The Murder at Wrides Park

by J. S. Fletcher

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J. S. FLETCHER

MURDER AT WRIDES PARK

BEING ENTRY NUMBER ONE IN THE CASE-BOOK OF RONALD CAMBERWELL

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Chapter I

WHO IS THIS MAN?

I came to man's estate—legally speaking—on the first day of March, 1920, and on that day the trustee guardians who had looked after me and my interests from childhood paid over to me the sum of six thousand pounds, my entire fortune. Six thousand pounds, invested, as this was, at 5 per cent., means an income of three hundred pounds a year; clearly, I had got to do something to supplement it. The question was—what to do? I had never felt the least inclination for the Navy, and still less for the Army, and neither Church, Stage, Bar, nor Medicine made any appeal. But I had to do something—for which reason the first thing I did, after leaving the solicitors' office whereat I had received my patrimony, was to buy a copy of that day's *Times*. And there, in the Personal Column, I read the following somewhat curious but decidedly intriguing advertisement:

> Advertiser desires the companionship of a young, good-tempered, well-educated gentleman with a taste for books, a preference for English country life, and a liking for occasional foreign travel: some skill in billiards, a knowledge of and love of whist (in preference to bridge) would be a strong recommendation: to one who satisfies advertiser in these respects a salary of £500 a year would be paid. Apply, in the first instance, enclosing photograph, full particulars, and two unimpeachable references, to Box X.Y.C. 3748, *The Times*, E.C. 4.

I had just sat down to a bit of lunch in the Holborn Restaurant when I noticed this advertisement; before I finished eating I had made up my mind to reply to it, for it seemed to me—always supposing that the advertiser turned out to be a man I could take to—just the sort of thing I was seeking. I certainly possessed a taste for books; already I owned a small, carefully chosen library of my own. I preferred country life and all its amenities to town life, vastly. I had no objection to foreign travel—far from it! I was a pretty good hand at billiards; in an amateur fashion, of course. And having been brought up under the roof of a guardian who was old-fashioned enough to loathe and detest bridge and had a passionate love of whist, I was proficient enough in that king of all card games. And I wasn't ashamed of my looks; the photograph I could send represented a good-looking, well-set-up sort of chap. As to references—the very best. Taking everything into consideration, I thought this job would suit me, and before evening I had made my application through the medium of *The Times* office.

For a fortnight I heard nothing. Then, when I was beginning to think that I was not going to hear, I heard. There came one morning a letter, as follows:

> Wrides Park, Havering St. Michael,
> Surrey, March 15th, 1920
>
> Mr. Christopher Nicholas presents his compliments to Mr. Ronald Camberwell, and desires to acknowledge Mr. Camberwell's letter of the 1st instant. Mr. Nicholas will be greatly obliged to Mr. Camberwell if Mr. Camberwell will call upon him at Claridge's Hotel to-morrow, March 16th, at four o'clock in the afternoon. Should this appointment not be convenient to Mr. Camberwell, will he kindly notify Mr. Nicholas of the fact, and at the same time fix a date and time of his own choosing?

It was quite convenient for me to call on Mr. Nicholas at his own time, and at five minutes to four o'clock that afternoon I walked into Claridge's and asked for him. My impression had been

that Mr. Nicholas had come up to town with the idea of interviewing certain picked candidates for his job, and I was quite prepared to find myself one amongst many. But I was immediately taken away to a private suite and shown into Mr. Nicholas' presence.

There were two people in the room into which I was ushered, and as they figure largely in this story I had better say at once what my first impressions of them were. One was a tall, sparely built man of I should have said sixty to sixty-five years of age (he was actually ten years less than that) whose thin hair and sparse beard and moustache were whitening; a somewhat stooping carriage and the pallor of his checks gave me the idea that he was something of an invalid. He was very smartly dressed in check tweeds, set off by a blue tie with large white spots—the bird's-eye tie largely affected by old-fashioned country squires; the country gentleman, indeed, was written big all over him, from his sporty tie to his thick-soled boots. But I looked closer than at his mere outward semblance. There was a curiously care-worn look about him; either he had some present great trouble or had once had one from which he had not yet made recovery. Otherwise he had a kindly, gentle expression, and the reception he gave me was almost paternal in its nature, mingled with a certain shyness which I soon found to be one of his chief characteristics.

The other occupant of the room was a young woman of, I supposed, two or three and twenty. She was a bit odd-looking; more masculine than feminine, I thought—a strongly, squarely built figure, suggestive of considerable strength, shoulders square and muscular; waist indefinite; hands as capacious as a man's. She was not beautiful—a square jaw, a snub nose, a mane of brown, reddish hair over a pair of sombre, yet shrewd eyes; these features gave the impression of solidity rather than of charm, and the impression was added to by the somewhat mannish attire affected by its wearer—a tailor-made suit of rough tweed, finished off with a hunting-stock in which was fixed a horse-shoe pin. I set this young lady down, at once, as a devotee of anything relating to country life.

'My niece, Miss Starr,' said Mr. Christopher Nicholas. 'Miss Rhoda Starr.'

I made my obeisances to Miss Rhoda Starr, who, from my first entrance into the room, had been taking me in, microscopically. Mr. Nicholas motioned me to sit between him and his niece; he began to talk; as for Miss Starr, I had not been there ten minutes before I came to the conclusion that she was gifted with a really brilliant reserve of speech, and never talked unless she was obliged to. Her uncle, however, was talkative enough, and in a few minutes he and I understood each other pretty well: I, at any rate, had gathered what he wanted. And that, to put it plainly, was to have a young man about the house who would play billiards and whist with him, go abroad with him, share in country pursuits and pastimes with him, and play the part of what, unfortunately, as he said, he hadn't got—a son. He showed a good deal of nice and kindly feeling in putting all this before me, and I began to take to him.

'There's one thing I haven't mentioned, so far,' he said after we had talked a good while. 'You have a taste for books? Now, do you think you could classify, re-arrange, and catalogue a library? You see, when I came into possession of Wrides Park, a few years ago—it was left to me by my aunt, the late Miss Nicholas—I found there a very fine library of eighteenth- and seventeenth-century books, a really valuable collection, I am told, which sadly needs putting in order. You wouldn't object to attempting this?' he went on, in a half-apologetic tone. 'Taking your time about it, of course—there's no need to hurry.'

I made no objection to that, nor to anything; since seeing him, I had taken rather a fancy to Mr. Nicholas—something about him had aroused both interest and curiosity in me. And so we came to an agreement: I was to join him at Wrides Park on the following Monday.

'I think we shall get on together very well,' he said, with his usual shy smile, as we shook hands. 'And you will like Wrides—a delightfully situated place.'

I fully agreed with him on that point when I saw Wrides. It lay in a beautiful valley in the

most beautiful part of Surrey, between the county town and the smaller town of Havering-St. Michael; it was eight miles from one, three miles from the other. The house, a fine old mansion, dating from Georgian days, but thoroughly modernized and equipped with every conceivable up-to-date appliance, stood in the midst of a park of several hundred acres, rich in woodland, and enhanced in charm by the meanderings of a little river that ran down from the high ground to the southward. The gardens and grounds surrounding the house were beautifully laid out; everything that I saw as I drove up to this future home of mine indicated that its owner was a man of taste as well as of wealth.

But if Mr. Christopher Nicholas' wealth was made manifest in his exterior surroundings, it was also made still more evident in the delightful old house of which I was now made an inmate. There was nothing of vulgar ostentation at Wrides Park, but there was everything that any man, or family, could want. Mr. Nicholas kept a big staff of servants, several motor-cars, and a select stable of uncommonly good horses, for both driving and riding. Considering that there were only three of us in what you might call his family, his domestic staff seemed to me a bit redundant—men and women and boys, there must have been some sixteen or eighteen servants in all. And these were indoor servants; outside the house there were chauffeurs, coachmen, grooms, stable-boys, gardeners. All this was the more inexplicable to me because during the month which elapsed between my arrival at Wrides and the beginning of the chapter of extraordinary events which I am going to deal with Mr. Nicholas did no entertaining—we never had one single guest, and I formed the opinion, based on a word or two from my own special man-servant there, that Mr. Nicholas never had any. Still, there was the big staff of servants, well trained, very capable. Only two of them need any special mention here: Hoiler, the butler; Mrs. Hands, the housekeeper. Mrs. Hands was a big grenadier of a woman; I should say a martinet. She wore black silk of an afternoon, and though she invariably treated me with the most punctilious respect, I feel sure that she considered a responsible housekeeper to be something far superior in station to a paid companion. Equally grand, in rather a different style, was Hoiler—a quiet, reserved clean-shaven man of I suppose fifty or fifty-five, very perfect in his duties, and evidently very much in his master's confidence. These two people, Hoiler and Mrs. Hands, really ran the house; it might have been a perfectly appointed hotel, with them as manager and manageress, and Mr. Nicholas, Miss Starr, and myself as sole guests. And, anyway, the whole thing went on well-oiled wheels.

I got acquainted with Mr. Nicholas' little ways within a day or two of my entrance under his roof. He followed a routine, and followed it punctiliously. Every morning, if the day was fine, he and Miss Starr went out riding on horseback. When they returned he would potter about the gardens, or in the library until it was time for lunch. After lunch he liked a nap until three o'clock, when he and his niece went out again, this time in one of the cars. On their return at five he drank tea, and that over liked to play billiards until it was time to dress for dinner. After dinner—to be precise, at exactly nine o'clock every evening, he sat down to his rubber of whist. And here came in something that caused me surprise. The fourth hand was taken by Hoiler. Every night Hoiler appeared to the minute, and the four of us gathered round the card-table. I had been pretty well trained in whist, and Miss Starr was an exceptionally good player, but of all the whist-players I have ever seen in my time, Mr. Nicholas and his butler were the two very best, and Sarah Battle would have loved them; with them, as with her, cards were cards. Of course, I gathered from what I saw the very first night that I was there that Mr. Nicholas was a devotee of this greatest of all card games, and I wondered who had made a fourth to the trio of himself, his niece, and his butler before I came on the scene? I soon discovered that secret—a fourth player had been found in Jeeves, the first footman, an ingenuous young man, who once, subsequently, confided to me that he had done his best, but that the master and Mr. Hoiler played in such adept fashion that his efforts to live up to their standard made his poor head ache.

Nothing—out of the routine which I have already described—happened at Wrides Park during that first month of my residence there. I found life very pleasant, even if a little regular and monotonous. I had a suite of rooms of my own, a man-servant to attend to my own special needs, and except for the billiards-playing, and the solemn games of whist, I could practically do anything I pleased with my time: there was some good rough shooting in the park and its outskirts for the present, and Mr. Nicholas had promised me plenty of cricket with an adjacent club of good standing as soon as May arrived. And, fortunately, I had plenty to interest me in the old library of which he had spoken during our interview at Claridge's. It filled three rooms—there were thousands and thousands of volumes in all sizes, from big folios and quartos to small octavos and duodecimos. And it needed, as he had said, classification, arrangement, cataloguing—a big task that would take some time.

I was busy amongst these books one fine morning, about four weeks after my arrival at Wrides, when Jeeves, the footman, came to me, looking a bit puzzled.

'Sorry to disturb you, sir,' he said, 'but there's a—hardly know how to describe him, sir—a very strange—er, person—entered the house. Says Mr. Nicholas knows him, sir, but won't give any name. Mr. Nicholas is out riding, sir, and Miss Starr with him, and Mr. Hoiler is away—it's his day out, sir. So—I came to you.'

'Where is this person, Jeeves?' I asked.

'He's in the dining-room, sir,' replied Jeeves. 'He—well, sir, as a matter of fact, he forced himself in there! When I went to him at the front door, I told him that Mr. Nicholas was out. He said that didn't matter—he'd come in and wait till he came back. And then he strode in, past me—he's a great, big fellow, sir, very rough-spoken—and after looking round him in the hall, marched into the dining-room, sir. I—I think he's at the sideboard, Mr. Camberwell.'

I went off, there and then, to the dining-room, Jeeves in my wake, wondering whoever this strange caller might be. The dining-room door was slightly ajar—I pushed it wide open and strode in. There, at the big sideboard, stood a man, a great, brawny fellow, evidently of colossal strength, who held a glass half full of whisky in one hand and a syphon of mineral water in the other.

Chapter II

DENGO IS HERE!

I was so taken back by the man's impudence that for the moment I stood helplessly silent, staring at him. But he had no mind to be silent himself.

'Hullo, young fellow!' he exclaimed, in the cocksure, half-insolent accents of a man who is sure of his position. 'Who may you be?'

'It would be more to the point if I enquired who you are!' I retorted. 'What do you mean by forcing yourself in here?'

He paused, in the act of squirting soda-water into his glass, and for a moment looked me up and down from head to foot, from foot to head. Then he deliberately finished what he was after, took a hearty pull at the contents of his glass, and setting it down on the table between us, put his hands in his pockets and looked me over once more.

'Sofdy, my lad, softly!' he said. 'You don't know who you're talking to! And since you don't I'll overlook your bit of rudeness. You keep a civil tongue and a civil tone, young fellow! Now, where's——' He checked himself, but I'll swear he had another name on the tip of his tongue than that which he made haste to substitute—'Where's Nicholas?'

'Mr. Nicholas is out,' I replied.

'Mr. Nicholas is out, eh? And how long will Mr. Nicholas be out?' he demanded. 'No lies, now!'

'Mr. Nicholas may return at any moment,' I answered. 'And——'

'That's better!' he interrupted. 'I'll wait for him. Comfortable quarters, and good liquor at hand—a man of my modest requirements wants no more. But hark ye, my lad!—I've come a goodish way since breakfast-time, and I could peck a bit. Nothing serious, you know—I'll keep my appetite for lunch with Nicholas. A sandwich, now? Tasty.'

I had been looking him over while he talked, and something warned me that he had better be humoured. He was an ugly-looking customer to tackle if crossed—I could see that. What he was, what rank, class, calling, he represented, I could not make out: a big, bluff, giant of a man, well dressed in an obviously brand-new suit of stout blue serge, and scrupulously clean as to linen and boots. Something about him suggested the sea. And I had already noticed that his hands, which were of a prodigious size, were coarse and toil-worn.

'Are you known to Mr. Nicholas?' I asked suddenly.

He looked at me with a sort of pitying expression and began to chuckle.

'Known?' he repeated. 'Known? Ah, I should think I was known! Him and me—but that's nothing to do with you, my lad. That sandwich, now? The breast of a chicken between two nice bits o' bread and butter—what?'

'I'll speak to the servants,' I answered. 'I daresay they can get you what you want.'

'Good boy!' he said approvingly, rubbing his hands. 'Treat me proper, and I'm a good 'un to get on with. But treat me bad, and——'

I didn't wait to hear what he was when treated bad. I left the room, and seeking Mrs. Hands told her of the man's presence and what he wanted. Mrs. Hands showed no surprise.

'I'll take him something myself, Mr. Camberwell,' she said. 'He'll be some old seafaring acquaintance of Mr. Nicholas—Mr. Nicholas, sir, has travelled the world over in his time. Leave the man to me, Mr. Camberwell.'

I left the man to Mrs. Hands very willingly. But knowing that Mr. Nicholas might return from his ride at any moment, I hung about the hall, so that I could warn him of what awaited him. Presently Mrs. Hands appeared, carrying a small tray: she entered the dining-room. I heard its occupant let out a smothered exclamation—of joy, I supposed, at the sight of food. Mrs. Hands

closed the door: no doubt she felt it part of her duty to placate this curious visitor. And knowing she was with him, I went back to the library. But about ten minutes later, I saw Mr. Nicholas and Miss Starr riding up the park, so I repaired once more to the dining-room.

The man was alone—Mrs. Hands had left him. He had eaten whatever she had brought him, and in addition to having mixed another and a stronger whisky-and-soda had helped himself to a cigar from a cabinet that stood on a corner table. He looked at me benignly.

'Well, young fellow, and what now?' he demanded. 'Come to keep me company?'

'Mr. Nicholas is coming up the drive,' I said, pointing to the window. 'I will go out and tell him you are here. What name shall I give him?'

He rose heavily to his feet, and lumbering across to the window, looked out on the park.

'Aye!' he said, musingly. 'Just so! That's Nicholas, to be sure. Should ha' known him amongst ten thousand. Um!'

'Your name?' I repeated.

He turned, regarding me quizzically.

'Name, is it?' he said. 'Name! Well, my lad, names is neither here nor there amongst friends. However, since you're so particular, say to Nicholas that Dengo is here! D'ye get that—Dengo! D-e-n-g-o—and Dengo was his name, oh! Dengo—is here!'

I left him standing there and went out to the front of the house. Mr. Nicholas and Miss Starr had just left their horses, which were being led away to the stables. I went up to him: something in my face made him glance at me with sudden questioning—I fancied—if it was fancy—that he looked apprehensive.

'Anything the matter, Camberwell?' he asked sharply.

'I don't know that anything's the matter, sir,' I replied, 'but there is a man in the dining-room who forced himself in there saying that he wanted to see you, and would await your return——'

'A man!' he interrupted. 'What man?'

'He asked me to tell you that Dengo is here,' I said. 'His——'

But he held up a hand as if to stop me, and at the same time turned quickly aside as if he did not wish either Miss Starr or myself to see his face. But I had already seen it, and seen that he had gone pale to the very lips.

'Dengo, eh?' he muttered, trying to force a laugh. 'Oh—yes, yes, an old pensioner! Where do you say he is?'

'He is in the dining-room,' I answered.

He went into the house, leaving Miss Starr and me standing there. For a moment she seemed as if she was going to ask me some question; then she suddenly turned away and went off in the direction of the gardens. She was at all times a reserved, silent, uncommunicative young woman: some people would have set her down as of a sullen nature: certainly she held very little conversation with me.

I went back to my work in the library; as I passed the door of the dining-room I could hear voices within, but could not gather from the tone that anything unusual or disturbing was going on. And I heard nothing more of Mr. Nicholas and his strange visitor for quite half an hour. Then Mr. Nicholas came to me. He was endeavouring to show nothing, but I could see that he was greatly upset.

'Camberwell,' he said, 'I must go out for an hour or two—into the town. Miss Starr is somewhere in the grounds I believe—when you see her, tell her that I don't think I shall be back in time for lunch.'

He went off without further remark; a minute or two later, I saw him crossing the park in company with the man who called himself Dengo. They went in the direction of Havering-St. Michael—on foot, of course. That in itself was unusual in Mr. Nicholas—he rarely walked anywhere. But he was walking now, and walking rapidly. The strange man lumbered along at his

side, hurrying to keep pace with him. And—as long as they remained within my view—I noticed that Mr. Nicholas never turned to his companion: they marched away in silence.

I did not see Miss Starr until we met for lunch. I gave her my message then: she said nothing. As I have previously remarked, Miss Starr was an unusually silent and reserved young woman, more sparing of speech than any other member of her sex I had ever, or ever have, met. She ate and drank, and kept silence until lunch was nearly over. Then, Jeeves, who had waited on us, happening to be out of the room, she suddenly spoke:

'Who was that man that came to see Mr. Nicholas?' she demanded, abruptly.

'Not the faintest idea!' said I.

'But you saw him,' she retorted.

'Certainly I saw him!' I replied. 'But I don't know who he is. He called himself Dengo. That, of course, I took to be a nick-name.'

'What did he want?' she asked next.

'No idea of that, either! Except that he wished to see Mr. Nicholas.'

'Has my uncle gone out with him? Yes?—where?'

'That I don't know, but I saw them crossing the park in the direction of Havering-St. Michael,' I answered. Then as she made no further remark, I added, 'Mrs. Hands suggested that the man was some old seafaring acquaintance. And didn't Mr. Nicholas refer to him as an old pensioner? Not that he looked as if he were in need of any pension!—in my opinion.'

'What did he look like?' she enquired.

I gave her a description of Dengo and of his behaviour, watching her narrowly the while, to see if she showed any recognition of Mr. Nicholas' strange visitor. But her face retained its usual stolidity, and presently, without further remark, she left the table and went off. She had a suite of rooms of her own, and spent a great deal of her time in it; I, indeed, rarely saw her except at meals.

I did not see Mr. Nicholas again until dinner that night: I don't know at what hour in the afternoon he returned home. I had tea served to me in the library: I judged from that that Mr. Nicholas was not yet back again. And when we met at dinner two or three unusual things struck me. One was that contrary to his invariable custom he had not dressed for dinner: a matter about which I had always known him most punctilious. Another was that he was extremely silent, scarcely speaking to Miss Starr, or to myself. And a third was that he ate very little and drank a great deal. Up to that time I had always found him a most abstemious man; a glass or two of light wine with his food, and a couple of glasses of port afterwards was his limit. But on this occasion he was drinking whisky, and he filled and refilled his glass in a fashion that made me wonder. Once or twice I saw Miss Starr look at him anxiously, questioningly, but she made no remark—Mr. Nicholas' own unusual silence did not encourage conversation.

There was no mention of whist that evening. Miss Starr slipped away as soon as dinner was over, and finding that Mr. Nicholas did not want me, I went away to the library, to read and smoke, leaving him at the dinner-table, where he had just helped himself to more whisky. I felt increasingly anxious and perturbed about him: something, I was quite sure, had happened. And, of course, it had to do with the visit of the man who called himself Dengo.

About half an hour after dinner, wanting a book which I had left in the breakfast-room that morning, I was crossing the inner hall when I saw Mr. Nicholas near the front door. He wore an overcoat and a soft cap, and at the moment I caught sight of him he was selecting a stick from a rack full of sticks and umbrellas. A second later he opened the front door and slipped out. This was a most unusual thing: I had never known him to leave the house of an evening before.

But this was not the only unusual event of that evening. As I was returning from the breakfast-room, where my book had not been easy to find, some housemaid having tidied it away into a book-case, I saw Miss Starr leaving the house. She was just going out of the door when I

saw her, and I only saw her for the fraction of a second. But it was long enough for me to see that she was heavily veiled.

This added to the mystery which I felt to have been steadily gathering round Wrides ever since Jeeves came to me in the library that morning with the news of Dengo's arrival. What was it that made Mr. Nicholas and his niece go out—separately, too—so late in the evening? And where had they gone? There were no houses near—houses, I mean, at which they could call: the nearest place, inhabited by persons of their own class, was the Vicarage, two miles away. The more I reflected on this strange proceeding the more I was convinced that it all sprang out of Dengo. And who was Dengo?

I did not see either Mr. Nicholas or Miss Starr again that night. But next morning, Jeeves, who happened to be doing something for me in my room, gave me a queer look.

'Strange doings yesterday, sir,' he said. 'You didn't see the master come in last night? Good job you didn't sir! He was—well, sir, between you and me, he was speechless! I helped him to bed, sir. Never knew such a thing happen before. But there's the fact! Oh, of course I shan't say anything about it, sir. Good job nobody saw him but me.'

I wasn't surprised by Jeeves' news. But—where had Mr. Nicholas been? And where had Miss Starr been? I breakfasted alone that morning, and as soon as breakfast was over walked into Havering-St. Michael to execute a commission for Mr. Nicholas. On my return about noon, Hoiler, the butler, met me. There was more strange news. Mr. Nicholas and Miss Starr had gone to town for a few days.

The few days lengthened into a fortnight, during which I heard nothing of my employer. I had Wrides Park to myself: everything went on in the usual smooth, well-oiled fashion. Nobody seemed surprised that Mr. Nicholas should be away: Hoiler, questioned on the subject, replied airily that Mr. Nicholas and Miss Starr might return at any moment, and mightn't. I let things rest at that and went on with my work. Then, one morning, Jeeves came to tell me that Grayson, the head-gamekeeper, wished to speak to me. I went out to Grayson: he took me aside.

'Mr. Camberwell,' he whispered, 'I haven't said a word to anybody yet—I thought, as Mr. Nicholas is away, I'd better speak to you first. Mr. Camberwell!—I've found the dead body of a man in our Middle Spinney!'

Chapter III

THE SWORD-STICK

I don't know what particular sort of sickening fear it was that came over me when Grayson spoke his last words. But it came—and for a moment left me speechless. I stood, gaping and staring at him.

'He found it,' he went on, pointing to a lurcher that hung about his heels. 'Nosing about in a ditch full of rubbish. It—it had been put away, sir. Buried!'

I found my tongue at last.

'What sort of a man?' I asked. 'Anyone you know?'

He shook his head at that, but the gesture signified something more than a mere denial.

'Can't say that I know him, sir,' he replied, 'but——' And here he paused, looking, it seemed to me, as if he would rather not say what he was going to say. 'I've seen him before, sir,' he concluded. 'Alive, I mean.'

'Where—when?' I asked.

'About a fortnight ago it'll be, sir. He was crossing the park, with Mr. Nicholas. A big, heavy-built man.'

'You're sure it's the same man?' I demanded. 'Certain?'

'Dead certain, sir! I was within fifty yards of him and the master, that morning. About noon it was—near the lodge gates.'

'And you say he's in the Middle Spinney?' I asked. 'I'll go across there with you. Don't say anything to any of the servants, Grayson.'

I went back to the house and got a hat, and rejoining the gamekeeper went with him across the park. Middle Spinney was not, in the strict sense of the word, a spinney at all: it was a wood of old trees, perhaps an acre and a half in extent, which lay on two sides of a valley that, watered by a narrow stream, crossed at one point by a rustic bridge, transected the park. The trees were close-set, and there was a great deal of unchecked undergrowth. Grayson's lurcher betrayed a desire to explore this as soon as we reached the densest part and had to be brought sharply to heel.

'As I said, sir, it was him as found it,' remarked Grayson. 'He got nosing round in an old ditch there is at the back here, and kicked up such a noise that I went to see what he was after—I fancied it might be a badger. And I saw a foot!—he'd scratched the rubbish away from it. This way, sir.'

He led me off the path and through the tangle of undergrowth to where a deep ditch ran alongside the boundary of the wood. At a point where the ditch rounded a corner there was a heap of rubbish and dead leaves, and by it something dimly outlined under a couple of old sacks, themselves grey and rotten.

'Here we are, sir!' whispered Grayson. 'That old stuff lay handy, and I covered him up. He—he isn't nice to look at, sir!'

He drew aside the corner of the sacking, and for a brief second I glanced at what was revealed. There was no need for more than a glance. In it, sharp as it was, I recognized the man who had called himself Dengo.

I straightened myself, in silence, wondering what we ought to do. But Grayson was at no loss.

'This is a police job, Mr. Camberwell,' he said. 'We'd best telephone to Havering, and get 'em out here. And nobody should touch—him—until they come. If you'd go back to the house, sir, and ring up the Havering superintendent, I'll stay here and keep watch. They'll not be long in getting here after they hear from you. But a moment, sir—have you seen this man before?'

I saw no use in concealing matters: everything was bound to come out.

'Yes,' I replied. 'He's a man who called to see Mr. Nicholas about a fortnight ago.'

'Ah!' he exclaimed. 'Then I'm right, sir!—he is the man I saw walking with Mr. Nicholas across the park. Now how did he come by this, I wonder? But the police'll find out—if you'll go and 'phone them, Mr. Camberwell.'

I left Grayson there and went back to the house. A host of suspicions, wonderings, fears, doubts, crossed my mind as I hurried across the park. What was the man's dead body doing there in Middle Spinney? How had he come by his death? Was it a natural death? Or was it—murder? And if murder, who was the murderer? But that—that was a question to which, at that moment, I attempted no answer.

I chanced to come across Hoiler and Mrs. Hands, together, as I entered the house. I must have shown some trace of agitation, for the butler immediately accosted me.

'Something the matter, sir?' he enquired. 'You aren't——'

I shook my head, turning to the housekeeper.

'I'm all right, thank you, Hoiler,' I answered. 'But there is something serious wrong! Mrs. Hands—you remember the man who came here a fortnight ago, asking for Mr. Nicholas?—the man who called himself Dengo? Grayson, the gamekeeper, has found his dead body in Middle Spinney—I've just identified it. Now I'm going to telephone to Havering for the police.'

I turned away at once, without noticing the effect of this announcement. But when I had finished at the telephone, I found Hoiler at my elbow.

'Anything to show the cause of death, sir?' he asked. 'I was away that day and didn't see the person. But Mrs. Hands tells me she saw him and that he was a big, strong, well-fed man, so I suppose it couldn't be privation, sir? Any sign of foul play, now?'

'I can't tell you, Hoiler,' I replied. 'I only just glanced at the man's face. I'm going back there now to meet the police—you can come with me if you like.'

The police car was coming at full speed up the main drive of the park by the time we reached Middle Spinney. There was the superintendent stationed at Havering-St. Michael and a couple of his men; there, too, was the police-surgeon. And after a brief explanation from me as to the circumstances of the discovery, we went into the spinney and to the place over which Grayson was keeping watch.

Hoiler and I stood aside while the doctor made a preliminary examination. But we hadn't long to wait for a decisive remark from him.

'This man has been murdered!' he exclaimed suddenly rising to his feet. 'He's been run clean through the heart! And from the back, too—a cowardly thing!'

No one made any remark. We stood, staring at the dead man. There was a moment's silence. Then the police-surgeon bent down again, and the superintendent turned to me, and began a series of questions. Who found the body? Did anyone know the man? A man who had called on Mr. Nicholas a fortnight ago? Then Mr. Nicholas would know him? Where was Mr. Nicholas? Away from home? Address not known—well, Mr. Nicholas would have to be found.

One of the policemen, who had been inspecting the dead man closely, came up to where the superintendent, Hoiler, and myself were talking.

'I've seen this man before, sir,' he said. 'I saw him twice one morning about a fortnight ago. The first time was just after ten o'clock; he came up to me in the High Street and asked me if I could tell him the way to Wrides Park. The second time was about two hours, or perhaps a little more, later. He was walking along High Street again and Mr. Nicholas was with him. Mr. Nicholas went into the Havering Old Bank; this man waited outside. When Mr. Nicholas came out, he rejoined the man and they went back along the High Street together till they were out of my sight.'

'We must get in touch with Mr. Nicholas as soon as possible,' said the superintendent. He

turned to me again. ‘You think he’s in London? he asked. ‘Where does he usually stay when he’s there?’

‘The only hotel I can think of is Claridge’s,’ I replied. ‘I can telephone there.’

‘Do!’ he said. ‘We must find out who this man is. Will you go and telephone now, Mr. Camberwell?—we’ll see to everything here.’

Hoiler and I went back to the house, and I immediately telephoned to Claridge’s. But Mr. Nicholas and Miss Starr were not there, and had not been there. I tried three or four more West End hotels and got no result. And just as I had given up this quest, Mr. Nicholas and his niece drove up to the door.

It fell to my lot to tell Mr. Nicholas the news, and as soon as he had entered the house I followed him into his study. But before I could say anything he began talking to me, in the rapid fashion of a man full of some project.

‘Camberwell!’ he said. ‘You remember that one condition of our agreement was that you should have no objection to travel? Just so—well, I’m making arrangements for a trip round the world! We shall be away between two and three years and see everything that’s worth seeing, and I propose to start almost at once. You’ve no objection? It’ll give you the opportunity of extending your knowledge.’ He paused suddenly, seeing, perhaps, something in my face that startled him. ‘Don’t say you don’t like the idea!’ he exclaimed. ‘I want you to go!’

‘I like the idea immensely, sir,’ I replied. ‘I should be only too jolly glad to go, of course. But I followed you in here, sir, to tell you that something has happened this morning of which you ought to be made aware at once. You remember the man who called to see you here about a fortnight ago—Dengo?’

He turned on me with the speed of a flash, and I saw what I knew to be fear, sheer stark fear, come into his eyes.

‘What about him?’ he snapped. ‘He’s not been——’

‘His dead body’s been found, in Middle Spinney, this morning,’ I said. ‘The doctor says he was murdered!’

I had let it out point-blank, and the next instant I regretted it. For Mr. Nicholas once again went white to the lips, and this time, muttering something inarticulate, he swayed, gasped, and fell full length on the floor before I could catch him.

This was the first time I had ever seen anybody faint. I was so taken aback that I rushed headlong into the hall—fortunately, Hoiler was there. He snatched up a decanter of brandy or whisky from the dining-room sideboard and ran into the study: within a few minutes Mr. Nicholas came round again. His first action was to motion us to close the door.

‘Sorry to give so much trouble,’ he murmured presently. ‘Heart must be—but don’t say anything to Miss Starr—I shall be all right soon. Help me up, Hoiler.’

We got him into a chair, and I hastened to apologize for my abruptness.

‘All right, my boy,’ he said. ‘You didn’t know. I—I can’t stand shocks of any sort nowadays—as I used to, once. Had too many of them, perhaps. But—give me a little more brandy, Hoiler—this news, Camberwell? Just tell me all about it, quietly—but tell me everything . . . everything you know.’

I told him all that I was in a position to tell, which was not much. He listened quietly to the end and then put an anxious question.

‘Was—was anything found on the body?’ he asked. ‘Money, for instance?’

‘There had been no search made when I came away,’ I replied. ‘I suppose the police will be able to tell about that, presently.’

The Superintendent of Police came to the house soon after this. He had heard of Mr. Nicholas’ return home and wanted to see him. I tried to put him off, but it was no good: he insisted on seeing Mr. Nicholas at once and on seeing him alone. He got his way and was with

Mr. Nicholas some time; when he left him, he looked very grave. He saw Jeeves next, and then Mrs. Hands; finally, he turned his attention to me. I told him all I knew about Dengo, but about Mr. Nicholas' doings and movements on the night of the day of Dengo's visit I said nothing, and I gathered, or concluded, that Jeeves had not said anything either.

'There are some very queer circumstances about this affair, Mr. Camberwell,' remarked the superintendent. 'Mr. Nicholas tells me that he helped this man with money—a considerable amount. Well, there was no money in the clothing, beyond some loose silver. Nor papers, either—not even a letter to show who the man is.'

'Hasn't Mr. Nicholas given you his real name?' I asked.

'Mr. Nicholas has given me no more information on that point than that he knew this man as Dengo,' he replied. 'Of course, we're only beginning enquiries. But there's just one question I want to put to you. When this man came here, you were the first person to see him after he'd thrust past the footman, weren't you? Yes?—well, what sort of attitude did he take up? Bullying?'

'Decidedly bullying!' I asserted.

'As if he'd some right to be here?' he suggested. 'As if, to put it otherwise, he was sure of his ground?'

'Ye-es,' I replied, 'yes, I suppose so. He was hectoring in manner, certainly.'

'And it was you who announced his presence to Mr. Nicholas, wasn't it?' he went on. 'Now, how did Mr. Nicholas take it?'

But I was not going to be drawn on that subject.

'Mr. Nicholas remarked, on hearing the name Dengo, that he was an old pensioner, and went in to see him,' I replied.

'Did Mr. Nicholas seem taken aback, afraid, upset?' he persisted.

'I prefer not to say anything about Mr. Nicholas,' I answered. 'In fact, I'm not going to! You must excuse me.'

'Yes, yes, I quite understand your attitude, Mr. Camberwell,' he said. 'Quite proper, no doubt—and just as you like. But you know, there'll be an inquest, and you'll have to give evidence, and you'll find that the coroner will want to know everything you can tell. This is a case of murder!—no doubt about that.'

'When will the inquest take place?' I enquired.

'I should say it will be opened to-morrow, or next day,' he answered. 'That's for the coroner to decide.'

Then he went away, and from what we heard from time to time during the rest of the morning and the ensuing afternoon, he and his men were closely examining Middle Spinney and its surroundings. And towards evening the superintendent came to me once more. One of his men had found, hidden away near the scene of the murder, a sword-stick, which he brought with him, wrapped in paper. I recognized it at once as one that belonged to Mr. Nicholas, and usually stood, with other sticks and canes, in his front hall.

Chapter IV

THE ORDEAL BEGINS

I suppose I let my recognition of the sword-stick show itself in my face, for the superintendent questioned me before I could speak.

'You know this stick, Mr. Camberwell?'

'Yes,' I replied. 'I know it!'

'Whose is it?' he asked.

'It is one of Mr. Nicholas' sticks,' I said.

He began to re-invest the stick in its wrappings—silently. I watched him, wondering at his silence. But I saw that he was thinking. Suddenly he spoke.

'Look here, Mr. Camberwell!' he said. 'Just oblige me by not mentioning this to Mr. Nicholas. Now that you've identified the stick as his, I don't want the fact of its discovery to get out until the inquest.'

'Where did you find it?' I asked.

'One of my men found it, shoved down a rabbit-burrow, close by where the dead man was lying,' he answered. 'Of course, there isn't the slightest doubt that this'—he tapped the stick significantly—'is the weapon with which the man was killed! Run through the heart—from behind. That's what the doctor says. Well—you've no doubt that it is Mr. Nicholas'?'

'No, I've no doubt of that,' I admitted.

'Where did he keep it—do you know that?' he asked.

'Yes! In a stand in the hall, amongst a lot of other sticks,' I replied.

'Where anybody could get at it?'

'Where anybody could get at it!' I asserted.

'Well, that's another reason why I want you to say nothing about it,' he said. 'So—not a word till the inquest, Mr. Camberwell.'

The inquest was opened—in the club-room of the Wagon and Horses, a roadside tavern, once a famous old posting-house in the days of stage-coaches, which stood close by the lodge-gates of Wrides Park—next day, and I accompanied Mr. Nicholas and his niece to it. We were all very silent, and Mr. Nicholas, I could see, was in a highly nervous condition: the sight of the crowd of inquisitive folk gathered outside the inn, and of the packed room inside did not tend to improve him. And from the first I was conscious of a curious, indefinable atmosphere of suspicion. Rumours and gossip had, of course, been busy; everybody knew that the dead man had visited Mr. Nicholas, that Mr. Nicholas had walked into Havering-St. Michael with him from Wrides Park, and that as far as was known, Mr. Nicholas was the last person to see him alive. And when Mr. Nicholas, Miss Starr, and myself had been accommodated with seats, every eye in the place appeared to be turned on us. Mr. Nicholas groaned.

'I ought to have had Chancellor here!' he muttered. 'It was a great mistake not to send for Chancellor!'

Chancellor, I knew, was Mr. Nicholas' solicitor, whose office was in London.

'Shall I telephone for him, sir?' I suggested. 'They've a 'phone here, I believe.'

'No—no!—they're going to begin,' he replied. 'Too late—these can't be anything but mere formal proceedings. There'll be an adjournment—I'll have Chancellor in attendance at the resumption.'

But it was very soon evident that these were not to be merely formal proceedings. During the two days that had elapsed since the discovery of the dead man, the police appeared to have been very busy and very thorough in their enquiries, and they were now ready to bring forward a good deal of evidence. The coroner, in his opening remarks, let it be seen that he was prepared to go a

good way that morning, and once more I suggested to Mr. Nicholas that I should 'phone Chancellor at once. But again he demurred—no, let us hear what there was to hear, first; there would have to be an adjournment of course.

The first thing we heard was from the coroner himself. He pointed out that although the greatest publicity had been given to the case through the newspapers, no one had come forward to identify the dead man, and that in spite of the fact that exceedingly full descriptions of him had been given in the morning and evening papers, both in London and in the provinces, no communication of any sort regarding him had been received by the police up to that moment. The members of the jury, therefore, would have to rely, for the present, on the evidence which would be given, and particularly on that of one witness. He did not mention who that witness was—but everybody knew.

The evidence had been very carefully arranged by somebody—I mean, as regards its sequence—and in such a fashion as to trace out the dead man's movements from his appearance in the neighbourhood. The first witness was the policeman who had recognized Dengo when he saw his dead body in Middle Spinney. He fixed the date of Dengo's arrival at Wrides Park—April 17th. On the morning of that day, he said, he was on point duty in the High Street of Havering-St. Michael. A little after ten o'clock, the deceased came up to him and asked to be directed to Wrides Park. He pointed the way, and the deceased went off in that direction. About two hours later he saw the deceased again; he and Mr. Nicholas were walking together along the High Street. Witness saw Mr. Nicholas go into the bank—the Havering Old Bank—the deceased waited outside, walking up and down. Mr. Nicholas was in the bank a few minutes; when he came out he rejoined the deceased and they walked back along the High Street, in the Wrides Park direction. That was the last he saw of deceased, until he saw his body in the wood. He did not see Mr. Nicholas part company with deceased: they were together as long as they remained in his sight.

Jeeves was the next witness. He said that the deceased came to the front door of Wrides Park about half-past eleven on the forenoon of April 17th, and asked for Mr. Nicholas. Without waiting for any reply, he strode into the hall. Jeeves told him that Mr. Nicholas was out; deceased said he'd wait. Then he went past Jeeves into the inner hall, and after looking into one or two rooms, the doors of which were open, walked into the dining-room and made for the sideboard, where there was a spirit-case and mineral water. As the butler, Mr. Hoiler, was away for the day, Jeeves then went to fetch Mr. Camberwell, Mr. Nicholas' secretary.

That was really all that Jeeves could tell, but the man of law who represented the police evidently wanted to make more out of the footman's evidence, and began to cross-question him a bit.

'What sort of tone did this man adopt when he asked for Mr. Nicholas?' he enquired. 'Was he polite?'

Jeeves allowed himself to smile—but it was a smile of surprise.

'Anything but, sir!'

'Was he rude—bullying?'

'Just that, sir!'

'You say he walked in without invitation?'

'He walked in, sir, as if the house belonged to him!'

'As if he were absolute master of it—and of you, eh?'

'Just about that, sir!' assented Jeeves.

The barrister asked no more, but I knew why. He had got his effect. Already he had conveyed the impression to everybody in court that Dengo, whoever he was, had some hold on Mr. Nicholas which made him Mr. Nicholas' master.

They called me next. I took up the tale where Jeeves had left it off. I said as little as possible

—but I was on oath, and obliged to answer whatever questions were put to me. And presently I found myself facing them in plenty.

'You heard the evidence of the last witness as to the man Dengo's behaviour? Was he similarly domineering to you?'

'He was certainly aggressive.'

'Did he seem—let us say—sure of his ground?'

'He seemed confident—yes.'

'Behaved, in fact, as if he knew that he could do what he liked?'

'Yes—I suppose so.'

'What did you think?'

'I didn't know what to think.'

'Come—come! You must have thought something! Here's a rough, uncultivated man who forces himself into a gentleman's house, helps himself to whisky and cigars, behaves generally as if the house were his own, and so on. You must have thought something about that, you know! What, now?'

'If I thought anything it was that he might be some seafaring man, known to Mr. Nicholas, who presumed on their acquaintance——'

'I see! Very well—now about Mr. Nicholas. You went out to announce the man's presence. Was Mr. Nicholas surprised?'

'I think so.'

'Did he show it? Come, now—either he did or he didn't! Did he?'

'He did!'

'How?'

'He seemed to be taken aback—upset.'

'How much upset? You're on your oath, you know!'

'He became very pale.'

'Say anything?'

'Yes. He said something about the man's being an old pensioner. Then he went into the house to him.'

'Into the dining-room?'

'Yes.'

'When did you see Mr. Nicholas next?'

'A little while after. He came to me and said he was obliged to go out, and a few minutes later, I saw him go out, in company with the man. They walked across the park in the direction of the town.'

There was a brief pause here; then he came at me again.

'Just tell us all you remember of Mr. Nicholas' movements during the rest of that day, will you?' he asked. 'All, please!'

I told all I remembered—no, not all! For I purposely left out what I remembered about Mr. Nicholas' doings at dinner, and about my recollection of his taking a stick out of the stand, and about Jeeves' confidences in relation to his master's condition. My questioner watched me keenly.

'That's all you can tell?' he asked. 'Very good—but in view of certain evidence which will be called later, I want you, Mr. Camberwell, to refresh your memory a little on one or two points. First of all, you dined with Mr. Christopher Nicholas that night as usual? Yes?—well, was he his usual self?'

That was an unpleasant question, but I had to reply.

'He was very much upset.'

'Answer this, if you please. Did he drink a good deal?'

‘He drank whisky, which was most unusual. As a rule, he is a most abstemious man.’

‘And on this occasion he wasn’t, eh? Drank so much that it attracted your attention?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did it excite him?’

‘No—on the contrary, he was abnormally quiet.’

‘Well—another question. Did you see Mr. Nicholas leave the house that evening?’

‘Yes!’

‘What time?’

‘Shortly after dinner was over.’

‘Alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where was he when you saw him?’

‘In the hall, near the front door.’

‘Doing anything?’

I hesitated at that, remembering what the superintendent had said.

‘Come, now!’

‘He was selecting a stick from a stand in the hall,’ I said.

‘A walking-stick?’

‘Yes.’

He paused for a second; then he suddenly stooped, felt for something beneath the table at which he and other men of the law were sitting, and finding it held up the sword-stick.

‘Was this it?’ he asked.

But I could not answer that. And I was thankful I couldn’t.

‘I can’t say!’ I replied. ‘I was too far away from Mr. Nicholas to see which stick it was that he selected. There are a great many walking-sticks, canes, and that sort of thing in the stand I referred to.’

‘But he took a stick?’ he persisted.

‘He certainly took a stick out of the stand.’

‘Black—brown—white—green—what was the colour?’

‘I can’t say definitely. It was a dark stick.’

‘But—a stick! And he took it. Now, is this stick the property of Mr. Nicholas?’

‘I think it is.’

‘Can you positively recognize it as being his property?’

‘Let me handle it,’ I said, and took the stick into my hands. ‘It is a stick that I have often seen in the stand in the hall at Wrides Park—yes!’

He took the stick from me, put it away again, and suddenly appeared to have lost all interest in my presence. He sat down, and began to whisper to the Superintendent of Police, and the coroner, taking up the running, glanced at his notes and bade the usher to call Grayson, the gamekeeper.

Chapter V

THE ORDEAL CONTINUES

For some reason or other, not clear to me at the time, the coroner and the legal folk questioned Grayson at considerable length as to his discovery of the dead body. The police had prepared a rough map of Middle Spinney and its surroundings, and the gamekeeper was asked a great many questions as to the position of the spot where the body was found in its relation to the neighbouring paths and roads. The coroner also wanted to know if there was any indication that the body had been dragged there: further, he was particular in questioning Grayson as to whether he thought it possible, considering the dead man's bulk and weight, for one man to have dragged the body to the ditch in which it was found. And on this point Grayson gave some important evidence. Running parallel with the ditch and at the distance of only a yard from its edge was a narrow path. Supposing Dengo to have been struck down on this path and to have fallen there, it would have been quite an easy matter for his assailant, single-handed, to roll the body over the edge into the ditch at the side. As to the path itself, it was a mere track, a couple of feet wide, traversing the undergrowth; it was little used, though it certainly made a short cut from one corner of the spinney to another. At a few yards' distance was another track, a cartway through the spinney. Grayson had been following this when his dog's barking attracted his attention: it was the usual way of crossing the spinney. He himself had not trodden the pathway by the ditch for a long time, perhaps not for months. In his opinion the dead man might not have been discovered for a long time if the dog had not scratched the leaves and rubbish away from him.

The Superintendent of Police came next. He had little to tell, but it was of importance. After detailing what he had heard and seen on being summoned to the spinney, he went on to say that he made a careful examination of the dead man's clothing. There were no papers or letters in the pockets which might have helped to identify him. There was a small amount of money—two or three pounds. There was a cheap watch and chain, and such things as a tobacco-pouch, a pipe, a clasp-knife. The linen was not marked, and there was no tailor's label on the clothes. Since the discovery of the body the police, through the Press, had done everything possible to get it identified, but they had had no success so far. They knew, however, that the dead man came from London, for in his waistcoat pocket he, the superintendent, had found the half of a return ticket between Waterloo and Havering-St. Michael.

After this a policeman went into the box. He had little to tell, but his tale was of even more serious importance than the evidence of his superior. For he was the man who discovered the sword-stick. He had found it thrust into a rabbit-burrow a few yards away from the place at which the dead man had been unearthed.

And then came the medical evidence. That was simple. The man had been killed, practically instantaneously, by a thrust from some weapon which, entering the body a little beneath the left shoulder-blade, had transfixed the heart. Yes—the sword in the stick now produced would certainly have produced the wound and effect just described. It would not require any great muscular strength to run the man through—the sword was finely tempered and of a keen edge.

When the police-surgeon left the witness-box, I was conscious that everybody in court felt that we had now reached a sort of crisis in the proceedings. All that had been said and done seemed to constitute a preliminary—a prologue to the actual drama. There appeared to be little doubt that the dead man had been killed in Middle Spinney by a thrust through the heart from the sword-stick which now lay plain for all to see on the table before the coroner, and the question was—who struck the blow? But behind that question lay two others. The first was—who was this dead man? The second—why did he call on Mr. Nicholas? And no one but Mr. Nicholas could give an answer to either.

Mr. Nicholas was the next witness. He was in a pitiable state of nervousness, and everybody was aware of it. The coroner, who first took him in hand, was as considerate of this as he possibly could be, but from the very start out, Mr. Nicholas, as a witness, was eminently unsatisfactory. I, listening with nerves nearly as jangled as his own, could not help seeing that every answer he gave was damaging to his peculiar position. The coroner began by asking him if he had heard the evidence of the footman, Jeeves, and of myself as to the arrival of Dengo at Wrides Park? Yes, he had heard it. Was it correct—as regards himself? Yes, as far as he knew: Mr. Camberwell had met him and told him that the man was there.

'Naming him as Dengo, Mr. Nicholas?'

'Yes—naming him as Dengo.'

'You knew who was meant?'

'Yes, I knew who was meant.'

'Was that the man's real name?'

There was what the newspaper reporters call a breathless silence when the coroner put this question, and Mr. Nicholas became the focus of every eye in the court. But the answer came readily enough.

'It was all the name I knew him by!'

'You knew no other name for him?'

'No other name.'

'No Christian name?'

'No!'

'You can't tell us if this was a nick-name, or a real name?'

'I can't. I don't know.'

'Who was this man, Dengo?'

'I don't know.'

'But—he was known to you!'

Mr. Nicholas made no reply to that. He stood fingering the ledge of the witness-box, staring at nothing, waiting. . . .

'What did you know about him?' asked the coroner.

Mr. Nicholas hesitated. When he spoke again, it was as if he were being forced to speak . . . in desperation.

'He was a man to whom I gave money, now and then!'

'May I ask why?'

'To—to relieve his necessities, I suppose. He asked for it.'

'How long had you been giving him money?'

'A few years.'

'Did he usually come for it?'

'No—he had never been before.'

'You had sent him money by letter, I suppose?'

'From time to time, yes.'

'Was he any relation of yours?'

'He? No!'

'Had he any claim on you?'

'No!'

'Why did you give him money, then?'

'It was—a private reason.'

'Well, did he want money when he came to you on this date before us—April 17th?'

'Yes.'

'Did you give him any?'

‘Yes.’

The coroner paused a moment, as if to consider his next question. Then his manner became more inviting.

‘Will you tell us, Mr. Nicholas, exactly what passed between you and this man whom you knew by the name of Dengo, after you went into your dining-room to join him? Tell us in your own way, but—tell us everything.’

Once again Mr. Nicholas hesitated. Then, folding his hands on the ledge before him, he began to talk—this time with some increase of confidence.

‘He wanted money. It was to start a business. After hearing what he had to say, I said I would give it to him. He wanted cash. I said I would walk into the town with him, and draw money from my bank. We walked into the town, and I went into my bank and cashed a cheque.’

‘For what amount?’ enquired the coroner.

‘Fifteen hundred pounds.’

‘All for—this man?’

‘Yes. That was the amount he wanted.’

‘How did you take the money?’

‘Notes of a hundred pounds each. Bank of England notes.’

‘Well—proceed, if you please.’

‘I left the bank and rejoined him; he had waited outside. We walked back along the High Street until we were clear of the town. Then I gave him the money——’

‘The full fifteen hundred pounds?’

‘Yes. And then we parted. He went back towards the town. I returned towards Wrides Park. But remembering that I was then late for lunch, I walked back into the town and had lunch at the hotel. Afterwards I walked home.’

‘Did this man tell you where he was going when you parted?’

‘No. I understood he was returning to London.’

‘That was the last you saw of him—when you parted outside the town, after you had handed him the money?’

‘Yes!’

The coroner remained silent for a moment or two; when he looked up from his papers it was to glance at the barrister who represented the Police. That gentleman got to his feet—and with something like alacrity.

‘How long had you known this man Dengo, Mr. Nicholas?’ he asked.

‘Oh—some years!’

‘Old acquaintance, eh! Do you think Dengo was his real name?’

‘It was all the name I knew him by.’

‘Never knew him by any other?’

‘Never!’

‘Did you know him well—intimately?’

‘No!’

‘Had you ever been on intimate, friendly terms?’

‘No!’

‘When did you last see him, in the flesh, before the morning of April 17th?’

‘I—I can’t remember that.’

‘Approximately?’

‘It would be some time ago—a few years.’

‘Where?’

Mr. Nicholas had replied to this new questioner fairly readily up to that point, but now he not only hesitated, but showed decided signs of embarrassment.

‘I would rather not say,’ he faltered at last. ‘It is a private——’

‘But you know where it was!’ interrupted the questioner. ‘I said—where?’

‘Yes,’ admitted Mr. Nicholas.

‘And you won’t tell us?’

‘I would rather not, if you please.’

‘Very well, but will you tell me this. What was the relationship between you and this man, who was not at all of your class, that you should give him money whenever he demanded it?’

‘There was no relationship!’

‘Why did you give him money, then?’

Mr. Nicholas made no answer.

‘Now, Mr. Nicholas, I’m going to ask you a plain question. Was this in the nature of hush-money?’

‘I—I don’t quite understand that.’

‘Then I’ll be plainer! Was this man blackmailing you?’

‘I gave him money voluntarily.’

‘No doubt! But—were you paying him to keep some secret? We have heard what his behaviour was when he went to your house this morning, and it seems to indicate that he felt himself to be your—master, eh? Now, why?’

Mr. Nicholas remained silent and his tormentor turned to another track.

‘Where were you during the evening of April 17th, Mr. Nicholas?’

‘I was at home until after dinner. Afterwards I went for a walk in the grounds and the park. I—I was much upset. I grieve to confess it, but I fear I drank spirits too freely at dinner that night: the events of the day had upset me very much indeed. And—I may as well admit that my recollection of anything that happened after dinner is very vague and confused.’

‘Do you remember where you went?’

‘I don’t! At least, not very well. I think I walked across the park. I wanted to think. I—but I have really very little recollection of that evening.’

‘Well, there is something here that may refresh your memory, Mr. Nicholas! Is this your sword-stick? Take it in your hands—examine it. Be sure!’

‘Yes, it is my stick. Certainly it is!’

‘Did you take it out with you that evening? Can you remember?’

‘I can’t. I have no recollection whatever on that point.’

‘But you may have done?’

Mr. Nicholas’ answer came in his mildest tones.

‘I may have done!’ he replied. ‘It is quite likely!’

Chapter VI

THE ORDEAL CONCLUDES

For some reason, this reply caused a sort of sensation in court. And Mr. Nicholas' questioner was not slow to perceive and to take advantage of it.

'Try to think, Mr. Nicholas!' he said. 'Did you take the stick—this stick!—out with you?'

'I have said I think it probable that I did,' replied Mr. Nicholas. 'Very probable.'

'Why, now?'

'Because it is a favourite stick of mine; one that I carry five times out of six.'

'Can't you be sure about it?—as regards that particular occasion?'

'I can't. I have already told you that I have next to no recollection of the events of that night, owing to the—the cause I mentioned. I—to be truthful, I scarcely recollect anything.'

'You know where this stick was found, Mr. Nicholas?'

'I have heard what has just been said about that.'

'It was found thrust into a rabbit-burrow, close to the scene of the murder. Did you place it there?'

'I? No! Certainly not!'

'You say this is a favourite, perhaps the favourite stick amongst your collection of such things. I believe you left home on the morrow of the day we are talking about?'

'Yes, I went to London.'

'Didn't you want to take this stick with you?'

'No. I never take a walking-stick to London. I take an umbrella.'

'Well, you returned from London, in due course. Did you notice, next time you wanted a stick, that this was missing from the place where it was usually kept?'

'No, I did not. I never missed it, never knew it was gone, until you produced it this morning.'

'How do you account for that, Mr. Nicholas?—if it's your favourite stick?'

'Easily! I have not been out of my house since I returned home, and so have had no occasion to use a stick.'

'Well, you still think it probable that you did take this stick when you went out that night?'

'Yes—I think it highly probable.'

'But you have no recollection of what you did with it?'

'None!'

'Don't remember losing it?'

'I don't.'

'Don't remember putting it back in its place when you returned home?'

Mr. Nicholas sank his head and shook it, sadly.

'I grieve to say,' he answered, 'that—for the reason I gave you in my desire to tell the truth—I have no recollection whatever of returning home! I remember nothing whatever about it.'

'You don't remember re-entering your house?'

'No. I do not!'

The barrister glanced towards the place where Jeeves, Hoiler, and one or two other members of the Wrides Park staff were seated. There was a question in his glance and Jeeves responded to it.

'I let Mr. Nicholas in, sir,' he said. 'He'd forgotten his latch-key, I think.'

'May I interpolate a question to this witness?' asked the barrister, with a look at the coroner. 'You admitted your master?' he went on, turning to Jeeves. 'To be plain, what condition was he in?'

'He—he seemed very odd, sir,' replied Jeeves, with evident unwillingness. 'I wondered if he

was ill and asked him. He made no reply; only looked queerly at me. He walked straight across the hall and upstairs.'

'Had he a stick—this stick—with him?'

'No, sir—he had no stick with him.'

'Certain?'

'Positive, sir!'

'You say he walked upstairs. Was his gait—his—walk—affected at all?'

'No sir, he walked all right. But—he couldn't talk. He—he just stared, sir. His eyes were queer.'

'And you're absolutely positive about the stick?'

'Mr. Nicholas had no stick when he came in, sir. He had nothing in either hand. But I—I noticed something, sir.'

'Oh? And what was that? Don't be afraid to tell us.'

Jeeves sank his voice to a whisper.

'He—he'd the neck of a bottle of whisky sticking out of his overcoat pocket, sir!'

'You saw that, eh?'

'Saw it plainly, sir. Couldn't help it.'

'Did you help him off with his overcoat?'

'No, sir. He went upstairs in it.'

'I suppose all this surprised you?'

'Flabbergasted me, sir! Mr. Nicholas, sir, is a most abstemious gentleman!'

'Never seen him like that before, eh?'

'Never, sir!'

The barrister turned once more to Mr. Nicholas. He stood for a moment regarding him with a steady scrutiny, and when he spoke his voice took on a graver tone.

'Mr. Nicholas!' he said. 'I want to ask you a very serious question. Is it the fact that you did not know this dead man by any other name than that we have heard—Dengo?'

'It is the fact,' replied Mr. Nicholas. 'I did not know him by any other name.'

'Will you tell me another thing? Had he some hold on you?'

Mr. Nicholas hesitated.

'We had a secret between us,' he admitted at last.

'A secret?'

'I suppose it would be called so.'

'Will you tell me what it was?'

This time there was no hesitation in the reply.

'No!'

'Not—considering the gravity of the situation?'

'Not on any consideration! It has nothing to do with this matter.'

The barrister hesitated a moment, glanced at the coroner, and suddenly sat down. A moment later, Mr. Nicholas, dismissed, left the witness-box. And as he passed me, to resume his seat by his niece, I could not help seeing that he was trembling violently, and that great beads of sweat were rolling down his cheeks.

And now, when I had hoped that the proceedings had ended, and that the coroner would adjourn till some future date, came the greatest surprise of the day—sprung on us, no doubt, by the police. There was summoned to the witness-box Welman, landlord of the Wagon and Horses, the very house in which the inquest was being held! Welman was a well-known character in that district; a landlord of the good old-fashioned sort; a thoroughly honest, highly respectable man whose word could be depended upon to the last degree. Evidently, from the mere fact that he was called, Welman had something to tell; evidently, too, judging by his demeanour, he was

extremely reluctant to be obliged to tell it. It was quite easy to see that he stepped into that box and took the oath with great distaste—but he had no choice in the matter.

'I believe,' said the coroner, 'that you have been shown the body of the man into the cause of whose death we are enquiring?'

'I have, sir,' assented Welman.

'Did you recognize it as that of a man you had seen before—alive?'

'I did, sir!'

'When did you see him—and where?'

'He came here, sir, to this house, twice, at different times, on Monday, April 17th.'

'How do you fix the precise date?'

'I made a note of it, sir, on a calendar.'

'Why?'

'Because more than one strange thing happened that day, sir.'

'Something unusual?'

'Very unusual, sir!'

'Well, about this man. Just tell us about his visits to this house.'

'He came in here, sir—that is, into the bar-parlour—somewhere between eleven and twelve o'clock on the date I mentioned. He was, of course, a perfect stranger to me, and I gathered that he was strange to these parts, because he asked if the lodge-gates along the road were those of Wrides Park, where Mr. Nicholas lived? I told him they were. He then had a whisky-and-soda, drank it off, and went out. I saw him turn into the entrance to Wrides Park. Some little time later, I saw him come out of the Park, in company with Mr. Nicholas. They passed this house—I happened to be standing at my front door at the time—and went along the road in the direction of Havering-St. Michael.'

'Together?'

'Yes, sir, together.'

'Were they in conversation?'

'They didn't seem to be talking, sir. Mr. Nicholas was walking along with his head bent, as if thinking; the other man walked a yard or so behind.'

'You say the man came to your house twice. The first time was in the morning. When was the second?'

'About eight, or from eight to a quarter past, the same evening, sir. He came into the bar-parlour again, told me that he had a bit of business hereabouts which would oblige him to spend the night here, and asked if I could let him have a room. I told him we could accommodate him. He pulled out a handful of money—notes and silver all mixed together—and offered to pay me there and then. I told him to pay me after breakfast next morning. He then ordered whisky and a cigar, and stopped, drinking and smoking, in the bar-parlour for half an hour or so. He——'

'Did he talk to you or to any customer during that time?'

'To me, sir. No one else was in. Yes, he talked. I came to the conclusion that he was an old seafaring man, and that his business hereabouts was to buy a small house or cottage to which he could retire.'

'Did he go out again after that?'

'Yes. About nine o'clock, he looked at his watch, said he'd got an appointment, and went out, saying he'd be back for a bit of supper at ten. But he never returned. I waited up for him till twelve; then I went to bed.'

'You never saw him again?'

'Not till I saw him dead!'

'Did he leave anything in your charge?—any bag, suit-case, parcel——?'

'Nothing, sir.'

‘I want to ask you something more, Mr. Welman. Did Mr. Nicholas call at your house—this house—that evening?’

It was here that the landlord became reluctant. Obviously, it distressed him to be obliged to answer this question. But he answered it.

‘He did, sir!’

‘About what time?’

‘Half-past nine, sir.’

‘Half an hour after the man we have been talking of had left?’

‘Yes, sir—just about.’

‘What happened? I am sure you will tell us the truth, Mr. Welman.’

‘I shall, sir—though I wish it had never been necessary to ask me these questions. And after all, there’s little to tell. I heard somebody come into the hall. As whoever it was didn’t come into the bar-parlour, I went out to the hall. Mr. Nicholas was standing there. Of course I knew him well enough, but he’d never been in my house before. He looked at me in what I thought was rather a queer way and whispered that he wanted a glass of whisky. I thought he was perhaps a little shy, so I showed him into a private room close by. I then fetched a glass, mineral water, and a freshly opened bottle of whisky. He motioned to me to set these down, and as he didn’t seem inclined to talk, I did so, and left him. About a quarter of an hour later I heard the front door close, rather noisily. I went out of the bar. The door of the private room was open. The room was empty—Mr. Nicholas had gone. He had taken the bottle of whisky away with him. That is all I can tell, sir.’

‘You thought Mr. Nicholas’ manner was strange?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Did you think he was drunk? Don’t be afraid to say?’

‘I did not think that, sir. But I thought he was—queer. Ill, perhaps. His appearance was odd—strange. I can’t describe it. But he spoke plainly, though faintly, and he walked with precision.’

‘One question more, Mr. Welman. Be particular, in answering it. Can you say, positively, if Mr. Nicholas had a stick with him when he came to your house?’

‘I can say positively, sir. Mr. Nicholas had no stick with him!’

The coroner, after a pause, motioned to the officials sitting at the table. But before he could speak to them, the foreman of the jury rose in his place.

‘Mr. Coroner,’ he said, ‘we don’t see much use in going further with this! We’ve about made up our minds, sir, as to what our verdict’ll be!’

Chapter VII

WHAT IS THE SECRET?

I might have mentioned before this that the jury had been drawn from the rural community round about Wrides—that is to say, we had before us twelve stolid-faced, honest, unimaginative men whose chief idea in life was to deal with the obvious. I don't think the coroner had paid any particular attention to them until now, but when the foreman delivered himself of this announcement he turned and gave the interrupter a long stare.

'I think you had better wait until you have heard——' he began. But the foreman shook his head, obstinately.

'Seems to us that we've heard plenty, Mr. Coroner!' he declared. 'We've formed our own opinion, sir, and we're ready to give it in.'

'I had not thought of a verdict to-day,' observed the coroner. 'I was about to adjourn these proceedings——'

'We don't want no adjournment, sir,' persisted the foreman. 'To our minds, the thing's as plain as a pikestaff. We know what we think—unanimous.'

'I haven't even summed up the evidence——' began the coroner, who was plainly taken aback by this display of rustic obstinacy. 'You must hear——'

'Heard enough!' muttered an elderly juryman. 'We have summed up all evidence ourselves! Clear enough matter—my opinion!'

'There is something else you must hear, at any rate,' said the coroner, peremptorily. 'Let Mr. Nicholas be re-called. Mr. Nicholas,' he continued, 'I wish, in view of the position in which matters stand at present, to ask a few more questions. You heard the evidence of Mr. Welman just now? Did you visit this house on the evening of April 17th—the day on which the dead man visited you?'

Mr. Nicholas showed the same hesitating, doubtful manner which had characterized him all through.

'I—I can't remember it, if I did!' he answered. 'I've already told you that my mind is—well, more or less of a perfect blank about the events of that evening. I simply cannot remember!'

'Nothing?'

'I remember that I left the house, after dinner, to walk in the park to think.'

'What did you wish to think about?'

Mr. Nicholas made no reply.

'Was it about the visit of this man Dengo?' suggested the coroner.

'I suppose it was.'

'You had been much upset by it?'

'Yes!'

'You won't tell us why?'

'No!'

'Well, you went into the park. Don't you remember anything about that, or after that?'

'I do not—frankly!'

'Tell me this, if you please. When you parted from Dengo after giving him the money you told us of, fifteen hundred pounds in Bank of England notes, did you make an appointment to meet him anywhere that evening? Think, now!'

'No! Indeed I did not! On the contrary, I told him that he must never come near my house or me again!'

'Did he promise compliance?'

'Yes! But I didn't know whether he would keep his word.'

‘And that upset you?’

‘I was naturally upset by wondering if—if I was to be subjected to future annoyance.’

‘Well, one final question, Mr. Nicholas. Have you the least, the faintest recollection of encountering Dengo in your park that night?’

‘I have not! I have no recollection of anything that happened that night after I went into the park. I remember leaving the house, but nothing else until I awoke, in my own room, next morning.’

The coroner turned from Mr. Nicholas to the officials who were grouped at the table beneath his desk, and for a minute or two held a whispered consultation with some of them. This ended in his addressing the jurymen.

‘It will be most advisable to adjourn at this point,’ he began. ‘I propose to adjourn——’

‘Begging your pardon, Mr. Coroner, but us don’t hold with no adjournment!’ interrupted the foreman, stoutly. ‘Us be brought here to give a verdict, and us be prepared to give it right now! We don’t want no more evidence, and us be unanimous and agreed upon all that’s been considered. Us wishes to say what us thinks, now, without further argufying, Mr. Coroner, as is our right and duty.’

‘That’s it!’ muttered two or three jurymen. ‘Ain’t no use in putting off, seeing as we be agreed,’ remarked another. ‘Say the words, foreman!’

‘Let me point out——’ said the coroner.

But the foreman had risen to his feet.

‘We be agreed upon our verdict!’ he said. ‘We finds Mr. Nicholas not guilty—an’ ’tis the verdict of us all!’

A low ripple of laughter amongst the better-instructed spectators caused the jurymen to turn angry glances in the direction from which it came. The coroner tried to show patience.

‘You are under a misapprehension, Mr. Foreman,’ he said quietly. ‘We are not trying Mr. Nicholas: this, though a court of record, is not an assize court. We are here—you are here—to enquire into the cause of the death of the man known to us as Dengo. It will be far best to adjourn ——’

‘Us sees no reason for adjournment,’ persisted the foreman. He turned to his fellow-jurymen, and for another half-minute the twelve heads drew together. ‘Us’ll agree on another rendering of that verdict, Mr. Coroner,’ he said, turning again. ‘We finds as how this man Dengo come to his death by being stuck through his heart with that there sword, and as how Mr. Nicholas done it, but we holds him as not guilty ’cause he didn’t know he done it!’

Amidst another murmur in court, the coroner laid down his pen.

‘I can’t take that verdict!’ he said, showing signs of vexation. ‘You can’t give such a verdict. If you believe that Mr. Nicholas killed this man you must say so in plain words.’

‘Meaning that us would have to return a verdict of wilful murder?’ asked the foreman, suspiciously.

‘If you think Mr. Nicholas killed him—yes!’ replied the coroner.

‘Then us shan’t do no such thing!’ declared the foreman, aggressively. ‘Us is of opinion that Mr. Nicholas stuck this fellow with his sword, and serve him right, but we don’t consider him guilty of murder ’cause us is certain Mr. Nicholas didn’t know what he was a-doing of!’

The coroner stared at the representatives of the law: suddenly he rose in his chair. ‘I shall not accept that verdict!’ he said firmly. ‘And I adjourn this enquiry until this day fortnight!’

‘There’ll be no other verdict from us!’ declared the foreman. ‘Us is entitled to our own opinions, and us knows the law, too. Us was asked for a verdict, and us has given one, and us won’t give no other!’

According to the reports in next day’s newspapers, the proceedings then ended, in confusion. But something else happened. As Mr. Nicholas, Miss Starr, and myself were leaving the room,

the Superintendent of Police asked Mr. Nicholas for a few minutes' private conversation. They went into the parlour across the hall in which, according to Welman, Mr. Nicholas had stayed awhile on the night of April 17th, and from which he had carried away a bottle of whisky. Thither, five minutes later, Miss Starr and myself were summoned by a policeman, who said that Mr. Nicholas wished to speak to us. Miss Starr showed no sign of alarm or of surprise: I confess that I, myself, went into that room unsuspicious of anything unusual having taken place. But as soon as we crossed the threshold I saw that trouble had come. There were two or three men in the room—police officials in plain clothes—in addition to the superintendent; there, too, was Mr. Nicholas. He glanced at Miss Starr and then at me, and nodded quietly.

'I am arrested!' he said, without any show of emotion. 'I expected it. Rhoda,' he went on, turning to his niece, 'you will see to everything while I am away. Camberwell'—turning to me—'communicate at once with my solicitor, Mr. Chancellor—you'll find his address in the address book on my desk—and ask him to come down here, or, rather, to the magistrate's court at Havering-St. Michael, to-morrow morning, and to be there at—what time will it be, Mr. Superintendent?'

'Half-past ten, sir,' replied the superintendent, promptly. 'Merely formal proceedings!'

'Half-past ten, then, Camberwell,' continued Mr. Nicholas. 'And——' Here he turned to the superintendent again, 'May I have some things sent down?' he asked. 'Linen, and so on?'

'Anything you like or require, Mr. Nicholas,' said the superintendent. 'Certainly!'

Mr. Nicholas gave me some instructions as to what he wanted, and presently Miss Starr and I left the room. The superintendent followed us out.

'Sorry, Miss Starr,' he said. 'But I'd no option after hearing what I have done. You may rely on me to see that Mr. Nicholas is made thoroughly comfortable, and I sincerely hope he'll be cleared: get that solicitor down, Mr. Camberwell, and do all you can. But look here, Miss Starr, I want to ask you a question—between ourselves. I may as well tell you that in the course of my enquiries, I've found out that during the evening of that 17th of April, you left the house after dinner and were out some little time. Do you mind telling me where you were?'

Miss Starr replied readily enough.

'No!' she said. 'I was in the park, wandering about. I was looking for Mr. Nicholas. I knew he'd gone out, and I wanted to find him.'

'You were uneasy about him, Miss Starr?'

'Very!'

'Did you see anything of him—hear anything?'

'No! I went all round and about the park and neither saw nor heard anything of him or of anything else.'

The superintendent reflected a little. Again he turned to Miss Starr.

'I suppose you don't know who this man, Dengo, really was?' he asked.

'I?' exclaimed Miss Starr. 'No, indeed!'

'There's some secret, some mystery about him and all this,' said the superintendent. He turned to me. 'Get that solicitor, Mr. Camberwell!' he continued. 'Probably he knows all about Mr. Nicholas' affairs. Anyway, whether he does or not, impress upon him that he, in his turn, must impress upon Mr. Nicholas the absolute importance of clearing this up! Mr. Nicholas, Miss Starr and Mr. Camberwell, is keeping something back! And—he mustn't.'

Miss Starr and I walked back together across the park. She preserved her usual and characteristic silence for some time; as for me, I was wondering at the cool and even phlegmatic fashion in which both she and her uncle had taken Mr. Nicholas' sudden arrest. Mr. Nicholas, while before the coroner and his jury, had presented a pitiable spectacle; once in the hands of the police his self-confidence seemed to have returned to him in full force, and he had given his instructions to me as calmly as if he had been giving orders to Hoiler. Miss Starr was similarly

cool and possessed; her uncle's announcement when we entered the inn parlour appeared to leave her unmoved.

'You'll write to Mr. Chancellor at once?' she said suddenly.

'I've been thinking that it would be far better if I took one of the cars and went to him, at once,' I replied. 'Don't you think so?'

'No!' she answered. 'Write. Because there'll be a full report of this inquest in the papers to-morrow morning, and he can read it as he comes down. Then he'll know what it's all about. It'll save the trouble of explaining matters to him.'

'I was thinking that if he came down this afternoon he might arrange bail for Mr. Nicholas,' I said.

'That's impossible!' she answered, coolly. 'Don't you know that they won't grant bail in a murder charge?'

'I didn't,' I replied.

'Well, they won't—I know that much,' she said. 'Write. And don't forget to send Jeeves down to Havering with those things.'

I wrote to Mr. Chancellor, and when Miss Starr and I arrived at the police-court next morning Mr. Chancellor was there. He had a man with him, a tall, grizzled, soldierly-looking man whom he introduced as ex-Inspector Chaney.

'Mr. Chaney,' he said, 'after a long and distinguished career at New Scotland Yard, is now devoting himself to a little private enquiry work. And after reading the report of the inquest on Dengo in this morning's papers, I enlisted Mr. Chaney's services. We shall need them. For there is some extraordinary mystery here, and it will need some unearthing if I'm not mistaken!'

The proceedings before the magistrates were merely formal and were over in five minutes. A few minutes later Mr. Chancellor, Chaney, Miss Starr, and myself were closeted together in a small room at the police-court, put at our disposal by the superintendent. Mr. Chancellor, a precise, elderly man, motioned us to seats round a table, and before his own chair opened out one of the morning newspapers, already marked here and there with blue pencil.

'Now,' he said, 'Chaney and I have gone through this report as we came down in the train, and we want to ask you young people certain questions arising from it. And there is one question I want to put to Miss Starr at the very beginning. It is quite evident that there is some big secret in this case, known, probably, to no one but Mr. Nicholas. We must know what it is—at present, Mr. Nicholas will not speak. So we must turn to you, Miss Starr, his niece. So now please tell us —who is Mr. Nicholas?'

Chapter VIII

EX-INSPECTOR CHANEY

I need hardly say that this direct question surprised me, coming, as it did, from Mr. Nicholas' solicitor, the very man of all men whom one would have thought to know all about him. But if it occasioned surprise in me, it produced blank amazement in Miss Starr. Her usually stolid face flushed, and she turned wide-open eyes on her questioner.

'Whatever do you mean?' she exclaimed. 'You ask that—you, his solicitor?'

'Precisely what I was thinking, myself,' I murmured.

But Mr. Chancellor shook his head.

'I know next to nothing about Mr. Christopher Nicholas,' he said. 'All I know is this: I was solicitor to his aunt, Miss Anne Nicholas, the owner of Wrides Park, a very wealthy lady. Miss Nicholas died some six years ago, having some little time before executed a will by which she left everything she possessed to her nephew, Christopher Nicholas, who, she always told me, lived, or was always travelling, abroad: he was abroad when she died. In due course, following the announcement of Miss Nicholas' death in *The Times* and other newspapers, Mr. Christopher Nicholas turned up. He produced papers and documents to show who he was—and he went through the usual formalities and was put in possession of his property. And that's all I know, except that he has employed my professional services in small matters, from time to time.'

'But what do you mean—when you ask who he is?' enquired Miss Starr. 'He's Mr. Nicholas, of course!'

'I should have put my question in another form,' said Mr. Chancellor. 'I should have asked—of you, at any rate—what is known about him? What do you, his niece, know about him? Where did he live before he came to claim his property? What did he do? Had he any profession? Again—what can you tell?—you!'

'No more than you can, Mr. Chancellor,' replied Miss Starr. 'I can't answer any one of those questions! I have gathered that he has been a great traveller, but I know no particulars.'

'What do you know about him?' persisted Mr. Chancellor. 'You're his niece—maternal niece, isn't it? You must know something. Tell us what you can.'

'All I can tell is this,' said Miss Starr, who was obviously much puzzled. 'I know—from having been told so—that my father and mother died when I was very young, so young that I don't remember them. I was brought up by some people who took care of me till I was twelve or thirteen. Then I was sent to Anne Ethelburger's school at Harrogate. I was there for the next five years——'

'That's a pretty expensive place, as I happen to know,' interrupted Mr. Chancellor. 'Now, who paid your fees there?'

'I don't know,' replied Miss Starr, 'but I always had plenty of pocket-money.'

'Where did you spend your holidays?' enquired Mr. Chancellor.

'With the people who brought me up—Mr. and Mrs. Helston. They lived in Hampstead. No, they aren't alive—they're both dead,' continued Miss Starr. 'I always understood that they were friends of my father.'

'Well, you were at school at Harrogate till you were eighteen,' said Mr. Chancellor. 'Had these Helstons died before you left?'

'Yes—they died during my last year,' said Miss Starr. 'Then Mr. Nicholas came. I had never seen him before, and had only just heard that there was such a person—my mother's brother. He told me who he was—my uncle—and said that he'd just come into Miss Nicholas' property in Surrey, and that he wanted me to live with him. And so we came to live at Wrides Park. That's all I know, Mr. Chancellor.'

‘Did he never tell you anything about his past?’ enquired the solicitor. ‘Never say anything about his travels?’

‘Not particularly. He’d sometimes mention places that he’d seen,’ replied Miss Starr, ‘and I gathered that he’d travelled very extensively at some time or other. But he scarcely ever referred to anything that had to do with the past.’

‘Do you know where he’d been living before he came into this Wrides property?’ enquired Mr. Chancellor.

But Miss Starr didn’t know—she knew no more than she’d told. And Mr. Chancellor turned to me.

‘Do you know anything?’ he asked. ‘You don’t? Well, I never expected you would, Mr. Camberwell. But now you may wonder, both of you, why I’ve been asking these questions. The reason is this—Chaney here, who is a very clever hand at this sort of thing, has read most carefully the evidence given at the inquest yesterday and he’s formed a theory which I’ll ask him to explain to you. Tell us, Chaney, exactly what’s in your mind.’

While Mr. Chancellor had talked, I had been inspecting Chaney. As I have already said, the ex-Scotland Yard man looked more like a soldier than a policeman—that is to say, he had that certain indefinable bearing which one associates with long and honourable service in the Army. And when he began to speak he showed a sort of military precision, saying what he had to say in crisp, direct sentences and without any circumvention.

‘I have read through this evidence twice,’ he said, tapping the copy of *The Times* which lay, marked here and there, before him. ‘Some of it I have read three or four times over. I have formed certain conclusions. The primary one is this—Mr. Nicholas has a secret. There is something in his past which he does not wish anyone to know of. It is something which he desires to keep hidden. But—it was known to the man who called himself Dengo.’

‘Exactly—exactly!’ murmured Mr. Chancellor. ‘I agree, entirely.’

‘Dengo, in all probability, had been blackmailing Mr. Nicholas for some time,’ continued Chaney. ‘Previously, however, he had, I think, done his blackmailing by correspondence. But on April 17th he came to Wrides Park to do it in person. And I think that the demand he made that day—for fifteen hundred pounds in cash—was considerably in excess of previous demands. Probably his demands had increased in amount from time to time. The fact that Mr. Nicholas had always acceded to them, and that on Dengo’s arrival on April 17th Mr. Nicholas immediately went to the bank with him and drew therefrom the money that Dengo asked for, proves—what? That Mr. Nicholas was in abject fear of Dengo, or, to put it in another way, was terrified that Dengo should split!’

‘Just so—just so!’ muttered Mr. Chancellor. ‘Highly probable—nay, certain!’

‘Now,’ Chaney went on, ‘what is the secret? Mr. Nicholas knows. Mr. Nicholas won’t tell. It may be that now that Dengo is dead, Mr. Nicholas is the only absolute possessor of the secret. But Mr. Nicholas is in danger! Evidence is strong against him. Dengo, no doubt, was murdered in Middle Spinney, in Wrides Park. Mr. Nicholas’ sword-stick, it seems certain, was the weapon used. Mr. Nicholas took that sword-stick out with him that night—that, too, seems certain. Altogether, things point to Mr. Nicholas’ guilt. The men who formed the coroner’s jury yesterday, hard-headed rustics, were agreed, evidently, that Mr. Nicholas killed Dengo, but qualified their opinion by saying that Mr. Nicholas didn’t know what he was doing. I’m afraid that doesn’t help. Well, I don’t think Mr. Nicholas did kill Dengo! I don’t think Mr. Nicholas ever saw or met Dengo that night: I think Mr. Nicholas is absolutely innocent. And I think I know how Dengo came by his death.’

‘Good—good!’ said Mr. Chancellor. ‘Most interesting!’

‘We must indulge in supposition,’ continued Chaney. ‘A good deal of supposition! Now supposing that Dengo’s knowledge of Mr. Nicholas was shared by somebody else, some other

person. I'll say what is in my mind, Mr. Chancellor!—I think it more than likely that Dengo represented a combine, a gang, of two or three men, all in the secret. But I don't think Mr. Nicholas would know that—Dengo, as mouthpiece, would be instructed, and would be cute enough on his own account, to represent himself as the sole repository. Well, now, let us indulge in a little more supposition. Dengo has been getting money, through correspondence, from Mr. Nicholas for some time, probably in modest amounts. He suddenly appears in person and demands fifteen hundred pounds in cash—I deduce from this that there were two other men in with him and that there was to be five hundred each for the three. Well, Mr. Nicholas draws fifteen hundred pounds from his bank, in Bank of England notes (we must have the numbers of those notes at once) and he hands the lot over to Dengo and parts from him. Now then, suppose something else—suppose that one of the Dengo gang knowing Dengo's previous success in extracting ready money from Mr. Nicholas, and feeling confident that he'll be equally successful on this occasion, has followed Dengo down to Havering-St. Michael and Wrides Park. Supposing he tracks Dengo during the day, encounters him—and murders him for the money he has on him. Or supposing—to vary the theory—that there was more than one man concerned, that Dengo was followed by both his fellow-conspirators—with, of course, the same result. This, at any rate, is what I think a very probable theory, everything considered. I feel confident that Mr. Nicholas did not commit this crime for one simple reason. It's this—I can't believe that a man who was in the confused condition in which Mr. Nicholas, through over-indulgence in spirit, was on the evening of the murder, would be sufficiently aware of what he was doing to hide that sword-stick in a rabbit-burrow! That, I feel sure, was the work of a man whose brain was working in a normal fashion.'

Mr. Chancellor, Miss Starr, and myself remained silent for a minute or so, considering what Chaney had advanced. Miss Starr spoke first.

'If some person we know nothing about murdered Dengo,' she said, 'how did that person become possessed of Mr. Nicholas' sword-stick?'

'Ah!' exclaimed Chaney, glancing appreciatively at Miss Starr, as if in acknowledgment of her acuteness. 'Now that *is* a mystery, for I don't think there's much doubt that that sword-stick was the weapon which the murderer used! You think it practically certain that Mr. Nicholas selected that stick when he left the house after dinner that evening?'

'Mr. Nicholas,' replied Miss Starr, 'had a lot of walking-sticks, canes, and umbrellas in a stand in the hall at Wrides Park: there must be at least twenty or twenty-five canes and sticks. But in nine cases out of ten when he wanted a cane or stick he selected that sword-stick. I have more than once asked him why he always chose it, or nearly always. He merely replied that he had got into the habit—it was a stick he had kept for a great many years. Because of this, I think it is pretty certain that he took the sword-stick with him when he went out that night.'

'Well, there are more ways than one in which it would be possible for the stick to pass from Mr. Nicholas' hand to that of the murderer,' observed Chaney. 'It is, I suppose, absolutely impossible to get any further information from Mr. Nicholas as to where he went and what he did that night?'

'Mr. Nicholas has no recollection of any of the events of that night,' I replied. 'He remembers nothing of it—from the time he left the house.'

'Well, we must investigate,' said Chaney. 'But if I am to be of any use, there is something I wish doing at once. Miss Starr!—I am told you are Mr. Nicholas's niece and have been his daily companion for years. Can you induce your uncle to tell you what the secret is about this man Dengo? Can you get him to tell you what hold Dengo had on him? For that Dengo was blackmailing Mr. Nicholas there isn't the least doubt. And I want to know why.'

Miss Starr shook her head in a way that suggested hopelessness.

'My uncle never refers to the past,' she replied. 'His past, at any rate.'

‘But his life’s in danger!’ persisted Chaney. ‘Or, if not quite that, he’s in a very unfortunate situation. Surely——’

‘I can try—if I’m allowed to see him,’ said Miss Starr. ‘But I don’t think it’s the least use.’

‘Miss Starr and I had better see him together,’ remarked Mr. Chancellor. ‘The police superintendent here struck me as being a very good fellow—I’ll go and arrange the matter at once.’

He went away, and returned almost immediately, to conduct Miss Starr to her uncle’s presence. They were not away very long, and when they came back, the solicitor not only looked discomfited, but annoyed.

‘Here’s a pretty state of things!’ he exclaimed testily. ‘Nicholas must really be talked to most seriously—if he says to the police what he’s been saying to us it will make it impossible to help him!’

‘What has he said?’ enquired Chaney.

‘Far too much!’ replied Mr. Chancellor. ‘To begin with, he flatly refuses to tell us anything about the secret, though he admits that there is one. And to end with—never knew anything so foolish!—he says that he doesn’t know that he didn’t kill Dengo!’

‘Ah! He says that, does he?’ exclaimed Chaney. ‘Positively says so!’

‘He says he doesn’t know whether he did or he didn’t,’ growled Mr. Chancellor. ‘He doesn’t know what he did that night. But he says he may have done—quite unconsciously. Of course, in my opinion, it’s simply foolish to talk in that way—and there were police officials present, too!’

‘It all depends if he went out with some such intention,’ said Chaney, thoughtfully. ‘But I should have taken Mr. Nicholas for a very mild-mannered gentleman.’

‘Mr. Nicholas wouldn’t hurt a black beetle!’ remarked Miss Starr. ‘I don’t suppose he ever had a thought of injuring Dengo in any way—not he! He’s simply puzzled to know what he did and where he went that night.’

At this point the superintendent came into the room which he had lent us. He held a sheet of paper in his hand.

‘Here’s some news!’ he said. ‘This is a letter, just received, from a woman who thinks she can identify the dead man.’

Chapter IX

LITTLE COPPERAS STREET

I have copied out from my case-book the letter which the superintendent laid before us—an illiterate document written in an unformed hand, in pencil, on cheap notepaper.

53 Little Copperas Street,
Kingsland Road, London.
May 5th

DEAR SIR,

Having read the newspaper piece about that inquest on a man found dead in a wood which is called by the name of Dengo, no other name being known, beg to say that in my belief same is my lodger, Mr. Ogden, which is missing from his room in my house since more than a fortnight ago, and have heard him called by that name Dengo by one of his friends occasional. Mr. Ogden went out one morning about the time mentioned saying as how he was going into the country but never come back which I have wondered where he was his things being left here and hoping no ill had befallen him which it now seems he was done in though a quiet peaceable man what's living with me which is above a year and paying regular every week. Hoping this may be satisfactory and am

Yours respectful,
SUSAN PETTIGO

P.S.—A neighbour having advised me to write.

'This seems to be a bit of useful information,' remarked Chaney. 'Dengo is, of course, a transposition of the name Ogden. I suppose you'll enquire into it—at once, eh?'

'I'm sending a man along by the next train,' replied the superintendent. 'It will be something to establish the dead man's identity.'

Chaney turned to the rest of us.

'I suggest that Mr. Camberwell and myself go, too,' he said. 'For Mr. Nicholas' sake, we must find out all we can. And here is an opening!'

'An excellent idea!' assented Mr. Chancellor. 'Go, Camberwell!—and let me know of anything you discover.'

Chaney and I went off at once, in company with one Willerton, a detective attached to the police force at Havering-St. Michael. All the way to town he and Chaney discussed the case from various angles. As for me I was wondering about Mr. Nicholas, whose attitude and behaviour seemed incomprehensible: I mean as regards his saying to Mr. Chancellor and Miss Starr that he wasn't certain that he hadn't killed Dengo! That on the night of Dengo's murder, Mr. Nicholas was in such a state that he didn't know what he was doing or where he went I was very well aware, but to make the suggestion that he might have killed his blackmailer was, to say the least of it, inopportune and foolish—especially when it was made in front of the police. And Willerton, as I soon learnt, was full of the police theory.

'Clear case, I call it!' he said as we journeyed along to Waterloo. 'We see it from start to finish—everything being nicely added up. Whether he remembers it or not, Nicholas makes another appointment with Dengo for that evening. That's why Nicholas left his house after dinner: that's why Dengo turned up at the Wagon and Horses. Nicholas and Dengo met in the park; perhaps they'd a row; perhaps Nicholas saw that as long as Dengo lived, Dengo was going to blackmail him, never leave him alone, give him no peace. So he just ran his sword through

Dengo, and put him comfortably away in that ditch. That's what we think—and I don't see there's any mystery about it.'

'What're you going to London for, then?' asked Chaney, cynically.

'Oh, just to make sure who Dengo was,' replied Willerton, twiddling his thumbs. 'We must establish his identity, of course. It don't matter two pins to us what secret there is or was between Nicholas and Dengo. All we've got to prove is that Nicholas killed Dengo. And I reckon there's no doubt whatever about that! What are you going for, pray?'

'Ah!' replied Chaney. 'That's asking!'

Little Copperas Street, where Mrs. Pettigo lived, proved to be at the further end of the dull and dreary Kingsland Road; it was as dreary and dull as the thoroughfare from which it turned off. Uniformly built little houses of grey stone, made greyer by years of contact with smoke and grime; lifeless windows with dirty blinds and curtains framing a vase of artificial flowers or a miserable aspidistra, this was not the sort of place in which one would expect to find romance though one might encounter mystery. But there was very little mystery about things at Number 53. Mrs. Pettigo, a wisp of a woman who seemed in no wise surprised to see us, was ready enough to talk once she had admitted us to her house.

'I felt sure as how somebody would come to-day, me having sent that letter, which Mrs. Pelband, as lives next door advised strong,' said Mrs. Pettigo. 'Which, of course, I knew it would be police gentlemen, not as how you look particular like that sort, to be sure, though, as I always say, not to be judged by appearances. And of course——'

'Just give us a description of that lodger of yours, will you, Mrs. Pettigo?' said Willerton, cutting short what promised to be a flood of eloquence. 'Tell us exactly what he was like.'

Mrs. Pettigo obliged—at considerable length. To add force to her description, she produced a recent photograph of her late lodger, taken as a snapshot by her daughter, who, we learnt, was in the millinery, and amused herself in spare moments and fine weather with a Kodak camera. It was a sufficiently good photograph to convince me that Mr. Ogden—Christian name, James—and Dengo were one and the same person.

'How long had you known him?' enquired Willerton—Chaney and I left him to do all the questioning. 'When did he first come here?'

'It'll be about fifteen months,' replied Mrs. Pettigo, after musing a little. 'Just about the time that Serena Green—which is my daughter's name, gentlemen, and as good a girl as ever walked!—went to Straw and Sizers' millinery. He come looking for rooms, and I let him my front parlour and front bedroom, which he paid a month in advance for them there and then. And I will say this for Mr. Ogden, that a more regular gentleman in his payments never breathed. There it was, down on the nail, as they say, to the very minute!'

'Plenty of money, eh?' suggested Willerton.

'Always seemed so, mister,' assented Mrs. Pettigo. 'Never stinted himself of anything—in reason, of course.'

'What did he do? Work at anything?'

Mrs. Pettigo shook her head as if shocked.

'Oh, dear me, no, mister!' she answered. 'He didn't work at nothing, didn't Mr. Ogden! He was quite the gentleman, you understand—just did nothing at all.'

'How did he spend his time, then?'

'Well, sir, he were that regular in his habits that you might ha' set the clock by him! He weren't one for getting up early—he'd have his breakfast about half-past nine. Then he'd sit quiet in his room, a-reading the papers. He was a great hand at the papers, 'specially them as has pieces about sporting in 'em: they was left for him every morning, you see, from the shop at the corner. Then he'd take a walk out before his dinner at one o'clock. Then he'd have his pipe, or his cigar, and his bit of a nap; then he'd go out again before tea. And he went out every evening

between tea and supper—I fancy he used the Dog and Pot, round the corner; I know he used to take his glass there. But he was always in to supper at nine o'clock, and by ten he'd go to bed. Uncommon regular man, was Mr. Ogden.'

'Steady man, Mrs. Pettigo?'

'I never saw him no other, sir. Which he took his beer and his drop of spirits very regular, but never no more than you'd expect of a gentleman. Which there's near on to a couple of dozen of bottled ale in his cupboard at this minute, and two or three bottles of spirits, just as he left 'em, me never touching nothing of that sort, though to be sure I have had a taste with him, on occasion—perhaps you'd like to see his sitting-room, gentlemen?'

We followed Mrs. Pettigo into the front parlour, which, she assured us, was precisely as the late Mr. Ogden had left it, except for its having been dusted and tidied. And the first thing that struck me was that Mr. Ogden had evidently a great taste not merely for sport, but for sporting literature. On the top of a low cupboard, let into a recess, were two big piles of sporting newspapers of all types; Mr. Ogden, said Mrs. Pettigo, kept all his papers and read and re-read them. And in a corner book-case were rows and rows of sporting novels, from cheap editions of Surtees and Whyte Melville to sixpenny reprints of Nat Gould. On the chimney-piece between two china dogs stood a row of Ruff's *Guide to the Turf*, obviously purchased second-hand.

Willerton made a perfunctory examination of the room, opening drawers, cupboards, and an old writing-desk, and made no discoveries.

'Did he have many letters?' he asked.

'Which he did not, sir,' replied Mrs. Pettigo. 'He was a lonely gentleman.'

'Nobody come to see him?'

'Never but once, sir. That was a little man which I never heard his name, but he was the man as I heard apply the name Dengo to Mr. Ogden. And that,' added Mrs. Pettigo, 'was not long before Mr. Ogden went out that morning, never to return!'

'Did Ogden ever tell you anything about his past?' enquired Willerton. 'Ever tell you what he'd been?'

'No, sir, he did not. Which my own impression about him, gentlemen, was that he'd used the sea.'

'What made you think that, now?'

'Well, sir, it was his appearance—he was that big and hearty. And rolled in his walk, as sailors does. Which my husband, dead these many years, was of that persuasion,' added Mrs. Pettigo. 'But I never heard Mr. Ogden say anything definite.'

We presently left the house. Outside, Willerton looked at his watch.

'Well, I'm off,' he said. 'Got all I want. I know who the man was, now—sufficiently, at any rate. Going back with me?—we can get a taxi at the corner.'

'No!' replied Chaney, contriving to nudge my elbow. 'We're going to take a look round this pleasant quarter of the town.'

Willerton laughed, a little sneeringly, as if in deprecation of any further efforts, and saying good-bye, went away to seek a cab-rank. Chaney waited until he'd gone, and then turned to me.

'Now, Mr. Camberwell,' he said, 'we'll begin. And we'll begin at the Dog and Pot. I saw it, as we came round the corner.'

We walked back to the Dog and Pot, a tavern which stood where the dismal street opened on the dreary highway. It was, of course, the most attractive building anywhere in sight, and the saloon bar into which Chaney led me was bright and cheery. There were only two or three men in the place; behind the bar a smart-looking fellow in a white apron was busily polishing glasses. Ordering a drink apiece, for the good of the house, as Chaney put it, we sat down in a corner.

'Now, Mr. Camberwell,' said Chaney, pulling out a well-worn briar pipe and proceeding to fill it from his pouch, 'we'll do a bit of talking. Let Willerton and the Havering people go their

own way—we'll go another. I'm not satisfied with the mere knowledge that the man who called himself Dengo was really one James Ogden, who lodged with Mrs. Pettigo in Little Copperas Street! I want to know more than that. I want to know who James Ogden was; what his past was; where and when he knew Mr. Christopher Nicholas; what hold he had on Mr. Nicholas; why Mr. Nicholas is so determined not to tell what *he* knew of Ogden. I want to know all that—and I'm going to know!'

'How do you propose to acquire your knowledge?' I asked.

Chaney lifted his pipe, and before throwing away the match, used it to point at the barman.

'I'm going to ask that chap a few questions presently,' he answered. 'Mrs. Pettigo says that Dengo used the Dog and Pot—this is the Dog and Pot. If Dengo came in here pretty regularly, that barman will remember him. He'll be able to tell us if Dengo had any pals here—if he talked with other men—if there were any men that Dengo was in the habit of meeting here. I think that last's a very likely thing. I've formed an opinion about Dengo from what I saw in his lodgings. He was in all probability a turf man—interested, at any rate, in horse-racing. Perhaps he backed horses. More likely, he'd a share in a street-bookmaking concern. This is the sort of place in which he'd meet his pals—if we can trace any pal of his we can get some information about Dengo. And if we're going to clear Mr. Nicholas, we must have that information.'

Presently the men lounging at the bar went away, and Chaney, drawing a newspaper from his pocket, approached the barman.

'I'm seeking a bit of information,' he said. 'Perhaps you can give it. Read about this murder down in Surrey?' he went on, pointing to a heavy-typed headline. 'Man who went by the queer name of Dengo?'

The barman, still polishing glasses, glanced carelessly at the paper.

'Read it, yes,' he answered. 'What about it?'

'You don't know the man?' asked Chaney.

The barman stared his surprise.

'Me?' he said. 'Are you thinking I do?'

Chapter X

REVELATIONS

Chaney drew the newspaper towards him, and pointing to the description of Dengo, pushed it back to the barman.

‘Just read that, and think,’ he said. ‘Don’t you recognize it as that of a man you’ve seen many a time—a customer?’

The barman read, reflected, and shook his head.

‘Can’t say as I do,’ he answered. ‘Lots of big, heavy-built men come in here.’

Chaney tried another tack.

‘Did you ever know a man that lodged at Mrs. Pettigo’s, down the street here?’ he asked. ‘Name of Ogden?’

The barman showed signs of interest.

‘Oh, him!’ he exclaimed. ‘Yes, I knew him, but I never knew his name. Yes, I knew him, of course. Why, you don’t mean to say——’

‘That’s the man!’ said Chaney. ‘You see then?—the only name he was known by down that way was Dengo. Well, that’s Ogden, spelt another way—transposed, as the proper term is.’

The barman possessed himself of the newspaper again, and slowly read through the marked portions.

‘Done in, eh?’ he remarked, pushing the paper away. ‘Hefty chap, too, he was; shouldn’t ha’ thought he’d ha’ let himself be taken unawares like that. Queer business, apparently. Looking into it?’

‘We’re trying to find out a few things,’ assented Chaney.

The barman resumed his polishing of glasses. After a minute’s silence he gave first Chaney, and then me, a keen, scrutinizing look.

‘ ’Tecs, eh?’ he asked.

‘I used to be one,’ replied Chaney. He produced his professional card, whereon he was described as late of the C.I.D., New Scotland Yard, and now private enquiry agent. ‘This gentleman is a friend. We’re trying to get some information as to who this man Ogden really was. We’ve been to his landlady, Mrs. Pettigo. She told us that Ogden used this house. She doesn’t know much about him. Do you?’

‘I should say not as much—not as much as she’s likely to, anyway,’ replied the barman. ‘He came here, pretty regular. Quiet sort o’ chap. Never talked much to me or to anybody. He’d drop in for a glass of beer of a morning and sit reading the paper while he drank it, and he’d look in at night for a whisky. Not a communicative sort, you understand. As I tell you, I never even knew his name.’

‘Did you ever see him here in company with anybody?’ enquired Chaney. ‘Bring anybody in, for instance?’

The barman gave a ready answer to this question.

‘Yes! Not so very long ago he was in here three or four times within, well, within a fortnight, with two men who were strangers hereabouts, leastways I’d never seen either of ’em in this house before he brought ’em,’ he answered. ‘They sat in that corner and talked—they’d be here for an hour at a time. I noticed it because up to then I’d never seen him talking, particular-like, to anybody.’

‘What sort of men were they?’ asked Chaney.

‘I should say—sporting men. Sort you see on racecourses,’ replied the barman. ‘I took ’em for that, more by reason that all three of ’em had sporting papers in their hands whenever they came. Seemed to be talking racing matters.’

‘Can you describe the two men?’

‘I can! One of ’em was a tall chap, who looked, well, like a gentleman—anyhow, you could see he was a better class than the others. Smart, well-dressed chap—bit of a military look about him, as if he’d been in the Army. Good-looking chap, with a moustache—altogether superior to the other two. The other man was a little, weasel-like fellow; very sharp eyes—he seemed to do most of the talking.’

‘And you say they came—how often?’

‘They came in with the man you’re talking about at least three or four times in a fortnight or ten days before I lost sight of him—that ’ud be, let me see, about the early part of last month. I wondered,’ continued the barman, finishing off his glasses, and adding the last to a series of neat stacks, ‘I wondered where he’d got to; he’d come in so regularly for a good twelvemonth that I missed him when he didn’t come.’

‘Do you think you could recognize those two men you’ve described, if you saw them again?’ asked Chaney.

‘I could! They were a bit—well—uncommon. I wondered what the gentleman-looking chap was doing with the little scrubby fellow, and what the three of ’em were discussing. Of course, I never heard a word of what they said. Oh, yes, I noticed ’em pretty particular. The man that looked like a gentleman smoked rare good cigars—and he’d a silver cigar-case.’

‘Swell, eh?’ suggested Chaney.

‘Shouldn’t wonder,’ agreed the barman. ‘Piccadilly style about him, anyhow.’

We presently left the Dog and Pot, the barman (whose name we discovered to be Joe Fowler) having promised to give us any help he could in the matter of identifying the two men he had described.

‘And we’ve just got to find those two, Mr. Camberwell!’ declared Chaney, as we went away from the tavern. ‘Apart from Mrs. Pettigo, who knows, or says she knows, next to nothing of Ogden, these men are the only persons we’ve heard of who are likely to be able to give information about him. Whether they’re willing to do so is another matter. I think they aren’t! Why? Why, because although there’s been no end in all the papers about the Wrides Park murder and they must know well enough who the man concerned was, they haven’t come forward. But I’ll unearth ’em! Fortunately, I know pretty well how to get hold of them.’

‘Yes?’ I said.

‘I’ve known and cultivated a lot of queer people and characters in my time,’ he answered. ‘I know two or three men who know, one way or another, pretty nearly every sporting man in town! I’ll get in touch with one or two of them—I shall hear something.’

‘You think it’s absolutely necessary to rake up all you can about Ogden if we’re to clear Mr. Nicholas?’ I asked.

‘Absolutely!’ he replied, with emphasis. ‘Must do it! We must have the secret that Mr. Nicholas possesses. And we shan’t get it from him. He’s some reason for keeping his lips closed like a vice.’

‘There’s a certain thing that puzzles me immensely, Chaney,’ I said. ‘It’s the question of that sword-stick. Presuming that Mr. Nicholas’ sword-stick was the weapon with which Dengo was killed, how came it to be near the scene of the murder, if, as you say, and as we hope, Mr. Nicholas was not the murderer?’

He nodded his head two or three times.

‘Yes—yes—yes!’ he said. ‘I’ve thought that over a good deal, Mr. Camberwell. And I can suggest a good deal. First of all, I’m not sure that it was Nicholas’ sword-stick with which the murderer killed Dengo. Secondly, I’m not sure that Mr. Nicholas took the sword-stick out with him.’

‘How came it to be where it was found?’ I asked in surprise.

‘Ah!’ he answered. ‘And that’s another point! Look here, Mr. Camberwell, you’ve got to remember several things and to take them into account. Mr. Nicholas was not the only person who had access to that sword-stick—by a long way!’

‘What do you mean?’ I exclaimed.

‘Oh, I mean that there’s a big staff of servants at Wrides Park!’ he said, with a knowing laugh. ‘How do we know that one or other of ’em hadn’t an interest in getting rid of Dengo? Dengo was knocking about the neighbourhood all that day—we know that. He may have encountered some man—a man whom nobody’s suspected, to whom his presence, perhaps his very existence, was dangerous. There’s a lot in it, Mr. Camberwell! And then there’s another thing I’ve reckoned with. The sword-stick was not found immediately in the rabbit-burrow, was it?’

‘There was an interval, certainly,’ I replied.

‘Ah, well, supposing it was deliberately planted there, to throw suspicion on Mr. Nicholas?’ he asked.

‘Who on earth would do that?’ I exclaimed. ‘Abominable!’

‘Do you think this earth is peopled by saints and angels, Mr. Camberwell?’ he asked, with a dry laugh. ‘I don’t. Oh, don’t deceive yourself, sir—there’s a lot to be found out about this affair. But one thing at a time. My line at present is to unroll the late James Ogden’s record, and I’ll begin at once by calling on one or two likely men. You’re going back, of course, to Wrides Park? Well, keep your eyes and ears open, Mr. Camberwell. As soon as I know or hear anything, I’ll ’phone you.’

We parted, presently. Chaney went off to the West End, to seek out his possible informants; I, to Wrides, pondering all the way on the things I had heard and seen. Once more the old question came up—who was Ogden and what was the secret between him and Mr. Nicholas which Mr. Nicholas was so obstinately resolved to keep a secret for ever? Should we solve it?—and would the solution save him? I saw the obviousness of the police theory—Nicholas, desperate at the continued urgings of blackmail, and under the influence of the drink he had taken to drown his woes, had turned on and killed his blackmailer. There it was in plain fact—and it was the sort of straightforward theory that would appeal to a jury. No intricacies, no twists and turnings; just the sort of case that the average juryman likes, requiring no mental effort. The rebellious jury of the coroner’s court had only anticipated what a jury at the assizes would say—or, at any rate, think, however differently they phrased the decision. It was, of course, what everybody round the neighbourhood was thinking. After all, it would not be the first case, by a long chalk, in which one man had killed another and retained no recollection of having done so.

Hoiler met me as I re-entered Wrides. I saw he had news of some sort.

‘Message for you, sir, from Miss Starr,’ he announced. ‘Her compliments, sir, and while these unfortunate proceedings are in process, she thinks it best to go and stay with friends in town, sir. This is the address, sir, in case you or Mr. Chancellor want her. She desires that you’ll take charge of everything sir, while she—and Mr. Nicholas—are away.’

‘All right, Hoiler,’ I said. ‘I suppose you and Mrs. Hands will see to all the domestic arrangements?’

‘We’ll see to all that, sir,’ he replied, reassuringly. ‘Any news, sir?’

‘I don’t know that there is, Hoiler,’ I answered.

‘Most unfortunate business, sir,’ he went on. ‘Between you and me, Mr. Camberwell, the master had borne that blackmailing about as long as he could!’

‘Oh?’ I said, surprised at his statement. ‘So—you know something about it, do you?’

‘Well, sir, I do—and I shall have no objection to saying so—I mean in court, sir—if I’m asked. What I know is this—two or three years ago, Mr. Nicholas had to be in town for a week or two on business, and he took me with him as valet. We stayed at Claridge’s. One day Mr.

Nicholas and I had been out together. As we were re-entering the hotel this man—big, burly chap—came up. He and Mr. Nicholas walked apart. I don't know what was said or done, but Mr. Nicholas came back to me white to the lips, sir. Next morning the man came to the hotel—evidently by appointment. Before he came, sir, Mr. Nicholas had sent me to his bank in town to cash a cheque for five hundred pounds. I believe the man got that, sir—he went away looking highly satisfied, anyhow! And I should say that went on, sir—I do know this, at any rate, Mr. Camberwell: every now and then Mr. Nicholas used to get letters in a very illiterate handwriting, and he used to be very, very much upset when he got them. No, sir!—I don't wonder that he should turn on the fellow!'

'Hoiler,' I said, 'do you think Mr. Nicholas did kill him?'

Hoiler glanced round the hall; there was no one about.

'On the evidence, sir, I don't see how anybody could think anything else!' he replied confidentially. 'But I feel sure he remembers nothing about it.'

'You think that's possible?' I said.

'I've known Mr. Nicholas some time, sir,' he answered, giving me a significant look. 'Mr. Nicholas, sir, has some secret trouble—this trouble, no doubt. When it weighs heavier than usual he—he turns to spirits, sir, and can't control himself. And when he does, he hasn't the least idea of what he's doing, and no recollection afterwards of what he's done. Sad case, Mr. Camberwell, but there it is! That sword-stick, sir, is a fatal weapon. . . . in the hands of the police!'

'It's a great pity you were away, Hoiler, that particular day and evening,' I remarked. 'As you knew this man Dengo by sight you might have been of use to Mr. Nicholas.'

'Ah, I don't know, sir,' he replied. 'From whatever cause or for whatever reason, that man had some deadly hold on Mr. Nicholas! Mr. Nicholas, sir, I'm certain, was frightened to death of him. I could see that when the man came up to Mr. Nicholas outside Claridge's. Some ghost in the cupboard, you know, sir.'

'Do you know anything of Mr. Nicholas' past, Hoiler?' I enquired.

'Nothing, sir. Never heard of Mr. Nicholas until he engaged me when he came here after entering into possession of his estate,' he replied. 'But I've always understood that he'd spent a great deal of his life in foreign parts.'

That was all—but Hoiler was not the only person with whom I had conversation that evening. Jeeves brought me my coffee into the library after I had dined alone, and after he had set the tray down, hung about.

'Can I have a word with you, sir?' he asked, suddenly. 'In confidence!'

Chapter XI

THE SWISS WALKING-STICK

There was something in the footman's tone and manner that made me instinctively glance at the door. He nodded reassuringly.

'Door's closed, sir, and there's nobody about—Mr. Hoiler and Mrs. Hands are at supper and the others are in the servants' hall,' he said. 'Quite safe, sir.'

'What is it, then?' I asked.

'It's this, Mr. Camberwell,' he answered, coming close to my chair and speaking very earnestly. 'You know what a lot they're making—those police people—out of the sword-stick business, don't you? saying that Mr. Nicholas took it with him when he went out that night of the—of the murder?'

'I'm afraid that Mr. Nicholas himself has encouraged them in that opinion, Jeeves,' I answered. 'You were present at the inquest—you heard what he said. That he thought it highly probable that he did take it with him.'

'Yes, sir. I did hear him say so. But—excuse me for plain-speaking, sir—Mr. Nicholas was not in a condition that evening to know anything for certain. And what I want to say to you, sir, is this—it's my firm belief that Mr. Nicholas did *not* take out that stick!'

I turned in my seat and gave Jeeves a lengthy stare. I was wondering what he was after. And again he gave me a nod of reassurance.

'I know what I'm talking about, sir!' he said. 'Let me explain matters—as they seem to me. Mr. Nicholas, as you're aware, sir, has a pretty big collection of walking-sticks and canes in that stand in the outer hall. There are just about a couple of dozen of one sort and another. But all the time that I've been in this house, Mr. Camberwell, I've never known Mr. Nicholas to use but two of those sticks—I mean that there's always been two sticks that he had as favourites; if he didn't use one, he used the other. One of 'em, of course, was this sword-stick that the police found in Middle Spinney; the other was a stick that Mr. Nicholas brought back with him from abroad, Switzerland, I think, just after I came here—he'd been away in foreign parts with Miss Starr. And, sir, I'm dead certain that it was that stick, the Swiss stick, that he took out with him the evening of the day on which that man Dengo came here—dead certain!'

'Why, Jeeves?' I asked, surprised at his vehemence.

'Because it isn't there, sir!' he replied. 'It's not in the stand; it's not in Mr. Nicholas' room, nor in his dressing-room, nor in the cloak-room that opens off the hall, nor anywhere in the house! I've made a particular search, sir, high and low, on the quiet, and that stick, Mr. Camberwell, is not under this roof. That's why I'm certain that it was it—the Swiss stick—that Mr. Nicholas took out that night—and lost somewhere. For certainly he never brought a stick in with him.'

I remained silent for a minute or two, speculating on what this might mean. I, myself, had seen Mr. Nicholas selecting *a* stick from the stand in the hall, but I was too far away from him to be able to say which or what stick.

'Can you describe the Swiss stick, Jeeves?' I asked.

'Yes, sir—accurately. A plain, strong oak stick, sir, with a crook handle. The figure of some sort of a flower or plant carved on it——'

'Edelweiss, no doubt,' I muttered.

'Can't say, sir—not up in those matters. And underneath it—the plant, I mean—the name of some place, Swiss place no doubt, and a date. Instead of the usual ferrule, sir, a spike—steel or iron, a couple of inches long.'

'A stick that anyone would readily notice, eh?' I observed.

‘In England, yes, sir. Obviously foreign, sir. And—it’s not there! Now if that was the stick that Mr. Nicholas took out, sir, it’s a proof that he didn’t take the sword-stick. And I’ve got a notion about that, Mr. Camberwell.’

‘Yes?’ I said. ‘Out with it, Jeeves.’

‘Supposing that man Dengo took the sword-stick away with him, sir?—when he went out with Mr. Nicholas? Mr. Nicholas, sir, is that absent-minded that he’d never notice it if the man had appropriated that sword-stick under his very nose! Anyway, sir, the Swiss stick is missing.’

‘Have you mentioned this to anybody, Jeeves?’

‘Not to a soul but you, sir!’

‘Not to anyone in the house—Hoiler, for instance?’

‘No, sir! I’ve never spoken of it to anybody but yourself. In my opinion, sir, this is a very important discovery.’

‘It may be, Jeeves. But—if Mr. Nicholas did take out the Swiss stick, where is it?’

‘I conclude he lost it, sir. You know what condition he was in, Mr. Camberwell. He—he’d be likely to lose it, sir.’

I let my mind go back to Welman’s evidence before the coroner.

‘As far as I remember, Jeeves,’ I said, ‘the landlord of the Wagon and Horses said at the inquest that he was positive that Mr. Nicholas had no walking-stick with him when he called there that evening. Am I right?’

‘Quite right, sir. Welman did say so.’

‘Then if Mr. Nicholas took out a stick with him he must have lost it, or mislaid it before he got to the Wagon and Horses?’

‘Exactly, sir—just what I say.’

‘But the police say something else! They say that the stick which Mr. Nicholas took out was his sword-stick—which they found hidden in Middle Spinney. How are we going to show that he didn’t take the sword-stick, but took the Swiss stick?’

‘I was wondering, sir, if the offer of a reward for the Swiss stick would do any good?’ suggested Jeeves. ‘The villagers and village boys would comb over every inch of that park if a sovereign were offered!’

‘I don’t know whether that would be advisable—at present,’ I answered. ‘I think we’d better keep quiet about it, at first, Jeeves. Keep it to yourself, until I can consult Mr. Chaney, and perhaps Mr. Chancellor. Of course, if what you advance as a theory is true, it will be most helpful. The puzzle then will be—who took the sword-stick away from the hall?’

A day or two passed without further happenings; then, one morning, I had to take various letters and documents to Mr. Chancellor. He and I took them down to the remand prison in which Mr. Nicholas had been lodged pending the adjournment of his case before the magistrates. We found Mr. Nicholas marked by that curious apathy and listlessness which had characterized him from the moment of his arrest: his behaviour altogether was that of a man who feels that he is confronted by some fatality, and is powerless to battle against it. Chancellor, as we travelled together, had remarked to me that the worst of the situation was that Mr. Nicholas seemed inclined to accept it and would make no effort on his own behalf. But when we were admitted to our interview he at once showed us that he had been thinking over the things alleged against him.

‘I’m very glad you have come,’ he said. ‘There’s something I wanted to tell you. I’ve been trying to recollect the events of that evening—you know the one I mean. I’m still very confused about them—I cannot recollect much, however I try. But there is one thing I have remembered—positively. They are saying, the police, you know, that I took out my sword-stick that evening. And at first I thought it highly probable that I did! But I now remember that I did not.’

‘Certain?’ asked Mr. Chancellor, a little incredulously.

‘I am positively certain,’ replied Mr. Nicholas. ‘I now remember all the circumstances—

about that, at any rate. I went to the stand in the hall where I keep my sticks, intending to take the sword-stick——'

'Any particular purpose in view?' asked Mr. Chancellor.

'No purpose at all, I'm sure. As I think I said before, I use that sword-stick nine times out of ten. That's why I admitted that it was exceedingly possible that I did take it. But as I say, I did not. For a simple reason—the sword-stick was not there!'

Mr. Chancellor, who had odd ways, made a little clicking sound with his tongue.

'Now, now, now!' he said when the clicking was over. 'Now, you're really sure about that? Not there, eh?'

'It was not there at all. I remember, now, distinctly remember that I made a mental note to enquire into its whereabouts when I came in. But it was not there when I wanted it!'

'Then you never took a stick at all?' suggested the solicitor.

'Oh, yes, I did! I took my Fluelen stick!'

'Your—what?'

'A stick that I call my Fluelen stick. It's an oak stick which I bought at Fluelen, at the foot of the Lake of Lucerne when I was in Switzerland some little time ago—it, too, was a favourite stick of mine. It has the name Fluelen carved on it, under another carving of a sprig of edelweiss—and a date. That was the stick I took out. I now remember it clearly.'

'And brought it back, I suppose?' asked Mr. Chancellor.

Mr. Nicholas shook his head wearily.

'That I can't remember,' he said, sadly. 'I cannot re-create the events of that evening after I left the house. But I did not take the sword-stick. Can you find out what had become of it?'

Mr. Chancellor made no reply to that question; he passed on to the business matters which had taken us to see Mr. Nicholas. But when we had left he turned to me about it.

'What did you think of that statement of Nicholas' about the stick, Camberwell?' he asked. 'Do you really think his recollection's to be depended upon?'

'I said nothing in his presence,' I answered, 'because I wanted to consult you first. I think his recollection is to be depended upon!—and for a very simple reason: his statement that the stick was not there, and that he took the Swiss stick in place of it can be corroborated.'

'By whom?' he exclaimed.

'Jeeves, the footman,' I answered. 'This is what he told me the other night'—I went on to tell him all that Jeeves had said. 'What do you make of that?' I concluded.

'It certainly looks queer,' he replied. 'But there'd be a great deal more in it if the Swiss stick could be found, especially if it were found in some place where Mr. Nicholas was likely to have placed it, or lost it, while he was wandering about that night. If you could institute a quiet search, an enquiry——'

'I shall try to do so,' I said. 'And at once. If we can prove that Mr. Nicholas did not take out the sword-stick, that it was not there for him to take——'

'There's only his word for it that he didn't take it out, you know,' he interrupted. 'And how can one depend on the word of a man who confesses that he was so overcome, confused, stupefied, that he didn't know where he went or what he did? The mere fact that the Swiss stick is missing doesn't prove anything!'

'Yes—but suppose we could prove that it *was* the Swiss stick he took out——'

'That, I agree, might be important. And, by George, we want some really strong evidence on our side, Camberwell! I don't know what the police are after, but I've had two or three visits of enquiry from them, and from certain hints dropped it's my opinion that in their view they'll be able to present a damning case against Nicholas when he's brought before the magistrates again! They're working up something, I'm sure—something that I know nothing about.'

'I suppose the case will have to go for trial?' I said.

‘Oh, that’s sure enough!’ he asserted. ‘I daresay they’ll commit him for trial at the next assizes when the adjourned hearing takes place. And, you know, it’s no defence at all to plead that if he did kill this fellow it was done while he was not conscious of what he was doing! We haven’t got to those fine shades of distinction yet in this country. And as Nicholas’ legal adviser I’m handicapped, Camberwell, heavily handicapped!’

‘How?’ I asked.

‘By his reticence! He won’t tell me a thing about his past. There’s some secret, in which that man Dengo, or Ogden, as you tell me the fellow’s real name was, is mixed up, but what it is, Heaven knows!—I don’t, and Nicholas won’t say. Of course, Ogden has been blackmailing him. What you tell me about your discoveries in Little Copperas Street proves that. But—what hold it was that Ogden had on Nicholas, who shall say in face of Nicholas’ determined silence?’

‘Do you think Chaney’s search for the two men that Ogden used to meet will do any good?’ I asked.

‘Chaney is a clever chap, Camberwell! Bit old-fashioned in his methods, perhaps, but painstaking and thorough-going. I know what he’s after. He wants to get at the secret of Nicholas’ past through unearthing Ogden’s previous history. It may be a good way. It’ll do no harm. We may get at something. But Lord a’mercy!—what the deuce does Nicholas mean by being so foolishly reticent? He could say anything he liked to me—a lawyer! And he won’t say a word!’

‘You’ve no ideas on the matter, Mr. Chancellor?’ I suggested.

‘Bah!’ he exclaimed, testily. ‘Not one! I’m not gifted with imaginative faculties. Otherwise I should be thinking that in that mysterious past of his Nicholas had been a pirate, or a slave-trader, or had cut somebody’s throat, and that Ogden had been his aider and abettor! No!—I’ve no ideas. Let’s be practical—you go back to Wrides and see if you can do anything about finding that Swiss stick, and, if it is found, establishing how it came to be where it’s found. And then’ll come another question—if Nicholas didn’t take out the sword-stick, who the devil did?’

I went back to Wrides and instituted a quiet enquiry for the Fluelen stick. A few days passed. Then, when I was beginning to wonder what had become of him, I got a telephone message from Chaney asking me to meet him at once in London.

Chapter XII

FOR A CONSIDERATION

Chaney had asked me to meet him at Waterloo, and he was waiting for me when my train came in. His first words formed a question that went straight to the purpose.

'Mr. Camberwell,' he said, 'where we're going we shall want ready money. Can we get it from Mr. Nicholas' solicitor? It'll be laid out on Mr. Nicholas' behalf.'

'How much?' I asked.

'Fifty pounds would be ample,' he replied. 'We mayn't want anything like it, but it's well to be prepared.'

'I can manage that,' I said. 'But we'll have to go to my bank, in Fleet Street.'

'That'll do,' he answered. 'We can take it on our way—we're going to Islington, first. Get the money in fivers, if you please.'

We got into a car and drove off to the bank; as we turned out of the station into the streets Chaney gave me a queer smile.

'You're wondering what we want the money for?' he said. 'Well, the fact is we're going amongst men whose chief idea in life is to get something for nothing, if they can, but at any rate never to do anything for nothing! In other words, we want the money for palm-oil.'

'Bribes, eh?' I suggested.

'Call it what you like,' he agreed. 'You see, I've found out where I can get some information, but it'll have to be paid for. Perhaps we can get it cheaper than I fancy—you'd be astonished how cheaply some of these chaps will sell each other! Two or three fivers, judiciously distributed, will produce a lot of information.'

'Dependable?' I asked.

'Pretty well so,' he replied. 'Yes, I think we can depend on what we hear.'

'Racing men?' I suggested.

'Of the lower sort—yes,' he answered. 'We've got to see more than one. Wheels within wheels. Give you a glance into a compartment of the underworld, Mr. Camberwell!'

I drew the fifty pounds from my bank—in five-pound notes, according to his request—and handed it over to Chaney.

'We'll play as light as we can with it,' he said as he pocketed the notes, 'but it'll be money well spent if we get the information I'm after.'

'And—that's what?' I asked.

'Whereabouts and particulars of those two pals of Ogden's,' he replied. 'I've found a man who knows another man who, the first man thinks, will be able to tell us what we want to know. For a consideration, of course!'

'Who's the first man?' I enquired.

'A street bookmaker, in Islington,' he answered. 'We shall find him on his pitch. After that I don't know where we're going—depends on him.'

We left the car at the Angel, and proceeding on foot along Upper Street, turned suddenly into a side alley which debouched on a drab and shabby byway that seemed to lead to nowhere. With the exception of a few workmen's cottages, old and dilapidated in appearance, there were no houses in this street; the other buildings seemed to be warehouses, stables, and general repositories of such superfluous stuff as old boxes, hampers, and discarded furniture. But at one point building was going on, and here where men were excavating foundations and putting up hoardings Chaney nudged my arm.

'We're interested in this,' he whispered. 'We're inspecting the work. We appear to be viewing it over—but we don't forget to keep an eye on the end of the street. And there—as you

see—there's a man in a shabby light brown overcoat whose sole occupation seems to be to lounge against a post. That's our man, Mr. Camberwell!—watch him a bit, but don't seem to do so.'

I followed Chaney's instructions. Passers-by might have fancied that we were watching the building operations, but we were really watching the man thirty yards away. He was a twopenny-halfpenny sort of chap who lounged against a streetpost set on the kerb and looked as if he had no more interest in the world than the thing he leaned on. But every now and then, as we watched, we saw figures appear round the corner of the street—a man's, a woman's, even a child's. Man, child, or woman, whichever it was, made along to the lounging figure and slipped a slip of paper into its hand; the hand plunged for a moment into a pocket of the shabby overcoat.

'See the game?' whispered Chaney. 'Those bits of paper have names of horses on them and wrapped up in them are half-crowns, or shillings, or even sixpences! If the horse named should happen to win this afternoon, the child, or woman, or man'll come back at a certain time for the money. See? It's a fine game—for the bookmaker. But—hallo! Now watch!'

The man leaning against the post suddenly started into activity. A white window blind in a house facing him just as suddenly shot up; that window also faced the point where the street turned, at almost right angles. The bookmaker moved; coming rather smartly in our direction, he now looked as if he had some legitimate business in that street. And round the corner, solemn and stately in his blue uniform, came a policeman.

'See that?' chuckled Chaney. 'The man has somebody watching for the policeman coming on his round—that blind was a signal. You watch what happens.'

The man came along and passed us, without any recognition of Chaney. He vanished into Upper Street. Then came the policeman, at a slower pace; he, too, with a glance at us, and another at the workmen, passed on and vanished. And in a few minutes more the bookmaker reappeared again, at the other end of the street, and once more lounged against his post. In the house opposite, the white blind fell again.

'Come on!' said Chaney. 'Our turn now.'

I followed him along the street; the bookmaker, lazily watching our approach, opened his mouth to a humorous grin, and as we drew nearer, winked knowingly.

'All serene, guv'nor!' he said as we came up to him. 'Your friend, eh?' he went on, glancing me over. 'Bit of a swell for where we're going, ain't he?—don't often see his like in our quarters. Best to keep your mouth shut as much as you can, young feller, while we're where I'm going to take you. Let him do the talking—he's all right!'

'Compliment to me,' observed Chaney, with a laugh. 'But you needn't be afraid—my friend's as right as I am. Where are we going?'

The bookmaker looked up the street and down the street.

'I'll knock off, now,' he said. 'Don't seem to be no more clients about as is falling over each other to back their fancies. Where are we going, guv'nor? Ah, don't you ask no questions, and then you'll get no inconvenient answers! You follow me, guv'nor; we ain't going so very far, neither.'

'Show the way, then,' said Chaney. 'We're ready.'

The bookmaker turned towards the end of the street by which he had entered it, but before he had gone many yards, turned again, with another wink.

'Best to be businesslike, guv'nor,' he said. 'What's it going to run to, if I introduce you to this here chap as I knows of?'

'What do you want?' asked Chaney.

The bookmaker transferred his attention to me, and I began to wish that my tweed suit had not been quite so new nor so indicative of its West End origin.

'Well, judging by appearances, guv'nor, it'd ought to be something handsome,' he said.

‘What d’yer say to a fiver for the introduction, and another if you gets the stuff you wants?’

‘All right!’ agreed Chaney. ‘You shall have it.’

‘You makes your own terms with him, of course,’ said the negotiator, jerking his head in some indefinite direction. ‘I dunno what he’ll want.’

‘All right, all right,’ said Chaney. ‘Let’s get at him.’

Our guide made no further attempt at conversation, but keeping a little in front, and crossing Upper Street, proceeded by various short cuts, turns, and twists in the direction of Canonbury. Before reaching Canonbury Square, however, he made other devious departures, and after conducting us through a mews, which, though it was now largely given up to motor-cars and drays, was still redolent of horses and their stables, turned a sharp corner and revealed a queer old-fashioned public-house, hidden away in a back street. Into the parlour of this he ushered us, to contemplate a bright fire and sitting by it, a cigar in the corner of his lips and a glass of what appeared to be rum, with a slice of lemon in it, in front of him on a small table, a man of the type that you may see by the thousand amongst the baser sort of those who frequent our racecourses. He had a pursed lip, a suspicious eye, and a mottled complexion, and was altogether the sort of gentleman whose absence was much to be preferred to his presence.

‘These here,’ said the cicerone, indicating Chaney and myself pretty much as if we had been a couple of prize cattle on exhibition, ‘these here is the two as wants a word or two with you—quiet, like.’

The person by the fireside—he was the sole occupant of the room and appeared to have had no other occupation than that of twiddling his thumbs over a capacious waistcoat—turned his heavy jowl and looked at us, slowly, reminding me of the way in which a fat, stalled ox glances at any disturber of its peace. For some reason or other he appeared to regard me with a mixture of dislike, strongly mingled with contempt; Chaney, whom he looked at longer, he seemed to comprehend and to have no objection to.

‘ ’Tec, eh?’ he suggested, running Chaney over from top to bottom. ‘I knows your make!’

‘Not at present!’ replied Chaney, cheerfully. ‘Won’t say I haven’t been, though. But this is a bit of private business.’

The person grunted, twiddled his thumbs afresh, and again eyed me with positive disfavour.

‘Who’s the young ’un?’ he asked suddenly.

‘Friend of mine,’ said Chaney. ‘Young gentleman that wants a bit of information.’

Once more a grunt and another sizing up of me—and probably of my financial status.

‘What’ll it run to?’ demanded the person. ‘I ain’t going to give away no information for nothing.’

‘We don’t know that you can tell us anything that’s worth buying!’ retorted Chaney. ‘Let’s see the goods first!’

‘What d’ye want to know?’ asked the person. ‘Something about a couple o’ men, isn’t it?’

‘That’s it!’ assented Chaney. ‘I’ll describe ’em.’ He went on to give a literal and accurate description of the two men of whom the barman at the Dog and Pot had told us. ‘Now,’ he continued, ‘do you know those two? Have you seen ’em anywhere lately? Can you give us their names and any information?’

The person, twiddling his thumbs with renewed vigour, regarded Chaney steadily out of the corner of an atrabilious eye.

‘How much?’ he said, huskily.

‘What d’ye want?’ retorted Chaney.

The person hesitated, got himself out of his chair, motioned our guide to accompany him to a corner of the room, held a whispered conversation with him, and returning, dumped himself heavily into his seat again, and took an inspiring and deep draught of the rum and water in his glass.

‘Do it for twenty quid!’ he said. ‘Accurate information, mind yer! good value for money.’

‘Right you are!’ assented Chaney. His hand went into his hip-pocket and came out again: something crisp and crackly rustled. ‘Four fivers! Now, then, what about these fellows?’

Instead of replying then and there, the person, secreting the banknotes with sleight-of-hand celerity, again rose to his feet, and going over to a bar at the other side of the room, turned a more friendly eye on us.

‘What’re you going to have?’ he asked.

We had something. So had the guide—gin. So had the person—more rum, hot. When he had got it, and tasted it, he sat down again, and became confidential.

‘The tall feller you talks about is Gentleman Jack,’ he said. ‘Don’t know no other name for him. Feller as knocks about racecourses, and so on. Said to ha’ been an Army officer in his time and got cashiered, of course. Baddish lot, I should say—out for anything he can get. T’other, the little chap, I knows better. Sparkes—Nutty Sparkes. Been a tout in his time. Picks up a living all sorts o’ ways—all connected with the turf. Saw ’em together a good deal this last winter, them two. Used to come in here now and then. Ain’t seen a vestige on ’em lately, though, and don’t know where they are. In quod, as like as not! But I do know this here, and that’s where Nutty lodged. Name of Gesh—Mrs. Gesh, widow woman, 123 Balmoral Terrace, two turnings to the left. She might know where Sparkes is. And where he is, t’other chap’ll not be far off. Run in couples, that sort does. All private and confidential, this here, mind yer!’

We assured him on that point, and leaving him and the intermediary to their refreshment, went round two turnings to the left, and discovered 123 Balmoral Terrace. A faded woman with a hungry eye answered our knock at the door and admitted that she was Mrs. Gesh. But at the mention of Sparkes’s name she shook her head.

‘Mr. Sparkes, sir?’ she said. ‘Well, he did lodge with me, sir, but he’s left. Mr. Sparkes, sir, he left here earlyish in last month, April.’

Chapter XIII

FOR THE PROSECUTION

Chaney had a way with him where ladies of the lodging-house variety were concerned. His smile melted Mrs. Gesh immediately, and she held the door wider.

'Is it anything I could tell you, sir?' she asked. 'Mr. Sparkes, he ain't left no address with me.'

'We'll come in, ma'am,' responded Chaney. 'Left last month, did he?' he continued as Mrs. Gesh showed us into a parlour as faded as herself. 'Ah!—and didn't leave any address, eh? That's unfortunate, ma'am—we wanted to see Mr. Sparkes, very particularly. Not that Mr. Sparkes has been doing anything, you understand, ma'am—oh, dear, no! We just wanted a bit of information from him. You don't know where he's gone, I suppose?'

'I don't indeed, sir,' replied Mrs. Gesh. 'Mr. Sparkes, he left sudden. Which I can give you the exact date, sir, 'cause I have a note of it in his rent-book. It was the 16th of April, sir,' she continued, after referring to a penny memorandum book taken from behind the clock on the mantelpiece. 'He paid up then, and went. But where, I've no idea, sir.'

'How long had he been with you, Mrs. Gesh?' asked Chaney. 'Long time?'

'Well, it would be a twelvemonth, sir,' said Mrs. Gesh. 'A twelve month last Feb-ry, if I mistake not. But I can tell, sir——'

'Oh, never mind,' said Chaney, as Mrs. Gesh again turned to the penny memorandum book. 'It's no matter. But what did he do—work at?'

'Well, sir, Mr. Sparkes, he didn't work at nothing—quite the gentleman, in a way of speaking. Something to do with the horse-racing, I think, sir. And of course, like all them gentlemen as favours the horses, he had his good days and his bad ones. But always paid up reg'lar, every Saturday morning—I never had to wait for my money where Mr. Sparkes was concerned.'

'Many friends come to see him?' enquired Chaney. 'Particular friends, I mean?'

'He didn't seem to have no particular friend, sir, excepting the captain,' replied Mrs. Gesh. 'He come pretty regular.'

'Ah, and who was the captain?' asked Chaney. 'Captain who?'

'Which I never heard the gentleman's name as I remember, sir,' said Mrs. Gesh. 'The captain was what Mr. Sparkes called him by.'

'What was the captain like?' enquired Chaney. 'Military man?'

Mrs. Gesh described the captain—at some length. When she had completely finished, we had no reasonable doubt that the captain was identical with the gentleman described to us by the person who had recently pocketed some of my banknotes.

'Pretty thick, those two, eh?' suggested Chaney. 'Pals?'

'They seemed to be so, sir. Though different, sir. The captain, sir, you could see he was quality. Now Mr. Sparkes, he bain't, though a nice, friendly man.'

'Um!' said Chaney. 'You've a good memory, Mrs. Gesh. Now do you remember seeing another man here—a big, heavy man? Sailor sort of man—probably wore a suit of blue cloth?'

To our delight, Mrs. Gesh showed instant recognition of this picture.

'I do, sir—a tall, fine-built gentleman as came one morning not so long before Mr. Sparkes left,' she said. 'It 'ud be during the week before.'

'Ah, during the week before, was it?' said Chaney. 'Any name, now?'

'He didn't give me any name, sir,' replied Mrs. Gesh. 'Which I remember the gentleman well enough, him and me having quite a talk. He come one morning not so long after breakfast. Mr. Sparkes he'd stepped out to buy his papers, sir, at the shop round the corner, and was gone rather

longer than usual. The gentleman, he came in and said he'd wait for Mr. Sparkes, which I showed him in here, and he set in that very chair. And me being engaged when his knock comes at the door, in dusting this room and sech-like, he talked to me till Mr. Sparkes came back with his papers.'

'And what did he talk about, Mrs. Gesh?' asked Chaney. 'Horses?'

'Which there was no mention of horses, sir. No, sir, he asked me if I made my living by letting lodgings? Which I replied that I did since Gesh, he was a stevedore and killed sudden by a box of Demerary sugar falling on him, was called home. "Deal o' lodgers you'll have had in your time, no doubt?" he says. "Men and women?" "Both, sir, one time or another," I says. "You've had women lodging with you, time and again?" he says. "Which I have, sir, though having a preference for gentlemen which is less trouble and easier to satisfy," I says. "Have you ever had a woman called Mrs. Ogden?" he says. "Mrs. Ogden, or again, she might have called herself Mrs. Harrison," he says. "Harrison, or Ogden," he says. "No, sir," I says. "I ain't never had no ladies of either of those names." "I'm a-looking for a woman o' that name, or one o' those names," he says. "There's money coming to her and she can't be found!" "Well, sir," says I, "if it was me, I should put one o' them there advertisements in the paper." "D'ye think them's any good?" he says. "I've heard of more than one person as was discovered that way, sir," I says. "And when it's a question of money folks is pretty quick to come forward," I says. "Which o' these here papers would you recommend for a notice o' that sort?" he says. "Is any of 'em better than t'others?" "Which it depends on the circle the person moves in, sir," I says. "There's papers what the aristocracy reads, and there's papers what they don't," I says. "This here woman as I'm talking about was a cook," he says. "Well, sir," I says, "in that case I should recommend one of them Sunday morning papers—them as has all the murders and the tasty bits in, sir." So he said he'd think about it, and just then Mr. Sparkes came in, and presently him and the heavy gentleman went out to take a glass together, and I see no more of him.'

'And it was a few days after this that Mr. Sparkes left, was it?' said Chaney.

'It was, sir. As the rent-book there records,' replied Mrs. Gesh.

'Leaving you no address?'

'No address at all, sir.'

'But what about his letters, Mrs. Gesh? Didn't he give you any address to which they were to be sent?'

'He did not, sir. Which there ain't been no letters for him since he left. And scarcely ever was any when he was here.'

'Has the captain ever called since Mr. Sparkes went?'

'He has not, sir.'

'Nor the big man?'

'No, sir—he only came that once.'

We left Mrs. Gesh presently, and when we had got clear of her, I asked Chaney if he considered we had had value for our money?

'We've made a discovery or two, Mr. Camberwell,' he answered. 'First of all, Ogden, during the last weeks of his life, was in touch with two men, one of whom is known as the captain, or as Gentleman Jack, and the other as Nutty Sparkes. We knew that he not only had conversations with these two men at the Dog and Pot in Kingsland, but that he also visited Sparkes here in Islington. And most important of all, we know that just about the very time that Ogden went down to Wrides Park, Nutty Sparkes disappeared from his lodgings in Balmoral Terrace. Oh, yes, we've learnt a good deal!'

'And something else,' said I. 'We've learnt that Ogden was desirous of finding a Mrs. Ogden or Harrison, to whom money was due.'

'Oh, yes—some family affair, no doubt,' remarked Chaney. 'I wish we could get at any

member of Ogden's family, if there were such people. But no relations of his have ever come forward. Well, we must go on!'

'Towards—where and what?' I asked.

'Towards finding these two men,' he answered. 'Of course! My notion has always been that they were in the plot to blackmail Mr. Nicholas, and I'm strengthened in it by finding out that Sparkes disappeared when Ogden went down to Wrides. Oh, yes—I must find Sparkes!'

He left me, presently, to try another source of information, and I returned to Wrides and for a day or two occupied myself in the search for the Swiss walking-stick; it seemed to me that if we could prove that it was that stick and not the sword-stick that Mr. Nicholas took out with him, we should do a great deal towards proving his innocence. But by the day on which Mr. Nicholas was to appear once more before the magistrates I had had no success.

I was very uneasy about that adjourned hearing. The first had been a mere matter of form—mere evidence of arrest. But I was conscious that this was going to be a very serious business. I heard rumours: the police had discovered this; the police had developed a strong line; the police had something up their sleeve. And this much was certain, and was disconcerting, when Mr. Nicholas was brought up on remand. Mr. Pelterfield, the famous criminal barrister, appeared to prosecute on behalf of the Director of Public Prosecutions. Chaney, present, with me, shook his head at the sight of Pelterfield: Pelterfield, he whispered to me, was a deadly hand at prosecuting a case—moreover, the fact that the Director of Public Prosecutions had taken the matter out of the hands of the local police showed that the authorities meant to leave no stone unturned in the matter of securing a conviction.

'And there's a worse feature than that, Mr. Camberwell,' he added. 'This shows, too, that the police know something that we don't know.'

The magistrates court at Havering-St. Michael was of very limited dimensions, but it was packed to the doors and windows when Mr. Nicholas once more faced the Bench. Everybody concerned was there—Miss Starr; the servants from Wrides, headed by Hoiler, who looked anxious and upset; Welman of the Wagon and Horses, and all the various people who had given evidence at the inquest. But Mr. Pelterfield was the centre of interest; it was not at Mr. Nicholas, sitting meekly in the dock, that the packed audience gazed, but at this big, ruddy-faced man, more like a country squire than a barrister, who in soft, purring accents set forth his damning story. Eyes and mouths began to open before Mr. Pelterfield had been speaking many minutes; by the time he had got fairly under way they were distended and gaping. Beginning by the practical remark that it would be foolish to suppose that their worships were not already possessed of that knowledge of the case which had become common property, Mr. Pelterfield proceeded to outline the details of the evidence on which the prosecution relied in asking for a committal:

'The accused, Mr. Christopher Nicholas, a gentleman of means and property, and a much respected resident of this neighbourhood, in which he has lived for some little time, since inheriting the estate of the late Miss Nicholas, of Wrides Park, is charged with the murder of a man named James Ogden, who, at the time of his death, was lodging with a Mrs. Pettigo, of Little Copperas Street, in the north-east of London. The facts, briefly stated, are these: on the morning of April 17th last, Ogden, calling himself by the name of Dengo, presented himself at Wrides Park, and asked for Mr. Nicholas. Being told that Mr. Nicholas was out, he forced his way into the house and behaved in a masterful and even bullying manner, as will be shown by the evidence. Mr. Nicholas returned and was evidently upset on hearing of Ogden's presence. He went into the room where Ogden was and they were closeted together for some little time. They then left the house together and walked into Havering-St. Michael. Evidence will be called which will show that in Havering-St. Michael Mr. Nicholas entered his bank and drew fifteen hundred pounds in Bank of England notes, which—as I shall prove—he immediately handed over to

Ogden. According to Mr. Nicholas' own evidence at the coroner's inquest on Ogden's dead body, they then parted, Mr. Nicholas returning to Wrides Park in the afternoon. That evening Mr. Nicholas, after dining with his niece, Miss Starr, and his secretary, Mr. Camberwell, left the house: there is evidence to show that he carried with him a certain sword-stick of which he was very fond. He went out into the park and was not seen again until he returned late at night and was admitted by one of his footmen, Jeeves, who will tell you that when his master came in he was not carrying any stick. But we have evidence as to certain happenings near to Wrides Park during that evening. Welman, landlord of a roadside hotel, the Wagon and Horses, just outside the gates of Wrides Park, will testify that during that evening Ogden came into his house and booked a room for the night saying that he had business in the neighbourhood which would necessitate his staying until next morning. After Ogden had booked his room he went out, and he never returned. Some little time after he had gone Welman heard somebody enter the hall, and going out found—very much to his surprise—Mr. Nicholas standing there. You will hear Welman's evidence and will learn from it that Mr. Nicholas, when he entered the Wagon and Horses, was not carrying, and had not in his possession anyway, the sword-stick which he picked up when he left his own house. Welman will also tell you what Mr. Nicholas did on this visit to the Wagon and Horses. I have already said that Mr. Nicholas returned home, and was admitted by Jeeves. Next morning Mr. Nicholas and his niece left Wrides Park unexpectedly for London, and were away until noon on April 17th. Now on the morning of April 17th something happened—the dead body of Ogden was discovered, hidden in the wood called Middle Spinney, in Wrides Park. Ogden had been stabbed to death; run through the heart, by a blow directed at him from behind. Within forty-eight hours of the discovery of the body another discovery was made, close by the scene of the murder. A police constable, making a careful search, found Mr. Nicholas' sword-stick. It had been thrust deep in a rabbit-burrow.'

This was Mr. Pelterfield's prologue. He paused a moment—and I think everybody in court, even the least imaginative, knew that something startling was coming. It came—but Mr. Pelterfield knew the value of dramatic effect. He paused—long enough to make everybody strain their ears for the next words.

'Now, your worships, there can be no doubt, as I shall bring evidence to show, that this man Ogden had been blackmailing Mr. Nicholas for some time—heavily! Ogden had Mr. Nicholas in his power. Mr. Nicholas was mortally afraid of Ogden! Why? What was the hold that Ogden had on Mr. Nicholas? What was the secret that Ogden and Mr. Nicholas shared? We know it!—and I am now going to tell it!'

Chapter XIV

THE SECRET OUT

The effect of Mr. Pelterfield's dramatic announcement on Mr. Nicholas was instant. He had been given a seat in the dock and had sat there meekly, his eyes cast on the floor: never once had he looked up since Pelterfield began to speak. But now, after one wild stare at his accuser, he dropped his head forward into his hands and let out a groan that was audible all over the court. Miss Starr jumped up from her seat, near me, as if to go to him, and at a word from the Chairman of the Magistrates the police-surgeon, there in readiness to give evidence, moved across to the dock. But Mr. Nicholas waved him away.

'Go on—let him go on!' he said audibly. 'I knew it would come out! Let him say his say!'

And Mr. Pelterfield went on, his voice suaver and smoother than ever; its tone was even apologetic.

'From a very early stage of the proceedings resultant on the discovery of Ogden's identity,' he said, 'the police felt it to be incumbent on them to investigate his past. Thanks to the perseverance of Detective-Sergeant Willerton, attached to the police force at Havering-St. Michael, I am now in possession of a great many facts relating to Ogden, and am able to throw some light on at any rate the later stages of his career. Ogden was known to the police, and especially to those connected with the turf. He first came under their notice some years ago, when he was sent to prison for welching at an obscure race-meeting in the North of England. At one time or another he served various short terms of imprisonment for similar or kindred offences. He appears to have made a living by nefarious practices such as thimble-rigging, the three-card trick, and other illegal so-called games. Now and then he figured as a tout, and sometimes as a tipster: I have evidence of his having been in trouble at Newmarket, at Ascot, and at Goodwood. Finally, he got five years' penal servitude for fraud in connection with a scheme which his ingenuity had evolved for the cheating of a well-known firm of turf commission agents. He served the major portion of this sentence at the convict prison at Marshurst. And at Marshurst he made the acquaintance—he had, at any rate, abundant opportunities of doing so—of one Charles Norton, who was serving a term of three years' penal servitude as a result of his conviction as a director of the famous—or infamous Aurora Financial Corporation, which, it will be remembered, crashed suddenly some years ago. All the directors—five, I think—of that corporation were arrested, tried, found guilty of fraud, and sentenced to terms of penal servitude varying from ten to three years. Charles Norton was one of the two directors who received the minor sentences: it was pleaded on his behalf that he was a mere catspaw, a figurehead. I am not going outside my province when I say that I think this was so—Norton appears to have been entirely misled, influenced, and even cheated by the leading spirit amongst his fellow-directors, the man who got ten years. But Norton was technically guilty, and he got three years, and served it at Marshurst, where, as I have said, Ogden was serving his sentence of five. Now, who was Charles Norton? I shall produce evidence to prove, conclusively, that Charles Norton is Christopher Nicholas, now before you, charged with Ogden's murder!'

Mr. Pelterfield paused—probably on purpose to let this sink into the minds of all who heard him. But he went on again, almost immediately, and this time there was a more businesslike tone about his voice.

'I have already said that I shall bring forward evidence to prove that Ogden had been systematically blackmailing Mr. Nicholas for some time. One of the witnesses I am going to call is Mr. Nicholas' butler, Hoiler, who will prove that on one occasion Ogden accosted Mr. Nicholas at Claridge's Hotel—that may have been, and probably was, the first time that the two men met since their release from Marshurst. There can be little doubt that from that time onward

Ogden continually got money out of Mr. Nicholas; little doubt, either, that he got it to a considerable amount. Detective-Sergeant Willerton has ear-marked Ogden's banking account—at the time of his death this man, who had no occupation and lived what Mrs. Pettigo, his landlady, called the life of a gentleman, had a balance of well over two thousand pounds. Everything we have discovered points to the fact that he had got all this out of the man he was blackmailing. But up to April 17th last, he appears to have made all his demands by post. On April 17th, however, he came to his victim in person. He wanted fifteen hundred pounds ready cash. We know that he got it. We know a great deal about what happened on April 17th: we know that in the morning Mr. Nicholas and Ogden met, and what took place between them. And the theory of the prosecution is that at some hour of the evening of that day they met again, by appointment, in Wrides Park, and that there, in the wood known as Middle Spinney, Mr. Nicholas, losing his self-control and probably maddened by the drink which, to drown his sorrows, he had taken too freely, ran his persecutor through the body and killed him!'

I looked at Chaney when Mr. Pelterfield had finished. His face had lengthened and he shook his head as the barrister sat down.

'Strong line, Mr. Camberwell!' he whispered. 'I wish we'd found that Swiss walking-stick! Of course, I'd no idea that Nicholas was Norton!—I remember that case, well enough, though I wasn't in it. I suppose there's no doubt of what Pelterfield says?—that Nicholas is Norton?'

There was no doubt about it at all—when one heard the evidence. We heard a lot of evidence; we spent the rest of the morning, and all the afternoon, in listening to evidence in support of Mr. Pelterfield's opening statement. I think the most damning thing of the whole lot was the unmistakable evidence that Ogden had systematically blackmailed Mr. Nicholas, and of that particular sort of testimony Hoiler's was certainly not the least important. I could not make out how the prosecution had got hold of Hoiler at all, but there he was. He betrayed great reluctance, and even went the length of protesting against being questioned and cross-questioned about his master's affairs, but he had to tell, and he told . . . just what he told me about the encounter outside Claridge's. And just as Hoiler was obliged to speak, so we all were—Jeeves, myself, Welman, everybody who had already given evidence at the inquest. It made up a damning body of evidence against Mr. Nicholas.

Chancellor had engaged an eminent counsel to represent his client, and this gentleman did his best in cross-examining witnesses. But when the case for the prosecution was completed, he offered no defence. His client, he said, reserved his defence and pleaded not guilty. And therewith Mr. Nicholas was formally committed to take his trial at the next ensuing assizes.

Chaney stopped at Wrides Park that night, and he and I, after dinner, reviewed the whole situation with a view to our next proceedings. Since hearing Pelterfield's revelations, Chaney had become somewhat grave and anxious.

'Unless we can prove that Nicholas did *not* take out the sword-stick that evening, he's in a bad way,' he remarked. 'If he did kill Ogden, the argument that he'd had so much alcohol that he didn't know what he was doing won't avail him at all. But how can we prove it? Finding the other stick won't prove it!'

'Not even if we prove—conclusively—that it was the Swiss stick he took?' I asked.

'Ah, well, that might!' he agreed. 'But it's a question of—if! If! If we could only prove—conclusively, as you say, that Mr. Nicholas did not take out that sword-stick, and that he never met Ogden that evening, why, then, there's an end of the case against him! But the job is—proving it. It's a queer thing to me that nobody ever saw him that night, except Welman. If he was wandering about, you'd think he must have been seen. I wonder if anybody's keeping anything dark? There's a certain thing we might try, Mr. Camberwell. The Press!'

'Newspapers?' I said.

'Why, not exactly newspapers,' he answered, 'though, to be sure, publicity's a good thing.

No, I was meaning the printing-press, a local one. Couldn't you draw up an appeal to anybody who knows anything, any little thing, anything whatever, about Mr. Nicholas' movements that night, to come forward and tell what he or she knows? You see, Mr. Camberwell, it's this way—I've had some experience of these country folk, and I've found that they're very reticent about telling anything that they may happen to know in cases like this. They're afraid of being mixed up in anything that has to do with the police. I've known, oh, a score of instances in which what's seemed to be an unsolvable mystery could have been cleared up in five minutes if only somebody had spoken who wouldn't.'

'What about making it worth the informant's while?' I suggested.

'Well, a reward always attracts,' he replied. 'And it also always does another thing—it brings forward people who really haven't anything to tell, though they fancy they have, and also people who deliberately invent some information in the hope of its being swallowed. If a reward is offered the best thing is not to name any precise sum, but to say that the informant will be suitably rewarded. I suppose there'd be no difficulty about giving a reward in this case?'

'I think I can guarantee that,' said I. 'What do you suggest, then?'

'You draw up a notice,' he answered. 'We'll get it printed in the form of a handbill, and have it distributed all round this neighbourhood, and posted up in any likely place. And we can send copies to the papers and ask them to take notice of it. It may produce something, you know.'

Between us we evolved the following—it seemed to me somewhat vague, but Chaney pronounced it to be just the thing:

> The friends of Mr. Nicholas, of Wrides Park, will be grateful to anyone who happened to see Mr. Nicholas at any time during the evening of April 17th last if he or she will come forward with any information of which they are possessed. A handsome reward will be paid to anyone who can give any particulars as to Mr. Nicholas' whereabouts or movements that evening. All communications, which will be regarded as strictly confidential, should be addressed to Mr. Ronald Camberwell, Wrides Park, near Havering-St. Michael, Surrey.

We got a few hundred copies of this production set up and struck off by a local printer and made arrangements for their distribution at every house and cottage in the neighbourhood; we also had some small posters printed in bold type, and got a bill-poster to fix them on blank walls, gate-posts, and likely public places. To do the thing thoroughly, I sent copies of the handbill to all the local newspapers, with a covering note begging the editors to draw attention to our effort. And this done, I sat down to wait for any news . . . and at the end of the fifth day I was still waiting.

Then, on the morning of the sixth, I got some. It came in the form of a letter written on a scrap of dirty paper, enclosed in a cheap, flimsy envelope. It had no date, but it bore an address —*The Union Workhouse Infirmary, Penchester*. And it ran as follows:

> DEAR SIR,
>
> Having read your appeal on behalf of Mr. Nicholas in the *Penchester and Southern Counties Herald*, I beg to say that I believe I can give some information which may be of use to you. I am unfortunately unable to call on you, as, being in bad health, consequent upon long unemployment, I have been obliged to seek shelter in the above-mentioned institution. As the matter appears to be of importance, I have obtained permission for you to see me at any hour of the day on which you can make it convenient to call. The information I can give is of a nature that cannot be written in a letter, as the necessary explanation would be of too lengthy a nature.

Yours respectfully,
CHARLES BURRIDGE

Chaney came in just as I had finished reading this letter, and I handed it to him without comment. He ran rapidly over it.

'Educated man, evidently,' he said. 'Well written; well expressed. Some chap down on his luck, no doubt. Wonder what he was doing in these parts on the night of April 17th?'

'You think it worth enquiring into?' I asked.

'Anything's worth enquiring into!' he answered. 'Anything! You never know what you mayn't learn. Penchester, eh? Now, how far away is Penchester?'

'About thirty-five to forty miles,' I replied.

'Plenty of cars here, Mr. Camberwell, aren't there?' he said. 'Let's have a good one, and get there as soon as we can. This may be little; it may be much. But let's know what it is.'

There was no difficulty about getting one of Mr. Nicholas' best cars, and within half an hour Chaney and I were off.

'I'm curious to know what this may be,' he said, as we turned out of the park into the highroad. 'Odd that the first response to our handbill should come from forty miles away. Lay anything this correspondent of yours is a tramp! But that doesn't matter. Any other communications, Mr. Camberwell?'

'Not one!' I replied. 'The local result is nothing!'

'All the more reason why we should see this man immediately,' he remarked. 'We can soon tell what it's worth, this information of his.'

We were in Penchester within the hour and a half, and just before noon were admitted to the infirmary from which the letter had been sent. There we were taken to the bedside of a sick man —the sort of man who had obviously seen better days.

Chapter XV

STEPS FORWARD

Within a very few minutes Chaney and I knew that our journey to Penchester was not going to be fruitless. Burridge, a quiet, well-spoken man, had not only something to tell, but was plainly one whose word was to be relied on. His account of himself, frankly given, was a not uncommon one. Thrown out of work by no fault of his own he had been going from one town to another seeking employment. On the evening of April 17th he was completing the last stage of a day's journey which he intended to terminate at Havering-St. Michael, where he meant to sleep for the night. Then something happened to him—what it was he told us in plain, unaffected fashion.

'As you gentlemen come from near Havering-St. Michael,' he said, 'you'll know that some little way outside the town, on the west side, there's a roadside hotel or tavern, called the Wagon and Horses. I was approaching that, from the west, about (I should say, though I'm not definitely certain) nine or half-past nine, when I saw a man in front of me behaving in a very curious fashion. When I first saw him, he was on the footpath on the opposite side of the road to that on which the hotel stands. There was no one else about, nobody standing at the hotel doors; the blinds and curtains were drawn in the windows. There are two lamps in front of the hotel and they throw a lot of light, but within its circle there was nobody and nothing to be seen. I mention this point—nobody in view—because it made the man's behaviour all the queerer. When I first saw him he was dancing up and down on the footpath, shaking his fist—at somebody across the road, I thought. But there wasn't anybody! Nor was there anybody to be seen in the windows of the hotel. Just before I came up to him he changed his tactics. He had been shaking his left hand at somebody or something across the road; now he raised a stick which was in his left hand and began gesticulating with it in the same direction, slashing it savagely through the air, as if he were beating the life out of somebody! And, just as I came close to him—of course, he never saw me—the stick flew out of his hand across the road!'

'Ah!' exclaimed Chaney, giving me a look. 'Lost it, eh?'

'It flew clean away from his hand,' replied Burridge. 'He was slashing so violently with it. But the road was well lighted there, and I saw where the stick went, and I ran across and picked it up, and coming back, handed it to him. And I took a good look at him as I did so.'

'Describe him, then,' said Chaney.

'A tallish, thinnish gentleman, slightly bearded, rather careworn and very pale, and, to tell you the truth, either, in my opinion, a bit mad or terribly excited. He was breathing fast and heavily, and he stared, or glared at me when I offered him the stick as if he didn't understand what I was doing. But he took it.'

'He took it?'

'Yes, he took it. And for a second or two he stood staring at me, in silence. Then, all of a sudden, he thrust his hand in his pocket, pulled something out, and pushed it into my hand. It was some silver—seven or eight shillings. The instant he'd done that, he turned on his heel, and walked off, very fast, in the opposite direction—I mean, he turned towards the way by which I'd come. I walked a few yards towards Havering-St. Michael; then I turned and looked after him. I watched him go along the road a little way; then he suddenly twisted sharply round, and coming back, made for the hotel. As he neared it he came full into the light of the two lamps, and I saw that he was still flourishing the stick about, though not so wildly as before.'

'Well?' enquired Chaney, as Burridge stopped. 'And then?'

'That's all,' replied Burridge. 'He went into the hotel.'

'You saw him enter?'

‘I saw him enter; oh, yes.’

‘Carrying the stick?’

‘Carrying the stick, certainly.’

‘Well, now, look here,’ said Chaney. ‘You’re a more than usually intelligent man, I’m sure, and no doubt an observant one. When you picked up that stick, you were in the full spread of the light from the two lamps you’ve spoken of, weren’t you? So you could see the stick clearly, plainly? Very well—did you notice anything particular about it?’

‘Yes,’ replied Burridge, promptly, and with a smile. ‘I did! It had the name Fluelen carved on it, beneath another carving of edelweiss.’

‘Now, what made you particularly notice that?’ demanded Chaney.

‘The fact that once, when I was better off, I had a week’s holiday at Lucerne,’ answered Burridge. ‘Fluelen is at the bottom of the Lake—I went there. I saw sticks similar to this sold there. In fact, I once had one of my own.’

Chaney drew me away to a corner of the room in which this interview took place.

‘This is a real good find, Mr. Camberwell!’ he said. ‘Now look here—before we go, we ought to get this man’s statement embodied in an affidavit. And there’s another thing—you’ll feel justified in promising him some reward?’

‘He can certainly count on that!’ I said.

‘Then let’s tell him so, and ask him if he’ll make his statement again before a commissioner of oaths,’ he answered. ‘We can easily arrange for that at once. Burridge,’ he continued, when he returned to the bedside, ‘you’ll be well rewarded for the information you’ve given. But now just tell me—you’ve no objection to give it again before a lawyer—an affidavit, you know? You know what that means?’

‘Of course,’ said Burridge, smiling. ‘No objection whatever.’ He turned to me. ‘I shall be obliged for any help you like to give me,’ he said. ‘And—would you mind just giving a hint to these people here—the officials—that it’ll be forthcoming? I’m not well enough to leave this place yet.’

We promised to stand by him in more ways than that, and leaving him for the present, went out into the town to find a commissioner of oaths. That was an easy task, and after lunching at Penchester we set off to Wrides Park once more, with Burridge’s duly signed and sworn affidavit in our possession.

‘What next?’ I asked, as we left the town.

‘The next,’ replied Chaney, ‘is Welman, of the Wagon and Horses. Burridge swears that he saw Nicholas carry the Fluelen stick into the Wagon and Horses. Welman has declared, more than once, that Nicholas had no stick when he came there. We must see Welman again on that point. Now, look here, Mr. Camberwell—is Welman the sort of man one can put absolute confidence in?’

‘I should say yes—emphatically,’ I replied.

‘We can depend on him to keep things to himself?’ he suggested.

‘I would depend on him,’ I answered.

‘Then we’ll show him this affidavit,’ he said. ‘If Nicholas carried that Fluelen stick into the Wagon and Horses, where is it?’

We found Welman at home, and getting him into his private parlour—the room into which, he had said at the inquest, he showed Mr. Nicholas when he made his strange call at the Wagon and Horses—told him what we had heard at Penchester and, in strict confidence, showed him Burridge’s affidavit. He read it through carefully, handed it back, and shook his head.

‘Can’t understand that, gentlemen!’ he said firmly. ‘Mr. Nicholas had no stick, brown, black, white, or green, when he came here that night! I’m willing to take *my* affidavit of that. But I’ve given evidence already, twice, as you know.’

Chaney folded up the affidavit, returned it to its envelope, placed the envelope in his breast pocket, and buttoned his coat over it. There was a suggestion in his action which betokened a determination to go further.

'Well, now, let's do a bit of reflecting and looking back,' he said. 'Turn your mind back and you'll take a step forward—good saying! Now, Welman, go back to that evening of April 17th. Where was Mr. Nicholas when you first saw him after he'd entered this house?'

'In the hall, outside this room,' replied Welman. 'I was in the bar—alone. I heard somebody come in at the front door and expected whoever it was to come in to the bar. Nobody came. So in a minute or two I went out into the hall. Mr. Nicholas was standing just within the door—he'd closed it behind him. I was so surprised to see him at all that for a minute or so I stood staring at him. He stared at me. As I've said before, he looked queer—very queer.'

'Never mind his looks!—we know all about that,' said Chaney. 'Let's keep to *the* point. Had he a stick in his hand—either hand?'

'No, he had not!' replied Welman, with emphasis. 'He'd no stick in either hand, nor under either arm. His hands, as a matter of fact, were in the side pockets of his coat—like this.'

'Well?' said Chaney. 'What then?'

'I opened this door and showed him in here. Up to this he'd never spoken. When we'd got in here——'

'We know what happened then,' interrupted Chaney. 'He asked for whisky—a bottle—and you went to get it, and got it, and so on and so on. That's established—we want to trace the stick which Burridge swears he saw him carry into this house!'

'He brought no stick into this house!' declared Welman.

Chaney got up from his chair and motioned Welman and me to the door.

'Come out into the hall!' he commanded.

We went into the hall, all three. It was a fairly big one, square, stone-paved, wainscoted in old oak. A flight of stairs went off it on one side; on the other doors admitted to the bar and the coffee-room. The usual ornaments of a country inn were displayed on the walls—foxes' masks, sporting prints, a stuffed fish or two, a case of stuffed birds, one or two time-blackened oil paintings. Near the front door was a grandfather's clock, flanked by two old oak chairs. Between the left-hand-side chair and the door, standing in a dark corner, was an old spirit-cask, or tub, polished and fitted with brass hoops, which did duty as an umbrella and stick stand. And after a moment's glance round, Chaney made a sudden dart at this, and suddenly, from amongst the dust-covered things that stood in it, drew forth the Swiss stick! One look at it showed that it was the thing we wanted.

'Good God!' muttered Welman. 'To be sure, I never thought of that!'

'You see how that's happened?' exclaimed Chaney, a note of triumph in his voice. 'He wasn't himself when he came in here; he scarcely knew what he was doing; he was carrying this stick; he saw the stick and umbrella stand, and he unconsciously thrust the stick into it! Simple!—now that we know.'

He handed the stick to me—certainly it was the Swiss stick we had been so anxious to find. I handed it to Welman; Welman handled it as if it had some magic property about it.

'Lord bless us!' he muttered. 'And to think it's been there all that time! To be sure, I never even look at what's in there—these things accumulate. Folks—customers—leave sticks and umbrellas here, and they're shoved in there and forgotten. So this is it, is it?'

'That is it!' said Chaney. 'It's it!'

'I suppose it'll make a difference, eh?' asked Welman. 'Big difference?'

'All the difference in the world—eventually,' replied Chaney. 'You'll have to swear as to how we found it, you know!'

'Oh, I'll swear, right enough!' protested Welman. 'Trust me! Of course, I never have

believed that Mr. Nicholas did it—but hang me if it didn't look as if he had done it when he didn't know what he was doing. Queer things in this world, gentlemen!'

Impressing upon Welman the necessity of keeping the discovery of the Swiss stick a profound secret for the time being, Chaney wrapped it up carefully and we went back to Wrides, highly satisfied with our day's work. But I was full of wonder about the other stick—the sword-stick.

'If Mr. Nicholas didn't—and we're about certain now he didn't—take out the sword-stick that night,' I said, 'who on earth did?'

'Mr. Camberwell,' replied Chaney, 'we'll just leave that little point alone! From what we've found out to-day, this is the stick that Mr. Nicholas took with him when he left his house that night. His memory's proved reliable on that point. He took this stick because the sword-stick wasn't there! No!—*because somebody had already taken it.* Who?'

'That's what I'm asking,' I said. 'Just that!'

'Aye, well, I can tell you that,' he answered, drily. 'The murderer! Find the murderer and you'll know who took the stick. You might say—find who took the stick and you'll find the murderer. I think we'll find the murderer first. And—we shall!'

'Any new idea?' I asked.

'My present idea is the old idea,' he answered. 'I still want more information about those two men. Of all the people we've heard of, they're most likely to know things about Ogden. I'm not going to give up this search for them. We must know more about Ogden! Nicholas we know plenty about, now: Ogden we know something about—we must know still more and still more! Has it ever struck you, Mr. Camberwell, that there's been no answer by anybody, so far, to a question that must have occurred to most people in connection with Ogden? What question? Why, this: Why did Ogden, after getting the fifteen hundred pounds in banknotes from Mr. Nicholas, stay in this neighbourhood? To meet somebody? Yes—but who was that somebody? And when, since his arrival, had he had the chance, the opportunity, of meeting anybody with whom he could make an appointment?'

We were just entering the house as he asked this last question and before I could reply to it, Jeeves, coming forward, handed me a telegram. Opening it there and then I saw it to be from Fowler, the barman at the Dog and Pot in Kingsland.

Chapter XVI

UNDER INSPECTION

The telegram was worded as follows:

> Meet me outside post-office Epsom this evening about eight-thirty have some information for you Fowler

and Chaney at once pointed out that it was from Epsom that it had been despatched.

'What's Fowler doing there?' I said. 'Does it mean that he's got some news——'

'At Epsom?' interrupted Chaney. 'No doubt! I'd forgotten it till just now, but to-day's the first day of the Epsom summer meeting; it's the Derby to-morrow. Fowler has evidently gone there. And when you come to think of it, Epsom—or its race-course!—is just the place where he'd be likely to pick up some news. We must meet him, Mr. Camberwell.'

Epsom is but some fifteen miles from Wrides Park, and at a quarter to eight I had the car out again and Chaney and I set off on this new errand. By twenty minutes past eight we had parked the car and were waiting in front of Epsom post-office. As is usual in that town on racing days, the streets were packed with people and the neighbourhood of the post-office particularly so. We stood on the kerb looking about us, when a tap on my arm made me twist round to encounter a very rakish-looking individual in a suit of loud checks, who carried a fieldglass slung over his shoulder and was altogether the complete sportsman—Fowler, of course, but very different in appearance from Fowler in his barman's white apron. He distributed a couple of nods on us, and motioning us to follow him led the way into a side street. And there he turned on us with a knowing glance and went straight to business.

'You still want those two fellows that used to come into our place with Ogden?' he asked abruptly.

'More than ever!' retorted Chaney.

'Well, I've seen 'em!' said Fowler. 'They're here—in Epsom.'

He looked us both over, as if to ascertain what effect this announcement made on us. I glanced at Chaney: Chaney said nothing, and continued to watch Fowler. And presently Fowler spoke again.

'Fact is, I've had a word or two with them,' he continued. 'I came across 'em this afternoon in one of the restaurant bars in the Grand Stand up yonder: they recognized me. And as I knew you were keen about seeing 'em, I told 'em.'

'Told 'em what?' exclaimed Chaney.

'That there were two men very anxious to get hold of 'em—two men who wanted information about the chap they used to meet at our place,' replied Fowler. 'Just that!'

'Well?' asked Chaney.

'They wanted to know, first, who you were, and second, what it was you wanted to know. Of course, I knew what was in their minds! They thought you might be detectives.'

'Wrong!' said Chaney.

'Well, it's like this,' continued Fowler. 'If they're assured that it's all private and confidential, and all on the square, and so on, they've no objection to telling what they know about Ogden. But they'll want paying for it!'

'How much?' asked Chaney.

'They didn't say. I was to see you first, and find out if you'd fork out for their information. Also, I was to assure them that you don't want to bring them into the limelight—all on the quiet, see?'

Chaney considered matters.

'Are they anywhere about?' he asked suddenly.

'Here in the town—for to-night,' asserted Fowler. 'I can put a hand on 'em in five minutes, if necessary.'

'Well,' said Chaney, after thinking things over. 'You can tell them that we've nothing to do with the police. We're endeavouring to get information about Ogden. If they can tell us anything about him we'll pay for the news. The question is—how much do they want?'

'Meet me here in half an hour,' he said. 'I'll bring you an answer. And look here!—while we're talking about paying, you'll not forget me?'

'What do you want?' asked Chaney.

'Oh, a couple of fivers'll do for me!' said Fowler, with a grin. 'I'm not greedy. But these chaps!—however, I'll do my best for you.'

He went off, turned the corner into High Street, and vanished amongst the crowds. We looked at each other. Chaney shook his head.

'I'm afraid it'll be another case of paying out, Mr. Camberwell,' he said lugubriously. 'The thing is, shall we get value for our money? I suppose you can find the money?—it's in Mr. Nicholas' interest, of course, and, also of course, he'll pay in the end.'

'I can find the money,' I answered, 'if you think it worth while to lay it out!'

'Ah!' he said, with a sigh. 'It's a good deal like buying a pig in a poke. But you see, there *may* be something valuable in it, and it doesn't do to miss any chance. A mere word, sometimes, works wonders. It would be a foolish thing to lose an opportunity for the sake of a few pounds. And after all, it's Mr. Nicholas' money!'

I might have remarked that so far it had been my money, but as I knew that Mr. Nicholas or his representatives would repay me, I refrained. Presently, rather sooner than we had expected, Fowler came round the corner again—I guessed that he had been no further than one of the adjacent hotels or taverns. He gave us a sharp nod as he approached.

'Fifty quid!' he said tersely. 'How'll that do?'

'For the two?' asked Chaney.

'No—each!' replied Fowler. 'Fifty quid each—on the nail. And all *sub rosa*, as the saying is. No names to be mentioned—their names, anyway.'

Chaney looked at me. His look was full of questioning.

'I suppose so!' I said.

Chaney turned to Fowler.

'A hundred pounds is a lot of money,' he said, grumblingly. 'However—when and where can we see them? To-night?'

'No!' replied Fowler. 'To-morrow night. You're to meet me at London Bridge Station about nine o'clock. I'll take you to see them then.'

'I suppose,' growled Chaney, 'they'll want spot cash?'

'Spot cash, as you say,' agreed Fowler. 'You're to hand the money, in banknotes, to me before we meet 'em, and I'm to settle with them. You can give me my bit at the same time,' he added, smiling. 'I'm letting you off cheap, you know!'

He went off then, throwing over his shoulder an admonition as to our being on time at the appointed rendezvous next day, and Chaney and I returned to our car.

'I suppose that chap is to be trusted?' I said. 'What do you think?'

Chaney shook his head, with a gesture that implied all sorts of things.

'Mr. Camberwell,' he said, 'in a game like this you've got to run risks, take chances, and never neglect opportunities! I think Fowler's all right—as to the other two, I should want to see 'em first before speculating on them. Anyway, we've *got* to see them!'

There was no question of that, and next day I provided myself with the necessary money, and

in due course set off with Chaney to meet Fowler at London Bridge Station. Fowler turned up to the minute, in obvious good spirits—he had had good luck at Epsom, he promptly informed us, and was now ready to wind up his day by pocketing the ten pounds which we had agreed to give him for his services.

'You've brought the money for *them*?' he asked as he led us towards a taxi-cab. 'That'll be the first thing they'll ask me about?'

'The money's all right, my lad,' replied Chaney. 'It's to be handed to you, eh? Well, we depend on you to see that we get value for it.'

Fowler paused, in the act of signalling for a cab.

'We'd best be plain about that,' he said. 'All I can promise is this: these chaps, once the money's paid over to 'em, will see you. They'll tell you all and everything they know about Ogden. It's to be private and confidential, but if you want to make use of it, there'll be no objection if you consult them first. And that's as far as I can vouch for 'em.'

'That'll do,' said Chaney. 'Where do we meet 'em?'

But Fowler made no reply to that. He ushered us into a taxi-cab, gave an instruction to its driver, and took his place with us.

'We're going to be set down in St. Martin's Lane,' he said. 'Never mind where we're going then. You'll be all right.'

'Oh, we shall be all right!' agreed Chaney, giving me a quiet nudge. I knew what he meant by it. Before leaving Wrides that evening he had thrust a wicked-looking automatic pistol into my hand, telling me to put it in my handiest pocket, and remarking that he had another in his own. 'Oh, yes, quite right. Some saloon bar or other, I reckon, eh?'

'Something of that sort,' agreed Fowler, drily. 'But before we get there, you'd better hand over the money—doesn't do to pull out banknotes in public, you know.'

I handed over ten ten-pound notes, and an eleventh for Fowler himself, and Fowler, after carefully counting them, put them away in an old notecase. He then relapsed into silence and remained silent until our cab came to a halt half-way up St. Martin's Lane, where we got out and left it. Fowler turned us northward, and after walking a little way, led us through a succession of small streets and passages into a narrow court, which, the time now being past nine o'clock, was dark and gloomy enough to warrant us in feeling somewhat suspicious. Suddenly Fowler stopped and knocked three times at a door sunk deep in the wall. It did not appear to be the door of a house, nor of a shop, nor of a warehouse; there were no windows on either side of it. But at about the level of a man's head there was a grille in the panels of the door, and presently the shutter of this was pushed back with a sharp click and we felt that we were being inspected.

'All right!' muttered Fowler to some unseen person. 'As arranged!'

We heard a bolt withdrawn; a key turned. Fowler opened the door. Whoever it was that had drawn bolt and turned key was now gone; all that we saw was a narrow passage, lighted by one feeble gas-jet. Chaney hesitated.

'What is this place?' he demanded.

'Private club,' answered Fowler. 'You're all right—I'll answer for it. Come on!—this way.'

He led us down the passage, opened another door, and showed us into a small room, empty. But there was a stronger light there and the fittings and furniture were respectable enough—a sort of writing room. Somewhere, close by, we heard voices, and the clink of glass, and the click of billiard balls.

'You'll have to wait here a bit,' said Fowler. 'Make yourselves comfortable. Can I get you a drink? Bar's next door.'

We declined his offer, and he went away, shutting the door on us. During the next minute or two we inspected our surroundings, in silence: then Chaney spoke, in a whisper.

'Do you know what's happening?' he said.

‘Not the faintest idea!’ I replied.

‘We’re being inspected—looked over—sized up!’ he muttered. ‘That’s about it! They want to make sure who we are, or what we look like. Well, they won’t know you! But . . . they may know me!’

‘Suppose they do?’ I asked.

‘If they do, they’ll know I’m no longer in the police force,’ he said, ‘so it mayn’t make any difference. At least, perhaps not. We shall see.’

We soon saw. Fowler came back a few minutes later. He closed the door behind him and faced us.

‘This is how things are,’ he announced. ‘One of ’em will see you!’ He pointed to me. ‘Neither of ’em will see you!’ He indicated Chaney. ‘But the one who sees him will tell the young gentleman all they know about Ogden, and he’ll be at liberty to tell you what they’ve told him. That’s it!’

Chaney looked at me.

‘Afraid of my recognizing ’em!’ he muttered. ‘Well, Mr. Camberwell, you hear? What’ll you do?’

‘See the man, of course,’ I replied. ‘Where is he?’

Fowler opened the door and beckoned me to follow. As I stepped across the threshold, he glanced at Chaney.

‘I’ll see that he’s all right,’ he said. ‘You stop where you are.’

Chaney resigned himself to being left behind; as for me, though feeling far from happy about it, I followed Fowler into the passage, past the half-open door of a room in which I had a glimpse of men smoking and drinking, and to another small and empty room further along. And here he motioned me to a chair.

‘Look here, guv’nor!’ he said. ‘They wouldn’t see your friend, nohow! They knew him—know what he is now and know what he was. They’ve nothing against him at all, but they’re just not going to have any dealings with him. But it’s different with you—you’re a gentleman! This chap that’s coming’ll tell you all—all! they know, and you can speak as free as you like to him. And you’ll be as safe here as if you was in the Bank of England!’

He went off at that, leaving the door half open; a moment later it was pushed wide, and there came in, smiling, a little, loudly dressed fellow who puffed a big cigar.

Chapter XVII

IN CONFIDENCE

For the space of a minute this sporty-looking person and myself inspected each other in silence; then his smile broadened into a grin and he laughed quietly.

‘Well, guv’nor!’ he said, in unmistakably friendly tones, ‘and what can we do for you? Wanting to hear a bit o’ news, aren’t yer? Of what sort, now?’

‘I understand that you—and your friend—can give me some information about James Ogden,’ I replied, going straight to the point. ‘Is that so?’

‘Me and my friend—which I speak for both, guv’nor, and he ain’t no particular desire to show hisself just now—certainly knew Ogden,’ he answered. ‘But such a very little, guv’nor, that we could scarcely be called friends, or even acquaintances of his. Put it down that we met him.’

‘Where?’ I asked.

‘Well, chiefly at the Dog and Pot, in Kingsland, where your friend Fowler is barman,’ he replied. ‘But I called at his diggings once, or it might be twice, and once he called at mine.’

‘Where were your diggings?’ I enquired.

‘I’ve left ’em now, guv’nor,’ he answered. ‘But there ain’t no reason why I shouldn’t say. They were at a Mrs. Gesh’s, a widow woman, up Canonbury way.’

‘What did you know about Ogden?’ I asked.

‘Precious little, alive or dead, guv’nor,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘Of course, we know he is dead, and what happened, or is supposed to have happened to him. Done in!—by somebody. We read that in the papers.’

‘The papers asked for information about him,’ I remarked. ‘Why didn’t you come forward?’

He looked at me with unaffected astonishment.

‘Whatever for, guv’nor?’ he asked. ‘We couldn’t tell anything that would ha’ helped the police! We knew nothing about how he come to his end—nothing! I tell you, we knew next to nothing about him anyway.’

‘Well,’ said I, already wondering if we were going to get any value for our hundred pounds, ‘what do you know.’

He had been standing until then—we both had—but now he sat down on one side of the table between us, and motioned me to a chair opposite his own.

‘Sit down, guv’nor, and I’ll tell you,’ he answered. ‘And mind you, though we don’t want to become what you might call stars in this here turn, we’re not going to keep anything back—from you! You’ve paid your money down, handsome, and you’re going to get its value—as much as we can give, anyhow. Well, it’s like this, guv’nor—but before we start, what d’ye say to a drop of something?’

‘Not for me, thank you,’ said I. ‘Don’t let me prevent you, though.’

‘Half a mo’, then, guv’nor,’ he agreed. Rising, he tapped the wall behind him; a panel moved back; a man’s face showed itself. ‘Drop o’ the usual, Mike,’ he said to the face. ‘One only—the gentleman isn’t having none.’ A well-filled glass was handed in; the panel closed; my companion took a pull at his liquor, and setting the glass on the table between us, addressed himself to me.

‘Like this, guv’nor,’ he repeated. ‘Me and my friend outside—which we’ll call him the captain while we’re a-talking o’ these things—me and my friend, I says, we’re connected with what you calls the turf. Always has been—in one way or another. Now, a bit of a time since, we gets it into our heads that it might be a very good idea to start a commission agency, and to open an office in Glasgow.’

‘Why Glasgow?’ I asked.

He smiled pityingly.

'So's folks could send ready money, guv'nor,' he answered. 'You can't do that in England, you know! But you can in Scotland. So, as I say, we fixed on Glasgow. Well, that there sort o' thing requires a bit o' capital, to start with. Now, we both of us, me and the captain, had a bit, but not so much as we considered we ought to have. So we thought we'd take a partner. And we advertised for one. And this here Ogden answered the advert.'

'That was the first time you'd ever heard of him?' I suggested.

'The very first as ever was, guv'nor,' he replied. 'Hadn't a notion of him before!'

'Neither of you?' I asked.

He looked at me as if he didn't understand the question.

'You can answer for yourself that you'd never heard or seen Ogden before,' I said, 'but can you speak for your friend, the captain?'

'I can speak for him, too, guv'nor!' he declared. 'We'd neither of us ever heard of nor seen this here Ogden at any time, till then. A perfect stranger he was—to us.'

'Well,' I said, 'you say he answered your advertisement. Where did he write from?'

'Little Copperas Street, guv'nor.'

'Did you go there?'

'Not then, guv'nor. Ogden, after we'd exchanged a letter or two, suggested a meeting. We were to meet outside the Dog and Pot, what I mentioned just now.'

'And you met, of course?'

'We did, guv'nor!'

'And went inside?'

'Naturally we did, guv'nor, and did our bit of talk there. We met Ogden there several times—by his appointment.'

We were getting to business now, and I assumed the office of examiner-in-chief. To do him justice, my witness answered all questions readily and frankly.

'Well,' I began, 'what did Ogden tell you about himself?'

'Precious little, guv'nor.'

'Did he say what he was?'

My companion smiled.

'Oh, well, guv'nor,' he said, 'he described himself as a retired gentleman!'

'Retired—from what?'

'I dunno! We made out as how he'd been out o' the way for a time. Might ha' been at sea. Or in foreign parts. Or—in quod. Didn't matter to us.'

'What about your advertisement?' I suggested. 'What did you want?'

'Partner, guv'nor, that could find money, to put to ours.'

'Any definite sum?'

'The sum named, guv'nor, for a third share in our little business, was fifteen hundred quid.'

Fifteen hundred pounds! That was the amount handed over to Ogden by Mr. Nicholas on the day of the murder.

'You asked Ogden for that amount—fifteen hundred pounds?' I said.

'We told him that's what he'd have to pay, if he came in.'

'What did he say?'

'Said he could find that, easy enough.'

'Anything else?'

'Yes! He said he'd somebody, or something, behind him that meant money. Gave us to understand, d'ye see, that if necessary he could get what money he liked.'

'To any amount?'

'Well, he did say this, guv'nor, I remember. That if we come to terms, and started this here

little business in Glasgow, and if it paid, and if we wanted more capital, he could find it. Just that!'

'Did you come to terms, then?'

'We come to an arrangement, after having several talks at the Dog and Pot, him and me and the captain there, and Ogden and me, once at his digs, and once at mine. It was this here—we were to put up a capital of three thousand pounds to start off with. Me and the captain was to find fifteen hundred pounds of it, and Ogden t'other half. He to have only one-third profits, for all he was finding half the capital, 'cause, you see, we had the experience and was to do most of the office work. That was it.'

'Did you have any articles of partnership drawn up?'

'Papers, y'mean, guv'nor—writings? No—we took each other's words, as gentlemen.'

'Did Ogden keep his?' I asked.

'I daresay—from what I saw of him—that he would ha' kept it, guv'nor, if he hadn't been done in! But—he was done in, as you know. We know—me and the captain—that he got the fifteen hundred quid—we read everything in the papers. He got the fifteen hundred quid from that old johnny as is now accused o' settling him—they'd been together in Marshurst, them two, according to the papers. So, of course, we learnt that Ogden was an ex-convict.'

'You'd no idea of that until you read about the proceedings before the magistrates, I suppose?'

'Not an idea, guv'nor. We didn't know who or what he was!'

'So, of course, you never got his fifteen hundred pounds?' I said after a moment's reflection.

'We didn't, guv'nor! How could we when it was taken off him at the time o' the murder? No, we never seen a penny of it.'

Another moment's reflection led me to put what I knew Chaney would consider the most important of all my questions.

'Where,' I asked, 'were you and the captain at the date of the murder—which was April 17th? In London?'

'No, guv'nor!' he replied promptly. 'We was not in London, nor anywheres near it! We was in Glasgow. Our arrangement with Ogden was this here: me and the captain was to go down to Glasgow on the 10th of April. We went—on that very date. We was to look about and engage a likely office. We did that: we entered into occupancy of it on the 14th. Ogden, with his fifteen hundred pounds, was to come down and join us on the 18th or 19th. He never came. Later, we heard what had happened to him. And we kept our mouths shut!'

'Why?'

'No concern of ours! Of course, our business could ha' done with that fifteen hundred pounds. But there, it's done without it. And—done well, so far.'

'You—and the captain—were in Glasgow on April 17th, then?'

'Me and the captain, guv'nor, went to Glasgow on April 10th and never left it, for an hour, let alone a day, from that date till three days ago, when we come up for the Epsom meeting. So of course we were in Glasgow on April 17th.'

'You could prove that, if necessary, I suppose?' I asked.

'As easy as I looks at you, guv'nor! The captain and me, we lives at one o' these here private hotels in Glasgow; has lived there ever since we struck the place on April 10th. The landlord and landlady they can prove that we've never been a day or night away from that date until this last Sunday, when we come up.'

That settled the point which Chaney had raised more than once. If these two men whom he had been so anxious to find were in Glasgow on April 17th, they could not have been at Havering-St. Michael or Wrides Park. I got up.

'Do you mind waiting a minute while I speak to my friend?' I asked. 'I won't keep you.'

‘All right, guv’nor, take your time,’ he said. ‘But don’t bring your friend here. We know who he is!—Chaney. What used to be a Scotland Yard chap—C.I.D. And we don’t want to have no truck with him, or his like. You’re a gentleman!—that’s different. You’ll treat us as gentlemen.’

I left him there, and going back to Chaney repeated to him, as nearly as I could, every word that had passed between us.

‘You think he’s been telling you the truth, Mr. Camberwell?’ he asked.

‘I should say—yes,’ I answered. ‘I’m quite prepared to believe him, anyhow.’

‘Very well; that settles one of my theories,’ he said. ‘If these men were in Glasgow from April 10th to the other day they weren’t at or near Wrides Park on April 17th! That’s flat!—and we could soon prove it by enquiries at Glasgow. But still, there may be something they know about Ogden that this little chap hasn’t told you. Go back, Mr. Camberwell, and ask him one more question. Ask him if, during the time they knew him, Ogden ever said anything to them about his private affairs? We know that he did to Mrs. Gesh—it may be that he said something to her lodger. Ask, anyway.’

I went back to the little room and once more closed its door on my informant and myself.

‘There’s just one thing I want to ask you,’ I said, reseating myself opposite him. ‘Did Ogden, during your interviews with him, ever tell you anything about his private affairs?’

He looked at me wonderingly for a moment; then he nodded, as if suddenly remembering something.

‘Well, now I come to think of it, guv’nor, he did once,’ he answered. ‘It was when he come to see me at my diggings. We went out to have a drink together, and while we were having it—and maybe another or two—he asked me what was the best way to find somebody as was missing? I asked him what he meant, and he said: Well, the fact was, that while he was away (where, he didn’t say, though, from what the papers now says, it was while he was in quod) his wife had disappeared, and he couldn’t find her. And he did say as how he wanted to find her, particular, ’cause he’d found out as how there was money coming to her, and of course, it couldn’t be got without her. That was all, guv’nor. And I said to him that if it was me, I should put a piece in one of these here papers that advertises for lost rellytives, saying that if whatever her name might be would apply wherever it might be she’d hear of something to her advantage.’

‘Well, did he say he’d take your advice?’ I asked.

‘He didn’t say he would, and he didn’t say he wouldn’t,’ he answered. ‘But he did say this, guv’nor—that the devil of it was that he didn’t want his name to appear!’

Chapter XVIII

THE ISLINGTON SOLICITOR

That seemed to be about all there was to extract from the little man in the suit of loud checks, and I rose to leave him. But at the door I turned and put one further question.

'Did Ogden say why he didn't want his name to appear?' I asked.

'He didn't, guvnor,' he answered. 'But now I comes to think of it, there was that about Ogden what made you think that he was one o' that sort what's always a-keeping something back. There was a air of—of—what d'ye call it?—I ain't no scholar!'

'Mystery?' I suggested.

'That's the word, guv'nor—mystery! Like what you reads about in the penny bloods. Seemed like as if there'd been something—eh?—what he didn't want to talk about. Of course, now, since we read the papers, me and the captain knows what it was—Ogden, he'd done time. I recollect, now, that if, when we was a-talking to him, say, about racing matters, and mentioned a certain horse of a certain year, he'd say "Ah, that was when I was away!" Which really meant, guv'nor, if he'd voiced it plain, "That was when I was in quod." For that's where he'd been, of course—though we didn't know it till it come out when Nicholas was before the beaks.'

I said good-bye to him and rejoined Chaney, and presently, making our *adieux* to Fowler, we left the premises and got out into purer air.

'Have we done any good?' I enquired when we had fairly got away. 'Learned anything worth while?'

'We've learned a good deal, Mr. Camberwell,' replied Chaney. 'Let's tick it off. First, we've ascertained that these two men were not partners, accomplices, with Ogden in blackmailing Nicholas. Second, we've learned that on April 17th they were in Glasgow and therefore couldn't have been at Wrides Park. Third, we've had it established that Ogden was very anxious to find a certain woman, and asked two or three people how to set about it. Fourth, we know that Mrs. Gesh and this chap you've just been talking to advised him to advertise for the woman. Very well—what I now want to know is, did he?'

'How will you find that out?' I asked.

'We can search the files of the likely newspapers,' he said. 'If Ogden did advertise, and we can spot his advertisement, we may, by following it up, get some further clue. Let's do it at once. Can you stay in town to-night?'

'I can, certainly,' I replied.

'Very well,' he continued. 'Do—and meet me at half-past nine to-morrow morning at, say, Temple Bar. We'll search the files of the likely newspapers—I've a pretty good idea of where a man like Ogden would turn. He'd go for the lurid, sensational Sunday papers. Perhaps we shan't find anything—but it's worth trying, anyway.'

I stayed in town that night, and at the time and place agreed upon met Chaney, and we walked down Fleet Street and began our task. Chaney had thought out what we had better do. According to our information, it was early in April when Ogden asked advice of Mrs. Gesh and of her lodger; there was no use, therefore, in looking over files of a date prior to, say, April 7th. But to make sure, we consulted files dating from April 1st: if any advertisement had appeared, it must have been between that date and April 17th. Going from one office to another, we had looked through the columns of half a dozen likely papers by half-past eleven, and had found nothing. Chaney began to shake his head.

'No good, I'm afraid,' he said. 'He may have meant to do it, but hadn't done it when he went to Wrides Park. I'm afraid that's all useless, Mr. Camberwell—we'd better give it up.'

'There's another source we haven't tried,' I said. 'The personal column of *The Times*.'

‘Oh, that’s no good!’ he exclaimed. ‘Ogden would never think of that!’

‘Perhaps,’ I agreed. ‘But Ogden may have consulted a solicitor. And any solicitor would know that the personal column of *The Times* is a very valuable medium for that sort of thing.’

‘Well, there’s something in that,’ he admitted. ‘And as we’re close to it, we may as well drop in at *The Times* office. Of course, there are personal columns in other dailies than *The Times*. But let’s try it, first.’

We went round to Printing House Square and began a systematic examination of the personal columns of *The Times* from the first day of April onwards. It was a weary business—and when we got to April 15th we were both inclined to give it up, especially as that was about the last date on which Ogden could have advertised. But I just glanced at the issue of April 17th . . . and there, staring me in the face, was the name *Ogden*.

‘Here we are, Chaney!’ I exclaimed triumphantly. ‘Here it is!—and on the very day on which he was murdered, too! That’s an extraordinary coincidence. But this is his advertisement, without a doubt, though you’ll observe that he’s kept himself out of it!’

There, standing side by side, we read the advertisement:

> OGDEN—If this should meet the eye of Sarah Ogden, formerly Sarah Harrison, at one time resident at Chelmsford, she will learn of something to her advantage by communicating in person with Mr. F. B. Barfitt, Solicitor, 529 Colebrooke Row, Islington, N.1.

Chaney pulled out his watch.

‘Half-past twelve!’ he said. ‘Time to catch this lawyer before he goes to lunch. Come on, Mr. Camberwell—let’s get the first taxi we see.’

We hurried up to Islington and along Colebrooke Row, a quiet, semi-secluded thoroughfare of old red-brick houses, until we came to Mr. F. B. Barfitt’s brass plate affixed on a green door. In a few minutes we were closeted with Mr. Barfitt, a somewhat youthful gentleman, evidently not long set up in practice, who regarded us with curiosity and Chaney and his professional card with speculative interest. Chaney had provided himself with a copy of *The Times* for April 17th, and had marked the advertisement with blue pencil; he now placed the marked paper before Mr. Barfitt.

‘We want to acquire some information about that!’ he said. ‘As your name is attached to it, Mr. Barfitt, we came to you.’

Mr. Barfitt glanced at the advertisement. His eyes brightened.

‘Ah, that?’ he said. ‘Yes—just so. On whose behalf do you come?’

‘Our own!’ replied Chaney. ‘We are endeavouring to clear up the mystery of the murder of a man named James Ogden, who met his death at Wrides Park, in Surrey, on April 17th, and we believe that this advertisement has some connection with the mystery. You have heard, of course, of the Wrides Park affair, Mr. Barfitt Ogden, a big, heavily built fellow, was found——’

Mr. Barfitt let out a sudden exclamation.

‘Good Lord!’ he said. ‘That must have been the man who came to me!’

Chaney paused, looking a question.

‘To—you?’ he asked.

‘To me! The man who brought me that advertisement. I—I never connected him with the Ogden I read about—the murdered man. But—it must have been the same. Bless me!—why didn’t I think of it before?’

‘Do you mind telling us all about this advertisement, Mr. Barfitt?’ asked Chaney. ‘It’s most important we should know why it was inserted and by whose instructions. You know who I am by my card. This gentleman, Mr. Ronald Camberwell, is the private secretary of Mr. Christopher

Nicholas, the man charged with Ogden's murder. We're convinced of Mr. Nicholas' innocence, and we're trying——'

'Oh, I'll tell you all I know!' interrupted Mr. Barfitt. 'It's not a great deal, but it contains a good many mystifying and curious incidents. On April—wait a minute, and I'll give you the exact date from my desk diary—yes, here we are—on April 14th a man answering your description, a big heavily built man, called on me. He asked me how one could find somebody who was missing?—a woman, in this case. I recommended advertising. He then said that he wanted to find a woman named Sarah Ogden, whose maiden name was Sarah Harrison; the reason being that he had ascertained since coming home from a long absence somewhere else, that there was money and property due to her. I then asked him for further particulars. He wouldn't give any.'

'Wouldn't give any?' exclaimed Chaney.

'Not a particular! He wouldn't tell me his name nor give his address. He wouldn't say what, if any, relation the wanted woman was to him, nor how much money and what property it was that was waiting for her. All that, he said, could stand over until she was found. If she came forward, he would then give full information. I said, of course, that all that seemed very unsatisfactory—was there anything he wanted me to do, professionally? He then pulled out two five-pound notes, and said he wished me to draw up the advertisement, insert it in what I considered a likely paper or papers, and pay myself for my trouble. Between us we concocted the advertisement you see there, and I suggested he should leave it to me as to where I sent it. As he had told me that the missing woman would probably be found occupying a place as cook or housekeeper I sent it, to begin with, to *The Times*, as you see. Well, after we'd arranged this, the man went away saying he'd call again in a week. But—he never did! And it certainly never dawned on me that he was the man who was found murdered down there in Surrey. Of course the murdered man's name didn't come out at once, did it?'

'It didn't,' agreed Chaney. 'But, Mr. Barfitt, here's a perhaps more important question. Did you ever get any response to the advertisement?'

Mr. Barfitt nodded, promptly, and once more referred to his desk diary.

'Yes!' he replied. 'On April 21st. A woman called!'

Chaney started and became, obviously, more keenly attentive.

'*The* woman?' he exclaimed.

'No!—a woman. I'll tell you about it,' continued Mr. Barfitt. 'The man had been mysterious, but this woman was more so. She came here, as I said, on April 21st, and on my seeing her said she'd come about the advertisement in *The Times*. I at once asked her if she was Sarah Ogden? She said no—but she knew her. I questioned her further: she was difficult to manage. Eventually I got this much out of her. She had known the woman wanted all her life, first as Sarah Harrison, then as Sarah Ogden. She knew where she was now; she also knew that Sarah Ogden, *née* Harrison, had for some years been living under another name. In fact, she could bring Sarah Ogden into the limelight—but she wanted paying!'

'Reward?' suggested Chaney.

'She wanted paying for her information,' replied Barfitt. 'She looked that sort—grasping. No pay, no news! Of course, I told her that I was only an agent in the matter and could do nothing until I'd seen my client, the advertiser. I took her address and promised to write to her when he called again. But, as I've told you, he never did call again.'

'And you've not heard or seen anything of this woman since?' asked Chaney.

'Nothing.'

'But you have her name and address?'

'Here—in my diary. Mrs. Luke, 850 Harley Street. I should imagine she is in service there.'

Chaney rose from his chair.

‘Mr. Barfitt,’ he said, ‘we must have that information! I suggest you should see this woman and get it. How much do you think she’d want?’

‘No idea,’ replied Mr. Barfitt. ‘No sum was mentioned when she was here. But as I said before, I should say she was a grasping woman. What she said was that if my client, the advertiser, was so anxious to get news of Sarah Ogden, and if, as seemed likely, there was money or property coming to Sarah Ogden, she didn’t see why she shouldn’t be paid for telling where Sarah Ogden was and what name she now went by.’

‘Can you suggest a figure?’ asked Chaney.

‘Oh, well, I don’t know,’ replied Mr. Barfitt. ‘I daresay the sight of fifty pounds would extract everything from her—perhaps less.’

Chaney turned to me. I knew what he was asking, and I nodded—we were fairly in for it by that time, and it was no use boggling at fifty pounds.

‘Yes!’ I said.

A few minutes later, Mr. Barfitt’s clerk having summoned a taxi-cab, the three of us set out westward. We called at my bank for ready money, and I handed the solicitor fifty pounds in crisp new notes. At the Cavendish Square end of Harley Street we left the cab, and Mr. Barfitt, bidding us wait at a certain corner for him, set off on his mission.

‘How do we propose to profit by this, Chaney?’ I asked, when he had gone. ‘You’ve no idea, of course?’

‘My idea is that the more we find out about Ogden’s past, the nearer we’re getting to the truth about his murder,’ he answered. ‘Dig down—it’s only a question of waiting.’

We had not very long to wait for Mr. Barfitt. Within half an hour he came hurrying back, and as he drew near us, he waved a scrap of paper.

‘The fifty pounds did it!’ he exclaimed. ‘Here’s the name and address.’

He thrust the scrap of paper into my hand, and I opened and read what was pencilled there.

Mrs. Hands, Wrides Park, Havering-St. Michael!

Chapter XIX

WHO WAS IT?

For some reason or other, Mr. Barfitt had handed the scrap of paper to me instead of to Chaney, and it was my eye alone that first read the words Mrs. Luke had written on it in exchange for fifty pounds. To say that what I read gave me a shock is to put the matter mildly—I felt as if I had been groping about in a darkened room and had suddenly had a flood of blinding light let in on me. I saw and realized!—and from that moment I had a pretty clear vision of the track we had to follow.

'What is it?' Chaney was asking at my elbow. 'Let's see, Mr. Camberwell.'

But I kept the scrap of paper firmly rolled in my hand.

'A moment!' I said, and turned to the solicitor. 'You know what's written here, Mr. Barfitt? Well, just oblige me by keeping it secret for the present. We'll see you again—and now you'll excuse Chaney and myself—there's something I must say to him at once.'

Mr. Barfitt looked a little surprised and mystified, but he understood, and was good enough to take himself off. I turned to Chaney, who was looking even more surprised.

'Something unusual, Mr. Camberwell?' he asked. 'Startling?'

'You remember what the woman was to give, Chaney?' I said. 'The name by which Sarah Ogden, formerly Sarah Harrison, now called herself, and her present address? Very well—here's name and address written down. Do you see?—Mrs. Hands, Wrides Park!'

'Good God!' he exclaimed. 'The—the housekeeper!'

'The housekeeper—Mr. Nicholas' housekeeper,' I assented. 'Well—there's a revelation for you. Chaney, Mrs. Hands is—Sarah Ogden! And now we've got to talk, and to think. Here, let's go somewhere and get some lunch—it's two o'clock and we've had nothing since breakfast.'

We turned into Regent Street, and finding a restaurant, entered, and got into a quiet corner: the waiter who came to us doubtless thought us strange or absent-minded for we were both too excited to remember at first what we had gone there for. But when he ordered something I plunged into matters.

'Chaney, we've got at—I don't know what!—at last,' I said, 'though we've been a long way round to get at it. We ought to have begun at home! Here's the fact—if this woman informant is right—that Mrs. Hands, the severely respectable housekeeper of Mr. Christopher Nicholas, is Sarah Ogden! Now remember this—take it in order. On April 17th Ogden, calling himself Dengo, comes to the front door of Wrides Park and asks for Mr. Nicholas. Jeeves, the footman, says that Mr. Nicholas is out. Ogden forces his way in, enters the dining-room, helps himself to whisky from the sideboard. Jeeves, alarmed, comes to me. I go to the dining-room: Ogden bullies and blusters, and he demands a sandwich. Thinking it wise to humour him I go in quest of a sandwich and meet Mrs. Hands. Mrs. Hands says she'll take him a sandwich herself. She does so—she enters the dining-room, and Ogden meets—Sarah!'

'Aye—aye!' muttered Chaney. 'Wife—sister—cousin—what?'

'You may be perfectly certain of the relationship,' I replied. 'Ogden wouldn't bother himself about advertising for a cousin or a sister. Wife, Chaney, wife, of course! Well, there you are: husband (who's been in penal servitude) and wife (who's struck out a line for herself) meet, there in Mr. Nicholas' dining-room. I remember now that Mrs. Hands was there with our blustering visitor for several minutes—I believed that she was engaged in the laudable task of keeping him quiet till Mr. Nicholas returned. But we may now be perfectly certain that Mr. and Mrs. Ogden, having recognized each other, were having a hurried talk about their own concerns. And now, Chaney——'

But just there the waiter came and we had to bring our minds back to the fact that it was

necessary to eat and drink. I went on, however, before I had well swallowed my first mouthful.

'Now remember a little more of the events of that day and evening,' I continued. 'Ogden went away with Mr. Nicholas. Mr. Nicholas walked with him into Havering-St. Michael, drew money—fifteen hundred pounds—from his bank, and handed it, in notes, to Ogden, from whom he then parted. Mr. Nicholas believed that Ogden, having got what he wanted, would go back to town. But we know that Ogden did not go back to town! Ogden turned up at the Wagon and Horses that evening; told Welman that some business would necessitate his staying the night in the neighbourhood, and asked if he could book a room? He did book a room—and soon afterwards, saying that he had an appointment, went out. Now, then—who was Ogden going to meet when he went out? Do you think there's any doubt about it? He was going to meet Mrs. Ogden, *alias* Mrs. Hands!—to resume the conversation begun that morning. What do you say, Chaney?'

'Looks like it—uncommonly like it,' muttered Chaney. 'Do you remember anything about her movements that night?'

'No!—how should I? She was in one part of the house, I in another—I never did see her of an evening. I don't know what she was doing that night, at all. But we can find out—even now.'

Chaney ate and drank in silence for a few minutes. Then he gave me a questioning look.

'The sword-stick?' he said. 'Have you thought about that?'

'I've thought about a lot of things during the last half-hour!' I replied. 'Including that! I suggest that Mrs. Hands, otherwise Mrs. Ogden, took the sword-stick. I think Mrs. Ogden was probably afraid of her precious husband, and that passing through the hall on her way out she picked up the sword-stick on the spur of the moment so that she might have a weapon of defence at hand—literally, in hand—if Ogden became ugly. I think, too, that Ogden did become ugly—and paid for it.'

'You think, then, that she did it?' suggested Chaney.

'Killed Ogden? I think it's very likely, now that we know all we do,' I replied. 'Far more likely than that poor, muddled, bewildered, desperate Mr. Nicholas did!'

'Well, we shall have to know more,' he observed. 'How can we find out anything about Mrs. Hands' movements that evening?'

'Jeeves is the man!' I said. 'Jeeves is a dependable chap; we can trust him. Had Hoiler been at home that evening I'd have taken him into confidence. But I remember that Hoiler was away until late that night. It was Hoiler's day off, and he went, as he always does, to town. Jeeves will probably remember what Mrs. Hands was doing on the evening of that day—he's a good memory.'

'I'll go back with you,' said Chaney. 'We'd better get on this track at once. By-the-bye—isn't Mr. Nicholas' niece the mistress of the house at Wrides?'

'Nominal mistress, anyhow,' I replied.

'Well, mightn't she be able to remember something about the housekeeper's doings that evening?' he suggested. 'I should have thought her a likely person.'

'Well . . . she might,' I admitted, after considering this proposition. 'No harm in asking her, anyway, Chaney. She's in town at present, staying with friends. Look here—you meet me at Waterloo at five o'clock. In the meantime I'll see Miss Starr and ask her a question or two.'

Miss Starr was staying with an old school-friend in Kensington, and when I called at the house I was lucky enough to find her in. Without telling her anything about our recent doings and discoveries I said that for certain reasons connected with her uncle's defence Chaney and I were endeavouring to trace the movements of all the servants at Wrides Park on the evening of the murder—could she help me? Gradually, I led the way to a direct question about Mrs. Hands. But Miss Starr knew nothing about Mrs. Hands—as far as that evening was concerned.

'You're not suspecting Mrs. Hands?' she exclaimed. 'Surely not? My uncle regards her and

Hoiler as trustworthy beyond corruption. Mrs. Hands! Oh, no!'

'I didn't say I was,' I replied. 'All we want is as much information as ever we can get about everybody in the place on that particular evening.'

'Oh, well,' she said. 'I daresay some of the under-servants could say where Mrs. Hands was that night—just as Mrs. Hands, no doubt, could say where they were. I don't know anything—I was out of the house myself, you know, for some time, looking for Mr. Nicholas.'

'You never saw anyone about in the park while you were looking round?' I asked. 'No suspicious people?—I mean people whose presence you couldn't have expected?'

She hesitated so long before giving a reply that I saw she had some idea, or recollection. At last she spoke.

'Well,' she said, 'I've never mentioned it before, for it has never occurred to me that it might have anything to do with—with the murder, if it was murder, of that man, but I did see something, some one, I mean, that night, when I was out in the park. A woman!'

'What woman?' I asked eagerly.

'Ah, that I can't say!' she answered. 'I wasn't near enough to her to say that. I thought nothing of it—I supposed it was one of our maids, keeping an appointment with her sweetheart. It was a woman's figure, anyhow—and she was the only person I saw all the time I was out. I never saw Mr. Nicholas at all—you know I'd gone out to look for him.'

'Where was this woman?' I enquired.

'You know where a path turns off from the main drive, the carriage drive, and leads towards Middle Spinney? She was there when I saw her—standing: I saw her figure outlined clearly against the sky. A tallish woman—but there are two or three of the women servants at Wrides who are tall. When she heard me coming down the drive, she moved away.'

'In which direction?'

'Towards Middle Spinney. She moved off slowly—saunteringly. I passed on, but when I'd gone a little way down the drive I looked round. She'd moved back to where I first saw her. That made me think it was one of the women servants waiting for somebody.'

'You didn't meet anyone coming up the drive?'

'Not a soul! I saw no one else while I was out. I turned off the drive just after I'd looked round, and went across the park towards the summer-house that Mr. Nicholas built last year in the west corner, to see if he was there. He wasn't, and after wandering round the park a little longer, I went back to the house.'

'I suppose you've no idea which of the women servants would be likely to be out that night?' I suggested.

'Oh, dear me, no! I had no concern with their movements or doings. If they wanted to go out they'd apply to Mrs. Hands, not to me. Mrs. Hands had full control of the women servants and Hoiler of the men. I know they all had a good deal of liberty. Why are you making these particular enquiries, Mr. Camberwell?'

'Every little helps, Miss Starr,' I answered. 'It may help us to know that you saw a woman standing about in the park that night.'

I joined Chaney at Waterloo, and after we had got in our train told him what I had heard from Miss Starr.

'Ah!' he said, with a sigh. 'Now if only the young lady could have sworn that the woman she saw was Mrs. Hands that would have been a grand bit of evidence! Of course, it was Mrs. Hands!'

'Isn't that rather jumping at a conclusion?' I said. 'We don't know!'

'I'll lay anything it was!' he exclaimed. 'Mrs. Hands, otherwise Mrs. Sarah Ogden, gone out to meet Ogden. Now how can we find out, quietly, if there's anybody in the house who can say definitely, positively, what Mrs. Hands did with herself that evening?'

‘Leave it to me,’ I said. ‘Jeeves is the man! I’ll get hold of Jeeves some time to-night and talk to him. We can depend on Jeeves.’

I contrived to get Jeeves into my room late that evening, and after assuring myself that there was nobody about who might come eavesdropping, went pretty straight to the point with him.

‘Jeeves,’ I said, ‘I want to have an absolutely private and confidential talk with you! You’ll keep strictly to yourself whatever passes between us, won’t you?’

Jeeves sat up very straight in his chair and looked his rectitude.

‘You can depend on me, sir,’ he replied quietly. ‘Not a word to anybody, sir.’

‘Well, Jeeves,’ I continued, ‘you know that Mr. Chaney and myself are doing all we can to clear Mr. Nicholas of this charge? I want you to help a bit.’

‘Glad to do anything, sir,’ he answered eagerly. ‘Anything that I can do.’

‘Well, to start with, don’t be surprised at the question I’m going to put to you,’ I continued. ‘Let your mind go back to the evening of the day on which Dengo, whose real name, of course, was Ogden, called here—the evening on which he was murdered. Now, listen!—do you know whether Mrs. Hands went out that evening?’

I saw at once that he did know. A sudden gleam of interest shot into his eyes, and he answered readily.

‘Yes, sir—I do know! I’d never thought of it since, though. Mrs. Hands did go out! She was out a good time.’

‘You’re absolutely certain?’

‘Positive, sir. It was me that she told about it. She came to me just after the servants’ supper and told me that she was going out to see Mrs. Summers, at the House Farm: Mrs. Summers, she said, was very ill and she must really go to see how she was. She went out there and then, sir; Mrs. Summers and Mrs. Hands are great pals, sir.’

‘Very well,’ I said. ‘Now then, Jeeves, just listen further. You’re a clever chap—can you find out, without exciting any suspicion, if Mrs. Hands did go to see Mrs. Summers?’

Chapter XX

THE CAUTIOUS LOVER

I saw at once that this question acted as a sort of suggestion to Jeeves: he nodded his head with a gesture that showed that he had an idea.

'I might get something out of Ben Summers, sir,' he replied. 'Ben and me are good pals—he belongs to the cricket club, and so do I. But those Summerses, Mr. Camberwell, are a very close lot! I know them well enough, sir, because I often go there when I have a bit of time to spare. They're the sort that know how to hold their tongues—you can't get much out of any of them if they don't want to speak.'

'An admirable quality, Jeeves,' I remarked. 'Still, there are times when one ought to speak. And I want to know, particularly, if Mrs. Hands did go to see Mrs. Summers at the Home Farm that evening we're talking about, and if you can find out——'

'I'll try Ben, sir,' he said. 'Ben'll know, if she did. But I know Ben!—if I ask him the question, straight out, he'll ask why I'm asking it and what business it is of mine, and so on. Those Summers, they're a set of what-do-you-call-'ems!—mottoes, such as "Mind Your Own Business," "See All and say Nothing," and suchlike. But I can try, sir. There's only one thing I know of, though, that might make Ben to speak—if he's anything to speak about.'

'What's that, Jeeves?' I asked. 'Out with it!'

'Well, sir, as I said, Ben's one of the cricket club,' replied Jeeves. 'Now Mr. Nicholas is very popular with the cricket club—he's done a rare lot for it. If Ben Summers could be told that the question I ask him has to do with clearing Mr. Nicholas, he might answer.'

'You can tell him that it has,' I said. 'For it certainly has, Jeeves. I tell you, Mr. Chaney and myself are most anxious to find out all we can about Mrs. Hands' movements on that particular evening, and especially if she went to the Home Farm, as, you tell me, she announced her intention of doing. So—do what you can, as secretly as possible. It's in Mr. Nicholas' interests.'

'I'll do my best, sir,' responded Jeeves. 'It's my day out to-morrow, and I'll make it in my way to see Ben Summers. You needn't be afraid of anything getting out, sir; I know how to hold my tongue, and Ben, he's as close as they make 'em—been brought up to it.'

Having made the acquaintance of the Summers family—Summers being one of Mr. Nicholas' tenants—I knew what Jeeves meant when he spoke of the difficulty of getting anything out of them. Father, mother, and son were singularly reserved in manner and sparing of speech: it was, as Jeeves had said, a point of honour with them to mind their own business and never interfere with anybody else's. I therefore had no great hope of getting any information from that quarter; it was as likely as not that if Ben Summers had seen Mrs. Hands in his mother's house on the night of Ogden's murder nothing would induce him to say so. However, towards the close of the following afternoon Jeeves, looking exceedingly knowing and mysterious, sought me out in the library.

'I've some news for you, sir,' he said when he had made sure that we were alone. 'I've seen Ben Summers. And Ben Summers, sir, knows something!'

'What do you mean, Jeeves?' I exclaimed. 'Knows—what?'

'Ah, sir, that's what I don't know,' he answered. 'But he does know—something! Something, of course, of what happened that night, sir.'

I stared at him in silence; he shook his head, significantly.

'I went to see Ben this afternoon, sir,' he continued. 'I made an excuse to see him about cricket matters. I found him alone, sir—he was all by himself in one of their fields. And I was artful, Mr. Camberwell!—I sort of led up to things, sir. Bit by bit, you know—I didn't hurry. And I worked on Ben's feelings, sir, about Mr. Nicholas—Ben, sir, is a deal softer-hearted than I

should have thought. Bit sentimental, really, Ben is. And at last I got on to talking about what a shame it was that Mr. Nicholas should be lying there in a prison cell, charged with a murder that somebody else had done. And then Ben wanted to know if anything was being done to clear Mr. Nicholas, so I told him a bit of what you and Mr. Chaney were doing. And after that, with a deal of hesitation, Mr. Camberwell, Ben said that if he were dead certain that it would be kept a dead secret, he could tell something that might be useful. But it would have to be a secret, a real proper secret, or else he'd be ruined!'

'Why would he be ruined, Jeeves?' I asked.

'Well, sir, I'll tell you, because I know—I've known for a good while. Between you and me, sir, Ben Summers is in love with Lettice, our parlour-maid. He's been coming over ever since last winter, and he's determined to marry her. But his father and mother are against it—they're very proud people and they think he ought to marry higher; as a matter of fact, they've got their eyes on a wife for him, another farmer's daughter with a bit of land and a lot of money. But Ben says he can't abide the sight of her: he wants Lettice, and he's set on her, but frightened to death of his father and mother finding out that he's meeting her regular. Now I got out of him that he was with Lettice in our park on the night of the murder, and though he wouldn't give me any particulars, I think he saw something or somebody. But you see the position, sir?—if Ben tells, and it gets out, his father and mother would find out that he'd been with Lettice, and they'd be that mad that poor Ben would have a rough time of it.'

'He didn't give you any idea of what it was he could tell, Jeeves?' I asked. 'Not even a hint?'

'No, sir—I only know that there's . . . something,' replied Jeeves. 'Back of his mind, you know, sir.'

'Look here, Jeeves!' I said. 'This may be of the highest importance. See Ben Summers again. Tell him, from me, that if he'll tell me and Mr. Chaney what he knows, we'll keep it an absolute secret, and nobody shall ever know he's told us. Point out to him that it may save Mr. Nicholas' life! And if he'll tell us, get him to fix up with you a place and time of meeting, after dark, so that no one will know anything about it. Go and see him now!'

He went off at once on this new mission, and I sought out Chaney and told him what I had just learnt. Chaney made a grimace.

'Now isn't that just like these rustics!' he said. 'They'll keep the most important things to themselves regardless of the effect their silence may have! I shouldn't wonder if there's more than one chawbacon about here who could tell something if he liked. Do you think this chap'll tell?'

'We shall soon know if he won't,' I replied. 'But if we see him don't let him see that you consider him either rustic or chawbacon, Chaney, or we shall never get one word out of him! These old tenant-farmers who have been hundreds of years on the land, in one place, are infernally proud and consider themselves vastly superior to——'

'Mere policemen or ex-policemen, I suppose?' he interrupted, laughing. 'All right!—but I know 'em! Rustic reticence—the "you mind your business and I'll mind mine!" spirit—has sent many an innocent man to the cell and the scaffold before now. However, it may be that this young Summers knows nothing at all! Still, we ought to know what he thinks he knows.'

'We shall!' I said. 'Jeeves will manage it.'

Jeeves did manage it. He came back before evening, looking more mysterious and confidential than ever.

'Mr. Camberwell!' he said, coming to me in the library and lowering his voice to a whisper, in spite of the fact that we were absolutely alone. 'It's all right! If you and Mr. Chaney will meet me at the Hunting Gate just after nine o'clock I'll take you to meet Ben! He'll tell!'

'You don't know what?' I asked, with emphasis on the last word.

'Haven't a notion, sir,' replied Jeeves. 'But I know this much—he won't say anything about

being with Lettice, and you mustn't ask him what he was doing in the park that night. Lettice, Mr. Camberwell, isn't to be mentioned!—you'll have to be satisfied with what Ben chooses to tell. Will nine o'clock do, sir?'

I assured Jeeves that nine o'clock would do very well indeed, and when he had once more departed, went to tell Chaney of the arrangement.

'Let's hope we shall get the truth!' he said. 'No fairy-tales!'

'We shall get the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth out of Ben Summers, Chaney,' I replied. 'Of all the obviously unimaginative and plain matter-of-fact youngsters I've ever seen, he's the pick! However he tried, he couldn't tell of anything that hadn't come within his actual experience. Whatever he says he saw or heard, you may be absolutely certain he did hear or see. And don't forget that our job is to listen and not to ask questions.'

It was growing dark when we left the house to meet Jeeves at the Hunting Gate—a wicket on the further side of the park which opened on a bridle-path that intersected a belt of woodland overhanging the little valley at the head of which lay the buildings of Summers' place, the Home Farm. Led by the footman (who appeared to be thoroughly enjoying the ambassadorial tasks I had thrust upon him) we followed this bridle-path until, leaving the wood, it turned off along one side of a field of young wheat. And at the end of that field was a shed, or shepherd's hut, stuck in a corner, and quite out of the way of the world. The door was open, revealing a darksome cavity within; into this Jeeves stuck his head and let out a cautious whisper.

'Ben?'

Somewhere in the depths of the shed a somewhat gruff voice made answer.

'Hello!'

'They're here, Ben,' continued Jeeves. 'Haven't you got a bit of a light somewhere?'

We heard the splutter of a match; a feeble gleam illumined the darkness, and entering we found Mr. Ben Summers affixing a lantern—containing a tallow candle—to a nail in the main beam of the shed. He turned, regarding us with what most people would have called a lowering and unfavourable, but what I knew to be a merely critical and appraising, eye.

'Good evening, Ben,' I said as suavely as possible. 'This is my friend Mr. Chaney. You know me, so you can take my word for him. There's something you can tell us, isn't there? Well, you can rest assured that whatever you tell us will be regarded as being of a strictly private and confidential nature. So—what is it, Ben?'

It will have been gathered already that Ben Summers was of a solid, stodgy, phlegmatic nature. He was certainly not given to loquacity and he stood now, leaning against the post on which he had hung the lantern, hands in his breeches pockets, eyes fixed steadily first on me, then on Chaney—where they rested—silent, as if he were never going to speak. But he spoke—at last.

'Don't want to make trouble for anybody!' he said, almost growlingly. 'Ain't my line!'

'Very proper feeling, Ben,' I hastened to say. 'But you don't want to see an innocent man wrongly accused—and what's more, wrongly convicted? We're trying to clear Mr. Nicholas, you know. Now if you can tell us anything——'

Suddenly his expression changed—from one of doubt to one of something very like cunning.

'You want to know if the housekeeper came to our place that night?' he asked. 'Jeeves there says you want to know—that.'

'We do!' I replied.

'She didn't. Wasn't never near it—as I know of. She hadn't been when I went out, and she didn't come after I got in, and she couldn't ha' come while I was out—I do know that!' he replied, with a laugh of confident knowledge.

'Why couldn't she have come when you were out, Ben?' I asked.

'Because she was elsewhere!' he answered triumphantly. 'Good way off.'

‘You saw her, eh?’ I suggested.

He laughed again at that, looking slyly from one to the other of us.

‘Tell you just how it was,’ he said, with a growing air of confidence. ‘I was in the park that night—never mind just where, but it was where nobody could see me—I was waiting for somebody, d’ye see, and didn’t want to be seen myself. Well, as I was waiting, I see her coming ——’

‘Mrs. Hands?’ I whispered.

‘That’s who I mean. The housekeeper. She came along down the drive from the house. Just as she got fairly near me, a man come up the path that crosses the park from the entrance gates, the Lodge, you know, and he met her. I didn’t know it was her till then—all I knew up to then was that it was a woman. But just after he met her and while they stood talking a minute, the man he lit a match for his cigar, and I saw both their faces. Of course, I knew hers. I didn’t know him—big, fat-faced chap.’

‘Big man altogether, Ben?’

Ben Summers laughed once more. There was something queer about this laugh.

‘I saw him after that!’ he said. ‘But—he was dead then. I saw him—body, I mean—before the police moved him away from where he was found. I knew then ’twas the man I’d seen with her, the man as I saw strike a match. But I wasn’t going to tell anybody.’

There was a moment’s silence. Then Chaney spoke.

‘What did this big man and Mrs. Hands do after he’d lighted his cigar?’ he asked.

‘Turned off across the park and went towards Middle Spinney,’ replied Ben. ‘I saw them go off that way till I lost ’em among the trees.’

‘And what did you do?’ enquired Chaney.

But Ben made no answer. The rest was his business—and, I suppose, Lettice’s.

Chapter XXI

THE ANXIOUS SERVANT

We went away from Ben Summers certain of this much if of nothing else—Mrs. Hands met Ogden in Wrides Park on the night of the murder and went with him into or in the direction of Middle Spinney, where ultimately his dead body was found. Hers of course was the female figure that Miss Starr had seen—but Ben Summers' evidence was worth a ton of Miss Starr's, for he was able positively to identify her. So we were now certain on that point, and the thing was—what to do next.

'The police?' I suggested as Chaney and I talked matters over in the privacy of my room that night. 'I suppose we ought to put all these facts before them?'

But Chaney—as an ex-policeman—shook his head.

'Not just yet, anyway,' he replied. 'They're on the other tack—certain they've got an unanswerable case against Nicholas. I saw Willerton the other day in Havering-St. Michael—he asked me, a bit sneeringly, what we were doing, or, rather, what I was doing. I didn't tell him, of course. But I got out of him that they want no more evidence than they've got. They're certain of a conviction—and Willerton's already made up his mind—such as it is!—as to what the verdict will be. Manslaughter! Then, he says, there'll be a mild sentence. Twelve months, perhaps. Willerton, in my opinion, is a fool!'

'But if we don't tell the police, Chaney, what are we going to do next?' I enquired. 'We can't keep all this to ourselves, you know.'

'No intention of doing so,' he answered. 'We're bound to disclose our doings and the result of our investigations, to the proper authorities, in due time. But that time hasn't arrived, Mr. Camberwell. We aren't finished yet—our case isn't complete.'

'What's wanting, to complete it?' I asked.

He made no answer to that for a minute or two, but rising from his chair began to walk up and down the room, evidently thinking. Suddenly he stopped, in front of me, and sank his voice to a whisper.

'I wish I could get into that woman's rooms!' he said.

'Why?' I exclaimed.

'To make a thorough search of her belongings,' he answered. 'Look here—just call to mind all we know about the discovery of Ogden's dead body. He ought to have had fifteen hundred pounds' worth of banknotes on him. Where are those banknotes? Probably he had a pocket book. Where is it? I don't say that either banknotes or pocket-book or papers would be found in the woman's possession, but they might, and if they were—well, you can imagine what a find that would be! But there's something else that I feel sure I should find—can you think what?'

'Haven't a notion!' I replied. 'What?'

'Her marriage lines!' he answered with a significant laugh. 'Her marriage lines, Mr. Camberwell! Women—of her class in society, anyhow—never lose those. I haven't the least doubt in the world that she's Mrs. James Ogden, and if she is, she'll have the certificate of her marriage. And if we had that—ah, I wish I could just get into her rooms here and have them and all her belongings to myself for a couple of hours! I'd find something useful, I'll be bound.'

'Well, I don't see how you can manage that, Chaney,' I said. 'My experience of Mrs. Hands, since I came into this house, is that she spends most of her day in her own rooms. Mrs. Hands is a singularly privileged lady—I had occasion to seek her in her rooms once, and it struck me that she'd got two of the best in the house!—her sitting-room, anyway, was fit for a duchess. And she doesn't go out much—if she does, it's only for a walk in the garden or on the terrace. Mrs. Hands is in clover!—all the servants are, in this house. Hoiler, now——'

Chaney suddenly stopped me with an exclamation.

'Ah!' he said. 'Hoiler! The butler! Now I wonder if he'd help?'

I stared at him, wondering.

'Help in what?' I asked.

'Help in getting that woman out of the house for a few hours,' he said. 'Send her off somewhere.'

'Hoiler has no authority over Mrs. Hands,' I said. 'He bosses one side of the *ménage* and she the other.'

'All the same, he'd be useful—might be useful,' he persisted. 'Look here—is Hoiler a very devoted servant?'

'He's been with Mr. Nicholas a long time,' I replied.

'Do you know if he's anxious about his master?' he asked.

'I believe—from what he's said to me now and then—that he's very much concerned about Mr. Nicholas,' I said. 'I know he was very much upset because they called him at the police-court proceedings.'

'Aye—he was the first man to know of Ogden's blackmailing business, wasn't he?' said Chaney. 'First saw Ogden outside or at Claridge's, didn't he?'

'He suspected that the man he then saw and who turned out to be Ogden was blackmailing Mr. Nicholas.' I replied. 'Yes—if there was anything in that evidence.'

'You don't see anything in it?' he asked.

'I don't!' I answered. 'What is there in it?—I mean against Mr. Nicholas?'

'Ah, a good deal, Mr. Camberwell!—it was one of the most damning bits of evidence brought forward,' replied Chaney. 'It proved, you see, that Mr. Nicholas had been subjected to this fellow Ogden's blackmailing and persecution for so long that it had brought him to a pitch of desperation. That was what the prosecution was out to prove—that Nicholas had become desperate; that Ogden's personal visit was the last straw; and that Nicholas, maddened by the drink he took that day, took his persecutor's life. So, of course, Hoiler's evidence was of vast importance.'

'Well, Hoiler's anxious enough, I think,' I said. 'He constantly asks me if anything favourable to Mr. Nicholas' chances has turned up.'

'Do you think he's a man to be trusted?' enquired Chaney.

'Mr. Nicholas trusted him implicitly,' I answered. 'I know that he'd every confidence in him.'

'Very well!' said Chaney. 'Then I suggest that we take him into our confidence. We want help—and he's the man to give it.'

'You'll tell him—all we've found out?' I asked.

'Everything!—in confidence,' he replied. 'These old family servants, they're used to keeping secrets. To me, Hoiler looks just the sort of man who'd keep a secret close and tight. And there's nobody but Hoiler who can do what I want—which is to get access, quietly and secretly, to Mrs. Hands' rooms.'

'I suppose he might suggest something,' I said. 'I've been thinking of something myself, though, while we've been talking. Look here—Mrs. Hands always, without fail, goes to church every Sunday morning, and as the church is some little distance off, she's away quite two hours. How would that do for you? Two hours on Sunday morning, when she's out?'

'No!' he said, with decision. 'Not at all!—because though she'd be out, other servants would be in. No, it'll have to be at night—after every soul in the house has gone to bed. Let's see Hoiler in the morning, test him first as to his desire to help in clearing his master, give him our confidence, and see if he can suggest anything.'

I saw no objection to this proposal. Hoiler, from my observation of him, was certainly the

sort of man anyone, having a merely superficial knowledge of him, would be inclined to trust. He was a model servant, punctilious, prompt, scrupulous in the discharge of his duties; moreover, I had reason to know that Mr. Nicholas had a very high opinion of him. A quiet, reserved man, careful of speech, Hoiler, indeed, seemed to be just the sort of person one would take into one's confidence in an emergency such as this. And from what I had seen of things since entering upon residence at Wrides Park I had no reason to believe that there was any particular friendship between Hoiler and Mrs. Hands. They each had their own departments and duties, and I scarcely ever remembered seeing them together.

'Very well,' I said. 'But I think you'd better let me see Hoiler first. I'll get him to come to me in the library after breakfast to-morrow and I'll sound him. If I think he's willing to help, I'll fetch you, and you can explain things to him. But for Heaven's sake don't let us make any false step, Chaney! If this woman had anything to do with the murder and gets to know that we're suspecting her, everything may be upset.'

'She suspects nothing,' he said. 'I'll swear to that. I've watched her as closely as I could since we first found things out, and I don't believe she's the ghost of a notion that we, or anybody, know anything. I've talked to her now and then about Mr. Nicholas' bad luck—and I've never seen a sign to show that she could change it by a word. If what we're suspecting is true, she's not only a cool hand, but a damned clever one.'

'All the more reason for being careful,' I said.

'Just so,' he agreed. 'But—we must try the butler.'

I got Hoiler into the library next morning, and began to talk to him casually about Mr. Nicholas.

'I suppose you feel very anxious about it, Hoiler?' I suggested, after we had discussed several phases of the case. 'You and Mr. Nicholas have had a long connection.'

'More anxious than I can say, sir,' he replied. 'What is your opinion of it, sir? Do you think there's any chance of an acquittal?—or a verdict of manslaughter? The jury might take that view of it, sir.'

'I don't know what a jury may say, on the present evidence, Hoiler,' I replied. 'But we've been endeavouring, Mr. Chaney and I, at the wish of Miss Starr and of Mr. Chancellor, to find evidence which would clear Mr. Nicholas—before ever the trial comes off.'

'Clear him altogether, sir?' he said. 'That would be a splendid thing, sir. May I ask if you've had any success so far?'

'We've had some, Hoiler—we've found out certain things,' I answered.

He inclined his head gravely as if suggesting that he knew there must be reserve of speech about these matters.

'Anybody—other than Mr. Nicholas—suspected, sir?' he asked quietly.

This was bringing matters to a definite point: I made up my mind there and then to be equally definite.

'Look here, Hoiler!' I said. 'Am I right in thinking that you'd do a great deal to see Mr. Nicholas cleared?'

'Quite right, sir! I'd do all I could to effect that, Mr. Camberwell.'

'And you'd help, Hoiler?'

He looked at me in surprise.

'I, sir? Certainly—if I could.'

'You can!' I said. 'If you'll keep absolutely secret what Mr. Chaney and I can tell you. If we speak to you, in confidence, Hoiler, will you promise to keep everything to yourself—in Mr. Nicholas' interest?'

'You can rely on me, sir,' he answered. 'Mr. Nicholas, sir, would tell you, if he were here, that I am a man to be trusted.'

‘Very well, Hoiler—I’ll fetch Mr. Chaney to explain matters to you,’ I said. ‘I’m afraid you’ll be surprised and perhaps shocked——’

He shook his head with a half-cynical, half-sorrowful smile.

‘I have seen a good deal of the world, sir,’ he remarked. ‘I am not easily astonished.’

I fetched Chaney into the library, having first told him of the conversation I had just concluded with Hoiler. And for the next hour or so, Chaney, having first extracted, on his own behalf, a promise of strict secrecy from Hoiler, told him our story in detail, marshalling his facts with precision, and, to my mind, with damning effect. I sat by, listening and silent. And Hoiler, the picture of a grave, respectful serving-man, sat in similar silence, taking in every word, but never asking a question.

‘And that’s it!’ concluded Chaney when he had brought the story to that very time. ‘You’ve heard it!’

Hoiler sighed.

‘And sorry I am to hear it, gentlemen,’ he said quietly. ‘But as I remarked just now to Mr. Camberwell, I have seen a good deal of the world, and, I may add, of the people in it, and it takes a good deal to astonish me. A strange story, this, gentlemen, but there are doubtless stranger things behind it. What do you want me to do, gentlemen?—I gather you want my assistance?’

Chaney explained what he wanted. Could he, Hoiler, get Mrs. Hands out of the way for a day and a night? Could he, for instance, get Miss Starr to make some excuse for summoning the housekeeper up to town and keeping her there until we had had an opportunity of examining her rooms and effects?

Hoiler reflected. Obviously he was not the man to promise anything hurriedly.

‘I take it that you wish to avoid anything that would arouse suspicion in the person’s mind, gentlemen?’ he said after a pause. ‘There is a plan that occurs to me. I have a sister in town who has been ill for some time, and the—er, person (I wish to mention no one by name, gentlemen) we are talking of, promised to visit and cheer her up a little. I think I could arrange it in such a way that it will occur in quite the ordinary run of things. If that would meet your wishes——’

Chaney replied that it would meet our wishes quite satisfactorily and that we would leave everything in Hoiler’s hands. And a few days later, Hoiler came to us and told me, in his quietest fashion, that Mrs. Hands was going up to town that afternoon and would be away from Wrides Park until the following morning.

Chapter XXII

LEFT BEHIND

It was about noon when Hoiler communicated this piece of information to us, and two hours later, happening to be on the terrace, smoking my pipe after lunch, I saw Mrs. Hands drive away from the house in one of Mr. Nicholas' cars. Mrs. Hands was a dressy woman, and on this occasion she was arrayed in her best and made such a fine display that, almost mechanically, I noted its details in my memory: I noted also that she carried with her a very smart black morocco dressing-case, silver-mounted. Within twenty-four hours I was glad to have paid attention to both dressing-case and details of dress.

Life at Wrides Park followed its usual routine during the rest of the day—having regard to the fact that its master and his niece were both absent from home. It spoke much for the capabilities of both butler and housekeeper that everything went on as if Mr. Nicholas and Miss Starr had been there, instead of one being in the cell of a detention prison, and the other in London. Meals were served with the usual punctuality; the servants went about their various duties as if nothing unusual had occurred; the whole of the well-oiled machinery moved smoothly. No chance comer would have suspected that a black, threatening cloud hung over the place nor that mystery, intrigue, suspicion, were thick there. And nobody seeing Chaney and myself placidly smoking—or with the appearance of placidity—that evening after dinner would have suspected that we had business, midnight business, at hand which savoured of the sort of thing merely associated with sensational fiction or transpontine melodrama.

It was Hoiler's business, as butler and majordomo, to see that the house was secured for the night; he made a round of it, examining doors, windows, bolts, bars, locks, at half-past ten, and the place was of such considerable extent that this job occupied him for the better part of half an hour. Consequently it was just about eleven when he came to Chaney and myself in the billiard-room.

'The coast is quite clear, now, gentlemen,' he said. 'You will not be disturbed. As Miss Starr is away from home there is no one at all in that wing of the house. I have left a light on in the corridor of the wing—perhaps you'll be good enough to turn it off when you leave the room? I suppose you won't need my services again, gentlemen?—No need for me to sit up, I mean?'

Chaney assured him that there was no need at all, and bidding us good-night, he went away. He had rooms on the ground floor—the butler's pantry, in which the more valuable silver was kept in a safe by the side of which he had his bed; and next door to it a sitting-room wherefrom he ruled the household. These rooms were in the east wing of the house; Mrs. Hands' rooms were on the first floor of the west wing, a long way off; between the two wings stood the main body, devoted chiefly to reception rooms on the ground floor and to state bedrooms, which, I believe, had never been used since Royalty once slept in one of them a hundred and fifty years before.

Everything was still as the grave as Chaney and I made our way along the corridor to Mrs. Hands' rooms. I was full of curiosity as to what was going to be done, and regarded myself as a mere spectator, a looker-on while Chaney wreaked his will on the belongings and surroundings of the absent woman: incidentally, I wanted to learn something of his methods. The first thing he did was to switch off the light in the corridor; the next, on entering the housekeeper's domain, to draw the curtains over the windows before he turned the light on in the rooms. And the next was to turn the keys in both doors—there was a sitting-room and a bedroom—and then to take a general, comprehensive view of the surroundings.

'Very comfortable!' he observed, musingly. 'Very comfortable indeed! What could woman want more? And—what woman would care to be disturbed in such quarters? Good deal in that, Mr. Camberwell. Mrs. Hands doubtless thought that she was nicely settled here for life. And then

—Dengo turns up. Well, let's get to work.'

He took another look round—we were standing in the middle of the sitting-room—and began to check off what he saw.

'Bureau—with drawers in it. Writing-desk—more drawers. Small chest—all drawers,' he observed. 'And, doubtless, all locked. But that doesn't matter,' he added with a grin, as he drew a bunch of small steel instruments from his pocket. 'I can open any lock in existence—ordinary lock, that is—with them. Pretty things, aren't they, Mr. Camberwell—they belonged to a famous burglar once upon a time. Well, now, look here—you start on that bureau: I'll open it for you. Examine every scrap of paper in it, methodically. I'll attack the writing-desk. There's only one thing to remember—don't consider anything, however small, beneath your notice. Read all letters. Look out, in anything, for the name Ogden. Don't hurry, we've all the night before us.'

So, in the silence of that room, without a sound except the hooting of the owls in the woods and coppices outside we set to work on what I, at any rate, found a weary and dreary task. Obeying Chaney's instructions to the letter, I examined every scrap of paper to be found in the bureau. There were a great many letters, but the name Ogden did not occur; they were all, indeed, of comparatively recent date. There were a great many newspaper cuttings; most of them were recipes for cooking or fashion articles. I made an end of my task with absolutely nothing to report. And at about the same time Chaney came to an end of his with a like result.

'Well, there's this chest,' he said. 'Four drawers in it. I'll take two—you take the other two. Patience!—we don't know what we mayn't find yet.'

But I found nothing. Accustomed, perhaps, to dealing with papers and documents rather more than Chaney was, I looked more swiftly than he did, and had finished my two drawers before he had finished his. I was lighting my pipe, as a relief, when he suddenly turned with a sharp exclamation from examining an envelope, yellow with age, which was full of newspaper clippings.

'Hah!' he said triumphantly. 'Got something at last! Look here—see what this is?' he went on, holding up a long clipping of newspapers which curled itself up in his fingers. 'Trial of James Ogden for fraud!—full account. Now what on earth did she keep that for! That's out of one paper. Here's another from another. And—a third from a third. Come!—we aren't doing badly, Mr. Camberwell!'

'What good are these things?' I asked, doubtfully.

'Precisely! I knew you'd ask that. Well, they show that she was interested in James Ogden, don't they? And having ascertained that, one might be encouraged to ask—why? What was James Ogden, a convicted criminal, to the respectable Mrs. Hands that she should clip out of the newspapers and keep the accounts of his trial at the assizes? Oh, yes, this is very helpful, very! One stone in itself, Mr. Camberwell, doesn't amount to much, but a great many stones, put together, make—well, let's say a bridge, wide enough to cross the Straits of Dover! Come on—let's see what's in the bedroom.'

What struck me first in the bedroom was a brand-new suit-case, lying on a stand at the foot of the bed, strapped, and probably locked. It struck Chaney, too. He stood gazing at it for a moment, as if in deep thought.

'That's a suspicious thing!' he observed meditatively. 'I'm going to see what's in that. Somewhat too new—and too heavy—to be wholly innocent, Mr. Camberwell, that is. Poor locks, the things they put on these suit-cases—any fool can open them if he knows the trick.'

He was undoing the straps as he spoke, and in another minute he had snapped open the locks by some deft touch of his fingers and was inspecting the contents of the suit-case, laying everything out carefully on the bed behind the stand. He shook his head.

'I see what this means,' he muttered. 'This woman was meditating flight, and she's packed this in case she had to be off in a hurry. See!—there's every mortal thing she could want, and do

you notice that all the stuff's intended for a warm climate? That's it, sir!—Mrs. Hands was ready to be off at a moment's notice! She's taken some pains in getting all these things together—and most of 'em are new, too, specially got. I wonder where she was thinking of going? This stuff isn't intended for Brighton or Margate, anyway. However, there's nothing here but feminine frippery—we want something more serious.'

He repacked the suit-case carefully, putting everything back in its place, and when he had relocked and strapped it, turned to inspect the room. There was little to see that was out of the common; there were the usual bedroom furnishings and the usual things that one would expect to find in a woman's apartment. But in one corner, near the window, stood an old-fashioned secretaire or writing-cabinet, and Chaney immediately turned his attention to it, pointing me—as the inferior and inexperienced partner in these investigations—to a chest of drawers which stood against a wall.

'You go through that, Mr. Camberwell,' he commanded. 'You'll think, no doubt, that it's nothing but female toggery, but you examine every scrap of it, and every corner of each drawer! Women, sir, have a trick of shoving letters and papers away in all sorts of places, and you never know what you may find. Look well and closely!'

I looked well and closely, and found nothing but what I expected to find—clothing, outer and under. I was well sick of the job, and just about to finish it when Chaney, busy at the secretaire, let out a sudden triumphant exclamation.

'Hooray!' he said. 'I've got it! I knew what I was gambling on! They always forget something. She forgot—to destroy these!'

He held up in one hand an old, frayed leather pocket-book; in the other some papers which he had evidently drawn from it.

'From a mere glance at 'em, there's no doubt that these belonged to Ogden,' he said. 'They've been taken from his dead body. Well, here they are, in Mrs. Hands' room—shoved away at the back of that drawer. What is she doing with them? How came she by them? Stiff nuts for her to crack, those, Mr. Camberwell. But let's have a closer look at them.'

He moved over to the dressing-table, above which an electric light hung, and began to lay out the papers one by one, specifying the nature of each as he unfolded it.

'Of course these were on Ogden!' he muttered. 'Look at 'em! Two receipted bills from Mrs. Pettigo, his landlady. Ditto, for spirits and beer, from a firm in Kingsland Road. Cutting from some newspaper—looks like *The Times*—about the chances of the various horses for the Derby. Ditto, another cutting on the same subject from another paper. And ah! What's this? Cutting of that advertisement which he got Barfitt to put in *The Times*. Of course, Ogden was just the sort of chap to cut out anything that he had any concern with. Now here are some letters—look at that, now! That's from that chap, Sparkes. See?—making an appointment. Here's another about the arrangement Sparkes had proposed. And what's this—eh, this is more important still. Let's read it together, Mr. Camberwell.'

He spread out a square sheet of paper, typewritten as to the body, but signed at the foot in a formal, crabbed hand. The address at the head was of a small market-town in Essex; the letter was directed to 'Mr. James Ogden, c/o Mrs. Pettigo, 53 Little Copperas Street,' and the date was an early one in March. This followed:

DEAR SIR,

In reply to your letter of the 4th inst., enquiring if we know anything of the present whereabouts of your wife, Mrs. Sarah Ogden, formerly Miss Sarah Hands Harrison of this town, we regret to say that we are not able to give you any information on the point. We may state, however, that we ourselves have been endeavouring to trace Mrs. Ogden for some little time. By the will of our late client, Mr. Benjamin Hands, who

died some months ago, your wife, as one of his nieces, is entitled to a share of his estate, and the executors are anxious to be placed in communication with her. If you should succeed in ascertaining your wife's present whereabouts, we shall be obliged if you will ask her to communicate with us. As you say that you have not heard of your wife for some years and think that she may be dead, we may mention that if it can be proved that Mrs. Ogden is no longer living, the share in Mr. Hands' estate just referred to will pass to you as it was left to her absolutely.

We are, dear Sir, yours ffly.,
CHARPSTON & PENKETHAM. *Solrs.*

Chaney folded up this document with great deliberation and restored it and the other papers to the pocket-book.

'All right!' he said. 'I don't believe Mrs. Hands ever examined this pocket-book and its contents: she just shoved it away, back of this drawer, intending to look at it on some other occasion. Well—she will look at it again!—when it's shown to her, and she's asked how she came by it! Now let's go, Mr. Camberwell—we've come off successful. I *know* now, for certain!'

'Know—what?' I asked.

'Know—what?' he exclaimed. 'Why, that Mrs. Hands, or, as she really is, Mrs. Ogden, was privy to the murder of Ogden! That's sure. Come on—let's to bed.'

We had a much-needed drink in my room, and retired: our search had occupied us nearly three hours. I was dead tired and fell asleep at once; when I woke, Jeeves was in my room, drawing up the blinds rather noisily, as if he meant to rouse me. He spoke suddenly.

'Mr. Camberwell, sir, are you awake, sir?' he asked. 'Here's something wrong, sir! Mr. Hoiler's gone, sir—gone in the night! And one of the cars, the Biddleby-Watkins' car, sir—has gone, too!'

Chapter XXIII

THE MARKED BRADSHAW

I am one of those fortunately constituted mortals who, the instant they wake, are *wide* awake, with every faculty alert, and before Jeeves had finished speaking I was not only out of bed and rushing for the nearest available garment, but had realized the full significance of what he was telling me. Hoiler gone—and in one of the best cars!—and in the night!—and knowing what we had told him a few days before! That meant—but I knew very well what it meant.

'Have you told Mr. Chaney?' I asked.

'No, sir, I came to you first,' replied Jeeves. 'They know downstairs, sir. Bowlby came up with word that a car was missing from the garage. I went to tell Mr. Hoiler. Then I found that Mr. Hoiler wasn't there, and that his bed hadn't been slept in. His room looks as if he'd done a bit of hurried packing, sir—things left about.'

'Go down, Jeeves, and don't let anybody interfere with that room till I come,' I said. 'Lock the door and put the key in your pocket.'

Jeeves hurried off, and I hastened to Chaney's room and walked in without the ceremony of knocking. Chaney, half asleep, started from his pillow, staring.

'Hullo—hullo!' he said. 'Anything the matter?'

'This is the matter,' I answered. 'We've given ourselves clean away! Hoiler's gone! And he's taken one of Mr. Nicholas' best cars with him!'

Chaney was not as instantaneously active as I had been: obviously it took him a little time to clear his brain of sleep. But he sat up, staring, and his jaw dropped.

'You don't mean it?' he exclaimed.

'Don't I?' I retorted. 'You'd better get up quick and see, Chaney! But there it is—Hoiler's gone! And why he's gone, you may guess! We've made a nice mess of it! Hoiler and Mrs. Hands are the two people we want—and they're flown, all because we were such asses as to take Hoiler into our confidence. Of course, as soon as we'd done that, he went and told Mrs. Hands. Then he got her safely away. Now he's got safely away himself. And—there you are!'

Chaney was out of bed by that time, and hustling into some clothes. He looked like a man who has just been told that his dearest and most trusted friend is a double-dealing scoundrel.

'They can't have got far, anyhow,' he muttered. 'Hoiler can't, anyway!'

'Can't he!' said I. 'We don't know what time he went. Hoiler, Chaney, could be a long way off by this time—if there's such a thing as an early-morning boat from any of the Channel ports, he may even be in France! We're not far from the coast here, you know, and he's had a long start. What's to be done?'

He was half dressed by this time, and he became practical.

'First thing is to have a look round,' he answered. 'You'd better dress. And then—well, we'll set the wires to work.'

I went back to my room and dressed as quickly as I could. When I came out of my room Chaney was just leaving his. His old look of confidence had come back to him.

'We'll get 'em!' he said. 'Now, first thing, just let's take a glance at Mrs. Hands' rooms again—I want to make sure of something.'

We hurried round to the rooms which we had left only a few hours before, but this time one glance inside the bedroom satisfied Chaney. He pointed to the stand where had stood the brand-new suit-case.

'Gone,' he said, with an expressive look. 'Hoiler's taken it! He must have come up here after we'd finished, taken what he came for, and cleared out as soon as we were safe in our own rooms. Well, that certainly gives him a good many hours' clear start. But let's go downstairs.'

Downstairs everything was at sixes and sevens—in the servants' hall, at any rate. The women were in groups, whispering; the men were gathered about Mr. Nicholas' chauffeur, who appeared to be explaining something. Chaney beckoned him aside.

'One of the best cars is missing, eh?' he asked.

'Yes, sir,' replied the man. 'The Biddleby-Watkins—Mr. Nicholas' favourite car, that, though of course, the Rolls-Royce is better.'

'Powerful car?' suggested Chaney.

'Very fine car indeed, sir—you can do your fifty or sixty easy with it,' answered the chauffeur. 'Easy to drive, too.'

'Do you know if Hoiler can drive—and if he could drive that particular car?' asked Chaney.

'Mr. Hoiler, sir, is a very good driver, and he's driven that car many a time. There's been times, sir, when Mr. Hoiler's driven that car instead of me—for Mr. Nicholas, I mean.'

'Well,' continued Chaney, 'we won't say that Mr. Hoiler has taken the car, because we don't yet know that he has, but I want to know this—how could anybody get that car without your knowing?'

'Easy enough, sir,' replied the chauffeur, smiling. 'I don't live over the garage, nor yet near it: I live down in the village; I'm a family man, you see, sir. My duty is to lock up the garage every night, and to hand the keys over to Mr. Hoiler until morning. Mr. Hoiler, sir, is the only person who could get into that garage after a certain time in the evening.'

'Did you give him the keys last night?' asked Chaney.

'I did, sir—at the usual time. Eight o'clock.'

'And when you came this morning——'

'When I came this morning, sir, the keys weren't to be had, because Mr. Hoiler wasn't to be found! I went down to the garage and found it open—the keys were left in the door—and the Biddleby-Watkins gone.'

Chaney thought in silence for a minute or two.

'All right,'he said. 'Now we know! Hoiler's gone off in the Biddleby-Watkins. Very well—we've got to track and catch him. As it's in Mr. Nicholas' interest, we must have Mr. Nicholas' best and fastest car. Get it out and get it ready, and be prepared to start at a moment's notice.' He turned to me. 'Now let's have a look at Hoiler's room.'

Jeeves was mounting guard over the butler's domains. As soon as we entered Hoiler's room we saw that its late occupant had been packing, and Jeeves pointed to a recess behind the bed.

'Mr. Hoiler kept a certain portmanteau there, gentlemen,' he said. 'I've helped him to pack it many a time. It's gone!—though I know it was here yesterday, for I saw it myself. And look here, gentlemen!—is this of any assistance?'

He pointed to a copy of the current Bradshaw's *Guide*, which lay on a side-table, open at a page at the top of which, in bold lettering, appeared the names *London-Paris, by the shortest, fastest routes*. On that page some hand had made three heavy scorings with a blue pencil, and in the present circumstances it seemed very significant indeed that they were made against the three following entries:

Folkestone	10.55	A.M.
Boulogne	12.25	P.M.
Paris (Nord)	4.0	P.M.

Chaney stood looking at this marked page so long that I began to wonder. Suddenly he turned to Jeeves.

'Was this lying open, just as it is now, when you came into the room?' he asked, sharply. 'Exactly there—on that table?'

'Exactly where you see it, sir,' replied Jeeves promptly. 'And just as it is now. I've never

even touched it—Mr. Camberwell said don't touch anything. But I looked at it, to see what the blue marks meant.'

'Um!' muttered Chaney. 'I wonder what they *do* mean! Well, let's get a bit of breakfast as quickly as possible and then we'll get off in that car. Hurry up some breakfast for us, my lad—anything! It's just seven-thirty,' he went on, turning to me as Jeeves left the room. 'Let's say that Hoiler's had five hours' start. Well, that's plenty! But—it all depends what was in his mind. I'll bet on one thing that wasn't in his mind, anyway!'

'What?' I asked.

'Why, that!' he answered, with a sneer. 'That's a piece of bluff! He marked that page and left it open to make us think he'd gone to Folkestone. All the same, when we get down to the post-office we'll wire to Folkestone: we'll leave no loophole. But it won't be Folkestone!'

'Where, then?' I asked, wondering what he meant. 'Some other port?'

'There are other things than ports, too!' he muttered. 'He mayn't mean that all. That open page in Bradshaw—bluff!'

We made a breakfast as hurried as our toilets and as soon as it was finished went out to the car. Jeeves came running after us.

'In case anything comes, any message or anything, where shall I find you, Mr. Camberwell?' he asked. 'What I mean, sir, is that the letters'll be here in half an hour, and there might be something——'

'We shall be for the next half or three-quarters of an hour, my lad, at the police-station at Havering-St. Michael,' said Chaney. 'If anything comes, or you hear anything new, jump on your bicycle and come down with it. You heard what I said then?' he went on, turning to me as the car moved off. 'The police-station? Know what that means? Well, it means that we've got to tell! Got to tell those other chaps, chaps like Willerton, safe in their own theories, that they've been all wrong and that we've been right. In other words, as we aren't officials we've got to place our non-official information in the hands of the men who are officials!'

'And supposing they don't believe us?' I suggested.

'Ah!' he replied with a grim smile. 'They'll believe right enough! But they won't like it. When the official mind has made up its mind and sees its way to getting its way it doesn't like anything to come along and put it off its straight line. According to officialism Mr. Nicholas of Wrides Park murdered James Ogden, and officialism won't be pleased to hear that he didn't—officially, of course. Officialism never likes to know itself in the wrong, or mistaken, or even liable to make mistakes. Your average official, Mr. Camberwell, is like the railway booking-clerk who believes it impossible for himself to give wrong change! You see, I've been an official myself, so I know!'

I made no answer to this: I was bewildered enough by the discoveries of the past twenty-four hours and especially by that of Hoiler's flight. And I was wondering what secret Hoiler had carried away with him, and how much he really knew, and how, if he knew anything, he had managed to keep it to himself so cleverly, and . . .

But the big car was pulling up at the entrance to the police-station at Havering-St. Michael, and in another minute Chaney and I were closeted with the superintendent. Chaney went straight to business.

'Willerton anywhere about?' he asked. 'Yes? Bring him in—I've something to tell both of you.'

Willerton came in, surprised at the sight of us. And again Chaney went straight to the point. For some minutes—not more—I sat listening while, never wasting a word but never missing a really important detail, he outlined our story to the two astonished men. And I saw, perhaps more than he did—that they were not only astonished, but convinced.

'So there it is!' concluded Chaney. 'These are the two you want—the butler and the

housekeeper—Hoiler and Mrs. Hands, who, of course, is Mrs. Ogden. And they're off! I attach no importance to the marked page in the Bradshaw—I think Hoiler did that to put us off. Still ——'

'We can 'phone every port along the coast from Southampton to Dover,' broke in Willerton. 'If he's making for the Continent——'

'But the woman?' interrupted the superintendent. 'What about——'

'She'd meet him somewhere, of course, early this morning,' said Willerton. 'The car, now? Can anyone describe it? Yes, Mr. Camberwell? A Biddleby-Watkins? It would have Mr. Nicholas' name and number-plate, I suppose, and you can tell me its distinctive features? There's this in our favour, you know,' he went on, turning to the others. 'There's no sailing from England to France—or to Belgium, either—before the 10.55 from Folkestone to Boulogne: the next's the 11.45 from Newhaven to Dieppe. Southampton has nothing in the morning. But if you're right, Chaney, and the marked Bradshaw is all bluff, then he won't have made for the coast at all, and in that case we'd better broadcast a description of the car all over the country.'

'And of him—and of her!' said Chaney.

'Exactly! We'd better get in touch with head-quarters in London and stir things up all round,' continued Willerton. 'But let's have your description of the car, Mr. Camberwell, as nearly as ever you can give it, to start with.'

I told him all I could remember of the Biddleby-Watkins. It certainly had one peculiarity; like Mr. Nicholas' other cars and carriages, it was painted in a rather unusual shade of something like royal blue, picked out with a dark green line.

'Good to recognize,' commented Willerton, as he scribbled fast at my dictation. 'Well, now then, I suppose you can supply a description of the man, and another of the woman? Hoiler, now—anything remarkable or unusual——'

Before I could reply a constable stuck his head into the room with the announcement that Mr. Jeeves from Wrides Park was anxious to see Mr. Camberwell and Mr. Chaney, and in another minute Jeeves, pale with excitement and sweating with haste, was amongst us, waving a telegram. The envelope was addressed to 'Nicholas, Wrides Park, Havering-St. Michael.'

'Came just now, sir!' panted Jeeves. 'I took the liberty of opening it.'

I read the message aloud to the other men:

'*Car bearing your name and number wrecked on roadside near here occupants disappeared please communicate police-station Rottingdean Brighton.*'

Chapter XXIV

ROOM 31

Before the last word had left my lips Willerton had seized a telephone directory and was rapidly turning over its pages; in another second he was at the telephone and the rest of us kept silence waiting. He was through to Rottingdean almost immediately; he got a ready response; there was a sharp exchange of question and answer between himself and his respondent. He suddenly rang off and turned.

'Biddleby-Watkins car—blue with dark green line—found wrecked or broken down on roadside near Rottingdean at seven o'clock this morning—luggage in it but no occupants nor trace of them,' he said. 'Police are keeping guard over it pending enquiry at this end. So—what next?'

'The next,' said Chaney, 'is that we have Mr. Nicholas' Rolls-Royce outside, and we'd better go to Rottingdean, and at once. How far is it?'

'Roughly speaking, thirty miles,' replied Willerton. 'Through Brighton.'

Within five minutes there were four of us in the Rolls-Royce—the superintendent, Willerton, Chaney, and myself—and we were off. It was just a quarter past eight as we went out of Havering-St. Michael, and as there was little traffic on the highroads at that early hour we got along somewhat faster than would have been possible at a later one. Anyhow, we were in sight of the long rampart of the South Downs in half an hour, and through them in three-quarters, and it was only a little after nine when we turned out of the Brighton-Newhaven coast road into the narrow street of Rottingdean and pulled up at the police-station. A moment later the resident sergeant was telling his tale.

'The car's lying on the roadside—in the hedge-bottom, as a matter of fact—between here and Falmer,' he said, pointing up the village in the direction of the Downs. 'What we know about it is just this. A man—a roadside labourer—came in this morning, and told us he'd seen it as he came to his work. I went up there and took a constable with me. There it was, just as the man said, though we couldn't see anything very much amiss with it, except that it had run into the hedge and the bank and seemed wedged pretty tight in both. But there was nobody in it, and no sign of anybody belonging to it being about. All the same their luggage is in it—a portmanteau and a suit-case. We made enquiry round about—there are one or two cottages fairly near—but nobody had either heard or seen anything. So I left my man up there, and having got the number and name—Mr. Nicholas, Wrides Park—I came back and telegraphed. No, I haven't heard anything at all since I 'phoned to you an hour ago. We'd best go up in your car and have a look at things. What licks me is why did whoever was in this car abandon it, and where have they gone?'

We returned to the Rolls-Royce, taking the sergeant with us, and went forward through the village, past the old church, and out on to the road that climbs across the Downs. Now, I knew that road well enough, for I was familiar, and had been for years, with all that district, and I was wondering as we went along whatever Hoiler should have been there at all for! I was pretty certain in my own mind that he was making for Newhaven. But the obvious route to Newhaven from Havering-St. Michael was that which we had followed—first to Brighton, then straight along the coast road, through Rottingdean and the new cliff settlement of Peacehaven. Now this road we were on, and where the wrecked car lay, was a road across the Downs, from Rottingdean to Falmer, and while an excellent road for giving access to some striking and beautiful scenery was, after all, merely a by-road, cutting across country from the Brighton-Lewes to the Brighton-Rottingdean main roads. Once again—why should Hoiler have been on it at all?

However, the fact that Hoiler had been on it, and had left the Biddleby-Watkins derelict on it, was very soon abundantly manifest to us. We were alongside the abandoned car in a few

minutes. At a little distance past Ovingdean Grange, where the Rottingdean-Falmer road dips and winds a bit before beginning to climb towards the Brighton race-course, we found the Biddleby-Watkins in charge of a policeman. It was driven far into the bank and the hedgerow, and the first remark that was made by any member of our party after we had dismounted from the Rolls-Royce was made by Mr. Nicholas' chauffeur, who proceeded to examine his second-best car with a professional and jealous eye.

'There's been no accident here, gentlemen!' he said. 'This car—which, of course, is ours—has been driven into that hedgerow wilful! I know.'

'How do you know?' demanded Chaney.

The chauffeur gave learned explanations. Whether we accepted them or not, it was plain that he himself had no doubts about his own infallibility.

'Wilful!' he repeated. 'Wilful! Done o' purpose!'

The Rottingdean sergeant opened the door of the car (a saloon) and pointed within.

'There's the luggage I spoke of,' he said. 'Two pieces.'

Willerton dragged the two pieces out—Chaney and I knew both, but one better than the other. And that was the brand-new suit-case we had seen and examined in Mrs. Hands' rooms at Wrides Park not many hours before; the other was Hoiler's portmanteau, which I, at any rate, whether Chaney had or not—had often seen on a stand in his room.

'Labelled!' remarked Willerton. 'Now, then?'

We all crowded round to look at the labels—bright yellow tags, addressed in Hoiler's precise, formal hand. Each bore the same inscription:

MR. AND MRS. HUMPHRIES
PARIS
Via Newhaven and Dieppe

Chaney broke the silence.

'Newhaven!' he exclaimed. 'I told you the marks in that Bradshaw about Folkestone were all bluff! Well, we're close to Newhaven. And the Dieppe boat leaves Newhaven at a quarter to twelve. But—if they're going by that, or meant to go by that, what does this mean?'

He waved a hand at the car, the portmanteau and suit-case, at the entire situation. And I shared his feelings. The whole thing seemed incomprehensible. I had already put it to myself; had put myself in Hoiler's place. Hoiler, after our revelation to him, must have told Mrs. Hands all we had told him. They had there and then decided on flight. She had gone off, ostensibly to London; in reality to some place between Wrides Park and the coast, at which place Hoiler was to pick her up. Hoiler, as soon as we were safely in our own rooms after examining Mrs. Hands' had taken her suit-case, his own portmanteau, and whatever else he wanted, gone down to the garage, got out the Biddleby-Watkins, and cleared out. And if we had not had the wire from the Rottingdean police, there was no reason why he and Mrs. Hands, after he had picked her up somewhere in the early morning, should not have got away. True, when the wire came, we were about to broadcast descriptions of car and fugitives all over the country—still, they had so many hours start. And the puzzling question was—what was that car doing there in that by-road, with its labelled luggage, and where were its former occupants?

The Rottingdean sergeant looked questioningly from one to the other of us.

'What's best to be done?' he asked. 'Whoever was in this car must have gone somewhere! And we haven't heard of anybody strange being seen hereabouts.'

Chaney glanced at Willerton, who was trying the locks of Mrs. Hands' suit-case.

'You mustn't waste time over that,' he said. 'I went through it myself this very last night at Wrides Park. What's more important is *that*!' he went on, pointing to the yellow label. 'Newhaven! Paris, *via* Newhaven and Dieppe. I believe that's another piece of bluff! First

Folkestone, now Newhaven. Both—bluff! And probably—damned clever!'

'What's your idea?' asked Willerton.

'Well, I have an idea, certainly,' replied Chaney. 'But first, who knows this district? I mean, knows it well?'

'I do, Chaney,' I said. 'I've lived hereabouts.'

'Then how far is it across these Downs to Brighton?' he asked. 'Under three miles to the boundaries? Now would it be possible for anybody walking straight away from this spot where we're standing to make Brighton without being seen—without passing through villages?'

'In the early morning, yes,' I replied. 'I could do it at any time of the day, myself, knowing the country. Go straight up the hillside there; cross the ridge; keep clear of Ovingdean village on the left; skirt the golf-links, and make the town boundary at its eastern edge. Easy!'

'That's one way,' he said, nodding his comprehension. 'Now, then!'—he turned, pointing in the opposite direction. 'Supposing one went that way, where it looks to be a regular solitude—across those Downs? Where would that take one?—I mean what town would you strike?'

'Lewes,' I answered. 'Six or seven miles away—and practically nothing but houseless country in between.'

'Very well!' said Chaney. 'Then this is what I think. They did mean to make Newhaven. But as they got near they began—*he began!*—to get frightened, knowing that as soon as the flight was discovered, the various ports would be warned. And to cut it short, I think they abandoned everything here, and took to their heels across these Downs, but whether east or west, Lord knows! What is certain is—they're gone!'

Willerton, during this last speech, had been turning over the Bradshaw which Chaney had brought away from Wrides Park to show at the Havering-St. Michael police-station. He suddenly shut it up and flung it back into our car.

'I think there's a lot, a big lot, in that theory, Chaney,' he said. 'You're very likely right. But we're close to Newhaven, and we've plenty of time, and I suggest that we just run along there and take a glance at things. It can do no harm, and—you never know!'

We left the local police to look after the Biddleby-Watkins and the forsaken luggage, and re-entering the Rolls-Royce went off to Newhaven. It was just after half-past ten o'clock when we entered that somewhat dingy port, and as the Dieppe steamer did not leave the harbour until a quarter to twelve we had ample time to consider our plans. Willerton's notion was just what would suggest itself to anyone of his essentially practical nature—to go straight to the quay-side, post ourselves where we could see everybody who went on board, and look out for the two people we wanted. But Chaney had another idea.

'Plenty of time for that when we've tried something else,' he said. 'Look at that!—the London and Paris Hotel, close to the harbour station. What harm in making an enquiry or two there? If my theory's right, we shan't find anybody or anything; if it's wrong, we may. A quiet question at the office won't cost us either time or money—shall I ask it?'

We ran the car up to the corner of the hotel, got out, and after a brief consultation, divided our forces. The superintendent and Willerton were to remain outside; Chaney and I were to enter the hotel and find out what we could. And in another minute we were in the hotel and at the office. The reception-clerk looked up from sorting a pile of papers. I wondered what Chaney was going to ask—but Chaney had got everything cut and dried.

'Mr. and Mrs. Humphries?' he asked. 'Are they in?'

The clerk ran the point of a finger down the register lying between us.

'Mrs. Humphries,' she said. 'No Mr. Humphries.'

'Ah, I expect he hasn't arrived,' remarked Chaney, carelessly. 'What number is Mrs. Humphries?'

'Room 31,' replied the clerk. 'Shall I send up? She's leaving by the Dieppe boat.'

‘Oh, we’ll just walk up,’ said Chaney. ‘We’re personal friends. Room 31?’

‘Room 31,’ repeated the clerk. ‘Second floor.’

Chaney nudged my elbow and turned away towards the staircase. People were coming and going up and down that, and in the entrance hall the presence of luggage, heavy and light, indicated that passengers had stayed the night in the hotel preparatory to crossing over to France. Our presence went unnoticed, and in another minute we were in a corridor upstairs, examining the numbers on the doors—twenty-five—twenty-seven—twenty-nine—thirty-one. . . .

‘Now for it!’ whispered Chaney. ‘One tap—and we go straight in!’

He gave a smart, short rap on the door, turned the handle, and walked in, with me close on his heels. And there was Mrs. Hands, with her back to us, busily packing a small hand-bag. Without turning her head, she spoke.

‘You’ve run it pretty close!’ she said. ‘We’ve scarcely an hour before the boat goes——’

Then, as with a sudden realization of something wrong, she turned, saw us, gasped, backed away, staring. . . . And Chaney’s voice seemed to me to be a long way off and its tones as cold as ice and hard as steel.

‘Morning, Mrs. Hands!’ he said. ‘Well, the game’s up, you see! You were expecting Hoiler, of course. Well, Hoiler isn’t here, but the police are—there’s two of ’em from Havering awaiting you downstairs. They want you, you see, in connection with the murder of your husband, James Ogden. They think, Mrs. Hands, that you had something to do with it—in fact, that you murdered him! Ugly thing to face, but—yes?’

Mrs. Hands was gesticulating, strangely, nervously, as if she wanted to speak.

‘I didn’t kill Ogden!’ she burst out. ‘Hoiler killed him! Hoiler killed him with Nicholas’ sword-stick! I—oh, where is Hoiler?’

Chapter XXV

THE SUSSEX ADDER

Mrs. Hands was a big, strong woman; from my experience of her I should have considered her to be a woman of iron nerve, not easily upset nor disturbed by any suddenly created situation. But now she collapsed as if her nerve had clean gone, and throwing herself into the nearest chair she covered her face with her hands and began to sob in a weary, hopeless fashion that made me wish myself elsewhere. And I was thankful when Chaney came to the rescue.

'Mr. Camberwell,' he whispered, turning to me. 'Go downstairs. Tell the other two what we've found. Bring 'em into the hotel. Tell Willerton to get a private sitting-room—he'll know how to arrange that. I'll bring her down there, after a while. Leave her to me—I'll manage her.'

I was glad to get out of that room: the woman's quiet, hopeless sobbing was more than I could stand. I hastened downstairs and out of the hotel: the superintendent and Willerton were walking up and down near the Rolls-Royce watching people making their way to the harbour station and the steamer for Dieppe. I went up to them.

'She's here!' I said.

Both turned eagerly on me.

'She?' exclaimed Willerton. 'The woman?'

'Mrs. Hands,' I replied. 'Under the name of Mrs. Humphries. Hoiler isn't there. She—she wanted to know where he is.' Then I told them exactly what had happened, and gave them Chaney's message. 'He says he'll manage her,' I concluded. 'I don't know what he means by that, exactly, but it seemed to me that she'd broken clean down—and no wonder, after the anxiety she must have gone through!'

'And she said—you heard her say—that Hoiler killed Ogden?' asked Willerton. 'Said it as if—as if it were true?'

'Oh, true enough!' I answered. 'I've no doubt about that. She said Hoiler killed Ogden with Nicholas' sword-stick. The impression I got was that she saw it done! She was just stating a bare fact—I'm certain of that much.'

The two men looked at each other.

'Well, that'll clear Mr. Nicholas, of course,' said Willerton, after a pause. 'To be sure, it'll have to be proved.'

'She'll prove it,' I said. 'She's—done for!'

'I know what you mean,' he answered, 'come to the end of her endurance. Well, let's go into the hotel.'

We went into the hotel. I left matters to Willerton; within a few minutes he, the superintendent, and myself were in a small private room. And there we waited, ten, twenty, thirty minutes. And then the door opened and Chaney brought Mrs. Hands in. She had pulled herself together by that time, and had put on a thick veil which hid the traces of her late emotion, and when she took the chair which Willerton drew forward for her she was outwardly composed, though I noticed that her hands trembled a good deal as she folded them in her lap. She looked from one to the other of us with an appeal that finally lodged itself in a questioning glance at Chaney. And Chaney, standing by her, gave her shoulder a sort of fatherly pat as if to reassure her.

'Now, gentlemen,' he said in his suavest tone, 'Mrs. Hands and I have had a bit of a talk, and I've told her about the car and the luggage in it, and that Hoiler has probably cleared out, and she understands that the best thing she can do is to tell us all about it. So——'

'Mrs. Hands is aware that anything she says——' began Willerton. . . .

'All right, all right!' interrupted Chaney. 'Mrs. Hands is aware of all that. Mrs. Hands wants

just to tell us everything—everything!—and she'll be quite willing to tell it all again—elsewhere. Let's know all she can tell us up to this point, and then we can get busy after Hoiler. Now I'm going to help Mrs. Hands out.' He sat down between Mrs. Hands and the rest of us, and began to question her.

'Just you answer my two or three questions, Mrs. Hands, and it'll save you a lot of talking. Now to start with, when you were a young woman, you married James Ogden, didn't you?—the same James Ogden who came to Mr. Nicholas' house at Wrides Park as Dengo?'

Mrs. Hands inclined her head and murmured a faint affirmative.

'And Ogden got into trouble and was sent to prison—to penal servitude?'

Again a murmured assent.

'And you, to support yourself, went into domestic service, and eventually became housekeeper to Mr. Nicholas?'

'Yes.'

'Had you ever seen Ogden from the time he was sent to prison until the morning he came to Mr. Nicholas' as Dengo?'

'No, never!'

'You'd never heard of him?'

Mrs. Hands began to show more signs of interest and animation.

'No!' she replied. 'I'd never heard of him in any way.'

'Well, we know that Hoiler knew something about him as a man who was blackmailing Mr. Nicholas,' said Chaney. 'Did Hoiler never mention that, or him, to you?'

'No—never! I never saw or heard of Ogden at all till he came that morning.'

'Well, just tell these gentlemen what you've told me about that morning—about what happened.'

'There was scarcely anything happened. Mr. Camberwell told me there was a strange man in the dining-room who was behaving in a queer way and who wanted a sandwich. I said I'd take him one myself. I did so, and recognized Ogden. Of course he recognized me. He said he'd been trying to find me—there was a bit of property coming to me. We had a few words together, and I arranged to meet him that night in the park—I told him where to meet me and what time. Then I left him, and Mr. Nicholas came in, and after a while Mr. Nicholas and Ogden went out together.'

'You met Ogden that night?'

'Yes—where I'd arranged. We walked about the park, talking. We went through Middle Spinney, to the other side. And while we were talking there, Hoiler came along. He'd been out for the day and was returning. I may as well tell you that Hoiler wanted to marry me. He knew that I'd a husband somewhere that I hadn't seen for a good many years, and he used to say that if I hadn't seen or heard of him for seven years I should be safe in marrying again. Well, as I say, Hoiler came up. Hoiler, for all his smooth manner, is a fearfully violent man. He wanted to know what I was doing there with Ogden. Then he recognized Ogden as the man who blackmailed Nicholas. They had words—Hoiler began to talk about the police. Ogden sneered at him, and he suddenly—Ogden, I mean—turned on his heel and set off on the path through Middle Spinney, saying that he'd go straight to Mr. Nicholas again, and Hoiler should see who was boss. He went off, laughing and sneering, and Hoiler followed close behind him, and I followed Hoiler, begging both of them to be quiet. Then, right in the centre of Middle Spinney, where the path's very narrow, Hoiler suddenly drew that sword out of the stick—he often took Mr. Nicholas' things out with him—and he ran Ogden through the back. And Ogden gave a sort of half-scream and half-groan, and never made another sound. Next thing I knew Hoiler was shaking me by the shoulders and telling me to be quiet—I didn't know that I wasn't quiet. Then he made me help him to move and hide the—the body. But first he took things out of the pockets——'

‘What did he take?’ asked Willerton.

‘I don’t know—I was too upset. But there was a roll of banknotes—it must have been the money that I heard of again, the money that Mr. Nicholas had given to Ogden. And there were other things. Hoiler put everything in his own pockets. Then he hid the sword-stick. And then he made me swear I wouldn’t see anybody when I went in, lest they should see I was upset. Before ever we went into the house he fetched me a stiff dose of old brandy and made me drink it—I was in a real bad state of nerves. And next morning he talked to me—and I was frightened of him and promised to do all he said. He said nobody would ever find it out. And then in a while, Mr. Nicholas was suspected. And Hoiler said that was the very best thing that could happen, and it was certain Mr. Nicholas would be found guilty and hanged, and we should benefit by it.’

‘How would you and Hoiler have benefited by it?’ asked Willerton.

‘Hoiler said that he’d seen a copy of Mr. Nicholas’ will,’ replied Mrs. Hands, ‘and that Mr. Nicholas had left us each a legacy of five thousand pounds. And he said that if Mr. Nicholas was hanged, we should get the money just the same, and then we’d get married and go and live abroad or take a small hotel on the Riviera, or something of that sort. And I was so frightened of Hoiler that I kept silence—and—and—it’s come to this!’

Mrs. Hands began to cry again, and there was nothing to do but let her cry. A welcome relief came in the shape of a knock at the door, prefacing an enquiry if we were the police gentlemen who’d been at Rottingdean that morning, and if we were there was a telephone call from that place.

Willerton answered the call and came back in a few minutes somewhat excited.

‘A man’s been found up on the Downs not far from where we saw that car,’ he announced. ‘But’—here he paused, glancing at Mrs. Hands—‘he’s dead!’ he went on. ‘From the description I should say it’s——’

He broke off there, with another glance at Mrs. Hands. But Mrs. Hands went on crying quietly as if nothing mattered.

‘Come on!’ said Chaney. ‘We’d better get along there. Mr. Camberwell, take Mrs. Hands out to the car—I’ll settle her bill. If that’s Hoiler and he’s dead, we’d better know all about it at once.’

In a few minutes we were racing back along the coast road to Rottingdean: the sergeant there was on the look-out for us. He came up to the side of the car.

‘The information came in not so long after you’d gone,’ he said. ‘A man’s lying dead on the hillside just above where that car is. Not Brighton way—the other way, towards Lewes. Yes, you can get your car within a few hundred yards of the place. I’d better go up with you.’

We took him in and ran forward up the road to where we had left the Biddleby-Watkins in the charge of a local constable. But the constable was no longer there; he was up the hillside, the centre of a small group of people, and he shouted and waved to us. We left the car and climbed up the slopes. It was, and had been ever since sunrise, a very hot morning: I noticed as we toiled upward how dry the soil was, how dried-up the grass.

The constable came to meet us.

‘It’s a queer case, this, gentlemen,’ he said. ‘This man that’s lying dead here seems to have shot himself! There hasn’t been a finger laid on him since he was found by that old shepherd you see there, and there’s a revolver tight in his right hand, and a hole through his temples. But before he shot himself he appears to have been bitten by a viper—one o’ these Sussex adders. It’s there—not dead yet: they say you can’t kill a Sussex adder before sunset—won’t die till sunset, anyway.’

We went forward, incredulous. The little knot of rustics parted, making room—the constables threw back a piece of rough sacking which had covered the dead man’s face. Hoiler?—yes!—Hoiler, sure enough, and dead enough. There was that in his right temple which had made death

certain, and in his right hand, tightly clenched, an automatic pistol. But . . .

He had evidently sat down there on that slope to eat and drink before pursuing his flight across the hills to Lewes, where, of course, he would have had a choice of trains to various places. There was a flask lying by him, containing whisky and water, and by it an open box of sandwiches. And just in front of these, still feebly writhing, lay an adder, a fine specimen of *vipera berus*. The old shepherd, leaning on his crook, and watching us and everything with shrewd, knowing eyes, nodded at it.

'That won't die till sundown be come, masters!' he said. 'Do what you like i' the way o' killing them Sussex adders, but them won't give up the ghost till sun be down!'

'What does it all mean?' muttered Willerton, staring from one thing to the other.

But I knew. Hoiler, abandoning the car and the luggage in a sudden fear, and setting off across the lonely Downs to turn on his tracks, had sat down at this spot, in the blazing heat of the summer morning, to eat and drink. And—perhaps as he reached into the grass for his flask—the viper had fastened on his wrist (the bite was there, anyway, and the resultant swellings) and driven its fangs into him. And then, knowing what was before him, and possibly exaggerating his fears, he had first dashed the thing on the ground and stamped his heel into its head over and over again, and never waiting to see if he had killed it, had killed himself. For Hoiler, as we subsequently ascertained, was a rustic-born man, and rustics are mortally afraid of snake-bite and believe there is no cure for the bite of a viper.

So there, on that sun-baked hillside, amidst the silence of the Downs, the thing came to an end. The last thing of all was that just before they removed Hoiler's body, Willerton, as by a sudden thought, put a hand into the hip-pocket of the dead man's trousers, and drew out a small case which contained, untouched, the fifteen hundred pounds' worth of Bank of England notes which Mr. Nicholas had paid to the blackmailer, Dengo.

[The end of *Murder at Wrides Park* by J. S. (Joseph Smith) Fletcher]