

MURDER
AND ARIADNE

—
L. WRAY

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE VYE MURDER

MURDER— AND ARIADNE

**BY
I. WRAY**

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MURDER—AND ARIADNE

CHAPTER I

THE sound of the church clock striking seven had just died away when Julius Lane sat up in bed.

‘Must be a very still day,’ he reflected, ‘if I can hear the clock from here.’

The summer sun was flooding the room, shining on the wildly dishevelled bed and on the brilliant red hair of the young man sitting on the edge of it.

After a despairing glance at the pillows that had given him no sleep that night, he rose and strolled to the window.

Across a strip of park was a small wood and through its trees came the flash of sunlight on water. This seemed to give him an idea, for he turned towards the dressing-table with a little more briskness. The glass showed a man of twenty-eight or thereabouts with slight but unmistakable Jewish characteristics, which were less in the modelling of his features than in the thick, creamy skin, the rather full lips and the hot brown eyes allied to red hair. As he gave those red curls a few perfunctory dabs—to get them into correct smoothness was far too formidable a task for a sleepless young man before an early bathe—he frowned heavily at his reflection, which showed him a very pale face with black circles under eyes that were heavy and a trifle bloodshot.

‘God! what a sight!’ he muttered, and, having added a pair of slippers, a shabby tweed coat and a bath towel to his elegant mauve pyjamas, he left the room very quietly.

The house was very still. The hall was almost dark, but light enough to show a litter of ashtrays and empty glasses. Julius sniffed, and again murmured to himself, ‘What a crowd! and any one looking at me would think I was the worst of the lot—which is a bit hard, all things considered.’

He let himself out by a side door and crossed the park towards the lake.

As he came to the belt of trees on to the open ground at its edge, he stopped abruptly and became even paler. Before him was a little bathing hut and a diving-board, on the end of which a girl was sitting with her back to

him. She was in a bathing-dress, and sat very still, gazing across the water, her bare arms clasped round her knees.

Julius's hand went to his throat and he swallowed once or twice before he seemed able to speak. Then, calling out 'Hallo' in a voice that struck him as oddly unlike his own, he crossed the space of turf between them.

The girl turned abruptly, showing a small white face and frightened dark blue eyes between wings of black hair.

'What on earth are you doing?' Julius dropped down beside her, a little suddenly. His knees seemed to have become quite inadequate to the task of holding him up, but his voice was steady. 'The lake is deep everywhere this side and you can't swim.' He looked down at the weeds swaying lazily in the twelve feet of water and shivered.

The girl looked away and spoke rapidly with an obvious effort at lightness. 'It's so ridiculous not to be able to swim. Pure nerves or inhibitions or something. I thought I'd have a try. I am sure I could if I *had* to.'

She did not see the sudden spasm of pain that crossed his face nor the little gesture of his hands towards her, and went on: 'But when I got here I found I wasn't brave enough. I've always been a coward.'

His face showed pity and something very like pride as he answered, 'I'm very glad you were. I don't hold with life-saving so early in the morning. It was a mad idea. Promise me you won't do anything of the sort again.' He spoke urgently.

'You needn't worry. I shan't. My instinct of self-preservation seems to be extraordinarily strong. It won't allow me to take the slightest risks. Are you going to bathe? I'll watch you.'

Julius laughed. 'I didn't think anybody would be up. I haven't got anything to bathe in.'

'Well, I'll go. I should have had to in a minute, anyway. I don't particularly want to meet the gardeners. What they think of us I can't imagine. Greta doesn't mind, but I'm such a fool I hate being disapproved of even by a gardener or the village gossip. You know that none of the village girls will come here as maids, and I believe that our maids are the scandal of the surrounding countryside.'

'They do run a bit to legs and lipsticks,' Julius agreed, 'but still, why shouldn't they have their harmless amusements?'

'I don't mind that so much, but they are such damned bad maids—pert and lazy, and I believe the cook drinks. Oh, well, I suppose by their standards we don't deserve any better.'

She rose to her feet and made her way along the board, Julius following her. Just as they reached the hut, she gave a surprised little cry and swayed. He was just in time to catch her as she fell. For a moment he held her close to him, his face pressed down on the soft black hair, murmuring, ‘Oh, my Sylvia, my poor little Sylvia.’ Then he laid her down, and, dipping his towel in the water, began to squeeze it gently over her face. Soon her eyelids flickered, and he said in a voice that he strove to keep normal, ‘You fainted. Stay quite still. I expect you’re feeling horribly sick. I know I did the only time I ever fainted. It’ll go off in a minute.’

He pulled off his coat and wrapped it round her, holding her against his shoulder while he rubbed her cold hands.

‘I’m better now. I’d better get in.’

She rose with his assistance, and, with his arm still about her, they started for the house.

‘This is the result of too late nights, too many cocktails, and so forth.’ There was a little touch of pride in her voice. She was, Julius reflected, absurdly young for her nineteen years. ‘You know the life we lead.’

‘Why lead it then? I don’t want to say anything against your cousin, but it would drive me completely gaga.’

‘Why do you come here then?’

‘Oh’—he seemed a little taken aback. ‘As a young novelist I feel it is up to me to see how our Bright Young Things live—and I come to see you, my sweet.’

‘I don’t think I shall be with Greta much longer. I must try and find some work or something, but it won’t be easy. I may not see eye to eye with Greta about everything—though I do over most things’—there was an oddly defensive note in her voice—‘but it’s better than living with mother at Bath or those third-rate foreign places she loves. I do meet interesting people here with Greta. Mother’s friends talk about nothing but bridge.’

‘And Greta’s about nothing but sex. I suppose on the whole it is more interesting,’ Julius agreed a trifle dryly.

‘Of course it is. Half the trouble in the world is the result of our false ideas left over from the Victorian repressions.’ It was such an obviously parrot-like quotation that Julius smiled.

‘Oh, I agree—but one can be obsessed as well as repressed.’

Suddenly she shivered. ‘I don’t think all their conversations and discussions are very—practical. Things that they don’t seem to think exist now—or only in books—do, and they can hurt.’

‘I think you are right.’ He had become very grave again. ‘Sylvia, I may not be as up in sex as Greta’s friends, but I *do* know something about love. I knew about you and poor Gerald, and I know you must be dreadfully unhappy. If there is anything I can do—if it would be any help for you to have some one to listen while you talk—will you promise to let me know? We have, I hope, been friends for quite a time now.’

She looked at him doubtfully, hesitated, and then said, ‘I promise. Thank you. I was in love with Gerald—we were engaged, but I was afraid to tell mother. He was so ineligible and she—oh, well, what does that matter now? He’s dead, and I must get on alone. Please don’t tell any one about my fainting like that. It was nothing, except I have been—fretting like a girl in a Victorian novel—no sleep, no appetite, but I hate to be fussed over. I’ll go to bed, I think.’

They had reached the house by this time. It was still silent, but as they entered the hall, a door opened at the far end and a yawning girl appeared, duster and broom in hand. Her very short dress was crumpled, her apron dirty, but her face was lavishly painted and her hair curled, though it would have been improved by the application of the brush. She gave an audible exclamation as she saw them, and stood staring after them as they went upstairs.

At the head of the stairs Sylvia paused, for their rooms were in different wings.

‘Try and get some sleep, my dear,’ he said. ‘You look ghastly,’ he added with tender frankness.

‘I feel it, and now I come to look at you, Julius, you don’t look up to much, yourself. Are you feeling sick—you look it?’ she asked with sympathy.

‘A little, but it’s nothing.’

‘We’re a nice pair.’ She gave a sudden hysterical little laugh, and turned away.

Julius, having regained his own room, sank into a chair in front of the writing-table, saying as he did so, ‘Well, I know now, but what in God’s name is the best thing to do?’

He sank his chin on his doubled fists, and with a deep frown on his brow, gave himself up to thought.

Two hours later he found himself the first in the dining-room, for which he was not sorry.

He had just poured himself out a cup of coffee when he heard steps outside, and looked up with a frown which cleared when one of his fellow

guests entered the room.

This was a small, elderly man who somehow seemed to suggest jockeys and the turf; an entirely erroneous impression, for the Earl of Sands had never, even in his young days, shown the slightest interest in racing or horses, and now that he was nearing seventy, spent most of his time in the country among his books, occasionally being heard of as the author of an essay in one of the more erudite reviews, on early eighteenth-century literature.

His presence at Clinton Manor that week-end was accounted for by the fact that his grandson and heir had just announced his engagement to their young hostess, Greta Swanson.

He seemed relieved at finding that Julius was the only occupant of the dining-room, though he favoured that young man with a very searching glance that took in his pallor and his heavy eyes.

Beyond a somewhat curt ‘Good morning,’ neither said anything, till Lord Sands, laying down his paper, said suddenly, ‘You don’t look up to much, but you were quite sober last night.’

‘I was, so it can’t be that.’

‘Didn’t you sleep?’ He gave him another very penetrating glance as he spoke.

‘Not very well. It is, I believe, a common affliction of all who use their brains,’ he added, with a suggestion of pertness in his tone.

‘If that is so, most of the rest of the party slept like logs, I should imagine,’ his lordship commented dryly. ‘Tell me, do they go on like this all the time?’

‘Like what?’

‘You needn’t pretend to misunderstand me. You have some sense yourself—far too much to find any pleasure in this futile, half-fuddled existence; has anybody but you and myself been completely sober since they arrived?’

‘No. It’s been a most successful party,’ he concluded ironically.

‘What do they get out of it?’ Sands asked impatiently. ‘You’re all too young to have been in the war. It can’t be war nerves which accounted for a good deal a few years ago.’

‘I wasn’t in the war, but all the same I hate it—I’m a pacifist.’

‘I know. I overheard you telling those two choice representatives of officers and gentlemen so last night. Your tongue will get you into trouble one of these days, young man. I know it’s expected at my age—but I don’t

know what things are coming to. If an officer had got drunk in the presence of ladies when I was a young man——’

‘The ladies don’t mind now—perhaps they find them more interesting drunk than sober——’

He broke off as the door opened and one of the young officers, Jerry Soames, entered, accompanied by Olga Brown.

Julius rose, and after a curt greeting, started to leave the room.

Jerry threw a glance at his place, noticed the bit of dry toast crumbled on his plate, and laughed. ‘Like that, is it? Feel that an aspirin and some soda-water would be the most suitable breakfast. I don’t know that I don’t agree with you. Greta certainly does throw some parties.’

‘We looked in on the rest on the way down,’ Olga put in. ‘Greta shouted to us from the bathroom—wonderful physique that girl has. Jack and Phil merely reviled us. They’re not getting up. Gervase is nearly ready, but in a foul temper. I think at Greta’s parties being a blue who is in the running for Wimbledon has the same effect as a Victorian conscience. Neither really stops their owners from doing anything, but both produce a horrid temper.’

‘Don’t forget, my dear, that Gervase is essentially respectable, and I hear he is practically engaged to Marjorie Maitland. If it’s true, it’s good-bye to Greta’s parties and the likes of us.’

‘Who are the Maitlands?’

‘Pills or something even less refined. Pots of money. They only know nice respectable people, not young women who divorce their husbands and write books that are burned by the public hangman.’

Julius from the door favoured them with a long, insulting stare. Then he remarked pointedly. ‘Thank God, I’m a Jew.’

With this offensive comment, he departed, almost cannoning into Gervase as he did so.

‘What’s the matter with Julius?’ Olga asked. ‘He seems to be in a foul temper too.’

‘I don’t know,’ Gervase answered shortly. ‘If you ask me, I think he spends most of his time posing—but then I’m prejudiced. I never did like Jews.’

‘Don’t be so narrow-minded—and don’t allow your truly old-fashioned respect for brains to show in such obvious cattishness,’ Olga jibed. ‘Hallo! here’s Greta. Greta, how do you do it? You look as if you had gone to bed at ten with a nice nourishing glass of hot milk.’

Greta paused for an instant in the doorway with a sure instinct for an effective pose that was only half conscious. Tall, slender without being thin, she held herself well and wore her clothes with unusual grace. Her hair was very fair and waved close about her well-shaped little head. Her eyes were grey, very clear and shallow. A woman might have seen that her mouth was cruel; a man would only have noticed its redness and her lazy smile.

‘Binks not down yet?’ She greeted Sands with a smile. ‘You haven’t brought your grandson up very well. It’s lucky I shall be an indulgent wife.’

‘I think so too. I can hardly say that I think Ethelred has the makings of a perfect husband as yet.’

He rose as he spoke and left the room.

‘I can’t say I think your future grandpapa-in-law any too matey,’ Olga remarked.

Greta’s smile was faintly malicious now. ‘No,’ she agreed, ‘but after all I’m marrying Binks, not his grandfather.’

‘Why?’ pursued Olga.

‘I’ve tried most things—marriage will be a new experience, and I have an infantile desire to be called “my lady”.’

Here the door opened and her fiancé appeared. ‘I was just saying, my cherub,’ she continued, ‘that I shouldn’t dream of marrying you if you weren’t a viscount.’

‘Well, as long as you do——’ the young man began fatuously.

She tilted her head back that he might kiss her, and while he did so, her eyes went slowly from Gervase to Jerry.

Olga watched with a certain detached interest—she was a shrewd young woman. ‘What a perfect vamp Greta is,’ she reflected, ‘and what fools men are!’ for Gervase had looked away with a frown, and Jerry had flushed. ‘If ever she meets a man with any guts, she’ll find herself being murdered one of these days.’

Her reflections were interrupted by the entrance of James Carter, a man of nearly fifty, who had been a friend of Greta’s father and was her trustee. He was what Olga described somewhat vaguely as something in the city—as a matter of fact he was a stockbroker—and though the life she had led for the last five years had blunted her sensibilities, she disliked him heartily, finding it hard to grant to his age that freedom of which she was so ardent an advocate for herself and her friends; in her bleaker moments she was haunted by the thought that he must have been young once, and that she and her friends, who seemed such an agreeable contrast to what she imagined the

Victorians and Edwardians to have been, might not be so very different when they too had reached fifty.

Julius, meanwhile, made his way to his bedroom, which he found occupied by a couple of giggling maids.

Cursing under his breath, he retired to the garden and sought a remote summer-house where he thought he would be undisturbed. However, he found it occupied by Lady Dallas, who, as Fay Crystal, had been a leading star of the musical comedy stage. At the time of her marriage, four years ago, she had looked eighteen, but since then she had had a long illness, and now looked more than her real age of forty-two. Her once exceedingly pretty face was haggard and too much made up, her slimness was now mere thinness, and her voice, which had always held a faint Cockney accent, was developing into something perilously near a whine, broken at intervals by an ominous little cough. Her illness, moreover, seemed to have crushed that indomitable spirit which had carried her from an East End slum to a West End theatre, and a salary that ran into thousands.

‘It’s a lovely day.’ Julius spoke with considerably more gentleness than he had shown at breakfast.

‘Yes. A nice contrast to our lives, isn’t it?’

‘Anything wrong?’

‘Only everything. I was a fool to have left the stage, but I always wanted to have a good position and be respectable, and I thought when I married Archie—Lady Dallas—it sounds all right, doesn’t it? But there, look at his friends! Believe me, the chorus is a convent school compared to some of them, and now Archie’s drinking himself to death and we’re head over ears in debt.’

‘Why don’t you go back to the stage?’

‘I’m not strong enough now.’

‘I’m awfully sorry.’ His voice sounded sincere.

‘That’s kind of you. You’re a bit different from the others, aren’t you?’

‘I think I have a little more sense, and their amusements don’t appeal to me particularly.’

‘Will you give me your candid opinion of the crowd in this house?’ The careful refinement was slipping from her voice and the native Cockney was showing more and more. ‘Look at last night. I don’t deny that I like a drop of bubbly at dinner as well as any one, but starting in on cocktails directly after breakfast till they’re all half drunk, and the way they talk—the things they say! I know people aren’t saints, and love is natural and all that——’

‘Would you call it love?’ Julius inquired dryly.

She laughed. ‘Perhaps you’re right, though I must say it has crossed my mind that perhaps it’s all only talk—and that they have none of them done anything their mothers wouldn’t have approved of. When you come to think of it there doesn’t hardly seem to be time—it’s morning before they have done talking of who shall sleep with who and whether they aren’t quite right and so on.’

Julius laughed in his turn, but grew grave as he said, ‘It’s not all talk.’

‘You mean Carter?’

Julius had meant something quite different, but he nodded and said, ‘He’s very keen on you, or so I was told yesterday. I can’t stand the blighter myself.’

‘He’s got money.’

‘Oh, if you can sting him, you have my good wishes, but he’s no fool—you may find yourself in a mess.’

‘I can look after myself.’ Fay smiled a little wryly, and then added, ‘Now I come to look at you, you don’t look too chirpy yourself.’

‘I’m bothered about the plot of my new book.’

Thank heaven Fay was a simple soul who would accept this, quite unlike Lord Sands who, Julius reflected gloomily, seemed to have an uncanny flair for a lie. Indeed, that gentleman who was just setting out on a solitary walk was thinking to himself, ‘That young man has got something on his mind—at his age it is probably love—poor young fool—in which case I wonder _____’

The day dragged on.

Sylvia did not appear. Julius, who asked after her at lunch, was told she was in bed. This information that was given him by Greta, was accompanied by a flash from her usually cold eyes, very quick and gone in an instant, but he would have sworn it was pure hatred.

It was after dinner that Gervase announced his intention of going duck-shooting the following morning. Jerry, and Jack Langdon who had not put in an appearance till lunch-time, said they would go with him.

When it transpired that they would have to rise at three-thirty to get to Poole Harbour before daybreak, the rest of the party promptly told them they would never manage it, for, as Greta truthfully remarked, getting up did not seem to be their strong suit.

In the end bets were made by most of them on the subject, and the three departed for bed at a comparatively early hour, Gervase nursing a very

powerful alarm clock, borrowed from the cook.

It was three-forty-five the following morning when Gervase reached the hall. He was just taking his coat from a cupboard when he heard steps and saw Julius descending the stairs.

‘Hullo, you coming too?’

‘Coming where?’ Julius spoke impatiently. In the dim light he looked very pale.

‘Duck-shooting.’

‘No, I am not. If you want to slaughter some harmless thing, why don’t you go out and wring a chicken’s neck at some reasonable hour, instead of motoring miles in the middle of the night? That would at least be useful, and though I never liked butchers much——’ he made a curious gesture of repulsion with his supple, expressive hands.

‘Damn you.’ Gervase too was white now. ‘What do you want? Are you trying to pick a quarrel with me?’

‘No, not particularly.’ His voice had changed and become suddenly lifeless. ‘I’m—oh, nothing,’ and leaving Gervase staring after him, he went out through the front door. He was still standing staring when the silence was broken by the stutter of a motor-bicycle which died away into silence as Jerry and Jack came down the stairs.

They did not have a very successful morning. Greta’s parties were hardly the best preparation for duck-shooting. They breakfasted unsatisfactorily at a wayside inn and did not return to Clinton Manor till nearly ten o’clock. On the doorstep stood the village constable. He informed them briefly that Miss Swanson had been found dead in her bed that morning and had, without doubt, been smothered. He added that they were to go straight to the library and wait there, as the Inspector wanted a word with them.

CHAPTER II

AT six-thirty that same morning Alf Parsons was driving his lorry across Bagshot Heath.

He felt a pleasant glow of self-righteousness in being up so early, but, as he frequently remarked, he was a man who would put himself out for any one who ‘asked him civil’, and his employer being at the moment shorthanded, he had consented to make a great effort to get back to London early, from Andover where he had delivered a bath the day before.

He eyed the countryside with a certain austerity. In his attitude to nature Alf was pure eighteenth century. He would have thoroughly agreed with the gentleman who spoke of ‘a horrid Alp’, though he might have expressed himself differently. A cabbage plot met with his approval—he liked cabbage—or a flock of sheep—a good juicy chop was hard to beat, but nature in the raw left him cold, and struck him as needing a good deal of improvement.

He had been born and bred near the New Cut, and had every intention of dying there. The wide open spaces had no call for him. Still, it was a fine morning, the sun shone warmly, and somewhere a lark was singing, so Alf sang too, as the lorry jolted over the road at a somewhat reckless pace. He had a not untuneful voice and a varied repertoire. He had the world to himself except for a small rabbit sitting by the roadside a hundred yards ahead. It was a young doe, and, judging by rabbit standards, very comely, a fact that would have filled a conscientious eugenist with alarm, for the creature was practically half-witted.

Alf, having just finished a spirited rendering of ‘There ain’t no sense in sitting on the fence’, had begun somewhat surprisingly to whistle an aria from ‘The Magic Flute’, when he heard the sound of a motor-bicycle at his rear. In a moment it was past him, travelling fast, driven by a young man whose bare head blazed like new-minted copper in the morning sun.

It was this precise moment that the moronic rabbit elected to cross the road. The bicycle swerved, struck a stone, and the young man sailed over the handle-bars to arrive in a crumpled heap on the grass some yards farther on. The rabbit, totally unharmed, stopped dead, and abruptly returned whence it had come.

‘Strewth!’ ejaculated Alf, and pulled up with a savage grinding of brakes.

A moment later he was on his knees with the young man's head on his arm. He was very pale, but to Alf's surprise and relief, still breathing.

While Alf was still debating what was the best thing to do for him, his lids flickered, then his eyes opened, and he clutched at Alf's hand with a despairing grip.

For a little he stared, dazed, then he remarked, 'Gosh! I'm going to be sick.'

'Orl right, mate,' returned that practical, if phlegmatic philanthropist, Alf Parsons, 'I'll 'old your head.'

The young man swallowed, and spoke again. 'No, it's going off.' He shivered. 'Hold still a moment.' He shut his eyes and stayed quiet while Alf watched him somewhat anxiously. Presently he spoke again. 'I'm better now.'

'Move a bit and see if the're any bones broken. You didn't 'arf take a toss—all for a rabbit too—must be fond of them.'

'I'm not,' said the young man, tentatively moving arms and legs. 'I never have liked them—they've got silly faces. I swerved without thinking. I didn't like them even when I was a child.'

'I'm quite partial to a bit of rabbit with onion sauce.'

'No, I don't like them alive or dead,' was the firm answer. Here it appeared to strike him that to lie by the roadside, his head pillowed on the overall-clad shoulder of a total stranger discussing tastes in rabbits, was perhaps a little unconventional, for he sat up, detached his cold hand from Alf's warm one, and said, 'I seem to be all right. I arrived on my head, and that's hard.'

'It must be,' Alf agreed. 'You've cut your hand though.'

Julius surveyed the gash across the palm of his left hand. 'That's nothing.' He fished in his pocket, and produced a handkerchief which Alf took from him, noticing vaguely as he did so that it seemed extremely smooth and fine. It was indeed of the best quality linen lawn with a chaste border of blue and grey.

Alf twisted it round the hand and then said, 'It isn't long enough.'

Julius dragged up his pullover with his disengaged hand, showing an expensive silk but buttonless shirt secured by a large safety-pin.

Alf chuckled as he fastened the bandage. 'You're not married,' he deduced.

'Quite right, Sherlock. I take it you are.'

‘Yus.’ Perhaps it was the beauty of the morning, perhaps it was the shock he had just had, that caused a wave of sentiment to pass over Alf, for after a second’s pause, he gave vent to an ardent tribute to Mrs. Parsons, ‘And I wouldn’t say but what I might have done worse.’

‘Lucky man,’ remarked Julius, and struggled to his feet.

They walked together to the motor-bicycle. Julius surveyed the wreckage pensively and then gave it a tentative shake. ‘There’s a week’s work for three strong men on that,’ he summed up with truth. ‘Thank God, I’m insured.’

‘Where were you going—London?’

‘Yes, I was rather in a hurry too.’

‘I’ll take you and the bike. The lorry’s empty.’

‘Thanks awfully. Whatever should I have done if you hadn’t come along?’

The bicycle was hoisted into the lorry, and in a few more moments they were proceeding on their way.

Suddenly Julius gave an exclamation. ‘Got it.’

‘Wot?’

‘You know when you try and remember something and can’t even remember what it is you want to remember,’ was his not very lucid answer, but Alf nodded.

‘There was something at the back of my mind all the way up. Now I’ve remembered what it was, though where it comes from I can’t think.’ He gazed over the sunny countryside with unseeing eyes and quoted slowly, ‘“ . . . the image of a wicked heinous fault lives in his eye; that close aspect of his doth show the mood of a much troubled breast”, then something—something—“quoted and signed to do a deed of shame”. I haven’t got it quite right.’

‘That’s Shakespeare, that is,’ put in Alf promptly.

‘You’re sure?’

‘Yus. I’d take my oath I’ve heard it down at the Old Vic.’

‘But where does it come from?’

‘I can’t think. Say it again—properly like.’

Julius obeyed, and Alf closed his eyes in an effort of memory. The lorry swerved alarmingly. ‘Blast,’ observed Alf without heat, as a wrench of the wheel just saved them from the ditch.

‘I can find out when I get to town,’ said Julius hastily, ‘if you can’t remember with your eyes open. One smash before breakfast is about enough for me.’

Alf shook his head. ‘I can’t remember, but this much I can tell you. It’s a play they haven’t done very recent, and, what’s more, it isn’t said by any chief character. I’ve got a very good ear, I have, and if it had been said by any of the young fellows that I’ve heard frequent in any of the star parts, I should be able to hear him a-saying of it—d’ye see?’

‘I know.’ Then he continued with interest, ‘Talking of voices, whose do you——’

An exchange of opinions on the merits of various actors and productions lasted them for another two or three miles, when they fell silent while Alf negotiated a herd of cows.

Julius broke the silence by asking, ‘How long have you been married?’

‘Five years.’

‘Any children?’

‘Two. A boy going on for four, and the baby, a girl.’ A fatuous grin overspread his face, and he added, ‘A proper little madam she is—twists her dad round her finger, she do, and that forward for her age.’

‘Lucky man,’ said Julius once again.

‘Well,’ said Alf sensibly, ‘why don’t you get married yourself? There’s plenty of girls, God knows, and a nice spoken young fellow like you shouldn’t have no difficulty.’

‘I rather hope to be, but you see I want a particular girl and—oh, well, things are in rather a muddle.’

‘I hopes you will be lucky, and, cheer up, it’s a bit of spirit that wins, and, Lor’ bless you, when you’ve been married a year, you’ll laugh to think how you could have taken on so. You wait till you have your Missus ill—we had a few words when we were courting now and again and I was rare upset, but it ain’t nothing to like when she had pneumonia three years back.’

‘Some people mightn’t find it consoling to be told that there’s worse to come.’ Julius smiled a little. ‘But of course you’re quite right.’

Alf looked at him a trifle surprised. ‘I know I am, but I didn’t think you’d agree. I made sure you’d argue, and I thought it would do you no harm to get it off your chest.’

‘Perhaps I would a few weeks ago, but—she was very near death a little while ago, and—she’s not quite out of the wood yet. What I feel has become rather unimportant.’

‘I am sorry.’ There was genuine sympathy in Alf’s voice. He looked at Julius’s tired face, with its resolute jaw and the eyes that still seemed to hold some hint of cheerfulness in spite of their weariness. ‘You’ve got some pluck.’

‘I hope so.’

There was another silence, while a cross-roads complicated by a motorbus, a small boy on a bicycle, who was apparently blind and deaf, and an agitated dog were negotiated. Presently Alf began to sing again.

As they passed through a village, a policeman eyed them sourly. Julius noticed him. ‘He doesn’t approve of you,’ he said. ‘I suppose he thinks no one ought to sing so early in the morning.’

Alf threw him rather an anxious glance. He seemed to be paler than ever. ‘Quite sure you wasn’t more hurt than you thought?’ he inquired. ‘You don’t look up to much.’

‘I’m all right,’ Julius replied, and as he did so, wondered how many more people were going to put the same question to him. ‘I haven’t had any breakfast. Will you join me in some at Staines? We should be nearly there, and, I tell you what,’ he added wistfully, ‘I could do with a little drink, but I suppose that is impossible—these damned hours——’

A spirited critique of the licensing laws lasted them till Staines was reached.

On their arrival in London the bicycle was deposited in a garage not far from Waterloo Station, and then Julius said farewell to his new friend. ‘I do hope I see you again,’ he said; ‘if I may say so, there is something about your attitude of mind that is like mine. I think we should have a lot in common. Here’s my card, not that the address is of any use at present, as the house is shut up and the landlady away. I’ve got a cottage in the country, and I was going to stay there for the summer, but I’ve changed my mind. I shall go to an hotel or my club.’

‘Well, I usually drops into the Peal of Bells for a pint most evenings.’ He indicated it with his thumb at the corner of the road.

‘I’ll come down and see you one evening. Again thank you for the lift.’

‘It was a pleasure, I’m sure,’ Alf replied handsomely.

Julius went to Waterloo Station, where he had a bath and shaved. Then he made his way to the nearest Free Library, where he spent a good deal of time over Whittaker, and more than an hour in the composition of a letter which apparently caused him great trouble.

It was after one when he finally emerged.

He paused as though in doubt as to his next step, and then bought a paper off a man standing on the kerb as an excuse for asking the way to the nearest post office. Having got the information, he moved slowly down the street, looking at the paper as he went. He was not the least interested in racing, to which it was practically entirely devoted, but to read any form of print that happened to come under his eye was nearly as inevitable to him as breathing.

Suddenly he came to a full stop, and stood staring at the paper with startled and incredulous eyes.

Three times he read the short paragraph that stated that Miss Greta Swanson had been found dead in her bed, and that the cause of her death was alleged to be suffocation. Then he turned and walked thoughtfully over Hungerford Bridge to the Embankment, where he slowly shredded up the letter he had written and threw the pieces in the river.

For an hour he sat on one of the seats, his face tense with thought, occasionally making a note on the back of an envelope.

Finally he rose, and, muttering to himself, 'That's the best I can do,' made his way once again to Waterloo Station, where he removed his bag from the cloak-room.

It was on the south side of the river that he found an outfitter's, where he bought three modestly priced shirts and, with a shudder, two pairs of cotton pyjamas. A little farther on he bought a second-hand suit-case, and then with his booty he dived into a public lavatory. There he changed his shirt for one of the new ones, and ripped the Savile Row tailor's name out of his tweed coat.

Then he made his way by bus to the Strand, where he bought a pair of horn-rimmed sunglasses so slightly tinted as to look normal to the casual glance.

Then at a large tailor's he purchased for five pounds a neat blue serge suit which he took with him.

Another lavatory and another change, and as he emerged, with a little laugh which was very nearly hysteria, 'There won't be a lavatory I haven't visited at this rate. I'll be able to write a really modern novel.'

He pulled himself together, and went off to buy a bowler hat, which he put on in the shop.

His next visit was to the book-stall at the Temple Station, where he bought a large paper devoted almost entirely to women's fashions. He took a ticket to Charing Cross, and during the short journey perused his journal's advertisements with great care.

At Charing Cross he bought a block and envelopes, and walked up Northumberland Avenue to Trafalgar Street where, after another reference to his fashion paper, he wrote a few lines on a piece of paper, put it in an envelope, and, leaving the paper as a gift for one of the lions, took the Tube to Piccadilly Circus. There he left his bag in the cloak-room, and a few minutes later the 'Bond Street Beauty Parlour' was entered by a quiet young man who might have been a valet or a footman. He handed over his note with a 'I'll take the parcel, miss'.

He paid the bill for one bottle of 'Venus' hair dye, medium brown, and turned his steps once more towards Waterloo. He cautiously opened the parcel in the Tube, and managed to abstract the instructions which he read with a frowning face. It was this perusal which apparently made him go straight to the book-stall when he left the Tube. There he suddenly uttered a cry of pleasure, and remarked to the lad in charge, 'This has not been my lucky day so far, but a new P. G. Wodehouse is consolation for much.'

'Published this morning, sir,' said the boy.

'You haven't got Shakespeare, I suppose.'

'No, sir.' The boy appeared slightly stunned.

One more dash into the streets where, after some search, he discovered a small general shop where he bought a couple of face towels and a very small pie-dish, and finally back once more to the station bathrooms.

A grim time followed, and he read half his book while waiting for the stuff to dry, and the attendant, becoming alarmed, banged on the door to know if he was all right.

At last when his hair was dry, and the most stringent examination showed no tell-tale red at the roots, he proceeded to repack his two bags that had got somewhat muddled during his peregrinations.

Into his own he crammed, with considerable effort, his grey flannels, his tweed coat and pullover, together with his silk shirt and pyjamas.

For a moment he knelt dubious, with half a dozen of his fine lawn handkerchiefs in his hand, then, with an impatient shrug, he threw them into the new suit-case in which he had already crumpled his shirts and pyjamas. He added his shaving tackle, sponge, tooth-brush and brushes which were luckily of plain and unobtrusive ebony. Then he sallied forth. The attendant regarded him sourly, but he was not observant, and though he grumbled at the length of time he had been, he did not notice that the young man who had entered with a little red hair showing under his hat, had come out with brown.

His own suit-case deposited in the cloak-room under the name of Lavery, Julius, looking more inconspicuous than any one who knew him would have believed possible, made his way once more towards the Tube.

CHAPTER III

THE CHIEF CONSTABLE was in bed with a broken leg, and a chapter of minor accidents and illness had left him with a very depleted staff; this, coupled with the fact that most of the inmates of Clinton Manor were Londoners, of whom he knew nothing, made him decide as soon as he had a telephone report from the Inspector saying there was no sign that the house had been entered from without, to send for Scotland Yard.

He telephoned at once, and Detective Inspector Digby, accompanied by a Sergeant Brown, arrived about four o'clock.

The Inspector at once took him into the small morning-room, and proceeded to give him the bare outlines of the case. 'And a difficult one it is going to be,' he finished, 'for there is hardly a person in this house I would trust to speak the truth, not that I think they are lying exactly on purpose, but they are so rattled and muddled, and, if you ask me, I should say they have all such shady pasts—morally speaking, I mean, that one can't get a word of sense out of them. I've left them for you. My sergeant is a smart young fellow and he's taken notes.'

The young sergeant, Rogers, was presented to Digby, and the harassed Inspector took himself off, assuring Digby that all the usual inquiries as to suspicious characters and so on had been set on foot.

Digby turned to Rogers. 'I'd better see the room first. Have you got the doctor's report?'

'Dr. Smaile, her own physician, saw her first. He gave it as his opinion she had undoubtedly been smothered—with her pillow, he suggested—it was very crumpled. He added that in actual fact he thought she had died more from failure of the heart under the strain than actual suffocation. Our own doctor corroborates that. He rang up to say so, but they haven't done the complete P.M. yet. I have asked Dr. Smaile to come up and see you this evening.'

He led the way upstairs, turned to the left, and entered a room at the end of a long passage.

The furniture was old-fashioned, and it was obvious that Greta had not interfered with it, but her own extravagant belongings contrasted strangely with the solid Victorian mahogany.

Digby uttered an exclamation as he glanced round; a chair lay overturned by the dressing-table, a large powder-puff lay forlornly on the window-seat, clothes covered the sofa and floor.

‘Why, it looks as if there had been a struggle.’

‘I thought that too, sir, but I saw the girl who waits on her, the one that found the body, and she says it’s the usual way she found the room—her mistress wasn’t tidy—neither is she, I should say,’ he added with a sniff. ‘A decent girl would be ashamed to let a room she had charge of get into this state—there’s the dust of days here—if you ask me, a proper little——’ He recollected to whom he was speaking, and pulled himself up. ‘Not a very respectable or high class of maid if you ask me, sir—nor are the others from what I’ve seen of them. You wouldn’t think a real lady would have them in her house.’

While Rogers was speaking Digby had made a swift survey of the room, now he pointed to another door, and said, ‘What’s in there?’

‘Bathroom, sir.’ Rogers threw open the door, showing an up-to-date bathroom still fragrant with bath salts.

‘And that door?’ He pointed to one on the far side of the bathroom.

‘An empty bedroom.’

He opened the door, and showed a small, plainly furnished room. A strapped suit-case stood on a chair by the door, and the waste-paper basket had some crumpled newspaper in it.

‘Who’s in charge here? Have you interviewed anybody yet?’

Rogers shook his head. ‘We decided to leave that for you, sir, particularly as the young lady who can tell us most—a cousin of the deceased, was apparently ill all yesterday. I saw a Mr. Carter who was staying here. He was Miss Swanson’s trustee. He has wired to her lawyer. The Inspector gave orders that no one was to leave, and all the exits were watched.’

‘Anything else before I begin to interview them? I’d better get that over as soon as possible.’

‘Well, there’s this, but whether it’s of any value at all it’s impossible to say.’ He lifted a newspaper that covered a table, disclosing a crumpled man’s handkerchief and an ash-tray full of cigarette ends.

‘The handkerchief was found under her pillow,’ he said, ‘but whether there is anything in it or not, I don’t know. From what I’ve seen of this house it might well have been there for a week.’

Digby took it up. It was a man's handkerchief of crêpe de Chine, pale mauve, and marked in one corner J. Lane.

'A handkerchief is a thing anybody might borrow,' said Rogers slowly. 'But all the same sir, I don't think this is what one would call a pleasant case.'

Digby gave him a sharp look, but said nothing, and turned his attention to the ash-tray. 'Four gaspers, Gold Flake, I think, two stained with lipstick, and a half-smoked Balkan Sobranie.'

'Two have been smoked through a holder,' he remarked, 'but that doesn't tell us much. She may only use one occasionally or she may have mislaid it; and the Sobranie she may have taken by accident or out of courtesy—being half-smoked, it looks like that; again three separate people may have been in here. What about finger-prints?'

Rogers waved a hand round the room where most of the furniture bore traces of finger-print powder. 'There were hundreds. Most of the household must have been in here one time or another, and the furniture hasn't been, what I'd call cleaned, for years.'

'Well, I'll see the young lady now if she is well enough.'

He led the way out of the room and down to the morning-room, where, after a few minutes, Sylvia appeared. She was very pale and looked, Digby thought, very ill and certainly frightened. There was terror in the eyes that were so vividly blue under their dark lashes.

'This is a bad business, Miss Swanson, and I'll not trouble you more than I can help, but I'm afraid I must ask you a few questions.'

'Yes, of course.' She sat down, holding her hands to prevent their trembling.

She was obviously in such a pitiable state of nerves that Digby did not think anything could be learnt from her manner, and he was rather afraid of her breaking down so he said reassuringly, 'There's nothing to be afraid of. Won't you smoke if that would help you, or would you rather have a friend here with you?'

'No thank you, but I'll smoke.'

While she lit her cigarette Digby took a glance at Rogers's notes. Greta, he noticed, was a well-developed woman of five feet eight and muscular for all her slenderness, for Rogers had noted that considerable strength would have been necessary to hold the pillow down over her face. Sylvia was not more than five feet two and seemed slight and unmuscular. He turned to a hastily developed photograph of the body as he asked for her name and age.

It showed that Greta had been found lying near the wall, that meant that the murderer must have been fairly tall, or he could not have reached across the broad bed. That certainly seemed to let Sylvia out.

‘You are a cousin of Miss Swanson’s?’

‘Yes, my father was her father’s younger brother. He died ten years ago. Greta’s father made a great deal of money during the war.’

‘And he died——?’

‘Six years ago when Greta was nearly nineteen.’

‘And so she became her own mistress?’

‘Yes. My mother stayed with her for a bit. I was at school.’

‘She lived in town, I understand?’

‘Uncle bought this place just after the war, but Greta never liked it. She only came down here this summer because the lease of her flat was up and she can’t have her new one till September—and she said it might be amusing here.’

‘You’ve been with her some time?’

‘I’ve practically lived with her since I left school.’

‘I see. Now can you tell me if she had any enemies—quarrels, anything of the sort?’

‘No.’ The answer did not seem to come with the candour of her previous ones, but she continued more easily, ‘It is beyond me to imagine any one murdering her—if it had been suicide——’

‘Well? She had been depressed—frightened?’

‘Not frightened, but very nervous—very strung up, but I dare say it was nothing. She had been overdoing things, as she always did.’

‘She was engaged to be married?’

‘Yes, to Lord Mercia.’

‘It was a happy engagement?’

Sylvia shrugged. ‘I suppose so. I don’t think his grandfather was very pleased though.’

‘Had he said anything?’

‘Not so far as I know, but one could feel it.’

‘Now, about Monday?’

‘I really know nothing about it. I got up early and went out to bathe, and I must have got a chill or something, for I felt very ill when I came back, and went to bed and stayed there.’

‘Didn’t you see any one—your cousin for instance?’

‘No. I was feverish and sleepy. I saw no one but the maid who brought up my meals.’

‘When did you first hear—what had happened?’

‘Lady Dallas came and told me about nine o’clock this morning.’

‘Thank you. I won’t keep you any longer now. I wonder if you would ask Mr. Carter to be good enough to come and see me.’

She rose and went towards the door. She looked very helpless and forlorn, and was, after all, a mere child—only nineteen. Digby spoke on impulse. ‘There ought to be some one here to take charge of things—have you wired for your mother?’

Sylvia turned swiftly, and if her eyes had been frightened before, they held stark terror now.

‘Not yet—I must, of course—she’s on the Riviera——’

She stopped, twisting her hands together.

‘What is it?’ Digby asked gently. ‘You know that nothing you say to me will go further unless it is necessary, don’t you?’

Her face lightened a little, but she said nothing for a minute. Then she burst out, ‘It’s going to be dreadful. Mother doesn’t understand a bit. She’s always lived very quietly, although you wouldn’t think it to hear her talk. She reads things like the *Sketch* and the *Tatler*, and thinks how nice it would be to lead that sort of life, and so she was glad when I came to Greta—her photo was often in the papers, you know—but it isn’t a bit like she thinks, and she’s really awfully old-fashioned; she’d be horrified if she knew that we drink as much as we do and other things.’

Digby faced her gravely. ‘I understand,’ he said quietly.

When she had left the room, Digby said to Brown who had been taking shorthand notes, ‘We shall have trouble with the Press over this case before we are through—it looks to me as if it had all the elements of a really popular scandal. What did you make of her?’

‘Very upset and no wonder; scared, too, but I should say she’s more scared of her mother than us.’

Digby nodded. ‘I should like to know just what has been going on in this house—she knows, of course, but I can get it more suitably from some one else.’

There was a knock at the door, and Carter entered. After the usual questions Digby said, ‘I understand you were Miss Swanson’s trustee—could you give me a few particulars of her financial affairs?’

‘Her father left about four thousand a year and this house. It is held in trust for her, and after her Miss Sylvia. Her lawyer is the other trustee.’

‘Had she the power of disposing of anything?’

‘None at all. In fact very much the other way. She was very extravagant, and about two years ago got into considerable difficulties. I should say since then she would not have found it very easy to lay her hands on even fifty pounds suddenly. This house takes a good deal of keeping up, there are the taxes, and she was saddled till this summer with a far too expensive flat in town.’

‘She had never said anything to you that suggested she went in fear or anything of that sort?’

‘Never.’

‘There is nothing that happened during the week-end that struck you in any way out of the ordinary?’

‘Of course the earl was here. Greta didn’t fly quite as high as that as a rule—and, this is only a vague impression, mind—I don’t think any one was in very good spirits—a sort of atmosphere, if you know what I mean—not like Greta’s parties usually were.’

‘Thank you. I take it you know most of the guests?’

‘Pretty well.’

‘Perhaps I could have another talk with you when I have seen them all. I think I will see the cook now. I can get the domestic arrangements from her without troubling Miss Sylvia. By the way, you might just tell me how many people are staying in the house.’

‘Ten.’

‘Good God!’ Digby murmured to himself.

‘A shrewd man,’ he reflected, as Carter left the room, ‘but unpleasant. His eyes were cold and too close together, the pouches under them suggested self-indulgence, and the mouth was both sensual and cruel.’

A heavy step was heard outside, and there was a knock on the door.

‘Come in,’ Digby called, and the cook entered. She was a stout, elderly woman with a red face, so like the usual cook of the comic papers that Digby almost smiled. Her face was blotched as though with tears, and there stole on the air a faint aroma of gin.

‘I understand you are the cook-housekeeper. I should be glad if you would give me a little help.’

Cook was voluble. She burst into lamentations on the horror of the business. Digby let her go on for a little and then pulled her up by asking,

‘When did Miss Swanson come down here?’

‘About four months ago—the beginning of April.’

‘You had been here some time before that?’

‘Yes, as caretaker.’

‘I understand you are in charge of all the domestic arrangements. How many maids have you under you?’

Cook had recovered from her first disturbance; she found this young man quite friendly and not at all forbidding. Digby looked younger than his forty years, and his voice was always quiet, unlike cook’s preconceived ideas of detectives gleaned from the movies, also the last nip of gin she had taken to nerve herself for the interview was beginning to take effect. A genial smile overspread her face. ‘Maids! Lor’ love you. Five little bitches is what I’ve got to help me.’

Digby was slightly taken aback. ‘Ah, yes, I understand it is difficult nowadays——’

‘Not that I care,’ pursued cook, ‘make ’ay while the sun shines is what I say; anyway, what with the goings on in this house and one thing and another—well, like mistress like maid, but lor’ we’re only young once.’

Here cook relapsed into maudlin tears, and Digby dismissed her with something very like despair.

‘What a household,’ he reflected, though at the moment it was less their morals that were afflicting him than their terrible vagueness. He decided to try the five little bitches. The first to appear was Elsie Parker, and he could not help feeling as he took in her too short skirts, her bright pink stockings, her make-up, and the flounce with which she entered, that cook had not been far out in her summing up.

Elsie had entered with a flounce, but, on catching sight of Digby, her manner changed. He was youngish, not bad-looking, she decided, so she smiled and settled herself in her chair with a fine display of plump knees.

‘I understand you found Miss Swanson this morning?’

Elsie nodded and shivered a little. She had pretty well recovered from the shock she had had that morning, but it was not pleasant to think about.

‘What time was that?’

‘Half-past eight.’

‘Was that the usual time?’

‘Good gracious no, but she said she was going into Bournemouth.’

‘You acted as lady’s maid?’

She nodded.

‘Tell me, had you any reason to suspect that Miss Swanson was frightened or upset in any way?’

‘Not frightened, but she was what you might call upset—she had a temper.’

‘Yes?’ Digby encouraged her.

‘It was Sunday afternoon. I was just going out when I remembered I hadn’t done nothing to her bathroom, so I ran in to give a look round. I was there a few minutes straightening things up, and I could hear her and Miss Sylvia in her bedroom—having a fair old row, they was.’

‘What about?’

‘I couldn’t hear,’ was the regretful answer. ‘I think Miss Sylvia was crying, though I can’t be sure—I couldn’t hardly hear her voice at all, but I could hear Miss Greta—fair storming, she was.’

‘I see.’ Digby looked thoughtful. ‘Now, do you help her to get ready for bed? Did you last night?’

‘Sometimes I do if she’s not too late. I did last night. She was very quiet—didn’t talk at all, but kept smiling to herself. I tell you,’ added Elsie in a sudden burst, ‘it half frightened me—a sort of malicious little smile—I thought to myself, “You’ve got it in for somebody, and I wouldn’t like to be them”.’

‘Did you think it was Miss Sylvia?’

Elsie shook her head. ‘I shouldn’t hardly think so—she’s a poor-spirited little thing, and these last few months she’s gone round so dull and quiet. Of course they say she was in love with that young officer who was killed flying a few months ago. I can’t say I ever noticed anything much myself—he used to come over here a bit same as the others——’

‘What time did you go to bed?’ Digby interrupted.

‘About half-past eleven it was when I left Miss Greta. I went straight up then.’

‘Had the rest of the party come up?’

‘There was a light under Mr. Lane’s door, and I met Mr. Oliphant at the end of the passage—don’t know about the others—oh, yes, either his lordship or the young lord must have been up, because I heard the water running in the bathroom that’s between their bedrooms on the front landing.’

‘You can tell me where every one sleeps, can’t you?’

‘Mr. Lane had the little room next door to Miss Greta’s bathroom, Mr. Oliphant the room opposite, and Miss Hanbury next door. Mr. Soames had

the room next to Mr. Lane. The earl and his young lordship had the two front rooms, and in the other wing there is Miss Sylvia at the end, Miss Brown and Lady Dallas in front, and Mr. Langdon and Mr. Carter at the back.'

'Thank you.' Digby was looking down at the rough plan Rogers had drawn of the upper landing. 'You say Mr. Lane is sleeping next to Miss Swanson's bathroom—do you mean the little room that opens out of it? It didn't look occupied when I saw it.'

Elsie looked puzzled. 'That's the room. I didn't know that any of the rooms had been done to-day, everything being so upset; but he was only here for the week-end—came over on his motor-bike, and didn't have much luggage with him.'

'I see. One thing more. You told Rogers that there was nothing missing as far as you could tell. You are sure of that? I mean that Miss Swanson had no jewel-case or box she kept locked?'

'No. She didn't care for jewellery much. Her engagement ring was on her hand, so he told me, and her diamond brooch on the table. I told him that he would find some more strings of beads and some of that new fancy jewellery in her drawer, and he said it was all right.'

'Who sees to the locking up of the house?'

'I don't know. The last one of us in locks the back door. I suppose Miss Greta saw to the front.'

Digby dismissed her, and after a few minutes' thought, sent for Lord Mercia.

He was a tall, fair young man, with very little intelligence, Digby decided, and obviously very upset. From him he learnt very little. He had been engaged to Greta for just over a fortnight, and they had had no quarrel or anything approaching one. He had gone up to bed about midnight the night before, and had slept soundly till his grandfather had wakened him to tell him the terrible news. He did let out that his grandfather had not approved of the engagement, but did not seem unduly worried by the fact.

When he had gone Digby decided to interview the two girls and Lady Dallas, and leave the others till later in the evening. He would have another interview with Lord Mercia later—he had just wanted to have a look at him.

At that moment there came a knock on the door, and a young man entered.

CHAPTER IV

DIGBY would have been rather interested if he could have heard the conversation that had been taking place in the library, which would have enlightened him considerably though it threw no light on the main problem.

Carter, Gervase Oliphant, Lady Dallas, the two girls and the two officers had been in the library most of the day. They had not shown much pleasure in each other's company, but they had all appeared to suffer from an extraordinary reluctance to be alone. It was just before Digby arrived that Carter said, 'Look here, I want to speak to you seriously. This thing has got to be faced. As to the murder, I suppose it was a burglar, and I dare say the police will catch him, but that's not the point. What I'm thinking of is the Press and ourselves. That's where we need to be careful.'

'What do you mean?' Jerry demanded.

'He means there will be headlines, "Orgies in country house", if we aren't careful. You know what they can make of the least thing,' Olga explained dryly.

'I don't quite know what you mean by orgy or "the least thing", but they'll be about right.' Fay Dallas spoke bitterly.

'I quite agree with Carter,' Gervase broke in. 'We must think of ourselves; it isn't as if anything we could do would help poor Greta. Put that down, you fool, you'll need all your wits, and you're half drunk already.'

Jack started, and dropped the stopper of the decanter with a crash.

'I've noticed you've kept at it pretty steadily,' he snapped.

'I can stand it. Now what we *must* do is to give the impression that this was a perfectly simple respectable week-end party.'

'It's not going to be easy,' Olga demurred. 'There are the servants to be thought of, and we don't know what Sylvia may have said.'

'She'll keep quiet for her own sake,' Carter put in. 'And, anyway, I shouldn't think any one will pay much attention to her—a young girl very upset and probably hysterical.'

'There's Lord Sands,' Gervase said thoughtfully. 'He's not likely to give us much help.'

'I don't know,' said Olga, 'after all, he was only here three nights, and he went to bed before things hotted up.'

‘He’s very observant. I noticed that.’ Phil suddenly joined in. She was a tall girl with red hair and a beautiful, sullen mouth.

‘But remember Greta was engaged to Mercia,’ Jerry contributed.

‘I don’t believe it will be the least good,’ said Fay drearily. ‘The papers get hold of everything. This is my last chance gone. Reggie’s uncle was furious when he married me, but he had begun to come round a bit. This will tear it.’

‘But, look here,’ cried Jerry, ‘aren’t we making a fuss about nothing? We had a cheery week-end, I admit, but what does it amount to? We were all a bit screwed when we went to bed, but we can deny that, and there’s nothing else’—he grinned suddenly, and added—‘that any one can get hold of, I mean.’

‘Oh, isn’t there?’ Olga murmured.

‘What about young Lane?’ Carter asked suddenly. ‘He seemed to be going out of his way to make himself unpleasant, and he writes—sure to have a nasty mind——’

‘Thanks,’ Olga interposed dryly. ‘By the way, where is he? I haven’t seen him all day.’

‘He’s with Sylvia, I expect,’ Jack answered. ‘She’s the only person he hasn’t been rude to.’

‘I haven’t seen him since early this morning,’ said Gervase. ‘He went off on his bike; he was in a foul temper——’ He paused abruptly. ‘I wonder _____,’

‘What?’ Olga asked.

‘Oh, nothing, but don’t you think he should be found? It would be as well if we decided what we are going to say, and he should be here.’

Jerry volunteered to fetch him, and left the room accompanied by Jack.

When he had gone, Olga said slowly, ‘This is entirely altruistic on my part, because after the fiasco of my book and what not, nothing can hurt my reputation, but some of you still have something to lose. I take it we all keep quiet about cocktails, poker——’

‘Certainly.’ Carter and Gervase spoke together, and Carter shot him a sardonic glance as he did so.

‘There’s something else though,’ Olga continued still more slowly. ‘What about Greta? We were friends—don’t think I’m running her down—you know I believe that every one should be free to lead their own lives as they like, and, anyway, I’m in no position to throw stones——’

Gervase's brows drew together in a sudden frown. 'What are you getting at, Olga?'

'Didn't you know?' she asked gently.

Phil suddenly spoke. 'She only means that Greta was what the Victorians called of "easy virtue"—as we seem to have got so very refined all of a sudden. Virtue! My God, she didn't know the meaning of the word.'

'Phil!' Olga expostulated.

'Well, it's true. You're always talking of the necessity of facing facts, and this is a fact. I think myself it's rather an unpleasant one, but what I think doesn't matter.'

Gervase hesitated, and then said, 'Look here, you oughtn't to say things like that.'

'It was true, Gervase,' Olga said quietly.

'That doesn't make any difference. Hang it all, there is a limit.'

'Oh, you're old-fashioned,' gibed Phil, 'honour rooted in dishonour and all the rest of it.'

'Phil, what on earth is the matter with you?' Olga cried impatiently.

'Oh, nerves all to pieces. Sorry. Give me a drink, some one.'

'All the same,' Olga continued, 'Phil is right. It's all your good names. I've made one Roman Holiday for the Press and the great British Public, and I assure you it's not pleasant—there's Greta too. We were her friends, and it's up to us to do what we can for her. I think it will be all right if they don't start asking questions outside us—if you see what I mean. We can hold our tongues. There's one thing I'm afraid of though, and that's letters.'

'She never kept any. She told me that once,' Gervase volunteered.

'Supposing one comes to-night or to-morrow,' suggested Phil.

'Really,' Gervase spoke hotly, 'you are impossible—she was engaged to Mercia.'

'And you think that would stop Greta?'

Olga was watching Gervase, and she saw a sudden odd expression cross his face. She could hardly say what it was—anger? fear? disgust?

A vague thought that had crossed her mind sometime before returned to her, and she said, 'I haven't the least idea who the last man was. Gervase, do you know?'

'Me? Of course not,' came the prompt denial.

'I suppose you would have to say that, anyway——' she was beginning, when the door burst open and Jack and Jerry came hastily into the room.

‘We can’t find Julius anywhere,’ said Jerry. ‘His bike isn’t in the garage, and no one has seen him all day.’

There was a dead silence while they all looked at each other.

Jack suddenly shivered, and helped himself to whisky with hands that shook.

‘Where can he be?’ Olga asked. ‘He didn’t say anything about going yesterday.’

‘Perhaps he had an accident,’ suggested Fay.

‘I say,’ Jerry began slowly, ‘it was somebody from outside of course—a burglar or something.’

There was another silence which was broken by Fay, ‘Oh, don’t suggest such horrible things. Of course it was.’

Carter spoke firmly. ‘The police must know at once. They’ll blame us for not having let them know before. You had better tell them, Gervase, you seem to have been the last person who saw him.’

‘Oh, I can’t—it seems——’

‘You must. Get along now.’

‘Very well then.’ He rose and left the room with obvious reluctance.

CHAPTER V

DIGBY glanced up quickly and saw a tall, athletic young man, fair and good-looking, who was obviously nervous or embarrassed.

‘I say,’ he began abruptly, ‘Lane is nowhere to be found, and Carter said I had better come and tell you as I seem to have been one of the last to see him.’

‘Yes,’ said Digby patiently. ‘Suppose you begin at the beginning. Your name?’

‘Gervase Oliphant.’

‘Business?’

‘I’m in the Central Bank. Got some private means though.’

‘Well, tell me your story in your own way.’

‘I’ve been down here for about a week. I’ve known Miss Swanson for some time, and she asked me to spend my holidays here. There was only herself, Miss Sylvia and myself during the early part of the week—some other guests had left on Monday. On Friday the rest arrived.’

‘You may as well tell me who they are. I’ve seen Mr. Carter and Lord Mercia.’

‘Oh, Lord Sands didn’t arrive till Saturday, I forgot that. Mr. Carter, Miss Brown and Miss Hanbury came down from town; Lady Dallas came over from Bournemouth where she had been staying, and Lane came over on his bike—he’d been here the week-end before—he has a cottage by the sea—Studland, I think—but I’m not quite sure.’

‘What does he do?’

‘Writes.’

‘Julius Lane?’

Gervase nodded.

‘H’m.’ Digby looked thoughtful.

‘We did the usual things, played tennis and so on. Oh, I forgot—Mr. Soames and Mr. Langdon, they’re subalterns stationed at Farnborough. They motored over on the Friday evening.’

‘Nothing unusual happened during the week-end?’

‘No. On Monday evening Soames and Langdon and I decided to go duck-shooting the next morning. I called them soon after half-past three, got

dressed and went downstairs. In about a minute Lane came down. I asked him if he was coming with us. He said no, and that he hated shooting.'

'Did he say where he was going?'

'No.'

'Didn't you ask him?'

'No.'

'Didn't it strike you as strange—surely it was rather an unusual hour to get up?'

Gervase fidgeted nervously and then said, 'He wasn't in a very good temper—and—well, these writers do weird things, and I knew he hadn't been sleeping well. Then the others came down and I didn't think any more about him.'

'Was he carrying a bag or anything of the sort?'

'I don't know—oh, he had a Burberry over his arm—he might have had a small bag—the light wasn't any too good. When we came back we were told of Miss Swanson's death, and I never thought of him again till just now.'

'Can you give me a description of him?'

'He's got red hair, rather curly, very pale—or at least he was then—he paused abruptly—'but that may have been the light. Anyway, he's pale naturally, and I didn't think he was looking too well when he arrived. He's about five-ten, slim, small hands and feet.'

'Eyes?'

'Brown. Some people think him very good-looking—he is, of course, but I don't admire the Jewish type myself—not that it was very noticeable.'

'Thank you.'

Digby made a sign to Brown who left the room. He returned in a minute, and nodded, and Digby knew that a message was being sent which would, he hoped, speedily produce Mr. Julius Lane.

'I suppose you know nothing that would throw any light on this affair?'

'Nothing more. We all thought it must be burglars.'

'There's nothing missing as far as we know.'

'But he might have been scared by what he's done—if he'd gone to her room first and bolted.'

'You heard no noise during the night?'

'None at all.'

'How did you wake up so early—by will-power?'

‘I had an alarm clock.’

‘Thank you, that will be all now. Will you tell the other gentlemen that I’ll see them after dinner—and I won’t trouble the other ladies till tomorrow, unless they would rather see me now and get it over. This must have been a very trying day for all of you.’

‘Have you any ideas—any clues?’

‘It’s too early to speak of that yet.’

Gervase departed with a sigh of relief, and Digby rang the bell. It was answered by one of the five—not Elsie, and of her he demanded who took in the post in the mornings.

‘I do.’

‘Were there any letters for Miss Swanson—if so, what did you do with them?’

‘Lor!’ The girl’s eyes grew round. ‘Whatever did I do with them—I had them in my hand when Elsie came running downstairs to say she couldn’t wake Miss Swanson——’

‘Yes?’ Digby interrupted. ‘What did you do with them?’

‘I don’t know, I was that upset—I’ll think in a minute—there were two others as well—not stamped—on the hall table—I remember thinking at the time that perhaps the gentlemen who had gone shooting might have left them to say they’d be late or something.’

‘Try and think,’ was the patient answer. ‘Did you lay them down in the hall—I don’t think so or they would have been found by the Inspector and given to me. Perhaps they are in the kitchen, or did you slip them into the pocket of your apron? You had better go and look.’

At this moment the door opened, and Rogers, who had been receiving the reports and relieving the men posted about the grounds, came in. Him Digby dispatched with the maid to look for the missing letters, and turned to look at the reports Rogers handed to him. They stated that nothing had been heard of any suspicious character in the neighbourhood—nobody unaccounted for had left by any of the early trains. That there were no signs of any attempt to enter the house from outside, and that though it had rained heavily from about eleven to one, there were no signs of foot-prints on any window-sill or verandah, nor were there any, as Digby had noticed for himself, on the light carpet in Greta’s room.

He had barely finished the reports when Rogers returned with the missing letters, that had eventually been discovered in a cracked soup-tureen on the kitchen dresser.

There were not very many, four for Greta, bills and circulars, and one unstamped note, another note for Sylvia, two for the earl.

Digby ripped open the note for Greta which ran:

‘DEAR GRETA,—I’m off to town. I’ve just thought of something that I must attend to there. I suppose you are frightfully annoyed with me—“Hell hath, etc.”—though I know well enough that aspect of the matter doesn’t come in, but I did spoil your little plan—or didn’t I? I hope I did, because it was a dangerous one. Seriously I mean it. There is such a thing as driving a man to desperation, and even in these degenerate days a man *may* see red—especially when he isn’t particularly sober—so do be more sensible; or is that by any wild chance what you want—if so, don’t you think it is a bit hard on him? Anyway, you are and always have been a mystery to me. I suppose it is impertinence to say that I am desperately sorry for you, but I am.

‘Yours,
‘JULIUS.’

Digby read through this cryptic epistle twice, and then handed it to Rogers who, having read it, remarked frankly, ‘It seems pure nonsense to me, and yet— There are no sentences even—“Hell hath——?”’

‘“Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,”’ amended Digby. ‘I shall be very glad to meet Mr. Julius Lane and hear his explanation of the events of last night. He certainly knew a good deal, and it would seem even had some idea or fear of what did occur.’

‘You know the news was in the midday editions,’ said Rogers slowly. ‘Don’t you think it is rather funny that he has not wired or rung up, or something of the sort?’

‘We won’t consider that till we have heard what explanation he has to offer for his proceedings. Brown, will you ask Miss Sylvia to come here for a minute?—I want her to open this note.’

When Sylvia came Digby handed her the note. She read it and gave it him without a word. It too, was very short, and ran, without any beginning:

‘I’m going up to town because I have a very excellent plan. You know you said this morning you wanted to find something to do—it is to do with that. It is really a good idea I’ve got hold of, and I think it will cover everything you want—which, my dear, I think I know as well as you do. I’ll write you to-night; in the meantime—do believe me—things are going to be all right, and

no more bathing or anything of that sort. I hate leaving you because I think it good for you to have some one you can talk to—but it can't be helped. You said you were a coward, but I expect you have realized by now that you have a courage that leaves me simply awed—and after all, that's the thing that really matters.'

While she had been reading it she had flushed and then gone pale again. Digby, watching out of the corner of his eye, had seen her look puzzled, then frightened—then for one moment he had seen her head go up, and for one second had caught a glimpse of the girl she should have been if it had not been for something that seemed to have nearly—but not quite—crushed her.

'Would you mind explaining this?' he asked. 'It does not seem very clear to me.'

'It's a perfectly private matter, and can have nothing to do with——'

'That may be, but the thing is Mr. Lane is not here, and the sooner I can get at the motives and actions of every one in the house, the sooner the whole business will be cleared up.'

'Very well,' she spoke listlessly again, 'it's nothing. Yesterday morning I happened to say to Mr. Lane that I wanted to get some work to do. It is quite time I started to do something. He was enthusiastic—he believes in everybody working—idlers bore him. I've no idea what his plan is.'

'And the last part?'

'That's—oh, well, it's nothing much either. About six months ago I met a man—I got fond of him, and then he was killed in an aeroplane accident. Mr. Lane knew about it—he guessed—and I suppose he thinks I've, as they say, "taken it well".'

'And the bathing—had there been an accident?'

'No, I got a chill as I told you.'

There was something defiant in her voice now, and Digby thought to himself, 'I wonder how much of this is true—if any; it's certainly not the whole truth by any manner of means.' Aloud he merely said, 'Thank you. What time do you dine?'

'Eight.'

'It's half-past seven now. Do you think I could just see Lady Dallas and the other two young ladies before dinner—as they would rather see me to-day?'

Sylvia nodded, and left the room.

A minute later Fay Dallas appeared, nervous and ill at ease. She answered his first questions almost mechanically. Then he said, 'Can you

tell me something about Miss Swanson? You have known her for some time, and a woman is so much better a judge of another woman than a man.'

'I don't know that I can tell you much. She was very pretty—you might call her beautiful—well off, gay and so on.'

'She was happy in her engagement?'

'It was a very good match.'

'She cared for Lord Mercia?'

There was something faintly incredulous in his voice, and Fay bit back what would have been an acquiescence. She was doing her best to carry out their plan, but there was no need to be ridiculous—a vision of Mercia's fatuous face rose before her, and she smiled faintly.

'She wasn't what you would call passionately in love with him, but she liked him.' That Fay felt was true, no one could dislike such a nonentity. 'And she liked the idea of being a countess——' She broke off to cough.

'No jealous rivals or anything of that sort?'

'Not that I know of. Of course plenty of men have been in love with her. Oh'—Fay paused, her eyes widening—'do you mean that it wasn't a burglar?'

Digby paused and then said, 'There is that possibility, but I think it is rather an unlikely one. It is only fair to tell you this, as I'm afraid till the matter is cleared up everybody'—he emphasized the word—'everybody who was under this roof last night is suspect to a certain extent.'

'But that's ridiculous—there's no one who could have possibly——'

'Nevertheless the fact remains. Miss Swanson was murdered. Murderers are not a class apart, Lady Dallas. I should say there are very few people who have not felt the impulse to murder once at least in their lives. But you know of no one who had any reason to feel himself injured by Miss Swanson?'

Fay shook her head.

'Now for your own movements. The whole party dined together, I understand, with the exception of Miss Sylvia, who was in bed. Did they all seem as usual? Nothing out of the way? Please think carefully—the smallest thing may be of importance.'

'It had been very hot,' Fay answered slowly, 'and I think we had all felt the heat. Every one was a little languid—and—perhaps a little irritable. Harmless discussions showed a slight tendency to become a little quarrelsome—Greta seemed quite herself though—in fact she looked unusually well and—pleased with herself.'

‘Everybody ate their dinner with good appetites?’

‘Nobody did. It was too hot. Mr. Lane, I remember, ate nothing or hardly anything, and I remember Greta chaffing Mr. Oliphant about his lack of appetite, and he pointed out that no one seemed hungry.’

‘And afterwards?’

‘We sat and talked for a bit. Then I played bridge with Mr. Carter, Lord Sands and Miss Brown till about eleven, when they started talking about duck-shooting; we joined in for a little, and then they all went up to bed except Miss Brown, Mr. Carter and myself. He and I played picquet for a little, and Miss Brown watched us as she wanted to learn the game. Then she went up to bed, and we followed shortly after—that would have been about half-past twelve. I went to bed, and the next thing I knew was when Mr. Carter knocked at my door to tell me that Miss Swanson had been found dead in her bed, and to ask me to tell Sylvia.’

‘You heard no sound in the night?’

‘No. My room is in the other wing, you know.’

‘Thank you.’

Fay departed, and left Digby feeling rather exasperated and depressed. It was not that he exactly suspected her of lying, but he was conscious of the fact that no one he had interviewed so far, with the possible exception of the cook, had answered with genuine frankness. He was beginning to suspect the reason, and he saw that it was going to add to his difficulties. For himself, their morals were no concern of his, but to a certain extent he saw their point—they certainly did not want their frailties dragged to the light of day. He could hardly, with honesty, assure them that nothing would come out—he could not yet say what would be necessary, and there was a very great fear that in keeping their own secrets, they would suppress evidence of vital importance.

Olga Brown arrived next. She gave her name, and added flippantly, ‘known to the police’.

‘What?’ Digby was a little startled.

‘A book of mine was suppressed a few years ago—during the process I saw a good deal of the police.’

‘I see.’ Digby checked a desire to ask what the book was. Literature was his hobby, he being a lonely man, and his reading was astoundingly wide and varied. He would find out later easily enough, and he must not let himself be drawn into a discussion on a side issue. He glanced at his notes.

‘You played bridge all yesterday evening, I understand, and went up to bed soon after twelve?’

‘Yes, that is quite correct.’

He asked all the questions that he had put before so many times, and received the most circumspect answers. Olga, he decided, had ten times the brains of Fay, and he felt she might, if she had cared to do so, have given him some useful information. She was observant—and that banned book of hers—it was coming back to him now—he had thought at the time that what had caught the eye of a prudish newspaper editor was not so much the intrinsic immorality—it was not immoral—but a somewhat devastating outspokenness—a literal reproduction of facts, that, while possibly injudicious in a novelist, would be of great use to a detective.

However, no amount of questions got anything but the same non-committal answers, and he was compelled to let her go, feeling that she could have told him a good deal more if she liked, but also that she knew nothing of the murder. She was followed by Phil, and at the sight of her mouth and hair Digby felt more optimistic. She did not look as if discretion played any very great part in her make-up, and if she lost her temper—if he was any judge, with that mouth it was a frequent occurrence with her——

He started his questions more briskly. It was obvious to him that Phil was labouring under some excitement, and was also irresolute about something; she spoke jerkily, corrected herself, and began sentences that she left unfinished.

Presently he said weightily, ‘Now I want you to think carefully and tell me if you noticed anything in the least unusual during the week-end. Don’t trouble if it seems to have no connection—I know murder must seem so strange——’

‘It doesn’t,’ she broke in. ‘I’m only surprised that it didn’t happen before.’

‘What do you mean by that?’

Phil, who had spoken rashly, paused. Then she shrugged her shoulders. ‘Oh, well, you may as well have it. They all said as Greta was dead, we must be careful what we said, but I never could hold my tongue.’ She seemed rather proud of the fact. ‘Greta simply asked for it. She could not let any man alone, and she didn’t know the meaning of being faithful.’ She paused and looked at him defiantly.

‘Go on. Are you suggesting that jealousy was the cause?’

‘Not exactly. Partly that, I should think, but chiefly that she liked to make people desperate—it—amused her. Of course poor Binks can’t see

what's under his nose, or I don't think he could have borne the way she looked and spoke to other men, but he'd have seen it in time, and then he'd have been as unhappy as the rest, but I don't suppose he'd have found out till after they were married—she had a kind of awful fascination for men. Even when they didn't like her, they used to lose their heads about her, and she—she's never cared for any one or anything in her life. She loathed all the things that most people like—dogs and children, for instance. I have known her for some time, but it was only lately that I have begun to see what she was really like——'

'Tell me,' Digby broke in, 'were any of the men here, with the exception of Lord Mercia, in love with her?'

'I know Jack Langdon wasn't,' she answered hastily—too hastily, 'because he happens to be in love with me; for the others, I don't know—I don't think so because they've all known her for some time, and I should think they would have got over it by this time—men do get over things pretty quickly,' she finished with half-unconscious cynicism.

'Thank you. I won't keep you any longer now.'

She went, and after a short interval, one of the five brought them an untidily served meal. Rogers came in with her.

'I'll get down to the station now, sir, and bring the doctors up about nine if that will suit you.'

'Quite well. I hope I shall have some facts for us to go on by then.'

He and Brown ate their meal in deep and thoughtful silence.

CHAPTER VI

AT about the same time that Digby was beginning his interrogations, Julius emerged from Balham Underground Station. A tram clattered by, followed by a bus. He cast a glance about him. To one side stretched a street lined with shops, fairly quiet in the heat of this August afternoon. The other way under the bridge, the road was flanked by private houses standing back from the road on the one side and a row of new shops on the other. It was in that direction he turned. He came to a church and paused outside, drinking in its curious architecture, and reading the notices on a board by the gate that gave entrance to an asphalt yard. With a slight shudder he turned away and went on for about half a mile. A side road caught his eye—‘St. Martin’s Road.’ ‘That’s more what I want,’ he murmured to himself, and turned down it. There were gardens on each side of him and the trees made a pleasant shade. The road curved slightly, and over the trees he could see what looked like a church spire. He quickened his lagging steps, and then his heart fell as he saw straight ahead of him the red doors of a fire station, and his church tower appeared to be inextricably mingled with them. He rounded the curve and gave a sigh of relief. To his left stood a small church with the road curving round it.

As he approached the gate the bell began to ring. ‘Evensong,’ he murmured. ‘Ah, well, that will do very nicely.’ He lingered by the gate for a minute, and it became obvious that there was not going to be a very large congregation, in fact it appeared to consist only of himself.

He entered and took a seat near the back, and waited with interest for the arrival of the Vicar. A good deal would depend on him.

As he picked up a Prayer Book, he noticed, somewhat to his surprise, that the church was dedicated to All Saints, and it struck him as extremely odd that his excellent deduction that St. Martin’s Road would lead to St. Martin’s Church should have been so right and so wrong. For a second this trivial circumstance caused an almost overwhelming desire to burst into hysterical laughter. He had barely pulled himself together when the Rev. Robert Craig entered and began the service. He was young, dark and good-looking, and to Julius’s relief, read well.

Julius, while outwardly behaving with due decorum, was busy with his further plans.

When the service was over, the Vicar smiled at him as he went towards the vestry. Julius smiled back, and stayed where he was. In a few minutes the Vicar was back again wearing his cassock with a biretta in his hand. ‘High Church,’ Julius reflected, ‘so much the better.’ In his mind began to stir various works of the Fathers, modern controversies and other matters suggested by his wide and miscellaneous reading.

‘Good evening,’ the Vicar said. ‘Can I do anything for you?’

‘You can. I was waiting to see you, though really it’s a bit of nerve expecting a total stranger——’

‘Not at all. What is it?’

‘I want to stay here for a few weeks. Can you recommend me to lodgings or some one who would take me as a paying guest? That’s what I should prefer. You see it’s like this. I am going to write a series of articles on the London suburbs—as they really are—without being funny about it, and as Balham and Tooting seem to suffer most in the comic papers and so on, I’d thought I’d start here.’

The Vicar smiled. ‘It seems quite an original idea. Don’t you know them at all?’

‘No, I’m from the North myself. I say, do you know Manchester at all?’

‘A little.’

‘That’s where my fiancée lives,’ said Julius, with an enviable presence of mind. ‘I was there this week-end. There’s a go-ahead place if you like. I’m from Wolverhampton myself, but my ambition in life is to get on to the *Manchester Guardian*.’

‘Come over to the Vicarage and see my wife. I can’t think of any one who lets rooms off-hand, but I think we might put you up at the Vicarage.’

They emerged together into the sunlight, and then came what Julius was beginning to regard as an almost inevitable question. ‘Are you feeling quite well? You look——’

‘He probably *did* by this time,’ he thought to himself, as with truly brilliant inspiration he answered, ‘It’s my infliction that I’m always train-sick—and when you have been sick for about three hours without stopping, you don’t look your best.’

‘That is bad luck—you will feel better after you’ve had your supper.’

He opened the door and called ‘Mary!’

Mrs. Craig appeared from what Julius gathered was the kitchen. She was still young and had been pretty, but was now rather faded and looked

harassed, Julius thought. She was badly dressed and untidy, but her smile was friendly.

Julius was shown into the living-room and left alone while the Vicar consulted with his wife.

‘Isn’t it a little rash?’ she asked. ‘You say he wants to come at once so we should have no references or anything.’

‘Well, my dear, you know well enough that there is nothing in this house worth stealing, nor should I say the neighbourhood is very promising for an enterprising young burglar, and surely Mrs. Wood’s face and figure are sufficient protection against the most abandoned young man.’

‘Really, Robert!’ She smiled. ‘Of course the money would be very welcome. What should I say, two guineas a week?’

‘I think that would be quite fair. I’ll tell him then and find out where he has left his luggage.’

‘You’ll want to know my name,’ remarked Julius when he had accepted the terms. ‘It’s John Lang. My bag is at the station. I’d better go and fetch it.’

‘I’ll walk down with you.’

‘It’s very good of you, sir.’ His heart sank a little. There would surely be a pub somewhere near the station, and he was beginning to feel that he was very near the end of his tether, but he did not want to jeopardize his reputation as a blameless young man.

As they turned into the main road, he bit his lip and spoke fiercely to himself. ‘You fool. Everything has gone splendidly up till now. If you go and faint and collapse, you will spoil everything by creating a sensation and what not—pull yourself together, man.’

Somehow he covered the burning stretch to the station, but when they emerged from the railway bridge, Craig took him by the arm and steered him across the road. ‘What you want, young man, is brandy,’ he remarked. ‘I know what I’ve felt like after a choppy Channel crossing.’ He pushed open the swing doors and propelled his charge within.

‘Thank you, sir. You’re a sportsman. I needed that. They were all shut when I arrived,’ he added with pathos.

Back at the Vicarage he was shown to a small room, and told that supper would be ready in a quarter of an hour.

He washed his hands and then, sitting on the edge of his bed, with pencil and note-book, forced himself to sketch in the main lines of the life and

career of one, John Lang of Wolverhampton, who was engaged to a girl—Beryl Smith, tall, dark, typist—he decided hastily.

The main lines were more or less clear in his mind when a bell rang, and he went downstairs to be introduced to two more members of the family, Cecilia aged ten, and Bobby eight. There were, he gathered in the course of the meal, two more children, Rosalind three, and the baby Angela. No wonder Mrs. Craig looked harassed!

After supper he excused himself on the plea that he had letters to write, and retired to his room. There he did write one letter that cost him a good deal of trouble, and sallied forth to post it. He walked rapidly down the road till he came to a chemist's shop, which was, luckily for him, still open. Inside he dropped the diffident manner he had employed to the Vicar, and, speaking with authority, said, 'Look here, I've got a bad fit of insomnia, can you give me something?'

The chemist, after a glance at his haggard face, mixed a draught which he handed over, saying, 'That should give you a good night's rest, sir, and is quite safe.'

Julius thanked him and left.

Half an hour later he had proved the chemist's words true, and was sound asleep after the longest day he had ever spent in his life.

CHAPTER VII

AT nine o'clock Rogers returned, bringing with him the two doctors, Dr. Smaile, who had been Greta's medical attendant, and the police surgeon.

They handed over their report to Digby. It was as Rogers had told him. The actual cause of death was heart failure caused by asphyxiation. Digby laid it down while he asked some questions. 'I see you say there were no signs of outrage—was she a virgin?'

'No,' Dr. Smaile replied, 'and had not been for some time.'

Digby nodded. 'Anything else?'

'There were one or two very slight bruises on the back of the neck. I should say she had been wearing a necklace of some sort, but it was not on the body when I saw it,' the police surgeon said.

'Nor when I saw it,' Dr. Smaile put in. 'And I understood that nothing had been touched.'

'Any idea of the time of death? Her wristwatch had not been wound up, and had stopped at one-thirty.'

'I should say she was dead before that, but it is impossible to be more exact.'

'There's one other thing,' said Dr. Smaile, 'though I don't see that it can have the slightest bearing on the subject. I have stated that she was a healthy young woman, but when she was a girl, about seventeen to be exact, she was in a bad motor accident and severely injured. She recovered all right, but could never have a child; she knew that.'

'Well, I won't keep you any longer. The inquest will be the day after tomorrow. The Inspector will let you know about it.'

When the doctors had gone, Digby summoned Jerry Soames, who had nothing to tell him. He confirmed the stories of the others as to the time they went to bed, and was quite certain that he had known nothing from laying his head on his pillow till he found Oliphant shaking him the next morning at about three-thirty. He had not seen Julius, and Oliphant had not mentioned him.

From him Digby got a few more particulars of the duck-shooting. He learnt that they were all off their day and had got nothing. He gathered that they had had a disappointing morning, and heard in rather lurid language

Jerry's opinion of the inn where they had breakfasted, where they had been kept waiting for nearly an hour for a breakfast that was not fit to eat when it arrived.

He insisted firmly that he knew nothing of the relations of any one in the house. He had met Greta in London, but did not know her very well. When she had told him she was coming down to Clinton, he had naturally motored over to see her, and he had gladly accepted various week-end invitations because she could be relied on to give cheery parties.

He was followed by Jack Langdon who, Digby saw at once, had been drinking. He was more intelligent than his friend, it was obvious, but Digby could get nothing from him, though he felt all the time that he was keeping something back.

Finally Lord Sands entered. Digby was a little apprehensive of this interview. Earls as earls he felt he could manage, but Lord Sands was nearly old enough to be his father for one thing, and had a certain reputation for exclusiveness. Digby felt sure he would not like being questioned about his private affairs.

He had not asked the usual preliminary questions before he knew that he had a very shrewd man to deal with, who, if he liked, could give him a good deal of help.

'You came here to make Miss Swanson's acquaintance as your grandson had just got engaged to her?'

'That is so.'

'Did you approve of the lady—were you pleased with the match?'

The old man smiled a trifle grimly. 'I understand you have already seen Mercia. I know quite well that he is incapable of keeping anything to himself, so you must know I did not.'

'May I ask your reasons?'

'I cannot see that that has anything to do with it.'

'I am afraid I must be the judge of that. But I would point out that as Lord Mercia is of age and has independent means, it is impossible to prevent him from marrying where he likes; in which case I take it you must have had strong grounds for attempting useless opposition—and it is only too obvious that some one else had strong grounds for disapproval.'

Sands's scanty eyebrows came together in a heavy frown. 'Very well. One does not wish to speak ill of the dead, but as I dare say you know already, she was—wanton.'

'How did you know?'

‘I had some inquiries made in town before I came down here, and—well, I am over seventy—I know one when I see one—it was obvious.’ He made a gesture of disgust with hands that seemed so incongruously fine compared with his wizened jockey’s face.

‘She was also,’ he continued slowly, ‘cruel. It is harder to explain how I know that, but I am sure of it. She would not have made any man happy. Of course she was of no birth either, but that I would have ignored.’

‘Now can you tell me if you observed any signs of enmity or jealousy?’

‘It is hardly fair to ask me, as I admit I disliked the whole crowd of them, and am therefore prejudiced—with the exception of young Lane, who, I understand has disappeared—I liked him. For the rest, that red-haired girl, I’ve forgotten her name, was jealous—though I’m not suggesting that she murdered her.’

‘You heard no sounds or disturbance in the night?’

‘I heard the young men start out about three-thirty, that’s all.’ He hesitated a moment as though he had something else to say, and then shut his mouth firmly.

‘You say you liked Mr. Lane. Did you have any conversation with him—did he happen to mention that he was leaving?’

‘I talked with him a good deal. He certainly didn’t say he was going to leave in the middle of the night, but I was under the impression that he was leaving to-day, and as he had told me that he was not sleeping well, it does not seem very surprising that he should have decided to go when he would have clear roads. It seems to be the ambition of every young man to break his neck trying to “whack her up to eighty or ninety” as the case may be.’

‘Thank you. There is one more question.’ Digby took up Rogers’s notebook that lay on the table. ‘As you know, all the rooms were examined this morning. I see that you have a revolver with you.’

Lord Sands started a little, but replied calmly enough. ‘One hears so many stories of violence these days that with old age I have grown a little nervous.’

‘And that,’ said Digby to himself as Sands left the room, ‘is a damned lie.’

With a sigh he turned to Brown. ‘What a case. We can’t do any more tonight. We’ll get on down to the pub. I hope to goodness they have got decent beds. I’m dead tired.’

‘I can’t make head or tail of it yet, sir.’

‘I can’t say I have very many ideas myself, except that no one is telling the truth. I’ll make out a précis of what we have learnt first thing to-morrow, and perhaps we shall begin to see a little light. I hope they’ll have got hold of Mr. Lane by then—he may be able to tell us something.’

‘I’ve a feeling, sir, that you aren’t going to get hold of him as easy as that.’

‘Why?’

‘I know you don’t approve of intuitions, sir, but I can’t get rid of the idea that he would have wired or ’phoned Miss Sylvia. If he’s in London he must have heard by this time—think of the posters there’ll be—some of them are sure to have “Clinton Manor Tragedy” or something of the sort. Of course he may have met with an accident as you said, but if it was on the main road from here to London, we’d have heard of that by this time.’

Digby looked grave. ‘I hope you’re wrong. Apart from everything else, he seems to have been the one decent person in the house, and I don’t want to have to go suspecting him of murder.’

Digby was up early the following morning, dealing with the mass of notes in front of him.

One thing emerged fairly clearly, and that was that the murder had undoubtedly occurred between eleven-thirty and three-thirty, and it was probably safe to put the first figure an hour later. Carter and Fay Dallas had not come up to bed until then.

On the question of motive he was in deep perplexity. From the point of view of any one who could be persuaded to express one, it was unnecessary to look far. Greta had found her amusement in driving her lovers to distraction, and had gone too far. Judging from Julius’s letter, he knew of something that she was contemplating, which he seemed to think he had frustrated; but the whole letter was extremely cryptic and could bear several interpretations—it was really waste of time to speculate as to its meaning. To set against that, there did not seem to be any one in the house who was in love with Greta except Mercia—but Sands had said that Phil was jealous. If he had seen that during the week-end, it presumably meant that she was interested in some one in the house. Julius, according to what he could gather, had shown no interest in any one but Sylvia—that left Oliphant, Soames and Langdon. He was inclined to choose the latter—Phil had mentioned him. Julius’s apparent interest in Sylvia did not, of course, prevent Phil being in love with her, and he undoubtedly knew more of Greta than any one seemed to have suspected. Digby swore to himself, and

wished heartily that the human race had found it possible to get on without love—if they were all fish, for instance—he felt that to be a detective among fish would be a cool, detached, dignified proceeding—there was something about their eyes. . . .

But in spite of the obvious opportunities for jealousy, or at least a purely erotic motive, he was inclined to look elsewhere. If any young man had been in such a state that he was driven to murder, surely it would have been obvious. In all the cases of the sort that he had come across before there had been plenty of indications that the young man was becoming—to say the least of it—unbalanced.

But besides being young and attractive, Greta was comparatively wealthy, and though jealousy might enter into the motive, he did not think it was the sole incentive. He made a number of notes on things that were to be looked into at once.

Carter was her trustee, for instance. His financial position must be investigated.

There was that string of beads that the doctor thought she had been wearing.

There was the quarrel Elsie had overheard.

There was Jack Langdon, he knew something, though what it was Digby had not the faintest idea.

When he arrived at the Manor, his first step was to summon Elsie. He asked her what jewellery, if any, her mistress had been wearing on the Monday night.

Elsie, after a few moments' thought, said that she had been wearing a chain of crystal. Digby then accompanied her to the bedroom and asked her to show it to him. Elsie opened a drawer confidently, glanced in, seemed mildly surprised, and then began to search in it in earnest.

'It's not here,' she said at last.

Digby began to help her, and at the end of a quarter of an hour had convinced himself that there was no crystal string in the room.

He got a description—of sorts—from Elsie. Rather small crystals set in silver. 'I don't suppose it was really silver,' she explained, 'it was dullish, and anyway they are quite cheap'—buy them at any shop you could, but she was lucky over hers—it seemed brighter than most and didn't lose its brightness. Miss Greta was very fond of it—wore it nearly always though she didn't care for jewellery—had none of any value as far as Elsie knew.

Digby dismissed her and sent for Sylvia, who appeared looking iller than ever.

‘Rather a strange thing has happened,’ he said. ‘The maid says that Miss Swanson was wearing a string of crystals on Monday night, but we can’t find them anywhere—do you know anything about it?’

Sylvia’s eyes widened suddenly. ‘But they weren’t crystals,’ she said, ‘they were diamonds.’

‘What?’ Digby was genuinely surprised.

‘Diamonds,’ repeated Sylvia. ‘She used to say they were imitation.’

‘But why?’

‘It was like this. She was always annoyed that Uncle had tied up his money so carefully that she couldn’t touch it. She used to say that you never knew when you would want a lump sum in a hurry. Well, she had some money left her by her mother, about five thousand pounds. A few years ago she was in debt all round, and she was afraid she would have to use that money to get clear. Then she had a bright idea—she promptly bought diamonds with it—she knew that Mr. Carter would manage to fix things for her if she had nothing else. Since then she’s bought some more separately, and that chain must be worth ten thousand now—they’re quite well matched.’

‘How did you know all this?’

‘She told me a long time ago—she said that if she died suddenly she didn’t want them given to a maid or something like that, and I think she was rather pleased with the way she had got round the trustees.’

‘Did she buy the diamonds herself, do you know?’

‘Some, I think, and I know Mr. Oliphant bought some for her—he knows quite a lot about jewels.’

‘This puts rather a different complexion on affairs,’ said Digby thoughtfully. ‘Of course she might have some secret hiding-place for them as they were valuable; however that can be found out fairly easily. There was one other thing I wanted to ask you. You had a quarrel with her on the Sunday afternoon, did you not?’

Sylvia looked startled, then her face became set. ‘No. How on earth did you get that idea?’

‘The maid Elsie is prepared to swear she overheard a quarrel when she was in the bathroom.’

‘She must have been mistaken. I was certainly talking to Greta in her room and she was a little excited—her manner was always—excitable, and

she used to speak with a great deal of emphasis over perfectly trivial things.’

‘What were you talking of?’

‘Part of the time we were discussing my idea of getting work, and she was saying that she wanted me to go on living with her after she was married and I was saying that I didn’t think it was a good idea,’ she answered glibly.

Digby looked at the mutinous little face. He knew she was lying, but she looked so ill and frightened, he felt pity instead of anger.

‘Come, Miss Sylvia, I think there was more than that—you had better tell me—we mostly find out things in the long run, you know.’

‘There is nothing more to tell. Elsie is a most unreliable girl. I dare say she was exaggerating to make a sensation—or else she wished to make trouble. Is that all you want with me? I have a good many things to see to.’

Digby rubbed his chin thoughtfully. ‘Do you play tennis?’ he asked.

‘Very little and very badly,’ was the surprised answer. ‘I’m no good at any kind of game. Why?’

‘Nothing of any importance. I won’t keep you any longer now.’

He turned to the table and started to go through Rogers’s preliminary report once again. Rogers had not only made a careful examination of the scene of the crime, but he had also seized the chance of the three young men being absent, to examine their rooms as well. The report was meticulous in its details. Digby made a mental note that he was a smart man who deserved a good word at headquarters, even though he was compelled to smile at some of the details. Rogers had apparently taken to heart the maxim that anything may be of importance in the detecting of crime. It was the description of Gervase’s room he held now. The place of the furniture, texture of the carpet, position of the windows, then ‘bed untidy, evidently been slept in, fixed washbasin with shaving-brush still damp and soapy on ledge above’, a fastidious young man if he shaved before going out duck-shooting, Digby thought. ‘Clothes in drawers of good quality.’ Rogers was evidently thinking of ‘Found’ notices here. ‘No paper in the waste-paper basket.’

Digby turned to the reports of the other rooms. They were much the same, except that the other two had apparently considered shaving unnecessary.

Suddenly a thought struck him. It might be possible to narrow the time down a little. He dispatched Brown for Gervase, and when he arrived, said, ‘Just one or two more questions, Mr. Oliphant. What time did you set the alarm clock that morning?’

‘Three-twenty-five.’

‘Then it was later than half-past three when you called the others?’

‘No, I called them almost at once. I hadn’t much to do, just to slip on flannels and a sweater. Then I called them and went back for my coat and boots.’

‘But you shaved?’

‘I didn’t.’

Digby laughed. ‘There’s where the Sherlock Holmes method of deduction breaks down. Your shaving-brush was wet, and we deduced you’d shaved instead of the fact that a slovenly housemaid hadn’t done your room properly—and it hardly needed a detective to discover that this house was not well run. Of course you see what I am after. The longer the time we can prove that there was some one awake down that corridor, the shorter the time in which the murder could have been committed.’

‘I don’t see that,’ Gervase began hastily, ‘he might——’

‘What? I should be interested to hear.’

Gervase looked uncomfortable. ‘It was nothing. I’m not going to say anything more. It seems so horrible to be speculating about that poor girl before she is even buried.’

‘I see. You were going to suggest that if the murderer had been in her room all along, he would not have known whether you were up or not—at any rate not till you began to make a noise—wouldn’t have seen a light under your door, for instance.’

‘Perhaps I was thinking of something of the sort; it’s all beastly—raking up her past like this—need you do it—anyway, it’s your business not mine, thank God.’

‘There is one more thing I want to ask. I understand you bought some diamonds for Miss Swanson?’

‘How the devil do you know that?’ Gervase spoke sharply.

‘Is it true?’

‘Well, since you know, I suppose it’s no use denying it—but it was meant to be a secret—I promised I’d say nothing about it.’

‘Do you know where she kept them?’

‘No.’ He seemed rather surprised at this. ‘At her bank, I suppose.’

‘She used to wear them all the time, but said they were paste—she was wearing them the night she was murdered.’

‘Good Lord!—that long string—I didn’t even know she had had them set. I say, does all this mean they are missing?’

‘We certainly have not come across them yet.’

‘Then that accounts for everything—somebody must have got wind of them—they are pretty valuable, you know—well matched, but having been bought separately, not well known—easy to dispose of.’

‘But you said it was to be a secret.’

‘Well, she told whoever told you,’ was the shrewd answer. ‘I suppose it was Carter or Sylvia.’

‘As a matter of fact it was Miss Sylvia.’

‘Well, she’s only a girl, she might easily have told some one else, and for that matter——’ he paused.

‘Well, what is it now?’

‘The whole thing is so horrible—but—I wouldn’t take too much notice of anything Sylvia says—she’s a very unbalanced, hysterical sort of girl—I know Miss Swanson was worried about her—she talked to me about it—she told me that Sylvia imagined things—that she could convince herself that people were working against her—maligning her—or trying to make her do things she didn’t want to do—all that sort of thing. I think myself she looks as if she were on the edge of a nervous breakdown.’

‘Thank you.’ Digby was very thoughtful when he had left. If that were true, it might explain the exaggerated fear he had seen in her eyes—might also explain her refusal to tell the truth about her quarrel with Greta—but all the same he didn’t think it was true. That she had something on her mind was obvious, but Digby flattered himself that he had seen more of the abnormal than either Greta or Gervase, and he didn’t think she was abnormal, at least not to the extent that Gervase did.

He left the room then to superintend the search for the missing jewels, which went on for the rest of the day.

By tea-time no sign of them had been discovered, nor had any trace been found of Mr. Julius Lane. He had been traced without difficulty to London, or at least a red-haired young man riding a motor-bicycle had been seen by a constable not far from Bagshot Heath. A red-haired young man had breakfasted at Staines in company with a lorry driver, and a boy employed at the inn had had the curiosity to look into the lorry which had contained a battered motor-bicycle. They had proceeded on the way to London, and there all trace of them had been lost.

It was only a question of time before they found the lorry, Digby knew. Also, Julius might have left his bicycle somewhere. That would be discovered in a day or so, but he did not think that he would be any nearer finding Julius. It was obvious that some sort of disaster must have overtaken him, and that he had got a lift from a passing lorry which had presumably dropped him somewhere in London.

He had a 'phone call put through to Staines, and learnt that the young man, though pale and with a bandage on one hand, had not appeared in any way seriously injured. Still there was a chance that he had been damaged in some way that had become worse afterwards. The hospitals had already been searched. Digby sent instructions to try nursing homes, and at the same time informed the voracious Press men that they could announce in all their papers that the police would be very glad to know the whereabouts of Mr. Julius Lane answering to the following description.

The cause of this disturbance had remained utterly oblivious of police, murders and his own worries for the better part of the day.

He had been called at eight o'clock, and with an effort that had taken all his powers, had risen and descended to breakfast. Then he had announced that he wanted to get a thorough knowledge of the neighbourhood and would not be in to lunch.

The after-effects of the chemist's draught remained. He was still overpoweringly sleepy. Knowing himself, he knew that once they had worn off, he was not likely to get much more sleep, and he had long arrears to make up. Three months and more of 'sleeping badly', and that for Julius meant very little, followed by thirty-six hours of none at all, could not be made up in one night, so Julius swung himself on to a tram at the end of the road—he was not going to risk dispelling his drowsiness by taking exercise—proceeded to Clapham Common, where under a secluded tree he curled himself up with his head on his arm, and slept soundly till late in the afternoon.

He looked at his watch with surprise, listened to it, and then glanced round him. The sun convinced him that it was right. 'Gosh!' he murmured, 'that was a sleep. Alexander and Napoleon used to do that sort of thing—sure sign of your great man,' he added, pleased.

He rose and stretched and made his way back to Balham, buying an evening paper on the way.

The headlines were all devoted to the 'Alleged Murder of Beautiful Society Girl', but there was no news. The police were keeping things pretty

dark, he realized, and with an isolated place like Clinton Manor it would be fairly easy to keep reporters out. There was no mention of himself at all. In Balham he purchased another suit—a quiet grey this time. He was not particularly fastidious about his clothes, but ready-made cheap suits did afflict him, and as he surveyed himself, he was stunned to see how common he looked—not of the working classes, but lower middle class. A salutary lesson for human vanity, he reflected with his usual philosophy.

CHAPTER VIII

AS DIGBY came down into the hall after the fruitless search, he interrupted what was apparently an agitated conversation between Phil and Jack.

They both stopped abruptly and looked at him apprehensively, and as though by common consent moved away into an adjoining room. He gave some instructions to the man in charge of the constables on guard, and was just leaving the house when Phil suddenly reappeared. She spoke breathlessly.

‘Can I speak to you? I’ve something to tell you that I should have told you yesterday.’

‘Certainly.’ Digby opened the door leading into the morning-room, and ushered her in.

‘Well, what is it?’ He spoke gently as was usual with him unless he was very much exasperated. This case had come nearer to making him lose his temper more often in one day—he thought ruefully—than all his others put together.

‘When you hear what I have got to say, I am sure you will understand why I didn’t tell you before. I suppose it is of some use to you to know of at least one person who could not possibly have—done it?’

‘Most certainly it is.’

‘Well, it couldn’t have been Jack Langdon. He was with me from a quarter to twelve till quarter-past three.’

She flung back her head and gazed at him wide-eyed and defiant. She was standing, having refused a seat, and he appreciated her pose. It was most effective. It also struck him that she was not unconscious of its effectiveness herself.

‘I take it you are not married?’

She shook her head.

‘Have you been lovers long?’

She hesitated for a moment, and then said, ‘No, it was the first time.’

‘When did you arrange this—assignation?’

‘He’s been in love with me for some time—just before dinner—in the garden.’

‘Mr. Oliphant says Mr. Langdon was asleep in his own bed at three-thirty.’

‘Of course he was pretending. He didn’t want every one to know. That was why I kept quiet about it yesterday, but now——’

‘Yes, why now? I should like to know that.’

‘Oh,’ she paused; there was an amusingly disappointed air about her—her dramatic scene was not going as she had hoped, Digby concluded. ‘We thought it was our duty,’ she brought out unconvincingly.

Digby laid down his pencil. ‘You did, did you? I should love to know why it was your duty to tell me all this rigmarole. I don’t believe a word of it.’

‘But—but—I ask you, is it the sort of thing I should have told you if it hadn’t been true?’

‘I shouldn’t have said so, but there are some funny ideas in this house. I should like to know your reasons.’

‘But why won’t you believe me?’

‘First, because you say you arranged this before dinner. You must have a very unflattering opinion of yourself if you think that under the circumstances the young man would then go and arrange to go duck-shooting. Second, on your own showing, you must have been awake, and yet you never heard one of the loudest alarm clocks I have ever struck in the next room. I find it hard to believe that it didn’t wake you, but it is impossible you didn’t hear it if you were awake.’

Phil gave in. ‘It isn’t true, but’—she looked puzzled—‘I *was* awake and I didn’t hear that alarm.’

‘You are sure of this?’

‘Quite, I couldn’t sleep. I have a little striking clock, and I heard it strike three, and then I heard them when they went out.’

‘That’s odd,’ said Digby reflectively. ‘Of course Mr. Oliphant may have been very quick turning it off—but to return to the main point. Why did you think it was so necessary for Mr. Langdon to have an alibi that you were prepared to perjure yourself and sacrifice your reputation to provide it?’

Phil gave a little laugh. ‘How old-fashioned you are. In my set it would probably enhance my reputation, but—I can’t tell you. I don’t know myself. I only know that though Jack didn’t do it, he is sure you suspect him.’

Digby rose and went to the bell and Jack was summoned.

‘Well, Jack,’ Phil began briskly when he appeared, ‘I’ve made a frightful mess of things. There is nothing for it now but the truth.’

Jack turned hunted eyes on Digby. ‘I was wondering when you would send for me. Of course I’ve made things a thousand times worse by not telling you before.’

Digby maintained a discreet silence. He had not the least idea what Jack was talking about, but he was evidently credited with information he didn’t possess.

‘I’ll tell you now. Would you mind going, Phil? I can manage better by myself. She doesn’t know anything,’ he added to Digby as the door shut. ‘She only guessed there was something up. What’s she been saying to you?’

‘She made an attempt to convince me that you knew nothing at all about this affair.’

‘I don’t really. It’s like this: I’ve been keen on Greta for some time now——’ he paused and then added, ‘mad about her. I asked her to marry me and of course she refused, but——’ he paused again. ‘Oh, this is impossible—one can’t say these things.’

‘If it is that you have a natural reluctance to say anything against her character, I can tell you that I know about that. Am I to take it that though she had refused to marry you, you did not quite give up hope of some less permanent connection?’

‘That’s it. Then she got engaged to Mercia and I was in despair. I thought it meant that she was going to settle down. I knew his grandfather was strict and all the rest of it, and as it was obvious she was marrying him for his title, I didn’t think she would risk losing it once she was married. This week-end she was very nice to me—almost encouraging. When I went up to bed that night and realized that I was going next day, I thought and thought and finally decided to have one more shot. I knew her fairly well, you see, and I thought she might have been sort of regretting things—she was very independent—and be ready for a last fling. Really, I didn’t think at all—not properly that is—I was a bit drunk too. It must have been about half-past two that I went along to her room. The door wasn’t locked so I just opened it and said “Greta”. There was no answer, and then—I fuked it—she had a temper and she might have been furious. I suddenly saw what a complete fool I had been, and it was as I turned to go back to my room that Lord Sands saw me from the end of the passage.’

Digby’s fingers tightened round the pencil he was holding, but he gave no other sign of surprise at this somewhat startling piece of information.

‘And then—did you speak to him?’

‘No, I knew he’d seen me, but I hoped that perhaps he hadn’t recognized me—it was darker where I was than where he was standing; afterwards I

knew he must have—partly by the way he looked at me in the morning and partly because the moon was bright as day—it had been a futile hope.’

‘If the moon was shining it must have been after the rain stopped—nearly three.’

‘I dare say. It didn’t seem very long before Gervase came in to call me for that damned duck-shooting. Now what are you going to do about it?’

‘Why, nothing at present except to advise you to keep your mouth shut about the whole business for the time being. As soon as the inquest is over to-morrow you can leave here. There is just one thing I want to ask you. Do you know Mr. Lane well?’

‘No, I’ve met him in town and here this summer.’

‘Would you give me some idea of what he is like?’

‘Oh, one of these writer fellows. He’s a pacifist too. I’ve never read any of his books. Unaccountable sort of bird, moody and all that. He lives alone in a cottage about thirty miles away. I went over there a little while ago to see a motor-bike I bought off him—I paid him for it this week-end—Saturday to be exact.’

‘How much?’

‘Fifty pounds.’

‘By cheque, of course—will you let me know as soon as possible if it has been cleared?’

‘As a matter of fact I paid him in cash.’

‘Why? Surely you don’t usually pay bills of that size in cash. Did he ask for it?’

‘No, but I happened to have it on me, so I thought I might as well—sudden flash of prudence, you know—I’d probably have lost the lot—oh——’ he stopped abruptly.

‘I see. You won the money at cards. What game?’

‘Poker.’

‘Pretty high stakes?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Jack put in hastily, ‘I was very lucky.’

After a meal and a glance over the reports that had come in concerning red-haired young men in various parts of the country, none of whom sounded in the least probable, Digby returned to the Manor and asked to see Lord Sands. As soon as he entered he shot Digby a sharp look from under his white brows, and Digby knew that he was perfectly aware what he had come about.

‘My lord,’ Digby began gravely, ‘I have come to ask you if you would care to make a statement as to what you were doing at two-forty-five on Tuesday morning.’

‘I certainly don’t care to,’ was the dry answer, ‘but I suppose I shall have to.’

He remained plunged in thought for a few moments and then said, ‘It’s an unpleasant story and I don’t show up well, so I sincerely hope you will be able to keep it to yourself. I had an interview with Miss Swanson on the Sunday morning, when I did my best to persuade her to break off the engagement, quite without effect.

‘Then I decided to do what I could myself. That boy is all I have got left in the world. His father married early and was very happy—for a little. He was bringing his wife down to us in the country for her confinement, when they had a motor accident. He was killed at once, and she died a few hours later, giving birth to Mercia—which perhaps accounts for the fact that the poor boy is not particularly intelligent, but he is kind-hearted, well-meaning and a gentleman. He would be happy and would make any ordinary, maternal sort of girl happy. There is nothing wrong with him, you understand. A happy marriage will be the making of him—a bad one his ruin. I felt so strongly on the subject that I did a thing that I shouldn’t have said I was capable of.’

‘Yes?’

‘I got an idea that one of the young men here was her lover—how it is rather hard to say, but partly from a look on her face when they were saying good night. There was a mocking ring in her voice as if she were amusing herself by risking discovery—anyway’—he made a gesture of disgust—‘I decided to spy on her. Naturally I waited till the house was quiet and had, as I thought, extraordinary luck—I saw young Langdon shutting her door behind him.’

‘But why didn’t you tell me this yesterday?’

‘I was quite sure Langdon was not the murderer, if that is what you mean—he hasn’t the guts—besides, though he was startled and annoyed, he was not frightened, and I do not think there is a murderer in the world who would not betray himself if he was surprised leaving his victim’s room. For the rest it was a thoroughly discreditable story, and I am not proud of myself.’

There was a silence. Then Digby said, ‘We have had no news of Mr. Lane yet—it is beginning to look very odd. Will you tell me what you thought of him during the week-end?’

‘It was quite obvious that he had something on his mind. He looked ill and worried and confessed to sleeping badly. Also, I should say he was suffering from considerable strain. He was, to say the least of it, irritable. He has a tongue and he used it. He told those two young officers he was a pacifist—in what I can only describe as a markedly militant manner; he also told that man Carter that he was a Socialist, and gave his opinion of capitalists with remarkable frankness—he doesn’t appear to like them. I happen to be something of a Socialist myself. I said as much to him, and he promptly said he was a firm upholder of authority in both Church and State. I laughed, and then he laughed too, apologized, said he had no politics at all. After that we got on quite well together. He is, I should say, absurdly tender-hearted.’

‘Do you think he would be incapable of murder?’ Digby asked point-blank.

‘In the ordinary way—yes. For the ordinary motives that is. He did not strike me as being of very strong passions. He’s a writer, you know, and I understand a good one, and, contrary to the popular ideas, as a general rule they keep their passions for their work.’

Digby nodded.

‘But in certain circumstances—I think perhaps he might kill to save pain—if some one were suffering from an incurable disease, for instance—but it’s ridiculous. No guilty man would be such a fool as to fly from the place the moment he had committed a murder.’

‘There is one point you have overlooked. It might have been a totally unpremeditated murder, and it may be his dead body we shall find.’

Sands started a little. ‘I had not thought of that. But what of his letter? I understand he left a note for Miss Sylvia. Quite a normal note.’

‘That might have been written before the murder and forgotten, or, again, it might have been intended for a blind, though it was a very stupid one—and you say the young man is intelligent—but this is mere guess-work. We’re bound to find him shortly now. His motives can wait till then. What did you think were his relations with Miss Swanson?’

‘I should say he was interested in her without being the least attracted. I never saw the least sign of that, but he used to watch her and he always listened to her with great attention, but his attitude struck me as being detached and critical.’

‘Thank you. The inquest will be at two to-morrow. It will, of course, be purely formal and will be adjourned. You can leave as soon as it is over if you wish, though you may be called on again later.’

CHAPTER IX

THE next morning the papers all had descriptions of Julius, and the hunt was up with a vengeance.

Men have rarely found red hair a blessing from the moment they are old enough to understand the lisped ‘carrots’ of their little friends. For the next few days the lives of all red-haired young men were made a burden to them by facetious friends or zealous police.

A report came in that a young man had crossed to France by the morning boat on the Tuesday. In some way—it was not very clear in the report—his behaviour had been suspicious. He was eventually run down in Monte Carlo, which was unfortunate for him, as his mother—a most redoubtable lady—was under the impression that he was learning the French tongue in a respectable family in Montpellier. His little tragedy was one of many. To balance them, it may be added that the virtue displayed by their fellows after the publication of the Thursday newspapers was quite remarkable, and no doubt they had their reward.

Julius, sallying forth fairly early, bought a paper and read the description of himself. He then turned to go back to the Vicarage. A few yards up the road was a large policeman with his back to him. He experienced a sudden overwhelming instinct to take to his heels, which he repressed, though, since discretion is the better part of valour, he turned down a side road and made his way home by a detour.

‘That was funny,’ he reflected as he went. ‘I suppose that is how criminals feel. I shall know a lot before I am through with this. Oh, well, all knowledge is helpful, though just at the minute I could do without some of mine.’ His mouth twisted with pain, and he walked on slowly.

He found a certain amount of consternation at the Vicarage. The baby, which had struck him as the most virtuous infant he had ever seen, had suddenly elected to start cutting a tooth, and to be very feverish and cross in the process, with the result that it had taken up Mrs. Craig’s whole morning. A further blow fell just after the midday dinner. A small boy appeared with a message for Mrs. Wood. Her youngest married daughter was expecting a baby any day. Her elder sister, who lived quite near, had been spending a good deal of time with her, and was now suddenly prevented from doing so by one of her children contracting measles. They were all naturally very much upset, and would Mother come and stay till it was all over. Mrs. Wood

was genuinely concerned at leaving, for she was kind-hearted, and had an affection for Mrs. Craig, slightly contemptuous, it was true, but nevertheless a thing to be prized above rubies. She retired to the kitchen to fetch her hat, and poor Mrs. Craig leant weakly against the wall of the hall and stared despairingly at her husband. Julius and Cecilia now joined them.

‘I’ll try and find you some one else this afternoon,’ said the Vicar, ‘but I must fly now, I’ve got a wedding.’

He departed, and Julius said, ‘Cheer up, Mrs. Craig, I’ll go and wash up. We’ll manage somehow, and Cecilia will play with the other two outside the kitchen window where I can keep an eye on them.’

‘But can you—wash up, I mean?’

‘Oh, yes.’ He was just going to say that he always did it for his mother, when prudence restrained him. It would be as well to find out first if he could do it. He did not think there was any great mystery about it. It was a thing that half-witted girls seemed to manage all right—but you never knew.

Mrs. Craig hesitated, and then from upstairs there came a wail.

‘You go to baby,’ Julius urged, ‘and try to get a rest yourself.’

The wail grew louder, and Mrs. Craig fled.

Julius, having handed the children their hats, saw them ensconced on the green plot under a tree well in sight of the kitchen window, and repaired to the kitchen.

His first view left him slightly appalled. Mrs. Craig was no manager—two days had told even the happy-go-lucky, untidy Julius that—and Mrs. Wood, though good-hearted, was a stranger to method and neatness.

He removed his coat, rolled up his sleeves, tied a towel about his waist, and filled a large kettle which he set on the gas stove. His eye then caught sight of a ponderous tome, ‘Mrs. Beeton on Household Management’. With an exclamation of joy he seized it and, sitting on the table, began a research into the ‘Duties of the Scullery Maid’. The book enthralled him, and he was roused from his absorbed interest in ‘The House Steward’ and ‘The Lady’s Maid’—two attendants it was improbable he would ever employ—by the kettle boiling over. He tore himself from his reading and started to search for soda and various other things the book had suggested as necessary.

He washed up, and to his own surprise and pleasure did not break anything. Then he scrubbed the table. After consulting the book again, he washed the tea towels. Then, growing more ambitious, he decided to scrub the floor. He went quietly upstairs to his room, passing the nursery on his way. It was the coolest room in the house, and there the baby had at last

fallen asleep. Lying across Rosalind's bed in an exhausted heap, sound asleep, was Mrs. Craig.

He tiptoed into his room, donned his pyjamas, and went back to his scrubbing. When you have only two reach-me-down suits in the world, you must be careful of them. By the time he had done the floor it was nearly tea-time, so he put on the kettle and reconnoitred the larder for bread and butter, which, after a few efforts, he decided not to cut. Then he laid the table, and with a weary sigh contemplated his efforts. He was extremely pleased with himself and more tired than he could ever remember. However, one heavenly thing was that for three hours he had hardly worried at all—he had been too busy. 'I'll do the larder to-morrow,' he remarked to himself, and went upstairs to change.

At the inquest that afternoon the coroner remarked that it was extremely advisable that Mr. Lane should be found as soon as possible. Several other people had already come to that conclusion, and efforts were redoubled, but perhaps it was not unnatural that no one thought of looking in the kitchen of a suburban vicarage. The papers were not read there with the exception of *The Times* occasionally, and though Mrs. Craig was aware through Mrs. Wood that another murder was exciting the public and that a young man was wanted by the police, she never thought of connecting the excellent young man who had just given evidence of such praiseworthy and bourgeois domesticity with a young author who apparently mixed with a dissolute and Bohemian crowd—her translation of Mrs. Wood's 'orful goings on'.

That same morning Digby, going through the post for Clinton Manor, came across a paper addressed to Sylvia. After a moment's thought he slipped it from its wrapper and unfolded it. It was *The Times* of the day before, and the top of the Agony column was marked with a large cross.

Digby put it back in its wrapper and took it up to the Manor when he went.

'This is for you, Miss Sylvia,' he said, 'would you just tell me what it is about?'

Sylvia certainly looked puzzled as she took the paper and began to read it. Once he thought she started. Finally she said 'Oh' and held it out to him, her finger on one item. 'Domestic Training. Cooking, laundry work, domestic economy. Apply the Principal, Rosehurst School of Domestic Economy, Chislehurst, Kent.'

'This must be it,' she said. 'A little time ago I was saying that I wanted to know the name of one of those domestic schools. Some one must have

sent me this.’

It was another lie, Digby was sure, so he asked, ‘Will you give me the name and address of the friend, please?’ rather sharply.

‘But I don’t know. There were a lot of people there—it was at a party Greta and I went to about three weeks ago when we were up in Town. Anybody might have sent this on.’

Left alone, Digby found another copy of *The Times* of the day before, and set to work to study the Agony column. There were, luckily for him, only four items that could possibly apply.

The first ran, ‘S. Must see you. Can explain everything. B.’ The next was ‘Ariadne. Remember down by the lake. Trust me. All will be well. Tomorrow more. D.’ Another was ‘Q. pvtka rtfgaoztr vozi wkqlt. qkk aqyt. M.’ The last, which did not seem likely, was ‘The lady who wrote the charming letter to the man who lent her the taxi fare did not put her address. Please, please do.’

The cipher he translated easily. It was merely the using of a standard keyboard typewriter in its alphabetical order. The message ran, ‘A. Jewels deposited with Blake. All safe. Z.’ Some very simple-minded thieves, he reflected, who had probably already been dealt with by the Yard.

Digby pondered the others for a little, then went to the library, where he found Lord Sands alone.

‘Has anything been heard of young Lane?’ he asked as the detective entered.

‘No,’ said Digby gravely. ‘It’s growing serious. I have had an account of a young man who crossed to the Continent on Tuesday, but it doesn’t sound very probable.’

‘Well, you will find it very hard to convince me that he is a murderer—unless in very unusual circumstances.’

Digby, remembering a handkerchief marked ‘J. Lane’, was silent. After a pause he said, ‘I should be a little surprised myself. I have read his books.’

‘Yes? That rather surprises me—did you do it for pleasure or in the way of business?’

‘Oh, I’ve read most things.’ Digby suddenly smiled. ‘I’ve read your lordship’s.’

‘What?’

‘When you said your family name was Harold Godwin, it didn’t suggest anything to me at first as the name is not unusual, but when you told me you had never read any modern literature, I was nearly sure that you must be the

author of the Essays and Criticisms I have enjoyed so much. I particularly enjoyed your two essays on Shakespearean criticism in the eighteenth century as contrasted with the Romantic view. I'm sorry. It is not my business.'

Sands smiled. 'Please don't apologize. It is delightful to meet any one that has read anything I have written. My audience is sadly limited—but I confess that I am a trifle surprised.'

'I was brought up among books. My father was a bookseller, and I suppose I should have followed in his footsteps if he had not died when I was a lad. Since then reading has been my hobby as you might say, and in my job one gets a good deal of time one way and another. I shouldn't be chattering about myself like this except that I want you to understand that I am not talking wildly when I ask you if you will tell me how far the impression I have gathered from his work tallies with the one you have of the man himself. Of course it is dangerous to generalize from a man's books, but there are some things—some of his poetry, for instance, shows a rare mind, and he has a sense of humour for another thing which doesn't square with my idea of a murderer, and I know something about them,' he added a trifle grimly.

'Yes, he has that,' Sands agreed.

'A vivid imagination too.'

'That might be a motive if my idea was right.'

'I agree. It is also standing him in good stead if he is still alive—I mean if he is hiding deliberately he will probably have thought of some quite original scheme.'

'Yes. There's another thing about him. He struck me as being oddly mature for his age.'

'That is noticeable in his books. He has no desire to shock for one thing. He's frank, but only when it is necessary—artistically speaking.' Suddenly he smiled. 'I'm getting quite obsessed by him, but I have a very strong feeling that the key to this riddle is in his hands.'

'Have you any clue at all to his whereabouts?'

'None at all,' was the frank answer. 'But I will tell you that I have a reason that is little better than a guess for thinking that my first idea was wrong and that he is still alive.' He glanced at the newspaper in his hand. 'One more thing, my lord. I suppose you will leave as soon as the inquest is over. I must know where you are going.'

'I shall go to my Town house, Portman Square. By the way, I can tell you one thing more about young Lane. He has when he likes "a way with

him”.’

‘An attractive personality you mean—he isn’t popular with the rest of the house-party.’

‘I’m not surprised—he didn’t like them, but if he is pleasant to one he has that power of making one feel absurdly flattered.’

As soon as he was left alone, Digby started to search the shelves, but without finding what he wanted. ‘What a library,’ he murmured with disgust, ‘no classical dictionary! However, this can wait, and anyway I think I can trust my memory.’

After the inquest he returned to the house to await the arrival of Mrs. Swanson, who was expected by the afternoon train.

Digby, from the morning-room, had a good view of her as she alighted from the car, and realized that it was not very surprising that Sylvia seemed afraid of her. Mrs. Swanson was large and majestic, with a double chin and well-corseted bust. She was well dressed and quietly, but her face was both cold and hard, and her blue eyes held that predatory glare that incessant bridge seems to produce in middle-aged women.

Having given her suitable time to greet her daughter, he sent a message asking if he could see her for a moment. To his surprise, she came, in quite an amiable mood. He was yet to learn that one of the ruling passions of her life was a desire for publicity, and she had decided that the best way to gain the favourable notice she desired was to be amiable, if patronizing, to Digby.

He explained that they were at liberty to leave as soon as they liked, and that, indeed, it would be the best thing they could do, as the house would have to remain in the hands of the police for some time to come.

He listened politely to the account she gave him of the shock the news had given her, and noticed a trifle sardonically that she made no mention of the shock it had presumably been to her daughter, and that her sufferings did not include anxiety for her daughter mixed up in so terrible a business, so young and so alone.

A few questions satisfied him that she knew nothing of Greta that was of any help to him.

He mentioned Sylvia, to be told ‘She was a mere child’, and to hear a somewhat belated explanation for the apparent lack of maternal solicitude. She was like all these modern girls, very hard and unsensitive—‘hasn’t got a nerve in her body; of course I am very glad of that, but sometimes one can’t help wishing that they could sympathize with the agonies endured by supersensitive people like myself.’

Digby had been feeling fairly exasperated with Sylvia, but hearing this, and recalling her white face, her quivering mouth, her hunted eyes, his annoyance was swept away by pity.

‘A stupid woman,’ he decided. Sylvia might be a child in years, but she was not quite so childish as her mother thought her, and had apparently been in deep trouble for some time without her mother having the slightest idea of her sad little love affair and its tragic sequel. He gathered that she had seen her several times, and that they had spent a week together just before Mrs. Swanson had gone abroad, which must have been a short time after the disaster.

When she had gone back to her room he sent for Sylvia once again, and tried to make her tell him what had happened on the Sunday afternoon. He tried gentleness and he tried the sternness of authority, but she stuck to her story. They had had no quarrel. Elsie had been mistaken or malicious. Indeed she hardly took the trouble to disguise the fact that she was lying, but repeated her statements so mechanically, that he came to the conclusion she was so mentally exhausted, that even if the necessity for lying were over or—as he had hoped—reflection had told her she was being foolish, she would not have been able to do anything but stick to her story with weary obstinacy.

In spite of his annoyance, he remained sorry for her, and as she was leaving, said, ‘I understand you are leaving at once for London. I think you should have a complete rest. You look to me on the verge of a breakdown. It will save you from the attentions of the Press if you announce that you are suffering from shock, and perhaps when you feel better you will feel more inclined to give me the information and help that it is your duty to give.’ He finished in a tone that was gentler than his words.

Till far into the night Digby sat with his note-book and a mass of papers in front of him, his brow creased in a frown of perplexity.

Away in Balham Julius lay propped up in his uncomfortable little bed, reading Mrs. Beeton with stern concentration. Occasionally he swore softly to himself as the book slipped, for that stout volume is not adapted for reading in bed. Occasionally he let the book drop and gave himself up to his thoughts, which, judging from his face, were not pleasant. Then with a muttered, ‘Don’t be a fool. Pull yourself together, man,’ he would return to his ponderous tome.

CHAPTER X

THAT night's hard work left Digby with a neat and methodical summing up of his possible suspects.

Sylvia. She benefited by Greta's will. She had quarrelled with her. According to Oliphant she was unbalanced. She could, of course, enter Greta's room and talk to her without arousing suspicion. As a set off to that he thought that she was physically too weak. She was very small and slight, and he had discovered she did not play games. In any case there was not a shadow of evidence. On the other hand her lies and reticences might have been occasioned by something entirely unconnected with the murder, or it was possible that she was shielding some one and that some one could surely only be Julius. It was pure guess-work, but he felt that one of those communications in the Agony column was to her from Julius. A quiet watch would be kept on her when she returned to Town and he, Digby, would study *The Times* with interest.

Olga Brown. He could acquit her. Unless she was a homicidal lunatic he could think of no motive. Also she struck him as being much the most frank of all those with whom he had had to do, and if she had been unduly reticent it was from the very understandable motive of keeping hidden the more discreditable aspects of the party.

Phil Hanbury. She was jealous. She had a temper and was probably strong enough. Her attempt to provide an alibi for young Langdon looked as if she was innocent, unless she had been far cleverer than he thought she was and was really trying to provide one for herself. Again no evidence.

Jerry Soames he was prepared to acquit. He had no motive, and there was not the slightest suggestion that he was on anything but casual friendly terms with Greta.

Jack Langdon. There was something approaching evidence in his case. He had been seen leaving her room. He was in love with her and seriously upset at her approaching marriage. But on the whole he was inclined to accept his story. It was not impossible, in fact it was fairly probable behaviour from a weak young man suffering from an infatuation.

Gervase Oliphant. No motive that any one had hinted at yet. He appeared truthful, but he certainly had opportunity as had the others. He smoked Balkan Sobranies, but still there was no real evidence in that. That one of his cigarettes or rather one of the brand he smoked should have been

found in the murdered girl's room was proof of nothing. He was, according to Carter, hard up, but it was hard to see how he could benefit by her death—he knew about the diamonds—at least he knew they existed, but according to himself he thought they were at the bank, and there was nothing to suggest that he was not speaking the truth—except that little incident of the shaving-brush—though why any one should lie about that passed Digby's understanding; but somebody was certainly lying, for a further interview with the maid who attended to his room had elicited the statement that she had done the room after dinner and had particularly attended to the washbasin. She was lying or he was, or they had one or both forgotten—it was not very important, but Digby hated leaving little untidy ends about. Well, as a simple precaution Mr. Oliphant would be watched very carefully too.

Carter. He was improbable, nevertheless he could not be dismissed entirely. On the face of it the last thing a defaulting trustee, if he was that, and there was no proof that he was, would want, would be the stringent inquiry into all affairs that a crime would necessitate, but—money was the root of all evil and its lack seemed to lead to peculiar ingenuity in wrongdoing.

Lord Sands. That was more serious. He had admitted that he was prepared to do almost anything to break off the marriage, and Digby had a feeling that in some ways he would have found murder easier than the spying to which he had confessed. Then again there was that revolver. Elderly peers of peaceable habits do not usually include a revolver in their week-end luggage. Could it be that murder was in his thoughts when he came and that the revolver was intended—perhaps for the crime, more probably for himself should detection seem imminent?

Mercia. He seemed a harmless young man, but he was in love with Greta and there seemed little doubt that she was, to say the least of it, treating him very badly. He was not quick-witted, but if Lord Sands had suspected Greta was deceiving him, might he not have got the same idea more by instinct than reason. There was, of course, no evidence unless—could it be that Sands was on the watch that night less to spy on Greta than to keep an eye on his grandson?

Remained Julius. Against him there was the only bit of tangible evidence—the handkerchief. Of course it might be explained, but it was coupled with that unlocked door into the bathroom. It would have been easier for him than for any of the others, and he had disappeared. Everybody seemed agreed that he had been worried and upset. Certainly if he was the murderer he had done his best to hang himself, but in a crime of passion that was not unusual,

though Digby was far from convinced that it had been a crime of that type. There was the missing diamond necklace for one thing. The doctors were not able to swear that the slight bruises had been made by the necklace at all. It was possible, though unlikely, that it had been stolen by a maid ignorant of its value some time during the Monday, who had later hidden it—probably at the bottom of the lake—when she discovered what it was she had got hold of.

He had had a circular issued to all jewellers and pawn-brokers, which might bear fruit in a few days' time. It was practically certain that he would find out who had set the stones and so get an exact description and valuation of the necklace.

On the whole it was one of the most unsatisfactory cases he had ever had to deal with. Everybody was so deplorably vague, so inaccurate. The house was badly and unmethodically run, and so no one seemed able to give the exact time anything had happened or should have happened.

There was another little episode that illuminated this carelessness. Sylvia had said she had caught a chill bathing. The maid he had questioned to corroborate her story had said that she had not bathed though she had been out in her bathing-dress, for the maid had met her coming in with Mr. Lane, but the dress was not wet. It was trivial—no doubt she had thought the water looked cold, had shivered on the brink and then funked it—she would not have been the first to do so. To Digby's mind early morning swims in England were, except on a few rare occasions, akin to the mortifications of the flesh practised by Indian ascetics. All the same he felt strongly that though it was a venial sin to say you had bathed when you hadn't, to the police one should maintain strict accuracy.

He was returning to Town that day, but before he left, he motored to Poole to check, in his painstaking way, the statements of the duck-shooters.

He found out where they had left their car without much difficulty, and from there he went on to discover the man from whom they had hired their boat. His times tallied with theirs.

Finally he went to the inn where they had breakfasted on their way home.

Yes, they had certainly been there—a bit 'put out,' the waiter said, because they had had to wait for their breakfast.

What had they done while waiting?

'Sat about and rang the bell.'

'That all?'

‘Except the tallest gentleman. He had asked where the nearest pillar-box was, where he had posted a letter and then walked up and down for a bit.’

For a few days after he returned to Town Digby was fully occupied with the purely routine work of the case.

He received a visit from the jeweller who had set Greta’s necklace, and the next morning a young man was sent round to him with a written description which contained the weights, etc., of every stone.

Elsie’s dullish silver turned out to be platinum, and altogether the thing was more valuable than he had thought. The jeweller explained that the price of diamonds had risen and that the stones had been bought separately. Now that they were set, being well matched, they were naturally worth more.

He added that if the necklace was broken up the stones would be very difficult to trace as they were in no way remarkable.

After that he had to go through endless reports on the past life of all the house-party and their present activities, and what was worse, to sift the innumerable stories of red-haired young men. Needless to say, the police had realized that if Julius was still alive and deliberately hiding, which they had begun to doubt, he would by this time have done something to his hair, but the fancy of the general public having been caught by the red hair, they continued to report the appearance of any stranger with hair that by any stretch of imagination could be called red. Red hair being dismissed as a clue, the description was very nebulous. Apart from his hair it appeared Julius had no very striking features. Those who disliked him said that he was distinctly Jewish, those who liked him said one would hardly have known he had any Jewish blood.

Above all, to add to their difficulties, it appeared that quite unlike most young authors he had a rooted objection to being photographed. The only thing they had to go on was the photo in his passport which had been found in his rooms, and that might have been the photo of practically any youngish man, or for that matter—as Digby disgustingly remarked, ‘of any passably good-looking monkey’.

Digby himself made a visit down to Dorset to interview his old housekeeper, but she could tell him no more than she had told the local police when they had first made their inquiries. She offered him a photo of Julius at the age of two, stark naked on a bear-skin rug, which was not helpful. She had been his nurse and was obviously very attached to him, but she appeared to Digby to be an upright and truthful woman, and he felt bound to believe her when she told him that Julius, at any rate in the country, led a decent, hard-working life. He had plenty of friends and seemed to go

about a good deal, but his pleasures all appeared harmless. Only one thing of any interest did he glean, and that was that for about the past three months he had appeared depressed, had been sleeping badly and not eating much. Nurse put it down to the new book he had just begun, and remarked that it had never taken much to put him off his sleep. He might have been in love, she agreed, but he had said nothing to her. She was shocked at the tragedy, but very indignant indeed that the papers should dare to hint that ‘Master Julius’ could have anything to do with it, though she was obviously worried at his disappearance. He was, she admitted, frequently erratic in his movements, but he was considerate and always let her know where he was.

Digby tried to reassure her, and impressed on her the necessity for giving information the moment she heard from him or of him, and left her feeling far from sure if he would be obeyed if that unlikely contingency did arise. On Tuesday he was rung up by Gervase Oliphant.

‘I say,’ he began, ‘have you any idea when the adjourned inquest will be?’

‘I’m afraid I can’t say yet.’

‘Not for a week?’

‘No, certainly not.’

‘Then is it all right for me to go away for a few days?’

‘Where do you want to go?’

‘Well, I thought I’d go over to Ostend. Really things are more than I can stand—nobody will talk of anything but this horrible affair—ghouls. I can’t very well retire to bed and say I am suffering from shock or something, as the girls have done—and I can’t stand much more. Oh, if I do go I shan’t go under my own name—not at the hotel, I mean. Of course I’ll have to use my own passport, but I thought I’d better tell you in case you wondered what I was up to.’

Digby hesitated. He knew perfectly well that he had no right to detain him, and he did not see what harm he could do by going, though it went against the grain to let any one out of his sight so to speak, till he had completed his case, but it was not even certain that Gervase would be wanted at the adjourned inquest, so he said:

‘I can’t stop you and I quite understand that things must be very unpleasant.’

‘Unpleasant! It’s hell. I say——’

‘What?’

There was something like a giggle from the other end of the 'phone, and then Gervase went on, 'Your sleuth, you know. Do you think he'll like Ostend. I could make it Dinard if he'd prefer it, or isn't he going?'

'I don't quite understand,' Digby began icily.

'I'm sorry, but I couldn't help noticing and anyway I expected it. I had something to do with a case at the bank and got quite matey with the detective in charge—he told me a lot. I was sure that you would have us all watched, so I spotted your man—and I say——'

'Well, what now?' Digby was still rather annoyed.

'I'm afraid I gave him the slip once or twice. I couldn't resist trying to see if I could.'

'The police have their duties to perform,' was the severe answer, 'and it is the duty of every citizen to assist them in those duties, not to play tricks with them.' Then he laughed. 'All the same I may tell you, you enlivened Winter's time as well as your own—it's a dull job. Will you let me know when you are going?' He rang off.

He was still nursing his private guess that the Ariadne advertisements were from Julius. There had been three more. The first had appeared on the Wednesday, there had been another on Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

They ran as follows:

'Ariadne. My pseudonym is too presumptuous but I couldn't help it. Truly you can trust me. D.'

'Ariadne. All goes well. Answer if you can, once only. D.'

'Ariadne. Say nothing, do nothing. It won't be for long. D.'

Then had come one that was obviously an answer.

'D. What do you know? Ariadne.'

Digby seized *The Times* with a certain excitement the next morning but found no answer, but the next day it was there.

'Ariadne. About you, all. For the rest, nothing. D.'

He had sent a man down to *The Times* office, and after a certain amount of difficulty the following information had been extracted. The advertisements had all been typed with the exception of the first one. The name and address that had to be enclosed as a guarantee of good faith were given as 'Robert Sinclair, 27A Montpellier Square.' Inquiry revealed that Robert Sinclair did indeed live there, but was at present on his summer holidays, which it was believed had taken the form of a cruise on the

Mediterranean. No one knew his exact address. Another dead end. He arranged that he should be allowed to see any more advertisements that came in with their envelopes, as something might be learnt from their postmarks.

Later he had an interview with Alf Parsons who was inclined to be grumpy. He had realized that it was his duty to tell the police what he knew, but he did not relish the idea of getting Julius into trouble, having his own ideas on the subject of that young man.

He gave a brief account of their meeting and went on, 'I tell you, you are barking up the wrong tree if you want that young—gentleman'—to himself he thought of Julius as a nice young fellow, but this seemed a subtle way of putting Digby in his place—'for murder. He hadn't been a-murdering of no young women in their beds—too soft hearted he was—why he nearly broke his neck avoiding a ruddy rabbit, and what's more he was clean knocked out, and you don't tell me that a young fellow that's flying away from a horrible murder wouldn't let on something when he come to. "Gosh," he says, "I'm going to be sick," and that was all, and later he goes on to speak of Shakespeare and what not. I tell you he wasn't the sort to go murdering any one, let alone a girl—he'd be far more likely to let them put upon him—out of pure good-heartedness—'e'd see through them all right—he wasn't no fool.'

'Well,' Digby answered patiently, 'I haven't said he did commit a murder, but he was there in the house and I should very much like to hear what he could tell me about it. Quite apart from that if he's innocent, as you seem to think, and has no reason for disappearing, he may have met with an accident. His friends are getting anxious.'

Alf answered more amiably. 'He did say he was coming to see me the next day or the day after. He said he'd got to stay in London some time and most of his friends were away, so I suppose he was glad of some one to talk to of an evening,' he finished modestly, but Digby, looking at the face opposite him, felt that Julius had shown great sense if he had wished to pursue this acquaintance, friends or no friends. There was something very attractive about the steady brown eyes, the big nose and chin suggested strength, and there was about the whole figure a strange, indefinable air of ease and self-confidence. Alf's opinion was worth a good deal, Digby decided.

Alf, who had paused, went on, 'He said it as if he meant it. I can't help thinking that if, as you say, he has cleared out, it must have been because of something that happened after he left me.'

‘Did he seem worried about anything? I have been told he had behaved like a man with something on his mind for some time past.’

‘He didn’t look well, but that was ’ardly surprising, not if you’d seen the toss he took, and of course he was in love.’

‘He told you that?’ Digby asked, surprised.

‘It come up in conversation. Not happy he wasn’t. I understand ’is young lady preferred another, and what is more that she’d been very ill and still was—though I may be mistaken there—he didn’t say it in so many words—might have been an accident perhaps—but he’d been badly frightened about ’er.’

‘Thank you. I’m sure I needn’t remind you that it is your duty to communicate with us immediately if you hear anything of him.’

‘You needn’t!’ was the dry answer. ‘I knows it perfectly well.’

With this he departed, leaving Digby to think over his story. Sylvia would fit the part of the ‘young lady’ up to a certain point. She had certainly ‘preferred another’, but he did not know that Julius was in love with her though it seemed quite possible, but she had not been ill or in an accident as far as he knew, and she had not spoken of Julius as if she thought he loved her—once again his thoughts reverted to fish. After he had spent time and trouble in unravelling the details of Julius’s love affairs and racking his brains for that young man’s probable reactions—a thankless task since God alone knew how a lover would behave—it would probably turn out that it had no bearing on the murder or his disappearance.

Digby sighed impatiently, and then as the ’phone rang took it up with relief. Needless to say, it was a report of a young man with red hair who had been behaving oddly in Macclesfield.

CHAPTER XI

JULIUS, in the meantime, was discovering rather more about the suburbs than had been his first intention.

Mrs. Wood had remained away and the baby had remained ill. One of his discoveries had been that he had a flair for cookery. He had made a profound study of the invaluable Mrs. Beeton; books being his trade, he was one of those who can take instructions more quickly and easily from the printed word than from precept and practice, so it had not taken him more than two of his still rather sleepless nights to grasp the general principles, and in the days that followed, in spite of a few half-hearted protests from Mrs. Craig, he had constituted himself cook, ably assisted by Cecilia.

On the whole he was profoundly thankful. It gave him something to do and filled up the time. It also made him so much safer. The greater the terms of intimacy he was on with the Craigs, the less likely it was that they could ever think he was wanted by the police.

It was on the Tuesday, about the same time that Gervase was informing Digby he could bear London no longer, that a new disaster struck the Vicarage, for Mrs. Craig collapsed. A prolonged fainting fit frightened them all, and the hastily summoned doctor, though reassuring them that it was not serious, insisted that she must have rest. They were, Julius reflected, a thoroughly unlucky family. After a worried and agitated council, the baby, now much better, and Rosalind were taken by their father to an aunt who lived in Hampstead. In the deserted kitchen Julius addressed Cecilia and Bobby, both looking very grave and worried.

‘Mummie’s ill, but she’s not so very bad. You needn’t be anxious. It’s only the heat and being worried about Angela’s teeth—she wants rest and very nice meals, which we must cook. Now, Bobby, will you go to the fishmonger’s and order sixpen’orth of ice and—I know. Get some eau-de-Cologne at the chemist’s—it’s a nice thing to have when you’re ill.’ He took some money from his pocket and handed it over. ‘Look out for the crossing.’

Bobby departed full of pride, and Julius turned to Cecilia.

‘Now then, where’s Mrs. Beeton? Turn up “Invalid Cookery” and let’s see what we can find for Mummie’s supper that is within our scope and not too extravagant.’

Together they bent over the table and he went on, ‘What lovely names you have; Cecilia, Rosalind, Angela—three sweet symphonies—I *am* glad

you don't shorten them.'

'They are pretty, aren't they? What about this? There's a bit of that cold fowl.'

Julius read the recipe and shook his head. 'There's cream and eggs as well—besides, I'm terrified of doing those things where it says "on no account let it boil or the eggs will curdle"—they curdle long before the damn—oh, sorry—the dratted—that's suitable for a cook—thing boils.'

She laughed. 'I've heard "damn" before even if I am a parson's daughter. Daddy says it—so do I.'

'I know you do.'

'What about this—oh, no, three eggs again. When I grow up I shall marry a man of enormous wealth so that it won't matter if I have thousands of eggs in every pudding.'

'You wouldn't be able to cook then,' Julius pointed out. 'You'd have a French chef called Alphonse, and a most frightfully haughty butler and a maid all black silk and a little white apron—with pockets in it,' he continued, drawing on his recollections of stage ladies' maids, 'who would treat you with "respect and discretion", Mrs. Beeton says, and you'd be terrified to go near the kitchen. Here I think this will do "Fish Soufflé", we can run to one egg.'

He straightened himself and moved towards the larder.

'Saucepan, basin, spoon, fork,' murmured Cecilia. Then, 'I *should* be afraid of servants like that—I know, I'll live in the country and keep a cow and hens. That will be splendid and so good for the children.'

'What children?'

'Mine, I mean to have six, three boys and three girls, and they shall each have a dog of their own—how many are you going to have?'

'Dogs or children? I've got a dog already. Haven't I told you about him? He's a bull terrier called Ban—he was Launcelot's cousin.'

'Will you tell me more about Launcelot and Tristram?—they are truly romantic,' she sighed.

'Yes, after tea—or supper or whatever the meal is.'

'Hasn't to-day been upset?'

'It has. I don't know what time your Daddy will get back, but I think Mummie ought to have her supper at the usual time—we three will have a spot of tea out here in the kitchen when we've done this.' He broke an egg and separated the yoke from the white with great efficiency. 'I say, didn't I do that well—now you beat up the yoke and I'll do the white. That's it.'

You've got a way with you over cooking. Your husband will have a treasure—if I wasn't engaged myself I should wait eight years on the chance of persuading you to marry me—but as it is——'

'Are you very much in love?'

'Will you keep it to yourself if I tell you?'

'I promise, on my honour!'

'“Neither rhyme nor reason can express how much.”'

'That's Shakespeare. We did “As You Like It” at school last term.'

'Shakespeare—that reminds me——' Julius stood quite still.

'Reminds you of what?'

'To look up a quotation, that's all.'

'But seriously, are you so much in love?'

'Seriously, as much as even you could wish.'

'What's she like?'

'She's got dark hair.'

'I was sure she would have.'

'Why?'

'It's so much lovelier than fair.' She shook back her own despised yellow mop.

'I don't know about that—what about Golden Helen?—she was the world's desire.'

'Perhaps,' was the dubious answer, 'but go on.'

'Her eyes are blue—the most wonderful blue you ever dreamt of, and she's small and rather pale—and not very happy.'

'Why?'

'Her mother isn't very kind to her.'

'Well, when she marries you she won't be able to do anything to her. When are you going to be married?'

'I don't quite know. Soon I hope, but——'

'Doesn't her mother want her to marry you?'

'No, she wants her to marry some one with ever so much money.'

'Oh, but she won't, not if she loves you,' said Cecilia confidently.

Julius's mouth twitched suddenly. Then he said briskly, 'Tell me what the man you're going to marry will be like.'

'He'll be tall and slim, with wavy dark hair and rather mournful dark eyes,' began Cecilia with gusto, 'and rather a hawk-like nose and beautiful

white teeth and very long, pointed white fingers.'

At this moment Bobby returned, and the talk turned to more mundane things as Julius began to struggle to cut bread and butter.

'We'll have to eat all these bits and crumbs,' he said, as he discarded a hopelessly unsymmetrical slice. 'But I should just like to get two decent ones for Mummie. Cecilia, don't you think you'd better go up now and see if she wants anything before tea. Take the eau-de-Cologne and——' He looked at her doubtfully as she leant against the table. She was a pretty child, very fair, with wide-set grey eyes, but her face was undeniably dirty, so was her pink cotton frock, half hidden by the tea-cloth tied round her waist. 'I think you'd better wash, and could you change that dress?'

'Must I wash?' she asked in dismay, standing on tiptoe to see into the glass. Then despondently, 'I suppose I must, but I've only got one other clean dress and that's not very clean. Do you think we could wash some after tea?'

'We could *wash* them,' said Julius, a trifle doubtfully, 'but don't they have to be ironed or something?'

'Oh, I can iron,' was the cheerful answer.

'All right, we'll try. Now tell your mother that everything is going splendidly and there's nothing to worry about. Bobby, you've laid that tray beautifully. Call down when you're ready, Cecilia, and I'll bring it upstairs and you can take it in.'

He sat on the kitchen table and took up Mrs. Beeton again.

'This is a wonderful book,' he murmured again. 'It tells you everything.' He cast an eye over the tray and then added, 'It says a flower on the tray is a good idea.'

'I'll get one.' Bobby shot out of the back door and returned with a rather pathetic little rose.

'There, that's perfect. Help me clear the things off the table, old man, and then we'll have our tea—I expect you can do with it—it is hot, isn't it?'

About the time that Julius was embarking on his amateur laundry—a very wet and messy business that was thoroughly enjoyed by all except perhaps the cat, who happened to be in the way when Bobby upset a basin of water—Digby started off to pay a call on Olga Brown.

She saw him in the very modern sitting-room of her little Bloomsbury flat.

Digby sat rather nervously on the very low divan she indicated and began cheerfully, 'Don't you think you could give me a little more

information now. I quite understood that when I was down at Clinton you were all anxious to keep certain facts from me—or rather the papers, as I am sure you must know that such things as gambling and so forth in a private house are no concern of mine.’

‘I think I was rather foolish,’ Olga answered, ‘but you see we all thought it was a burglar, and so it didn’t seem as if anything we said or didn’t say could possibly matter; and I knew well enough that “goings on”, as my woman would say, are far more exciting for the papers than a mere robbery with violence—and I’ve been through it all before.’

Digby nodded sympathetically. ‘You mean your divorce and the trouble about the book. I have naturally looked up your past life along with the others.’

Olga gave a queer, twisted little smile. ‘I wonder what you made of it all?’

‘I think it was obvious that you had done nothing but marry an unspeakable cad, as many a woman has done before, but I admit that by the time he and the papers had done their worst no one would have believed it.’

‘They didn’t!’ she interjected dryly, ‘and that made the book affair worse. I was honestly surprised over that though you mayn’t believe it. I had got so sick of the silly set I haven’t the strength of mind to break away from, that I thought I’d try and show them what boneheads they were—they aren’t wicked, you know—just slack and lazy and discontented and self-indulgent—and then the book was burnt by the public hangman!’ She laughed. ‘It is rather funny, for it was the only thing I have ever written in my life with the idea of doing a spot of good.’

‘You made the mistake of being too direct—there are certain things and words that come within the legal definition of indecency and so on.’

‘I know that, and I suppose I deserved what I got for the artistic failure, but I wanted to make it ugly—if you are vague it sounds romantic and Bohemian and all the rest of it. But surely you didn’t come here to talk about my past?’

‘Not exactly, but I am sure you have seen by the papers that any attempt at reticence is hopeless. I assure you they have had no help from me, but really your friends seem to have been singularly unlucky in creating scandals, and one can’t stop the papers from recalling the facts that Miss Swanson’s fancy dress at the “Four Arts” ball was so—*outré* that they requested her to alter it or leave—particularly as she took no steps to deny the story.’

‘I’ll tell you anything you like to ask. I *can* speak the truth, though you may find it hard to believe.’

‘First, about the poker on Saturday night?’

‘They began fairly reasonably, but they were all drinking a good deal—so was I,’ she added frankly, ‘but I’ve a good head—I didn’t play, neither did Sylvia—and later on the stakes were very high, far higher than any of them could afford except perhaps Greta, but she won, so did Jack and Carter. I can’t give you actual figures, but I should say Fay Dallas, Gervase and Jerry lost anything from between fifty to a hundred pounds each.’

‘And that was more than they could afford?’

‘Well, Jack’s father is quite wealthy, so I don’t suppose it would mean more than a row for him, but I know Fay is broke—her husband has been practically bankrupt for years—how they live I don’t know—on what he makes racing, I think—and Gervase—well, I’m not so sure—he said he was frightfully hard up, but he had just got engaged to a very wealthy girl.’

‘I didn’t know that.’

Olga bit her lip. ‘I shouldn’t have said that, but I thought you knew—I only knew by accident—it was during that week-end—just before dinner on Saturday. I was in the library looking for something to read, kneeling on the floor almost hidden by a big chair when Fay and Gervase came in. He was opening a letter and he said, “It’s all right, thank God. She’s accepted me.” Of course I got up then and pretended not to have heard anything. I knew it must be Marjorie Maitland.’

‘They didn’t say anything about it?’

‘No, I imagine he didn’t want to announce it till he had seen her—afterwards I forgot all about it.’

‘He is very friendly with Lady Dallas then?’

‘Oh, yes—he’s known her for ages, so he says.’

‘I take it that you haven’t thought of anything that might be of any help—since I saw you before.’

Olga shook her head. ‘No, except that I can tell you now that I’m not surprised. Greta was the sort of woman who gets murdered. I remember during that very week-end I thought that one of these days she would go too far—in fact I said to myself that it was only because most of the men she knew seemed so spineless, she hadn’t found herself in real trouble before—she nearly did once too.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘About a year ago a boy committed suicide. It was because of her, but her name was kept out of it.’

‘About Miss Sylvia. Were they on good terms?’

‘Oh, yes. Though I don’t know what was the matter with Sylvia lately—I thought perhaps she was just beginning to see what a silly, soul-destroying life she was leading and didn’t quite know how to get out of it—oh, I’ve just remembered something——’

‘What?’

‘I don’t suppose it’s very important, but when they were settling up for the poker, Carter paid for Lady Dallas and she gave him her I.O.U. He said something about it being more convenient as he would be seeing her in Town later—I remember thinking that if I’d got to owe money to any one I’d far rather owe it to Jack Langdon than to Carter.’

Digby was silent for a few minutes wondering how he should phrase his next question. Finally he said, ‘Did you think that any of the men staying there that week-end were—in love with Miss Swanson?’

‘Well, poor Mercia was cracked about her—all this must have been an awful shock to him—not but what he isn’t lucky if one looks at it dispassionately.’

‘Any one else?’

‘I don’t know,’ was the slow answer, ‘and yet I feel there was. I can’t put my finger on anything exactly, but there were things Greta said that didn’t seem to have much meaning, and yet you felt from the tone of her voice that they had—you know?’

Digby nodded. ‘You mean things said—to annoy?’

‘Yes, and to show her power. Little things like the way she could always get what she wanted—that any one who tried to thwart would be very ill-advised—all said with an undercurrent as if they were meant to make some one squirm, but who it was I haven’t the slightest idea. I thought Gervase was very keen on her at one time, but he seemed to have got over it and, anyway, I don’t think he is the sort of young man to take things hard—I should think he was keener on his tennis than his heart.’

‘He struck me as rather a typical young man.’

‘Ye-es. Perhaps he thinks a bit more of himself than is quite our English ideal. He has a very good opinion of himself, has young Gervase. I suppose it isn’t altogether surprising as he’s had a good deal of fuss made of him.’

‘What about young Mr. Lane?’

‘Oh, Julius. I don’t know him very well. He doesn’t really belong to that set. It’s early days to say yet, but I shouldn’t be surprised if that boy turned out to be a genius—a real one. I see that the papers are suggesting now that you want him for the murder. Of course I’ve never met any murderers, but I should say it’s perfectly ridiculous, though what can have happened to him I can’t think. He had ideas about taking one’s responsibilities seriously—during that very week-end I remember we were arguing about politics, all complaining, we were, as far as I remember, and he suddenly remarked that we all made him sick, that the government was us, that we were adult citizens, and yet we apparently expected everything to be done for us as if we were children and half-witted at that, and that our one idea was to try and shelve our responsibilities; he was in a very bad temper that week-end, but he does practise what he preaches to a certain extent, I know, so I think he would have come to the inquest as his duty unless something really serious had happened to prevent him—only, of course, with Julius you can’t be quite sure what he would call serious, but I dare say he would be right, and I don’t think he would let a little thing like being had up for contempt of court stand in his way. I’m sorry I’ve not been able to give you any more help, because I shall be glad when the whole business is cleared up. I dare say it’s selfish, but really it is horrible for us, you know.’

Digby gave her his sincere sympathy and departed.

That night Julius abandoned Mrs. Beeton for Shakespeare. It was hours before he found what he wanted, and when he had, he let the book fall from his hands and sat very still, his face white.

‘So that was it,’ he muttered. ‘My God!’ Suddenly his hand went to his throat. ‘Oh, hell, I’m going to be sick again. I *did* think I had got over that.’

CHAPTER XII

THE next morning Oliphant rang up to say he intended to cross the following day, Thursday.

Digby got his address, the Grand Hotel, and learnt that he intended to call himself Oliver. Then he wished him a pleasant holiday, and as soon as he had rung off sought an interview with his chief, Sir Charles Vaughan.

He made a brief report on the case, which he sadly admitted did not seem much nearer solution than it was a week ago. Finally Sir Charles said, 'As a man and not a policeman and evidence be damned, have you any ideas?'

'Well,' was the slow answer, 'I have got one, but it seems so improbable that I think I'm a fool for holding it, and I'd rather not say anything if you don't mind, sir. It's bad enough to have to struggle with it myself. I've not a shadow of evidence, and you know what I think of "intuition".' There was a world of scorn in his voice.

'I won't press you. After all, our business is to collect facts and then see where they point. What do you intend doing now?'

'To-day ought to see the end of all the reports on the past lives and so on of all the people in the case. Then I think I shall go down to Clinton again. One thing I wanted to ask you, sir. I want a very good man to go over to Ostend to-night.'

He gave a brief account of Gervase's movements. 'Things being as they are I don't think we ought to neglect the smallest chance. It's probably waste of time and money, but all the same I think it should be done. He's quite a bright young man and spotted he was being shadowed. I don't so much mind that, but he showed a good deal of ingenuity in giving my man the slip. He said he couldn't resist the temptation of trying to see if he could do it. Well, I dare say he was bored and is at a loose end—but he was clever at it—that's why I thought that it would be better to send some one over to-night. He's not likely to suspect a man already in his hotel. You see, sir, it has struck me that perhaps he knows more than he has said about Mr. Lane. After all, he was the only one who saw him when he left. He may know where he is—anyway, it's worth trying.'

'Yes, send some one by all means. Choose a man who can speak French and I'll ring up Huysmann. He's a personal friend of mine and will give him

any semi-official assistance that he needs. Then if your young Oliphant doesn't behave with perfect correctness you can tell him about it afterwards, which will be a bit of a shock for the lad. Young men who try to be funny with Scotland Yard deserve a lesson. What are you going to do if by any chance you do find Lane there? I don't think we've evidence enough for an arrest.'

'Oh, no, sir, I'll go over and get his statement. Of course the papers insist that his flight is proof of guilt, but to my mind it's much more like proof of innocence—only a fool would try to escape, and he's no fool, I've discovered that.'

'To say that flight is foolish presupposes the certainty of capture. I would point out that up to date his flight has been remarkably successful,' was the dry answer.

'I know. Where the devil can he have got to? I'd give a good deal if I could see him now.'

At that moment Julius, bending intently over the gas-cooker was saying to Cecilia, 'This is an awful moment. Do you think that "coats the back of the spoon", because if it does, the custard is done, and if we go on it will go all bluey. I *do* hate these dealings with eggs, but an invalid must have custard.'

'Well, even if it is a bit thin it won't matter. Take it off now and I'll put it in the little glasses. Can I lick the spoon and the saucepan?'

'Yes, of course.' Julius mopped his forehead and watched her as she poured it out.

Then busily scraping the saucepan she said, 'I do hope Daddy doesn't find a woman—I like this.'

'So do I,' Julius agreed cheerfully. 'But though we are jolly good cooks, you and I, we *are* slow, and there are the beds to make and so on—mine never got made at all yesterday—did yours?'

'No, I just pulled it straight when I went up to bed. Anyway, I always think making them is rather a waste of time. I always make mine untidy the moment I get in it.'

'I rather agree with you,' was Julius's reprehensible answer, 'but in the daytime you must admit they look rather like one of the more depressing Russian novels.'

'I've never read one. Tell me about it.'

'They talk and talk——'

‘So do we,’ Cecilia pointed out. ‘Do you think we are Russian?’

‘No, I don’t think so. They wouldn’t cook, they just drink vodka.’

‘But what on earth has he done it for?’ Sir Charles asked in an exasperated voice.

‘Well, there *is* always the possibility that he doesn’t know anything about it. Suppose he was thoroughly fed up with the whole crowd—and we’ve good evidence that he was—and Parsons insists he was unhappily in love—perhaps he wanted to get away from every one for a time. He may be in one of the smaller French villages or in Italy—or for that matter even in England. There are people even in these days who don’t read the papers.’

‘But surely he would have let his housekeeper know?’

‘He might have written a post card that has gone astray, or more probably he forgot to post it—I don’t say that this is probable, but it is possible. I think it more likely that he knows something—perhaps even who the criminal is and can’t face giving evidence, and has cleared out in the hopes that we will find out without his help.’

There was a silence and then Digby said, ‘I’ve got an idea that these advertisements are from him. I haven’t much proof to go on except that I am sure Miss Sylvia saw more in the paper than an advertisement of a domestic training college, and this is the only one that could apply.’

He took out the cuttings and laid them on the table.

‘You see how they go. “Ariadne.” That gave me a sort of idea too. I did get out of Miss Sylvia that she had been in love with a young man who was killed. I suppose you could call that desertion and Mr. Lane must have had to decide on the thing in a hurry——’

‘What are you talking about? If I ever knew anything of Ariadne I’ve forgotten it. Something about a clue—we could do with one.’

‘I don’t mean that bit of the story, it’s the end this refers to. She sailed with Theseus when he returned to Athens, but he landed her on the island of Naxos and deserted her as she lay asleep. To her came the God Dionysius who loved her and married her and made a constellation out of her marriage crown. At least that’s one story—the most usual one, there are others—it’s all in Plutarch—oh——’

‘What is it—an idea?’

‘Hardly an idea, sir. Just a notion, and if I’m right, finding him won’t help in the solution of the murder.’

‘It’s a tricky case, I admit.’ Sir Charles consoled him. ‘I’ve never read such an inaccurate set of statements.’

‘I know. They were terrible. Never thought of anything with any exactness in all their lives. Well, it’s dogged does it. There’s always the hope that the diamonds may lead to something.’

Back in his own room he found the man waiting for him who had been conducting some inquiries into Fay Dallas’s past life.

‘I’ve got it pretty well all, sir, and I don’t think you will find much in it. Born 1887 in Hackney Wick, real name Muriel Briggs. Parents died when she was sixteen. She went on the stage. Been in pantomimes and so on before. Toured in the chorus of second-rate companies for some time. Finally, in 1907 she took up with one Albert Saunders—he was a theatrical agent. She lived under his protection for six years, then he died, but by that time she was getting quite good parts; lead in touring companies and so on. In 1915 got a London engagement, and in 1916 was living under the protection of Charles Oliphant, who was then fighting in France—spent his leaves with her, and was with her for the greater part of the winter 1918-19, recovering from a wound. He was killed in Russia in 1920. By that time she was well known and popular, and was star in three musical comedies that each ran for a year or so. In 1925 she left the stage to marry——’

‘Yes, I know the rest, but this Charles Oliphant.’ Digby turned over his note-book. ‘Was he regular army?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Then it’s the same man. Father of the young man in this case. That would account for his being friendly with her, I suppose. He’d have been about twenty-one when his father died.’

‘Well, I think we will see Lady Dallas again,’ Digby murmured to himself, and set off for the Mayfair Mews where the Dallases lived in a converted garage.

However he was unsuccessful. A stern-faced maid opened the door and announced that Lady Dallas was very ill and could see no one without the doctor’s permission. She gave him the doctor’s name and Digby perforce withdrew. Of course he would see her if it was essential, but in the face of a doctor willing to grant a certificate there would be certain formalities to be gone through.

At the bottom of the mews he met Carter, who passed him with a brief greeting. Digby, rather interested to know if the doctor’s prohibition applied to any one but the police, paused to light a cigarette, and in a moment had

the pleasure of seeing Carter coming towards him with a scowl on his face. It cleared at the sight of Digby, and he stopped to speak to him.

‘I suppose you, like myself, have been to see Lady Dallas,’ he said pleasantly enough, ‘though I must say I think it is rather hard lines on her.’

‘I haven’t seen her,’ Digby answered. ‘I want to, but I won’t keep her long. I must see her doctor and find out when will be the best time. Has she been ill long, do you know?’

‘I haven’t seen her since she got back from Clinton. I understand from her maid that she had a hæmorrhage that night and has seen no one since. One can hardly wonder—she has been threatened with phthisis for some time, and it was a terrible affair. Miss Sylvia is ill too—nervous breakdown. So far I have done the necessary business with her mother, but I understand that her case is not serious, and is more in the nature of a protection against the Press and too officious friends.’

‘Yes. You could give me a little information if you would. You told me that Mr. Oliphant was in a bad way financially——’

‘I suppose I shouldn’t have said anything about that, but still it is fairly well known that he has been speculating—he made no particular secret of it among his friends, and I happen to know he bought Amalgamated Oxides which slumped heavily, and in fact, if he can’t raise a few thousands in the next week or so, I should say he’d be done for. I’m practically certain that his private means have gone long ago. Whether he could borrow—is, I should say, doubtful.’

‘Another question, rather an impertinent one, I’m afraid, but I must ask it. Have all the gambling debts of that week-end been settled up?’

‘What on earth——’ Carter began in indignant tones.

‘I’m sorry, but you see it was owing to Mr. Langdon’s winnings that Mr. Lane had so much cash on him.’ He gave a brief account of the motor-bicycle deal, and then continued, ‘I understand that Lady Dallas owed you a good deal—has that been paid yet?’

Carter hesitated, and then, with a reluctance that Digby felt was not altogether genuine, said, ‘No, but of course under the circumstances——’

‘Of course,’ Digby agreed. ‘Mr. Soames?’

‘Oh, he settled up during the week-end. Gave me a cheque, quite O.K.’

‘Mr. Oliphant?’

‘Not yet—he’s away from Town.’

Digby returned to the Yard and rang up the doctor, who told him that Lady Dallas would not be able to see him till the middle of the following

week at the earliest. She had been suffering from phthisis for some time, and on her return from Clinton had had a severe hæmorrhage. She was better, but still seriously ill.

He then caught the afternoon train down to Clinton. He thought he might as well get a Sunday in the country, as he intended going down there again.

The inn was full, so Rogers had taken rooms for him at the little combined post office and shop kept by a garrulous widow.

Rogers met him at the station and came back with him to make his report. No trace of any outsider had been found, which was only what Digby had expected, as he had never doubted that the murderer was one of the house-party.

A more thorough search had been made of the house and grounds, but the necklace had not been discovered.

The village had talked of nothing but the murder for the past week, but the constable who had, it appeared, heard most of the gossip had nothing new to report. The general impression seemed to be that, first it was a judgment for the 'goings on' at the Manor, and second, though this was not so frankly expressed, a godsend for the village in the way of morbid sight-seers and food for gossip.

Mrs. Dickson was, of course, full of the subject, and as she placed her lodger's supper on the table, she kept up a long monologue, interrupted by excursions to the kitchen and hearty encouragement to eat more. She had, it appeared, attained a certain celebrity as the last person in the village to speak to the dead girl. 'The very day she were murdered, it were. Just about tea-time she came in for some stamps. One of the young gentlemen was with her——'

'Which one?' Digby asked mechanically.

'The tall one with the fair hair.'

'Mr. Oliphant?'

'That's him. I had a few words with him too, a very pleasant-spoken young gentleman. He bought a registered envelope, and he hadn't been gone more than a few minutes when he came running back and says, "I quite forgot. I was asked to get a small bottle of marking-ink. Just like me to remember my own affair and forget what I was asked to do. I must be a selfish fellow," and he laughs. A nice young gentleman, I thought, though they do say that none of them up there was any better than they should be ——'

She paused expectantly, and Digby said, 'Ah, you shouldn't believe all you hear. Did you see anything of the others?'

‘Not that time,’ was the regretful answer. ‘Miss Sylvia, of course, I’ve seen pretty often. A quiet young lady, she seemed, and looked ill to my mind. Mr. Lane I’ve seen fairly frequent—he ain’t been found yet, I understand—do you think he did it, sir?—the papers seemed to hint at it like, but it’s an awful thought—he’s been in this very shop——’ She rambled on, but Digby was not listening.

It was still light after supper, so he set out to stroll up to the Manor. He was in deep thought, a heavy frown on his forehead, which made him look very different from the quiet and inconspicuous figure that he usually presented. It was only when he was very absorbed that the essential strength of his face seemed to be visible—a certain dogged determination that enabled him to follow to the bitter end the lines that were suggested by his brilliant brain. Brains that were apt, he knew, to lead him astray by being just a little too clever—too inclined to work out a brilliant hypothesis without pausing to see if he had all the facts at his command.

As he entered the grounds he murmured to himself, ‘It is possible—it’s the most plausible solution, but why—why? Anyway, this is a thousand to one against—if it comes off I shall feel almost justified——’

He had reached the house, and he now began a careful search in the herbaceous border that ran along one wall. At the end of ten minutes’ groping he stood up triumphantly looking down at a small bottle of marking ink that lay in his palm. For a minute he remained staring up at the windows above him, then he turned and walked slowly towards the village.

The next morning he returned to Town.

CHAPTER XIII

THE first thing he did when he got back to Town was to make a list of all the Ariadne advertisements, with their places of posting gathered from the postmarks. They were as follows:

Wednesday, July 31st. 'Remember down by the lake. Trust me. All will be well. More to-morrow.'

This had, presumably, been posted in or near London, as it had arrived in time for insertion in the next day's issue.

Thursday, August 1st. 'My pseudonym is too presumptuous, but I couldn't help it. Truly you can trust me.' Posted at Taunton.

Friday, August 2nd. 'All goes well. Answer if you can, once only.' Posted at Newcastle.

Saturday, August 3rd. 'Say nothing. Do nothing. It won't be long.' Posted at Manchester.

Wednesday, August 7th. 'About you, all. For the rest, nothing.' Posted at Bedford.

Thursday, August 8th. 'I do not forget the past, but there is still the future.' Posted in Dublin.

Saturday, August 10th. 'There is a way out of all difficulties. I have found yours.' Posted in Hyères.

This was the one Digby had found waiting for him, and he swore softly to himself.

'What is he doing?' he muttered. 'He can't be dodging about, like a snipe, all over the place, and surely he can't have friends in all those places so devoted to him that they are willing to hide his whereabouts.'

A close examination of the dates showed it would be impossible to get from Dublin to Hyères in the given time, unless he had flown, and that seemed impossible in view of the strict watch that was being kept at all ports and aerodromes. He wondered if there were, by any chance, a friend in collusion with him who was doing this extensive travelling. He gave orders that all Julius's intimate friends were to be looked up, and an unobtrusive account of their recent doings obtained.

There was another advertisement the next morning posted from Reading. It ran:

‘Ariadne. Read Plutarch. I am a friendly Naxian too, but the story shall have a happy ending. D.’

As Digby read it he crashed his fist down on the table. ‘So I *was* right,’ he exclaimed. ‘Well, young man, I shan’t trouble any more about you, though I shall be very interested to hear how you have managed. Now let me see——’ He drew a calendar towards him and studied it attentively.

A few minutes later he was summoned by his Chief. He went in a much more cheerful frame of mind, and greeted Sir Charles with a calm that the latter recognized, as the usual forerunner of good news.

‘Well, discovered anything fresh?’ Sir Charles inquired.

‘I’m not quite sure, sir. I have at least got one or two significant facts, and I am in hopes of being able to prove to you, at any rate, who is the criminal, but whether we shall ever have enough evidence for a conviction is another thing. I think by the end of this week—I’ll be in a position to lay all the facts before you, also I am pretty certain that I shall be able to produce Mr. Lane.’

‘What?’

Digby smiled. ‘Oh, yes, I think I know what his reasons have been, but I haven’t the faintest idea where he is at the moment. Of course’—Digby spoke with entire impartiality—‘I may be entirely wrong, but I intend to spend the next few days in testing all my conclusions and trying to do a little more eliminating—there are still one or two people who have not been entirely frank with me.’

‘Miss Sylvia for one,’ said Sir Charles, who was looking at his notes of the case.

‘Yes, but I think I know all that she could tell me. I shall let her alone for the present, but there is Lady Dallas, though I think I shall let her alone too—and Lord Sands. I wish he would be frank with me; I’ll see him to-day.’

That afternoon saw Digby in Portman Square, where he had arranged an interview by telephone.

He found Lord Sands looking older and greyer even in these few days.

Digby began frankly, ‘I have come to ask you a question, my lord, and I hope you will answer me openly. Will you tell me the real reason you took that revolver with you to Clinton Manor?’

There was a silence. Then Sands said slowly, ‘It is hard to say. I don’t think I made it clear to you how strongly I felt on the subject of that marriage—and I have a very—a very violent temper when it is aroused—it has been all my life a struggle to control it. At the back of my mind was the

feeling that it might perhaps get the better of me and then—I could not answer for what I should do—in that case it was for myself.’

‘You are implying that you went there with thoughts of murder in your mind?’ was the grave question.

‘No. I won’t go as far as that. I didn’t allow myself to think—but, well, it’s impossible to explain exactly what was in my mind—but I will swear to you that I had no hand in the murder, nor have I the slightest idea who had.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Though I ought to say that I do not know what I might have done if I had not seen that young man leaving her room. That settled my problem for me. But one thing I do know, if I had done it I should have shot myself. I am old-fashioned and believe in a life for a life.’

His old face had gone very white, but his voice was steady.

‘They talk a good deal of a mother’s love,’ he went on, ‘but fatherhood can be a passion too, especially when one is old and almost the last of an old family. I know I am an anachronism’—he smiled suddenly—‘but there it is.’

After a slight pause Digby said, ‘I think I may go so far as to say that I believe we are near a solution, though whether the evidence is sufficient—you know there are many cases where we have what might be called moral certainty, but no evidence for a jury.’

‘I am glad of that. Will you come and see me when it is over and tell me about it? I think this is the first time in my life that I have been brought into contact with a criminal case, and I find it very interesting.’ Suddenly his face changed. ‘It’s not young Lane? I liked him.’

‘I can’t answer questions now.’ Digby smiled a little.

‘Of course not. I apologize.’

He left the house very thoughtful, but on the whole satisfied that he could eliminate Lord Sands. He might have been capable of murder, but then, who is not at one time or another in their lives, and no doubt the murder coming on his half-formed thoughts had given him a considerable shock. In his spying he had already done what he no doubt had believed was impossible to him, and though ‘There, but for the grace of God——’ is a salutary lesson, seventy is a little old for lessons of any sort.

Digby’s mouth gave a little twist of pity as he thought of how that pride had been humbled.

That afternoon was spent in listening to the report of the man who had been put on to the financial affairs of the group, which did not seem to be on a much sounder footing than their morals, Digby reflected.

Carter, though not exactly hard up, was certainly pressed for money, and had been unlucky in his recent speculations.

The Dallases were practically bankrupt, and the only reason they were not so actually was that it was hardly worth while to bankrupt them, while there was still the faintest chance that the uncle would make them an allowance or remember them in his will, a thing he certainly would not do if there were any further scandals. Reggie Dallas was charmingly frank about his affairs, and it had not been hard to discover from his creditors how the land lay.

Carter had not exaggerated when he said that Gervase was in a tight corner. It appeared that if he could not raise at least a thousand in the next week, he would be more or less ruined, and it seemed to Digby that the bank would willingly dispense with the service of a young man whose hobby appeared to be unfortunate speculation. Of course he was engaged to a wealthy girl, so that presumably it did not affect him very deeply, though it was possible the young woman's father might have something to say on the subject.

The next morning the advertisement read, 'Ariadne. Leopards been sent for. D.' and had been posted in Copenhagen of all places.

For a moment Digby stared at it puzzled, then he began to laugh. 'That young man's spirits seem to be rising.'

Well! His smile grew a little grim. It would probably be a considerable shock for the presumptuous young Dionysius to be touched on the shoulder by a mundane policeman just as he ascended his leopard-drawn car, which was what Digby intended should happen. He quite agreed with Sir Charles that those who played games with Scotland Yard deserved a lesson.

Later he was rung up by the man who had been to Ostend, to say that Gervase had just returned and was at that moment in his rooms. Digby sent a man down to relieve him and told Masters to report next morning.

He arrived to find Digby looking remarkably pleased over that morning's advertisement, which ran:

'Meet me, steps St. Mark's Church, West Norwood, noon tomorrow. Bring some money if you can, but don't worry unduly. Look out for the Argus on your doorstep. There's probably one.'

It had been posted in Clapham.

'Now we shan't be long,' he murmured, 'before that little bit of the puzzle is cleared up. Well, Masters?'

Masters drew out a sheaf of papers.

‘Nothing very interesting to report, sir. He bathed, played tennis, went to the Casino in the evening, made plenty of friends and so on. It wasn’t till Monday that anything out of the way happened. He went to Brussels for the day by the early train with a young lady——’

‘Who was she?’

‘Well, when I say “lady”, she wasn’t exactly what you would call a lady—might be a typist or something of the sort. He picked her up at the Casino the first night, and after that he went about with her quite a bit—flighty little thing she was, but quite respectable, I should say.’

‘Well, did anything happen in Brussels?’

‘They did some shopping, had lunch, looked about a bit, and came back in the evening.’

‘What sort of shopping, do you know?’

‘I had to be careful as I was afraid of being recognized, but they spent some time in a jeweller’s—I suppose he was buying her a little present—she didn’t look the sort who would refuse anything—then they bought picture post cards and so on.’

‘I see. Have you got the girl’s name and address?’

‘Yes. She’s a Miss Daisy Fisher, and she lives at 157 Ongar Road.’

‘Off the Old Brompton Road, isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you know when she is coming back?’

‘To-morrow, I believe, but I’m not quite sure. I tried to find out from Mr. Oliphant—we were on speaking terms at the hotel—but he didn’t seem to know, and of course I couldn’t very well press him, but I think it is within the next few days. I rather gathered that he wasn’t too keen on continuing the acquaintance.’

‘Well, he probably isn’t, seeing that he’s engaged already,’ was the dry answer.

The rest of the day Digby spent in making various preparations and in wishing the time would go faster. Now that a few hours would tell him whether he was right or wrong, he began to lose confidence in himself and wonder if he had not been following a will-o’-the-wisp.

He spent a restless, sleepless night. It might have been some comfort to him to know that Julius was once again equally sleepless. He was worried about leaving the Craigs for one thing. He had got fond of them, and he knew they liked him, and it was making him feel like a cad; there were also

practical difficulties, as he discovered the next morning, and it was only by a sudden and surprising volubility that he avoided giving his address.

He managed to leave them under the impression that he had given it, and it was only when he was out of reach that they discovered that he had not. They were not unduly upset, relying on his promise to write.

CHAPTER XIV

SOON after ten the next morning Sylvia emerged from the door of the quiet but select West End Hotel, where her mother had taken a suite and where she had passed the last ten days. Sylvia had spent most of the time in bed. She had pointed out to her mother that it was Digby's advice, and had shown the utmost reluctance to face reporters.

Mrs. Swanson was pleased at this instance of the shyness proper to a young girl, and so deplorably lacking as a general rule, and only too glad to do the interviewing herself. She also found it more pleasant to discuss the affair with her numerous friends without Sylvia's presence, who, as inmate of the house, would naturally have been more interesting. Sylvia was also the heiress, a fact Mrs. Swanson had tried unsuccessfully to suppress.

The day before Sylvia had seen Carter, who was to continue as trustee, and had got from him a hundred pounds. She had refused to tell him what she wanted it for, and he had surmised that it was to pay a debt of her own or Greta's that would cause further scandal if not settled at once.

He was glad enough to hand over the money. He would have gladly paid it out of his own pocket to prevent any further stories, as his association with the case had already done him considerable harm financially.

This money was safely in the top of her stocking, and she had a few clothes in an attaché-case. On leaving the hotel she turned into Mayfair, and in the quieter streets it did not take her long to discover she was being followed.

She smiled to herself. There was a little colour in her face, and her eyes shone with a desperate strained excitement. For about a quarter of an hour she pursued her way, walking slowly, till suddenly she caught sight of what she had been looking for. Rounding the corner just ahead of her was a policeman. Sylvia cast a glance over her shoulder at her faithful shadow, and then took a bit of paper from her bag which she affected to consult. After a glance round, she quickened her steps and went up to the policeman, to whom she spoke a little breathlessly.

'Oh, officer. A man has been following me for some time. I don't want to make a fuss or anything of the sort, but could you just speak to him?'

Her blue eyes were very appealing, and P.C. Baker frowned austere.

'Of course I will, miss,' he said warmly, 'you've no need to worry.'

‘Thank you so much,’ she smiled, and then flashed swiftly round the corner, where she began to run. At the next corner she got a taxi.

‘Harrod’s, and I’m late.’

The taxi swung round and was off.

In the meantime Baker had descended in majestic displeasure on the shadow. For a moment he thought that depraved character was adding consummate insolence to his undoubted profligacy, and by the time he was convinced, amid much bad language, that he really was hindering a C.I.D. man in the pursuance of his duties, Sylvia had disappeared.

She walked straight through Harrod’s and out at the rear door, where in the comparative quiet she was able to assure herself that she was no longer followed. Then she walked to Sloane Square, where she took the Underground to Victoria.

At about eleven Digby emerged from the station at West Norwood. He had never been there before, and had naturally taken the precaution of looking up St. Mark’s on the map, but as soon as he was in the street he realized that it had been unnecessary. It would have been hard to miss the church which stood in a commanding position at the top of a small hill. It was a classical building, with a wide flight of steps leading up to a pillared porch. It did not seem to be very popular. The place looked shabby and neglected, the doors were shut, and there was not a soul in the untended churchyard that sloped down to the foot of the hill.

After one glance Digby realized that Julius—if it were he—he must keep that doubt in mind—had chosen his spot very carefully. It would be almost impossible to get anywhere near without being seen.

Sylvia would, of course, recognize him, and it was possible that if she did so she would turn straight round and go back. For all her air of fragility and her obvious state of exhaustion, Digby had a certain respect for that young woman. She had kept from him what she had intended to, and had, on the whole, showed a strength of character that seemed out of keeping with the impression she made on first sight.

To be on the safe side he walked a little way up the hill above the station, and then crossing the road began to saunter slowly down till he reached the bottom of the hill. From there a straight broad path led up through the churchyard to the porch. He glanced up this and saw a young man, who had entered by the top gate, seat himself on the steps and take a book out of his pocket. Digby went back up the hill, keeping a sharp look-out for Sylvia, and entered by the same gate.

He strolled past the young man, glancing at him as he passed. There was nothing about him that in the least suggested the descriptions he had received of Julius.

He strolled out again, and once more crossed the road. A few minutes later he saw Sylvia come out of the station and glance round her. Digby turned his back and moved to the shelter of a portly lady who was progressing slowly up the hill.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sylvia stop to read the notice-board and then go into the churchyard.

A moment later she came out accompanied by the young man, and they both set off up the hill together.

Digby crossed the road and followed them.

They were talking earnestly—at least the young man was—but as Digby drew a little nearer his heart sank. Surely this could not be Julius. He was dark-haired, and his clothes suggested the lower middle class. The hair Digby had been prepared for, but the clothes—had he come on a wild goose chase? He was close behind them now, and if Sylvia turned she would recognize him, but he felt he no longer cared. However, for the minute they seemed to be too absorbed in their own conversation to have a thought for anything else.

As he got within hearing distance he heard Sylvia say, ‘I was beyond caring, everything was so terrible—I’d have done anything that anybody suggested—and you had always seemed to be friendly to me, Julius——’

That was enough for Digby. He stepped forward and touched the man on the shoulder.

‘Could I have a word with you, Mr. Lane?’

Julius spun round on his heel. Sylvia turned with equal suddenness and gasped, ‘It’s the detective from Scotland Yard.’

‘Oh, damnation!’ Julius exclaimed with great fervour, but even at that moment it struck Digby forcibly that annoyance and not fear was his chief feeling.

Sylvia went very white and swayed a little. Julius put his arm round her and then said, ‘Well, we can’t talk in the street. I’ve got some rooms quite near here. Come along.’

He turned down a side street, and a little further on opened the gate of a neat, though rather shabby villa, and went up the steps. He opened the door with a latch-key and led the way up to the front room on the first floor.

It was the typical furnished sitting-room, and the only sign of habitation it possessed was a pile of books flung on the table.

At one side double doors stood half open, showing a bedroom. Julius, though he looked worried, seemed master of the situation. He led Sylvia across the room and said firmly, 'You go in there and lie down. I'm afraid that was a bit of a shock for you. I'll see what——'

'Inspector Digby,' put in that gentleman, who had maintained an uncompromising silence up till then.

'Inspector Digby wants.'

He shut the door behind her and then turned to Digby.

'Well?' he asked briskly.

Digby was slightly taken aback. This carrying of the war into the enemy's country was a little disconcerting.

'I should be glad to know, sir, what you have been doing for the past fortnight?'

Julius raised his eyebrows. 'May I ask what right you have to inquire into my movements?'

'What?'

'Well,' Julius explained, with exemplary patience, 'I know one is bound to assist the police if they need it, but I thought they usually gave some sort of explanation—or had a warrant or something. I've no objection to telling you, but I should like to know why?'

'Because you did not appear at the inquest, and have not come forward to give information to the police since.'

'What inquest?'

'The inquest on the murder, of course.'

'What murder?'

Digby began to wonder whether he or Julius were going mad.

'The murder of Miss Swanson, of course, the papers have been full of nothing ever since.'

'Ah, the papers. There was Renaissance Pope who refused to read his Office for fear that it would corrupt his Latin style. I don't read the papers for the same reason. My style is, let me tell you, my livelihood, as there are a certain number of misguided people who will pay good hard cash for it.'

'Do you mean to tell me that you have heard nothing of the murder—nothing of the search for yourself? I don't believe it.'

Julius suddenly smiled. ‘I don’t expect you to, but that’s what I’m going to say, and you’ll have a darned hard job proving that I did know. I have been living quietly collecting copy for a new book, and because I am something of a celebrity in a quiet way I took another name. There’s no crime in that. But as I suppose you have got the power to take me along and make me give a statement, I don’t mind telling you the truth, particularly as we have no witnesses.’

‘Let me tell you that there are other things. I am quite justified in detaining you as an accessory after the fact, or even for the murder itself.’

‘M’m, yes. I was afraid of that, of course, but I hoped you’d have got the right man by now. I’m quite innocent, and I’ve no doubt I can prove it. If you’d given me a few more hours I’d have come to you of my own accord—but now—oh, it’s a bit hard. Still, if you’ll do me one favour I’ll do anything you like.’

‘I can’t make any bargains as you must know. The best thing you can do is to make a clean breast of the whole thing. You may say what you like, but you have put yourself in a very awkward position.’

‘It’s a long story.’

‘It can hardly be too long for me,’ said Digby a trifle grimly. ‘You’ve caused a lot of trouble, and I should be glad to know what you’ve been doing—exactly, and in detail.’

After a moment’s thought Julius sighed, and then said, ‘All right; I promise to tell you the whole truth. I’ll swear it if you like.’

He took off his glasses and flung them on the table and looked full at Digby, who received a slight shock that he hadn’t time to analyse fully, but it seemed to him that he had been thinking of Julius as a young man like any other young man, and now realized that it was not so. Looking at his eyes he suddenly became conscious of an unsuspected strength, and—what was more surprising—calmness. Julius might be rather upset and no doubt put out, but he was not frightened, and was in full command of himself.

‘You know I’m half a Jew?’ he began.

‘Yes.’ Digby’s tone suggested that he didn’t see the relevance of this.

‘It’s rather important,’ Julius explained. ‘It’s more than half really, as both my grandfather and father married Jewesses.’ Suddenly he pressed the back of his hand across his mouth—that calmness was costing him a considerable effort, Digby noticed—and said, speaking jerkily, ‘It’s pretty awful having to tell you all this. You won’t let it go any further if you can possibly help it, will you? I’d rather—I don’t know what—than tell you, but it seems the only thing to be done now. Oh, well, here goes. I met Sylvia

about four months ago, and I fell in love with her at once, though I knew it was hopeless as she was in love with some one else, though I don't think any one knew that——'

Digby nodded. 'She told me that, though I must admit it's a little difficult to know what to believe where Miss Sylvia is concerned.'

'I knew too—how exactly I can't tell you—— Oh, this is ghastly——' He stopped abruptly, biting his forefinger.

'I am very impersonal, you know,' said Digby quietly. 'You are all just figures in the case to me. Think of me as a doctor or something like that. I don't think there will be any need to make this part of the story public.' He spoke more gently now.

'Sorry to be such a fool. I knew they were lovers. I wasn't jealous—you must believe that or the rest of it will sound odd instead of natural. I don't think I am jealous by nature, and in this case she owed me nothing, so there was nothing to be jealous about, but—I was very unhappy. That's not a bid for sympathy, or at least I hope it isn't.' He smiled suddenly. 'But it explains things a bit. I hadn't been in love for a long time. From about sixteen to twenty-four I'd been in love nearly all the time—like everybody else, I suppose——'

Digby nodded. 'But not very seriously, I take it?'

'No. I knew that even at the time! But now I'd got it properly! Then Gerald was killed in the air smash, and things were worse than ever. Of course I thought there might be hope for me in the future, but Sylvia was so desperately unhappy—it was almost more than I could bear. I saw a good deal of her, and she didn't seem to be getting over it at all; she looked more and more miserable each time I saw her. I went over there on that Friday as I suppose you know, and all that evening and the next day I was puzzled—there was something about her—— It wasn't till the Saturday night that I thought she might be going to have a baby. That was the first shock I got—I had enough of them that week-end to last me for the rest of my life. I ought to have thought of it before, of course, but in these days it's about a thousand to one chance and I hadn't. I didn't know what to do. The obvious thing was that she should marry me, but'—he flung out his hands—'it was difficult——'

'I understand. You weren't sure, and if you had been wrong——'

'She might have been annoyed with me. That wouldn't have mattered. No, though of course I didn't *know*, I was sure I was right, and I was afraid of driving her to desperation—if I, just a casual young man had guessed—you see. I thought if she would only tell me herself it would be all right, and

I decided to work the conversation round till we could get on to the subject, but I didn't get a chance all Sunday—— Oh, at breakfast I got another shock. I picked up the *Observer* and the first thing I saw was "Maternal Mortality. Grave Figures." I hadn't thought of that before. Since then I've thought of little else,' he added grimly. 'I had never known what it was to be very terribly frightened, but I was then, and I have been more or less ever since, so though I like to think I am a very reasonable sort of person, perhaps reason might have been more to the fore if I'd eaten, and above all, slept more. I hadn't slept properly for months, and that week-end I didn't sleep at all—or eat much. I kept on being sick too, which rather cramped my style. I was fed up with myself—it was so silly.'

He was speaking more fluently now and seemed to have forgotten his audience, and Digby, looking at his white face and tired eyes, realized he was finding relief in speaking after the strain he had been under. He looked at the sensitive mouth and thin, delicate hands and thought:

'Highly strung. It's a wonder he didn't break down. Must have a will like iron.'

Julius went on. 'I tried to find out a little more from the encyclopædia that evening—I don't trust my intuitions—but it didn't tell me anything useful, though it frightened me a good deal more. I was beginning to get some sort of a plan that night. It was obvious that we ought to be married as soon as possible, and it was equally obvious we couldn't get married down there, where as I am by way of being one of the local objects of interest, for naturally I meant to say we had been married last year and had kept it quiet. I thought of half a dozen good reasons for secrecy. I went out to bathe on the Monday morning and got the worst shock of all. Sylvia was sitting on the diving-board in her bathing dress. The lake is twelve feet deep right up to the edge and—she can't swim. I knew what she was thinking of. We talked for a little, but I simply can't remember what she said or what I did. Then she fainted and—well, I knew then. She went to bed when we got to the house, and I didn't see her for the rest of the day. I didn't quite know how long it took to get married, so I thought I had better come up to London and write to her. I thought it would be less upsetting, and that it would be better if I had everything cut and dried. I was afraid she wouldn't let me help her, and it seemed that if I could say, "Come to me on such and such a day and we will be married and go out to Italy", she would be more likely to do it. You know when you are very worried you will do almost anything if it doesn't need to be thought about.'

Digby nodded, and Julius went on slowly, 'Another rather ghastly thing happened that night which I think I ought to tell you, though it's not very

important, but I'll just finish my own affairs first. As you see they have no bearing on the murder.'

'Very well.'

'I knew I couldn't sleep, so I thought I might just as well come up to Town at once. I must have got that bright idea somewhere about twelve. I wrote a couple of notes, flung a few things into a bag and went off. I met Oliphant and had a few words with him in the hall, as I suppose you know.'

Digby nodded.

'And I suppose you know about my trip up to Town; a half-witted child could have traced me.'

'Yes. I've seen Alf Parsons.'

'I did like Alf. I was jolly sorry I couldn't go and see him as I said I would. Well, I'll go later. It's a funny thing,' he added musingly. 'I shouldn't mind explaining all this to him—however— After a bath and shave I went to a Free Library. I've forgotten the name of the street, but I could find it again, it's not far from Waterloo. I discovered that I could be married by licence in two days if I had a fifteen days' residence—which of course I hadn't. That seemed simple, so I wrote to Sylvia which took me some time. It was lunch-time when I left to go to my club and get a room. I bought a paper just outside and saw about the murder. Another ghastly shock! Then I began to think. I didn't know very much about these things—in real life—but I did know I should be wanted at the inquest, and I remembered that I had heard of inquests being adjourned, and adjourned for months. I thought I might be kept hanging about all that time, and time was what I couldn't spare. Besides, I knew it would bring Mrs. Swanson back and it couldn't have been long before she guessed. While I was still thinking of that, I suddenly thought of my own position which was a little odd—departing like that in the middle of the night, and naturally I didn't want to give my reasons in a coroner's court. I didn't much believe in the burglar theory. You see I had been awake, and I thought I should have heard something, and if that turned out to be wrong, I saw it was the sort of murder that would need no motive in the ordinary sense. Then I remembered something else. You know the way you suddenly see something quite clear and plain in front of you—when you aren't even thinking about it. I saw the door leading to the bathroom, and I saw, too, that it wasn't locked on my side and I knew it wasn't on the other—I'll tell you about that in a minute—well, after a bit of thought the best thing seemed to be, to lie low. I was quite innocent. The worst I was doing was neglecting my duty as a citizen, and one can have two duties. After all, Greta was dead. What I was out to do was possibly to save

two lives, which is surely of more value to the state. That was looking on the worst side, but even at the most favourable it was obvious that the sooner Sylvia was stopped worrying and got a peaceful life, the better chance of having a nice healthy baby—that's where the Jew in me comes in—no one cares for children like we do or sets such a value on them. That's one reason why we have lasted for so many ages and through so many vicissitudes. I know perfectly well that the average Englishman wouldn't have thought of the baby at all. I didn't want to particularly, but I couldn't help myself. That's why the thought that she was contemplating suicide was, I think, worse for me than it would have been for any one else—you can't get quite away from the things you learn from your mother. However, that's just an explanation.'

He then proceeded to give a careful account of the steps he had taken in the way of disguise, and described his journey to Balham and the meeting with the Vicar.

'But why Balham?'

'It seemed a good place. Near enough London to be crowded, and yet where I was not likely to meet any one I knew. Also the sort of place where people keep to themselves. I thought out everything down on the Embankment. Don't you let any one persuade you that a poet isn't a practical person. He may differ from the rest of the world in his ideas of what is worth bothering about, but when he does bother he can use his brains to good purpose. I had the whole scheme worked out in less than an hour,' he finished with modest pride.

'About the advertisements in *The Times*. How did you manage those?'

'Did you get on to those? How on earth?'

'I saw the paper you had marked. Miss Sylvia, I may say, said it had been sent to her because it had an advertisement of a domestic training college in it.'

'Good for her,' Julius remarked reprehensibly. 'But how did you guess?'

'Well, I knew that she had been in love with a young man who had died, which I suppose you could call desertion——'

Julius was staring at him in undisguised surprise.

'I went to Carchester Grammar School and got a thoroughly good classical education,' Digby explained.

'Now isn't that bad luck. I had a bit of difficulty over those advertisements. I didn't want to get Sylvia into trouble, and I didn't want to make them so cryptic she wouldn't understand it was meant for her, and I *did* think I was pretty safe in choosing the classics.'

‘I may say that I knew a good deal of the story you have told me before I came here. When I read that one about your being a friendly Naxian I remembered the other version of the story—that Ariadne had been landed at Naxos during a storm to have a baby, and had died there before Theseus, who had been blown out of the harbour in his ship, could get back. But I’m afraid we must ask Miss Sylvia to corroborate your story; there is,’ he added a trifle grimly, ‘a good deal more to be explained, and though, as a man, I may believe you—that’s neither here nor there. I’ve got my duty as a policeman.’

‘I’ll go to her now.’

‘You will not,’ was the firm answer. ‘You’ll not stir out of my sight. There are orders out to detain you, and you’ve shown altogether too much ingenuity.’

‘But this is awful. Do you realize that I’ve got to ask her to marry me?’

‘Well, I won’t listen more than I can help.’

‘My God! Oh, all right. Everything has got to such a state I’m almost beyond caring.’ He went to the door and opened it. ‘Sylvia, will you come here for a minute?’

Sylvia crossed to the armchair he indicated, throwing a frightened glance at Digby as she did so.

‘It’s all right, darling.’ He sat down on the arm of her chair. ‘He’s really been very decent to me, and now I’m going to ask you a few questions. I’d have given anything in the world to have spared you this, but it seems the only way to avoid worse. After all, it doesn’t really matter what a total stranger thinks or knows about us.’

‘Never mind, Julius; I’m past caring now. What is it?’

‘Here goes then. You’re going to have a baby, aren’t you?’

‘Yes. Oh, I’m so glad you did know. I wasn’t quite sure, sometimes I thought you did, and sometimes I thought you didn’t.’ She leant back and relaxed her tense pose.

‘It is poor Gerald’s?’

She nodded.

‘I suppose you weren’t married by any chance?’

‘No. We were going to be, of course, but I was afraid of Mother, and he had no money, and when it began he wasn’t twenty-one, and we weren’t sure you could get married before that so we didn’t bother. We always felt married, and we thought we could be if anything turned up, and people

found out. Then he was killed, and I found out about this——’ She stopped, biting her lip.

‘That morning down by the lake——?’ Julius took both her hands as he spoke.

‘You know what I meant to do, but when I got there I suddenly knew I couldn’t. I told you I was afraid, but that wasn’t true. It was that I wanted my baby. I didn’t care what any one did to me any more or what they said. The baby was mine and they couldn’t take that away from me.’

‘I knew it.’ Julius’s voice shook a little. ‘My brave one.’

Digby walked to the window and stood looking out, though he need hardly have troubled as the others appeared to have forgotten him.

Then Julius said briskly, ‘Now I’ll tell you what we are going to do. I’m afraid I shall have to go with Digby and make a statement, but first we will get married. The Registry Office is quite near and I’ve made all the arrangements——’

‘But, Julius——’

‘It’s quite all right. It’s by far the best thing you can do. Some people are fitted to be pioneers and stand against the whole world, but you, my lamb, aren’t the sort who can say, “I’ll have twenty babies if I please and whose business is it?”’

‘No, I’m not, but it isn’t fair to you—I don’t love you.’

‘I know that, but I love you, and—oh, well, we’ll discuss all that later when the baby is born and you’re quite well again. Then if you don’t think you can bear me as a husband you can divorce me. After all, thousands of people have been quite happily married without being in love.’

‘If you really mean it I swear I’ll make you a good wife. I can’t promise to love you, but I *can* promise that.’

‘That’s settled then.’

He turned to Digby. ‘You’ll let me get married, won’t you? In fact I don’t see how you can stop me except by using force, and if you haven’t got a warrant——’

‘I’ve got a warrant, but all the same if the lady cares to take the risk I think you may.’

‘Sylvia.’ Julius suddenly turned to her. ‘What on earth did you think I was doing till you got my advertisements and afterwards?’

‘I had no idea why you wanted to keep away, but though I’m a fool in some things, I never for one single second thought you had anything to do with the murder—that’s ridiculous.’

‘After we’re married,’ Julius continued, ‘we will have a spot to eat, and I’ll go off to Scotland Yard or wherever he wants me to go, and you’d better get some clothes. Have you any money, by the way? Mine’s about done. Oh, it doesn’t matter now I can cash cheques again.’

‘I’ve got a hundred pounds.’

‘Good. Get some clothes and a suit-case and come back here. I think you’d better go to bed; that’s your room in there, mine is across the passage. The landlady is a nice old thing; she thinks you have been staying in the country with your mother, and that we have got to stay in Town for a week or so on business. I don’t think they’ll keep me in durance vile.’ He smiled at Digby. ‘I can answer all his questions satisfactorily. Now I’ll just write to your mother.’

He pulled a pen out of his pocket and sat down at the table.

‘When shall I say we were married. Last Christmas? When’s the baby due, by the way?’

‘The middle of January.’ She spoke cheerfully and calmly, and Digby looked at Julius with a certain admiration. He had carried off a difficult situation extraordinarily well and had worked a surprising change in the desperate silent girl Digby had tried to deal with. A young man of forceful personality and no self-consciousness!

‘I’ve said we didn’t say anything about it because we knew she wouldn’t approve, and we were afraid of trouble, marrying without her consent, but that as now she will shortly be a grandmother you thought it better to join me. I have thoughtfully omitted to give any address and said I’ll write again in a day or so. That being done, we had better be moving.’

CHAPTER XV

AT the end of the road they found a taxi and were soon at the Registry Office, where the short ceremony was performed. As they came out—Digby had acted as witness despite his grave doubts as to the propriety of so doing—Julius remarked:

‘I had a moment of panic the day before yesterday when I went to get the licence, but I managed to carry it off with a little airy badinage. You see, I had to give my real name. It’s Julius Philip. I gave it as Philip Lane, and when I had to fill up the complete form I said, “For Heaven’s sake don’t go sending for the police just because of my name. It’s been done twice already and we had a good laugh over it, but they’ll be getting peevisish if any more people turn up saying they’ve got their blue-eyed boy.” Now I’d better come along to Scotland Yard.’ He turned to Sylvia. ‘I’ll ’phone if I’m kept—don’t worry. You can decide where you want to go. I think Italy would be a good place; I speak quite passable Italian.’

In the Tube Digby said, ‘I still don’t see how you managed it. After all, every one in the country was looking for you.’

‘They were all looking for red hair,’ Julius remarked; ‘at least I suppose the police jumped to the idea that I had dyed it, but I knew very well they wouldn’t have much to go on. There were no photos of me. I’ve always held authors make a great mistake in broadcasting their features, and of course I know, too,’ he continued quite without malice, ‘that my Jewish characteristics depend on exactly how much any one likes me.’ He grinned suddenly. ‘I hadn’t made myself exactly popular that week-end, so I imagined that all your men were looking for some one like a caricature in a comic paper.’

‘That is more or less true,’ Digby agreed.

‘I told you poets were practical, didn’t I? They’re the most practical people on earth when they want to be. I did some really hard work that morning on the Embankment, and got everything planned out down to the details of the order I must make my purchases in, so that I could get a complete change of clothes without exciting comment anywhere, as it would have done if I’d had to do a bit of it wearing flannels and a bowler.’

‘But didn’t your Vicar read the paper?’

‘He read *The Times*, and not very carefully at that. I am quite sure that if you asked any of the household casually they would say that I had arrived

before the murder. They didn't really hear about it till the Thursday, when Mrs. Wood——'

'Who's she?'

'The charwoman. A great friend of mine. She helped a lot; I'll come to that in a minute. She talked about the murder, but you may have noticed the papers described it, quite correctly, as taking place on Tuesday, but they also talked about "this dastardly crime in the depths of night," which, if you read carelessly, suggested Tuesday night—what time I was sleeping blamelessly—or more or less so, as a matter of fact I was drugged—in their spare room.'

'Yes, I see that.'

'Then I had provided myself with a fairly reasonable excuse for being there. My clothes were suitable. I didn't drink or stay out at night. In fact, I was eminently respectable and—I could discuss Church History with the Vicar. There's very little I can't talk about—up to a point.' He finished with a deplorable lack of modesty.

'As you may have gathered,' Digby remarked, 'I read. I knew we were going to have trouble with you as soon as I discovered who you were. I've read your stuff—and you've got brains—as well as being able to write—no doubt of that.'

Julius flushed and then said in an oddly detached voice, 'Some of it is good, isn't it? If you've read it, weren't you sure I should never go and commit such a stupid murder?'

'I did doubt it,' Digby acknowledged. 'But my convictions are purely private and have nothing to do with the case. I have no evidence that you didn't, even now, I should like to point out.'

'Nor that I did, which is what you've got to prove. Well, for the rest, my writing made me very fitted for the business of deception. I write novels, but my mind is dramatic. I see my characters very clearly and I say their speeches in my head. When I'm on a book I think about it all the time. I do the real writing in my head, so to speak, and then go home and write it down. It's an absolute fact that when I was writing an historical story I stunned the porter at my club by walking through the hall and saying over my shoulder, "My horse, sirrah", so you see it wasn't difficult for me to keep up the rôle of John Lang. I got him all worked out that first evening at the Vicarage just as if he was a character in a novel.'

'You haven't told me how you worked the advertisements.'

'Oh, that was childishly simple. I used to go through *The Times* every day and pick out any advertisement that gave an out-of-town address. Then I

wrote and asked them to send me particulars—there was a pub for sale, I remember, and Pekinese, and the Copenhagen one was an agency. I was rather vague as to how to answer that, but I just asked for particulars and ended as I did all of them, that I enclosed a stamped envelope for reply. Then I carefully enclosed my stamped and addressed letter to *The Times*. That night or the next morning I wired, “Enclosed wrong envelope in error. Please post.” I never put my own address, and I suppose they just thought I was a careless fool. They posted the letters all right, and presumably are still waiting for me to write and ask why they have not sent the said particulars. My only trouble was finding enough telegraph offices. I didn’t want to draw attention to myself, but I used to go for long walks every evening. That was where I had another stroke of luck——’

‘What was that?’

‘Mrs. Wood had to go and nurse her daughter and Mrs. Craig was ill, so I found myself doing all the cooking and most of the housework——’

‘What!’ Digby was honestly startled. ‘Do you know anything about it?’

‘I didn’t, but I do now. There was Mrs. Beeton, and after all some one had to do it. The Craigs were dears, but so inefficient—it rather worried me. I don’t mind living in a pigsty myself if you’ve got something more important to do or don’t like that sort of work, but it does annoy me when I see some one spending their whole time over something and getting nothing done. Anyhow, it was lucky for me. It gave me an excuse not to go out till after dark, as I was hard at it till then, for let me tell you, no one knows what work is till they’ve been the average wife and mother for a bit. It gave me something to do and no time to think, and made me so tired I slept, which was a mercy, because really my chief danger was myself. I had arrived looking pretty ghastly, and I was awfully afraid I might be ill, or that even if I went on looking ill I should draw attention to myself—I didn’t want them to think I had anything on my mind. Then Mrs. Wood came back. She had been looking after her daughter with her first baby, and she took it all so calmly that I got a bit more sensible and less scared—though not very much so,’ he added, half under his breath.

Digby looked at him closely. He might say he was better, but he still looked pitifully tired, and Digby suddenly realized that there was still a good deal in front of this unfortunate man. He had succeeded in his plans to a certain extent, but he still had to adjust his life to marriage with a very young girl whom he passionately loved, who did not love him, and who was soon to bear a child to her dead lover. He had asked for no sympathy. He did not even appear to think he was unlucky, or that it was any one’s business to help him. He even bore sleeplessness and sickness with philosophic

resignation. Pluck was a quality Digby admired. He tried to harden his heart. He knew very well that one of his weaknesses was that he was sometimes tempted to let his purely human interest in people swamp his professional duties. There had been another case not so long before in which he was guiltily conscious that he had devoted far too much thought to a very attractive woman—— Well, Daphne Dean was dead and young Julius interested him more than any one he had met since, and what was more, almost against his will—for Julius had led him a dance that was somewhat galling to his professional pride—he liked him. Not that that was going to be much help to Julius, for however much Digby might be convinced of his innocence, it would not prevent him carrying out his duty to the last detail—he was not paid for his feelings, but to perform certain more or less definite acts.

Julius was at least scrupulously keeping his promise of candour. He could hardly have given more painstaking details to his father confessor, for with almost childlike frankness he was continuing:

‘I was glad to be able to do something to help them, for of course I felt a frightful cad—in fact, it was that that first made me think that probably I hadn’t been very sensible. Of course one may have to be a cad at times, but the necessity doesn’t arise very often. All the same, even when I felt that, I knew I was making myself safer than ever. One doesn’t expect the solid domestic virtues in a young man wanted by the police, and they certainly didn’t expect them in an author who lived in Greta’s somewhat lurid circle—particularly after the Press had done its worst in the way of innuendo and suggestion. I really do seem to have quite a flair for cooking——’

Digby bit his lip to keep from smiling—there was something engaging about this young man, though he could well understand that people might on occasion find him infuriating.

‘I think that is all,’ Julius went on, ‘except one rather important fact; you’ll forgive me for harping on it, but it is of some moment to me. I was quite innocent. That was the big difference between me and all the other criminals you have had to hunt down. Nothing particularly dreadful was going to happen even if I was found. Things wouldn’t have been any worse than they were before I went away, and I still don’t see that you have any hold over me—after all, it’s not a crime to ignore the newspapers and I was never subpoenaed for the inquest. Surely you don’t believe now that I had anything to do with the murder?’

‘I think you may be able to give me some very useful information,’ Digby answered slowly.

‘I can’t. There’s only one thing that, as it happens, I can swear to—as far as the others were concerned it may be hearsay and not evidence, but that’s a matter for the trial.’

‘Mr. Lane.’ Digby’s voice was puzzled. ‘You speak almost as if you knew who the murderer was.’

‘But of course I know.’ Julius turned astonished eyes on him. ‘Do you mean to say you don’t?’

CHAPTER XVI

ARRIVED at Scotland Yard, Julius was shown into a little room and left alone while Digby went to see his Chief. After that astounding statement Digby had firmly ordered him to keep silent, and the rest of the journey had been passed without a word.

To Sir Charles Digby related the gist of Julius's confession, and finished by saying, 'I would swear he was speaking the truth. His story is corroborated by Miss Sylvia and is quite plausible. It also explains her reticence and obvious fear. You will no doubt see him yourself, sir, and then I am sure you will agree with me that if at times he seems to have acted a little foolishly, it was merely the result of strain and anxiety.'

'He seems to have behaved with considerable ingenuity,' Sir Charles commented a trifle dryly.

'In details, I agree with you, sir, but I think he was and is, for that matter, a little obsessed with the necessity of secrecy, but of course we must remember that he was considerably overwrought when he arrived at Clinton Manor, and after all, it would be a shock to any young man to find his young woman contemplating suicide—he admits quite frankly that he was terrified. I think he had almost an *idée fixe* on the subject, or perhaps it would be more correct to say he was too exhausted with shock and sleeplessness to be able to think of anything else.'

'Yes, you're probably right. I'd trust you any day as a judge of character, though you are so diffident yourself—and he's quite right about one thing. We have no hold over him except in connection with the actual murder. One has no legal right to assume that everybody reads the newspapers or listens to the wireless, and I have no doubt that counsel could make out a very good case for him on the grounds that a newspaper is largely fictitious and has no official status as the mouthpiece of the law.'

'There is, of course, the handkerchief,' said Digby, 'that gives us sufficient grounds for questioning him, and that unlocked door. I am going to hear the rest of his story now. Would you wish to be present, sir?'

'No, I think not. Get his statement and I'll see him later if it appears necessary.'

'He made one very surprising remark. He said he knew who the murderer was.'

‘The devil he did.’

‘Yes, he seemed to take it for granted that I knew too.’

‘And do you?’

‘I think so, sir, but I’ve no evidence. I am in hopes he may be able to supply some.’

Digby then returned to his own room, where Julius was brought to him.

‘Now, Mr. Lane,’ he began cheerfully, ‘I think it would be best if you just tell me all you know of the murder now. Afterwards you can make your official statement, and we will see how far we can avoid dragging in your private affairs.’

‘Thank you,’ Julius answered gratefully. ‘You know so much already that I don’t mind telling you the rest—much—some of it is rather—well, I never thought I’d have to tell any one.’

‘When did you first meet Miss Swanson?’

‘I’ve known her off and on all my life, or at least since I was about ten, but it was only during the last year that I saw much of her——’ He paused and Digby said encouragingly:

‘I know a good deal about her now; you need not be afraid that you are giving her away.’

‘It’s not that. I know you must know that she was—promiscuous—it’s about myself——’

‘You were in love with her—her lover?’ Digby hazarded.

Julius shook his head. ‘No—it’s worse than that, I think. I am sorry I must talk so much about myself—of course I like doing it as well as the next man, but it must be pretty sickening for you. If anybody told me I had the artistic temperament I should clout them over the head. It’s mostly used as a mere excuse for not doing something you dislike, or having no ordinary self-control, but there is something and I’ve got it—a very terrible curiosity, not so much about people’s lives as their souls—the rights and the wrongs of satisfying that curiosity are between my God and myself——’

‘Yes,’ Digby agreed gently, as he looked at the face that had suddenly changed. Julius seemed to have withdrawn to an immense distance, and in his eyes for one second Digby seemed to read both joys and sorrows that were remote from the common run of life.

‘I wasn’t in love with Greta, I didn’t even like her, but—my God, I was interested in her. Of course I’ve met plenty of loose young women, but she was different—she hated—really hated, and I’d never met that before. I wanted to know why.’

‘I think I understand,’ Digby answered slowly.

‘Then of course I met Sylvia, and naturally I saw a good deal of Greta. She never took much interest in me—none at all, as a matter of fact, till that week-end. It was on the Sunday night that they had a row——’

‘Who had?—Miss Sylvia and Miss Swanson? The maid said it was in the afternoon.’

Julius look puzzled. ‘I don’t know anything about that; I meant Greta and Gervase.’

‘What!’

‘I know. That’s the one bit of information that I’ve felt a bit guilty at keeping to myself—though I was glad in a way. I kept on hoping you would manage without it, and it’s rather beastly to have to say these things about people who were to a certain extent my friends.’

‘How did you come to know about it?’

‘I told you I hadn’t slept at all—they must have left the door into the bathroom open——’

‘You mean Mr. Oliphant was in her room?’

‘Of course.’ Julius looked at Digby’s surprised face and then said, ‘Do you mean to say that you didn’t know they were lovers?’

‘I had a suspicion, but that was all, and I am prepared to swear that no one else knew except perhaps Miss Sylvia—she was not very communicative,’ he finished a trifle dryly.

‘Well, that beats everything,’ Julius remarked with conviction. ‘That crowd spent nearly all the time discussing sex in one form or another—who was living with who and so on, and yet they couldn’t see what was going on under their noses. It never entered my head that you didn’t know that, though I did think that owing to the most unfortunate position of my room I was perhaps the only person who could swear to it.’

‘Then you mean the murderer is——?’

‘Gervase. I am sure of that, but I haven’t got a shred of evidence.’

‘Well, go on with your story—leave nothing out, however trivial.’

Julius’s lips twisted a little, and the sudden movement of his thin hands suggested disgust.

‘It’s horrible, and the next bit is the worst of the lot. I told you I came up to bed fairly early on the Monday night. Well, about half-past eleven Greta came into my room by way of the bathroom. I’m a careless sort of person, and I’d never thought of looking to see if that door was locked or not—naturally I didn’t use that bathroom. She just chatted a little and then she—’

oh, well, she sort of suggested I should come back with her to her room. Aren't we extraordinary creatures? I have quite an admiration for chastity in the abstract, and I really do dislike promiscuity, but I'm quite sure that I should feel less ashamed at telling you that I went than that I refused, which I did. I was, as you may imagine, hardly in the mood for love-making—I'd been sick—seven times I think it was, that day, and was nearly distracted with anxiety. Anyway, she only laughed and went away, and I decided to go up to Town as soon as I could. I must try and explain something. I knew, with the most absolute certainty, all the time she was speaking to me, that she didn't care two straws about me, but that she only wanted to annoy somebody else. I know it sounds almost incredible, but remember I had heard her voice the night before—I couldn't catch a word, but her tone had been absolutely venomous—it made me shudder—mind you I don't think she was what I should call sane, and she wasn't a vamp in the usual sense, though that was what Olga called her. She wasn't a huntress—indifference didn't pique her—she liked easy conquests that she could get well under her thumb and then—torture. I think she had some hold over Gervase as well as his love for her. About six months ago he was her slave, but he was getting tired—I was rather interested in him too. At first sight he was just the typical young Englishman, but I am beginning to wonder if there is such a thing—or if perhaps it is that his limited code was no use when he found himself in strange circumstances. Gervase would have been as nice as you make them if he had never moved outside his own ordinary, respectable, well-to-do circle—or if he had ever had enough imagination to realize that there is nothing that one may not come to——'

'There, but for the grace of God go I.'

'Exactly—and of course he was awfully stupid—and childish—— Sorry to digress, but I noticed the papers all spoke of me as a young man—I suppose that is true, but I would like to point out that I am a man of nearly thirty—adult and fully responsible for my actions. I come of an old race and have a certain amount of sense. With the exception of Lord Sands there was no one else in the whole house as old as I am, and what's more, they won't be if they live to be a hundred. Gervase is a schoolboy—he has never had the glimmering of an idea of reality or of his relation to the world around him—he has still the boy's idea that all things are legitimate if he can do it without the master finding out—he has no definite standards at all—except for playing games—— Sorry I'm digressing again, but there's not much more, though I'm afraid I shall have to talk about myself a little more. You know I met Gervase as I came down into the hall?'

'Yes.'

‘I *hate* shooting—blood sports of all kinds, so when I suddenly felt a most curious and strong sense of repulsion I thought it was because of that. We had a few words, and I remember I said I didn’t like butchers. I was in a vile temper. For a moment I thought he was going to strike me, and I was conscious of—an excitement—an extraordinary tension. I noticed it in spite of my absorption in my own affairs. For the moment I put it down to the thought of shooting on top of my own overwrought state—I had had the hell of a day—but as I stood there something came into my mind—I knew it was a quotation—though I couldn’t remember a single word. Minds work in a funny way, and my unconscious runs largely to quotations.’

Digby nodded. His own mind worked in something the same way.

‘That knock on the head I got later seemed to stimulate my brain, for I remembered it more or less. In my usual untidy manner I had got two mixed together—they were, “The image of a wicked heinous fault lives in his eye; that close aspect of his doth show the mood of a much troubled breast.” That’s Pembroke speaking, King John, IV, 2. The next bit is, “quoted and signed to do a deed of shame.” King John speaking later in the same scene. I didn’t know where they came from then, but Alf told me it was Shakespeare. I thought about it a little on the way up to Town, and I remember I thought it showed that my dislike of bloodshed was really fundamental, and I remember wondering too, if the feeling I had had in my rather supersensitive state was not at one time common to every one—the primitive fear of blood—and whether the actual killing or the contemplation of killing did not produce such excitement, or perhaps actual chemical changes in the body that could be felt by other people, and that was partly responsible for the old ideas of purification and the necessity of having a special person to do the killing—priests and so on—and all the time I was thinking about ducks!’

Digby listened in absorbed silence. To a certain extent the story he was hearing sounded strange, but after all, he reflected, Julius was in any case very receptive, and he must have been, as he had said, in a far from normal state. He was fasting and sleepless, and though those conditions might at times produce hallucinations, Digby knew from his own experiences during the war that they very often produced the most extraordinary clarity of mind, and at times acted almost like hypnosis in making the subject capable of doing things impossible in his ordinary state. He remembered a time when in a very tight corner during his Intelligence work, he had been able to produce some excellent Italian, a language with which he had no more than slight acquaintance, though he had been hearing it spoken round him for some weeks.

Again if his suspicions were right and Gervase had been coming practically red-handed from murder, was it not certain that he must have been in such a state of excitement that it would be bound to communicate itself to others? Even the most ordinary person could frequently tell on the moment of entering a room that a quarrel had just been in progress, and murder was such a serious affair—surely it must shake one to the very core.

‘Go on,’ he said to Julius, who was deep in thought.

‘Remember, I didn’t know the end of the quotation then. I didn’t know what the “heinous fault” was, or the “deed of shame”. As a matter of fact I thought it probably referred to “ravishing Tarquin” whose fault was rape, and I thought that my dislike of bloodshed was reinforced by my dislike of promiscuity. I suppose my mind was very unwilling to accept the idea of murder, which my unconscious was trying to force into it—you remember Macbeth speaks of “ravishing Tarquin” on his way to murder Duncan.’

Digby nodded.

‘When I read the first account of the murder—it suggested that robbery might be the motive, and of course it was possible, though I knew till the murderer was caught we should be all more or less under suspicion—I didn’t think the burglar idea was very probable. The idea had crossed my mind that evening that Greta, whether consciously or unconsciously, wanted to drive some one to murder—or something very near it. I thought perhaps she wanted a new sensation, and was getting to the state when it would take something pretty violent to stimulate her. I don’t say she thought of murder, but I knew very well that it *might* lead to that—particularly when you get people drinking pretty heavily into the bargain——’

‘That accounts for your letter then?’

‘Oh, I’d forgotten that you would have read that. The first two days I didn’t think much—I was pretty tired, and I’d got some stuff from the local chemist to make me sleep. Its effects seemed to have lasted for a bit. Then, of course, I did begin to think, and I was very puzzled about the whole thing—you see I didn’t know what had happened after I had left, or for that matter for the hours after Greta had left me—I wasn’t even at all sure how long it had been. I had been thinking, and I’d tried to write to Sylvia and given it up and just scribbled a note—I suppose you saw it?’

Digby nodded.

‘I thought I had probably scotched Greta’s plan for that night, but I wasn’t sure. After all, there were others in the house—she could have done what she liked with Jack Langdon—and I wasn’t even sure who she wanted to exasperate—it *might* have been Mercia, though I thought it was probably

Gervase. It was a week before I thought of that quotation again, and looked it up and found it was murder it referred to; then I knew for a certainty, and the moment I had thought of it I knew, of course, that however overwrought I might have been, and however much I disliked the idea of duck-shooting, I could never have felt that mixture of repulsion and fear over it—because it was fear.’ His voice rose a little, and his slim, beautiful hands were shaking. Then he resumed in his normal tones. ‘As you see, I have no proof of anything, and what I know is of no help to you. I may say that I was sure you knew all along. I thought the police always did, except in a very few cases, and were just waiting for enough evidence.’

‘There is one point you haven’t explained,’ said Digby. He opened a drawer and threw a mauve silk handkerchief on to the table. ‘This is, I believe, yours.’

‘No, it isn’t,’ Julius answered promptly.

Digby’s face hardened and he said sharply, ‘You seem very sure. Hadn’t you better examine it more carefully?’ For the first time there was suspicion in his eyes.

‘I know it isn’t mine. I’m one of those people who simply can’t use silk handkerchiefs. They set my teeth on edge.’ He shuddered slightly, and then laid his own on the table. ‘I always use these—they’re my chief extravagance—linen lawn, and I get them at a place in Bond Street, three guineas a dozen.’

‘Have you any proof of this?’

‘Well, nurse—my housekeeper would know, and I dare say lots of people have heard me say that I loathed silk ones. Funny, isn’t it, when I love silk pyjamas and shirts?’

‘How do you account for the fact that this is marked with your name?’

‘What? Anyway, that would be further proof that it isn’t mine. I can’t even put my name in my books, let alone on my clothes, and nurse is getting old and naturally doesn’t do more work than she has to. Where did you find it?’

‘I don’t think I can tell you that now.’

‘I’ve told you everything I know. Now what must I do? I should like to get back to my wife as soon as possible.’

‘I hardly think you need make a statement. There is practically nothing that you have told me that is evidence. I’ll send for some tea for you and see Sir Charles while you have it. Then you can go.’

CHAPTER XVII

IT was some time before Digby returned to his room, nearly half an hour, and Sir Charles came with him to have a look at the troublesome young man.

‘Not that we can do anything about him,’ he had remarked, ‘but he has given us a good deal of trouble, and I’m going to read him a lecture on his social obligations.’ His mouth tightened a little.

‘He has quite a good idea of them. Which do you consider of greatest service to the State, to assist in catching a murderer or to save the lives of a woman and child?’

‘What?’

‘That’s the way he saw his little problem.’

Sir Charles laughed. ‘You’ve taken a fancy to him, haven’t you? Well, his motives do do him credit if they are a trifle quixotic, but a lecture will do him no harm. It never did hurt any young man. If they don’t deserve it to-day they will to-morrow,’ Sir Charles declared with conviction, but that lecture never got delivered, for on the threshold of the room he paused abruptly.

The black tin tray with the cup that had held Julius’s tea was pushed to one end of the table. Half across the other Julius was lying, his head pillowed on the crook of his elbow, so sound asleep that he didn’t stir at their entry. Sir Charles looked down at the white face against which the eyelids showed nearly black, took in with one swift glance the prominence of the cheekbones, the distressed pucker on the forehead, and noticed that the signet ring hung very loose on the thin finger. Then half under his breath he said:

‘He’s had a rough time. An outsider would say this is sure proof of your third degree methods.’ He grinned at Digby. ‘I should say it’s a sign of a clear conscience to sleep like this in the lion’s den.’

‘I gave him rather a bad time, I’m afraid,’ Digby answered in the same low tone. ‘I dare say though, in the long run, it will be a relief to him to have told the whole story, though it can’t have been pleasant at the time—and I must say he was very good about it.’

Sir Charles bent and touched the sleeper on the shoulder.

Julius sat up abruptly and flushed a little. ‘I’m sorry——’

‘This is Sir Charles Vaughan,’ Digby told him.

‘I must apologize to you, sir. I’m afraid I’ve caused a good deal of trouble.’

‘You have.’ But the little homily that followed was quite gentle and finished: ‘But I admit the circumstances were difficult, and though a frank explanation to the Inspector here would probably have set you free to carry out your own plans—— But the layman had such an exaggerated view of the power of the police——and the Press——and naturally you preferred to keep your story to yourself—— Still, we’re not quite inhuman here.’

‘I have found that out, sir.’ Julius threw a grateful look at Digby, who felt absurdly pleased, but there was a warmth in Julius’s voice, a sudden brightening of the tired eyes that recalled to Digby Lord Sands’s verdict—‘He’s a way with him’. He had, and it augured well for his future. Sylvia was very young, gentle, and Digby guessed affectionate. He did not think she was likely to hold out long against a ‘way’ in the man to whom she was already bound by gratitude.

Sir Charles was explaining to Julius that he must remain in England for the time being, and keep Scotland Yard informed of his movements, and above all, hold his tongue. If he did that there was no reason why his private affairs should ever be made public.

Then he said, ‘What did you give him, Digby—tea? Of course we don’t approve of drinking in working hours, but still, under the circumstances, I think a little whisky——’

Digby laughed and turned to a cupboard, and Sir Charles continued cheerfully, ‘We have to keep it in stock—in case of nervous witnesses and so on.’

Julius took the proffered drink gratefully, and then Sir Charles said as he rose to his feet, ‘You get home now and try and get a good night’s sleep. You’ve nothing to worry about.’ He held out his hand, and Julius realized with extreme thankfulness that the gesture proved conclusively that Sir Charles accepted his story.

As the door closed behind him, Digby said, ‘One more slight unpleasantness, and then I don’t think we shall have to trouble you any further. I’ll take you back now by car, and I must just get Mrs. Lane to tell me what did happen between her and Miss Swanson that Sunday afternoon. I suppose Miss Swanson had found out——’

‘I don’t understand——’ Julius began.

‘Of course, I forgot. The maid insisted that she overheard a quarrel between them, but Mrs. Lane denied it.’

‘I don’t see that Greta had any right to object.’

‘It’s very often the way that those who allow themselves most latitude are the first to object when others take the same.’

They spoke very little during the run back to Norwood, where they found Sylvia surprisingly calm and cheerful. It was evident to both of them that she had determined to be as little trouble as possible—a practical way of showing her gratitude that drew forth Digby’s admiration.

He realized with certainty now, that as he had guessed before, that to Sylvia, standing her trial for murder would probably seem preferable to facing her mother with her pathetic little tragedy. Once removed from her, and with the certainty that Julius was there to stand between her and whatever she feared, she was ready to answer Digby’s questions promptly and truthfully. Of course one could hardly expect her to take a completely balanced view of the situation. Even in the most happy circumstances, a first baby was apt to strike its prospective mother as a fact of exaggerated importance, and so perhaps it was not surprising that she could not realize the calmness with which Digby would have taken the affair, nor the matter-of-fact ease with which he would have kept it to himself.

When he asked her to tell him what had happened that afternoon between herself and Greta, her eyes grew dark with fear again, and she said slowly, ‘It was terrible. Do you think Greta can have been not quite—sane? She wasn’t that afternoon. She must have been mad, nothing else could explain it.’

‘I think it is quite possible,’ said Julius. ‘What did happen?’

‘She called me into her room and told me she knew about me—I wasn’t very surprised. I thought she had guessed. I didn’t think she would be very helpful, but I’d never thought she would be angry. I thought she would think me an awful fool, and that she would want me—to do something about it—there are doctors—and when she knew I wouldn’t, that she’d wash her hands of me.’

Julius nodded again. ‘Didn’t she?’

‘No. She said she knew the baby was Gervase’s, and she simply refused to believe me when I said it was not. Even when I got desperate and told her all about Gerald she went on saying that it wasn’t true, and that she would see Gervase about it. Of course I couldn’t prove it wasn’t. Gervase had been down for a lot of week-ends and had always been about a lot. First I thought perhaps she was jealous—but Gervase has never looked at me, and he was keen on her at one time. Then she suddenly seemed to lose her temper. She called me names that I’d never heard before in my life, though I could guess

what they were—it was awful. I got away at last, and I simply didn't know what to do—things were bad enough as they were, but if Greta was going to drag Gervase into it, I didn't think I could bear it. I was sure no one would believe Gervase and me—they never do believe the principals, do they? By the morning I was almost—no, quite—in despair, and you know what happened then——'

Julius nodded again.

'I really did feel ill all that day, very ill, but I made up my mind—I was rather vague as to how you could help, but I decided to tell you the whole thing, Julius. You had said you were my friend, and I thought perhaps you might warn Gervase or think of some way of my proving the truth when it came out, as I knew it would have to do soon. Then, of course, after the murder everything was like a nightmare—you had gone and I was terrified. The one thing I could think of was trying to keep my own secret. I thought if I told anybody it would be in all the papers—and then there was Mother. I know it's horrible of me, but I had felt all along that Greta would have to take some of the blame—I know Mother, and, though she thinks she's up-to-date, I knew she would think Greta responsible for me—and that would have divided the storm, so to speak—and up till that Sunday I had thought that Greta would help me—though I couldn't bring myself to tell her—why I don't quite know, and to this day I can't imagine why she was so angry with me. She doesn't mind that sort of thing—you know she had had lovers herself, and so had most of her friends. Another thing, I'm quite sure she didn't really believe it was Gervase. I felt that all the time—and surely in these days no one tries to blackmail a young man into marrying—it's incredible, and that Greta should mind so much about a cousin's disgrace that she would have me do a thing like that—that can't be it——'

'I don't understand that part of it myself,' said Digby, 'but for the rest, did you know that she could never have had a child?'

'What?' Julius exclaimed. 'That explains a good deal—that is a reason for having a grudge against life—for hating it, and for being wild with jealousy of you, my poor child—whether she knew it or not—but the Gervase business beats me.'

Digby threw him a warning glance, and he went on: 'Look here, Sylvia, I do know something about all this, but I've promised to say nothing at all, so do you mind not asking anything about the murder—anyway, I'm sure it's better for you to talk of something more cheerful. I'm out of it.'

'Yes, you needn't worry about him, Mrs. Lane, and if you can, don't think of the matter. I am in hopes that the whole thing will be cleared up in a

few days—till then the less said the better.’

‘Very well,’ Sylvia agreed submissively.

Digby rose and took his leave, and went to his own home. Shortly after dinner he was rung up from the Yard to be told that Miss Daisy Fisher had returned home that evening.

Early next morning Digby went down to Ongar Road to interview Miss Fisher.

After some delay, and a slight explanation to her somewhat agitated mother, the young woman came in. She was young, pretty and fluffy, but, Digby decided, quite able to take care of herself, and not without considerable Cockney shrewdness. She was a manicurist, employed, by an odd coincidence, at the beauty parlour where Julius had bought his hair dye.

Yes, she had been to Ostend for her holidays, and had made the acquaintance of Mr. Oliver.

‘You went with him to Brussels for the day?’

‘Yes.’ She spoke reluctantly, and seemed embarrassed and uneasy.

‘I am afraid you must tell me exactly what happened.’ Digby spoke firmly. ‘This is a very serious matter.’

‘I promised not to,’ she began.

‘I can’t help that. You must tell me—or tell your story in court.’

‘Very well, then. There’s no real harm in it. It was like this. Mr. Oliver told me he had been travelling abroad on business for some time. He said he was not very happily married—his wife was exacting and had a temper. I dare say she was right,’ she suddenly added with surprising impartiality. ‘He needed a firm hand, but there, most men do. However, that was nothing to do with me. I’m a respectable girl I am, but I don’t mind a bit of harmless fun, and he was good company. Well, he told me he liked gambling, and that he had been unlucky both at Ostend and at other places before he came there, and he really should have to raise some money before he went home. He had a plan if I would help him. It appeared that he had promised to bring his wife a diamond necklace——’

Digby’s face remained impassive, but his heart leapt suddenly. At last a tangible clue.

‘Well,’ continued Miss Fisher, ‘he had got this necklace, and his idea was to raise some money on it, and spin his wife some yarn about having to wait till they could match one diamond or find a special one for the clasp, or something like that.’

‘Well, where did you come in?’ Digby asked as she paused.

‘He wanted me to go with him to Brussels, pretending I was his wife, and that the necklace was mine. He gave me a dress and hat, and promised me a brooch if we pulled it off. We went to Brussels to a big jeweller, and we told our tale, or at least he did. He said we were on our honeymoon, and that we had spent too much money, and he didn’t like to tell his father, who didn’t hold with extravagance, so we had decided to raise money on the necklace, which was a wedding present. He said we’d got a paste one which would do for the time, and later, when things were settled, we could get the other back. He explained that I hadn’t had time to have my passport altered from my maiden name. I think the old man swallowed that, but I’m not sure. Anyway, they talked for a bit, and the old man handed over some money. I think he was really a swagger pawnbroker——’

‘How much, do you know?’

Miss Fisher shook her head. ‘It was all in French, and I’m not much good at francs. It was quite a lot. Well, we went off, and he bought me a nice brooch and gave me a slap-up dinner, and off he went, and,’ she concluded with frankness, ‘I don’t suppose I shall ever see him again.’

‘Didn’t he give you his address or arrange for a future meeting?’

‘Now I ask you, was that likely?’ she demanded with scorn. She was a cheerful little soul, and seemed to accept the fact that it was highly unlikely with equanimity.

‘Is that all?’

‘Every single thing, I give you my word, and I do hope to goodness that I haven’t gone and got myself into trouble—I believed every word he said.’

‘I don’t think you’ll find yourself in any trouble if you’ve told the truth, but I’m afraid you may have to give evidence in court. By the way, do you remember the jeweller’s name?’

‘Carrong and something. It was near the Cathedral.’

‘Carron. Thank you. Now will you read this and sign it if it is correct.’

Miss Fisher, now much subdued, read through the short statement he had prepared, and signed it.

‘That’s all for the present,’ said Digby, rising, ‘but really, Miss Fisher, I think I should warn you——’ and he gave a short homily on the folly and danger of picking up total strangers at a foreign watering-place.

Then he went back to the Yard, where, after a little thought, he decided to go himself to Brussels. Armed with the description of the necklace he had got from the jeweller’s, he flew over early that afternoon, and within an hour he had satisfied himself that the necklace was indeed Greta’s. There would

be many formalities to go through before he could take possession of it, so he had a short interview with the Belgian authorities, and promising to send a man over to take them in hand, he returned to London, where on the following morning he took out a warrant for the arrest of Gervase Oliphant.

CHAPTER XVIII

BEFORE he left for Brussels he had taken the precaution of putting two men on to Gervase, so he felt little anxiety about being able to lay his hand on him quite easily, especially as before leaving Brussels he had wired that they should exercise particular vigilance, though he did not see how Gervase's suspicions could be aroused. If he had not become alarmed already—and there had been nothing to rouse alarm, it did not seem likely that he would become suspicious now.

A scandal connected with the raid of a nightclub, at which a number of well-known people had been supping, had ousted the Clinton Murder from the papers. Julius had undertaken to continue his unobtrusive existence in Norwood, and Digby felt he would keep his word. Certainly he was not at all anxious to find himself in the lime-light. Now that he knew the truth about the diamonds, Digby did not feel that Julius's evidence was of very great importance—at any rate till the trial, and he and Sir Charles had decided that as soon as Gervase was arrested, Julius should be permitted to go to Italy with Sylvia. From there he could write to his friends explaining that he had not heard of the murder till his wife joined him, inventing whatever lie seemed suitable to him to account for their not corresponding for that fortnight—letters gone astray or something of the sort. He could also announce his marriage with what further lies seemed necessary to conceal its actual date and explain their secrecy. Julius, Digby felt, was quite capable of concocting a perfectly plausible and watertight story. The police would announce, if it became necessary, that they were early convinced of his innocence, and that though his evidence would no doubt have been useful, it was not essential, and they had made their arrest without it. That would redound to their credit, and would be, as Digby expressed it, 'A slap in the eye for the papers', which had been caustic over their failure to find Julius.

Armed with his warrant, Digby went to Gervase's rooms in Davies Street. In the gutter outside a dreary looking individual was standing, a tray of collar-studs suspended from his neck. Digby paused a moment to drop twopence on the tray, and the man murmured under his ragged moustache, 'Went off to the bank as usual. Black following him.'

'Good, Winter. 'Phone me at the Yard as soon as he comes back in case I miss him at the bank. Got the warrant.'

‘Thank you, Guv’nor. Good day, Guv’nor.’ The man returned to his apparently pessimistic contemplation of the universe, and Digby, turning sharply away, walked rapidly down to the Piccadilly Branch of the Central Bank. There was no loiterer outside, so after a moment’s halt he went back to the Yard.

He had been working on certain details of the statement he had prepared of the case for about an hour when his telephone rang. At the other end an apologetic voice said, ‘Black speaking, sir. I’m very sorry to say that Mr. Oliphant gave me the slip a few moments ago.’

‘Where are you?’ Digby asked sharply.

‘Piccadilly Tube Station, sir.’

‘Come down here at once and tell me about it.’

During the few moments that elapsed before Black arrived Digby paced his room anxiously. Gervase had given his shadow the slip several times before, so there was probably no need for uneasiness, but he could not rid his mind of a foreboding of trouble.

‘Well, how did it happen?’ he asked, as soon as the apologetic Black stood before him.

‘Like this, sir. I followed him down to the Piccadilly Line. He glanced up at the indicator board that said “passing Brompton Rd. and Down St.”, shrugged his shoulders and began to stroll down the platform. The train came in and passed him, and he strolled after it till he was abreast the last carriage. I was behind him. Then just as the automatic doors were closing he made a sudden spring and entered the train. Of course the doors shut in my face—he only just cleared them. I thought it was useless trying to pick up the trail, and that it was better to let you know.’

‘Well, it can’t be helped—though it certainly looks as if he had done it on purpose, and I don’t quite like that. What had he been doing that morning—was he on business from the bank?’

‘I don’t know, sir, but I should think his own. He left his rooms as usual and started to walk down to the bank. Just at the corner of Dover Street and Piccadilly he met a young lady. They stopped, and after a few words, they went into Stewart’s, where they had coffee, being there about ten minutes. Then they came out, and the young lady went on up Bond Street and he went to the bank. He was only there about half an hour before he came out and walked to Piccadilly, where he gave me the slip.’

‘What was the young lady like?’ Digby asked, a sudden fear stirring in his mind.

‘Small, fair, big blue eyes—not quite the lady. Carried an attaché-case—typist or superior shop-girl, I should say.’

‘Damnation!’ Digby sprang to his feet. ‘I ought to have guarded against such a contingency—though it was an unlikely coincidence.’

He pressed the bell on his desk, and after having given some crisp orders went swiftly downstairs.

In less than ten minutes he was at the ‘Bond Street Beauty Parlour’ peremptorily demanding Miss Fisher, to the scandal of that select establishment.

One glance at the girl’s frightened face told him the truth, and a few sharp questions elicited the fact that she had met Gervase totally unexpectedly that morning. Impressed by the coincidence and moved with gratitude for the dress, had told him of Digby’s visit and questions. Digby hurried down to the bank, where he learnt that Gervase had applied for leave that morning, giving as a reason he had to go to Scotland Yard in connection with his evidence at the adjourned inquest.

Outside Digby paused, deep in thought.

Gervase was now warned. The question was, what would he do? It was unlikely that he would return to his rooms, as he must know they were watched, but if he attempted flight he would probably have to make some preparations—money, for instance. Of course it was possible he had already made all his arrangements, and had taken the precaution of keeping a certain sum on him—— Well, orders had been given for his arrest wherever found, and in a short time all the stations and ports would be watched. Digby could do nothing further there, but in case he hadn’t——

Fay Dallas! She lived near, and Olga had told him she and Gervase had been friends for years. He had felt all along that she had some fear greater than was to be accounted for by her dread of her husband’s uncle and his probable reactions to scandal. What if she, knowing of his relations to Greta, had suspected all along? Anyway, it would only take him a few moments, and would be worth trying.

Hailing a taxi, he gave Fay’s address. Just before they turned into the mews they passed a woman walking rapidly in the same direction who seemed familiar. As he was paying the taxi he suddenly remembered it was Fay’s maid.

A man was washing a car close by, and Digby asked him if he had seen a man enter the mews, giving a short description of Gervase.

‘Mr. Oliphant?’ asked the man. ‘I know him. He garages his bike here. He came down the mews about half an hour ago. May be there still for all I

know.’ He jerked his thumb towards Fay’s door.

Rather doubtful if he would get an answer, Digby kept his finger firmly on the bell, and after a wait of several minutes heard steps coming down the passage, and the door was opened by Fay herself, who looked very ill.

She had always been thin, but now she was emaciated, and her lavish make-up only made her face look more haggard. Certainly the doctor had not exaggerated out of sympathy.

‘Inspector Digby, isn’t it?’ she asked. ‘Will you come in?’

Digby followed her into the sitting-room, which was empty.

‘I wanted a word with Mr. Oliphant. I understand he is here.’

‘I’m afraid you have just missed him. He went about ten minutes ago.’

She spoke quite naturally, and Digby hesitated. If he told her the truth or part of it, he could, of course, point out to her that she was doing a serious thing in attempting to shield Gervase, but he did not think much good would come of it. Women, he had always found, had little respect for the law, and if she had determined to help Gervase she would probably not be deterred by the fact that she was making herself liable to prosecution as an accessory after the fact. Instead, he asked:

‘Can you tell me where he has gone?’

‘Somewhere up the city, I believe. He has got the day off from the bank to see to his own affairs, he told me.’

‘Thank you; I won’t trouble you any further. It was good of you to see me, as the doctor told me you were not fit to see any one.’

‘I have been ill—really ill——’

‘I hope you are better now.’

Fay shrugged her thin shoulders. ‘As well as I’ll ever be, I dare say.’

As he was descending the steps he suddenly thought of the maid—probably she had been sent out, so that there should be no chance of her overhearing the conversation between the two, but it was worth while making sure. He had heard her come in while he was talking to Fay, so she would presumably open the door to him if he rang again. He was right in his guess, and after one glance at the woman’s forbidding face he knew that suavity and politeness would have no effect on her, so he began briskly:

‘As you know I am from Scotland Yard. Will you tell me what you have been doing this morning?’

The woman scowled, but answered, ‘There’s nothing to make a secret of. Mr. Oliphant called, and after a few minutes her ladyship called me and said, “I’ve had bad news. Sir Reginald is very ill at Dinard. His friends wired Mr.

Oliphant and asked him to break it to me. As I do not think I could possibly stand the journey he has offered to go over, but he will have a rush to catch the train. Will you go round to his rooms and fetch his passport and money, while he goes back to the bank to tell them what has happened?"

'Then Mr. Oliphant gave me his key and his card and told me where to find the passport, and I hurried round to get it.'

'What have you done with it?'

'Why, I gave it to her ladyship.'

They had been talking just inside the door. Suddenly the roar of a powerful motor-bicycle came from immediately below them. Digby glanced out, and was in time to see it as it swung round the corner and to recognize Gervase. Leaving the open-mouthed maid standing staring after him, he sprang down the steps and flung a hasty question to the garage hand, who was still proceeding with his leisurely car-washing.

'What's the make and number of Mr. Oliphant's bicycle?'

'Norton. B.H. 77564.'

Armed with this information Digby fled to the nearest telephone.

As he came out of the box he saw a long red racing car emerge from the mews he had just left driven by a young man. After a second's pause Digby hailed him. He was practically certain that Gervase could not escape, but there were sometimes delays, even when the telephone lines were supposed to be cleared for Scotland Yard, and as there was still a great deal of holiday traffic, it was possible that he might slip through, particularly as passports were not needed for day trips, which meant that the passport examination tended to become slack. He knew that Sir Charles would be far from pleased if, having so nearly got his man, they were now to be involved in all the trouble and expense of extraditing him.

To the young man Digby rapidly explained himself and asked for help, which was promised with the utmost enthusiasm. The prospect of driving to the danger of the public chaperoned by the police seemed to give him intense pleasure.

'I think it is almost certain that he is making for Folkestone. He could just about do it. Will you take me there?'

'You bet I will,' said the young man, whose name, in the subsequent excitement, Digby forgot to ask and therefore never knew. 'What do you want him for?'

'Murder,' was the laconic answer, as he stepped into the car.

‘The devil you do. Well, here goes.’ They emerged into Piccadilly at a pace that drew a startled protest from the traffic policeman and a caution from Digby, who pointed out that if they were killed before they left London, little good would be served.

They spoke little. The young man was fully occupied with driving, and Digby was divided between admiration of his skill, which was undoubted, and pure terror for his own life.

They got as far as Tonbridge without accident, which struck Digby as remarkable. They slowed down through the town, and before they had gathered speed their attention was caught by a little crowd gathered about a motor-lorry that stood half across the road just where it forked. From behind them came the sudden clang of an ambulance bell. The young man suddenly put on the brakes hard.

‘Didn’t you say your bloke was riding a Norton? That bit of wreckage half under the lorry was a Norton not long ago.’

Digby was out of the car in a moment, pushing his way through the crowd. A figure lay by the side of the road covered by a coat. By it stood a constable listening to a man who was evidently the driver of the lorry.

‘I were coming along on my own side, going not more than fifteen,’ he was saying, ‘and he suddenly comes out from behind a char-à-banc and tries to pass it—cutting across me just as I got to the fork. He was into me before I could say knife——’

Digby interrupted this with a request to see the man. ‘I’m from the Yard,’ he added.

The constable turned back the coat. ‘Do you know him, sir?’

‘Yes! His name is Gervase Oliphant. Is he dead?’

The constable nodded. ‘Must have been killed instantaneously, sir.’

Digby uncovered mechanically and then said, ‘I’ll be back in a minute; I have a warrant for him, so I’d better take charge.’

He made his way to the young man, and told him briefly of the tragic end of their chase.

‘Poor fellow—but perhaps he was lucky after all,’ said the young man, now unwontedly serious. ‘Well, you won’t want me any more, so I’d better be pushing off.’

Digby watched the scarlet car turn and start off for London, and made his way back to where the ambulance men were shutting the doors on their burden.

CHAPTER XIX

LATE in the afternoon of the same day, Digby once again ascended the steps of Fay's flat.

To his relief he found that she had already heard of the tragedy of that morning, and he found her more composed than he had dared to hope.

He then asked her gently if she felt inclined to give him any further information, explaining that he wished to give a full account to the authorities, and that the fuller it was, the less likely they all were to suffer from publicity, but that the police must satisfy themselves as far as was humanly possible, that they had got to the root of the matter. 'After all,' he said, 'nothing can do any further harm to Mr. Oliphant. The fact that a warrant had been taken out and all the ports warned to detain him is bound to become public knowledge, but we would like, as far as possible, to be able to clear others on whom suspicion may have rested.'

'Julius for one?' put in Fay swiftly. 'He was a nice lad when he wasn't worried. I wonder what was the matter with him that week-end, and where he is now.'

'He is in Italy, I understand. You will probably hear of him in a few days,' Digby answered untruthfully.

'I'll tell you what I know. I suppose it isn't evidence, but I *do* know the truth—which I have half suspected for the last week. I suppose you know Gervase and Greta had been lovers for some time. He was growing a little tired of her, I think, but his chief trouble was financial—he was at his wits' end for money.'

'You knew all this at first hand?'

'Yes. I lived with his father for several years. He was the only man I have ever cared about, and I had grown very fond of Gervase long before I ever saw him. His father was devoted to him, and I used to hear all about him when he was at school and so on. When his father died I met him for the first time—over some business arrangements—and we became good friends—his father had told him about me. Gervase has always told me about his affairs.'

'I see.'

'He had been gambling on the stock exchange and had been consistently unlucky, and he was desperate for money. Of course I couldn't help him

there, as I haven't a penny, but I suggested that the only thing he could do was to marry, and told him that I thought Miss Maitland was quite fond of him. He liked her too, and was beginning to think that settling down into solid respectability was the best thing he could do, and that it had its advantages. I warned him that he would have to be careful. Miss Maitland was a little strict in her views, and had been brought up in rather an old-fashioned way.

'Everything seemed to be going well. He was getting on well with Miss Maitland and Greta got engaged, so that it looked as if it would be easy to break with her. I confess that I was a little uneasy that Greta had not broken it off herself, and before that week-end I had told him that he must do something definite about it. They were taking awful risks, I thought. Mercia was not very bright, but he was not quite blind, and a scandal would have ruined Gervase's chances with Miss Maitland. Anyway, I thought it foolish for him to spend his holidays with Greta instead of being near Miss Maitland, who is a pretty, popular girl as well as wealthy—and much sought after, but—the truth of it is he was afraid of Greta. She told him to come down to Clinton so he came. I was nervous all that week-end. I could see that Lord Sands was as sharp as they make them, and thoroughly against the marriage—and Greta—well, she seemed to take a malicious—perverse pleasure in going too far. How everybody in the house didn't know what was going on I can't imagine, but apparently they didn't.

'On the Monday morning Gervase came to me in a fearful state. He had received an answer accepting his proposal from Miss Maitland on the Saturday, and he had promised me he would break with Greta, which he had tried to do on the Sunday night, giving as a reason Greta's marriage. She had told him quite calmly that she didn't intend to do anything of the sort—she was marrying Mercia for his title, and Gervase should go when she wished and not before. He lost his temper, and said he would leave the house next day—then she threw her bombshell. If he did anything of the sort she would immediately accuse him of being the father of the child Sylvia was expecting. That absolutely stunned Gervase. To begin with he didn't even know that Sylvia was going to have a child—nor did I for that matter. Greta, with perfect cynicism, met his denials by telling him that if she and Sylvia chose to swear to their story no one would believe him, and that while Miss Maitland might possibly have forgiven a liaison with Greta who, after all, had a fairly notorious character, no decent young woman would forgive his desertion of a young girl of his own class like Sylvia——'

'Blackmail, in fact, but why?—was she infatuated with him?'

Fay shook her head. 'I don't think so. I don't think Greta was quite responsible—she liked power and she liked seeing people suffer—she'd always made her lovers miserable, and I think, though I'm not quite sure, that this was the first chance she had had with Gervase—he was too—vain to be made jealous—which was her usual method. She was—a sadist, don't you call it?—though she dealt with the mind and not the body——'

'Messalina,' murmured Digby.

Fay twisted her handkerchief round her fingers, and then went on: 'I don't know what happened that night. I have tried to think that he made another effort to persuade her, and lost his temper and—and killed her—but lately I have not been able to get the look in his eyes that afternoon out of my mind, and I have been afraid it might have been premeditated——'

Digby, remembering a bottle of marking-ink and a handkerchief marked J. Lane, nodded a trifle grimly.

'Believe me,' went on Fay earnestly, 'I had no suspicions at first. I thought it was burglars, as we all did. I was very nervous about what might come out, and I was very worried about my own affairs. I had lost far more than I could pay to Mr. Carter—and he was making himself very unpleasant about it—I told Gervase that. Then I came up to Town and had that hæmorrhage, and was too ill to bother at all for a bit—then I began to think, and the suspicion began to grow in my mind—though I suppose for you who are used to these things it is difficult to realize how impossible it seems that any one one knows *can* be guilty of such a terrible crime. I didn't see him because the doctor wouldn't let me see any one, but I did grow more and more afraid. Then he came back from Ostend and gave me enough money to settle with Carter—he said he had been lucky at the tables. I didn't say anything of my suspicions. One can't say that sort of thing. Then—why, it was only this morning—it seems years ago—he came in suddenly, and told me that the police were close on his heels. There was so little time that I don't know what I felt—I don't think I felt anything. He didn't dare to go back to his rooms, so I made up a story and sent my maid to fetch his passport. Then I happened to look out of the window and saw you down below talking to one of the car-washers. For a moment I thought it was all up, then I remembered that there was an inside stair down to the garage. These flats are converted mews, you know, and "not so darned converted at that" my husband says.' She laughed hysterically. 'I told him to go down there, and then I let you in. I thought I had put you off the scent, but when you came back and I heard you talking to the maid, I knew speed was our only hope. She had given me the passport and money, so I ran down to the

garage with them and told him about you. He always kept his motor-bike there, so now he made a dash for it—the rest you know.’

‘Did he actually confess to you?’

Fay nodded without speaking. She was looking very white and exhausted, and Digby felt she could stand no more. With a few murmured words of sympathy, for he was genuinely sorry for her, he rang the bell for her maid, and left the flat feeling that he had all the clues to the puzzle in his hand at last.

CHAPTER XX

A WEEK later Digby, in accordance with his promise, was sitting in the library of Lord Sands's house after a very good dinner.

He had just given a brief account of the tragedy, and it was now Sands's turn to ask questions.

'It seems quite obvious that he was the guilty man; in fact the necklace proves it, but when did you first suspect him?'

'You gave me my first clue, my lord.'

'I? He never entered my head.'

'One of my chief difficulties was that everybody in the house was so unreliable. I don't mean so much when they tried to deceive as when they tried to tell the truth—they seemed quite incapable of recounting the most trivial thing accurately, and what was worse they were so absorbed with their own jealousies and likes and dislikes, they could not give even a faintly unbiased account of any one. You, my lord, though you frankly disliked the dead girl, I believed to be unbiased and shrewd. You told me she was wanton, a fact that had already been suggested by the doctor; you also told me you believed she was carrying on an intrigue with one of the young men in the house—it was a most trivial affair that directed my attention to him rather than to the others. His shaving-brush had been used when the police examined the room. I took it that he had shaved before he went out, but when I mentioned the fact in an effort to fix the exact time he was awake, he denied that he had done so. I then thought his room had not been done since before dinner, a thing that was not surprising in that house! I happened to mention the fact to the girl who did the room, and she swore she had done it properly, and moreover, that his shaving-brush had not been used then, so it appeared that he shaved when he went to bed. Of course he might have done it, so that he would look more or less presentable when he got back from shooting—but I doubted it. From the rest of the party I learnt that he was making a rather special effort to get to bed early. No, it struck me that he had probably shaved then because it was his habit to do so, and there is, as far as I know, only one reason for a young man wanting to look his best at that hour. There were four young women in the house and Lady Dallas, but a few more inquiries narrowed the choice down considerably. Then there was another puzzling fact. Miss Hanbury was awake from three onwards, and she swore she didn't hear the alarm go off. I tried it, and it was very

powerful, so powerful that I should have thought it would have waked any ordinary sleeper in the next room, and it seemed impossible that she should not have heard it if she was awake. Of course she might have been mistaken; people are notoriously unreliable about the length of time they are awake in the night, but she seemed to be speaking the truth, and she had no reason for lying, rather the other way, in fact, so that it looked as if Mr. Oliphant had never used that alarm. There was not much in that, of course, except that it seemed such a pointless lie unless something lay behind it. Another thing was that it was he who had suggested the duck-shooting. Again a trifle, but all these trifles mounted up. Perhaps the most significant fact was that he alone knew of the diamonds, as far as I could learn. I discounted Miss Sylvia, for I was sure she had not got the physical strength to commit the murder, though for a time I did think she might have stolen the diamonds.

‘I may say that when I left Clinton the first time, I had no suspicions of Mr. Oliphant in particular. There was Mr. Lane’s inexplicable behaviour, though I felt that on the whole it was too foolish for a guilty man; besides, the general opinion seemed to be that he was incapable of murder. If it had been in a book he would, of course, have been guilty, but in real life the judgment of men so far apart as yourself and Alf Parsons carried a good deal of weight. One of my difficulties was that it might have been a purely sexual murder, with no motive in the ordinary meaning of the word. Even the diamonds did not help me to settle the point conclusively, for there was no evidence, except hearsay, that she actually had the stones with her. Miss Sylvia said that she had told her so, but Miss Swanson might have been lying for reasons of her own. Miss Sylvia was no judge of diamonds, and couldn’t have told paste from the genuine thing, and though we had made a very careful search, it was possible that we had overlooked some hiding-place, or that she had a safe deposit in another name. Again the theft might have been another crime totally unconnected with the murder, though I felt that this was unlikely.

‘When I went down to Clinton the second time I made one small discovery, namely, that Mr. Oliphant had bought a small bottle of marking-ink at the shop, saying he had been asked to get it for some one else. At once I thought of that handkerchief. It did not seem very likely that a young man should want marking-ink on a short holiday, or for that matter, that any of the others should either, and if that handkerchief was not Mr. Lane’s, and was left there to supply a false trail for me, it would have been necessary to mark it. Then I had a stroke of luck, for when I went up to the house I examined the flower-bed under the window of Mr. Oliphant’s room, and in it I found the opened bottle of ink. None of this was conclusive, you

understand, and I was handicapped by Mr. Lane's disappearance. He *might* have been guilty all along, and it is so hard to find out anything about a man's character without seeing him. However, later in that week I got an idea as to what Mr. Lane was doing, or at least what his trouble was, an idea that eventually turned out to be correct, and when I had found him, which I did within a day or so, I discovered that he was quite certain that Mr. Oliphant was guilty.'

He then related Julius's account of his meeting with Gervase. 'Then came the discovery of the diamonds and certain proof.'

'It was, you think, premeditated. How do you reconstruct the crime?'

'I am afraid it was—but I think he was unlucky in several things—most of all in his confidante.'

'Lady Dallas!'

'Yes, she is a kind-hearted woman, and I have no doubt she was very sympathetic, but it was a case where brains and a little bracing common sense would have been more to the point. Another thing, she had no money, and so of course couldn't help him, and what was worse, she had a most exaggerated idea of the value of money. She was distracted about her own debts, and—well, one can hardly blame her. An ageing woman, ill, with no friends or relations, hated by her husband's people; no wonder that plenty of money seemed the only thing that could make her life worth living, and that the lack of it was terrible, and she lent her own terror to him. After all, he would not have been so terribly badly off if the worst had happened. He was popular, had heaps of friends, who would have been ready to help him if he had only put his pride in his pocket. There was another thing too. Miss Sylvia. Lady Dallas, being a woman, no doubt assured him that it was true she was going to have a baby. Once given the hint she must have known—oh——' He broke off abruptly. 'I should not have breathed a word of that. That comes of breaking my rule and talking about cases.'

'I assure you I will forget it as soon as you have gone. I have been told many secrets in the course of my long life. Also, you credited me with being observant—I had thought of that for myself—she is not the first, and she won't be the last—and they all, even the most modern, behave the same way. Why, a great niece of my poor wife's——' He broke off prudently. 'Will you go on?'

'What I was going to say was that if he had gone to Miss Sylvia herself, or to any one else in the house, for that matter, they would all have assured him that she wouldn't have fathered her child on any one like that. That is one point where I think girls have changed. They have more sense of fair

play, and of course things are easier now—but in the class Lady Dallas comes from it is still quite common. It would strike her as natural. I think myself that Miss Swanson had succeeded in convincing him that Miss Sylvia was not quite responsible—he said as much to me. She gave me a lot of trouble, Miss Sylvia did. I could not think what was up. My fault for not taking morals seriously enough, I suppose. I kept on thinking of something so much worse! I forgot how young she was—if she'd only told me—poor young lady, I was sorry for her, but there were moments when she made me so exasperated I could have wrung her neck. Well, to return to Oliphant. I think he must have been more in despair than ever after that talk, and he laid his plans that afternoon. I imagine he must have made it up with Miss Swanson. They were seen in the village that afternoon, apparently on quite good terms. There he bought the marking-ink, and came back and marked one of his handkerchiefs with Mr. Lane's name, and later when he got the chance suggested duck-shooting. I don't think he really meant to get Mr. Lane into trouble—just wanted to confuse the trail a bit, because he didn't incriminate him to me when he got the chance. It must have been a shock to him, Mr. Lane going off like that. The duck-shooting was arranged to make some sort of an alibi, I've no doubt.

‘The actual crime was very simple. He came up to bed, shaved as usual, and went along to her room, as he had done many times before. I think he dawdled a good deal, and that she was asleep when he came in—at any rate there was no sign of a struggle. Then he just went back to his own room, did up the diamonds, which I think he took as an afterthought, addressed them to himself, and waited till it was time to rouse the others.’

‘A strange case,’ mused Sands. ‘He's not the type that murders as a rule. He seemed a fairly typical young Englishman.’

‘That misled me too. It is so hard to get away from preconceived notions. After all, is any one typical, and isn't our idea of the typical Englishman a myth, or rather a legal fiction? I was given some hints that I ignored for those very reasons. If a man is vain over some artistic achievement we are apt to suspect the worst at once; if he is vain of his athletic prowess we think nothing of it. We say at once that a movie star must be spoilt, yet we expect a man to keep his head through nearly as much adulation and nonsense if it happens to be given him for cricket or something of the sort. It may be heresy, but I should say the movie star is less vain—at least, it's all on the surface, and you know where you are with it. Mr. Oliphant's was fairly well hidden, but he was very vain and very spoilt, characteristics of all criminals, and I think those two more than any other faults lead to crime, though the crimes are usually the petty sins like

slander and spitefulness. Oliphant had the misfortune to come up against a thoroughly unbalanced young woman—she was hardly sane, of course, and I think it was a foregone conclusion that she would have driven some man to murder sooner or later, unless she had become quite insane and so been protected against herself; but what really drove Oliphant to the murder was that he could not bear to face the fact that he was not the splendid young fellow he had fancied himself, and had succeeded in making his friends believe he was. He had got himself into an awkward corner, and he could not bear to face the consequences. I think it seemed preposterous to him that he should even have to economize—ridiculous that he should not be successful in all he undertook, and above all, he suffered from that arrested development which is found in all criminals—and in thousands of other people—namely, that anything he did was somehow different because it was he that did it. What was murder in another was somehow excusable when done by Gervase Oliphant because he was not quite like other men—he was better, was more unlucky—was driven to it—God knows what—anything rather than face the facts—which were, that like everybody else in the world, he wanted to eat his cake and have it, get something for nothing, avoid the consequences of his acts, put the blame on some one else—but give him his due, he had courage. It does take that to go as far as murder. Luckily, for a million who will toy with the idea, only one will actually do it.’

‘If that is so, I don’t wonder that you found the case difficult, for nearly all the people in the house were of that type—spoilt, lazy, childish.’

‘With the exception of your lordship. I suspected you at one time.’

‘I know that. I am glad you acquit me of what you have described as the usual stigmata of the criminal.’

‘There were two things I felt about you, my lord; one was that you have been a wealthy, independent man all your life. I should imagine there have been very few occasions when you have not got your own way, and I could not feel sure what would be your reactions if you suddenly came up against something you could not alter. The other was, your obvious love for your grandson. I felt that if you had been guilty it would truly have been a crime of passion. It was not, in spite of the fact, that outwardly it appeared to be a typical “crime passionel”. In fact, of all the people I came across in this case there were only two that I should say were quite incapable of murder—Mr. Lane and Alf Parsons. They might be capable of violence in hot blood, but even that I doubt. They are both adult responsible men, with a knowledge of themselves and a grasp of reality. Very much the same and yet very different, for one was thoroughly conscious of his knowledge and the other

quite unconscious. Like to like. In spite of the difference in age, class, education and practically everything else, they took an instant liking to each other.'

'I should like to know what young Lane was doing all this time.'

'I'm afraid I can't tell you that, but I can tell you where he was.' He gave an account of Julius's activities at Balham.

'But why?'

'It was nothing discreditable. An ingenious young man.' He laughed and added: 'I think if you meet him on his return from Italy he would probably tell you a good deal. He told me when I last saw him that you had shown sympathy and great patience with him that week-end, for which he was grateful, and that he wanted a chance to apologize for his manners, which were ungracious.'

Sands laughed. 'I didn't mind. I told you he was overwrought and I thought, ill.'

'He was. A young man with great strength of character. He had several severe shocks, and seems to have spent most of that week-end quite literally sick with anxiety. How he forced himself to carry on and diddle us so neatly I don't know.' He threw the end of his cigar into the fire and then said, 'That is really all I can tell you. It was not a satisfactory case, and I am not proud of my conduct of it, though I'm glad it ended as it did——' Suddenly his face changed. 'Good heavens!'

'What's the matter now?'

'Do you know what the legal age is for a girl to get married without the consent of her parents?'

'Twenty-one, I believe; I'm not sure.'

'If you're right I've assisted at committing perjury or something of the sort. I must go and find out.'

Sands laughed heartlessly. 'I hope you get off lightly; I'll come and see you on visiting days.'

'You're thinking of hospitals, not prisons,' Digby pointed out, 'but I'm not afraid of trouble. We all have our reasons for keeping quiet on the subject—still, it's an awful thought for a policeman!'

'I hope you will come and see me again.'

'Thank you, my lord. Good night.'

He went home through streets, quiet now after the noise of the day, thinking to himself that however unsatisfactory the case might have been, he

had made two new friends, Julius, happy he sincerely hoped, in Italy, and the rather lonely old man he had just left.

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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 *Murder--and Ariadne* by Iris Elaine Bickford (as I. Wray)]