

# **THE CLAVERTON MYSTERY**

**JOHN RHODE**

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## The Claverton Mystery

No. 13 Beaumaris Place was the last remaining private residence in a street long since given up to apartment houses. Dr Lancelot Priestley was all too familiar with its rather gloomy interior, for he had been in the habit of calling there to see its owner, his old friend Sir John Claverton, though circumstances had prevented him from visiting for some time.

When he did at last call again at No. 13 it was to find Sir John ill and his doctor uneasy. On a second visit he was informed that Sir John had died suddenly the day before. The family physician was not the only person to find circumstances which seemed to him suspicious, and after consultation with Dr Priestley there was little doubt in anyone's mind that Sir John Claverton was poisoned.

Nevertheless, the case presented several baffling aspects, but by ingenious deduction from slender clues Dr Priestley eventually succeeded in finding a satisfactory solution to the case that became famous as The Claverton Mystery.

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JOHN RHODE

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# The Claverton Mystery

Dr Lancelot Priestley investigates . . .

## The Disappearing Detectives



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## CHAPTER 1

Nearly a year had passed since Dr Priestley had last found time to call upon his old friend, Sir John Claverton. And, as he got out of the train at Earl's Court Station, and began to walk towards Beaumaris Place, he blamed himself for this neglect.

And yet, perhaps it was not altogether his fault that they had not met in the interval. Dr Priestley was a busy man. His scientific pursuits left him little leisure for social relaxations. Besides, there were other calls upon his time. His hobby, the nature of which he fondly imagined was known only to the very few, had developed almost in spite of himself. He was liable at any moment to become involved in an investigation which might demand weeks of concentrated effort.

Sir John, on the other hand, was a man of unlimited leisure. He lived the life of a recluse, his only occupation the books with which he loved to surround himself. This being the case, he might easily have found an opportunity for visiting Dr Priestley at his house in Westbourne Terrace. But perhaps he had not considered the effort worth while.

The truth was that the two, in recent years, had drifted apart. In the old days, when Dr Priestley had held a professorial chair at one of the Midland universities, they had been close friends. Claverton had then been an actuary in the same town, and the two brilliant intellects had found much in common.

But, a year or two before the war, Dr Priestley had thrown up his post, much to the regret of the more serious of his students. Whether the university authorities shared this regret, it is difficult to say. Of his ability, no one who had ever come into contact with him had the slightest doubt. But his mental attitude was that of the critic rather than the teacher. The limitless patience with which he loved to trace scientific facts to their ultimate causes was only equalled by his impatience with human nature. On more than one occasion his lectures had degenerated into diatribes against eminent men who had enunciated theories based upon imperfect data.

He may have seen his own unsuitability for the duties of an instructor. It is quite certain that nobody else ventured to drop him a hint to that effect. At all events, he abandoned his chair and retired to the house in Westbourne Terrace which he had inherited from his father. His income was more than sufficient to permit him to occupy himself as he pleased. And for many years past he had

employed his brain in scientific criticism. Among the comparatively narrow circle of men of science, he was regarded as a leading authority.

Shortly after the outbreak of war, Claverton had rather unexpectedly, come into a considerable fortune. A cousin, whom Claverton had scarcely seen since infancy, had lost her son, her only child, in the first days of September, 1914. She had made a fresh will, leaving all she possessed to Claverton. Not long afterwards, she had died in her own house in Beaumaris Place.

At that time Claverton had been appointed to a government post in the North of England, in which his organizing abilities had full scope. He did not take possession of the house, which was used as a hostel during the continuance of the war. Not until after the Armistice did Claverton, now Sir John Claverton, KBE in recognition of his services, decide to reside permanently in London. Number 13 Beaumaris Place was redecorated in accordance with his own ideas, and in due course he moved in and occupied it.

He had never married. He was fond of saying that the more he saw of other men's families, the better pleased he was that he had never risked having one himself. Never a very sociable person, since he had lived in London he had sedulously avoided contact with all but a very few of his old friends, of whom Dr Priestley was one. They met at irregular intervals, which insensibly tended to grow longer. Indeed, Dr Priestley would not have interrupted his studies this autumn afternoon had he not that morning received a letter from his friend.

A curt communication, hardly more than a note. Just a brief intimation that the writer was confined to the house with a slight indisposition, and that he hoped that Dr Priestley could find time to come round and see him. That was all; no suggestion of an appointment. And Dr Priestley, anxious to repair his long neglect, had decided to call on Claverton that very day.

Beaumaris Place had suffered many changes since the Victorian era. Then, it had been on the borderland of fashion; a desirable residential area, in the language of the house-agents. Its large and severe-looking houses were inhabited by prosperous city men, who drove daily to and from their offices behind their own spirited pairs of horses. But, as distance fled before the advance of modern transport, the class of people who dwelt in Beaumaris Place emigrated to suburbs which they proudly designated as 'the country', and, one by one, the windows of the houses in the place began to display the fatal sign, 'Apartments to Let'.

All but those of Number 13. A certain strain of obstinacy in the family into which Claverton's cousin had married forbade them to abandon the house to which they had grown used. Ignoring the decline of the neighbourhood, the cousin had maintained her solitary state in the old house even after her husband's death. She often expressed the hope that she would die there, a hope

destined to be fulfilled far earlier than she expected. If her son chose to sell it subsequently, that was his affair. Secretly, she hoped that he would not.

And when, with her son's death, the future crashed about her ears, it was of the house she thought. It had grown to be part of her life. With a sort of silent sympathy, as it seemed to her, it had watched her joys and sorrows ever since the day of her marriage. With nothing left to live for, death beckoned to her with a stern but not unfriendly finger. She was ready to obey the summons, but she could not bear the thought of lodgers, a careless, ever-changing legion, inhabiting the familiar rooms.

A Claverton herself, it was then that John Claverton occurred to her. She knew nothing of him. Her only news of him trickled irregularly through rarely seen friends of the family. But she knew that the Clavertons shared the conservatism of her husband's family. She may have guessed that Number 13 would be safe in the hands of a Claverton. At all events, she made a fresh will, leaving the house, and with it her fortune, to her cousin John.

She said nothing to him of her wishes. Indeed, she had not even considered it necessary to inform him that he had become her heir. It was not until the day of her funeral that John Claverton ever set eyes upon Number 13. But her intuition had not been at fault. From that day he had decided that, in the fullness of time, he would live there.

To many it would have seemed a strange choice. Already the changes were proceeding swiftly. The grimy but still imposing façade of the eastern side of the street the side upon which the even numbers were situated—had almost disappeared. One by one the desirable residences had fallen into the hands of the housebreaker, and unfamiliar edifices had arisen upon their ruins. In one place was a block of not very desirable flats, in another the bare and factory-like wall of a cinema, of which the entrance was in an adjoining street.

John Claverton looked at these and shrugged his shoulders. It did not matter in the least to him that the appearance of the street was spoilt. If he thought about it, he probably reflected that, after all, one lived inside a house and not outside it.

Nor did the rapid changes which took place after he entered into occupation of Number 13 disturb him. The remaining even numbers disappeared within a year or two after the war. Then the odd numbers began to fall before the onslaught of the speculative builder. Numbers 1 to 7 vanished, almost as it seemed in a night, and their places were taken by a big garage. Numbers 9 to 11 were converted into a warehouse, outside which heavy vans were daily congregated. Only Numbers 13 to 27, the last a corner house, marking the end of Beaumaris Place, remained.



Thus it had been when Dr Priestley had last visited his friend. But now, as he turned the corner by the garage and entered the street itself, he saw that the march of progress had advanced a step further. Beyond Number 13 was nothing but a hoarding, from behind which came a sound of busy activity. Of Numbers 15 to 27 there was no visible trace.

He experienced a mild shock at the sight. The people who had occupied these houses, had they too disappeared, leaving no root behind them? How long would Number 13 survive, an oasis amid the desert? And, when it at last was swept away, what would remain of the personality of John Claverton? Assuredly, he had been remiss. He had allowed other things to intervene between himself and his old friend. In future, he would make a point of coming to see him regularly. He would make a note of it, on his calendar at home. Once a month, at least. Every fourth Wednesday, for example. He hastened his steps, as though he feared that Number 13 might vanish before his eyes.

The door was opened by the butler, a grave elderly man, who bowed as he recognized the visitor. Without a word he took Dr Priestley's hat and coat, and deposited them on the hall table with a reverent gesture, as though laying a sacrifice upon an altar. It was barely four o'clock, but the hall seemed full of a premature twilight, in which objects could only dimly be discerned. And yet it seemed to Dr Priestley that his hat was not the only one on the table.

The idea that he might not be the only visitor annoyed him. He had put aside some rather urgent work for the purpose of seeing Claverton, and having half an hour's chat with him. It had not for a moment occurred to him that he would not be alone. Never before had he met any other visitor to the house. It would be most annoying if the tête-à-tête which he had anticipated should degenerate into a general and desultory conversation. 'Is there any one else with Sir John, Fawknor?' he asked sharply.

'Sir John is alone in the library, sir,' replied the butler. And he began to ascend the heavily-carpeted stairs.

Dr Priestley followed him. He knew the arrangement of the house well enough. On the ground floor were the dining-room and morning-room, the drawing-room and library being on the first floor. It was in the latter that Claverton had always received him. But, to his astonishment, as soon as Fawknor reached the landing, it was to the drawing-room door that he turned. He seemed to pause for a moment before he touched the handle. Then he opened the door and stood aside for the visitor to enter. 'Dr Priestley!' he announced.

In this room, with its heavily-curtained windows, the gloom of the hall seemed only slightly relieved. A profound silence greeted Dr Priestley as he

entered it, and for the moment he thought himself alone. Fawknor had merely shown him in here while he announced his arrival to his master. But why on earth had he introduced him thus formally?

A dull rustling, from a sofa in the corner of the room, undeceived him. He turned sharply, and his eyes, growing accustomed to the darkness, made out the form of an elderly woman, her head bent over some complicated needlework upon which she was engaged. Her fingers moved methodically, with the rhythm of some well-ordered machine. She seemed wholly unaware of his presence.

He became aware that there were other people in this silent room. In a chair beside the empty fireplace sat a girl, a book on her lap and cigarette ash strewn the carpet beside her. Dr Priestley, aware that she was looking at him, bowed rather vaguely. Her expression, sullen and indefinitely hostile, did not change in the slightest. Dr Priestley's bow was returned by a smartly dressed young man, who until that moment had been leaning negligently over the back of the girl's chair.

Dr Priestley could not imagine who these people could be. It was as though Number 13, that last fortress of the past, had been silently invaded by an unknown enemy, bound by pledge to utter no word, lest their presence should be discovered. He felt that he had intruded upon their secrecy, knew from the moment that he saw the girl's eyes upon him, that his presence was undesired. The silence can only have lasted for a second or two, but in that time he formed a swift impression of these incomprehensible strangers. The woman in grey upon the sofa, sewing mechanically, never raised her head. The man, now upright and rigid, motionless as though carved out of stone. And finally the girl, questioning him with unfathomable eyes, her resentment at his presence almost tangible in its ferocity.

It was the girl who broke the silence. Suddenly with an unexpectedly swift movement, so rapid that she seemed to be sitting one moment and standing the next, she rose from her chair. She stood for a moment, a tall and graceful outline against the light from the window. Her dark hair fell like a veil, concealing the contour of her head. With a curious gliding movement she advanced towards the door. 'I'll tell Uncle John you're here, Dr Priestley,' she said, without turning her head. Her voice was utterly dull and lifeless, contrasting oddly with the lithe vigour of her body.

She left the room, closing the door behind her noisily, almost defiantly. The sound of it, echoing dully through this silent house, shocked Dr Priestley. It was as though some one had shouted obscenely in some dimly lighted shrine. But the fingers of the woman in grey upon the sofa never faltered. Nor did her eyes leave for an instant the pattern of the thread which she was

weaving.

But the crash of the door, or perhaps the departure of the girl, seemed to galvanize the young man into life. He took a couple of steps towards Dr Priestley, and then stopped uncertainly. 'Fine day for the time of year, sir,' he said, with a heartiness which was certainly assumed.

'Yes, yes,' replied Dr Priestley irritably. The sheer futility of the remark annoyed him profoundly. If the man could find nothing better than that to say, he might just as well hold his tongue. Why couldn't he have introduced himself, for instance? The girl at least had given some clue to her identity. Uncle John, she had said. Dr Priestley remembered vaguely that Claverton had once spoken of nephews and nieces. She was presumably one of the nieces. Was this young fellow a nephew? Dr Priestley hoped not.

He could not have explained why he had taken an instant dislike to him. It was not merely a reciprocation of the unfriendliness with which he had himself been greeted. There was something deeper than that. It may have been the inflection of the young man's voice, the tone in which the word 'sir' had been uttered. Dr Priestley was accustomed to this token of respect from the younger generation. But on this man's lips it had sounded less a token of respect than of challenge.

A man of less experience than Dr Priestley might have felt uncomfortable in the face of such a cold welcome. But Dr Priestley had found himself in so many queer situations before this that discomfort had ceased to trouble him. Instead of being embarrassed, he was resentful. Claverton should never have exposed him to this sort of thing. He should have explained in his note that there were people staying in the house. In any case, Fawknor should have known better than to show him in here. He could have been asked to wait in the morning-room, for instance. Unless, indeed, another group of inexplicable beings had entrenched themselves there. Dr Priestley decided that unless he was admitted to Claverton's presence within the next five minutes, he would walk downstairs, pick up his coat and hat, and leave the house.

Meanwhile, his habits of observation urged him to make what he could out of his companions. The woman in grey, aware of nothing beyond the passage of her needle through the fabric, defied him. He could see nothing of her but a grey dress enclosing a spare, gaunt figure, the dull sheen of her iron-grey hair, and her thin, restless fingers. The dark fabric upon which she worked spread like a pall over her knees, falling in heavy folds to the floor. Dr Priestley could form no idea of the purpose which it was eventually intended to serve. Motionless but for the monotonous movement of her fingers, rapt apparently in some hypnotic abstraction, she might have been a figure of wax, concealing the mechanism which plied the needle.

The young man, apparently discouraged by Dr Priestley's reception of his opening remark, had strolled across to the window, and now stood gazing absently at the flats opposite. By some trick of light, his face was reflected in the panes, and Dr Priestley studied it intently. He seemed to be in the early twenties, so far as could be judged. His features were clear-cut, and his chin was sufficiently prominent to hint of determination. A handsome enough face, though marred, in Dr Priestley's opinion, by the lack of any trace of humour. It was an axiom of his that no man without a sense of humour can be really successful in this world.

A heavy frown clouded the young man's expression. Annoyance, probably, thought Dr Priestley. Of course, he had been hanging over the back of the girl's chair when the visitor had been announced. Could that have been the cause of his inhospitable reception? Perhaps their conversation had been of a highly intimate nature. They had been to all intents and purposes alone, for the presence of the woman in grey could hardly have been a deterrent to confidences. Dr Priestley felt sure that she would have taken no notice had they flown out of the window before her very eyes.

But surely this momentary interruption was a very small matter for such deep and obvious annoyance! The girl had only to tell Claverton that his visitor had arrived, and in a few minutes at most they would have been relieved of his presence. Surely the attitude of these people must be capable of more rational explanation than that? Dr Priestley had come to the conclusion that the house held some mysterious secret, when the door opened, and the girl appeared.

'Uncle John will see you,' she said abruptly. 'He's in the library. You know your way, I expect?'

And, apparently dismissing Dr Priestley from her mind, she turned her back on him and joined the young man at the window.

## CHAPTER 2

Dr Priestley appeared not to notice her rudeness. He left the drawing-room, taking care to close the door quietly behind him. But, having reached the landing, he paused for a moment, more than half-inclined to leave the house where he had met with such a strange reception.

But the thought of Claverton, waiting for him in the library, restrained him. After all, Claverton was not responsible for the way in which he had been treated. And, perhaps, the thought that a few words with Claverton would

throw some light upon these extraordinary people and their manners, influenced Dr Priestley's decision.

He opened the library door and walked in. Here such vestiges of daylight as could struggle into the gloomy interior of Number 13 had been rigidly excluded. The thick dark curtains were drawn, hanging heavily from ceiling to floor. But no blaze of artificial illumination replaced the daylight that the windows might have admitted. Only a single reading-lamp, placed upon a table in the corner of the room, shed its light upon the man sitting in a chair beside it. The rest of the room was in deep shadow.

Sir John Claverton looked up wearily as Dr Priestley came in. He was tall and gaunt, with a powerful, clean-shaven face, and deeply sunk eyes under his heavy brows. But, as Dr Priestley approached him, an unwelcome question flashed through his mind. Do I look as old as that?

For the two were of the same age, fifty-seven. Dr Priestley bore his years well, and was more active, mentally and physically, than many younger men. He frequently astonished his contemporaries by his power of endurance. Claverton, on the other hand, his face in the relentless glare of the reading-lamp, looked an old man. There were deep lines upon his cheeks, a weary listlessness in the gesture with which he stretched out his hand to greet his old friend. And the hand trembled as Dr Priestley grasped it.

But, when he spoke, his voice had lost little of its old power. 'It's good of you to come, Priestley,' he said. 'I never for a moment expected that you would be able to spare the time so soon. Sit down, we've got a few minutes before us yet.'

Dr Priestley, wondering what this last sentence might mean, sat down as he was bidden. 'I was sorry to hear that you were not well,' he replied. 'I took the earliest opportunity of coming to find out what was the matter. I am very much afraid that I have been guilty of neglecting you lately, Claverton.'

'Yes, it's a long time since we met. You've noticed some considerable changes, I expect?'

Changes! Yes, but what sort of changes had Claverton in his mind? The change in his own appearance? Since Dr Priestley had last seen him he had aged ten years at least. The changes in his household, invaded in this incomprehensible way? Or merely the material changes which had fallen upon Beaumaris Place? Dr Priestley decided that he would assume the last.

'I noticed that the block of houses beyond you has been demolished,' he replied quietly.

'Yes, they're going to put up another lot of flats, I believe. This is the last of the old houses left. Well, I don't care. It'll last my time, and then I don't

suppose it will matter to anybody what happens to it. We live in a changing world, Priestley, as you and I know well enough. We may not like it, but we've got to put up with it.'

Exactly how much had Claverton to put up with, Dr Priestley wondered. But his host, as though anxious to change the subject, began to speak of himself.

'I haven't been any too well these last few weeks. Pains in the inside, and that sort of thing. Worried me a bit, I've never had a day's illness in my life. We've got to be careful at our time of life. So I sent for Oldland. You remember him, of course?'

'Oldland! You mean Dr Oldland, whom we used to know in the old days? Yes, I remember him, of course, though I have not heard his name for years. I thought—'

Claverton interrupted him hastily. 'Oh, he's lived all that down, it appears. He bought a practice in Kensington, a few years ago. He traced me, somehow, and came to see me. We've kept in touch ever since. And it seemed natural, when I wanted a doctor, to send for him. He'll be here very soon now. Told me he'd look in about half-past four. You won't mind meeting him?'

'I shall certainly not mind in the least. We were always very good friends. In fact, I was deeply grieved when I heard the news.'

'Oh, there will be no reference to that. It's all forgotten, long ago. Oldland says that there is nothing very serious the matter with me, and he's a chap who knows what he's talking about. Nobody ever had any doubts about that. Told me to take care of myself, putting me on a diet, and gave me some stuff to take. He's doing me good, there's no doubt about that. I feel a lot better than I did a week or two ago.'

'I am very glad to hear that,' Dr Priestley replied warmly. And then, after a pause, he added, 'I did not like the idea of you being alone here with nobody to look after you.'

Claverton smiled queerly. 'Oh, I'm looked after. You needn't be afraid of that. Oldland can be trusted for that sort of thing. He tells me that if I follow his treatment, I shall be all right again before very long. And then I'll ask you to come and dine with me. For the present I'm condemned to dine off boiled fish, and I wouldn't ask you to share that.'

Dr Priestley made no reply. The sense of bewilderment, which had oppressed him since he entered the house, was increasing. In spite of the material solidity of his surroundings, he felt that his experiences were unreal. Claverton's manner was inexplicable. He obviously avoided every reference to his niece, if the ill-mannered girl whom he had seen was indeed his niece, or to

those other mysterious occupants of the drawing-room. It was not even certain that he welcomed the presence of his friend, in spite of the fact that he had definitely asked him to call.

Yes, to the subtle observation of Dr Priestley, it was plain that he had something on his mind. His allusions to his own state of health, his references to trifles, had no ring of sincerity. He would not have asked Dr Priestley to come and see him merely for the purpose of discussing his ailments with him. Yet, after glancing at the clock and comparing it with his own watch, he continued hastily, as though afraid that his visitor would intrude some unwelcome question.

‘It’s not so much the diet, as the stuff that Oldland is giving me, that does me good. I don’t know what it is, but I feel ever so much better after I have taken it. It isn’t an ordinary mixture out of a bottle. It’s some stuff which has to be specially got. And I don’t mind telling you, Priestley, it’s devilish expensive.’

Dr Priestley could scarcely restrain a smile. So one thing at least in this odd house had not changed. That queer kink in Claverton’s nature had not been straightened out. It was not that he was mean, in the ordinary way. He would spend money lavishly where he considered that such expenditure was justified. But, every now and then, he would suddenly hesitate at small sums of a few shillings or so. The cost of this medicine was evidently a sore point with him.

He turned to the table by his side, and picked up a box, bearing the label of a well-known chemist. ‘This is it,’ he continued, handing the box to Dr Priestley. ‘I have to swallow one of those things four times a day, after meals. Each box costs seven and six, and holds a couple of dozen of the blessed things. That’s eight and ninepence a week for that alone. If I wasn’t sure that the stuff was doing me good, I wouldn’t have it.’

‘Your rapid calculation betrays your actuarial experiences,’ Dr Priestley remarked. ‘I must say that I do not consider that a very high price to pay for a cure. What if Oldland had ordered you to some spa? Carlsbad, for instance.’

‘Oldland knows better than to do that,’ replied Claverton grimly. ‘But that’s not all, by any manner of means. I have to wash those things down with some stuff out of a bottle, which costs money, too. And there’ll be Oldland’s bill on top of it.’

Dr Priestley nodded, hoping that this fit of petulance would pass. He opened the box idly, and glanced at its contents. It held a number of gelatine capsules, each enclosing some whitish substance. He closed the box and handed it back to Claverton.

‘The gelatine capsule is a capital idea,’ he remarked. ‘You swallow the

things and don't taste what is inside them. Much better than the Gregory's powder we were forced to take when we were young. Ugh! I can remember the taste of that now, after all these years.'

'Yes, I suppose there is something in that,' Claverton conceded reluctantly. 'I wouldn't mind, if they weren't so infernally expensive. I shall have to ask Oldland if it wouldn't be cheaper to take the stuff, whatever it is, in the form of a powder. I dare say that I could put up with the taste. I haven't a doubt that I have put up with worse things than that in my time. And people are so confoundedly careless.'

He opened the box, and carefully counted the capsules it contained. 'Ah, so it's been found, has it!' he exclaimed, in a tone of satisfaction. 'I told them it would be, if they only took the trouble to look. Would you believe it, Priestley, one of these things was lost a couple of days ago. Some fool must have knocked the box over, and scattered the capsules over the floor. They would have been more careful if they had been paying for them.'

'How did it happen?' asked Dr Priestley mechanically. He had given up all hope of serious conversation with his friend. He was now merely waiting the arrival of Doctor Oldland, when he would be able to escape and return to the work awaiting him.

'How did it happen!' exclaimed Claverton, 'That I can't tell you. All I know is that a fresh box, this one, was opened at tea-time on Monday. I took one then, and one after dinner that day. On Tuesday I took four as usual. After breakfast on Wednesday I took one, and then I happened to count the number that was left. There should have been seventeen, of course. Actually, there were only sixteen.'

'I sent for Fawknor, who cleans up this room in the morning, and asked him if he had upset the box. Of course, he swore he hadn't. I couldn't prove it was him, so I left it at that. But I told him that one of the capsules was missing, and that it must be lying about on the floor somewhere. I said that he was to hunt under the furniture for it next morning, and be careful not to tread on it. With these things costing nearly fourpence apiece. I can't afford to have them wasted like that.'

Claverton paused, and once more counted the capsules in the box. 'He must have found it, I suppose,' he continued. 'I forgot to ask him. The right number is here now, at all events. Today is Friday. I took two out of this box on Monday, four on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and two so far today. That's sixteen, isn't it? There should be eight left, and, if you count them, you'll find that there are.'

'I am quite prepared to take your word for it,' replied Dr Priestley, utterly



bored with the subject. He waited for a second or two, then made a desperate effort to divert the conversation. 'Have you added anything of particular interest to your collection of books recently?' he asked.

Claverton shook his head mournfully. 'To tell you the truth, I have not felt up to exploring fresh fields,' he replied. 'I have contented myself with re-reading the old favourites. As soon as I am able to get about, I hope to pick up a few volumes that I have been wanting for some time. Wrythlington was here on Tuesday and he brought me two or three catalogues. You know Wrythlington, don't you?'

'I have heard you mention him, but I do not think we have ever met. A solicitor, is he not?'

It seemed to Dr Priestley that his face contracted for an instant. Perhaps a sudden spasm of the pains of which he had complained. 'Yes, he happens to be my solicitor,' he replied. 'But our mutual interest is in books. Our tastes coincide to a remarkable extent. He envies me my collection on necromancy, for instance. But to a practical scientist like you such a subject must seem the most arrant nonsense.'

'No avenue of human thought can be regarded as nonsense by the true scientist,' replied Dr Priestley. It seemed at last that the right note had been struck, Claverton seemed disposed to lay aside his pettiness, and to talk like a sensible, educated man. 'I am not one of those who maintain that the necromancers were merely charlatans. I regard their experiments as an attempt, mistaken, perhaps, to extend the knowledge then at the disposal of the human race.'

'Mistaken or not, it was a noble attempt,' said Claverton, with more energy than he had yet shown. 'Your modern scientist is given every facility and every encouragement for research. The necromancers were compelled to work in secret, liable at any moment to be arrested and carried off to the most horrible tortures. And yet, in spite of the handicaps under which they laboured, they achieved results which the modern world is unable to explain.'

'The modern world is endeavouring to reach the explanation by the methods of spiritualism,' remarked Dr Priestley.

Again Claverton's face suffered that momentary contraction. A moment or two elapsed before he spoke. 'Spiritualism! There may be more in that than the sceptics are prepared to admit. I myself—'

But at that moment the door swung open. Fawknor's deferential voice announced, 'Dr Oldland!'

Dr Priestley rose swiftly from his chair. 'It's time for me to go,' he said, extending his hand.

‘No, don’t go yet,’ replied Claverton hurriedly. ‘Oldland will be delighted to see you again, I’m sure.’

‘You mustn’t run away the moment I come in,’ said a voice from the doorway. ‘Why, man, how many years is it since we last saw one another? I was never more surprised in my life when Fawknor told me you were here!’

Dr Oldland strode forward into the room. He was immaculately dressed, short, nearly bald, and inclined to stoutness. Dr Priestley could scarcely recognize the all-round amateur athlete, whose name had once been famous throughout the Midlands. Since he had seen him last so many years ago, Dr Oldland had grown a short, stubby beard, and taken to wearing powerful spectacles which magnified his small and piercing eyes.

‘Yes, it is a long time since we have met,’ said Dr Priestley quietly, as they shook hands. ‘I had no idea that you were in London, until Claverton told me so just now. Why have you never been to look me up?’

Dr Oldland shook his head and laughed, a trifle self-consciously. ‘You’re too big a man for a poor GP to drop in upon uninvited,’ he replied. ‘I never pick up a scientific paper without seeing your name in it. I didn’t think you’d want your time wasted by old friends hanging around.’

Dr Priestley frowned. ‘That’s nonsense, Oldland,’ he said sharply. ‘Now that we have met again you must certainly come to see me. I live in Westbourne Terrace. You will find the address in the telephone directory.’

He turned towards the door, but Oldland detained him by a gesture. ‘You needn’t go because I’ve come in,’ he said eagerly. He manoeuvred across the room until he was behind Claverton’s chair then shook his head violently. Dr Priestley looked at him in some astonishment. Why on earth was Oldland so anxious for him to stay? Was his obvious concern part of the complicated puzzle which the house seemed to enclose? He nodded slightly, and was rewarded by the expression of relief upon Oldland’s face.

‘There’s no point in my driving you away, Priestley,’ Oldland continued, as he came face to face with his patient. ‘I’m not paying a professional visit. I only looked in to see that Claverton was all right. I’m going away tomorrow, and I shan’t see him again for a week. Upon my word, Claverton, I think you’re looking a lot fitter this afternoon.’

He sat down in the chair which Dr Priestley had just vacated. The latter, anxious to give doctor and patient an opportunity for discussion, strolled across the room into the deeper shadows.

Outside, in Beaumaris Place, the engine of a motor lorry standing outside the warehouse started up with a deafening clatter. There was a shock of engaging gear, and the lorry moved off thunderously. Number 13 vibrated at

its passage. Then it turned the corner, and the noise ceased suddenly.

An almost startling silence followed, as though the lorry had taken with it all the life of Beaumaris Place. Dr Oldland was talking in a low tone to Claverton. Nothing could be heard but the sound of his monotonous voice, the rest of the house was perfectly still.

A sudden vision of the group in the drawing-room appeared to Dr Priestley. He saw them as he had first entered the room; the woman in grey with her restless fingers, the girl immobile in the chair, the young man leaning over her. They were to him as figures in a tableau arranged for some mysterious audience. These arranged, it seemed as if they must remain, inactive, until Number 13 at last shared the doom of its neighbours.

The books on the library shelves seemed possessed of more reality. He could not read their titles, they were hidden behind that veil of darkness which seemed peculiar to Number 13. It struck him that it was fitting that this should be so. They had nothing in common with the light of day. The strange lore with which they dealt was the product of the night of ignorance, illumined only by black candles burning upon unholy altars . . .

Dr Priestley shook his head angrily. This was ridiculous. He was allowing himself to be influenced by the bizarre atmosphere of the house. He, who recognized nothing but facts, was in danger of succumbing to the suggestions of fancy. He turned his back on the shadows, and strolled quietly back into the circle of light.

Oldland was taking his leave of Claverton. 'I shall be back in town on Sunday week,' he was saying. 'I'll look in that evening without fail. Meanwhile, you'll keep on with the capsules and the medicine, won't you?'

'Yes, I don't mind them,' Claverton replied. 'But what about that confounded diet? I'm getting infernally sick of slops.'

'I'm afraid you'll have to keep on with that too. But I dare say a bit of chicken wouldn't hurt you for a change. Not every day, of course. Perhaps twice a week. For the rest, you'll have to be guided by what my locum tells you. You'll like him, he's a very decent young fellow of the name of Milverly. By the time I come back, I'm hoping that you will be able to get out for a bit, if the weather keeps fine. Goodbye, till then.'

He turned to Dr Priestley. 'It has been a real privilege to meet you again, Priestley,' he said. 'By the way, if you're going along, I've got a car outside. Perhaps I could drop you somewhere?'

He had once more passed behind Claverton's chair as he spoke, and his words were accompanied by an energetic nodding. What was the matter with the man now, Dr Priestley wondered? When he came in, he had desired him to

remain. Now he seemed equally anxious for his departure. Dr Priestley decided to humour him. The half-hour which he had meant to spend with Claverton had elapsed long ago. He would not be sorry to leave Number 13 and return to a saner atmosphere.

‘That is very kind of you, Oldland,’ he replied. ‘Any underground station that you may be passing will suit me.’

‘Nothing could be better!’ exclaimed Oldland heartily. ‘I live within a few yards of South Kensington Station, and I will drop you there.’

‘Must you go, Priestley?’ Claverton asked regretfully. ‘I had hoped we might have had a longer chat. There are lots of things I wanted to talk to you about. But you’ll come again, won’t you? Soon, I mean. One day next week.’

Dr Priestley hesitated before the veiled urgency of his request. It was beyond a doubt that Claverton had something on his mind which he had been unable to express. It was only fair to give him one more chance to unburden himself.

‘Next week!’ said Dr Priestley doubtfully. ‘I shall find that very difficult, I am afraid. I have engagements for nearly every day. I could, perhaps, look in for a few minutes on Monday morning, if that would not be inconvenient.’

‘Inconvenient? Of course not! It’s most awfully good of you to put yourself out like that. I’d save you the trouble by coming to see you myself, but Oldland wouldn’t let me. Till Monday, then.’

Dr Priestley and Oldland left the room together. The drawing-room door was shut, and neither of them made a move towards it. They walked silently downstairs, in almost complete darkness. But, as they reached the hall, a light was switched on, revealing the impassive figure of Fawknor.

Dr Priestley glanced at the hall table. There were only two hats upon it, his own and Oldland’s. Fawknor helped them on with their coats, then opened the front door. It came as a shock to Dr Priestley to find that it was still broad daylight outside.

A smart limousine, with a liveried chauffeur at the wheel, stood in the street. They entered it, and Oldland sank with a sigh of relief into the cushions. ‘That house gives me the creeps!’ he said. ‘You’re above any foolishness like that, of course, Priestley.’

‘I confess to being considerably puzzled by what I have seen and heard this afternoon,’ Dr Priestley replied.

‘Puzzled? You’re not the only one that’s puzzled, I fancy. I can’t tell you how glad I was to meet you there this afternoon. And you’re going to see Claverton again on Monday. That’s splendid!’

‘You think it does him good to talk to an old friend?’ Dr Priestley

suggested.

‘No, no, not that. At least, not that altogether. Look here, Priestley, I don’t know what you think of me. There is a certain passage in my life that I can’t expect you to approve of. But whatever the man may have done, I’d like you to believe that the doctor has remained faithful to his profession.’

‘My dear Oldland, your private affairs are your own business, and concern nobody else but yourself,’ replied Dr Priestley drily. ‘I see no reason why our friendship should not be resumed at the point where it was broken off.’

‘It’s good of you to say that. I’m going to take you at your word. I made up my mind to put it up to you as soon as I saw you, just now. The fact is, Priestley, I want to talk to you, and that pretty urgently.’

‘About Claverton?’ Dr Priestley asked.

‘About Claverton. The trouble is that I am leaving town the first thing in the morning, I’d put it off if I could, but that’s absolutely impossible.’

Dr Priestley’s mind was swiftly made up. He wanted to hear about Claverton. Oldland, who had been attending him for some time, might be able to throw light upon the mystery which had descended upon Number 13. Without being inquisitive, he was, as he had confessed, puzzled. And any form of puzzle inspired him with an almost passionate desire for its solution.

‘Perhaps you could dine with me this evening?’ he suggested tentatively.

‘I wish I could!’ exclaimed Oldland. ‘I should enjoy nothing better. But my locum is turning up at seven, and I shall have to spend an hour or two showing him the ropes. I’ll tell you what I could do, though, if it’ll suit you. I could come round to your place after dinner. Say between half-past nine and ten.’

‘That will suit me perfectly. You will find me alone, by the way.’

‘Excellent! I could not ask for a better opportunity.’

The car drew up at South Kensington Station, and Dr Priestley prepared to alight. As he did so, Oldland laid his hand for a moment upon his knee. ‘The fact is, I’m not altogether happy about Claverton,’ he said darkly.

## CHAPTER 3

Dr Priestley’s house in Westbourne Terrace had much in common with Number 13 Beaumaris Place. Its size, its grim outline, its air of reserve and respectability, for instance. But it lacked the peculiar sense of gloom which clung to the latter. Dr Priestley never stinted electric light. His study, the room

in which he was nearly always to be found, had a distinctly cheerful atmosphere, in spite of the austerity of its furniture.

Perhaps it was this impression that struck Dr Oldland when he entered it for the first time that evening. He looked round appreciatively at the glass-fronted bookcases, the comfortable chairs, the massive desk which seemed too big even for this spacious room. His eyes twinkled behind his spectacles. 'You're snug here, Priestley,' he said. 'I must say that I prefer your style of comfort to Claverton's.'

Dr Priestley nodded. He was too busily engaged in studying Oldland to pay much attention to his remarks. The man had changed in the last twenty years, in appearance, in manner, even in voice. What was it Claverton had said that afternoon? Something about living in a changing world, and having to put up with it, whether one liked it or not. How much had he himself changed in Oldland's eyes, he wondered?

'Claverton. Yes,' he said suddenly. 'I saw a great difference in him this afternoon. When I first saw him I imagined that he must be suffering from some serious illness. But it appears that you told him otherwise.'

'I told him the truth,' replied Oldland simply. 'There isn't really anything very serious the matter with him. Merely a slight gastric trouble, which there should be no difficulty in clearing up. It's a very depressing thing, I know, and is apt to affect the patient's outlook adversely. That may account for this thinking himself much worse than he really is.'

'And yet I gather that you are anxious about him, from the remark which you let fall when I left you a few hours ago?'

'I am anxious about him, Priestley, and that's what I want to talk to you about. If it had not been absolutely necessary for me to do so, I would not have left London until he had completely recovered. Do you go and see him often?'

'Not so often as I might, perhaps. I am afraid that I allowed nearly a year to pass without communicating with him. Had I known that he was ill I should certainly have called upon him before this.'

'Nearly a year,' said Oldland reflectively. 'Yes, you would notice many changes, of course. Did Claverton know that you were coming this afternoon?'

'No, he did not. This morning I received a brief note from him, in which he told me he was not well, and asked me to go and see him. He suggested no definite time for me to do so. But has that visit anything to do with your anxiety on his behalf?'

'Nothing whatever, I'm trying to understand, that's all. Sorry, Priestley, but it's all so devilish queer that I'm blest if I know how to make it seem reasonable to you. Claverton isn't living alone any longer, you know.'

Dr Priestley paused before he replied. He had a vision of a grey dress, over which flowed some heavy dark material, and of thin fingers ceaselessly moving. 'I was shown into the drawing-room first,' he said at last.

'Ah!' Oldland's voice vibrated strangely. 'So you saw them then?'

'I saw three people, but I have no idea of their identity. And I confess that their presence in Claverton's house surprised me.'

'Three? Of, yes, of course. Young Durnford came out of the house as I went in. He must have been there when you arrived. It was the other two that I was thinking of. Mrs Littlecote and her daughter.'

It was surprising enough that the woman in grey was sufficiently human to have a name. It was almost incredible that she should have married and borne a daughter. Once, then, for however short a period, those untiring fingers must have paused from their labour.

'I was not aware of their names until this moment,' said Dr Priestley. 'Claverton did not refer to them in any way.'

Oldland nodded. He seemed to take Claverton's reticence for granted. 'He never cared to speak of them. Although I have seen a good deal of him lately, I never knew of their existence until the other day. Mrs Littlecote is Claverton's sister. She and her daughter live—perhaps I ought to say lived—in a tiny flat somewhere in Putney.'

'I don't quite understand you, Oldland. Do you mean that they have given up their flat to live permanently with Claverton?'

'I don't know, I haven't the slightest idea what their intentions are. I'm responsible for their presence at Number 13, as I'll explain later. They may be duly grateful, but, if so, they have never expressed their gratitude—Mrs Littlecote is deaf, you know.'

'Deaf!' exclaimed Dr Priestley. Perhaps that explained it. Mrs Littlecote, her head bent over her work, might have been utterly unconscious of his presence in the drawing-room.

'She certainly suffers from a certain degree of deafness. How acute this is, I have never been able to discover. I am tempted to believe sometimes that she hears a good deal more than she appears to. She's had a pretty hard life of it, from all accounts, poor soul.'

He paused, took off his glasses, and polished them. His eyes, thus revealed, seemed to glow with an unnatural brilliance, as though some hidden fire had blazed up within his mind.

'Claverton told me her story, later on,' he continued abruptly. 'There were three of them, as you may have heard. Claverton was the eldest, and then came two sisters. Clara—that's Mrs Littlecote—was the youngest. The ewe lamb, I

gather, till she made a mess of things.

‘How it came about, I don’t know, but she took up with a wandering preacher. You know the sort of chap I mean. Fellow with a call to convert the human race to his own particular doctrine. Nothing to do with any recognized denomination. Sort of a religious freelance. Used to wander about the country preaching wherever the police would let him. Well enough born, I believe, but without a penny to bless himself with.

‘It seems that Clara Claverton heard this fellow once by chance, and promptly fell in love. Whether with the man or his message, I don’t know. After that, she used to follow him about. I don’t mean literally, of course. Claverton, as the eldest brother—their parents were dead by this time—kept too wary an eye on her for that. But whenever he was anywhere handy, she would slip off for the day, on some excuse of visiting friends, and stand listening to him by the hour.

‘To cut a long story short, she went off one day and didn’t come back. Claverton, in a terrible stew, of course, couldn’t get any trace of her. Thought there had been an accident. Went to the hospitals, the police, and all that sort of thing. Nobody knew anything about her. And then, next day, he got a letter. Clara had married the preacher chap, and was now Mrs Littlecote.’

‘Knowing Claverton as I do, I imagine that this must have been a great blow to him,’ remarked Dr Priestley. ‘He never mentioned a word of this to me, though we were very intimate at one time, as you know. When did Mrs Littlecote’s marriage take place?’

‘Very shortly before you and Claverton became acquainted, I fancy. Claverton was furious. Swore he would never have anything more to do with her. Told her in so many words that she could go to hell—or heaven—her own way, I believe. And he was jolly careful never to mention her name.

‘He used to hear about her though, sometimes. Couldn’t help himself. Littlecote used to get himself into trouble with his preaching, sometimes, and his name would crop up in the papers. He and Mrs Littlecote used to tramp the country, sleeping under hedges as often as not, I dare say. And very soon there were three of them. They used to carry the baby between them.’

‘The baby!’ Dr Priestley exclaimed. ‘Is that the girl I saw this afternoon?’

‘No, that one died. The life its parents led didn’t agree with it, I suppose. Helen—that’s the girl you saw this afternoon—came later. And when she was only a few weeks old her father died, leaving Mrs Littlecote completely on the rocks. She couldn’t very well continue the preaching business, I suppose. She appealed to Claverton, who obviously couldn’t let her starve, and relented sufficiently to give her a small allowance, on condition she kept out of his



way. I believe he increased the allowance when he came into his cousin's fortune.

'How Mrs Littlecote got on, I don't know. But she managed to give Helen some sort of education. And, just as the girl was growing up, she found a pretty profitable occupation for herself. I haven't the least idea what form her husband's doctrine took. But after his death she turned to spiritualism.'

In a flash Dr Priestley remembered the contraction of Claverton's face when that word had been mentioned. 'Did Claverton know of this?' he asked.

'He only learnt of it the other day. Mrs Littlecote never told him. Thought he'd disapprove and cut off the allowance, I suppose. Anyhow, she found a way of profiting by her spiritualistic experiences. Some seven or eight years back she blossomed out as a medium. Not under her own name, of course. She called herself Madame Diane. I've heard the name several times. I believe her seances were always highly successful. From what I hear, they paid very well.

'I don't know whether she ever had the idea of apprenticing Helen to the trade. The girl strikes me, from what I have seen of her, to be difficult, to say the least of it. If I had known what I do now, I wouldn't have suggested— However, I'll come to that. In the end, it was decided that Helen should take up nursing, and she went to St Ethelburga's Hospital for her training. The first person she met there was her cousin, Ivor Durnford.'

'Durnford?' said Dr Priestley. 'Did you not say that was the name of the young man whom I saw this afternoon?'

'That's the chap. I can't quite make him out. What his game is with Helen, I mean. He's the son of Claverton's other sister. No romantic story there. She married a civil servant and lived happily ever after. Ivor's a research chemist, employed by one of the big firms in the north. He was doing a temporary job at St Ethelburga's, and that's how Helen came to meet him.

'Now I come to the queer part of the story. I've been in touch with Claverton, practically ever since I bought my Kensington practice. About a couple of months ago he sent for me and said that he wanted to consult me professionally, complained of sickness and pain in his inside. I diagnosed his trouble as gastric, and prescribed an alkaline medicine, together with a course of papain. I'm a great believer in papain for those sort of cases. I told him to get it in capsules from Taylor and Hunt. Their drugs are always the purest.

'Claverton responded to this treatment all right, but I told him he had better stay in bed. That was all very well, but there was nobody to look after him. There were four servants in the house, including Fawknor and the cook, but none of them seem to have much idea of looking after a sick man. So I put it up to Claverton that he'd have to get in a trained nurse.

‘Now, Claverton’s a queer chap in some ways. He doesn’t care what he pays for a rare book that he happens to want. But he does jib at what he calls unnecessary expenditure. He wouldn’t hear of a nurse. Said it would be throwing money away, that she’d upset the household and all that sort of thing. I left him, wondering what the devil I was going to do about it. Naturally, I didn’t dare suggest that he should go into a nursing home.

‘Next day, after a lot of beating about the bush, he said that he’s got an idea about that nurse. He had a niece, who had been trained in a London hospital. She would come and stay with him for a bit, and it would save a lot of expense. A couple of days later, I found Helen Littlecote and her mother installed in the house.’

Dr Priestley smiled. ‘I see,’ he remarked, ‘Claverton’s desire for economy prevailed over his resentment at his sister’s conduct. But surely it was hardly necessary for Mrs Littlecote to accompany her daughter? What, exactly, is she doing at Number 13?’

Oldland’s eyes narrowed behind his glasses. ‘She’s waiting,’ he replied, in a curiously significant tone.

Waiting? In a flash Dr Priestley realized how aptly that one word described her attitude. Oblivious to what was passing around her, intent only upon that dark mysterious fabric, she was waiting! But for what? For some mundane event, or for some elusive spirit to descend and commune with her? Who, seeing only that bent grey head, could tell?

‘That is very extraordinary, Oldland,’ said Dr Priestley quietly. ‘What does she anticipate?’

Oldland threw up his hands in a curious gesture of helplessness. ‘How should I know?’ he replied. ‘She’s not exactly communicative, as you may have seen for yourself. What’s she waiting for? Heaven knows! Perhaps for her daughter and her nephew to show their hands. Perhaps to be received back into Claverton’s favour. He hasn’t so much as set eyes on her since she’s been in the house, I believe. Perhaps for something more startling even than that.’

He paused, and then continued more calmly. ‘I don’t know. I’m not in the secret. I can’t even tell you why Claverton consented to have her there. The only suggestion I can make is that Helen refused to come unless her mother came too. There she is, and there, apparently, she will remain until Claverton recovers—if he does recover.’

‘Surely there is no doubt of that, is there?’ exclaimed Dr Priestley, startled by Oldland’s words. ‘I understood you to say that his illness was not serious?’

‘It isn’t. And he’s doing very well now. But how long is it going to last? Look here, Priestley, I’ve simply got to tell you, though it’s a ghastly breach of

confidence. May I ask you to promise that not a word of what I am about to say will go beyond this room?’

Dr Priestley hesitated. ‘I am prepared to undertake that, unless exceptional circumstances render such a course necessary, I will not betray any confidences you may care to reveal,’ he said weightily.

Oldland nodded gloomily. ‘It’s exceptional circumstances I’m afraid of,’ he replied. ‘Then, of course, it’s bound to come out. Well, then, these are the facts. I don’t know what to make of them, but I’ve been worried to death ever since.’

‘Mrs Littlecote and her daughter had been in the house a fortnight before I noticed anything wrong. Claverton didn’t get on as quickly as I had hoped, but that was all. I changed his medicine once or twice, but it didn’t seem to have any effect. And then one evening, about six weeks ago, Fawknor came in a taxi to fetch me. There’s no telephone at Number 13, you know. Claverton has always said it would be more nuisance than it was worth.’

‘Fawknor told me that his master was very bad and I went round at once. I found Claverton in a state of collapse, and in a pretty bad way generally. Helen told me that it had come on very suddenly. I thought that his gastric trouble had suddenly become acute, and treated him accordingly. Even then, I noticed symptoms that I didn’t like the look of. After I had been with him for a bit, the trouble seemed to subside. But I wasn’t satisfied, I was afraid it might be necessary to operate. I didn’t say anything to Claverton, but I told Helen that I thought of getting a specialist round next day. As I wanted to give him the fullest possible information on the case, I secured the usual specimens, and took them home with me.’

‘I can’t say that I had my suspicions. My ideas weren’t nearly definite enough for that. But I got to work on those specimens at once.’

A twisted smile appeared for a moment on Oldland’s lips as he leant forward in his chair. ‘My analysis was pretty thorough, you can guess that,’ he continued grimly. ‘In each specimen I tested, there were abundant traces of arsenic.’

‘Arsenic!’ exclaimed Dr Priestley. ‘Were you able to trace its origin?’

‘I was not. Put yourself in my place, Priestley. What the devil was I to do? Claverton’s attack was perfectly consistent with his having taken a non-fatal dose of arsenic. I had found proof of it in the specimens. But where had the arsenic come from? I had not prescribed it. I took his bottle of medicine home next day and tested it, on the chance of a mistake in dispensing. That test was negative, as I had known it must be. The capsules were above suspicion; Taylor and Hunt don’t make mistakes. What remained?’

‘The food which had been served to Claverton,’ replied Dr Priestley slowly.

‘Precisely. But what was I to do? Make a fuss, threaten to call in the police? Tell Claverton that an attempt had been made to poison him? What would have happened? The remains of the food had all been thrown away long ago. The arsenic might have been absorbed by some purely accidental means. I tell you, I turned it over and over in my mind till I was nearly crazy. At last I decided to say nothing to anybody, but to watch my patient very carefully for any symptoms of a relapse.

‘That was six weeks ago. Almost every day since I have procured specimens and tested them. The traces of arsenic gradually ceased, and for the last month have been undiscoverable. Only that one dose was taken, evidently. Claverton has been getting steadily better. But what guarantee have I against a second dose?’

‘I am not going to ask you if you suspect anybody of attempting to poison Claverton,’ said Dr Priestley. ‘In a case of this kind, suspicion could only be based upon conjecture. Has Claverton any idea of the cause of his attack?’

‘I don’t think so. But he has an uncanny way of tumbling to things sometimes. I’ve often wondered if he is altogether happy in his surroundings. But he’s so stubborn that I believe he would rather run the risk of being poisoned in his own house than cured in a nursing home.

‘After this had happened, I wasn’t so satisfied about the nurse he had chosen as I had been. Mind you, Priestley, I’ve got nothing against her from the professional point of view. She’s quite as capable as the average nurse I could have found for him, and all that. She’s sullen and ill-mannered, certainly, but I don’t suppose that worries Claverton. And then, a week after all this bother, young Durnford buttonholes me in the hall.

‘I couldn’t make out at first what he was getting at. He started off on some long story about the anxiety he felt for his uncle’s health. Ever since his illness he had made a point of running up to London to see him whenever he had the chance. Thanked me effusively for the care I was taking of him, and all that. I tell you, Priestley, I couldn’t get away from the fellow.

‘And then he began to hint that there was something he thought that I ought to know. I said, rather sharply, maybe, that in that case I had better be told. Then, after a lot of beating about the bush, he asked me if I was aware that Helen was in the house under false pretences?’

‘False pretences!’ exclaimed Dr Priestley. ‘What on earth can he have meant?’

‘That’s just what I asked him, straight out. And then he told me that she

wasn't a qualified nurse at all. She had been chucked out of St Ethelburga's before her training was finished. I asked him what for, but he either didn't know, or he wouldn't tell me.

'That wasn't calculated to add to my peace of mind, as you might suppose. However, I told him that I had found nothing to complain of, and gave him to understand that I was the best judge of her suitability to nurse her uncle. I took the trouble to make inquiries at St Ethelburga's, though. It seems that Miss Helen was kicked out after a devil of a row with the matron. They wouldn't give me details, but they assured me that it was nothing to do with her abilities as a nurse.

'Again, what was I to do? If Claverton had been a desperately sick man, I should have insisted on his getting somebody else in. But he wasn't. He was improving every day. As you saw for yourself, he's able to get up and sit in his library. If I'd said anything of all this to him, he would, as likely as not, have told me to mind my own business. I shouldn't be in the least surprised if he knew it already.'

'Your position is undoubtedly a difficult one, Oldland,' said Dr Priestley gravely. 'I understand now why you are anxious that I should visit Claverton as frequently as possible. I will certainly do so, during your absence. But I foresee a certain unpleasantness. It was made quite clear to me this afternoon that my presence was unwelcome to Claverton's relations.'

'You're broad-minded enough not to let that worry you, I know, Priestley,' replied Oldland earnestly. 'I think I can explain their attitude. They're afraid of the advice you may give Claverton.'

'Advice! Why, even were I to offer him any advice, which I certainly should not do unless he asked me, how could that concern them?'

'They're all at their wits' end, just now, if I'm any judge of human nature. Did Claverton happen to mention Wrythlington, this afternoon?'

'He did, casually, in connection with some book catalogues which he had brought him.'

'That's like Claverton. He didn't tell you that Wrythlington came to see him at his request on business. I'll tell you the whole story. That attack I told you about just now shook Claverton up a bit, I can tell you. He asked me straight out if he was to expect any more of them, and whether they were likely to prove fatal. I told him that I sincerely hoped he would have no more, but that, in a man of his age, there was always the possibility that gastric trouble might develop into something more serious.

'He didn't say any more then, but last week he told me that his lawyer, Wrythlington, had got into the habit of dropping in to see him, and that I

should probably meet him some day. I met him all right, last Wednesday. Oldish man, with a very precise manner. Just what you'd expect a family solicitor to be. Had one of his clerks with him too. Wrythlington unfolds a document, gets Claverton to sign it, and then asks me and the clerk to sign as witnesses. The document was the last will and testament of Sir John Claverton.

'Now, it's ridiculous to suppose that a man like Claverton hadn't already made a will. Obviously then, this was a fresh will, revoking the original one. Wrythlington carried it off with him, and naturally I didn't see the contents.

'But don't you understand the state of mind of Claverton's relations? They know that Wrythlington has been coming to the house, and it would be an obvious guess on their part that Claverton was considering an alteration of his will. But they probably don't know that the new will was actually signed on Tuesday. In whose favour was it to be altered? I'll bet that's the question that's been puzzling all of them this last week or two. And each of them would try to create an atmosphere favourable to themselves. They're jealous of me, I know that. They don't exactly welcome the influence of Claverton's old friends. He might be tempted to leave the money out of the family. And you may be sure that Claverton hasn't let fall the slightest hint of his intentions. That's the one thing that reassures me.'

'In what respect?' asked Dr Priestley.

Again that twisted smile contorted Oldland's lips. 'I shouldn't expect to find further traces of arsenic until Claverton lets it be known who is his heir,' he replied cryptically.

## CHAPTER 4

For a long time after Oldland had left, Dr Priestley sat on in his study. Only a few hours before, he had set out to pay quite an ordinary visit of sympathy to an old friend. Since then, he had seen and heard so many surprising things that he felt sleep to be impossible until he had classified them in some sort of order.

Claverton, of course, was the central figure in this strange drama. Drama, that was the word. He felt that he had been present at some theatrical performance which had failed to produce an impression of reality. Did a situation out of the ordinary really exist at Number 13? Or were the amazing possibilities which had been conjured up merely the effect of vivid imagination?

Claverton's conduct, at least, was fully consistent with his character, as Dr Priestley knew it. It was not the first time that he had been known to put himself to considerable inconvenience to save a comparatively trifling expense. It was quite in keeping with his ways that he should suffer the presence of his sister and niece in his house rather than pay the wages of a nurse. But that they were there only on sufferance was quite obvious. Since Mrs Littlecote played no useful part, it was fitting that she should remain in the background.

It was Dr Priestley's habit to look at matters from a common-sense point of view. He was not in the least likely to be shocked by the unfeeling conduct of a brother refusing to see a sister living under his own roof. What would be the use of it? Any conversation between them would in all probability end in mutual recrimination, and an impossible situation would arise. No doubt Oldland's conjecture was correct. Helen Littlecote had stipulated as a condition of her coming to Number 13 that her mother should accompany her.

After all, despite their relationship, what had Claverton and his sister now in common? Their lives had been so utterly different that they must be further apart than the most utter strangers. Better by far that they should remain apart, and that no risk should be run of conflict between them. That, no doubt, was Claverton's opinion.

So far, the situation could be explained. It was ruled by Claverton, a sick man, certainly, but still master in his own house. But the incidents described by Oldland were almost incredible. Had an attempt really been made to poison Claverton, or had Oldland, his imagination carried away by the extraordinary atmosphere of Number 13, interpreted the facts incorrectly?

Oldland, whatever his past may have been—and Dr Priestley was as ready as Claverton had been to draw a veil over that past—was an able and a clever man. It was unthinkable that he should have discovered arsenic where none existed. That the arsenic had been present must be accepted as a fact, the explanation of which remained to be discovered.

To refresh his memory, Dr Priestley took a treatise on toxicology from one of the shelves, and turned over its pages until he came to the section on arsenic. He read that the symptoms of chronic arsenic poisoning were very similar to those accompanying certain forms of gastric disorder, that arsenic was to be found in a great variety of substances, and that it could be absorbed into the system in many ways. Then he closed the book, and began to think out the problem for himself.

Oldland evidently believed that Claverton had been poisoned after his illness had developed. But was this necessarily the case? Apparently not. The appearances which he had described were perfectly consonant with an

alternative theory. Claverton might have been absorbing arsenic for a considerable time, and his illness might have been the result. The collapse which had occurred might have been the culminating point.

If that were the case, the poisoning began before Mrs Littlecote and her daughter came to the house. The source of the arsenic might have been accidental. There was really no evidence that any deliberate attempt at poisoning had been made. Oldland's suspicions had been justified perhaps, but, as he had said himself, there was no way of proving them.

The more Dr Priestley considered the matter, the more he was inclined to suspect Oldland's imagination. Certainly, he had been confronted with some very remarkable people. Claverton, as Dr Priestley had already decided, was understandable. But Mrs Littlecote! Who could tell what strange thoughts she harboured as she waited, aloof from the world, in her brother's house? The experiences which she had gone through made her a wholly incalculable factor.

Dr Priestley vainly tried to imagine the effect they must have had upon her. The years of destitution, wandering at the heels of a penniless evangelist. The amazing mental development which had converted her to spiritualism, the subsequent emotional life of a professional medium. And, finally, the long days at Number 13, a stranger under her brother's roof, all but her fingers and her brain in a state of suspended animation.

How well Oldland had, in one word, described her attitude. She was waiting. After the stormy years she had found patience to leave all activity to others, and merely to wait. And her daughter? She was not of the type that would be content to wait. What part did she play in this strange household? Not merely the passive one of her uncle's nurse, Dr Priestley felt sure.

The situation was vastly complicated by Claverton's wealth, and, if Oldland's assumptions were correct, by the recent alteration of his will. Claverton was not the man to allow any hint of his intention to escape him. How the money was to be left was, no doubt, a secret shared between himself and his solicitor. But, in spite of his treatment of his sister, he would not be likely to be altogether insensible to the claims of his family. The Littlecotes and Ivor Durnford were the most likely people to benefit by his death.

This probably explained Durnford's unexpected confidences to Oldland. Guessing that his uncle contemplated some alteration of his will, his object was to discredit his cousin. No doubt he had repeated the story of Helen Littlecote's dismissal from the hospital to Claverton. He may have feared her presence in the house. She might work upon her uncle's feelings until she induced him to make her his heiress.



It was a curious situation, no doubt. Sufficiently so to arouse Dr Priestley's interest. But all he could do was to remain a passive spectator. The idea of interfering in any way in Claverton's affairs was repugnant to him. Nor was he disposed to share Oldland's uneasiness. He very much doubted whether any attempt had really been made to poison his friend. And there was something in Oldland's suggestion that nobody would have a motive for such an attempt until the contents of his will were known. But he had given his promise, and he would certainly pay a second visit to Number 13 on the following Monday morning.

During Saturday and Sunday, he was too much occupied to devote any more time to thinking about Claverton. His secretary, Harold Merefield, was away, and this circumstance threw more work than usual upon his own shoulders. Now and then a fleeting vision of Number 13 recurred to him. Claverton seated among his books. The enigmatic figure of Mrs Littlecote. The tall, contemptuous figure of her daughter, outlined against the twilight. These people had captured his imagination, as they had that of Oldland. But he had other things to do than to speculate about them.

Shortly before eleven o'clock on Monday morning he set out. On this occasion he took a taxi; being anxious to get back home as soon as possible. During the drive, he half-regretted the undertaking he had given. He felt in no mood to encounter the Littlecotes. He decided that he would tell Fawknor that he would wait in the hall until his arrival had been announced to Claverton. And then he would get his visit over as quickly as possible.

As quickly as Claverton would allow, that was. Since his conversation with Oldland, Claverton's manner on the previous Friday had become more explicable. He had had something which he considered important to say to him. That had been the reason for his note. He had not expected his friend to arrive a few minutes before Oldland was due. Hence his trifling conversation. There had been no time for him to say what he meant to, without being interrupted. No doubt he would find his opportunity this morning.

The car turned into Beaumaris Place, and drew up at the door of Number 13. Dr Priestley paid the driver and rang the bell. A longish interval elapsed, and he rang again impatiently. At length the door opened, and Fawknor looked out. Recognizing Dr Priestley, he hesitated. His face had a curiously worried look, very different from its habitual impassiveness.

Dr Priestley frowned as the butler made no move to admit him. 'I have come to see Sir John, who expects me,' he said sharply.

'I am very sorry, sir,' replied Fawknor, his face twitching nervously. 'Sir John died yesterday morning.'

For once Dr Priestley was startled out of his usual complacency. 'Died! Good God, Fawknor, how did it happen?'

The butler glanced behind him into the hall before he replied. 'Very suddenly, sir, directly after breakfast,' he whispered. 'Sir John had an attack similar to the one he had some weeks back. Miss Littlecote sent me for Dr Milverly, but Sir John was dead before he came.' He paused, and then continued in a louder tone. 'I am very sorry, sir, but I have orders to admit nobody who has not an appointment. If you would like me to inform Miss Littlecote that you are here, sir—'

'No, certainly not!' exclaimed Dr Priestley. He turned abruptly from the door, and looked hastily up and down Beaumaris Place. The taxi which had brought him had driven to the end of the street, turned, and was now coming slowly back. He hailed it, and it drew up beside him. 'Drive me to the nearest public telephone,' he said curtly to the driver.

His mind was made up before the taxi had covered the few yards to a telephone box. 'Wait for me here,' he said. He entered the box, rang up Scotland Yard, and inquired if Superintendent Hanslet were in the building. By good luck he was, and Dr Priestley was put through to him.

'Is that you, superintendent?' said Dr Priestley, as soon as he heard Hanslet's voice. 'Yes, yes, I am in perfect health, thank you. I am in urgent need of your advice. Can you lunch with me at Westbourne Terrace at one o'clock precisely?'

'I shall be delighted, professor,' replied Hanslet. 'What's it all about? Something in my line?'

But Dr Priestley had already rung off. He looked up Oldland's number in the directory, and put through a second call. A maid's voice answered him. No, Dr Oldland has not returned, though Dr Milverly was expecting him. Dr Milverly himself was out on his rounds, but would be back at half-past one. Perhaps he would ring up again then?

As the taxi carried him back towards Westbourne Terrace. Dr Priestley's mind worked rapidly. Oldland's uneasiness had been justified, and Claverton had been poisoned in his absence. Dr Priestley had an uncomfortably guilty sensation. He ought not to have been so sceptical, to have treated Oldland's anxieties so lightly. At least, he might have taken the trouble to call and see Claverton before this. And now he was dead!

Suddenly, after an attack similar to the last, Fawknor had given him to understand. Dr Priestley reflected grimly that in that case there would be no difficulty in establishing the cause of death. It would be the simplest matter in the world to discover arsenic in the body. And it should not prove a very

difficult problem to discover the agency by which the arsenic had been administered.

Having reached home, he sat down to await the arrival of Superintendent Hanslet with what patience he might. Those who only knew Dr Priestley by his scientific reputation might have been puzzled at his intimacy with an officer of the Criminal Investigation Department. But the two were old friends. Long ago they had been concerned together in elucidating a case of murder, and Hanslet had then discovered the nature of Dr Priestley's secret hobby. The professor, whose mind was trained to the logical solution of scientific problems, loved to devote his leisure to the application of his faculties to criminal detection.

Since then, Hanslet had brought many of the problems which confronted him in the course of his duties to Dr Priestley's notice, usually with results highly satisfactory to himself. But in nearly every case Dr Priestley's interest in the problem ceased when he had solved it to his own satisfaction. The fate of the criminal was a matter of complete unconcern to him. He treated detection much as he would have treated a game of chess. The pieces in the game had no more than a passing interest for him. Not that he was unsympathetic by nature, as many people had good cause to know. But, in the problems which Hanslet set before him, he purposely took up a detached and impersonal attitude. Only in this way, as he more than once remarked, was it possible to maintain an impartial judgment.

But in this case, where the death of his friend was involved, where he could not rid himself of the nagging thought that he had done enough to prevent it, this impersonal outlook was thrust aside. Hanslet, who arrived punctually, saw at once that his host was moved as he had never seen him before. Like a wise man he asked no questions, but awaited the story which Dr Priestley so obviously had to tell.

He had not long to wait. During lunch, Dr Priestley gave him a minute description of Number 13, and of the individuals assembled there. He omitted nothing that could have any bearing upon their characters or their actions, and he emphasized his own experiences of the previous Friday. But of Oldland's suspicions he said nothing. The extraordinary circumstances which should release him from his promise of secrecy had certainly occurred. But Dr Priestley was no believer in evidence at second hand. He preferred that Oldland should give his own account of that surprising incident.

'They seem a queer lot of people, professor,' was Hanslet's comment. 'Sir John sounds pretty normal, though perhaps a bit eccentric. I've often noticed that people who shut themselves up with books all day get that way. From what you tell me of her, I'm not altogether surprised that he doesn't fall on the neck of that sister of his.'

He paused, waiting for Dr Priestley to continue. He knew well enough that he had not been summoned to Westbourne Terrace merely to hear the history of a group of utter strangers. But Dr Priestley's bold statement, when it came, was hardly what he expected.

'I have reason to suspect that my old friend Claverton was deliberately murdered yesterday morning,' he said.

Very carefully the superintendent laid down the wineglass which he had been fingering. He knew Dr Priestley well enough to be sure that he would not make such a statement without sufficient cause. But how he intended it to be treated was not quite so clear. It was hardly the kind of information that is usually imparted, almost casually, over an excellent lunch.

'Do you wish me to accept that as a definite information to the police, professor?' asked Hanslet quickly.

'I hardly think that you need take it as such,' replied Dr Priestley. 'If I am correct in my belief, the police will be informed of the circumstances from another source. I have merely wished to put you in possession of certain facts at the earliest possible moment, in the hope that they may assist you in the identification of the criminal. All I can tell you of Claverton's death is what I learnt from his butler this morning. According to him, death followed a sudden collapse before the doctor had time to arrive on the scene.'

'I understand you say that Sir John had been suffering from some form of internal trouble for a considerable time?'

'That is so. It is not impossible that this trouble suddenly took a fatal turn. Whether that was the case is for medical opinion to decide. Do you feel justified in investigating the matter further without waiting for instructions?'

'To a certain extent, yes, in the light of what you have told me, professor. I should like, if possible, to see this Dr Oldland, whom you say was attending Sir John. At this stage we must be guided by his opinion.'

The caution displayed in Hanslet's answer was not lost upon Dr Priestley. 'I do not expect you to take my word for it that a crime has been committed,' he said. 'Unfortunately, Dr Oldland is not at present in London. To the best of my belief he went away on Saturday morning, intending to return next Sunday. During his absence he had secured a locum tenens, a young man of the name of Milverly, with whom I am not acquainted.'

'Then Dr Oldland was not actually in attendance upon Sir John when he died?' asked Hanslet quickly.

'So it would appear. But no doubt you would like to hear Dr Milverly's opinion.'

'I certainly should. If you will give me his address, I will go and see him at

once.'

'Perhaps you will allow me to accompany you. If you will excuse me, I will telephone to Dr Milverly. He was expected home at half-past one, and it is now a few minutes past that time.'

Dr Priestley rang up once more. This time Dr Milverly himself replied. He recognized Dr Priestley's name at once. 'Oldland spoke about you, sir, before he left,' he said. 'Yes, I'd be awfully grateful if you'd come round. It's about Sir John Claverton, I suppose? Oldland hasn't turned up yet, though I wired to him at once. I'll wait in till you come.'

Dr Priestley sent for a taxi. While he and Hanslet were awaiting it, a note was brought in to him, which had been brought by a messenger, who was awaiting a reply. With an impatient movement, Dr Priestley tore open the envelope, and withdrew a typewritten communication. The paper was headed 'Hugh R. Wrythlington, Solicitor, Commissioner for Oaths. 152 Bedford Row, W.C.2,' and the note read as follows:

Dear Sir,—Although I have not yet the pleasure of our acquaintance, my client, Sir John Claverton, has often mentioned you to me in highly complimentary terms. I regret to have to inform you that Sir John died suddenly on the morning of Sunday, the 14th inst. I have also to inform you, in confidence, that Sir John's will contains certain provisions which affect yourself. I venture to ask you whether you could make it convenient to call upon me at my office as early as possible, as there are certain matters which I should like the opportunity of discussing with you. I should be very grateful if you would inform the bearer when it would be convenient for you to do so.

Yours faithfully,

HUGH WRYTHLINGTON

'Will you tell the messenger that I will be at Mr Wrythlington's office at four o'clock this afternoon?' said Dr Priestley to the parlourmaid, who stood at his elbow. 'The taxi is here, you say? Very well, the superintendent and I shall be ready in a minute or two.'

He did not show the note to Hanslet. There would be time enough for that later, when he had heard what Wrythlington had to say to him. He waited until the messenger had time to leave the house before he made a move. Then he and the superintendent entered the taxi, and drove to Dr Oldland's house.

They were admitted at once to the presence of Dr Milverly. He was quite a young man, and obviously could not long have been qualified. There was still a boyish look about his open and ingenuous face, which now, however, wore

an expression of deep concern. He gave the impression that some sudden responsibility had caught him unawares, and Dr Priestley, understanding something of his feelings, felt profoundly sorry for him.

He greeted Dr Priestley with the utmost respect. 'It's awfully good of you to come round, sir,' he said. 'Oldland spoke about you a lot before he went away. Of course, I knew you by reputation before then. I would have come to see you myself yesterday, sir, but I thought it would seem cheek on my part to intrude.'

'I should have been delighted to see you,' replied Dr Priestley. 'As it was, I did not hear of Claverton's death until this morning. This is my friend, Mr Hanslet, who is an officer of Scotland Yard. He happened to be lunching with me today, and I thought you would not mind if I brought him with me.'

'I am only too glad to welcome any friends of yours, sir. I expect you would like me to tell you about Sir John's death?'

'Anything that you can tell me about him since I saw him on Friday afternoon would be of the deepest interest to me,' replied Dr Priestley.

'I'll tell you everything I can, sir. Oldland described the case to me very fully on Friday evening. He told me that it was pursuing a normal course, and that in his opinion the present treatment should be continued. I may say, sir, that he warned me that in some ways Sir John was a difficult patient, and that I should have to be tactful in the way I dealt with him.

'I called at Beaumaris Place while I was on my rounds on Saturday morning. I was met by a young lady who told me that she was a niece of Sir John's, and was nursing him. She gave me the usual details, told me that Sir John had had a good night, and so on. She also said that he seemed rather fretful—that was the word she used—and that he would get on much better if he wasn't so fussy.

'I asked her what form this fussing took, and she told me it was over his food. Her uncle would eat nothing unless she tasted it first and assured him that it was properly cooked.'

Dr Priestley controlled his surprise at this unexpected piece of information. 'Claverton was very particular, in some respects,' he remarked. 'How did you find him when you saw him?'

'Rather better than I had expected, from what Oldland had told me. And of the fretfulness which his niece had mentioned I saw not a trace. He received me very pleasantly, and we had a few minutes conversation, in which he scarcely referred to his illness. I formed the impression that he was recovering rapidly, so much so that in the case of any other patient I should not have called again for two or three days. But, since Oldland had particularly asked

me to call every day, I told Sir John that I should be round to see him again about twelve o'clock on Sunday.

'But, shortly before ten on Sunday morning, I was told that I was wanted urgently. Sir John's butler had come in a taxi, and he told me that his master had had a sudden attack. I went back with him in the taxi to Beaumaris Place. He opened the door with a key he had brought with him, and took me straight to Sir John's bedroom. Sir John was lying curled up on the bed, and I saw at a glance that he was dead. Upon examination I found that death must have taken place a few minutes before I arrived.

'Sir John's niece was in the room, and also an elderly lady, whom I had not seen before. Both seemed utterly overwhelmed, and I could get no coherent answers to my questions. The elder lady did not seem to understand what I said to her, and Sir John's niece seemed utterly petrified with horror. At last, with some difficulty, I got her to tell me what she knew. Punctually at a quarter to nine, she had brought her uncle his breakfast, which consisted of a poached egg on toast, a couple of slices of bread and butter, and a pot of tea. She had then gone into the dining-room to have her own breakfast.

'Just after nine o'clock, she had gone into the library, where Sir John's medicine was kept. She poured out a dose of the medicine, and took a capsule from the box in which they were kept. These she took to Sir John, but finding that he had not quite finished his breakfast, she put them beside his bed, where he could reach them, and left the room.

'Five minutes later, she heard what she described as a scream from Sir John's room. I pressed her for the exact time, but she could only say that it must have been about a quarter-past nine. She rushed in to find her uncle writhing in agony. He could hardly speak, but she made out that he wanted water. He managed to drink some, but the intense pain continued. Then she shouted for the butler, and sent him for me.

'Now, sir, I was in the room by a quarter-past ten. That means that Sir John must have died within an hour of the attack coming on. This seemed to me extraordinary. I had never heard of a gastric patient being seized in this way without any warning. Nor could I understand such a seizure proving fatal in so short a time. I hardly knew what to do. Under the circumstances, I did not feel disposed to issue a certificate on my own responsibility, especially as I had only seen the patient once before. I therefore sent an urgent telegram to the address which Oldland had left me. I felt that he was the proper person to decide what was to be done.

'I had no reply all day yesterday. In fact, sir, I have heard nothing from him yet. I could not wait indefinitely, of course, so this morning I communicated with the coroner, explaining the circumstances, and telling him

that I did not feel justified in issuing a certificate. He took the same view of the matter as I did, and ordered a post mortem. I hope you will believe that I acted for the best, sir?’

‘I think you took the only possible course,’ replied Dr Priestley approvingly. ‘Has the post mortem taken place?’

‘Not yet, sir. The body is to be removed to the mortuary this evening. Sir Alured Faversham is to undertake the post mortem, and he has asked me, or Oldland, if he returns in time, to be present.’

‘Faversham!’ exclaimed Dr Priestley. ‘I know him well. The examination could not be in better hands. I must congratulate you, Dr Milverly, on the way in which you have dealt with this most unfortunate affair. Perhaps you will be good enough to keep me informed of future developments?’

Milverly assured him that he would ring up as soon as the post mortem was over, and Dr Priestley and the superintendent left the house.

‘It certainly sounds a bit fishy, professor,’ said the latter, as soon as they were outside the door. ‘I shouldn’t wonder if your suspicions are correct. If they are, it’s a poor look out for Sir John’s sister and niece.’

‘We must await the result of the post mortem before we discuss that,’ replied Dr Priestley grimly.

## CHAPTER 5

Dr Priestley went back to Westbourne Terrace, but Hanslet, who had an appointment elsewhere, could not accompany him. And there was still an hour before it would be time for Dr Priestley to keep his appointment with the solicitor.

It was a strict rule of his never to speculate upon an event until all the facts available were in his possession. He held that the greatest mistake a detective could make was to form a theory too early. A theory, once formed, is apt to dominate the mind, and there is an inevitable tendency to twist fresh facts as they come to light to suit it. The only safe plan was to keep an absolutely open mind, to link each fact together as far as possible. Not until the chain was nearly completion was it wise to shackle it upon any individual.

From what Milverly had said, it was pretty clear that Oldland had told him nothing of the incident of the arsenic. Yet the circumstances of Claverton’s death had been so unusual that he had hesitated to grant a certificate. Although



he had never suggested it—indeed, his position debarred him from any such thing—he must suspect poisoning in some form. Nobody, knowing the facts, could doubt that a crime had been committed.

Further than that, Dr Priestley refused to go for the present. In due course he would make it his business to identify the criminal. But not yet. Not until after the post mortem, when the police would take up the case officially. Meanwhile, there was one very significant fact to be noted. Claverton had refused to eat his food until it had first been tasted by someone else. Was this due to pure fussiness, as Helen Littlecote had suggested to Milverly? Or had he some inkling of what had happened previously? Oldland had considered this not impossible.

With that, by an effort of will, Dr Priestley dismissed the matter from his mind. He employed his time making a series of elaborate notes upon an abstruse subject upon which he was engaged. And at quarter to four he set out for Bedford Row. During his journey thither, he ran over in his mind what Oldland had told him regarding Mr Wrythlington's visits to Number 13.

The solicitor was expecting him, and he was shown at once into his office. Mr Wrythlington was a man in his sixties with snow-white hair, and a shrewd, clean-shaven face. But the wrinkles about his eyes betrayed his possession of a sense of humour, and he had a hearty way of speaking which contrasted rather oddly with the formal wording of his note.

'It's very good of you to come and see me so promptly, Dr Priestley,' he said. 'Please sit down and make yourself as comfortable as you can. Terrible business about poor Claverton, isn't it? I saw him as recently as last Tuesday, and he appeared to me then to be getting a lot better. The end must have come very suddenly.'

'I called upon him last Friday afternoon,' replied Dr Priestley. 'Subsequently, I had the opportunity of a conversation with Dr Oldland, who was attending him. I certainly never anticipated that he would die so suddenly.'

'Oh, you saw him on Friday, did you?' asked the solicitor. 'I know that Claverton was anxious for a chat with you. No doubt he told you of the duties he wished you to undertake?'

Dr Priestley shook his head. 'While I was with him, Claverton's conversation dealt almost entirely with trifles,' he replied. 'I have thought since that there was something that he wished to say to me, but that he found the occasion unsuitable, owing to our liability to interruption.'

'You were right there. He had something to say to you. I confess that I had hoped that he had been more explicit with you, as an old friend, than he had been with me. He did not speak to you about his will, by any chance?'

‘He did not mention the subject. Dr Oldland told me, however, that he acted as a witness to a document that appeared to him to be a will, in your presence?’

‘That is quite correct. Well, Dr Priestley, since you knew nothing of this business, I had better begin at the beginning. I understand that you were one of Claverton’s oldest friends?’

‘We were certainly on very intimate terms at one time. But of recent years we have seen comparatively little of one another. I know very little of his life for the past twenty years.’

‘You can’t know less than I do, I only met him for the first time when his cousin, Mrs Rivers, died. That was in 1915. You know, of course, that he inherited her estate, including that barrack of a house in Beaumaris Place?’

‘Yes, I know that. He told me about it when we met for the first time after the war.’

‘I was Mrs Rivers’s solicitor, and her husband’s before that. She was a Claverton, of course. They’re a queer family, those Clavertons, from all I’ve seen of them. Though that’s not much. Obstinate as mules one moment, and yet swayed by all sorts of odd fancies the next. Take Claverton himself. But, there, you knew him better than I did. You wouldn’t think him the sort of man to become the victim of an absurd superstition.’

‘I was not aware that he was in any way of a superstitious nature,’ said Dr Priestley quietly.

‘It was nothing but superstition that made him stay on in Beaumaris Place. It’s quite true that Mrs Rivers wanted him to live there, but she never made it a condition. I know for a fact that she never even mentioned her wish to him. But nothing would shift him, although, as you’ve seen for yourself, the neighbourhood has become impossible. More than once I’ve said to him that, with all the rebuilding that’s going on there, he could get a good price for the old place. But he wouldn’t hear of it. He used to say that it suited him well enough.

‘Then, six months or more ago, the matter came to a head. You saw that they had knocked down all the houses on the further side of him? Well, the people who are going to build there badly wanted the whole block, including Claverton’s place. In fact, they offered him nearly four times as much as the house is worth. I did all I could to persuade him to accept the offer. But he simply wouldn’t look at it. He said he had a feeling that if he moved, he’d never be able to settle down comfortably again.

‘The usual Claverton obstinacy, I thought. That and the love of driving a good bargain. Claverton knew the value of money well enough, as I dare say

you've noticed. Without saying anything to him, I approached the other parties, and got them to increase their offer. Then, with this in my pocket, I went along to see Claverton. He wasn't even interested. "It's no good, Wrythlington," he said. "I'm going to stay here until I die." And nothing I could say seemed to make the slightest impression upon him. And then, when I'd given it up in despair, he said the most amazing thing.'

The solicitor paused, and fidgeted for a moment with the objects on his desk. 'You will scarcely believe me, I suppose,' he continued. 'He said that the house had brought him luck, and that if he left it he knew that luck would desert him for ever. Did you ever hear of an intelligent man talking such nonsense? But that wasn't the worst. He actually told me, quite seriously, that if the number of it had been anything but thirteen, things might have been different. Now, in the name of sanity, I ask you what one can do with a man like that?'

Dr Priestley smiled. 'I am not superstitious myself,' he replied. 'But I believe that I can understand something of what was at the back of Claverton's mind.'

'Then you are blessed with more penetration than I've got,' said the solicitor shortly. 'However, that's by the way. As you'll have gathered from what I've just told you, I've seen Claverton at fairly frequent intervals since he's lived in London. It seems that he had no regular solicitor, and when Mrs Rivers died he asked me to act for him. Now we come to this business of the will, which is really what I wanted to see you about.'

'I must explain that, some years ago, Claverton handed over to me a despatch box containing various documents. The most important of these was a will, which he had executed some twenty years ago. In any case, before he had inherited his cousin's money, or had any prospect of doing so. This will was a very simple document. In effect, he left everything he possessed to his sister, Mrs Durnford, or, should she predecease him, to her issue.'

'I asked him at the time if he wished the will to remain as it stood, now that his financial situation was so greatly altered. He seemed rather to jib at the question and wouldn't give me a definite answer. It's a queer thing, Dr Priestley, but lots of people seem to shy at taking what ought to be the most obvious precautions. They don't like to contemplate the certainty of death, I suppose. Claverton was very offhand about it. He said there would be time enough to talk about that sort of thing when he felt his end approaching. He hoped that he had a good many years of life in front of him yet.'

'Nothing more was said until three weeks or so ago. Then one day he sent for me. I knew he had been ill, but he had told me that it was nothing serious. However, he told me then that he had had a pretty bad go a few days before,

and that there was always the possibility of his having another one. The time had come, he said, to make a fresh will. And, then and there, he began to give me certain instructions.

‘Acting on these instructions, I drew up a will, which was duly executed last Tuesday. At the same time I destroyed the old one in his presence. But, if the first had been a simple document, the second was certainly peculiar. His whole estate, with the exception of the house, was put into trust. You and I, Dr Priestley, were appointed trustees.’

If the solicitor had meant to startle his visitor, he certainly succeeded. ‘But this is a most extraordinary thing, Mr Wrythlington!’ Dr Priestley exclaimed. ‘Claverton never said a word to me upon the subject.’

‘No doubt this is what he wished to speak to you about on Friday. I asked him at the time whether he had obtained your consent, and he said he had not yet had the opportunity. But he assured me that he would have no difficulty in persuading you to undertake this duty. May I, at this stage, ask you if you are prepared to fulfil his wishes?’

Dr Priestley frowned. The idea of being involved in any form of legal business was unwelcome to him. But a consideration, sentimental perhaps, prevailed. He felt he had neglected his friend during the last few months of his life. He also had that uncomfortable feeling that he had not treated Oldland’s misgivings sufficiently seriously. Surely the least he could do now was to accept the charge which Claverton had laid upon him.

‘I am prepared to act in the capacity of trustee,’ he said gravely, after a long pause.

‘I am very much relieved to hear you say that,’ replied the solicitor. ‘It will be of the greatest assistance to me to have as a colleague some one who understood Claverton better than I did. I may say that he had no intention that we should labour without reward. In his will, he expressed a wish that we should divide his library between us. He knew the interest we both take in books, Dr Priestley.’

‘That was a very kind thought on his part. But I am afraid that I have very little idea of the duties of a trustee. What are our responsibilities in the matter of Claverton’s estate?’

‘Merely to hold the monies in trust for a term of years, and, meanwhile, to make certain payments out of interest. The principal beneficiary is a certain Mary Joan Archer, who, I understand, is a minor?’

The solicitor put the question in a matter-of-fact way, as though he expected Dr Priestley to be perfectly familiar with this girl’s name. But Dr Priestley shook his head. ‘I am afraid that I have no information on that point,’

he replied. 'To the best of my recollection, I have never before heard of her.'

Mr Wrythlington glanced at him curiously. 'Did Claverton never speak to you about her, or her mother, Mrs Archer?' he asked.

'I do not remember ever hearing him mention the name.'

'Then we're both in the same boat, Dr Priestley. I had hoped that you would be able to tell me something about these people. There was no mention of them in the first will. The first I heard of them was when Claverton gave me his instructions the other day. Mrs Archer's address is The Willows, Martonbury. Martonbury, I happen to know, is a small town in the North Riding of Yorkshire. Does that give you any clue?'

Again Dr Priestley shook his head. 'Not the slightest,' he replied. 'I did not know that Claverton had any connection with Yorkshire. Except, of course, that he held a post in the North of England during the war. Did he not give you any particulars?'

'None whatever. I ventured to ask him if Mary Archer was a connection of his. He replied that Mrs Archer was an old friend of his, and changed the subject rather abruptly. I have been wondering whether there can be some youthful romance hidden behind this unexpected bequest. It doesn't seem to fit in with Claverton's character, I'll admit. But then, nor does that absurd folly over Number 13. Perhaps Mrs Archer was an old love of his, who in the end married somebody else?'

'You may be right. I cannot offer an opinion. I can only say that at the time when I was really intimate with him, in the years before the war, he very definitely avoided the society of women.'

'The reaction from his disappointment, perhaps. It's not an uncommon symptom. But I expect we shall hear all about it before long. I have already written to Mrs Archer, informing her of Claverton's death, but there has not been time for a reply. Meanwhile, I had better explain to you the provisions of Claverton's will.'

'The estate which the trustees will be called upon to administer consists of securities of a nominal value of more than one hundred thousand pounds, yielding at present an income of about four thousand pounds a year. This income is to be disposed of as follows. Two thousand pounds per annum is to be paid to Mrs Archer, until her daughter comes of age. Then one thousand pounds is to be paid to Mrs Archer, and one thousand to her daughter, until the latter attains the age of twenty-five. Five hundred pounds per annum is to be paid to Ivor Durnford, two hundred to Miss Helen Littlecote, and the remainder in certain specified proportions to certain charities, of which I have a list in my possession.'

‘Is no provision made for Mrs Littlecote?’ Dr Priestley asked.

The solicitor smiled. ‘Oh, yes,’ he replied. ‘The house and all its contents, with the exception of the books, become Mrs Littlecote’s property immediately. You can see the Claverton touch there, I think. She’s the only Claverton left, Mrs Durnford, I understand, having died within the last year or so.’

‘This will appears to me to be a very curious document. But from what you said just now, I gather that the trust is not permanent.’

‘It lasts only till Mary Archer shall have attained the age of twenty-five, when it comes to an end. The capital is then divided into ten equal shares, to be distributed as follows. Three shares to Mary Archer, and two to Mrs Archer. If Mrs Archer had died before then, her shares go to her daughter. One share to Helen Littlecote, and one to Ivor Durnford. The remaining three are to be divided among the various charities already specified. But there is a very remarkable provision. If, by the time the trust is ended, and the capital divided, Ivor Durnford shall have married Mary Archer, and be still living with her, the last three shares go to him instead of to the charities.’

For a minute or two Dr Priestley made no comment. He was considering the terms of Claverton’s will, not so much from the point of view of the beneficiaries, as of the influence it might have had upon his death. And then a possibility occurred to him. ‘What happens if Mary Archer dies before she attains the age of twenty-five?’ he asked.

‘Then the trust comes to an end, and the capital is divided. If she has previously married Ivor Durnford, her shares go to him or to the children of the marriage. If she has not married him, her shares go to her mother, if still alive, or, failing her, to the charities. Every eventuality is provided for.’

‘So it appears,’ said Dr Priestley slowly. ‘May I ask if the contents of either will, the one you have just explained to me, or the one which it supersedes, are known to the members of Claverton’s family?’

‘Most certainly not, I should say. I don’t know anything about the first will, its provisions scarcely matter now. But Claverton went out of his way to impress upon me the necessity for maintaining secrecy over the second. In fact, he went so far as to say that any indiscretion might be dangerous. A very unusual expression, I thought at the time.’

‘Did he explain in what way it might be dangerous?’ asked Dr Priestley swiftly.

‘No, nor did I press him. Dangerous to his peace of mind, I suppose he meant. The Littlecotes might have been offended if they had known to what a relatively slight degree they benefited. Mrs Littlecote gets the house, but no

income with which to maintain it. It's too late now for her to take advantage of the offer I mentioned just now. Those people have made other plans, and, therefore, Number 13 would be of no use to them. She'll have to sell it, for the best price she can get, I suppose, unless she has an income of her own. You know Mrs Littlecote, I expect?'

'I have met her once,' replied Dr Priestley.

'Is that all? Well, it's only recently that she's been about the place. Dr Oldland wanted a nurse, and Claverton sent for her and her daughter, I understand. I've seen her once or twice, but I can't say that I've ever got a word out of her. There's something very odd about that woman, in my opinion. Her thoughts don't seem to be in this world, if you know what I mean.'

'Very possibly they are not,' said Dr Priestley meaningly. 'I have been told that she is an ardent spiritualist.'

'Is that so? I must certainly cultivate her acquaintance. But you mustn't suppose that I am spiritualistically inclined myself. It is merely that I have an insatiable curiosity as to the occult. Perhaps that accounts for her curiously detached manner, which, by the way, her daughter does not appear to share.'

'Miss Littlecote's manners, if they cannot be described as detached, are, in my experience, none the less peculiar.'

'Did you find them so? She struck me as a particularly cheerful type of the modern woman. Very attentive to her uncle, and very delightful, even to an old fogey like me. An extremely handsome girl into the bargain. I must confess that I found her entirely charming. Although, of course, I could not say so to my client, I think he treated her very shabbily in his will. But perhaps she is already amply provided for?'

'I am told that for many years the only source of income which she and her mother possessed was an allowance from Claverton,' Dr Priestley replied. He was astonished at the impression made upon the solicitor by Helen Littlecote. She must have shown him a very different side of her character. In the hopes of gaining a hint as to her prospects, perhaps?

'Dear, dear, I am sorry to hear that!' exclaimed Mr Wrythlington. 'I certainly gathered that she and Claverton were not on the best of terms. The members of that family appear to be fondest of one another when they are apart. But that is no reason why he should have extended his animosity to his niece. Did you meet his nephew, young Durnford?'

'I met him last Friday on the same occasion that I met Mrs Littlecote and her daughter.'

'I have only seen him once, for a short time. He struck me as quite a nice young fellow. I wondered at the time whether his visits to Number 13 were

solely on account of his uncle. It seemed to me that he and his cousin were on very good terms. That is why the provisions of the will relating to Durnford's marriage seem to be particularly unfortunate.'

Dr Priestley nodded absently. To him these provisions appeared not necessarily unfortunate, but deeply mysterious. Who was this Mrs Archer and her daughter? That Claverton had never spoken of them was not so surprising. He had rarely referred even to his own family. But that they should benefit so largely under his will seemed extraordinary. And to Dr Priestley, the solicitor's conjecture to account for this sounded unconvincing.

'But to return to the will itself,' continued Mr Wrythlington briskly. 'I have already told you its main provisions, so far as they affect ourselves as trustees. There are, in addition, a number of smaller legacies, amounting in all to about a thousand pounds. Fawknor gets five hundred, and the other servants smaller sums. The trustees are empowered to realize capital, if necessary, to meet these bequests and to pay death duties.'

'Have you imparted the contents of the will to any of the beneficiaries?' asked Dr Priestley.

'Not yet, I wished to consult with you first. I only learnt of Claverton's death by the first post this morning. Miss Littlecote conveyed the news to me in a short note. I have replied to this, offering my sympathy and asking her to notify me as soon as possible what arrangements are being made about the funeral. I propose to attend, and to read the will to the assembled family afterwards. I should be very grateful if you could arrange to be present.'

'I shall certainly do so,' replied Dr Priestley. And then he added, after a pause, 'Claverton's death was very unexpected.'

'Sudden, certainly. But was it so altogether unexpected? He had had a very serious attack some weeks ago, and I suppose that a recurrence was to be expected. I think that Claverton must have felt his end approaching when he instructed me to make his will.'

Evidently there were many things of which Mr Wrythlington was not aware. Dr Priestley found his complacency suddenly getting upon his nerves. Or perhaps it was the good opinion of Helen Littlecote which he had expressed. He decided that a shock would do him no harm. In any case, he would learn the circumstances within a few hours.

'I think that I may describe Claverton's death as unexpected,' he said quietly. 'The coroner evidently shares my view, since I am informed that he has ordered a post mortem examination to take place.'

His words produced the effect which he had expected. The solicitor all but leapt from his chair in horror. 'Good gracious!' he exclaimed. 'A post



mortem? Then an inquest is nearly bound to follow. How very unfortunately! But may I ask whether you are sure of this? There must be some mistake. Dr Oldland can have had no reason for withholding a certificate.'

'Unfortunately, Dr Oldland was not in London when Claverton died. His locum tenens, a young man named Milverly, was in charge of the case. He felt unable to grant a certificate, and communicated with the coroner.'

Mr Wrythlington's expression of alarm changed to one of relief. 'Ah, that explains it!' he exclaimed. 'Dear me, Dr Priestley, you gave me quite a fright. An inquest would be a most unpleasant ordeal for all concerned. I see now how it is. This young doctor you speak of is afraid of the responsibility. It is unfortunate that he took the step he did, for a post mortem is always harrowing to the relatives. But it will serve to establish the cause of Claverton's death. I feel sure that no inquest will be necessary. The coroner will be enabled to issue his own certificate, and there the matter will end.'

'I hope your optimism will be justified. Did Claverton express to you his belief that his death was impending?'

'Not in so many words. But I am quite sure that his first serious attack had made a deep impression upon him. And I do not think that he would have faced the necessity of drawing up his will if he felt convinced of his recovery.'

'Possibly not. But, when I saw him on Friday, he had anything but the appearance of a dying man. Moreover, that evening I had a conversation with Dr Oldland, who certainly expressed no fears that his illness, as such, would end fatally.'

The solicitor shrugged his shoulders. 'My medical knowledge is not very extensive, I am afraid,' he said. 'But it is a matter of common experience that in many cases complications occur which the doctors cannot guard against. It does not seem to me so very extraordinary that something of the kind should have happened to poor Claverton.'

'I quite agree that complications are apt to occur,' said Dr Priestley gravely. 'But they can usually be traced to some external cause.'

Mr Wrythlington stared at him uncomprehendingly. 'Surely you do not suggest that any accident can have taken place?' he asked. 'Miss Littlecote made no mention of anything of the kind in her note to me.'

'I suggest nothing,' replied Dr Priestley. 'I can only hope that your forecast of the result of the post mortem will prove correct. You will inform me of the time and place of the funeral, no doubt. And now, unless there is anything further that you wish to discuss with me, I will take my leave of you.'

The solicitor thanked him warmly for his visit, and they parted. Dr Priestley made his way home in a state of some irritation, the cause of which

he could not definitely explain to himself. Wrythlington had been pleasant enough, it was not that. But he had shown a misplaced sympathy which Dr Priestley resented. Fresh from his reception at the hands of Claverton's family, he disliked hearing anything said in their favour, even if they were not directly responsible for Claverton's death. He wished he had said nothing about the post mortem, and allowed the solicitor to learn the facts, without warning, from the police.

But his irritation soon gave way to astonishment at the terms of Claverton's will. He tried to put himself in the place of his dead friend, and so to ascertain the wishes that had prompted it. His principal desire, undoubtedly, had been that his nephew should marry this Mary Archer, whoever she might be. The conditions of the trust had been carefully devised to that end. If he married her, he eventually came into four-tenths of the capital. If he did not his ultimate share would be only one-tenth.

The principal beneficiary was no member of Claverton's family, but Mary Archer. She could not inherit less than three shares of the capital. Even if she died before attaining the age of twenty-five neither Durnford nor the Littlecotes would benefit. Her shares would go to charity, almost, as it seemed, in their despite.

Finally, Helen Littlecote, under any circumstances, could not better her prospects. Whatever happened, she could not come into more than one share, and possibly the value of the house and furniture if her mother died. Her share, apparently, would bring in an income of four hundred a year. But, according to Wrythlington, she could not have known she participated in the new will. On the other hand, she did not participate at all in the old one.

Dr Priestley hastily put these thoughts from him. They could not be justified until the post mortem had converted his suspicions into certainty.

He picked up the evening paper, and made a great effort to concentrate his mind upon its columns.

## CHAPTER 6

That evening, just as the dinner gong sounded, Dr Priestley was told that he was wanted on the telephone. Anything which interfered with the ritual or punctuality of the house annoyed him. It was, therefore, in rather an abrupt tone that he spoke. 'Yes, this is Dr Priestley. Who is it?'

A familiar voice replied to him. ‘Hallo, Priestley! Faversham this end. I’ve got a message for you.’

Dr Priestley’s voice became more affable at once. He and Sir Alured Faversham, the famous pathologist and toxicologist, had known one another for years, and had frequently collaborated. ‘I did not expect to hear your voice, Faversham,’ he said cordially. ‘I think I can guess the subject of your message.’

‘I thought you would. I’ve just left young Milverly. He told me that he had promised to ring you up this evening. So I said that I would save him that trouble and ring you up myself. If you’re really interested in this business, I could drop round and see you, later this evening. Say about ten o’clock, if that will suit you.’

‘It will suit me very well. I shall be delighted to see you, and most interested to hear what you have to tell me.’

‘All right. I’ll be round as near ten as I can manage it.’ Faversham rang off, and Dr Priestley continued on his way to the dining-room.

During dinner, a solitary meal served by Mary, his parlourmaid, who knew his likes and dislikes exactly, he congratulated himself upon the way things had turned out. Faversham was an exceedingly busy man, and it was very good of him to make time to come round himself. Nothing could be better from Dr Priestley’s point of view. He would hear the results of the post mortem from the lips of the very man most capable of describing them. And to an old friend like Faversham, he would have no hesitation in dropping a hint of his suspicions, if necessary.

The meal came to an end, and Mary put the decanter of port on the table, preparatory to retiring. But Dr Priestley called her back. ‘Mary,’ he said, ‘Sir Alured Faversham is coming to see me this evening. Will you go down to the cellar, and bring up a bottle of the special sherry. One of those with a black seal. Decant it very carefully, and put it in my study, with a couple of glasses and some dry biscuits.’

He drank a glass of port, slowly and thoughtfully. Very soon now he would know the truth about Claverton’s death. The various people concerned by it passed through his mind in slow procession. How, he wondered, would each react to the impending shock? Wrythlington particularly, who had refused even to contemplate the possibility of anything out of the ordinary.

Dr Priestley left the dining-room and returned to his study. A small fire was burning in the grate, for the evening had turned chilly, and a silver tray held the decanter, glasses, and a plate of biscuits. Faversham had a weakness for that particular sherry, he knew. An hour must yet elapse before he could be

expected. Dr Priestley sat down at his desk, and set to work upon a review of a scientific work which had just appeared. He wrote rapidly, in an execrable and almost illegible hand.

Ten o'clock came at last, and he rose from his chair, putting his work aside. Any symptom of excitement was very unusual to him, but now he began to pace the room with an impatient expression. He had been holding himself in check all day, unable to take effective action until the full facts were in his possession. And, now that the expected time had come, each minute seemed to prolong itself indefinitely.

It was barely five minutes past ten when he heard the faint tinkle of the front door bell. He ceased his pacing abruptly and stood listening. He heard Mary go to the front door and open it. A few words passed, which he could not distinguish, and then at last the study door opened, and Mary announced her visitor. 'Sir Alured Faversham!'

Faversham, a man of his own age, with twinkling eyes and a bustling manner, hurried into the room. 'Sorry, Priestley,' he said. 'I'm a few minutes late, I know. Unpunctuality is a crime in your eyes, I'm well aware of that. But I couldn't help it. I didn't get away from the laboratory until quarter of an hour ago, so I haven't wasted any time.'

'I am much too glad to see you to grumble,' replied Dr Priestley. 'Sit down here by the fire. I remember that you liked my sherry the last time that you were here. I expect that you will not refuse a glass now.'

He poured out two glasses as he spoke, and moved the table carrying the tray close to Faversham's chair. Usually, when he entertained visitors in the study, Dr Priestley sat in the chair on the opposite side of the fireplace. The two men lifted their glasses and sipped the wine appreciatively.

'Damned good sherry, that!' exclaimed Faversham. 'I don't seem to be able to get anything like that, somehow. Well, that young chap Milverly told me that you had been to see him about Claverton's death. I remembered that the poor chap had been a friend of yours. In fact, if you remember, I met him here once at dinner, three or four years ago. But I've never seen him since, and I don't suppose I should have recognized him again.'

'I had not seen him recently, until last Friday. Milverly told you the circumstances of his death, of course?'

'He gave me a full account of the case, so far as he knew it. It's rather unfortunate that his regular man, Oldland, is away, and apparently can't be got hold of. But Milverly acted quite rightly, in my opinion. The cause of death, from his point of view, was certainly obscure. Oldland might have given a certificate, since he knew the whole history. Milverly, as you know, reported

to the coroner, who asked me to carry out a post mortem. I had only just finished when I rang you up. I went home, had something to eat, and I've been in the laboratory ever since.'

'And have you yet established the cause of Claverton's death?' Dr Priestley strove to render his voice indifferent, but, in spite of himself, his own voice vibrated strangely.

'I think I may say that I have, but you shall judge for yourself. You know as well as I do the usual procedure. Here was a man who had been suffering from gastric trouble of some kind. The obvious thing was to examine the stomach. This I did, and found that the trouble must have been more extensive than anybody suspected. So extensive, I may say, that the stomach itself was perforated. That, I need scarcely tell you, is a sufficient cause of death in itself.'

'How do you imagine that this perforation was caused?' asked Dr Priestley.

'There are two ways in which it might have been caused. The first is by natural means, as the result of the formation of a gastric ulcer. The second is by what we may call artificial means. There are certain substances which, if administered internally, might lead to perforation of the stomach. Arsenic is the best known of these.'

Dr Priestley's eyes flickered at the word, but he said nothing. At this stage he was anxious to give no hint which might influence Faversham's opinion.

'I noticed, at this stage, that the appearance of the internal organs did not suggest that any poisonous substance had been administered,' Faversham continued. 'None of the usual indications were present. Indeed, with the exception of the perforation, and a certain amount of inflammation around it, the condition of the organs was what one would normally expect with a gastric patient.'

'But in order to establish the fact, it was necessary to proceed to an analysis of the contents of the stomach. Having completed the post mortem, and assured myself that no other ascertainable cause of death existed, I took these to the laboratory. Naturally, I tested first for the most likely substances, arsenic, and so forth. The tests gave absolutely negative results. Not a trace of any of these substances was present. The contents consisted of a quantity of almost undigested food, showing that a meal had been partaken of shortly before death. Further tests revealed the presence of an unusual quantity of perfectly harmless sodium salts, mainly in the form of bicarbonate. These were accounted for by the medicine which Claverton had been taking, and which was a very ordinary alkaline mixture.'

‘Milverly told me that he had also been taking capsules of papainum. I found the remains of the gelatine of which these capsules are made. The papain itself I did not find, nor did I expect to do so, so long after death had occurred. Indeed, it is doubtful whether papain could be identified among the ordinary gastric juices.

‘That is as far as my examination has proceeded at present. There still remain certain tests to apply, and these I shall deal with in the morning. These tests are to determine the presence or otherwise of the more unusual class of poisons. But I do not anticipate any positive results. Between ourselves, Priestley, I am completely satisfied already that Claverton died from causes which can only be described as natural.’

For several seconds Dr Priestley made no reply. Faversham’s opinion was so much at variance with what he had expected that he could hardly realize what it involved. ‘When you say that, what exactly do you mean?’ he asked at last.

‘Simply this. Claverton died as the result of perforation of the stomach, and that perforation was not caused by external means. I cannot imagine any substance which would cause perforation, and yet would leave no trace of its presence. I will admit that it is curious that perforation should have taken place so suddenly. The presence of an ulcer liable to cause perforation can usually be detected. The patient’s temperature rises as the danger point approaches, for instance.

‘I questioned Milverly on this point, and he produced Claverton’s temperature chart. It was kept by the woman who was nursing him. She’s a niece of his, or something, isn’t she? The chart showed the usual fluctuations, but nothing like the sudden rise one would have expected. And the temperature had last been taken about a couple of hours before death. It is just one of those unusual cases where a crisis takes place without warning. I don’t see that anything could have been done to save the patient.’

‘What course do you propose to take in the matter?’

‘There is only one course that I can take. As I say, I have yet to complete my analysis. If it finally proves negative, as I am pretty well convinced that it will, I shall report this to the coroner, together with my observations on the post mortem. What he will do then is his own business. He may hold an inquest, or he may give his own certificate. He’ll probably take the latter course. There could be no possible point in an inquest. There can be no suspicion of foul play, and my report will be quite sufficient to enable the cause of death to be determined. The eventual result will be the same as though Milverly had granted a certificate in the first place. I don’t, however, blame him in the least for not doing so. The cause of death was certainly not obvious

until the post mortem revealed it.'

'You have astonished me very greatly, Faversham,' said Dr Priestley. 'I had, or believed I had, reason to expect a very different result. You carried out your tests personally, of course?'

'I don't usually leave that kind of thing to my laboratory assistant,' replied Faversham drily. Then with a sudden change of manner, 'Look here, Priestley, there's more to all this than meets the eye. You've as good as said that you suspected some hanky-panky. I think that we're sufficiently old friends for me to ask why?'

'I had rather that you learnt that from the original source,' replied Dr Priestley. 'Will you excuse me for a minute?'

He went to the telephone and rang up Oldland's number. Milverly answered him. Oldland had not yet returned nor was there any message from him. Dr Priestley returned to the study, and refilled Faversham's glass.

'Since Oldland is not available, I feel justified in repeating to you a statement he made to me in the strictest confidence,' he said. 'I warned him that, under certain circumstances, I should feel bound to divulge it, and I consider that those circumstances have arisen. According to him, some weeks ago an attempt was made to poison Claverton with arsenic.'

'By jove!' exclaimed Faversham. 'If that was the case I don't wonder at your suspicions. Can I have the details?'

Dr Priestley repeated Oldland's account of the incident, as nearly as possible in his own words. Faversham listened attentively, a frown upon his face. 'That's a very queer story,' he remarked. 'It's an infernal nuisance that Oldland can't be got at. I'd like to hear details of the tests he made, and all that kind of thing. Not that it could make any real difference. No arsenic had been administered in this case. That's a matter on which I'll stake my reputation.'

'You are perfectly certain of that?' asked Dr Priestley.

'I was never more certain of anything. In my job, where there's the slightest room for doubt, arsenic is the first thing we look for. It's the easiest thing in the world to find. It remains in the system for a considerable time, and if it's there, it's impossible to miss it. There are several well-known methods of testing for it, all of which are exceedingly delicate. I don't think a schoolboy beginning the study of chemistry could fail to detect the presence of a fatal dose of arsenic in the contents of the stomach. Why amateurs continue to poison their relatives with arsenic I can't imagine. They're bound to be found out, sooner or later.

'However, that's not the point. I applied each one of these various tests, as a matter of routine, not more than an hour or two ago. I am prepared to swear

that no trace of arsenic was obtained. I'm perfectly satisfied as to that, but, after what you've told me, I'll go through all the tests again tomorrow morning, to make quite sure. You can come round and help, if you like. You probably know as much about Marsh's test and Reinsch's test as I do.'

'Thank you very much, Faversham. I should like to be present, not that I doubt your opinion, but for my own interest. If you are satisfied that arsenic was not employed, I have no further doubts on the matter. But this possibility remains. If it is a fact that some person administered arsenic on a previous occasion, he or she may have repeated the attempt on Sunday with some other poison.'

Faversham shook his head doubtfully. 'I hardly think so,' he said. 'Look here, these are the facts. Claverton died from perforation of the stomach, I assure you that there isn't the slightest doubt of that. Arsenic, in extreme cases, is capable of causing perforation. Arsenic remains in the dead body, and there is no method of eliminating it. I have applied the recognized tests for arsenic, and obtained negative results.'

'You suggest the use of some other poison. My final tests will decide if any such poison was employed. Meanwhile, we can carry the argument a little further. If such a poison caused death, it must have been responsible for the perforation, since no other cause of death exists. A corrosive poison might cause perforation. But a corrosive poison leaves other traces, which cannot be mistaken. These traces do not exist.'

'There remains one other possibility. An uncommon poison, for which I have not yet tested, may have been administered. Before it could take effect, Claverton died of perforation, in no way due to that poison. This, you will admit, is highly improbable. Even if it were the case, the poison would not have been the cause of death. My final tests will decide this point. Is all this perfectly clear?'

'Perfectly,' replied Dr Priestley. 'I'm very grateful to you, Faversham. Your analysis will put the matter beyond a doubt.'

Faversham sipped his sherry appreciatively. 'As I said before, that's a queer story you've just told me,' he remarked. 'And yet, after all, it has no real bearing on Claverton's death. He may or may not have had a dose of arsenic some weeks ago. But, if he had, he had recovered from it completely. I said just now that arsenic remains in the dead body. But it is eliminated in due course from the living body. I should not expect to find traces of it in the stomach after so long a period. And one thing is absolutely certain. A dose of arsenic administered some weeks ago could not account for perforation occurring suddenly yesterday. Even if such a dose was, in fact, taken.'



‘You are inclined to doubt the fact?’ asked Dr Priestley.

‘Only on grounds of general improbability; though, on the other hand, I don’t see how Dr Oldland could have been mistaken. But that is not quite what I was leading up to. I do not see how I can allow what you have told me to influence my report to the coroner. That incident had nothing whatever to do with Claverton’s death. In fact, I cannot see that any useful purpose would be served by bringing it up.’

‘But surely the coroner ought to be informed!’ Dr Priestley protested.

‘I hardly see what good that would do. After all, the coroner’s business is to ascertain the cause of Claverton’s death, not to investigate incidents which had no bearing upon it. If it is anybody’s affair, it is the affair of the police. But, even if they were informed, I hardly see what they could do after all this time. I gather that Dr Oldland believed that an attempt had been made to poison Claverton. But, even at the time, he decided, I think quite rightly, that nothing would be gained by making a scandal. Besides, a doctor’s position is a very delicate one. If an investigation had taken place, and no source of arsenic could be discovered, he would have done nobody any good, least of all his patient or himself. I think we must all see that, as clearly as he did.’

‘Then your advice to me is to say nothing?’

‘Quite frankly, it is. Put it this way. You, or rather Dr Oldland, for he would necessarily be the principal witness, could only suggest that an unsuccessful attempt had been made to poison Claverton, who died some weeks later from a totally different cause. What proofs could he produce? None which would carry any weight whatever. Oldland could swear to the results of his tests of the specimens. But these tests were made without any legal precautions being taken.

‘Again, you may be sure that whoever administered the arsenic went about the job pretty carefully. They would not leave such obvious tracks that a search after all these weeks would discover them. The police would not have any grounds for arresting anybody, and, if they did, the accused persons would certainly be acquitted in face of the very flimsy evidence that could be produced against them. No, if you look at the matter in cold blood, Dr Priestley, I think you’ll agree that nothing could be done. Unless, of course, you could produce evidence of very strong motive. That might put a different aspect on the case.’

‘Motive!’ exclaimed Dr Priestley. ‘The motive has been puzzling me all the evening. The only imaginable motive that any one could have for murdering Claverton would be the expectation of benefiting by his death. As it happens, I was informed of the provisions of his will this afternoon. He left a

considerable sum of money, but those who benefit most under the will are not those who had the opportunity of administering the arsenic.'

'That seems to settle the matter, then. If I were you, Priestley, I should forget all about that yarn of Dr Oldland's. I don't know anything about the man, and I don't want to say anything derogatory. Nor can I imagine what possible object he could have had for making such a surprising statement if it was not true. But, all the same, it's a bit difficult to believe, isn't it?'

'It is certainly extraordinary, and I confess that I did not at the time attach so much importance to it as Oldland himself appeared to do. But, not unnaturally, Claverton's sudden death brought it into peculiar prominence.'

'And you jumped to the conclusion that that death was due to a second attempt of the same kind. I quite understand your position, Priestley. Claverton was an old friend of yours while to me he is only an individual like anybody else. You are naturally anxious to sift to the bottom any suggestion that his death was due to foul play. I will repeat the tests I have already made, and complete the final ones, in your presence tomorrow.

'If they convince you, there is nothing more to be said, and Oldland's yarn can be allowed to sink into oblivion. That any attempt was made then, or at any other time, to poison Claverton seems to me incredible. He was lying at his own house, and being nursed by a member of his own family. You're not suggesting, I take it, that the arsenic was the private venture of the cook who had a grudge against him?'

'Hardly that. But the members of his family present in the house are very extraordinary people.'

Faversham held his glass up to the light, and sipped its contents slowly before he replied. 'Are they, I wonder? Do you know, Priestley, as we get older and more settled in our convictions, we are apt to label everybody who does not happen to look at life from our own particular point of view as extraordinary. Don't think I'm doubting your judgment. I have far too much respect for it for that. I am quite prepared to believe that these people seem extraordinary to you. They would probably seem the same to me. But is that any reason for thinking them capable of a deliberate attempt to murder?'

Dr Priestley smiled. He realized that he had allowed Faversham to penetrate his mind more deeply than he intended. 'Most certainly it is not,' he replied promptly. 'Perhaps it is that Claverton's death has been a great shock to me, and has induced me to look for complications where none exist. No doubt we could find some more cheerful subject to discuss.'

They talked, rather aimlessly, for some time longer. Though neither made any further reference to Claverton or his affairs, Dr Priestley, at least, could not

get them out of his mind. Faversham went soon after twelve o'clock, leaving Dr Priestley to a sleepless night of unavailing conjecture.

Next morning, directly after breakfast, he went to Faversham's laboratory, where he found everything ready to begin. 'We won't waste any time,' said Faversham briskly. 'I'll repeat the tests for arsenic before your very eyes. We'll start with Reinsch's test, since it is the most convincing. This bottle contains the material to be tested. Now, watch!' He took an ordinary chemical flask, and into it poured some of the contents of the bottle. To this he added a much smaller quantity of strong hydrochloric acid. From a roll of bright copper foil he then snipped off a couple of pieces, and dropped these into the flask, which he placed on a stand over a Bunsen burner.

'We can leave that for a bit,' he said. 'While that lot's boiling, we can proceed to the final tests for other substances.'

Dr Priestley watched him as he manipulated test tubes, and all the complicated apparatus of the laboratory. Faversham worked like an expert who had devoted his life to his science. He preserved a complete silence; all his attention was devoted to the operation upon which he was engaged at the moment. Dr Priestley, a scientist himself, followed his movements with an admiration not untinged with envy. He realized that though theory might be the basis of progress, it must be translated into practice by men like Faversham before it could become of any use to mankind.

Curiously enough the practical application of science had never appealed to him. He was essentially the thinker, using the observed results of others as the basis of deduction. His was the power of collecting apparently isolated facts, of discovering the hidden relations which they bore to one another, of weaving them together into a rope by which man could climb to fresh heights of progress.

Something of this he realized as he watched Faversham's deft and rapid movements. What was the great pathologist doing now but establishing a fact? That was his duty, and his whole being was concentrated upon it. But what of the fact, when he had established it? Was it conclusive, in itself? Did it destroy, in one stroke, the whole complicated tissue which had woven itself in Dr Priestley's mind?

Surely it was rather a thread to be fitted into its appropriate place, to be correlated with others until the whole pattern developed. The laboratory, with its shining apparatus, disappeared from Dr Priestley's eyes, and for an instant a vision of the drawing-room at Number 13 took its place. He saw once more those unresting fingers at their inexplicable task, the heavy folds of the material upon which they worked. The design, hidden as yet, would one day become apparent.

He recalled his wandering thoughts to Faversham's experiments. Every now and again, the pathologist would, after a complicated series of operations, pick up a test-tube with an expectant air. It contained the essence of one particular investigation. Faversham would hold it up to the light, and with infinite care add to it a minute drop of some previously prepared reagent. Then, after a pause, he would lay it aside, walk over to his desk, and strike out an item on the list which lay there.

The list grew shorter as one by one these items were eliminated, until at last only one remained. Faversham turned to Dr Priestley. 'There's no other poison present,' he said. 'Let's see how Reinsch's test is getting on. It's been boiling for over an hour now.'

Dr Priestley watched him eagerly as he withdrew the pieces of copper foil from the flask. They had lost their brightness, and had become slightly tarnished. Faversham showed them to his friend, without a word. The details of the test were as familiar to Dr Priestley as they were to himself. This tarnishing might denote the presence of arsenic, or it might not. The crucial moment of the test had yet to come.

With the same swift dexterity that he had shown throughout, Faversham washed the pieces of foil, first in distilled water, then in alcohol, and finally in ether. Satisfied at last they were chemically clean, he dried them carefully on two or three pieces of filter paper. Then, choosing from a rack a small flattened test-tube, he placed the pieces of foil in it. 'Now we shall see,' he remarked shortly.

He held the end of the tube in the edge of a Bunsen flame, and Dr Priestley, in his eagerness, leant over it closely. The critical point had arrived. If a dark ring appeared in the cooler portion of the tube, the tarnishing of the copper would have been produced by arsenic. Faversham's hand, grasping the test-tube holder, was perfectly steady. And slowly a smile of satisfaction spread over his face. The appearance of the copper foil remained unaltered, the walls of the tube remained free from any ring of arsenic.

Faversham kept the end of the tube in the flame for a minute or two longer, then withdrew it. 'A negative test, like all the rest,' he said. 'Are you prepared to accept this as conclusive, or would you like me to proceed to Marsh's test?'

Dr Priestley shook his head. He was convinced now that arsenic had played no part in Claverton's death.

'It's the same all through,' Faversham continued. 'I've tested for every possible poison or group of poisons, without obtaining any result. Whatever you may have suspected, Claverton was most certainly not poisoned.'

'And you will report this to the coroner?' Dr Priestley asked.

‘I shall,’ replied Faversham, with decision. ‘I shall give him a résumé of my experiments, and inform him that I have established the fact that Claverton died from perforation of the wall of the stomach, naturally caused. The features of the case are a bit unusual, as I explained last night. But there it is, and we can’t get away from it. You’ve seen that for yourself.’

Dr Priestley nodded. Even to his critical judgment the fact was established.

## CHAPTER 7

Dr Priestley’s feelings, as he sat in his study that afternoon, would be difficult to analyse. The negative results of Faversham’s experiments had, as it were, cut away the ground from under his feet. He had confidently anticipated that the post mortem would show that Claverton had died from the effects of arsenic. It had, on the contrary, conclusively proved that arsenic had nothing to do with his death. Faced with this, Dr Priestley was conscious of a sentiment not far removed from disappointment.

Yes, disappointment. Certainly not relief at the discovery that his friend had died a natural death. It was not that he was heartless, and that he wished to see retribution overtake a group of people whom he instinctively disliked. But it was due to a conviction, of which he could not rid himself, that Claverton’s death had been brought about by some external influence.

And yet, to his annoyance, he could produce no logical reason for his conviction. Everything, indeed, was against it, Faversham’s experiments, the accuracy of which he did not dream of questioning. The utter lack of motive, as revealed by the will, for it was not to be supposed that those unexplained people, Mrs Archer and her daughter, had any hand in the matter. There were only two features which gave the slightest grounds for suspicion. Oldland’s previous discovery of arsenic, and the fact that Claverton’s death had taken place during his absence.

How far was Oldland’s account of his discovery to be relied upon? Dr Priestley remembered Faversham’s gently implied doubts. There were two possibilities, that Oldland had been mistaken, or that he had deliberately invented the whole story. The first was incredible. Oldland’s ability was beyond a doubt, and Faversham himself had said that a schoolboy could hardly go wrong over the simple tests for arsenic.

The second possibility remained. And, as Dr Priestley considered it, his expression hardened. Was Oldland the type of man whose word could be

implicitly relied upon? There had been one incident in his life which had incurred universal censure. Claverton himself had urged that the past might be forgotten. Certainly, but—by their fruit ye shall know them!

Dr Priestley had left Midchester and settled in London before the scandal occurred. But echoes of it had reached him, and he knew at least the outlines of the story. Oldland, though his reputation and with it his practice, was growing steadily, was then a comparatively poor man, with a wife and one child.

While Dr Priestley was still at Midchester University, remarks had reached his ears. Oldland had a new patient, a young and extremely wealthy widow. It was quite natural that during her illness he should be most assiduous in his visits. Such a patient was well worth cultivating, not only for her own sake. Her many friends might follow her example, and call in this most attentive and efficient doctor. Oldland was a lucky fellow to have the opportunity of extending his practice in such a lucrative direction.

Gossip, in Dr Priestley's time, had gone no further than this. It might have been noticed, perhaps, that the doctor's visits continued for an unusually lengthy period after his patient's recovery. It was alleged later that these visits took place at the most unusual hours. And then, a year or so later, Midchester was electrified by the simultaneous disappearance of both doctor and patient.

From that moment, gossip gave full range to its many tongues. People who scarcely knew either of the parties concerned professed to have been fully acquainted with the facts all the time. But this, at least, was certain. An amorous intrigue had been proceeding for months past. The disappearance was not due to any sudden infatuation. It had been carefully prepared, as the circumstances showed beyond the possibility of doubt.

Equally certain was it that Mrs Oldland—a rather colourless woman, Dr Priestley had always thought—had neither known or suspected anything. She was undoubtedly the victim of her husband's double dealing. In spite of considerable pressure, she had refused to divorce him, clinging pathetically to the impossible hope that one day he would return to her. And then, during the war, she had left Midchester, and passed into oblivion.

Not a very creditable business, as far as Oldland was concerned. The incident had passed out of Dr Priestley's mind, he had almost forgotten Oldland's existence. Until Claverton had mentioned him, and the man himself had appeared, a prosperous practitioner in Kensington. And, from what Claverton had said, Oldland had deliberately sought him out.

But what of the other people concerned? What had become of the woman he had run away with? After all these years, Dr Priestley had completely forgotten her name. What of Mrs Oldland and the child? That no woman

shared the house in Kensington had been clear enough to Dr Priestley from the moment he entered it. Yet Oldland now was apparently a wealthy man. The car, the luxuriously appointed house, indicated that clearly enough. Besides, practices in Kensington could not be bought for nothing.

Dr Priestley realized that all this was beside the point. But the fact remained that there was a discreditable page in Oldland's history. It was not impossible to imagine that he had invented the arsenic story, if he thought he could derive any advantage from it. But what possible advantage could it bring him?

It was very curious that Milverly had been unable to get in touch with Oldland. Dr Priestley remembered that Oldland had told him that his departure from London could not be postponed. Something very urgent, presumably, had demanded his absence. He had left an address, of course, Milverly had said as much. But a telegram to that address had elicited no reply.

As he pondered these facts, a strange idea began to shape in Dr Priestley's mind. Suppose that Oldland had known that Claverton's death was imminent, and, for some reason, had not wished to be present when it took place? He might have observed certain signs, which he had communicated to nobody else. Was it possible that he had told Dr Priestley the story of the arsenic in order to prepare him for Claverton's apparently sudden death, and to mislead him as to its cause?

Speculation such as this, though logical, led to no comprehensible result. Oldland's motives for such an extraordinary course of action were completely inexplicable. In his attempt to explain away his difficulties, Dr Priestley had involved himself in a maze through which he could progress no further.

And yet he refused to abandon his conviction that there was some mystery about Claverton's death, though he realized that his refusal meant going beyond the bounds of common sense. The post mortem and Faversham's experiments had settled the matter for good and all, as far as everyone else was concerned. The police, for instance, even Superintendent Hanslet, who had the greatest respect for his opinions, would dismiss his suspicion with a smile. There were the facts, conclusively proving the impossibility of any foul play. It would be ridiculous to contest them.

Dr Priestley was the first to admit this. He had no intention of contesting the facts. But there were one chance in a thousand that they might be capable of some interpretation other than the obvious. That alternative could not be arrived at by deduction. It could only appear when some further fact or facts, not yet known, should be ascertained.

How to ascertain such facts? From the nature of the case Dr Priestley was

condemned to work alone. He could not hope to induce anybody else to accompany him upon such an obvious wild-goose chase. But his mind was made up. He would ignore, for the present, the cause of Claverton's death. But he would do his best to unravel the motives of all those whom it most nearly concerned.

On Wednesday morning Dr Priestley received a visit from Mr Wrythlington. 'Fine house you've got here,' remarked the solicitor condescendingly, as he was shown into the study. 'This neighbourhood is not so fashionable as it used to be, as we all know. I don't suppose that this house would realize anything like its true value, if you thought of selling it.'

'Such a thought has not entered my mind,' replied Dr Priestley quietly, but with no little restraint. Already at this second meeting the solicitor's manner was beginning to get on his nerves again. 'Please sit down, Mr Wrythlington. You will pardon me if I remind you that I am a comparatively busy man?'

'Oh, quite, quite. Even people who have retired from active work must have their occupations. I shall not take up more than a few minutes of your time, I hope. As no doubt you have already guessed, my call concerns the affairs of our late friend, Claverton. The funeral is arranged for twelve o'clock tomorrow morning.'

Dr Priestley contented himself with a nod, but the solicitor smiled patronizingly. 'It was all right, you see, after all,' he continued, with an air as though he were comforting a child. 'I said it would be, you remember. It turned out to be merely a formality. I expect that young doctor you mentioned lost his head slightly. He'll learn wisdom when he's been in a practice of his own for a bit, and finds that patients will die on his hands, in spite of all his efforts to keep them alive.'

'The coroner has granted a certificate, I gather?' Dr Priestley inquired coldly.

'Oh, yes. No difficulties were raised at all. The matter was perfectly straightforward, as I felt from the first it must be. A mare's nest, that was all. Well, as I was going to say, all arrangements have been made, and Claverton's is to be buried in Brompton Cemetery. The funeral will start from Beaumaris Place at twelve. I have arranged that you and I, as the trustees, should share a car—at the expense of the estate, of course. I trust that will be agreeable to you?'

Dr Priestley almost smiled at the choice of the word. He could not imagine Mr Wrythlington's companionship being agreeable to him under any circumstances, least of all at a funeral. But he merely nodded his assent.

'Very well, then. I will pick you up here at a quarter to twelve. And I shall



ask you to be good enough to come back with me to the house afterwards. I propose to read the will to the relations then, and I think your presence, as a trustee, would be desirable.'

Dr Priestley hesitated. The prospect of attending a family gathering at Number 13 did not attract him. But an instant later a thought struck him. The behaviour of Claverton's relations on learning the terms of the will might be instructive.

'I will attend if you consider it desirable,' he said. 'Whom do you expect to be present?'

'Mrs and Miss Littlecote, of course,' replied the solicitor. 'I do not know whether Ivor Durnford will be able to get away. He returned to the North of England last Friday, I understand, and he may not be able to leave his work again so soon.'

'And Mrs Archer?' inquired Dr Priestley.

'I have received a letter from Mrs Archer, in reply to the one I wrote her. A curious letter, in some ways. She expresses regret at Claverton's death, and informs me that as she does not enjoy very good health, she does not feel equal to the journey to London. Not a word about her daughter. And a postscript to the effect that she trusts her presence will not be necessary in any subsequent legal transaction.'

For the first time since the solicitor's entrance, Dr Priestley betrayed some symptoms of interest. 'You informed her that she was a beneficiary under the will?' he asked.

'Exactly. But I did not inform her to what extent. She made no direct reference to this in her reply.'

'From what you tell me, it would appear that she expected to share in Claverton's estate.'

'Just the conclusion that I came to, Dr Priestley. Claverton may have told her so, of course. But, in any case, she must have expected to be among the participants. I have made a very interesting discovery since I saw you last. In my capacity as Claverton's executor, I have applied to the bank for his pass-book, in order to assist me in winding up the estate. In examining this, I have found that Claverton had given a standing order to his bank to pay Mrs Archer the sum of two hundred pounds every quarter.'

'Indeed?' said Dr Priestley, ignoring the significant tone of Wrythlington's announcement. 'No doubt Claverton had his own adequate reasons for making this allowance. Since Mrs Archer will not be present tomorrow, no doubt you will inform Mrs Archer by letter of the terms of the will?'

'Certainly,' replied the solicitor. He was on the point of continuing the

subject, but suddenly became aware that Dr Priestley's eyes were fixed upon the clock. He frowned slightly, and rose to his feet. 'I forgot for the moment how valuable your time is,' he said, with a hint of sarcasm. 'I shall call for you at a quarter to twelve tomorrow morning then. I hope that you will not consider the time occupied by Claverton's funeral as being entirely wasted.'

Dr Priestley stared at him half-regretfully as he left the room. That an antagonism had sprung up between them was only too obvious, and Dr Priestley was inclined to blame himself for the fact. He felt that he had been too quick to resent the peculiarities of the solicitor's manner. He seemed a decent enough sort of fellow really. Anyhow, as Dr Priestley reflected, he had consented to act as Wrythlington's co-trustee, and it was too late now for him to go back on his undertaking. Since he would necessarily see a good deal of the man, he must exercise more tolerance, that was all.

With this resolve in his mind, he set out next morning in Wrythlington's company. With a feeling of very real sorrow he stood at the graveside as the last solemn words were said over his old friend's body. And, as the mourners turned away, a solemn thought came to him. If, indeed, in spite of everything, Claverton's death had not been the natural event it seemed, it was his duty in the sight of God to avenge him.

He and Wrythlington drove back together to Number 13. 'So young Durnford was able to get away,' remarked the solicitor. 'You noticed him, of course, standing next to Miss Littlecote. I wonder what he'll think when he hears the terms of the will? Or rather, I wonder what Miss Littlecote will think? I've thought, more than once, that there was some sort of an understanding between those two young people. It's a queer position for Durnford to be faced with, very queer. Do you happen to know if he has any money of his own?'

'I have no idea,' replied Dr Priestley. 'Claverton was always very reticent about his family and their affairs.'

'Reticent! That's just the word. I had the greatest difficulty in extracting the necessary particulars from him when I was drawing up the will. Naturally, when he first mentioned Miss Mary Joan Archer I imagined that she was another niece, that Mrs Archer was a third sister. But when I asked him he merely said that Mrs Archer was no relation, and went on to say something else. I'm very sorry that neither she nor her daughter are here today. I should like to have made their acquaintance.'

Dr Priestley nodded. He also would have liked to make the acquaintance of this mysterious pair. But what he chiefly regretted was that the opportunity of seeing them in the company of Claverton's relations would be lost. Much might have been learnt by that.

The car entered Beaumaris Place, and stopped at the door of Number 13. To Dr Priestley the place appeared more depressing than ever. A fine drizzle was falling, and, though it was the middle of the day, a heavy, grey pall of semi-darkness hung over London. The hall, with its oak panelling and heavy furniture, enfolded them with the chill gloom of a subterranean cavern.

Wrythlington shivered as he felt the touch of it. 'Did you ever know such a beastly house?' he whispered, as they followed Fawknor upstairs. 'I wouldn't live in it at any price. I wonder—?'

Fawknor had flung open the drawing-room door before he could finish his sentence. As Dr Priestley entered, the room seemed suddenly familiar, as though he had known it all his life. Nothing had changed since he had stood in it for those few minutes, six days before. The same empty grate stared at him, the same stiffly arranged and inhospitable furniture. And, incredibly, Mrs Littlecote sat in the same place on the sofa in the corner.

Incredibly, because Dr Priestley had seen her standing, rapt in contemplation, beside the grave. She could only have entered the house a few seconds before him. Yet, in some mysterious way she had divested herself of her coat and hat, and had reassumed her accustomed seat, from which the trifling incident of her brother's death had momentarily disturbed her. The dark, shroud-like material fell in heavy folds from her lap, her iron-grey head was bent over the needle that moved backwards and forwards with maddening persistence.

Her daughter came forward to greet Dr Priestley and the solicitor as they came in. Her manner towards the former had undergone a subtle change. She was no longer brusque and defiant, she even smiled as she thanked him for attending her uncle's funeral. He saw her thus for the first time, tall, dark, with a face which seemed hostile to the world at large, yet haunted by an indefinable beauty, and half-hidden by the secret veil of her hair. A striking-looking girl, was his mental comment.

Ivor Durnford stood with his back to the room, staring moodily at a collection of china displayed in a glass-fronted cabinet. From the glance which Dr Priestley caught of his profile, he looked unutterably bored. His fingers fumbled at the watch in his pocket, which he withdrew and consulted with a frown. Then, scarcely turning round, he spoke in a dull, supercilious tone. 'You won't forget that I have to catch the two-ten from King's Cross, will you, Helen?'

A moment of irresolution followed. It may have been Dr Priestley's imagination that played him a trick, but it seemed to him that Mrs Littlecote's fingers faltered for an instant. Her daughter's eyes glanced at Mr Wrythlington, then rested upon Dr Priestley inquiringly.

He instantly became conscious of the tension in the room. He felt as though he were in the presence of a group of wax figures which a single word would galvanize into life. Their restraint was so intense that it had deprived them of all human characteristics. Behind their impassive masks they were on fire with a fever of anticipation. In that moment he decided that not one of them had the slightest inkling of the contents of the will.

Wrythlington must have noticed the expression with which Helen Littlecote regarded Dr Priestley, for he hastened to explain his presence. He picked up an attaché-case which he had brought with him, and cleared his throat. 'Since Mr Durnford is anxious to catch a train, I had better proceed at once with my intention of reading Sir John Claverton's will,' he said. 'As you will hear shortly, this will establishes a trust, and Dr Priestley is named as one of the trustees. Since he has generously consented to act in that capacity, you will all agree, I am sure, that his presence is desirable.'

He had raised his voice a trifle, and his eyes were fixed upon Mrs Littlecote as he spoke. But her head remained bent over her work, and it seemed as though she had heard nothing. Her daughter replied for her. 'Mother is rather deaf, Mr Wrythlington. I will sit beside her, and repeat what you say to her. She hears me better than she does anybody else.' She crossed the room and seated herself on the sofa, putting her hand on her mother's shoulder. 'Mr Wrythlington is going to read Uncle John's will,' she continued, in a harsh, rather forced tone.

Mrs Littlecote must have understood her, for she nodded, and put her work aside. Then, for the first time she looked up, and Dr Priestley saw that she was wearing a pair of tinted spectacles, behind which her eyes were invisible. She had not worn them at the funeral. Perhaps she only put them on indoors. But the effect was that of a mask, rendering her expressionless face yet more inscrutable.

Mr Wrythlington occupied an arm-chair, his attaché-case open upon his knees. Ivor Durnford strolled nonchalantly across the room, and took up a position at the corner of the fireplace, his elbow resting on the mantelpiece. Dr Priestley, in his rôle of detached observer, took a seat at the further end of the room, from which he could watch the rest.

Again the solicitor cleared his throat. 'The will which I am about to read was made quite recently,' he began. 'It revokes all previous wills and codicils which may have existed. The present will was signed by Sir John Claverton rather more than a week ago, on Tuesday, October 9th, and is witnessed by Sidney Oldland and James Fish.'

Mrs Littlecote's head had fallen forward again, and Dr Priestley could see nothing but the now familiar iron-grey hair. But a light flickered for an instant

in her daughter's eyes, and she exchanged a glance with her cousin. It hardly seemed a glance of understanding, rather of challenge and triumph. It seemed as though she acknowledged the battle of influence that had been waged, and saw in this new will the first token of her victory.

After a pause, the solicitor continued. 'I will now go through the clauses of the will. In the first place, there are certain legacies, which I will enumerate. First comes Fawknor—'

As his voice droned on, the strain began to tell on the girl sitting on the sofa. She was not interested in these trifles, the five hundred pounds to Fawknor, the hundred pounds to the cook 'if she should still be in my service at the time of my death.' It must have seemed to her that the solicitor would never get to the point. And, meantime, her hands fidgeted with the coverings of the sofa, creasing and folding them with almost savage intensity.

Yet never for an instant did her attention falter. She hung breathless upon the lawyer's words, as though she feared to miss the opening of the sentence which would mean for her the difference between her lifelong poverty and a much longed-for wealth. Her mother's fingers had ceased their sewing, and now lay idly in her lap. She sat there rigid and motionless, as if, when her fingers had ceased their motion, her whole body had become lifeless and inert. It was impossible to tell whether or not she could hear what was being said. And Dr Priestley noticed that her daughter made no attempt at interpretation.

At last Wrythlington came to the end of the small bequests. 'There is a clause here which concerns Dr Priestley and myself,' he continued. 'Sir John bequeathed the books in his library to us jointly, to share as we may decide. I am sure that Dr Priestley will agree when I say that should any of these books have any sentimental value for any member of the family, we shall be happy to hand them over. With that exception, this house, and all its contains, is bequeathed absolutely to Mrs Littlecote.'

Ivor Durnford smiled sardonically, but made no effort to catch his cousin's eye. Clearly, he did not in the least envy his aunt her possession of Number 13. Helen Littlecote's eyes sparkled for an instant, and then she leant over towards her mother. 'The house and furniture goes to you,' she said, slowly and distinctly.

Mrs Littlecote raised her head, still with eyes hidden behind those mask-like spectacles. Her lips moved, and she would have spoken, but her daughter nudged her sharply. 'Mr Wrythlington hasn't finished yet,' she warned her.

The solicitor paused. 'If Mrs Littlecote wishes to say anything—' he began, but Helen Littlecote interrupted him.

'It's all right, mother can wait till you've finished.' And then as an

afterthought, maliciously, 'We mustn't forget that Ivor has a train to catch.'

Mr Wrythlington frowned. Clearly he had no intention of being hurried. 'At this stage I am afraid that it will be necessary for me to make a somewhat lengthy explanation,' he said. 'As I mentioned just now, Sir John's will establishes a trust. With the exceptions which I have mentioned, the remainder of his estate is involved. It will be best, I think, if I set out briefly the conditions which such a trust entails.'

He entered upon a tedious and interminable discourse upon trusts, the duties of trustees, and the limitations laid upon them by the law. Helen Littlecote could not conceal her impatience. Her fingers had worked a hole in the cushion-cover with which she was playing, and, half-unconsciously, she began to enlarge it. Mrs Littlecote stretched out a thin arm and took the cushion quietly from her. No doubt she reflected that it was now her own property, and that it was a pity to damage it.

Even young Durnford's nerves began to suffer. His long and tapering fingers began to play the ghost of a tune upon the cold marble of the mantelpiece. He was holding himself in with an effort as great as that of his cousin. With real concern Dr Priestley began to wonder what would happen when they heard the truth. Surely this emotion, so long pent up, would burst into a scene which would reveal the rivalry of the past?

And then, smoothly and without a break, Wrythlington passed on to the vital provisions of the will. 'Having explained the meaning of the trust, I will read out the terms of its application. The residue of Sir John's estate, I should say, is estimated to yield at present about four thousand pounds per annum in income. "Of the said income, I desire the trustees to pay two thousand pounds per annum to Mrs Muriel Archer, five hundred pounds per annum to my nephew, Ivor Durnford, two hundred pounds per annum to my niece, Helen Littlecote, and the remainder to certain charities, as hereafter specified."'

The solicitor paused, and a queer choking sound came from the direction of the sofa. Then for a moment there was a dead silence. It was as though the listening group had been struck with sudden dumbness. Helen Littlecote made an attempt to speak, but her mother's hand closed like a bird's claw upon her arm. Ivor Durnford turned his head slowly towards Mr Wrythlington, and Dr Priestley saw the look of blank incredulity in his eyes. But he managed to control himself, only his voice quivered slightly as he spoke. 'And may I ask who is this lady who inherits half my uncle's estate?' he inquired.

This was evidently not quite the question that the solicitor had expected. But he encountered it cleverly. 'Perhaps Miss Littlecote or her mother can inform you, Mr Durnford,' he replied.

Helen Littlecote, thus appealed to, looked wildly round the room, as though she expected the unknown woman to materialize suddenly from one of its sombre corners. ‘Muriel Archer?’ she said, slowly and uncertainly. ‘I can’t understand. Neither mother nor I have ever heard her name before.’

Mrs Littlecote must somehow have understood, for she nodded her head sharply, and then relapsed into her former immobility.

Mr Wrythlington permitted himself a glance at Dr Priestley, and then continued briskly. ‘Mrs Archer is described in the will as “Of The Willows, Martonbury.” An old and valued friend of Sir John’s, no doubt. Her daughter, Mary Joan Archer, is also mentioned. Indeed, the trust terminates upon Miss Archer attaining the age of twenty-five. When that date arrives, the trust funds are divided into ten equal shares and distributed. Mrs and Miss Archer between them receive five shares. Of the remainder, Mr Durnford receives one, Miss Littlecote also receives one, and the remaining three are distributed among the charities already specified.’

The solicitor paused impressively, and then continued. ‘But there is a clause providing that, under certain conditions, these shares shall be otherwise proportioned. I will read it to you. “If, at the above specified date, my nephew, Ivor Durnford, shall be married to the said Mary Joan Archer, and no separation shall have taken place between them, then the trustees shall hand over the remaining three shares of my estate to the said Ivor Durnford, instead of to the charities before mentioned.”’

Ivor Durnford laughed, shortly and unpleasantly. ‘I never heard anything so ridiculous!’ he exclaimed. ‘Uncle John’s illness was mental, as well as physical, I imagine. You’ve pretty well finished now, I suppose, Wrythlington?’

‘There are certain additional clauses—’ the solicitor began, but Durnford turned his back on him.

‘I haven’t time to listen to them,’ he said. Then he strode up to the sofa, until he stood opposite Mrs Littlecote.

‘You’ll have a bit of a job to keep this place up, won’t you, Aunt Clara?’ he shouted venomously. And then, without looking round, he walked with an affected jauntiness from the room.

## CHAPTER 8

As the door closed behind Ivor Durnford, Helen Littlecote leapt to her feet, angrily shaking off her mother's detaining hand. It was as though her cousin's departure had released the hidden spring of her being. She stood for an instant, the incarnation of angry defiance. Above the rumble which rose from Beaumaris Place came the crash of the front door, violently slammed. Durnford had gone to catch his train.

Helen Littlecote's hand went sharply to her throat with a queer gesture. She seemed for a moment to be choking, to be unable to find utterance for the torrent of thought with which her breast heaved. And then, hoarsely and passionately, she spoke. However deaf her mother might be, it seemed to Dr Priestley impossible that she should not hear.

'It's all very well for Ivor to go off like that! He's only got to marry this girl, and between them they pocket nine-tenths of the money. But what about us? How are we expected to live on a beggarly two hundred a year?'

The solicitor flushed uncomfortably, as though the question had been an accusation. 'Really, Miss Littlecote, that is not a question that you can expect me to answer,' he replied smoothly. 'Your eventual share of the estate should bring in at least four hundred a year. Besides, your mother may, if she pleases, dispose of the house and its contents, which should yield quite a reasonable sum.'

She laughed contemptuously. 'A reasonable sum! It's easy enough to talk. Why should we remain beggars while those Archers are given the money which ought to have been ours? Who are they, anyhow? What possible claim could they have upon Uncle John? Why was he so keen that Ivor should marry this girl, whatever her name is?'

Dr Priestley was right. Mrs Littlecote had at least understood the purport of her daughter's words. For the first time she spoke, in a constrained and peevish tone which faintly resembled her brother's voice. 'You must not talk like that, my dear,' she said. 'I'm quite sure that your uncle had a very good reason for what he did.'

Helen turned upon her. 'Then I'd like to know it!' she retorted. 'What was the good of our coming here to look after Uncle John? What have we got out of it? The house for you, and two hundred a year for me, no more than we had a right to expect if we had never set eyes on him. Why didn't he send for these Archer people to nurse him, if he meant them to have all his money? And to think that he made that will while we were actually in the house!'

It seemed to Dr Priestley that this strange girl had come to life under his very eyes, and he could not withhold a certain admiration for her beauty, now at last fully apparent. She stood quite still for a moment, exhausted by her



outburst. Then, with the sudden, swift movement peculiar to her, she raised both hands to her face, and rushed from the room. Her mother very deliberately laid her work aside, removing the needle and sticking it with a deep purple thread attached into the arm of the sofa. Then without a word of apology, without even a glance towards the trustees, she rose and followed her daughter, leaving the door open behind her. Her slow footsteps could be heard ascending the stairs.

Mr Wrythlington looked at Dr Priestley with an expression of disgusted astonishment. 'Really, this is most extraordinary behaviour!' he exclaimed. 'I have never seen such a display of bad manners. Still, we must make allowances for them, I suppose. The provisions of the will seem to have been entirely unexpected.'

'So it would appear,' replied Dr Priestley drily. He had risen from his chair and moved towards the door. 'I do not think that I can serve any useful purpose by remaining here,' he continued.

'You're not going?' exclaimed the solicitor. He seemed for a moment panic-stricken at the idea of being left alone. And then he pulled out his watch and looked at it. 'Hallo, it's two o'clock,' he continued. 'We've neither of us had any lunch, yet. Perhaps it would be better if we both went. This is very annoying. I was particularly anxious to put a proposition before Mrs Littlecote. But I can come back tomorrow, by which time she and her daughter will have got over the shock, I hope.'

They went out together, and met Fawknor in the hall. The solicitor told him the news of his legacy, which he received with his habitual impassiveness. Mr Wrythlington's car was waiting, and he drove Dr Priestley home, refusing the latter's invitation to lunch on the excuse of pressure of work.

That afternoon Dr Priestley spent in his study, seated in a chair drawn up before the fire. He felt completely puzzled, not for the first time in his life. But hitherto, however intricate the puzzle had seemed, he had always contrived to find some method of approaching the solution. In this case, he could see no line of investigation which held out the slightest prospect of success.

As was his custom, he reduced everything to its simplest and most logical terms. In the first place, what was the problem? And here, at the outset, he was bound to confess that it was utterly illogical. There was nothing whatever to suggest that Claverton's death had been anything but natural, that, to put it bluntly, he had been murdered. Indeed, all the evidence pointed in exactly the opposite direction.

Dr Priestley would have been the last person to believe in intuition. He would not have admitted for the moment any evidence that could not be

perceived by the human senses. And yet his conviction that Claverton's death had been at least hastened, was perilously like intuition, in that there was nothing tangible to support it.

Putting aside Oldland's extraordinary statement, there was only one thing which could be deemed in the least suspicious. And this was that Claverton had died almost immediately after signing his new will. But any argument based on this circumstance must lead to a cul-de-sac. The inference was that his death was brought about by some one who would benefit under the new will. But who did so benefit?

The Archers, primarily. But, for the present, at least, they might be ruled out. There was no evidence that they had even been near Number 13, and it was difficult to imagine how they could have contrived Claverton's death from a distance.

Next came Ivor Durnford. But the consideration of him as the possible criminal was surrounded with difficulties. Claverton's death had occurred on Sunday the 14th. According to Wrythlington, Durnford had left London on Friday the 12th, the day of Dr Priestley's visit. He had apparently left the house while Dr Priestley was with his uncle.

Again, why should he have waited until the second will was signed? In all probability he was in ignorance of the contents of that will. He might have gambled upon being the chief legatee under it. But he was already that under the first. Looking at the matter from that point of view, he would have been better advised to murder his uncle before the second will was signed.

As he considered this question, Helen Littlecote's words recurred to Dr Priestley. It was quite true that if Ivor Durnford were to marry Mary Archer, he and she between them would eventually secure nine-tenths of the estate. But many years must elapse before that could occur. And people do not become murderers for the prospect of a remote benefit. If Claverton had indeed been murdered for his money, the criminal must have hoped to reap an immediate reward.

And then that strange pair, the Littlecotes, acting either separately or in concert. There was food for thought here. They were in the house when Claverton died, and had been there continuously for some weeks. It was in their interest to wait until the second will had been signed. Under the provisions of the first they got nothing whatever. Under the second they benefited to some extent, though evidently far less than Helen Littlecote, at least, had hoped. They could raise a certain sum almost immediately by the sale of the house and its contents.

There remained those who had been left small legacies. Fawknor, the other

servants, Wrythlington, Dr Priestley himself. But none of these could have expected to benefit to any considerable extent. The inducement to commit murder seemed incredibly slight.

Nothing very convincing was to be reached by this line of argument. Dr Priestley turned to a consideration of the will itself, in the faint hope that he might thus find a clue. Claverton had put off making a fresh will for a considerable time. And yet his original will must have been obsolete for many years. His desire to provide for the Archers could not have been due to a sudden impulse, since for a long time he had been giving them an allowance. Why had he suddenly made up his mind to instruct Wrythlington? The solicitor's explanation that his previous attack had alarmed him was probably the correct one.

In many ways this second will was a very curious document. It was an attempt by Claverton to direct affairs after his death. In any case, he had ensured that Mary Archer should inherit half his estate. His reason for thus preferring her before his nephew and niece was not yet apparent. Knowing Claverton's nature, Dr Priestley was convinced that a genuine reason existed, that the bequest was not due to some romantic and generous interest on behalf of a stranger.

But, having thus disposed of half his estate, he would naturally, one would have supposed, have left the remainder to his nephew and niece, in certain proportions. This he had not done. During his life he had been, not perhaps actually mean, but careful of his money. Dr Priestley remembered that, in the old days at Midchester, it had been notoriously difficult to extract from him any sort of charitable subscription. Yet he had deliberately gone out of his way to leave a very large slice of his money to charities.

Dr Priestley set to work to fathom his friend's intentions when he made these provisions. There were three people directly concerned, Mrs Littlecote, her daughter, and Ivor Durnford. How, exactly, had he regarded each of them?

His attitude towards his sister was not difficult to understand. He had never really forgiven her amazing marriage with the wandering preacher. During his lifetime he had allowed her a trifling sum, probably in order to avoid further scandal. It was likely that he would have continued this allowance in his will. But she had established herself in his house, obviously against his wishes, since he had refused to see her. Very well then, she had forcibly taken possession of Number 13. Let her keep it, and make the best of it. But nothing else of his should she have. It would be a characteristic decision on Claverton's part.

But what of her daughter? She, at least, seemed to deserve more consideration than she had received. She could not be held responsible for her

mother's actions before she was born. She had been summoned by Claverton himself to nurse him, and had, according to all accounts, carried out her duties efficiently. Why had her uncle so definitely limited her prospects?

Dr Priestley frowned as he tried to answer this question satisfactorily. That mysterious business of the arsenic refused to be set aside. Was it possible that Claverton had some inkling of it, that he believed that an attempt had been made to poison him? Oldland had admitted the possibility, and there was that curious statement made by Helen Littlecote to Milverly that he had insisted upon his food being tasted before he touched it. And if he suspected his niece of being the culprit, he would naturally not be inclined to leave her more than a bare minimum.

This, however, by no means exhausted the possibilities. Oldland was probably right in thinking that Durnford had told his uncle the story of her dismissal from St Ethelburga's. That he was profoundly jealous of his aunt and cousin was obvious from his behaviour. Guessing that his uncle was preparing a will, he would not be averse to a chance of discrediting his rivals.

And there was a third possibility, which appealed to Dr Priestley with greater force than the rest. Claverton might have purposely left Helen Littlecote badly off in order to diminish any temptation on Durnford's part to marry her.

For that was the crux of the whole matter. He had intended, for some obscure reason of his own, that Durnford should marry Mary Archer. The whole tenor of the will showed this perfectly plainly. Durnford was left little better off than his cousin, but he could quadruple his income if he obeyed his uncle's wishes.

Durnford, in fact, was definitely bribed to marry Mary Archer, of whom, apparently, he had never heard until the will was read. On the face of it, such an action on Claverton's part was preposterous. But Claverton, whatever his faults, had been no fool. Dr Priestley felt that he had been inspired by some definite policy. He had probably fathomed his nephew's character correctly. He had probably seen in him an ambitious young man, who would not resent having his wife chosen for him if he profited financially by agreeing to the choice.

The more Dr Priestley considered the complexities surrounding his problem, the more it fascinated him. Its solution, he felt convinced, could only be reached by a study of the characters of those involved. But how was one to study anybody so enigmatic as Mrs Littlecote, for instance? What part had she played in this extraordinary drama? Oldland had described her attitude as waiting for something to happen. Well, she had not been disappointed. The anticipated event had taken place. But had it been the event which she had

expected?

In any case, a study of character could not be conducted from an arm-chair. Dr Priestley realized that he would have to devote time to cultivating the acquaintance of people to whom he did not feel particularly drawn. He glanced regretfully at his desk, with its piles of books and manuscripts. He would much have preferred to take his seat there, and abandon any further speculation as to his old friend's death. But he knew well enough that he could never do so. To concentrate upon his work with a problem remained unsolved was impossible to him. He was condemned to an utterly irrational and quixotic quest, and meanwhile, the affairs on his desk must be put aside. Perhaps, after all, the cause of science to which he had devoted his life would not suffer very greatly.

Next morning he put his resolve into action. The Littlecotes would wait, he could always get into touch with them, through Wrythlington, if necessary. Oldland was not expected back in London for two or three days yet. He had time for a move which might yield profitable results.

So he caught an early train, and that afternoon found himself in Martonbury. It was a small market town, standing apart from the industrial district of Yorkshire, and shut in among the dales. His first care was to secure accommodation at the Black Bull, which seemed to be the principal hotel in the town. And, while there, he took the opportunity of asking the porter the way to The Willows.

The man scratched his head. 'The Willows, sir? That'll be Mrs Archer's, you mean? The widow lady that lives on the Richmond road?'

So Mrs Archer was a widow. That was a useful piece of information gained. 'Yes, that is the place,' Dr Priestley replied.

'Well, sir, it's not hard to find. You go straight across the market-place and along High Street till you come to the post office. Then you turn to the right, and you're in Richmond Road. Keep along till you come to the Almshouses, and Mrs Archer's is the next after that.'

Dr Priestley thanked him, and set out. Following his directions, he came after ten minutes or so to the Almshouses. Next to these a pleasant-looking little house, standing in a well-kept garden, caught his eye at once. This must be The Willows. He walked boldly up the path and rang the bell.

The door was opened by a little maid, who stared with awe-stricken wonder at the strange gentleman. However, in reply to his inquiry, she said that Mrs Archer was at home, and showed him into a prettily-furnished drawing-room, with a homely air of untidiness about it. Then, forgetting to ask the visitor's name, she went in search of her mistress.

Dr Priestley had time for a hurried glance about him. He noticed,

prominent among the photographs in the room, two or three of a youngish man in naval officer's uniform. But he had no opportunity for further investigation. He had scarcely been alone for a minute when the door opened and a woman entered the room.

For a second or two they stood facing one another in silence. Mrs Archer was a woman of forty, of middle height and a still girlish figure. Her features were well-informed and regular; without being exactly pretty, she was exceedingly attractive. In her younger days she must have been a very charming young woman, Dr Priestley decided. But it was her expression that drew his attention. There was a curious look of fear, of challenge, in her grey eyes which puzzled him.

'You wish to see me?' she asked in a pleasant but rather distant tone.

'I have called, hoping to have the privilege of a few minutes conversation with you, Mrs Archer. My name is Priestley, I was a friend—'

But she interrupted him before he could finish the sentence. 'Not Dr Priestley!' she exclaimed. 'Oh, I am delighted to see you! It is good of you to come all this way. Do sit down. Excuse me a moment, and I'll tell Beatrice that we are not to be disturbed.'

She literally ran from the room, before Dr Priestley could so much as open the door for her. It struck him that she seemed to have completely recovered from the ill-health which had prevented her attendance at the funeral. In a moment or two she was back, breathless and with a heightened colour.

'I've heard so much about you from Sir John, Dr Priestley, that I look upon you as an old friend,' she said. 'I was so delighted to hear that you were one of our trustees, I felt that we weren't altogether in the hands of strangers. I know, of course, that you were one of Sir John's oldest friends. You were with him when the end came, I expect?'

'Hardly that, though I saw him a couple of days before he died. The end came very suddenly, you know.'

She shook her head sadly. 'I don't know anything,' she replied. 'It was the most terrible shock to me when I got Mr Wrythlington's letter telling me he was dead. I knew he had been ill, of course. He wrote and told me so himself, a few weeks ago. But he assured me that his doctor had told him it was not serious. Do tell me how it happened?'

The very question he would like to be able to answer, thought Dr Priestley. 'His illness took a sudden fatal turn,' he replied. 'He was dead in less than an hour from the time when the attack came on. The news was as great a surprise to me as it was to you.'

'I can't imagine that he is really dead,' she said, hardly above a whisper.

‘He was one of those people whom one doesn’t associate with death, somehow. He never had a day’s illness, all the time I was with him.’

This seemed to be Dr Priestley’s opportunity. ‘You knew him well, Mrs Archer?’ he asked.

She stared at him for an instant, and again that look of challenge flushed into her eyes. ‘Why, yes!’ she replied. ‘Didn’t you know? I imagined that he must have spoken about me to you. I was his secretary, all the time that he held that appointment at Leeds. I can safely say that I worked with him every day for four years.’

So this was the explanation. Ludicrously simple, of course. Claverton, not feeling particularly drawn towards either his nephew or his niece, had decided to leave the bulk of his money to his old secretary. But why that curious provision about her daughter?

Mrs Archer continued, almost without a pause, ‘Then you really know nothing about me, Dr Priestley? How extraordinary all this must have seemed to you! But Sir John was very funny that way. He hardly ever mentioned his friends, I don’t remember hearing him mention any of them but you. And so, I suppose, he didn’t speak about me to you?’

Dr Priestley shook his head. ‘He never spoke about his work during the war. I did not even know until this minute that he was in Leeds at the time. We were completely out of touch from the time I left Midchester until he came to live in London.’

‘I have often thought it was a pity that he was left all that money,’ she said, half-regretfully. ‘He would have gone back to his own work after the war, and I believe he would have been happier. But I must explain how I met him. My husband was in the merchant service. We were only married a few months before the war, and lived in Liverpool. He belonged to the Royal Naval Reserve, and when war broke out he was called up at once. I only saw him three or four times, when he was on leave, after that.’

Dr Priestley nodded sympathetically, and she proceeded, ‘I felt terribly lonely, of course. Both my parents were dead, and we had no children then. So, after a few weeks, I gave up the house and applied for war work. I had been taught shorthand and book-keeping, and all that sort of thing, and it wasn’t long before they found me a job. I was sent to Leeds, and told to report to Mr Claverton, as he was then. At that time he had a staff of half a dozen girls and he selected me as his secretary. I stayed with him until just before the Armistice. And I can’t tell you how good he was to me all the time, especially during the terrible time I went through when my husband was killed.

‘It was in February, 1918. He had been home on leave only a week or two

before, and we had been able to spend a few days together in Leeds. Sir John let me have a holiday, though he was terribly busy at the time. My husband was terribly proud of himself. He had just been appointed to the command of a minesweeper in the Mediterranean. And then, only a few weeks later, came that awful telegram saying that his ship had been lost with all hands.'

For a moment she seemed overcome by the recollection of her husband's death. But in a remarkably short time she pulled herself together and continued. 'If it hadn't been for Sir John, I think I should have gone mad. He was the only person I had to turn to, and he did everything he possibly could for me. I stuck to my work, of course. It was the only thing that kept my mind off it. And then in August I had to leave him, for my daughter was born in November, just before the Armistice.

'I didn't know what I was going to do. I had nothing but a small pension from the Admiralty, and, of course, I couldn't go out to work. But Sir John thought of everything. He told me that I had been far too valuable to him for him to leave me in the lurch. He said that he had unexpectedly come into more money than he would ever be able to spend, and that it would be a privilege for him to share it with somebody who wanted it more than he did. I wouldn't hear of it at first, and I only consented in the end for my little girl's sake.

'Even then I didn't know how generous he meant to be. I went into a nursing home when the baby was born, and it wasn't until I was up and about that I saw him again. And then he told me that he had bought this house for me, and that he intended to give me an allowance sufficient for me never to have to work again.'

'That was exceedingly generous of him,' said Dr Priestley rather vaguely. He was thinking not so much of the provision which Claverton had made for his trusted secretary as of the possibilities of the future. If Mrs Archer's daughter had been born in November, 1918, she was now barely fifteen. Ten years, therefore, must elapse before the trust came to an end. And much might happen before then.

'Your daughter is specifically mentioned in Claverton's will,' he remarked, following out the train of his thoughts.

'Yes, I know,' she replied. 'Mr Wrythlington has sent me a copy, and I've read it. I don't think there is anything extraordinary about that. It was quite as natural for him to leave money to Mary as to those charities he mentions.'

There was a defiant tone in her voice which took Dr Priestley completely by surprise. 'I did not suggest that there was anything out of the ordinary in Claverton's bequest,' he said mildly.

She glanced at him questioningly, and then smiled. 'I'm sorry,' she said.



‘Since I have seen the will, I’ve been on the defensive. You may see nothing extraordinary in it, but you may be sure that those other people will. His relations, I mean. I had heard Sir John mention a nephew and niece, but he never told me anything about them. In fact, I hardly realized their existence until I saw their names in the will. Did he ever see them in recent years?’

‘He saw his nephew fairly frequently, I believe. And his niece, Miss Littlecote, was nursing him for several weeks before his death.’

Mrs Archer opened her eyes wide at this. ‘He never told me, when he wrote,’ she said. ‘Tell me, Dr Priestley, what sort of a girl is she?’

‘A very striking-looking girl, tall and dark, of about twenty, I should say, with, I think, what might fairly be described as a very tempestuous manner.’

Mrs Archer considered this for a moment or two in silence. ‘And the other one, the nephew?’ she asked.

Her tone was elaborately casual, but her eyes betrayed her. Dr Priestley saw in them an intensity which seemed to burn like fire. And suddenly the queer sense of unreality which he had experienced at Number 13 returned to him. Until that moment, Mrs Archer had appeared to him as a very ordinary person, living in perfectly normal surroundings. But, from the moment of her question, she became endowed with a personality which baffled him.

‘Ivor Durnford?’ he replied steadily. ‘I know very little about him. He is, I believe, a trifle older than his cousin, and a young man of considerable ability.’

Her disappointment was manifest. ‘I had hoped you would be able to tell me more about him than that,’ she replied.

Of course she had. Every detail concerning Ivor Durnford must be of the deepest interest to her. She was aware of that extraordinary provision of Claverton’s will. But did she understand the hidden motive which had inspired it? Had Claverton, before his death, mentioned to her his projects for her daughter?

But Mrs Archer changed the subject abruptly. ‘It’s wonderful to me to think that my little girl is provided for, whatever happens,’ she continued, in a conversational tone. ‘I think we must be the luckiest people in the world. And to think that it was pure chance that I was sent to Leeds, and happened to become Sir John’s secretary. If it hadn’t been for that, Mary and I should have had nothing but our pensions to live upon!’

‘I do not think that Claverton could have found a better use for his money,’ replied Dr Priestley gallantly. ‘Now that I have made your acquaintance, Mrs Archer, might I be allowed the pleasure of being introduced to your daughter?’

It was a very natural request, but at Dr Priestley’s words the colour left her face, and she stared at him in sheer terror. This expression only lasted for an

instant, then with a great effort she recovered herself. But her hands flew to her breast, and for a second or two she breathed shortly and rapidly. 'Forgive me!' she said. 'My heart isn't as strong as it might be, and I get these silly spasms now and then. I'm all right again now. What were you saying? Oh, yes, Mary. I should have loved you to have seen her, but she's in bed, and I think she's asleep. She was just before you came in. She hasn't been at all well, this last day or two. Rather a severe cold, and the doctor says she's better in bed. I always think this is a most treacherous time of year, don't you?'

She continued to speak volubly, but did not return to the subject of Claverton. And as soon as an opportunity came, Dr Priestley took his leave of her. She was profuse in her expression of thanks for his visit, but made no effort to detain him. In fact, it seemed to him that she witnessed his departure with profound relief.

## CHAPTER 9

It was almost dark when Dr Priestley left The Willows. As he came out of the front door, he saw the figure of a man hurry down the path in front of him, and disappear among the shadows beyond. He wondered for a moment where he could have come from. And then the simple explanation occurred to him. No doubt there was a back door, and this was some tradesman from the town.

He dismissed the incident from his mind. There were other aspects of his visit to Mrs Archer which claimed his attention. Her account of herself, quite freely given, explained Claverton's interest in her. It was quite understandable that Claverton should make provision for a woman who had served him faithfully through those strenuous years. After all, he had left a good part of his money to charities in which he could have no immediate interest. He had, quite clearly, no intention of endowing his nephew and niece with more than moderate sums. Part of the balance might just as well be left to a deserving acquaintance as to more or less impersonal charity.

So far, so good. It was even understandable that Claverton might wish the daughter to inherit the benefits conferred upon her mother. But his provision for her marriage still remained obscure. And what had been the reason for that strange uneasiness displayed by Mrs Archer whenever Dr Priestley had approached directly the subject of that daughter?

Whatever riddles might remain concealed at The Willows, Dr Priestley decided that they were not to be solved by remaining in the neighbourhood.

Discreet inquiries that evening at the Black Bull revealed that local gossip had little to report of Mrs Archer. She and her daughter led a very retired life. They were occasionally to be seen shopping in the town, where they had the usual circle of friends. But they rarely or never entertained. It was generally understood that, as the widow of a naval officer, living on a pension, Mrs Archer was not in a position to spend money freely.

Not altogether dissatisfied with his visit to Martonbury, Dr Priestley returned to London by the first train on the following morning, which was Saturday. That evening, in the comfort of his own study, he reviewed the progress which he had made. He had certainly discovered nothing which could throw any light upon Claverton's death. But at least he had gained some insight into the motives of his will.

And then, soon after he had finished dinner, the unexpected occurred. Dr Oldland was announced.

He came in hurriedly, out of breath, like a man engaged in the pursuit of some phantom which perpetually eludes him. He hardly replied to Dr Priestley's greeting, and flung himself wearily into a chair. 'I only got back a couple of hours ago,' he said. 'Didn't get Milverly's telegram till this morning. He told me everything, and then I dashed round to see you. Look here, Priestley, what the devil does it all mean?'

There was no doubt that Oldland was suffering from the shock. No sooner was he seated in the chair than he leapt up again and began to pace up and down, in an access of uncontrollable restlessness. 'The whole thing's incredible!' he continued. 'You remember what I said in this very room, hardly more than a week ago? I had a presentiment that Claverton's life was threatened. And yet Milverly tells me that there's no possible doubt that he died a natural death. I can't understand it. And yet Faversham is not the man to make a mistake. You know him, Milverly tells me?'

'I have known him for many years,' replied Dr Priestley quietly. 'Sit down here by the fire, Oldland. You'll find whisky and a syphon on the table beside you.'

Oldland poured himself out a strong drink. His hands trembled to such an extent that most of the soda-water splashed on the table. But he drank the contents of the glass at a gulp, and the spirit seemed to steady him.

'Ah, that's better!' he exclaimed. 'Sorry Priestley, but this business has completely bowled me over. I didn't like going away, as I told you before I went. But I had to. There was no choice in the matter.'

'And you didn't get Dr Milverly's telegram till this morning, you say?' Dr Priestley remarked.

Oldland looked at him squarely, and there was a trace of defiance in his eyes. 'You know something of my past, I expect,' he replied. 'How much, I don't know. But I'm not going to try to justify myself. I dare say that you can understand that if that past were to be revived, the position which I have rebuilt for myself would suffer. It was to prevent this that I was forced to leave London. And, since I wished no one to know where I was going, I left a false address.'

'That is entirely your affair,' replied Dr Priestley dispassionately.

'I'm glad you see that. And I don't see that I could have done anything if I had been there. Milverly took exactly the course that I should have done. But it's amazing that Claverton should have died like that, a couple of days after I left him. I'm ready to swear that there was nothing wrong with my diagnosis or treatment.'

'Let us try to look at Claverton's case objectively,' said Dr Priestley. 'I gather that Dr Milverly has supplied you with full details. Do those details satisfactorily account to you for Claverton's death?'

'No, they don't!' exclaimed Oldland. 'They make it perfectly incomprehensible. Claverton had been suffering from gastric trouble, certainly. But for some time that trouble had been clearing up, and the case was taking a perfectly normal course. When I saw him that Friday, I was convinced that unless something happened, he would be perfectly well in the course of a few weeks.'

'What exactly do you mean when you say unless something happened?' asked Dr Priestley sharply.

'You know perfectly well, Priestley. Unless some external circumstance brought on another crisis similar to the first. You must remember that I had definite evidence that the first was caused by the administration of arsenic. Yet, from all I can hear, there was no sign of poisoning to account for this second attack.'

Dr Priestley shook his head. 'None whatever. After what you had told me, I took considerable pains to satisfy myself on that score. Claverton died of perforation of the walls of the stomach.'

'That's what the certificate says, and of course there can be no doubt about it. But it's the first time I've ever heard of such a thing occurring without warning like that. Why, his temperature, taken only a couple of hours before he died, was perfectly normal. It's the most extraordinary case in my experience.'

'Can you fairly add Claverton's case to your experience?' asked Dr Priestley. 'He was not under your observation for the last forty hours of his

life, remember.'

Oldland turned a startled glance towards him. 'Yes, but the symptoms—' he began and then stopped irresolutely.

'What do we really know about the symptoms?' Dr Priestley asked, with a hint of eagerness in his voice. 'This is what we are told. On Saturday morning Claverton appeared to be progressing normally. On Sunday morning before breakfast, his chart shows a normal temperature. Immediately after breakfast he suddenly displays alarming symptoms, and dies before the doctor can be summoned. A post mortem reveals the cause of death as perforation, and proved conclusively that poison had not been administered.'

'That's briefly what Milverly told me,' Oldland agreed.

'Very well, then. Now let us examine that evidence. I am only prepared to accept it as fact, without further proof up to Milverly's visit to Number 13 on Saturday, and again after his visit on Sunday. Of what happened between those two visits, I maintain that we have no adequate proof.'

'But what can have happened!' said Oldland. 'If there had been any foul play the post mortem would have revealed it.'

Dr Priestley shook his head. 'Not necessarily,' he replied. 'Unless you do not consider it foul play to let a man die without rendering assistance. That's certainly moral murder, if it does not come under that definition legally. No, let me finish what I have to say. I repeat that we have only the evidence of one witness for the twenty hours or so which follows Milverly's visit on Saturday. And the credibility of that witness is at least open to suspicion.'

'I am not a medical man, but, as I understand it, the difficulty of accounting for Claverton's death is this. In cases of perforation, certain premonitory symptoms occur. If immediate action is taken on the appearance of these symptoms the fatal result of perforation can probably be averted. But in Claverton's case we have no evidence of any premonitory symptoms. Am I correct?'

Oldland nodded. 'That's the difficulty, expressed in general terms,' he replied.

'Very well. Miss Littlecote, who was acting as Claverton's nurse, is our only informant for the last twenty hours of his life. Suppose for a moment that her evidence is false? Suppose that the premonitory symptoms actually began shortly after Milverly visited his patient, on Saturday? Am I correct in assuming that you would thus find Claverton's death on Sunday less extraordinary?'

Oldland banged his fist on the table beside him. 'By gad, Priestley, I believe you've got it! But why—'

‘One moment. I believe it to be not impossible for a nurse to observe such symptoms, and to know that they betoken a fatal result if action was not taken. In this case Miss Littlecote knew that Milverly would not return, unless sent for, till some time on Sunday morning, by which time Claverton would, in all probability, be dead. But if she reported the symptoms correctly, if, for instance, she entered the correct temperature on the chart, she would be blamed for not sending for him. She, therefore, entered the temperatures as normal, and purposely did not send for Milverly until she knew it was too late. Then, to clear herself, she told the story of a sudden attack. Is there anything inherently impossible in this theory?’

‘I can’t understand a woman who had been trained as a nurse doing such a thing, that’s all. Her instinct would be to save her patient, whoever he might be. But then I can’t understand that arsenic business, either. No, I believe you’ve hit the nail on the head, Priestley. That girl’s as good as a murderess, if she isn’t actually one. First of all she tries to poison her uncle with arsenic, knowing that the symptoms would be very similar to those which would have followed an aggravation of his existing trouble. She imagined that if her attempt had been successful, I should have issued a certificate without further investigation.

‘Then, seeing her victim develop a second set of symptoms of his own accord, she sees another chance. She just lets him die without taking any steps to save him. It sounds incredibly callous, but I always thought that she was a very queer girl. And I shouldn’t be a bit surprised if that amazing mother of hers wasn’t behind it all. She always gives me the creeps somehow. Like a witch. It was Claverton’s money they were after, I suppose?’

‘By the terms of Claverton’s will, which you witnessed, the bulk of his estate goes to Mrs Archer and her daughter,’ replied Dr Priestley.

He was watching Oldland intently as he spoke, and felt satisfied that the doctor’s astonishment was perfectly genuine. ‘Mrs Archer!’ he exclaimed. ‘Who the devil is she? Wait a minute, though. Now I come to think of it, I’ve heard that name in connection with Claverton somewhere. How the deuce was it? Ah, I’ve got it now. Once or twice while I was attending Claverton he asked me to post letters for him, and I happened to notice the name Archer on the envelopes. I say, that’s rather a nasty knock for his nephew and niece. She’s some distant relation of his, I suppose?’

‘According to her own statement, she was his secretary during the war.’

‘And he left his money to her in order to spite his family. By jove, what a queer chap he was! I rather gathered that he hadn’t much use for the Littlecotes, but he seemed to get on all right with young Durnford. He hasn’t actually cut them all off with a shilling, I suppose?’

‘He has made what he doubtless considered adequate provisions for them. And Ivor Durnford’s position under the will can be very greatly improved if within the next ten years he marries Mrs Archer’s daughter Mary, now a child of fifteen.’

Oldland stared at Dr Priestley incredulously. ‘Sounds to me a pretty queer sort of will altogether,’ he said. ‘There’s one thing, though. Claverton was in full possession of his mental faculties when he made it. I’m prepared to certify to that effect, if anybody raises the question. What the devil could it matter to him whether Durnford married this girl or not?’

‘That is a question that I have been asking myself for a couple of days,’ replied Dr Priestley.

Oldland poured himself out another drink, and the action seemed to give him inspiration. ‘I believe I’ve got it!’ he exclaimed. ‘Durnford was given an inducement to marry this Archer girl, because Claverton didn’t want him to marry his cousin. He must have had a down on Miss Helen, and if you’re right about her behaviour, I don’t blame him. That brings us back to the point, doesn’t it? What are we going to do about that young woman?’

‘It will be necessary to secure some proof of the correctness of my theory before we can do anything,’ Dr Priestley replied. ‘We can scarcely approach the police on such a very vague suspicion. They would certainly refuse to take any action.’

‘Well, I’m going round to talk to her, first thing in the morning,’ said Oldland emphatically. ‘And I’ll have a jolly good shot at getting the truth out of her. Tell you what, Priestley. The best thing you can do is to come with me.’

‘I will certainly do so,’ said Dr Priestley. ‘I must confess to the greatest possible interest in the circumstances surrounding Claverton’s death. But I must say this. If Helen Littlecote connived at her uncle’s death, her motives for doing so are not very apparent. You will understand why when I explain the terms of the will to you in full.’

Oldland listened attentively as Dr Priestley ran through the terms of that curious document. ‘It’s a queer business,’ he agreed. ‘And, at first sight, Helen Littlecote doesn’t seem to have much to gain by the death of her uncle. I say Helen Littlecote, because she seems to have been the active agent. But I prefer to regard her mother as the instigator, in the joint interest of herself and her daughter.’

‘At first sight, no. But, as I listened to what you’ve told me, I believe I began to see daylight. We doctors are pretty carefully trained observers, you know, Priestley. We see a whole lot of things in the course of visiting our patients which have nothing to do with the practice of medicine. And we get a

good many queer sidelights upon human nature. Besides, you must remember that I've seen a good deal more of these people than you have.'

He settled himself into his chair, and lighted a cigarette. Dr Priestley noticed that his hand no longer shook. He had, within the last half-hour, become once more the capable physician. Whatever mystery of his past he had hinted at was now completely set aside, forgotten in his professional solicitude for his patient.

'Look at the thing from the point of view of the Littlecotes,' he continued abruptly. 'Mind you, I'm not accusing them and I'm not defending them. I don't care about them, I'll admit, but that is purely a personal feeling, and has nothing to do with what I'm going to say.'

'I can imagine them in that tiny flat in Putney, can't you? Mrs Littlecote cherishing the memory of the wandering apostle, and finding an outlet for her emotional nature in the practice of spiritualism. I suppose that it was her fees as a medium that they lived on, mostly. Claverton's charity wasn't exactly overwhelming, I fancy.'

'And that girl, accustomed ever since she could remember to the sort of poverty that is just able to afford the bare bones of life without any of the trimmings. Of the life she thought herself entitled to, I mean. I don't suppose that she ever actually went hungry, or anything so spectacular as that. But hunger is a minor evil to some people, women especially, otherwise the silk stocking trade wouldn't be so flourishing. There's another factor you mustn't lose sight of, Priestley. That girl's got a temper.'

Dr Priestley nodded. 'I have already some experience of that,' he remarked.

'It lost her her job at St Ethelburga's long before either of us saw her. What else was it likely to lose her, I wonder? What was she going to make of life, do you suppose? She's not the sort to find a job in an office, or at all events, to keep it after she had got it. The only solution of her difficulties, so far as I can see, was marriage. But she's no fool. Not she, with that strain of Claverton's blood in her. She must have seen pretty clearly that her chances weren't particularly bright. She didn't mean just to marry anybody who might happen to come along. And eligible young men will fight shy of the impoverished daughter of a professional medium, however good looking she may be.'

Oldland paused, and lighted a second cigarette from the stump of the first. 'Beastly bad habit, this chain-smoking,' he continued. 'I always warn my patients against it. And then what happens? A letter comes from Claverton out of the blue, as it were, asking the girl to stay at Number 13 and nurse him.'

'That gives them something to talk about, I'll warrant. What did it mean?'



Was Uncle John, the rich relation, relenting at last? It must almost have looked like it. Anyhow, it was a splendid chance. If the girl played her cards properly, she might establish herself as the favourite niece. And there was no saying what that might lead to.

‘Whose idea it was to make it a condition that her mother should come too, I can’t say. From their point of view it was a tactical error. The idea was, I suppose, to effect a reconciliation between brother and sister. But it didn’t come off. Although Claverton consented to her coming to the house, he wouldn’t see her. So it was left to the girl to fight the Littlecote battle, with her mother in the background, as Chief of Staff.

‘A remarkable position, when you come to think of it. The Littlecote army well dug in, and in full view of their objective. The only danger to them from that direction was that Claverton should recover before they had achieved their object. If that happened, they would be bundled out neck and crop, back to their base at Putney. It wasn’t to their advantage that Claverton should recover too quickly. On the other hand, if their operations were delayed, they ran the risk of being outflanked. Young Durnford, the favoured nephew, was threatening this position by manoeuvres on his own account.’

Dr Priestley smiled. ‘This wealth of military metaphor I find rather confusing,’ he said. ‘What manoeuvres was Ivor Durnford conducting?’

‘I served in the RAMC during the war. I don’t suppose you knew that. What I’m telling you is what we used to call an Appreciation of the Situation. Good phrase that. Durnford? Oh, he’d always been on good terms with his uncle. Used to go and see him pretty regularly, long before he was taken ill. And after that, his visits became more frequent. But he played his game very tactfully. Never in the way, or anything like that. Just popped in, every week or so. “Hallo, Uncle John, glad to see you looking better!” That sort of thing. Stop and talk to him an hour then off again. Clever enough not to make himself a nuisance.

‘Meanwhile, the Littlecotes weren’t making much headway. Mrs Littlecote’s attempt at reconciliation had failed and Claverton didn’t take to the girl as they had expected him to. Besides, he wasn’t as ill as they had—well, hoped. It was as certain as anything could be that he would recover, and if they hadn’t captured the position by then, they were never likely to. A change of strategy was indicated and they changed their front accordingly.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Dr Priestley.

‘They sought an alliance with the rival forces. You told me just now that at this time an old will of Claverton’s was in existence, by which Durnford was his heir. I’m pretty certain that everybody concerned had some vague

knowledge of this. You know yourself how these things get about. It was fairly obvious, anyhow, that Durnford had the best prospects of anybody. Very well then. Why shouldn't Helen Littlecote marry her cousin? They weren't strangers to one another, you must remember. They had met some time before, at St Ethelburga's.

'I believe Durnford was definitely attracted. Whatever we may think of Helen Littlecote, she's a very fine girl in that peculiar way of hers. And he may have looked at it in this way. There was always the chance of Claverton relenting and leaving her at least some of the money which Durnford must have regarded as his. If he were to marry her this wouldn't matter so much. By the way, neither Durnford nor the Littlecotes knew anything about Mrs Archer and her daughter, I suppose?'

'I imagine not,' replied Dr Priestley. 'That is, if one may judge by their surprise when they learnt the provisions of Claverton's will.'

'I thought as much. But the Littlecotes must have seen the danger of putting their scheme into operation while Claverton was still alive. They must have discovered that he did not look upon them with any particular favour. He might have objected to the idea of Durnford marrying his cousin. We know now that they were right. And Claverton would certainly have enforced his objection by cutting Durnford out of his will.'

'There was only one thing for it. Since Claverton showed no inclination to remove himself to another world, his progress thither must be accelerated. You may say that the Littlecotes could never have looked at it in such a cold-blooded way. But you must remember that all ties of relationship between them had been broken off long ago. Mrs Littlecote had never seen her brother since her marriage, years before. The girl must have been bitterly resentful that he treated her with no more affection than he would have shown for any other hired nurse. Besides, they had a grievance against him.'

'A grievance?' Dr Priestley remarked inquiringly. 'Upon what grounds?'

'They had the grievance which recipients of charity always feel. They hated him because he had money and they hadn't. And the sight of Number 13 must have infuriated them. Claverton was obviously a wealthy man, yet he allowed them a mere pittance. What use could he, a bachelor, have for all his money? Why couldn't he share it with his sister and niece? I tell you, Priestley, I can see them sitting in that sinister drawing-room asking one another these questions. It wouldn't take long for them to convince themselves that his death would be a mere act of justice.'

'Once they had reached that stage, the rest was easy enough. Arsenic was the very thing for their purpose, as I explained just now. And arsenic is easy

enough to get hold of. Just think of the cases of poisoning by arsenic that have occurred during the last few years. And naturally, we only hear of the ones that have been detected. Has it ever struck you what a very small proportion they bear to the ones that haven't?

'It has,' replied Dr Priestley curtly. 'I am aware that the problem of arsenical poisoning is a most difficult one.'

'And you may bet that Helen Littlecote, as a nurse, knew it too. However, she failed. It's uncertain stuff at the best of times, unless you give so big a dose that it is almost certain to be detected. And her failure involved consequences that she hadn't foreseen. Her uncle took fright, and made obvious preparations for drawing up a new will.

'As I told you before, Priestley, that raised a commotion in the camp. Both camps, in fact, Durnford's and the Littlecotes'. What was Claverton up to? His attitude towards his sister and niece hardly suggested that he was altering his will in their favour. On the other hand, since Durnford was formerly the sole heir, any alterations must be to his disadvantage. I would like to have heard the conversations between the Littlecotes as to what was best to be done now. They couldn't be expected to guess what Claverton was really up to.'

'The alteration of Claverton's will was not, as a matter of fact, inspired by the presence of the Littlecotes,' said Dr Priestley. 'Its main provisions had been intended by him for many years, though he had delayed putting them into writing. The purpose of the new will was to provide for the Archers after his death. It concerned the Littlecotes only incidentally.'

'Its intention was wider than that,' said Oldland weightily. 'It was an indirect hit at the Littlecotes. Why didn't Claverton just leave half his money to Mrs Archer and half to Durnford, having provided that two hundred pounds for his niece? Because he guessed what would happen. You take it from me, Priestley, he noticed a good deal more than ever he mentioned. He knew well enough that there was something between the two cousins. And he didn't mean the girl to get hold of his money that way. So he remembered that Mrs Archer had a daughter, and put in that clause about Durnford marrying her.'

Dr Priestley nodded. This explanation sounded quite plausible.

'But the Littlecotes weren't to know all that. All they could do was to pray that Claverton would die before this second will was signed. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't. They must have guessed that Claverton was willing away his money from the family. And it seems that this time they confined themselves to prayer. They say that people have been prayed to death. That may have been Mrs Littlecote's real occupation as she sat on the sofa. I don't know.

‘Anyhow, at a remarkably convenient juncture for them, Claverton’s complaint takes a sudden turn. If a doctor had been called, he would have whisked Claverton away, operated, and all would have been well. But he wasn’t called, according to your own theory of Claverton’s having shown his first symptoms on Saturday.

‘He wasn’t called, because that girl knew that if Claverton were left alone, he must die. And, as it happened, she had the game in her own hands. Durnford wasn’t about, to interfere. I was away. Not that that made any difference but, after all, Milverly was a younger man and a stranger, and they may have thought that he would be easier to deal with. Besides, if I had been at home, I might have looked in unexpectedly. I did, sometimes, after that arsenic business.’

Oldland paused, and a deep silence fell upon the room. Was this indeed the solution of Claverton’s death? To Dr Priestley it seemed at least probable. But how to make certain, and, when certain, to bring home to the Littlecotes the consequences of their crime? Could any punishment equal the mortification which they must have experienced on learning that the crime was of no avail?

Oldland roused himself with a start. ‘By jove, it’s getting late!’ he exclaimed. ‘You don’t want me sitting here all night. But you’ll come round with me to Number 13 tomorrow? How would it do if I sent my car to pick you up at ten o’clock, say?’

‘It will suit me perfectly,’ replied Dr Priestley. And with that they parted. But it was long after his visitor’s departure that Dr Priestley finally left his study and went to bed.

## CHAPTER 10

The car arrived for Dr Priestley as arranged. Oldland joined him outside his house in Kensington, and the two drove on towards Beaumaris Place.

‘I’ve got Milverly to give me an exact note of what Helen Littlecote said to him,’ said Oldland. ‘We may be able to catch her out that way. Curiously enough, Milverly seems convinced that she was telling the truth. The fact is that he’s young and impressionable, and I believe that he was rather taken by her. I’ve said nothing to him of our suspicions, of course.’

Dr Priestley nodded. ‘I think we should approach this matter with absolutely open minds,’ he replied. ‘The theory that I propounded to you last

night may be absolutely incorrect.'

'It may be, but it's the only one which accounts for the facts. Dash it all, Claverton can't just have died suddenly like that. Coming on top of that other business, it's absurd. Of course, I shall say nothing about that. It's a card we can afford to hold up our sleeves. By the way, we'd better ask for Mrs Littlecote, I suppose?'

The car drew up at the door of Number 13. At this hour on Sunday morning Beaumaris Place appeared utterly deserted. An odd silence filled it, broken only by the monotonous tolling of a church bell near at hand. Number 13 projected slightly on to the pavement, the last survivor of the once stately houses, the embodiment of the stubborn Claverton spirit.

The door was opened by Fawknor, who informed them that Mrs Littlecote was at home. In the hall he fussed about rather unnecessarily with their hats and coats, and it seemed as though he had something on his mind. But apparently he could not bring himself to express it, and eventually he led them upstairs to the drawing-room.

It was with almost a shock that Dr Priestley, on entering it, saw that it was empty, and the sofa unoccupied. The room seemed strangely incomplete without the sinister figure of Mrs Littlecote. But traces of her presence remained. The dark heavy stuff upon which she had been working had been laid aside, and hung in funereal folds to the floor.

Oldland shuddered as they were left alone. 'This room is like a crypt!' he exclaimed. 'Can't you feel the chill of it to your very bones? I don't believe there can have been a fire in it since Claverton took possession. Not that a dozen fires would ever make it much more cheerful. It's like coming into a place with a curse upon it!'

Before Dr Priestley had time to reply, Helen Littlecote came in, with the peculiar suddenness which was characteristic of her. She was dressed in some black, filmy stuff which displayed the fine lines of her figure. But her hair seemed to have escaped from all restraint, and covered her head in a dark, semi-opaque veil. Her expression, as she nodded casually to her visitors, was sullen and inhospitable. 'You can't see mother just now,' she said. 'She's in a trance.'

She conveyed this astounding piece of information with the utmost nonchalance. She could not have spoken more carelessly had she said, 'She's lying down,' or 'She's changing her frock.' But Oldland started forward in amazement. 'In a trance!' he exclaimed. 'Good heavens! Can I—'

But she checked him with a short and rather contemptuous laugh. 'No, it's not a case for a doctor,' she said. 'She's a spiritualist, you know, and these

trances are one of her symptoms. She'll come out of it before lunch, I expect. Would you care to wait?'

Oldland seemed a trifle disconcerted. But then it appeared to strike him that this trance provided an opportunity of interviewing Helen Littlecote by herself. 'I should certainly be glad to see Mrs Littlecote,' he replied. 'But the object of my visit, as you have probably guessed, was to inquire about your uncle's death. I only learned of it, with the deepest regret, yesterday. And, as his doctor, I am naturally interested in the details.'

'Naturally,' she said ironically. 'It must be very unpleasant to have a patient slip through one's fingers like that. I am sufficiently a nurse to feel that way myself. I'll tell you the whole story, if you like.'

She sank into a chair, and nodded to Oldland and Dr Priestley to follow her example. Then, without a trace of emotion, she repeated the story which she had already told Milverly. 'And so that was that,' she concluded. 'Uncle John died about ten minutes before Dr Milverly turned up.'

'And you noticed no unfavourable symptoms before you heard that scream from your uncle's room?' asked Oldland incredulously.

'Of course not. If I had, I should have sent for Dr Milverly at once,' she replied. 'You don't suppose that I enjoyed having all the responsibility on my shoulders, do you?'

'No, no, certainly not. Dr Milverly described your uncle's condition, when he saw him on Saturday morning, as being very similar to when I saw him the previous day.'

'I should say he was better if anything. Anyhow, he was very crotchety on Saturday afternoon. I had always noticed that his temper got worse as he was beginning to feel better. He made it pretty clear that he thought I had been in the house long enough. He said that in a few days he would be well enough to get on without a nurse.'

'H'm, yes,' said Oldland uncomfortably. 'Invalids are apt to be inconsiderate in their remarks. When did your uncle say this?'

'After dinner on Saturday evening. As you know, he had all his meals, except breakfast, in the library. For the last day or two I brought them in myself. Fawknor used to, but Uncle John suddenly gave orders that he was not to be allowed into the room. He said he disturbed his things. But that was all nonsense. It was just one of those fits of dislike he took for people.'

'Had Fawknor disturbed his things in any way?'

'No, I don't think so. He used to clean out the library in the mornings, before Uncle John was up, and I suppose he tidied things up. But Uncle John was always making a fuss about trifles. During the week before he died he

declared that Fawknor had upset his capsules, and lost one of them. It was after that that he wouldn't allow him in the room. And, since I wasn't going to turn housemaid, the place was left alone. It wasn't even dusted. On Saturday evening he complained that the place was dirty, and I told him that if he wouldn't let the servants into the room, he couldn't expect it to be clean. He really was most unreasonable.'

Her eyes smouldered as she spoke. It was quite evident that she and her uncle had quarrelled. But Oldland did not press the point. 'Since your uncle would not have Fawknor in the room, the whole duty of attending to him fell upon you, Miss Littlecote?' he said.

'I had to do everything,' she replied. 'In fact, I was the only person in the house who ever set eyes on him. And after all I had done for him, my only reward was to be given to understand that he had had enough of me!'

'Merely a moment of irritability on the part of an invalid, no doubt,' said Oldland hastily. 'Perhaps the crisis which led to his death was already beginning. You took his temperature that evening, as usual?'

'However useless Uncle John may have thought me, I don't fail in my duties as a nurse,' she retorted. 'He went to bed soon after nine, and I settled him down for the night, took his temperature, and entered it on the chart. Dr Milverly has got that. I expect he's shown it to you.'

'Yes, I've seen it. Did your uncle have a good night?'

'He must have, or he would have rung my bell. He had a bell push beside him, which rang a bell in my room. I looked in to see him when I went to bed, soon after eleven, and he was asleep then. I didn't see him again until about eight on Sunday morning, when I brought him a cup of tea. I took his temperature again then, and it was still normal. He seemed to be much the same as he had been the evening before. Later on, he ate his breakfast, and took his medicine and capsule. I know that, because I had brought them in to him. I noticed later, when it was all over, that the medicine glass was empty and the capsule had gone.'

'Can you describe your uncle's condition when you came into the room on hearing him scream?'

'I saw at once that he was desperately ill. He had been sitting up in bed, with a bed table in front of him with his breakfast on it. The table and the breakfast things were on the floor, and my uncle was lying doubled up, apparently in great pain. I asked him what was the matter, but I don't think he even heard me. He couldn't speak, he was frothing at the mouth and could only groan. He seemed to be desperately thirsty, so I held a tumbler of water to his lips, and he managed to drink some of it. Then I ran to the top of the stairs,

shouted for Fawknor, and told him to get a taxi and fetch Dr Milverly.'

It was evident that nothing more could be got out of her, and after more questions Oldland and Dr Priestley took their leave. She let them find their own way downstairs, and in the hall they met Fawknor, who handed them their hats and coats. But instead of opening the front door, he hesitated, and then addressed them in a low tone. 'If I may be so bold, there's a favour I should like to ask you gentlemen,' he said.

'What is it, Fawknor?' replied Oldland.

'Well, you see, sir, Mrs Littlecote has given all the servants a month's notice. And as I'm thinking of looking for another place, sir, and Sir John is dead, I was wondering if you and Dr Priestley would be kind enough to give me a reference. I don't know who else to ask, sir.'

'The fact that Sir John left you a legacy of five hundred pounds ought to be reference enough in itself, I should think,' replied Oldland. 'But if you care to refer any one to me, I will put in a good word on your behalf. What do you say, Priestley?'

Dr Priestley nodded absently. His eyes were fixed on the dining-room door, close to which they were standing. Without a sound it swung open slowly, inch by inch, as though under the impulse of some imperceptible draught.

The room beyond was in almost complete darkness. Dr Priestley wondered vaguely why the curtains should be drawn at that time of day. And then as the door further opened, he saw an indistinct form within. The light from the hall fell upon the bent grey head of Mrs Littlecote.

She came slowly forward, seeming to glide rather than walk, and dressed entirely in black. Fawknor sprang aside hastily, with a sudden look of awe. But she seemed utterly unaware of their presence. She never raised her head, and they could not see her face. With the same gliding step she crossed the hall, and began to ascend the stairs. Not until she had passed out of sight did any of them venture to move. Then Fawknor opened the door silently, and Oldland and Dr Priestley left the house.

The incident produced a queer impression on them both. It was Oldland who spoke first. 'Was that dining-room door fully shut, or only ajar when we came downstairs?' he asked as soon as the car had started on its homeward journey.

'I am afraid that I did not notice,' replied Dr Priestley. 'But I think that if it had been securely shut, we should have heard the turning of the handle.'

'You're probably right,' agreed Oldland moodily. 'Those people puzzle me more every time I see them. Trance, indeed! Was the woman just keeping her



hand in, or what? And the way the girl told us! “You can’t see mother, she’s in a trance!” Just as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Does Mrs Littlecote go off into a trance as part of her daily routine, do you suppose?’

Dr Priestley shook his head. ‘I have little or no experience of such matters,’ he replied.

‘It’s preposterous!’ exclaimed Oldland. ‘Who the deuce was to suppose she’d choose the dining-room to play these games in? I naturally supposed she was safely upstairs, out of the way. And was she still in a trance when she appeared just now? Or had she been listening to what the worthy Fawknor had to say to us?’

‘I have grave doubts whether Mrs Littlecote is as deaf as she appears to be,’ Dr Priestley replied doubtfully.

‘Oh, so you’ve come to that conclusion too, have you? Well, it doesn’t matter much if she did overhear us. There’s no reason why Fawknor shouldn’t ask us for a reference if he wants to. It gave me quite a turn, seeing her come out like that. But there’s no getting anything out of those people. I couldn’t shake the girl’s absurd story. She and that uncanny mother of hers have had plenty of time to think it all over by now. No amount of cross-questioning will ever get the truth out of her.’

That was very much Dr Priestley’s opinion as later in the day he reviewed the conversation between her and Oldland. Her apparent sincerity had not shaken his faith in his own theory. Logically, it was the only possible way of accounting for Claverton’s death. Death from perforation could not have occurred with so little warning as Helen Littlecote’s statement implied. That death had been due to perforation was definitely established. Therefore, Helen Littlecote’s statement was false. Yes, but how to disprove it?

By her own admission she had been the only person allowed in Claverton’s presence. If the crisis had begun some time on Saturday, it would have been quite easy for her to conceal it from the rest of the household. Even Fawknor, the faithful servant, had been excluded since the incident of the capsules. She had told the truth there, at all events. Dr Priestley remembered that Claverton had grumbled about that very matter on the last occasion that he had seen him.

Another thing. Oldland had been right about her feeling towards her uncle. Her manner, as much as her words, had shown that. They had actually bickered on the day before his death. Utterly inhuman as such a proceeding seemed, she had undoubtedly allowed her uncle to die under her very eyes. Dr Priestley achieved considerable satisfaction from the thought that she had gained very little by it.

But he was by no means content to leave it at that. There must be some

means of bringing her guilt home to her. He racked his brains to think of some trap which might be laid for her, but without avail. And then, as his habit was, he made an effort, and put the matter out of his mind and resumed his own neglected occupation. He had by no means abandoned all hope of ultimate success. But perhaps, if he gave the subject a rest for a while, a new point of view would present itself.

However, his attention was recalled to the Littlecotes, and that most unexpectedly. On Monday afternoon Oldland rang him up. ‘Sorry to disturb you, Priestley,’ he said. ‘But I’ve had a note from Mrs Littlecote. She seems very anxious to see you and me this evening. Half-past nine, she says. What are we going to do about it?’

‘Does she give any reason for wishing to see us?’ asked Dr Priestley.

‘Not she, but there must be a pretty urgent one. It’s the first time I’ve ever known her want to see anybody. It has struck me that she may want to make some sort of statement. Anyhow, I’m inclined to go and hear what she’s got to say.’

Rather reluctantly, Dr Priestley agreed. It must be confessed that he shared Oldland’s curiosity. This might be the opportunity of penetrating the veil of remoteness with which Mrs Littlecote surrounded herself.

So that evening, punctually at half-past nine, Dr Priestley and Oldland found themselves once more at Number 13. Fawknor took them up to the drawing-room, where they found Helen Littlecote awaiting them. Of her mother there was no sign; even the black shroud-like material had been removed from the sofa.

Helen Littlecote seemed more animated than usual. ‘Mother will see you in a moment,’ she said. ‘She asked me to talk to you first and explain things. She doesn’t always understand what strangers say to her.’

She paused for a moment, but neither of the men spoke, and she continued.

‘We are going back to our own flat tomorrow, so this is the last opportunity mother will have. It had to be done here, you see. Mother doesn’t think that Uncle John would go anywhere else.’

Oldland looked at her as though she had suddenly taken leave of her senses. But, after a second of amazement, Dr Priestley understood. Mrs Littlecote’s spiritualistic gifts had come to her aid. In her trances she had entered into communication with her dead brother. But this girl, who spoke in such a matter-of-fact tone. Did she share her mother’s gifts? Or had the whole scene been carefully staged for their benefit?

‘Your Uncle John, Miss Littlecote?’ said Oldland, with a puzzled look. ‘You will forgive me if I do not quite understand.’

‘No, you wouldn’t, of course. Perhaps you didn’t know that mother was a medium? And yet, I told you yesterday that she was in a trance. Well, it seems that Uncle John was in touch with her, and told her to ask you both here this evening.’

Oldland shook his head. ‘But this is most extraordinary, Miss Littlecote,’ he said. ‘I am hardly prepared to admit—’

Her eyes flashed angrily. ‘It hardly matters what you admit or don’t admit,’ she interrupted him. ‘The point is this. Are you prepared to accept mother’s invitation, or are you not?’

Oldland glanced at Dr Priestley, who replied with a slight nod. Although he kept a perfectly open mind with regard to all matters incapable of definite proof, Dr Priestley was highly sceptical towards spiritualism. He could hazard a guess as to what was about to happen. But, whether genuine or not, any revelations which might transpire could hardly fail to be interesting. But he left Oldland to reply to the girl’s question.

‘We shall be very glad to hear anything that Mrs Littlecote may have to say to us,’ said Oldland diplomatically.

‘Very well, then, come along.’ Helen Littlecote walked out of the room, and they followed her. She led the way across the landing, and to Dr Priestley’s surprise opened the door of the library. All the lights were on, and she beckoned to them to enter.

Nothing in the room had been altered since the day when Dr Priestley had sat there with Claverton. A fire burned in the grate, even Claverton’s chair and table stood exactly where he had last seen it. The illusion was complete. It seemed as though Claverton had merely gone out for a moment, and might be expected to return at any instant and resume the attitude Dr Priestley remembered so well.

And then he noticed Mrs Littlecote, and started with surprise as he caught sight of her. She was seated bolt upright in a small arm-chair at the side of the room furthest from the fireplace. But all that could be seen of her was her bent head, with its straggly iron-grey hair. The rest of her body, from neck to feet, was draped in some black stuff, which seemed strangely familiar. Yes, there could be no mistaking it. It was the material upon which she had been so assiduously working. A border, worked in purple silk, of curious design, ran round the hem of it. This strange garment enveloped her as closely as a winding sheet.

But only for a moment was she thus revealed. Almost immediately upon their entrance the room was plunged in darkness as Helen Littlecote switched out the lights. Only the firelight remained, a single flickering flame that cast

strange dancing shadows about the room. All that could be seen of Mrs Littlecote was the faint reflection of her grey hair above a mysterious and ill-defined patch of utter blackness.

At this late hour no sound from without broke the silence of the room. And when Helen Littlecote spoke, her voice sounded unnaturally blunt and harsh. 'It had to be in here,' she said. 'This was the room which Uncle John used most. Sit down, Dr Priestley. Not in his chair, he mightn't like it. You, Dr Oldland, come over here.'

There was just light enough, now that their eyes were accustomed to the semi-darkness, for them to avoid the furniture as she led him to a chair which had been placed facing the one in which Mrs Littlecote sat. As he took his place in it, he found himself with his knees almost touching hers. And then, softly, the heavy black stuff moved and her hand appeared. Her arm stretched out slowly until it pointed directly at him.

'Take mother's hand in yours,' commanded the girl, this time in a whisper.

Oldland, after an instant's hesitation, obeyed her. The hand felt cold and lifeless, rigid as the hand of a corpse. He shuddered slightly, despite the warmth of the room. The touch of this strange woman's hand thrilled him with a violent antipathy.

The silence became oppressive. Helen Littlecote had retired to a corner of the room, and Dr Priestley could see only the pale mask of her face outlined against the dark bookcase behind it. He was impressed, in spite of himself. The staging of this queer comedy was admirable, he thought. Would the play itself be of the same quality?

Slowly the minutes passed, and no sound or movement disturbed the utter stillness of the room, save when the fire settled sharply. The flickering flame shot up for an instant and then expired, leaving behind it nothing but a dull-red glow, which seemed to stain the darkness with the tint of blood.

And then, with a dry, sibilant sound, Mrs Littlecote's lips began to move, inarticulately at first. It was rather horrible, as though some domestic animal were striving vainly for human speech. The shadows seemed to have sprung up between Dr Priestley and the medium. For him, she had become part of the darkness of the room.

The strange, disturbing sounds continued, hardly louder than a whisper. But gradually they grew in strength and in distinctness. A word here and there, slurred or mispronounced, could be distinguished. It was now as though the speaker was trying to break through some barrier that restrained her from making her thoughts known.

Suddenly the barrier was broken through, and the words came clear and

lucid. With a curious thrill Dr Priestley recognized the voice of Sir John Claverton. Not as he had last heard it, subdued and inclined to petulance, but young and fresh as he remembered it in those far-off days at Midchester. ‘Oldland!’ it said, ‘Oldland! Are you there?’

Oldland made no reply. However greatly startled he may have been, he made no reply. He could not have withdrawn his hand, even had he wished to do so, for the hand of the medium, passive at first, had gradually closed upon his till it grasped it as in a vice.

After a pause the voice continued. ‘Hey, why don’t you answer, Oldland? You’re there, I can see you plainly. Don’t you know me, your old friend Claverton? Where’s Mrs Oldland? What have you done with your wife, eh?’

The question took Dr Priestley so utterly by surprise that he could not repress an involuntary start. From the direction of Oldland’s chair came a sudden creak, as though its occupant had suddenly changed his position.

‘You won’t tell me that, eh?’ continued the voice. ‘Well, never mind. It’s none of my business. You’re a cunning fellow, Oldland. But you’re a bit too cunning, sometimes. Why didn’t you tell them what you found, a few weeks ago?’

Dr Priestley smiled. The seance was beginning to interest him far more deeply than he had expected it to. He felt that he was on the verge of a startling revelation.

‘You know what I mean, well enough,’ continued the voice irritably. ‘The white powder. But you didn’t see the hand that sprinkled it on my plate. You weren’t clever enough for that. A hand that came with a packet of white powder, and sprinkled it as you might sprinkle salt. It doesn’t matter now. But mind you remember that hand, Oldland.’

In the pause that followed Dr Priestley heard a rustling sound from the corner in which Helen Littlecote stood. For a moment he held his breath, expecting the girl to take some sudden action to end the seance. But nothing happened, and the voice went on, less firmly than before.

‘Priestley’s there too, isn’t he? I know he is, but I can’t get in touch with him. Tell Priestley to remember that hand and the white powder. He’s looking after things now I’ve gone. He’ll hear of it again, if things don’t go on as I want. That’s all. They won’t let me stop any longer. They—’

The voice once more became inarticulate and died away. As soon as the last sound of it had died away, Helen Littlecote felt her way across the room and switched on the light. Mrs Littlecote still sat motionless, with bent head, but Oldland had released her hand, which was once more withdrawn within the dark stuff which enshrouded her.

But, as Dr Priestley watched, she shuddered violently, shaking the chair on which she sat. Then slowly, with the angular movements of a wooden figure, she rose until she stood erect. As she did so, the heavy black garment dropped from her shoulders, to fall in rich folds from the seat of the chair to the floor. She began to move, with the strange gliding step that Dr Priestley had noticed on the previous morning, across the floor.

He stepped forward and held the door open for her, bending down to look into her face as he did so. But no mask could have been more impassive. Her eyes, open but unseeing, were set in the bloodless pallor of her face. She passed on, speechless, enigmatic, seeming the mere shell of a woman from whom all volition has departed. But her daughter, with that unexpectedly swift and lithe movement which contrasted so strangely with her mother's deliberation, sprang to the door and closed it. Then, with her back against its dark panels, imperious and defiant, she faced the two men.

'What did Uncle John mean?' she asked, in a low thrilling voice, scarcely louder than a whisper.

But neither answered her. Oldland was examining the hand which Mrs Littlecote had held, with a curiously intent expression. It seemed as though he expected to find upon it some supernatural impression. And Dr Priestley was gazing at the girl with the speculative interest of the scientist. He was wondering at that moment where lay the boundary line between the players and the audience.

With the gesture of angry impatience the girl stamped her foot. This time she addressed Oldland directly. 'I want an answer, please, Dr Oldland,' she said. 'You needn't be afraid. I'm not concerned with your wife, or what you may have done with her. I never knew till this moment you had one. What was it that you found a few weeks ago, and told nobody about? And what was this white powder sprinkled on Uncle John's plate?'

For the first time, Oldland looked at her, and as the light fell upon his face, Dr Priestley saw that it looked strangely haggard. But his voice was firm as he replied, 'That, Miss Littlecote, I must decline to tell you at present.'

He glanced at Dr Priestley as though seeking for approval of his refusal. But Dr Priestley only smiled grimly. He seemed to find some secret amusement in the situation.

The girl clenched her fists, and her eyes blazed. Was she, Dr Priestley wondered, merely a magnificent actress, or was she indeed stirred by some deep and genuine passion? 'You won't tell me? Then I shall make it my business to find out. And, if you don't like the consequences you've got yourself to blame, Dr Oldland.'

With a swift sudden action, like that of a young panther, she flung open the door and disappeared into the darkness of the landing.

## CHAPTER 11

Dr Priestley and Oldland left the house in silence, and entered the car. Oldland seemed to feel the cold. He shivered and wrapped the fur rug tightly round himself. And then suddenly he swore. ‘Damn it!’ he exclaimed. ‘If there’s anything in demoniacal possession, that old woman’s an example of it!’

That Oldland’s nerves had received a violent shock would have been apparent to a less acute observer than Dr Priestley. He shivered convulsively at intervals, and his eyes, magnified by his powerful spectacles, had a queer, wandering look. It could hardly be supposed that a doctor of his ability and experience would be disturbed by a mere spiritualistic seance, however impressively staged. Dr Priestley guessed that it was that mysterious reference to his wife which had so completely thrown him off his balance.

But of this he said nothing. ‘Mrs Littlecote?’ he replied. ‘A most remarkable personality. I am quite sure that she would repay very careful study. I must confess to having spent a thoroughly instructive evening.’

‘Instructive!’ exclaimed Oldland bitterly. ‘I dare say you found it so. I wish I knew—Look here, Priestley, I don’t suppose there’s much sleep for either of us tonight. Do you mind if I come round to your place? I would ask you to come to me, but Milverly is still with me, and I don’t want to talk about this business before a third person.’

‘I was about to suggest it myself,’ replied Dr Priestley readily. ‘There are several points in connection with what we have heard this evening that I should like to discuss with you.’

A few minutes later, they were again seated in Dr Priestley’s study. On his host’s invitation, Oldland poured himself out a stiff drink, and drank it off eagerly. The spirit seemed to soothe him, for his expression softened, and for a while he sat staring moodily into the fire. Then suddenly he spoke. ‘What did it all mean, Priestley?’ he asked abruptly.

‘That is a very difficult question to answer offhand,’ replied Dr Priestley. ‘Personally, I have never been convinced of the reality of occult manifestations, and I see nothing in our experiences of this evening to shake that belief. Whether Mrs Littlecote was in her normal condition, or whether she

was to some extent self-hypnotized, is a matter for you to decide rather than me.

‘The assumption of Claverton’s voice was certainly startling at first. But there was one rather significant thing about that. It was Claverton’s voice as we knew it many years ago, not as we have heard it recently. Does that suggest nothing to you?’

Oldland shook his head. ‘I was more concerned with what was being said than with the voice,’ he replied. ‘But, now you mention it, it was the voice of a comparatively young man.’

‘Exactly. Now, we believe that Mrs Littlecote had not seen Claverton since her marriage, and, therefore, in all probability had not heard his voice. It is not a difficult matter for certain people, with sufficient practice, to imitate very closely another person’s voice. If Mrs Littlecote wished to imitate her brother’s voice, she would necessarily reproduce it as she remembered it. I make this remark without prejudice, as the lawyers would say.’

‘H’m. There’s something in that,’ said Oldland gloomily. ‘Do you know, Priestley, I half-believed at the time that it was really Claverton speaking through her. It’s ridiculous, I know. But, unless she’s possessed by the devil, how did she know about—about Winnie?’

He hardly seemed to expect a reply, and Dr Priestley maintained a discreet silence. Better, he thought, that Oldland should wrestle with the problem without his prompting. Winnie, he remembered, had been his wife’s name. He wondered whether the mystery of that episode was about to be revealed.

Oldland poured himself out another drink, but set it down untasted. ‘It’s incredible!’ he exclaimed fiercely, as though still in the grip of his torturing doubts. And then, after a pause, he added in a queerly matter-of-fact tone, ‘I am perfectly satisfied that not a soul in London knows that I buried my wife on Friday.’

From its very simplicity the statement sounded almost ludicrous. But Dr Priestley, watching his friend unobtrusively, could see that he was suffering from some deep emotion. But still he said nothing, feeling instinctively that any word of sympathy he could utter would be futile.

‘Oh, you know the story!’ Oldland burst out impatiently. ‘Shocking business, Dr Oldland runs off with a rich patient of his, leaving his wife and child to starve. That’s what people said, I suppose. I don’t know. I didn’t trouble to inquire. But I suppose I was entitled to my own point of view, however depraved it may have been. You never knew Desiree, did you?’

Dr Priestley shook his head, but it is doubtful whether Oldland saw the gesture. He was still staring intently into the fire. And almost immediately he



continued.

‘Desiree! Queer thing, isn’t it, how only one woman in a thousand gets the name that quite suits her? Desiree! The longed-for, the one being that can fill a man’s horizon till all the rest is merely an unreal dream! Lord, Priestley, how you scientists waste your time! You wrangle about the constitution of matter, the forces that hold together the particles of the atom. Why can’t you tell us something about ourselves? Why can’t you analyse the force that controls the most important actions of our lives?’

Dr Priestley disregarded the bitterness of his tone. He knew well enough that Oldland expected no reply to his unanswerable question.

He was hardly surprised when Oldland uttered a short, contemptuous laugh. ‘Money! What was money to us? It would have happened just the same if neither of us had had a penny, if we had had to sleep in a ditch like Mrs Littlecote and that ranting preacher of hers. I count myself a lucky man, Priestley. That surprises you, doesn’t it? Yet I have enjoyed two years of perfect happiness. Happiness, I tell you. Not mere content, as so many of us contrive for ourselves. And how many men can truthfully boast of that?’

‘And all the time she was dying. We both knew it, but never for a moment did we allow that knowledge to cloud our happiness. Nothing could have saved her. You won’t understand this, Priestley, but I don’t think that either of us wished for an impossible reprieve. Had we been faced by the prospect of growing old together, our love might have lost something of its hold upon us.

‘How damn silly all this must sound to you! But the truth often is silly, isn’t it? She died in Italy, just before war broke out. Her last wish was that with her money I should build up again the career which I had abandoned for her sake. That’s why, after the war, I bought this practice.

‘I know what you’re thinking, Priestley. All very fine and romantic, but what about the wretched woman who had to suffer for our happiness? Did she suffer? I don’t know. I honestly believe that an impartial deity would count her petty suffering a very small thing to put against our surpassing happiness.

‘It sounds a queer thing to say, but Winnie was a total stranger to me. I don’t mean physically, of course, but mentally. I could count a dozen people with whose minds I was far more intimate than I was with hers. She was fond of me, I suppose, whatever meaning you may choose to give to a word we use to cover so many shades of affection. I’m fond of whisky. You’re fond of all that litter on your desk. And I was fond of Winnie.

‘But from the moment the boy came, she had very little further use for me. The male had played his part, and the female instinct was free to devote itself to its natural cares. Don’t do me the injustice to think that I’m trying to defend

myself. I'm not going to advance the ridiculous plea that I was driven to unfaithfulness by the absorption of Winnie in her child. I've heard that yarn put forward as an excuse before now.

'She wasn't left to starve. Desiree's generosity enabled me to see to that. The boy—Bill, we called him, do you remember—was given a decent education, and both have always had enough to live on comfortably. It wasn't long before Winnie got over the shock to her feelings. The boy was hers. After a while she would have hated having his father about to interfere with his upbringing. Anyhow, since I have been in London, she never made any attempt to get in touch with me.

'The boy is now in an engineering works in Yorkshire, and doing very well. She kept house for him, and found all the occupation she wanted in that. And then, last Thursday week, I got a message from him through my solicitors, that she was dying, and would like to see me.

'Well, that's the kind of request one can't very well refuse. I hadn't seen her since the day I left her. I made arrangements to get in young Milverly, and went off as soon as I could. Boroughby was the name of the place. But you'll understand why I didn't leave that address. I didn't want it to come out that I had a wife alive all that time. Patients are apt to be suspicious of a doctor who doesn't live with his family. That's why I'd given out that I was a widower. I dare say even Claverton thought that Winnie was dead. I couldn't afford any risk of the past being brought up against me.'

Dr Priestley nodded absently. The name of Boroughby had awakened a faint chord in his memory. Where had he seen or heard of it, during the last few days? It was some moments before the recollection came to him. He had seen it in the course of his journey to and from Martonbury. Yes, to the best of his belief, Boroughby was the next station to Martonbury. Curious that he should have been within a few miles of Oldland, without knowing it! And, now he came to think of it, he had not told him Mrs Archer's address.

'I won't dwell on the scene between us,' continued Oldland, after a pause. 'We found we hadn't much to say to one another after all. We were like two people who had once been acquainted meeting after a long absence, and finding that the separation had turned them into complete strangers to one another. Do you know, Priestley, I even found it hard to understand the boy's passionate devotion to his mother. Me, of course, he looked upon as an interloper.

'Well, that's that. Winnie died on Monday, and, as I told you, she was buried on Friday. Not a soul down here knew anything about it. Her death never appeared in the papers. I saw to that. And you heard that woman ask me this evening what I had done with my wife. What's behind that, Priestley?'

‘Nothing occult, I fancy,’ replied Dr Priestley at once. ‘In fact, I may say at the outset that I believe the seance to have been an elaborate misrepresentation. I believe that all the time she was perfectly conscious of what she was saying, and that every word she uttered was with a definite purpose. The assumption of Claverton’s voice was merely a trick to heighten the impression. To my mind the interest lies in discovering the object of it all. Whatever it was, I find it difficult to withhold my admiration from her methods.’

‘Admiration!’ exclaimed Oldland. ‘I’m afraid I can’t follow you there. To my mind the whole business was utterly damnable. If you’re right, that the affair was a deliberate fraud, what the devil was she getting at?’

‘Perhaps the frame of mind in which I observed the circumstances was more detached than yours. Would you care to hear my conclusions?’

‘I’d listen to any explanation which would set my mind at rest about it all.’

‘Very well, then. Let us try to find an answer to the riddle which Mrs Littlecote has set us. I say Mrs Littlecote, for I am quite satisfied that Claverton’s spirit had nothing to do with the matter.

‘The first question, I think, is this. Why did she choose the form of a spiritualistic seance in which to convey her riddle to us? She can hardly have hoped to deceive us into thinking that Claverton had returned from the dead to speak to us. As a professional medium the setting she chose would be natural to her. But, unless I am greatly mistaken, her object was to convey a certain piece of information to us, without incurring the responsibility for that information.’

Oldland looked up at this. ‘I think I see what you mean,’ he said. ‘What she said wasn’t evidence. She couldn’t be asked to repeat it in the witness box. In her normal state, she would plead ignorance of anything she might have said while in a trance. Even if we both swore to what she said it could be urged that her words were of no value as evidence.’

‘Exactly. Now, her first remark was a reference to your wife. The intention of this, I feel sure, was to startle you, to produce in you a feeling of apprehension. If I were to borrow the military phraseology which you employed the other night, I should say that her attack opened with an attempt to undermine your morale.’

‘Well, if that’s the case, she certainly succeeded. She upset me from the very start. But how the dickens did she know anything about Winnie?’

‘That presents no great difficulty. The extent of her knowledge may have been limited to the fact that you had once been married, not a very difficult matter to discover. I will suggest one simple means. Since Claverton’s death, she has had every opportunity of going through his private papers. He may

have kept a diary, in which you and Mrs Oldland were mentioned. Or she may have come across old letters referring to you both. The possibilities are almost unlimited.

‘That remark was merely preparative, I am sure. It is improbable in the extreme that she knew of your visit to Boroughby last week. She merely meant to impress you with the extent of her powers which she wished you to believe were supernatural. Remember, she was holding your hand in hers, and she could therefore judge your reactions fairly accurately.

‘In the same way, her next question was a trap. She asked you why you had not revealed what you found a few weeks ago. When you exhibited amazement at this, she knew at once that you had found something, and that knowledge guided her as to what to say next. So we had the emphatic and repeated mention of the hand and the white powder.

‘That, of course, explains our invitation to the seance. Mrs Littlecote knew that an unsuccessful attempt had been made to poison Claverton some weeks ago, or, at all events, she suspected it. Her object was two-fold. First, to find out whether you had detected the attempt. And second, if you had not, to inform you of it under conditions which made it impossible for you to make any effective use of the information. I was amused to see how ingeniously she secured her first object.’

‘That I knew all about it already? How could she tell that?’

‘Have you forgotten Miss Littlecote’s question, after her mother had left the room? Your answer implied a complete knowledge of the facts, which you did not choose to reveal. No doubt Miss Littlecote has by this time repeated that remark to her mother.’

‘Good Lord! I never thought of that at the time!’ exclaimed Oldland. ‘The fact is, Priestley, I was so rattled that I hardly knew what I was saying. I wanted to put an end to the whole business, and get away.’

‘It hardly matters, I think,’ replied Dr Priestley consolingly. ‘The essential points are these. How did Mrs Littlecote acquire her knowledge, and why was she so anxious to convey her knowledge to us?’

‘The first question is easy enough to answer. The hand that sprinkled the white powder, by which I suppose she meant the arsenic, was either her own or her daughter’s.’

‘That explanation makes the second question still more puzzling. Surely, in that case, she could not be anxious to impress the incident on your memory. No, after this evening I am inclined to believe that we are wrong in suspecting the Littlecotes of that first attempt. I still believe that they let Claverton die without calling in medical aid. And I think that this evening’s entertainment

was their first step towards averting suspicion.'

'You're getting a bit out of my depth, Priestley. How do you make that out?'

'Put yourself in their position. When you called yesterday, you asked pointed questions about Claverton's symptoms. Although you extracted no damaging admission from Miss Littlecote, she must have seen that you suspected something. The invitation to the seance followed very closely upon your visit. Now Mrs Littlecote, and possibly also her daughter, knew of the first attempt. But, because she hoped it would succeed, she kept her own counsel. She may have hoped, when it proved unsuccessful, that a second attempt would be made.

'But, learning of your suspicions, she saw a way of making use of her knowledge to advantage. She saw a means, as I have already explained, of imparting it to us without any risk of being called upon to appear as a witness, or of being asked to explain why she had not spoken before. She knew that we should infer that, since she imparted the information, neither she nor her daughter was the author of the first attempt.

'The impression she wished to create was this. Some third person had previously attempted to murder Claverton. It would be only reasonable to suppose that the same person was in some way responsible for his eventual death. The onus of suspicion would therefore be shifted from her daughter to this person.'

'That's all very fine, Priestley,' said Oldland grudgingly. 'But isn't it a bit too subtle? Why all this mumbo-jumbo? Why couldn't she tell us the facts straight out? Say that somebody in the house—Fawknor, for example, for the sake of his legacy, which he had learnt about by some amazing means—sprinkled arsenic on Claverton's bread and butter, and she saw them do it. Why not say so outright?'

'For two obvious reasons. First, because she would be asked why she had kept silence all this time. And second, because she feared that any inquiry into this attempted murder would lead to an investigation into the facts of Claverton's death. And that, I imagine, would be the very last thing she would desire.'

'Well, you may be right. But, if so, who the dickens was it who played those monkey tricks with the arsenic? From the facts of the case, it must have been somebody in the house.'

'Yes, somebody in the house, undoubtedly,' replied Dr Priestley. He seemed suddenly disinclined to continue the conversation. Abruptly he got up, and stood warming his hands in front of the fire. Oldland took the hint, and

with a remark that it was getting late, went home to Kensington.

From that moment Dr Priestley appeared to put the Claverton affair, as he had mentally labelled it, out of his head. On the following day his secretary, Harold Merefield, returned, and to him he dictated a long note on the matter, to be filed for reference. That more would be heard of it, he had no doubt. But, for the present, he could afford no more time to devote to it.

During the ensuing weeks he received an occasional visit from Oldland, who seemed glad once more to have got into touch with one of his old friends. But the subject of Claverton's death was tacitly barred between them. They found other topics of conversation in which they had a common interest.

There was also a certain amount of correspondence with Wrythlington. This was purely of an official nature. The solicitor kept Dr Priestley, in his capacity as trustee, informed of the administration of Claverton's estate. There were cheques to be signed for the various beneficiaries, and so forth. And there was the matter of the division of the books, Dr Priestley made a list of a few volumes which he knew Claverton to have possessed, and these were duly delivered to him as his share. The remainder passed into Wrythlington's possession. It was not until early in the New Year, three months after Claverton's death, that he saw Wrythlington again. The solicitor had asked Dr Priestley to call at his office, as there were several matters connected with the estate which he wished to discuss. These matters concluded, Wrythlington assumed a more confidential matter. 'Have you heard anything of the Littlecotes lately?' he asked.

Dr Priestley shook his head. 'Nothing whatever,' he replied.

'I have. She asked me to go and see her the other day. She and her daughter are living at Putney, you know.'

'I understand that she has a flat there,' said Dr Priestley, without much enthusiasm. He was not anxious to discuss Mrs Littlecote or her affairs. He felt that Wrythlington could tell him nothing that he would care to know. That enigmatic personality was far too subtle to reveal to the lawyer anything of moment. It was significant that he had not been invited to be present at that unforgotten seance.

'Yes, she's got a flat of sorts,' replied Wrythlington, undeterred by Dr Priestley's lack of interest. 'Miserable little place it is, too. However, she's going to leave there as soon as she can find something better. I dare say you know that she has sold Number 13? Well, perhaps you didn't. As it has nothing to do with the Claverton trust, I didn't worry you with all that business. But I persuaded her to leave the matter in my hands, and I am glad to say that I was able to arrange it to her entire satisfaction.'

The solicitor rubbed his hands. He was evidently very pleased with himself, and anxious to exhibit his ability. 'Yes, I may congratulate myself upon a very good stroke of business on behalf of my client,' he continued. 'You remember my telling you that I had a very good offer for the place, which Claverton refused? Well, the very day after the funeral, I approached the people who had made that offer.

'I had a devil of a job with them, I can tell you. They wouldn't listen to me at first. Said that it was too late, that they had drawn up fresh plans, and that they didn't want Number 13 now. But I kept at them and at last I got them to renew their offer, subject to acceptance by Monday morning.

'That meant there was no time to be lost. But I didn't care about that, I've always found that the best way to deal with women is to rush them into a thing. If you let them think there's no hurry, they talk about their business to every other woman they know, and raise a heap of silly objections. I went to see Mrs Littlecote, that very evening, Saturday, and put it up to her. Told her I must have her definite decision before I left the house.

'The daughter was there too. She jumped at it at once, like a sensible girl, and helped me to persuade her mother. I don't know that I should have managed to persuade Mrs Littlecote without her.'

'Surely Mrs Littlecote had no intention of remaining at Number 13?' asked Dr Priestley.

'I'm not sure. She talked a lot of nonsense about the house having a favourable atmosphere. All those Clavertons have a kink in that direction. They talk about atmosphere and environment and all that nonsense as if they were real things instead of a lot of silly fancies. But I don't think that Mrs Littlecote meant it seriously. She soon shifted her ground when I explained what an amazingly favourable offer it was. Do you know, you'd hardly believe it, but she wanted to stay on for a bit, and gamble on a still better offer being made!'

To Dr Priestley this threw a rather unexpected light upon Mrs Littlecote's character. In the interval between her trances she had evidently a keen appreciation of the value of money. He pictured her as he best knew her, sitting with bent head, seeming remote from all earthly consideration. But he was recalled to the present by the monotonous sound of Wrythlington's voice.

'Her daughter and I managed to persuade her that wouldn't do. As I told her, the people who made the offer had been played about with long enough. It was now a case of take or leave it. Well, to cut a long story short, I got her consent. The agreement was put through at once, and the furniture was removed and sold. You haven't been to Beaumaris Place lately, I suppose.

Well, if you want to see the last of Number 13, you'd better hurry up. The housebreakers are at work upon it already.'

Despite Dr Priestley's composure, this sudden announcement affected him strangely. It was not that he was in any way attached to the house, or that he had ever felt affected by its mysterious influence, of which Oldland had spoken. But the destruction of this house, in which Claverton had died, and which had witnessed the conflict of human passions surrounding that death, seemed to him like the closing of a chapter in his own life. He felt that the mystery which he had never really despaired of solving, must now for ever remain unrevealed.

If mystery indeed there was. Latterly, he had begun to wonder whether he had not let his imagination play tricks with him. Claverton's death need not necessarily have been due to any deliberate intention on the part of his niece. It might have been nothing more sinister than pure ignorance on her part. Perhaps she had not recognized the symptoms, and this accounted for her neglect to send for the doctor. In the presence of Wrythlington's matter-of-fact attitude towards things in general and the Littlecotes in particular, suspicion seemed slightly ridiculous.

'But it wasn't that, that I meant to tell you,' continued the solicitor after a pause. 'Since you're a trustee, I think it's only fair to warn you. In the strictest confidence, of course. Mrs Littlecote is, in a sense, my client, and I am bound not to divulge her secrets. But this, in a sense, concerns the trust.'

Dr Priestley betrayed no curiosity. But he wondered very much what this rather involved preamble was leading up to. 'I should, of course, treat anything connected with the trust as entirely confidential,' he replied.

'Yes, yes, I'm sure you would. It's about her nephew, Ivor Durnford. Have you seen or heard anything of him lately?'

Dr Priestley glanced at the solicitor in mild astonishment. 'I? No, certainly not. I see no reason why we should enter into communication of any kind, except through you.'

'Oh, I thought you might have heard of him, that was all. You know he had a job with one of the big chemical works? Well, from what I can gather from a letter he wrote to me some time ago, he's chucked that up. He gave me an address in Leeds, where he had gone, according to his letter, to do some research work of his own.'

A faint smile came into Dr Priestley's eyes. 'Leeds is not a very great distance from Martonbury,' he remarked.

'Ah, so you thought of that too, did you?' exclaimed the solicitor. 'Gone to spy out the land, eh? Well, he'd naturally be anxious to make the acquaintance



of that young woman. She's worth about twelve hundred a year to him, besides what she's got of her own. But that's just it, Dr Priestley, that's what I'm coming to. There's going to be trouble in that direction, I'm afraid. And it's that infernal clause in Claverton's will that's at the bottom of it.'

He paused, and nodded significantly. 'Neither Mrs Littlecote nor her daughter have set eyes on young Durnford since he walked out of the house on the day of the funeral, and, what's more, he hasn't even troubled to answer their letters.'

'Does that distress them unduly?' asked Dr Priestley. 'Mrs Littlecote and her nephew hardly seemed on very friendly terms when we last saw them together.'

'Perhaps not. But that may have been merely a family tiff. But Mrs Littlecote assures me that her daughter has in her possession a promise in writing from young Durnford to marry her when their uncle died. And she threatened to use this unless Durnford shows signs of fulfilling his promise.'

'You mean that Miss Littlecote will sue him for breach of promise?' asked Dr Priestley, in a tone of disgust.

'So Mrs Littlecote gave me to understand. But she seemed perfectly satisfied that the threat alone would suffice. She hinted, rather darkly, that she could bring influence to bear on her nephew to make him do his duty. But she didn't tell me how she proposed to bring influence to bear. I thought I'd warn you what's brewing, in case we, as the trustees, are brought into it in any way.'

Dr Priestley left the solicitor's office, and returned home in rather a scornful mood. Evidently the Littlecotes had decided to save what they could out of the wreck of their hopes. It did not fit in with their views that Durnford should marry Mary Archer. Dr Priestley gravely doubted whether any real affection existed between him and his cousin, but no doubt his share of his uncle's estate would be a welcome addition to the family fortunes. Hence this particularly sordid threat of a breach of promise action. Some people seemed to be completely deficient in natural dignity.

When he reached Westbourne Terrace he found a letter awaiting him. The envelope was inscribed in a woman's hand, and the postmark was Martonbury. Wondering what Mrs Archer could possibly have to say to him, he unfolded the letter and read it.

It was commendably brief.

Dear Dr Priestley,— Directly after Sir John's death you were kind enough to come and make my acquaintance. As the only one of his old friends whom I know personally, I turn to you now. Could you possibly come and see me again? My only excuse for making what

must seem to you such an outrageous request is that I am very worried. If you can possibly manage it, do please come as soon as you can.

Yours sincerely,

MURIEL ARCHER

Dr Priestley frowned as he folded up the letter and put it in his pocket. 'Some fresh machination on the part of Mrs Littlecote, I'll be bound,' he muttered angrily.

## CHAPTER 12

Had Dr Priestley's interest in the Claverton affair not been reawakened by his conversation with Mr Wrythlington, he would probably have refused to undertake the journey to Martonbury. His time, as he reminded himself, was already fully occupied, without wasting it in listening to the troubles of a comparative stranger. Mrs Archer and her daughter were safe enough, whatever happened. Mrs Littlecote might lay claim to occult powers, but even these would be impotent to upset the terms of a will duly proved and filed at Somerset House.

But the letter had reached him at exactly the right moment. His dislike of the Littlecotes had been fanned into fresh flame by what Wrythlington had told him. They were endeavouring to bring pressure to bear upon young Durnford. No doubt they had also been trying to influence Mrs Archer. They were determined that Durnford should not escape their clutches.

Personal prejudice apart, Dr Priestley felt it his duty to oppose them. He had no affection for Durnford, whom he regarded as an offhand young man with appalling manners. But, for some reason best known to himself, his old friend Claverton had wished Durnford to marry Mary Archer. It was his duty, as Claverton's trustee, to do all he could to further his wishes.

So Dr Priestley argued with himself, endeavouring to justify the decision he had already made. But, secretly, he knew that this was not the true reason which urged him to comply with Mrs Archer's request. His own insatiable curiosity, his hatred of leaving a problem unsolved, was at the bottom of it. If he followed every move of the Littlecotes they must at last leave him some opening of which he could take advantage.

Had Claverton been a stranger, he would have considered the problem of

his death sufficiently solved by what he had already deduced. Helen Littlecote had indirectly murdered him by failing to call in Dr Milverly in time. The facts admitted of no other interpretation. The crime was proved, beyond possibility of doubt. And with that, Dr Priestley would normally have been content.

But, in this case, the fact that Claverton had been his friend, and the feeling that he had somehow neglected him, made him anxious to press the matter to its conclusion. No court would commit Helen Littlecote on the evidence he could at present produce. She had only to adhere to her statement that no warning symptoms had been visible to secure a triumphant acquittal. Dr Priestley's only hope was that somehow, in their grasping eagerness, the Littlecotes would give themselves away.

He sent a telegram to Mrs Archer, telling her to expect him on the following day. But he told nobody of the object of his journey. 'I shall be going away tomorrow morning, and shall not be back until the next evening,' was all he said, even to his secretary.

He reached Martonbury by the same train as before, and secured a room at the Black Bull. Then he walked rapidly through the crisp and frosty January air to The Willows. Mrs Archer was expecting him, and greeted him with an unaffected warmth. But her face was drawn and anxious, and that curious look of fear, which he had noticed at intervals during his previous visit, seemed now permanently fixed in her eyes.

'I can't thank you enough for coming all this way, Dr Priestley,' she said. 'I would have come to London and seen you there, but I didn't want to leave Mary alone. And there didn't seem to be anybody else but you who would help me. I didn't like to write to Mr Wrythlington, since I have never met him.'

'As one of Claverton's trustees, I am always at your service, Mrs Archer,' replied Dr Priestley, with old-fashioned politeness.

'I'm so glad to hear you say that,' she said. 'It's about the will that I wanted to talk to you. It couldn't possibly be upset now, could it? I mean, if anything cropped up?'

She hesitated, and stopped. Dr Priestley, although considerably puzzled, came to her assistance at once. 'I am not a lawyer, Mrs Archer,' he replied. 'But I imagine that, once probate has been granted, a will cannot be challenged. In this case probate has been granted, and the trustees have already made certain payments. To yourself, for instance. You may safely rest assured that your income will be paid regularly till the termination of the trust.'

'Yes, I'm quite sure of that,' she said absently. 'It's not about myself I'm worrying. But I'm so afraid about Mary. That somebody could contest her claim, I mean. There's no way they could do that, is there?'

Her voice had assumed a pleading tone, as though she were beginning some extraordinary favour. Dr Priestley began to feel slightly uneasy. There seemed to be some queer mystery connected with this girl. He remembered Mrs Archer's look of terror when he had asked to see her on his previous visit. 'I hope your daughter has recovered from the cold she had when I was here in October?' he asked abruptly.

'Cold!' exclaimed Mrs Archer. 'I don't remember—' And then she corrected herself hastily. 'Oh, yes, of course! She was in bed for a day or two, wasn't she? But she very soon threw it off. She's one of the healthiest children you ever knew. She's gone to the pictures this afternoon, with a friend of hers, and I'm afraid she won't be back till late.'

The mystery was apparently deepening. It was pretty clear that for some reason Mrs Archer did not want Dr Priestley to meet her daughter, although as her trustee he had almost a right to insist upon such a meeting. In whichever direction he turned it seemed that those connected with Claverton had something to hide.

'But you haven't answered my question, Dr Priestley,' Mrs Archer continued anxiously. 'Nobody could challenge Mary's right to Sir John's money, could they? Even if they found out something, I mean?'

'Really, Mrs Archer, I hardly understand you,' Dr Priestley replied sternly. 'The only grounds that I can imagine for contesting your daughter's claim would be the discovery that she was not the person mentioned in Claverton's will.'

'Oh, but she is!' replied Mrs Archer passionately. 'There's not the slightest doubt about that. But I've had a letter, threatening all sorts of dreadful things, and I don't know—'

She stopped abruptly in the middle of her sentence, and sprang to her feet. For a moment or two she stood listening, and then, with a hurried excuse, ran from the room.

Dr Priestley shrugged his shoulders. He was beginning to think that all the women he had met in connection with this affair behaved in the same incomprehensible manner. Mrs Archer had apparently run from the house in a sudden panic, for he heard the front door open, and her footsteps on the path outside. Then a distant throbbing came to his ears. It grew louder, and he recognized it as the sound of an approaching motorcycle. It increased in intensity to a steady roar, and then ceased abruptly as the machine drew up at the gate of The Willows.

As it did so, Dr Priestley heard the sound of Mrs Archer's voice, apparently in anxious inquiry. And then a girlish voice, clear but troubled,

replied to her. He caught one or two words only, 'accident' and 'call Beatrice'.

But that was enough for him. That one word, accident, would be his sufficient excuse. He hurried from the room, through the open front door, and down the path. It was quite dark, and at first he was dazzled by the glare of a headlight. But as he approached, this was extinguished, and somebody switched on an electric torch.

Then the scene became clear to him. A motorcycle and side-car was drawn up at the gate, with two figures bending over it. One was Mrs Archer, the other a girl, closely muffled in a heavy coat and scarf. Sitting in the side-car was an inert form, apparently that of a young man.

Dr Priestley's approach was unnoticed. 'Do hurry up, mother!' the girl was saying. 'Run and get Beatrice, and between us we can carry him on to the sofa in the drawing-room—'

She stopped abruptly as she became aware of Dr Priestley standing beside her. But she seemed to accept his presence as perfectly natural. 'Oh, you'll do better than Beatrice!' she exclaimed. 'There's been an accident, and my friend's badly hurt. I want to get him into the house. Can you manage his head, do you think?'

Dr Priestley could not see her face, but her youthful command of the situation appealed to him. Obediently he grasped the injured man's shoulders, and between them he and the girl lifted him out of the side-car. Mrs Archer said not a word. But, as they started with their burden up the path, she gave a strange, moaning cry and rushed into the house before them.

They carried the injured man into the house in silence. As soon as he was laid on the sofa, Dr Priestley bent over him. He was quite young, little more than twenty, Dr Priestley judged, well built, and with a clever, rather handsome face. Such was Dr Priestley's swift impression. But there were other things than the young man's appearance urgently demanding attention. The right leg of his trousers was slit from the thigh downwards, and round the leg itself, just above the knee, a handkerchief had been made into a tourniquet with a spanner. But, in spite of this, the whole leg was soaked in blood, from the loss of which the unfortunate man had evidently fainted.

Dr Priestley looked up from his inspection to find Mrs Archer watching him as a cat watches a mouse. 'Mary has gone to the telephone,' she said, with a queer catch in her voice. 'You—you saw?'

Saw what, Dr Priestley wondered. What on earth had the woman got into her head now? 'I am afraid that I was too much concerned with this young man to notice your daughter much,' he replied. 'She certainly seems extremely capable. She is telephoning for a doctor, I suppose? The sooner our patient

receives expert attention the better. Who is he, by the way?’

‘Oh, an old friend of ours,’ she said hastily. ‘Bill, we call him. His surname is Oldland. He lived with his mother close to here, at Boroughby, but she died a few months ago. Now he’s taken rooms in Martonbury, and we see a lot of him—’

She broke off as she heard her daughter’s step in the hall, and ran to the door. It seemed as though she wished to prevent her entrance, as though she was still obsessed by some absurd desire that she should not meet Dr Priestley. But Mary Archer put her gently aside. ‘Nonsense, mother!’ she said, in reply to some whispered injunction. ‘Dr Seaton will be along in a few minutes. I must look after Bill till then.’

So, in the brilliantly lighted room, Dr Priestley saw her for the first time, face to face. She was tall and sturdy, with a boyish figure and a sort of immature clumsiness of movement, as though she were more at home out of doors than within the four walls of a drawing-room. Pretty too, in a healthy English way, with blue eyes and closely cropped fair hair. At first sight, there was nothing to distinguish her from a hundred girls of her age. And yet one glance at her was sufficient to betray her secret to Dr Priestley. He dropped his eyes hurriedly, and busied himself in arranging Bill Oldland’s wounded limb.

He knew now, and Mrs Archer, in that one brief instant, read the knowledge in his eyes. For a moment she swayed helplessly and then staggered to the nearest chair, and subsided into it. Then, without a word, she burst into tears, like a child whose secret is discovered. And her sobs cut Dr Priestley to the heart.

He longed to offer some word of sympathy, but dare not do so in her daughter’s presence. At all costs it was necessary to put an end to this amazing scene. And, with quick resource, he hit upon the only way to do so.

‘Your mother is naturally rather upset,’ he said quietly to the girl who stood by his side. ‘She would, I expect, be better for some occupation. Would it not be as well for you and she to get water and towels ready before Dr Seaton comes? I will stay with Mr Oldland meanwhile.’

Mary Archer seemed grateful for the suggestion. ‘Right-ho!’ she replied bravely. And then, breaking suddenly into a trembling whisper, ‘He—he’ll be all right, won’t he?’

‘I think so,’ replied Dr Priestley, as cheerfully as he could. ‘That tournament certainly saved his life. Who put it on?’

‘I did. Those tiresome first aid stunts came in useful after all. Come along, mother, we must have things ready by the time Dr Seaton arrives.’

She led Mrs Archer from the room, and Dr Priestley, sternly repressing his

thoughts, devoted all his attention to young Oldland, who showed signs of restlessness, endangering the safety of the tourniquet. For the next few minutes Dr Priestley was fully occupied; this was no time to unravel the extraordinary tangle with which he was confronted.

Fortunately, Dr Seaton arrived promptly. He was a bluff, hearty, middle-aged man, and evidently an old friend of the family. 'What's all this?' he said, as he came into the room, followed by Mary Archer. 'Bill Oldland in the wars, eh? That infernal motorbike of his, I'll be bound. I always said they were confoundedly dangerous. No, I don't want to hear about it now. Let's get him patched up first. Hallo, first aid, eh? That's not at all a bad job. We'll have to set to work to sew him up properly, though. You'd better stay and lend me a hand, Miss Mary. You won't faint at the sight of a drop of blood, I know.'

Dr Priestley, seeing that his presence was no longer required, left the room. He found Mrs Archer standing in the hall. She led him into the dining-room, and shut the door. She was dry-eyed by now, and looked at him defiantly. 'Well?' she asked. And Dr Priestley felt the note of challenge in her voice.

Challenge, as though she feared that the discovery of her secret would turn his hand against her! Dr Priestley made no reply, but stood looking at her with an expression of infinite pity. Slowly the defiance faded from her eyes, to be followed by an expression of eager relief. 'You know everything, now?' she whispered hesitatingly.

'I know,' replied Dr Priestley gravely. 'And let me assure you that the knowledge increases the interest I already felt in you and your daughter.'

'It is good of you to say that,' she said simply. 'I can't tell you how I have dreaded this moment. It was cowardly of me, I suppose. But I have kept the secret so long that the idea of it becoming known was horrible to me.'

'I see no reason why the secret should go any further, at least for the present,' replied Dr Priestley gently.

But with a nervous gesture she swept the suggestion aside. 'No, you have given me the strength to face it now,' she said. 'Forgive me for having deceived you, Dr Priestley. That's why I didn't let you see her when you came here before. I didn't mean you to see her this time. It was I who arranged for her to go to the pictures this evening. And then, when she came into the drawing-room just now, I could see by your face that you had found out.'

'Nobody who knew John Claverton could fail to recognize that your daughter was also his,' Dr Priestley replied steadily.

She turned aside swiftly, perhaps to hide the hot colour that flushed to her face. 'Oh, I'm not ashamed!' she exclaimed, with some return of her former defiance. 'I loved John too well to be ashamed of what I did. It was for Mary's

sake that I kept the secret.'

'Believe me, I fully understand that, Mrs Archer,' replied Dr Priestley.

But she hardly seemed to hear him. The truth, pent up so long, poured from her irresistibly now that the dam of silence was broken. 'The story I told you when I first saw you wasn't true,' she said, with desperate calmness. 'It was the story John and I agreed upon, long ago. I had to give some account of myself, you see. It is quite true that my husband was a naval officer, and was called up in 1914. It is quite true that I was John's secretary. But what nobody has ever known but us two is that I became his mistress.

'Oh, it's easy enough to blame me, I know. But if it hadn't been for Mary I wouldn't have cared. Whatever you or anybody else may say, I'm proud of every moment that we spent together. I wouldn't give up a single one of my memories to save myself from eternal damnation. To you, John was merely a friend. To me, he was the most wonderful lover that ever lived!'

She seemed to find relief in this proud confession, for after a pause she continued more naturally. 'I never saw my husband again after the early days of the war. From that moment our lives separated. He was appointed to a distant station, and I dare say that he found his own consolations. I found an interest, and later a love, such as I had never known before.

'He never came home on leave before his ship was sunk. Nor was he drowned when that happened. If he had been, things might have been very different. He was picked up out of the water and sent to Germany as a prisoner.

'When John and I knew that Mary was coming, I wrote to him, with John's consent. John was anxious for me to obtain my freedom at any cost. He would have married me, and we should have lived in London, at the house which had been left him. But my husband never answered the letter, or others that I sent him. And after the Armistice, when he was released, he disappeared and we were never able to find him, in spite of all John's efforts.

'John wanted me to go to London with him, just the same. But I wouldn't. I was in terror that my husband would turn up unexpectedly and that there would be a scandal. Not that I cared what might happen. But I knew how John would have hated anything of the kind, and the dread of it would have spoiled our happiness.

'Yes, we met regularly. Twice a year I would take Mary to rooms in some quiet seaside place, and he would stay at an hotel there. Mary, as she grew up, was told that we were old friends who had met in the war. He was "Uncle John" to her and I think that she came to look forward to those weeks as much as I did.

'Then, early last year, I learnt quite by chance that my husband had died in



South America, and that I was free. My first impulse, of course, was to tell John. But in the end I never did. It seemed, after all those years, hardly fair to him.'

Dr Priestley listening attentively could discern the restrained passion behind her matter-of-fact words. But the meaning of this last statement escaped him. 'Hardly fair, Mrs Archer? I am afraid that I do not quite follow.'

'And yet you should, knowing John as you did. If I had told him that my husband was dead, he would have insisted upon marrying me. But could I have made him happy? If we could have been married years ago, yes. But he had got so used to his own life in Beaumaris Place, that to have had a wife and daughter about the place would have got on his nerves. I loved him too greatly, Dr Priestley, to run any risk of becoming a burden to him.'

Dr Priestley bowed his head in assent. She was right, he knew. That secret affection, which could subsist upon a few weeks in every year, would have been strained to breaking point by the subtle influence of Number 13. He tried to imagine Mrs Archer, of her capable, athletic daughter, in the gloomy environment of that outpost of a forgotten age. No, such a thing would have been impossible. 'Number 13 is being pulled down,' he said inconsequently.

'Is it?' she replied. 'I'm very glad to hear it. I always hated that house. I never saw it, of course, but I fancied it had a bad influence upon John. It seems absurd to say that a man like him could be influenced by the house he lived in, I know, but I believe it was so. He became more bound to it every year, sank more inside himself if you know what I mean. His attitude towards me never changed a bit. But I have noticed that it was becoming a strain for him to tear himself away from London. A woman knows these things, without being told.'

She paused for a moment, and then changed the subject abruptly. 'I'm wasting your time, I know, Dr Priestley. But you don't know what a relief it is to be able to talk about John, as I really knew him, at last. I'm glad now that you know everything. About Mary, I mean. It's ridiculous to think how frightened I was of your finding out. But I'm still dreadfully worried about that letter I was going to tell you of.'

Mrs Archer picked up her bag, and from it took an envelope which she handed to Dr Priestley. 'I should like you to read it for yourself and tell me what you think,' she said simply.

The address was typewritten, and the envelope bore a London postmark. Inside it was a single sheet of paper, also typed, and bearing no heading. The communication itself was certainly of a startling nature.

Madam,—As an old shipmate of your husband's I have certain knowledge that he was not in England after September, 1914. The

parentage of your alleged daughter, known as Mary Joan Archer, seems therefore very doubtful. This is an important matter since she has become heiress of a considerable estate. I shall, however, take no steps in the matter until I have had the opportunity of discussing the matter with you. If that opportunity is denied me, I shall have recourse to the surviving relatives of the late Sir John Claverton.

Yours faithfully,

CHARLES SPAYDER

Mrs Archer watched Dr Priestley eagerly as he read the letter. ‘Well, what do you think of it?’ she burst out as he came to the end.

‘It suggests to me an attempt at blackmail,’ replied Dr Priestley. ‘Have you ever heard this name, “Charles Spayder”, which, I observe, is not a signature, but is typewritten, before you received this communication?’

She shook her head. ‘Never in my life,’ she replied. ‘But it is quite possible that he really was a shipmate of my husband’s. It is quite true that my husband never came back to England, as he says.’

‘Your daughter’s birth was presumably registered under the name of Mary Joan Archer?’ asked Dr Priestley.

‘It was. And the father’s name was entered as Walter Archer. What could I do, Dr Priestley? I couldn’t tell the registrar that John was her father. It would have been a terrible scandal for everybody.’

‘Well, it seems to me that you have very little to fear. You have certainly made a false registration, but I should imagine that the penalty for that is not very severe. I think that you would be perfectly safe in telling this Charles Spayder to do his worst.’

‘But suppose he goes to the Littlecotes, or to Mr Durnford? What would they do if they knew?’

They would probably make as much unpleasantness as possible, thought Dr Priestley. But he did not say so. ‘I cannot see that this false registration affects your daughter’s inheritance in any way,’ he replied. ‘There is no possibility of doubt that she is the person mentioned in Claverton’s will. She is expressly referred to as your daughter, Mary Joan Archer. That seems to settle the matter of her identity.’

‘Oh, I’m so glad to hear you say that!’ exclaimed Mrs Archer. ‘I’ve been so worried, in case—’ But she was interrupted by the opening of the door, and the entrance of Dr Seaton and Mary herself.

‘Well, I’ve fixed up that young man as well as I can for the present,’ said the doctor, as he sat down heavily. ‘I’ll arrange for an ambulance to take him to hospital, though, as soon as I leave here. I’ll have another go at him

tomorrow.'

'He'll be all right, won't he, Dr Seaton?' exclaimed Mary Archer pleadingly.

'Yes, he'll be all right, if nothing goes wrong,' replied Dr Seaton, with assumed gruffness. 'But he owes his life to you, young woman, if that's any consolation! If it hadn't been for your first aid, he'd have bled to death before he got here. But it looks to me as if it had been a pretty queer accident. How did it happen?'

'It all happened so quickly, I really don't know,' replied Mary. 'Bill had called for me here. We were going to the first house of the pictures at Boroughby, like we often do, and coming back here for supper. Weren't we, mother?'

'That is what you arranged, I believe,' said Mrs Archer.

'We arranged! I like that! You know you arranged it yourself. That's why I told Bill last night to get back early from his work, so as to take me.'

'Anyhow, we started off, and went by the lane that runs through Ashton Wood. We always go that way. It's so much nicer than the main road. It was just getting dark, and we were in the middle of the wood, when Bill suddenly yelled out and let go of the handle bars. I leaned forward and caught them, or we should have been in the ditch. Bill had taught me to ride the machine long ago, so I knew how to pull up. Lucky I did, for Bill tumbled off before he could do anything.'

'You didn't hear or see anything when this happened?'

Mary shook her head. 'I didn't see anything, and you can't hear much when the old bike's running. The silencer is broken, and she kicks up an awful racket. I'm always telling Bill that he'll be run in one of these days. I ran to see what was the matter with Bill, and found that he was bleeding like a pig from a wound just above his right knee. So I got a spanner and his handkerchief and tied him up as best I could. He could hardly stand, but we managed to get him into the side-car somehow, and I drove him back here. That's all. Something must have bumped off the bike and hit him on the leg, I suppose.'

'Then you suppose wrong, young woman,' said Dr Seaton shortly. 'Shall I tell you what's the matter with your boyfriend? He's got a bullet in him. Think I don't know a bullet wound when I see one? I ought to, after four years of the war. Yes, a bullet. It severed the artery, broke a bone, and is still there. I'll have to dig it out tomorrow.'

All the colour had left Mrs Archer's face. 'A bullet!' she exclaimed. 'You mean somebody shot him?'

'That's how bullets usually find their way into people's anatomy,' replied

Dr Seaton brusquely.

‘But how terrible! They might have killed Mary!’

‘They nearly succeeded in killing Bill Oldland, anyhow. I’ll have to have a chat with the police about this. I’ve heard that there have been some suspicious-looking characters about lately. But the first thing is to see about that ambulance.’

Dr Seaton stamped out, and Mary followed him. ‘I’d better go and keep an eye on poor old Bill,’ she said.

But Dr Priestley stopped her. ‘One moment, Miss Archer,’ he said. ‘I should like to ask you one or two questions. Do you and Mr Oldland often go through Ashton Wood together?’

‘Always, when we go to Boroughby and that’s pretty often. There’s no picture house here, and that’s the nearest.’

‘Mr Oldland works at Boroughby, I understand. Does he use his motorcycle to go there and back?’

‘Sometimes, but not very often. He finds it less trouble to go there by train. It’s only one station.’

‘When did you arrange that you should go to the pictures this evening?’

‘Last night. He looked in after supper, and we fixed it up then. Mother suggested it.’

‘Do you happen to know if he has made any fresh acquaintances lately?’

‘I really can’t say. He hasn’t told me about it, if he has. And now I really must go in to him. Dr Seaton told me to keep an eye on him till the ambulance came.’

Dr Priestley calmed Mrs Archer’s fears as best he could, and shortly afterwards left the house. But secretly he agreed with Dr Seaton that it had been a pretty queer accident. So queer, in fact, that it gave a fresh aspect to the problem which he had set himself to solve.

## CHAPTER 13

Dr Priestley’s first concern on returning to the Black Bull was to order a fire to be lighted in his bedroom. And to that vast chamber, with its massive bed and heavy mahogany furniture, he retired as soon as he had finished dinner. He felt the need of solitude in which to arrange his thoughts after his experiences of

the last few hours.

So the puzzle of Claverton's will was explained at last! Dr Priestley, in the light of Mrs Archer's confession, felt that he understood his old friend now better than he had ever done in his lifetime. He had been the victim of one great consuming passion, and had devoted himself to the memory of it. That solitary existence, buried in his library at Number 13, became explicable. Debarred from living with the woman he loved, and with the daughter she had borne him, he preferred to shut himself away from the world and dwell upon his lost happiness.

Except for those brief visits to some quiet seaside town, where for a brief space the three could meet again, strangers among the strange folk about them. As the years had passed by, the flame of passion must have burnt down to the warm glow of a deep affection. He must have watched, with a satisfaction that Mrs Archer alone could share, the growth and development of his daughter, whom he could not own. And his one thought must have been how, after he was gone, to provide her with a position in which the stigma of her birth would be effaced.

It was clear enough now. He had so arranged matters that in any case her material future was secured. But that fatal likeness between them remained. Mary, in every line of her features, proclaimed herself Claverton's daughter. In her girlish innocence this would have meant nothing to her, even if her attention had ever been called to it. But, sooner or later, the truth must be discovered, as Dr Priestley, that very evening, had discovered it. And from that very moment she would be branded with the shame of illegitimacy.

Dr Priestley could imagine how this must have preyed upon Claverton's mind. Intolerant in his own views, it would seem to him that she and her mother would become socially outcast, as his own sister had become outcast in his eyes by her degrading marriage. He must have envisioned his daughter as a pariah, the easy prey of any adventurer who might seek her for the sake of her money.

Claverton had been a worshipper of Respectability, that stern god who so mercilessly visits the sins of the father upon his children. Number 13, with its austere gloom, had been the temple of his faith. He must have spent many sleepless hours wondering how he could ensure the respect of the world for his own daughter.

And then the idea, so typical of his character, had occurred to him. Ivor Durnford was of Claverton blood, and therefore, by the rigid Claverton standard, respectable. This surpassing attribute could be conveyed by marriage. Under certain circumstances, of course. The pair must live up to the required standard. Clara Claverton's marriage had not invested her disreputable

evangelist with the sacred robe of respectability. But then they had abandoned the worship of the god in favour of obscurer faiths. But Mary, his own daughter, could be trusted to do nothing so foolish.

The argument was perfectly logical. If she were to marry Ivor Durnford, all would be well. And Claverton saw how that desirable end could be brought about. A sufficient bribe, to a man of his nephew's ambitious nature, would be an irresistible inducement. And so the bribe had been offered.

From all appearances, it was to be accepted. Durnford had studiously avoided Helen Littlecote since he had learnt the contents of his uncle's will. Dr Priestley found considerable food for thought in what Wrythlington had told him. Of course, Mrs Littlecote was at the bottom of it. The breach of promise was only to be used as a threat. Durnford, at all costs, was to be captured for the Littlecote interest while there was yet time. At present, apparently, he had not cultivated the acquaintance of the Archers.

Then there was that surprising letter received by Mrs Archer. Dr Priestley had tried to pass it off as a mere attempt at blackmail. So, in a sense, it probably was, but Dr Priestley feared that it had a much deeper significance as well. He felt very sceptical as to the existence of the self-styled Charles Spayder, the late shipmate of Mrs Archer's husband. How should such a man have learnt the contents of Claverton's will, which had only been very briefly published?

Here again Dr Priestley suspected the hand of Mrs Littlecote, working obscurely behind the scenes. She might have suspected the true relationship between Mrs Archer and her brother, and made inquiries as to the husband's movements during the war. Such details could be discovered by patient inquiry, and Dr Priestley was ready to credit Mrs Littlecote with endless patience. Had she not sat in that sombre drawing-room, day after day, waiting, as Oldland had expressed it, for something to happen.

Oldland! The momentary thought of the father sent Dr Priestley's thoughts off at a tangent to the subject of his son. Claverton's unacknowledged daughter, and Oldland's repudiated son. Strange that they should have met, in complete ignorance of their parents' friendship. Stranger still, perhaps, that he had apparently become deeply attached to her. Mary was little more than a child yet. It would be ridiculous to attach too much importance to a mere boy and girl friendship. But, all the same, the time might come when Mary, with true Claverton obstinacy, would refuse to consider her father's wishes before her own affections.

But to return to Mrs Littlecote. If she had inspired that letter, what had been her object? Undoubtedly, to frighten Mrs Archer with the threat of open scandal. She might intend to fling so much mud as to scare Durnford away

from any approach to Mary. She might even hold her knowledge as a threat to extort an allowance from Mrs Archer. One thing was certain. She was without pity. She would regard the Archers as fair game, since they had inherited the fortune which otherwise might have fallen to herself and her daughter.

There was, however, a matter even more urgent than the letter. The 'accident' that had befallen Bill Oldland that very afternoon. Assuming that Mary's account of it was correct, he had been shot at by somebody concealed in Ashton Wood. The wound was on the outer side of his right leg, just above the knee.

Had the shot been accidental? It scarcely seemed possible. If that had been the case, surely whoever had fired would have put in an appearance as soon as they saw the result. The same reasoning applied to the suspicious characters whom Dr Seaton had mentioned. There had certainly been cases recently of cars being held up on lonely roads. But surely none of motorcyclists being shot at, and no attempt being made to rob them afterwards.

It appeared, then, that a deliberate attempt had been made to murder young Oldland. Had the shot been aimed a little higher, it would have passed through his body. But what possible motive could anybody have for wishing to kill him? Dr Priestley felt that the solution of the mystery must be sought in some other direction.

As he considered the position of the wound the possible truth dawned upon him. Anybody wishing to kill the rider of the motor cycle would have aimed higher than that. The assailant had presumably been hidden in the edge of the wood, close to the road. A man on a motor cycle in an uncertain light was certainly a difficult target, even at so close a range. But any error in aim on a moving target was more likely to be horizontal than vertical. The bullet was likely to pass in front or behind the intended spot, but not above or below it.

Dr Priestley visualized the relative positions of the rider of the motor cycle and the occupant of the side-car. He came to the conclusion that the head and body of the latter would be about on the level with the knee of the former. Was it possible that the shot had been intended for Mary?

Once more Dr Priestley's thoughts flew to Mrs Littlecote. Who but she had any interest in the girl's death? And her interest was pretty obvious. Once Mary was out of the way, Durnford would have no further reason for neglecting her own daughter. By the exercise of suitable diplomacy, the marriage between them could be brought off without delay. Mrs Littlecote was admittedly a remarkable woman. But Dr Priestley could not imagine even her lying in wait with firearms on the edge of a lonely road. If she had instigated the deed, she must almost certainly have employed an agent to execute it. And if that agent could be discovered, there was a very fair chance of unmasking

the whole plot, extending as far back as Claverton's death. Dr Priestley felt the longing to avenge his friend grow stronger and more merciless.

Yet his mind worked with its usual calm logic. He had very little hope that the local police would find the individual who had fired the shot. They would arrest any suspicious characters in the neighbourhood and question them. But Mrs Littlecote's agent would almost certainly not be a suspicious character, as defined by the police. He would, Dr Priestley imagined, be an apparently respectable member of society.

The involuntary use of the masculine pronoun brought Dr Priestley's argument up short. He had never considered the possibility of the assailant being a woman. But why not? Why should Mrs Littlecote employ an outsider when she had an instrument ready to her hand? Her daughter had already displayed almost incredible ruthlessness in allowing her uncle to die before her eyes. Would she have any more compunction in attempting to murder the girl who stood in the way both of her fortune and her affections?

So fantastic was this idea that Dr Priestley hesitated to accept it. It was a possibility which must be borne in mind, that was all. But, whoever the assailant might have been, he felt sure that his or her identity could not be discovered at Martonbury. He decided to return to London by the earliest possible train in the morning. Once there, he could set investigations on foot. The desired result, he knew very well, could only be achieved by patience.

He left Martonbury without seeing Mrs Archer again. He was not anxious, as yet, to emphasize his acquaintance with her. And, on his return to London, he rang up Dr Oldland and asked him to come round and see him that evening.

Oldland agreed, readily enough, and reached Westbourne Terrace shortly after Dr Priestley had finished dinner. 'Glad you rang me up,' he said. 'Haven't seen you since Christmas. Anything special in the wind?'

'I have just returned from Martonbury,' replied Dr Priestley, watching Oldland as he spoke.

'Martonbury? Where the devil's that? I seem to have seen the name somewhere, but I'm blest if I can place it.'

'It is where Mrs Archer lives,' said Dr Priestley slowly. 'It is only a few miles from Boroughby.'

Oldland glanced quickly at his host. Something in his voice had warned him. 'What's happened at Boroughby?' he asked abruptly. 'Bill hasn't got himself into any trouble, has he?'

The urgency of his tone told Dr Priestley what he wished to know. Something, perhaps the loneliness of his own life, had drawn him towards his son since Mrs Oldland's death. Probably each was too proud to make the first



move. But to Oldland, at least, reconciliation would bring back something, at least, of his lost happiness.

‘The trouble your son is in is not of his own making,’ replied Dr Priestley. ‘He is at present in hospital, with a bullet in his leg. And I have every reason to believe that his life was saved by Mrs Archer’s daughter.’

‘You’re talking in riddles, Priestley!’ Oldland exclaimed. ‘What’s he been doing? And what the devil has he got to do with Mrs Archer’s daughter? That’s the girl who inherited Claverton’s money, isn’t it?’

For reply, Dr Priestley described the scene which he had witnessed at The Willows. ‘It seems fairly obvious that some one laid in wait for the couple and fired at them,’ he concluded. ‘I expect that by this time the local police are hunting for the assailant. And, from what I can gather, that young man of yours is treated pretty much as one of the family by the Archers.’

But Oldland was not listening. ‘Bone broken and artery severed, eh?’ he said anxiously. ‘I hope this chap Seaton that you speak of knows his job. Boy might be lame for life if he doesn’t. I say, Priestley, I think I’ll have to run up, just to make sure. I could get young Milverly to look after my practice for a day or two. He’s in London just now, I know.’

‘I think you would be well advised to go to Martonbury as soon as possible,’ replied Dr Priestley.

‘You do? Then I’ll get off as soon as I can. I say, do you mind if I run off now? I could get on the phone to Milverly straight away, and get him to come round and see me tonight.’

Dr Priestley raised no objection to Oldland’s departure. In fact, when he had gone, he chuckled softly, like a man well pleased with himself. Things were taking exactly the course which he desired.

Three evenings later, Oldland again presented himself at Westbourne Terrace. Dr Priestley greeted him warmly. ‘You’ve seen your son, of course?’ he asked. ‘I hope that he is progressing favourably?’

‘Splendid!’ replied Oldland enthusiastically. ‘Capital chap, Seaton. Extracted the bullet and set the bone like a tip-top surgeon. The lad will be all right in a few weeks’ time. But, I say, you saw that girl, didn’t you?’

‘Miss Archer, you mean?’ inquired Dr Priestley.

‘Yes, of course, who did you think I meant? I met her and her mother at the hospital. They’d come to see how Bill was getting on. I introduced myself, and they asked me up to their place. Jolly decent people, and the girl’s a damned good sort. It’s a queer thing, but she reminds me of Claverton, somehow. She’s not unlike him, and sometimes she speaks exactly as he did.’

‘There is, perhaps, a certain resemblance,’ said Dr Priestley. It was not for

him to reveal the secret he had discovered. Oldland, when he was less concerned about his son, would probably guess the truth for himself. 'You heard full details of that extraordinary adventure, I suppose?'

'I did, and I can't make head or tail of it. The police can't find the chap who fired the shot, and it's the only case of the kind there's been up there. They're inclined to think it was an accident. Somebody poaching in those woods, or something like that.'

Dr Priestley raised his eyebrows at this. 'Did you see the bullet that was extracted?' he asked.

'Yes, the local sergeant showed it to me. Looks as if it had been fired from a German automatic.'

'A somewhat unusual weapon for a poacher to employ. I can hardly bring myself to accept that explanation. It seems to me that everything points to the attempt having been deliberate.'

'It certainly looks like it,' replied Oldland doubtfully. 'But who the devil can it have been? Bill hasn't got an enemy in the world.'

'Our most dangerous enemies are not always the ones we know of. It has occurred to me that the shot may have been intended, not for your son, but for Miss Archer.'

Oldland whistled softly. 'By jove, I never thought of that!' he exclaimed. 'But I don't see that makes it any easier to understand. You've got the Littlecotes on your mind, of course. But, from what I remember of what you told me, they've got nothing to gain by Mary Archer's death. I don't suppose their feelings towards her are those of loving kindness, and all that. But if anything happened to her, her money would go to charity, wouldn't it?'

'Yes. But they might have other objects in view. However, we need not labour that point. If the attempt was deliberate, the assailant must have known that Miss Archer and your son would pass along that particular road about that time. It would be instructive to know who could have possessed that knowledge.'

'That's the very thing I said to Bill! I asked him who knew that he was taking Mary Archer to the pictures that evening. He told me that anybody might have known. It seems that some friend of his asked him to spend the evening with him, and he explained why he couldn't.'

'Was this friend one of his regular colleagues?' Dr Priestley asked.

'Apparently not. A young fellow of the name of Cobbett. A Londoner, from what Bill said. It seems he had a design for some machine or other, and came up to Bill's firm to get them to work it out for him. He had only been there for two or three days, and seemed to have taken a fancy to Bill.'

According to him, this chap Cobbett seemed a decent enough fellow, but his design, whatever it was, wasn't worth a damn. Bill says that he doesn't remember telling any one else that he was going to the pictures, but that, of course, Cobbett might have mentioned it to anybody.'

'Did it occur to you to question this man Cobbett while you were at Martonbury?'

'Yes, it did, but I wasn't lucky. I went over to Boroughby to see Bill's chief at the works, and tell him what had happened. And I took the opportunity of asking for Cobbett. Too late, he'd gone. It had been broken to him that his precious invention would never work, and he'd left the place. Gone back to London, they supposed.'

'I should like to know more about this Cobbett,' remarked Dr Priestley thoughtfully.

'Why, you don't think he had anything to do with that outrageous business, do you?' exclaimed Oldland. 'He can't have, it's ridiculous on the face of it. A perfect stranger to the neighbourhood, only met Bill a couple of days or so before, and never set eyes on Mary in his life! What the deuce would he want to take pot-shots at them for?'

'People have hidden motives, sometimes,' replied Dr Priestley abruptly. 'Have you any idea of the subject of this design or invention of his?'

'I didn't trouble to ask. But the principal line of Bill's firm is making plant for chemical works, so I suppose it was something of that sort. Bill would know. I'll write and ask him, if you're really interested.'

'It hardly matters,' Dr Priestley said carelessly. 'I am very glad indeed that you found your son in no danger. It must have been a very great relief to you.'

'It was!' exclaimed Oldland fervently. And he immediately plunged into a highly technical account of his son's injuries. 'He'll get on all right,' he concluded. 'A little stiffness for a bit, I expect, but nothing to worry about. It's lucky for him he had that girl with him, from what Seaton tells me. Jolly plucky of her to tackle the job at once and get him home like that. There aren't many girls of her age who would have known how to set about it.'

Dr Priestley nodded, in complete agreement. But, after Oldland had left him, he felt more bewildered than ever. This man Cobbett might be absolutely innocent of any participation in the event. On the other hand, there were certainly grounds of suspicion against him. He had apparently ingratiated himself with Bill Oldland immediately upon his appearance at Boroughby. He was, apparently, the only person, beside Mrs Archer, who knew of the projected visit to the pictures. He had disappeared very soon after the attempt had taken place.

If he had fired the shot, he must have done so, according to Dr Priestley's reasoning, as the agent of the Littlecotes. Yet how could he, a stranger to the district, have known the route which Bill and Mary would follow? On the other hand, he might not have been so great a stranger as he professed. He might have spent some time observing the movements of the two young people, and only shown himself publicly when his plans were made.

That the design he had furnished himself with was only a pretext was quite possible. It had proved to be quite impracticable. His real reason for presenting himself at Boroughby might well have been to make young Oldland's acquaintance, and so to be forewarned of his movements. The longer Dr Priestley considered the matter, the more suspicious of Cobbett he became.

But, if he was the author of the attempt, Cobbett was almost certainly a pseudonym. What was his true identity? Was he Charles Spayder, the author of that mysterious letter to Mrs Archer? If these two individuals were one, it was very evident that somebody had busied himself in ferreting out all that was to be known of Mrs Archer and her daughter, and also in watching their friends. Who could this be but some agent of the Littlecotes?

And yet there was one hint, so vague as to be practically worthless. The firm for which young Oldland worked manufactured chemical plant. Therefore, presumably, Cobbett's design had some connection with that particular industry. But, worthless as the design had proved to be, it must, on the surface at least, have presented some possibility of success, or the firm would have rejected it at first sight.

This meant that it must have been prepared by somebody possessing a working knowledge of chemical plant. Was it merely a coincidence that Ivor Durnford had been employed in a chemical works?

It was the introduction of Durnford's name in this connection that was the cause of Dr Priestley's bewilderment. That Durnford could have been working hand in hand with the Littlecotes seemed incredible. Mrs Littlecote had certainly told Wrythlington that he had been engaged to her daughter, but Dr Priestley was not disposed to place an implicit trust in Mrs Littlecote's statements. Even if this was the case, there now seemed to be something very like open war between them. Besides, their interests were diametrically opposed. The Littlecotes' object was clearly to secure Durnford's four hundred a year by his marriage with Helen. Durnford's interest, on the other hand, was to marry Mary Archer before she reached the age of twenty-five. Plenty of time yet.

Nevertheless, Dr Priestley felt that it might be worth while to learn as much as possible about Durnford. Hitherto he had not troubled his head about him, since it was quite obvious that he could have had nothing to do with

Claverton's death. Durnford had not been at Number 13 for two days before his uncle's death, and the symptoms which Oldland declared must have preceded that event had not then shown themselves.

But, all the same, Durnford might be playing some game of his own, trying to reap what advantages he could from his uncle's death and its consequences. He had given up his job, and gone to Leeds, ostensibly to engage in research work. Leeds was no great distance from Martonbury and Boroughby. It would be a very convenient base of operations from which to observe the Archers. And it had been during his uncle's residence at Leeds in the war that he had become acquainted with Mrs Archer.

It was, on the whole, more than likely that Durnford had indulged in a little detective work on his own. He would naturally be anxious to learn what he could of the girl whom it was so much to his advantage to marry. He might well have made inquiries about Mrs Archer, and discovered that she had been his uncle's secretary. That discovery would have led to others, perhaps even to the secret of Mary Archer's birth. And any observation of Mary would reveal her intimacy with young Oldland.

Now, Durnford's prospects depended upon his marriage. But Mary Archer's did not. Her future was secured in any case. In other words, she had not the same inducement to marry Durnford as he had to marry her. Claverton's motives seemed perfectly clear. She was to be given this chance of a union with respectability. But she was not to be compelled to accept it. If she believed that her happiness lay in any other direction, she was free to take it.

Durnford would realize this. He might not have entire confidence in his own powers of attraction. His chances would be immensely improved if he could bring some form of pressure to bear. What means were available to this end?

His knowledge of Mrs Archer's relations to his uncle, in the first place. He had presumably made inquiries, and found that her husband had not been home since the beginning of the war. He could not, then, have been Mary's father. If he had ever seen the girl, he could hardly fail to guess her true parentage. Even Oldland, his mind full of other things, had noticed her extraordinary likeness to Claverton. A threat of exposure, such as that contained in the 'Charles Spayder' letter, would give him a powerful lever with which to influence Mrs Archer, at least.

But young Oldland threatened to become an obstacle. It would be very awkward if Mary, in spite of her mother's opposition, insisted on marrying him. Something had to be done about this inconvenient young man before it was too late. Hence, probably, the affair in Ashton Wood. The intention might have been not to kill Oldland, but merely to disable him, just as a warning. If

that failed, more drastic measures could be taken later.

All this, as Dr Priestley never ceased to remind himself, was pure conjecture. Nor did it seem to have any bearing upon the central problem, which was to expose the neglect, to give it no harsher term, which had been the immediate cause of Claverton's death. Still, if the shooting could be brought home to Durnford, the possibility of any further attempt on his part would be averted.

By the time that Dr Priestley went to bed that night he had sketched out a complete plan of campaign.

## CHAPTER 14

In his secretary, Harold Merefield, Dr Priestley had a very able assistant. Not only was he capable of much of the spadework involved in the regular occupations of his employer, but he had been trained in Dr Priestley's methods of investigation. He could be trusted to ferret out the facts without which Dr Priestley very rarely moved far.

On the following morning, therefore, instead of embarking on the usual routine, Dr Priestley gave Harold Merefield a brief outline of the principal characters concerned in the Claverton affair. 'As you will see, my information is fairly complete, except in the case of Ivor Durnford. Of him, I know little or nothing, except that he was formerly employed in a chemical works, and is now said to be living in Leeds.

'I now find that further particulars are necessary, especially concerning his recent movements. These you will endeavour to obtain for me. Here is a note for Mr Wrythlington, in which I have asked him for Durnford's present address, and the name and address of the firm for which he formerly worked. Having obtained that information, you will act as you think best. You must be careful, however, not to let it appear that you are seeking information on my behalf. I shall expect you back, with such information as you have acquired, this day next week.'

Harold went off, overjoyed at the prospect of a respite from his regular duties, and Dr Priestley settled down to the composition of an elaborate monograph. During the ensuing week he kept himself free from interruption, and resolutely put the Claverton affair out of his mind. But when, at the end of that time, Harold walked into his study, his eager greeting revealed the intensity of his interest. 'Well, my boy, I'm very glad to see you back!' he

exclaimed. 'Have your inquiries proved successful?'

'Pretty fair, I think, sir,' replied Harold, taking a notebook from his pocket. 'Durnford's movements weren't very difficult to trace. The name of the firm where he was employed was Tomlin and Hurst, of Sunderland. I went there first with a yarn that I was a distant connection of Durnford's just home from abroad, and asked if I could see him. I expressed great astonishment when they told me that he had left, three months ago. On Saturday, October 27th, to be exact.'

'A fortnight after Claverton's death,' remarked Dr Priestley. 'Did you think of asking if he left of his own accord?'

'Not then, sir, but I found out about that later. I merely asked if they knew his present address. They told me in the office that they had no knowledge of it, but that a friend of his, a man called Dixon, who had worked with him in the research department, might know.

'That same evening I got hold of Dixon. He turned out to be a quiet, reserved sort of chap, but I took him out and gave him a slap-up dinner, and after cocktails and a bottle of wine he unbent a bit, and was quite ready to talk about Durnford.

'According to him, Durnford had first come to Tomlin and Hurst's about the beginning of last year. He could not give me the exact date. Durnford had told him that before then he had been working for a short time in one of the London hospitals. He had also talked about his cousin, a very fine girl, who had been working there as a probationer at the same time.

'Durnford had also spoken to Dixon about an uncle of his, a man of considerable means, living in London. Dixon gathered that when this uncle died, Durnford would come into his money. In fact, Durnford's general behaviour gave Dixon the impression that he was only working to amuse himself until he inherited this fortune.

'Some time, about last July or August, Durnford told Dixon that his uncle had been taken ill, and that he was going up to London to see him. He came back saying that there didn't seem to be anything very seriously wrong with the old chap, after all. But, in spite of that, he seemed very worried and anxious. He was always getting a day or two off to run up to London to see his uncle.

'After that, sir, Dixon became more accurate in his dates. On Saturday, October 6th, he was told by the directors that they had decided to give him a rise of salary, and the date seemed to have become fixed in his mind. On Monday the 8th, Durnford told him that he had received a wire, saying that his uncle was much worse, and asking him to come at once. He went off that

afternoon, and did not turn up again at the works till Saturday morning, the 13th.'

Dr Priestley made a note of these dates. 'It was on Friday the 12th that I called on Claverton and saw Durnford,' he said. 'So far Dixon's statement is corroborated. But I do not understand that telegram. According to Dr Oldland, Claverton was certainly no worse that week than he had been. In fact, he appeared to be getting better.'

'So Durnford seems to have found, sir. At all events, when he came back, he said something to Dixon about it having been another false alarm, or something like that. But he seemed restless and nervy. Dixon thought it was because his uncle hadn't died, after all. He thought that Durnford was pretty anxious to lay hands on the money. And then, on the following Tuesday, Durnford showed him a letter from a solicitor, informing him that his uncle was dead.'

'It seems curious that Durnford should have received a telegram on the previous occasion, and note on this,' remarked Dr Priestley. 'One would have thought that whoever telegraphed the first time, would certainly have done so when Claverton died.'

'It does seem rather queer, when you come to think of it, sir,' agreed Harold. 'Anyhow, Durnford said to Dixon that he supposed he would have to attend the funeral, and went off at once. Dixon wasn't best pleased at this, as it happened. For the last ten days or so Durnford had been engaged on some rather urgent experiments. Something to do with a new process for the electrolytic production of metallic sodium from common salt. The directors wanted these experiments concluded, and Dixon had to take them on in addition to his own work. That's another reason why he remembered the dates so well.'

'Durnford turned up at the works again at the end of the week, in a vile temper, according to Dixon. He didn't say a word about having come into any money, but he gave in his notice at once. Dixon says he hardly spoke to anybody during the next week. He left the works on the twenty-seventh as I told you, sir, and that was the last Dixon saw of him. He hadn't the slightest idea what had become of him. But he gave me the address of his rooms, and told me that his landlady might be able to tell me something.'

'So far, this confirms what I already know of Durnford's movements,' Dr Priestley remarked. 'Did you interview the landlady?'

'Yes, sir. But she couldn't tell me much more. Durnford had left no address when he went away. But he did tell her that his uncle was dead, and that he had come into some money. She confided in me that this was just as



well, for Mr Durnford was a gentleman of rather extravagant tastes. In fact, sir, she hinted that he owed money all round.'

Dr Priestley nodded. No doubt Durnford had had a pretty accurate idea of the contents of Claverton's first will, and had not foreseen that he would alter it. It was hardly a matter for surprise that he had returned to Sunderland in a vile temper!

'Next day I went on to Leeds, sir,' Harold continued. 'I had already made up my mind what I was going to do. I went straight to the address I had got from Mr Wrythlington, and found that it was a small private hotel. I walked straight in and took a room. And that evening I saw Durnford for the first time.'

'I took care not to become acquainted with him, for I didn't want to have to answer any awkward questions. And, for his part, he didn't seem anxious to have anything to do with the other people in the place. But I did manage to cultivate the acquaintance of the proprietress, a very decent and communicative old body.'

'I let her understand that business had brought me to Leeds for a few days, and told her all sorts of fictitious stories about myself. In return, she was quite ready to talk about Durnford. She was quite proud of him, although it was obvious that he puzzled her a bit. He hadn't apparently been very confiding. She told me that he was a very superior gentleman, though rather reserved. She evidently considered that he was a bit above the rest of her guests.'

'She hadn't the remotest idea what he was doing in Leeds. She hinted darkly that she suspected that it was in connection with some highly confidential business. Durnford was usually out all day, and sometimes he would be away for several days at a time. He told her, on these occasions, that he had to go to London. The last time that this happened had been from the tenth to the fifteenth of this month.'

'One moment!' exclaimed Dr Priestley, as he noted down these dates. 'It was on the thirteenth that I went to Martonbury, returning on the fourteenth. The period from the tenth to the fifteenth, therefore, covers the time spent by Durnford at Boroughby. An interesting point, but, of course, quite valueless by itself. Did Durnford tell your informant his London address?'

'No, sir. He merely told her that he would be staying with friends, and that any letters were to be kept for him. As a matter of fact, he rarely had any letters. Those that did come bore the London postmark.'

'Communications from our friend Wrythlington, no doubt,' Dr Priestley muttered, half to himself. 'But I wonder if there were others, from the Littlecotes, for example? However, that is by the way. Go on, my boy.'

'There's not much more to tell you, sir. I tried to find out where Durnford

went all day, but I couldn't. I didn't like to run the risk of giving him any idea that I was watching him. But yesterday morning I followed him from the hotel. He went to one of the stations, took a ticket, and got into a train. I daren't go close enough to him to hear where he booked for, since he would have recognized me as a fellow-boarder of his. But I found that the train he took was bound for stations in the North Riding.'

'You were quite right not to run any risk of being seen,' said Dr Priestley approvingly. 'Indeed, I may say that you have done very well. I have already prepared a file, which you will find marked "Claverton". You had better make a copy of your notes and add them to it.'

While Harold set to work upon this task, Dr Priestley set to work to examine this latest information. Up to the time of his uncle's death, Durnford's behaviour seemed perfectly normal. He had evidently regarded himself as his heir, and had thought it politic to display concern at his illness. He had, therefore, gone to London at frequent intervals.

So much was understandable. But the telegram received by him on October 8th was puzzling. Who had sent it, and why? At that time Claverton's condition was improving. He was instructing Wrythlington in the preparation of his new will, which he actually signed on the next day, the ninth.

Was it possible that Mrs Littlecote or her daughter had sent the telegram? They must have guessed, from Wrythlington's frequent visits to the house, that Claverton was making some legal arrangements. But would they be inclined to inform Durnford of the fact? It seemed unlikely, for any alteration of the previous will must be to their advantage.

Durnford had returned to Sunderland on the Friday, and was there at the time of his uncle's death. No doubt, during his visit to London, he had learnt of Wrythlington's activities, and that had made him uneasy. He was, however, reassured as to the state of his uncle's health. He had spoken of another false alarm. He could not, therefore, have anticipated Claverton's death so soon after. And the Littlecotes apparently had not informed him of it.

After his uncle's death, however, Durnford's movements became more mysterious. He had thrown up his job, and left Sunderland without giving any address. He had gone to Leeds, telling Wrythlington that he was doing so in order to undertake research work on his own account. But it seemed far more likely that he had chosen Leeds as being conveniently close to Martonbury. And he probably knew that his uncle had worked at Leeds during the war.

Though there was no proof that he had any connection with the Spayder letter or the attack upon Bill Oldland, Dr Priestley felt that at last a balance of probability existed. But the time to take action had not yet arrived. There were

certain other points to be cleared up first. And Dr Priestley resolved upon a bold move in that direction.

He had obtained the Littlecotes' address from Mr Wrythlington, and next day, after lunch, he set out for Putney. He found the place, after some difficulty. The flat proved to be situated in the basement of a converted house, which had a dilapidated and uncared-for appearance. He rang the bell, and after some delay the door was opened by Helen Littlecote.

For a moment she stared at him in astonishment. He had not seen her since the evening of the seance, but to his eyes she seemed little changed since then. There was the same sullen expression in her eyes, the same air of hostile defiance. She made no attempt to welcome him, or to ask him in. 'Hallo, Dr Priestley?' she said, in a tone of casual inquiry.

'Good afternoon, Miss Littlecote,' replied Dr Priestley urbanely. 'May I have a few words with your mother?'

'Mother's out, and I don't expect her back till this evening. Is it anything I can tell you?'

'Perhaps, Miss Littlecote. But it is not a matter that I should care to discuss at the street door.'

Reluctantly, as it seemed, she took the hint, and led him into a dingy and ill-furnished room. The contrast between the squalor of this basement flat and the formal stateliness of Number 13 struck Dr Priestley with peculiar force. Helen Littlecote, who was watching him intently, must have guessed his thoughts. 'You wouldn't think Sir John Claverton's sister and niece had been forced to live in a hole like this, would you?' she asked bitterly.

Dr Priestley avoided any direct reply to the question. 'Mr Wrythlington tells me that you are leaving here shortly,' he said.

'Yes, we've got a place a little less like a pig-sty,' she replied. 'What did you want to see mother about?'

'I was very much impressed by the seance she so kindly invited me to some three months ago. I have been wondering whether I could induce her to repeat the experiment?'

It was a bold stroke to play, but it succeeded. Helen Littlecote looked at him narrowly. 'Has Dr Oldland put you up to this?' she asked.

'I can assure you that I have not mentioned my idea to Dr Oldland,' replied Dr Priestley.

'Has he told you the answer to the question I asked him last time?'

This was the question that Dr Priestley had anticipated. But there was no anxiety in her manner, rather a contemptuous curiosity, as though the matter

no longer concerned her. And, as he watched her, a suspicion that had been gradually forming in Dr Priestley's mind acquired a sudden strength.

'He has, Miss Littlecote,' he replied gravely. 'And it is in connection with that I am anxious to repeat the experiment.'

'You choose to make a mystery of it,' she said, with a short, unpleasant laugh. 'Well, I dare say that mother won't object, that is, if you pay her for it. She's a professional medium, you know, and can't afford to give free shows too often. Her usual fee is five guineas, but I dare say she would make a reduction, since you're a trustee.'

Her cynicism did not escape Dr Priestley. He guessed that she did not suspect him of having been imposed upon. But at the same time her curiosity led her to encourage this odd idea of a second seance. It seemed that she was quite confident that there would be no revelation of her responsibility for her uncle's death.

'I am perfectly prepared to pay the full fee,' he replied. 'And I should like the seance to take place at my own house, if that can be arranged.'

'Oh, yes, that can be arranged easily enough. Mother always holds her seances in other people's houses. You don't suppose that we entertain very largely here, do you? I'll make an appointment for her now, if you like.'

'I would rather suggest a date a little later, if you have no objection. But, while I am here, I should be very grateful if I might ask you for certain information?'

Once more she looked at him narrowly. 'It's about Uncle John? What's the good of going into all that again? It's all over and done with now, surely? I wish I had never set eyes on him! I wish I had never gone to that hateful house to nurse him! It was mother who persuaded me. She thought—'

She broke off abruptly, but not before Dr Priestley had caught an insight into the depths of her disappointment. Mrs Littlecote had thought that it would lead to a reconciliation between her brother and herself, that Claverton would take his niece, possibly divide his estate between her and Durnford. But none of these things had happened.

But Dr Priestley appeared to notice nothing. 'What I wish to ask you is only indirectly concerned with your uncle's illness,' he persisted. 'It really concerns the visits of your cousin, Mr Durnford, to the house.'

At the mention of Durnford her eyes blazed. 'What do you want to know about him?' she asked abruptly.

'I want to know why he came to Number 13 on the Tuesday before your uncle's death,' replied Dr Priestley.

But the question did not seem to trouble her. 'I'm sure I don't know,' she

replied. 'He came to the house several times while I was there. He never stayed in the house, only came in for an hour or two at a time. He was in and out, for instance, about the time when Uncle John had his first attack. But why he came down on that particular Tuesday, I can't say. Unless it was that he got wind of Uncle John's conversations with Mr Wrythlington. I didn't send for him, if that's what you're getting at.'

How could he have known of Wrythlington's visits to Number 13, if not from the Littlecotes, Dr Priestley wondered. But he did not labour the point. 'If your uncle had not made a second will, your cousin would have become his sole heir, I believe!' he remarked, apparently casually.

Helen Littlecote laughed mirthlessly. 'So he told me, soon after we met for the first time at St Ethelburga's,' she replied. 'I believe he was right too, from what Mr Wrythlington has told us since. He must have got a bit of a shock when he heard the will read. Of course, mother and I guessed that Uncle John was making a new will. But I don't think Ivor knew anything about it. He didn't happen to meet Mr Wrythlington and we certainly told him nothing about his visits. And Uncle John wasn't the sort of person to give anything like that away.'

This was interesting. There was a possibility then, that Durnford had had no idea that his uncle had even contemplated altering his will. But, in that case, what had brought him to London at that particular juncture? 'You knew, of course, that the new will had been signed on the Thursday before your uncle's death?' Dr Priestley suggested.

She shook her head. 'I knew nothing whatever about it,' she replied. 'As I tell you, I guessed that Uncle John was up to something of the kind. But he never said a word to me about it. I had no idea whether a new will, if one had been drawn up, was signed or not.'

There was something about her downright, rather scornful manner, that induced Dr Priestley to believe that she was telling the truth. If so, her motives for letting her uncle die were obscure. Was it in her interest to risk her cousin becoming the sole heir? Only if some compact existed between them. That he was to marry her, for instance. But, even then, would she have trusted him to fulfil this compact?

Dr Priestley tried to look at this situation coldly, as he guessed she would have looked at it. Her uncle was in the act of drawing up a new will. It was a fair assumption that she and her mother would benefit by this, since she knew nothing then of the Archers. Would it not have been to her advantage to keep him alive, at least until she knew for certain that the will had been signed?

Dr Priestley felt that he was making very little progress. It was as though a

veil had been drawn between himself and these people, through which their actions appeared indistinct and motiveless. To force an admission from this girl appeared to be impossible. But he was not yet prepared to abandon the attempt. 'You say that your cousin was in London when your uncle had his first severe attack?' he asked.

'Yes, he was,' she replied. 'He turned up the day before, and stayed at Number 13 for a long time. He sat with his Uncle John for some time, and then came out and talked to me. He seemed very fidgety and asked me if there wasn't a danger of Uncle John dying suddenly. I told him, I remember, that Dr Oldland did not appear to think so.'

'Next morning he came back quite early. I was just getting Uncle John's breakfast ready; in fact, I had it waiting for him in the dining-room. Mother had had hers in bed, as she always did. Ivor seemed in a great state of mind about something, and begged me to go and ask Uncle John if he would see him at once. I told him it wasn't a bit of good, but he insisted. So I went up, and, of course, Uncle John said that if Ivor wanted to see him he could come again later. I went back and told Ivor this, and he seemed very much upset. However, he went away. By the time he came back Uncle John was very ill and Dr Oldland was in the house, so he never saw him after all, that time.'

But Dr Priestley seemed to have lost interest in the subject, and merely nodded absently. 'I am very much obliged to you for your information, Miss Littlecote,' he said. 'I can count upon you to convey my request to your mother, can I not? Perhaps one evening next week would suit her?'

'Oh, I expect so,' she replied. 'If you'll drop her a line, she'll let you know. I'm afraid you'll have to put up with me coming with her. She always likes me to be present on these occasions.'

'I shall be very glad to see you, Miss Littlecote!' Dr Priestley replied gravely. He left the house and made his way home, confident that, if Helen Littlecote's evidence was trustworthy, he had made one discovery.

If her evidence was trustworthy! That was the crucial question. What did she really know? To what extent was she and her mother in collusion? Was this strange secret, hinted at but never revealed, actually shared between them?

These were the questions which Dr Priestley asked himself as he sat in his study, pondering over his conversation with that strange girl. For, if her words were to be taken at their face value, the source of the arsenic which had caused Claverton's attack was fairly obvious. Durnford had sprinkled it on his breakfast while he was alone in the dining-room.

Could Mrs Littlecote, gliding about the house in that uncanny, ghost-like fashion of hers, have seen him, and guessed what he was about? If so, she

would undoubtedly have let events take their course. She had no love for a brother who refused to see her. Had Claverton died, as a result of the arsenic, she could have blackmailed Durnford as she pleased. He would, at that time, have inherited the whole of Claverton's estate. She could, by the threat of exposure, have insisted upon him marrying her daughter, or making her a substantial allowance.

But the attempt had failed, and Mrs Littlecote had said nothing. Perhaps she expected Durnford to make a second attempt. Perhaps that had been the mysterious event for which she had been waiting all these weeks. No one could tell what dark thoughts had passed through her mind as she sat day after day in that sombre drawing-room, her head bowed over her interminable work.

And then, after all, Claverton had died naturally. Had she urged her daughter to let him die? There was little danger in such a course. A firm denial that any symptoms had been observed until one hour or so before his death would be a sufficient defence whatever inquiries were made.

And Durnford? The object of his journey to London during the week preceding his uncle's death was still unexplained. Had Mrs Littlecote sent for him, without her daughter's knowledge? Was there already some secret compact between these two, based upon her knowledge of his previous attempt? Or had Durnford come for some purpose of his own, stating falsely that he had received a telegram as a pretext?

Dr Priestley felt himself lost in the maze of these conflicting questions. In Helen Littlecote's presence he had believed in her truthfulness. But how could she, who undoubtedly had her uncle's death on her conscience, be considered a reliable witness? The facts could not be disputed. Claverton had died from the effect of perforation of the stomach. No trace of poison, which might have caused such perforation, was present. The perforation could be explained by the gastric trouble from which he had been suffering. But it could not have occurred suddenly, without certain premonitory symptoms, which, to a trained nurse, could not be mistaken. Helen Littlecote had not reported these symptoms. Therefore, she was morally guilty of her uncle's death.

Impatiently, Dr Priestley rose from his desk, and fetched the file into which Harold Merefield had transcribed his notes. Perhaps he might find some remote clue to what he sought, something that would serve as the thread to lead him from the labyrinth.

And, as he read the notes through, weighing each word separately, the truth was revealed to him. He fell back in his chair, like a man who has received a sudden blow. A chance word had shown him how his friend's death had been contrived.

## CHAPTER 15

During the next few days Dr Priestley's time was fully occupied. He called upon Sir Alured Faversham, and his visit resulted in a prolonged discussion, lasting for several hours. But, even at the end of that time, Sir Alured was not very enthusiastic.

'It's amazingly ingenious, of course,' he said doubtfully. 'You may be right. I don't say that you're not. But how in the world you are going to prove it I can't make out. Analysis won't help, you know.'

'That I fully understand,' replied Dr Priestley. 'As for the difficulty of proof, I believe that I have discovered a way of getting round that. Meanwhile, I have your promise that you will do what I have asked you?'

'Oh, yes, I'll do that all right. I'll send them round to your place in two or three days' time. And most certainly I will accept your invitation to come and see the experiment, as you call it, although I warn you that I'm not a believer in spiritualism. Let me know in good time when the seance is to be held.'

Dr Priestley's next interview was with Dr Oldland. He asked him to dinner, and the two adjourned to the study afterwards. Oldland had had very good news of Bill's progress and was consequently in excellent spirits. His only sorrow was that the assailant had not been found. 'We shall never lay hands on the scoundrel now,' he said regretfully.

His host maintained a discreet silence. He thought it wiser not to impart his suspicions that Durnford had fired the shot. Oldland might have insisted upon taking matters into his own hands, and for this Dr Priestley was not yet prepared.

'You remember the seance to which Mrs Littlecote invited us?' he said. 'I propose to repeat the experiment, under conditions arranged by myself. I have, in fact, asked Mrs Littlecote and her daughter to come here one evening. And I am particularly anxious that you should make it convenient to attend.'

Oldland stared at him open-mouthed. 'What! You mean you've invited that woman here to hold a seance?' he exclaimed. 'Why, last time you said yourself that the whole thing was a fraud! You haven't become converted to a belief in her occult powers in the interval, have you?'

Dr Priestley smiled. 'Hardly that,' he replied. 'But Mrs Littlecote's assistance is necessary to an experiment I propose to make, and which I think will interest you. I am, I repeat, very anxious that you should witness it.'

'Well, I'll come if you want me to,' said Oldland. 'That is, if you'll guarantee that she won't make any more remarks about my private affairs. And also, by the way, if you'll undertake not to ask me to hold her hand again. It



still makes me shudder when I think of it.’

‘On this occasion, I propose to play the part of agent myself. And I think you can rest assured that Mrs Littlecote will have no opportunity for any reference to you.’

Oldland, not without some reluctance, promised to attend the seance, and Dr Priestley diverted the conversation to indifferent subjects.

On the following evening he again had a guest to dinner. This time it was Superintendent Hanslet, who dearly enjoyed the luxury of dining at Westbourne Terrace. But he guessed that he had not been invited without a purpose, and when they had adjourned to the study, his curiosity as to that purpose revealed itself. ‘Nothing ever came of that business about the death of Sir John Claverton, did it?’ he asked. ‘We never heard anything about it at the Yard.’

‘The coroner was satisfied with the results of the post mortem,’ replied Dr Priestley. ‘But I have never abandoned my suspicions that the true facts were not as they appeared. And I should like to tell you the conclusions to which my suspicions have led me.’

Hanslet smiled and nodded. He knew now why he had been invited. And for a long time he sat patiently listening to Dr Priestley’s able exposition of the theory he had formed, and of the steps which he proposed to take.

‘Well, professor,’ he said at last, ‘I’ll be perfectly candid with you. If anybody but you had told me this, I should say it was all damned nonsense. But I know you well enough by now to admit that there may be something in it. You want me to attend this seance, or whatever you call it. Very well, I’ll do that, on this condition, that when it is all over you put all the information you’ve got at my disposal. And I reserve to myself the right to act upon it as I think fit.’

Dr Priestley agreed to this without demur, and shortly afterwards the superintendent took his leave of him.

But Dr Priestley’s greatest difficulty was with Mr Wrythlington. He called on him by appointment and after a few words between them relating to the affairs of the trust, he broached the real object of his visit. ‘Mrs Littlecote has consented to give a seance at my house, on some evening early next week,’ he said. ‘I am very anxious that you and Mr Durnford should attend. But, as I do not suppose that Mr Durnford would consent to come all the way to London for such a purpose, I, therefore, suggest that you should write to him, informing him that the trustees desire to consult the beneficiaries under Claverton’s will, and that the meeting will be held at my house.’

Mr Wrythlington stared in amazement at his co-trustee. ‘But this is a very

remarkable suggestion!’ he exclaimed. ‘Before I could entertain it, I should require to know your reasons for desiring Durnford’s attendance at this seance.’

‘I believe that his presence would help to throw light upon the circumstances of Claverton’s death,’ said Dr Priestley quietly.

The solicitor snatched at his glasses, and waved them impatiently in the air. ‘But, my dear sir, that’s all settled and done with long ago!’ he exclaimed. ‘You will remember that the suspicions which you had at that time were proved to be utterly unfounded. I cannot consent to my clients being worried about such a matter. My duty to them would not permit it.’

‘Sir John Claverton was also your client,’ replied Dr Priestley sternly. And then he played what he knew would be a trump card. ‘I should perhaps have explained that I have been in communication with the police. If the seance is not held, they will take action immediately on their own account.’

Mr Wrythlington nearly leaped from his chair. ‘The police! Take action! And against whom, pray?’

‘That is surely a matter for them to decide,’ Dr Priestley replied equably. ‘I assure you, Mr Wrythlington, that you will save considerable inconvenience to your clients by agreeing to my project.’

At last, after much grumbling, the solicitor promised to summon Durnford to a meeting of the trustees, to be held at Westbourne Terrace, in the near future. Dr Priestley left his office with the knowledge that his plans were almost complete.

It only remained to fix the date of the seance to suit the convenience of those who had been invited. An evening in the early part of the following week was decided upon, and Dr Priestley wrote to Mrs Littlecote, informing her of this.

When the evening at last arrived, Dr Priestley, probably for the first time in his life, made an alteration in his regular habits. He and Harold Merefield dined in the morning-room, an hour before their usual time. The seance had been fixed for nine o’clock, and by half-past eight Dr Priestley was in his study, ready to receive his visitors. Harold, by his instructions, was stationed in the hall.

The first to arrive were Mrs Littlecote and her daughter. Harold handed them over to the care of the parlourmaid, who took them upstairs to a dressing-room which had been prepared for their use. Then a long pause ensued before Sir Alured Faversham arrived. Harold showed him into the study. He was followed after a short interval by Dr Oldland, who was likewise shown into the study. A few minutes later Superintendent Hanslet appeared. To Harold’s

amazement, he was in uniform, a fact which he explained by a hurried remark to the effect that he had just come off parade.

Somehow it had never struck Harold that superintendents of the Criminal Investigation Department ever went on parade. He was still puzzling over this when another visitor arrived. It was Mr Wrythlington, inclined to be fussy and rather pompous. Harold showed him into the study and waited. Of the guests whom he had been told to expect only one remained unaccounted for.

It was not until a few minutes after nine o'clock that Durnford arrived. Harold, in a dinner jacket, bore very little resemblance to the unassuming boarder at the private hotel in Leeds. But he took care that Durnford should have no opportunity of recognizing him. Muttering something about the meeting being waiting, he hurried him into the study, and took up his own position in the shadows by the door.

Durnford, as he entered the room, looked at its occupants in astonishment. He nodded in an offhand way to Dr Priestley and Mr Wrythlington, and then stared hard at the other three. Oldland muttered a few words of greeting, but Sir Alured and the superintendent, who were standing together at one end of the room, appeared to ignore his presence.

Dr Priestley glanced at the clock. 'That completes our numbers, I think,' he said. 'I have arranged to hold the meeting in another room, which will be more convenient than this. Will you go and see if the room is ready, Harold?'

Harold disappeared, to return in a few seconds. 'Everything is ready, sir,' he reported.

'Then we may as well begin,' replied Dr Priestley. 'Will you show the way, please, Harold?'

The men filed in procession from the study and followed Harold across the hall, Sir Alured leading. After him came Mr Wrythlington and Dr Oldland, engaged in conversation, with Durnford a few paces behind them. Hanslet followed Durnford, looking remarkably unconcerned, and Dr Priestley brought up the rear. Harold opened the dining-room door for them to enter.

The dining-room presented a wholly unfamiliar appearance. Nearly all the furniture had been removed, but the heavy mahogany table stood in the middle of the room with the chairs arranged round it. A fire burned in the grate, but a heavy screen had been placed in front of it, so that it threw very little light into the room. The only illumination was provided by a single reading-lamp, placed at one end of the table.

But even more striking than the room itself were the figures grouped at the further end of it. Seated in a chair beyond the end of the table was Mrs Littlecote. As before, her heavy pall-like garment hid everything of her but her

bowed head. Facing her, at a little distance away, was an empty chair, beside which stood her daughter, a tall, commanding figure dressed in white. The unrelieved brightness of her frock contrasted strangely with the dark mist of her hair.

Durnford started and drew back as their eyes met. ‘Hallo!’ he exclaimed. ‘What the devil is all this?’

There was no trace of alarm in his tone. But he was evidently surprised and disgusted at finding himself in the presence of his aunt and cousin. He turned round to confront Dr Priestley. As he did so, he may not have noticed that Hanslet stood between him and the door.

‘Mrs Littlecote has very kindly consented to allow us to ask her a few questions,’ replied Dr Priestley. ‘You will readily understand their purport when you hear them.’

Durnford shrugged his shoulders. ‘Aunt Clara is going to give us an exhibition of her powers, I suppose,’ he said contemptuously. ‘I thought only fools believed in that sort of thing. I wouldn’t have come all this way if I had known that I was to be let in for this sort of tomfoolery.’

He took no notice of Helen, but deliberately turned his back on her. Her eyes flashed, but she made no other sign. She remained statuesque, immovable, seemingly oblivious of the presence of the man before her.

Harold showed the guests to their places. At one side of the table, nearest to the medium, he placed Sir Alured, next to him Dr Oldland, and on his left again Mr Wrythlington. Opposite Sir Alured he placed the superintendent, with Durnford on his right. Finally, he himself took the chair on the right of Durnford.

Dr Priestley placed the reading-lamp at the extreme end of the table, with its switch within reach of the empty chair, which stood opposite to the medium. When all his guests were seated, he took that chair himself.

The reading-lamp was fitted with a heavy, opaque shade, which left the upper part of the room in darkness. A bright circle of light was shed upon the polished table, and was reflected upon the shirt-fronts of the men and the white dress of Helen Littlecote. All the rest was hidden, the two rows of faces with their expression of expectancy, the black-clad figure of the medium, which seemed to have become merged in the velvety darkness of the room. And then, after a pause, Dr Priestley put out his hand, and the circle of light suddenly disappeared.

Complete darkness fell upon the room. Only above the fireplace, a small patch of the ceiling was tinged with a faint glow. One of the men seated at the table coughed nervously. The sound seemed to be swallowed up in the utter

silence of the room.

In the darkness Dr Priestley stretched out his arm. He felt a movement behind the heavy draperies, and in a moment the medium's hand sought his, rigid, with the fingers bent like a claw. He felt his fingers clutched in a cold, lifeless grasp. And then, in a low, commanding voice, he spoke, 'John Claverton!' His words were as a summons.

A short, contemptuous grunt came from Durnford's direction. Dr Oldland, sitting opposite to him, smiled. Durnford had probably seen this sort of thing before, he thought. He, of all people, must long ago have estimated his aunt's trances at their true value. It must seem ridiculous to him that a man of Dr Priestley's standing should be taken in by her impostures.

Oldland himself was utterly puzzled by his friend's proceedings. Dr Priestley had expressed his complete scepticism after the previous seance. Did he imagine that a similar one would impose upon men like Faversham or Wrythlington, or the self-contained superintendent of police? Hardly. But there could be no doubt that he had some well-defined object in view.

A long silence followed Dr Priestley's summons, a silence tense with expectation. And then suddenly it was sharply cut, as with a knife. The voice of Claverton, clear and distinct, rang out. 'Hallo, Priestley! You again? What do you want with me?'

So remarkable was the voice that Oldland felt his neighbours on either side start in their seats. This was their first introduction to Mrs Littlecote's powers.

Dr Priestley's reply came sharp and commandingly. 'I want your help, Claverton. I have not forgotten what you told me to remember. I have found the white powder. But I am looking for the hand that sprinkled it. I see a small hand, with long tapering fingers. The hand of a woman. Is that right?'

The voice replied, instantly and emphatically, 'No! No! No! Whatever has got into your head, Priestley? It wasn't a woman's hand at all. You're on the wrong track, completely.'

Then Oldland understood. This was to be a battle of wits between Dr Priestley and Mrs Littlecote. It seemed already that the latter had felt the first blow, for the voice had sounded a shade less like Claverton's. A feminine note seemed to be creeping into it, the note of a woman hard pressed. And, as he listened eagerly for Dr Priestley's next words, he became aware that one of those present in the room was breathing heavily.

'No, that is not the truth, Claverton!' exclaimed Dr Priestley in ringing tones. 'The deed is known now to others beside yourself. The hand was that of a woman, I tell you, and the white powder was arsenic.'

From the further side of the room, where Helen Littlecote stood, came a

queer shuddering sigh. But it was drowned by the voice of Mrs Littlecote, now retaining only a semblance of her brother's. 'No, no, it was a man's hand, I swear to it. Who should know better than I, since I saw it?'

Although the assumption of Claverton's voice could no longer have imposed upon any one in the room, Dr Priestley retained the previous form of his question. 'You make it very difficult for me, Claverton. You saw the hand, you say, and yet you will not tell me whose hand it was. I still maintain that it was a woman's, and I shall act upon that belief.'

'I can't tell you whose it was!' wailed the voice. 'Why do you torture me like this? But it was a man's hand, a man's—'

The voice trailed away into a sob, and there was a moment's pause. Dr Priestley could feel the hand that grasped his trembling like a leaf. He knew the agony which his words must cause Mrs Littlecote, but he hardened his heart. Her ordeal would not last long.

'I am sorry that you refuse to tell me the truth, Claverton,' he said calmly. 'Suppose that I accept your statement that it was the hand of a man. Was it the hand that brought about your death?'

For a perceptible interval there was no reply. It was clear that the quietly spoken question had taken Mrs Littlecote entirely by surprise. But Dr Priestley could tell by the touch of her hand that she had suddenly grown calmer, now that his own persistence had ceased.

And when at last the voice spoke, it was clear that she had regained control of herself. Once more it seemed to be Claverton speaking, and the voice, though hesitant, was firm. 'What do you mean, Priestley? I don't understand.'

'And yet my question was plain enough,' Dr Priestley insisted. 'Was the hand that sprinkled the arsenic on your food the same that caused your death some weeks later?'

Again a long pause, and then the same hesitating answer. 'I don't understand.'

'And yet you, who saw the hand that sprinkled the arsenic, should have seen it the second time. Can you not let us see that hand for ourselves?'

Before the voice could answer, an amazing thing happened. In the darkness of the room a gloved human hand suddenly materialized. It seemed to flash out suddenly, like pale-blue fire, and hung for an instant over the end of the table. The hand opened. There was a faint splash, as of some small object dropped into water, and the hand vanished as suddenly as it had appeared.

Oldland, who had certainly expected no manifestation of this kind, was startled into a low exclamation. But before he had time to seek the explanation, Dr Priestley's voice rang out again, dominating the room. 'You have seen the

hand, Claverton, and you shall see how that hand brought about your death. Look!’

As he finished speaking, there was a faint plop of an explosion, followed by a hissing sound. Then a yellow lambent flame seemed to spring from the table, at the spot below where the hand had appeared. As Oldland’s eyes grew accustomed to the sudden light he saw that the flame issued from a saucer full of water, upon the surface of which it swam to and fro with an irregular and erratic motion.

A sudden cry broke the stillness, and Oldland recognized Durnford’s voice. ‘My God! What’s that?’ And as the flame flickered and went out with a final hiss, the loud crash of an overturned chair broke the tense silence of the room.

A flood of light suddenly swept aside the darkness. Dr Priestley had switched on the reading-lamp, and tilted the shade so that the end of the room by the door was brilliantly illuminated. Standing with his back to the door was Superintendent Hanslet, and before him, Ivor Durnford, white and trembling, with the fury of a caged beast in his eyes.

Those sitting round the table sprang to their feet, but Dr Priestley arrested them with a gesture. ‘Will you turn on the lights, please, Harold?’ he said quietly.

Harold went to the switches and flooded the room with light. Mrs Littlecote had not moved, but the dark garment with which she was covered trembled violently. Her daughter had advanced to the table, and stood clutching its edge, her eyes fixed upon Durnford as though fascinated. ‘What is it?’ she asked in a hoarse whisper. And her words echoed through the room like the sibilant note of the wind in some secret forest.

‘Your mother can tell us that,’ replied Dr Priestley. And all those present leaned forward, hanging upon his words. He turned to face Mrs Littlecote, and placed his hand upon her shoulder. She shuddered afresh at his touch, as though she felt what his question must be, and knew that evasion was no longer possible.

‘You must tell us the truth now, Mrs Littlecote,’ said Dr Priestley not unkindly. ‘The hand that you saw sprinkling the arsenic upon your brother’s food was Ivor Durnford’s, was it not?’

Slowly she raised her head, and her eyes, weary and defeated, looked into his. And it was in her natural voice that she replied with the single monosyllable, ‘Yes!’

She had hardly spoken when a scuffle broke out at the other end of the room. Durnford had made a leap for the window, but Hanslet was too quick for him. He held his arms pinioned in his powerful grasp. ‘Ivor Durnford, I arrest

you for the murder of your uncle, Sir John Claverton,' he said solemnly.

With a queer, shuddering cry Helen Littlecote released her hold of the table. For an instant she stood, swaying wildly. Then, before Dr Priestley's outstretched arms could catch her, she fell heavily to the floor.

## CHAPTER 16

Later that same evening, Dr Priestley was entertaining some of his guests in his study. The round table, with the decanter and syphon upon it, stood in the middle of the floor, and round it were grouped Sir Alured, Mr Wrythlington, and Harold Merefield.

Dr Priestley was seated at his desk, and every now and then glanced towards the door with an expectant air. A silence had at last fallen upon the room, following the refusal of Dr Priestley to explain matters to Mr Wrythlington. Ever since the dramatic conclusion of the seance, the solicitor had been in a state of fussy bewilderment, alternately demanding an explanation, and denouncing the trick that had been played upon his client, Mrs Littlecote.

But Dr Priestley had at last succeeded in quieting him. 'I accept full responsibility for the events of the evening, Mr Wrythlington,' he said. 'I am prepared to answer any questions you may care to ask. But I must ask you to await the return of Dr Oldland and Superintendent Hanslet, which cannot be delayed much longer.'

Hanslet had taken Durnford to the police station, and Dr Oldland, having revived Helen Littlecote, had insisted upon escorting her and her mother back to their flat. So Mr Wrythlington was compelled to wait, his expression indicative of offended dignity.

Oldland was the first to return. In reply to Dr Priestley's inquiring glance he nodded reassuringly. 'The girl's had a bit of a shock, that's all,' he said. 'She'll be all right in a day or two. Her mother's looking after her. What she thinks of it all, I don't know. She's not a very communicative person, as I dare say you've noticed.'

He had hardly finished speaking before Hanslet came in. He walked straight up to the table, poured himself out a drink, and drank it off. 'Well, that's that,' he said complacently. 'I took him along and charged him straight away. He immediately said that he wished to make a statement, I warned him,



but he insisted. The statement was taken down in my presence, and amounted to a full confession. It was just as you said, professor.'

Mr Wrythlington could contain himself no longer. 'I must insist upon an explanation!' he exclaimed testily. 'My position has been completely ignored. I utterly fail to understand this extraordinary charge. It is quite impossible that Durnford could have murdered his uncle. Why, he wasn't even in London when Claverton died.'

'You are certainly entitled to an explanation, Mr Wrythlington,' Dr Priestley interposed quietly. 'If any discourtesy has been shown towards you, I most sincerely apologize. But, as you will understand later, the utmost secrecy was necessary. Even Dr Oldland was not admitted to my confidence.'

'That's quite true,' Oldland interjected. 'Even now, I don't in the least understand what happened.'

'Now that we are all assembled, I will endeavour to explain,' replied Dr Priestley. 'The easiest way of doing so, perhaps, will be for me to outline the various steps which have led up to the scene which you witnessed just now.'

'To begin with, I was never completely satisfied as to the cause of Claverton's death. A couple of days before it occurred, Dr Oldland had made a statement to me in this very room. He had described a previous crisis in Claverton's illness, which he had strong reasons for suspecting had been caused by the administration of arsenic.'

'When Claverton died so unexpectedly, I naturally supposed that arsenic had again been administered, this time with fatal results. So sure was I that this would prove to have been the case, that I went so far as to warn Superintendent Hanslet in advance. The results of the post mortem, conducted by Sir Alured Faversham, seemed incredible to me. He will tell you how difficult he found it to convince me that no arsenic, or, for that matter, any other poison, was to be found in Claverton's system.'

Sir Alured nodded. 'That's quite right,' he said. 'Priestley was not satisfied until I had repeated the necessary experiments in his presence.'

'I was, at length, forced to yield to the logic of facts. The inference was that, since Claverton had not been poisoned, the perforation of the stomach from which he died had been due to natural causes. I learnt from Dr Oldland that such perforation was a possible sequel to the gastric trouble from which he had been suffering. But, in this case, adequate warning that death was likely to ensue would be given by certain premonitory symptoms.'

'These symptoms had not been reported by Miss Littlecote, who was acting as nurse in charge of the case. Upon being questioned later, she denied that anything of the kind had been apparent. She adhered to her statement that

her uncle had died within an hour of being suddenly attacked by violent pain. This statement seemed incredible, an opinion in which I was borne out by Dr Oldland. I became convinced that Miss Littlecote had, in fact, observed the premonitory symptoms, and had purposely delayed summoning medical aid until too late.

‘This, in effect, amounted to a conviction that Miss Littlecote, if she had not deliberately murdered her uncle, had been directly responsible for his death. It did not, therefore, seem unreasonable to suppose that she had been the author of the previous attempt to poison him with arsenic. But, since it appeared impossible to prove either of these charges, I was condemned to inactivity. And at this stage a very remarkable incident took place. Perhaps Dr Oldland, who was more intimately concerned in it than I was myself, will describe it to us.’

Oldland gave a description of the seance to which he and Dr Priestley had been invited. When he had finished, the latter again took up the tale.

‘Mrs Littlecote’s so-called revelations puzzled me considerably. If the hand which had sprinkled the white powder had been her daughter’s, she would have kept all knowledge of the incident to herself. It seemed to me that her object was to frighten the perpetrator of the deed, while herself remaining in the background. I was driven to the conclusion that Durnford must have been guilty of this attempt.

‘Later, my suspicions of Durnford were strengthened by the discovery that Durnford had been in London at the time, and had obtained access to food ready prepared for his uncle. His motive for desiring his uncle’s death at that time must be apparent to you, Mr Wrythlington.’

‘It is certainly a fact that if Claverton had died at the time of his first seizure, Durnford would have been his sole heir,’ the solicitor conceded.

‘Thank you, Mr Wrythlington. Now, I am anxious to emphasize this point. Whatever my suspicions may have been, I could prove nothing against Durnford. Mrs Littlecote’s hint had been dropped while she was in an alleged trance. I knew very well that, if she were questioned, she would deny all knowledge of what she had said while in that state. It was not until quite recently that I saw a way of testing my suspicions.’

Dr Priestley paused, and glanced meaningfully at Oldland. ‘There is no need for me to enter into details,’ he continued. ‘It will suffice to say that an outrage occurred, some distance from here, and that, from certain investigations made in connection with that outrage, I formed the opinion that Durnford was the perpetrator.

‘I determined that, if it were possible, I would put an end to these sinister

activities on the part of Durnford. I had no proof of his guilt, and I saw no direct method of obtaining evidence. But it occurred to me that Mrs Littlecote might be made use of. If I could persuade her to give a second seance, and contrive that Durnford should attend it, it might be possible to surprise him into an admission of his guilt, at least of administering arsenic to his uncle.

‘I had, at this time, formed no definite plan as to how this was to be done. Nor did I suspect Durnford of being in any way responsible for his uncle’s death, since I had ascertained that he was not in London at the time. But, as I reviewed the information I had obtained about Durnford, a possibility occurred to me, which quickly developed into a certainty. In spite of the facts revealed by the post mortem, and in spite of the fact that Durnford was absent from London at the time, I saw the means by which he had murdered his uncle.

‘Now, I must mention an incident which, until that moment, had entirely escaped my memory. I called upon Claverton on the Friday before his death, and spent some time in conversation with him. He was then in a slightly irritable frame of mind, and was inclined to attach undue importance to trifles.

‘As part of his treatment, Dr Oldland had prescribed capsules of papainum, to be taken four times a day, after meals. These capsules were obtained from Taylor and Hunt, the well-known pharmacists, and cost seven and sixpence per box, of two dozen. Claverton considered this very expensive, and rather grudged the money spent upon them.

‘This he told me when I visited him. He was very much annoyed because one of the capsules had been lost. The circumstances, as he told them to me, were these. A new box had been opened at tea-time on Monday. On Wednesday morning Claverton counted the capsules remaining in the box. There should have been seventeen, but there were actually only sixteen.

‘Claverton came to the conclusion that somebody, probably Fawknor, whose duty it was to clean out the library, had upset the box and failed to pick up all the contents. So irritated was he by this that, as I learnt later, he forbade Fawknor to enter the library at all. At the same time he gave orders that a search was to be made for the missing capsule.

‘By the time of my visit on Friday, the number of capsules in the box, allowing for four having been taken daily, was again correct. The inference was that in the interval the missing capsule had been found and replaced in the box. Claverton was satisfied with this. His irritation at so trifling an incident was obviously the result of his state of health. As I say, the matter passed entirely from my mind, except as an illustration of Claverton’s moods.

‘But when I considered the experiments upon which Durnford had been engaged at the time, the importance of the missing capsule occurred to me. I

went to Sir Alured Faversham, and asked for his opinion upon the theory which I had formed. He agreed with me upon its possibility, and at my request prepared half a dozen capsules, exactly similar in appearance, to those which Claverton had been taking, but filled, not with papainum, but with a very different substance.'

Dr Priestley opened a drawer of his desk, and from it took two small boxes. 'The first of these contains papainum capsules, purchased from Taylor and Hunt. The second contains the capsules prepared for me by Sir Alured Faversham. If you compare them, you will see that in appearance they are exactly similar. The gelatinous covering in both cases is exactly the same. Were I to mix the two sorts together, it would be impossible to separate them again by inspection.'

He passed the boxes around for his visitors' inspection and then turned to Sir Alured. 'Perhaps, Faversham, you will be good enough to repeat under less dramatic conditions the experiment we saw this evening.'

A brass tea-kettle was standing in the fireplace. Faversham picked this up, and from it poured some warm water into a saucer which stood on Dr Priestley's desk. Into this he dropped one of the capsules which he had prepared. It floated on the surface, but for a few moments nothing happened. Then when the gelatine coating had dissolved, there was a sudden pop! A yellow flame shot up from the capsule, which began to dart erratically about the surface of the water. After a few seconds the substance had entirely disappeared, and the flame went out.

As it did so, Oldland uttered a sudden exclamation. 'By jove! I see now. Sodium, of course!'

Sir Alured nodded. 'Ordinary common metallic sodium,' he replied. 'Simple, when you know how, isn't it?'

'It was metallic sodium that Durnford was experimenting with at the time of his uncle's death,' said Dr Priestley. He looked inquiringly at Hanslet.

The superintendent nodded. 'That's right, professor,' he said. 'Durnford said in the course of his statement that as soon as he saw that yellow flame he knew that you had seen through his dodge, and that it was all up. And he told us exactly how he did it.'

'When he came up to London on the Monday before Sir John's death, he brought with him a supply of sodium, and also a collection of empty capsules of various sizes. He knew that his uncle was taking capsules, for he had seen them on his table. On Tuesday evening he took one of them from the box. He was staying at a hotel, and during the next two days he experimented with the sodium and the empty capsules until he had produced one exactly like the

capsule he had taken. He threw the genuine capsule away, and put the one which he had made in the box on his uncle's table on Friday morning.'

'Well, he bowled me out, anyhow,' Sir Alured remarked, with a touch of bitterness. 'Perhaps I may be allowed to explain how. In the first place, you have seen how sodium behaves when placed in warm water. It would behave in exactly the same way if introduced into the contents of the stomach. It would apparently catch fire—I say apparently, for it is really the hydrogen derived from the water that catches fire, and not the sodium. As you can imagine, this would cause instant perforation of the walls of the stomach.'

'In the second place, the sodium, once dissolved, would leave no trace of its presence. It would combine with the chlorine of the gastric juices to form sodium chloride, common salt, a substance which one would naturally expect to find in the course of analysis. In Claverton's case I did find a rather large proportion of sodium compounds, but I put this presence down to the alkaline medicine which Dr Oldland had also prescribed.'

'You are all familiar, I take it, with the idea of a capsule. It is swallowed whole, and the gelatine casing does not dissolve until it reaches the stomach. The taste of the substance which it contains is thus not perceived. Since in this case the sodium was contained in a capsule, it left no trace of a caustic action on the mouth or throat.'

'What exactly happened, no doubt, was this,' said Dr Priestley, after a pause. 'The sodium capsule was exactly similar to the others in the box. On Friday, after lunch, when Durnford left Number 13, there were in the box eight capsules in all. The chances were, therefore, eight to one against Claverton selecting the sodium capsule at tea-time that day, seven to one against his selecting it at dinner-time, and so on. Though every time that a capsule was taken the chances diminished, it was probable that at least twenty-four hours would elapse after Durnford left the house and before his uncle died. This is a matter of simple mathematical calculation. Actually, the sodium capsule was not selected until breakfast-time on Sunday. The results were immediately fatal. This, of course, explains the absence of premonitory symptoms of perforation, and entirely exonerates Miss Littlecote.'

'It may interest you to know, professor, that Durnford declares that he had no idea that his uncle had altered his will until he heard it read after the funeral,' Hanslet remarked.

'So I conjectured,' replied Dr Priestley. 'But you must appreciate this fact. Although I was satisfied in my own mind as to the means by which Durnford had contrived the death of his uncle, I saw no prospect of proving them. The very ingenuity of the method adopted precluded detection. But I believed that it might be possible to startle Durnford into a display of guilt.'

‘The seance, which I had already determined upon, seemed to lend itself to the purpose. Dr Oldland has described the first seance to you, and you will understand that I had Mrs Littlecote’s utterances on that occasion, concerning the hand and the white powder, to work upon.

‘My policy was to force her hand. By insisting that the hand was that of a woman, and by revealing my knowledge that the white powder was arsenic, I made her believe that I suspected her or her daughter of an attempt to poison Claverton. I knew that sooner or later, in self-defence, she would be compelled to divulge the identity of the criminal. The presence of Inspector Hanslet, whom I had asked to attend in uniform, tended to heighten her fears.

‘Under what circumstances she saw Durnford sprinkling the arsenic I cannot tell. But Dr Oldland and I had a curious experience of her methods. She can, when she chooses, be utterly silent in her movements, and, in the gloom of Number 13, she seemed almost to have the power of making herself invisible. I have no doubt that though Durnford thought he was alone at the time, Mrs Littlecote was watching him.

‘But my questions were framed with a double purpose. While bringing pressure to bear upon Mrs Littlecote, they were intended to reassure Durnford. Through them he must have learnt for the first time that anybody knew of his attempt. But my insistence must have convinced him that he was not suspected.

‘Then, when he was at the height of his security, I suddenly changed my tactics. All pretence of spiritualistic revelation was at an end by then, of course. But the darkness and the tense situation which had developed was still sufficiently impressive. It seemed to me that the time was now ripe for a few simple conjuring tricks.

‘Under the chair upon which I was seated I had previously hidden my properties. These were a saucer, a thermos flask containing warm water, one of Sir Alured Faversham’s sodium capsules, and an old glove painted with luminous paint, the latter covered with a black cloth.

‘As soon as I mentioned Claverton’s death, Mrs Littlecote was at a loss for a reply. It was clear to me that she knew nothing of the substitution of the capsules. I released her hand, poured some water from the thermos into the saucer, and placed the latter on the table. Then I drew the prepared glove on to my own right hand, still keeping it covered with the cloth, and picked up the capsule. When my right hand was above the saucer, I withdrew the cloth with my left, and dropped the capsule into the water.

‘All very theatrical, no doubt. But the unexpectedness of my action had the desired effect. Durnford, from the height of his security, suddenly saw that his

device had been unveiled. And, before he had time to recover from his terror, I forced the admission from Mrs Littlecote that he had been the author of the first attempt.'

A long pause followed the conclusion of Dr Priestley's explanation. It was broken by Mr Wrythlington. 'I owe you my apologies, Dr Priestley,' he said. 'But, without actual demonstration, I should not have believed that such a thing was possible. I can only say that if ever I am tempted to commit a crime, I shall take very good care that it does not come under your notice.'

That, so far as Dr Priestley was concerned, was the end of the Claverton affair. That night, before going to bed, he sealed up the file containing his notes, and put it away. And it was with renewed energy that he embarked next morning upon a trenchant piece of scientific criticism.

Durnford in due course suffered the penalty of his crime. Mrs Littlecote still practises her chosen profession, apparently with considerable success. The most constant visitor to the Littlecotes' new flat is young Dr Milverly. Mr Wrythlington, who keeps a benevolent eye upon his clients, already scents a romance in that quarter.

Dr Oldland now spends his holidays at Martonbury with Bill, who has completely recovered from the effects of his wound, and is on better terms than ever with Mary Archer. In fact, as Mrs Archer has confided to Dr Priestley, they are only waiting to be married until Mary is a little older.

And Dr Priestley, who thoroughly approves of young Bill Oldland, is quite satisfied that Claverton's dream of ultimate respectability for his daughter will be adequately fulfilled.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Claverton Mystery* by John Rhode (pseud. of Cecil Street)]