new to the job, sir." The shrill voice whined apologetically.

"You've got something to learn, Orson. What time did his lordship go out?"

"A couple of hours ago, sir. For a walk, I understand. I ain't seen 'im yet, sir."

"Not seen him?"

"No, sir. Only just arrived myself."

"Oh, you're as new as that, eh?" Michael stared at the

thin white features. "Is there anyone in the place who knows I'm expected?"

"Couldn't say, I'm sure, sir. They're mostly new servants, sir—owin' to his lordship bein' a bit changeable lately. So I understand, if you'll pardon me. It's a pity Mr. Stopford isn't in, sir."

"All right," Michael shrugged resignedly. "You'd better tell Lord Harnley that Mr. Chillaton called. Say I'll be at the Takyll Arms in the village, until he's ready to end this state of siege."

He heard the doors close quickly, with a rattle of chain. In disgust he climbed back into the car and started down the drive. A toot of his horn brought Mrs. Yeo out of her cottage to open the gates. She stared at him with surprise.

"You don't mean, Mr. Michael, as his lordship won't see you!"

Michael explained the queer situation with as much restraint as his irritation would permit.

"Well, I never, sir. If that isn't a funny thing. His lordship didn't pass out this way, Mr. Michael. And it isn't like him to be out after dark these days. Of course, he'll have the dog with him. One of Major Norton's bloodhounds, that is. He sets great store by that dog, his lordship does."

The giant gates swung open. Taking the direction of Bishops Takyll, Michael shot the car forward with a jerk in tune with his exasperation. The whole thing—all this tomfoolery—on top of a two hundred mile journey from London was enough to give anyone the willies. He decided firmly that he would take up his quarters for the night at the Takyll Arms, no matter what apologetic or urgent message might arrive from the big house. Let the old fool stew in his own juice for another night. That Assistant-Commissioner chap had been quite right. It was the clearest case of hallucination. Sheer idiocy.

He pressed the accelerator and streaked up a rise. A couple of miles would bring him to the village and some sort of welcome, at least. Already he seemed to smell beer and sawdust and strong tobacco, that comfortable amalgam of the Takyll Arms, as it should be of every proper inn. Old Sam Bellever, the landlord, would be glad to see him, anyway. Lord, this was enough motoring for one day!

Michael eased the car a little. And then he jammed on his brakes with a grunt of surprise, for there was a dark object lying on the near side of the road, barely fifty yards ahead. Pulling up he saw that it was the figure of a man, sprawled face downward. Leaping out, Michael ran forward. The inference was simple enough: another victim of the tragic sequence of road accidents.

Kneeling down, he gently turned the figure over. The upturned features were streaked with blood that ran from a cut cheek across twisted lips and stained the little "imperial" of gray hair.

Michael gasped in consternation.

"Good God! *Harnley!*"

Chapter V

MICHAEL jerked out a hand. He touched the closed eyelids and felt them flicker—very slightly. The heart, too, was beating, though in spasms and leaps. Life persisted, it seemed, but very tenuously, very precariously.

He stood up. It looked bad—too bad a case to be moved without medical attention. His first impulse was to lift the victim into his car and drive on to the doctor's in Bishops Takyll, but there might be danger in that. The shock—at that age. Internal hemorrhage. Heaven knew what concealed injuries. He walked to the car and got out a rug and his overcoat. The coat he placed, carefully rolled, under the unconscious man's head. The rug would serve to keep some warmth in that battered body, until help could be got.

Too little traffic used that road to justify waiting for a passing car, and yet Michael disliked the idea of leaving his wounded relative for even as long as it would take to cover the odd mile or so to village and back. Suddenly he became aware of a white gate across the road. It was familiar, that gate! He'd be forgetting his own name if he couldn't remember the entrance to the Tarn House. There'd be a telephone at Aunt Phil's, of course.

The gate was padlocked, but without stopping to consider that, he vaulted over and ran up the short drive. In the dim light the house looked even more neglected than he remembered it. Aunt Philadelphia, he recalled, always kept the Tarn House as shabby as herself. Not her fault, poor old fossil. He found the brass knocker and banged vigorously. Within, the sound echoed back and forth, cavernous and mournful, until it died away into silence. Again Michael banged. Then, stung to temper by the thought of that poor devil in the road, he seized the door handle and threw his weight forward. Instantly there was a splintering of rotten woodwork; the door gave way and Michael pitched to his hands and knees. The contact of his hands on bare boards told him what, in more reasonable moments, would have been obvious from the first; that Miss Philadelphia Hemstone no longer tenanted the Tarn House. Nor, apparently, did anybody else.

Picking himself up, he was about to turn back when he caught sight of an old-fashioned wall telephone. There seemed little doubt that the instrument had been disconnected, but he grabbed the receiver and listened.

As he listened, he heard a sound—not through the receiver,—but from overhead; the tapping of muted footsteps that ran towards the front of the house and halted there, one foot continuing to tap as though in impatience or anxiety.

It was curious that, in an empty house. Later, Michael decided, he would have a look. He rattled the receiver arm gently, but the line was manifestly dead. Replacing the receiver he turned back to the open door. He would have to cut along to the village after all.

From where he stood he could see into the road between the tall hedges that flanked the gateway. The gate itself was silhouetted sharply against the rays of the headlights. At that moment a figure on a bicycle crossed his view, in

characteristically deliberate movements. With a sigh of relief Michael recognized the outline of a policeman's helmet.

He was on the point of running to this Heaven-sent assistance when again he heard the shuffle of footsteps overhead. He checked himself, wondering. Coupled with what might or might not be an accident to old Harnley this presence in the empty house called for inquiry. It would only take a second or two to clear this up. He turned and mounted the stairs, treading softly in the direction of those sounds. He flung open the door. Instantly a smothered gasp came from the darkness and a shadow crossed the window. Michael closed the door and stood with his back to it. He waited. In the deathlike pause that followed he heard the labored sound of somebody's breath.

"Well," he suggested, "suppose you introduce yourself."

The only answer was a barely audible movement, like a scrape along the wall. The implication of that sound made him smile. All right, he was ready. As good in a scrap as the next man. He tensed his muscles and stretched out his arms to meet the expected rush in the darkness.

And then he dropped his arms, with a sniff of surprise.

"So it's a lady? Such charming perfume! Now we positively must be introduced."

Still no answer; only another tiny scrape along the wall.

"Come, my dear. Not afraid of me, surely?"

This time a response came, barely above a whisper.

"Yes, please go away!"

"And leave my curiosity unsatisfied?"

"What does your curiosity matter? I am nothing to you!" came in low tones.

Michael then deliberately moved into the center of the room. Instantly he was aware of her movement along the opposite wall. Soon there came the frantic patter of foot-

steps in the direction of the door. Then he turned, swift as a panther, and caught a supple body fair and square in his arms. A cry of hysterical terror broke from her. He slackened his grip a little.

"Steady," he said, gently, and led her to the window. In the faint light that filtered in he saw that she was young, though the dark distended eyes and white face were strained with fear. She wore a long leather coat with a little pulled-on hat of the same material, beneath which shining golden hair glinted.

"Let me go!" she breathed pitifully.

Michael pointed through the window, across the road. The kneeling figure of the policeman could be seen, beside the stretched-out form.

"Do you see that? Does he frighten you more than I? Tell me what this means."

"I—I can't!" Drawing in her breath she stared at him, for the first time meeting his eyes. They were good-humored eyes, but perfectly inflexible. Suddenly Michael smiled.

"Come on," he said. "I won't eat you!"

The girl's form relaxed in his grip.

"Don't—don't hold me so tight!"

Michael chuckled. But his grasp remained.

"I'm waiting," he observed comfortably.

For a moment she was silent, motionless. Then with a savage, desperate wrench she strove to free herself.

"Let me go! For God's sake. If you knew—!"

"How can I know if you don't tell me, you silly girl?" the young man demanded reasonably. "Had you anything to do with *that*?" He pointed again through the window.

"No!" the reply came instantly. She was shaking her head with horror.

"You saw it happen?"

"No!"

"Do you know who did it?"

"No—Yes!" she stammered. "Have they—have they killed him?"

"Not their fault if they haven't—whoever *they* are," Michael retorted grimly. "It strikes me you're what is called a material witness. And yet you don't want to meet the police. What am I to assume from that?"

She was silent, and he shook her gently.

"What am I to assume from that?" he repeated. "That you are up against the police?"

A weary, half-defiant shrug answered him. "All right," she said. "Why don't you hand me over?"

Michael paused and surveyed her in the gloom. The fantastic conclusion that had first jumped to his brain seemed fantastic no longer. "Do you think I like the job?" he demanded presently.

"What does that matter? You will be doing your duty. Think how people will admire you!" She began to laugh, unevenly. He shook her again, not so gently.

"Stop that and listen to me," he ordered. "Suppose I tell you, that putting two and two together in the light of recent events, with the aid of admirably circulated police descriptions, I could arrive at a pretty close guess at your identity? Wouldn't you consider me justified in returning you safely where you belong? Especially in view of the somewhat drastic treatment your friends seem to have accorded my respected uncle."

He felt her start at that.

"Lord Harnley is your—?"

"Unfortunately, yes. No reason, in my opinion, why he should be butchered to make a crook's holiday."

The girl's shoulders drooped wearily.

"I can't expect you to believe anything that I say—but if I had known—" she broke off.

"Go on," Michael urged quickly.

She shook her head.

"No, I am ready now. You had better take me—to him." She pointed towards the window.

"Very well. And look here," Michael released one of her wrists and patted her shoulder, "if I can help you—afterwards. Curse it, I loathe this job, but it's got to be done! Come on!"

He linked his arm through hers and moved to the door. Passing through they descended the stairs in silence. Then, on the threshold of the front door the girl halted rigidly.

"Listen!" she whispered.

He stared in the direction of her pointed finger, at a dark shadow that lurked in the shrubbery. A tingling came at the roots of his hair. Suddenly the girl gave a vigorous wrench and freed herself. In a split second she was out of the doorway and out of sight.

Michael made no attempt at pursuit. "Glad she thought of that," he murmured softly. "It solves a rather beastly little problem for the present! Only for the present, by Jove!"

He walked thoughtfully down the drive and vaulted the padlocked gate. The policeman was engaged in applying a bandage to the injured man's head. He looked up stolidly.

"You've come back, eh?" he observed in an unfriendly voice. "I take it you're the gentleman who knocked his lordship down. I'll trouble you for your name and address when I've fixed this here bandage. Why, bless me, if it isn't Mr. Chillaton! Gor', this is a bad business, Mr. Chillaton, sir! However did you come to do it? Your poor uncle, too!"

"Don't be a fool, Sergeant Bassett," Michael retorted without heat. "How's he getting on?"

"Coming round, sir, by the look of it. Well, if you didn't knock him down, who did?"

"It'd be interesting to know, wouldn't it?" Michael asked patiently. "For the present hadn't we better get a doctor? I've been trying to phone from the Tarn House, but it seems—er—untenanted."

"The Tarn House, sir! Coo! It's been empty ever since Miss Hemstone left it. A matter of five years or more. Doctor Lumsden's coming, sir. The new doctor. I stopped young Joe Carey just now and told him to take a message. And here 'e is, by the look of it!"

Headlights topped the rise ahead of them and sent long shafts of light into their faces, illuminating too, the chalky, hooked features of the victim. In a half minute the car had pulled to the side of the road. A short, stoutly built man got out and approached the group. Nodding to the Sergeant Dr. Lumsden gave Michael a brief, critical stare.

"Um. How long ago did this happen? And how fast were you going?" He addressed Michael who scowled irritably.

"Mr. Chillaton is not the responsible party, I understand, sir," the sergeant intervened.

"Um, I see." Dr. Lumsden stared again at Michael. "Mr. Chillaton, eh? Haven't had the pleasure of meeting, I think. Um—" For awhile he was occupied, flexing joints, prodding, pulling, listening, tapping. Presently he straightened up.

"Not too bad. That cut on the face—superficial. Nothing to worry about. Shock, of course. Remains to be seen just how *much* shock. Better get him home. You staying there, eh?" He addressed Michael abruptly.

"Right. I'll go with you, of course. Though he'll probably boot me out as soon as he comes round."

Dr. Lumsden grunted sourly. "Lord Harnley and I are the barest of acquaintances, I may tell you. Well, we'd best get him into your car. I'll follow—Hello!"

The ejaculation was caused by a sudden movement of the

victim's left leg, which flexed itself at the knee. The next moment both eyes opened, surveying the trio with a queer, hostile expression which sent a shiver down Michael's spine. He had never been intimate with his uncle Edward Harnley and that look revealed a new and displeasing aspect of the man.

"Hello, uncle," Michael said uneasily. "You're getting on famously. Don't you know me? I'm Michael—Michael Chillaton."

The glare switched to Sergeant Bassett, and from the Sergeant to Dr. Lumsden, upon whom it rested venomously. With an effort the old man lifted himself on one elbow.

"Here, steady—" Lumsden began, when a cracked voice cut him short.

"Hold your tongue, you fool, and take me home!"

"I'm going to," the doctor replied grimly, "and until you get there, Lord Harnley, you'll consider yourself under my orders. After that you may call in any medical man you choose. It won't be me." The last words were in an undertone. Aloud, Lumsden proceeded, "Your nephew is here fortunately, and I propose to put you in his car."

Once again the hostile gaze rested on Michael.

"My nephew," said the cracked voice, feebly and yet with extraordinary vindictiveness, "is not to enter my house! Do you hear! I won't have him inside my house. I won't! I won't!"

"Good Gor'!" muttered the Sergeant, aghast. "The shock! That's what it is! The shock!"

"All right, uncle," Michael said soothingly. "Just as you wish."

"Lend a hand, you two," Lumsden interjected curtly. "In my car, since he'd probably have a fit in yours. You'll follow, I take it?" he asked Michael, who shook his head.

"The Takyll Arms seem to appeal more to me to-night, doctor, strange to say. I'll go and see him in the morning."

The Sergeant and Lumsden set their burden carefully in the doctor's car. Then the Sergeant pulled at his lower lip thoughtfully.

"I don't know as I hadn't ought to go along with 'im," he observed. "We've got to find out something about this here accident. He might remember a bit, so to speak."

"Assuming that it *was* an accident," Michael cut in. He found himself again meeting the eyes of the old man, glaring at him with an expression that baffled the young man beyond words.

The car started, gathered speed until its twinkling tail light vanished.

Chapter VI

OLD SAM BELLEVER of the Takyll Arms greeted Michael with a nice blend of enthusiasm and respect. Mr. Chillaton was his lordship's heir; hence the respect. It was well known that Mr. Chillaton and his lordship did not altogether hit it off; hence the enthusiasm. And if Old Sam was startled by the young gentleman's request for a bed, he kept his surmises to himself.

"Why, certainly, Mr. Chillaton, sir. Bless us, what shocking news about his lordship, sir. It's quite remarkable what a lot of folks have been knocked down lately! Right at the end of the holiday season, too. Did you say half of bitter, sir?"

Michael took a casual glance round the little bar. There was a sprinkling of rustics, and a peculiar-looking youth clad in khaki shorts surmounted by a revoltingly hideous wool pullover. The youth had long pallid features, and lank black hair that hung over one ear. His eyes glinted owlshly behind very thick horn-rimmed spectacles. He reminded Michael of a certain left-wing member of Parliament.

"What they call a 'iker, sir," old Sam whispered. "Spends his time walking about these here lanes and foot-

paths and getting 'is knees all scratched with brambles. It's queer the way some folks enjoy 'emselves, sir."

Michael acquiesced and took a pull at his drink. Chancing to meet the hiker's eyes he nodded a greeting.

"Exploring the neighborhood, eh? Decent country round here," he observed carelessly.

The hiker inclined his head solemnly.

"It is remarkably interesting," he agreed. "I have d-discovered m-many indications of p-paleolithic occupation in the district."

"Oh." Michael was a little balked by this unpromising subject. "Er—have a drink?"

"Thank you. I will have a ginger b-beer."

Old Sam snorted covertly as the soft drink was set before this erudite young man. To Michael's relief the tension was broken by the entrance of Sergeant Bassett, mopping his forehead as a result of his cycling exertions and manifestly put out. Observing his condition Michael prescribed with satisfying promptitude.

"Thankee, Mr. Chillaton, sir." The Sergeant accepted his tankard with a sigh of relief. "Well, there's rum happenings up at the Place, and no error. First, 'is lordship knocked down and now 'is lordship's man gone and disappeared."

"Stopford?" Michael demanded in surprise.

"Stopford, sir. Clean disappeared! Went out on his tricycle—it being his afternoon off, I understand—and 'asn't been seen since. Four hours overdoo."

"Four hours hardly seems long enough to suggest a disappearance. He's probably punctured a tire."

"You don't know Stopford, sir, begging your pardon, not as I do, or you wouldn't say that. Been with 'is lordship nigh on thirty years, and wouldn't no more dream of overstaying his time than fly, puncture or no puncture. His lordship's in a rare to-do about it. Been telephoning

the station fit to bust the wires. Gor!" The Sergeant took a long pull at his tankard and banged it down with dramatic emphasis. Natcherally, he were the first person 'is lordship asked for. And 'ere I've been 'unting all round these lanes and not so much as a smell o' Mr. Stopford. Clean disappeared, tricycle and all!"

"Have another," said Michael tactfully.

"Thankee, sir. Don't mind if I do."

"Heard any more about my uncle—about Lord Harnley's injuries?"

"No, sir. But 'e's getting along nicely, judging by the way 'e spoke on the telephone. A tough gentleman, his lordship, begging your pardon. I shouldn't wonder if the doctor don't happen along soon, sir." The Sergeant glanced round the bar, and his gaze alighted somewhat coldly on the hiker with his ginger beer, as though implying some disparagement of the present company.

"And here he is!" ejaculated the landlord. The door was thrust inwards and Dr. Lumsden entered. "Good evening to you, sir!"

Lumsden nodded curtly and pushed his hat back from his forehead with an irritable gesture.

"Give it a name," Michael suggested with his usual tact. He reflected that at this rate it meant standing treat to most of the population of Bishops Takyll, but he felt a sort of family responsibility for the ragged tempers around him. The doctor accepted the invitation morosely.

"I trust you left my respected relative on the way to recovery, doctor. Quite his bright and normal self, in fact."

Dr. Lumsden pulled out his pipe and began to fill it with a certain savage earnestness.

"If," he said, "Lord Harnley is now his normal self, then in my opinion he ought to be in a lunatic asylum."

With which somewhat contradictory diagnosis he took a draft from his tankard.

"There's something damned funny going on in that household, if you ask me," he added, wiping his stiff gray mustache with a colored silk handkerchief. "In the first place Lord Harnley needs professional attention. He's had a devil of a shock and the result is profounder than you'd think. Temper and mental state are all to hell. But I can't *force* my services on him, can I? And where the deuce is Stopford?"

Sergeant Bassett's big fist came down on the counter with a bang.

"That's what *we* want to know, sir. Mark my word, there's somethink queer about Mr. Stopford's disappearance!"

Michael lit a cigarette. He was unaccountably reluctant to refer to yet another incident in the locality, even more "queer" than the disappearance of Lord Harnley's butler. A vision came before his eyes of a white-faced girl with frightened eyes and gleaming yellow hair.

The hiker had risen to replace his empty ginger beer glass.

"Have another," Michael said mechanically.

"Thank you, no," the precious youth responded with a peculiar click in his mouth that betrayed ill-fitting dentures. "It is very k-kind of you." Returning to his seat he extracted a guide book from his knapsack and proceeded to study it. Michael caught the Sergeant's withering glance and grinned.

"There's another damned queer thing," the doctor continued ruminantly. "You know Harnley never took his walks without Jailer. It occurred to me to ask that new under footman—Orson, his name is—why the dog hadn't been with his master at the time of the accident. Orson, who in my opinion, has a face like a criminal degenerate, declared that Jailer *did* go out with his lordship. Well," Dr. Lumsden paused to light his pipe, "as I subsequently

discovered, Orson was perfectly right. I saw the hound's body by the roadside on my way home. Shot dead!"

Michael's tankard checked in mid-air.

"Shot?"

"Dead as mutton," said the doctor.

Sergeant Bassett wiped his mustache.

"That don't surprise me," he observed, shaking his head. "His lordship 'ad been using that dog to track poachers with. Made 'im unpopular, it did. Depend on't, sir, that's poacher's work."

Dr. Lumsden tapped the counter emphatically.

"If a poacher killed that hound, Sergeant, he'd have used a shotgun. You're not going to say I could mistake the sort of wound a shotgun makes?"

The Sergeant gazed owlshly and Michael laid down his tankard.

"You're telling us," the young man said slowly, "that it was a bullet?"

The doctor nodded.

"Go and see for yourself, Chillaton. It's near the ditch—outside the Tarn House."

"The Tarn House!"

"Well, I never," observed old Sam Bellever with relish. "If that isn't a rum go!"

Michael maintained an uneasy silence. Glancing across the bar presently, he got the impression that the hiker, despite his earnest posture was more interested in the conversation than in his guidebook.

Naturally, perhaps. It was a queer conversation.

Then his soliloquy was interrupted by a booming voice from the open doorway of Sam Bellever's sitting room behind the bar.

". . . *The weather forecast for to-night and to-morrow . . .*"

"That's the missis," old Sam explained apologetically,

“always will turn it on full, being a bit deaf, you understand.”

“. . . *A low pressure system is extending eastward over the British Isles . . . !*” bellowed the nerve-racking accents, “. . . *in Scotland, Ireland and the South-West of England there will be considerable rain. . . . In the South-East . . .*” Old Sam closed the door of the Bellever sanctum, to shut out further noise.

“I don’t suppose you gentlemen want to listen to that,” he observed. “Reckon most of us could tell the wireless gentleman as it’s goin’ to rain hereabouts to-night—without his help, neither!” Old Sam snorted ironically and began to busy himself with various demands for replenishments. For a while Michael and his two companions smoked in silence. The young man was conscious of an increasing restlessness which he was able neither to define nor master. And conscious, more exactly, of having made a fool of himself in the matter of the girl in the Tarn House. To acquiesce, however involuntarily, in the escape of a convicted criminal was an act of unwisdom. There might be unpleasant consequences. Damn!

Behind the oak-paneled door Mrs. Bellever was still enjoying the benefits of modern invention. Not even solid oak could altogether muffle the announcer’s stentorian tones:

“Here is the first news, copyright reserved. . . . In the House of Commons this afternoon . . .”

“Have one one me?” suggested Dr. Lumsden with a gesture that included Michael and Sergeant Bassett. Michael nodded mechanically.

“Thankee, sir,” said Sergeant Bassett. “I don’t mind if I do.”

The tankards, foaming invitingly, were raised in mutual dedication.

“We regret to announce the death of Sir Ebenezer Wag-

horn," came shatteringly through the oak. "*Sir Ebenezer, who was a distinguished member of . . .*"

"Dang it!" scowled old Sam irritably. "Fair beats me it does, why the missis wants to listen to all this here twaddle, 'stead of a nice bit of moosic. You don't never hear any *noos* on the wireless, you don't. Not so much as a solitary murder nor sooicide. If it wasn't for the Sunday papers we'd never know what was 'appening, and that's a fact."

"*There is still no news of the four escaped convicts,*" bawled Mrs. Bellever's wireless set, manifestly straining every tube to secure a more appreciative audience. "*We are again requested by Scotland Yard to issue a warning to those who may be harboring the criminals. It is believed that two of the men are still in London but in the absence of definite clues the police are unable to proceed further. . . .*"

"Now *that,*" observed Sam Bellever with satisfaction, "is a bit more like it." He opened the door wide to admit the full blast of oratory to a now attentive clientele, incidentally disclosing Mrs. Bellever seated with her ear six inches away from the amplifier.

". . . *The convict Minser was traced to a house in Bermondsey following his escape from Wandsworth jail,*" came in tones that seemed to crackle with rage. "*Minser's fingerprints were discovered on articles of crockery in the bedroom in which he slept, but the owner of the house is unable to give any useful information regarding her lodger, beyond the fact that he appeared plentifully supplied with money. She states that he spent most of the day in the back yard, which abuts on the railway embankment and occupied himself taking geranium cuttings for her window boxes. . . . The police are interrogating this woman further. . . . It is believed possible that the convict may have boarded a passing train and that his reason for spend-*

ing so much time in the yard was with this end in view. . . . Minser's description is as follows:— Height 5 ft. 7 ins. Age about 62. Spare built and round shouldered. Hair gray, slightly bald. Eyes pale blue. Clean shaven. Wears spectacles. Possesses a gentle manner and ingratiating voice. . . . Is an expert forger. . . .

“Of the convict Parkwell who escaped from Pentonville the following day or of Neyland who broke away from a working party on Dartmoor the police have no trace whatever. There are grounds for believing that these men are under the protection of the person or persons who organized their escapes. . . . Their respective descriptions are:— Parkwell: 5 ft. 8 ins. Age 44. Sallow complexioned, light hair. Eyes brown. Clean shaven. Teeth crooked and broken. A locksmith by trade. Convicted for series of safe burglaries. . . . Neyland: A man of education and by profession an actor. Height 5 ft. 11½ ins. Strong, wiry build. Dark hair turning gray. Eyes gray, features strongly aquiline and regular. Good teeth and hands. Age 47. The last of the four escaped criminals is the woman blackmailer Christine Abbott, whose removal from Hollbury Prison constitutes a unique achievement in the history of such feats.”

Michael found himself gripping the handle of his tankard with unwonted firmness. Old Sam, he saw, was shaking his head solemnly.

“A shocking affair that was, Mr. Chillaton, sir. You heard all about it, I reckon?”

Michael forced himself to nod casually.

“More or less. I've not been to Takyll Place for the best part of six years.”

“Oh. So you didn't meet the young lady, sir?”

“No.” The young man's reply came deliberately. Was it imagination, he wondered, or were that infernal hiker's eyes fixed on him with a sinister meaning?

"Such a nice young lady, I did hear," remarked Sam Bellever. "It just shows you never can tell."

"Height five feet eight inches!" shouted the announcer. *"Eyes blue—"*

So they were blue? Michael had wondered.

"Age twenty-one—Slim build."

Yes, she had been slim. Slim and straight.

"Hair described as gold-yellow. Teeth good. Complexion clear."

Michael lifted his tankard and took a deep draft. He must dissemble or he would give himself away.

"Anyone who has information that will assist the police in the apprehension of these four convicts, is requested to ring up New Scotland Yard; telephone number Whitehall 1212."

"A reg'lar stir it made at the time," commented Old Sam reminiscently. "There was some as said that his lordship, begging your pardon, didn't ought to have brought the proceedings against the young lady. But of course you'd know more about the ins and outs of that affair than we should."

He paused provocatively. Michael smiled grimly.

"If you're suggesting that there were incidents in Lord Harnley's past that invited blackmailing attentions, Sam, you may be right. He didn't confide them in me."

Sergeant Bassett coughed disapprovingly.

"I reckon Mr. Bellever didn't mean to forget himself," he remarked, implying that old Sam had, in fact, forgotten himself badly. "And the law's the law, I reckon."

Dr. Lumsden grunted, implying, for his part, to all dissociation from the discussion. A little shamefacedly old Sam reclosed the door behind the bar, in time to check an outburst of football results.

Once again, Michael found himself meeting the gaze of the hiker. This time he failed to repress a scowl.

Chapter VII

"IF," observed the Hon. Miss Hemstone, "you expect me to exhibit any disturbance at your news you are mistaken. I am neither a fool nor a hypocrite."

She was sitting bolt upright in a high-backed chair while Michael occupied the window seat in the tiny drawing room at Delphinium Cottage. The morning sunlight made a pool of light on the faded carpet at his feet.

"I—er—thought you might at least be interested, Aunt Phil."

"Then you thought wrong. It is no concern of mine if Edward gets himself knocked down. I have nothing to say about it. Nothing."

Michael gazed at her in amazement.

"Even if it proves not to have been an—accident, Aunt Phil?"

"Certainly not. It is a matter of great surprise to me that my brother has not been murdered long ago. He is a disgrace to the peerage and you may tell him so, with my compliments."

Michael grinned ruefully.

"It doesn't look as if I shall have the chance," he observed.

"Then may I inquire," snapped the old lady, "why you have come to Bishops Takyll?"

"Because Uncle Edward sent for me, as a matter of fact."

"And now he won't see you? Tchah! You are wasting your time. Go away and do some work, young man, and leave Edward to get murdered if he wants to."

"Why should he get murdered?" Michael asked.

"Goodness; don't ask me! *I* don't know anything about his wickedness nowadays. But a man who can treat his own sister as he did is capable of anything."

Michael gazed at the white, hard old face pensively. Her hooked features were very like Harnley's, he thought.

"Did he treat you so badly?" he asked quietly. "Don't answer if you'd rather not."

"He did nothing," answered the old woman, as quietly, "except ruin my life."

The words were spoken with such an undercurrent of sheer hate that Michael was startled. An unpleasant pause fell. He became aware of Miss Hemstone's eyes glinting at him steadily as though reading his thoughts.

"Well," she said presently, "are you going to take my advice?"

Michael looked up inquiringly.

"Get back to wherever you came from," she went on. "Go away from Bishops Takyll."

The young man shook his head.

"Not until I have discovered why Harnley sent for me. There is something strange happening at Takyll Place and this business of Stopford—"

"There is always something strange in our family, young man. You should thank God you are not wholly one of us! But keep away! Lest you be contaminated." The old lady's bony jaws clicked together with sinister emphasis.

"You are the child of a half-sister, Michael. She was the only one who found happiness. Isn't that enough for you, that you must skulk about Takyll Place nosing for pickings?"

Michael stiffened resentfully.

"You think I came for *that*?"

"In my family we always believe the worst, young man. You are Harnley's heir. Do you suppose the sight of you is pleasant? He has neglected and stinted me—his own sister—for forty years. Did you know that? Did you know that when Edward Harnley dies I can claim a share of the estate under the entail, even if you do get the bulk? And do you know that Edward isn't likely to die soon enough to suit me, and I want money, money, *money!*"

Miss Hemstone scratched the arm of her chair with her small hands clawed like a cat's.

"All our lives Edward and I have hated each other—as only brother and sister can hate. As soon as he had the chance to express his hate in a concrete fashion he took it. And I couldn't hit back. All I could do was to laugh when someone robbed him as that Abbott girl robbed him. I laugh now you tell me that someone has knocked him down. I shall laugh loudest of all if someone kills him!"

The harsh voice rose to a shrill cacophony of mirth, and then ceased abruptly.

"Get out," said Miss Hemstone, very quietly.

Michael was more shocked than he cared to show. He made a pretense of gazing languidly out of the window. The bright morning sun was becoming obscured by drifting rain clouds and it looked as if the weather would break quickly. He said so. It was a fatuous remark and Miss Hemstone smiled sardonically.

"I am not a lunatic," she said. "Though I have every right to be. You had better go now."

Michael nodded, still gazing out of the casement. He observed that on the well-kept flower bed beneath him was the deep imprint of a hob-nailed boot. It struck him, quite suddenly, as curious. Gardeners do not trample on freshly dug beds.

“You seem to have had a visitor, Aunt Phil. A tramp, perhaps. Better keep your windows locked.”

He stopped, aware, without seeing her, that Miss Hemstone's attitude had become charged with intense hostility—or was it just bitter impatience at his failure to cut short an unpleasant interview? He turned to face her. She was sitting very still, with an expression that baffled him utterly. He gave her a muttered good-bye and went out.

Takyll Place was situate, as the estate agents say, on rising ground, amidst charming rural scenery. Constructed in the Tudor style, and approached by four drives. Accommodation comprising large reception hall and five other reception apartments, twenty-two principal bedrooms, ten secondary and servants' bedrooms and those mysterious apartments known as the “usual offices.” What the estate agents would probably omit to add was that four fifths of the mansion had been shut up for the past ten years while the remaining fifth, owing to persistent under-staffing, was as shabby as a third-rate boarding house.

The expenditure of money for the benefit of posterity was an exercise in which Lord Harnley had indulged as little as possible. He nursed a grievance against the times that could inflict heavy imposts upon his estate and not provide him with an heir of his body to inherit it. Michael Chillaton, ineligible for the titular honors, he regarded as a fortuitous intruder in the family scheme. The fact that Harnley's only essay at marriage many years previously had ended in swift and irremediable disaster merely aggravated the offense of Michael's existence.

Upon all of which Michael dwelt with some gloom as he proceeded along the footpath that crossed the estate from the village. He was resolved to make one more effort to see his uncle in order to get at the bottom of that letter appealing for his help. Given a convincing assurance that the fears expressed in the letter were unfounded, he would return to Wolverhampton and his career forthwith. That, in brief, was what he proposed to say, if he got as far as deciding anything at all. And to that extent he would follow Aunt Philadelphia's advice.

The footpath took him across the last of the pasture fields and into the parkland surrounding the house. Another two hundred yards brought him to the main drive and thence to the imposing stone doorway. The doors were opened as before with the chain across them, and Michael scowled despairingly as the unprepossessing countenance of Orson appeared.

"Good mornin', sir," the man greeted, in his shrill voice. "His lordship thought as you might call to-day, sir."

Michael surveyed the fellow coldly.

"Did he, indeed? I suppose that's why you're keeping the place barricaded?"

"Oh, no, sir. That's only in case of other visitors, sir. Persons that his lordship mightn't want to admit, you see, sir." A clattering sounded from within and a little to Michael's surprise the doors were swung wide.

"His lordship's in the study, sir," Orson squeaked, as he carefully replaced the chain. He turned to lead the way. In another moment the young man found himself ushered into one of the dingiest of the Takyll Place "reception" rooms, with the old-fashioned Venetian blinds drawn down so that only thin shafts of fitful sunlight across the faded carpet redeemed the place from darkness. In the depths of an ancient leather-covered armchair, sat the victim of last night's "accident," a large patch of sticking plaster

over one bony cheek and a forbidding expression on the remainder of the face.

"Good morning, Uncle Edward," Michael started with suitable brightness, "I hope you are feeling better."

The reply came like a bark.

"How the devil do you expect me to feel better when you come pestering me in this manner! Sit down!"

The young man lowered himself gently into a chair and fished for his pipe.

"No objection, I hope?" he queried with valiant pleasantness, holding aloft the pipe.

"Now look here, my boy," began the older man grimly. "Don't imagine that you are going to settle down to a pretty little family chat. I gave Orson instructions to admit you this once in order to hammer one plain fact into your apology for a brain. D'ye understand?"

Michael lit his pipe carefully, concealing his growing amazement under a smoke screen.

"As a matter of fact, sir, I don't understand at all." He glanced around for an ash tray to receive his spent match and seeing none in the immediate vicinity rose to approach the fireplace. A sudden snarl of fury checked him.

"Sit down!"

Michael was astounded. It was the vehemence of a madman. Checking the exclamation that came to his lips he seated himself again and waited, brows knit.

"You will have the goodness to keep still until I have finished what I have to say. After that you'll clear out—for the last time!"

Michael drew at his pipe grimly.

"I also have one or two observations to make," he said. "After you."

"Your observations do not concern me in the least, you young fool. Now listen! It is my wish that you leave this

neighborhood and leave it without the waste of a single unnecessary moment. You will cease to concern yourself with my affairs. Go back to your infernal blast furnaces, or whatever it is you soil yourself with, and leave me alone. Can you understand *that?*”

The harsh voice ceased and one trembling hand was raised to the wounded cheek as though in pain. But the eyes, with their unfamiliar balefulness continued to glare unwaveringly. Michael bit hard on his pipe-stem.

“Very well,” he said, forcing himself to speak quietly, soothingly even. “If you will be good enough to explain certain peculiarities that I do not understand to my satisfaction, I will go away, with no regrets whatever at the termination of our cordial relationship. I must assume that something has happened to alter your views about enlisting my help, as expressed in a somewhat agitated letter to me. Before complying with that request for my society it may interest you to know that I paid a call on your old friend Colonel Tankerville, the Assistant-Commissioner of Police—”

An ejaculation like a snarl interrupted him.

“Did you speak, uncle?”

“No, confound you! Get on with it!”

“I am aware,” Michael proceeded, “that your opinion of Colonel Tankerville, as expressed in the same letter, is not too flattering to a worthy official, but I considered it my duty to consult him before proceeding here. It was a little unfortunate that you referred to Colonel Tankerville as a moron because he read the letter. On the other hand he equalized matters somewhat by informing me that you suffered from nasty hallucinations. Probably both of you are right. What isn't so satisfactory from my point of view is that I have traveled some hundreds of miles and taken unwarranted leave from my job, only to be told that my valuable services are not required.”

The young man halted to draw at his pipe, and surveyed his uncle steadily. There was something behind his unpleasant crankiness and he badly wanted to know what it was. He watched the old man's fidgety movements and queer, almost nervous drumming of finger tips. Presently the reply came, barked out with an exasperation that seemed to conceal some ulterior emotion.

"Why the devil should I answer your fool questions! I'm entitled to change my mind. Besides—" a short pause broke the sentence "—there isn't any danger now. Not the remotest!"

"You say that, after last night?" Michael asked quietly.

"Last night? Pooh! An accident!"

"I see. And Stopford's disappearance is another accident?"

"Stopford is a rogue. If he shows his face here again I shall dismiss him."

"After thirty years' service?"

"Bah! Thirty years' robbery!"

"All right," Michael said equably. "It's your funeral. By the way, how do you explain the shooting of Jailer?"

"Jailer! What the devil—"

"Your dog, sir. A valuable bloodhound, I understand."

"Good God!"

Michael stared, puzzled. For the life of him he couldn't make out whether the exclamation implied surprise or indignation.

"These poachers, by God! Someone with a grudge against me." The thin lips above the little tuft of "imperial" parted with rage. "The damned rascals!"

Michael continued to stare and the older man returned the stare balefully. Abruptly Michael stood up. He saw no point in enlightening Lord Harnley as to the precise manner of his dog's death.

"All right, sir. I'll go now. I've only one thing more to

say. If Stopford comes back don't let him out of your sight again."

He started for the door. With his hand on the knob he shot a final glance at the figure in the chair, with its drumming fingers, grotesque patch on one cheek, and queer, unfamiliar eyes. It was the eyes that conveyed beyond all doubt—the madness of Edward Harnley.

In the hall Orson was standing, so close to the library door as to suggest that he had been eavesdropping. Then a movement on the stairway caught Michael's attention and held it. It was a woman descending, a tall, slender figure, not over young, but *bien soignée* from her admirably waved hair, carefully drawn eyebrows, and faultlessly vermilioned lips down to the small feet expensively shod in brilliant-mounted snakeskin. She made an almost fantastic contrast with the shabby antiquity of the hall. With her penciled eyebrows raised inquiringly at Michael, she descended the remaining steps and came towards Michael. She held out a fragrantly scented hand, whose fingernails, Michael noted, matched her lips in their incarnadined brilliance.

"How do you do?" said this exotic creature. "I think you must be Mr. Chillaton. I am Bernice Randall, Lord Harnley's new secretary."

Michael took the proffered hand.

"Really, I had no idea," he began controlling his wonder, "that my uncle—er—"

"That he had engaged a new secretary?" the woman asked, opening her eyes dazzlingly. "But why should he not? At least I shall treat him better than the last one, I hope!" The vermilion streaks parted to reveal marvelous teeth in a smile. "*That* was too bad, wasn't it?"

Michael nodded dumbly. He was aware of a covert grin upon the shifty features of Orson. A damned peculiar butler, he thought angrily. A still more incongruous secre-

tary. More and more his surmise about Lord Harnley's mental state hardened into conviction. The old man must certainly be mad. At his age, to introduce this pretty lady—a professional, or he'd eat his hat—into the staid and correct environment of Takyll Place! With a bewildered shrug, Michael turned to go, muttering a few words of leave-taking. As the heavy doors closed behind him he could have sworn that a tinkle of laughter sounded. Or it might have been the rattle of that damned chain.

He walked quickly, with mounting uneasiness, and a sense of impotence. Something was wrong there. Something very wrong. Harnley's accident. The slain bloodhound. Stopford's disappearance. Stopford's successor, who looked like a jailbird. And, lastly, that woman. His uncle had forbidden him the house and unless some doctor certified the old man as *non compos mentis* Michael had no more right to enter the house than the police. He might as well go back to Wolverhampton and do some useful work. No, he was damned if he would.

He was on the point of turning to take the footpath that led back to the village when he observed, in the distance, the lanky figure of the hiker, bent idiotically to peer at some weed by the wayside. In his present mood Michael had no wish for the company of this erudite youth and decided not to encounter him. He proceeded, therefore, straight down the drive towards the main lodge.

Some impulse made him turn for one last glance at the vast façade of Takyll Place before a bend in the drive would shut it from his view. In the mild October sunshine its gray stonework took on a mellow warmth and he was struck anew with the beauty of the structure, with its long rows of diamond-paned, stone-mullioned windows that caught and reflected the sunlight in variegated hues like the pattern on a Harlequin's costume. The whole of the eastern wing, he knew, was out of use, and rarely were

the windows opened, even for ventilation. But one casement was now thrust outward and he was surprised to see someone move across the room within. Suddenly the figure stood very still, gazing out, a curiously remote, lonely figure in that vast emptiness. Like a lone bee in a hive, Michael thought. One of the maids, he supposed.

Then she turned as though the door behind her had opened. And as she turned the sunlight caught her hair and lit it up like a skein of spun gold.

Chapter VIII

WHEN the girl turned at the sound of the opening door she saw Orson the butler standing there, a peculiar, watchful grin on his ugly countenance.

“You want to keep away from that there window, Miss Abbott, if you’ll excuse me. I’ve just looked in to warn you about that. There’s a nosy parker of a young fellow hangin’ around, and it wouldn’t do for him to see you.”

The girl nodded without answering. She understood that this curious servant was in some way implicated in the plot that had brought her here—smuggled into this disused wing of Takyll Place at dead of night—but she had asked no questions and sought no explanation of the many queer events that had transpired since her release at the hands of her unknown benefactor. She had nothing to lose in life and possibly everything to gain by passive acquiescence in whatever came to pass. She knew, also, that Takyll Place would be the last spot on earth in which the police would expect to find her. As a hide-out it was an inspiration.

Orson crossed to the window and closed it. “Better not switch on the light, miss, to-night,” he continued in his high-pitched voice. “Can’t be too careful.” He paused as

if expecting her to say something, but again she merely nodded. Orson displayed his broken teeth in a grin.

"I see you can keep your mouth shut," he observed approvingly. "Well, it won't be for much longer. *He's* coming to-morrer night, they tell me."

It was on the tip of Christine's tongue to ask who the mysterious visitor was to be, but she checked herself, and asked instead:

"I suppose there is no risk of Lord Harnley visiting this part of the house, or any of the—other servants?"

Orson broke into a cackle of laughter.

"His lordship? T'ain't likely! And there isn't any other servants except the cook and kitchen staff, because they've all been sacked." He checked himself quickly. "Don't you worry yourself, miss. Nothin' isn't going to happen to you so long as you b'ave yourself."

The door closed. To Christine's uneasiness, the key was turned and withdrawn from the lock. There was so much she didn't understand. Well, to-morrow night would clarify things. After all, an escaped convict has no right to quarrel with a good hiding place. She went into the little bathroom that led from her bedroom and bathed her face. Then she sat down with a book to wait.

Meanwhile Orson, humming shrilly, had lounged back to the occupied portion of the house. In the hall he paused to listen outside the library door, then turned and entered the dining room opposite. This was a spacious, paneled apartment, with massive and dignified furniture, but Orson's interest in the furniture was confined to an antique cellarette that stood adjacent to the high oak sideboard. The cellarette proved to be locked, but it took him only a few minutes with a skeleton key to open it. From within he lifted a bottle of port and a corkscrew. There were tumblers on the sideboard and Orson, filling a tumbler to the brim, held it up admiringly to the light. He had con-

sumed barely half the contents of the bottle when the door opened and the lady who had introduced herself to Michael Chillaton as Lord Harnley's new secretary, stood there, her rich lips parted contemptuously.

"If it isn't an impolite question," she asked, "may I inquire whether you think this is the way to behave in a gentleman's private house?"

Orson chuckled.

"Come in, Bernice," he answered, "and have some of the gentleman's private port. Cool! This is the stuff, believe me."

The woman lifted her head resentfully.

"Miss Randall to you, please," she snapped. "And if you'll take my advice, Bossy, you won't be quite so free about the house. There are some things he won't stand for, and boozing's one of them."

Orson drained his tumbler carefully and laid it down. An observable increase of assertiveness was in his demeanor.

"I'll tell you what's the matter with this job, Bernice. There's too much blasted orderin' about, that's what! This here Crooks' Shepherd, huh! Thinks that because he's got us out of jug he can do as he bloomin' well likes with us!"

Bernice Randall's eyes flashed.

"So he can, you fool. And I'll thank you to leave me out when you speak about crooks. You don't think I've been in jug, do you?"

"Some people has all the luck. There's plenty of time, dear. Now don't get excited, because I want to tell you somethin'. When this bloke comes here to-morrer night I'm going to put one over on 'im. See? What are *we* going to get out of this graft? Ten per cent? Not on your life! It's fifty-fifty, or I stand out. And what's more, if he starts tellin' me he'll send me back where I belong, why, there's two can play at that game. See?" Orson laughed as

he picked up the bottle again. Bernice Randall tapped the floor with her foot, ominously calm.

"It'd be a real pity," pursued Orson placidly, "if you lost a chance like this. You'd better stand in with me, dear, and then we needn't upset the apple cart. Now listen: all we got to do when 'e comes to-morrer night is take 'is 'at orf and 'ave a good look at 'im, so as to know 'im again if we're so unfortunate as to meet in a police station, or any narsty place like that. We're three to one, and it ought to be easy. And besides I don't hold with this mystery business. It ain't healthy."

Bernice Randall smiled slowly. Into her voice there came a world of scorn.

"If you aren't very careful, Bossy," she said, "you'll knock yourself against something much more unhealthy than the identity of the Crooks' Shepherd."

Back on the main road again Michael pursued his moody way. Every inclination urged immediate abandonment of the neighborhood to its own impossible devices, with a return to the sanity of routine and work. But in the same breath he knew such a course was out of the question. Whatever was skew-eyed up at Takyll Place must first be straightened out. Incidentally, he wouldn't straighten anything by returning to the inn to drink more beer. So Michael seated himself upon the nearest farm gate to think. It was high ground here and the outlook commanded the village with its picturesque cottages and squat, ancient church set at one end of the winding High Street. Many of the cottages were thatched, their color-washed walls cheek by jowl so that they looked like a lot of ragged-haired conspirators whispering. Michael smiled whimsically. It wasn't easy to imagine anything very nefarious happening down there. He observed presently the gaunt figure of his aunt, Miss Philadelphia Hemstone, in conversation with the vicar, over whom she towered like an

old ostrich about to administer a savage peck. The likeness was heightened by the long spindly legs beneath a somewhat attenuated, moth-eaten fur coat, and by the jutting chin that protruded from under a forward tilted hat of black straw like a menacing beak. Poor old bird. It was said that in her youth Miss Philadelphia had been handsome. Difficult to believe now.

Michael turned his reflections back to present problems and Uncle Edward Harnley. He felt badly in need of a confidant, but Aunt Phil was no good there. As a result of ten minutes' serious cogitation he got down from the gate and set off towards the house of Major Norton, Justice of the Peace, and breeder of pedigreed bloodhounds.

Major Norton was discovered washing the old Buick touring car outside his garage. One bloodhound was dribbling contentedly in the driver's seat, another striving dejectedly to discover some *via media* between forsaking his beloved master and getting drenched by the erratically wielded hose. At the sight of Michael, Major Norton dropped the hose, which shot a vicious jet straight at an inoffensive cat which happened to be performing its ablutions a dozen yards away.

"Hello, Michael!" Major Norton called, turning off the hose. "I was wondering when you'd show up. Come in and have a drink."

The two shook hands in the perfunctory manner of Englishmen who haven't met for years, but who must yet conceal their regard for each other. Leading the way to the porch of his house, Major Norton kicked off his rubbers and called for glasses and bottles.

In the low-raftered dining room Michael was greeted by his host's daughter, whose half-matured figure was charmingly emphasized by the tight scarlet jumper she wore. Last time, Michael reflected, Jill Norton had been a child. Now, with her carelessly carefully waved chestnut

hair and cocksure manner, she had sprung to years of indiscretion. He observed that she was studying the racing information in the *Daily Mail*.

"Hello, Michael! How are the blast furnaces?"

"Last time I saw you," Michael answered reprovingly, "you addressed me as 'Uncle.'"

The child scoffed and lit a cigarette, passing the box to Michael, who sighed with regret for her vanished innocence. The ten years between them seemed to have dwindled to nothing. He hoped when his host mixed the drinks, that she didn't include cocktails among her adolescent habits. She did!

"There you are, my boy," Major Norton said. "And now what brings you here out of season? Not that it isn't high time someone took that old chap in hand. I allude, of course, to your respected uncle." Michael took a sip at his glass.

"That, more or less," he replied, "is why I have come to see you. The popular view is that my Uncle Edward was knocked down by a motor car. In my opinion he was laid out by some thug."

"What did I tell you, dad?" interjected the girl triumphantly. "He's just got what was coming to him, the old beast."

"You might remember you're speaking of Michael's uncle," grunted her father.

Michael intervened tactfully.

"My sympathies are with the thug, I assure you."

"Anyone who could treat a girl like Chris Abbott in that unspeakable way *deserves* to be laid out," supplemented Jill with energy.

"Now, now, now," reproved her father. "That case was properly dealt with according to law."

"It was a rotten frame-up!" Jill declared heatedly. Michael felt his heart unaccountably warm towards the girl.

"Jill reads detective stories," Major Norton observed, in extenuation of his daughter. "Still, I'm bound to say—the shooting of that hound—poor old Jailer—*has* a very fishy look. Too bad, that was! Best dog I'd bred for years, and Harnley thought a lot of him."

Michael nodded.

"There's another fishy item: Stopford's absence," he went on. "By the way, when did you last see my uncle?"

"Um, let's see. Couple of weeks ago."

"Was he—er—normal, then?"

"Normal? Ha! As normal as I've ever known him. That's to say, his own charming, cantankerous, perverse, acrimonious and bad-tempered self. Oh, yes, quite normal." Major Norton gulped at his glass, as though he swallowed resentments with it.

"Probably liver," he added. "Mustn't be too hard on him."

"Quite," Michael agreed. "You would not, however, have said that my Uncle Edward was insane?"

"No, wouldn't go as far as that. Very jumpy, though. Nervous. Told us he'd written for your company and damned your eyes in the same breath."

"I'm not exactly *persona grata* now," observed the young man dryly. In a few words he detailed the meeting with Lord Harnley at the scene of the accident and the interview that morning. He omitted, however, to refer to the much more interesting encounter with the solitary occupant of the Tarn House. Major Norton was a magistrate and Michael felt by no means certain that he wanted to see that elusive personality manacled to Sergeant Bassett until he had learnt a little more about her.

"It's plain enough why the hound was shot," he concluded, and Major Norton nodded.

"Jailer had a wonderful nose," he said. "He'd have been on the scent all right."

Jill uttered an exclamation of excitement.

"So that's why you've come to us!" she cried. "How too terribly thrilling!"

Her father stared for an instant uncomprehendingly. Then he pursed up his lips.

"Rather a small chance, I'm afraid. Because we've nothing belonging to your thug to give 'em to smell. Still there's a chance they might pick up something to follow. Um!" He turned to the girl. "Fetch Barrister and old Wardress. If they can't do it, nothing can."

Jill tore jubilantly from the room, to reappear a bare minute later with a couple of massive hounds tugging at their leashes. They sniffed inquisitively at Michael's boots. Having memorized the boots they gazed up at him with their peculiarly mournful red-rimmed eyes under puckered brows, and then tugged towards the door as though aware that some job was afoot and must be started without delay.

"All right," Major Norton grunted. "May as well get straight on with it, though I don't believe you'll get any results."

He thrust his feet into the gum boots again and the trio set out with Jill leading, a yellow beret rakishly aslant her chestnut curls and a cigarette between lips that were almost as bright as Bernice Randall's, though in Michael's opinion much more attractive. The scene of the accident lay not more than a mile away, and the trampled grass of the roadside made the exact spot easily identifiable. Jill held the hounds in at short leash. The party halted. Michael pointed beyond the ditch that ran between the roadside and tall dense undergrowth flanking the road.

"If there's anything in my theory," he said, "the tough who floored my Uncle Edward might have been lying in wait somewhere inside that covert. In which case there

ought to be a lingering whiff of him for the benefit of your hounds."

Jill Norton nodded eagerly and took the hounds forward, jumping the ditch and plunging into the thick autumn foliage beyond. They heard her encouraging her charges, amid the cracking of twigs.

"Smell him, Wardress! Smell him, Barrister! Go on, then—go on, go on! Good old bitch!"

Presently she called out: "Somebody *has* been here! The ground's trodden about—Hooray! Here's a bit of boot leather! And they've picked it up!"

Almost as she spoke the hounds dragged her back through the undergrowth, across the ditch and back to the tangled grass of the roadside. Here they stopped, sniffing in circles, their sterns waving, questing very carefully and deliberately. In Jill's hand was a thin flake of half-moon shape leather that had manifestly belonged to a boot heel. Major Norton examined it critically.

"There's a nice assortment of scents here," he observed. "Yours, Chillaton, for one, Sergeant Bassett's for another. To say nothing of Harnley himself. But this ought to help. Ha! Look at 'em!"

For both hounds, as though entirely of one mind about it, were straining in the direction of the village, their noses on the macadam. A bare twenty yards on, however, they checked again momentarily, and then crossed the road. To Michael's consternation they made straight for the gateway of the Tarn House.

Jill's eyes were round with excitement.

"I always knew there was something sinister about the Tarn House," she declared blissfully. Her father uttered a growl of disparagement.

"Those detective stories," he said. "'Sinister' on every page! Bilge! All we're likely to find in the Tarn House is rats. Over you go, then."

He assisted the heavily built animals—no great jumpers—over the locked gate and clambered after them. Straight up to the front door they went and halted.

“Hel-lo!” Major Norton ejaculated, and then whistled. “Somebody’s bust the lock on this door!”

Michael felt himself growing hot with embarrassment.

“Didn’t take much busting,” he remarked. “Er—I mean the woodwork looks pretty rotten.” Privately he cursed himself for not anticipating that the scent might lead here, despite *her* assurance that *she* had known nothing of the “accident.” He was only saved from blurting his guilty cognizance of the broken door by Jill’s action in thrusting the door inward. Promptly Barrister and Wardress dragged her inside. At once they made for the stairs. Michael’s dismay increased. Halfway up the stairs, however, they checked momentarily, and after the manner of good sleuths cast back to the hall again. To Michael’s relief the scent lay finally along the passage leading to the back premises. In a stone-paved scullery, a dark and cheerless place, there was another check due to the presence of a locked and bolted door. Major Norton frowned with bewilderment.

“Dashed funny, this! If our friend went out that way, who the deuce locked the door after him?”

Again Michael was uncomfortably aware it lay in his power to answer that question. Instead of doing so he turned the key and drew back the bolts. Beyond was a wilderness that had once been a kitchen garden, with the remains of a cinder path down the middle. Straight along this path Barrister and Wardress led them to a wicket gate at the end. The gate gave on to the public footpath that wound deviously from the village across the Takyll Place lands. Without checking the hounds took the direction of Takyll Place.

To their left the ground fell away in a great water-worn

curve to the tarn below. It had been a considerable lake until two centuries of drainage had reduced its level to the stretch of still, tree-hung water that was now little more than a turbid pond, shelving conelike to its center. An ancient punt floated sluggishly at its mooring rope. Around half the rim of this basin of landscape Barrister and Wardress quested the footpath until Major Norton halted thoughtfully.

"This," he observed, "is getting very interesting. But I don't know that we're justified in sniffing round Harnley's property without his permission. Speaking as a magistrate it strikes me as irregular." He paused, staring doubtfully along the path. In the middle distance a lanky figure in ridiculous khaki shorts was seated on a fallen tree trunk, occupied with a Thermos flask and a packet of sandwiches.

"What blots on the landscape these hikers are," the Major went on. "Now where have I seen those knickers before?"

"We gave them a lift from the station yesterday," Jill enlightened her father.

"Ha! So we did! Well, I don't suppose there's anything *sinister* there!" Major Norton grunted with amusement. "Though of course it's important to look out for strangers in the neighborhood and keep 'em tagged. We'd best be getting back now, and I'll try 'phoning Harnley for permission to do a little sleuthing round his house. If you ask me, his answer's going to be rude."

Michael lit his pipe. That chance remark of Major Norton's had set him thinking. It was important to keep strangers tagged while such strange doings were afoot in Bishops Takyll.

And who the devil *was* this hiker chap, anyhow?

Barrister and Wardress puckered their foreheads disgustedly as they were dragged back from the scent.

Chapter IX

DEAR MR. CHILLATON,

I have given some thought to the subject of your call here, and I have decided that although this is not a case in which our intervention is likely to be required, it may nevertheless be advisable to maintain unofficial contact. Accordingly, with the permission of the Chief Constable of the County, I have arranged to send Mr. Paunceforte, about whom I spoke to you. As explained, Paunceforte's status at Scotland Yard is that of an auxiliary or free-lance detection agent, an innovation not entirely popular with the regular police, but one that finds increasing favor among our Continental colleagues. Should Paunceforte decide to enlist your aid please do all you can for him. He has very generously offered to forego a fortnight's holiday in your interests.

Yours very truly,

A. H. L. E. TANKERVILLE, Lt. Col.,
Assistant-Commissioner of Police

Michael read this missive with mixed emotions. Following the Assistant-Commissioner's scornfully expressed

skepticism he had reason to be grateful for this official change of heart. On the other hand, any detective worthy of the name would undoubtedly discover the existence of a certain young woman in the unoccupied wing at Takyll Place. And the thought of that attractive personality manacled to Mr. Paunceforte was intolerable.

Yes, even though Harnley might be in dire peril.

And yet, things *couldn't* be allowed to slide.

Damn!

A sense of impotence kept Michael Chillaton on the edge of his nerves all that evening. The hiker was absent from dinner but a garrulous traveler took his place. Unable, after dinner, to avoid the gentleman's society, Michael sought refuge in his own bedroom with a noon-day issue of the *Evening Standard*.

The bedroom was a large, chilly apartment with wall-paper of a depressing ginger hue, decorated by enormous engravings depicting grim incidents from the Old Testament. Vases contained dried fancy grasses, and on the shelf above the high doorway was a marble bust of the first Duke of Wellington. Michael sank glumly into a basket chair by the fireless grate and unfolded the *Evening Standard*, a cheerless prelude to bed.

A shock of surprise came, like a stab at his heart, as he met the gaze of Christine Abbott from the front page of the paper. It was a police photograph, and not even the rigid pose, harshly lighted full-face, could detract from the girl's loveliness. They were the same delicate features he had seen so dimly within the Tarn House, even to the indomitably humorous curve of the lips, the same clear steady eyes.

Michael stared into those eyes and read something in them that resolved his last fleeting doubts. He was glad, now, that he had let her go.

On either side, stretching across the page, were official

likenesses of the convicts Parkwell, Minser, and Neyland, and below each a repetition of the police descriptions. A column and a half headed: *WHO IS THE CROOKS' SHEPHERD?* was devoted to police theories on the possible course of the fugitives, and an ominously insistent warning of the penalties that would be meted out to those who harbored them. The police thought London contained the most probable hiding places.

Michael laid down the paper. For much longer than he knew, he sat and gazed at the Duke of Wellington. But it was not the Duke he saw. Instead there rose before his vision a stone-mullioned window with one open casement, and within it the figure of a girl whose yellow hair gleamed in the October sunshine.

He became aware, presently, of a strange quiet that hung about the inn. The faintly heard babel of voices had ceased, and footsteps no longer passed his door along the corridor. Michael looked at his watch and realized the passing of time. Yet the thought of sleep was fantastic. He rose and went downstairs. Old Sam Bellever, engaged in sliding the massive bolts on the street door, turned in surprise at the sight of his guest.

"Why, Mr. Chillaton, sir, I thought you'd gone to bed!"

"No sleep for me, Sam. I'm going out."

Old Sam stood open-mouthed.

"Going out, sir! What for!"

Michael shrugged.

"God knows! Call it insomnia. And give me a key."

Bewildered and slightly disapproving, old Sam took down a key from the nail in the wall.

"That's the yard door, sir. You'll be less likely to disturb folks if you come in that way. It isn't none of my business, of course—" He paused, but his guest failed to fill in the hiatus. Michael picked up his stick.

"By the way, Sam," he asked casually, "what's the name of that funny bird you've got staying here?"

"The hiking gentleman, sir? Simpkins is the name. And I don't know as I've ever had a gentleman who spent less on drinks. One ginger beer a day and he's finished." Old Sam shook his head disgustedly. "It's unnatcheral, sir. And what's worse, it's unprofitable."

He followed Michael to the street door and drew the bolts to let him out. A gusty wind blew in their faces, dissipating the comfortable warmth of the bar; a hint of cold rain came with it. Old Sam made no further observations but his manner hinted that he found his guest's behavior inexplicable. And as the door closed behind him Michael almost agreed. He made straight for the footpath to Takyll Place, alternately conscious of being a fool and a rather daring chap. What good, he asked himself, did he think this crazy expedition was going to do? Probably no earthly good at all, but what a hell of a chap he was for doing it.

He had an electric torch in his pocket, but there was enough light in the stormy sky to keep him on the track. The wind increased, whining shrilly through the trees in a mournful cadence; the threat of rain grew ominous. Michael pressed on at an increased speed and presently broke into a steady run. Within five minutes he was at the drive leading up to the great mansion.

Looking at his watch he saw that the hands stood close on midnight. Not so much as a chink of light showed from any window of the large edifice ahead of him. For a few moments he stood there, feeling silly, and in three quarters of a mind to beat a retreat. Eventually he went on, keeping to the grass border of the drive, the better to deaden his footsteps, until he halted directly beneath the unoccupied wing of the house.

He looked up. The window he wanted was the eleventh

from the end, on the second floor. He had marked it carefully by the way the ivy grew just there. It was tough old ivy, capable of bearing many times his weight, but the height looked positively dangerous in that murky visibility. He'd look pretty silly, he reflected, if he slipped and broke a leg on those uninviting flagstones. Nevertheless he began to climb, taking each handhold with extreme care, thankful that the screaming wind drowned the rustling of the creeper, until his head drew level with the casement. He tried to peer in, but the blackness beyond those diamond panes was unfathomable. All he could tell was that the window possessed neither blind nor curtain. After an uneasy hesitation he drew out his torch and switched it into the room, almost instantly extinguishing it. The flash showed him bare floor boards, a wooden chair and a glimpse of a bed that had bedding on it. Another flash would show whether the bed was occupied or not.

But to show light might reveal his presence to others than the occupant of that room—a risk that must not be undertaken. Very softly Michael rapped his knuckles against the casement. No sound was audible above the screech of wind and he rapped again, louder. This time he felt, rather than heard, a stir within the room as though someone had wakened and was listening tensely. Again he rapped and a girl's voice called unevenly: "Who's there?"

Michael cupped one hand against his mouth.

"Open the window!"

He saw a vague movement of white across the room and guessed that she was putting on a dressing gown. Then came a click as the window fastening turned and the casement was thrust out. Michael swung sideways to avoid it, then leant inwards, with one arm across the sill. He could see her now, even catch the glint of her yellow

hair in the light that came from the cloud-torn sky. He smiled at her disarmingly.

"It seems to be our fate," he said, "to meet under these queer conditions. You do recognize me, I hope?"

She nodded silently, defensively. There was no trace of fear in her demeanor.

"Last time," Michael went on, "you terminated what should have been an interesting acquaintance. It was my fault, really, for having such a rigid conception of public duty. You won't run away now, will you?"

He saw her smile faintly.

"It would be rather difficult," she said, "because the door is locked, and you seem to be monopolizing the window."

Michael hummed softly.

"So that's how things are? You walk out of one cooler into another? It doesn't make sense to me. Won't you explain?"

She shook her head.

"I can't."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't."

Michael scowled.

"You're telling me," he said incredulously, "that you don't know why you're a prisoner here?"

The girl smiled. It was good to see her smile.

"Just that," she said. "I don't know why."

"And I suppose you'll say also that you don't know why you escaped from Hollbury?"

"I didn't escape; they took me out."

"*They?*"

"Whoever they are."

"You don't know who?"

"No."

"Good God!" Michael muttered, staring at her. "Don't

you think you'd better let me take you back to prison? You'd be safe there."

She shook her head vehemently.

"Never! You can give me away, of course. But if you are a—friend, you won't."

"Then you are here of your own free will?" he asked, and the girl nodded.

"Even as a prisoner?"

He saw her hesitate.

"I don't know why I am locked in," she confessed presently. "Perhaps they are afraid that I shall not keep my—my bargain."

"Oh! So there is a bargain!" Michael hitched himself up on to the window sill and threw one leg across. "I am coming inside to hear about this bargain. And besides you'll get pneumonia if you stand here any longer."

The girl tried to bar his way.

"You mustn't—it isn't safe," she pleaded; and then with a smile: "Ladies in Hollbury aren't allowed gentlemen in their cells."

Michael chuckled and slipped into the room, closing the casement after him.

"Now, Christine—"

The girl shook her head.

"I have nothing to say. You are Lord Harnley's nephew. I was convicted of blackmailing Lord Harnley and sent to prison."

Michael took her by the shoulders and shook her gently.

"And I am prepared to believe," he said soberly, "that you never did anything of the kind. Now will you treat me as a pal?"

"You are on Harnley's side," she declared quietly.

"If by that you mean I won't stand by and see him murdered—yes."

He felt her move uneasily in his grasp.

"Why should anybody murder him?"

"That's what I want to find out. You'll admit that there's been one serious attempt, enough to provide what one might call sound reasons for believing him to be in danger. Are you aware that the escape of three other convicts besides yourself was engineered by your friend, the Crooks' Shepherd?"

He saw her frown in bewilderment.

"The Crooks' Shepherd?"

"That conveys nothing to you?"

"No, of course not—how ridiculous!"

"They don't show you newspapers here?"

She shook her head.

"Then I will enlighten you. 'The Crooks' Shepherd' is a sobriquet bestowed by the popular press and the criminal fraternity upon your mysterious friend. He has earned it by getting you and certain less desirable characters out of jug. Does it occur to you, Christine, that other occupants of this curious household may be under a similar obligation to this altruistic person? Orson for one? And can you seriously believe that philanthropy is your friend's motive?"

She sighed in perplexity.

"I understand only one thing," she said. "In return for—for carrying out his wishes he would prove my innocence."

"And you believe that?" Michael queried ironically.

"Yes. If I'm wrong what more have I to lose?"

"Only another year or two of liberty, my dear, on the top of the five years already forfeited. It would be nasty, that."

"It is worth it," Christine declared with emphasis.

"All right," Michael shrugged. "Tell me what it is you have to do."

"I have told you—I don't know."

He gazed at her in the gloom, gently and reproachfully.

"Is it possible," he asked, "that you are such a little mutt? Commit a second crime to absolve you from the first!"

"No. There is to be nothing illegal. He—he promised that."

"So thoughtful of him. And when does the absolution take place?"

She was silent, and he felt her shoulders droop a little as though some of the spirit had gone out of her. And a little of the hope.

"I am sorry, Christine," Michael said, dropping the ironic banter in his tone. "If you knew how pathetically crazy all this sounds!"

"If you knew what Hollbury is like—!"

"Better finish with Hollbury first."

"Five years!"

"There'd be remissions. Say three years and a half. I'd help you—to clear this up, if you'll let me," Michael urged.

But she shook her head.

"It would be too late. Too long! The clues would be stale. No, I am going through with it."

Michael paused.

"Very well," he said presently. "At least tell me when you have to fulfill your part of the bargain."

"*He* is coming here to-morrow night. Now I have betrayed him. If you bring the police here, you will betray me."

He laughed shortly.

"Looks as if I'm getting involved with your friends. And suppose you *are* requested to kill my Uncle Harnley or commit some other and possibly less desirable crime?"

"I shall refuse, of course."

Michael scowled anxiously.

"I don't like it, my dear. With those thugs—Orson, for example."

She laughed.

"I am not afraid of Orson."

"I am," Michael retorted. "Orson has jailbird written all over his ugly face. One of the Shepherd's flock—unless he *is* the Crooks' Shepherd."

"How absurd! *He* is—different!"

"Quite the gentleman, in fact?"

She nodded. "Yes, it is someone who is educated, at least."

"You would recognize him?"

"No, I hardly saw him."

"A woman, perhaps?"

"No, I don't know—" The girl shook herself free. "What does it matter? Please go now."

Michael nodded deliberately. He had the air now of a man whose mind is made up. Walking to the casement he pushed it open. In the act of climbing out he stopped and turned to the girl. The wind was blowing her hair out in a golden shower and she looked almost ethereal.

"To-morrow night," he said, "you will leave the catch of this window unfastened. If you are not in the room the door will be left unlocked. Do you understand?"

The girl was silent. "It may be dangerous," she answered presently, "for you."

"Give me your promise. I will not intervene—unless it is necessary."

Again she hesitated; then gave a reluctant nod. Michael took her hand, pressed it for an instant, and was out of the window, clinging to the ivy in the blustering wind. Not until he had reached the stone flags below did he hear the casement close.

He had started to run towards the terrace steps, his rubber-soled shoes making no sound, when a thin pencil

of light seemed to dart out of the darkness. Instantly Michael halted, rigid with the instinct for danger. But he heard nothing beyond the wind's moaning and saw no movement, though he strained his eyes towards the direction of the light. Presently it stabbed the darkness again, a tiny ray sweeping in an arc from one of the shuttered ground floor windows of the unoccupied wing. Someone, manifestly, had moved a lamp within the room, and the action had sent a narrow beam through a crack in the shutters. It had the effect of a miniature lighthouse.

This, Michael decided, was interesting, so he moved silently towards the window. Within the casement the crack between the shutters gleamed brilliantly, yet the space between casement and shutter—some six inches—effectively prevented a view into the room, and did not permit any audible sound to issue.

The urge to know what was going on inside that room at such an hour, when all normal households sleep like law-abiding people, was too strong to resist. Trusting to the wind to drown any sound he might make, Michael inserted the point of his penknife into the leadwork of one of the diamond panes and began to cut it away. At the conclusion of a few minutes' neat work he had removed the little pane of glass.

Still not the smallest sound came from within the room. The ominous hush seemed to threaten him with a sudden attack, as though those within had foreknowledge of his intention and were biding their time. Uneasily Michael stared over his shoulder into the darkness, and waited. Every stirring shadow in the wind that blew seemed to be alive. It cost him an effort to turn again to the window and slip a hand into the opening to feel for the catch.

A tiny little creak came from the rusty hinges and he

checked rigidly, his heart in his mouth. He thanked God for this wind. He had the casement wide open presently, and by leaning forward could get his eye close to that crack between the shutters. The angle of view was very narrow but it showed him the room's occupant, an elderly, clean-shaven man, slightly bald, who bent round-shouldered over his task. He was seated at a table upon which stood the lamp. There was no other furniture in the room and no other visible occupant. So absorbed was this singular individual in his task that manifestly he did not notice the increased clamor of the wind that came through the open casement and set the shutters in a subdued rataplan. Michael tried gently to steady the shutters with the pressure of his hand, but to little purpose. With the realization that every minute increased his danger he stared again through the crack.

Upon the table were a number of opened letters. The man held one of these letters close to his steel-rimmed spectacles and was scrutinizing it with minute thoroughness. Presently he took up a magnifying lens and resumed his scrutiny with that. Letter after letter he examined. Then, drawing a blank sheet of paper before him, he began to write, very slowly and laboriously. So tediously meticulous were his movements that Michael was utterly perplexed—until he observed the fact that the inkwell contained six or seven different pens, and that the studious old gentlemen changed his pen from time to time until he secured one with a nib that precisely answered his purpose. Then he began to write with more assurance, though never quickly. At the conclusion of two lines of calligraphy he paused and compared his handiwork with one of the letters before him. The result, apparently, was satisfying, for a smile crossed his benign features. Michael understood perfectly. He could not, however, detect whose handwriting was being forged.

He had, he decided, seen enough, and it would be advisable to go while the going was good. He reclosed the casement softly, and because it would be impossible to replace the little pane of glass he threw it deep into the shrubbery. The gap in the window would have to speak for itself.

He walked quickly toward the drive again, pausing on the edge to glance back at the dark mansion. The absence of light at any other window appeared to affirm that he had not disturbed its somewhat sinister peace. But immediately he became aware of a movement, away to his right, in a grass pathway that ran between high rhododendrum shrubs. At first he took it for the low branch of a tree swinging laterally in the wind, but as he waited the figure of a man came dimly into view, peering with bent shoulders towards the house; standing not a dozen paces from where Michael stood. The man remained motionless for several seconds, and to Michael it seemed that his gaze was fastened on Christine's window. The thought sent a chill of uneasiness down the young man's spine. Christine up there—in her isolated room of a deserted wing—with this unpleasant person lurking below. She seemed horribly unprotected, horribly remote. He waited, speculating on the identity of the figure, resolved that he would not quit his vigil until the other had removed himself from the vicinity, even if it meant waiting until dawn. He had virtually promised Christine that he would not intervene, nor make any move that might jeopardize her chances of obtaining those proofs of the frame-up against her. But he'd wait—and wait. It made him smile to realize that the safety of an escaped convict had become of more importance than the safety of Uncle Edward Harnley.

The move came with disconcerting sharpness, so suddenly that Michael had barely time to drop to his hands

and knees as the figure turned. For just one instant it seemed that discovery in this unheroic posture must be inevitable, but the figure walked straight past him down the drive.

Michael gave him thirty yards' start and then followed. The wind still maintained its clamor but the threat of rain had dwindled with the racing clouds and a diffused moonlight shone fitfully. The man ahead turned from the drive towards the footpath for Bishop's Takyll, and Michael hurried after him. Beyond the stile they were in open parkland, and without warning the man ahead glanced back. In that lack of cover concealment was impossible, and Michael knew himself seen. The next instant, irresistibly, he was tearing over the ground in pursuit of a figure that moved like the wind itself.

It took a quarter of a mile all out before he drew level—reached out a hand. They went hurtling together on to the wet grass. Michael sat on his quarry for just long enough to regain breath. Then he turned the fellow over and switched on his torch.

"Now, dogsbody," he panted, "let's have a look at you."

He broke off with a whistle of amazement.

It was the hiker!

Chapter X

THE captive was glaring furiously through his thick glasses.

“G-g-get off my chest!” he snarled. “B-b-bally fool!”

Michael’s amazement increased. This was not exactly the demeanor of a crook caught red-handed. Nevertheless Michael continued to sit.

“First,” he said, “let us hear what brings you to these peculiar haunts at an hour when all good little boys should be in bed.”

The youth made a vicious attempt to wriggle free. Under the merciless light of the torch his face gleamed with sweat and his parted lips emitted a steamy breath. He had artificial teeth, Michael noted. Altogether an unpleasing person, this Mr. Simpkins.

“Want to be sat on all night?” Michael demanded callously.

“I d-deny your right to question me. It is a m-monstrous outrage!”

“Ah! You consider you have a perfect right to trespass on Lord Harnley’s property?”

“As g-good as yours!” snapped the youth.

"My reasons are excellent, I assure you. But probably yours are more interesting. The nocturnal habits of the Peeping Tom, for example? Eh!" Michael prodded his victim none too gently in the stomach. "Shall we go and tell Sergeant Bassett?"

"Sergeant B-Bassett! Tchah!"

Michael became frankly puzzled.

"Look here," he pointed out, "if you're not a crook you've no business to behave like one. Snooping around private property in the small hours. You may not be aware that Lord Harnley is my uncle, a fact that causes me no particular gratification, but explains my right to snoop if I want to. You, on the other hand, are liable to turn the old man's fancy to thoughts of mantraps. He'd never believe you were hunting the edible fungi or what-not. So unless I'm to squat on your carcass until dewy dawn you'd better come across."

Another frantic contortion answered him, and Michael gazed down at his indignant captive regretfully.

"You don't think I like sitting on these damned knobbly bones, do you?"

"When I summons you for d-d-damages," stuttered the other, "you'll be sorry for this. You have committed an unp-p-provoked assault. You have attempted b-b-by violence to extract information t-t-to which you are not entitled. B-b-by some obscure p-p-process of your m-m-muddled b-b-brain you imagine that your relationship with Lord Harnley gives you the right to d-d-do so. That is all I have to say—for the p-p-present."

Michael whistled admiringly. In the circumstances it seemed a pretty good effort. He heaved himself off his couch.

"Rise, Mr. Simpkins, please. If you can talk like that with 170 pounds on your malformed torso you are entitled to more respect than, I fear, I have shown you."

The captive rose, adjusted his disheveled clothing, and straightened his glasses. Except for the clicking of teeth these actions were performed in menacing silence. Michael surveyed him and found the spectacle unedifying. His curiosity, however, prevailed on him.

"I suggest, Mr. Simpkins," he said firmly, "that you volunteer a statement."

The youth glowered.

"I am not p-p-prepared," he stuttered, "to d-d-do anything of the sort."

"All right. Then come along. It'll be your funeral."

"My b-business is p-p-private."

"I gathered as much," Michael observed dryly. "The police will be interested in your private business."

The youth clicked his teeth again. He appeared to deliberate his reply.

"It must be d-distinctly understood," he said, after a long pause, "that you d-divulge nothing of this except in consultation with Scotland Yard."

It was Michael's turn to stare. Suddenly he experienced a profound, and almost brotherly sympathy with Chief Inspector Gidleigh.

"The mystery clears," he said slowly. "I congratulate you on your disguise—Mr. Paunceforte."

The youth inclined his head in chilly acknowledgment.

"Thank you. It appears hitherto to have b-been efficacious. I suggest now that we return to the inn."

"And I," replied Michael, "suggest that we have a little chat on the way." He produced his cigarette case. "Smoke?"

"Thank you, I d-d-do not indulge in tobacco."

Michael lit a cigarette. These abstemious detectives, he reflected, were not very lively company. Aloud, he remarked: "It would be interesting, Mr. Paunceforte, to hear what progress your investigations have made."

Mr. Paunceforte began to hum softly. Beyond this he appeared unwilling to commit himself.

"I take it," Michael observed, carefully repressing an inclination to give his companion a sock on the jaw, "that Colonel Tankerville has told you of the conversation I had with him. During the conversation he gave me the outline, so to speak, of your views.—Inspector Gidleigh—"

"I have no wish," interrupted Mr. Paunceforte with bitter contempt, "to hear the Chief Inspector's views, Mr. Chillaton."

Michael drew at his cigarette, with admirable control.

"Curiously enough, Gidleigh didn't appear to care much for yours," he observed. "However, as I was saying, Colonel Tankerville—"

"P-Pardon me, I do not consider that Colonel Tankerville was justified in d-discussing the case with you."

Michael repressed a retort. For this callow outsider of the C.I.D. to refer thus to the Assistant-Commissioner was just a bit too strong.

"Considering that I took him a letter in which my uncle appealed for protection from certain unspecified thugs, I think the Assistant-Commissioner *was* justified in discussing the case with me," Michael averred with some heat.

In the semidarkness he observed a mysterious smile on his companion's lank features. Irritated, he added:

"The fact that one attempt, at least, has been made on Lord Harnley's life seems enough to warrant my presence down here—if not yours."

Even this studied insult failed to elicit more than a scornful sniff. For the next hundred yards they proceeded in hostile silence. Finally the youth spoke:

"If you take my advice, Mr. Chillaton," he remarked, "you will leave the neighborhood without d-delay. Your presence here, far from doing any good, appears to irri-

tate Lord Harnley to such an extent as to hamper my investigations."

More and more Michael found himself united in a spiritual bond with the absent Gidleigh. To bestow a kick in the pants on this police paragon would be ecstatic indeed. With a sigh, however, he again controlled himself.

"It appears to me," pursued Mr. Paunceforte, "that Lord Harnley is at more pains to exclude you from his immediate environment than the criminals from whom you suppose he requires your protection. The result is he leads so cloistered an existence that it is impossible to get near him. I am convinced that in your absence Lord Harnley would be more accessible."

Michael shuffled angrily. There was something in this argument, perhaps, that his presence in Bishops Takyll could do no good, but he had no intention of leaving—yet. And no intention of confiding his reasons to this self-sufficient and superior, but unfortunately intelligent, detective. Did the fellow know of Christine Abbott's presence at Takyll Place? An unpleasant possibility, with deuced awkward implications also for Michael if his doings that night were an open book to his omniscient companion. It became suddenly vital that Michael should discover just how well informed Mr. Henry Paunceforte might be.

"I'll think about it," he said evasively. "By the way, I suppose you'll decline to tell me if you know what's happened to Stopford?"

"I d-do not know what has happened to Stopford," answered Mr. Paunceforte in a tone that indicated that he would certainly not have enlightened Michael in any case.

"You have observed Stopford's successor, I take it," Michael pursued carefully.

"If you refer to Orson, I have observed him," returned Mr. Paunceforte.

"In that case it would be interesting to know whether

your conclusion regarding Orson is the same as mine," Michael went on, humorously conscious that he was catching the infection of Mr. Paunceforte's pedantic phrases.

"And what, may I ask, are your conclusions, Mr. Chillaton?"

"Only that Orson is better acquainted with the inside of a jail than most of us, Mr. Paunceforte."

"You are re-m-markably astute," Mr. Paunceforte said ironically. Michael scowled hopelessly. It was something of a relief when they halted under the covered archway of the Takyll Arms. Michael produced his key.

"I presume," he said, "that you informed Mr. Bellever of your plans for spying on my uncle's establishment. No? Then may I ask how you proposed to re-enter this inn, Mr. Paunceforte?"

The young detective tightened his lips in manifest annoyance at the question.

"I d-did not desire my activities to be common gossip," he replied coldly. "I therefore left the inn by way of my b-bedroom window, and it was my original intention to return by the same means. Since you have a k-key, however—"

Michael smiled nastily and shook his head.

"I think not," he said.

Inserting the key in the door he admitted himself, swiftly closed the door in his companion's face, and shot the bolts.

"I am afraid, Mr. Paunceforte," he called through the panels, "that you will have to find your own way in. May I express the hope that you will discover that the window has been fastened in your absence by some assiduous maid. Alternatively, that every dog in Bishops Takyll will bite you. Good-night."

He walked softly to the back hall, lit a candle from the row that stood on the oak chest, and tip-toed up the creak-

ing stairs with mixed feelings. The satisfaction at Mr. Paunceforte's discomfiture was somewhat tempered by Michael's growing conviction that he had behaved rather foolishly in antagonizing the detective. The fellow was enough to inspire a saint to murder, but this had been bad tactics, needless and rather petty. Anyhow, he wasn't going back on it.

Along the wide corridors, the candle in his hand threw weird shadows upon the high ceiling, like a huge genie that followed and hung over and menaced him. The inn had been built in the spacious days of the Regency, when Bishops Takyll was a posting place of some consequence by virtue of its situation midway between two far-distant county towns. They built lofty rooms in those times, though drafty and cold at this season of the year. As he turned the handle of his own room the candle spluttered violently and all but went out.

Michael never knew what made him hesitate on the threshold of his bedroom that night. He had thrust the door slightly ajar and yet, inexplicably, had failed to enter at once. Then, suddenly irritated, he gave the door a push.

The crash that ensued woke every soul in the Takyll Arms. Old Sam Bellever came scurrying out dazed, with trousers pulled over his pajamas and braces flapping behind. Door after door opened along the corridor and tousled heads peered out, anxiously or angrily or stupidly.

"Good Heavens, Mr. Chillaton, sir!" gasped old Sam. "Whatever's the matter!"

Michael pointed within the door where the first Duke of Wellington lay on his side with a broken nose.

"Do you mean to say, sir, that it fell just as you was going in? God bless me, how did it do that!" Old Sam bent to peer at the bust as if expecting it to vouchsafe some explanation of its unwarrantable behavior; then he peered up at the shelf above the door.

"Must be the shelf got loose, sir, and sloping. Gor. It's a mercy you escaped it! Such a crack on the 'ead you'd 'a had! Might ha' killed you, sir."

Clicking his tongue concernedly old Sam dragged the bust against the wall of Michael's room and up-ended it.

"*Would* 'appen just when you choose this un'oly hour to come in, wouldn't it, sir?" he added with a touch of resentment. "All right, ladies and gents, nothing to worry about. Just a little accident."

Michael glanced along the corridor as these reassuring words were spoken and observed the various heads withdraw. It occurred to him to wonder whether Mr. Paunceforte had heard the crash. He answered old Sam's somewhat aggrieved "Good-night" mechanically and re-entered his room. Then by the light of the candle he bent down to examine the Duke of Wellington. The examination revealing nothing of interest, he stood on a chair and made the minutest inspection of the shelf over the door.

Presently Michael found what he was looking for: a broken piece of black cord hanging from a rusty nail in the back of the shelf. Behind the door a similar piece of cord was fastened to a clothes hook.

Just a little accident.

Chapter XI

IN the early afternoon of next day the Assistant-Commissioner received a packet expressed from Barnborough. The packet contained a report beginning: "I have the honor to submit for your consideration the following . . ." and ended: "I have the honor to be, Your obedient servant, Henry Paunceforte."

Colonel Tankerville sent for Chief Inspector Gidleigh, and bade that reluctant officer extend his ear. Gidleigh sank into a chair in doleful submission.

"A very interesting report," observed his Chief, rustling the papers pleurably. "A little—hr'rm—verbose in places, but admirably detailed. Our young friend appears to be employing his abilities to great advantage. Now we won't for the moment trouble about the preliminaries, which are chiefly concerned with such precise matters as local topography—all very correct and proper, but somewhat prolix. Omitting the first three paragraphs, then, we come to a description of a somewhat peculiar accident to Lord Harnley. It appears that Harnley was knocked down by a car which has not yet been traced and that the effect of his injury has been to make him even more eccentric than formerly. Not only does he refuse to see

visitors, but he also refuses now to have anything to do with his nephew, Chillaton. What do you make of that, Gidleigh?"

"What does Paunceforte make of it?" inquired the Inspector, lethargically.

"Paunceforte considers that the services of a medical man should be obtained to inquire into the state of Lord Harnley's mind. Unfortunately Harnley refuses to see a doctor and we cannot compel him. All this, of course, may be outside our province, but we have to follow up apparently irrelevant details in order to discover whether there is any justification in that letter to Chillaton. As you know, the Chief Constable of the County has given us permission to make private inquiries, and we are doing so by dint of Paunceforte's semiofficial status, which enables him to work independently of the local police. Events may prove, of course, the need for regular intervention, in which case your service will be requisitioned. Now we come to two very peculiar items, which in my opinion show that there *is* something amiss with Lord Harnley's affairs: firstly, the disappearance of the family butler, an old servant of thirty years' service, and secondly the shooting of a valuable bloodhound. Paunceforte considers that these events are connected with some design against Lord Harnley, and seems to regard the missing butler's successor with a certain amount of suspicion. Unfortunately, he says, he is quite unable to establish personal contact with Lord Harnley, or to enter Harnley's house to pursue his investigations, and for the moment matters are at a standstill. For this state of affairs he holds Chillaton partly to blame and asks us to use our influence to persuade Chillaton to leave the neighborhood."

Chief Inspector Gidleigh's boredom yielded momentarily to surprise.

"Funny, that, sir."

"On the contrary I find it entirely reasonable. Chillaton, it seems, has been making himself a nuisance to Harnley by repeatedly seeking admission to Takyll Place after being as repeatedly told that his company is not required. Harnley, of course, has changed his mind about his nephew. Either he no longer trusts him, which is Paunceforte's view, or he no longer believes himself in danger, which is *not* Paunceforte's view, though Paunceforte is not absolutely satisfied yet as to the existence of any danger. It is possible, he states, that these peculiar local happenings are fortuitous and unconnected. In any case Chillaton's continued presence in Bishops Takyll seems to have hindered investigations by making Harnley more inaccessible than ever.

The Assistant-Commissioner turned a page of the report.

"Much of this is a trifle—hr'm—redundant," he observed. "It concludes with the request that communications be addressed to Henry Simpkins, at the Takyll Arms, Bishops Takyll, Devon. Presumably Simpkins is Paunceforte's *nom de guerre*. I have now given you the gist of the report. Really I don't see what we can do about Chillaton, however."

The Chief Inspector leant forward in his chair with a faintly perceptible awakening of interest.

"Might I just look through the report for myself, sir? Thank you, sir."

He sat back and placed a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles upon his large nose. At the conclusion of the perusal he removed the spectacles and silently handed back the document.

"Well?" demanded the Assistant-Commissioner, impatiently.

"Very interesting, sir. But, as you say, we can't very

well exert our influence on Mr. Chillaton. As a matter of fact it doesn't seem altogether desirable for Mr. Chillaton to leave. Only my impression, of course, sir."

Colonel Tankerville shot a resentful glance at his subordinate.

"Now what do you mean by that, hey! Of course I know that you regard Paunceforte as incompetent."

"Oh, no, sir, not at all. A little inexperienced, of course, but highly intelligent. Only I get the impression that Chillaton wouldn't do any harm by staying. It's a funny thing," concluded the Chief Inspector rather stupidly, "but Lord Harnley's attitude to his nephew appears to me a good reason why Mr. Chillaton shouldn't leave the neighborhood at present. Quite likely I'm wrong. Not being subtle, like Paunceforte—"

He checked himself and sighed, as though with self-abasement. The Assistant-Commissioner frowned.

"If you take my advice, Gidleigh," he said, "you won't indulge in these veiled sarcasms at the expense of a young colleague. The result of your own investigations into the matter of those escaped convicts hardly warrants that. To put it bluntly you have discovered precisely nothing. We do not expect miracles, of course."

Colonel Tankerville paused in such a manner as to imply that he did, in fact, expect miracles, and miracles should have been duly forthcoming. He drummed his knuckles on the desk.

"No, sir," Gidleigh shook his head lugubriously. "Mrs. Parkwell has a new fur coat—beautiful rabbit-sealskin, it is. She hasn't heard from her husband, of course. The lady who passes as Minser's wife has paid her rent, which was six weeks overdue, and bought a very natty radio set. Neyland's young woman has vanished for the moment, but I shouldn't wonder if she hasn't been spending money, too. An expensive piece she was, I remember. I'm afraid it's

going to be difficult to find out where all that money came from, sir."

"Difficult!" the Assistant-Commissioner snorted. "Of course it's difficult. That's what detectives are for. You're keeping a watch on those women, I hope."

"Yes, sir. But it's my belief they got all their money before the alarm was raised. From the clever person who arranged the escapes. It wouldn't surprise me to be told that they don't know where their menfolk are."

Colonel Tankerville scratched his chin.

"Well, we've got to find those men somehow, Gidleigh, and the Abbott woman too, or there'll be a fuss made. I've an idea Mr. Paunceforte would work on different lines."

Superintendent Gidleigh stood up with a sad smile.

"Yes, sir. Don't you think Paunceforte would look nice in the uniformed branch, sir? On point duty at the Elephant & Castle. Of course he might get knocked down, which would be a pity."

The door closed gently as the Superintendent made his exit.

That particular day being appropriated to Petty Sessions at Barnborough Police Court, Major Norton had attended in his capacity as Justice of the Peace. Jill found herself at a loose end. Norton was a widower of ten years' standing, and his daughter's more than admirable rapid development may have derived from that unblessed state. It is certain that Jill at sixteen possessed wisdom and precocity beyond such few years, though mercifully leavened by a certain naïve and childish enthusiasm.

At the moment she was bored. Having nothing to do was nice when you didn't want anything to do, but when it's a fine afternoon and you're just spoiling with surplus energy something must be done. Being Jill she made her

decisions without much regard for discretion or expedience.

Before his departure for Barnborough Major Norton had telephoned to Lord Harnley offering the services of his hounds in tracking the missing butler Stopford, and for the assailant, if such existed, of Lord Harnley himself. Norton had detailed in brief the little experiment tried in Michael Chillaton's company. He had not seen fit to proceed further, he explained, because the trail might lead over part of the Takyll Place estate. Lord Harnley's reply was of such vehemence as to render Major Norton speechless for nearly half an hour. Later, he explained to Jill that Lord Harnley, far from regarding the offer as neighborly or sporting, had declared it to be grossly offensive, interfering, and an unpardonable breach of good manners. Further, if Major Norton imagined that an absconding butler, plus a common motor accident, could possibly furnish grounds for the existence of a sinister criminal conspiracy, then he, Lord Harnley, was profoundly apprehensive for the Major's mental state. Still further, Lord Harnley would be obliged if Major Norton would report these observations and remarks to Mr. Michael Chillaton, together with the most strenuous intimation that Mr. Chillaton's instant departure from the scenery would confer an inestimable boon upon Lord Harnley. In short Lord Harnley was quite at the top of his form.

Jill had enjoyed the recital. But, being Jill and in need of stimulating occupation, she proposed to evade his lordship's wishes. The thing could be done, she decided, without the appearance of doing it. Barrister and Wardress would be taken for a walk along the footpath and given a chance to recover the scent that had been so inconsiderately denied them the previous day. The footpath was a public right of way. If the scent should lead away from the footpath—well, she'd decide then what to

do about it. A little mild excitement would be all to the good.

Five minutes later, clad in a tight little jumper of electric blue, with tweed skirt and a saucy little tweed hat worn much a slant, Jill once more made for the scene of Lord Harnley's accident. Here, refreshed with good sniffs of the heel leather which Jill had taken the precaution of retaining, Barrister and Wardress, with less hesitation this time, set their noses in the direction of the Tarn House. Instead of entering the house, however, Jill dragged her charges round it and allowed them to recover the scent outside the back door. There, as before, she was pulled away through the garden and wicket gate to the footpath beyond. The adventure began. For the first half mile round the lip of the tarn, Barrister and Wardress quested steadily and very carefully in the manner of good sleuth-hounds, pausing occasionally to resolve a doubt, and occasionally casting back a few yards. But no definite check came until they were near the second stile and on the fringe of the Takyll Place park. Here, instead of keeping to the track, both animals sniffed in circles, the transverse puckers on their dome-like foreheads giving them a curiously worried look. Jill, watching the maneuvers, nodded wisely to herself.

"The scent goes two ways," she thought. "They're not sure which to take. Probably one's fresh and the other's old—"

It was Wardress, the sagacious old bitch, who decided, and Jill found herself pulled energetically away from the footpath across the field in a direction which she knew would take her somewhere in the region of Lord Harnley's walled-in garden at the rear of the great house. For the first time she felt a qualm of uneasiness. It would be awkward if she were to meet anyone after Lord Harnley had made known his views on the subject of sleuthing.

Not that she was likely to see Lord Harnley or any of his new indoor servants. The danger lay in being observed with these too conspicuous animals by some casual employee, who might recount the circumstance to others until it reached the small talk of the servants' hall. And then it might get to Harnley's ears, involving the sequel of another pretty bitter conversation over the telephone with Dad—who would be as angry as he ever was with Jill, which wasn't very angry, after all— By the time Jill had finished these soliloquies she was a quarter of a mile further on the way to trouble. After all, she reflected, she knew most of the outdoor servants and gardeners. She might share this secret by an appeal to sportsmanship, if she met one of them.

The hounds were pulling faster now, in a wide detour that kept them out of view of the house and brought them presently to a door in the high walls of the kitchen gardens. The door was just ajar, and through it Jill caught a glimpse of trim box borders, phalanxes of chrysanthemums, and long rows of glass houses against the opposite wall. But the hounds were questing past the open door and Jill prepared to move on, thankful that at least she would not be required to enter that enclosure. Then suddenly the door was swung wide from within, and an elderly round-shouldered man stood facing her, his mouth open in mild astonishment, his pale blue eyes blinking through steel-rimmed spectacles. He wore the blue apron of a gardener and an ancient Panama clung to the back of his head. In one hand a pruning knife was grasped.

Jill was quick to recover herself.

"Good afternoon," she said. "I don't think I remember you. A new gardener, surely?"

The man nodded, still staring fixedly.

"Yes, miss," his voice was curiously soft and gentle. "Were you—looking for anyone, miss?" His gaze strayed

momentarily to Barrister and Wardress, who were straining impatiently at their leashes, and his eyes seemed to flicker uneasily.

Jill hesitated, then shook her head.

"Oh, no," she said brightly. "Just out for a walk with the hounds. Have you taken Carey's place? I didn't know he'd left."

The man nodded, fidgeting with the pruning knife. Jill's quick eyes noted that his hands, though grimed with soil, were very unlike a gardener's. The fingers were long and tapered ridiculously for a manual worker.

"Well, I must be getting on," she observed carelessly. "I see you're busy pruning." She glanced with simulated interest through the open doorway. "How very nice the garden looks."

She was uneasily conscious that her casualness was overdone, that he was looking at her with peculiar intentness. The urge to run away at that moment was very strong. But the man's next words were as mild and inoffensive as anything could be.

"Yes, miss, I was doing the geraniums. Taking the cuttings, miss. They've got a fine lot of geraniums here." His voice took on a note of queer enthusiasm. "The zonales and staghorns, now, a wonderful lot! There'll be a rare show here next year. I only wish—" he broke off as though checking himself, and then added inconsequently, "I don't suppose you're specially interested in geraniums, miss."

Jill's nervousness had vanished, to be succeeded by wonder. He was an odd character, the new gardener, she thought, with that voice and those hands, and his curious enthusiasm for geraniums at a time when no geraniums were in flower. Her curiosity piqued her to prolong the conversation.

"Yes, of course I love geraniums," she answered him, smiling.

“Do you really, miss?” The man’s eyes glinted eagerly. “I always say that there isn’t a flower to touch them. The flower of the people, I say. For window boxes, now. Is there anything that can beat them for window boxes?”

Odder and odder, Jill thought. Gardeners of the sort one finds on big country estates are not usually interested in window boxes.

Unfortunately Barrister and Wardress were beginning to tug again in their impatience, and she decided to curb her curiosity for the present and take them home. Manifestly it would not be discreet to follow any more scent for the present. Then she heard a very low growl from old Wardress as light steps sounded upon the path within the walk. The next instant a woman came into view, halting abruptly in the doorway behind the gardener, who shifted his position quickly aside. Jill met the newcomer’s gaze, while her heart beat with unwonted fear.

Chapter XII

BARRISTER and old Wardress were growling in unison as though aware of the hostility of this new presence. Jill jerked sharply at their leashes. The woman's eyes ran over the girl's figure in contemptuous appraisal of its immaturity, and Jill's habitual aplomb began to ooze. There is an eon between the years of sixteen and thirty where the miscalled gentle sex is concerned, and Jill felt herself outmatched. She managed to bring out an awkward greeting, which was acknowledged by a faint hard smile. Jill next murmured something about taking the hounds home now, and the smile widened with a malicious curve of lacquer-red lips.

"Such a pity you cannot stop," the woman said drawlingly. "Even to introduce yourself."

"I am Jill Norton: Major Norton's daughter," Jill answered shortly. "I am sorry if you think I've been trespassing."

"Oh, not at all. But I don't suppose you came all this way merely to talk to the gardener, did you?"

"No, it was to exercise the hounds."

"Really? Do you always exercise them on other people's property?"

Jill found herself flushing.

"How absurd! As if Lord Harnley minds! I've often

been this way before," she said, struggling to control her resentment. "You must be a stranger here to say that!"

The woman nodded amusedly.

"So clever of you, Miss Norton. Yes, I am a newcomer, certainly. But at least I know enough of Lord Harnley's wishes to tell you that he doesn't much like people treating his grounds as a public park. In fact, I rather imagine Lord Harnley had something to say on the subject to your father not very long ago."

A glance with raised brows at the two fidgeting hounds accompanied the last words and Jill bit her lips. This was worse and worse. But the feeling of being cornered gave her a sort of desperate courage.

"My father doesn't know I'm here," she declared bluntly, "and anyhow I don't see what the fuss is about. You can tell Lord Harnley I think it's horrid of him to treat his friends like poachers. I suppose you've come from London, or you'd understand that in the country we don't behave like that. And that—" Jill concluded, "is all I have to say. Good afternoon!"

She dragged at the hounds, uncomfortably aware that now the elderly gardener was grinning too.

"I will give Lord Harnley your message, Miss Norton," the woman said. "But it isn't very polite, is it?"

Jill shrugged angrily.

"Lord Harnley doesn't understand politeness," she retorted. "If you're a friend of his you've probably found that out."

"I am Lord Harnley's secretary, Miss Norton."

Jill's stare was almost rude.

"His secretary! Crikey!"

The smile vanished momentarily.

"You seemed surprised, Miss Norton."

Jill continued to stare at the expensive tailor-made clothes, flashing rings, and diamond-set wrist watch.

"I am," she said candidly. "You don't look much like a secretary."

The smile returned, not very pleasantly.

"Indeed? Perhaps that is a compliment."

The girl shrugged again.

"All right, I didn't mean to be rude," she answered. "But you're a bit different from—Miss Abbott."

"Miss Abbott? Ah, my predecessor! I gather that she left a little suddenly." A titter of amusement followed and Jill set her teeth.

"Christine Abbott was sent to prison for blackmailing Lord Harnley," she answered fiercely. "And nothing will ever persuade me that she ever did anything of the sort. Christine was my pal."

"I must congratulate you on your friends. And now, before you go, Miss Norton, may I first offer a little advice."

Jill began to move away.

"I shouldn't worry," she said with airy unconcern.

"For your own good, Miss Norton."

"Too kind of you," Jill retorted sweetly.

The woman's lips tightened.

"Little fool!" she snapped.

"Better than being something else," Jill replied, still more sweetly. "*Good* afternoon."

She walked away quickly after that, but not so quickly as to miss a muffled guffaw from the gardener that heartened her like a cocktail. Not even Wellington after Waterloo was more exalted.

She sped back to the footpath and took the direction of the village. An agreeable afternoon's entertainment had been provided at the expense of a possible row with Lord Harnley, but Lord Harnley's rows were too much of a commonplace to be disturbing. Jill felt tolerably well pleased with herself.

Towards the wicket gate of the Tarn House she espied a young man smoking a pipe and moodily swinging a stick to and fro.

"Oy, Michael!" Jill shrieked happily.

Michael Chillaton waved the stick in acknowledgement. His demeanor displayed little enthusiasm.

"You look," observed Jill, drawing nearer, "about as cheerful as mud."

Michael relit his pipe morosely.

"At the moment," he answered, "I don't see anything to be particularly cheerful about. Apparently you do."

Jill nodded serenely.

"I've just taken Barrister and Wardress up to the Place for a good smell round. In sheer defiance of his lordship's orders."

"It is the sort of damn silly thing you would do," Michael commented, discouragingly.

"Don't be a pig, Michael. I say, do you know your uncle's just installed a most expensive-looking mistress?"

Michael surveyed the child with cold reproach.

"Apparently," he said, "you are referring to Miss Randall, my uncle's new *secretary*. I don't think you're very nice."

"Secretary my foot!" retorted Jill scornfully, "she's the real, slap-up dyed-in-scarlet liver-in-sin, or I've never met one. Michael, the plot thickens! There's a new gardener there and he's phony, too!"

"Hands like an artist, Michael, and the queerest blue eyes that squint ever so slightly and don't look you straight in the face. And the crookedest mouth you ever saw."

"Who? My uncle's new mistress?"

"No, loopy! The new gardener. It's my belief that the only gardening he ever did was in the backyard of a London slum."

The young man was worried.

"Great Scott! It does thicken! The deuce of it is we can't do anything without my uncle's authority. And he being three parts bughouse in my opinion we shan't get it. And then you go and ask me why I don't look cheerful."

He paused to relight his pipe for the third time, and Jill whistled tunefully.

"Poor old Mike," she said. "In my opinion this village can do with a bit of excitement. Action's what you want, Michael! Come on, I'm going to explore the Tarn House. There's something fishy about that place, I'll swear."

Michael shook his head quickly, in concealed alarm.

"Rot! There's nothing there—"

"All right," retorted Jill composedly, "then perhaps you'll explain why Barrister and Wardress thought otherwise. May I remind you that the scent led straight through the front door."

"And straight out of the back door to the wicket gate," Michael supplemented promptly. "Your mysterious crook merely took a short cut from the road to the footpath."

"And broke open the front door sooner than go round the house? Pish! Besides, the scent didn't take 'em *straight* out of the back door. The hounds went halfway up the stairs first, remember, and then checked. All right, if you don't want to come I'll go by myself."

Jill strode jauntily to the wicket gate and pushed it open. With an uneasy shrug Michael followed. It wasn't likely, he reflected, that any trace of Christine Abbot would remain but he found it hard to explain his own dislike of the intrusion of others into the Tarn House. His virtual acquiescence in Christine's concealment involved him in risk of serious trouble, but that wasn't the reason.

Jill pulled the hounds round to the front entrance and gave them the heel-leather to sniff once more. Through the

front door they went again and halfway up the stairs. And here again they checked. But this time Jill dragged Barrister and Wardress up the treads, and Michael heard their paws padding along the bare landing. After a moment's hesitation he followed. Jill was thrusting in door after door. On the threshold of a bathroom with its enormous and ancient mahogany-surrounded tank the girl chuckled with merriment.

"I've often wondered what Miss Hemstone looked like in her bath," she said. "And now I know. Do look at that waste plug. It's like a sluice-gate! And there's actually a cake of soap!" She entered, picked the soap up and sniffed it critically. "Michael! This is *new* soap! And it's damp!"

"Blame the caretaker," answered Michael, with an airiness that concealed his growing anxiety. "Even caretakers wash sometimes."

"But there isn't any caretaker here."

"Well, whoever comes to see that things are all right. Somebody probably keeps an eye on the place."

"And has a bath in *that!* Michael, you're simply batty. Don't you realize that this is a real live clue! Verbena-scented soap. I bet it's a woman!"

Michael relit his pipe for the fourth time and flung the spent match into the bath. "What a thing it is to have the dramatic mind," he observed tolerantly. "I happen to use verbena soap myself. What are we going to do about it?"

Jill gazed at the soap, fascinated, then carefully replaced it.

"The trouble with you, Michael, is that you lack imagination. There's more in that soap than meets the eye."

"Well, I don't particularly like soap in my eyes. *And* the next thing?"

Jill gazed at him searchingly.

"What's bitten you, Michael? You were rather keen on finding things out at first, and now you've gone all soggy."

Michael sucked at his pipe. "Dash this pipe. Won't draw to-day. You know, I think those hounds are getting bored."

Pouting the girl turned back to the corridor. The next room she entered was *the* room. Michael followed grimly on her heels.

"Nothing here, my good girl. Try the next."

But Jill strode into the room's center and stood looking round. To Michael's relief there seemed to be nothing there that could conceivably be regarded as a trace of human occupation; but presently Jill's inquisitive eyes were attracted to the fireplace.

"Look!" she cried triumphantly.

The young man directed a blank look at the spot.

"Crumbs, Michael!"

"Crumbs?"

"The remains," Jill explained, controlling her excitement, "of a meal. Perhaps you'll say *that* isn't a clue? And look!" She pointed to the dust on the mantleshelf. "Someone has rested a cup or a Thermos here. Do you see those four little impressions. Fingermarks, Michael! And not a man's fingermarks. Now I wonder if it's your uncle's new mistress—sorry, secretary."

But Michael was gazing with deliberate lack of interest out of the window. Suddenly he started.

"I say, here's our little Boy Scout playing at redskins!"

Jill ran to his side and peered out. Below them, keeping to the shrubbery in such a manner as to obscure his presence from the road approached the hiker. The comical stealth of his movements caused Jill to grin, but the next moment she was looking thoughtful.

"There's something fishy about the little tyke," she said incongruously. "I vote we lie low and see what he's up to."

Michael chuckled. The prospect of an encounter between Jill and Mr. Paunceforte contained possibilities. They watched the unsuspecting youth glance quickly backwards before entering the porch. They heard the front door open and close. They heard his footsteps, carefully muted, up the stairs. Presently old Wardress began to growl.

"Hist!" Jill gave the leash a jerk and whispered. "Michael, he's coming *here!*"

The door, already ajar, was cautiously thrust in. Round it appeared the hatless head of Mr. Paunceforte, his omniscient eyes distended in surprise.

"Come in," Michael called affably, and Mr. Paunceforte entered, his thin lips tight with manifest annoyance. At the sight of him old Wardress lunged forward suddenly with a sharp growl. Jill dragged her back.

"It's those knees of yours," she explained distastefully. "If you'd wear trousers it'd be safer. And now suppose you tell us what brings you here."

The youth began to stutter a frigid reply when Michael intervened.

"Let me introduce you, Jill. This is Mr. Perkins—or is it Simpkins? Miss Jill Norton. Miss Jill Norton—Mr. Simpkins—or is it Perkins?"

The youth found his voice.

"I g-gather, Mr. Chillaton, that you have not informed this lady as the reason for my pup-pup-pup—"

"Quite correct, Mr. Paunce—Perkins. I have not. Your dreadful secret is safe with me."

Mr. Paunceforte drew a breath.

"In that case," he pursued, "p-perhaps you will kindly

d-do so. I shall then require an explanation of your p-presence here."

Jill stared resentfully as Michael turned to her.

"The great secret is out," he said. "Allow me to present Mr. Henry Paunceforte, of the C.I.D. from Scotland Yard. Incredible, but true."

Jill's mouth dropped open.

"A detective!"

Mr. Paunceforte nodded unsmilingly.

"Good lord! You don't look much like a detective!" Jill ejaculated crudely.

"He isn't meant to," Michael explained. "Hence the knickers. No detective has ever adopted such a disguise before. Effective and economical, at one-and-eleven the pair."

The youth glowered hostilely.

"Now that my status is p-perfectly clear," he said coldly, "p-perhaps you will k-kindly explain the meaning of this invasion of p-private p-premises."

Jill's scarlet lips curled scornfully.

"Don't be silly. We're doing the same as you, of course. Trying to find out who's been living here. If you're so clever perhaps you can help us."

"Indeed!" Mr. Paunceforte smiled acidly. "And m-may I ask how you know anyone has b-been here?"

For answer Jill pointed at the fireplace. "If you were a proper detective you'd go down on your knees with a magnifying glass and examine those crumbs," she said. "Only I suppose you'd dirty your knees. Don't come any nearer to Wardress, please. She can't resist bones."

Mr. Paunceforte's acid smile was succeeded by a still more acid scowl as he moved to the hearth, glanced briefly down, glanced again at the disturbed dust on the mantelshelf and shrugged his lean shoulders.

"A tramp, p-probably."

His superior manner stung the girl to retort.

"Marvelous! I suppose your tramp uses scented soap."

Mr. Paunceforte gazed in disdainful inquiry and Jill snapped:

"In the bathroom."

The youth shrugged again.

"It is p-possible. You are p-probably not aware that d-deserted empty houses are frequently used by such p-people."

"All right," Jill snapped again. "You're welcome to your tramp. Personally I'm convinced it was a woman."

"There are such things as female tramps," Michael suggested, thankful at the turn the conversation had taken. "Anyhow I think we'd better leave Mr. Paunceforte to it and clear out."

The youth inclined his head superciliously.

"You are right, Mr. Chillaton. By the way, it m-may interest you to know that there is a t-telegram waiting for you at the inn."

"Thanks," Michael nodded. "Well, I'll be getting along. Coming, Jill?"

The girl tossed her curls and followed him from the room, dragging the hounds away from the magnetism of Mr. Paunceforte's knees. In silence they descended the stairs and left the house. In the roadway Michael hesitated. It was on the tip of his tongue to confide his discovery of Christine Abbott to his youthful companion. He decided otherwise. They parted with casual farewells, a little cool on the girl's part. Michael walked back to the Takyll Arms.

Old Sam Bellever met him with a telegram.

It read: "*You are requested to attend here this afternoon. Very urgent. Gidleigh.*"

Michael thrust the telegram into his pocket. The ex-

pression on his face was so curiously one of chagrin that old Sam was intrigued.

"Not bad news, sir, I hope," he ventured conversationally.

"No. Just—inconvenient. I'm called to town on urgent business." Michael scowled and shrugged.

"You'll be coming back, sir, I hope?"

"Yes, to-morrow."

"Very good, sir." Old Sam moved away, and then he turned back again.

"By the way, Mr. Chillaton, sir, I've been looking at that shelf—the one with the bust on it, in your bedroom. Can't make it out at all, Mr. Chillaton."

Michael grinned sardonically.

"As firm as a rock that shelf is, sir. There wasn't no call for that there bust to go slipping off—on to your head—it might have been— A nasty crack it'd have fetched you, sir," pursued old Sam, wrinkling his brows worriedly. "Weighs 'alf a 'undredweight if it weighs an ounce—Howsever, I've not put it back, sir."

Michael grinned again.

"Thanks, Sam. It'd be quite safe to put it back. That kind of accident doesn't happen twice. And now I've got to catch the next train from Barnborough."

He drove the twelve miles to the junction town in a state of mental indecision and irritation. It should be possible—*must* be possible—to return to Bishops Takyll by midnight at the latest, or he would fail in his promise to Christine. She might not need him, of course, but he'd got to be there. On the other hand it was imperative to know what Scotland Yard had discovered that required his presence there so urgently. Perhaps the key to the whole mystery.

He garaged the car and found himself with half an hour to wait for the London express. Chafing at this inactivity

he entered a telephone booth and called up Scotland Yard, only to be informed that the Assistant-Commissioner was absent from his office at that moment. Still further irritated Michael demanded Gidleigh. The Chief Inspector's impassive voice came unhurriedly over the wire:

"Look here," Michael snapped. "What's up?"

"What's up, Mr. Chillaton?"

"Curse it! That's what I said. *What's up?*"

"Nothing's up, Mr. Chillaton. I wish I could say otherwise."

"Well, but—why the deuce d'you want me at the Yard?"

A pause, then:

"I didn't quite follow, Mr. Chillaton. At the Yard, did you say?"

"That's what your confounded telegram said."

"It's the first I've heard of it, sir," said the Chief Inspector's wooden voice.

It was Michael's turn to be surprised.

"I see," he said presently. "Rather interesting, isn't it?"

"Very interesting, Mr. Chillaton. Sounds as if you were not exactly popular in that village of yours. And I gather his lordship wasn't pleased to see you, after all."

"You seem to gather a lot," Michael answered bitterly. "Do I communicate this interesting item to your Mr. Paunceforte?"

An inarticulate but perfectly intelligible minor explosion sounded over the wire. Michael grinned.

"We seem to be in perfect agreement, Mr. Gidleigh. Any hope of your coming this way?"

"Unfortunately not, sir. But may I ask a question? Just this, Mr. Chillaton: His lordship is a rich gentleman?"

"Warmish. Definitely warmish."

"And you will—excuse me—eventually benefit?"

"I used to think so," Michael answered dryly.

A grunt came over the wire, that seemed to indicate amusement.

"Would it be possible to say just about what his lordship *is* worth, Mr. Chillaton?"

"Roughly half a million, I should say."

"A nice little round sum, that is," the Chief Inspector observed respectfully. "Safely invested, I shouldn't wonder."

"National Chemical Stock; South African Gold Mines and Airliners, Ltd., I believe. Anything else I can tell you?"

"That will be all, thank you, sir. Except that somehow I think I'd let 'em suppose that telegram's done the trick. In other words I wouldn't trouble to go back to that village for to-night. Some people don't know what's good for them, Mr. Chillaton."

"Ha!" Michael exclaimed, suddenly alert. "Do *you* know what's good for Lord Harnley?"

"No, sir. I wouldn't go as far as that. But I could tell you what's bad for the gentleman, sir."

"Well?"

"All that money." The Chief Inspector chuckled gruffly, and added with seeming irrelevance: "I suppose there aren't any of our escaped convicts down your way?"

For a split second Michael was off his guard, then he answered easily:

"Not very likely, is it? With your Mr. Paunceforte on the warpath."

For the second time Superintendent Gidleigh emitted that explosive and highly impolite monosyllable.

Chapter XIII

“MARTHA!” said Miss Hemstone.

Martha paused in the act of clearing away the remains of Miss Hemstone’s exceedingly frugal late supper. She hoped Miss Hemstone would not order the fire to be lit. It was close on nine o’clock and Miss Hemstone had been very unreasonable of late.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“I shall not require my hot milk to-night. You may go to bed when you choose.”

“Yes, ma’am,” answered Martha thankfully. Bed for her was the supreme beatitude. She completed her task briskly and Miss Hemstone was left alone.

For more than an hour the old woman sat there, an open book on her knees, but not one page had been turned when she closed and laid it aside. Rising, she went into the little hall and donned an ancient, moth-eaten fur coat, together with a hat of black straw that tilted oddly over her jutting features. Moving soundlessly she made her way through the back passage to the tradesmen’s door and let herself out into the garden, where, set in the privet hedge, a wicket gate led to the public footpath. It

was the same footpath that passed the back of the Tarn House, leading eventually around the rim of the Tarn basin towards the Takyll Place parkland, and was much in use by workers on the estate. At this hour, however, an encounter with any human being was in the highest degree unlikely. Nevertheless Miss Hemstone proceeded watchfully in the fitful moonlight, ready at any instant to step from the footpath into the neighboring obscurity.

Eventually she reached the wicked gate of the Tarn House, a distance of less than a mile, and let herself into the neglected kitchen garden. Here she stopped to stare fixedly at the black mass of the old house as though expecting some signal. Then she went on, picking her way between the tall weeds and brambles that caught at her clothes.

Presently she halted again. From the main road she heard the deep hum of a motor engine, and saw the glare of its headlights in the sky. Miss Hemstone decided to wait until the car had passed. But to her surprise the engine hum grew lower as the car slackened speed; in another moment the lights died out. Next she heard the sound of squeaking hinges as the drive gate of the Tarn House was swung open. Then the restarting of the car. Another squeak told that the gate had been closed again.

Miss Hemstone stood irresolute. This was a contingency she had not foreseen. After a few seconds' hesitation only, for she did not lack courage and decision of a metallic kind, she took a path that brought her round the house in a wide enough detour to observe the car at rest in the drive without revealing herself. From where she now stood, her grotesque hat protruded between the branches of a ragged rhododendron bush a bare dozen yards away from the car.

Its lamps were out, and the moonlight gleamed palely on opulent blue and chromium bodywork. The man at

the wheel lit a cigarette as he alighted, and the flickering match revealed his face. Miss Hemstone tightened her lips.

From the driver's seat next came another man, a smaller fellow. The two proceeded to the rear of the car where a bulky package, canvas covered, was strapped to the luggage rack. Miss Hemstone watched them uncover this package and lift to the ground a battered tricycle. It seemed odd luggage for this expensive-looking car to carry, and at first she almost smiled. Then as a thought flashed through her mind the smile vanished. Miss Hemstone's white face became even more bloodless than usual, and the sickness of apprehension gripped her as the taller of the two men opened the rear door of the car. She heard him grunt with exertion as he strove to lift something within, then the other went to his aid. There emerged from the car a thick, inert shape that became revealed as yet another man. Miss Hemstone's thin hands went to her mouth as she saw that this man was dead.

Voices, muted into gasping undertones, floated towards her:

"Heavy as Hell— Here, take his legs, can't you—" and then the aggrieved retort: "What d'ye take me for? Carnera? Two hundred pounds 'e is, if a h'ounce—"

Curt instructions followed, and the dreadful bulk was laid on the weedy gravel, its upturned face a white blur in the moonlight. Then the taller of the two men pointed to the house and Miss Hemstone caught the word "rope." The short man nodded and strode away. In another moment he had vanished within the front door of the Tarn House.

For ten dreadful seconds Miss Hemstone stood still, her breath almost strangling her; then she protruded her pallid countenance still further between the rhododendron boughs and whispered a name. At the sound the tall

man started as though he had been shot. In a couple of strides he was facing her, his torch blindingly on her face.

"Christ!" he said. "*You—*"

"The light," gasped Miss Hemstone. "Put the light down!"

He lowered the torch sharply.

"Here! I thought I told you not to come here?"

Miss Hemstone nodded. She was more mistress of herself now.

"I know. But I had to come—to warn you—to go away. The police have been here. Sooner or later they will find out." Her staring eyes strayed over the man's shoulder at the thing on the gravel.

"The police!" He whistled sharply, and then grinned. "If you mean that fatheaded Sergeant—"

"No, it is a detective. I am sure of it. I have seen him here twice. Over in the grounds and once inside the house. He did not see me. He is dressed absurdly—in khaki shorts—"

The man interrupted with a contemptuous guffaw.

"That! If you think I'm afraid of him—"

"I am," said Miss Hemstone quickly. "He is dreadful. I can't explain, but you must go away. I will send you money, somehow." Again her eyes strayed over the man's shoulder. "For pity's sake tell me you had nothing to do with—"

The tall man interrupted here, almost savagely. "No, I tell you!" He breathed deeply. "Now be sensible, for God's sake! It was an accident. If he hadn't been a fool, it wouldn't have happened. Remember you are not to come here again, unless you want to wreck everything."

Miss Hemstone nodded uneasily.

"You will be—careful," she whispered. "It would break my heart—if you failed."

"Your heart!" The tall man laughed almost ironically, and yet not without a certain kindness that caused a momentary flush on Miss Hemstone's cheeks. "Hasn't Harnley taught you to forget that you have one?"

He turned sharply as the sound of footsteps came from the direction of the house. It was the short man returning with a coil of thin rope in his hands. Miss Hemstone drew back and stole through the kitchen garden once more to let herself through the wicket gate. As she stood there, panting for breath, the ghastly lunar radiance accentuated every line and wrinkle in her haggard old features, so that she seemed as ravaged by time as the very landscape.

Far below, the moon's reflection winked at her from the still surface of the tarn.

With the slow fading of daylight Christine's eyes had become habituated to the almost total darkness that now enveloped her. Only the dim square of window relieved that gloom, and yet she was able to distinguish each object from the door handle to the fireplace and the solitary chair the room boasted. It was at the door handle that her gaze was fixed now as she sat on the bed, alternately hoping for the end of this vigil and yet dreading its consummation.

She had no idea how long she had sat there when steps sounded in the corridor outside and a key was thrust into the lock. As the door opened a beam from an electric torch slanted to the floor and in its reflected light she recognized Bernice Randall. The woman was smiling curiously.

"Your turn has come, Miss Abbott," she said.

Christine nodded and stood up. Her heart began to beat rapidly.

"He is here?" she asked.

"Yes; he is here. But we must be careful. Do exactly as I say, please." The woman turned and led the way along the corridor in the direction of the servants' wing. Christine, knowing every twist and turn in the great mansion realized that she was being taken towards one of the service staircases. This descended into the ground-floor passage that ran through the kitchen premises. At a right angle from this passage another took them towards the great central hall. Over the entire place an unearthly darkness hung.

"Lord Harnley—" Christine began in an uneasy whisper, when the other checked her swiftly.

"Don't speak! Lord Harnley will not trouble us tonight!"

Bernice Randall halted, as if listening, outside the door of Harnley's library. Then she turned her torchlight to the sliding door opposite and tapped gently. As an answering murmur came from within, a bracket clock high up the paneled wall struck with a sharp little *ping*. Involuntarily the girl turned to gaze up. It was just possible to see the clock face. Half past twelve. The next moment she was thrust gently but quickly within the study door.

A deep radiance came from a single table lamp by the fireside, strangely enhancing the room's size by its surrounding shadow. The torch in Bernice Randall's hand was extinguished and Christine's first impression was that she and this woman were the room's sole occupants. But the next moment she felt, rather than saw, the figure of a man seated at the far end within the window recess. And she knew that this was the queer person who had been responsible for her removal from the walls of Hollbury Prison.

The characteristic voice, preceded by that queer intake of breath, floated towards her in a flat murmur.

"Sit over there—by the lamp. Turn your—face towards me. Do not move—until I instruct you."

Christine obeyed. Bernice Randall remained standing, with her back to the door.

"You will—now be given your—opportunity," the man's voice went on, "of acquiring proof—documentary proof—that you were not guilty of the—crime for which you were—convicted. Do you wish now to take that opportunity?"

"Yes," Christine answered quietly, though the beating of her heart seemed to suffocate her, and added, "on the one condition you have already promised me."

Again there came that curious intake of breath.

"Was there a condition? Ah, I remember—" The voice paused. "There was to be no—commission of felony. My good girl, your—presence here and mine at this moment—already constitutes a felony— Really, I advise you—not to be too nice."

Christine shook her head.

"I did not mean that. Tell me what you want me to do. If I refuse you will understand what I do mean."

"If you refuse you will be incredibly—foolish. I do not think you could—possibly refuse—" Another intake of breath broke the sentence, then:

"Do me the favor of glancing at that—portrait over there, Miss Abbott. It is a—three-quarter length of the second Baron Harnley, by Lely."

Christine turned her head. And her lips tightened.

"You are aware, Miss Abbott, that behind that—portrait is a small safe—built into the wall."

The girl nodded, but did not speak.

"The safe contains nothing of intrinsic value. That—also—you know?"

Christine nodded. Then she spoke, correcting herself: "When I was Lord Harnley's secretary it contained noth-

ing beyond personal papers and account books. What it contains now I do not know.”

“Then let me enlighten you. That safe contains the—proofs you require.”

“How do you know?”

A restrained exclamation of annoyance sounded from the window recess. Christine caught a glimpse of a white countenance and screwed-up eyes. Another intake of breath.

“What a fool you are—to waste time over such—questions! How do I know anything? How did I—get you out of Hollbury Prison? How do I—deal with the hundred and one obstacles—to my—plans. I tell you that the safe holds incontestable—proof of your innocence and that is enough.”

Christine gazed steadily at the speaker. But the fear in her heart was rising.

“Tell me what you want me to do,” she said.

“So you will be sensible. Very good! That safe—possesses, as you know, a—combination lock. There is—no reason to suppose that the—combination has been altered since your—secretaryship. If it has been altered, then I—fear I shall have had my—trouble over you for nothing, and after a—brief interval it would be—necessary to return you to Hollbury, with your mission unaccomplished and your innocence beyond the possibility of proof. What that means to you your own imagination will say—better than I. You recall the combination, of course?”

Christine hesitated for a bare instant before she answered:

“Yes.”

“Then you will do me the favor of opening the safe?”

Christine was silent.

“Come, Miss Abbott!”

"Give me time. I must think."

"There is no time to waste on thinking." A deep intake of breath followed. "Very well, I will give you five minutes, no more."

"If you have lied to me," Christine said, "I shall be worse off than ever. Why should I believe what you say?"

"If I have lied to you, you will be no worse off. If I have spoken the truth you will gain—immeasurably."

"Why do you want me to open it?"

The sound of indrawn breath came across the room.

"That, my dear Miss Abbott, is a subject I must decline to discuss with you."

In the uneasy silence that followed Christine was aware of two pairs of eyes on her. Outside in the hall she could hear the bracket clock ticking, she wondered inconsequently what Lord Harnley was doing. He would not trouble them, Bernice Randall had said, and those words seemed to imply that Harnley had been rendered incapable of interference. Perhaps drugged by these queer unpleasant people who now awaited Christine's answer. She had not thought them dangerous, or even unpleasant hitherto, but now she found herself growing frightened. The room had become gradually charged with hostility as an electric cell is charged, increasing its pressure until her very nerves began to tingle with alarm.

It was Bernice Randall who spoke next, and softly as the words came they seemed to snap the silence like a twanged wire.

"One minute more, Miss Abbott," she murmured.

Christine gripped the arms of the chair in which she sat to steady her body, to force control to her voice, which threatened to tremble.

"Surely," the woman went on, as softly, "you are very ungrateful to hesitate."

"I am not ungrateful. If I could believe you I would

not hesitate. But—" the girl's voice rose a little, despite her almost frenzied effort to keep it flat— "I do not believe you and I will not open the safe."

Another silence fell, and Christine was aware of an exchange of glances between the man and woman. Though they spoke no word to each other she sensed that a message had passed between them. Presently came the indrawn gasp that was a prelude to the man's every sentence.

"You realize, of course—what this means to you, Miss Abbott?"

Christine nodded.

"You are prepared to return to the living death you have left. To prison food, prison clothes, prison labor, and jail-bird—associates. For almost a year—that has been your lot. For many years to come it will continue to be your lot, if you persist in this unbelievable—folly. Make no mistake about it—you are throwing away a chance that will never recur. If you do not open that safe it will be opened by force, a step I am reluctant to take for very—strong reasons. I should then destroy your proofs and with them every hope of your rehabilitation. Are you prepared to countenance that?"

Christine kept her gaze fixed in the man's direction. Her grasp of the chair arms tightened, but otherwise she gave no sign of her increasing terror.

"I will not assist you in committing a crime," she answered stonily.

"I have not asked you to. Is it a crime to pry into another man's papers? Call it simple curiosity, and don't indulge in—moral quibbles. There is something I want to inspect in that safe. Perhaps—like you—my reason is connected with the desire to clear myself of some—charge." Another intake of breath sounded: "Good God, what a fool you are!"

Bernice Randall moved impatiently.

"Your time is up, Miss Abbott!"

Christine nodded and stood to her feet.

"Yes, I am ready to go back!"

"You refuse to help us?"

"Yes, I cannot help you."

A sign, barely perceptible to the girl, came from the window recess. Bernice Randall turned abruptly and opened the door. Into the darkness she called in a low, distinct voice. A shuffling of feet answered her and drew nearer, until Orson, grinning shiftily, came into view. Within the room he stood regarding Christine with an uneasy stare. The door was closed again. From the window recess came a command, sharply spoken. Obediently, the butler moved towards the portrait of the second Baron Harnley and slid it along the rail from which it hung, disclosing in the wall behind a circular steel door, some eighteen inches across, which gleamed dully.

The gasping voice spoke again:

"Miss Abbott—be good enough to open that safe."

Christine, white now to the lips, stared at the speaker, and then, slowly her gaze moved to Bernice Randall and Orson standing side by side, the one critical, detached, the other licking his lips with manifest anxiety.

Christine shook her head.

"For the last time, Miss Abbott, will you—open that safe?"

"No!"

A gasp came from the window recess and then a curt command. Uncomfortably Orson moved his weight from one foot to the other.

"If you don't mind, guv-nor," he answered in his peculiarly shrill voice, "this sort of thing ain't quite in my line."

Again the command was spoken, with no more emphasis than at first, and this time Christine caught the words:

“Gag the fool!”

She became aware that Bernice Randall was approaching. In her hand the woman carried a silk scarf and a linen handkerchief. As Christine retreated involuntarily she felt her wrist grasped from behind by the butler and held tightly in one set of bony fingers. Orson's other hand swung over her shoulder and gripped her jaw. The pain forced the girl to utter a sharp cry and instantly the handkerchief was rammed with savage force into her open mouth by the woman. The next moment the silk scarf was tied tightly at the back of her neck, securing the gag in place. The bony hands thrust her forward until she stood beneath the safe. She was nearer now to the man in the window recess and could see his white features and screwed-up eyes revealed between the wide-brimmed hat and dark muffler that covered his mouth and chin. Again there came the curious intake of breath followed by words that seemed to come in a little rush.

“Will you—open the safe now, Miss Abbott?”

She shook her head vehemently. Sick with fear as she was, it did not seem possible that these people would actually do more than frighten her. But the man's next words, gasped out in little more than a whisper, sent a cold thrill down her spine. Orson muttered uneasily and then squeaked out with sudden defiance:

“Blast you! I'll be damned if I will! Do your own bloody job, you—”

Christine felt the grip on her wrists slacken. But the next moment Orson's bony fingers tightened again almost savagely. Looking over her shoulder she saw something that gleamed in the hand of the man who sat in the window recess.

"Do as I tell you!" came in a snarl.

Orson's voice died away protestingly, then he muttered behind the girl:

"Best be sensible, miss. Open the blinkin' safe and 'ave done with it. Else I'll 'ave to 'urt you."

Christine shook her head again. But she knew it for a gesture that deceived no one, least of all herself. She met Bernice Randall's gaze and saw that the woman was smiling contemptuously.

"I shouldn't waste time being heroic, if I were you, Miss Abbott. The cause isn't worth it."

"That's right," came Orson's voice again, wheedlingly. "I got my orders, miss, and you've got yours. It's no manner of use me tryin' to go against 'em with that cove sittin' there and it ain't no use you tryin' to with me 'ere—Gawd!"

He broke off with a squeak of surprise and involuntarily released the girl's wrists. As Christine swung round she saw that Orson was pointing at the door. A half-strangled exclamation came from the man in the window recess.

"Quick, you fools! Quick!"

The door had opened, a bare six inches. A hand slipped through the opening and touched the light switch. The next moment the room was in darkness.

Chapter XIV

AN instinct quicker than thought sent Christine towards the door. She heard Orson bump into Bernice Randall. He let out a strange mixture of apologies and oaths, followed by the woman's cry:

"The door, idiot! The door!"

Christine felt a man's hand on hers. She was dragged into the hall and the door slammed with noise enough to wake every soul in the building.

"Key's on the inside, unfortunately," said Michael's voice coolly. "I hope you're good for a sprint!"

He pulled her across the hall and entered the room opposite. It was Harnley's study, and as Michael closed and locked this door behind them they heard a stampede of footsteps in the hall. Someone rattled the door knob violently and then cursed. It was the unmistakable accents of Orson. Deliberately Michael completed his task of removing Christine's gag, then flung open the French windows. Out in the murk of the terrace he turned towards the wing that terminated in an immense glass conservatory. From the terrace at this point stone steps descended to the garden below.

But as they reached the end of the balustrading a shout echoed in the night air, and a man's figure came hurtling up the long flight of steps towards them. Below him another man stood. Without hesitation Michael dashed his elbow against the glass door of the conservatory. With incredible swiftness he reached his arm through the jagged opening, turned the key and entered. A couple of flower pots crashed to the tiled floor as he plunged on with the girl towards the double doors that led to the long salon. These doors were unlocked and the two fugitives lurched into the salon, upsetting a table with bric-a-brac that clattered hideously to the floor. Somehow they got across to the window opposite.

"Every blessed man, woman, and dog is on our trail," Michael observed with a fierce chuckle. "We've got to get through that window, my child, or we're sunk! My car's halfway down the drive. If they knock me out, go to it." He threw up the big sash. As a beam from his torch shot through the opening a shadow leapt out of the darkness against him, knocking the breath out of him and the torch from his hand.

He heard Christine's cry for help; scrambling up, he ran towards the sound. The room seemed filled with the scrabbling of feet but Michael, cool in this crisis, knew that there were not more than two adversaries in the blackness around him. One of them, manifestly, had Christine in his grasp. Whether they were Harnley's servants or the crooks made no odds. Christine must not be left in the hands of either.

The young man's outstretched hand touched a face—not a girl's face. Instinctively he swung his right. A squeal of pain informed him that it was Orson. Michael called Christine's name sharply, but no answer came. A desperate anxiety seized him and he ran in all directions, arms outstretched, calling the girl's name. Nothing but

silence. He paused, steadied his breath, and listened, straining his eyes in the darkness. It occurred to him to search for the light switch but his unfamiliarity with the precise disposition of the furniture involved the risk of too much delay. Somewhere in the big apartment Christine was being held captive by men with the priceless advantage of being on the defensive. At any moment reinforcements might arrive. Then the task would be hopeless.

He became aware of a movement against the wall on his right, while a faint sound, between a sob and a sigh, seemed to rise from the floor. With extreme stealth he moved towards the sound and dropped to his knees. His outstretched hand touched slim silk-clad ankles, then a piece of cord that bound them together. He wasted no time trying to unfasten the knots or to cut the cord, but placed his arms under the limp body and lifted the girl soundlessly from the floor.

The next few moments were the worst in his life. Beyond doubt his opponents were waiting for him at the potential exits. There was the door, the window, and the conservatory. Which should he attempt?

He made his decision with quite characteristic coolness. The window was still open, judging by the draft that swept in. So were the double doors to the conservatory. By making a feint towards the one he might achieve the other. He began to move, so softly that his footfalls on the thick carpet were noiseless. With the girl in his arms the greatest risk came from the sound of his own labored breathing. He played with the idea of freeing her bound ankles, but her very limpness told him he could expect no help from her in this crisis.

Towards the conservatory doors he paused, for against the dim light that filtered through from the glasshouse beyond he saw the silhouette of two heads, bent watchfully. Michael turned, moved back to the room's center,

and stared at the window opening, just discernible against the night sky. Then he stole towards it, step by step, his muscles braced. It seemed certain that on either side of the window eyes would be watching him. But he reached the window without so much as a sound or movement on the enemy's part.

He hesitated, his scalp tingling. The necessity for making a decision, with the handicap of this girl's weight in his arms, forced him to risk the trap that might await him outside the window. So he climbed out, to find himself standing on a flower bed with the cold wind in his face. Stars were twinkling in a cloudless sky. But he had the sensation of eyes all around him. The very atmosphere was eerie, and Michael almost shivered. Setting his teeth, he began to run down the drive, expecting each moment the shot that should bring him down, or the onrush of concealed enemies. But he gained the car with no more disturbance than the thumping of a strained heart.

Scarcely able to credit his good fortune he set the girl in the car and took the wheel. He drove like mad to the main gates, leapt out, and discovered that the gates were locked. Dismayed, he seized a handful of gravel and flung it at the window of the lodge. The agony of the succeeding moments deepened to despair as he realized that Mrs. Yeo was not in her cottage, that the lodge was, in fact, untenanted. *They* had seen to that!

Michael reversed the car and raced back up the drive. Two hundred yards ahead a farm gate gave on to enclosed pasture and springing out again he lugged the gate open and drove into the field, bumping his way unevenly he knew not whither. Presently his sense of direction came back to him. By keeping roughly to his present bearing he would eventually come up against the hedge bordering the high road to Barnborough. Somewhere in that hedge

there should be a gate. With his headlights full on Michael steered across country at a speed that caused the car to rock like a ship in a gale.

Hitherto one idea only had monopolized his thoughts: to put as great a distance as possible between himself and Takyll Place in the shortest space of time. Now, however, he began to be perplexed about this escape with the girl. Beyond the first hectic moments, the whole escape had been too easy. They had him cold in the big house. They had let him walk calmly through the window without so much as a kick in the pants. With the girl! It wasn't natural!

The girl, of course, was going to be a fearful embarrassment. But that didn't explain why they had let her go. A lot of other things needed explaining, too, and Michael had the uncomfortable feeling that he had been made a fool of in a way that would transpire later.

The headlamps had now picked up the hedgerow, and Michael swung the car parallel to it. Fifty yards on he saw a swing-gate. It took him a bare two minutes to get outside and to bring the car to rest in the road beyond. Then he drew a deep breath and bent down to unfasten the cords that bound the girl's ankles. She was leaning back in the cushions, her face averted from him, her whole poise listless and exhausted. A sudden anxiety seized the young man and reaching for her hand he felt her pulse. To his relief it was beating with perfect regularity.

"Christine!" he said gently, and then, louder: "Christine!"

A little sigh escaped her, as of returning consciousness. Then a low gasping laugh.

"Thank God you're all right!" Michael breathed happily. "This sort of thing is certainly shattering for the nerves. In fact, I wonder you don't come to the conclusion that there's no place like prison. And now, my good girl,

tell me what the deuce I'm going to do with you, now I've got you."

Another laugh came, full-throated this time.

"That," said Michael's companion, with a note of mockery in her voice, "is exactly what I'd rather like to know myself!"

He turned and stared at her face in the darkness, when suddenly his heart missed a beat.

"What—" Michael began unsteadily, and then with a movement quick with horror he snapped on the dashboard light.

And saw the face of Bernice Randall.

Chapter XV

SHE lay back in the cushions while fresh peals of merriment echoed in the night air. To the young man, grimly suppressing an urge to throttle her, the sound was a paean of obscenity. At last her laughter subsided and she looked at him in silent amusement.

"Well," she said, "what *are* you going to do with me?"

"I know what I'd like to do with you. What I shall do is another and simpler matter. A matter for the police."

The smile went from her face, and she looked at him contemptuously.

"The police! How stupid! And how unoriginal."

"Your sort of originality isn't appreciated by the law, Miss Randall."

"The law! My poor deluded man, what crime are you going to charge me with?"

"Suppose we say criminal conspiracy against Lord Harnley—for a start."

"Really?" The smile returned to those brilliant lips. "But for that charge you would need the testimony of Lord Harnley."

"Ever hear of subpoenas?" Michael inquired gently. She shrugged with an air of boredom.

"Subpoenas are not much use if the witness won't give evidence, Simple Simon."

"You think Lord Harnley won't give evidence against you, Miss Randall?"

"I am quite certain that he would not," she declared with such an air of finality that Michael's memory flashed back to Jill Norton's estimate of her position in the Takyll Place ménage. If Harnley were under the spell of a senile infatuation he would certainly be even less amenable to reason than usual. None the less, Michael persisted doggedly:

"Your other friends may be more communicative, Miss Randall. Orson, for one."

She turned and stared in withering scorn.

"Are you suggesting that the butler is a friend of mine?"

"Perhaps accomplice would be a better word," said Michael carefully. "I have no wish to wound your vanity."

Bernice Randall shook her head pityingly.

"Please do stop this pathetic nonsense," she begged. "And give me a cigarette. Thank you so much. Don't you think now you might take me back?"

Michael felt his respect for Bernice Randall increase. Quite definitely she had poise.

"So you expect me to return you to Lord Harnley?"

She nodded coolly as she blew out a cloud of smoke.

"You cannot very well leave me here, can you? So unless you propose to keep me I see no reasonable alternative."

"Not even the police station—as a reasonable alternative?"

"Must you harp on the police station in this monotonous way? Very well, let us suppose you take me there. What

then? You will be asked to charge me. You have no charge that you can formulate—except one. And I do not think you are particularly keen to involve yourself—and someone else—in *that*.”

Michael was silent because there was no answer possible. Her knowledge of his secret disconcerted him profoundly. Presently he spoke.

“So long as *she* is in danger I will not rest. And if you harm her I will make you pay, every one of you, no matter what the consequences may be to anybody. I hope I make myself clear?”

His companion smiled, with narrowed eyes.

“Delightfully clear, Mr. Chillaton. But I think you alarm yourself quite needlessly. And now, please, shall we start?”

“For Takyll Place?”

“Where else!” She laughed. “You must admit that our device for persuading you to leave without your prize, was prettily done. Incidentally it has given me the best thrill I have had for years. Even in my experience of—adventures.”

“Which must be truly extensive,” Michael observed with oblique gallantry. “Very well, Miss Randall, I give you best—this time! And, by God, I *will* take you back!”

Jabbing the starter he reversed the car and swung back into the field. Neither spoke until Michael brought the car to rest beneath the great porch of Takyll Place. Then leaping out he banged grimly on the oaken doors. In almost immediate response Orson's ugly features appeared before them. At the sight of Michael and his companion the butler shut his eyes and laughed silently.

“So you've brought the lady back, sir! His lordship's in a rare stew about this! 'Arf ready to do murder about this, 'e is!”

A step sounded in the gloom behind Orson and Michael

glimpsed the tall thin figure of Orson's master. He wore a quilted puce dressing gown and the scrap of sticking plaster on his face was given a ghostly prominence in the reflected light of the headlights. There was no illumination within the hall, a fact that only long afterwards struck the young man as peculiar. At that moment his brain was seething with the problem of how to convince his crazy relative of the danger surrounding him. He was aware that Bernice Randall had slipped silently through the doorway and stood now at the old man's side. The cigarette glowed vividly between her lips in the murky light. Michael felt his self-confidence ebb, and his uneasiness sharpen almost to fear. That unhallowed gleam in his uncle's eyes was horrible. He forced himself to speak by a supreme effort, but his voice sounded like the voice of a stranger in his own ears. Before he could complete his first sentence he was interrupted with vehemence by the old man.

"Get out, curse you! Before I order my servants to flog you for this outrage!" The cracking voice choked with rage and a pair of white, trembling hands raised themselves as though about to strike. Michael took a breath.

"Uncle, listen—"

"Listen! To you—!"

"Let me explain, for Heaven's sake!"

"By God! You break into my house like a common thief! You smash my windows and my furniture! You attempt to force my safe. You abduct my—secretary. And you stand there and say that you will *explain!*"

The crazed accents ended in an inarticulate screech. Michael caught the sound of a stifled laugh from Bernice Randall, and his temper rose fiercely at the callousness which could make capital out of an old man's lunacy. But he set his teeth and persisted with grim control.

"Give me five minutes alone in your study, sir. That's all I ask."

"Alone! With you— Ha! Very likely!"

Michael held himself in.

"May I ask, sir, what is your objection?"

"Now, young feller," the butler broke in with smug reproval. "You didn't ought to upset his lordship like this. I ask you, sir, is it reasonable to expect his lordship to shut hisself up alone in his study with a young gentleman what has just be'aved with such shockin' vi'lence? The best thing you can do is go away quiet, sir."

Bernice Randall laughed again. The young man looked at her gravely.

"I wish I had your sense of humor, Miss Randall. You will find it useful—later on." He then turned to the old man.

"Since you won't listen to a reasonable request I must content myself with telling you a few bare facts. Having discharged that duty I shall allow you to go to blazes at your own sweet will. This charming lady, sir, is a crook. Your butler, and probably the rest of your present so-called domestic staff are also crooks. What their ultimate object may be is not at the moment clear—"

A deep breath came from the old man, like the gust pre-uding a tempest. Michael waited for the storm with resignation. It began like a rumble of thunder.

"You— By God! You expect me to believe this twaddle?"

"Quite the contrary, sir. I expect nothing so reasonable."

"You invade my house. There is no explanation of *that*."

"A little amateur detective work, sir, merely."

"Bah! You abduct my secretary."

Despite himself, Michael grinned.

"Perhaps Miss Randall will elucidate that," he suggested, and heard her laugh once more. Apparently it was still a good joke.

"You scurrilous young cur! You dare imply that this lady went with you of her own free will! It is a monstrous suggestion!"

Michael shrugged coolly.

"Really, sir, I don't see much object in prolonging this little chat. In fact it seems rather futile."

Throaty rumblings in the semidarkness told that a fresh verbal onslaught was impending.

"Either you are raving mad," growled the old man hoarsely. "Or I am."

Michael nodded and turned away. It did not seem feasible to decide this difficult question to Lord Harnley's satisfaction. He re-entered the car and started the engine. For the last time he heard the laughter of Bernice Randall, and then the massive oak doors were slammed shut. Michael paused to glance up at Christine's window, but the close casement revealed no light. It was not likely that she would be permitted to return there, he reflected. Yet she must still be somewhere concealed in this vast mansion, at the mercy of the strange criminals who surrounded its master. How to save the girl from them, without disclosing her to the tender mercies of Harnley or the police, was a desperate problem.

But Michael, being young and charged with optimism, was determined to solve that problem.

There was still an amused smile curving the vermilion lips of Bernice Randall as she moved, electric lamp in hand, along the gallery whose windows overlooked the terrace. Through door after door she went, until the dust-sheeted furniture of the unoccupied wing was reached. In a little room here—it had once been the boudoir of a

former mistress of Takyll—she confronted Christine Abbott. The girl was lightly tied to a chair with cords that were knotted out of her reach, and she sat apathetically in silence as the cords were unfastened. Her face shone white and strained in the harsh light. She made no demur to the woman's request and followed her through the silent house like one in a dream until they reached the hall once more. The bracket clock tinkled six sharp little strokes, and through the high stained-glass window above the stairway came the first grayness of dawn, but these tokens of the night's passing held no meaning for Christine.

The study door was opened and they passed in. There, as before, Christine saw the shadowy man in the window recess, and again, fidgeting with his uneasy smile, stood Orson.

The man in the window recess spoke in his gasping voice. "I regret exceedingly, Miss Abbott, that the—interference of your misguided—friend should have caused this delay. You will be relieved to know that he has now—left us."

The voice paused for a fresh intake of breath, then it resumed:

"May I ask, Miss Abbott, whether you are—now willing to assist us?"

Mechanically, the girl nodded.

"Thank you. Orson!"

The butler moved forward and taking the girl's arm led her to the safe in the wall. As one who acts with almost unconscious volition Christine turned the dials on the clock face. Then she depressed the safe handle and the little circular door swung open.

"Thank you, Miss Abbott," came the voice. "Will you—have the goodness to extract the contents of the safe in order to confirm my assertion that—it contains nothing of value?"

Again the girl obeyed, drawing out, one by one, the slim account books, a checkbook, a bank passbook, an unsigned lease of a farm, two files of letters to a London stockbroker and several shillings' worth of stamps. There was nothing more. She became aware, dully, of Orson's grinning face. Then she turned round to face the man in the window recess.

"The proofs," she said in a low voice, "the proofs of—"

Her voice died away into the unanswering hush of the room.

Chapter XVI

“ . . . It is my considered opinion that failing definite evidence of a contrary nature during the next week or two weeks, nothing is to be gained by prosecuting further inquiries in this district, the one apparently tangible incident of suspicious import having been resolved by a letter which I am informed reached Lord Harnley this morning from Stopford, the missing manservant. I am unable to discover details of this letter, beyond the fact that it arrived from Paris, but Lord Harnley states that he is satisfied with the explanation contained therein and does not wish the matter to be pursued further. The impression one gains, of course, is that Stopford had absconded with certain belongings of his master, and that in view of the man's long service Lord Harnley has no wish to prosecute. I shall take the first opportunity, needless to say, of informing Lord Harnley that even if no prosecution is intended the police must be informed of Stopford's precise location, in view of the official inquiries already instituted. . . .”

Colonel Tankerville sat back in his chair and blinked tiredly. He decided that in such matters as rendering official reports Mr. Henry Paunceforte would be an asset to most government departments, but that Scotland Yard liked things a bit more terse. He read on:—

"As stated, Lord Harnley has made it known that he no longer requires police protection, and, in fact, regards my activities here as an impertinence. Without subscribing to his lordship's view that I should relinquish my supervision forthwith I am disposed to agree that no danger to Lord Harnley's person exists. There are, however, certain facts to which I desire to draw your attention. In the first place I am by no means satisfied as to the bona fides of the new staff at Takyll Place, who appear to me to consist of persons without previous domestic experience. The antecedents of these persons is my next concern. In the second place Lord Harnley's behavior, in his choice of servants, as in other matters, appears to indicate some mental abnormality, and although he has, of course, a perfect right to indulge in these exhibitions of eccentricity it is my opinion that sooner or later the state of his mind will have to be inquired into. Since this is a matter outside the province of the police, it should be the concern of Lord Harnley's sister, the Honorable Miss Philadelphia Hemstone. I gather, however, that the relationship between this lady and her brother is not a cordial one, and that she declines to intervene. Alternatively, of course, the matter should be inquired into by Lord Harnley's nephew, Mr. Michael Chillaton, but it is a regrettable fact that Mr. Chillaton's presence only serves to irritate Lord Harnley to such an extent as to convince me that Mr. Chillaton should leave the neighborhood forthwith, in favor of some other and possibly more acceptable relative. . . ."

Colonel Tankerville sighed again: then he rang the bell. An orderly appeared. "Ask Chief-Inspector Gidleigh to come here, please," the Assistant-Commissioner said abruptly.

"Chief-Inspector Gidleigh, sir? He's out on that case."

Colonel Tankerville scowled as he recalled this fact.

"Hr'rm, I'd forgotten. That's all."

The man hesitated.

"The Chief-Inspector left a message for you, I understood, sir. Er—it's there on your desk, sir, I think."

Colonel Tankerville laid down Mr. Paunceforte's voluminous report and bent his gaze on the litter of papers before him. He picked up a thin unopened envelope.

"All right, Biggs; you needn't wait."

"Sir." The door closed.

The Assistant-Commissioner opened the envelope. The enclosed sheet, beyond the formal official address bore characteristically little of Gidleigh's calligraphy, in contrast to Mr. Paunceforte's:—

". . . There has been heavy selling of National Chemical Stock held by Lord Harnley. Also South Africa Gold Mines and Airlines, Ltd. Same holder. Suggest that this is significant. . . ."

HUGH GIDLEIGH, *Chief-Inspector*

Colonel Tankerville's bristly eyebrows rose in bewilderment. Significant? It was damned funny, anyhow. Why should Harnley be realizing his capital in this way?

After five minutes' intensive thought he started a vigorous letter to Mr. Henry Paunceforte.

He pointed out, among other details, that the last person to blackmail Lord Harnley had been Christine Abbott.

For once, Sam Bellever's beer tasted sour in the mouth. Sam himself was a bucolic old fool. Frequenters of the Takyll Arms stood condemned as half-wits or double-dyed nuisances. Thus the immediate universe as observed through the jaundiced gaze of Michael Chillaton. At twelve noon Dr. Lumsden sauntered in.

"Hullo, Chillaton, how's the amiable relative?" he queried breezily.

Michael gazed coldly. It struck him that his first impression of Dr. Lumsden had been totally incorrect. Dr. Lumsden was, without doubt, an entirely objectionable fellow.

"Thank you for your kind inquiries," Michael answered discouragingly. "I am sorry I have no information to give you on the subject. Will you have a drink?"

Dr. Lumsden cocked a searching eye at the young man and grunted.

"Um, all right. Since you're so pressing— Er, sorry if I've touched on a sore point. As a matter of fact it's a subject that's been occupying my mind a good bit lately."

Michael stared into his tankard.

"Has it indeed?" he asked in somber tones.

"Yes, it has indeed," retorted the doctor bluntly. "Harnley was a patient of mine for a brief period, whatever he is now. Look here—" The doctor lowered his voice and tapped the counter with emphasis. "There's no use blinking at facts. Harnley's going on in a queer way. In my opinion he ought to be under observation. In my opinion you ought to get a mental specialist along. Probably you don't want my opinion, in which case I shall merely observe that I have discharged my duty and wish you good morning. And for God's sake don't look at me as if *I* were a pathological monstrosity!"

Michael averted his stare, took a pull at his tankard, drained it and pushed it towards old Sam Bellever who hastily refilled it. Michael took another pull.

"My inclination this morning," he observed at large, "is to sock everyone present on the jaw."

Dr. Lumsden met old Sam's glance. Old Sam winked. Mr. Chillaton was coming round, presumably.

"We all has our off days, sir," old Sam observed genially.

"Wonderful what a lot o' difference this nasty wet weather makes."

Michael surveyed the landlord morosely.

"The conversation is restricted to mental specialists, Sam. You drag in the weather at your peril." He turned abruptly to the doctor. "Sorry if I seem unpleasant, doctor. As a matter of fact I was hoping for an opportunity to talk to you."

Dr. Lumsden grinned ironically and said nothing.

"You have inferred," Michael went on, "that my uncle, Lord Harnley, is rapidly qualifying for a keeper. I agree. The point is, how do we set about it?"

"If there's one thing more than another that we medical men dislike," he remarked, "it's being called in to certify lunatics. There have been lawsuits enough to make us very shy about signing along the dotted line. I advise you in the first instance to apply to a magistrate. There's Norton, for example. The trouble is, of course, you have to prove that your uncle is incapable of managing his own affairs. And how you're going to do that when he won't allow you inside his front door I don't know."

Michael grunted.

"It doesn't sound very helpful," he commented. "First you advise me to get a mental specialist and then apply to a magistrate and then do the job myself."

"Well, anyhow, someone's got to start the ball rolling. If you can't, what about the servants?"

Michael uttered a short, bitter laugh.

"The servants appear to regard Uncle as an entirely satisfactory employer, my dear doctor. No, there will be no help forthcoming there!"

"Um. That new secretary, then—"

"Secretary—!"

"Well, that's when she calls herself, I believe," observed Dr. Lumsden equably. "And very nice, too. But not

evidence of insanity on your uncle's part, I'm afraid. Still, he may start knocking her about, in which case she'd be a valuable witness."

Dr. Lumsden drained his tankard. Michael hunched his shoulders disgustedly and prepared to leave the bar. It hadn't been an exactly profitable morning. And the thought of Christine worried him unceasingly. If only he had someone in whom he could safely confide about that delicate matter.

The trill of a telephone bell sounded in Sam Bellever's back parlor and Sam hurried to answer it. A moment later he called out:

"For you, Mr. Chillaton, sir. Speaking from Major Norton's."

Michael raised the counter flap and passed through with a shrug betokening lack of interest, that changed into vague annoyance as he heard Jill's clear voice over the wire:

"Is that you, Michael? I say, I've got a most terrific brain wave about that old uncle of yours."

Michael grunted distrustfully.

"What did you say, Michael?"

"Nothing. I just grunted."

"Don't be a pig. Look here, I want you to come round at once. It's frightfully important. Daddy's out again and we can have lunch together and then I'll tell you."

"Very kind of you. Sorry, but—"

"Oh, *shut* up! Are you coming?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Too busy."

"Busy doing what?"

"Just busy."

"That means you're busy getting tight in the bar. If that's your best excuse—"

Michael interrupted coldly:

"I am not getting tight in the bar, you impudent hussy."

"Yes, you are. I can smell beer from here. And if you feel like getting tight you'd much better do it on Daddy's whisky. Michael, I warn you that unless you're on the doormat within ten minutes I shall come to the Takyll Arms and get raving blotto in your presence."

Michael hung up the receiver and sighed. Within two minutes he was seated at the wheel of the car. Within five he was ringing Major Norton's bell. Jill answered the door jubilantly.

"I thought that'd fetch you," she said. "Come right in and have a Monkey Gland to remove that funereal gloom. Afterwards we'll have lunch. Michael, I'm certain I've spotted the Big Crook himself in this game!"

She led the way, a cocky little figure in jodhpurs and tight vermilion polo jersey. The concoction she prepared from gin, absinthe, grenadine, and orange juice was admirably calculated to enliven Michael's view of the world in general and to incline him with more genial indulgence towards his precocious hostess.

"It's a good thing Daddy's away," Jill observed as they seated themselves at table under the disapproving eye of an elderly maid. "Because you look pretty squiffy and he's distinctly old-fashioned on the subject of mixing drinks. Well, I hope you're sober enough to listen to what I've got to say. All right, Spink, you *needn't* wait."

The elderly maid sidled from the door resentfully and the door closed. Michael smiled expansively.

"Bless us, young woman, what *is* the big mystery?"

But Jill's first words caused his heart to miss a beat.

"Listen, Michael. Did you know Christine Abbott?"

"Christine—!" Michael stammered. "I—er— No. That is—"

"Goodness Michael, you *are* squiffy! Christine was

old Harnley's secretary for about two years, until they jugged her for blackmail. And if ever there was a put-up job *that* was."

Michael felt his heart warm suddenly towards his intelligent young hostess.

"I quite agree," he declared heartily. "The whole thing was monstrous. Christine Abbott was no more capable of such a crime than—than—er—you were."

She regarded him curiously.

"I thought you said you did not know her," she remarked, with a disconcertingly steady gaze, and Michael hid his confusion under a careful application to his lunch.

"Quite correct," he answered deliberately. "As it happened I was never at Takyll Place while she was my uncle's secretary. But I heard about the case, of course. It was preposterous to suppose that a girl like that would commit a crime like blackmail. You knew her, eh?" he asked the question casually.

"Christine was my pal. That's why I'm going to clear her—before she's caught again. The first thing is to find out who planned her escape—and why. I think I know *who*—" Jill paused dramatically. "It's not my fault if I've got a better brain than you. Now listen! The man who planned her escape was the man who got those other crooks out—Neyland and Minser and Bossy Parkwell. That's not original. It's in all the papers. And it's as plain as can be that those escaped crooks are going to do what their master tells them or he'll give them away."

"That's not original, either."

"I know it isn't. But *this is*. Those new servants at Takyll Place—" Jill paused again. "Michael, can't you see? That butler Orson; the gardener who isn't a gardener—"

Michael helped himself to whisky and soda and held it up to the light reflectively. It was curious that this

young girl should put one over on the erudite Paunceforte in this matter.

"You're suggesting that my uncle's new servants are the escaped convicts. Why?"

"I'm coming to that." Jill looked a little disappointed. "It doesn't seem to thrill you much."

"It does. More than you think," Michael answered truthfully. "Go on."

"Well, what's the natural inference? If two of them are there, why not three—and why not the fourth?"

"Meaning Christine Abbott?" Michael asked with perfect steadiness.

Jill nodded, her eyes wide with sudden excitement.

"Yes. Think of it, Michael! The last place in all the world the police would search! Under the roof of the man she's supposed to have blackmailed!"

Michael took a sip at the whisky.

"And what, exactly, do you propose to do about this?"

"The first thing is to find out why she's there."

"And who took her there?"

"I know who took her there!"

"Eh!"

"There's only one *possible* person. It's so obvious that it sticks out a mile— Michael, can't you *see*? First Stopford is got out of the way, because he's honest, then the servants are gradually changed to these escaped convicts, who are going to carry out the plot—whatever it is."

"It sounds like a thick-ear melodrama. And who is the hissing villain behind the scenes?"

Jill gazed at him.

"Michael, you *are* dense!"

"All right, who is it?"

"Why, *Harnley*!"

Chapter XVII

WITH the whisky half-way to his lips, Michael set it down untasted. It spoke for his control that he spilt none.

“Harnley! My dear, egregious child—”

“I’m not egregious. That’s the one sensible explanation for what’s happening at Takyll Place. It’s much more absurd to suppose that Harnley could engage all those crooks without knowing it.”

Michael shook his head skeptically.

“I can’t swallow this, Jill.”

She grimaced pityingly and went on eating.

“Poor old Mike! Swallow some more whisky, then. And I thought you were bright!”

“If you can explain why my respectable uncle should dismiss his respectable servants in order to engage these thugs I might believe you.”

“I can’t explain it. Except that your respectable uncle is evidently no longer respectable. *Would* a respectable uncle go and engage a female secretary like that Randall woman?”

Michael blinked and took another go at the whisky. Recovering himself, he said:

"You're suggesting that Miss—er—Randall is evidence of my uncle's deterioration into criminal tendencies?"

"No, I'm not. As far as I can gather it's quite the thing for old gentlemen to engage fascinating secretaries or prowl about parks in the twilight. I'm just telling you that something pretty deep has happened to your uncle. At first I thought that accident the other night must have made him go all haywire, but now I'm convinced it all started long before. Anyhow, he *is* nutty. And now I'm going to ring, so you'd better talk about the weather. Spink's got ears like aials."

The elderly maid heralded her re-entrance with a suspicious sniff and having laid the dessert before her young mistress showed a disposition, as before, to linger.

"Thank you, Spink," Jill said sweetly. "You *needn't* wait."

The door re-closed, a little sharply. Jill helped herself liberally to an over-rich trifle and pushed the dish towards her guest. Michael, declining firmly, reached for the cheese.

"All the same," he observed presently, "I'm hanged if I can see where this wonderful theory of yours is leading us. Suppose Harnley is the Crooks' Shepherd himself, why in the name of all that's demented should he want to release Christine Abbott?"

"For the same reason that he released the others," Jill answered patiently. "Whatever it may be. In my opinion he faked that blackmail case against Christine in the first place. Now he's got her in his power. Michael, there's something dirty going on in Takyll Place, and we ought to know what it is."

Michael was silent. As the result of half a minute's swift cogitation he made his decision.

"How much of this have you told your father?"

Jill shook her head.

"Nothing, as yet. I'll tell him when he comes back, but he'll only scoff."

"Well, don't tell him for the moment—and I'll tell *you* something."

Jill's eyes widened.

"All right!"

"It's just this," Michael pursued deliberately. "In one respect, at least, your theory is quite correct."

"About your uncle?" the girl asked eagerly.

"No; Christine Abbott!"

"Chris—!" Jill half rose in her excitement. "Michael, you mean that she is—*there!*"

Michael nodded.

"And you never told me! You rotter!" Jill's voice rose shrilly.

"Of course I didn't tell you. Is your father a magistrate, or is he not?"

Jill sat down again, with a gasp.

"This," she declared, "is absolutely *super!* I'm cleverer than I thought I was." She paused, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "Michael, we've got to get her out of that!"

"Wait a bit. You haven't heard the whole story. Suppose you finish eating that concoction and come into the next room. I want to smoke."

Jill obeyed at lightning speed and leapt up to fling open the door, almost colliding with the maid, whose thin lips tightened as she stood aside to let them pass. In the study Jill helped herself to a cigarette and tossed the box to Michael. Michael tossed it back and pulled out his pipe. He filled the pipe with that deliberation peculiar to the man with a tale to tell, regardless of the sufferings of his audience. Then he related his meeting with Christine Abbott in the Tarn House on the evening of Harnley's accident.

"I knew it was a woman!" Jill exclaimed triumphantly. "Though that idiotic detective said it was just a tramp."

"A good job he did," Michael commented dryly. "The sagacious Mr. Paunceforte has been my chief worry."

Jill wrinkled her brows.

"What I don't understand," she said, "is why you didn't give Christine away at the start."

"Because she gave me the slip," Michael answered, puffing equably.

"Well, but—afterwards. When you'd discovered she was at Takyll Place."

"Because I'd changed my mind about her," Michael said, puffing a little harder.

Jill gazed at him critically.

"All right, go on," she said briefly.

The rest of the story followed without interruption until Michael reached the incident of Miss Bernice Randall's involuntary abduction by himself. Jill lay back in her chair and laughed.

"Glad it amuses you," Michael observed woodenly, relighting his pipe. "Miss Randall seemed to find it funny, too. So did Orson. I doubt, however, whether it appealed to Christine Abbott's sense of humor."

Jill nodded, sobered.

"It was filthy luck. Of course, they'll know you mean to try again."

"And be ready for me. Won't be so easy."

"No, that's why I'm going to help."

Michael surveyed her with an indulgent smile.

"Very sporting, but again you've forgotten that magistrate father of yours."

"We shouldn't tell Daddy," Jill pointed out coolly. "And it's no use your trying to chuck your weight at me." She frowned thoughtfully. "There's one thing I don't understand—at least it messes up my theory to a certain

extent. You heard them trying to make Christine open the safe in the library. That doesn't sound as if old Harnley could be in the graft. Unless he's so cracked that he's forgotten the combination."

Michael shook his head.

"The explanation is not so simple, my dear. In fact, the more I dig into this problem the more it seems to have no bottom. The devil of it is we can't begin to clear things up without setting the police on to the escaped convicts—assuming that they are convicts, and that involves your friend Christine."

"She seems to have become your friend, too," Jill observed, with the directness of extreme youth.

Michael kept his countenance.

"I hope I am hers," he answered.

The girl nodded seriously.

"It was Christine's lucky day when she met you. Anyone else would have handed her over."

"It might have been the wisest thing."

"No; not so long as there's the smallest chance of clearing her."

He shrugged.

"Well, there's the situation. We can only clear out that nest of crooks if we get Christine away first. And what's to be done with her in that unlikely event Lord only knows. Do you realize that the penalty for harboring an escaped convict is—*jug*? Perhaps you'll be convinced now that a magistrate's daughter is not a suitable confederate for me?"

Jill whistled pensively.

"We might hide her in the Tarn House," she said, disregarding the latter part of Michael's speech.

"Too risky. Our little Boy Scout might find her. Depend on it, he *would* find her."

"Well, but—we can't leave her where she is."

The young man scowled worriedly.

"It seems to me," he observed, "that we ought first to find out whether this Crooks' Shepherd—whoever he is—has kept his part of the bargain. Personally, I think all that was hokum. But if he has given a square deal we'd best not interfere."

"And if he *hasn't*, we must get Christine away. The only person who can answer is Christine herself. Michael, I'm going to see her to-night!"

"If you attempt anything of the sort," Michael answered severely, "I will tell the Boy Scout, and Christine will go straight back to Hollbury Jail."

He rose and knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

"I'm going now. There's just one thing I'll ask you to do. There's a chance—merely a chance—that the funny people inside Takyll Place will be too much for me. If I don't re-appear by to-morrow morning I think you'd better tell your guv'nor and get Sergeant Bassett on the job. It'll mean that Christine Abbott will be safer in Hollbury Prison!"

Chief-Inspector Gidleigh accepted a second cup of tea from his hostess and sipped appreciatively.

"Thank you, Mrs. Minser. It's a great pity, if you will allow me to say so, that other ladies in your—um—position are not so ladylike. Makes a lot of difference to chaps like me with delicate jobs to perform. And so you haven't heard from your husband yet?"

The lady addressed shook her head and sighed genteelly.

"Very distressing it is to me, Mr. Gidleigh, as I'm sure you'll understand. Having been brought up most respectable and all that. A little more fish paste?"

The Inspector accepted gratefully, and during the pause that ensued allowed his gaze to wander round the select little apartment with its carefully arranged furni-

ture and knick-knacks, including a pair of china side vases on the mantelpiece containing pipe tapers—evidence of wifely solicitude—and lace curtains that parted just sufficiently to ensure a view across the Fulham Road and yet guarded against intrusion into Mrs. Minser's privacy. He observed, also, the new radio cabinet and among other evidences of restrained prosperity, Mrs. Minser's nicely marcelled gray hair, and the effective ear pendants that completed a picture of chaste elegance not usual in ladies in Mrs. Minser's "delicate position."

"It's always been a great trial to me," remarked Mrs. Minser patting her hair complacently, "the way Mr. Minser makes such mistakes. Not being that sort of gentleman really, his father having had the Unicorn down at Epping and a sidesman too, at St. Barnabas. The fact is, Mr. Minser's an artist, and you know what artists are, Mr. Gidleigh. Will you take a little seed-cake?"

The Inspector grinned at this reference to the absent Mr. Minser's artistic temperament and accepted the seed-cake.

"I expect you're right, Mrs. Minser. Only having made the mistake, so to speak, you'll agree that p'raps it's best to finish—um—paying for them, rather than give us all this trouble and expense. It'd be more reasonable now, wouldn't it?"

Mrs. Minser inclined her head regretfully, and proceeded to sip tea, crooking her little finger with the greatest refinement.

"And so you still haven't heard from him?" queried Chief-Inspector Gidleigh for the second time.

He gave no sign of having observed the fleeting change of expression on his hostess's countenance. A trace of a scowl creased one side of it.

"I have not, Mr. Gidleigh, as I told you before. If I do, of course, I hope I shall know my duty." Mrs. Minser

laid down the cup and folded her hands in her lap, presenting, as she smiled at her guest, a touching picture of afflicted gentility. The Chief-Inspector coughed to conceal, no doubt, his emotion.

"It's a pity," he remarked, shaking his head, "a great pity, because when we do find him, he'll have to keep you waiting still longer. And I mustn't disguise from you that we have one or two very likely clues. For instance, you'll remember he stayed for a night at that little house of your friend by the railway embankment. No objection to a pipe madam?"

"Excuse *me*, Mr. Gidleigh," intervened Mrs. Minser promptly, "but the lady you just mentioned is no friend of mine."

The Chief-Inspector smiled sadly and proceeded to fill his pipe.

"I hope you are right madam, I do indeed. But the lady has been talking a little more freely of late. You see, *her* husband's in trouble too, unfortunately. It's a curious thing—" the Chief-Inspector pursued irrelevantly, "that it was the main line to the West of England. Most—um—people in your husband's predicament find it best to stay in London. Of course, it's just possible he crossed the line and boarded a freight train going up, but there are certain indications that he didn't." Gidleigh reached out for a taper from the vase on the mantelpiece and lit it from the fire. "Do you remember a young lady named Miss Christine Abbott?"

He fired the last question with singular abruptness between puffs of smoke but Mrs. Minser's calm remained unruffled.

"To be sure I do, Mr. Gidleigh, and a very shocking case it was. Blackmailing a poor old gentleman, and a peer of the realm, too."

The Chief-Inspector nodded and reached for another

pipe-lighter. Apparently the pipe drew badly. And apparently he failed to observe the expression of almost savage vindictiveness and something like fear that momentarily disturbed his hostess's features. Blowing out the taper, Gidleigh produced as if absently a folded sheet of newspaper.

"Must be very inconvenient to you, Mrs. Minser, with the—um—wage-earner away so much." From another pocket the Inspector extracted a pair of steel-rimmed glasses. Through them he surveyed his hostess solicitously. Mrs. Minser set her lips.

"No doubt it is, Mr. Gidleigh, but I mustn't complain. I has my little savings, fortunately."

"And when the little savings run out, what with radio sets and one thing and another—very awkward for you, madam." Gidleigh's tone was sympathetic. "And when remittances don't turn up—in spite of little hints that it's quite time they did—" He unfolded the newspaper and looked at its front page reflectively. "Little hints like this one, madam:— *To C. S. Tide going out. Kindly avoid wrecks. M.* A very plain little hint I'd call that. Too bad that no notice was taken of it." He paused to shake his head, looked at the pipe and sighed to observe that it had gone out again. Another taper was extracted from the vase. "Of course I daresay the party concerned may feel he has been quite generous enough for the *moment*. Or maybe he doesn't believe it's in anyone's power to arrange that—um—wreck. Eh?" He paused again to gaze mildly at his hostess and sucked at the obdurate pipe. She met his gaze with hard eyes now, hard and watchful.

"So that's it," she said, speaking rapidly now, and between lips that barely parted. "Coming here to accept my hospitality and think you're going to get *that* out of me. Well, let me tell you, Mr.—"

The Chief-Inspector checked her with raised hand and deprecating smile.

"Now, now, madam. Must I remind you that you asked me in? And do you know, it's a funny thing, but I was under the impression that you asked me in to try and discover just how much the police do know about all this. You'll correct me if I'm wrong, of course, but that's my impression. Quite a mutual little affair, really. Don't you think, Mrs. Minser, that you and I ought to work together over this little matter? Now that we've cleared the air, so to speak. Dear me, this pipe—"

"I don't know what you mean," said Mrs. Minser, a little shrilly, "but if you think I'm the sort of lady what mixes herself in low doings with the police, then you're mistaken. I wouldn't demean myself."

The Inspector looked reproachful and a little shocked. In his distress he took several pipe-lighters at once and slipped them into his pocket, a lapse that was fortunately concealed by the newspaper in his hand.

"You quite misunderstand me, madam. No one is suggesting anything that isn't proper. All I mean, in a friendly sort of way, is that p'raps a hint—just a hint—to that artistic husband of yours and he might do himself a bit of good, and no harm to you, either. Now I think we understand each other nicely, Mrs. Minser, eh?"

Mrs. Minser's thin lips set more tightly still before she jerked out a reply in tones that were no longer genteel.

"That's plain enough, you lousy cop," she said. "Call it turning King's Evidence and have done with it. Well, now you can listen to me for a bit—"

Whereupon she let out a flood of obscenity while her guest sat in pained silence.

"And that—" concluded Mrs. Minser, "is the answer, you ——."

With a sigh Chief-Inspector Gidleigh rose and sought his bowler hat. Yet he was not entirely displeased at the result of his visit, as he let himself out of Mrs. Minser's door and mounted a bus for Whitehall. It is peculiar, too, that communing with himself on the upper deck of the bus he had no difficulty in keeping his pipe alight all the way to New Scotland Yard.

He learnt as he entered his office that the Assistant-Commissioner desired to see him without delay. He shook his head with sad prognostications that were duly realized when Colonel Tankerville asked him to wade through Mr. Paunceforte's latest effusion.

"Very interesting, sir," said Chief-Inspector Gidleigh, handing back the report.

Colonel Tankerville snorted.

"Glad you think so!"

"But not exactly informative, if I might say so, sir. What one might call of a—er—negative nature, sir."

"Ha, you think so? Then let me tell you, Gidleigh, it is the first time I have known Paunceforte to make a *positive* mistake. Not, mind you, that a more experienced detective mightn't have done the same in the circumstances. You will be prepared, Gidleigh, to start at once for Bishop's Takyll."

"Me, sir?" The Inspector was startled.

"Exactly. The Chief-Constable of the district has applied through the Home Office for Scotland Yard assistance. Our intervention now becomes official. None the less, you would be well advised to confer with Paunceforte, who has the advantage of much preliminary knowledge of the district and its residents. His views on the present discovery will be important."

Gidleigh swallowed his irritation at his chief's instructions and waited.

"It appears," pursued the Assistant-Commissioner,

“that acting on an anonymous communication, the local police undertook dragging operations in a certain pond, with the result that they have discovered a tricycle lashed to the body of a man. The man has been identified as Stopford, the missing butler. This is, in short, a case of murder.”

Chapter XVIII

THE lunch plus Major Norton's whisky plus Jill's exhilarating personality sent Michael Chillaton with more direction than discretion towards Lord Harnley's big mansion before even twilight had fallen. Only when he was in sight of the porch did he halt to take counsel with himself, suddenly aware that he had no more definite plan than to gain entrance by some surreptitious means, and to explore until he found Christine—or her captors. Most probably it would be the latter. And then he would look a fool.

Drawing into the shrubbery Michael lit a pipe, pulled himself together, and pondered. All sorts of expedients presented themselves, to be rejected as fantastic or too risky or incapable of performance. He had finished the pipe before he decided on the simplest and most obvious course. By this time twilight had definitely descended.

He entered the porch of Takyll Place and banged with aggressive violence at the door knocker. Orson, with a surprised expression, appeared quickly within the safeguard of the door chain.

"Hullo, sir! You again?" he growled, and instantly proceeded to close the doors. Michael frustrated this action with the toe of his shoe.

"Your method of receiving visitors does become monotonous," he said cheerfully. "Take my compliments, please, to Lord Harnley and say I should be glad for a few words with him."

The man grinned.

"That's more than his lordship would be, sir. No thanks. I got my orders."

"I advise you," Michael said patiently, "not to waste time. Take that message to Lord Harnley, you nauseous crook, or you'll be sorry for yourself."

Orson grinned again, less mirthfully.

"The Hell I will."

"The Hell you will," Michael answered. "And the same applies to every other jailbird in this outfit."

A savage kick aimed at his leg almost threw Michael off his balance. Recovering with the speed of light he swung his right and caught the butler fairly on the nose. Orson yelped and sat down on the floor. His remarks were unsuited to feminine ears, but evidently not to Bernice Randall, who now appeared at the foot of the stairs, smiling with frank amusement first at Orson and then at the visitor.

"What a good thing the chain hasn't broken," she observed, coolly. "Have you come to abduct me again, Mr. Chillaton? I feel so flattered!"

Michael raised his hat.

"It is a pleasure I must regretfully deny myself on this occasion. May I come in, however?"

She shook her head.

"No, Mr. Chillaton, your ardor really frightens me too much."

"For a little chat, merely."

Reproachfully, Bernice Randall pointed a highly manicured finger at the blaspheming butler, in the act of scrambling to his feet.

"If this is a specimen of your conversation, Mr. Chilton, we must beg to be excused."

"That was merely a quid pro quo," Michael explained. "No well conducted butler should kick a visitor. I will undertake not to hit him again if he behaves himself and takes my message."

"Your message?"

"To Lord Harnley."

"Oh! But surely Orson explained that Lord Harnley does not wish to receive visitors?"

"It will be in his own interests to receive me," Michael said bluntly, "and yours, too."

"Mine?" The brilliant lips parted in a smile to reveal beautiful teeth. "How quaint you are!"

"Let me come in, and I'll tell you something quainter still. It's a bit chilly standing here."

He saw her hesitate.

"If you do," rapped out the butler quickly, "you'll bloody well live to regret it!" He made a move towards the door, eyeing Michael watchfully. But the visitor kept both hands in his pockets. He regarded the butler with a level gaze.

"Jump to it, Bossy Parkwell," Michael said.

A roar of fury broke from the man. He swung round to face the woman.

"What did I tell you! Didn't I say so all along? The whole blinking game's gone to pieces, all because none of you 'ad the sense to listen to *me*. And now, by Christ, it's too late!"

Bernice Randall stood very still, eyes on Michael, ignoring the butler as though his comment was unheard and his presence unseen.

"And so you have come here to frighten us, Mr. Chilton?"

"I have not come to frighten you. I came to see Lord Harnley."

She shook her head, smiling curiously.

"That is impossible."

"Then, after all, perhaps I must frighten you."

"That, also, is impossible," she said. Michael met her smile with his.

"I believe it is. Let us call it reasonable persuasion."

"It does not matter what you call it. Why do you want to see Lord Harnley? To frighten him also?"

"Perhaps. For his own good."

She looked puzzled.

"It is the least—and the most—I can do," he went on.

"I see. You want to warn him?"

"The law will take its course. And he can take his."

She nodded, still with that curious smile.

"I will tell him. But you had another reason for coming, had you not?"

For just an instant Michael hesitated. The butler was staring at him fixedly.

"Yes: I had another reason; that, also, is for Lord Harnley's ears."

She shook her head again.

"Will not mine do?"

"No."

"Perhaps I could understand, better than Lord Harnley," she said softly.

"Perhaps. But—most regretfully—I do not trust you."

Her eyes glinted at that, but she kept her tones admirably cool.

"Still, I am afraid you will have to trust me, because Lord Harnley will see no one."

"Will not—or cannot?"

"Both."

"And if I say that he *shall* see me? Or take certain consequences?"

"It would make no difference."

Michael made a gesture and turned aside from the doorway. The butler leapt forward.

"'Arf a minute, by God! If you think—"

"Hold your noise!" Bernice Randall's voice seemed to cut the man's face like a whip. He checked uncertainly, shifting from one foot to the other, scowling.

"Open the doors!"

The man obeyed, after the barest hesitation. But Michael remained on the step outside.

"Mr. Chillaton," Bernice said calmly, "you have said that you don't trust me. But I know why you have come here. Not to warn Lord Harnley—a thing you cannot do—but for another reason. One that counts more with you than twenty Harnleys. You will not admit it, but you forget that I am a woman."

Still Michael stood outside the doorway. Bernice Randall smiled, a little bitterly.

"Perhaps, after all, I was mistaken," she said.

Slowly Michael mounted the step, and faced her within the doors now. The butler watching him between narrowed eyelids made no move.

"I will make a compact with you," Michael said. "Christine Abbott comes with me, and for twelve hours I will not hinder you. Refuse those terms—I offer no others—and I will bring the police to this house."

"Even with Christine Abbott here?" There was no mockery in the woman's tone.

"Even with Christine here. Do you agree?"

"A strange compact, surely. You range yourself with us, Mr. Chillaton."

"That is my affair."

"Surely. And after the twelve hours?"

"The police shall be told."

"Oh! That, I suppose, is obvious. But you will forgive our curiosity. What is it you will tell the police?"

Michael pointed to the butler.

"That there are escaped convicts hidden in Takyll Place," he said.

"But not Christine Abbott?"

"That I shall decide—later. For the moment all I insist on is that she shall leave here."

"For her own safety—or your satisfaction?"

Michael compressed his lips.

"My reasons concern only myself and her, Miss Randall."

"Of course. Very well— I agree. But still I do not see what good you will do her. She is surely more indebted to us, and I think she will refuse to go with you."

Michael hesitated perceptibly. Bernice added quickly:

"You shall see her for yourself. Come in."

The doors closed behind the young man and the chain clattered back into place. For an instant Michael was conscious of alarm and halted. As if divining his thought Bernice Randall shook her head.

"It is not a trap. I am not so foolish as to suppose that you have kept your knowledge to yourself."

He smiled.

"You are right. I left word that unless I return before dawn the police will be told."

She did not answer, but turned towards the doorway, motioning him to follow her. The butler started to follow but a glance from the woman checked him, and he hung back, scowling uneasily. At the head of the stairs, to Michael's perplexity Bernice Randall turned, not towards the corridor that led to the unoccupied wing, but to the broad passageway commanding the principal bedrooms,

among them the suite occupied by Harnley himself. To Michael it proved Harnley's complicity in this strange conspiracy beyond any doubt. Presently Bernice halted and took from her pocket a key. Before unlocking the door she tapped and Michael heard Christine's answering voice. They entered a large room lit by a single lamp on a bedside table. The shutters had been drawn and secured by padlocks. A fire glowed in the grate and its glow illuminated the figure of the girl who stood in the room's center, as though she had started up at their entrance. It was the first time Michael had ever seen Christine clearly, and the sight of her strengthened his resolve never to rest until he had restored to her her birthright of honor and happiness.

Bernice Randall watched the meeting, still with her curious smile. But Christine made no movement, and her eyes were sad.

"Why have you come?" she asked almost under her breath. "It is good of you, but you can do nothing. And you will only harm yourself."

"To take you away," Michael answered as quietly. "Will you come?"

"Away! Where can you take me? There is only one place I can go to!"

"Listen," Michael said. "In the morning the police will be here. Until then you are safer with me than—" he shrugged his shoulders expressively. "At least I choose to believe so. I have given these people twelve hours to get clear. It does not suit me that you should be—roped in with *them*."

Bernice raised her eyebrows in amusement.

"You are so very sure that we shall be roped in, as you express it. But perhaps there are surprises in store for you—and some others."

Michael made no answer, but continued to look at Christine.

"You will come?"

The girl shook her head.

"No."

"Then I must stay," he said with finality.

"Please, no! I am past helping." She shook her head vehemently. "I came into this like a fool. It was madness to suppose that any good could come of it. The least I can do is to go back without harming my only friend. Please, Michael—"

She broke off and looked at him in appeal. There had been a tenseness in her voice that he was quick to detect, the tension of overwrought nerves. He saw that unless he could relieve that tension she would break down.

"Powers above!" Michael ejaculated, smiling. "Did you really think I was proposing to conceal you from the forces of law and order, with a perfectly good reward to be had for the asking? Never was a bigger mistake made, my dear. Tomorrow I lead you into the arms of Sergeant Bassett. To-night, at the risk of outraging the conventions, we stay together."

He turned to Bernice and spoke with a new incisiveness.

"Miss Randall, may I remind you that half an hour of the respite allotted to you has already expired. Tell your friends to make the most of their opportunity. And tell them to count themselves lucky."

The woman nodded, then she turned to Christine, unsmiling now.

"I think," she said, "that Christine Abbott is luckier still, to have found such a champion."

She moved to the door. An impulse sent Michael forward as she reached it. From the outside he extracted the key.

"Forgive me for this base suspicion, Miss Randall, but I prefer not to be locked in."

"I understand." The smile returned momentarily to those brilliant lips. "I am trusting you, Mr. Chillaton, not to hinder us."

When the door closed, Michael locked it. Then he took Christine by the shoulders in a firm grasp that steadied her trembling.

"You wonder why I do this," he said very gently. "It is no time for fencing and I am going to tell you. Ever since I met your eyes in the dark, a fugitive from justice as I thought you, Christine, I have loved you. I know now that these charges against you are fantastic and impossible, but even if you had committed crimes a thousand times worse it would make no difference. And even if you must go back to prison, it will make no difference, for I shall wait for you and then ask you if you can care enough to marry me—"

His grip on her shoulders tightened.

"Christine, what will you say to me then?"

She looked up at him with swimming eyes.

"That I care too much. Far, far too much."

Michael smiled, content with that, oblivious to all else but the certainty of her in his arms.

They did not hear the bracket clock in the hall below strike four, but a moment later the sound of a single shot crashed the silence of Takyll Place.

Chapter XIX

MAJOR NORTON found his daughter in a suppressed excitement for which she evaded all explanation. Tired at the close of an arduous day, Major Norton was in no mood to probe the cause of Jill's unwonted restlessness. After dinner he settled himself in his arm-chair with a pipe and *Horse and Hound*. Jill, however, continued to fidget. By 11 P.M., she had smoked double her ration of cigarettes and was in a fair way to develop hysteria. Major Norton removed his pipe, and laid down *Horse and Hound*.

"What the deuce," he inquired, "is the matter with you?"

Jill threw away her cigarette.

"Nothing," she said nervously.

"Then why the deuce can't you keep still?"

The clock struck as he spoke and the sound seemed to shatter the remnants of his daughter's restraint.

"Golly!" she exclaimed, "I can't hold it any longer! You'll have to be told, anyway. Daddy, it's about Christine Abbott."

"What about Christine Abbott? Has she been found?"

"No— Yes; that is the police haven't found her, but she's *there!*"

"Where?"

"At Takyll Place."

The pipe slid from Major Norton's hand to the floor. He snatched it up, frowning irritably.

"I don't know what's the matter with you, Jill, talking all this nonsense. *Who* did you say was at Takyll Place?"

"*Christine Abbott!*" said Jill with savage emphasis.

"That is ridiculous. How can Christine Abbott be at Takyll Place? It's absurd!"

Jill lit another cigarette.

"I wish," observed her father, "that you wouldn't smoke so much."

"Please, darling," said Jill, "don't be boneheaded. I simply can't stand it to-night. Now listen. Takyll Place is just about the last corner of the earth the police would think of searching for Christine, isn't it? Well, that's why they haven't found her. But she's there—unless Michael Chillaton is a liar."

"Michael Chillaton, eh?" answered her father, in the tone of one who has manifestly not noted a patent fact. "What has young Chillaton to do with it?"

"He found her there, that's all."

"Found her there? How?"

"Darling, what does that matter? I'm trying to tell you that Christine is hiding at old Harnley's and Michael's gone to get her out before we set the police going. Because Michael and I have come to the conclusion that those new servants are the escaped convicts. Now do you see?"

"No, I *don't*," snapped Major Norton in a decisive voice. "Except that you and Michael appear to have been playing an extremely dangerous game. If this crazy yarn is true, then your proper duty was to inform the police without wasting a single instant. The best thing you can do now is to tell me the whole story from the beginning."

His manifest alarm, not at the implication of any danger to Michael, but at the threat to legal correctitude generally, had the effect of restoring Jill's habitual, affectionate disrespect.

"Darling, don't be magisterial. Michael only told me this afternoon, and you wouldn't expect me to rush along and hand Christine over to that little pipsqueak of a detective, would you?"

"Little pipsqueak?" echoed Major Norton weakly.

"The Boy Scout, darling. His name is Paunceforte, and he comes from Scotland Yard."

Major Norton's jaw dropped.

"A detective. That!"

Jill nodded.

"Good God!" exploded her father.

Having reduced her parent to tractability, Jill proceeded to give him a detailed account of her theories and her misdemeanors, including her visit to the forbidden territory with Barrister and Wardress. Even this enormity failed to outrage Major Norton's sense of propriety in the light of the vaster implications of Jill's recital. At its conclusion Jill waited for reactions. Major Norton drew a profound breath.

"Extraordinary," he said with consternation. "Most extraordinary. Of course there's only one thing to be done."

He glanced up at the clock as he spoke. Jill's lips compressed.

"No, darling," she said firmly. "*Not* yet."

"But, good Heavens! Every minute makes the situation worse. Don't you see! By concealing this—this knowledge—we make ourselves accessory."

"*No*, darling," repeated Jill more firmly. "I promised Michael not to stir until morning. If he does the job properly he'll be *here* in a little while—with Chris Abbott."

Major Norton's eyes bulged.

"With the Abbott girl! Here! It would ruin me!"

"On the contrary, it will give your untarnished reputation an extra polish. Darling, you *are* being dense. You will figure as the magistrate who handed her over to the police, *after* she's given herself up to you. Remember that Christine didn't escape like the others; she was abducted from prison. But if she's caught with the others it will be far worse for her. That's one reason why Michael's gone to get her out of Harnley's clutches. It'll prove that from first to last she hasn't been a free agent."

Major Norton agreed unwillingly.

"Um. And the other reason?"

"The other reason is that both Michael and I are convinced that somewhere in Takyll Place we're going to find the proof of Christine's innocence," Jill said deliberately.

"Innocence! My good girl, she was tried and convicted after incontestable proof of guilt." Major Norton got to his feet and began to stride the room. "No, Jill, I don't like this. It was a bad case, and whatever the rights of this escape business, we've no earthly justification for withholding important information from the police. Sergeant Bassett must be told without the waste of another second. Besides, it doesn't seem to occur to you that young Michael might be in danger, apart from anything else."

Jill shook her head.

"Michael can take care of himself. They'll know what's coming to them if he gets hurt."

"It strikes me," retorted the Major grimly, "that he *will* get hurt, whatever may be coming to them." He looked at the clock again. "It'll be past midnight before we can wake things up. But, by God! we've got to begin!"

Jill was silent. Her father's uneasiness had affected her though she declined to admit it, even to herself. If Michael came to harm she would be culpable. On the other hand Michael might be awkwardly placed if his arrangements were upset by untimely police intervention. Jill comforted herself with the reflection that it would be long past midnight before the local forces of law could be assembled, and thus some compromise might be effected in Michael's time-table. Sergeant Bassett would have to send for extra men from Barnborough.

She heard her father rattling the telephone receiver in the hall outside. Presently he shouted a demand to be connected to the police station in a voice sharpened by annoyance at the operator's apparent somnolence. Seemingly interminable delay followed and then she heard her father's voice again.

"What's that? No reply? Nonsense, nonsense! Try again."

Another lengthy delay. Jill bit her lips and smiled.

It didn't matter. But presently she frowned.

"Line out of order! Rubbish! They're all asleep! Wake 'em up!" Major Norton's accents were thickening now with rising anger. "I said, wake 'em up!"

Jill looking through the open door, met her father's resentful gaze.

"It's absolutely disgraceful the way Bassett sleeps," he growled. "Or else he's dead drunk. If he doesn't come to the 'phone within two minutes I shall report him at Barnborough. Hullo! *hullo!*"

Presently the operator's voice came through again, a bit flustered, but certainly wide awake.

"I am sorry, sir, there's no reply. Something's out of order. Line's quite dead, sir. The wire may be down, sir."

"Wire down! Ridiculous! How can the wire be down," demanded Major Norton testily. "Upon my soul, I shall report this disgraceful inefficiency."

"Perhaps," Jill intervened quietly, "the wire has been cut."

Her father's eyes protruded.

"Eh? *Cut?* Good God!"

"And I think," pursued Jill evenly, "that you had better ring up the Boy Scout. If that line's cut too, we'd better get out the car and see about things. It looks as if those people have been busy."

Controlling himself, in unwilling admiration of his daughter's self-possession, he bawled into the receiver: "Operator, get me the Takyll Arms and be quick about it."

Another delay, shorter this time, and then the voice of old Sam Bellever:

"Ask for Mr. Simpkins," Jill intervened swiftly.

"That you, Bellever?" Major Norton barked. "Ask Mr. Simpkins to come to the 'phone, will you?"

"Mr. Simpkins isn't in, sir."

"Not in—at this hour!"

"No, sir."

"Then, damn it, where is he?"

"Couldn't say, sir."

"Curse it—somebody must know."

"No, sir. Nobody knows where Mr. Simpkins is. He went out before closing time and left no word. If he comes back now he's going to find the door locked."

Bellever's reaction to Mr. Simpkins' behavior was revealed with unmistakable clarity. Major Norton fumed.

"Don't be a fool, Bellever! When Mr. Simpkins comes back you'll tell him there's trouble up at Takyll Place that requires his attention immediately. He'll understand what that means, unless he's as big a jackass as he looks.

And listen, Bellever, I want to know how much Sergeant Bassett had to drink to-night."

"The Sergeant, sir? Nothing to mention. He was in for a half-pint at six o'clock, that's all."

"Ha! Not drunk, you say?"

"Good Gawd, no, sir!" The reply came in thunder-struck accents. "The Sergeant drunk!"

"Then, dammit, he must be dead!" snapped Major Norton fiercely replacing the receiver. He turned on his daughter.

"Get the car out, Jill. I'm going up to get my revolver."

Jill's eyes gleamed happily.

"And if you think *you're* coming, you'll be nicely mistaken. Go on, don't waste time!" The Major stumped noisily up the stairs. When he returned, with an enormous bulge in his coat pocket, he saw Jill firmly at the wheel of the Buick. He started to speak, gulped, and decided not to waste time. The car lurched down the drive.

They reached the village in a few minutes. In the darkened High Street Jill pulled up, and simultaneously a bulky figure clattered down the police station steps. It was Sergeant Bassett, his uniform awry.

"I was just coming out to see you, sir," the Sergeant panted. "There's been something very funny happening to-night."

Major Norton heaved himself out of the car.

"I wish," he grumbled, "I had your sense of humor. Why the devil don't you answer the telephone!"

"That's just it, sir. The wires've been cut. Every main wire out of the village, sir. Gor, I'd like to catch the practical joker who's been amusing himself to-night!"

"Good God! Are you suggesting that this is the work of a practical joker!"

"Not exactly, sir. Just my manner of speaking," said

the Sergeant woodenly. "Things have been moving since you went to Petty Sessions this morning. It's going to be a matter for Scotland Yard, now, sir."

The Major stared.

"What's going to be a matter for Scotland Yard? Not that it isn't about time somebody started to do something intelligent in this confounded place. And so you've discovered the escaped convicts at last, have you?"

It was Sergeant Bassett's turn to stare.

"Escaped?"

"That's what I said," snapped Major Norton. "What the deuce are you calling in Scotland Yard for, if it isn't that? Though *why* the deuce you want to send to London for a regular job like arresting these fugitive criminals I'm blest if I know. *Who* applied to Scotland Yard, anyhow? Answer, can't you!"

Sergeant Bassett gave a hitch at his belt and straightened his tunic. The conversational pace was a bit too rapid for his liking and he wanted time to formulate his replies.

"It was the Chief-Constable, sir. As a result of certain information I laid before 'im, 'e decided to apply for assistance to the Criminal Investigation Department." Giving another hitch to his belt, he added with smug satisfaction, "Murder, sir, that's what it is!"

Jill registered excitement but Major Norton looked grim.

"I am not surprised," he growled. "There will be some more unless you look alive. Who was it?"

"As a result, sir, of certain information—"

"You can cut all that, until the inquest," interrupted the Major testily. "*Who was it?*"

"Stopford, sir." Sergeant Bassett looked offended. "In the tarn—"

Major Norton whistled. Jill's eyes were dancing.

"I knew there was something sinister—" she began, when her father cut her short.

"How many men can you get hold of, Bassett?"

The Sergeant stared uncomprehendingly.

"Men, sir? There's only Muddiford and myself in the village. Of course we could get some more men from Barnborough, but with the wires down it'll take a little time."

"Quite so, Sergeant Bassett. And that's why the wires are down. Your job now is to send a messenger over to the Barnborough police with instructions to 'phone all stations to keep a look-out for the escaped convicts who have been hiding at Takyll Place. After that you'll collect half a dozen fellows in the village who are good for a scrap and come with me. And if you waste time asking fool questions now, I'll have your confounded stripes taken away."

Chapter XX

BENEATH the high porch of Takyll Place a car, blue and chromium, with the lines of a bullet, was parked. There was a woman at the wheel, but she sat alone. Within the hall two men faced each other. One was muffled to the nose and his hat shaded his eyes. The other was Bossy Parkwell, alias Orson. In Bossy's hand was something no criminal likes to have on him when the police arrive.

"Too much of a 'urry, that's what you're in, mister," squeaked Bossy. "The rest of 'em's gone without troublin' to say good-bye, but I ain't that sort. See?"

The man in the muffler drew in his breath before he answered, quietly:

"What do you want?"

"I'll tell you what I want, and what I'm—well goin' to get. Keep yer 'ands out of yer pockets, damn you!"

The other made no movement.

"Well?"

"Take yer 'at off," said Bossy curtly.

"Why?"

"Because I, well because I say so. And take off that there muffler, too. See?"

"Yes, I see."

"I thought you would," grinned Bossy. But the man before him still made no movement.

Bossy raised the pistol until its muzzle pointed at the gleam of white features between hat and muffler.

"The other mugs in this graft," he said, "are too obedient, that's what's the matter with them. Every time you lift yer little finger they jump to it. It don't seem to occur to them that they might do a bit better for themselves than a dirty little ten per cent among the lot. I wasn't brought up to live like a retired bank clerk, I wasn't. My father would 'ave sent me to Oxford and Cambridge if 'e 'adn't lost all his money bettin' with the Prince of Wales. Ten per cent? Why, I wouldn't demean myself by touchin' it!" Bossy's forefinger curled round the trigger of his pistol. "It's goin' to be fifty per cent for me, mister. And why? Because I'm goin' to be the only man who'll know you again when 'e sees you. *Take orf that 'at!*"

There was a moment's hesitation, barely a moment, and then a black gloved hand was raised. Bossy stared at the head thus revealed, at the curiously screwed-up eyes that seemed to find sight difficult, with an interest that quickened presently to something sharper.

"We're goin' back to finish our stretches," he squeaked. "And when we come out there's to be a packet for each of us. And the biggest packet's goin' to be mine. Take orf that choker!"

Again the black gloved hand went up. The silken scarf came away, and Bossy stepped back a pace. His jaw dropped.

"Gawd! Gawd! *You!*"

The figure before him suddenly sagged and fell in a heap at his feet. Bossy's amazement switched in a flash to alarm. He had gained this staggering, almost in-

credible knowledge. Was he to surrender it into the hands of death? Dropping to his knees he placed one hand over his victim's heart, and was relieved to feel its beat. Not death, at least. Shamming, perhaps? He held his gun at the ready and cautiously loosened the unconscious man's collar. He wasn't going to be gulled by any old trick.

The gasping voice was little more than a strained whisper. Bossy bent over.

"Water!"

"All right." Bossy stood up. "But if you think you can guy me you'll be nicely mistook." With a deft action of his spare hand Bossy sought and extracted an automatic pistol.

"Now you won't shoot me in the back, see? And if you beat it while I'm getting you that drink it won't make any difference to me. Because I know you now. And I shan't forget."

Bossy chuckled as he turned and made his way to the rear of the hall. At the kitchen door he glanced back. The figure on the floor lay very still. Nevertheless Bossy kept both pistols ready as he proceeded through the deserted kitchen to the scullery beyond, glancing about him uneasily. Those ill-lit places with their cavernous shadows were enough to give anyone the horrors. A single electric lamp was burning in the big scullery, but its illumination was feeble at best. An open doorway beyond led to an unused still-room. Bossy stood on the metal grid below the sink and stared into the opening, wondering suddenly why the door *was* open. No one ever used the still-room.

As he stood, he fancied he heard a movement within that square of darkness. And the sound of breathing. All nerves, of course. Funny how that amorphous shape looked like fur. Gawd, what a bloody fool he was! From a shelf he took down a tumbler, and pocketing one of the

pistols reached out to the cold water tap over the sink. And at that moment, Bossy Parkwell died.

The sound of the shot that echoed along the deserted corridors died away into a stillness so profound that Michael could hear Christine's breathing. He stood now in the open doorway listening. But nothing further broke the stillness. No answering shot. No scuffling of footsteps. Motioning her to remain still and to await his return, he started along the corridor. But her agonized whisper brought him to a standstill.

"Michael, don't go!"

"Dear, I must. To see if the way is clear. We must get out of this!"

"You are not armed!"

"All the less likely to be shot at. I won't be provocative, I assure you. If I can help it I won't even be seen. But we've got to know who's there. Better lock your door. When I come back in a few minutes, I'll give three raps. Don't open to anyone else."

He closed the door despite her tremulous protest, and ran lightly along the corridor, pausing at the head of the stairs to listen. The electrolier in the hall shot its rays into his eyes. The big double doors below were unchained and unbolted. He ran down a dozen steps, far enough to lean over the carved baluster rail and gain an angle that commanded the doors of the principal rooms. Each door was shut and not a sound came from any of them. Michael descended the remaining steps and went to the double doors. He opened them and peered out into the darkness. The silence outside was as complete as within. He had turned to reascend the stairs when a gleam of light through the partly open service door caught his eyes, and he tip-toed towards it.

Hearing nothing he thrust it open and saw that the

light came obliquely from the kitchen doorway. Afraid that someone lurked there he went forward, step by step, until he could peer within the room. The kitchen was empty, but in the scullery beyond a man's boot jutted at an odd angle. Michael dropped all caution and ran forward. Orson, alias Bossy Parkwell, was lying, face down, with wide-open eyes and parted lips that seemed as though they had been about to speak. Michael turned him over. He could see no wound, no blood, yet the man was dead. By his side was a smashed tumbler. A sense of danger came to Michael, and fear of a kind he had not known before. This silence, this death, had stricken down the crook and left no trace. He must get Christine away. At all costs he must get her out of this.

Beyond the scullery he saw another open door, and the glitter of stars through a window beyond. Something impelled him towards that door, to shut and bolt it against the return of intruders, though he told himself that the great house was now forsaken by those who had lately outraged its peace. Still, he must shut that door.

It was very dark. As he felt for his torch, his foot caught against something heavy and inert so that he almost fell. Recovering himself, he flashed the torch downwards. The body of another man lay there, face upturned, eyes glazed. There was no blood upon him save a small, half-healed scratch upon his cheek. It was the face of a stranger, a dark-haired man of middle age, well built, with aquiline features and shapely hands. Something oddly familiar about the features.

Mechanically, Michael turned back. In the scullery he paused again to look at the dead butler. There was a red mark on the palm of the upturned hand. A curious mark!

The sound of an approaching car came to ears sharpened by anxiety and the nervous tension of the wait for

Michael's return. The hum grew louder until it ceased, almost beneath the window of Christine's room. Switching off the light, she ran to the padlocked shutters and pressed them apart the fraction of an inch to peer out. In the glare of the car's headlights she saw dark figures alight and cluster together as though in whispered discussion. The figure of a girl remained at the wheel of the car. Presently the little group—there were six men altogether—deployed on either side of the porch while the central figure approached the entrance. Except for the car's driver, they were now out of the angle of Christine's vision and she turned back into the room, switching on the table lamp again. If only Michael would come.

The tension drove her to pace the room; her temples began to throb. She heard the sound of knocking downstairs, of someone imperiously demanding admission. Voices murmured. Footsteps echoed on the stone slabs of the terrace. Footsteps in the hall below. Footsteps along the passageways.

Her head was bursting, her mouth was dry and ached with the thirst that fear brings. Christine walked into the bathroom and took down a glass from the shelf above the wash-basin. She was on the point of filling the glass from the cold water tap when a strange instinct made her pause. She frowned, staring at the glass in her hand. As she again reached out for the tap, three quiet raps came at the bedroom door.

Replacing the glass Christine sped to the door and unlocked it. Michael stood there, his face as white as chalk.

"Thank God," he breathed, "you are all right. I was afraid I might be too late." He glanced into the lighted bathroom and his lips compressed grimly.

"There is death there," he said. "It means death to touch those taps. I must warn the others, but first I came to you."

Christine nodded, only half comprehending.

"It is the police?"

"Yes. I am going to get you away before they find you. Afterwards, we will see. Come." He took her arm and drew her out of the room. Down the corridor he entered another room whose shutters were unfastened, and in darkness groped towards the window. Stealthily he thrust out the casement and looked down. Below them the Buick rested, and at its wheel sat Jill Norton. Michael's whisper was just enough to reach her, and Jill's answer no more than a sign that the way was clear. A few urgent, whispered instructions, and Christine climbed out of the window to descend by the ancient ivy.

Michael waited only until the car had shot forward down the drive before he turned and sped towards the voices in the hall below.

Chapter XXI

MAJOR NORTON'S greeting was grim.

"In due course," he said, "we shall require an explanation for your presence in this house. At the moment we are concerned with four escaped convicts who are believed to be in hiding here. If you have any information about those convicts it is your duty to give it."

The group stood beneath the hall electrolier. In Norton's hand was a clumsy, old-fashioned Service revolver. On the Major's right stood Sergeant Bassett, on his left a nondescript person who might have been anything from a bellringer to a solicitor's clerk.

"I am ready to give you any help I can," Michael said. "As for my presence here, it seems to have escaped your memory that Lord Harnley is my uncle." He added with a faint grin, "Fortunately for your safety there appear to be no convicts to arrest."

Major Norton scowled.

"Are you suggesting that we are lacking the courage to tackle these miscreants, young man?"

"Oh, no, sir, only it'd take a complete division to surround this house—and forgive me—you seem a little

short-handed. Very intrepid, if you don't mind my saying so."

Sergeant Bassett nodded solemnly.

"You may well say that, Mr. Chillaton. But duty's duty, even if the telephone wires *'ave* been cut."

Michael whistled in surprise.

"Good staff work, by Jove! And not the only detail that's been attended to, believe me. If you'll come this way I'll show you some more. Only for the love of Mike *don't touch the water taps!*"

Turning he led the puzzled little group through the service doorway, through the kitchen, to where the dead butler lay.

"Who the devil," demanded Major Norton, "is this?"

"His appearance," Michael answered, "tallies with the published description of one Bossy Parkwell, late of Pontonville. Known here, however, as Orson, my uncle's butler. His butlering days are apparently over."

"Dead, eh?"

"Definitely dead, sir. And now will you please step this way? I have another exhibit for you."

The Major gasped. Sergeant Bassett cleared his throat uneasily, while the nondescript follower hung back, his eyes glassy. By the second body they halted again.

"This," observed Michael, "appears to be another of our escaped convicts, namely, Clifford Neyland, sometime of the drama, but more lately of Dartmoor. What his precise function in this establishment was I am unable to tell you, but he also seems to have finished with it."

"Good God!" choked Major Norton. "Both dead! How did—all this—happen?"

"The answer, sir, is a water tap."

"A water tap?"

"Apparently several water taps, sir."

Major Norton only partially comprehended. Sergeant Bassett stared, with no comprehension at all.

"What the devil," snapped Major Norton, "*do* you mean?"

"I mean, sir, that these men have been electrocuted."

"Good God!" ejaculated Major Norton. "You'll excuse me, Mr. Chillaton, but I don't quite follow."

"It appears," Michael explained, "that a wire from the light main has been connected with this metal grid on the floor. By standing on it and touching the tap a complete circuit is made. Very simple. And very effective, as you'll discover if you turn on a tap. Or, if so valuable a member of the Force cannot be spared, perhaps this gentleman here will oblige with a demonstration?"

The nondescript person fell back, open mouthed.

"Gor!" he said, and thereafter held his peace.

"Are there," demanded Major Norton in a husky voice, "*any more?*"

"That, sir, is what I suggest we now discover."

"There's another man that's wanted," put in the Sergeant. "There's Minser. And there's the woman, Abbott."

Major Norton shot a suspicious glance at Michael.

"Is Christine Abbott in this house?" he demanded.

"That," Michael repeated smoothly, "is what I suggest we now discover. As I am well acquainted with the geography of this house, if you will permit me to act as your guide we can search the whole place within an hour. In my opinion, however, we shall find nothing more."

Major Norton set his jaw grimly.

"That is my opinion, too. Lead on!"

The Sergeant had been busy with his notebook. Replacing it in his pocket he nodded agreement.

"We'll come back to these," he observed. "And by the time we've searched the place perhaps the Barnborough chaps'll be here."

Switching on his torch Michael strode beyond the sculleries. There were odd rooms branching off, unused places that had not been wired for electricity. They explored each of them without result. Systematically, the salon, library, dining room, study, billiard room and unused, musty-smelling boudoirs were entered. Only silence and an emptiness in each. They were on the point of mounting the stairs when the nondescript person gave a little yelp.

"Gor!" he said uneasily. "What wor' that?"

Sergeant Bassett stared at him woodenly.

"What wor' what?" he demanded.

"'Ark! There it is again!"

Michael frowned.

"You're right! There *is* something. Listen!"

They heard a faint moan, a moan that came from nowhere in particular, yet was near at hand. The group held its breath as one man. Presently the moan was repeated. Michael swung down the stairs, making for the door of the cupboard beneath it. The trio above, leaning over the baluster rail, were astounded to see him drag out a pair of thin, stockinged legs that culminated in a pair of much crumpled khaki shorts. Next, a pale, bespectacled face came into view.

"Good 'Eavens!" gasped Sergeant Bassett, "if it isn't the 'iker!"

"Gor!" supplemented the nondescript person, "Mr. Simpkins!"

"In other words," Major Norton added with bitter contempt, "the Scotland Yard detective!"

Michael prodded the inert form with the toe of an unsympathetic boot.

"Awake, Mr. Paunceforte!"

Another groan followed and Michael bent over him, sniffing curiously.

"Not electrocuted," he observed, "although he certainly deserves to be. By jove, he's been doped! Chloroform! This is going to take a lot of living down, this is. Poor devil! Get some cold water, some one."

No one responded, and Michael looked up, puzzled.

"Oh, yes! I'd forgotten! Well, lend a hand and we'll get him on to that settee."

Sergeant Bassett lifted Mr. Paunceforte with ease and dropped him on the hard wooden settee against the wall. Mr. Paunceforte opened his eyes, blinked with pain, and was thereupon distressingly sick. On the conclusion of this performance Michael sat him up.

"Now," he admonished, "tell the gentlemen how you came to leave home. Don't be nervous. You're quite safe now."

The youth glared dizzily, adjusted his spectacles, and made an effort to stand up. Failing in this he sank back on the settee.

"Well," he demanded, "have you g-got them?"

Sergeant Bassett stared back with hostility.

"No, we ain't. And nor, seemingly, 'ave you."

The youth clicked his ill-fitting teeth.

"You have p-permitted them to escape," he persisted, grasping the situation. "The c-convicts have escaped. It is a d-disgraceful d-d-derelection of d-d-duty."

Major Norton controlled himself.

"May we ask," he inquired, "what you were doing in that cupboard? Don't answer if you'd rather not."

"In which case we will assoom," added Sergeant Bassett pleurably, "that the escaped convicts put you there. Did you come 'ere to arrest 'em, or what?"

Mr. Paunceforte was visibly regaining control of his faculties. He made another effort to stand, this time with some measure of success. Swaying slightly, one hand extended to the wall opposite, he addressed the group

with a clarity that was in the circumstances creditable.

"No one but a f-fool," Mr. Paunceforte began icily, "would suppose I came here single-handed to c-catch c-convicts. My p-purpose was to p-pursue my investigations. I m-made a d-d-discovery of the utmost importance. Nothing less than a c-colossal c-c-conspiracy involving the sum of t-two hundred thousand p-p-p-pounds."

Mr. Paunceforte paused as though expecting applause, but beyond a muttered "Gor'," he received none. Michael, in fact, was regarding him with something like pity, while Major Norton conveyed a less gentle emotion.

"T-two hundred thousand p-p-pounds," Mr. Paunceforte repeated, clicking his teeth again. "A colossal fraud which appears to have succeeded in its p-purpose."

"All right," Michael interposed indulgently. "It'll keep. For the moment we're rather busy looking for escaped convicts. We found two, but they're not exactly in a returnable condition. I suppose you can't give us a clue?"

The youth's eyes flickered behind their thick lenses. His jaw dropped slightly.

"You found t-two c-convicts? Here!"

"Yes, but don't be nervous. The undertaker will deal with them. It's Minser we're after now. Did your investigations tell you anything about Minser?"

Mr. Paunceforte shook his head with annoyance. It was plain that he considered too little respect was being paid to his account of the colossal conspiracy.

"Then I suggest," Michael said, "that we complete our search for the missing Minser. After that we shall be charmed to hear your little story."

He dropped a wink to Sergeant Bassett which that worthy solemnly returned. They formed in procession again and mounted the stairs, Mr. Paunceforte bringing up the rear, clinging grimly to the stair rail. Bedroom

after bedroom Michael entered, until they came to the one so recently occupied by Christine Abbott. At the sight of the padlocked shutters Major Norton grunted.

"Somebody's been kept under lock and key, eh? Very curious, this."

He darted a keen look at Michael but the young man's expression remained blank. The next room was heavy with fragrance. Half opened drawers and abandoned bits of exotic lingerie betokened the hasty departure of its late occupant.

"Miss Randall's room, I imagine," Michael murmured. "The new secretary, you know."

"Secretary? Ha!" snorted Major Norton cynically.

The party moved on. The search continued until every apartment in the occupied wing had been examined; it was extended in the opposite direction. The third room brought them to a sudden stop.

Michael, as usual, led the way, flashing his torch, for there was no electric light. Suddenly Michael uttered an exclamation that sent his companions rushing past him through the doorway, then to hang back with the primal instinct that death inspires.

The room was bare, unfurnished, its bleakness lending a dreadful significance to the sole object it contained. This was the body of a man whose blood stained the uncarpeted boards. In the outflung hand a revolver was grasped. The grinning face turned towards the doorway was that of Edward, Baron Harnley.

Chapter XXII

JILL was outside in the Buick, as though she had never deserted her position. With her were two cold and resentful irregular levies who, wearying of their tasks of guarding exits, had drifted back to the main entrance. They occupied themselves in acquainting Miss Norton with their sentiments regarding the Sergeant for summoning them from their beds in the King's Name to aid in the apprehension of nefarious persons who seemingly didn't exist. They were joined presently by the third man who had observed the reassembling of the party with manifest relief.

"Gives me the creeps, it do." this individual whispered, "'anging about with nothin' but trees and shadders and—and sperrits fer company." He shivered while his companions guffawed. Jill regarded him with interest.

"Did you see any spirits, Joe?"

"I saw *somethink*, miss," answered Joe with conviction, "and not escaped convicts, neither. Somethink not 'uman, it wor'. Well, what'd you expect in a 'aunted place at *this* hour o' night?" He appealed solemnly to Sergeant Bassett who grunted skeptically.

"If you saw anything," he said, "it was your plain duty to arrest it or give the alarm. But we don't want to waste no time chasing your hallucinations, and that's a fact."

"What the devil," snorted Major Norton irritably, "*did* you see?"

"Twasn't so much what I *see*, sir, as what I *felt*," answered the man carefully. "I wouldn't go so far as to say I *saw* anythink—not what you might call substantial, that is. But there was a *shadder*, sir, in them bushes over there. Like a animal, with fur." He stopped, awed by his own recital. "It'd vanished before I got near it. Nawthin' there at all. Just a shadder. There's some," he continued, lowering his voice, "as *sees* these things."

"Bosh!" snapped Major Norton crossly. "If that's your idea of keeping watch—goggling at things that aren't there, then all I can say is—hullo!"

He paused as the sound of approaching cars came up the drive. It proved to be three police cars from Barnborough, the occupants of which proceeded to surround the house while their Inspector engaged in a staccato argument with Major Norton and Sergeant Bassett. The result of an hour's intensive beating of the shrubbery having failed to establish further discoveries, half-a-dozen men were detailed to guard the premises with its gruesome contents. To Michael, Major Norton extended a not very enthusiastic invitation to spend the brief hours before dawn at his residence. Jill, smiling serenely, drove them thither in the Buick.

Despite the lack of sleep Major Norton appeared for breakfast at the usual hour and proceeded with grim urgency to assault the telephone. Discovering that the wire had not been repaired he proceeded with equal grimness to assault his breakfast. In the middle of his second rasher Michael arrived, unshaved, tousled, and dirty. The host glared at him indignantly.

"Good God! Haven't you the decency to wash yourself before appearing at meals in my house?"

Michael dropped listlessly into a chair.

"Sorry, sir. The fact is, I had no chance."

"No chance! You accept my hospitality, sleep in my house. In your clothes by the look of it—"

"As a matter of fact, sir, I haven't been to bed."

"Then where the devil," exploded the Major, "*have* you been?"

Michael helped himself to coffee.

"At Takyll Place, sir. A little job to do. It failed." He added the last words very quietly.

Major Norton sat back in his chair. For an instant it seemed another outburst were impending, then something in Michael's face checked him. He leant forward.

"Look here, my boy, does it occur to you that you might confide in me?"

Michael smiled in quick response.

"There's no one I'd sooner confide in, sir, believe me. I'd have done so sooner, but to put it frankly, your position cramps your style. You've probably guessed that I'm implicated in the present situation of Christine Abbott. That's because I believe with all the conviction I'm capable of that Christine never committed the crime she was sentenced for. And also because—" Michael hesitated for a second, "because I am in love with Christine Abbott and intend to marry her. So I went back to Takyll Place last night in order to find proofs that would set her free. You see," he hitched his chair round so as to face his host, "Christine was abducted from prison because she knew the combination of a safe in my uncle's study. For reasons of their own these crooks didn't want to force the safe. The inducement to Christine was the existence, within the safe, of proofs of her innocence. She didn't find them there, but I am convinced that the proofs exist somewhere,

because, well," Michael struck the table with sudden energy, "May I ask, sir, whether you ever knew Christine Abbott?"

Major Norton nodded.

"As your uncle's secretary, yes. No more than that. But she was a pal of Jill's." He spoke with unwonted quietness. "My dear boy, it was a rotten business, and, on the face of it, inexplicable, that a girl of that sort should stoop to such devices to gain money. But there may have been, *must* have been, motives, of which we know nothing. Probably she was desperate for want of money. Some private scandal, probably. We are not likely to learn the truth about that."

Michael shook his head firmly.

"No, not even the worst private scandal would drive anyone like Christine to blackmail. Soul-murder, as I have heard it called. She might have borrowed or begged, or even stolen. Listen, sir, while I give you an outline of that case as I had it from her own lips. Harnley, for all his shrewdness in business and finance, was a fool where women were concerned. He had affairs. Each affair, from his marriage onwards, was damaging both to his peace and his purse. He seemed to have a genius for finding harpies, poor devil. Sometimes I think that that is the explanation for the bitterness between him and his sister. Some of those women, I daresay, were associates of crooks. Attempts were made from time to time to blackmail Harnley, generally without more than temporary success, though their cumulative effect must have made him very bitter. Then came the most resolute attempt of all, with Christine Abbott as the tool. That meant, in the event of failure, that Christine would suffer while the real perpetrators went scot free. They hadn't any animosity against Christine, but if Harnley should cut up rough there was Christine to take what was coming. As Harnley's secretary,

presumably well acquainted with his private affairs, she formed the obvious choice."

Michael stirred his coffee mechanically.

Major Norton nodded. "Go on."

"Harnley's wealth," Michael said, "made him a natural target. And Harnley's stupid affairs with these women provided the barbs. They meant to sting him. It began with a series of communications of the usual kind, reminding him of certain incidents at certain places, and certain letters that would be returned, for a consideration. As a rule Harnley purchased immunity. Sometimes he fought and won. In this case he employed a private detective, who examined the threatening letters and followed carefully prepared clues. Little similarities were discovered in the letters with the handwriting of Christine Abbott. They were forged similarities, but so cleverly done that a handwriting expert declared Christine to be the author. Probably if these crooks had merely copied Christine's writing *faithfully* the forgery would have been detected. But they forged *similarities*, which shows they were clever. Other clues, all with an eye to an emergency, were prepared. The rendezvous for the delivery of cash was selected as one that Christine sometimes visited on her walks. When Harnley, on the detective's advice, made a payment with Treasury notes, some of them were traced to Christine's banking account, having been consigned there with a deposit slip bearing what purported to be her signature. And then Harnley refused to pay any more and Christine was arrested. The rest I imagine you know."

Major Norton nodded again.

"Yes, the rest is common property. It was convincing enough for most of us. You'll forgive me for saying that the defence was so feeble that even we, her friends, could not remain in doubt."

"Except Jill," Michael put in.

"Yes, except Jill. But Jill is young and enthusiastic and not very qualified to judge."

"And so you still believe Christine did this?" Michael asked quietly.

Major Norton moved uneasily.

"My dear fellow, frankly, what am I to believe? Hard-boiled facts, or your instincts? The story you tell me has, I admit, a convincing sound, but it is utterly unsupported. And this chimera of a search for proofs of innocence—what bearing has that on the presence of a gang of escaped convicts at Takyll Place. Unless, I must speak plainly, Christine Abbott were in league with them? Is it not more likely, on the face of it, that the young woman and her associates were concerned in some fresh devilry against your uncle? I am afraid that will be the police view of it." Major Norton shook his head and shrugged. "I wish you'd kept out of this, my boy."

Michael smiled.

"I shall never be out of it until Christine is cleared. I have a feeling that that won't be until we find out what's been going on at Takyll Place during the past two weeks. By the way, what happened to our young friend from Scotland Yard?"

Major Norton snorted.

"That monumental ass! He needs a kick in the pants."

"He seems to have received the equivalent, at any rate. But he may have useful information. You remember that incoherent stuff about a conspiracy involving two hundred thousand pounds? It doesn't sound like blackmail, that. Though there's Harnley's suicide to explain."

"If it was suicide."

Michael stared thoughtfully.

"I am almost certain it was," he said. "For one thing, Harnley was insane. There is no doubt about that. How

else can you explain his dismissal of honest old servants in favor of these criminals? Jill has a theory—it sounds crazy, but it fits the facts—that Harnley is the Crooks' Shepherd himself.

A snort of derision came from Major Norton. "If you're going to listen to schoolgirl theories out of dime novels," he said, "we shan't get far."

Michael knit his brows. The Major shifted in his chair.

"This sort of thing puts me in a damned unpleasant position," he went on jerkily. "You leave me with no alternative but to carry out a duty that properly belongs to the police. Christine Abbott must be handed over, guilty or innocent. You realize that?"

Michael nodded silently.

"Then I must ask you to say where you have concealed her," Major Norton pursued with a forced firmness that revealed his distaste for the question. The young man nodded again.

"There will be no attempt at evasion," he said. "But as long as—" he stopped suddenly and half rose to his feet, for the door had opened and Jill, fresh as though she had slept the clock round, entered. At her side stood Christine Abbott.

A strangled exclamation came from Major Norton. Rising, he gripped his chair as he stared at the girl.

"Darling," Jill interposed soothingly, "*Don't* be apoplectic, please."

The Major dropped limply back into his chair, gulping painfully. He began to speak but Jill stopped him.

"Not now, darling. Chris is so hungry, and we're going to have breakfast first."

"Breakfast! Good God!"

Christine smiled, a little wanly.

"It does sound improper, doesn't it?" she sighed. "Please don't think I mean to give any more trouble. I'll

—I'll go back when you tell me to. It's easier to go with friends to see me off."

Michael drew forward a chair and she sank into it with a smile of thanks. But his features were grim.

"I failed," he said, half under his breath.

Christine nodded.

"I was afraid of that. It is good of you. But I don't mind so much, now."

"We'll win, yet," Michael assured her. "Make no mistake about it!"

With superb control Major Norton rose and rang the bell. On the appearance of Spink he ordered further supplies of bacon and coffee. At the sight of Christine the maid's eyes opened, but before she could speak, her employer had slammed the door on her. Seating himself Major Norton took a deep breath and prepared with true British phlegm to play the host. He observed that Christine was well turned out. Her hair was exquisite. It struck him with disconcerting force this Christine Abbott was a remarkably beautiful young woman, with the delicate features and steady gaze of breeding and sanity. And also a criminal with a price on her head.

"May I ask," he said presently, "where you spent last night?"

Christine's lips ever so slightly twitched.

"Here," she answered.

For an instant British phlegm was jeopardized. A warning glance from Jill restored the balance.

"Where else do you suppose Chris could spend it, darling? In the village lock-up?"

Major Norton was dumbfounded. Glancing round the breakfast table, at Michael unshaved and weary, Jill cool and serenely unruffled and Christine subdued but by no means the popular notion of an escaped convict, he was reminded of a scene in a farce. It deeply disturbed him,

for in his opinion farce and British Justice do not mix.

Then he thought of the record of this girl who formed such an incongruous guest at his table, and yet looked exactly right there. By all standards she was the lowest of the low, a creature without a single decent instinct. A social parasite of the worst description. An evil-minded harpy.

He suddenly sprang to his feet and flung down his napkin.

"Pish! Good God! It's—it's preposterous!"

Jill regarded him calmly.

"What is, darling?"

"Why, *she*—" Major Norton pointed an indignantly trembling forefinger at Christine. "That girl's no more capable of committing such crimes than I am!"

Christine met Michael's eye. Jill, smiling equably, continued her breakfast.

The door opened and Spink's countenance, goggle-eyed, appeared.

"A gentleman to see you, sir. Chief Inspector Gidleigh, from Scotland Yard!"

Chapter XXIII

CHRISTINE went very white and started to rise, but Michael at her side held her arm restrainingly. Major Norton had started to speak, and in his consternation, failed. Before he could articulate an order the figure of Chief Inspector Gidleigh appeared in the doorway behind Spink. Gidleigh's mien as he addressed himself to the Major was apologetic. He appeared not to have noticed the company, nor Michael's studiously casual nod of recognition, in his anxiety to excuse his untimely intrusion.

"It's an unpardonable hour to call, I'm afraid, sir, but the fact is, certain clues have brought me here. I am anxious to discuss them with you." The detective gazed pensively down at the breakfast table. "Of course I'll—er—withdraw until you've finished breakfast if you'd prefer it."

Major Norton shot an uncomfortable glance at his guests. But each was assiduously concentrating on the business of eating. On Jill's face was an expression of controlled excitement. Major Norton scowled. Trust Jill to find a situation like this *enlivening*. The solution of the impasse came to him in a peculiarly British manner.

"Er—hadn't you better have some breakfast, Inspector? That is—unless you've—"

"Very kind of you, sir, I'm sure. No, I haven't had any, as a matter of fact. Came down by the newspaper train to Barnborough." The detective rubbed his hands together with anticipatory gratification. "I will admit to feeling a little hungry, sir."

The grin on Jill's face widened as her father carefully drew up another chair on Michael's left, thus obscuring his new guest's view of Christine. Then he rang the bell again for Spink and replenishments of eggs and bacon. Spink's reaction to the sight of the grim visitor amicably seated at the family table is too complicated to analyze, and the Major's emotions also may be described as mixed. There was nothing in the Justices' Manual to assist him in coping with such a situation, and he liked prescribed rules of conduct for all the affairs of life. Here was he, a magistrate, having breakfast with an escaped convict and a Scotland Yard official. A situation that Jill might find funny, but it had its undercurrent of tragedy. Presently the tragedy would be apparent.

Michael broke a silence that threatened to become oppressive.

"Would you mind passing the marmalade?"

Chief Inspector Gidleigh met the young man's glance with apparent surprise.

"Bless me, Mr. Chillaton, I hadn't realized it was you! You'll pardon my preoccupation, I hope."

Major Norton cleared his throat uneasily.

"My fault," he put in. "Entirely my fault. I should have introduced you to your—er—fellow guests, Inspector, but to tell you the truth, I was startled by your entry, and I—er—. However," he waved a hand vaguely round the table, "Er—take the—er—members of my family as introduced, won't you?"

He had got out of that rather well, he thought. Fortunately the detective did not appear interested in his fellow guests with the exception of Michael.

"It's a curious thing, Mr. Chillaton," Gidleigh went on, stirring his coffee reflectively, "how Paunceforte's line of inquiry and mine should converge like this. You've met our Mr. Paunceforte, of course."

"I managed to penetrate Mr. Paunceforte's disguise," he remarked.

"Was he disguised? Dear, dear, that seems rather foolish," Gidleigh said mildly.

"Foolish!" interjected Major Norton with sudden vehemence. "The fellow's a pitiful imbecile! An incurable case of arrested development, by God! Been here all this time and never discovered those con—" He checked himself on meeting Jill's eye. The Inspector shook his head with a barely concealed smile of gratification.

"Hardly an imbecile, sir. Hardly that. As a matter of fact, Paunceforte is highly intelligent. He lacks experience, of course, and—um—stability, but I can assure you that the Assistant Commissioner has a very high opinion of Paunceforte's ability. More than he has of—um—some of us. However, as I was saying, it's curious that I should find myself on his territory, so to speak, because my task has been to trace the escaped convicts who were reasonably thought to be in hiding in London, whereas clues to one of them at least—that is, Minser—have led me down here. And I know now that Paunceforte has discovered the whole gang in hiding at Lord Harnley's house. Very extraordinary. In the whole course of my experience I cannot recall anything so extraordinary as that."

"So Paunceforte takes the credit of *that* discovery, does he?" Major Norton demanded with sardonic emphasis.

The detective nodded.

"I saw him this morning on my arrival together with the Divisional Inspector from Barnborough and the Chief Constable. Officially, I am in charge of the—um—case."

"The murder, hey! Any clues?"

The detective coughed evasively.

"It is a little early to say, sir. It will be my duty to—um—survey the neighborhood—and its inhabitants." He paused to sip his coffee and Jill's eyes sought Michael's, with alert interest. The implication of the detective's last remark also caused Major Norton to rumble in his throat.

"In fact, Inspector, you are suggesting the possibility that Stopford was murdered by some other party than one of the escaped convicts? I confess that doesn't sound very reasonable to me."

"No, sir. On the other hand it doesn't altogether make sense to me that all these peculiar people at Takyll Place would operate without some outside contact. A very funny affair it is, and no mistake. Paunceforte gave me an astonishing recital of his discoveries. He did not—um—give me any breakfast, however."

"And that's why you came here?" queried Jill brightly. "Besides looking for the murderer?"

Gidleigh's eyes were expressionless in a wooden face.

"Perhaps there's a third reason, miss. Something that our Mr. Paunceforte hasn't elucidated as yet," he said obscurely, and buttered a piece of toast. Jill grimaced impatiently.

"Did Paunceforte tell you we found him elucidating things in a housemaid's cupboard," she asked, "after the gang had run away? The ones that hadn't been killed, you know."

Chief Inspector Gidleigh's gaze returned to his youthful vis-à-vis, a smile concealed under his drooping mustache. So this attractive and intelligent young lady meant to be another thorn in the flesh of the erudite Mr. Paunce-

forte? The Inspector's heart warmed towards these hospitable people.

"I gathered that Mr. Paunceforte was—um—overpowered by superior numbers, miss," he said. "Very intrepid, I call it, to enter the place single-handed.

"Damned silly, I call it," snorted the host. "If that's the kind of fellow the public safety is going to depend on, God help us all! What's he done to clear up this appalling muddle, hey? There's Harnley dead, after the craziest behavior that even Harnley was capable of. There's Stopford a sodden corpse. Two more corpses in the shape of escaped convicts; a woman, a lady, secretary, who seems now to have made herself scarce, and—er—" Major Norton pulled himself up with an effort and began to gulp coffee. It was Jill's eye again he had caught.

Gidleigh stared across at Jill pensively.

"Two convicts dead and a third man on the run. Now that he's on the run we'll get him all right. That's why I'm here. All along of a little chat with the lady he calls his wife. H'm, I beg pardon, I'm sure." He coughed in self-reproval.

But Jill nodded brightly.

"Has Minser got a mistress, too? He was supposed to be a gardener at Lord Harnley's, you know. But as soon as I looked at his hands I knew he wasn't that. They were like an artist's hands."

Gidleigh gazed admiringly.

"Very observing of you, miss, I must say. Minser's a forger, as a matter of fact. It seems a pity to lock him up again. But he is a marked man now. Then there's the fourth escaped convict to find—Christine Abbott—"

A sudden hush seemed to descend on the room as he spoke. Then Major Norton pushed back his chair, as though the inevitable, tragic moment had come and he must speak. But Gidleigh went on, musingly:

"Now that was a case that interested me rather personally, because I'd had my eye on the gang behind all that blackmailing. We didn't fix it on 'em, of course—except for the girl herself." He broke off as Major Norton rose in his chair. From the hall had come the sound of the telephone bell. The wires, manifestly, had been repaired.

"You'll excuse me for a moment, Inspector?" Norton's relief at this brief respite was manifest. The Inspector nodded, and helped himself to more toast. They heard Major Norton's voice with a note of surprise in it. A moment later he re-entered.

"A call for Chief Inspector Gidleigh, from Scotland Yard. Though how they knew you'd be here—"

Gidleigh got swiftly to his feet, leaving the query unanswered he hurried out. It was a lengthy conversation, though chiefly monosyllabic on his side and the party at the breakfast table were none the wiser at its termination. They spoke no word amongst themselves as though by tacit consent. Gidleigh re-entered smiling, and reseated himself.

"Let me see," he remarked, "where was I? Oh, about the Abbott case. Well, it was during a little chat I had with Minser's—um—wife. Always a good plan to keep friendly with these ladies, I find. Which is where our young Paunceforte makes a mistake, in my opinion. Well, there was I, taking tea with Mrs. Minser and presently I fills my pipe. Being of an economical nature with matches, I helps myself from a natty little vase full of paper tapers. You wouldn't think there would be any significance in that, would you?"

The Inspector paused and met Major Norton's blank stare. But Jill was leaning forward.

"Go on," she said. "What was the significance?"

"Why, miss, being a nosey kind of fellow like all us detectives, I noticed that these paper spills were made up,

partly of scraps of newspaper, partly of old letters, and other oddments. It was the handwriting on one of the scraps of letter that specially caught my attention because, as I say, I'd followed the Abbott case pretty closely and I recognized this writing as Christine Abbott's without any doubt whatever."

The silence at the table was profound. Gidleigh paused to gaze again at Jill, the focus of his attention.

"A queer thing that, wasn't it, miss?"

Jill nodded, silently.

"Of course I contrived that my pipe should go out more often than it usually does and in one way and another I got most of these interesting spills out of that vase and into my pocket with only some of the tips burnt. To cut the story short I took the scraps home and pieced them together. They proved to be a letter written by Christine Abbott to a concern called the Cornhill Loan Society. In this letter she declined the offer of a secretaryship made by this firm and expressed surprise at being approached with such an offer. It was quite obviously a mystery to Christine Abbott how the Cornhill Loan Society had got hold of her name, and why they should require her services out of the countless thousands of other young ladies available."

The Inspector paused to utter an amused grunt. "It was a mystery to me, also, until I took the trouble to find out that no such concern as the Cornhill Loan Society existed, except as an accommodation address for the brief space of one week. The object of securing that letter from Christine Abbott becomes very plain when one discovers it in the house of William Minser, the forger."

He paused again and Major uttered a whistle of comprehension. Michael reached for Christine's hand and found it icy cold. . . . Jill's eyes never left the detective's face.

"It is the proof we want," Jill said, under her breath. Gidleigh shook his head.

"In itself it is not sufficient proof. But it provided a powerful weapon, a lever, to extract further information. Before I left the Yard last night I gave instructions as to the use of that letter in certain circumstances. Those circumstances materialized at 6.30 this morning. In other words, William Minser has been recaptured. To be exact, he has given himself up."

Chief Inspector Gidleigh leaned back in his chair. He spoke quietly, almost casually, but each syllable seemed to pluck at the strung nerves of his hearers.

"That was the subject of the telephone call I have just received. Acting on my instructions Minser was confronted with this letter found in his rooms. He is already under sentence of five years for another job, and it was put to him that a statement on this letter would not necessarily involve him in a fresh prosecution. He had nothing to gain by concealment, but someone else stood to gain heavily. That's apart, of course, from anything we may get from him about his doings down here.

Jill held her breath. Major Norton stared at the detective fixedly. No one made a sound.

"Minser's statement was read to me over the telephone," Gidleigh went on levelly, "It contains nothing that implicates his associates. Indeed, he professes complete ignorance of their identities. He was, he says, paid for a job of work. That job was the forging of the letters in the Abbott blackmail case and Minser's statement completely exonerates Christine Abbott."

The silence that fell was broken by a single dry sob from the girl at Michael's side. Rising from his chair Inspector Gidleigh went towards her and held out his hand.

"May I, Miss Abbott," he said, "be the first to congratulate you?"

Chapter XXIV

FROM the high backed chair that was set facing the open casement of the Delphinium Cottage drawing room the Hon. Miss Philadelphia Hemstone observed a person who looked like an undertaker, a gloomily clad man with black clothes and a drooping mustache. This person thrust in the little wicket with one gloved hand, carefully reclosed the gate and made his way to Miss Hemstone's front door. A moment later Martha entered the drawing room, breathing heavily.

"A gentleman to see you, ma'am. Chief Inspector Gidleigh from Scotland Yard, ma'am." She paused, her mouth gaping.

"And what," quiered Miss Hemstone calmly, "does the Chief Inspector from Scotland Yard wish to see me about?"

The shuffling of heavy boots sounded from the hall beyond as Martha shook her head blankly.

"He didn't say, ma'am. Just the favor of a few words, and he'd come another time if it wasn't convenient."

Miss Hemstone rose and turned her chair so that its tall back was against the window.

"You had better show him in, Martha," she said clearly. "And see that he wipes his boots."

A faint sound, like a muted grunt, betokened the audibility of this speech in the hall. It might have been due to Chief Inspector Gidleigh's exertions on the door mat. It was due, as a matter of fact, to the officer's controlled amusement.

But his features were correctly wooden as he entered the tiny drawing room and placed his bowler hat carefully upon an occasional table.

"I apologize, madam, for this intrusion."

"There is no need to apologize," Miss Hemstone returned, "provided you will be brief. Please sit down."

Cautiously Gidleigh lowered his bulk into a fragile-looking chair. The precariousness of this perch, coupled with the strong sunlight in his eyes, would have placed a lesser man in a position of inferiority. But not Gidleigh, although he sensed a definite respect for his lady's presence.

"My profession, madam," he observed with the lugubrious sigh that preceded so many of his openings, "obliges me to make myself something of a nuisance to people."

Miss Hemstone inclined her head.

"I cannot envy you your profession, Inspector. No doubt, however, it is a necessary one." She made the last observation as though Chief Inspector Gidleigh had confessed to being a public scavenger.

"Please be brief," repeated Miss Hemstone.

"Certainly, madam. My object, as you may have guessed, is to ask you a few questions on the subject of your brother's death. You'll forgive me if it is a painful subject."

"My brother's death," retorted Miss Hemstone grimly, "is not a painful subject. Proceed."

The Inspector coughed.

"It would be idle to deny," he said, "that I have already

gathered that his late lordship and yourself were not on the best of terms. Local—um—reports—”

Miss Hemstone sniffed. The sniff implied the scavenger of local reports.

“May I ask, madam, whether you would suspect your brother of taking his life?”

“I would suspect him,” retorted Miss Hemstone, “of any folly or wickedness.” She spoke with such vehemence and bitterness that Gidleigh darted a quick, appraising glance at her. A peculiar lady, he thought. Unsuspected depths there. Hard as ice.

“Do you know of any definite reason why Lord Harnley should commit suicide?”

“No.”

“Or of any reason why he should be murdered?”

“No. Except—” She hesitated, and then set her lips grimly.

“Except, madam?”

“Except that he deserved to be,” said Miss Hemstone. Chief Inspector Gidleigh frowned. This was no answer to the question.

“May I ask when you last saw his lordship?”

“It was many years ago. I do not know when.”

“You have heard from him?”

“No.”

“No communications, whatever?”

“Through my solicitors, solely.”

“I see. Not even a telephone conversation?”

Miss Hemstone hesitated again, as though searching her memory, then she answered firmly:

“Yes: he rang up a week or ten days ago. I forget the date. My maid answered the call. I declined, however, to speak to him.”

“So that you do not know why he rang up?”

“That is so.”

"Might we assume, since it was so rare an occasion, that Lord Harnley had some very urgent reason for this telephone call?"

Miss Hemstone shrugged slightly.

"I did not concern myself to assume anything, Inspector."

"You are aware that about that time Mr. Michael Chillaton received a letter from Lord Harnley appealing for help against some danger which his lordship evidently imagined to be threatening him?"

"Mr. Chillaton told me something of the sort. I was not interested."

The detective gazed with some admiration at Miss Hemstone. She was certainly consistent.

"Have you finished these somewhat tiresome questions, Inspector?"

"If you please, no. Now, madam, you have heard of the murder of Stopford, Lord Harnley's personal man. I remind you of this to demonstrate that the danger threatening his lordship was not imaginary. Our discovery of Stopford's body in the lake was due to an anonymous letter sent to the local police. So far the sender of that letter has not come forward, but there are reasons to believe it might be a local person." The detective paused and added, almost reflectively, "I suppose you couldn't give me any idea where we might look for the sender of that letter?"

Miss Hemstone tittered sharply.

"A ridiculous question," she remarked. "The answer is certainly not."

Gidleigh nodded and sighed as though regretting the fool he had made of himself. Then from his overcoat pocket he drew out two envelopes, laying them on his knees. From the first he extracted what appeared to be a piece of brown fluff.

"I found this," he said, "on some brambles in the neglected garden of the Tarn House. The sort of brambles that—um—catch in one's clothing." Very carefully Gidleigh replaced the scrap in its envelope. From the other envelope he produced a similar piece of fluff. Miss Hemstone's eyes never flickered.

"This, madam, was discovered in the shrubbery near the terrace at Takyll Place. You will observe that it is fur, from a coat that has evidently been moth-eaten. When a fur coat gets into that condition bits come out at the slightest tug. The bits I have shown you are obviously from the same coat. While waiting in the hall just now I took the liberty of comparing these pieces of fur with a coat hanging there. There is no doubt whatever that the fur matches my specimens.

Chief Inspector Gidleigh replaced the envelopes in his pocket. His voice when he spoke again was curiously soft.

"I am prepared to be told, madam, that your recent presence in the grounds of the Tarn House and at Takyll Place has no bearing whatever on the subject of my investigations. I am prepared to believe a reasonable assurance. Can you, Miss Hemstone, give me that assurance?"

Miss Hemstone's fingers were tightly clasped in her lap. Her features, always bloodless, betrayed not the slightest index to her emotions, if indeed, she possessed any, other than those of ridicule and scorn.

"I can certainly assure you, Inspector, that your so-called discoveries have no connection with the death of my brother."

"Or of Stopford?"

"Or of Stopford. Of course."

Chief Inspector Gidleigh nodded.

"I am glad to have that assurance, madam. I should be gladder if you will back it up with some explanation."

Miss Hemstone shook her head.

"I have none to offer."

"Very well, for the moment I will not press that. But there is a question which I am bound to ask you, that you may consider invidious. A necessary formality. In the event of your brother's death you knew that you stood to benefit financially?"

Miss Hemstone inclined her head silently.

"Can you tell me to what extent you will benefit?"

"Not exactly. It will be to a very limited extent. My nephew is the principal heir."

"So I understand. And your brother was a rich man?"

"I believe so."

"Would it surprise you, madam, to know that his lordship's estate has been depleted to the extent of nearly two hundred thousand pounds?"

Miss Hemstone's hard eyes met the detective steadily—and conveyed to him nothing at all of what he sought to learn. There was neither surprise nor consternation nor any uneasiness in her gaze.

"I am certainly astonished," she said quietly, "to learn that my brother's follies involved him to that extent."

The detective leaned forward.

"When a capital crime is committed, he said, "inquiries are set on foot in a hundred directions at once. The victim's financial, social, and personal affairs become public property. This is not the first time, as you are aware, that his late lordship's affairs have concerned the police. In the past there have been blackmailing episodes, in particular what was known as the Abbott case, in which a young lady was falsely accused, and falsely convicted."

Gidleigh paused abruptly once more. But the woman he addressed seemed to react to nothing. . . . Concealing his secret chagrin he grunted:

"This does not surprise you, madam?"

She shook her head.

"Nor does it interest me. Must I repeat that my brother's follies are no concern of mine?"

"It must, at least, distress you to know that his estate has been defrauded on this colossal scale?"

"If it affects me personally, yes. If it merely affects Mr. Michael Chillaton, no."

Despite himself Gidleigh smiled.

"Your cynicism is almost refreshing, Miss Hemstone. It is possible, however, that what I am about to reveal *will* affect you. I do not know—" The Inspector paused as though uncertain how to begin. "You will recall, madam, the circumstances of an accident to Lord Harnley. His lordship, apparently, was knocked down at night by a passing motor car and left unconscious on the road, suffering from shock and a slight wound on one cheek. He was discovered by his nephew, and after medical attention returned to Takyll Place. His behavior subsequently became so strange that Mr. Chillaton and others were convinced that his lordship must be suffering from a mental breakdown. It proved impossible, however, to induce Lord Harnley to take medical advice, because from that moment he practically shut himself up, even from his nephew, and saw no one except the somewhat peculiar staff of newly engaged servants, who have since become revealed as criminals and fugitives from justice. All this you have probably heard in some form or other?"

The detective paused again, but this aggravating lady neither confirmed nor denied his supposition. Gidleigh decided with sardonic relish that the Hon. Miss Hemstone would prove a thorny subject for any cross-examining counsel. . . .

"What I am about to tell you now, however," he went on, "is not common knowledge as yet. I have said that after the road accident there was a small wound on the

victim's cheek. Subsequently a large piece of sticking plaster was worn over the wound. Yet, when we discovered Lord Harnley dead from a revolver shot there was no wound and no trace of a scar. What, Miss Hemstone, do you infer from that peculiar circumstance?"

Miss Hemstone shook her head, thin-lipped.

"What am I expected to infer?"

"I will add a further detail. Upon the left cheek of the dead convict, Clifford Neyland, there *was* a scar, a superficial wound, barely healed." Gidleigh paused again. "The inference," he said, "is surely obvious."

"You are telling me that my brother was impersonated by—by this convict?"

"Yes." Gidleigh was watching her keenly now. Was there a tremor of those hard lips?

"How very ingenious," remarked Miss Hemstone.

Gidleigh controlled the desire to swear.

"It was, as you say, ingenious. The scar, necessitating a wound dressing, helped admirably as a disguise. Then Neyland had been an actor, of sorts, before he went crooked. His greatest asset, however—" once again the detective paused to emphasize his words: "Neyland's greatest asset, madam, *was an extraordinary personal resemblance to Lord Harnley.*"

The silence that fell then contained a peculiar quality of intensity. Gidleigh kept his gaze fixed unwaveringly on the lady in her high backed chair. He was aware that her hands had tightened their clasp, and of a curious rigidity in the gaunt body, but it was at Miss Hemstone's face he looked. And not by the merest flicker of an eyelid did Miss Hemstone betray anything but the most casual interest in Chief Inspector Gidleigh's remarkable statement.

"Very interesting," observed Miss Hemstone steadily. "You are assuming, of course, that this convict must be a member of the family."

"It is a natural, an inevitable assumption," Gidleigh returned. "Neyland was younger—by twenty years—a man of forty-five at the most. Nevertheless there are facial peculiarities so strongly marked that no other assumption is reasonable. It is obvious that the person who engineered this deception must have known of the resemblance and organized Neyland's escape accordingly. You now understand, Miss Hemstone, why I have come to see you?"

The old lady nodded. She spoke very quietly now, almost under her breath, but as decisively:

"I understand, but I cannot help you."

"You do not know who Neyland was?"

"I do not know."

"Is it possible there could be a—black sheep—of the family, without your knowledge?"

"It is quite possible. I advise you to interrogate other members of the family, Inspector. My nephew Chillaton, for instance."

"Mr. Chillaton can tell me nothing," Gidleigh said. "Shall I give you the police history of Clifford Neyland, Miss Hemstone?"

Miss Hemstone shrugged.

"I have no wish to hear it."

"Nonetheless, I will give it." From an inner pocket the Inspector produced an official note-book and opened it. He knew its contents almost by heart, and this action was no more than another maneuver to break down that granite reserve.

"Neyland first came under our notice fifteen years ago. He was then an actor with a provincial touring company. Convicted for robbing fellow members of the company. Subsequent convictions include fraud and robbery with violence. Eventually sentenced to seven years at Dartmoor. Here follows a description, with which I will not

trouble you. Finally, I have a note as to Neyland's antecedents." Gidleigh was speaking now with slow deliberation.

"Parentage unknown. Brought up by farm laborers near Cleckton, in Hertfordshire. Remittances received from unknown source up to age of sixteen, when he appears to have tracked down the source—to his own benefit. Appears to have lived a precocious and idle life on the increased remittances until—" Abruptly, Gidleigh snapped up the notebook and looked at Miss Hemstone.

"Do you wish me to go on?" he asked.

The thin white hands clutched each other almost fiercely now, so that the blue veins stood out.

"It is immaterial to me, Inspector."

Gidleigh leant forward.

"You drive me," he said. "Please believe that I do not enjoy this task. But if you continue to drive me I must tell you that the farm laborers at Cleckton are still alive, and that they would be prepared to identify the unknown lady who brought them a child on a specified date forty-five years ago."

Miss Hemstone rose to her feet. He saw that she was trembling now, and pitied her from the bottom of his heart.

"Please go," she said. "I have nothing to tell you."

Gidleigh stood up.

"What you say now," he answered quietly, "may spare you future pain. I shall make no use of the information I have gained unless it assists me in finding the author of at least two murders. That I am resolved to do."

"I have nothing to tell you," Miss Hemstone repeated fiercely.

"Listen, please. Your quarrel with Lord Harnley came to a head when he reduced your allowance to the border line of poverty. You were no longer able to send those

remittances. Clifford Neyland drifted deeper into crime—”

Gidleigh picked up his hat and walked to the door. With his hand on the knob he turned. Miss Hemstone was sitting again in her high-backed chair, her face inscrutable.

Chief Inspector Gidleigh let himself out of Delphinium Cottage, profoundly dissatisfied with the interview.

Chapter XXV

COLONEL TANKERVILLE settled his spectacles, cleared his throat, and glanced round his office. These were the gestures of one who expects the entire attention of his audience and is accustomed to get it. Chief Inspector Gidleigh, on his left, perhaps the only member of the assembly to exhibit discernible lack of proper alertness. On the Assistant-Commissioner's right Christine Abbott, very charming and certainly incapable of that monstrous crime. Next to her Michael Chillaton, a look of settled content on his features. Opposite sat Paunceforte, correctly clad, his eyes glinting omnisciently. Lastly there was Miss Jill Norton, whose richly colored lips were parted with amusement and eagerness. The Assistant-Commissioner cleared his throat again and picked up a typewritten sheaf of papers.

"As you are aware," he began, "I have called this meeting for the purpose of co-ordinating your knowledge of the events that have recently taken place at the home of the late Lord Harnley. Those events have been of so fantastic a character that it is my firm belief that only the mental derangement of Lord Harnley himself can explain them.

My view of Harnley's insanity dates from an interview I had recently with his nephew, Mr. Michael Chillaton, during which I was afforded an opportunity of reading an extraordinary missive appealing for assistance against some mythical enemy. As a result of that appeal Mr. Chillaton left his work in Wolverhampton and proceeded to Takyll Place. Most of you are aware of the general sequence of events after that, but by my instructions these events have been carefully detailed on paper in the hope that a recital of them will elicit from you such further details as to clear up what is still a complete mystery to us, that is to say, the identity of the person or persons responsible for the conspiracy which has resulted in the loss to the estate of the late Lord Harnley of no less a sum than two hundred thousand pounds. Hr'rm."

Colonel Tankerville flicked over a leaf of the typescript in his hand, Inspector Gidleigh changed over his legs and sighed patiently.

"One unexpected but highly gratifying result of our investigations," the Assistant-Commissioner went on, "has been the rehabilitation of Miss Christine Abbott." Here Colonel Tankerville paused again to make a little bow in Christine's direction. "Unfortunately, however, the fact that Miss Abbott is proved innocent of complicity in an old plot to blackmail Lord Harnley does not assist us in the least with our present inquiry. Miss Abbott was abducted from Hollbury prison because she knew the combination of a small safe in the study at Takyll Place. As an inducement to comply with their wishes she was assured that the safe contained the proofs of her innocence. That assurance, of course, was false."

"Now we come to the means employed by the conspirators to carry out their colossal scheme. For an admirable summary I am indebted to a member of my staff—" Here Colonel Tankerville glanced momentarily at Pauncefore,

whilst Gidleigh sighed again—"who has displayed remarkable acumen and ingenuity in its compilation. Beginning with the shrewd assumption that each of the escaped convicts was selected for a specified task we are able to reconstruct the plot. First, then, it was necessary to remove the manservant Stopford who was in close personal attendance on Lord Harnley. Secondly, Lord Harnley himself was removed. How that was done may be news to some of you and the discovery of the method employed is yet another instance of excellent detective work." Again the Assistant-Commissioner glanced at Paunceforte, again Gidleigh sighed. The Assistant-Commissioner turned to Michael.

"Kindly verify, Mr. Chillaton, these circumstances of the accident to your uncle."

Michael nodded.

"You found him knocked unconscious. Although apparently suffering from severe shock the only injury was a superficial one—a deep scratch on the left cheek?"

Again Michael nodded.

"The next time you saw your uncle was in a semi-darkened room. He had then a large patch of sticking plaster over that cheek?"

"Yes, that is right."

"And the only subsequent occasion on which you saw your uncle prior to his death was in the doorway of the hall at Takyll Place, in company with the bogus butler and the woman known as Bernice Randall. The hall, I believe, was unlighted."

Again Michael nodded.

"When your uncle was found shot there was no scar on his cheek. It is not conceivable that any scar, however slight, should vanish in so short a space of time. The inference becomes obvious—that your uncle was imperson-

ated from the time of the accident. So you were deceived, as others were deceived. Needless to say, precautions were taken that no intimate friend should be allowed near Lord Harnley. His lordship was suffering from shock, it was given out, and his impersonator repelled friendly advances with a characteristic surliness. Remember, too, that you had not seen Harnley for six years."

"Now as to the real Harnley. It is probable that he was assaulted while out walking with his hound by a member of the gang in hiding within the coppice bordering the roadway. The sham Harnley was then left lying in the road for you or any other passer-by to discover. The bloodhound was shot as a potential danger. Probably Harnley himself was taken back to Takyll Place and kept a prisoner. In that half empty mansion it would easily be done."

The Assistant-Commissioner flicked over another leaf of the typescript.

"I think that is quite clear," he said assertively.

Michael gave a mechanical nod; Inspector Gidleigh smiled faintly and re-crossed his legs. Paunceforte continued to sit motionless, very correct in his official demeanor and manifestly satisfied with himself. He did not apparently observe the veiled grimace Jill made in his direction, nor Christine, half puzzled, half amused, glance in his direction. Colonel Tankerville's monotonous recital continued:

"So much for what we may call the groundwork of the plot. We now come to its execution. The convict Neyland had been allotted his role and Parkwell the safe-breaker had been substituted for Stopford, the faithful servant. Parkwell was obviously intended to step into the breach should Miss Christine Abbott prove obdurate. The last of the four convicts to arrive, Minser, became a gardener,

and the remaining member of this interesting house-party. Bernice Randall ostensibly fulfilled the functions of secretary and housekeeper. It is impossible to suppose that these changes in the household of the eccentric Lord Harnley would pass unnoticed in the neighborhood, but equally there was absolutely no reason to connect such changes with the escaped convicts. In fact, no corner of England stood less chance of being searched for them. The unknown organizer knew that.

"In due course Miss Abbott was required to open the safe in Lord Harnley's study. Although well aware that the safe contained no valuables in the ordinary sense, she at first refused. During the altercation that ensued she was very nearly extricated by Mr. Chillaton, who seems in some highly improper manner to have kept his knowledge of her presence there to himself. Eventually," the Assistant-Commissioner paused to dart a censorious glance over his spectacles at Michael, "Mr. Chillaton may be required to defend himself against a charge of failing in his duty."

Michael smiled grimly. Jill's soft laugh was audible.

"You can count me in on that, too," she said coolly.

"I am sorry to hear it," remarked the Assistant-Commissioner primly. "Not only is such conduct reprehensible in itself, but it seriously hampered the investigations of the officer we sent down. We will return to this matter anon." He cleared his throat and resumed.

"Eventually Miss Abbott was induced to open the safe. Its contents, she informs us, consisted of personal and business letter files, including correspondence with Lord Harnley's broker in London, a bank pass-book, and a check book. These contents were precisely what the organizer of the conspiracy needed. He was now able, without fear of interrogation, or danger of immediate discovery, to dictate letters to the broker, through the work

of Minser, giving instructions for the realization of a large part of his investments and their conversion into cash or bearer bonds, subsequently, I have no doubt, to be remitted abroad and perhaps changed into half-a-dozen different currencies to decrease the risk of tracing such huge sums. We know now that the Harnley estate is poorer by close to two hundred thousand pounds. And although Mr. Chillaton, as heir to the estate, is still a very wealthy young man, it is our duty to discover where this money has gone in order to throw some light on the activities of the man—perhaps it is a woman—who was prepared to commit a series of cold-blooded murders to obtain it. Including the murder of his own colleagues.”

“With the exception of Minser,” Gidleigh interjected quietly.

“Exactly. The reason for that is not plain.”

“We might assume, sir, that Minser was the only man who didn't know too much.”

The Assistant-Commissioner, shrugging tolerantly, glanced at Paunceforte.

“Is that your view?” he inquired. Paunceforte shrugged back with an acid smile.

“It is p-possible, sir.”

The Inspector scowled. The next moment he met Michael's eye and grinned sardonically.

“It seems the only reasonable explanation,” Michael said. “Parkwell and Neyland may have become too inquisitive. The safety of the crook who ran this graft depends on carefully concealing his identity. I have a feeling that our unknown friend was uneasy about the other two, including,” Michael paused deliberately, “Miss Christine Abbott. If I had not interfered, illegally, as you view it, Miss Abbott would have been electrocuted also.”

Christine was aware of three pairs of keen eyes on her

suddenly. The eyes of Colonel Tankerville and Gidleigh and Paunceforte.

"I have understood," the Assistant-Commissioner said, "that Miss Abbott is *not* in a position to identify the person who organized this affair."

Christine Abbott shook her head uncertainly.

"No, that is, I am not sure. He had a curious voice, and screwed-up eyes. But I saw little beyond the eyes. Perhaps if I heard the voice again, I should know. And yet he tried to kill me—to kill us all."

Colonel Tankerville grunted.

"Not very helpful, I am afraid," he commented. "I am afraid you cannot be regarded as a danger to the murderer's peace of mind. On the other hand it is certainly possible that the woman Bernice Randall may be able to give us information. So far we have not succeeded in tracing her."

Christine shivered.

"I think she is dead, too," she said. "That is how—*he*—regarded us. Just so many pawns in his game. To be used, and then destroyed. He was inhuman."

Chief Inspector Gidleigh turned his head in his slow fashion.

"You are sure it was a man?" he asked.

"Yes—almost sure."

Gidleigh nodded.

"Perhaps it is healthier not to know, for the present," the Inspector observed reflectively. "Like Minser, who curbed his curiosity and lives. Minser has gone back to finish his sentence with a joyful heart. When he comes out, he says, he is to receive ten thousand pounds. No one will know where it comes from. Not even Minser. And he won't want to know. It strikes me, without any detriment to Paunceforte's little summary, we are no wiser than we were before all this talking began. Lord Harn-

ley's dead, whether by his own hand or not doesn't matter, and several others are equally dead. Lastly there's a couple of hundred thousand gone where it's going to be useful to someone. It was a clever scheme, but in my opinion it didn't go altogether as it was meant to go. The original idea was to carry the thing through *without* these murders. Neyland and Parkwell and Miss Abbott were to return to jail precisely as Minser has returned. They were to finish their sentences and be compensated handsomely on release. But Parkwell got nose-y and Neyland discovered something; that made them both dangerous. I believe there were other complications. Lastly, Mr. Chillaton's discovery of Miss Abbott and subsequent intervention upset the apple cart. Instead of a neat fraud that would merely look as though Harnley had been the victim of another blackmailing attack, culminating in his own suicide, and leaving *no trace at all* of anything that could warrant police investigation, the whole thing went cock-eyed. Those murders became necessary. And because those murders had to be committed," Gidleigh concluded, thumping his knees for emphasis, "the man behind the show is in fear of his own life. He knows he's bungled and he's every right to be scared stiff. He'll be too careful. Then we shall get him—or *her*."

Gidleigh stopped abruptly. Michael glanced at him in surprise. It seemed unlike Gidleigh to get grim like this. The Assistant-Commissioner was annoyed. Paunceforte's stare was coldly hostile.

"P-permit me to say—" remarked Paunceforte, "that I d-disagree. The p-p-plot has been p-p-perfectly successful. Had it not b-b-been for the interference of M-M-Mr. Chillaton I m-m-might have f-f-frustrated it. As it is, we have not a single c-c-clue to the identity of the p-p-p-person who p-p-perpetrated it."

Mr. Paunceforte shut his lips tightly to indicate that

much had been left unsaid owing to the proximity of the Assistant-Commissioner and others present. Gidleigh shrugged. The Assistant-Commissioner's frown deepened.

"I suppose I oughtn't to butt in," observed Jill cheerfully, "but after all we don't seem to have got anywhere much, do we? And as to finding out things at Bishops Takyll, it seems to me that Michael and I were the only ones to do it. He," she pointed with innocent candor at Mr. Paunceforte, "went and got himself laid out the very first time he entered old Harnley's house. If you call that clever, I don't!"

Michael chuckled; Inspector Gidleigh was amused; Colonel Tankerville frowned.

"Your lack of experience, Miss Norton, does not excuse these interruptions. I must remind you that you are here to answer questions."

Jill grinned unabashed. A momentary silence fell. The Assistant-Commissioner tapped his desk irritably. Despite his admirable summary of events, it was true that no useful line of investigation was indicated. His annoyance increased.

Paunceforte began to stutter again:

"In m-my opinion," the youth observed, his teeth clicking with exasperating monotony, "the p-p-p-person who d-d-d-d—"

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Colonel Tankerville, "do, for God's sake, learn to control that stammer! It gets worse every day. Now take a deep breath and try again!" Mr. Paunceforte obeyed. Christine continued to look as though such a personality within the walls of the C.I.D. were an enigma. Mr. Paunceforte alternately amused and puzzled her. Suddenly he met her eyes, and the expression in his struck a chord of memory. It was a curious, fleeting, familiar expression. Something like a—she searched her mind vaguely for a simile.

But Mr. Paunceforte had risen to his feet. "With your p-p-permission," he said, "I p-p-propose to f-f-fetch certain notes I have m-m-made."

Colonel Tankerville nodded morosely. Inspector Gidleigh sighed and changed his legs one over another. Christine sat very still, staring with knit brows at the floor.

Chapter XXVI

FOR several minutes the silence was broken only by the impatient tap of Colonel Tankerville's foot. The Assistant-Commissioner appeared to have shed some of his superb confidence. The Chief Inspector noted the change, divined the cause, and bided his time. Let Paunceforte stutter himself to a standstill with his egregious theories and clutterings of irrelevant details. Then Gidleigh would begin and say more in five minutes than Paunceforte in fifty. But it must be after the close of this absurd meeting. Although officially in charge he was not prepared to submit his observations to anyone but the Assistant-Commissioner. Besides, there was the question of confidence. He had promised Miss Hemstone her secret should remain inviolate, unless it provided the clue to the mystery. Ah, would it do that? She was clever. She was more than clever!

Gidleigh became aware of Christine Abbott's eyes upon him. There was a curious expression in hers. A puzzled, half-baffled look. Like someone trying to recapture an elusive memory.

The *ting* of the telephone bell at Colonel Tankerville's

elbow made them all start. Tankerville snatched up the receiver.

"Hullo! What? *Speak up—Who?*" Then he swung round towards Christine, scowling. "Call for you, Miss Abbott. An infernally bad line."

In surprise Christine took the receiver. The voice that came over the wire was indistinct, but there was an urgency that keyed up her hearing.

"It is Dr. Mandeville speaking . . . Dr. Mandeville . . . my name does not matter . . . listen, please." The tones were so spasmodic that Christine had to raise her finger to check a slight movement of Gidleigh's. "I am speaking on behalf of a woman to whom I have been summoned. She is dying. Not more than an hour, at the most, to live. She has asked for you and begs that you will say nothing to the police, until after her death. Her name, she says, is Bernice Randall. Can you hear me? She has something of great importance to tell you. Seems to be quite friendless, poor creature."

The voice stopped momentarily as though its owner had turned away to verify something; then it continued, still almost inaudibly:

"The address is No. 71A Millbrook Street. . . . Can you hear that? No? I will repeat it. 71A Millbrook Street, Millbrook Street. Millbrook Street. Vauxhall Bridge Road. You had better take a taxi. I am giving her oxygen now."

The voice ceased. Christine faced the Assistant-Commissioner, her brows knit.

"I must go," she said. "It is someone I know who is dying. I must go quickly."

Colonel Tankerville stood up.

"In the circumstances, Miss Abbott, I cannot very well detain you. We have not, however, finished our inquiry here and I will ask you to return as soon as possible. If

you find it impossible to return within the next hour, please telephone me."

Michael reached for his hat and stick.

"I am going with you," Michael said firmly.

The Assistant-Commissioner intervened abruptly.

"I am sorry," he said, "I cannot allow Mr. Chillaton to leave yet. When Paunceforte returns it will be necessary to check his notes and resume our discussion. I am sure you will understand that. It is unfortunate, but I have no alternative."

Inspector Gidleigh looked up quizzically.

"Might we know where you are going, Miss Abbott, or is it a personal matter?"

Christine hesitated, why, she hardly knew.

"It is—personal," she answered, half under her breath. "Someone who is dying. Not a friend, but someone who needs me."

She went to the door as Michael opened it. Her lips started to frame a whispered sentence, but the Assistant-Commissioner stood close to them, frowning suspiciously, so she checked herself. The next moment she was speeding to the street.

She got a taxi and gave the address. The taxi drew up outside a dingy shop with half drawn blinds in a few minutes. Beneath the blinds appeared a shabby miscellany of patent medicines, sponges, and dusty cakes of soap. A placard on the door announced reopening hours for Saturday afternoon. At the side of the door, another bore the number 71A.

"Shall I wait, miss?" the cab driver queried. Christine nodded and ran to the door. The door was ajar, and thrusting it open she saw that there was another within it. The house, manifestly, had been divided into two. Christine sought for a bell and found none. Then she rapped, but no answer came.

"Better go straight in, if you know the parties, miss," the taxi driver advised. "Most of them upper floors don't run to bells. Open the door and give a shout, miss."

Christine turned the handle, to discover that the door was unlocked. She called softly up the narrow stairway and fancied she heard a faintly murmured answer. The place was stuffy, almost fetid from lack of ventilation, no fit domicile for the elegant Bernice Randall. But perhaps its very dinginess had led the woman here. It would be a last refuge.

She mounted the staircase to a landing. There were two doors here, one to the right and the other facing her. At hazard she tapped at the right hand door. Receiving no answer she tried the handle. The door was locked. She tapped on the other door, and again there was no response. Puzzled, Christine twisted the handle and pushed. The door gave, but the room within lay in complete darkness. For an instant she hesitated, then, to make certain, stepped forward and reached out for the switch. As the light flashed on she saw to her bewilderment an untidy litter of books and packing cases, and around the walls shelf upon shelf of dusty drug bottles. She had blundered into the chemist's store room.

At that moment she noted the closed shutters over the window. It gave her a curious twinge of alarm that the shutters were padlocked. Then someone pushed her gently into the room and the door behind her swung to. She heard the click of its key.

Christine stood immobile for two tense seconds before deadly fear gripped her heart. She fumbled for the door handle. She pulled at it, gently at first, and then with a frenzy that was almost hysteria. She heard the sound of the taxi as it moved away; then she heard the sound of footsteps mounting the stairs towards her.

The key turned again. Steadily, unhurriedly, the door

opened. A hand in which something gleamed appeared, and then in one swift, concerted movement a man had swung into the room and closed the door behind him. At that white countenance with its screwed-up eyes under the wide-brimmed hat, the girl started back, her hands at her breasts.

"You!" she stammered.

He laughed, the sunken lips showing the red gums inside. Then he drew in his breath in the familiar prelude to speech.

"You know now," he said. "But you know too late. I have forestalled you, you see." He laughed again. "It was quick work, like all my work. I waste no time. I make no mistakes. Stand over there!"

The thing in his hand gleamed again and Christine backed towards the opposite wall. She filled her lungs for the scream that should bring help, but as if divining her purpose he raised his hand.

"I should not advise that. Because I wish to be merciful. Since you must die, it is better to die without pain."

The girl did not answer, but her eyes never left his.

"Last time you saw me," he went on, "it was in ignorance and safety. But there was a seed sown, chance words were dropped, something that would have germinated in your mind until knowledge blossomed. I saw that, because I have trained myself to watch the reactions of words upon people. You did not apprehend the implication of those words and it is possible that you would not have done so for many days. But my life and security depended on your continued failure to remember. So I have struck first. Do you recall the words whose significance eluded you?"

Christine nodded. Her voice came barely above a whisper.

"Yes," he said. "Take a deep breath before attempting to speak."

He laughed, and took a deep breath.

"Exactly. You did not know what those words conveyed to you, but they were buried in your inner consciousness. Now you understand that it has been the effort to disguise my stammer that accounted for such a peculiarity in my speech. That is, in the character of Crooks' Shepherd, the only character in which you have hitherto known me. Needless to say, in the character in which you have *not* known me, I have allowed my stammer to become slightly emphasized. That peculiarity of controlled speech, aided by the removal of my artificial teeth and the immensely strong glasses I am obliged to wear completed a disguise far better than any artifice could conceive. The features of a sufferer from acute myopia *without* glasses are transformed into those of a different being. Unfortunately I am so hampered by this partial blindness that I propose now to regain part, at least, of my other identity."

The gasping voice ceased, though the toothless mouth still gaped in horrible amusement. One hand plunged into the overcoat pocket and drew out a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles with massively thick lenses. In another moment the bright, omniscient eyes of Henry Paunceforte regarded Christine Abbott. The wrinkled features became smooth.

"I have little time to waste," he said. "At the Yard they are waiting for my notes, so I must return. But you stay here. You understand that, don't you. You understand that there is no animosity towards you, but that you cannot be permitted to live. Only you have seen me as the Crooks' Shepherd. The others are dead. So it is necessary for my safety that you should be dead also."

He paused, whistling for breath again, and then turning to the door locked it and took out the key. Christine watched him in mute terror.

"It is lucky that my friend the chemist gives himself a half-holiday on Saturdays," he went on. "Lucky for you

too, Miss Abbott. Otherwise it might not be so easy to do the thing without pain. This is what the police would call my accommodation address and the good chemist knows me merely as an occasional lodger. When he discovers you here he will suspect the occasional lodger and the police will send out a full description of the wanted man. Chief Inspector Gidleigh and I shall be very busy searching for clues to the murderer. It is amusing to reflect that I shall be hunting for myself." He broke off with a chuckle and then became once more the serious, didactic Henry Paunceforte.

"We are wasting time, Miss Abbott. As I have told you, I propose to employ humane means to end your life. Let us call it euthanasia. But to adopt euthanasia requires your co-operation. I cannot compel you to swallow a drug that shall silently end all your troubles—and mine. I can, however, offer you the alternative of a death that is also silent, but not painless." He held up the gleaming knife as he spoke. It was a razor-edged hunting blade. "Do you understand? Either you will swallow the drug that I shall give you, or I will cut your throat with this. Be quick, please."

Christine's mouth was dry. Words refused to come. She stared at the door haggardly. One thought only obsessed her. She must play for time. Stave him off. Keep him away from her until help came. But would help come? There was no help. No one knew.

He came nearer, and a ray of light from the bulb overhead reflected from the blade into Christine's eyes. She jerked herself away in terror until she stood with her back to the shelves. One of his arms was outstretched now, not to her throat, but up towards the shelf above her head. The girl slipped aside and made a frantic, futile grab at the hand carrying the knife. With an unguessed-at strength he twisted his wrist free. There was now a

bottle containing a colorless fluid in his other hand. He set the bottle on a packing case, and beside it a chemical measure. He looked at Christine again.

"It is chloral hydrate," he said. "It kills by paralyzing the breathing and by its action on the heart muscle. But you will feel no pain—merely giddiness and drowsiness. That is euthanasia. You should be grateful to me."

Christine watched him, fascinated, as he drew out the glass stopper and prepared to tilt the bottle into the measure. Then she gathered her strength into one frenzied effort and leapt at him.

He flung her off coolly without the loss of one single drop of the bottle's contents. She came at him again, her breath sobbing with terror, and he laid down the bottle to confront her. There was now a hard glitter behind the thick lenses and the knife was raised to strike.

"So you prefer it that way. Very well."

She backed away again towards the door. Reaching it, she hammered it madly on the panels. He gripped her by one shoulder and flung her aside. She flashed out a hand, knocked up the light switch and in the darkness struck him, with all her force, in the face.

There was a tinkle as something fell to the ground and then the light flashed on again. Christine saw the white face peering myopically downwards. At her feet were Mr. Henry Paunceforte's spectacles. With the speed of inspiration she brought her heel down on them and ground the lenses to powder.

He uttered an exclamation of rage. She ran across the room, while he followed, arms outstretched, blundering over the packing cases. She looked round desperately for something that could serve as a weapon and found nothing better than the bottles on the shelves. Seizing one, she hurled it at him, but it was a feeble effort. The bottle smashed itself against the opposite wall, wide of

its mark, and an acrid smell arose. The next moment he was on her again.

Half choking, half screaming, she managed miraculously to elude him once more and found herself against the opposite wall. There were no shelves nor bottles here, no weapon of any kind. She saw him screw up his eyes to focus her there, and then approach again.

"It is useless," he said. "You cannot possibly escape me. I advise you for the last time not to force me to use this knife." He stopped in the middle of the room and held it out. "It will hurt you excruciatingly," he said. "Be advised, and choose—the other way." Her mind began to work at unnatural speed. She saw him, death in his hand. Beyond him on the upturned packing case there was death also. She could read the label on the glass-stoppered bottle. . . . There were rows of bottles along the shelves that seemed to swim before her eyes. Then her vision cleared, sharpening into unearthly clarity. She would try. God helping her, she would try.

Peering at her near-sightedly, Paunceforte became aware that she was moving towards him. Suddenly she made a feint, swung aside, dashed out the light-switch, and gained the opposite wall by the shelves. As he fumbled his way towards the switch a bottle hurtled through the air at him, and then another. One struck him between the shoulder blades. Again the light flashed on and he rapped out:

"Fool! What can you do? It is only a question of time. But I will give you no more time. Since you will not be reasonable I must make your decision for you." Again he came towards her, and this time she did not move. Instead, she stood there awaiting him, and her listless poise spoke of defeat.

"Yes," she said under her breath, "you are right. I can do nothing. Please—not *that* way—"

He lowered the knife, and his lips parted in a grin.

"You choose wisely, Miss Abbott. Very well."

Still with the knife poised ready in one hand he lifted the little bottle from the packing case and half filled the measure from it. Then he held out the glass.

"Drink, Miss Abbott, and good-by."

Their eyes met—held each other. Christine raised the measure to her lips and drained it.

She saw him move to the door and carefully collect the debris of the smashed spectacles. That would be evidence of his presence, of course. She saw him glance at her curiously, as he drew the key from his pocket.

And then she sank to the floor.

Chapter XXVII

“You have kept us waiting,” the Assistant-Commissioner commented with displeasure, “for close on three quarters of an hour.”

Mr. Paunceforte inclined his head in respectful acknowledgment of the rebuke and seated himself. Chief-Inspector Gidleigh, staring at him in distaste, observed that Paunceforte was wearing a different pair of spectacles. The Chief Inspector’s trained eyes noticed also without significance that there was a damp mark on the shoulder of Mr. Paunceforte’s coat. A very faint smell of ammonia permeated the office. It looked as though this over-nice young man had dallied to remove some little stain from his coat. Gidleigh sniffed contemptuously.

“I m-m-much regret the d-d-delay, sir,” Paunceforte began. “Unfortunately, I b-b-broke my g-glasses and was obliged to g-get another p-pair.”

The Assistant-Commissioner snorted irritably. “Good God! Do you mean to say you’ve kept us waiting here all this time for that!”

He snatched back his cuff to glance at his wrist watch. “Unless Miss Abbott returns within the next ten minutes we shall have to adjourn this meeting. I should, of course,

have declined to permit Miss Abbott to absent herself at such a time."

Michael frowned uneasily. A peculiar obsession had taken hold of him that Christine's absence held some deeper significance than a mere call to a dying friend. He should have insisted on going with her. And yet what possible danger could threaten the girl? It was not in Christine Abbott's power to disclose information that might endanger the secret enemy. Over and over again she had insisted that she knew nothing. Nothing. Her part had been played. She had come out of it with clean hands, thank God, a restored reputation. They had granted a free pardon and her life would begin anew with him. He smiled to himself at that, but the next moment frowned again. He should have gone with her. And yet she was no fool. He began to wonder who this dying friend could be. She had very nearly told him, and then checked herself. He found himself wondering about her people. Her mother and father were dead, but there must be relatives. What sort of people would they be?

Jill was looking at him thoughtfully, and, as though she read his mind, she nodded.

"I don't like this, Michael. Chris shouldn't have gone alone." Jill's voice was meant to be too quiet to reach any other ears but his. But Gidleigh heard.

"What harm can come to her?" he asked levelly. "Unless—" he paused.

"Unless what?" Michael faced him abruptly.

"We have to be frank, sir, even if it hurts. Unless she's mixed up in this, after all."

Michael shook his head obstinately, and Jill's red lips curved in scorn.

"I'm ready to admit it is more likely I am wrong," Gidleigh said patiently. "But there's something here I don't understand. Something working against us. A sort of

hunch I get at times, that almost make me smell a crook—Um—” He paused to glower somberly across the office. Paunceforte’s teeth were clicking in his frantic efforts to frame a coherent sentence. Colonel Tankerville was bad-temperedly declining to listen even to his protégé just now.

“That will do now, Paunceforte. Be good enough to hold yourself in readiness for another conference at short notice.” The Assistant-Commissioner turned towards Jill and Michael. “The same applies to you, if you please. Miss Abbott, I understand, is staying with Miss Norton. Very good. It is possible that by our next meeting some news may have come through regarding the missing woman, Bernice Randall, though I incline to the view of Paunceforte here, that she will be in no better position to tell us anything than the rest of you.”

“It is really astounding,” the Assistant-Commissioner concluded, “that so little useful information is available from people who have been in actual contact with these criminals. As matters stand we can make no move in any direction.”

In the study of his well appointed service flat in Half Moon Street, Mr. Henry Paunceforte, Master of Arts and Criminologist, sat and wrote a letter. The shaded desk lamp threw a white light on the paper before him, lent a sickly greenish tinge to his thin features, and left the remainder of the room in studious obscurity. The faint scratching of his pen was the only sound to disturb the stillness.

It was a longish epistle that had occupied him for many pleasantly unhurried moments:—

“He believes that the plan was bungled, that its organizer is in fear of his life. Does not that amuse you? I will own that I understood the kind of fear he meant when I re-

alized that C.A. was beginning to stare at me. . . . Sooner or later the revelation would have come to her. But I was too quick. It was an inspiration that made me telephone from your deathbed, my dear. That amuses you, surely?

“When all is said, I cannot call it a perfect piece of work. It is not the flawless scheme I had planned. That is thanks to the incalculable human element. What fools those others were to have selected knowledge and death rather than ignorance and security and wealth. Only M. was sensible. Eventually he will profit. . . . Wealth! Enough even for you, my dear, and that is saying a great deal. I shall love to see you as the princess you were meant to be. But be careful for the present. So much from the Bank at Cannes: so much from the Bank at Nice. So much from Bordighera and Budapest and Lisbon. You will find that there is an embargo on the export of money in these countries. It does not matter. With the credits you have in each you will be free to move about. And then, one glorious day I will join you. But not just yet. Not for six months, at the least. It is essential for me to play the game a little longer. Then I will resign and the fool, G., will clap his silly fat hands, and go and arrest Miss H.

“Was there ever anyone so well equipped as the man to whom you have joined your life for this great success? I do not say it in any spirit of boasting; it is a simple statement of fact by one who sees himself very clearly—as clearly as he sees the qualities of others. When you reflect that I have used my abnormal powers to make myself acquainted with the minutest detail in the lives and methods of criminals, taking the infinite pains that in other professions would be hailed as the manifestations of genius. You will understand that no matter what obstacles might beset my path I was bound to succeed. My knowledge of

prison systems alone is more complete by far than that of any prison governor. . . .

"It is curious that those researches into C.N.'s history should have revealed that his likeness to H. was no accident. Here, again, a card was placed in my hands that only I could use to its fullest extent. G. will watch Miss H. until the crack of doom.

Mr. Paunceforte laid down his pen and smiled pensively. There was humor in that last reflection. . . . He resumed:—

"Mine has been the fortune that comes to those who earn it by scrupulous attention to detail, and the same quality has enabled me to turn apparent reverses to good account. Thus, the unforeseen intervention of M.C. and our subsequent failure to make him go away or otherwise render him ineffectual, Miss H.'s concern for her son, so desperate that she must needs sink everything to warn him when my anonymous letter fished S. out of the tarn. These obscure intuitions of obscure people clouded the issue to perfection. It is pleasant to dwell on that. Suspicion lies on her, and on the dead. Even on H. himself. On no one else. Not a breath. They can learn nothing. Nothing. The last thread has been cut.

"Do not write to me here, for the present. And be patient. It is hard for me, also, to be patient.

The scratching pen paused as a knock came at the outer door of the flat and Paunceforte rose to answer it. To his surprise it was Gidleigh. The Chief Inspector entered the hall and took off his bowler hat. He looked tired and concerned.

"You'll excuse me butting in like this, Paunceforte, especially as we don't exactly—um—see eye to eye about things. But there's been a fresh development, a very serious one, and I'd like your opinion."

Mr. Paunceforte smiled acidly, and reclosed the door.

"B-by all means, Inspector. Though I d-d-don't suppose you'll like my opinion when you g-g-get it."

Removing his overcoat the visitor hung it up. Paunceforte, preceding him into the study, carefully placed in a drawer the letter he had been writing and re-seated himself, fingertips together in an attitude of didactic attention. Gidleigh fished in his pockets and frowned absently.

"Must be in my overcoat pocket," he said. "My pipe. You'll excuse me one moment."

He made his way back to the hall and collected the pipe. Re-entering the study he sank into a chair and began to fill the pipe.

"You'll remember," he began, "that during our conference this afternoon there was a telephone call for Miss Abbott?"

Mr. Paunceforte nodded. So *that* was the serious fresh development. He had been wondering when the discovery would be made.

"At the time," Gidleigh went on, "it did not seem possible that any danger could threaten Miss Abbott. There was no conceivable reason to suppose that the poor girl could be added to the list of people murdered by the Crooks' Shepherd. I, I own that this business has shaken me somewhat, Paunceforte." The Inspector passed his hand across his forehead. "It is awful to think that this child went from the Yard, from the police stronghold to *that* fate."

Mr. Paunceforte's eyes gleamed behind their thick lenses, and the green light illumined his pallid cheeks like an exultant spirit of evil. But Gidleigh was not looking at him.

"This is shocking, Gidleigh. G-good Heavens, what n-n-next!" Mr. Paunceforte said in horrified tones. "How d-d-did you f-f-find her?"

"It was young Chillaton and Miss Norton. Apparently they could not get away from the idea that there was something behind that telephone call. Chillaton went to the taxi stand and succeeded in finding the driver who had taken Miss Abbott to an address in Millbrook Street. It proved to be premises above a chemist's shop. The shop was closed, and getting no answer to his knocking young Chillaton broke in, a thing he had no right to do, but, poor devil, I don't blame him."

Gidleigh paused, his mouth grim. Mr. Paunceforte leant forward.

"And he found Miss Abbott, you say? *Murdered?*"

Gidleigh's face was working oddly, and Paunceforte stared at him with veiled contempt. Emotion in a detective. Pah! Paunceforte tapped the desk impatiently.

"Tell me the details, Inspector, if you want my help."

He did not hear the door open, and in the gloom he did not see the figure standing there. Until, with a shrug at the Inspector's seeming speechlessness he sat back in his chair. And then he saw—*the wraith of Christine Abbott*.

The screech that rose from his throat died into a strangled gasp as he saw his mistake. His hand dropped to a drawer in the desk.

"Stop that!" snarled Gidleigh. His own hand shot upwards as he spoke, and something glinted in it. A deadly, breathless silence hung. Pale as death, Christine moved into the room. At her side stood Michael Chillaton. Paunceforte looked at her as though he saw only her in the room.

"You drank it!" he said, under his breath. "And you live!"

The girl shook her head.

"I drank, but not Chloral Hydrate."

Paunceforte smiled faintly.

"I see. And so you changed the bottles?"

"Yes."

"That was clever of you, and insanely foolish of me. Let me see, it was after you smashed my glasses." He spoke as though the discussion were one of merely academic interest. "And then, I remember, you switched out the light. While I fumbled for the switch you threw a bottle at me, the Chloral Hydrate?"

"Yes."

"And then you substituted another bottle on the packing case, something that your good eyes had seen to be harmless. In those few seconds you had memorized its position on the shelf. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"I see. I congratulate you." Paunceforte made a little half bow, a strangely courteous gesture. "I ask you to believe that from first to last of these—operations—I have been actuated by malice to no one. Do you believe that?"

"Yes," said Christine. And, strangely, she did.

"Thank you," answered Paunceforte.

Then he turned and held out his wrists to Chief Inspector Gidleigh.

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