



THE WAGONER'S HALT MYSTERY

Michael
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The Wagoner's Halt Mystery

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The Wagoner's Halt Mystery

CHAPTER I

An Office Interlude

“Why don’t you keep to your own office? Why can’t you stay in your own kennel?” Mr. Cummings snapped out, suddenly, bitterly, and even vindictively. “If the Scouts had taught you to mind your own business and let other people get on with theirs it might have done you a lot of good. You come into this office as though you owned it. You’re supposed to keep in Mr. Raven’s office when he’s not here. You clear out of this office, you—you—you Nosey Sprout!”

There was a hint of triumph in Mr. Cummings’s voice as he found the right insult to hurl at the youth who half sat, half leaned on the big pedestal desk which Mr. Cummings shared with his colleague, Mr. Mason. The desk was piled with letter-files, documents, bulky envelopes, and a variety of official-looking papers all tied with pink tape.

For this was the main office of Messrs. Micklethwaite, Raven, Mortimer & Raven, Solicitors, of Old Flag Court, London, E.C. The hour was half-past eleven on Thursday morning, and Jimmy Sprott, being bored with his own company in the empty office of Mr. Christopher Raven, a junior partner in the firm, had strolled out to waste a few minutes with anybody who was available. He had found Mr. Mason and Mr. Cummings, two of the clerks, indulging in some small bickering.

It had become swiftly evident that Mason and Cummings were rapidly becoming thoroughly annoyed with each other. Jimmy Sprott had butted in instinctively, though he fully realized that it would probably end with the pair of them forgetting their own disagreement and combining forces to squash him. The prospect of being squashed did not worry Sprott in the least. Several people in this office had attempted to do that but so far had failed lamentably.

Generally speaking, Mason and Cummings were the best of friends and colleagues. But they had their off days. It was evident to Sprott that Cummings was in a peevish, quarrelsome mood, which explains why he took Mason's side without the slightest idea of what they were arguing about. Mr. Mason was about forty; Cummings was three or four years younger, and had been something of an athlete and sportsman in his younger days, but confined himself to tennis and gardening nowadays.

When Cummings became really annoyed with the wit and banter of Jimmy Sprott it was his great jest to call him Sprout. This was quite clever, so Cummings thought, because it was a play on both Sprott and Scout, and everybody in the office knew that Jimmy Sprott was a Scout, and quite an important one at that, because he had on occasion come to the office in full kit, having been selected to represent the Scouts at some important function.

It was also common knowledge that young Mr. Raven had brought Sprott into Micklethwaite's office. Mr. Raven, assisted by Sprott, really formed a small, special, rather secret and confidential department, all by themselves. In sarcasm, yet not without some little truth in the gibe, Mr. Mason and Mr. Cummings would at times refer to Sprott as "our secret service staff".

After Mr. Cummings had hissed forth his vindictive and crushing gibe of "Nosey Sprout", which was just about the very limit of low vulgarity according to the Micklethwaite standard, he glared at Mason and Sprott as though to let them see that he was a truly savage animal when roused. Mr. Mason smiled and turned to Sprott, judging that in a moment or two the good-looking junior would render valuable assistance with several much more cutting though possibly more refined comments than Mr. Cummings had achieved.

"He's got a liver this morning," Mason remarked, hoping to encourage Sprott. The junior, however, was regarding Cummings quite calmly and with the air of a fishmonger observing some curious specimen of the finny tribe on his marble slabs. There was not the slightest sign of annoyance over the "Nosey Sprout" insult.

"No, it isn't a liver," Sprott said, judicially and regretfully. "It's much more serious than that, I'm afraid. It's probably a good thing that I came in, Mr. Mason. This is a case where an understanding friend may be very helpful. Now do listen to me, Mr. Cummings! Take my advice and you'll be grateful to me in the years to come. Don't go home wearing that tie to-night! Leave it at the office—lose it, forget you ever had it, but don't wear it. Buy another when you're out at lunch. That's the very first thing you must do."

"What do you mean? What's wrong with my tie?" Cummings demanded, but there was a sudden guilty flush about his face and a startled note in his voice which told Mr. Mason that young Sprott had touched the spot in some

way. What the tie had to do with Cummings's ill-temper was something Mason could not grasp, but Cummings's manner showed that it had. Sprott was an extraordinary youngster, and it was certainly not all hot air that he talked when he lectured them on the art and science of observation.

"There's nothing wrong with the tie," Sprott said. "It's really quite a nice tie, but not for you. You know perfectly well that your wife doesn't like it because it was given to you by someone at the tennis club after you'd won the mixed doubles—but we needn't go into that now. It's ancient history. But you must get rid of that tie!"

"If you'd mind your own business——" Cummings said, but so weakly and so lacking real protest that he never even attempted to finish his sentence. He merely stared moodily at the work in front of him and his sulkiness encouraged Sprott to continue.

"I'm sorry for you, Mr. Cummings. You're a happily married man and yet you're foolish enough to quarrel over a trivial thing of that sort. Not only did you quarrel with your wife over breakfast, but you didn't even kiss Betty good-bye this morning. A big-hearted man like you oughtn't to behave in that way. You simply dashed off out several minutes before you need have left home and then walked by the field-path to the station, which was quite unnecessary. As a result you came up to town by an earlier train and missed the men with whom you usually travel. Didn't feel in the mood for their company this morning, I suppose? Childish—not worthy of you, Mr. Cummings."

"Who's told you this?" Cummings made a sudden effort to become angry again and glared at Mason accusingly. "What have you been saying about me?"

"I've not said anything," Mason protested. "I don't know anything about it. You certainly mentioned that you caught the 8.35, but I certainly never mentioned it to Sprott."

"Now please don't argue, children," Sprott reproved. "Nobody told me. I observed it for myself. It's so very obvious. I was going to mention that you didn't even finish the boiled egg you had for breakfast, but I'm not sure that it wasn't a poached egg. However, take my advice. Replace your tennis club tie with another one; buy your wife a nice bunch of—No, she'll think you're extravagant if you buy flowers when you have all you need in your own garden. So it will have to be sweets or chocolates, according to the lady's taste. Oh, and I'd take Betty something, too."

"Anything else?" Cummings asked.

"Better say something about having a most difficult time at the office just at present. Don't overdo it, you know. You see the idea, however? Don't refer to breakfast at all; don't mention the tie. If the subject is raised, treat it in an

off-hand fashion. Hint that you never did like the thing and you've given it away to the office boy who rather fancied it. But do what I tell you and you'll be saying to-morrow, just quietly and in confidence to Mr. Mason, that you think young Sprott is a marvel. As I've said before—Always take Sprott's advice!"

Mr. Mason was watching his colleague's face while the cheeky junior spouted his hot air. Cummings had been annoyed before Sprott appeared on the scene and this sort of talk was liable to make him explode. But it didn't. Cummings simply stared at the youth as though temporarily hypnotized. Everybody knew that Cummings was happily married and that his daughter, Betty, was one of the world's supreme wonders. It would annoy Cummings exceedingly to be lectured on his domestic affairs by a mere junior.

Instead of showing his annoyance, however, Mr. Cummings's lips slowly twisted into the wisp of a smile, the first of the morning, and then rather weakly he asked: "How did you know about—about the tie—and everything else? Who told you? You couldn't have guessed all that."

"It isn't guesswork; it's what we call deduction," Sprott said calmly. "I just observe the details and form my own conclusions. We all know that Betty never fails to smooth those massive eyebrows of yours; you told us some joke about the tie a long time ago, but you've never worn it except on that one occasion. Mrs. Cummings doesn't like it, and she's annoyed that you should drag it out again. You ought to have lost it long ago. The other details are all there to be seen. The fleck of egg still showing on your coat indicates that you left home without submitting to that final little flick with the clothes brush and the quick look-over which your wife always gives you. Any ass can tell from one glance at your shoes that you came across the field-path this morning; it isn't dust but a mixture of morning dew and dust which makes mud. And you were already here when I came in and getting on with your work instead of reading the morning paper. Put two and two together——"

"Ah, good morning! Good morning! Could I see Mr. Raven—Mr. Christopher Raven, please?"

Sprott's airy lecture came to an abrupt end. An apparition had entered the office. Behind him came Wilks, the middle-aged man who sat in the inquiry office, dealt with all callers politely, and performed other useful tasks. Wilks had his arms outstretched and was obviously pained and angry that this man had eluded his grasp and burst into the general office.

"I couldn't stop him! He never gave me a chance. Told me he must see ____"

"All right, my good fellow! I shall explain everything to Mr. Raven, and I feel sure he will not blame you in the least. Good morning, gentlemen! I must apologize for entering in this unseemly fashion, but I am most urgently

anxious to see Mr. Raven.”

He was not at first sight the kind of man Wilks ought to have admitted. Rather was he the type of caller whom Wilks was expected to keep in a dark corner of the waiting-room until somebody had found out his business. Judged by his appearance, the man had just come through an earthquake or been mixed up in a wild street row. His tie was hanging loosely from his half-open waistcoat; his collar had come unanchored and one end was flapping about like a flag of truce; the right side of his face had apparently been banged and rubbed against a brick wall, and there was a slowly congealing trickle of blood from a cut near the temple.

He had no hat and his clothes on one side had gathered a good deal of mud and dust, from which, going on Sprott's lines, one might deduce that he had first of all been in contact with some wet earth and later had been rolled in a drier spot.

That side of his face which had not been mixed up with the brick wall, however, gave the impression of a fairly youngish man, though his hair, getting rather thin and with a greyish tinge here and there, hinted at middle age.

But it was his smiling air of complete amiability, and the ridiculous appearance of lop-sidedness as he looked over the top of his broken eyeglasses, which made both Cummings and Mason decide very quickly that the best plan would be to get rid of the man at the earliest moment. He was most assuredly not the sort of prospective client Messrs. Micklethwaites desired to welcome. Important business men came to them, and ordinary police-court cases were not quite in their line.

“I am afraid Mr. Raven is out this morning, but if you will call again this afternoon it is possible that he will be free,” Mr. Mason said, rising, and preparing to use all the tact at his command to persuade this queer character to depart quietly.

“I'm sorry to hear that,” the man said, and his tones were those of a courteous and cultured man. “But I wonder if Mr. Raven's assistant is in the office? I should like to see him for a few moments—ah—privately, you know. Mr. Jimmy—let me see—Scout, Sprout—Ah, yes, Sprott! Mr. Sprott! Is Mr. Sprott engaged?”

The first real genuine smile of the morning was on Mr. Cummings's face, and both Mason and Wilks were checking a grin. Mason turned to Jimmy Sprott and said in swift low tones: “He's your pigeon, Jimmy! Now you'll be able to deduce quite a lot! Take him away—but press the bell hard if you want any help!”

Sprott was already moving forward and smiling pleasantly, despite the visitor's playful way with his name.

“I am Mr. Raven’s assistant. Will you come this way, please, Mr.—I didn’t quite catch your name, I’m afraid?”

“Kel—ah—Smithers! Yes! John Smithers! John Murgatroyd Smithers. How do you do, Mr. Sprott? If you could spare me a few minutes I should be most grateful.”

“Come this way, Mr. Smithers,” Jimmy said, and led the way from the general office and just across the passage to the private room of Mr. Raven, where Jimmy himself usually occupied a small desk, except at those times when Mr. Raven indicated that he could wander away.

“Will you take a chair—Mister—Murgatroyd—Smithers?” Jimmy said, and gave an emphatic and slightly sarcastic note to the name. “And then, if you wouldn’t mind, I should like to know your real name. We prefer our clients to deal with us frankly, and naturally have strong objections to dealing with anyone under an assumed name.”

CHAPTER II

Sanctuary for Creed

Sprott intended his remarks about the visitor's real name to be challenging and at the same time he hoped that Mr. Smithers would have a little shock. The sooner he realized that frankness paid and bluff didn't, the better it would be.

But the visitor was not in the least shocked. He beamed over his broken glasses as though he found Jimmy's challenge distinctly amusing.

"Of course, Mr. Sprott. But I thought it better not to broadcast my name before the others, and I am sure you will appreciate my reasons presently. As a matter of fact, I had decided to use another name, but in the excitement of the moment I completely forgot it. It was Sir Roger Marston who suggested some time ago that if ever we were in difficulties we should consult Mr. Christopher Raven. You will have heard of Sir Roger Marston, of course?"

"Oh yes," Sprott agreed.

"He has been very interested in certain work my brother and I have been engaged upon lately. My name is Kelvin Creed, and my brother, Stanton Creed, works with me in the laboratory we have built at Wagoner's Halt. Unfortunately, we have encountered serious difficulties in the past few days. Stanton, indeed, has disappeared completely—*not* of his own free will, you understand. He is now being detained somewhere as a prisoner."

Sprott's feelings towards the visitor had already undergone a distinct change. He was not the foolish person he had at first appeared to be. There was even in his present dishevelled state something fascinating about the man and a certain charm not easy to define, but very quickly appreciated by Jimmy Sprott. The names, too, were distinctly familiar: Kelvin and Stanton Creed had surely been mentioned in the newspapers quite recently? As for Sir Roger Marston, his name was more than familiar. Kit Raven and Jimmy Sprott had carried out two or three confidential investigations on his behalf in a way which had earned high praise.

"No, I won't sit down, thank you very much," Kelvin Creed said when Jimmy asked him for the third time to take a chair. "I must apologize for my very untidy appearance, but I have no doubt that you frequently have strange callers. I will be as brief as possible in my explanations. First of all, I am anxious to hand over to you an important package for safe keeping."

Sprott had already decided to allow the visitor to babble or explain in his own way, possibly with an occasional prompting. But when the man began to remove his coat and waistcoat, then flung his braces over his shoulders, Jimmy

felt it was time to make some mild protest. Mr. Raven's office was not a disrobing-room nor even a cubicle at the swimming-baths.

Kelvin Creed took not the slightest notice of the quiet suggestion that there was no sleeping accommodation here. Creed carried on with his performance and appeared to be tying himself in knots.

"Ah! Here we are!" Creed had just discovered that his collar was still attached on one side to the stud and that this prevented him from making further progress with his efforts to undress. Having unfastened the collar, he seemed to be trying to remove his vest without first taking off the shirt. That queer fascination the man had for Sprott prevented the youngster from saying another word of protest. He merely wondered what was going to happen next.

"At last!" Kelvin Creed's face beamed with triumph as he produced a flat package, wrapped in brown paper and sealed in several places. It must have measured some fourteen inches by ten. Apparently it had been secured by tapes over Kelvin Creed's shoulders. There was method in the man's madness after all. He had evidently been determined that neither through his own carelessness nor by any other person's design would he lose the packet. He handed it to Sprott, smiling at his own humour as he did so.

"My chest protector, Mr. Sprott!" he said. "If you would be good enough to place this in your safe, or some other secure hiding-place, until you can deliver it into the hands of Sir Roger Marston, personally, I should be most grateful. I would have taken it myself, of course, but Sir Roger is away at present. Mr. Houghton, his secretary, will let you know when he is back. You have probably met Houghton? Charming fellow. Very practical, of course, and remarkably orderly. I don't quite know how he would have dealt with this situation. Stanton suggested—Oh dear! If only we could be sure about Stanton! You—you will urge Mr. Raven to begin his efforts to find Stanton at the earliest possible moment, Mr. Sprott?"

He had begun to dress himself with almost desperate haste, and now, as he knotted his tie rather badly, he dropped into the armchair reserved for visitors. One hand went slowly to his forehead and his eyes closed. That bright, perky look had gone, and Kelvin Creed had become a worn and jaded elderly man. Yet in a moment or two he was making a fresh effort to be bright and smiling.

"I am very tired, otherwise I would have tried to explain more fully. Normally my mind works fairly clearly and without confusion of thoughts. But Stanton has disappeared. He vanished last night—kidnapped by our enemies, I fear. I, too, shall vanish for a time. I must. My mind has become confused and I am losing my sense of proportion. I must rest. It is wiser to keep calm in times of crisis than to allow oneself to be overwhelmed. We have discussed the question several times, Stanton and I. But in my case I shall disappear of my own free will, and I shall be quite safe. Rest assured on that point, Mr. Sprott. I

fear that Stanton is in grave danger and may even be suffering, though I trust not. Will you—you and Mr. Raven—do your utmost to help us? Sir Roger—or Houghton—will tell you——”

For a moment Jimmy feared that Kelvin Creed was going to collapse in the chair and that it would be wise to summon a doctor immediately. Before he had time to make a definite decision, however, Kelvin Creed was jumping up.

“I must go now. I am sure that it is the best course. You have the package and it will be safe in your hands until it is delivered to Sir Roger Marston. You will get in touch with Houghton and tell him that Stanton has gone and that I am in hiding, seeking rest. Sir Roger Marston will help you all he can. Now—is there some more private exit from these premises other than the main entrance through which I came?”

There was, as it happened, a rear or side entrance to this block of offices, but it was not the sort of exit one would use to take out a client. Yet Sprott conducted Kelvin Creed to this doorway without any protest simply because he had the feeling that Creed was right. If it had been possible Jimmy would have accompanied him farther, but Kelvin Creed begged him not to do so.

Sprott merely saw him out through this private exit into Leeson’s Alley, and explained that if he took certain turnings it would bring him out into the same street as the main entrance. Mr. Creed was anxious to reach Boston Street and there, apparently, his journey would end.

“Whether he likes it or not, I’m keeping an eye on him for a time!” Sprott decided, and, having allowed Creed a fair start, he followed him.

Creed went at a good pace, almost breaking into a run when he reached Old Flag Court, and so through to Boston Street. Jimmy determined to keep him in view until he either took a taxi or train or bus, or disappeared into some office or hotel.

Someone else was also interested in Creed, as Sprott suddenly realized. Two men actually passed Jimmy and he heard their excited whispers.

“That’s Creed all right! We should get him now!”

“Signal the car to keep close at hand. They’ll be all right in this street, but once we’re in Threadgold Circus it won’t be so easy.”

Jimmy had instinctively kept close to the men, who were not in the least interested in him, having eyes only for the figure ahead. He heard no more of their quick, jerky talk, however, and was indeed not quite certain whether he had correctly grasped the few brief sentences he had managed to pick up. They were getting very near the corner of Boston Street now, and the men began to put on extra speed.

Creed turned round suddenly and saw the men. There was not the slightest doubt in Jimmy’s mind about that, because Creed suddenly broke into a desperate run and was vanishing round the corner before the men were within

a dozen yards of him. There were a fair number of people about, and the men were hampered when they tried to make a spurt.

They beat Jimmy Sprott by yards, however, and had vanished round the corner a few seconds before he reached the point where Boston Street joined the busy and important Threadgold Circus.

Just as Sprott turned into the Circus and went to the left, which was the way the two men had gone, a policeman went hurrying by. He was almost running—and it was just then that Jimmy saw the little crowd gathering round another policeman only a few yards away. For perhaps four seconds Jimmy had a somewhat interrupted view of the exciting scene which was holding up the pedestrians.

The policeman's helmet had obviously been knocked off, and a smaller man was prancing round in the manner of a light-weight boxer trying to find an opening for a knock-out blow against a much heavier opponent. Once the smaller man managed to land a hit that was barely more than a tap, but hopped out of the policeman's reach before he could be seized. The onlookers were apparently too amazed and possibly too amused to interfere as swiftly as they might have done, and even the policeman showed more signs of amusement than serious annoyance.

Again the little man pranced round, but the policeman decided that the show had lasted long enough. His arms swept forth and he gathered in the comic light-weight to his broad chest in the manner of a grizzly bear hugging its victim. The second policeman was on the scene by now and he stepped forward with ponderous calm to assist his comrade. The incident was over. Two seconds later the optimistic little man who had tried to knock out a policeman in Threadgold Circus was fairly and squarely in the grip of the law. Somebody had already handed the policeman his helmet and he looked calm and imposing once again.

"Great Scott! Kelvin Creed!" Sprott was gasping to himself as he recognized the silly ass who had pitted his puny strength against the massive pillar of the law. Creed looked tremendously pleased about his effort, too, despite the firm grip of two towering constables as they took him off.

"Bats in the belfry, I should say," a man was trying to explain to his friend as the crowd dispersed. "I saw it all. He came dashing up and took the copper by surprise. Made one jump and sent his helmet flying, then shouted out something about taking on the whole of Scotland Yard at twopence a time. It may be some stunt to call attention to himself, as you say, but I doubt it. He looks pleased with himself, anyway. Not a young chap either. Ah, well! I must get along."

As the two policemen passed by Jimmy Sprott another man was butting in and trying to explain something to the police. Sprott had put his handkerchief

to his face as a momentary disguise as he had no desire to be seen by Kelvin Creed.

“All right! You come round to Dane Street and tell the sergeant there all about it, sir. He’ll tell you what to do.”

Sprott had an idea that he recognized the man who was trying to engage the policeman in conversation. He was one of the two men who had been so anxious to overtake Creed just before this queer performance took place. They were, according to the odd remarks Jimmy managed to hear, relatives of the prisoner, and they were anxious to impress the policeman that the poor fellow was under medical treatment. The police were polite but quite firm. Everything could be explained at the police station but not in the street.

Jimmy Sprott did not follow the police. He was very interested in the two men, however, and did his best to keep track of them. Just round the corner in Boston Street their car was waiting for them and both men jumped in the back. The car was being driven away almost immediately but not before Sprott had made a note of the number and mentally photographed the two men.

Later on he wandered round to Dane Street. He knew quite a number of the officers attached to this police station. At various times in the past year or two it had been necessary for Kit Raven to work in conjunction with the police, and it was owing to these cases that Jimmy Sprott could rely upon a welcome and any information it was possible to give him.

The sergeant in charge had finished with the case recently brought in, and the man had already been taken to a detention cell. The policeman had suffered not the slightest harm, of course, and it might have been regarded as a ridiculous but objectionable prank, except for the man’s own statement.

“A mental case, I should think,” the sergeant told Sprott. “We shall have the doctor along to see him and his opinion will decide what course we take with the fellow. Name? James William Hope, so he says. No, he didn’t give us any address because, according to his story, he was turned out of his last place and nobody else wants him. He said he was tired of walking the streets and he wants a rest. We get some queer cases here at times.”

“Well, you’ll look after him all right, I know,” Sprott said. “And I say, Sergeant! Don’t be in too big a hurry about letting his friends bail him out. I think there’s something very queer about the case, and it’s highly probable that Mr. Raven will be acting for this man Hope. I have an idea that he’s really a client of ours, but I’d better not say too much at this stage. Mr. Raven will probably be coming round himself. But give us a ring if there’s any talk of bailing him out, will you?”

“Oh? Client of yours, eh?” The sergeant scratched his head and considered the matter. “Well, that will be all right with us, of course. Certainly! Something fishy behind this attempted assault, is there? I shouldn’t be

surprised at that, Jimmy Sprott! All right! We'll take care of him and we'll let you know if there's any talk of bail. From what Hope said himself he'll refuse to be bailed out, anyway. But we'll let you know if anything crops up."

Jimmy Sprott thanked him and wandered forth. He walked back to the office leisurely, trying to see the queer incidents of this morning in proper perspective. Were Kelvin Creed's visit and his later performance in Threadgold Circus to be regarded as comic interludes of no particular importance, or was there a good deal more behind it than Jimmy had yet grasped?

In any case, the visit of Kelvin Creed, alias John Murgatroyd Smithers, alias James William Hope, had given him quite a pretty problem on which to ponder. There was no need for him to exercise his powers of observation upon Mr. Cummings. Cummings could look after himself, but it looked as though Kelvin Creed was badly needing someone to look after him!

CHAPTER III

Cancelled by Death

Kit Raven came into the office soon after Jimmy Sprott had returned. He was a well-built, athletic-looking man of twenty-seven or so, and was the junior partner in the firm of Micklethwaites. Seven or eight years ago the prospect of becoming a solicitor and spending his life in an office, poring over legal documents and becoming an expert on the intricacies of Company Law, had filled him with unhappy forebodings. He wanted an open-air life with some dash of adventure and spice of danger knocking round.

His father was very keen, however, that young Christopher should carry on the family tradition and become in due course a partner in the legal firm of Micklethwaite, Raven, Mortimer & Raven. Kit Raven was a good son, a sound and occasionally a brilliant scholar in those subjects which happened to appeal to him, and he possessed a good deal of common sense. He chose a middle course by studying hard for his exams while indulging his taste for the open air by walking holidays and becoming a member of certain rambling organizations.

He also took a keen interest in the work of Scouts. In the troop which particularly interested him was a youngster of sixteen whose name was Jimmy Sprott. Soon after Kit Raven joined his father's firm young Sprott consulted him on the problem of getting a job and the outcome was that Jimmy entered Micklethwaites' offices as a junior clerk.

As legal advisers Micklethwaites covered a wide field and there were occasions when cases came their way which required skilled investigation. It was on this type of work that Kit Raven began to make a name for himself, and shortly after Sprott entered the office he found himself accompanying Kit Raven on a curious inquiry where fraud was suspected.

"Just use your eyes and let me know afterwards if anything strikes you," Kit Raven told his youthful assistant. Sprott carried out his instructions and, almost entirely as a result of his observations and his suggestions later, one of the most ingenious frauds ever attempted in the city was nipped in the bud.

There had been other cases since then and Mr. James Sprott, junior clerk in the employ of Micklethwaites, had appeared in the witness-box. Both Kit Raven and Sprott had been later complimented by the judge besides earning the thanks of the police. Their photographs had appeared in the newspapers and the name of Micklethwaite, Raven, Mortimer & Raven was mentioned a good many times.

Just at first the senior members of that highly reputable firm were not entirely pleased about the publicity this particular case had brought them. It was not on that type of case the firm had made its reputation. When they found that highly important people were anxious to have the services of a firm which not only combined firmly established integrity with expert commercial knowledge but had the alertness of Scotland Yard as well, the senior partners were pleased instead of pained.

In a very short time Kit Raven and Jimmy Sprott became a special department generally known as "Inquiries". They conducted the discreet investigations where it was advisable to know more of a person's reputation than appeared on the surface, or they handled those cases where there was a hint of blackmail behind the problem which had arisen, and at times they had been called to solve a genuine mystery, with police assistance if it seemed desirable.

The other clerks in the office were almost as well aware of the work done by young Mr. Raven and his junior clerk as the partners were, and at times became facetious, generally in the presence of Jimmy Sprott. "Our secret service staff" or the "Hush-Hush Department" and sometimes "our trained bloodhounds" were among the more regular nicknames conferred on the two investigators, and it helped to liven the routine of legal work. They could always rely upon young Sprott playing up to their efforts at humour, a fact which certainly helped his own popularity in the office.

This morning Kit Raven had been to keep an appointment with Sir Rufus Grayle, chairman or director of several great industrial companies and president of an important manufacturers' association. The appointment had been arranged by Mr. Micklethwaite senior, and he had told Kit that he knew nothing whatever about the real object of the consultation except that it was highly confidential and that Sir Rufus had made it clear that it was not so much a legal problem as a difficult case for investigation.

It sounded like a big job for the hush-hush department, though it did not necessarily follow that Jimmy Sprott would take any great part in it. But he was very anxious to hear anything Kit Raven had to tell him when he came back. Sprott's own story of Kelvin Creed and his queer antics in Threadgold Circus could wait for a time.

"Oh, I doubt if there is really anything in it for us, Jimmy," Raven said in answer to Sprott's inquiry, and he sounded slightly peeved. "Nothing for your powers of observation and no clues to ponder on. It is all very secret, but, so far as I can gather, Grayle's idea is that there is a steady leakage of information about new developments in the British industrial world. He thinks that there may be some well-organized system of spying whereby other countries learn all our manufacturing secrets almost before they are being worked in this

country. That's the gist of what he had to tell me."

Sir Rufus Grayle had not really been very helpful, nor had he given exact details of any particular case. He had spoken of some man who had died suddenly, but the verdict had been "accidental death". This man had been under suspicion of playing the part of traitor to his employers, but there had certainly never been anything definite established against him nor a direct accusation made.

The case had caused some talk, however, and suicide had been suggested. Sir Rufus Grayle's private secretary had expressed the opinion that it was murder, but was unable to bring forward anything that would justify his belief. Grayle and those with him were anxious to avoid calling in Scotland Yard, at all events not until they were on more certain ground. There were no real facts but merely vague suspicions to work upon.

"Then what does he expect us to do?" Sprott asked.

"Carry out a preliminary investigation—if you can tell me just what that means and how one begins. We may learn something more this afternoon, though I am not too hopeful. Grayle has telegraphed to this secretary, a man named Cantrell, and he is coming to see me this afternoon. He will have to come by car from Grayle's country house—at least, it's one of Grayle's residences, but it also happens to be near one of the big works in which Grayle is interested, and Cantrell spends a good deal of his time at this place, Hartsmere. That may be the jumping-off point for us, if ever we do manage to jump! But I think it's time we went out to lunch!"

It was while they were having their meal in a quiet corner of Kit Raven's club that Jimmy told his own yarn about the visit of Kelvin Creed, now resting in a detention cell at Dane Street police station.

"An extraordinary business!" Raven said. "It's queer, too, that he should mention Marston's name. We spoke of him several times this morning as he has been responsible for urging Grayle to consult me! He's evidently determined to push us forward as general trouble and mystery solvers. Well, I do hope we justify his good opinion of our abilities, but I'd prefer to tackle one case at a time instead of having two separate and distinct cases thrust on us in the same morning. What did you do with the package Creed gave you?"

"Locked it in the steel cabinet," Sprott answered promptly. "I did not telephone Houghton as Creed suggested, because I thought you might prefer to talk to him yourself. He may give you some idea of what is at the back of Creed's trouble."

"Yes. I'll ring Houghton when we get back. Then I might have a talk with the inspector at Dane Street. Kelvin Creed is a pretty big name in the scientific world. I suppose the best plan will be to see him as his solicitor and find out why he went out of his way to land himself in a cell."

They lingered over lunch, not because of the meal, but because both of them were worrying round in their minds in an attempt to get some clearer ideas about the two problems which had been thrust before them this morning. Kit Raven was anxious to do anything he could to justify Sir Roger Marston's good opinion of his abilities, and it would certainly not do the firm of Micklethwaites any harm to count Sir Rufus Grayle among their clients. But Grayle's problem was all so vague and woolly that it was difficult to know where to begin to tackle it. Possibly the visit from this man Cantrell might be helpful.

Jimmy Sprott was wondering afresh about Kelvin Creed. In one way it was unfortunate that Kit Raven had this other problem on his mind, as he would obviously regard Grayle's trouble as the more important of the two. There might be something in the Creed case if they could only tackle it in the right way. He was still wondering over the question of what was the right way when they returned to the office.

"I wonder what time this man Cantrell will turn up?" Raven said as he stood near his own desk. "When he does come, Jimmy, you might take a walk round to Dane Street and have a chat with Inspector Blair. I'll see if I can get hold of Houghton right away and find out what he knows. . . . All right! I'll answer it."

The telephone bell had tinkled and Raven took off the receiver. In a couple of seconds he knew that Sir Rufus Grayle was at the other end. Judging by his voice, he seemed a great deal more excited and urgent than he had done during their talk this morning!

"Is that Mr. Raven? Oh, good! Grayle speaking. You know that I sent a wire immediately to Cantrell this morning? It was better than telephoning, so I thought, as he might be in any of half a dozen places at the time. He received the telegram all right and sent a message through to me to say that he was coming to town immediately, calling on me first of all and then coming along to your office as arranged. He was evidently very pleased that you had been consulted. Well—I—word has just come through from Hartsmere. Cantrell has been killed. Shot dead in the house of a friend. It—it's murder, Raven!"

"I am sorry," Raven said quietly and simply. "Is there any idea—any theory—how it happened?"

"Apparently there is not much doubt about what happened though I have only had brief particulars so far. Cantrell was shot by one of his closest friends. There are two brothers living together not so very far from my place at Hartsmere. I knew them quite well myself—friends of Sir Roger Marston. Cantrell visited them frequently—last men on earth one would suspect of any kind of wrong-doing. The Creed brothers are quite well-known——"

"What name did you say?" Raven interrupted to make certain that he had

heard the name correctly.

“Creed. There are two brothers, Stanton and Kelvin. In the scientific world their names carry great weight—they have done a great deal of work for some of the companies with which I am personally associated. They live at a rambling sort of house—Wagoner’s Halt is the name of their place—about three or four miles from my house at Hartsmere.”

“Did Cantrell call to see them on his way to London?” Raven asked.

“That’s apparently what happened. A very good man was Cantrell. A bachelor—so were the Creeds. They were great friends. I can’t understand it. You don’t think this. . . . It isn’t possible that this tragedy can have any connexion with what I was telling you this morning?”

“I couldn’t possibly even guess at that,” Raven said. “Tell me—Cantrell must have been shot somewhere between noon and one o’clock? Yes, I thought so. And both the Creed brothers were at home when he called?”

“So far as I can gather from the brief report I have had. As I say, I have only heard the news by telephone, but I understand that both brothers were panic-stricken and took to their heels. There doesn’t seem to be any doubt about the fact that both Stanton and Kelvin Creed were at Wagoner’s Halt this morning, and they were in their laboratory when Cantrell called there. Now both brothers have vanished. They won’t get very far, of course, but—What do you think, Raven?”

Kit Raven was in a worse position for forming any opinion than Grayle was, but he gathered, after one or two further questions, that Sir Rufus was merely anxious that the young solicitor would act on his behalf and, if possible, let him have a report of some kind as soon as it was convenient. From one or two brief remarks he made over the telephone it was evident that Grayle had some weak idea that this tragedy at Wagoner’s Halt was in some remote way connected with the problem which he had endeavoured to put before Raven this morning.

Raven put the receiver back at last and turned to Jimmy Sprott. Briefly he told him Grayle’s news, though Jimmy had grasped the more important items from Raven’s remarks over the telephone.

“Our two cases seem to have become connected and to be part of one case before we have even attempted to tackle them,” Raven said. “The police will be busy, of course, but they will probably look at it from a different angle. We’ve had two or three queer cases in the last few months, Jimmy, but this looks like being the queerest and biggest.”

“Kelvin Creed can’t have had anything to do with Cantrell’s death,” Sprott said. “At least, he was not at Wagoner’s Halt when Cantrell was shot, whatever the evidence may be. Creed was in this office at half-past eleven and in Dane Street police station by noon. And according to what he told me his brother

Stanton had already disappeared when Kelvin left Wagoner's Halt. I wonder if we can get a photograph of Kelvin Creed just to make certain that it really was Kelvin Creed who called here this morning? I don't think there's any doubt about it myself, but it may be as well to make as certain as we can on that point. I think I should be able to tell from a photograph even though the visitor this morning was not looking his best by a long way."

"We'll get hold of a photograph, anyway," Raven decided, and rang up an agency. Within less than half an hour five or six different photographs of Kelvin Creed, as well as two or three of his brother Stanton, had been delivered. Raven handed them to Sprott.

"That's our man all right," Jimmy asserted after a very short examination of the photographs. "I'm prepared to stand firm on that! So we can take it that Kelvin Creed was not at Wagoner's Halt when the tragedy occurred; secondly, that it is quite possible Stanton Creed was not there either."

"That's a beginning," Raven said. "And what's the next move, Jimmy?"

"Go down to this place, Wagoner's Halt," Sprott said promptly. "Let's find out what really did happen there—and what has been happening just lately, especially last night. But Wagoner's Halt is the centre of the mystery and that's where the real beginning ought to be made."

CHAPTER IV

Kit Raven asks Questions

“Yes, I think you’re right,” Raven said some two or three minutes after Sprott had given his opinion. “The sooner I go down to Wagoner’s Halt the better it will be.”

“You’ll want me to come with you?” Sprott suggested, having observed that his chief had spoken in the first person singular.

“No, I think you’d better remain here, Jimmy,” Raven said slowly. “I’ll go down there right away and find out as far as possible what the position is there. The police will be in charge, and sometimes these local men don’t like outsiders wandering round. I shall have some official standing, of course, as I am acting as the legal representative of Sir Rufus Grayle, Cantrell’s employer.”

“I shan’t be able to help very much just sitting in the office,” Sprott said, anxious to make the trip to Wagoner’s Halt if possible.

“There may be quite a lot for you to do. It might be very helpful to me if I can telephone you here and ask you to make inquiries for me. Oh, and you’d better see the inspector or sergeant at Dane Street later on. Don’t say anything about our client being Kelvin Creed just yet. Evidently Creed himself won’t give his real name. Hope, wasn’t it? Curious he should choose that name, in view of what has happened.”

Jimmy Sprott was disappointed that he was not making the trip to Wagoner’s Halt, but he never attempted to argue against his chief’s decisions. Their relationship was curious in some ways, though not altogether unusual. On one of their queer investigations together, or even when alone in the office, they were “Kit” and “Jimmy” to each other, just two good friends, one of whom was some eight or nine years senior to the other. If a stranger or a client or even one of the other clerks happened to be present, then they became Mr. Raven, solicitor and partner in the firm, and Sprott, his junior clerk.

But whether anyone was present or the two were alone, Kit Raven remained the chief and there was never any argument about his decisions. He gave Sprott certain instructions before he left, and one way and another the junior would have quite enough to do before the day finished.

It was after three o’clock when Kit Raven left Old Flag Court to collect his car from a city garage. Hartsmere was a good hour’s run, but Wagoner’s Halt, although four miles away from Sir Rufus Grayle’s residence, was just about the same distance and possibly took slightly longer because one had to wander

over two or three different roads across the common and then through a patch of woodland to the old highway that was little more than a country lane these days.

Years ago it had possibly been a well-used road, but even before the new arterial road had been built the Nappwood Road had ceased to be of any great importance. The name of the house where the Creeds lived, Wagoner's Halt, was reminiscent of days long ago when the place had been an inn.

The house had been through several phases since those days. Successive owners had made additions and improvements until now it was a very pleasant, rambling, rather patchwork country cottage of the type that would have housed a large family. The inn had stood well back from the road, but the wide space in front where in days gone by the countrymen's wagons had been drawn in while their owners sought refreshment had been enclosed by a wall and formed part of the small estate. The present occupiers had made their own particular improvements, and what had once been a skittle alley at the back had been converted into a very modern laboratory.

Those were among the items which Kit Raven learned after his arrival at Wagoner's Halt. A policeman was on duty by the gate at the end of the short semicircular drive to the front entrance. After a brief delay Raven was allowed to go inside. Within the next three minutes he was meeting two people whom he knew quite well: Detective-Inspector Forshaw and his assistant, Sergeant Hopley, of Scotland Yard.

It surprised Raven to find Scotland Yard on the job so soon, but he learned that the Chief Constable for the district, realizing that the people concerned in this tragedy were of some importance, and that there was something mysterious about the whole affair, had promptly decided to avail himself of the Yard's help. In turn, the C.I.D. had acted with equal promptness.

"An unpleasant case," Forshaw said, when he had heard that Raven was holding a watching brief, so to speak, on behalf of Sir Rufus Grayle. "There doesn't seem to be any motive whatever so far. I've only been here a very short time, of course, but judging by the brief statement made by the Gills there seems very little doubt that one of the Creed brothers fired the shot. Unfortunately both of them have bolted instead of staying to face the music. Probably they were in a panic, which suggests that they never intended to kill Cantrell. It may have been an accident, but we shan't know what really happened until they have been found and made their statements."

A full description of the two brothers had already been circulated to the police. Those descriptions and other particulars were being distributed over a wide area. The net was being spread and it was highly improbable that the Creed brothers would be at liberty for more than a few hours.

"I'm having certain photographs taken now," Forshaw said as he

accompanied Raven through the house to the laboratory at the back. "I doubt if it will help very much and I don't think fingerprints are going to play any important part. Still, one never knows!"

Inspector Forshaw was not the sort of man to jump to conclusions before he had made a very thorough investigation, unless, of course, the main facts were quite clear from the very beginning. Raven was tempted to tell the Yard man about the queer affair at the office this morning, but decided that it might be better to keep back the information until he had personally seen the man who claimed to be Kelvin Creed.

"Is it quite certain that both the Creed brothers were in this laboratory when Cantrell called this morning?" Raven asked.

"No, it isn't. You'll be seeing Gill presently. I'd like you to have a talk with him. One brother was here—Stanton. But there seems to be some doubt about the other brother, Kelvin. But come along and see the Gills. There's two of them, husband and wife, and they have one boy, age fifteen, still at school. Mr. and Mrs. Gill, with occasional help, look after the Creeds and have been here ever since the brothers came. This has been a nasty shock for them, and they want careful handling. I'll let you do most of the talking this time."

They went from the laboratory to a pleasantly furnished dining-room in the house. Sergeant Hopley was sent to ask Gill to come. For the moment they would not trouble Mrs. Gill, but Raven could see her, probably without Forshaw, later on. Kit Raven judged that the Yard man was satisfied with their evidence and evidently saw no reason for piling on the agony by too much questioning at this stage.

Kit Raven appreciated Forshaw's attitude when Frank Gill came in. A man of about forty-three, cleanly built and looking physically fit except for the strained look about his face, he gave Raven the impression of being absolutely honest and straightforward; a conscientious man who could be trusted to do a job thoroughly whether he was being watched or not.

He and his wife had been with Mr. Stanton and Mr. Kelvin Creed before they came to Wagoner's Halt some five years or more ago. Gill had, indeed, been in the service of the Creed family ever since he left school, and nowadays he was chauffeur, gardener, butler when necessary, and handyman at all times. He was also the watchdog who saw that his employers were not disturbed by visitors when they were busy in the laboratory. He helped his wife in the house, and he was at times called on to give any assistance the brothers might need in the laboratory.

"You always found them kind and considerate employers?" Raven asked in an almost casual tone, though he was anxious to see just how Gill replied to that question.

"Yes, sir!" The man was almost eager in his answer. "They were always—"

they're two of the finest gentlemen that ever breathed, sir. I'll swear they wouldn't hurt a fly—not even when they were experimenting.”

Raven asked a fair number of questions, but had never the slightest doubt in his mind that Frank Gill could be crossed off the list as a possible suspect. Gill knew Mr. Cantrell very well and obviously thought highly of him. He had never heard a wrong word between the Creeds and Mr. Cantrell.

There was nothing particularly unusual about the way in which this household was run. Naturally when the brothers were engaged on special work the daily round was varied to some extent. At such times only two people were allowed to go through to the laboratory, and these two visitors were not shown in by Gill but entered alone. They knew the ropes and their visits did not interfere with the scientists' work at all.

These two visitors were Sir Roger Marston and Mr. Cantrell. Sir Roger's visits were few and far between, but he was a friend of long standing. Mr. Cantrell was a much more frequent visitor, but even he was very considerate when he knew they were at work on some important task. During these strenuous times the brothers became hermits to some extent, and Gill himself only saw them at the end of the day when they generally managed to take an hour or so off for their evening meal.

That had been the condition of affairs just lately. For the past week or more the brothers had taken their meals, except in the evening, at such times as happened to be convenient in the sitting-room next to the laboratory.

This sitting-room was fitted up with various electrical fittings so that hot dishes could be left for an hour or two; coffee could be made in the percolator and milk boiled by merely using a switch. Gill's custom at such times was to put everything ready for them early in the morning, and then, later on, being satisfied that both of them had breakfasted, he would clear the crockery away and arrange everything for lunch.

“I dare say they wouldn't have minded at all if I'd gone in while they were having a meal,” Gill said. “But they've often told me I was a marvel the way I've done things for them—me and the wife, sir. They were that sort, appreciated everything done for them even though it was only our duty.”

Kit Raven did all the questioning, but it was in an easy conversational way. He was anxious to learn every detail he could about last night and this morning. Apparently the brothers had just completed some highly important work upon which they had been engaged more or less continuously for several weeks past. Last night they had spent longer than they usually did over their evening meal, but had returned to the laboratory later. The Gills had not seen them after that.

This morning breakfast had been prepared in the usual way in the small sitting-room or den next to the laboratory. Up to this point in his story Gill had

given his replies clearly enough and without the least suggestion of being on his guard. There was at times a distinct trace of nervousness in his manner, but that was perfectly understandable. The nervousness became more pronounced when he was answering the questions about the events of this morning. He had not seen the brothers, nor had he heard any sounds from the laboratory. It was very unlikely that he would hear anything since the place had been made as sound-proof as possible.

“I—I think they must have had breakfast, sir,” Gill said, and moistened his lips as though the strain was beginning to tell. “I didn’t—didn’t take particular notice when I cleared away.”

Mr. Cantrell had called just after twelve. He came in his car, which was still in the drive now. If anything, Gill thought he seemed rather more than usually cheerful, and he had told Gill that he would only be staying a few minutes as he was going up to London.

“No, I didn’t show him into the laboratory, sir. He said, ‘I’ll just go in and see what’s happening, Gill.’ Then he went off along the passage and let himself into the laboratory.”

“And a few minutes later——?” Raven asked.

“I—I don’t quite know why I went into the passage, sir. Maybe I heard a sound, but I can’t be sure. Just as I reached the passage the door opened—there’s double doors to the laboratory as you’ll have seen for yourself. The outer door was being pushed open and Mr. Cantrell came staggering out. I—saw straight away—something was wrong, and before I could get to him he just toppled forward in a heap. I—did what I could, sir—but—I knew—it was too late.”

Gill’s lips were twitching, and the memory of those moments was upsetting him badly. Raven did not hurry him, but just gently prompted him to go on with his story each time he paused.

“You saw, or thought you saw, Mr. Stanton or Mr. Kelvin Creed through the partly open inner door? You did not see both of them?”

“No—no, sir! Only one,” Gill jerked out. “I thought—it might have been Mr. Stanton—I couldn’t be certain.”

“And he dashed off through the laboratory door which leads to the heath garden?”

“I saw—somebody—going out—and the door banged,” Gill said, and if Raven had been accusing him of the crime the man could not have been more upset.

“You didn’t see any weapon in his hand?”

“No! No, sir! I—I’m certain I didn’t. I only saw—just a moment. There was Mr. Cantrell—I was trying to help him. I didn’t see any weapon.”

“Nor has one been found,” Forshaw put in quietly. “No ammunition either.

We may discover something later.”

Some instinct prompted Raven to put another question, rather more abrupt and challenging, to Gill.

“You have no doubt in your mind that Stanton Creed shot John Cantrell?”

“No—no, he didn’t!” Gill gasped the words out. “He couldn’t—he wouldn’t do it, sir. They—neither Mr. Stanton nor Mr. Kelvin would hurt a fly. Mr. Cantrell—he’s their best friend. They thought the world of him. I—I’m sorry, sir.”

Forshaw, who had been making one or two notes in his book, looked up quickly. Like Raven, he was startled by the intensity of Gill’s protests.

“Yes. I quite understand,” Raven said, but he did not really understand at all. There was something about Gill and his statements which puzzled him considerably. He had the contradictory feeling about the man that he was entirely honest and straightforward and yet he was keeping something back.

“We might see Mrs. Gill now, I think,” Forshaw said.

“She’s very upset, sir,” Gill said weakly. “She can’t tell you anything about it. If you could—if you wouldn’t mind—leaving it for a time——”

“There’s nothing to worry about, Gill,” Forshaw assured him. “Mr. Raven quite understands, but he would like to see your wife for a minute or two. I won’t come with him. Mr. Raven really hasn’t anything to do with the police, you know.”

For a moment it looked as though Gill was going to make a fresh protest. Raven was in two minds about it himself, but some instinct urged him on. He went with the reluctant Gill to the kitchen. Mrs. Gill was sitting in a chair and, judging by the way she was huddled up, she was in a worse state than her husband. Normally she was obviously a good-looking, cheerful, middle-aged woman, but she seemed to be completely crushed at present.

And then her eyes, when she did turn them towards Kit Raven, had in them a look of sheer terror as though some unknown fear had her in its grip. There was not a more sympathetic, understanding man to be found than Kit Raven, yet there was a queer feeling in his mind that it was not so much the shock of this tragedy but some threat which still hung over this house which was frightening both Frank Gill and his wife. Moreover, Gill’s story did not altogether tally with some of the items Kelvin Creed had told Jimmy Sprott this morning.

Raven was quite gentle, however, in his questioning of Mrs. Gill, though he wished she would raise her head and look him straight in the eyes. As he turned towards the dresser he noticed a tray with two or three pieces of crockery on it. Quite by accident, apparently, Raven put his hand rather heavily on the upturned rim of the tray.

A cup and saucer were jerked off and fell with a clatter to the floor. Gill

was jumping forward at once and jerking out, "It's all right, sir. My fault. I'll see to it, sir."

In that brief instant Mrs. Gill, suddenly startled, had jerked her head up and Raven had the answer to the question that had been puzzling him. Mrs. Gill did not wish anyone to notice her throat. There were three very recently made scratches or wounds as though some animal had tried to bite her, or—no! It was not likely that an animal had caused those wounds. More probably it was a human hand with sharp nails that had gripped her throat.

For an instant Raven was tempted to ask questions about those marks. Then, almost abruptly, he was thanking Mrs. Gill for the little she had been able to tell him and was leaving the kitchen. Gill followed him anxiously, eager, it seemed, to be of any help, but Raven no longer needed him.

He joined Inspector Forshaw again, and together they went through the laboratory and then out into the garden. Forshaw could answer all the questions Raven wanted to ask, though Kit was now beginning to wish that he had brought Jimmy Sprott with him. His young assistant had an extraordinary capacity for noticing trivial items which usually turned out to have quite an important bearing on the problem they were trying to solve.

"You'll be staying on here for a time, Forshaw?" Raven asked suddenly, as he looked at his watch and realized that Sprott would be waiting for him at the office, and that the case of Kelvin Creed still had to be dealt with. "I shall have to be getting back now, but I'll probably run down here again to-morrow. It's a queer case."

"There's a lot more behind it than we have fathomed yet, of course," Forshaw said slowly. "But I doubt if we shall make much progress until we have one or both of the Creed brothers in our hands."

"And possibly you won't learn very much from them," Raven said dubiously, and then added hastily, as Forshaw looked at him sharply: "No, I haven't any theories at all yet beyond a strong feeling that neither of the Creeds had a hand in Cantrell's death. I'll be seeing you to-morrow. Good-bye!"

CHAPTER V

The Vulture Calls

The first task Jimmy Sprott had to tackle that afternoon was to hunt up the names of Kelvin Creed and Stanton Creed in certain reference books and make all the notes he could gather about them. It was neither a long nor a difficult task, and possibly it was of no particular importance.

In the same way he made a full report of what had happened this morning from the time when Kelvin Creed burst into the general office until Sprott's talk with the sergeant at Dane Street police station. It might be very helpful later on to have this record.

He was typing out a fair copy of his report when he became conscious of a queer feeling that someone was actually in the room and watching him intently as he worked. It came as a sudden thrill, or as though some instinct warned him, whispering to him: "You are being watched! Take care!"

He stopped typing and then very deliberately turned his eyes towards the door. His instinct had not deceived him. The door was closed and standing with his back to it was a tall man who had a distinct stoop. He was dressed in dark clothes and the overcoat he wore looked unfashionable because of its unnecessary length. The large soft felt hat was pulled down so that it almost covered the man's eyes.

His face, indeed, was almost hidden; the turned-down brim, the head bent forward, and the upturned collar, all combined to conceal the man's features. What little Jimmy could see of the face in the first few moments seemed to be entirely lacking in colour.

"Are you—looking for anyone?" Jimmy had the feeling that it was a silly sort of question to ask, but it happened to be the one which first entered his mind. There were more important questions he really wanted to ask, but he only thought of them after he had asked the first. How had the man been able to come into this private office without Wilks seeing him? And how had he managed to open and close the door without the slightest sound? What did he want, anyway?

The man moved forward and came towards Sprott. Even in the smooth, noiseless way he moved there seemed something sinister. There had already been one queer visitor to-day to see Mr. Raven, but the first one had raised a smile; this second visitor had something definitely threatening and evil about him.

"I came to see you," the man said and removed his hat. As Sprott rose from

his chair he became aware of the extraordinary eyes the man possessed, though the effect may have been partly due to their deep setting below heavy, shaggy eyebrows. His head was bald and massive, and from the eyebrows upwards it was out of proportion to the narrow, fleshless face with its greyish tinge. Yet the eyes seemed to glow with some hidden fire, but it was not the glow of bright enthusiasm. There seemed to be some deep malevolence and hate in the very intensity with which he kept his gaze fixed on Jimmy Sprott.

"I'm here!" Jimmy said, and there was a note of challenge in his voice. "I'm afraid Mr. Raven is out——"

"I know that. He has gone to Wagoner's Halt. I shall see him just when it suits me to see him. My business at present is with you. A man came to see you this morning and handed you a package——"

"We never discuss our clients with other people," Sprott interrupted. "Whatever business you mention to me will be regarded as confidential. That rule applies to all callers."

"This man gave you a packet of papers. They were stolen. It will save us both a great deal of trouble if you obey me without question."

He still kept his eyes fixed on Sprott. The idea of anyone trying to hypnotize him struck Jimmy as ridiculous, but the thought did flash into his mind. There was something unpleasantly fascinating about those eyes. Jimmy turned his head abruptly and looked towards the door. He had the feeling that it had cost him a real effort of will to do this apparently simple act.

"I know nothing about stolen papers, and I should certainly not hand anything over to a stranger without having very full authority," he told the man. "I'm very sorry, but if you would care to call later when Mr. Raven is here——"

In a flash the man's hand had shot out and his fingers were gripping Sprott's throat. It was done so unexpectedly that Jimmy never had a chance to defend himself. In some extraordinary way the man's body had come forward as swiftly as his long arm. For several agonizing seconds Jimmy had the feeling that the fingers were piercing his flesh and then he felt himself slipping helplessly to the floor.

For a few moments he must have lost consciousness, but something sharp was being jabbed into the left side of his neck, and he made a desperate effort to raise himself. That fierce, paralysing pain had gone and a pleasant glow was throbbing through his veins. He had a vague idea that the weird-looking stranger was helping him to his feet.

After that Jimmy Sprott's ideas of what happened were all very confused and unreal. He knew vaguely that he talked with the strange visitor and that, although he had no intention of telling him anything about the visit of Kelvin Creed, he answered certain questions the man put to him because they did not

seem to matter. After all, it was an amusing story, and Kelvin Creed wouldn't mind.

The stranger seemed to have grown bigger and more grotesque, but there was no longer any fear in Jimmy's mind. In some way he, knew that the man was known as the Vulture, but whether the visitor told him so himself or whether in some queer way Jimmy guessed, he never knew.

Everything became very vague and dreamlike, with strange shadows moving about the room until it grew dark. Jimmy Sprott still sat at his desk, dreaming and dozing, but curiously content. Nothing mattered very much so long as he could just sit here and dream. It annoyed him slightly when he realized that somebody was shaking him and calling him by name.

"Jimmy! Jimmy! Wake up, boy! Anything wrong? Jimmy! Shake yourself, boy! What's the matter with you? Jimmy!"

"Hullo! What's that? What? What's the matter?" Sprott raised himself with a sudden effort. He had been sitting at the desk, his arms resting on the writing-pad to the left of his typewriter while his forehead had been resting in turn on his hands. His first waking impression was one of annoyance with himself for having dropped off to sleep, but he felt too hopelessly dazed to grasp anything except the fact that Kit Raven was standing by his side.

"What's wrong, Jimmy? What's been happening here?" Kit asked. He had come straight from Wagoner's Halt back to the office and had at first formed the impression that Sprott, like everyone else, had gone home. It was close on seven o'clock, and the place was in darkness. Even Wilks had gone, and Kit had let himself in with his private key. It was only when he switched on the lights in his own office that he saw the figure of Jimmy Sprott slumped across the desk. It had given Raven the worst shock of the day. Jimmy was slowly getting to his feet and was putting a hand to his head.

"I don't know," he murmured dully. "Must have dropped off to sleep, I suppose. Somebody came in, I think, and wanted to know—Oh, what happened?"

Still with his hand to his forehead, he raised his head as he tried to recall something definite from the nightmare mist that clouded his mind. As he did so, Kit Raven gave a quick gasp of amazement, but checked it almost instantly. On Sprott's throat were three marks, blurred by the dried trickles of blood which had come from those slightly crescent-shaped wounds.

They were exactly the same marks as those Kit Raven had seen on Mrs. Gill's throat. Raven had worried and puzzled over the story behind those small wounds all the way back from Wagoner's Halt. Mrs. Gill had been anxious to hide them from him, and Gill himself had been afraid lest Raven or anyone else should notice them. Raven was certain that both husband and wife were anxious to conceal the marks; he was equally certain that they had some

connexion with the tragedy that had taken place. It was natural that his first suspicions should be concerned with Frank Gill, despite the strong feeling he had in the beginning that Gill could be ruled out as a possible suspect. The person who had caused the marks on Mrs. Gill's throat was someone who had visited this office during the afternoon and attacked Jimmy Sprott. Gill had been at Wagoner's Halt all the time.

"Sit down, Jimmy, and take things calmly. I'll ring up and ask a doctor to come along and have a look at you. Then I'll ring up the Argosy Hotel and ask them to send round tea and toast—or would you prefer something else? I want tea myself. I'm not in the mood for dinner just yet."

"Tea!" Sprott said. "Jove! A cup of tea is the one thing I do want. Falling asleep in that ridiculous way seems to have given me a rotten headache. I'm trying to remember about the visitor who came this afternoon. An unpleasant-looking fellow he was and his name was——What was his name? Something like the Vulture. It all seems so silly. I've been having a nightmare, I think, and I can't get it out of my mind."

"Very probably. But just take things quietly. I'll talk to you later."

Raven was using the telephone, despite Sprott's protests that there was not the slightest need to send for a doctor. Within ten minutes a doctor had arrived, and he was still there when the man from the Argosy Hotel arrived with tea and toast. The doctor was puzzled, but felt fairly confident that Sprott would be all right presently. He had evidently had some drug, and, as Jimmy began to recall certain incidents in his nightmare, he mentioned about the sharp pricking sensation.

"Hypodermic syringe," the doctor said. "But these marks on your throat——They were made by somebody's fingernails unless I'm very much mistaken. What on earth has been happening to you, young man?"

The doctor left them presently, having given Jimmy a couple of tablets and made arrangements about seeing him again. Tea and toast would do him no harm, and under the influence of these refreshments Sprott's brain began to return to its normal state. Even so, he was still unable to give a very clear account of his strange visitor and of what had happened in the office.

"He was in the room before I realized it," Jimmy said as he tried to get everything in its right sequence. "Yes! I remember now! He wanted the package Kelvin Creed had handed to me. His statement was that they were stolen from someone else. And then, without a word of warning, he was attacking me. After that——" Again Jimmy closed his eyes and passed his hand across his forehead—"I really can't remember anything very clearly."

"The package?" Raven said. "You put that in the steel cabinet, didn't you? Ah, here are the keys on your desk. I'd better just make certain that the package is still there."

He went quickly across to the fairly large set of steel drawers in which important documents and papers were kept. Sprott called out to him, "Bottom drawer!" as Raven selected the right key. There were not very many papers stored in this bottom drawer, and it did not take Kit Raven more than five seconds to make certain that there was no large sealed packet deposited here.

In the next few minutes every one of the drawers in the cabinet had been opened and carefully searched. Jimmy Sprott was by Raven's side before he had finished the search and he remained there, watching anxiously, until Raven had gone carefully through everything in the cabinet.

"It's gone!" Jimmy jerked the words out as the unpleasant truth became painfully obvious even to his dulled but still hopeful mind. "That fellow—I'm sure he told me that he was known as the Vulture—must have taken it. I'm sorry! I'm frightfully sorry, Kit! I've let you down badly this time."

"Don't worry about that," Raven told him. "It's not your fault. Events have been happening a little too quickly for us, Jimmy. That's the trouble. I seem to be getting hold of odd bits and pieces that don't fit together at all. I think the next move will be to go round to Dane Street and try to have a talk with Kelvin Creed. James William Hope is the name he's given there, isn't it? It is quite on the cards that the Dane Street authorities have already had the description of the two brothers which Forshaw was circulating. In that case they may have recognized Creed as one of the wanted men. But you had better get home and have a good night's rest. I'll go round to Dane Street."

"I'm all right now," Sprott asserted. "I'd prefer to come with you, if you don't mind. I shan't rest until I know whether those papers in the package are so precious as Kelvin Creed seemed to think they were. I'm hoping to goodness they were not!"

It may have been the tablets the doctor had given him, or the tea, or even the effect of the shock caused by the discovery that the package of papers had vanished, but whatever the reason Jimmy Sprott was feeling anxiously alert and fairly fit again. Within a quarter of an hour or so he was entering the Dane Street police station with Kit Raven. The inspector himself was in his office, and Mr. Raven and his young assistant were shown into him at once.

"Yes. I understood that you would be acting for the man Hope," the inspector said. "But I'm afraid you won't be able to see him to-night. We've already had some friends of his here and they were anxious to bail him out."

"You didn't agree to bail?" Raven asked quickly.

"Hope wouldn't listen to the idea in any case. He didn't want to leave his comfortable detention cell!" The inspector smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "These friends of Hope's had a medical man with them, and according to what they said Hope has been under treatment for some time past. We allowed this doctor to see the man, but Hope kicked up a terrible row, and we had to ask the

doctor to leave. Later on we had our own medical officer along. He thinks Hope is a nervous breakdown case and gave him a sleeping-draught. I believe he's sound asleep now, and our doctor gave instructions that he was not to be disturbed. We have to handle these cases very carefully nowadays, Mr. Raven, but I should think you could interview him in the morning."

Raven asked one or two questions as to the course the police would take with the man now detained. The case would have to be mentioned in court, but if the doctor gave a certificate they would merely ask for a remand. All being well Mr. Raven could see Hope in the morning.

Whether the inspector had the slightest idea of Hope's real identity Raven did not know, nor did he raise the question at all. The Wagoner's Halt case was never mentioned. Kit Raven had the feeling that for the time being it would be as well not to raise that affair in connexion with James William Hope, alias Kelvin Creed. He would have a better idea of what course to take when he had seen Creed personally.

"I'll call on you in the morning, Inspector," Raven said, and in company with Jimmy Sprott left the police station. The pair went back to the office for a short time, but did little more than send a telephone message which would be delivered to Sprott's home. It was not the first time by any means that this kind of message had been sent. Jimmy was on special business and would be spending the night at his chief's flat in town.

"And then, if you're feeling fit again, we'll have a real meal," Raven said. "I think we can call it a day. Don't ask me what I think about the case so far, because I haven't any real idea myself. There are too many loose threads hanging round and I can't even guess where they will lead us, though I hope they will lead us somewhere. We'll start afresh to-morrow!"

CHAPTER VI

Doggerel or Clue?

On the following morning Jimmy Sprott left the flat in Halsbury Square some time before Kit Raven. Sprott was going straight to the office, but Raven proposed to ring up Inspector Forshaw first of all and then call at Dane Street police station on his way to the office. If all went well both Raven and Sprott would run down to Wagoner's Halt later in the day.

Jimmy was feeling perfectly fit, but the marks on his throat would remain as a reminder of his extraordinary experience for some days to come. Still, that wouldn't worry him a great deal, and all he hoped was that no one in the office would ask him questions about the marks. Probably they wouldn't. They were not a very observant lot, in Jimmy's opinion.

When he did wander into the general office to collect any letters or papers for Mr. Raven, he was momentarily puzzled by the sheepish but very friendly grin which spread over the face of Mr. Cummings as soon as he saw the junior. Mr. Mason also looked up, and he, too, greeted the junior with a kindly smile and a knowing wink in the direction of the beaming Cummings.

"Another triumph for the young detective!" said Mason. "The Cummings case is now completely settled, and he's going to live happy ever after. Your diagnosis of the trouble was entirely correct, and the course suggested was followed by the client with complete success. Cummings dropped the offending tie in a litter basket, having bought a new one at lunchtime; then he took home chocolates and sweets, accompanied by a bright smile, and everything in the garden was lovely, wasn't it, Cummings?"

"Dry up!" Cummings said, without any hint of venom, and he smiled again as he turned to Sprott. "It was all right! But we'll forget it now. I came along to see you yesterday afternoon but you'd gone."

Sprott had almost completely forgotten the leg-pulling of the ill-tempered Cummings yesterday morning, but began to recall it now. He was more interested, however, in Cummings's remark about having been to Mr. Raven's office yesterday afternoon. It had been about half-past three when Cummings strolled along, but found the door locked. He knew that Mr. Raven was not in, but had understood from Wilks that young Sprott was still in the office.

"Yes. We shall probably be out again this afternoon," Jimmy said, and did not enlighten Cummings by explaining that he must have been in the office although by half-past three he was probably in that strange sleep from which Kit Raven had wakened him more than three hours later. Jimmy asked,

however, if there had been any visitors calling to see Mr. Raven during the afternoon and learned that there had been none.

Sprott returned to Mr. Raven's office soon after that. Nobody had seen the mysterious visitor of yesterday afternoon arrive or depart. There was one way of entering the offices from the rear of the premises, but only someone who knew the building very well would realize it. Yet it seemed fairly certain that the Vulture had come into the offices by that entrance.

Who on earth was the Vulture? Had the man himself told Sprott his name? What extraordinary game was he playing? Since he came to Micklethwaites' office Jimmy Sprott had been mixed up in several curious mysteries, but none of them had had anything so fantastic as the behaviour of Kelvin Creed or the sinister threat which seemed to surround this creature, the Vulture. There had been robberies, missing documents, and even temporary disappearances, but there had been no sudden and mysterious death such as had befallen the unfortunate secretary, John Cantrell.

Moreover, Cantrell had been on his way to see Kit Raven, and according to Sir Rufus Grayle he would be bringing with him a statement he had prepared. Yet no papers had been found on Cantrell, and a search of the car in which he had driven to Wagoner's Halt had revealed nothing of importance. Inspector Forshaw was going to inquire at Hartsmere Hall whether Cantrell had taken any bag or case of any kind with him. Nothing had been found in the car.

"I hope Kit has managed to get some clue to all the mystery this morning," Sprott told himself as he sat at his desk again. "If he has been able to see Kelvin Creed and have a heart-to-heart talk with him he may have learned just what is at the back of it all."

It was half-past twelve when eventually Kit Raven entered the office. He was not a man whose feelings could be judged very easily by the expression on his face, and he came in this morning much as he did on most mornings. But there was just a slight wrinkling above his eyes and a little twist of the lips which told Jimmy Sprott that his chief was getting worried. Not until he had glanced swiftly through his letters and papers, however, did he say anything to Sprott.

"Not much progress to report yet, Jimmy," he said as he threw the last letter on his desk. "I called first of all on Houghton, Sir Roger Marston's secretary. Sir Roger is still in Paris, but he will be very much upset by this news of the tragedy at Wagoner's Halt. Houghton does not know a great deal about the work the Creeds have been engaged upon just lately except that they have been experimenting with some new substance which has been given the name of 'Syncredium'. Sir Roger Marston could probably tell us more about it although it has all been kept very secret."

"Kelvin Creed could tell you?" Jimmy suggested.

“I’ve been to Dane Street and I’ve seen Creed. There’s no doubt about the fact that it is Kelvin Creed. He admitted it at once as soon as he knew who I was. His case has been mentioned in court this morning but Creed himself did not appear. The doctor’s certificate settled that part of the programme, and the case has been remanded for seven days. But some other solicitor has been along to see Creed before I arrived there. Creed refused to have anything to do with him, and told the police afterwards that the man was a fraud, which may be true or may be untrue. The police accepted the man as a genuine solicitor.”

“How did Creed impress you?” Spratt asked.

“He looks pretty seedy, but the medical report is that there is nothing seriously wrong physically; it’s a case of nerves and probably overwork; possibly the man has had a severe shock, according to the doctor. At all events he is at present a difficult man to deal with, from my point of view.”

The police were now aware of the fact that James William Hope was really Kelvin Creed. Raven had been on the telephone with Inspector Forshaw at Hartsmere and had told him about Creed. He had also suggested that it might be advisable to keep the matter secret for a time as Creed was perfectly safe at Dane Street. Forshaw was taking all necessary steps and for the time being the truth about Kelvin Creed would not be made public.

“But I can’t say that I made very much progress with Creed,” Raven admitted. “He knows about Cantrell, and he knows that the papers he handed to you have vanished. It may be that these facts have upset him, but he said that it was no use my trying to help him unless I could find Stanton, his brother, and make certain that he is safe. Creed wishes now that he had not played this queer trick which has landed him in a detention cell—and even while he’s saying that he asserts that if he hadn’t done what he did he would probably be dead by now. I’m very sorry for the man, but I wish he would tell me everything that he knows. Apparently he thinks that if he talks too much he will injure his brother, but obviously we haven’t the same chance of helping Stanton unless we do know everything that Kelvin can tell us.”

However, there it was. Creed would remain where he was, and would be under proper medical care and observation for another week at all events. Those who were investigating the Wagoner’s Halt mystery knew that one of the wanted men was no longer missing, and they also knew that he could not possibly have been at Wagoner’s Halt at the time when the tragedy occurred.

They also knew that according to Kelvin Creed his brother Stanton had left Wagoner’s Halt before he did. Yet the evidence of Frank Gill was that one of the brothers, probably Stanton Creed, was in the laboratory when Cantrell called there, and had dashed out of the laboratory, apparently in a panic, just after Cantrell had been shot.

“I’m going to talk to Gill again,” Raven said. “I’ve a strong suspicion that

he knows something more than he has already told us. Come on! We'll have lunch before we set off and then we'll go straight down to Wagoner's Halt. Better let Mason, or someone in the office, know that we shall not be back at the office this afternoon. I've already warned Mr. Micklethwaite that we're on the job he mentioned to me when he asked me to see Sir Rufus Grayle."

It was barely a quarter to two when Sprott sat by Raven's side in the car as they threaded their way through the traffic. Once clear of London, Raven put on speed, but it was getting on for three o'clock when they turned into the drive at Wagoner's Halt. Inspector Forshaw was there waiting for Raven, having been advised of the probable time of his arrival.

Forshaw had gathered every item of information he could about Cantrell, and had the exact times of everything the unfortunate secretary had done on the morning when he met his death. When he left Hartsmere Hall he had taken a small suitcase and a dispatch-case with him in the car. Those cases were missing when the police searched the car a very few hours later.

Mrs. Gill, with the approval of Inspector Forshaw, had gone to stay with friends in Hartsmere. The boy, young Charles Gill, was also staying with friends. Frank Gill was remaining at Wagoner's Halt, but two policemen would also stay on the premises for the time being. Forshaw had been in touch with Sir Rufus Grayle, and would be seeing him later in the day at his residence.

"Would you care to wander round on your own for a time, Jimmy, and see if you can strike anything?" Raven suggested, and then to Forshaw: "You've no objections? There's nothing that must be left untouched now? You've made all the examination you require?"

"We've finished so far as anything in the house goes," Forshaw said and smiled. "If young Sprott can find something we've missed I'll give him full marks."

Sprott also smiled. Inspector Forshaw and his assistant had been over the place very thoroughly; so had the local police, and, in addition, Kit Raven had done his best. It was highly improbable that between them they had missed anything that mattered!

Raven had already given Jimmy a fair idea of the geography of the place, and he went straight to the laboratory. Despite its air of untidiness, the long, rather narrow room had an instant fascination for Sprott. It had been left just as it was, and no straightening-up or cleaning had been done nor was it likely to be attempted for the next few days. But the rule about not touching anything was no longer in force. Everything that might be helpful had been photographed and anything that might serve as evidence had been collected by Forshaw.

One corner of the room was fitted with a roll-top desk and a small

bookcase. After wandering round for a time Jimmy came to the desk and stared at the litter of papers lying there. One or two of the drawers in the top part of the desk had evidently been taken out and emptied, just to add to the confusion.

The only thing that eventually interested Sprott in the least among all the collection was a small notebook; a thin, cheap affair it was, with a cover of reddish-brown paper, and it had probably cost a penny when new. It was the somewhat amateurish lettering on the front cover which interested and then mildly amused Sprott.

“Poems Written in my Laboratory: By Kelvin Creed. Dedicated by kind permission to J. A. C. Most private and personal! Please do not Read, This Screed by Creed.”

Jimmy took this last injunction as a joke. In any case, there was nothing private in this place now. He opened the book and glanced at Kelvin Creed’s poems. Jimmy would never have counted himself a high-class judge of poetry, but he felt fairly certain that these few samples of Creed’s poetic ability deserved only one word of criticism—Doggerel!

Sitting in my laboratory, probing strange secrets;
Test-tubes before me like radium gleaming darkly;
Old secrets revealed; new secrets to be discovered;
What is a lemon? Its juice is a mere chemical symbol.

And so on at some length—just drivel and balderdash so far as Jimmy Sprott could make out. Kelvin Creed was undoubtedly a queer character with peculiar notions of his own, but it was difficult to understand an intelligent man, as Creed most certainly was, indulging in this nonsense. Moreover, after this first blithering effusion the two or three other verses in the book were copied from well-known authors and had the names of the poets beneath them. Altogether there were only about four pages in the book which had been used by Creed and the remainder of the pages were blank.

Creed’s idea about writing poems dealing with his thoughts while at work in the laboratory had evidently been a flash in the pan. It puzzled Sprott. Why on earth should a busy, clever man like Creed waste his time in writing the sort of doggerel stuff a schoolboy might do, if he was ass enough? Of course, some of these clever people did act queerly at times, but there was some notion lurking at the back of Sprott’s mind that Kelvin Creed had some method in his madness.

Jimmy was not actually aware at the time that Inspector Forshaw and others, including Kit Raven, had all looked at this book and then thrown it aside with scarcely a thought beyond the idea that these clever scientists often had queer kinks. There was certainly nothing helpful about this small book.

Just what mixture of ideas and notions drifted through Sprott’s mind as he

stood staring again at the doggerel verse Creed had written he could not have explained himself. Yet in some way the lines brought back to his mind some of his own experiments. Still holding the book, he turned towards the long slate-topped laboratory bench with its rows of bottles, test-tubes and retorts on the shelves above.

A small bottle eventually caught his eye, and Sprott knew just enough about chemistry to know that citric acid is obtained from lemons. He did not quite know what certain weird notes on the label attached to the bottle might mean, but the odd notion that now came into his mind was worth testing.

He looked at the notebook again; there was something about “schoolboy tricks” in that one drivelling effort of Kelvin Creed’s poetry. Opening one or two drawers beneath the laboratory bench, Jimmy found what he wanted: a supply of cotton-wool, though a piece of linen or a duster would have served his purpose. With a fair-sized wad of the cotton-wool he took up the bottle labelled $C_6H_8O_7$ and partially soaked the pad.

Starting on the first blank page, he dabbed the moistened pad on it. Nothing happened. Nor on the next page or the two or three pages following that. He began to fear that his sudden brainwave was no more a brilliant inspiration than Creed’s efforts to write poetry, but he dabbed a few more pages—and suddenly knew that the experiment was a success! On one of the right-hand pages just beyond the middle of the small notebook the effect of the dabbing showed up instantly. Certain words in just the same neat handwriting as the verses at the beginning of the book came up as though by magic. He could read the first words quite clearly.

“My dear Canty,

“By now the package we mentioned to you will, I hope, be with Sir Roger——”

That was all the first dabbing of citric acid had revealed. Sprott was just about to soak the pad of cotton-wool again when a sudden sound came through the wide-open doors of the laboratory. He closed the book and slipped it into his pocket, put the bottle back, and dropped the cotton-wool in one of the metal receptacles for waste.

This discovery wanted thinking out! Sprott had the feeling in a way that Kelvin Creed was his own particular and special client. There was no question in his mind of withholding information from the police; the only problem was whether to hand over information immediately he found it or whether he could handle it in such a way that Creed did not suffer unnecessary worry. There was something behind all this mystery which Sprott had not yet grasped, and his whole inclination was to tread very carefully.

The expected interruption of which he had had warning did not come after all. Sprott decided to go out through the door which led to that part of the garden where, so he had gathered, the Creed brothers had been in the habit of strolling when they were considering some difficult problem that had cropped up in their work.

It was through this door that Stanton Creed had bolted, according to Gill's statement, after Cantrell had been shot. Even at this time of the year, when most gardens were beginning to look bedraggled, this rockery-and-heath garden, with its winding path set in a spot that was secluded by a screen of cupressus trees, was a quiet and peaceful place in which to wander—and to ponder!

There was no chance of making any discovery, so far as footprints were concerned, on the dark, weatherworn flags which made the paths. As Sprott approached the end of the winding path he observed the fairly high wall on certain parts of which trees had been trained to grow fan-wise. If Stanton Creed had bolted from Wagoner's Halt through this garden he would have had to climb——

Jimmy turned his head suddenly. He could have sworn that the faint breeze which was in the air this morning had carried a whispering voice which called him by name! He must be getting jumpy and imagining things that didn't happen, so he told himself as he stared round the garden. And then that whispering call came again: "Mr. Sprott! Mr. Sprott!"

This time he knew that his imagination was not playing tricks with him. The voice was too distinct for that. And then, just over the edge of bushy heaths which were on the top of the sloping rockery by which he was walking, a face appeared.

There was nothing frightening about the apparition—if one could call it by such a name. It was just a good-looking, rather anxious face of a boy of fifteen or sixteen, and, as though to reassure Sprott that he meant no harm, the youngster raised his hand and two fingers and gave the salute Jimmy knew so well. Here was a brother Scout, and although Sprott did not know him and had never seen him in his life before so far as he knew, the youngster evidently recognized Sprott.

"Right!" Jimmy called out softly, and in another moment was dodging behind the high bank to join the youngster, who had evidently been hiding there for some time past.

CHAPTER VII

Sprott's Second Defeat

"And who are you?" Jimmy asked, as he put a hand on the boy's arm and held him in a gentle grip. "How do you know me?"

"Sh! Come behind here! We shan't be seen here!" The boy was already moving from the path, round a much narrower path, and then crouched down behind a small group of ornamental shrubs which helped to relieve what might have been a monotonously flat bank of smaller plants. "Bend down a bit! I'm Charlie Gill, and I really live here, but I'm staying in the village for a time because of all the trouble here. I sneaked up here because . . . Well, I want to find out about things."

"But how did you know me?" Sprott asked.

"I read about you in the paper when you and Mr. Raven had to tell the judge what had happened in the Merston mystery. You won't have forgotten that! Then I knew Mr. Raven had come down—my mother told me about him. She wanted to tell him everything she could—but she's scared. So's Dad. You mustn't think they're cowards. They're not, but they're frightened of what might happen to me or to Mr. Kelvin!"

"Why?" Sprott asked as young Gill paused.

"The Shadow," Gill said in a whisper. "He's got another name, I think—the Vulture. But I call him the Shadow. I've seen him. He's been haunting this house for weeks past. They never know when he'll pop out and startle them. Dad doesn't know I've seen him. He doesn't want me to know anything about him, but I couldn't help finding out. I've seen the Shadow to-day—not so long ago. He's somewhere in the lane now. I'll bet he didn't see me! I reckon that if the Scouts tackled him they'd do the shadowing just as well as he does. They wouldn't be frightened."

"What sort of a man is he?" Sprott asked, following the methods employed by Kit Raven of asking questions and encouraging the other person to talk without doing too much prompting.

"He's a big fellow and he generally wears——"

Young Gill was speaking quietly enough, but with a hint of suppressed excitement and perhaps anxiety in his tone. Now he broke off suddenly and a look of startled surprise came into his eyes.

"Yes! Go on!" Sprott encouraged him.

"You—you've met him! You know what he's like!" Gill jerked out. "Those marks—Mr. Stanton had the same on his throat. Mother's got them

now. The Vulture made them. That's why Dad is so afraid. You have met him?"

The last question was a challenge and Jimmy Sprott nodded.

"Yes, I've met him all right. I'm hoping to meet him again. That's why I was anxious to find out if you'd noticed anything about him that might help me to make sure when I do see the fellow. But you go ahead with your yarn. Tell me all you know, Charlie."

From Sprott's point of view it did not amount to a great deal in the end. That was not the fault of Charlie Gill, but simply due to the fact that he had neither seen nor heard enough to have any clear idea of what was at the back of all this mystery which had apparently cast a shadow of fear over the occupants of Wagoner's Halt.

Young Gill was evidently on the best of terms with the Creed brothers, and they were going to help the boy to become a scientist, so they had told him. They had even talked to him about the training he would have, and he had been in their laboratory many a time on their invitation. They had told him lately that they had made some wonderful discovery and that they would explain it to him later. But there was no doubt they had been worried by the mysterious visits of the Shadow.

Charlie had not understood at first why the two Creeds and his own parents had been so depressed and jumpy. They had been anxious to send Charlie away to stay with relatives, but he had kicked against it and had even spoken to Mr. Kelvin Creed. Probably it was owing to the Creeds that the youngster had been allowed to stay on. But it had also given Charlie the idea that there was some mystery hanging over the house.

He had tried his hand as detective, but not with any great success so far. On a few occasions he had climbed out of his bedroom window at night, and had at least made certain discoveries. He found out that the man whom he had christened the Shadow had visited the Creeds secretly at night. Why they had not informed the police, or why they had been so afraid of the man, was something Charlie could not explain.

But he had seen a car somewhere in the narrow lane which ran down the side of this large garden. He had also seen the figure which climbed easily over the high wall at a spot he would show to Sprott presently. Charlie had dodged and hidden in dark corners, anxious to learn something of the mystery man. There was nothing very definite or helpful in what he had seen or heard. All that he was certain about was that everybody in the house was afraid of this creature, the Shadow, or the Vulture, and none of them appeared to have the courage to do anything about him.

"I wonder why on earth they didn't tell the police?" Sprott asked.

"That's what I don't quite understand," young Gill said dully. "What I

think is that this fellow, the Vulture, has frightened them all with the idea that if they go to the police then one or other of them will be killed. Why did they want to send me away? And why did Mr. Stanton say that it wouldn't be any use because it would probably mean I should suffer anyway? It hasn't anything to do with me, has it? But I think the Shadow, or the Vulture as he calls himself, has other men helping him and he's managed to let Dad and everybody else know. That's what has scared them. They've hoped to get their big job finished and then do something to outwit the Vulture. Were you frightened when the Vulture attacked you?"

"I hadn't much chance of thinking about anything," Sprott said. "He attacked me without warning, and I certainly hadn't been frightened until then. I can't say that I liked the fellow. Next time I meet him I shall know what to expect. Did you say that you've seen him this afternoon?"

"I'm pretty certain I did," Gill asserted, and explained at some length just where and how he had caught a fleeting glimpse of a figure that could be nobody else but the Vulture. He had also seen a car which he believed to be the one that had brought the Vulture to Wagoner's Halt.

"Where did you see the car?" Sprott asked.

"I came across the fields and through Marley Wood," Charlie Gill said. "It brings you out on the other side of that wall, but some way farther down. I reckon the car will be about twenty yards or so beyond the very end of this garden. You wouldn't be able to see it from the end of the garden because there's a bend."

"Did you pass fairly near it?" Jimmy asked, and Gill shook his head.

"There were two men in the car and I dodged back into the wood before they could see me. It was in the wood that I saw the other man just for a moment. I'm sure it was the Shad—the Vulture."

"Right! I think I'll have a look at that car, Charlie," Sprott said. "You lead the way and I'll follow."

If he could obtain the number and description of that car it might prove to be the most useful clue they could desire. One way and another Sprott was beginning to get some real idea of what lay behind all this mystery. Kit Raven had once said that most of the mysteries which they or other investigators had to solve were rather like a jig-saw puzzle after somebody had scattered the different sections of the puzzle all over the place.

One had to hunt round to find first one and then another of these odd pieces. Often enough it happened that when one small piece was found it turned out to be the clue leading to the discovery of another more important piece. So the investigator went on, collecting all the odd pieces he could find and trying to fit them together until he could make the complete picture.

That was the idea in Sprott's mind as he followed young Gill through the

garden. This fairly large heath-and-rock garden was separated by a pleasant shrubbery from a longer patch of vegetable garden. There must have been well over an acre of ground attached to Wagoner's Halt, and although it had been divided into patches and sections there was a certain charm about the design. Different kinds of shrubs had been used effectively to form boundaries and screens, and there was a certain element of surprise in wandering through the place.

The vegetable garden was in a way just as secluded as the heath garden, and it was possible to walk from the heath garden through a strip of shrubbery and so to the orchard at the bottom without ever realizing that a fairly big quantity of vegetables was grown in this same garden. If Charlie Gill's father did all the gardening here he must have had his hands pretty full.

"Here we are!" Gill was climbing on a mound of what appeared to be sifted soil right in the corner. "Shall I climb over the wall first? It's easy enough to get back again. I made a foothold on the other side. It comes in useful sometimes!"

He was already looking over the top of the wall, then turned for a moment to say softly, "All clear!" before he clambered to the top and then vanished on the other side. Jimmy Sprott followed him in a couple of seconds. They were in the lane, and away beyond the wall the field was bounded by a fairly high, thick hedge.

Charlie Gill knew all about the hedge, however, and by crouching near the wall it was possible to squeeze through into the field. It struck Sprott that they might just as well have dropped into the field right away instead of coming into the lane first of all, but young Gill probably had his own particular reasons for taking it in this way.

"If we keep this side you'll be able to see the car," he whispered. "But go carefully! The hedge isn't so very high farther along, and we don't want them to spot us."

Gill seemed to be enjoying this part of the programme and had evidently played the Red Indian game before. His hand came out to give warning presently, and he was going more slowly and cautiously than ever. The hedge here was certainly on the thin side, and just a little way ahead there was a complete break, but odd posts and rails had been firmly fixed to make the fencing complete.

"Sh!" Gill had dropped back a little and was whispering to Sprott. "You can see the car from here all right. Don't think there's anybody about it. But keep down in case anybody happens to be knocking round."

There was wisdom in Charlie's hints as Sprott realized when he went forward another yard. The bonnet of a splendid saloon car came into view, the car being drawn up almost on the edge of the narrow ditch which ran on the

other side of the fence. Sprott crouched low and worked his way forward a little, then took out a small notebook and pencil. In the next few seconds he had noted the number and make of the car: Daimler black saloon, VXM-721.

He noted minor details as well, and then ventured a little farther along in order to see more of the car. Trivial details might be very helpful in dealing with people who possibly played tricks with the registration plates. There was apparently nobody in the car or anywhere in its vicinity. The temptation to slip over the simple fence and have a look at the licence, which could be seen in the usual place on the front screen, was strong.

“Just keep watch while I have a good look at the car,” he whispered to Charlie Gill. “If you see anybody coming—hop back and give me a warning signal. Just a soft whistle—Whoo-oo! Like that! Then start dodging back along the hedge. There doesn’t seem to be anybody knocking round at present, but of course somebody may turn up any minute.”

Both of them slipped over the fence without any difficulty. Charlie took up his position in the ditch in the shadow of the hedge while Jimmy Sprott stole cautiously towards the car. There was not a soul in sight, but the pair of them were alert and ready to slip quietly and quickly away at the first warning.

Sprott made a note of the licence details, but stepped well back into the hedge farther along to jot down the different items in his notebook. Then he slipped to the rear of the car and looked for any marks or signs that might be useful if any doubt about identification arose later on. After that he went, still keeping eyes and ears alert, towards the front again. His idea was to open the door on the near side at the back and have a good look at anything that might be in the car. Every little item might come in useful at some stage or other.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Charlie Gill now half lying on the road side of the ditch so that he could keep a look-out down the lane. Sprott opened the door of the car and saw the case that lay on the back seat. The case was in his hands in another second and he was giving it a quick examination.

Surprisingly the catches flew open easily enough when he tested them, and it was possibly lucky that he did not let the contents fall all over the place. At the moment it seemed to him a sheer piece of real luck. There were papers here, and they looked like legal documents. On the back of one was an endorsement to indicate what it was all about.

But he never had the time to note the names. A sharp scream suddenly broke the stillness of this very quiet country lane. It was nothing like the gentle warning “Whoo-oo!” that young Gill was to give at the first sign of danger. The cry was a startled screech of terror which came to an abrupt stop before it had gone its full course.

Sprott kept his head remarkably well at that juncture, all things considered. He closed the case quickly and jerked the thing back on the seat again. His

mind for the moment was working at full pressure deciding on the explanations and excuses he would make if the owners of the car had turned up. It was only a matter of a couple of seconds at the most from the time when he heard that agonized screech to the moment when he was calmly banging the door of the car and turning towards the spot where he had last seen Charlie Gill.

The brief picture his eyes took in within the next second was clearly photographed in his memory later. A man was standing in front of him as he turned, but beyond this person he had a glimpse of two other figures. One of them was carrying the limp form of Charlie Gill across his shoulders; the other was standing in such a position that he could watch what this man did as well as keep an eye on what was happening nearer the car.

This watcher was the only one of the three men whom Sprott had ever seen before. In the brief moment in which he was able to have a clear view of this man, Jimmy was certain that it was the fellow who had attacked him in the office—the Vulture, or, as Charlie Gill sometimes called him, the Shadow.

But it was no more than a snapshot view Sprott had of the scene. He was bracing himself up for trouble when the man who faced him suddenly dived. The next instant Sprott was seized by the legs below the knees and was being flung sideways into the ditch.

There was real violence in the force his attacker used to throw him. Sprott crashed heavily and was momentarily dazed by the shock of the fall. Before he had recovered himself the man was on him again, and this time his knee was planted with some violence into Jimmy's chest, knocking every ounce of breath out of his body. For a few moments he could do nothing but make those feeble yet desperate efforts to get air that any man does when he has been winded.

“Are you going to keep quiet?” the man asked, and for the first time, as he managed to get a real breath of air into his lungs, Jimmy saw the man clearly. A nasty-looking customer he was, too, with a complexion and accent that suggested he was not British, though he evidently had an excellent command of the language. “I want to talk to you, Sprott—just quietly and for your own good. Answer my questions first of all.”

As though to indicate to Jimmy that he had him absolutely at his mercy, he gave a quick jerk with the knee that was now merely touching his chest. It made Sprott gasp, not with the pain but simply because the air was expelled from his body again. The pressure was taken off immediately, and Jimmy could breathe again, but he had an unpleasant feeling that this man knew a good many tricks with which to bully anyone who was unlucky enough to be in his power.

“You met this youngster, Charlie Gill, quite by accident, didn't you?” the

man asked. "You were wandering about on your own when he turned up?"

"I'd never seen him in my life until half an hour or so ago," Jimmy said. "You've guessed correctly. We met by accident."

"Right! Well, we're taking him away with us as a sort of hostage. We're not taking you. You're going to be more useful to us where you are. But just get one big fact firmly fixed in your mind, Sprott. If you raise a finger or do one tiny thing against us; if you breathe a mere hint to those Scotland Yard busies who are now knocking round, it will be so much the worse for young Gill. He won't live very long after you've opened your mouth. We shall know. You and that poor fool Raven are butting in on something that doesn't concern you and can't do you any good anyway. You grip that?"

Just to emphasize his point he gave that quick jerking pressure with his knee again and then continued his running threats.

"The only thing that's likely to happen to Raven is that he'll be bumped off accidentally before he's had time to squeal. We're watching Raven all the time, and the moment he shows signs of becoming dangerous it'll be the end for him. Let that sink in. What's going to happen to you depends on how much help you give us. Don't forget that!"

Somewhere in the background other figures were moving about, but lying at the bottom of the ditch with his back pressed down against the muddy bottom and sides, Jimmy's outlook on the world was strictly limited. A glimpse of the car and the shadows of other figures, with now and again the whispering sound of voices or footsteps, was all that he had except the ugly face of the man who still knelt above him.

There was not the slightest chance of making some sudden attack or even changing his position in any way. Sprott was no weakling, but he was an infant compared with his captor. Until this man chose to let him rise Jimmy Sprott was a helpless prisoner.

"If you breathe a word to Raven about this little business, we shall know all about it. If you say anything about this lad Gill, we shall know. Don't run away with any notion that I'm bragging. You're up against something a good deal more powerful and a lot cleverer than anything they can show at Scotland Yard. Grip that!"

The man seemed to be very anxious to impress Sprott with the strength of this organization, and just to emphasize his words he jabbed his knee into Jimmy's chest or gave an extra twist to his arm. There was no retort Jimmy could make, even if he had felt any anxiety to score off the man in a verbal contest. His best plan for the time being seemed to be to let the fellow babble on in his own way.

"It was an unlucky morning for you when Kelvin Creed called to see you. You've one chance, and one chance only, of living long enough to see your

next birthday, and that is to keep your mouth closed and say nothing about this meeting or any other you may have. If you're called on for information, as you may be, you'll know who's asking for it. They'll give you a number. It will be seven for you. Just seven. You'll answer any questions asked—and then forget it. If you don't, it will be the end of young Gill. Finish! If you land Raven into trouble, it will be very unfortunate for both of you. Now you can get up.”

Jimmy did not need to make any great effort to rise. The man was giving him a jerk with hands that had the strength of a blacksmith's. As he stood upright he saw the car gently moving backwards down the lane away from Wagoner's Halt. He could see three men inside now, but there was no sign of Charlie Gill.

“Come on!” The man who was attending to him had gripped his arm, twisted it quickly, and swung him round so that his back was now towards the car. “You're alive and you're free, and that's something to be thankful about. But it won't last long if you say a word out of place or try to butt in on this business again. You've had your warning, and there won't be another. Over! And walk quickly back to the house—without looking round. Don't forget, Seven!”

Jimmy Sprott obeyed. He walked along the hedge inside the field towards the wall which bounded the lower end of the garden at Wagoner's Halt. The man had watched him climb the fence and Jimmy had the feeling that he was still watching him as he went along towards the wall over which he had climbed not so very long ago with Charlie Gill. He did not look back, having the sense, despite the temper that gripped him, to know when he was beaten.

He had had his second meeting with this mystery man, the Vulture, and some of his helpers. And he had been even more hopelessly and badly beaten than he had been on the first occasion. The first time he had lost, or at least failed to protect, the papers Kelvin Creed had entrusted to his care.

And on this second occasion he had put up an even worse show. It was Jimmy Sprott who had brought Charlie Gill along to show him the car—and Charlie Gill had been taken away without even the semblance of a fight being made on his behalf by Jimmy Sprott.

Just before he reached the wall he turned and looked back, trying to get a quick glimpse of the car, but there was no sign of it. The time had come for Jimmy Sprott to sit down quietly somewhere and do a little hard thinking! Twice beaten, threatened and warned, and then dismissed with curt orders, with the knowledge that death might come to young Charlie Gill if Jimmy Sprott made another mistake.

CHAPTER VIII

Gill tells His Secrets

To be right down in the dumps was an unusual experience for Jimmy Sprott. But he had the feeling badly as he stood in the field some distance away from the boundary wall at the bottom of the garden at Wagoner's Halt.

He had put up a very poor show against the men who had now vanished in the car. If they had taken Sprott himself instead of young Charlie Gill he would have felt a thousand times happier than he did at this moment. Even the fact that they had let Jimmy himself go free and had never even searched his pockets was no real consolation at this stage.

Of what earthly use were the notes he had made about the car? They wouldn't run any risks of the car being identified, but would take steps to ensure their own safety. Nor was that notebook with the invisible writing done by Kelvin Creed of any real value. Creed himself could tell them all they wished to know—if he wanted to do so.

In any case, Jimmy Sprott was a failure, a hopeless washout. He had fooled himself with the notion that he was quite a brilliant fellow just because he had had one or two trivial successes and Kit Raven had flattered him by talking about his powers of observation. For the first time in his life Jimmy Sprott saw himself as a conceited young ass with a tremendously exaggerated idea of his own self-importance.

Possibly it was a good thing for Sprott to have this little attack of self-contempt for his feeble, futile efforts. There were other qualities in his make-up which would more than balance this brief mood of depression. As he stood by the wall which he would have to climb to get back into the garden he began to recover something of his natural fighting spirit, as any healthy fellow does. What if he had been badly beaten twice? After all, he had been handicapped on both occasions, taken completely by surprise, and had never had a decent chance of putting up a real fight. But there would be a third time!

"I'll be ready the next time!" he told himself. "But it won't do to sit down and wait for them to come. I've got to map out my own programme."

It was a full quarter of an hour before he did eventually climb the wall and drop into the garden. When some little time later he reached the house and entered the laboratory by the garden door, he found Kit Raven wandering moodily round, hands in pockets, and evidently puzzling over a problem.

"Hullo! I was beginning to wonder what had happened to you," Raven said. "You don't happen to have struck any of your brilliant brainwaves yet?"

“Nothing like it,” Sprott admitted, but all things considered he spoke quite cheerfully. “Has anything been happening here?”

“No. We’ve been having a fairly long talk with Gill, but can’t get anything out of him that really matters. Forshaw became rather annoyed. He’s never had a real suspicion that Gill has taken any part in this affair, and he has treated him very gently all the way through. But we both think that Gill knows more than he has so far admitted, but he’s scared out of his wits about something.”

While they had been trying to get Gill to talk more freely and go more fully into details the telephone bell had rung. Forshaw had answered it, but the call was for Gill, and the receiver had been handed to him.

“He didn’t hold the receiver for more than thirty seconds, and all he actually said to the man at the other end was, ‘Yes, this is Gill speaking.’ We were naturally watching the chap like a couple of cats watching a mouse. He had been nervy enough before, but he had managed to keep a pretty firm hand on himself. When he was on the telephone it became more obvious that the man is precious near a nervous breakdown and he couldn’t keep a firm grip on the receiver. In the end he let it drop from his hand and went as white as a ghost. I almost expected the fellow to go off in a faint, but he didn’t.”

Forshaw had promptly jumped forward, not to lend Gill a hand, but to pick up the telephone receiver. He had tried to get in touch with the person who had been speaking to Gill but failed to get any answer.

Then Forshaw had asked the exchange to tell him where the call had come from, and had learned that it had come from an A.A. box on one of the roads in the neighbourhood. This particular box was four or five miles from Wagoner’s Halt.

“I came away and left Forshaw with Gill,” Raven said. “I had the feeling that I couldn’t be helpful and decided—Ah! Forshaw hasn’t stayed very long either.”

Inspector Forshaw came into the laboratory. Apart from a very slight hint of annoyance about his eyes, the Yard man gave no outward sign of the fact that he was beginning to feel rattled. Jimmy Sprott made a mental note of that detail, and decided that it was an example worthy of copying.

“Nothing!” Forshaw said with a slight shrug as he answered Raven’s question. “Gill broke down completely after you had gone and talked about his boy having been taken away, and that it will break his wife’s heart. The boy’s staying with friends not so very far away and his mother will see just as much of him, or nearly so, as she does normally. But I can’t get anything useful from Gill and I’ve left him for the time being.”

They talked together for some time. Forshaw was convinced that Gill could give useful information, and he also believed that Kelvin Creed could tell a great deal, but both men were scared of saying anything. There was some

threat hanging over them, and evidently the fact that Cantrell had been killed made such a threat far more dangerous than it might have been. But if only they would tell all they knew they could leave the question of adequate protection for themselves in the hands of Scotland Yard.

Forshaw proposed to go back to London to-night, but would leave Sergeant Hopley as well as two local men on the premises here. Gill could look after them. It might not be a bad thing for him to have a certain amount of work at present and it was possible that he might begin to talk to Hopley later.

“Would you mind if I saw Gill—by myself, Inspector?” Sprott asked, butting in on the conversation for the first time.

Forshaw looked at him in that cold, steady way which was calculated to have an upsetting effect on anybody with a guilty conscience. Then he said with a little twist of the lips that was almost a smile: “That’s not a bad idea, Jimmy! Talk to him about his boy, too. I left Gill in the dining-room. You go along and see him now.”

Sprott went off, but it was in the kitchen that he found Gill. Nerves? The Creeds’ handyman was in a shocking state, judging by the way he jerked round and almost dropped the plate he was taking from a cupboard when Sprott entered the place. He had not really met Frank Gill before, and he explained to him that he was Mr. Raven’s clerk and assistant, Jimmy Sprott.

“I don’t suppose you’ve ever heard of me, but your son, young Charlie, knew me all right. I’ve been with him this afternoon.”

“You—you’ve been with Charlie? He—he’s all right? How long ago is it since you saw him? Where is he now?”

“I’ve come to tell you about it. I asked the inspector to let me have a talk with you alone, but I haven’t mentioned to him anything about what has happened this afternoon. While Inspector Forshaw and Mr. Raven were talking to you, I was with Charlie. We met in the garden and had a good talk about this business.”

He explained what had happened up to the time when Jimmy himself heard the startled cry from Charlie Gill.

“It’s the second time I’ve seen this brute, the Vulture. First time—well, you’ve seen marks on somebody’s throat like these before, so you’ll have a pretty good idea of what happened to me and what I feel about this fellow who calls himself the Vulture. Yes, I know about your wife. Mr. Raven told me, and we guess that’s what’s scaring you. You’re not afraid for yourself, but you’re terribly anxious not to do or say anything that might lead to others suffering.”

“They killed Mr. Stanton and then—they killed poor Mr. Cantrell. They’ve taken Mr. Kelvin——”

“Oh no, they haven’t taken Kelvin Creed,” Sprott interrupted. “He’s

perfectly safe, and there's not the slightest danger of any harm coming to him. And I doubt very much whether they have killed Stanton Creed. You haven't any proof of that, have you?"

Gill hadn't, but one of the Vulture's men had told him that he hadn't long to live.

"They won't kill Stanton while Kelvin is in his safe hiding-place," Sprott asserted, and found himself talking in a confident, cocksure way. "They're getting rattled now, and that's why they've taken Charlie. But they won't harm him. I'm dead certain of that, because it won't serve any useful purpose. But I'll tell you just what actually happened to Charlie, and then I'd like to know more about your side of the story. There's one thing certain: we've got to fight back and not wait until they attack."

It was fully half an hour later when Jimmy Sprott left Gill. The talk had been at times very difficult and trying. This man who called himself the Vulture had learned that the surest way of sapping a man's courage is by threats against those who are dear to him. It was evident that Cantrell had gathered a fair amount of useful information against the organization controlled by the Vulture, but had been afraid to act promptly lest he should bring harm to the Creeds. In turn the Creeds had been afraid lest Cantrell, or the Gills, or one of the Creeds themselves, should suffer because of some false step.

They must have talked it over and decided on a policy of apparent yielding to the Vulture's threats while preparing a scheme to outwit him at the last moment. That scheme had not been a complete success, but it was possible that up to a point it had delayed the Vulture's own plans.

When eventually Jimmy Sprott left Frank Gill there was at least some little return of his normal fighting spirit to the Creeds' handyman. He had been badly scared, and still was, as he admitted, but he was ready to take some risks and make some effort to help those who were determined to fight back.

Luck was on Sprott's side when he went back to the laboratory after leaving Gill. Inspector Forshaw had left Kit Raven for the time being, and this gave Jimmy an opportunity of explaining his own ideas to his chief. He told of the meeting with Charlie Gill and its unfortunate end, and later explained about the notebook he had found on the desk in the corner of this laboratory.

Kit Raven took charge of the notebook and would have carried the experiment with the citric acid still further if Forshaw had not returned just as he was about to begin. Sprott decided that he could slip away again. Raven would tell Forshaw the full story just as well as Jimmy himself could have done, and, having done a fair amount of talking in the last hour or so, he had the feeling that a cup of tea was an urgent necessity for him.

He had it with Frank Gill, and told him something of what was likely to

happen now. Later he went back and hunted for Raven, whom he found eventually in the small room just beyond the laboratory. Sprott had put up certain ideas to Raven, and he was anxious to know what Inspector Forshaw had to say about them. The inspector himself had already finished his talk with Raven and had gone off.

“All right, Jimmy!” Raven said. “Forshaw is agreeable to your plan. He isn’t keen, and he wouldn’t agree to it if he had any alternative, but he’s up against it and is ready to try any scheme that will give him a chance of getting a real grip on this case. He is putting the inquiry about the car in hand at once. It may lead to something, and if so, the Yard will take prompt action. I don’t like the idea of leaving you here, however, and Forshaw suggests——”

“Don’t worry about that!” Jimmy interrupted quickly. “There isn’t any real risk, and I’d like to stay because of Gill. But I shall get into the car with you when you leave. It may be bluff, but they gave me the idea that they are keeping a careful watch on this place in some way or other. In any case, we can’t be too cautious about our own arrangements. If all goes well, there ought to be a certain amount of excitement here to-night!”

Sprott was feeling his own self again. Quarter of an hour or so later he was getting into Raven’s car, with Kit already at the wheel. Inspector Forshaw had left before them, but had been held up for a short time by two or three newspaper men who were still hanging round in the hope of getting some later items about the developments in this mystery case.

When he turned from the drive into the roadway Kit Raven was soon going ahead as though he meant to do the run back to London in record time. It was after lighting-up time, and his headlights sent long beams before them until they had travelled about a quarter of a mile from Wagoner’s Halt and were actually out of sight of the place.

Then the lights went off suddenly, and the car was being drawn into the side of the road. Raven hopped out on the left-hand side and did it with a fair amount of noise and with very audible comments on lamps that played tricks. Just what he did at the front of the car would have puzzled an expert, but it certainly did not take him more than a couple of minutes.

At the end of that time he was getting into the car again and the lights came on immediately. The whole delay, from the moment when he drew into the side of the road to the time when the car went forward again with headlights gleaming, had not occupied a full three minutes.

But Jimmy Sprott was no longer a passenger in the car. He had slipped quietly out in the moment when Raven himself was noisily banging the door on his own side. Sprott was crouching in the ditch as the car went on again. He had his own plans for the evening just as Raven had.

Five or six miles away from Wagoner’s Halt Raven again stopped his car,

but this time it was outside a fairly large hotel. He ran his car round the side and parked it alongside one which he recognized.

Inside the hotel he inquired for Mr. Johnston, and was shown to a private room on the first floor. "Mr. Johnston", otherwise Inspector Forshaw, had Sergeant Hopley with him after all, and Gill would not be looking after the sergeant's comfort this evening. Forshaw was busy on the telephone for a time while Hopley carefully studied the menu which had just been brought up by Forshaw's request.

In due course, after Forshaw had done a fair amount of telephoning, the three of them sat down to an excellent meal. While they ate, however, all three of them studied and discussed from time to time the large-scale map of this district Forshaw possessed. There was more telephoning after the meal, and then the two other men who were expected were shown in to see "Mr. Johnston".

It was shortly after ten o'clock when the small company of five men left the hotel and went out to their cars. They hoped to be busy to-night.

"If young Sprott's information is correct," Forshaw said slowly, as he stood by his car and exchanged final views with Raven, "we should make a big jump forward before morning. I think we've covered every possible point. The case won't be over even if we manage to gather in this fellow, the Vulture as you call him. But we shall have a real grip on the job and a fair amount of evidence. It will be routine work after that."

"All I hope is that the man himself comes to-night," Kit Raven said.

"We shall get him if he does," Forshaw asserted quietly. "There won't be any mistake made over that part of the programme."

Inspector Forshaw was neither boastful nor optimistic, yet for once in a while he had forgotten the old adage about counting the chickens before they are hatched.

CHAPTER IX

In the Trap

After Jimmy Sprott had watched Kit Raven's car disappear he played an imaginary game of spies with himself. He had not very much knowledge of the country round here, but he had a very fair sense of direction. In due course, after dodging a hundred imaginary watchers who were on the look-out for him, he landed back in the garden at Wagoner's Halt, but on the opposite side to the heath garden which he had explored this afternoon.

The side door of the house gave entrance to the dark scullery, and it was through this particular door that Jimmy eventually slipped quietly into the place. Probably the extreme care he had taken in making his return was unnecessary, but he was taking no risks. The people who were behind this horrible game were not novices, and it was a hundred to one that they were keeping a fairly strict watch on the house.

Since this afternoon, when he had felt so sick with himself over the poor show he was making, Jimmy had managed to get a fair grip of the problem which had to be tackled. He had summed up his ideas, based on the little he knew himself and the story Frank Gill had told him, in this way:

Sir Rufus Grayle's rather vague and woolly statements about some mysterious organization which obtained possession of valuable trade secrets and new inventions was perfectly correct. Such an organization did exist, and had probably been successful for a considerable time past. It was obviously a highly efficient concern and had plenty of money to spend on its plans. This man who styled himself the Vulture was either the leader or an important member of the organization.

There was no need for Jimmy Sprott or anybody else to start shivering because the man had given himself an unpleasant nickname. It was an old dodge of scoundrels in every type of crime to christen themselves with some fancy name calculated to make them a little more awe-inspiring. Nor was it a brilliantly new idea to frighten the victim in advance by threatening harm to someone else.

The Vulture had learned that the Creeds were at work on some highly important discovery. He had evidently been spending some time in this neighbourhood in connexion with certain efforts his helpers had made at the works controlled by Sir Rufus Grayle. Possibly John Cantrell had had his suspicions aroused and made some progress in his own investigations before his friends, the Creeds, were numbered among the Vulture's prospective

victims.

Some time ago, however, the Vulture had set out to learn the full facts about the work on which the Creeds were employed. In this case he had begun before the whole of their task was completed, and he had evidently played on their nerves very thoroughly. Yet the Creeds had made their own plans for eluding him, and Cantrell had shared some of their secrets.

The Vulture had managed to obtain possession of certain diagrams and important drawings which were essential for this new process discovered by the Creeds. Those drawings were in the package Kelvin Creed had handed to Jimmy Sprott for safe custody until he could deliver the packet intact to Sir Roger Marston. The Vulture had guessed or known all about that and he had beaten Sprott.

Yet the Vulture must have been at Wagoner's Halt when Kelvin Creed visited Sprott. Other men had kept trail of Creed and had evidently tried at least once to overpower him, but had been beaten by Creed. He had outwitted them a second time when he succeeded in getting himself arrested and lodged in a detention cell at Dane Street police station.

There still remained even more important papers dealing with this "Syncredium" the Creeds had discovered. These papers were hidden somewhere at Wagoner's Halt and the Vulture knew it. But neither the Vulture nor Inspector Forshaw nor Kit Raven had realized that the clue to the hiding-place was contained in the cheap little notebook lying on the desk in the laboratory.

No one would ever have guessed unless they happened to wonder about those doggerel verses in the way that Jimmy Sprott had done. Cantrell probably knew that the notebook contained the secret, and that, if anything did happen to the Creeds, he was to take possession of the book. It seemed rather a roundabout method of preserving their secret, but Sprott had a strong idea that the Creeds knew just what they were doing, and that there was a good deal of sound common sense in their peculiar methods.

"And the Vulture will be coming to Wagoner's Halt to-night!" was the big item of information Sprott had been able to give Raven. The one person who knew this was Gill, and he had had his instructions yesterday even while the police were in the house! If he failed to carry out those instructions then it would be his wife and son who would suffer.

To add force to that threat they had even telephoned Gill this afternoon to tell him that they had taken his boy. If Gill failed in any way to carry out his orders he would sign his son's death-warrant. For one who had already seen how far they carried their threats in the case of John Cantrell it was impossible to take the warning lightly.

Gill would never have mentioned a word of this to Inspector Forshaw or

Kit Raven. But when a youngster only a few years older than his son had talked to Frank Gill, had proved only too clearly that he had met the Vulture yet meant to fight back and defy him, the case was different. Reluctantly and fearfully, perhaps, Gill had become an ally of Sprott's, had admitted more than he had really intended, and had finally felt something of his own courage return as he talked to the keenly anxious youngster who was not afraid of the Vulture.

Sprott became the one person who had a real understanding of what had happened and what was likely to happen. He had to handle this knowledge carefully, and Kit Raven helped him. It was Raven who talked to Forshaw—and the Yard man made all the necessary arrangements.

Long before midnight every blind in the house was drawn, and from the outside at all events Wagoner's Halt was in complete darkness. In the little room which had served as a den and sometimes a dining-room for the Creeds, two members of the local detective force sat in the big comfortable carving-chairs at the table. It was more than two hours since they had had the meal Gill had prepared, but the coffee-pot and the cups were still on the table.

According to programme these two men should by now have been in a pleasant sleep. They would have wakened before morning, and there would be little or no aftermath of the mild drug they had taken. Neither of them would have any suspicions that the coffee they had drunk the night before had been doped.

But the coffee was not doped. The drug which Gill had been ordered to use was safely in the possession of Inspector Forshaw. The two men were not in the least sleepy though they were ready to give a realistic imitation of profound sleepers the moment the warning reached their ears.

Across the corner to the right of the sideboard the one big easy chair in the place was standing. On cushions which he had arranged behind this chair Jimmy Sprott was resting fairly comfortably. He had made one or two tests with the chair before he chose this particular hiding-place. He was anxious to be sure that he could push the chair out quickly and then get out himself without any squeak or creak that might arouse suspicion.

But it was not on the two detectives nor on Jimmy Sprott that everything would depend to-night. More than a dozen men, apart from Inspector Forshaw, Sergeant Hopley, and Kit Raven, were on duty to-night. Most of the men were round the house, waiting as patiently and probably less comfortably than those inside the house.

Wagoner's Halt was a mouse-trap to-night. If everything went as expected the wanted man who styled himself the Vulture would walk into the trap. Once he was inside, Forshaw was confident that there would be no chance of escape.

The grandfather clock in the hall struck twelve. Two people in that house at

all events were now beginning to feel nervously alert and jumpy. Gill, sitting alone in the kitchen, rose slowly as the clock boomed the hour; these past few weeks had played havoc with his nerves, as he realized, and he stood for a few moments taking in deep breaths to steady himself and praying fervently that the risks he had taken would be fully justified before the night ended.

He kept a firm grip on himself and followed the advice young Sprott had given him. Move slowly and breathe deeply! Don't let your thoughts wander to possibilities in the future but concentrate on the programme—and keep to it.

Gill went through the long passage to the laboratory. The door of the small dining-room was open and the light from the shaded lamp was the only illuminant, yet it seemed to be reflected through the wide-open doors of the laboratory and to show up ghostly outlines beyond. As Gill passed the small dining-room he had a glimpse of one man lying with his head on his arms as they rested on the table in front of him. Gill gave a gentle cough as he passed and then in a few more paces was right in the laboratory.

He stood there for what seemed a very long time, but was in reality no more than five or six minutes, listening and wondering, and still fighting against those fears which had become an obsession with him of late. It came as a shock when at last he heard the faintest sound from the other end of the laboratory—and then a light flashed as the door which led to the heath garden was closed.

In the reflected light from the powerful beam which was directed towards the floor Gill could see two figures. One of them he recognized even in this difficult light. There was no mistaking the tall, gaunt outline of the man called the Vulture, and Gill had seen him too often. He came up the long laboratory straight towards Gill, and then for a moment the light flashed on the handyman as he stood there like a sentry.

“Everything clear, Gill? Two men have been left on guard here. . . . Where are they?” The Vulture's voice had a curious metallic quality even when he whispered, and there was never any difficulty in hearing every word quite clearly.

“They're in that room, sir,” Gill said, and turned for a moment to indicate the small room behind the wide-open doors.

The Vulture strode past him and looked into the room. He saw two men slumping heavily over the table, and there could be no doubt in the mind of anyone that it would take a very loud-ringing alarm clock at close quarters to waken either of them. Their slow, heavy breathing told its own story.

“Listen to me, Gill,” the Vulture said when they again stood together in the laboratory. “Somewhere in this place certain papers are hidden. We know that for a certainty. That fool Cantrell knew the secret. We did not know that when he came here so unfortunately the other morning. Sooner or later we shall learn

from the Creeds, but they are taking a long time to tell us all we want to know. Stanton Creed is still alive—but he may not be after to-morrow. We have Kelvin Creed in a safe place and we can deal with him just when the right time comes. You know that, Gill?”

The question might have been a sudden challenge or test, and it gave Gill a little shock judging by the way he jerked out his answer: “Yes—yes! I know!”

“There’s still a chance that both the Creeds may come back here, just as there’s a chance that your boy may be back here with you to-morrow, safe and sound. It all depends on whether we find those papers to-night. Once we have those in our hands our work is done. We shall vanish. The Creeds can go on with their experiments, and your boy will have his life before him. Your wife will be perfectly safe, and no harm will come to you. But . . . Have you thought over the question I put to you the last time, Gill? Where are those papers hidden?”

“I—I don’t know!” Gill asserted, and this time there was barely any hesitation in his voice. “I’ve told you—I wasn’t often in this place when they were here, except for some little job. But I never had to help them put away any papers. Never! I’ve never noticed any place where they could hide them. I swear I don’t know anything about the papers.”

“All right! Stay where you are!” The Vulture turned his torch towards the desk, and the man who accompanied him loomed up from the black shadows and joined him. As they moved nearer the desk a wild echoing sound from somewhere outside broke the eerie quietness of the laboratory.

“Tu-whoo-oo—Whoo-oo-oo!”

It must have startled even the Vulture. He swung round and his torch shone again full on the face of Gill. Once more there was a sharp note of challenge in his voice.

“What was that, Gill?”

“An owl—an owl, sir. We often get them—at night.”

“It’s the first time I have heard one while I have been visiting here,” the Vulture said, and stood for a moment or two listening intently. Apparently satisfied that all was well, he turned again to the desk by which his companion was now standing. From where he stood Gill could hear the whisper of his voice as he spoke to his helper but could not understand a word of what was said.

Inside the den just beyond the laboratory that long-drawn-out cry of an owl had been heard and taken as a signal. Jimmy Sprott was gently pushing away the chair which had formed his hiding-place and was slowly rising. The two sleeping policemen sat up with an alertness that almost surprised Sprott, who had listened for some time past to their slumber song and had almost become convinced that they had fallen victims to some form of self-hypnotism and

were genuinely asleep. But they were smiling cheerily at Sprott as they rose and moved silently towards the door.

The mouse was in the trap. He might call himself the Vulture, but he was merely a foolish mouse, and every way of escape was guarded and cut off. Inspector Forshaw had made certain on that point, and he had set a good many successful traps for mice and rats, and even vultures and other birds of prey, in his time.

So far as Jimmy Sprott was concerned, those few minutes after the owl's shrill hooting had given the signal to fourteen or fifteen waiting men were among the most tense he had ever experienced. With the two local detectives he moved silently out of the small room and into the passage. His two companions stood together with their backs pressed against the wall near the first of the wide-open doors which led to the laboratory.

From where they stood they could see, in the faint light from the torch which was being used out of their sight, the dark outline of Frank Gill. He was still standing where the Vulture had told him to remain.

Sprott went down on his hands and knees and crept slowly and cautiously beyond the feet of his two companions. He had an urgent and instinctive desire to see what was happening inside the laboratory, but he took the utmost care before he ventured to peer round the inner doorway.

He had a brief glimpse of two figures on their knees in the corner of the laboratory to the right of the roll-top desk. There was a small glass-doored bookcase here, and this had been opened. The powerful beam from the torch shone on the interior, and Jimmy had an idea that one of the men was using some kind of tool. Both men, so he thought, were wearing dark coats or mackintoshes.

That one glimpse was enough for Sprott. He crept back, prepared to wait till the next signal came. Every second now was tense with expectancy; every faint sound sent a thrill through his veins. But it was not until Gill moved, suddenly and silently, and another dark shadow passed in front of him that the thrill became a certainty. Almost in the same moment that the shadow had passed by Gill a voice was snapping out a sharp command.

“Hands up! Both of you! Quick!”

It was the voice of Inspector Forshaw, and the trap which he had set was about to close with a snap, so he hoped. Everything had gone according to plan. The two detectives were on the move the moment they heard Forshaw's voice. Their instructions had been clear enough just as Sprott's were. This was a job for the police and not for amateurs. Gill was to join Sprott in the passage as quickly as possible.

The two men at the bookcase were jumping to their feet the moment Forshaw's voice snapped out his commands. Forshaw was not using a torch at

the moment, but had one ready to switch on instantly it was required. His right hand held a weapon.

Behind him three or four picked men were already backing up, ready to jump in instantly. The brilliant beam from the torch in the Vulture's hand had come up and for a moment flashed full into Forshaw's face, blinding him temporarily. He was snapping out another command, however, and his men were spreading out. One of them was already crouching slightly, preparing to spring at the first sign of any dangerous movement on the part of the two men they had caught red-handed.

But almost in the same moment that the strong white light flashed on Forshaw's face something was jerked from the hand of the man before him. There was no deliberate aim; there was not even a pause while the man raised his hand. It was just a quick jerk as though something had left his hand unconsciously owing to the shock of that sharp command. He seemed indeed for the moment to be obeying the order to put up his hands.

There was a tinkle of something tinny as the thing dropped to the feet of Inspector Forshaw. The next moment there was a queer cracking, tearing sound and a sharp explosion, scarcely more violent than a child's pop-gun would have made. Instinctively Forshaw had stepped back a pace, however, and his voice had a touch of hard temper in it as he rapped out another command.

“Keep still! Hands up, I tell you! Take your——”

Forshaw stopped and spluttered as a wreathing cloud of white smoke came sweeping upwards and enveloped him. In the background Kit Raven was probably the first to realize that some trickery was afoot, and he was jumping forward, desperately anxious to come to grips himself with the Vulture before ever the man had a chance to take advantage of this diversion. But the cloud had grown swiftly and Raven heard another of those sharp yet comparatively light explosions.

In the same moment the cloud was swirling round Raven, and he was gasping, just as Forshaw had done an instant before, as something stung his eyes with the biting fury of powerful acid. A fierce burning sensation it was which aroused a horrible and instant fear in the mind of any man who felt it. Raven's hands had gone instinctively to his eyes and he stood motionless, utterly unable to think of anything for a time because of the intense pain in his eyes.

The whole place seemed to be filled with the stuff. Away in the passage Jimmy Sprott and Gill saw the queer cloud enveloping the small group of figures and blotting them out. The light from the torch faded out for a couple of seconds, and all that either Gill or Sprott could see was a swirling greyish cloud which seemed to be advancing towards this passage from the laboratory.

“Keep back!” Gill sensed rather than actually saw Sprott as he suddenly jerked forward, and he was grabbing the youngster’s arm. “You’ll do more here. . . . Keep out of it! Get a light! There’ll be other men——”

Out of the whitish-grey fog two figures came at what seemed to be breakneck speed. The light was utterly confusing. To one side of them was the subdued light from the small dining-room which cast a gentle glow across the passage without really lighting it. In front of them came the sudden blaze of the powerful torch in the hand of one of the figures which so suddenly emerged from the fog.

Sprott had a brief vision of two desperate men, as they seemed in that moment, with coats flying apart like wings as they dashed into the passage; he saw, too, that over the upper part of their faces they were wearing broad bands into which glasses were fitted rather like the airmen’s goggles, but in this weird light they gave the two men the appearance of strange monsters sweeping down upon the two now standing in the passage.

“Take their legs!” Sprott was whispering a fiercely urgent command, but he was already blinking unconsciously. Wisps of that white fog were now drifting into this passage, and, although he had not yet realized it, his eyes were feeling the first faint irritation which might have been a warning to him.

From the laboratory he could hear harsh and at times desperate or angry voices, each calling on someone to lend a hand or to do something quickly.

There was no time for Sprott to attempt to get a clear understanding of what had happened. His job was to take the first man, and his instinctive belief was that he was facing the Vulture again. He was certain of that in the brief moment he had in which to decide his course of action. Then he was flinging himself forward and, as he did so, he heard the sharp crack of a weapon and the sudden cry which came from Gill.

It may be that the sudden cry checked the full fury of his effort to take the Vulture low down as he came forward. Or it may be that the Vulture sensed the attack almost as swiftly as Sprott made his dive. Whatever the reason, Jimmy’s arms clutched violently at the legs for which he had aimed but there was no sudden yielding before the onslaught. The legs to which he clung were as firmly solid as iron posts bedded in concrete.

His surprise attack had failed completely in its purpose. And when such an attack fails the one who makes it is a hundred times worse off than he was before. Instead of his victim flying helplessly forward it was Sprott who received the real shock. As his arms relaxed he made a desperate effort to scramble upright again and renew the struggle on level terms.

The Vulture kicked. Sprott gasped and dropped helplessly, completely winded for the time being. He was only dimly conscious of powerful arms picking him up as though he were a toy.

A moment or so later something struck him on the side of the head. For some time after that Jimmy Sprott lived in a nightmare world where he was being banged and rushed and jolted violently as he was borne swiftly through the darkness.

He had had his third meeting with the Vulture; this time he had not merely been prepared, but there had been powerful allies who had no doubt that if the Vulture ventured into the trap prepared for him it would mean his capture. Some of those allies were now in the laboratory, wandering aimlessly around and calling on the others to do something to help them in the calamity which had stricken them.

Others were still outside, waiting till their turn should come. But they lacked all knowledge of what had happened in the laboratory, and they would go on waiting for a long time before they learned the truth.

But Jimmy Sprott had been beaten. His defeat on this third occasion was more emphatic than ever, and his enemy would take good care that the chance of making a fourth challenge would never arise for Jimmy Sprott. He was down and out.

CHAPTER X

No News of Sprott

At nine o'clock on the morning following the midnight excitement at Wagoner's Halt the fairly large lounge in that residence looked more like the out-patient's department at a hospital than anything else. Most of the occupants gave the impression of being much more doleful and depressed than a normal collection of hospital patients.

Inspector Forshaw and Kit Raven were sitting together on a comfortable settee. Both of them had bandages completely covering their eyes, and several other men in the room were in a similar plight. Two of these men were sitting very upright on ordinary chairs while uniformed nurses were gently painting the patients' eyes with soothing lotions.

A couple of doctors had been along. They were puzzled about the exact nature of the poisonous gas which had caused this eye trouble. It was apparently some new and more powerful form of tear gas, and its after-effects were considerably worse than any tear gas with which they were acquainted.

Nevertheless, both of them had come to certain conclusions, and treatment was being given in accordance with their opinion. The fact that one or two of the men who had apparently only had a mild dose of the gas had made rapid improvement under the treatment indicated that they were taking the right course.

"You should be able to do without the bandage by the end of the day," the doctor had told Forshaw. "That isn't a promise, but we're fairly confident about it. I'll be coming to see you again in a few hours' time."

Gill was one of those whose eyes were now almost normal, but he had his left arm in a sling as he went about trying to carry on with some of his usual duties. He had been exceedingly fortunate. At the moment when the two men, the Vulture and his companion, had come into the passage last night, Gill had apparently been an easy mark. It was the Vulture's companion who fired at him at fairly close range.

As it happened Gill had been on the point of carrying out Sprott's urgently whispered command. As a result Gill must have jumped away from the wall and flung himself sideways at the moment the man fired. The bullet had torn across the upper fleshy part of his arm but had not touched the bone. The arm was now bandaged up and he would be unable to use it for some days, but, all things considered, he had been wonderfully lucky to escape so lightly.

He had been able to get domestic help along early this morning, and

Wagoner's Halt was for the time being more like a nursing home than a private residence. Gill had realized that it would be useless to enter the laboratory and had never attempted to do so. Despite his own injuries, however, he had struggled to get outside and open the door leading from the laboratory to the garden. Other members of the police had come up, but there had been a great deal of confusion for a time, largely owing to the threat of that smoke cloud which came billowing out into the open air when the door was opened.

Forshaw's plans had gone badly awry during the next hour. Neither the Inspector nor Kit Raven was capable of much clear thinking during that time; the fierce smarting pain in their eyes, combined with the horrible fear that their sight was injured, made the personal problem more important than anything else.

Forshaw had the consoling thought, however, that this place was ringed with good men. By the time the doctors had come and all traces of that foul tear gas had been cleared away he was in a more hopeful frame of mind. He began to take up the reins to some extent and to ask for reports. He was surprised that someone had not already been worrying him to tell him what had happened.

"Well, sir, there's nothing to report, except that one man, Farren of the Hartsmere police, has been found unconscious. He's been taken to hospital."

That was the first genuine news Forshaw obtained. There was no report of any capture having been made, and before nine o'clock Forshaw knew that his plan had been a failure. No car had been observed either.

It was about this time that Kit Raven began to ask for Jimmy Sprott. Until then he had assumed that Sprott was among the slightly injured. This impression was due to something Gill had said at the time when Raven was not in the mood for grasping information clearly nor for asking questions. It was only later that he began to make real inquiries.

"But where is he now?" Raven asked. "I wish you'd find out just where he is, and, if he can come to see me, ask him to do so."

Sprott did not come. No one had seen him. By ten o'clock something in the nature of a preliminary report had come from the man Farren, now in hospital suffering from head injuries. He had been keeping watch on the house in the field which adjoined the Wagoner's Halt property on two sides. It was scarcely anticipated that, even if the expected intruders at Wagoner's Halt did get away for a time, they would choose this field as a way of escape. The other side was much more likely and there had been a fair number of men in the lane.

Farren thought he saw two or three figures emerging from the high hedge which on this particular side of the garden formed the boundary. He had gone forward cautiously, whistle already to his lips to give the signal if anything was wrong. One of the men had called "Police?" as he came forward, while the

other followed more slowly. Farren's impression was that this second man was carrying someone over his shoulder, but in the darkness it was difficult to be absolutely certain.

Nor had he much opportunity of making sure. As the man advanced towards him he had added in a clear whisper, "Message from Inspector Forshaw!" which had evidently put Farren off his guard for the moment. Nor had Farren blown his whistle in view of the man's statement that he brought a message from the Yard officer in charge of this affair.

Just what happened then Farren did not quite know, except that he had not the slightest warning of an attack. Something must have happened, and the next thing that Farren knew was when he wakened up in hospital and they told him that he had been found almost by chance in the field where he had been on duty. He had evidently been struck a stunning blow on the head and he was lucky to be alive.

"They must have collared Sprott," was Raven's unhappy verdict when he heard this report. "Where's Gill? He was the last person who saw anything of Sprott. I didn't quite grasp what he tried to tell me about the youngster, but . . . See if you can find Gill. Ask him to come here."

But Gill could add nothing to what he had already told them. He had seen nothing of Jimmy Sprott since they stood in the passage together and the man had shot at Gill. There had been a mix-up but Gill had been temporarily dazed and semi-blinded himself.

Gill led Inspector Forshaw to the telephone once again. Scotland Yard and the local police had heard everything that Forshaw could tell them as soon as he was in a fit state to talk over the telephone. They were taking what action they could, and every item that Forshaw could send through would receive immediate attention. Someone would come down to take charge until Forshaw himself could take full control again.

That evening the doctors took the bandages from the eyes of the men who were the worst sufferers. Those who had only been slightly affected were already going about as usual though their eyes still showed traces of the tear gas and they were still having treatment. Both Forshaw and Raven looked very bleary and bloodshot, but they could see fairly well though neither of them would have been willing to spend much time in reading the evening papers.

On Forshaw's instructions men were at work in the laboratory trying to carry on with the same task that the Vulture and his companion had been on when Forshaw's command surprised them. Sergeant Hopley, who had been one of the fortunate ones so far as the tear gas attack was concerned, was in charge of this job. So far it had yielded no result.

The small notebook was still safe in Kit Raven's pocket. He had not attempted to continue the experiment with the citric acid to its fullest extent.

The circumstances had not been appropriate and the task had been utterly impossible to-day. He would do it as soon as ever he could use his eyes safely. It was assumed that in the letter to Cantrell written in the notebook there would probably be further cryptic clues to the present hiding-place of the papers the Vulture was so anxious to obtain.

But Raven was not greatly concerned about that item just at present. It was the disappearance of Sprott which seemed to be the most urgent problem. The centre-point of the mystery had moved to a large extent the moment Raven realized that Sprott had vanished.

“As soon as these eyes of mine are right,” Forshaw told Raven after the doctor and the nurse who came to see him had finished their task, “I’m getting back to town and I’m going to see that fellow Kelvin Creed. Gill has told us all he knows. What we need now is Creed’s full story.”

“And what I’m going to do as soon as I’m fit to leave this place,” Raven said, with even more emphasis, “is to concentrate on finding young Sprott. If anything has happened to him I’ll never forgive myself for having landed him into this job.”

“Accidents will happen even in the easiest and softest of office jobs,” Forshaw said philosophically. “When you and young Sprott began to take a hand in the anti-crime game you were looking for trouble, and I guess you were aware of the fact. But don’t start worrying too soon. It isn’t the first time Sprott has been in an awkward corner or struck a packet of trouble, and I doubt very much whether this will turn out to be his last. I’ll ring up the office again and find out if they’ve picked up any information yet.”

But headquarters had no further news for Inspector Forshaw—not yet, they added hopefully.

CHAPTER XI

Fellow Prisoners

If Inspector Forshaw and others who were with him lived through a period of confusion and great discomfort after the Vulture's swift counter-attack, Jimmy Sprott was probably a few degrees worse.

He was never completely unconscious, though it might have been much more comfortable for him if he had been. He knew that he was being carried and jolted and jerked, and with a head that throbbed violently and a body that seemed to be one big dull ache he was incapable of clear thought. His brain refused to act, and yet in some queer way that instinct for observing details must have continued to record certain vague impressions of that horrible journey from its start.

His impression, when he had a chance to think about it later, was that they had left the house through that same side-door by which he had himself entered only a few hours before. Then they went, very slowly and cautiously it seemed, through the garden. It was not that part of the garden in which Jimmy had been earlier in the day, but away on the opposite side and far away from the wall which ran along the lane.

He was being dragged by the feet through a narrow gap in the hedge through which the other man had presumably already made his way. From some distance away the shrill echo of whistles sounded. They did not convey anything to Sprott at this stage; it was merely that his dull mind recorded the fact.

For a time he was still dragged over rough ground, or at least it seemed rough to one whose body felt a new pain at every jolt. But suddenly something happened. He had a vague idea of shadows in the darkness, and then he was being picked up and slung over his captor's shoulder again. A voice quite near him said in a clear whisper, "Police," and a moment or two later the same voice was murmuring something in which the name of Inspector Forshaw occurred. A moment later there was a thud and a queer, thin cry.

His captor was running and jolting Sprott in a way that was agonizing. He was thankful when at long last the pace slowed down, and then, surprisingly, he was being dropped on a couch. A light came on and, through eyes that refused to open properly and only focused the scene in a blurred way, Sprott's semi-conscious mind recorded the fact that they were in a living-room. At all events that was the impression which remained, much as a camera which had been badly focused might have recorded the scene.

Something was being pressed to his lips and Jimmy swallowed a spoonful or so of liquid. He wanted to drink badly, but for some reason this stuff tasted horribly bitter and he was letting the next small sip dribble from his mouth. He was feeling utterly weary and his main desire was to sleep.

There were other impressions later. Whether he actually slept or not he was never sure, but it must have been some considerable time later when he was lifted from the couch and forced to make an effort to stand on his own feet. He couldn't—and it was no use anyone trying to make him. So they swung him along, and he was out in the fresh air.

Dawn was breaking, and there was light enough now for him to see the broad garden path along which they took him. At the gate there was a tradesman's van, and it was into the back of this that the two men slung Sprott. He lay on the wooden floor of the van and the two men were jumping inside shortly after him. There were odd boxes and even old carpets and a few articles of furniture in the van. The men made themselves comfortable enough on an odd chair and a stool that happened to be among the load.

There was a third man too, but he did not climb into the van but stood talking for a time with the other two as they made arrangements for their own comfort. Sprott had been vaguely aware of this man once or twice, and he was certainly one of the two who had helped him down the garden path. He had a voice which was curiously soft and pleasant in contrast with the hard tones of the other two.

It was impossible to see the man in this difficult light even if Sprott had been capable of making a real effort to get a glimpse of him. But the sound of his voice in some way cheered Sprott and helped to rouse him a little so that he could follow something of what was being said.

“Very well, chief. I'll report to you during the course of the day. I shall be able to find out about Gill without any difficulty, and you can decide later how he is to be dealt with. And I'll get the official point of view some time during the day. I'll keep the place covered all the time.”

The doors were closed and the van was moving off. The two men who sat in the van spoke occasionally, but possibly they kept their voices low or it may be that the sound of the engine and the jolting of the van over roads that seemed none too smooth made their words difficult to follow. Sprott must have slipped off into dreamland for a time, but had no idea how long he dozed. The car had come to a halt when he wakened and the doors were being opened again.

“Come on! You've been resting long enough to have got over that little knock!” Somebody was jerking him into a sitting position, and he was presently helped out of the van. Two or three men appeared to be helping now, and one of them gave Jimmy a hand and led him into the house.

With this man he found himself standing in a small lift. It was going up, and Jimmy made an effort to count how many floors they passed. So far his mind had been in that semi-dazed state where it realized what was happening but made no effort to connect one thing with another. For the first time since he had been knocked out in the passage at Wagoner's Halt he began to get some idea of realities. Until now he had been no more than an inanimate body dully capable of recording confused impressions.

They stepped out of the lift into a dark passage. Before Sprott had quite taken in his surroundings a door opened just in front of them. Who opened it was a mystery so far as Jimmy Sprott was concerned, but his guide gently urged him into the room. It appeared to be a fairly comfortable double bedroom, with single beds placed on either side of the room against the walls. One of the beds was evidently occupied already, but the person who lay there never moved even while the guide was speaking to Sprott.

"You will be comfortable enough in here," the man said. "A meal will be served in a short time. Apart from that you will find everything you require here."

The man spoke as a well-trained waiter or servant might have done, and before Jimmy could get his mind working well enough to rake up any questions, his guide had gone and the door was closed. This room was evidently right under the roof and the only window in the place was the fairly large skylight above his head. The ceiling sloped but not very sharply, and it was this fact which roused Jimmy to do some real thinking instead of being content to act as a mere recording automaton.

There was another door just beyond the foot of the unoccupied bed. Sprott tried the handle and the door opened easily enough—into a fair-sized bathroom! This place, too, was lighted by a roof window which might have been the twin brother of the skylight in the bedroom. The sight of the taps, however, reminded Jimmy that what he was needing more than anything else was a good long drink.

He had it from the cold-water tap, using one of the two ebonite tumblers which were among the fittings in the place. That deep drink did him a world of good and in some way it acted as a tonic, lifting the dull cloud which had been fogging his mind for a long time past. A good many details which had temporarily vanished from his memory came flooding back to him.

"They've kidnapped me, I suppose," he decided. "They must be running a regular little prison here. There's Kelvin Creed's brother, Stanton, and then Charlie Gill. Wonder what really happened to Charlie?"

It was only then that he gave even a thought to the figure which lay beneath the coverlet in one of the two beds. Jimmy went from the bathroom to his temporary bed-sitting-room and crossed over to the occupied bed. He had

scarcely reached it when the one who lay there jerked to life and sat up—and the grin on Charlie Gill’s face was a full-blooded affair, in which cheeriness and amusement and joyous welcome were all equally mixed.

“Well, I’m dashed! Charlie Gill! I might have guessed it straight away, but my brain’s been addled for the last few hours,” Sprott said, but checked himself suddenly. Gill’s grin had quickly faded into a look of warning, and his hand was half raised as though to attract attention.

“Sh! Don’t give the game away!” he whispered and glanced quickly towards the door. “Somebody’s coming! I’m playing ’possum! Don’t give me away!”

He was lying down again and the coverlet was almost covering his head. As Sprott turned towards the door it was slowly opened and into the room came the man who had acted as his guide a short time ago. He was carrying a tray on which was a steaming cup of tea or coffee and several fairly substantial sandwiches. There was a small table near the bed, and he placed the tray on that, turned towards the door and closed it, then stood with his back against it as he spoke to Jimmy.

“That is your breakfast,” he said. “Another meal will be served in due course. I shall return in about ten minutes’ time to take away the tray.”

“Thanks very much,” Jimmy said. “It won’t take me long to clear that lot. Before you go I’d just like to ask you——”

“I cannot answer any questions, Sprott,” the man interrupted. “You will be told all that is necessary presently.”

“But this fellow who is lying asleep here?” Jimmy persisted, prompted by some queer instinct to ask what might be a risky question. “Does he sleep all the time, or——?”

“You have met him already, I understand. His name is Gill. You will be well advised not to make any attempt to waken him as he may be developing some serious illness. It must have been in his system before he came here, but he is being carefully watched. You had better have your breakfast at once.”

“All right!” Sprott was sipping the coffee before the man had left the room and had even taken a healthy bite at the sandwich. For a couple of seconds the man stood watching him and then, as Jimmy stared straight back at him, he went from the room. There was no sound of a lock clicking, and, acting once again on a sudden impulse, Jimmy jumped up and crossed noiselessly to the door. It was locked all right.

He came back and was just on the point of taking another bite at the sandwich when Charlie Gill jerked into life again.

“Sh!” Gill seemed to be keen on making that warning whisper, and he beckoned Jimmy to come to him. “Don’t eat or drink anything they’ve brought you. I think it will have been drugged in some way. Honour bright, I do! Why

do they think I'm asleep? Because they believe I took everything they gave me yesterday afternoon. But I didn't! Doesn't that coffee taste bitter? I never liked coffee, anyway, and that's what made me scared of drinking it."

"I don't quite know what it tastes like," Jimmy admitted. "If this is coffee, I'd very much have preferred tea. There's not enough milk in it, anyway. But the sandwiches seem to be all right."

"Don't risk them!" Gill said. "Hide them—get rid of them. Mine went into the bathroom. I'm jolly hungry and I hate looking at those sandwiches, but I'm not going to take risks. I'm dead certain that their idea is to send you to sleep just as they think they've sent me to sleep. I don't want to sleep. I want to get out of here as soon as it seems fairly safe. I'm going to escape."

"That's my idea too. But I'd better take your advice about the grub first of all. Just a minute. I'll talk about the big idea when I come back."

It was not quite so simple as it seemed to get rid of the meal, but apart from that first bite of the sandwich and a few sips of the coffee Sprott was content with a cup of water for breakfast. It was a big temptation to risk another bite because the first sample had tasted really good. Jimmy Sprott had a healthy appetite, and despite all that he had gone through his desire for a sound breakfast was just as strong as it usually was.

"Well, I've given breakfast a miss this morning," he told young Gill when he went back to him. "Now let's hear your story. What's happened to you since last we met?"

Gill told him all about it, but in two instalments. The first part was the shorter because after a few minutes Gill decided that it would be better to lie down again and carry on his performance as the Sleeping Scout. It was a wise precaution. Two minutes after he had lain down the man who had brought in the tray entered the room again. Sprott was sitting on his own bed when the man came in, and was holding the cup and saucer in his hand as though he had only just finished the coffee.

"I trust you found the meal quite satisfactory?" the man asked.

"What there was of it," Jimmy answered. "I shouldn't have left any if there had been twice as much."

"Your next meal may be larger," the man told him, and then stepped quietly across the room to look at Gill. It was an anxious moment for Sprott, but he need not have worried. The man was evidently quickly satisfied with his inspection and within a couple of minutes or so was leaving the room with the tray in his hand.

A few minutes later Sprott and Gill were talking together again. They kept their voices down to comfortable whispers, and Sprott realized presently that Charlie Gill had sound reasons for believing that the food and drink brought to him had been doped. He had heard several remarks which had been made by

those who had visited him, remarks which they would not have made had they suspected for a moment that the youngster was in reality wide awake.

The object of this doping was clear enough, and was in accordance with the Vulture's methods. In a drugged state they were helpless and there would be no need for their captors to take any particular precautions about them. There was no risk about it, and when necessary the boy who was drugged could be brought back to consciousness fairly quickly.

Not that there was much chance of escape from this place, but it prevented any attempts and avoided all risks and trouble. In the meantime, so Sprott judged, the Vulture would be in a position to bring pressure to bear on two people at least: Kit Raven and young Gill's father. Just how this power would be used Sprott could only guess, but he knew only too well just what Kit Raven would feel like!

"We've got to escape from here just as soon as possible!" he told Gill. "You say you have already been thinking about it and have an idea of how it can be done. Let's hear your idea first of all, Charlie!"

CHAPTER XII

No Way of Escape

That particular day was one of the longest and in some ways the most trying that Jimmy Sprott ever remembered. It was partly luck and partly his own queer instinct which warned him once or twice when danger threatened and so enabled the pair of them to go through the day without giving the game away.

Three times they were visited, and on one occasion at least it seemed amazing that the two who entered the room did not suspect that Sprott had only that moment settled down on the bed and closed his eyes. Once they tried to waken him and did indeed raise him into a sitting position. Something that one of the men said to his companion gave Sprott the right cue. They expected him to be showing signs of wakening—and he obliged, sleepily and heavily.

“Oh, go away!” he wailed. “I’ll get up—pres’n’ly. No hurry—needn’t go—office—Go away!”

“You are not well,” a voice said gently. “You won’t need to get up this morning. Here! Drink this!”

A small tumbler was placed to his lips and some sweetish liquid was tipped into his mouth. It needed a good deal more ability than one would imagine to pretend that he had swallowed the stuff, but he tumbled out of the supporting arm and hoped to goodness nobody would notice that he had quickly let the stuff seep into the bed-clothes. He would have noticed it himself if he had been on their job!

Charlie Gill had much the same experience. Their captors obviously underrated the capacities of their two prisoners. They were quite satisfied when they went out that the pair of them would sleep for a good many hours before requiring any further attention.

The day came to a close and the patch of glass in the ceiling gave but a faint suggestion of light when they decided that the time had come to make their effort. They were under no delusions. The job before them was bound to be highly risky, apart from the danger of being recaptured.

They were not even certain that the method Gill had decided upon was a possible one. All that they knew was that it was the only one open to them, and that they probably had several hours before them. During that time it was unlikely that anyone would visit this room and discover that they had vanished.

Once they left the room—well, there were several possibilities in the broad plan though the main idea was the same. The final details could only be

decided when they had done a little more exploration work. Charlie Gill was relying upon the fact that he was a first-class climber, and he had quickly learned that Jimmy Sprott considered himself an expert.

They carried the small table into the bathroom. A couple of pillows placed on the table added to the height, and Sprott was the first to clamber on this most important adjunct to their escape.

He had already made a close inspection of this skylight, and knew that he could push it open in the position he now occupied on the table. The awkward part of the programme was to lever himself up while the skylight was only open a matter of six or eight inches, but it was impossible to push it back any farther until he was out on the roof.

He managed it after a fierce, controlled effort. Once he had wriggled through to the roof he could open the skylight much more and render Charlie Gill's task a good deal more simple. Although he was considerably shorter than Sprott, it was evident that young Gill was a first-rate gymnast, judging by the way he came through that opening.

"Bravo!" Lying on the slated roof, Sprott whispered his congratulations to the youngster. "I'll lower the skylight again, but try to leave it slightly open just in case we want to get back. Then I'll do a bit of scouting to find out what the prospects are. I'm just beginning to wonder whether I ought to quit before finding out whether Stanton Creed is somewhere in this house. It's one of the important items I'd like to be able to report when we get back."

Lying on the roof, they had the first of several brief discussions. The outlook in the beginning seemed pretty favourable. The roof was not an awkward one, as the slope was comparatively gentle and there was a fairly wide flat part, like a narrow terrace, with small stonework balustrade along the edge. The house was obviously a pretty big place, and belonged to the early nineteenth-century type of solid country mansion.

Another item which cheered them was the fact that there appeared to have been several additions made to the house at different times, and these extra wings had lower roofs. That meant, so they argued, that they would be able to make their descent in stages, always providing that the downspouts ran conveniently!

Carefully they worked their way down to the parapet. Another bit of luck, so they thought, was the fact that the night was fairly fine, and now and again as the clouds parted a crescent moon, still low in the skies, came forth to give a silvery light which promised to be very helpful.

There was no hurry at this stage. They had time to explore and find out the best way of making the journey from the roof to the ground. Before coming out they had weighed up the possibilities, as far as they could without knowing the lie of the land. But they had imagination plus a general knowledge of roofs,

downspouts, creepers, garage roofs, and so on. Now they could hunt round and learn how to put their general ideas into practice.

“Slow but sure is the motto!” Sprott had said. “We shall have all the time we need, and we won’t run any risks by being hasty.”

It was young Gill who was the first to report that he had found the right way down from the roof.

“Come over here!” he whispered with a touch of excitement in his voice. “Now! What about this pipe? Look right down. Can you see where it goes? It runs straight down and just past the roof below us. If you can shin down this pipe . . . But of course you can! It’s as easy as falling off a house!”

“You’re trying to make a joke, Charlie,” Sprott smiled, but felt inclined to make some jest himself. “There isn’t going to be any falling off in our programme. Our big idea is to cling on until we’re standing safe and sound on the ground!”

Sprott had decided against making any attempt to learn something about Stanton Creed. In a house as big as this it might prove a long task, and there would be a good many risks if he ventured to re-enter the place. It would be much better to get right away, ring up the police, or better still, go to the nearest police station and tell them as much as was necessary. They would help them to get in touch with Kit Raven or Inspector Forshaw, and Sprott would do the rest.

Gill’s remark about falling off a house was not exactly the right comment in the circumstances. But he was fairly correct about the rather big pipe which stuck up two or three feet above the roof, though it had evidently been placed in this spot because it was not too prominent. The pipe was connected firmly enough to the wall, so Sprott judged after making a test. It did not run down in an absolutely straight line, but was bent at an angle of about 60 degrees some three or four feet below the coping which ran along this side of the roof. The sloping section only continued a very short way.

But this sloping section would give them some little help in getting a start, so Sprott fancied. Not a great deal, of course, but it would be slightly more useful than otherwise even though there might be one or two disadvantages. The pipe on its straight course ran quite close to the lower roof some distance below them.

“Right! Down to that roof it is, Charlie!” Sprott agreed after the pair of them had stared down for several seconds and weighed up the task before them. “Shall I go first, or will you? I think you’d better go first. I brought that towel along, and if I put it round you until you get a safe grip after you’ve climbed . . . No, don’t argue, Charlie! I’m the P.L. on this job and you can’t have two in command. I shall be all right. Ready?”

This was the most difficult part of the job—getting over the edge of the

roof and obtaining a good grip of the pipe for the downward climb. Sprott's idea was to give Charlie a helping hand by slipping a towel round his waist at one stage and holding on to the ends until Charlie gave the "All right" signal.

It was just as he was about to slip the towel round Charlie's waist, a job which required quickness without carelessness, that Jimmy had a sudden shock. A light seemed to burst out close behind him, a much whiter and more brilliant light than the gentle and very occasional breaks when the moon came from behind the clouds for a few moments.

Involuntarily Sprott gave a brief warning to Gill as he turned round to find out what the light meant. He was temporarily blinded by the powerful beam from what seemed in the first moment or two to be a small searchlight which was focusing directly on him.

As he knew later, it was merely a particularly large and powerful electric torch, and it was in the hands of a man whose head and shoulders showed above the skylight some twelve or fifteen yards away from where Sprott was standing. As he turned the man was calling out a sharp command.

"Come back! Come back—instantly! I will count three and if you don't return . . . One!"

He never completed his threat, but was already counting "One—two——" Before he gave the "two" Sprott was jerking out his command to Gill.

"Go ahead, Charlie! Don't rush it! Never mind about the towel now. You're on your own. Get away—without me! Tell them . . . Go!"

The "three" had been counted and almost immediately after that something was thrown by the man standing at the skylight. Jimmy did not see it because he was giving young Gill his orders, but he heard the slight crack and the little tinkle as though a wineglass had been broken and a paper bag burst immediately after it.

This was followed almost in the same instant by a burst of smoke which seemed to increase rapidly in volume. Sprott knew just what the missile was which had fallen so close to him. It was less than twenty-four hours since these same small egg-shaped bombs, charged with some powerful liquid which became transformed into gas when brought into contact with the air, had been used against his friends at Wagoner's Halt.

The smoke was already swirling in a menacing cloud, and Sprott had precious little time to lose. He was climbing quickly but calmly enough over the balustrade, but in the next two or three seconds came perilously near proving the truth of Charlie Gill's simile about the ease of falling off a house.

He had one or two shocks in those first few moments. The strong light into which he had stared for a moment or so and the effect of the bursting of that little gas-bomb had not been at all helpful for the perilous climb he was now tackling. But in some way he managed to get a grip with hands and knees and

feet on the fairly stout downpipe, and he knew that somewhere below him Charlie Gill was making the descent quite safely.

He had not gone very far—and one doesn't travel more than a few inches at a time by this method—when a wild uproar broke out from somewhere below. A dog, or two dogs were barking furiously, and though he dared not look down, nor was he likely to see them if he did, he knew only too surely that they were almost directly below him. Judging by the fury of their barking, they had already seen their prey.

“Here! Right! Stick your right leg out!” a voice which came from nowhere was whispering fiercely and dramatically. Jimmy paused in his descent, and realized that he was quite near the roof of the lower building and that young Gill was waiting there. Sprott grasped just what he had to do, and in the next moment was half jumping, half tumbling into the angle formed by the roof of this lower part of the building where it joined the wall down which he had just clambered.

Below them the dogs were baying in angry fury, but Sprott was content for the moment to take in a deep breath and rejoice in the thought that he had landed here safely. Time enough to worry about the barking dogs when he had recovered from this first effort.

He looked up and, as he did so, that powerful torchlight shone down on the pair of them again. Another moment and something was striking the roof in front of them, and Sprott realized that the man above was throwing one of those tiny, cracking bombs at them. They were an easy mark here, and a feeling of desperation came to Sprott as he knew that the odds against them were too heavy to give them a decent chance.

Both of them were instinctively pressing back against the wall down which they had just come. In this position the long beam of that big torch above them did not seem to cover them so well. It shone on the missile that struck the roof in front of them, however.

A silvery-looking egg-shaped object it was, and it was already rolling down the roof. Sprott was leaning forward and grabbing it instantly. His instinct was to fling the thing as far as possible away from them before it burst.

He had not had any real experience of these queer little “bombs” which had been used so effectively at Wagoner's Halt, but he knew fairly well now how they behaved and what the first effect was. He knew nothing of what had been the final outcome of the attack at Wagoner's Hall so far as his friends were concerned. But he did know that the Vulture and his companion had made their escape, despite all the precautions taken by Inspector Forshaw.

In the light from the beam which shone down on them from the roof above Jimmy saw the glass end of the rolling object as he jerked forward to pick it up. Probably there was a complete egg-shaped glass, partially covered by a

thin metal protection; possibly it had a cap to protect the glass end until the moment before it was flung into action. A throw, taking care to aim at the floor or wall in order to break the thin glass end, and the bomb would explode and distribute the gas.

So much flashed through Sprott's mind as he picked the thing up. He grasped the fact that the glass end was not broken. It was a matter of luck, perhaps, or else it was the bad throw made by the man above. Sprott pushed the thing into his coat pocket. He was probably taking risks in doing so, especially if he happened to get a bang against anything or if he fell and smashed the thing. But it might be highly useful to have this queer weapon in hand in the next quarter of an hour.

The beam from above had vanished, and Charlie Gill was whispering while the dogs below kept up that incessant baying. They were apparently making desperate efforts to spring up the wall of this lower building, but there was never the slightest fear that they would accomplish the feat.

"What do we do now, Jimmy?" Gill was breathing deeply after the stiff effort of the climb down and the excitement of their present peril. "We—can't get down with those dogs ready to attack us. If we tried the other side—we might——?"

His whispering trailed away in an unfinished question. Sprott was already racking his mind for some solution, and he realized that if there were any chance at all it would have to be taken very quickly. There was no time to stand here and weigh up all the possibilities. They must act at once.

"We shall have to divide forces, Charlie. If one of us can get away it will be a good deal better than both of us being collared. You'd better go. I'll take care of myself if they do get hold of me. Oh, there's the light again. Stand close to the wall. Better crawl along, keeping as close to the wall as you can, and get over to the other side. You must get away."

"But——"

"It's the only way out, Charlie. Together we shan't have a chance. I'll show myself in the light—keep all the attention on myself from men and dogs as well. I'll keep them busy while you're getting away on the other side. Make a dash for it as soon as you dare. Then get help—police—or ring up Forshaw at Wagoner's Halt, or get in touch with him in some way—as early as possible. But get away now, Charlie! It's an order. Go!"

"All right! I'll do my best, Jimmy, and I'll be back as soon as ever——"

"Good luck to you! Keep out of the light. I'll draw it away from you and try to fool the fellow I'm up to some trick. Good luck!"

Sprott was already making an effort, in much more gingerly fashion than he might have done, to crawl along the roof away from the wall. The beam above was following him—and Charlie Gill was lost in the darkness.

CHAPTER XIII

Hide and Seek

Purposely Jimmy Sprott made as much commotion as he could in his difficult progress across the lower part of the roof on the side where the dogs were barking. The light from above followed him all the time. That was just what he wanted, as it would give Charlie Gill a fair chance of making progress.

Once or twice he thought he could hear the sound of voices which might have been calling commands. Then a tile on the roof became loose under his hands and he stopped for a moment or so to pull it out altogether. He was going very cautiously, even though he made a pretence of being clumsy, as he kept in mind the danger he was running so long as he had that egg-shaped bomb in his pocket.

Having secured the tile, he wriggled round into a position along the guttering where he could take a cautious look over at the ground below. He had a glimpse of two great dogs and they must have had an equally good glimpse of him, judging by their renewed efforts to beat all their previous records in the way of jumping and barking.

He flung the tile over without any attempt to calculate where it would go. His sole idea was to create a noise and keep the interest on this side while Charlie Gill did the best he could to get clear away. As he looked again he could see the shadows of two men and heard their voices calling to the dogs. Within a few seconds the barking ceased, and in the silence Jimmy could hear the faint whisper of the men's voices coming to him from below.

For a moment he had an idea that it might be quite a sound notion to get rid of that tear gas bomb still in his pocket. He was not too happy about it, and yet it might be a very big help presently—if it didn't meet with an accident and put Jimmy himself out of action before he had a chance to use it. On the other hand, it might be wasted uselessly if he threw it now. Possibly it was a dud, anyway. It was also likely that in the open air it was not nearly so effective as inside a room. Obviously in the open air it would be much easier to get clear of the swirling cloud the bomb created than in the stillness and confined space of an ordinary room.

"I'll hold on to it for the present," he decided. "Wonder whether Charlie has managed to get down all right? If he can only get clear away everything will work out all right in the end. And the longer those fellows down there do nothing but keep watch on me, the better chance Charlie will have."

The next five or ten minutes, or it may have been quarter of an hour for all

Sprott knew, formed a curiously dull, flat interval after the peril and excitements of the fifteen or twenty minutes before this break. In one way Sprott was in just as much peril as ever, but the two distinct ideas that were in his mind at present overshadowed the feeling of immediate danger.

The main thought was, of course, that every minute that passed without any alarm being raised, and with the two men and dogs concentrating their whole attention on him, meant a bigger chance for Charlie Gill. And, rightly or wrongly, Sprott still had that vague ambition in his mind that he would like to make certain that Stanton Creed was in this house before he left.

It was a crazy notion on the face of it, especially just now when he might very easily bring his career to an abrupt end by a false move. These men were not amateurs in crime, but an efficient company of experts who had a far longer record of success than anyone suspected. Sir Rufus Grayle and others might have an uneasy feeling about the leakage of commercial and manufacturing secrets, but they had no more real idea of how it happened or to what extent it had happened than the man in the moon.

Jimmy Sprott's mind ranged over everything that had taken place in those long minutes during which he lay on the roof. Then he came back to the realities of the present situation, probably because one arm was becoming horribly cramped. The two men and the dogs were still there and showed no signs of excitement now. Evidently they were content to wait in the confident assurance that sooner or later Sprott would make a move.

An unpleasant fear entered Sprott's mind that Charlie Gill might not have been successful in his attempt after all. It was queer that these two men and the dogs were the only creatures who had shown themselves so far. There must be other people in the house. And why didn't the two men below do something instead of being content to stick there and wait?

A little touch of panic, or the need for urgent action of some kind, gripped him then. He began to move, and, just as luck had it, a heavy cloud came over the moon. It gave him a better chance of carrying out his first impulse, which was to clamber over the roof to the other side and spy out the land there as far as possible. He had to do something—and there isn't much choice when you're stuck up on a roof!

The darkness seemed to him to give a real chance of making a move, but he took risks without quite realizing them. As he worked his way back to the wall he made what seemed to him at that moment to be a remarkable discovery. Overlooking this roof, and on the other side from the one where he had spent all his time so far, there was a small window in the wall. Even in this light, or the lack of it, he could see as he crawled nearer that the window was slightly open.

Sprott wasted no time in working his way to that window. He wondered if

Charlie Gill had noticed it, and whether he had chosen that way of escape. He wondered, too, why he had not observed it earlier, but realized that when they had been crouching with their backs to the wall it was practically impossible to see it.

The sill was not more than three feet above the roof. He was half standing, in a slightly crouching attitude and anxious to keep himself as invisible as possible, and his hands were on the sill. Then, with the utmost caution, he had one hand under the middle of the slightly open lower frame of the sash window. It went up easily enough and without more than a very slight sound.

Luck? It seemed to be on his side at this moment. Without worrying about his future prospects when he was in the darkness which lay beyond the partially open window, Sprott decided that he was taking this way out of his present difficulties. He climbed through the open window, hoping and trusting that the two watchers below had already gone round to the other side.

They would probably suspect later on just what had happened, but by then, all being well, Jimmy Sprott would be in some safer hiding-place. Trust him to use his wits when he had the chance. This was a great game of hide and seek and he could surely play it a great deal better than these people.

He was safely inside and turned to pull down the window. To leave it wide open would be to leave too obvious a clue when presently somebody wakened up to the fact that Sprott was not dropping meekly into their hands as they had evidently hoped. His idea was to leave the window as nearly as possible exactly as he had found it before he entered.

Then he turned, wondering what sort of a room it was and wishing he had a pocket torch. His hand had gone to his coat pocket without thinking, but he remembered that his torch had disappeared after that attack at Wagoner's Halt. Instead, his fingers closed on that small egg-shaped bomb. Thank goodness, it was still all right. In the excitement of these past few moments he had forgotten all about it. Lucky for him that it had not been broken.

And then Jimmy Sprott nearly jumped out of his skin with sudden, instinctive fright as a quiet voice spoke to him in the darkness.

"All right, Sprott! Stand just where you are! I can see you very clearly against the window. Don't move an inch, or what little chance you have of living to old age will be gone in a moment. I'm covering you all the time."

Staring with wide-open eyes into what had been utter darkness, Jimmy Sprott now saw the vague outlines of some of the fittings in this place. A bathroom it was, so he guessed, and the man whose voice had made his heart leap into his mouth was sitting on the edge of the bath itself not more than four or five feet from where Sprott was standing. He could not see his face except as a slightly whiter patch in the black shadows. It was highly improbable that the man could see Sprott's face either unless his eyes had become like the cat's

through sitting here in the darkness. Yet he had known that it was Sprott who came through the window.

Jimmy had walked into a trap—and as he realized it a sudden fury swept through him, banishing that momentary fear which had come with the first shock. Every time he had come up against the Vulture or one of his helpers, Jimmy Sprott had been badly beaten.

“Put your hands above your head, Sprott! Jerk ’em up! Quickly!” the man ordered, speaking quietly enough, though the tone was insistent. “Then go before me. I’ll tell you which way to take! Put your hands up!”

The last command was the most threatening of all and the man was rising. Jimmy’s hands went up—but before his right hand reached its limit he was jerking it sharply forward. In this hand he was holding the queer egg-shaped bomb, and even while he had stood with his back to the window his fingers had been feeling it.

If one part of his mind thought of a dozen items and went through several emotions of fright and fear and angry fury, another part was grappling with the problem of how this little bomb worked and what was the exact result when it did act.

And then, as his hands went upwards, the bomb was crashing violently against the interior of the bath. Whether the man had seen the quick, jerking throw or not, he was certainly startled by the cracking sound and sharp little explosion as the glass end was broken by the impact with the side of the bath.

It was in the same instant that Sprott flung himself forward. It was a desperate and even foolish gamble he was making now, but that only added to the fury of his attack. His arms were round the man’s legs and he jerked them with all the force he had at his command. The man was toppling backwards, as Sprott hoped he would, and was falling into the bath against which he stood.

As Jimmy rose after his wild effort he felt the first touch of that stinging vapour which was already rising from the broken glass bomb. There was no time to see what happened to the man. That first stinging sensation in his eyes was an urgent warning to Sprott. He realized in another second or so that he might be worse off than ever as he sought vainly for the door.

There were at least two or three moments during which he was hunting for the door which would let him get out of this room when some little touch of panic seized him. He must get out of here as quickly as possible before the man started to raise a hullabaloo and call for help. Already that vague greyish cloud was spreading towards him like some ghostly octopus with waving tentacles seeking its victim.

“Steady! Steady!” He was gasping it to himself as he had done in times gone by when he felt the touch of fear gripping him. “Keep your eyes closed—hunt round—Good!”

Miraculously, it seemed, his hand was on the partly open door and he had a glimpse of some faint light beyond. He was through the door without pausing to think of the risks he might have to face on the other side. Even now his eyes were almost closed in his anxiety to keep them protected from the gas that was filling the room. The door was closed the moment he was out of the room.

If only there had been a key he would have used it, but the man he had overthrown had never made a sound so far except that queer little screech as he toppled backwards. He would certainly have the full benefit of that bomb which had originally been thrown for Sprott's benefit.

Once outside the bathroom he paused for a time. His eyes were causing him a certain amount of discomfort, though he judged that he had only had the faintest possible amount of the tear gas. It must be pretty powerful stuff, he told himself, if the irritating, stinging sensation he felt himself was only a mild sample of what one would get with a really full dose of the stuff.

He moved away from the bathroom door slowly. There was a light shining somewhere round the corner, and he realized that he was in a very short passage which ended with the bathroom. What lay beyond the end of this passage was the next discovery he had to make.

"My best plan will be to find some safe hiding-place for a time," he decided. "That fellow I knocked out will be raising a hullabaloo very shortly, and the whole place will be roused. He must have been stunned when he fell into the bath, but I don't suppose it will do him much harm. Bound to be pretty tough as he's one, of this crowd. Jove! But I could do with a good long drink!"

He could also have done with a good square meal. As he thought of that Jimmy almost wished he had made a desperate effort to make a dash for freedom. Whatever happened, he would hunt for food to-night and take all risks. Nobody could keep going day in and day out without food, and it seemed ages since he had sat down at Wagoner's Halt and enjoyed the light meal Frank Gill had prepared for him. He wondered how everybody at Wagoner's Halt was going on, and what Kit Raven was doing at this moment.

Meantime, while his thoughts rambled for a few moments, he had walked along the short and narrow passage and taken a cautious look into the longer and wider corridor. It was not particularly well lighted, but that was an advantage from Sprott's point of view. There appeared to be several doors opening on to the corridor though they were all closed at present.

He was very tempted to try one of these doors in the hope of finding some hiding-place in the room beyond where he could rest for a time. It was a queer and unaccustomed feeling for him to have, but he was feeling distinctly groggy, as though he had just about reached the end of his tether. He put it down entirely to the lack of food and not at all to the strenuous and even desperate hour through which he had passed.

The house seemed strangely silent, but, as he stood hesitating at the top of the stairs to which this corridor led, he heard the first sound of voices which had so far reached him since he had made his escape from the bathroom. Down below more powerful lights were shining, and as he stared down he had a glimpse of two or three figures. They were coming up these stairs.

That was enough for Jimmy Sprott. He went along the corridor again but away from the bathroom end, as swiftly and silently as a shadow. At the same time he was anxiously keeping an eye open for anything that looked like a temporary hiding-place until the threat of danger had passed.

He found it all right at the end of another short corridor. This house seemed to him, from the little he had so far seen of it, to be a big, rambling sort of place, very modern in parts and yet retaining some of its old characteristics, with odd stairways and short corridors or passages leading to rooms which appeared to be cut off from the rest of the house.

Here he was in an alcove that might have been a small room at one time, but had at some later period had the door and most of the wall facing the corridor taken away. Curtains had been fitted across the archway which had been left, and these were looped back without altogether destroying the illusion of a secluded nook. Moreover, there was a large chest of drawers standing against one of the side walls as well as a chair and small table.

Behind the chest of drawers certainly offered a temporary hiding-place, and it appealed to Sprott in his present mood. He had barely settled himself on the far side nearest the window when a sudden click followed by a gentle bang quite near him gave him a momentary shock. It was not absolutely dark in here though there was no light actually on in the place. The reflected light from the corridor was sufficient to give one a general impression of the place.

"Glory!" Sprott almost jerked out the exclamation aloud as he realized that almost directly opposite the chest of drawers, though slightly nearer the corridor, was a lift! It had just come up and stopped, and it was the light from the interior of this lift that suddenly increased the brightness in the alcove. It was a limited brightness, however, and fortunately Sprott's temporary hiding-place was in deeper shadow than before.

He did his best to shrivel into his own corner, and his mind was beginning to work again at full pressure as the prospect of being seen leapt into the range of immediate possibilities. He could not wriggle any farther back, and was thankful that he had just managed to get into a kneeling position.

It seemed to him that it would be touch-and-go whether he was discovered or not in the next minute or so. That was the main thought in his mind as two men stepped out—and that was abruptly banished in the next moment by another shock. The two men who had just emerged were swinging out a figure which seemed very limp and helpless. If either of the two men had chanced to

turn his head at that moment instead of keeping his eyes fixed on their semi-conscious burden, Sprott would have been seen without a doubt.

But it was not this particular risk which gave him the shock. It was the fact that the figure between the two men was Charlie Gill which staggered Jimmy Sprott. The big hope which had been at the back of Sprott's mind ever since he had parted from Gill was swept away completely in the moment when he recognized the youngster. Judging by the feeble efforts he made to keep his head up and even to use his feet, Charlie was just about as near unconsciousness as anyone could be without being utterly oblivious to everything.

They were swinging him away after a brief pause during which one of the men closed the lift gates and then the ornamental door which normally hid the lift shaft from view. A wild temptation almost overwhelmed Sprott to jump up and make some effort to rescue young Gill. He checked the impulse, realizing in time that it was simply a crazy notion which would only land the pair of them in a worse plight than they were at present.

This was a time for calm judgment and not impulsive actions. As they turned towards the corridor Sprott began to raise himself slowly as the fear of being seen gradually became less.

He had to dodge down again almost instantly, however. There was a sudden wild cry of "Help! Help! Kersten! Help!" It came echoing along the corridor, and was being shouted by some man who seemed to be in a frenzy. Other voices broke out, and there was the sound of someone falling and of footsteps as though men were racing along the corridor.

To keep just where he was in his hiding-place was a little beyond Jimmy Sprott's limit. An urgent desire to know what was going on tempted him out. He had an inkling of what had happened, but wanted to confirm his own ideas.

He came out slowly and cautiously, however, keeping himself tense and alert, ready to get back at the slightest sound or sign of danger. There was no one in the alcove, and he took cover behind the draped curtains as he tried to obtain a glimpse along the corridor to see what was happening there.

CHAPTER XIV

Victory for the Vulture

What Sprott saw first of all in the corridor was the prone figure of Charlie Gill, lying as though he had been dumped there in a hurry. For one moment Jimmy longed again to go to Charlie's side and find out just what was wrong with the youngster. There was even a wild idea in his mind about seizing him, getting him to the lift, and then making another desperate bid to get away from this house.

Something drove that notion out of his mind. As he stood there looking across towards Gill the youngster moved. In another second or so Sprott felt more like laughing than anything else. Young Gill was an artful fellow, and had his head screwed on the right way! It was very evident from the way he moved that head now and tried to take a discreet look down the corridor that Charles Gill was not nearly so helpless and incapable as his captors and Jimmy Sprott had imagined.

Watching the youngster at close quarters, Sprott was amused and fascinated. For a few moments at all events he almost forgot the bigger problems which were facing him. Gill was very carefully moving himself and getting into a position from which he could see what all the commotion was about farther along the corridor.

The little knot of men who were now at the corner where another short passage branched off were evidently excited about something. It was difficult to hear anything of what was said, but every now and again odd words reached Sprott, and the real cause of the bother became plain enough.

It was the man who had lost the brief contest in the bathroom who had been calling for help. He had evidently managed to get out, but was incapable of doing much for himself. There had been a touch of panic in his voice when he shrieked out for help. For some time he must have lain in the bath stunned by the fall, and even when he recovered he would scarcely know what course to take with the smarting pain in his eyes. In due course his testimony as to the efficacy of that tear gas might be useful!

He was gasping out commands to his friends, who, in turn, were anxious to understand what had happened. It took them some time to grasp the facts, largely because the man himself seemed incapable of making a coherent statement. One word Sprott heard, however, and knew that his own name was at last being mentioned.

Quite unaware of the fact that his companion in trouble was so near him,

Charlie Gill was taking a very keen interest in everything that was happening. The excitement at the end of the corridor did not last very long, however. The group of men were moving off in a bunch, helping the injured man between them. They disappeared from view, having completely forgotten the existence of Charlie Gill for the time being.

“Tu-who! Charlie!” Sprott was calling out very softly as soon as he realized he could take the risk. Charlie jerked as though someone had suddenly jabbed him, and it was only then that Sprott had a full view of his face and saw the streaky marks on his left cheek. Young Gill had been in the wars and had suffered a certain amount of damage.

“Be careful! Just come along towards me,” Sprott said. “It’s all right! I’m still knocking round—Jimmy Sprott. They collared you after all. What’s the chance of making a dash for it now?”

“None!” Gill answered softly but none the less emphatically. “I’m feeling pretty rotten, Jimmy—but not nearly so bad as I’m trying to make out to them. But they have four or five dogs outside and they’re big, nasty-tempered brutes. One of them jumped on me just as soon as I dropped down from that roof where I left you. I never heard a sound on that side, and it seemed all clear though the dogs on your side were still barking. Queer, isn’t it? I don’t think we’ll try to get away just yet, Jimmy. I’d say the best plan was to find some hiding-place, if we can, and try to make them think we’ve both got away. Do you think we can do something of that sort?”

It was not an easy problem to settle at once, and, as luck had it, the question was decided before Sprott had a chance to express his views at all. Charlie Gill was just on the point of getting to his feet, and, fortunately, Sprott was still keeping in the shadow of the curtain. A voice echoing along the corridor gave them warning, and the next moment a man loomed into view at the far end of the corridor. He came hurrying towards young Gill and a second man came two or three yards behind him.

“All right, Charlie! Play your own game now. I’ll be at hand.”

There was no time for more than that brief whispered message. Sprott was slipping quietly back to his place behind the chest of drawers. So long as he could keep out of their clutches there was always a possibility of doing something helpful. Charlie Gill’s report and his own common sense told him that the time was not ripe for any attempt to get right away from the house. It would be much wiser to lie low and try to find some fairly safe temporary hiding-place until the present excitement had died down. If he could keep clear of the people in the house, they might be deluded into the idea that he had managed to get away.

Sprott could hear Charlie Gill’s voice raised in wailing protest. If he had not known what he now did about Gill, he would have been convinced that the

youngster was still dazed and frightened out of his wits. The men were also protesting against the noise Gill was creating, and they were warning and threatening him at the same time.

Another voice broke in, more harsh and commanding. Sprott had an idea that he recognized the metallic quality of the tone, but could not be absolutely confident. He had the idea, too, that the tone of the men's voices changed, and they became brisker and yet slightly apologetic.

Jimmy had to guess what was happening, but listened intently, anxious if possible to gain some idea of the course things were now taking. As he listened he became convinced that his first suspicion was correct. It was the Vulture himself who spoke in that hard, commanding tone, and he was demanding explanations. The men were telling him something of what had happened, and it was evident that until a short time ago the Vulture had been quite unaware of any commotion in the house.

From something else that was said Sprott came to the conclusion that the Vulture had only just returned to the house and had not been in the place during the time when the real excitement of the chase had been on. Evidently the news he now heard annoyed him. They were telling him, so Sprott thought, of Jimmy's own escapades and his attack on some man named Frenzel (or at least that was what the name sounded like to Sprott and he made a mental note of it).

Frenzel, so Jimmy gathered, was now being treated for the damage done to his eyes. Somewhere in the house Sprott was still in hiding, but would probably try to make his escape as soon as he imagined he had any sort of chance. But the dogs were still out and they would give the alarm. From the tone of the voices Jimmy gathered that they were all very confident that he could not get away and that presently they would discover him in the house.

It was not exactly cheering news to hear. The Vulture and the men with him were moving off from the corridor, however, and that gave Sprott a breathing-space as they never came anywhere near his present hiding-place. He realized now that he had been very lucky in escaping detection so long, and that the sooner he discovered some safer spot the better it would be.

Jimmy was an optimist with a tremendous faith in the big idea which helps most optimists through their difficult times: he was confident that everything would come right in the end. But he was not a foolish optimist who expected Fate to be on his side all the time. He could only expect good luck if he made some very definite effort himself to ensure it.

He was in a tight corner and he knew it. But he was still at liberty up to a certain point. Charlie Gill was a prisoner again, and the hope that he would get right away from this place and let Forshaw and Kit Raven know the position no longer existed. It depended on Sprott himself now.

He came out of the alcove and stood almost in the corridor for a few moments, listening intently. The house no longer seemed so deadly silent as it had been when he first escaped from the bathroom, but such sounds as he did hear were dulled and far-off. Once or twice the barking of dogs reached his ears, but their baying never lasted for more than a few seconds.

As he moved slowly down the corridor, however, a voice came echoing clearly enough from somewhere in one of the passages near him. It gave Jimmy a sudden shock as he realized his immediate danger and the urgent need to find some cover again. Without really weighing up the risks he might be taking, but realizing clearly enough that it was too late to get back to the alcove again, he opened the door of the room by which he happened to be standing when the voice gave warning of someone's approach.

He had slipped into the room quickly and felt a momentary sense of thankfulness when he realized it was deserted. Luck was on his side. There was a light shining on the writing-table close to the window, which indicated that the room had been recently used and that in all probability someone would be coming here again shortly.

It was not a large room, and was evidently used as a study sitting-room, comfortably furnished for work or quiet relaxation. The desk-lamp shone on a fairly tidy, well-arranged desk. There was one article which seemed to leap to Jimmy's eye among all the odd books, pen-stands, blotting-pad and other impedimenta on the desk. It was the telephone instrument which raised new hopes, and sent one or two bright ideas buzzing in his mind.

He was still standing by the door, his hand on the knob ready to control it as he fastened the door behind him. But for a moment he ventured to open it slightly again, listening intently in the hope of forming some impression from the sound he might hear whether the man whose voice he had heard was coming in this direction or not.

There was not even a whisper of sound now. The voice had ceased. Spratt ventured to put his head beyond the door and take a look outside, but there was no sign of anyone in the corridor. Three or four different ideas were buzzing in his mind now, but each was clear and distinct enough. The fact that a light was on in this room served as a warning in the first place. Somebody might be returning here presently, and it would be necessary for Jimmy Spratt to have some hiding-place to which he could dodge the moment he had definite warning.

It might be a good idea, too, just to take some steps to ensure that he had a clear warning if, and when, anyone did come to this room. There was no key in the door, and even if there had been it might not have been advisable to lock himself in. But there was one little dodge which was not his own original idea, but he had seen it tried out, and it might serve him very well now.

Walking to the desk, he found a suitable pencil and then went back to the door. By forcing this pencil a little way under the bottom of the door he made a temporary wedge. It would not jam the door completely, nor would it keep anyone out for even a few minutes. What would happen in all probability would be that the first person who came along would find the door sticking a little as he tried to open it. The sound made would serve as a warning to Sprott.

With a little gentle persuasion the door would eventually open all right, but in the meantime Sprott would make for the corner he had already decided upon as his hiding-place if the opportunity arose. It was not unlike the hiding-place he had used at Wagoner's Halt on that night when they waited for the visit of the Vulture. A small, well-upholstered settee was placed across this corner, and behind that it was highly improbable that anyone would see a sign of him.

And there was the telephone! Here was a wonderful chance to put through some communication. The first problem was to decide the best and shortest way of accomplishing this. To put through a trunk call and try to get in touch with someone at Wagoner's Halt was altogether out of the question. The house might now be vacant, or it might need a good deal of unnecessary explanation if someone at the other end did not know Jimmy Sprott.

Or he might ask for Scotland Yard, and give someone there a message for Inspector Forshaw. They would get it through to him without any waste of time. But even this would take too long, and it was essential that Sprott should use the quickest possible way of sending his message.

He was by the writing-table, and his hand was on the receiver by the time he had weighed up all the possibilities before him. By then he had decided his course. He lifted the receiver and waited anxiously for the voice of the operator at the other end. It came at last, after what seemed to be a long time, though it was probably not more than a few seconds.

"Listen! I want to get an urgent message through to Scotland Yard," Sprott was saying as soon as he heard the operator's voice calling "Number, please". It was a man's voice, and it seemed to Jimmy that he spoke too loudly, but that was entirely due to Sprott's own anxiety about making the slightest unnecessary sound.

"Scotland Yard? I'll put you through to——"

"No! Take this message! For the love of Mike—it's urgent and important. Can't wait. Inspector Forshaw, C.I.D.—at Wagoner's Halt—Sprott sends message; now at——Oh, give him this number and exchange——"

"Just one minute! Your number and exchange——"

"Never mind that now! Get my message through! Sprott to Inspector Forshaw. At Vulture's headquarters. Come—urgent——"

"Gr-rr-rr-hh!" A sound as though something was scraping hard on the floor startled Jimmy Sprott. As he looked in alarm towards the door it was flung

open violently and angrily. The pencil had served its purpose up to a point, but only for a moment or so, and then it had been forced away by the sheer violence of the man on the other side. Sprott had no choice. He was putting the receiver back as the operator's voice was calling out to him again.

The Vulture himself, with another man just behind him, came into the room. There had never been a chance for Sprott to make a dash for his hiding-place. He had calculated on a slightly longer warning than this. The Vulture saw him as soon as he entered, and came straight across to the desk. From his manner he might almost have been expecting to find Sprott here, and certainly might have known just why he was standing at this desk. Jimmy imagined that he had put the receiver back in its cradle an instant before the Vulture could possibly have seen him.

The Vulture was taking up the receiver, but as he did so he jerked out some command in a tongue Sprott did not understand. It was not intended for him, but for the other man who had followed the Vulture into the room.

This man promptly came round and gripped Jimmy's left hand fiercely just as he was instinctively moving away from the desk. The Vulture was already speaking to the operator on the telephone. In the excitement of the moment, and owing to his immediate effort to shake off the man's grip, Jimmy did not hear the Vulture's first quiet words, nor did he hear, of course, anything of the operator's reply.

"Yes. That is quite right. Dr. Voltan is speaking now. One of my patients has probably been amusing himself on the telephone. I don't suppose he said anything that mattered, but in any case, please ignore it. Yes? Yes! That is correct. Thank you very much."

The receiver was put back and Jimmy Sprott, with both hands now twisted behind his back, was jerked away from the desk. His captor gave him a sharp turn so that he was brought face to face with the Vulture, who was apparently known also as Dr. Voltan. Even in his present uncomfortable state Jimmy Sprott was repeating the name "Dr. Voltan". Optimism died hard, and there was still the hope that this new item of knowledge might come in useful some time in the very near future.

The Vulture had turned from the telephone, and was now regarding Jimmy Sprott with the same cold, appraising look that a scientist might have regarded a new specimen of some wild creature just secured alive for his collection. It was some seconds before he spoke another word.

"Put him in that chair," the Vulture said at last. "I don't think he will run away again in a hurry. Now, Sprott, I am going to have a talk with you. I have been waiting for this opportunity for some time past."

His captor was none too gentle in his treatment. Sprott was literally flung backwards into the upholstered chair which was standing quite near them. But

the fierce grip on his wrists ceased to worry him, and he was, for the time being, comparatively comfortable. At such a time as this Jimmy Sprott was thankful for this small mercy. He could think more clearly when he was free from any hint of pain or discomfort!

CHAPTER XV

Fate of a Message

It might have cheered Jimmy Sprott a great deal while he sat helpless and faced Dr. Voltan, otherwise the Vulture, if he had known something of what was happening in certain other places.

Kit Raven and the organization behind Inspector Forshaw had not exactly made swift progress, nor had there so far been any dramatic moves in this case. Raven had returned to London, and had had a long talk with Kelvin Creed.

There could be little doubt about the fact that overwork and extreme anxiety had played havoc with the scientist's nerves. It would be some time before he would be his normal self, but, if nothing occurred to give him a setback, the man's natural courage would pull him through eventually. He told Raven a good deal of what had happened at Wagoner's Halt before he had left.

So far as Inspector Forshaw was concerned, he had precious little doubt in his mind now about the identity of the person who had killed John Cantrell. There was little or nothing in the newspapers about the fresh developments in the Wagoner's Halt mystery, but there had been a good deal of activity which would never be made public.

Drivers of a certain type of car may have wondered why they were stopped by the police and were subjected to a close examination. They were rewarded by having a small ticket stuck on the windscreen, and were informed that if they kept the ticket on for a few days there would be no further police inspection.

This hunt for a particular car was only one of many items which were being systematically carried out. Descriptions of certain men who were wanted by the police were widely circulated, and slowly but surely a fine-mesh network was spread. A persistent watch was kept at certain places where it was thought the men might be seen, and inquiries were being made over a wide area. The police might work slowly, but in the end they expected success to crown their efforts. There was, too, a telephone operator who was on night duty at the Braxdale Exchange, and he played a useful part. It was about nine o'clock in the evening, and he had not been on duty very long when a call came through which he answered with reasonable promptitude. Braxdale was busy enough during the day, but after eight o'clock at night the work fell off considerably.

There was certainly no rush of work at nine o'clock, and the operator was not in any great hurry to answer the call. Still, he was not nearly so long as the

one at the other end imagined him to be.

“Listen! I want to get an urgent message through to Scotland Yard,” a whispering voice was saying, but the words came through clearly, and every syllable was carefully enunciated. The operator tried to explain to the man that he would put him through so that he could give his own message, but the person at the other end became both irritable and insistent, though he still kept his voice down to that clear whisper.

The operator admitted afterwards that he thought the man at the other end was either hopelessly confused or else he was trying out some new practical joke. But from force of habit he jotted down a swift note of what the man was trying to tell him without really grasping what he meant. It was so jerky and altogether confused, or so it appeared at the time.

Before the operator had been able to persuade the man at the other end to repeat his message more clearly, or let him put the call through to Scotland Yard or the local police, the man had put the receiver back. That settled the matter so far as the operator was concerned—and then the same number was calling him again.

This time the speaker at the other end did not whisper, though he did not shout. He merely wished to know if the operator had been troubled a few moments before by a call from one of the patients. It was a doctor speaking, and he wished to warn the operator not to take any notice of the last call from this house. Had the last speaker tried to get through to any other number?

“I couldn’t grasp what he did want,” the operator said. “He wanted to know his own number. Your number is 931.”

“Yes. That’s all right,” said the voice, and added one or two explanatory comments which for the moment seemed to make everything clear. The whole affair had been a trivial waste of time.

Yet the operator had a look at the directory though he already knew that Braxdale 931 was Norfield House, a fairly big residence now used as a private nursing home. Dr. Melford was given as the occupier of the house, but the man on the telephone had given his name as Dr. Voltan. Probably there were one or two assistant doctors working under Dr. Melford, and the operator had a vague recollection of having spoken to Dr. Voltan before.

Even while he flicked back the pages of the directory with his left hand the operator was writing out a fuller note of the odd contractions he had jotted down when he answered the call. Possibly it was the mention of Scotland Yard which aroused his interest and explained why he made out a clear note. Sometimes queries arose about messages of this kind, and a brief note made at the time settled all arguments.

“9.5 p.m. Brax 931 call: desired urgent message to be sent Scotland Yard. Inspector Forshaw C.I.D.—at Wagoner’s Halt——” The operator was staring

at the entry in the local directory while his memory wakened up at some familiar name. Then he remembered. That queer murder mystery that had been in the papers recently was at some place called Wagoner's Halt.

It also came to the mind of John Flaxman, telephone operator, that Inspector Forshaw was the detective in charge of that particular case. There might be more in this message after all than he had at first suspected.

Flaxman wrote that message out more carefully now. He was afraid for the moment that he had not remembered the name of the man who sent the message. But it came back to him when he looked at his notes again.

"Whether it's a practical joke or not, I'm sending it through to the Yard," Flaxman decided, and when he was through to Whitehall 1212 he made a brief explanation to the operator on the board. It was quite all right. In less than two minutes Braxdale Exchange had another call. This time it was from Inspector Forshaw himself. Flaxman repeated the message and answered several questions.

Ten minutes later two local policemen visited the exchange. They asked him questions about a message to the Yard, and even checked his message with the copy they had with them. Then they asked him to ring up the Yard again. The sergeant himself spoke when the call was answered.

"Your message confirmed," was the gist of what he said. "Flaxman, operator, Braxdale Exchange, now on duty, and message received by him as stated."

"Thanks," the sergeant told the operator when he had finished his brief talk. "Between ourselves, there seemed to be some doubt at the Yard as to whether your message was correct so we had to drop round and see you. Good night!"

That was not quite the true explanation of why the sergeant and his man had called. The Yard were not running any risks, and they made assurance doubly sure. They knew now that there was nothing faked about that message from Sprott. Even before he was perfectly satisfied on this point Inspector Forshaw was busy.

One of the first persons with whom he communicated was Kit Raven. Both Forshaw and Raven had decided not so very long ago that they would have a few hours' sleep to-night, and tackle the job afresh early next morning. They could do nothing useful by merely keeping awake and talking it over again.

It was precious little sleep either of them had. Soon after eleven o'clock they were in a car which took them first of all to Braxdale telephone exchange. Later, it carried them on to Norfield House, from which, according to the operator's evidence, the broken message from Jimmy Sprott had been sent.

Theirs was not the only car which made its way towards Norfield House to-night, and the local police had been keeping a watch on the place soon after

Forshaw issued his first instructions. Certain precautions had to be taken to avoid rousing any suspicion that the place was being kept under observation.

Forshaw and his men had gathered all the information they could about Norfield House and its present proprietor. Other items from men who had been making minor investigations in connexion with the case had all been collected hastily.

Every step had been taken to ensure that no one would leave Norfield House that night without finding himself in the hands of the police. The orders were that any such persons were to be detained for questioning until the police were satisfied.

“We shall either make a big stride forward to-night,” said Inspector Forshaw slowly, and as though making a profound announcement, “or else—or else we shall come a very nasty cropper. It’s a bit of a gamble, and I’m the first to admit it. We’re banking rather a lot on what your youngster, Jimmy Sprott, has had to say in this affair.”

“I hope to goodness we find he’s safe and unharmed,” Kit Raven said. “I didn’t like the fuller details from the telephone operator about the way the message was interrupted. It gives me an unpleasant feeling that Sprott may be in desperate need of help at the earliest possible moment. The sooner you decide to take action the better I shall like it.”

Inspector Forshaw shrugged his shoulders. “More haste less speed” was an admirable motto, and he was not risking a complete fiasco by foolish rush. They would get more information before they made their official entry into Norfield House.

But Kit Raven’s fears that Sprott might be in need of help at the earliest possible moment were justified. After the unfortunate interruption when he was just on the point of telling the telephone operator exactly what he had to do, Sprott was flung into the chair and faced the Vulture.

By then he knew that the Vulture had satisfied the operator that no notice need be taken of any message—even if the operator had understood anything of what Sprott had told him. The fortune of the game, so Jimmy felt, had gone definitely against him now.

There was not much time to worry over lost chances, however. Sprott had to keep a grip on himself and check the tendency to let this brute, Dr. Voltan, and his companion, whose name was Metzler, hear anything of Jimmy’s feelings.

“Better strap his wrists behind him,” the Vulture said, and from somewhere close at hand Metzler produced a broad linen strap. It did not look very terrible nor particularly strong, but it served its purpose. Sprott’s hands were secured

behind his back, and he realized that he would probably find it exceedingly difficult to free himself if ever the opportunity came. It was another example of his optimism that his first thought when the strap was fastened round his wrists was concerned with the best way of freeing himself.

“Do you know why we use a strap instead of rope or cord, Sprott?” the Vulture asked in that hard voice of his which would have suited a robot better than anyone who still had claims to be regarded as a human being.

“I don’t know, I’m sure,” Sprott said, and tried to appear uninterested in the question. “I suppose it just happens to be handy.”

“We do it so that in the event of the police discovering your body later on there will be no marks of violence. Even one of your stupid policemen might recognize the marks made by a tight rope. The strap avoids that trouble to a large extent.”

“I see,” Sprott said, and tried to force a smile as though the idea amused him. “It must need brains to think out notions of that sort.”

“What number were you trying to get when we came in?” the Vulture asked.

“I just wanted to let my friends know where I was staying,” Sprott answered. “After all, they’re bound to be wondering where I am.”

“But you failed to get the number you required?”

“You didn’t give me much chance. I was still trying to waken the operator when you butted in. He was the only person I spoke to, and he never grasped what I was trying to tell him. If you’d only given me another five minutes it might have been different.”

The Vulture went on with his questions in a steady, relentless way, though never once did he show any outward sign of temper no matter what answer Sprott made. On the whole Jimmy did his best to avoid sarcasm, and to keep just as unruffled as the Vulture himself appeared to be.

Even the occasional threats the Vulture made were more in the nature of hints of what might happen. For more than quarter of an hour the questioning went on, but the main point of them all seemed to be directed towards learning just how much other people knew of what lay behind the Wagoner’s Halt mystery. He was particularly anxious, so Sprott judged, to find out how much Raven had learned. Jimmy did his best to side-step the awkward questions and give noncommittal answers.

“You are not telling me what I wish to know, nor all that you know, Sprott,” he said at last. “We must take steps to make you talk.”

He had pressed a bell-push a minute or so before this and it was now answered. A man entered the room and stood near the door as though waiting for instructions. Sprott did not really see the signal the Vulture gave as he rose, but the man advanced quickly into the room.

Metzler had also risen, and with the newcomer's aid he jerked Sprott out of the chair without giving him a chance to rise, himself. Both of them were slightly behind Sprott when the youngster was on his feet, and, having taken a grip on each arm just above the strap round his wrists, they were forcing him along.

There was not the faintest chance to make any protest even if it had been worth while at the present time. With his head lurching forward and his arms held painfully behind him, Sprott was pushed ahead of the two men. If the men had suddenly released their hold on his arms, Jimmy would have gone sprawling headlong.

All that he had any opportunity of observing was the carpet laid in the corridor along which he half walked and half staggered. Fortunately it was not a very long journey he had to make. A door was opened and he was pushed into another room. As he entered there were sounds of voices and two men seemed to be having a somewhat heated argument, to judge by their tones.

That at least was Sprott's impression, but he had no idea of what the argument was about because the language they spoke was not English, and it certainly was not French. There was no chance of guessing, anyway, as the argument ceased abruptly when Sprott and his two guards entered.

The Vulture must have been following immediately behind them. He came into the room a second or so after Sprott's arms had been released from that painful grip and he was standing upright again, very tempted to say what he thought of the two brutes near him, but still determined to exercise his self-control and play the game as calmly as the Vulture did.

His first impression when he could look round was that he had been whisked back to the laboratory at Wagoner's Halt again in some mysterious manner. It was no more than a momentary idea and then he realized there were differences here. But the slate-topped bench and the shelves and racks fitted with retorts and bottles were at first sight an exact replica of the laboratory fittings at Wagoner's Halt.

Even in his present unfortunate position Jimmy Sprott's eyes were roaming swiftly round, taking in every detail. This room was not quite so long, though possibly rather wider, than the laboratory at Wagoner's Halt, and there was scarcely so much space devoted to work benches and apparatus. One-third of the room at the fireplace end was furnished not unlike the room from which he had just been brought. Evidently the chemist or chemists who worked in this laboratory believed in resting between different tasks and had comfortable chairs and a chesterfield for that purpose.

There appeared to be another debate or argument breaking out again, and this time the Vulture was taking a leading part. This time, too, they spoke in English, and in a very short time Sprott had grasped what the trouble was

about and why the argument had been heated.

He felt he wanted to laugh when he grasped the main point. It was a bright item of news coming just when he was feeling very helpless and badly in need of a strong tonic to revive his spirits.

Charlie Gill had vanished again! Someone was already making a hasty search for him throughout the house. These two men who had been having their argument when Sprott was pushed into the place were thoroughly annoyed about the whole affair and apparently each blamed the other and was exceedingly angry.

They had brought young Gill in here as commanded by the Vulture. He was incapable of walking without support, and was in that semi-conscious state where he scarcely realized what he was doing. There was not the slightest risk, so they believed, in leaving him on the floor while they hurried off again to learn how the man who had been damaged by Sprott was progressing.

They were also anxious, according to what was said, to find Sprott. It did not exactly cheer them up to know that Sprott had practically given himself up to the Vulture.

It was, of course, utterly ridiculous that two youngsters should upset and interfere with the well-organized plans of these people who lived at Norfield House. Jimmy Sprott, standing by the laboratory bench and doing his best to appear calmly indifferent to all that was going on near him, fully appreciated their feelings. Incidentally he gathered a fair amount of new information about their activities, which he hoped would come in helpful later on.

He gathered, for instance, that until this Wagoner's Halt affair there had never been any real hitch in all the different plans they had carried out. There ought not to have been any real hitch in this last affair if Kelvin Creed had not tricked them and escaped.

This had happened just when Kelvin Creed had been expected to hand over the full details of the brothers' discovery of Syncredium. The Vulture himself was to have received the necessary papers and plans from Kelvin Creed. In return, Stanton Creed's life would be spared, and the threats which had been made against the Gills would cease.

After that the Creeds and the Gills would have been able to live in peace and quietness again so long as they never breathed a word to anyone about the threats or about the fact that the secret of Syncredium was no longer available. The Creeds would simply inform those who knew about the experiments that their efforts had finally ended in failure.

So much Sprott was able to put together from the remarks made during this lengthy discussion. Another item he was able to pick up while the talk was going on was that Kelvin Creed had to some extent been responsible for Cantrell's death. Creed had telephoned to Cantrell after he had managed to get

away safely from Wagoner's Halt. Apparently it was as a result of that telephone message that Cantrell had called at the Creeds' house before making his journey to London to meet Kit Raven.

Whether Cantrell expected to find the laboratory deserted when he entered that fatal morning Sprott could not tell, though he guessed that was the position. Cantrell would probably wish to possess the small book which later on Jimmy Sprott had discovered.

The move Creed had made just when the Vulture's men had managed to pick up his trail again had left them helpless. To get himself arrested and taken off to a police station was a move to which they had no reply. Moreover, their efforts to persuade Stanton Creed to tell them certain details had so far completely failed.

True, the Vulture had wasted no time in gaining possession of the precious package Kelvin Creed had handed to Jimmy Sprott. But, valuable though it was, this package of papers was useless without the full descriptive notes of the process which had been separately hidden by the Creeds.

These written notes were still somewhere at Wagoner's Halt. So much appeared to be quite certain from what the Vulture said. Cantrell would probably have found them at once, and it had been the biggest mistake the Vulture had made when he shot Cantrell. But at the time the Vulture was entirely unaware that Cantrell knew the secret of their hiding-place. It was known, however, that Cantrell had gathered certain information about the Vulture's work in various ways and was regarded as a dangerous man.

He might have been more dangerous had he been allowed his liberty after finding the Vulture in the laboratory at Wagoner's Halt. But it seemed likely that for once in a while the Vulture had allowed his temper to get the upper hand and he had shot Cantrell.

All this did not come out as a simple straightforward story, but in the different references and comments made during the fairly long talk which now took place in the laboratory. They were all beginning to get badly rattled, so Sprott thought.

But they never gave Sprott himself a loophole. His two guardians stood quite near him through all this talk. The youngster Gill had managed to get away, even though it would only be for a short time. They were taking no risks of allowing Sprott even a few moments of liberty. He would be dealt with presently.

CHAPTER XVI

Charlie Gill Intrudes

Several times while all the long discussion was going on in the laboratory it was made quite clear to Jimmy Sprott that if he made the slightest movement which looked like a dash for liberty he would have very good reason for regretting it.

Once or twice, however, there was only one man in charge of him. At such times the thought did arise in Jimmy's mind that it might be an opportunity for a swift breakaway, but he decided against it. The odds at this stage were too heavy.

Usually when one of the two men who kept such close guard over him left the room it was on the Vulture's instructions. The man was not away for more than a few minutes, and each time it was to give some order to other men in the house.

Among these orders was one to the effect that the dogs were to be allowed out again, if by any chance they had been called in. Someone was to go with them this time so that if they caught the boy Gill, he could be brought indoors at once.

It was not that they feared young Gill in any way, except the possibility that if he managed to escape it would probably mean hordes of policemen descending upon this place. There would apparently be time for them to make adequate preparations to deceive the police if that did happen, but it would save a great deal of trouble if the boy were caught before he started to talk.

The idea in capturing Gill had been merely to frighten the elder Gill and to force Sprott to do what he was told. This particular method of terrorization had apparently been regularly employed by the Vulture in his different schemes and had always worked admirably. It had not taken them long to discover that on this last occasion the terrorization method had failed completely. One of the men, Frank Gill, who had been frightened out of his wits, so the Vulture had assumed, had surprisingly taken the plunge and told the police what he knew—even after he had been warned that his boy was in the Vulture's hands.

"Gill will pay for that later," the Vulture said. "But we can leave that question for the present. Find the boy as quickly as possible. Bring him here when you do find him."

Sprott had forgotten to some extent his own immediate danger in the interest he found in listening to this discussion. The Vulture was undoubtedly rattled, but his supreme confidence was certainly not shaken. The one thing

that remained to be done now was to find the missing papers which formed the essential part of the full plans relating to the Creeds' discovery of Syncredium.

"We shall do that within the next two days," the Vulture asserted. "I am confident of that. Once that has been done we shall leave here for a time and allow the police and the other fools with them to continue their search. One by one we shall deal with those who have learned too much and may interfere with our plans later. But you go now. Find the boy Gill. Metzler! You remain here. Take this fellow Sprott—over there!"

He pointed towards the end of the bench against which Jimmy was still resting. Metzler gripped him by the arm and planted him with his back against the end so that he was facing the fireplace in which stood an electric radiator that was both ornamental and complicated in appearance. It had been switched on, and Jimmy could feel its warmth though he was standing several feet away from it.

"Now, Sprott!" The Vulture stood in front of him, and those deep-set eyes which seemed to glow with some burning hatred were fixed intently on Jimmy. "Has anyone—the police, Raven, or you, or anyone else—found any trace or any clue to the hiding-place of the other papers prepared by the Creed brothers? You know the papers I mean. They belong rightly to the package Creed handed to you and was later passed to me. What do you know about them?"

Sprott shook his head. "I never saw what was inside the packet you stole from our office, and Kelvin Creed certainly didn't tell me. Whether there were other papers which ought to have been in the packet, I don't know and I don't know that I care. I'm afraid you are giving me credit for knowing a good deal more about Creed's business than I do."

"You know perfectly well what papers I mean!" the Vulture answered with unusual quickness, and the coldness had left his voice. There was even a hint of passion in it, and suddenly his left arm shot out and his fingers were gripping Sprott's throat.

The attack came so swiftly and was so totally unexpected that Sprott never had a chance to dodge. In any case he was hopelessly handicapped from a defence point of view since his wrists were still secured behind his back.

For a second or so the Vulture exerted the pressure of those talon-like fingers on Sprott's throat. Jimmy had the greatest difficulty in keeping back the shriek of pain that came involuntarily. It would have been a strangled cry if it had come, but the grip slackened to some extent and the Vulture was snapping out: "Answer me!"

"I have answered you," Sprott gasped. "Take your hand from my throat. I swear you will get nothing from me by threats."

"Go on!" The pressure on his throat was lessened a shade more so that it

was no longer painful.

“I can’t tell you anything more than I have done. Kelvin Creed may know, but he has refused to tell us anything. You know where he is. It is useless threatening me because I can’t help you.”

That was the truth so far as Sprott knew it. Not the whole truth, perhaps, because he knew that the book he had found with the doggerel verse by Kelvin Creed probably gave the full clue to the papers about which the Vulture was asking. It was possible, too, that by now Kit Raven had read the full message which had been written in invisible ink.

It was also possible, so Sprott imagined, that Raven would have been to see Kelvin Creed again in the detention cell where he was perfectly safe from the Vulture and his helpers. But Sprott could not be sure of that and, even if he could, he had not the slightest intention of breathing one word about Kit Raven’s knowledge to the Vulture.

The pressure on his throat was now no more than a gentle grip, but never once did the Vulture’s eyes leave Sprott’s face. It was not merely that steady malevolent gaze nor even the fingers at his throat which gave that slight flush to Sprott’s face. The simple fact was that with all his cleverness in some spheres Jimmy Sprott was a poor hand when it came to evading the truth.

He was desperately anxious to play this game diplomatically, but that continued stare of the Vulture’s was even more nerve-racking than the feel of those fingers at his throat. An unpleasant fear was in his mind that if the Vulture pressed his questions it was just possible that he would learn something even from the way Sprott tried to dodge them. He would need a good deal more training and experience yet before he acquired a poker face.

“Hold him, Metzler!” the Vulture said, and released the grip of his fingers on Sprott’s throat. For a moment or two he turned right away from him and was bending down in front of the electric radiator.

As he came back again he held in his hand a short, ornamental poker, or bar of some kind. The handle must have been insulated since the Vulture held it comfortably though half the bar was glowing with a whitish-red heat.

Metzler must have known what his chief intended to do. He had already torn open Sprott’s collar and shirt and pressed them back, exposing the upper part of his chest. Jimmy never had a chance to wonder what the object of this might be. He knew before he had time to be puzzled.

“Now, Sprott! Answer my question! What clue has been discovered, or what is known about the papers? You know! Quick! Answer me!”

The red-hot point of the small bar was brought so close to his chest that Jimmy Sprott was again gasping involuntarily. In some way the very anticipation of the pain that must come in the next few moments had a stupefying effect on his mind. He could not think clearly. All that he could do

was to make a desperate effort to keep control of himself.

“I cannot—cannot tell you——” he began, making a fierce struggle to find the right words. He must fight—fight! A wave of anger flooded up within him, and for one moment he was tempted to take all risks and fling himself bodily at the Vulture. But he knew that Metzler was standing by him, ready for the slightest sign of movement.

The red-hot bar came slowly nearer, and again Sprott made his effort to speak the right word which would at least postpone the threatened torture.

“I tell you—I do not know——” he shouted, and then, before he had a chance to continue the sentence, something came hurtling through the air between him and the Vulture.

The red-hot bar was falling to the floor and there was the sound of burning iron eating into something and the smell of acrid smoke. The Vulture gave a sharp cry and tried to turn.

It was nothing more than a cushion which had struck him and sent the red-hot bar flying from his hand. The bar was on the carpet, and the intensely hot end had already burnt through to the wooden floor beneath. Jimmy Sprott’s mind took in so much instinctively just as it comprehended rather than saw that the Vulture was trying to come to grips with some extraordinary figure which was whirling round another cushion.

For one moment Sprott had a clear glimpse of the ruffled hair and badly soiled but grinning face of young Charlie Gill as he hurled this second cushion from the chesterfield over in the corner. But this time the cushion was not aimed at the Vulture but at the one fairly large electric lamp enclosed in a massive shade close to the ceiling.

There was a crash of breaking glass as the cushion reached its mark. The room was in darkness except for the glow of the radiator in the fireplace. Sprott was badly handicapped by the strap which kept his wrists so secure behind his back, but he still had the full use of his legs.

He was dodging just as the light went out, and he knew that Charlie Gill was doing his best to create a mad diversion. It was Gill’s voice which was yelling out wildly and even triumphantly: “This way! This way, Sergeant! Here they are! Bring your men along—quick! We’ve got ’em! Here they are, Sergeant!”

For some seconds even Jimmy Sprott was completely taken in by Charlie Gill’s appearance. Where he had come from and how on earth he had managed to get in touch with the police were questions which flashed into Sprott’s mind, but the answers were utterly beyond him.

Then Gill was by his side, but not until he had managed to do a fair amount of added damage. He had seized a bottle from the bench against which Sprott had been standing, and this bottle was flung furiously at the shadow dodging in

front of the radiator.

There was a sharp cry of pain or anger from the Vulture or Metzler. Neither Sprott nor Gill could have told which it was, and at the moment neither of them cared. Gill had seized something else in his progress to Sprott's side and this, too, had been flung at the radiator.

Then he was standing by Sprott. His first task was to get at the strap which was fastened so tightly round Sprott's wrists. There was no need for him to say anything. As soon as he gripped his wrists Sprott knew just what Charlie was trying to do.

"A strap!" he jerked out in a whisper. "Soon come unfastened. Who's with you?"

Gill was tackling the job of loosening the strap and never attempted to answer the question just then. He knew better than Sprott that their prospect of having help from any member of the police force was exceedingly remote.

It was not entirely due to luck, however, that young Gill had been able to jump in just at the critical moment so far as Sprott was concerned. Charlie had ideas of his own, and one of them was that it would do no good to put up a real fight until he had a real chance of success.

He had begun the game by successfully bluffing his captors that he was barely conscious. He was certainly not feeling very fit at that time, but his mental faculties were working pretty well, and that was the main thing.

Even after he had had his brief exchange with Jimmy Sprott at the far end of the corridor, Gill kept up his bluff of being too hopelessly dazed to take the slightest interest in what was happening around him. It is possible that the men who took him along the corridor might have had some suspicion if it had not been for that diversion created by the man Frenzel, who had had a heavy dose of their own tear gas in the bathroom.

Their orders from the Vulture had been to take Gill to the laboratory-study, and here they dumped him. In their anxiety to know more about Frenzel and to find out what had really happened to Sprott, they were not greatly concerned about young Gill. He was dangerous only so long as he was with Sprott. Rightly or wrongly, they regarded Kit Raven's assistant as much the more dangerous of the two. Moreover, they understood that he probably had information which would bring this affair to a successful end much more quickly.

Had there been any reasonable chance, of course, Gill would have left the laboratory and sought a hiding-place elsewhere. After he had been left in the laboratory he rose and made a swift exploration, only to discover that there were men in the corridor and any hope of escaping that way was cut off.

He could find only one hiding-place in the laboratory itself, and that was a fairly obvious one, but he took it. If they found him there, as quite possibly

they would, Charlie's intention was to keep up some pretence of being badly dazed and thoroughly frightened—and wait for the next chance. It was not a clever, deeply laid scheme, but Charlie Gill had quickness and pluck; and that was probably better in the present circumstances.

It was a good thing that he did take cover promptly behind the chesterfield in the corner not so far from the radiator. He had only just settled himself comfortably in his corner when someone entered the room. Within ten seconds Charlie knew that they were more concerned about blaming each other than in giving the problem a few moments' careful consideration.

At all events they took it for granted that young Gill had escaped from this room, and they never made the slightest attempt to hunt round for any possible hiding-place. Gill came to the same conclusion that Sprott had formed under somewhat similar conditions. These people might be wonderfully clever with their plots and schemes, but they were certainly jittery and afraid, anxious to blame each other for all that had gone wrong and even to blame their chief.

It was all very cheering to Charlie Gill. He had not had a great deal of experience, but already that feeling of some terrible Shadow with the power to carry out the most brutal threats had been considerably modified. The Shadow was a real person—and not so very remarkable. He might call himself the Vulture, but he was just a common thug who had managed to get away with his crimes so far.

Gill was an unseen listener of all that took place when Jimmy Sprott was brought in. On one or two occasions Charlie took risks and tried to get a glimpse of what was taking place by peering over the top of the chesterfield which so successfully hid him from view. He did it carefully, however, and took as much advantage as he could of one of the cushions propped up just a little higher than the upholstered back of the chesterfield.

Luckily, neither the Vulture nor Metzler had eyes for slight movements several feet away from them. They were concentrating too closely on Sprott, and Charlie Gill followed every word they said.

It was the sudden threat to Sprott that decided Gill's next action. He would have been quite content to stay where he was and wait for a much more favourable chance of getting in touch with Sprott, but he had no choice when he realized the game the Vulture was playing.

One cushion was hurled through the air and then another. Charlie was over the back of the settee and yelling out wildly—anything to create a diversion and give Jimmy Sprott a chance. Those first two efforts with the cushions had been completely successful, and Gill jumped from the settee and made for a bottle to use as another missile. Anything that came in handy would serve at this juncture.

He had grasped the fact that Sprott's hands were fastened behind him in

some way. That was the first job Gill had to tackle as soon as he had created enough excitement in the room to give him a chance. Just what the bottle contained he neither knew nor cared, but he flung it at the figure passing in front of the radiator.

Ten seconds later Jimmy Sprott's hands were free. They were stiff and cramped, but not altogether useless. He, too, had turned to the bench and followed Gill's example of seizing the first missile he could lay hands on. It was another bottle, and he flung it as he jumped away from the bench and towards the door.

From somewhere outside came the muffled report of a gun. In some way the sound of that shot produced a silence in this room as though everyone was anxious to listen intently. Almost immediately another shot echoed forth and then the barking of dogs broke out.

Remembering Charlie Gill's call only a minute or so ago, "Here they are, Sergeant!" it gave Sprott a thrill to hear those shots. It meant that the police were here. Probably Forshaw and Kit Raven were with them.

He was wrong, but did not discover that until later. In any case, it was merely the thrill of great new hopes rather than a considered opinion. Charlie Gill was by his side again, but had managed to grab another bottle and hurl it at the figure which suddenly made a jump towards them.

Then he was jerking out in a gasping sort of whisper to Sprott: "Come on! Get outside—if we can!"

Luck was on their side just then if they had but known it. The sound of that furious barking and the shots had attracted others in the house, and they had dashed out to find what the trouble was. For a brief period this evening the household at Norfield House was thoroughly disorganized. When once an excellently organized house or institution is thrown out of gear everybody becomes thoroughly rattled.

Neither Sprott nor Gill had seen the Vulture and Metzler disappear. They wakened up to the fact that they were no longer in this room just about the time when Gill was whispering the suggestion to get out. He was on guard then, ready for any attack, but quickly sensed the fact that none was coming, for the excellent reason that the attackers had vanished from the scene.

"You say the police are here, Charlie?" Sprott asked quickly, and he, too, spoke in a whisper and still kept alert.

"I don't know!" Gill said. "I tried to bluff them that the police were coming. First thing that came into my mind. But of course I don't know anything about them. I've been in this room ever since they brought me here after you'd been speaking to me. Do you think they've cleared off?"

"It seems like it," Sprott agreed. "I'll take a peep outside. Wait a second!"

In a few moments he was by Gill's side again and whispering his report.

“Not a soul to be seen!” he said. “They must have had the wind up to dash off and leave us here. Your bluff worked this time, Charlie. But I wonder who did fire those shots outside?”

“I don’t know,” Gill answered. “But I think our best plan will be to get out of this room. I feel I want a quiet rest somewhere. Do you know I’ve had nothing to eat—not really—since I came into this rotten hole? It seems months since I had a decent meal.”

“I’m feeling the same, but I guess you’ve had a longer spell on the starvation diet than I’ve had. Well, shall we get out?”

There was not a sign or sound of anybody when they slipped out into the corridor. For once it was Charlie Gill who took the lead and gave the orders, and Jimmy Sprott did not object in the least. Possibly he was now suffering the reaction from those few tense moments when the Vulture had stood in front of him with that red-hot bar.

“Up these stairs?” Gill suggested. “It will give us a breather and then we can see what happens. I don’t feel like another scrap with anybody just yet. Listen!”

From somewhere a long way off, so it seemed, a whistle was shrilling forth. It might have been a police whistle, and Sprott felt fairly certain that it was. For a moment he was tempted to alter Charlie’s suggestion about going up the stairs. If the police were somewhere near at hand, it might be as well to go down the stairs and meet them rather than run away and make for some temporary hiding-place. But young Gill was already disappearing into the darkness above. It was obvious that his main idea at the present moment was to get away from the Vulture and hide. The shots and the whistle might mean that help was near at hand, but Charlie felt that it would be safer to wait for a time.

Sprott followed after the youngster, and only when he was level with him did he hint that a change of plan might be advisable.

“That sounded to me like a police whistle, Charlie. What about going down and letting them know we’re here?”

“Probably they were only whistling for the dogs. I don’t know. If it is the police they’ll soon have the Vulture and all the crowd who have been in this house. We can soon let them know we’re here—when we’re sure that it is the police. But I’m all in favour of keeping out of any rows for a bit. I don’t know what you feel like, but I’m just about dead beat. Funny, isn’t it?”

“All right,” Sprott agreed. “You squat down in this corner and make yourself as comfortable as you can. I’m just beginning to get my second wind, I think. We’ll lie low for a short time until we really know what is happening.”

Young Gill had dropped down in the corner, dead beat for the time being. In the dim light which was reflected from the corridor below Sprott could just see his face, and it struck him as a new discovery that Charlie Gill was only a

boy after all. For a time to-night he had acted like a full-grown man of wide experience in tight corners.

“Well played, Charlie!” Sprott was giving him a pat on the back without thinking about it. “You played a great game with the Vulture and the other fellow to-night. I thought myself that you were leading a squad of police into action when you jumped in from nowhere. It was the best one-man show I’ve ever seen. And now I’m wondering what’s the best course to take at present?”

“Just lie low—and listen,” Gill suggested. “I’m wondering whether it would be better to find a good hiding-place first of all, and then we could take it in turns keeping watch, ready to dodge out of the way if anybody does come searching for us.”

“That’s probably the best idea,” Sprott agreed. “There doesn’t seem to be any excitement down below at present. Everywhere’s quiet, and even the dogs have stopped their barking.”

“Doesn’t sound as though the police have come,” Gill said wearily. “You have a look round and see if there’s any decent place for us. I wish we dare risk raiding their larder. I’d be ready for anything if I’d had something to eat and a cup of tea. I’ll be as right as rain when I’ve had that.”

“Same here,” Sprott agreed. “But I’ll wander along now and see if I can find any place more comfortable for our headquarters. If any trouble does crop up you give a yell as though you’re startled out of your wits. I’ll take it as a danger signal and try your dodge—wait quietly and then see what can be done to create a new diversion.”

They went on whispering together for a few more minutes, both of them being in that mood when they were no longer anxious to be up and doing. There were odd sounds from time to time, but nothing in the way of shots or the blowing of whistles. Sprott wandered off at last and began a quiet search.

By the time he came back he was able to report that he had found what he thought was a very useful cubby-hole where they would have a good chance of escaping capture if the Vulture or his men did turn up again. Then he stood by the railing at the top of the stairs and looked down into the faint glow which came from the corridor below.

A deathly silence now seemed to hang over the whole house. There was never a sound of anyone moving nor the faintest whisper of a human voice. Nor did any sound reach them from the outside. After that brief outburst in which shots had been fired and dogs had barked loudly there had been no further excitement out of doors, so far as Sprott and Gill could tell.

They were puzzled. When they first found themselves alone in the laboratory there had been a vague feeling that there might be some trap laid for them. Once Sprott had grasped the fact that his hopes about the police were unfounded, all his old doubts and misgivings had returned. Later, he had been

expecting pursuit, though there still remained a faint hope of a dramatic rescue by the police. But there had been no sign of the Vulture or of any of his men, nor had there been anything to suggest that the police had come to the house.

The silence became uncanny and at times they strained their ears, even holding their breath so that they might be able to catch the least sound. But the minutes passed and lengthened into an hour, and then the last sound Sprott had heard was repeated—the softened chiming from somewhere below of a clock that slowly and gently struck the hour.

“Twelve o’clock, Charlie—midnight,” Sprott whispered. “It’s jolly queer, isn’t it? They can’t have cleared off and left us monarch of all we survey, surely? Hush! Listen!”

There was no need to hold their breath to hear the sound that came to them just after the clock struck twelve. It was dulled and far-off, but to Jimmy Sprott the sound was unmistakable.

Someone was hammering heavily on a stout door somewhere below. Then a bell pealed wildly, or so it seemed to the two who listened, wondering and expectant. As the sound of the bell ceased the hammering on the door began again, but after a short spell it ceased again. But this time the sound of a voice came echoing up the stairs clearly, and it seemed almost as though someone in the hall below was calling out:

“Open the door! Open! In the King’s name—open—the—door!”

CHAPTER XVII

Forcible Entry

“All in the day’s work,” Inspector Forshaw remarked philosophically to Kit Raven as their car raced through the darkness towards Braxdale. “I don’t know if this stuff will be of any help to us to-night, but we’d better glance through them.”

Forshaw had brought a sheaf of papers with him. They were the reports which had been collected within the last two days or so. They were not very exciting reading, but they formed a record of the many and varied inquiries made on Forshaw’s behalf into different aspects of the Wagoner’s Halt mystery.

There were reports concerning cars and records of confidential interviews with such people as Sir Rufus Grayle and Sir Roger Marston. The careers of the Creed brothers as well as of the unfortunate victim of the tragedy, John Cantrell, were briefly given, and complete summaries of all the information elicited at different times from Frank Gill and his wife.

Other reports dealt with certain investigations which had been made in and around Wagoner’s Halt after that dramatic escape of the Vulture and his companions by the use of tear gas. At first some of this information had not appeared to be of any great value, but it was surprising how slowly and gradually it was all fitting in to the complete picture Inspector Forshaw was building up.

As a result of some of these investigations a thorough but very discreet watch had been kept on a cottage about a quarter of a mile from Wagoner’s Halt. It had been occupied for some three or four months by a man who evidently possessed fairly substantial private means; he had his own man to look after his needs, though on two or three mornings in the week certain domestic help was given by a woman who lived in the village.

According to the information gathered locally, the man was an artist and wandered about the district with sketch-book and pencil. Lately he had been given permission by the Creed brothers to make sketches of Wagoner’s Halt. Gill had seen quite a lot of him and had found him very amiable and pleasant.

Inspector Forshaw had already formed other ideas about the man. The watch on the cottage and its two occupants had become more strict.

Kit Raven had also made a report for that same file. He had solved the secret of the invisible writing in Kelvin Creed’s small notebook, and Creed himself had confirmed it in his talk with Raven. Creed, of course, was still

detained by the police, and had still to answer the charge standing against him. Meantime, however, he was perfectly safe and was being very well cared for by the medical man as well as the police officials.

The hiding-place of the other batch of papers relating to the Creeds' new process was known. Without these papers the drawings were useless. Nor were the papers nearly so valuable without the designs and working drawings, except to the Creeds. Kelvin Creed was very anxious, however, that the drawings should be discovered and returned.

He was still more anxious about the fate of his brother. On this point Kit Raven had been more optimistic than he really felt. He had assured Kelvin Creed that for the time being his brother was safe enough and that, all being well, no danger would come to him. But it was important that Creed should give all the help he possibly could to those who were doing their best to discover the whereabouts of Stanton Creed.

It was after half-past eleven that night when Forshaw and Raven reached Braxdale police station. There would be more reports here, so Forshaw expected, as the Yard had sent down urgent instructions regarding the steps to be taken.

As they entered the station an officer was speaking on the telephone. Judging by one or two sharp exclamations he made, he was listening to startling news, but he looked up immediately Forshaw and Raven entered.

"Hold the line!" he called to the man at the other end, and then jumped up to give a quick greeting to Inspector Forshaw.

"One of our men who is on duty at Norfield House has just reported, sir," he said. "His instructions were that anyone leaving the house should be stopped, questioned, and requested to come to the station in the company of two officers. We should have detained anyone here until you arrived."

Forshaw nodded quickly in agreement. The local inspector who had taken charge to-night in view of the Yard officers' visit was anxious to have confirmation from Inspector Forshaw himself. He carried on quickly with the report just received by telephone.

A man had come from the house on foot; the police officer who had just telephoned mentioned that this man's conduct appeared to be suspicious, but had not gone into details. Once outside the premises and actually in the road, the watchers had stepped forward and questioned the man.

Apparently he had been startled but definitely refused to answer any questions. He demanded to know by what right they were interfering with him. When he was told that he would be required to accompany them to the police station, the man had suddenly turned on the officers and attacked them furiously.

He had taken them by surprise and managed to send one flying and to

dodge the other. Then he had gone like the wind back to the house, pursued by both officers, one following the other. Near the house the leading officer had been suddenly attacked by a couple of Alsatian dogs and had been badly mauled.

On instructions from the Yard some of the men on duty as watchers tonight had been armed. That was Inspector Forshaw's idea, and there was no need for him to explain that only in the event of extreme necessity were the weapons to be used.

They had been used. The second policeman happened to be one of those who possessed a weapon, and he had promptly drawn it and fired two shots. Each shot had accounted for a dog.

According to the account over the telephone, the dogs had been deliberately encouraged to attack the two men. The man who had been pursued had vanished into the house in the meantime. Another man had appeared on the scene and he had called off other dogs which were ready to attack the two police officers. This man as well as the dogs had disappeared from the scene while the one officer was attending to his injured companion.

One of the officers had blown his whistle and more help had arrived, but none had come from the house. Everything possible had been done to treat the injuries of the man who had been mauled by the dog, and by now he would probably be in the doctor's hands. The first task of the police had been to get a car along and send off their injured colleague, but they had kept a close watch on the house in case anyone appeared.

"Then they tried to gain admittance to the house," the local inspector added. "No one answered their knocking, and they are still outside the house. Naturally they would not risk forcing an entrance for reasons you will appreciate, but if you think——"

Inspector Forshaw had done all the thinking that was necessary while the local man told his story. Nor did Forshaw waste any time by asking questions. He glanced at his watch before the local man had quite finished his story, and then interrupted with more than usual abruptness.

"Right! You've done everything possible. You have a few extra men standing by and ready to help? Tell them to follow us up to this place, Norfield House. You had better remain here yourself, and I'll send any messages through to you. Let us have a man with us who knows this district well and can take us the shortest way to Norfield House."

It was just after midnight when Forshaw with Kit Raven and one or two others stood in front of the massive entrance door at Norfield House. Forshaw was using a torch to find the bell, but when he pressed it he could not hear the sound of its ringing and he began to bang violently on the massive knocker.

Later he tried the bell again, but the banging of the knocker would have

aroused the Seven Sleepers if they had been in the place. There could certainly be no excuse later by anyone that they did not hear the knocking! To add to the noise, Kit Raven, on a hint from Forshaw, used his fists to beat a tattoo on the stout panels of the door.

Between them they hammered that door until they were tired of the game themselves. They were merely wasting their time, and Forshaw decided to take other measures.

“Locked, bolted and barred!” Forshaw said. “We’ll try one of the windows. If necessary, force one open and we’ll get in that way. I don’t quite like the look of things. Come round this side.”

Within two or three minutes Forshaw, Raven, and one or two other men were climbing through a wide-open window. It had been expertly forced by one of Forshaw’s men now on the spot. Once through the window they found themselves standing in a large and well-furnished room, so far as they could judge in the light from the couple of pocket-torches which had been brought into use.

Forshaw crossed the room and found the light switches. In another moment the room was brightly illuminated, and for a few seconds Forshaw stood staring round as though anxious to see whether there was any clue to the mystery here.

When he turned to open the door leading presumably to the main entrance hall he met his second rebuff. It was locked on the outside, and at first the door offered almost as much resistance as the big one on which they had hammered before making their entrance by the window. There was nothing cheap or jerry-built about Norfield House.

“Better bring a poker,” Forshaw told his assistant, and with that and a large pocket-knife the problem of the locked door was settled in a couple of minutes.

The doors of two or three other rooms were also found to be locked during their quick inspection of the ground floor. As the keys were missing it meant forcing an entry each time.

“Begins to look as though the birds have flown,” Forshaw said as he stood in one of the rooms. Raven guessed that the Yard man was feeling thoroughly peeved, and the young solicitor shared the sense of depression which had begun to settle on the party.

“What’s that bundle over there?” It was Raven who gave the first faint sign of excitement as he stood by Forshaw’s side and stared round the room. He was pointing to what appeared to be a big bundle covered with a large green baize tablecloth. As Forshaw stared at it the bundle showed signs of movement.

In another couple of seconds Forshaw was whipping off the tablecloth. Beneath it was a man, bound and gagged, and evidently still in a semi-

conscious condition. He opened his eyes, however, as Forshaw bent over him, and it was the muffled sound he managed to make that gave the Yard man the idea that the unfortunate fellow was gagged. His attackers, whoever they were, had rammed a fairly large duster into the man's mouth.

He was freed in a very short time, but was at first too dazed and helpless to tell his story. Forshaw was anxious to know why the man had been left in that condition and to get any information he had. He was equally anxious to carry out a thorough search of this house. It took some little time to get the man's story, and even when they had managed to drag it out of him it was not particularly helpful.

His name was Dilling, and he had been in the employ of Dr. Melford, the proprietor of this establishment, for some time. Recently Dr. Melford had decided to give up his work. He had never had, nor did he ever desire, more than two or three patients in the house at the same time. Latterly there had been only one, and Dilling believed that he was either cured or almost so.

A Dr. Voltan had agreed to take over the place as it stood, and he had already come to live there. A few days ago he received his first patient, just at the time when Dr. Melford was personally accompanying his own patient to some Continental resort for a long period of convalescence.

Since the arrival of Dr. Voltan and his staff, however, Dilling had been far from happy. In the last two or three days matters had been brought to a head by the refusal on Dilling's part to carry out certain commands. To-night there had been further trouble, ending with a savage attack on Dilling in which he had been overpowered and eventually left in the condition in which Forshaw and Raven had found him.

One of the men under Forshaw, an expert in First Aid, was running over Dilling before he had really finished his story. He reported briefly to Forshaw that there did not appear to be any serious bruises or injuries of any kind, and that after a rest the man would probably be as right as rain. Dilling was told to make himself comfortable and rest while the search of the house went on.

"Better go carefully!" Forshaw told Kit Raven after they had left Dilling. "That fellow doesn't appear to know much, but we may get something more out of him presently. There may still be other people in the house, and if they have any more surprises for us of the kind they tried out at Wagoner's Halt, we shall be back where we started once again. Don't quite understand the position yet. What's happened to that youngster of yours—Sprott?"

That same question had been in Raven's mind ever since he entered the house. Having broken into the place and advertised their presence in no uncertain fashion, he expected that they would be faced with a certain number of the Vulture's helpers, or else there would be cries for help. He had certainly hoped to have some indication early on that Sprott was in this place.

But if the Vulture had been here until an hour or two ago, and if they suddenly realized that the place was being watched by the police, Sprott's position as a prisoner here would be fraught with danger. Unpleasant possibilities were looming in Raven's mind as he stood in the hall again with Forshaw and listened for a time.

There was never a sound. The house was apparently deserted, and Raven was not the only one into whose mind unpleasant fears were beginning to creep.

"We'll take a look round upstairs," Forshaw said softly. "Go quietly, and use your torch as little as possible for the present. You have a gun with you? Keep it handy, just in case. . . . I hope there won't be any shooting, but we're up against a tough crowd. Ready? I'll lead the way."

They reached the first landing. Forshaw went ahead a little, but Kit Raven stopped for a moment, suddenly aware that a door quite near him creaked very slightly. He pulled out his torch and allowed the beam to shine for a time on the door almost opposite him. It was partly open and Raven stepped forward swiftly and silently, some instinct telling him that there was someone inside the room.

His light suddenly revealed the figure which came from behind the partially open door. Raven was holding the torch in his left hand and his right hand gripped the weapon which Forshaw had advised him to have ready. It came up for a moment—and then dropped again as Kit Raven recognized the figure. There was no need to use a gun in this case!

"Hullo, Kit!" Jimmy Sprott himself was blinking in the bright beam from the torch. "All well? What's happening here? I wasn't quite sure whether you were friend or foe, and we're very scared of taking any more risks to-night. Charlie Gill is here with me. I'll call him. Ho-ho, Charlie! Come down! All's well! Friends!"

"Are you and Gill the only persons in the house?" Raven asked, and Sprott shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know," he said. "We just don't know what has been happening. The Vulture was here an hour or two ago, but whether he's still on the premises I don't know. How did you manage to find the place?"

"I'll tell you all about that in a short time," Raven told him, and a wisp of a smile had come to his lips now. "We'll let Forshaw know. He'll be glad you're safe and sound at all events. Save your story for him, and then you won't have to repeat it. Ah! And here's young Gill! Forshaw!"

Inspector Forshaw was coming along the passage to join them. He had made no discoveries so far, but he was still hopeful.

CHAPTER XVIII

A Lull in the Fight

In one way it was no great surprise to Jimmy Sprott when he realized that Kit Raven was on the premises. He had hoped from the first that the men hammering on the door and demanding admittance to the house would turn out to be friends.

But no useful purpose would have been served by dashing down to meet them. Very probably some of the Vulture's men were still in the house. Sprott had every reason to believe that they would be, but he had had all the fighting and chasing he wanted for one night. It was much better to go slowly, let things develop a little, and wait until he had some fair idea of what the position really was.

He went down one flight of stairs, however, and heard the different sounds which told of the progress of the invaders. Sprott would not have been surprised if some of the Vulture's men had appeared on the scene then. That was another reason why he decided to keep back and see what happened. It might possibly be very useful if both Jimmy and Charlie Gill kept themselves in reserve for the time being, but ready to jump in and lend a hand if any emergency arose.

But the moment he had a glimpse of the figures ascending the stairs he knew that all was well. He stepped back into the room, however, until both men were at the top of the stairs so far as he could judge by the soft sound of their footsteps. Just as he was about to come out from his hiding-place the light from Kit Raven's torch flashed upon him.

Sprott's face developed a broad grin as he saw the look of surprise on Kit Raven's face. There had been precious few jokes in this adventure so far, but this was one! Jimmy did his best to greet Raven as though this sort of meeting was all part of the day's work.

Inspector Forshaw may have been as pleasantly surprised as Kit Raven to see Sprott and with him young Gill. If so, he did not show it. He was no more effusive than he would have been if he had met Mr. Raven's assistant in the city offices of Messrs. Micklethwaites.

"What's been happening here?" was Forshaw's first question, and Sprott did his best to give a brief and very condensed account of his own experiences since last he had seen Inspector Forshaw. Forshaw asked an extra question from time to time, but left one of his most important queries to the last.

"What about Stanton Creed? Do you know anything of him? Is he in this

place, or what has happened to him?”

“I believe he was here,” Sprott said slowly, and tried to rack his memory for odd references he had heard concerning Stanton Creed. “Whether he is still here or not, I can’t say. From the little I’ve heard, he was alive all right. I’ve heard his name mentioned once or twice while I’ve been in this hole, but I’m afraid most of them were made when I was either half-dazed or very anxious to keep myself from view.”

“Pity,” Inspector Forshaw said shortly, but never intended it as a reproof or criticism of Jimmy Sprott. Having heard Sprott’s story, followed by additional sidelights from young Gill, Forshaw would have given both of them gilt-edged testimonials for high-class courage and intelligence. But no one would have guessed that he thought so from his expression or the curt way in which he jerked out that one word “Pity”.

It gave Sprott something of a shock and brought him back with a bump to the fact that this affair was not chiefly a wild adventure in which he and Charlie Gill were dodging a particularly nasty crowd of scoundrels who had a personal spite against them. There was a good deal more than that in this affair, and the main item on Inspector Forshaw’s programme was the arrest of the man who styled himself the Vulture. Of equal importance was the finding of Stanton Creed.

But once again the Vulture had vanished. How he had managed it was a question which might be answered later. For the present Forshaw had to get on with the search, anxiously hoping to find some clue which would lead him to the final act of the drama.

Forshaw went off after a time and Kit Raven accompanied him for a few yards, after telling Sprott that he would rejoin him in a minute or so. Neither Sprott nor Gill heard what Forshaw said to Raven, but it might have cheered them if they had done so.

“Those two youngsters have just about had enough,” Forshaw said. “What they want is a decent feed and a good rest. We’ll get someone on the job of raiding the larder here and finding out what can be done in the way of supplying refreshments all round. It looks as though we’re still a long way from the end of this chase, but they must have left here in a panic.”

Forshaw was right in his theory that it was the experience of the man who had come from the house earlier in the evening and had been temporarily held up by the police watchers that had started the panic here. The Vulture and those with him must have realized that the place was being watched and that their only hope of safety lay in escape.

The only bright spot in this present situation was that when men were on the run they were fighting a losing battle all the time. Sooner or later the police were bound to win in such a contest. Forshaw and his assistants continued their

task of searching the house in the hope of finding something which would help them in the next stage of this chase.

After all the excitement of the night the next few hours were remarkably dull so far as Sprott and Gill were concerned. There was one bright spot, however. That was when a large pot of tea with a couple of plates piled high with sandwiches appeared on the scene.

This time even Charlie Gill did not regard them suspiciously. The pair of them tucked in. Never had food tasted so good to them as those none too dainty sandwiches cut by a police officer who had a heavy hand. It was a meal worth waiting for, as Gill remarked.

They rested after that, but Sprott's mind was no longer dazed. In due course he had a short sleep, but not before he had gone back in his mind over certain episodes of the last few hours. He had remarkably good powers of observation and, in addition, he had that gift which is often the basis of an excellent memory: he could visualize a scene and recall conversations long after they had happened, as though his mind had photographed the scene and recorded the spoken words.

As he lay in a big armchair he saw again the scene in the laboratory-study and heard the voices of men who were angry, jumpy, and yet savagely determined. When at last Jimmy Sprott dozed gently off to sleep he had a far better idea of what had happened and what had been said than when Inspector Forshaw questioned him. He would see Forshaw and Kit Raven presently and report more fully.

It was several hours later when he did see them, because he had slept soundly until the sun was streaming into this room. Charlie Gill was still fast asleep, but wakened up not so very long afterwards. In due course they saw Inspector Forshaw and Kit Raven.

Neither the Yard man nor Raven was jubilant over the night's work. They had done a fair amount of sound detective work and they had a good idea of what had happened here last night. They knew, too, that they had unfortunately arrived at this house just about an hour too late.

It seemed probable that the people who had occupied this house had been fairly well prepared for a swift escape. Forshaw had come to the conclusion that some man, probably Stanton Creed, had been moved from the house through the grounds at the back. A stretcher had been used, and this had actually been found. Evidently they had not found it possible to take the stretcher with them, and it had been left behind. Still, it had served its purpose in helping them to carry one helpless man from the house at a time when they were obviously in a great hurry.

There were other proofs, however, that everything had been in readiness for such a flight, and the method had been decided upon before the necessity

arose. There were no signs of papers having been hurriedly burnt, and there were no upturned drawers to indicate a sudden desperate effort to make certain that no incriminating documents had been left behind.

Nor was there any trace of the package containing the drawings which the Vulture had stolen from Raven's office. A very thorough search had been made for that but without success.

The man Dilling had been questioned at great length, but stuck to the same story that he had told when first they found him. He knew little or nothing about this man, Dr. Voltan, who had taken over the place from Dr. Melford. Forshaw did his best to find some flaw in the man's story but failed.

"We'll keep our eye on him, however," he told Raven. "I don't know what you think, but I fancy he's had instructions on the part he has to play from the Vulture himself. But we can't bring any charge against him—and it wouldn't help us if we did. The best plan is to keep him covered all the time."

Raven also had a shrewd suspicion that the man had been left behind purposely in the hope of being able to report to the Vulture later just what had happened at Norfield House when the police arrived. The trussing and gagging had been uncomfortable, but there was a suspicion that the man would have been able to free himself if he had not been discovered after a few hours.

The dogs were safely housed in their kennels. According to Dilling, they were Dr. Melford's property and had been left here until Dr. Melford returned from the Continent. Dilling was normally in charge of them, but they had been let loose in the grounds last night without his knowledge or consent.

That part of his story had been very weak, in Forshaw's opinion, but he had failed to shake Dilling's assertions. Any hope that the man could be forced to supply useful information about Dr. Voltan had to be abandoned.

"So for the time being we're up against a blank wall once more," Forshaw said. "I've put every possible inquiry in hand in the hope of getting on the trail of this fellow Voltan, or the Vulture as he likes to call himself. It's the second time he's slipped through our fingers when we had him almost in our grasp. My job is to force him to come to grips for the third time. But how?"

Inquiries about telephone calls which had been made to and from Norfield House in the past few weeks might be helpful. Useful information might come through the usual channels which would help in tracing the car which had evidently been waiting somewhere on the other side of the grounds of this house last night.

No car had been taken from the garage here, and one of the cars actually left behind was probably the one Jimmy Sprott had seen when young Gill had been taken off. Certain alterations had been made, however, and these would have been sufficient to enable them to use the car without the risk of being stopped.

“He’ll be paying another visit to Wagoner’s Halt when he thinks it’s safe,” Jimmy Sprott said as he sat with Forshaw and Kit Raven while they discussed every detail afresh.

Both Forshaw and Kit Raven turned to him quickly, and the Yard man almost snapped out his question.

“Why do you say that?” he asked.

“When I was trying to tell you my yarn last night I wasn’t in the best of form,” Sprott said slowly. “I wasn’t thinking clearly and was probably a little dazed. Later on after I’d had a meal and a decent cup of tea I began to think back and recalled some of the remarks I’d overheard when the Vulture was kicking up a fuss in that laboratory place upstairs. I told you something of what happened then.”

“Yes,” Forshaw nodded. “You’ve thought of something that was said about Wagoner’s Halt?”

“Not in so many words. But he is convinced that the papers relating to this stuff ‘Syncredium’ are still hidden away somewhere in the laboratory at Wagoner’s Halt. He’s determined to find them and then, from what I remember, he’ll be content to lie low for a time. But if he’s going to find those papers he’ll have to make another attempt at Wagoner’s Halt.”

The papers were absolutely necessary for anyone who hoped to make full use of the Creeds’ discovery. Sprott had an idea that the Vulture was relying on Stanton Creed to supply the clue to the present hiding-place of the papers. Once he knew that secret, there was, so Sprott asserted, precious little doubt that the Vulture would make a final attempt to get the papers. He would naturally take all possible steps to guard against interference from the police and would avoid all risks.

The Vulture had not actually said so much in Sprott’s presence, but in the course of that heated discussion in the laboratory last night between the Vulture and some of his men a good many remarks had been made which justified the view Sprott was now expounding to Inspector Forshaw.

It seemed probable, too, the Vulture still felt fairly confident that Kelvin Creed had said nothing, either because he was afraid to do so until he knew that his brother Stanton was out of danger, or because he was too ill. The Vulture had been suspicious about Kit Raven and the extent of his knowledge. There was just a possibility that Raven had discovered the clue to the hiding-place of the papers.

He had done his best to force Sprott to tell him the truth about that aspect of the question. Luckily, Charlie Gill had interrupted, and it was quite probable that the Vulture was still hopeful that the papers remained in their hiding-place. The fact that he had gone to so much trouble to take Stanton Creed away from this place, as Inspector Forshaw believed, was proof that he meant to

make one more effort to wring the truth from his unfortunate prisoner.

“I hate to think of him making that effort!” Sprott said with sudden bitterness, as he remembered only too vividly his own feelings a few moments before young Gill had begun his cushion-throwing last night. “Stanton Creed must have had a terrible time.”

Inspector Forshaw nodded gloomily and appeared to be pondering deeply on Sprott’s recollections and views. But for the present Forshaw expressed no views of his own. He was not a very cheerful or communicative companion in the next hour or two.

At the end of that time, however, Forshaw had made all arrangements so far as Norfield House was concerned. It would remain in the occupation of the police for the time being, and meantime efforts would be made to find this man Dr. Melford, just as other efforts were being devoted to discover any clue leading to the present whereabouts of the Vulture.

A short time later all of them left Norfield House and drove back to Wagoner’s Halt. Jimmy Sprott went in the same car that Forshaw and Raven used, and the Inspector became more talkative. He had certain ideas in his mind, and he was only too willing to hear other views on them. By the time they reached Wagoner’s Halt certain decisions had been made.

There were still two or three journalists paying their regular visits to the Creeds’ house in the hope of hearing some additional news about the progress of the case. Forshaw promised to see them soon after he arrived at Wagoner’s Halt.

Chatting with the journalists was the artist who lived in the cottage some distance along the lane. Since the tragedy here he had spent a fair amount of his time in the near vicinity of Wagoner’s Halt and had become very friendly with the pressmen.

“Well, gentlemen,” Forshaw said; “I am afraid there is nothing very important to give you yet. So far as this place is concerned, we can do nothing more. Every room has been searched very thoroughly, and we have found nothing that matters so far. You can take it, however, that we can put our hands on one of the Creed brothers any time we want him. That is probably the most important item I can give you.”

“Where is he, Inspector?” one of the journalists asked.

“He’s being properly looked after but is seriously ill at present. Kelvin Creed it is, and we are quite satisfied that he had nothing whatever to do with the crime. He was not within ten miles of this place when Cantrell called.”

“Oh! Then Stanton Creed was the one?”

“I’m not prepared to say that. In fact, I think it’s very doubtful whether he had anything to do with it. But I’m not committing myself on that question just yet. This man, Frank Gill, will be detained by the police, however, pending

further inquiries.”

The Inspector gave this item almost casually, but it created some surprise. Gill had never been regarded as a possible suspect, and the journalists were anxious to know more.

“Don’t run away with wrong ideas, gentlemen,” Forshaw warned them. “We don’t think Gill had any hand in the actual crime, but he probably knows more than he’s admitted. That’s all I can say. I wouldn’t make too much song about the step we’re taking, but I’m telling you so that you won’t jump to wrong conclusions.”

It was not altogether a satisfactory statement, but it was something to be going on with, and the journalists had to be satisfied. Forshaw also announced the fact that he was going back to London almost immediately. Wagoner’s Halt would be closed. There was nothing more to be done there, and the Yard men would continue their investigations in other directions.

An hour later Inspector Forshaw left Wagoner’s Halt, and, with Mr. Raven and young Sprott, was the last to go. Frank Gill had already gone in the company of two police officers. Judging by his downcast appearance, the Creeds’ handyman expected the worst.

But Frank Gill had had his instructions. So had Charlie Gill, who had been quietly dropped at the house where his mother was staying. That house was also under police protection now. Wagoner’s Halt was closed and locked and even the gates were closed. Forshaw waved a hand to the two or three journalists who were still standing in the road as he drove off.

One of the journalists, a man from London, so he told the others, was positively amused by Forshaw’s farewell greeting.

“Forshaw is badly pipped,” he asserted. “I don’t say he’s lost hope, mind you, but he’s not very confident. Not by any means! When he starts being friendly and taking us into his confidence, it means he wants us to deal gently with him and put up the best story we can. I guess this affair is going to be one of the unsolved mysteries they keep on the file at Scotland Yard.”

“But what about this fellow Gill?” someone asked.

“Bluff, I think. Forshaw has done it to show he’s taking action! I don’t think he’s got a scrap of evidence against Gill. Are you coming this way?”

He asked the question of the artist, who had turned in the opposite direction from which two of the men had gone. They wanted to get back to the town to send off such news as Forshaw had given them. The London journalist was in no such hurry. His story could be written up any old time before nine o’clock to-night, and anyway he wasn’t going to make too much copy from the little information Forshaw had given them.

The journalist strolled along the road with the artist. He had an idea that he would like to explore the neighbourhood, and asked the artist a good many

questions, but also talked about his own work. Crime stories were not his regular line, and he found this sort of case very boring.

He told the artist quite a lot about himself without any encouragement. But what he did not tell him was the fact that he was not a journalist at all but one of Inspector Forshaw's men who had been specially detailed to keep watch on the artist. The only story the alleged journalist was likely to write was a very full report on every suspicious movement made by the artist or by anyone else who visited the cottage where he lived.

CHAPTER XIX

Vulture versus Raven

At eleven o'clock that night Wagoner's Halt was in complete darkness. A stranger, or even a native of the district for that matter, walking along the road which ran past the Creeds' residence would have had no doubt in his mind that this patch of the countryside was utterly deserted.

It was not a pleasant evening in any case. A gusty wind from the southwest was bringing up the advance clouds of a coming spell of rainy weather. Now and again a light shower spattered down for a time, and then passed on towards London and the eastern districts.

But the neighbourhood of Wagoner's Halt was not by any means deserted. Inspector Forshaw had a small army out to-night. If events proved that it was necessary, the same army would be out again to-morrow night and for as many succeeding nights as Forshaw might decide upon.

Quietly and secretly Forshaw's men had taken up their positions. A number of them were carrying the comparatively new radio equipment which enabled them to send brief messages to the man in control, besides listening-in to any messages that were sent out. Apart from the important task in hand to-night, it was probable that the experiment would prove an excellent test of all the latest equipment and methods with which the police were now provided in their unceasing fight against crime.

It was some time before ten o'clock when a dark-clothed figure crept slowly and cautiously through the garden at Wagoner's Halt. At no stage did he use a torch or take the slightest risk of being seen or heard by any hidden watcher. He was still crouching low when he used a key to open the garden door which would allow him to slip quietly into the laboratory.

Kit Raven was taking big risks and he knew it. Inspector Forshaw had at first been opposed to his idea, though he had appreciated Raven's point of view immediately. Risks must be run by someone to ensure that not only those precious designs were recovered, but that the Vulture himself should be trapped.

Equally important was the problem of taking steps to find Stanton Creed. It was certain that he was in the Vulture's hands, and was probably in a serious state of health; it was even possible that unless the plans of Forshaw and Raven proved successful very quickly they would be too late to save Stanton Creed's life.

Risks had to be taken to force the issue. Not only would Kit Raven need all

his courage to-night, but he might also need all his ability as a talker as well! After a good deal of discussion both Forshaw and Raven had come to the conclusion that in all probability to-night would see the Vulture's return to Wagoner's Halt for his final effort to obtain the papers he desired.

It was a trying time for Raven after he had chosen his temporary resting-place. Both doors leading from the laboratory to the house were left wide open, and Raven settled down in the small room just beyond the laboratory where the Creeds had their meals during their busy spells of work. Sitting there in complete darkness, it seemed a long time before eleven o'clock came.

The next hour seemed even more interminable. How many times he looked at the luminous dial of his watch during those sixty minutes he did not know, but he tried to check himself and compose his thoughts lest he should develop nerves.

When one o'clock came at last Raven began to relax a little. It began to look as though the big show was not going to take place to-night after all. At half-past one he rose quietly, partly to stretch his cramped limbs and partly because he no longer felt the same need to strain his ears for the slightest sound. Surely the Vulture would have been here before now if this was the night he had chosen for his final effort?

Raven moved slowly towards the door, and it was just as he reached it that he became suddenly tense and alert again. The unmistakable sound of a lock being quietly turned came to his ears, and within a few more seconds he was certain that someone was moving stealthily through the laboratory.

As Raven stood right by the door of his room the faint whisper of a voice came floating to him. If the Vulture had come he had brought a companion with him as he had done on the last occasion.

Now a light was being used. Raven could not actually see it, but the pale reflection was sufficient to warn him. A few minutes later he could hear the scraping sound of wood against wood and then a sharp but subdued exclamation of success.

The Vulture had learned the secret of the Creeds' hiding-place! Raven had feared that he would, and for a moment his thoughts flew to Stanton Creed and the question of whether he was still alive.

He checked such thoughts quickly. In a very short time now Kit Raven's cue for action would come. Again he heard the exultant whisper as they drew out the sealed envelope they had found in the cleverly constructed fire-proof safe beneath the floor-boards in the laboratory.

That safe had been a neat and careful job, carried out by the Creeds themselves. Without some clue neither Kit Raven nor the Vulture would ever have found it. But Kit Raven had found it before the Vulture. His clue had been contained in the notebook of feeble and copied verse in which there was

also the invisible writing Jimmy Sprott had discovered.

But would the Vulture examine the bulky package he had found? If he did it was highly probable that he would change his note of exultation and triumph to one of rage. Kit Raven had taken no risks of the genuine papers falling into wrong hands, and the package the Vulture had now discovered was a dummy, carefully made up to resemble the genuine package now in a safe at Scotland Yard.

If the Vulture was content to put the packet away and leave the examination of the papers until later, Raven might alter his own plans and avoid taking any further personal risks. In his talk beforehand he had been of the opinion that the Vulture would spare a few minutes before leaving the laboratory to examine the find he had made and make certain that the papers were the ones he required.

He was right in that assumption. There came the sound of a pocket-knife being used to tear open the sealed packet. Then came the whisper as sheets of fairly stiff paper were being unfolded and straightened out, followed by a low command to turn the light from the torch on the papers so that the Vulture could make his examination more easily.

In another second or so he heard the furious exclamations of a man who at the moment of success realized that he had been badly sold! It had needed only the briefest of glances at those papers to grasp the full truth. The Vulture had been outwitted.

“Raven! That young fool who trails round with Forshaw! I tell you he’s been here first and left—this!” The Vulture was showing the real temper that was in him now, and Raven might well have hesitated and changed his plans even when they were going according to plan.

The other man was gasping out a question when he grasped the full significance of the trick that had been played on them.

“We’ll get him to-morrow!” the Vulture was snarling back in answer to his companion’s almost stammering questions. “We’ll find him early in the morning and drag him——”

“You won’t have to exert yourself quite so much as that, Dr. Voltan,” Kit Raven said calmly as he stood in the doorway of the laboratory. One hand held a torch while the other was in his coat pocket in what seemed to be a careless, lazy fashion. There was something in that pocket, too, and Raven was anxious that both the Vulture and his companion should observe his little piece of acting.

The two men standing together in the laboratory swung round instantly, and their hands were going swiftly to their pockets. The torch in the hand of the Vulture’s companion flashed on Kit Raven, who promptly moved to one side.

“Keep that light away from me!” Raven snapped out. “And don’t start any shooting. You won’t do any good with that game, you know. I’m here to talk business. You want something—and I have it. I expected you to come to-night, once you were sure that the coast was clear and those clever brutes from Scotland Yard had gone off to chase some other fancy clue. What are your terms?”

Both the Vulture and his companion were plainly ready to make an attack, but Raven’s manner and his calm tones, supported by the fact that he was now holding a gun in a way that suggested he was quite prepared to use it, checked them. But it was not the weapon so much as the curt, business-like query about terms which astonished them.

“If this is some new trick——” the Vulture began slowly, and then with a sudden jerk brought out one of those small silvery-looking bombs which he had already used so effectively on one occasion at Wagoner’s Halt.

“Don’t be silly,” Raven said, and leaned against the doorway. “What do you think you are going to do with that? The moment you try to throw it you’ll be where you put poor Cantrell. It wouldn’t worry me. Put that away. Are you prepared to talk business?”

“You have the papers?” the Vulture asked, and Raven judged that he was now trying to keep his own temper in control and put himself on a level with Raven.

“I took them and I know where they are—naturally,” Raven said. “They are now hidden away very safely, and you would have a good deal more trouble in finding them—without my help—than you have had in finding the Creeds’ hiding-place. I have also taken certain precautions to checkmate any fancy tricks on your part. The papers are mine and will remain mine.”

“And what do you propose to do with them?” the Vulture asked.

“Now you are talking sense. They are no use to me, and I don’t want them. That’s why I’m here to-night to meet you. Give me credit for having weighed up your plans correctly, which is more than you have managed to do about my plans. Don’t start making any threats or try any tricks. I can beat you at that game. You’re not the only one who can hand out warnings—and I’m giving you one now!”

“What are your terms?” the Vulture asked.

“We can’t talk here,” Raven said. “We’ll be having a couple of policemen round here very soon on their nightly inspection. I don’t want to be on the premises then. It’s time we all got out. I’m coming with you!”

Five minutes later Kit Raven was leaving the house by the same door as the one by which he had entered. He was still free, but the Vulture insisted on keeping behind him while the other man took the lead. But they had no need to warn Raven to avoid showing himself as far as possible. He was apparently

just as anxious as they were to get safely away from Wagoner's Halt.

They took a roundabout way from the house, but eventually reached a cottage where they stayed for some time. The Vulture was anxious to have some telephone message before he left here. Later, Raven was taken out and ordered to enter a van which was drawn up just inside the gate but hidden from the road.

The Vulture indicated that this was the conveyance in which they would travel to his present headquarters. He had obviously not altogether lost his suspicions regarding Raven, but was prepared to carry on with the game so long as Raven showed not the slightest sign of giving any call or making a signal.

There were three of them in the van, the Vulture being the last to enter. Raven never really saw the man who would be at the wheel, nor did he give any sign of being interested. He followed every instruction given him without demur, and made himself as comfortable as possible once he was in the van.

But it was not by any means a comfortable journey, and Raven found himself wondering why the Vulture had not arranged for something more luxurious. Even when he was in the van the Vulture issued another of his warnings to Raven.

"Oh, don't be a fool," Raven retorted in a bored tone. "I'm beginning to lose my interest in you. When first you loomed up I had a notion that I was likely to meet a high-class scoundrel and not a cheap bluffer. Why should I escape? Having offered to come with you and find out what your notions are when you talk business, is it likely I'd risk my neck by trying to get out of this wretched conveyance of yours? You spend your time thinking about what terms you're prepared to offer!"

There was no reply, and the rest of the journey was passed in silence. They were in almost complete darkness except for the one torch which the Vulture's companion had placed on the floor of the van so that it shone to some extent on Raven. They were not trusting him by any means.

And Raven was certainly not trusting them. He was perfectly well aware of the fact that the Vulture had no intention of allowing Kit Raven to live very long after the question of the papers had been settled. It was the fact that he was dealing with men who had no mercy and had shot at least one man in cold blood, had even been prepared to torture young Sprott, and had sapped the courage of a man such as Frank Gill by threatening the life of his wife, which gave Raven the courage to play this game of bluff.

The journey came to an end at last, and the doors at the back of the van were opened. One or two other men appeared in the light which came from the hall of the house by which they had drawn up. As Raven got out two men were ready to take charge of him, and one of them attempted to secure his arm in a

firm grip.

“Take your hands off me!” Raven snapped, and the Vulture himself was intervening. In the end Raven walked into the house with a man on either side of him, but with no one laying a hand on him. The Vulture came just behind him again, and Raven had no doubt that his hand was still gripping a weapon.

They went to a small room at the back of the house. It was furnished modestly but comfortable enough. It was the Vulture who indicated the armchair which he desired Raven to use.

“Now we will talk business,” the Vulture began as he took a chair facing Raven. “Tell me first of all when you obtained possession of the papers?”

“I found the clue to their hiding-place almost the first time I went to Wagoner’s Halt,” he said, and his tone was one of self-satisfaction with his own astuteness. “It was no trouble after that, and naturally I played the game according to my own ideas.”

“What was the clue that you found?”

“Don’t worry about that. Maybe I’ll tell you later. You must have been as big a fool as the policemen who were hunting round. They missed it, of course, but so did you. You’re a mighty clever fellow, Voltan, and you flatter yourself you’re backed by a powerful and wealthy crowd. But don’t get wrong notions into your head. Scotland Yard—and the Foreign Office—know a lot more about your affairs than you imagine. You’re in danger, and this is the last job you’ll attempt in this country. I’m telling you!”

People who knew Kit Raven well would scarcely have recognized him in this mood of sneering boastfulness. He wanted to annoy the Vulture, but at the same time he hoped to keep him interested. Surprisingly, however, the Vulture showed no outward signs of annoyance at Raven’s gibes now. Instead he quietly questioned him, without making much progress until he suddenly turned to the question of what terms Raven wanted.

“Fifty thousand pounds down,” Raven answered promptly. “And you won’t see so much as a shadow of those papers until the money is safe in my hands. That’s final! But don’t start shooting!”

He had jumped to his feet as though anxious to be on his guard. The Vulture did the same. For the first time the anger that must have been steadily rising in the Vulture’s veins as he listened to Raven now blazed forth. Two other men who had remained in the background throughout the whole of this talk were also on their feet. For Kit Raven the critical moment had come.

“I’ve warned you!” he blazed as the Vulture advanced towards him. “Don’t try any of your rough-house methods with me!”

Raven backed a little as he spoke, and for a moment he seemed to be frightened of the Vulture. Then suddenly he jerked forward and seized a small glass paper-weight on the writing-table just to one side of where he stood.

The paper-weight appeared to slip as Raven flung his arm back as though he meant to throw the thing at the Vulture. For an instant, indeed, the Vulture had dodged instinctively, but the paper-weight was crashing through the window behind him. The next moment Raven had dived forward and grabbed a pen-tray.

As the Vulture's arm leapt out the glass tray struck him full in the face. This time Raven made sure of his aim. Somewhere outside a whistle was blowing wildly—but the sound was drowned by the sudden crashing of glass as the window in this room was smashed.

For the next few moments Kit Raven went mad. The writing-table itself was swung round and then a chair as the two men tried to come to grips with him. They failed and Kit Raven fought on.

CHAPTER XX

The Last Chase

There were quite a number of persons who found the time between ten o'clock and half-past one very trying, and even depressing, when Kit Raven made his stealthy visit to Wagoner's Halt. Jimmy Sprott was one of them.

Sprott had been keen enough to be one of those taking part in this last effort to come to grips with the Vulture and to have some hand in what, it was hoped, would turn out to be the final act in the drama. Kit Raven had been inclined to give orders that Sprott was to go home and spend his time in bed. Jimmy had had quite enough, so Raven said.

Surprisingly it was Inspector Forshaw who brought the scales down in Sprott's favour. For one night only Sprott was to be an extra in Forshaw's army of helpers, and, like every other man, he had his number. This was for the convenience of those at headquarters as well as the men themselves.

It was a lucky number, so Forshaw said, but whether in jest or earnest nobody could have guessed. It was not always easy to decide when Inspector Forshaw was indulging his sense of humour.

No. 9, otherwise Jimmy Sprott, was detailed for duty in company with Detective-officer Mark Bell, who had been taking turns with another detective in keeping watch on a certain person who lived not very far from Wagoner's Halt.

It was Mark Bell who had walked from Wagoner's Halt this morning with the artist and had aired his views as a journalist about Inspector Forshaw. He had been relieved some time later, but was on duty again to-night and the cottage was still his particular care.

Bell's number was 10, and he was in charge of one of the small radio-telegraphic sets. If there was any dashing about to be done it would fall to Jimmy.

Bell had already decided upon their hiding-place when Sprott joined up with him. It was Sprott who did the cautious prowling around on the chance of seeing something worth while reporting to headquarters. But nothing happened, and at half-past one he was feeling very much the same as everyone else who was among Forshaw's numbered army.

"It looks as though we're wasting our time," Sprott whispered to Bell. "It's a pity! Forshaw will be very fed up if it turns out to be a failure."

"It's all part of the——Sh!" Bell was giving him a warning as he heard his radio giving a signal.

“The ‘stand-ready’ for everybody!” Bell whispered. “It isn’t a washout after all. Something’s going to happen soon.”

It was some time before anything happened in their neighbourhood, however. Then, out of the darkness, came three dark shadows stealing across the fields towards the cottage occupied by the artist. A faint light had been shining all the night in one of the windows here, and that light had cheered Sprott to some extent during the interminable waiting period.

The figures straightened up as they reached the gate in the fence round the cottage. Sprott could not see them clearly, but he was confident that the second man was Kit Raven. He felt fairly certain, too, that the third man was the Vulture.

All three of them entered the cottage for a short time. Somewhere on the road a small car passed at moderate speed. This same car had been noted several times to-night, and appeared to be doing a tour of the roads round this district. It was established later that the car belonged to the Vulture, and its task was to make certain that no watch was being kept in this neighbourhood.

Detective Bell had sent through one or two messages to the police car, safely hidden some two or three miles away. That headquarters car was sending out messages to other police cars, all waiting to take a hand in the game when called upon.

The three men were not in the cottage for any length of time. A small delivery van had been standing there for some hours, as Bell knew and had already reported. Into this van the three men who had come across the fields a short time before now climbed. Kit Raven was again the second man, and was helped to some extent by another man.

This part of the game was particularly trying to Sprott. He had the feeling that he wanted to butt in, although he was perfectly well aware that all of it was part of the plan and that everything was going well.

“I know everything is going according to programme,” Sprott whispered to Bell as the van moved off. “But I don’t like it. One never knows with a clever scoundrel such as the Vulture. He may have some clever move up his sleeve which will leave your fellows in the air.”

“He’ll have to be mighty quick about it,” Bell said, and then raised a hand to indicate that something was coming through on the radio. A few moments later he was whispering to Sprott: “You’re to wait at the end of the lane. The chief will be along presently and he’ll pick you up.”

They parted company at once. Bell would remain here for the time being and would give warning if anyone else arrived at or left the cottage.

Sprott was on the spot when Inspector Forshaw’s car drew up. Three men jumped out and on a signal from someone inside Jimmy stepped into the back of the car. It was a big car, but he wondered how three men, none of them

under average height or weight, had managed to squeeze in. The front seat was already occupied by the driver and another man who was evidently in charge of the wireless installation. Forshaw was sitting at the back.

“Yes, it’s been a tight squeeze for the last few minutes,” Forshaw agreed. “They are going to take charge of the cottage now. I’d like to know what that artist fellow and his man have to say when they’re arrested. We’ve been listening-in a bit to-day. But they’re clever. The calls came from a country box and not a private house. But we know the district where the calls came from, and we have put someone on the job of keeping a watch on the call-box just in case we can pick anything up in that way.”

The car was on the move again quickly. Forshaw was adjusting a pair of earphones and had a map-case in front of him. The radio man just in front of him had everything fixed up more conveniently, and it was he who gave the inspector a brief explanation of the position and what was happening.

The van in which Kit Raven was now travelling was the same as the one in which Sprott had made his journey from this same cottage to Norfield House. Where it had gone after that Jimmy did not know, but it was not on the premises at Norfield House when the police carried out their search.

To-night the number of that car had been known before Sprott’s companion outside the cottage, Detective Bell, had sent his message through. It was useful to have his confirmation, however, and later a fuller description. Every item of information was noted at headquarters and properly collated there.

Before that van left the cottage the radio headquarters had advised all cars which were waiting to take up the chase, and observers at different points were also informed.

Moreover, there had been another watcher on duty near the cottage. Just as the van moved slowly out into the lane this man had stepped silently forward and at a moment when he felt perfectly safe he had made use of a patent spray. For a couple of seconds or so a fine spray of liquid had played on the back of the van.

The man was something of an artist, and had described an almost complete circle. It ran a little perhaps, but his instructions to make the mark distinctive if possible had been well carried out. By the time the car reached the end of the lane the chemical compound had begun to dry, and a circle of silvery paint that seemed luminous when any light shone near it now identified that van beyond all argument. The number plates might be changed by some ingenious arrangement, but it would take a good deal of hard work to remove the painter’s effort.

How many times in the next hour the message was being sent out from headquarters, “Marked car XMB-379 now on road A——, line 27, heading

south,” no one kept count. From different points and from various cars the message came to headquarters. In turn the news was flashed out to all those who were keeping in touch.

One car might follow closely in the wake of the van for three or four miles and then drop out of the chase as another car coming from another road swung out and took up the chase. No suspicion would be raised in the mind of the driver of the marked van that he was being followed.

If any suspicion came to the driver or to those who were in the van when at last they descended it would not matter very much. There would be precious little chance of escaping the net that was being closed around them to-night.

It was not merely the one car which kept up the trail for the last few miles. There were other cars in touch with headquarters, and they would all arrive somewhere near the same spot within a matter of a few minutes after the Vulture reached his destination.

Apart from this important question of the Vulture’s arrest and the break-up of whatever organization he had, to-night’s effort would afford an excellent test of the Yard’s capacity to carry out big-scale operations swiftly and with complete success.

The car in which Jimmy Sprott travelled kept up a fairly good speed. That was how it came about that, according to the plan already made, it was Forshaw’s car which was nearest the marked van when they were approaching a particular district from which certain telephone calls had been made to the cottage occupied by the artist.

“We shouldn’t be long now,” Forshaw remarked, and, after a very brief pause: “They’re turning somewhere now. Go straight past, Dawson, but slacken speed as soon as you are past.”

The van they had been following had swung into the drive of a comparatively modern house. Three minutes later Jimmy Sprott was dodging back towards this house, having been dropped from the car as it pulled up for a moment.

The car had gone ahead again, but, as he knew, it would turn within the next fifty yards or so. His job was to find out the name of the house and report it immediately to Forshaw.

By the time Sprott went back Forshaw was out of the car. Two seconds later the message was being sent to advise headquarters and all other cars of the name of the house and the exact position where it stood on a particular road.

Already another car was drawing up just behind Forshaw’s car, and within another few minutes there would be half a dozen of them. Within twenty minutes the house was completely surrounded, silently and cautiously, by men who knew exactly what signals to expect and what they were to do when they

came.

Jimmy Sprott, accompanied part of the way by Sergeant Hopley, had his own particular task. It was possible that before he did anything at all of practical value the signal would come from inside the house. If not, there was one injunction Inspector Forshaw had impressed upon him, not once but several times.

“Avoid risks, Jimmy! I’m taking risks myself in letting you have a hand in this game at all. But I have a feeling that you’ve been a sort of mascot on this job, so I’m trusting you to have a share in the final effort. But remember! Give the signal instantly at the first sign of danger. We shall be ready for it!”

“I shan’t make a mistake,” Jimmy Sprott asserted as he slipped away into the darkness and began to work his way round to the back of the house. Sergeant Hopley would cover the front, and each of them would have others fairly close behind him.

And, as luck had it, Jimmy Sprott was right on the spot when something came crashing through the french windows of one of the rooms at the back.

From the room itself a sudden row broke out, and Jimmy Sprott was giving the signal to the others. Then he jumped forward and made for the smashed window. Somewhere on the other side of that window Kit Raven was making a fight in which every second would count.

CHAPTER XXI

Let Justice Prevail!

The french windows against which Sprott charged within about three seconds after the crash yielded very easily. He was pushing them back and jumping into the room without ever a thought of the excellent advice Inspector Forshaw had given him on the subject of avoiding any risk.

“All right, Kit! All up!” Sprott called out, and then had to turn to defend himself. He managed to ward off one blow the man tried to land, and then Sprott was jerked out of the way and two other men were tackling his attacker.

“Take that fellow first!” Kit Raven was calling out, and Sprott never had another chance of showing what he could do as a fighting man. Before he really had a proper grasp of the position, Sprott was again being gently pushed backwards towards the corner just when he hoped to advance.

“All right, Jimmy! This isn’t our job now!” Kit Raven was by his side, panting a little after his wild exercise. “This is where we stand back and become spectators.”

Pandemonium had broken out, and confusion seemed to reign throughout the house in the next few minutes. But it must have been an orderly confusion and there was some spirit of calm efficiency behind it all.

Once or twice they caught sight of Inspector Forshaw, as calm and unruffled as ever, but giving an order or jerking out a word or two as he made his way through the room. One always had the feeling about Forshaw that everything that happened to him was just what he expected and that it was, to use his own phrase, “All in the day’s work”.

Sprott had the feeling that he ought to be doing something, but Raven had definite ideas about the position of himself and his assistant. Forshaw was in command here.

The Inspector came to them at last in the same room where they had remained the whole time. For the last few minutes they had been the sole occupants, and had been exchanging odd items of news concerning the events of the past few hours. Curiously enough, it all seemed very ordinary and matter-of-fact now, and everything had worked out, so far as they could tell, just as it had been planned.

“Ah, here you are!” Forshaw said as he caught sight of them, and there seemed to be a little note of cheerfulness in his voice. “We’ve made a clean sweep now. We are just beginning to search the house, but I shall have to get back quickly to see about the charges preferred against the men we’ve

collected so far.”

“How many are there?” Raven asked.

“Eight of them. But you’ll be more interested in another discovery we’ve made. Come with me. We brought a medical man with us, as you know, just in case we wanted one urgently. He’s with Stanton Creed now. Yes, he’s alive, Jimmy—but only just. He can’t tell us anything, and we shan’t even try to get anything out of him just yet. The doctor is fairly hopeful—but come and have a look for yourself.”

Forshaw’s men had found Stanton Creed in a room on the first floor; probably it was the smallest room in the house, and was certainly the most barely furnished. It was impossible to guess what the man had been through since the night when the Vulture had overpowered him and taken him away.

Creed was lying on a camp bed; he was barely conscious, and Raven and Sprott were merely permitted to stand just inside the room for a few moments. There was no mistaking the man’s features, however. The two brothers bore a remarkable resemblance to each other though there was a couple of years difference in their ages.

Raven and Sprott did not stay more than half a minute, but some little time afterwards Raven saw the medical man and had a short talk with him.

“He will want the greatest care, of course, but there is nothing radically wrong with him so far as I have been able to make out. I have very little doubt but that he is suffering at present from the effects of drugs, and he seems to be worrying about his brother, Kelvin. Forshaw told me to tell him if I could that his brother is quite safe, and I think I made my patient understand that. Anyway, we should be able to make arrangements for his removal to more comfortable quarters in a few more hours. He will be all right for the present.”

There was one more discovery made before Kit Raven and Jimmy Sprott left the house. It was Forshaw again who came to tell them. His men were now busy in carrying out the search of the house, and Forshaw was making a quick inspection of anything to which his attention was specially called. His men had been told to put any documents or drawings on one side and inform Forshaw at the earliest moment.

Among the first to be discovered was the batch of designs and drawings dealing with the Creeds’ process for the manufacture of Syncredium. There was no doubt about the fact that these were the property of the Creed brothers since their name appeared on some of them, and in several cases the word which they had devised to describe this synthetic radium they had discovered was plainly written on the sheets.

In addition, the original cover with its broken seals was found with the drawings. A short letter to Sir Roger Marston was with this cover, and in this note mention was made of the fact that, in the event of the Creeds not being

available, John Cantrell would be able to find the papers necessary to gain a complete understanding of the whole process of manufacture.

The Creeds had made this arrangement to provide against certain dangers which might arise. If anything happened to them, their discovery would be in the right hands, and Sir Roger Marston would be able to take whatever steps he considered wise.

“I think you had better take charge of these, Raven,” Forshaw told him, carefully wrapping the drawings in their original cover. “We may want to see them again, of course, but I think you had better have them as the legal representative of the Creeds. There are other papers here—but we shall have them all carefully made up and taken back to town. I shall probably need your help with them later.”

For the present, however, the help of Kit Raven and Jimmy Sprott was not required. There would be much work for Inspector Forshaw, but Raven’s task was ended for the present. The man who had caused the death of John Cantrell was in safe custody, and Forshaw already had most of the evidence to ensure a conviction. Already, too, the story of the organization which the Vulture had controlled in this country, and had run so successfully for some two or three years at least, was becoming fairly clear.

Further investigation might be necessary, but on one point Forshaw was satisfied. The organization was now completely smashed.

“I’ll report to Sir Rufus Grayle to-morrow—or to-day, I should say,” Raven said, “Come on, Jimmy! It’s morning again, and your hours just lately have been disgraceful. We’ll get back to town for breakfast. We shall be seeing you later, Forshaw. I don’t suppose it will be at the office, but you’ll find me at my flat in town if you do happen to want me badly later on. There’s a car available for us?”

“I’ll soon arrange about that,” Forshaw assured him. “You can sign off now! I’ll be seeing you later.”

The night had passed, and the first grey shafts of dawn were showing in the sky when Kit Raven and Jimmy Sprott entered the car that took them back to London. They did not go to the offices in Old Flag Court that day.

As a matter of fact, it was three days before Jimmy Sprott returned to his duties at the offices of Messrs. Micklethwaite, Raven, Mortimer & Raven. During that time he had had a fair amount of sleep, and had done something to make up for the starvation diet he had endured during his enforced stay as the guest of Dr. Voltan.

He had also seen a fair amount of both Inspector Forshaw and Sergeant Hopley. In the company of Kit Raven he had made another short visit to Wagoner’s Halt, which was no longer unoccupied. Frank Gill, his wife and son, were already living there again, and it was understood that Mr. Kelvin

Creed would be returning shortly.

The case against Kelvin Creed, or James William Hope, as he was entered on the charge sheet, had been disposed of quickly enough by a small fine and an apology on behalf of the accused by his legal representative. It was not made public that the silly ass who had knocked off a policeman's helmet and tried to assault him in the City of London had the slightest connexion with the mysterious affair at Wagoner's Halt which was now occupying a big place in the day's news.

Now that the police had a grip on the case they were making a good many discoveries which made the Wagoner's Halt case even more important than it had appeared at first. The organization which the Vulture controlled in Britain had been successful, and the methods employed had frequently borne a strong resemblance to those employed in the Wagoner's Halt case.

They had made cowards of men who did not lack courage by making them afraid, not for themselves, but for those who were dear to them. There were two or three mysteries which had never been really solved until the Creeds affair was being cleared up.

It also became plain that a number of valuable secret processes and inventions, discovered by British research and experiment, had become known in every detail in other countries. The facts relating to these cases were never likely to be made public, but those who were concerned now knew the facts. Sir Rufus Grayle took a little credit to himself for his wisdom in consulting Mr. Christopher Raven.

"Creed will be fit enough fairly soon now," Raven told Jimmy Sprott when he asked about the brother, Kelvin. "As for Stanton, he's making progress, but, of course, his will be a much longer job. We shall hear his statement presently, but they are not worrying about it until he is much better. They have all the evidence they need against the Vulture and other members of his foul alliance."

"The Vulture will be charged with the Cantrell murder?" Sprott asked.

"Yes. He was solely responsible for that. Other charges will be made against the other men. It's a big job for Forshaw collecting all the evidence and making sure that each case is watertight."

"It should do him some good in official circles, anyway," Sprott remarked, having become a genuine admirer of Inspector Forshaw.

Raven agreed, but did not mention just then that it would also do Micklethwaites quite a lot of good when the news was made public that two members of that excellent legal firm had played a big part in solving the Wagoner's Halt mystery.

So far there had been no mention of Kit Raven or Jimmy Sprott in the brief statement Inspector Forshaw had given to the Press. Sprott assumed that their

names would be kept out of it altogether.

He was wrong. Not even Inspector Forshaw could control the Press, and some of the journalists knew quite a lot about the part Raven and Sprott had taken in the case. Jimmy Sprott discovered how much they knew when he went back to the office.

On the first morning of his return Sprott was distinctly late, though normally he had a well-earned reputation for punctuality. He quite expected that Mr. Mason or Cummings, or both, would indulge their gifts for biting sarcasm and grim humour very fully when he strolled into the main office fully half an hour late.

Sprott had not even had time to look at the morning papers, and in any case he was not expecting to read anything fresh about the Wagoner's Halt case. But the newspapers had had something fresh each day so far. Both Mason and Cummings were still talking over their morning papers when Jimmy strolled in, prepared for a few quick and crushing retorts.

"Hullo, hullo!" Mason jerked his head up as Jimmy greeted him. "Enter our Secret Service staff! Here comes the little hero! Tell us all about it, Jimmy! Getting your name in the papers——"

"You've been observing things again!" Mr. Cummings interrupted, and grinned broadly at his own brightness. "But tell us all about it, young Sprott! This Scotland Yard man, Forshaw, says that you and Mr. Raven have rendered invaluable assistance, and that you've been running grave risks. Oh, and there's quite a lot about you! Come on! Let's have the full yarn, Eagle-eye Sprott! Be a sport and tell us the whole story!"

"I observed that a man was wearing a green tie with yellow stripes," Sprott said. "Now, I've always observed that a man who wears a tie of that kind——"

"Yes, we know all about the tie!" Cummings said. "That's an old one, that is. Joking apart, Jimmy, tell us what's behind all this, and what you and Mr. Raven have been doing."

And Jimmy Sprott told them; at least, he told them some of the bright spots which seemed much more interesting when he talked of them in this office than they had done at the time. After all, they were in a legal office and knew how to keep a secret. Moreover, they could help Jimmy Sprott a great deal in his legal studies. There was nothing so good when one was studying than to go to the people who knew.

It was also a very pleasant way of spending the first hour or two of this first day back at the office. The Vulture was caged, and Justice would triumph in the end. Why worry about work and the normal routine of the office this morning?

Jimmy Sprott didn't. He had put in a lot of overtime just lately, and nobody would criticize him if he talked of the strange case at Wagoner's Halt this

morning. The normal work could wait for another day!

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Wagoner's Halt Mystery* by Michael Poole]