LE QUEUX WILLIAM

THE FOUR FACES

William Le Queux

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Le Queux W.

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Содержание

William Le Queux
The Four Faces: A Mystery

CHAPTER I
CURIOSITY IS AROUSED

"I confess I'd like to know somethin' more about him."

"Where did you run across him first?"

"I didn't run across him; he ran across me, and in rather a curious way. We live in Linden Gardens now, you know. Several of the houses there are almost exactly alike, and about a month ago, at a dinner party we were givin', a young man was shown in. His name was unknown to me, so I supposed that he must be some friend of my wife's. Then I saw that he was a stranger to her too, and then all at once he became very confused, inquired if he were in Sir Harry Dawson's house—Sir Harry lives in the house next to ours—and, findin' he was not, apologized profusely for his mistake, and left hurriedly."

"Anyone might make a mistake of that kind in some London houses," the second speaker said. "What is he like? Is he a gentleman?"

"Oh, quite."

"And for how long have you leased him your house in Cumberland Place?"

"Seven years, with option of renewal."

"And you mean to say you know nothing about him?"

"I won't say 'nothin',' but I know comparatively little about him. Houston and Prince, the house agents, assure me they've made inquiries, and that he is a rich young man whose uncle amassed a large fortune in Tasmania—I didn't know fortunes were to be made in Tasmania, did you? The uncle died six months ago, Houston and Prince tell me, and Hugesson Gastrell has inherited everything he left. They say that they have ascertained that Gastrell's parents died when he was quite a child, and that this uncle who has died has been his guardian ever since."

"That sounds right enough. What more do you want to know?"

"It somehow seems to me very strange that I should have come to know this man, Gastrell, without introduction of any kind—even have become intimate with him. On the day after he had come to my house by accident, he called to fetch a pair of gloves which, in his confusion on the previous evenin', he had left in the hall. He asked if he might see me, and then he again apologized for the mistake he had made the night before. We stayed talkin' for, I suppose, fully half an hour—he's an excellent talker, and exceedingly well-informed—and incidentally he mentioned that he was lookin' for a house. From his description of what he wanted it at once struck me that my Cumberland Place house would be the very thing for him—I simply can't afford to live there now, as you know, and for months I have been tryin' to let it. I told him about it, and he asked if he might see it, and—well, the thing's done; he has it now, as I say, on a seven years' lease."

"Then why worry?"

"I am not worryin'—I never worry—the most foolish thing any man can do is to worry. All I say is—I should like to know somethin' more about the feller. He may be quite all right—I have not the least reason for supposin' he isn't—but my wife has taken a strong dislike to him. She says she mistrusts him. She has said so from the beginnin'. After he had asked to see me that mornin', the mornin' he called for his gloves, and we had talked about the house, I invited him to lunch and introduced him to my wife. Since then he has dined with us several times, and—well, my wife is

most insistent about it—she declares she is sure he isn't what he seems to be, and she wanted me not to let him the house."

"Women have wonderful intuition in reading characters."

"I know they have, and that's why I feel—well, why I feel just the least bit uneasy. What has made me feel so to-day is that I have just heard from Sir Harry Dawson, who is on the Riviera, and he says that he doesn't know Hugesson Gastrell, has never heard of him. There, read his letter."

Seated in my club on a dull December afternoon, that was part of a conversation I overheard, which greatly interested me. It interested me because only a short time before I had, while staying in Geneva, become acquainted at the hotel with a man named Gastrell, and I wondered if he could be the same. From the remarks I had just heard I suspected that he must be, for the young man in Geneva had also been an individual of considerable personality, and a good conversationalist.

If I had been personally acquainted with either of the two speakers, who still stood with their backs to the fire and their hands under their coat-tails, talking now about some wonderful run with the Pytchley, I should have told him I believed I had met the individual they had just been discussing; but at Brooks's it is not usual for members to talk to other members unintroduced. Therefore I remained sprawling in the big arm-chair, where I had been pretending to read a newspaper, hoping that something more would be said about Gastrell. Presently my patience was rewarded.

"By the way, this feller Gastrell who's taken my house tells me he's fond of huntin'," the first speaker—whom I knew to be Lord Easterton, a man said to have spent three small fortunes in trying to make a big one—remarked. "Said somethin' about huntin' with the Belvoir or the Quorn. Shouldn't be surprised if he got put up for this club later."

"Should you propose him if he asked you?"

"Certainly, provided I found out all about him. He's a gentleman although he is an Australian—he told Houston and Prince he was born and educated in Melbourne, and went to his uncle in Tasmania immediately he left school; but he hasn't a scrap of that ugly Australian accent; in fact, he talks just like you or me or anybody else, and would pass for an Englishman anywhere."

Without a doubt that must be the man I had met, I reflected as the two speakers presently sauntered out of the room, talking again of hunting, one of the principal topics of conversation in Brooks's. I, Michael Berrington, am a man of leisure, an idler I am ashamed to say, my parents having brought me up to be what is commonly and often so erroneously termed "a gentleman," and left me, when they died, heir to a cosy little property in Northamptonshire, and with some £80,000 safely invested. As a result I spend many months of the year in travel, for I am a bachelor with no ties of any kind, and the more I travel and the more my mind expands, the more cosmopolitan I become and the more inclined I feel to kick against silly conventions such as this one at Brooks's which prevented my addressing Lord Easterton or his friend—men I see in the club every day I am there, and who know me quite well by sight, though we only stare stonily at each other—and asking more about Gastrell.

So Lady Easterton had taken an instinctive dislike to this young man, Hugesson Gastrell, and openly told her husband that she mistrusted him. Now, that was curious, I reflected, for I had spoken to him several times while in Geneva, and though his personality had appealed to me, yet—

Well, there was something about him that puzzled me, something—I cannot define what it was, for it was more like a feeling or sensation which came over me while I was with him—a feeling that he was not what he appeared to be, and that I saw, so to speak, only his outer surface.

"Hullo, Michael!"

The greeting cut my train of thought, and, screwing myself round in the big arm-chair, I looked up.

"Why, Jack!" I exclaimed, "I had no idea you were in England. I thought you were bagging rhinoceroses and things in Nigeria or somewhere."

"So I have been. Got back yesterday. Sorry I am back, to tell you the truth," and he glanced significantly towards the window. A fine, wetting drizzle was falling; dozens of umbrellas passed to

and fro outside; the street lamps were lit, though it was barely three o'clock, and in the room that we were in the electric lights were switched on. The sky was the colour of street mud, through which the sun, a huge, blood-red disc, strove to pierce the depressing murk of London's winter atmosphere, thereby creating a lurid and dismal effect.

Jack Osborne is a man I rather like, in spite of the fact that his sole aim in life is to kill things. When he isn't shooting "hippos" and "rhinos" and bears and lions in out-of-the-way parts of the world, he is usually plastering pheasants in the home covers, or tramping the fields and moors where partridges and grouse abound.

"Had a good time?" I asked some moments later.

"Ripping," he answered, "quite ripping," and he went on to tell me the number of beasts he had slain, particulars about them and the way he had outwitted them. I managed to listen for ten minutes or so without yawning, and then suddenly he remarked:

"I met a man on board ship, on the way home, who said he knew you—feller named Gastrell. Said he met you in Geneva, and liked you like anything. Struck me as rather a rum sort—what? Couldn't quite make him out. Who is he and what is he? What's he do?"

"I know as little about him as you do," I answered. "I know him only slightly—we were staying at the same hotel in Geneva. I heard Lord Easterton, who was in here half an hour ago, saying he had let his house in Cumberland Place to a man named Gastrell—Hugesson Gastrell. I wonder if it is the man I met in Geneva and that you say you met on board ship. When did you land?"

"Yesterday, at Southampton. Came by the *Masonic* from Capetown."

"And where did Gastrell come from?"

"Capetown too. I didn't notice him until we were near the end of the voyage. He must have remained below a good deal, I think."

I paused, thinking.

"In that case," I said, "the Gastrell who has leased Easterton's house can't be the man you and I have met, because, from what Easterton said, he saw his man quite recently. Ah, here is Lord Easterton," I added, as the door opened and he re-entered. "You know him, don't you?"

"Quite well," Jack Osborne answered, "Don't you? Come, I'll introduce you, and then we'll clear this thing up."

It was not until Osborne and Lord Easterton had talked for some time about shooting in general, and about "hippo" and "rhino" and "'gator" killing in particular, and I had been forced to listen to a repetition of incidents to do with the sport that Jack Osborne had obtained in Nigeria and elsewhere, that Jack presently said:

"Berrington tells me, Easterton, he heard you say that you have let your house to a man named Gastrell, and we were wondering if he is the Gastrell we both know—a tall man of twenty-eight or so, with dark hair and very good-looking, queer kind of eyes—what?"

"Oh, so you know him?" Easterton exclaimed. "That's good. I want to find out who he is, where he comes from, in fact all about him. I have a reason for wanting to know."

"He came from Capetown with me—landed at Southampton yesterday," Osborne said quickly.

"Capetown? Arrived yesterday? Oh, then yours must be a different man. Tell me what he is like."

Osborne gave a detailed description.

"And at the side of his chin," he ended, "he's got a little scar, sort of scar you see on German students' faces, only quite small—doesn't disfigure him a bit."

"But this is extraordinary," Lord Easterton exclaimed. "You have described my man to the letter—even to the scar. Can they be twins? Even twins, though, wouldn't have the same scar, the result probably of some accident. You say your man landed only yesterday?"

"Yes, we came off the ship together."

"Then he was on board on—let me think—ten days or so ago?"

"Oh, yes."

"It's most singular, this apparent likeness between the two men."

"It is—if they really are alike. When shall you see your man again?" Osborne inquired.

"I have this moment had a letter from him," Easterton answered. "He asks me to lunch with him at the Café Royal to-morrow. Look here, I'll tell you what I'll do—I'll say I'm engaged or somethin', and ask him to dine here one evenin'. Then if you will both give me the pleasure of your company, we shall at once find out if your Gastrell and mine are the same—they can't be the same, of course, as your man was in the middle of the ocean on the day mine was here in London; I mean we'll find out if he has a twin brother."

"Have you met his wife?" Jack Osborne inquired carelessly, as he lit a long cigar.

"Phew! Yes. I should say so. One of the most gloriously beautiful women I have ever seen in my life. She was on board with him, and I believe everybody on the ship was head over ears in love with her. I know I was."

"Ah, that settles it," Easterton said. "My man is a bachelor."

Osborne smiled in a curious way, and blew a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling without saying anything.

"Why, what is it?" Easterton asked, noticing the smile.

"Oh, nothing. A little thought that crept into my brain, that's all."

"Tell us what your Gastrell's wife is like," Easterton pursued.

"Like? What is she not like! Think of all the most lovely girls and women you have ever set eyes on, and roll them into one, and still you won't get the equal of Jasmine Gastrell. What is she like? By heaven, you might as well ask me to describe the taste of nectar!"

"Dark or fair?"

"Both."

"Oh, nonsense."

"It isn't nonsense, Easterton. She has the strangest eyes—they are really green, I suppose, but they look quite blue in some lights, and in other lights deep purple. They are the most extraordinary eyes I have ever seen; a woman with eyes like that must have tremendous intelligence and quite exceptional personality. It's useless for me to try to describe the rest of her face; it's too lovely for anything."

"And her hair?" Easterton asked. "Has she dark hair or fair?"

"Both."

"Ah, Jack, stop rottin'," Easterton exclaimed, laughing. "What is the colour of the hair of this woman who has so set your heart on end?"

"It may be auburn; it may be chestnut-brown; it may be red for all I know, but I am hanged if I can say for certain which it is, or if it's only one colour or all three shades. But whatever it is it's perfectly lovely hair, and she has any amount of it. I wouldn't mind betting that when she lets it down it falls quite to her feet and hangs all round her like a cloak."

"I should like to meet this goddess, Jack," Easterton said, his curiosity aroused. "Though you are so wedded to hippos, and rhinos, and 'gators and things, you don't seem entirely to have lost your sense of appreciation of 'woman beautiful.' Where are she and her husband staying?"

"I've not the least idea."

"Didn't they tell you their plans?"

"They said nothing whatever about themselves, though I tried once or twice to draw them out. In that respect they were extraordinarily reserved. In every other way they were delightful—especially Mrs. Gastrell, though I was greatly attracted by Gastrell too, when I came to know him towards the end of the voyage."

CHAPTER II
THE ANGEL FACES

Hugesson Gastrell had accepted Lord Easterton's invitation to dine at the club, and the three men were seated near the fire as I entered, Easterton and Jack Osborne on one of the large settees, their visitor facing them in an arm-chair, with his back to me. I went towards them across the big room, apologizing for my unpunctuality, for I was nearly ten minutes late. To my surprise they remained silent; even Easterton did not rise, or greet me in any way. He looked strangely serious, and so did Jack, as a rule the cheeriest of mortals.

"I am dreadfully sorry for being so late," I exclaimed, thinking that my unpunctuality must have given them offence. I was about to invent some elaborate excuse to account for my "delay," when the man seated with his back to me suddenly rose, and, turning abruptly, faced me.

I recognized him at once. It was Gastrell, whom I had met at the Hotel Metropol in Geneva. As he stood there before me, with his back half turned to the light of the big bay window, there could be no mistaking him. Again I was struck by his remarkable appearance—the determined, clean-cut features, the straight, short nose, the broad forehead, the square-shaped chin denoting rigid strength of purpose. Once more I noticed the cleft in his chin—it was quite deep. His thick hair was dark, with a slight kink in it behind the ears. But perhaps the strangest, most arresting thing about Gastrell's face was his eyes—daring eyes of a bright, light blue, such as one sees in some Canadians, the bold, almost hard eyes of a man who is accustomed to gazing across far distances of sunlit snow, who habitually looks up into vast, pale blue skies—one might have imagined that his eyes had caught their shade. He wore upon his watch-chain a small gold medallion, a trinket which had attracted my attention before. It was about the size of a sovereign, and embossed upon it were several heads of chubby cupids—four sweet little faces.

At first glance at him a woman might have said mentally, "What nice eyes!" At the second, she would probably have noticed a strange thing—the eyes were quite opaque; they seemed to stare rather than look at you, there was no depth whatever in them. Certainly there was no guessing at Gastrell's character from his eyes—you could take it or leave it, as you pleased, for the eyes gave you no help. The glance was perfectly direct, bright and piercing, but there could be absolutely no telling if the man when speaking were lying to you or not. The hard, blue eyes never changed, never deepened, nor was there any emotion in them.

To sum up, the effect the man's personality produced was that of an extraordinarily strong character carving its way undaunted through every obstacle to its purpose; but whether the trend of that character were likely to lean to the side of truth and goodness, or to that of lying and villainy, there was no guessing.

All these points I observed again—I say "again," for they had struck me forcibly the first time I had met him in Geneva—as he stood there facing me, his gaze riveted on mine. We must have stayed thus staring at each other for several moments before anybody spoke. Then it was Lord Easterton who broke the silence.

"Well?" he asked.

I glanced at him quickly, uncertain which of us he had addressed. After some instants' pause he repeated:

"Well?"

"Are you speaking to me?" I asked quickly.

"Of course," he replied, almost sharply. "You don't seem to know each other after all."

"Oh, but yes," I exclaimed, and I turned quickly to Gastrell, instinctively extending my hand to him as I did so. "We met in Geneva."

He still stood looking at me, motionless. Then gradually an expression, partly of surprise, partly of amusement, crept into his eyes.

"You mistake me for someone else, I am afraid," he said, and his voice was the voice of the man I had met in Geneva—that I would have sworn to in any court of law, "It is rather remarkable," he went on, his eyes still set on mine, "that Mr. Osborne, to whom Lord Easterton has just introduced me, also thought he and I had met before."

"But I am certain I did meet you," Osborne exclaimed in a curious tone, from where he sat. "I am quite positive we were together on board the *Masonic*, unless you have a twin brother, and even then—"

He stopped, gazing literally open-mouthed at Hugesson Gastrell, while I, standing staring at the man, wondered if this were some curious dream from which I should presently awaken, for there could be no two questions about it—the man before me was the Gastrell I had met in Geneva and conversed with on one or two occasions for quite a long time. Beside, he wore the little medallion of the Four Faces.

Easterton looked ill at ease; so did Osborne; and certainly I felt considerably perturbed. It was unnatural, uncanny, this resemblance. And the resemblance as well as the name must, it would seem, be shared by three men at least. For here was Lord Easterton's friend, Hugesson Gastrell, whom Easterton had told us he had met frequently in London during the past month; here was Jack Osborne claiming to be acquainted with a man named Gastrell, whom he had met on his way home from Africa, and who, as he put it to us afterwards, was "the dead facsimile" of Easterton's guest; and here was I with a distinct recollection of a man called Gastrell who—well, the more I stared at Easterton's guest the more mystified I felt at this Hugesson Gastrell's declaring that he was not my Geneva companion; indeed that we had never met before, and that he had never been in Geneva.

The dinner was not a great success. Gastrell talked at considerable length on all sorts of subjects, talked, too, in a most interesting and sometimes very amusing way; yet all the time the thought that was in Osborne's mind was in my mind also—it was impossible, he was thinking, that this man seated at dinner with us could be other than the individual he had met on board ship; it was impossible, I was thinking, that this man seated at dinner with us could be other than the individual I had met in Geneva.

Easterton, a great talker in the club, was particularly silent. He too was puzzled; worse than that —he felt, I could see, anxious and uncomfortable. He had let his house to this man—the lease was already signed—and now his tenant seemed to be, in some sense, a man of mystery.

We sat in the big room with the bay window, after dinner, until about half-past ten, when Gastrell said he must be going. During the whole time he had been with us he had kept us entertained by his interesting conversation, full of quaint reminiscences, and touched with flashes of humour.

"I hope we shall see a great deal of each other when I am settled in Cumberland Place," he said, as he prepared to leave. The remark, though spoken to Easterton, had been addressed to us all, and we made some conventional reply in acknowledgment.

"And if, later, I decide to join this club," he said presently, "you won't mind proposing me, will you, Easterton?"

"I? Er—oh, of course, not in the least!" Easterton answered awkwardly, taken off his guard. "But it will take you a good time to get in, you know," he added as an afterthought, hopeful that the prospect of delay might cause Gastrell to change his mind. "Two, even three years, some men have to wait."

"That won't matter," Gastrell said carelessly, as the hall porter helped him on with his coat. "I can join some other club meanwhile, though I draw the line at pot-houses. Well, good night to you all, and you must all come to my house-warming—a sort of reception I'm going to give. I ought to be settled into the house in a month. And I hope," he added lightly, addressing Jack Osborne and myself, "you won't run across any more of my 'doubles.' I don't like the thought of being mistaken for other men!"

The door of the taxi shut with a bang. In the hall, where the tape machines were busy, Osborne and I stood looking at each other thoughtfully. Presently Osborne spoke.

"What do you make of it?" he asked abruptly. "I am as certain that is the fellow who was with me on board ship as I am that I am standing here."

"And I am equally positive," I answered, "he's the man I met in Geneva. It's impossible there could be two individuals so absolutely identical—I tell you it's not possible."

Osborne paused for some moments, thinking.

"Berrington," he said suddenly.

"Yes? What?" I asked, taken aback at his change of tone.

He took a step forward and laid his hand upon my shoulder.

"Berrington," he repeated—and in his eyes there was a singular expression—"I have an idea."

He turned to a page who was standing near.

"Boy," he said sharply, "what address did that gentleman who has just gone tell you to give to his driver?"

"He told the driver himself, sir," the boy answered, "but I heard the address he gave, sir."

"What was it?"

"Three forty, Maresfield Gardens, sir. It's near Swiss Cottage—up Fitzjohn's Avenue on the right."

Osborne turned to me quickly.

"Come into this room," he said. "There is something I want to ask you. The place is empty, and we shall not be disturbed."

When he had closed the door, and glanced about him to make sure that we were alone, he said in a low voice:

"Look here, Mike, I tell you again, I have an idea: I wonder if you will fall in with it. I have watched that fellow Gastrell pretty closely all the evening; I am rather a good judge of men, you know, and I believe him to be an impostor of some kind—I can't say just yet of what kind. Anyway, he is the man I met on the *Masonic*; he can deny it as much as he likes—he is. Either he is impersonating some other man, or some other man is impersonating him. Now listen. I am going to that address in Maresfield Gardens that he gave to his taxi-driver. I am going to find out if he lives there, or what he is doing there. What I want to know is—Will you come with me?"

"Good heavens, Jack!" I exclaimed, "what an extraordinary thing to do. But what will you say when you get there? Supposing he does live there—or, for that matter, supposing he doesn't—what reason will you give for calling at the house?"

"Oh, I'll invent some reason quick enough, but I want someone to be with me. Will you come? Will you or won't you?"

I glanced up at the clock. It wanted twenty minutes to eleven.

"Do you mean now? Do you intend to go at this time of the night?"

"I intend to go at once—as fast as a taxi will take me there," he answered.

I paused, undecided. It seemed such a strange thing to do, under the circumstances; but then, as I knew, Jack Osborne had always been fond of doing strange things. Though a member of Brooks's, he was unconventional in the extreme.

"Yes, I will," I said, the originality of the idea suddenly appealing to me. In point of fact I, too, mistrusted this man Gastrell. Though he had looked me so straight in the eyes when, two hours before, he had calmly assured me that I was mistaken in believing him to be "his namesake in Geneva," as he put it; still, as I say, I felt convinced he was the same man.

"Good," Osborne answered in a tone of satisfaction. "Come, we will start at once."

A strange feeling of repressed excitement obsessed me as our taxi passed up Bond Street, turned into Oxford Street, then to the right into Orchard Street, and sped thence by way of Baker Street past Lord's cricket ground and up the Finchley Road. What would happen when we reached

Maresfield Gardens? Would the door be opened by a stolid footman or by some frigid maidservant who would coldly inform us that "Mr. Gastrell was not at home"; or should we be shown in, and, if we were shown in, what excuse would Jack Osborne make for calling so late at night? I cannot say that I felt in the least anxious, however, for Osborne is a man who has knocked about the world and seen many queer sides of life, and who never, under any circumstances, is at a loss how to act.

I glanced at my watch as our taxi turned into Maresfield Gardens. It was ten minutes past eleven. At the house indicated half-way up the hill the taxi suddenly pulled up.

Osborne got out and pressed the electric bell-push. As I looked up at the windows, I noticed that nowhere was any light visible. Nor was there a light in the ground-floor windows.

"I believe everybody is in bed," I said to him, when the bell remained unanswered. Without replying, he pressed the push again, and kept his finger on it.

Still no one came.

"We'd better call to-morrow," I suggested, when he had rung a third time with the same result.

The words had hardly left my lips, when we heard the door-chain rattle. Then the bolts were pulled back, and a moment later the door was carefully drawn open to the length of its chain.

Inside all was darkness, nor was anybody visible.

"What do you want?" a woman's voice inquired.

The voice had a most pleasant *timbre*; also the speaker was obviously a lady. She did not sound in the least alarmed, but there was a note of surprise in the tone.

"Has Mr. Gastrell come home yet?" Osborne asked.

"Not yet. Do you want to see him?"

"Yes. He dined at Brooks's Club this evening with Lord Easterton. Soon after he had left, a purse was found, and, as nobody in the club claimed it, I concluded that it must be his, so I have brought it back."

"That is really very good of you, Mr. Osborne," the hidden speaker answered. "If you will wait a moment I will let you in. Are you alone?"

"No, I have a friend with me. But who are you? How do you know my name?"

There was no answer. The door was shut quietly. Then we heard the sound of the chain being removed.

By the time Jack Osborne had paid our driver, and dismissed the taxi, the door had been opened sufficiently wide to admit us. We entered, and at once the door was shut.

We were now in inky blackness.

"Won't you switch on the light?" Osborne asked, when a minute or so had elapsed, and we remained in total darkness.

Nobody answered, and we waited, wondering. Fully another minute passed, and still we stood there.

I felt Osborne touch me. Then, coming close to me, he whispered in my ear:

"Strike a match, Mike; I haven't one."

I felt in my pockets. I had not one either. I was about to tell him so when something clicked behind us, and the hall was flooded with light.

Never before had I beheld, and I doubt if I shall ever behold again, a woman as lovely as the tall, graceful being upon whom our eyes rested at that instant. In height quite five foot nine, as she stood there beneath the glow of the electrolier in the luxurious hall, in her dinner dress, the snowy slope of the shoulders and the deep, curved breast, strong, yet all so softly, delicately rounded, gleamed like rosy alabaster in the reflection from the red-shaded light above her.

Our eyes wandered from exquisite figure to exquisite face—and there was no sense of disappointment. For the face was as nearly perfect as a woman's may be upon this earth of imperfections. The uplift of the brow, the curve of the cheek to the rounded chin, the noble sweep of delicate, dark eyebrows were extraordinarily beautiful. Her hair was "a net for the sunlight," its

colour that of a new chestnut in the spring when the sun shines hotly upon it, making it glow and shimmer and glisten with red and yellow and deepest browns. Now it was drawn about her head in shining twists, and across the front and rather low down on the brow was a slim and delicate wreath of roses and foliage in very small diamonds beautifully set in platinum. The gleam of the diamonds against the red-brown of the wonderful hair was an effect impossible to describe—yet one felt that the hair would have been the same miracle without it.

"Mrs. Gastrell! Why, I didn't recognize your voice," I had heard Osborne exclaim in a tone of amazement just after the light had been turned on. but my attention had been so centred upon the Vision standing there before us that I had hardly noticed the remark, or the emphasis with which it was uttered. I suppose half a minute must have passed before anybody spoke again, and then it was the woman who broke the silence.

"Will you show me the purse?" she asked, holding out her hand for it and addressing Osborne.

On the instant he produced his own and gave it to her. She glanced at it, then handed it back.

"It is not his," she said quietly. Her gaze rested steadily upon Osborne's face for some moments, then she said:

"How exceedingly kind of you to come all this way, and in the middle of the night, just to find out if a purse picked up at your club happens to belong to the guest of a friend of yours."

In her low, soft voice there was a touch of irony, almost of mockery. Looking at her now, I felt puzzled. Was she what she appeared to be, or was this amazing beauty of hers a cloak, a weapon if you will, perhaps the most dangerous weapon of a clever, scheming woman? Easterton had told us that Gastrell was a bachelor. Gastrell had declared that he had never before met either Jack Osborne or myself. Yet here at the address that Gastrell had given to the taxi-driver was the very woman the man calling himself Gastrell, with whom Osborne had returned from Africa, had passed off as his wife.

"My husband isn't in at present," she said calmly, a moment later, "but I expect him back at any minute. Won't you come in and wait for him?"

Before either of us could answer she had walked across the hall, unlocked and opened a door, and switched on the light in the room.

Mechanically we followed her. As we entered, a strange, heavy perfume of some subtle Eastern scent struck my nostrils—I had noticed it in the hall, but in this room it was pungent, oppressive, even overpowering. The apartment, I noticed, was luxuriously furnished. What chiefly attracted my attention, however, were the pictures on the walls. Beautifully executed, the subjects were, to say the least, peculiar. The fire in the grate still burned brightly. Upon a table were two syphons in silver stands, also decanters containing spirits, and several tumblers. Some of the tumblers had been used. As I sank, some moments later, into an easy chair, I felt that its leather-covered arms were warm, as if someone had just vacated it.

And yet the door of this room had been locked. Also, when we had arrived, no light had been visible in any of the windows of the house, and the front door had been chained and bolted.

"Make yourselves quite at home," our beautiful hostess said, and, as she spoke, she placed a box of cigars, newly opened, upon the table at my elbow. "I am sorry," she added, "that I must leave you now."

There was a curious expression in her eyes as she smiled down at us, an expression that later I came to know too well. Then, turning, she swept gracefully out of the room, closing the door behind her.

I looked across at Osborne. For some moments neither of us spoke. The mysterious house was still as death.

"Well, Jack," I said lightly, though somehow I felt uneasy, "what do you make of it, old man?"

"It is just as I thought," he answered, taking a cigar out of the box and beginning to trim it.

"How do you mean—'just as you thought'?" I asked, puzzled.

"Gastrell is an impostor, and—and that isn't his wife."

He did not speak again for some moments, being busily occupied in lighting his long cigar. Presently he leaned back, then blew a great cloud of smoke towards the ceiling.

Suddenly we heard a click, like the wooden lid of a box suddenly shut.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed suddenly, "what's that?"

"What's what?"

"Why! Look!" he gasped.

His gaze was set upon something in the shadow of a small table in a corner of the room—something on the floor. In silence, now, we both stood staring at it, for Osborne had risen suddenly. Slowly it moved. It was gradually gliding along the floor, with a sound like paper being pushed along a carpet. Whence it came, where it began and where it ended, we could not see, for the shadow it was in was very deep. Nor was its colour in the least discernible.

All we could make out was that some long, sinuous, apparently endless Thing was passing along the room, close to the wall farthest from us, coming from under the sofa and disappearing beneath the table.

All at once Osborne sprang towards me with an exclamation of alarm, and I felt his grip tighten upon my arm.

"Good God!" he cried.

An instant later a broad, flat head slowly reared itself from beneath the red table-cover which hung down almost to the floor, rose higher and higher until the black, beady, merciless eyes were set upon mine, and in that brief instant of supreme suspense my attention became riveted on the strange, slate-grey mark between and just behind the reptile's cruel eyes. Then, as its head suddenly shot back, Osborne dashed towards the door.

Once, twice, three times he pulled frantically at the handle with all his force.

"Good God! Berrington," he cried, his face blanched to the lips, "we're locked in!"

Almost as he spoke, the serpent with head extended swept forward towards us, along the floor.

I held my breath. Escape from its venomous fangs was impossible.

We had been trapped!

CHAPTER III
A HAMPSTEAD MYSTERY

With a shriek of alarm I leapt to the further side of the table which stood in the middle of the room, and at that moment hurried footsteps became audible.

Our wild shouts for help had evidently been heard, for someone was hurrying down the bare oak stairs into the hall.

"Hang this confounded lock—it catches!" we heard a voice exclaim as the handle turned. Then an instant later the door was flung open, and Gastrell stood before us.

"I am dreadfully sorry, you fellows," he said apologetically, "that you should have been alarmed in this way, because I can assure you that my tame cobra, 'Maharaja,' is quite harmless—look at him now," and we saw that the horrid reptile had swung round the instant its master had entered, and was sliding towards his feet. "He's a pet of mine—I brought him home with me, and he follows me like a dog—no, you needn't be in the least nervous," he added quickly, seeing that I instinctively edged away as the reptile passed. "I'm awfully sorry to have kept you waiting. I must apologize, too, for that confounded door—I myself got locked in here the other day. My wife told you I was out, but I was not. I came in by the side door, and she didn't know I was back, because I went straight upstairs. If you'll wait a moment I'll take our friend 'Maharaja' out."

He left the room, and the snake slid rapidly along the floor after him, almost, as he had said, like a dog following his steps.

"A nice cheerful pet to keep," I remarked, annoyed at my experience; but at that moment the mysterious Gastrell bustled in alone.

"So sorry," he said, and, after thanking us for coming out so far to ascertain if he had lost his purse, he pulled up a chair, seated himself between us, lit a big cigar, and helped us to whiskey from a silver tantalus.

"You had better add the soda yourselves," he said. "And now there is something I want to say to you both. You must have been surprised at my declaring so emphatically this evening that I had not met either of you before—eh?"

"I can answer for myself," Osborne exclaimed quickly. "Are you going to admit, after all, that you were on the *Masonic*?"

"Of course! Who else could it have been? Any more," he added, addressing me, than it could have been someone other than me whom you met in Geneva?"

"Then why did you deny it?" Osborne said rather irritably, looking hard at him with an expression of disapproval and mistrust, while my eyes wandered to that little gold medallion upon his chain.

"Because I had to,—that is, it was expedient that I should," was his reply. "I have a reason for not wanting it to be generally known that I am married,—least of all did I want Easterton, whose house I have just leased, to know me to be a married man; indeed, I told him some weeks ago that I was a bachelor—I had to, for reasons which I can't reveal at present."

He stopped speaking, and we watched him narrowly.

"Still," I remarked, "I don't see how you could have been on board ship in the middle of the ocean, and at the same time in London."

"I didn't say I was. I wasn't. I was in London a fortnight ago, and spent some hours with Lord Easterton. On the same day I sailed for Madeira, where I joined my wife on the homeward-bound *Masonic*. Think, Mr. Osborne," he ended, his curious gaze set on my companion's face, "think when we first met on board. It was not before the ship reached Madeira, surely."

Jack Osborne reflected.

"By Jove, no!" he suddenly exclaimed. "How odd I should all along have thought you had embarked at Capetown with the rest of us. But Mrs. Gastrell came from the Cape, surely?"

"She did, and the name 'Mr. Gastrell' was also in the passenger list, because a cousin of mine should have been on board. At the eleventh hour he was prevented from sailing, and it was upon receipt of a cable from him that I decided to catch the next boat to the Canaries and there meet my wife."

I admit that, as he paused, I felt rather "small"; and I believe Osborne felt the same. We had driven from the club right out here to Swiss Cottage, and on the way we had conjured up in our imaginations all sorts of mysterious happenings, even possible intrigues; and now the whole affair proved to have been "quite ordinary," with a few commonplace incidents to relieve its monotony—notably the incident of the giant cobra.

True, there was the mystery of the locked door. But then, had it really been locked? I had not myself tried to open it, and now as I thought about it, it seemed to me quite possible that Jack Osborne might, in the excitement of the moment, have failed to turn the handle sufficiently, and so have believed that the door was locked when it was not. Again we had Gastrell's assurance that he had found himself locked in one day. As for his declaration to Easterton that he was not the Gastrell whom Osborne had met on the *Masonic*, it was clear now that he had some secret reason for wishing to pass in London as a bachelor, and as Osborne had told Easterton that the Gastrell on the *Masonic* had told him that he had met me in Geneva, naturally Gastrell had been driven—in order to conceal his identity—to maintain that he had never before met me either.

Our host insisted upon our taking another of his very excellent cigars before we left,—it was close upon one o'clock when we rose to go. He rang up a taxi for us, helped us on with our coats, accompanied us to the door, and shook hands with each of us most cordially.

"What do you make of it, Michael?" Osborne asked, when we had remained silent in the swift-travelling taxi for five minutes or more, and were approaching Marlboro' Road Station."

"Nothing," I answered bluntly. "I don't know what to make of it."

"Suspect anything?"

"Yes—and no."

"That's just how I feel, and yet—"

"Well?"

"I mistrust him. I don't know why, but I do. I mistrust them both. There's something queer happening in that house. I am certain there is."

"You can't be certain, as you don't know."

"My suspicions are so strong that they amount to convictions."

"So I think, too. And those dirty tumblers on the tray, and the hot arm-chair I sat down in—Jack, I believe there were a lot of people in that house, hidden away somewhere, all the time we were there. I believe Gastrell admitted his identity only because he was obliged to. Our calling like that, so unexpectedly, and being admitted by his wife—if she is his wife—disconcerted him and took him unawares. I can't think why she admitted us—especially I can't think why she kept us so long in the dark in the hall before she switched on the light. By Jove! What a stunning woman!"

"She is—but crafty. I thought that when I met her on board ship. And those eyes of hers. Phew! They seem to read right into one's soul, and discover one's secret thoughts." He stopped for an instant, then added, meditatively, "I wonder what makes Gastrell keep that horrible cobra as a pet."

I yawned, and we relapsed into silence. Then gradually my thoughts drifted—drifted away from London, far from crowds and hustle, the rumble of motor 'buses and the hootings and squawkings of ears, to a peaceful, rural solitude.

I was in Berkshire. Down in the picturesque valley into which I gazed from the summit of a wooded slope stood a Manor house, ivy-grown, old, very beautiful Facing it an enormous plateau, hewn out of the Down, had been converted to various uses—there were gardens, shrubberies, tennis lawns. Lower came terrace after terrace of smoothly mown grass, each with its little path and borders

of shrubs, interspersed with the finest Wellingtonias in the county, tapering gracefully to heaven, copper-beeches and grand oaks.

The house itself was very long and low, its frontage white, mellowed with age, and broken up by old-fashioned, latticed windows which gleamed blue and grey in the translucent, frosted air. The roof of the Manor boasted a mass of beautiful red-brown gables, many half hidden from sight by the wealth of ivy; last summer also by a veritable tangle of Virginia creeper and crimson rambler, now sleeping their winter sleep.

My thoughts wandered on. They travelled with extraordinary rapidity, as thought does, picture after picture rising into the vision of my imagination like the scenes in a kaleidoscopic cinema.

Now I was seated in the old Manor. I could see the room distinctly. It was a small boudoir or ante-room opening into the large drawing-room—a cosy, homely place, its low, latticed windows, divided into four, opening outwards on to garden and terraces, its broad, inviting window-seat comfortably cushioned. Nearly all the furniture was quite old, dark oak, elaborately carved—writing-table, high-backed chairs, an old French "armoury" in the corner; but near the hearth there were two or three deep, modern armchairs of peculiarly restful character, covered with exquisite flowered chintzes.

This vision deepened. I started. The door of the quiet room had suddenly opened, and, humming a gay little French air, a young girl had entered—fresh, exquisite, like a breath of early Springtime itself in the midst of Winter. With her deep eyes, so soft and brown, her skin of a healthy olive pallor, the cheeks just flushed with crimson, and her nimbus of light brown hair through which the golden threads strayed so charmingly, she made a perfect picture standing there in her long gown of sapphire-blue velvet.

The soft contours of her young face were outlined against a tall screen embroidered gorgeously with silken peacocks, before which she stopped to lay down upon a small table the sheaf of red and brown and golden chrysanthemums which she carried in her arms.

My pulses throbbed as they always did in her presence, or when, indeed, she so much as crossed my daydreams, as at this moment. For this girl was Dulcie Challoner—the woman who was fast becoming the one woman in the world to me, and thus had I seen her enter that very room when last I had spent a week-end at Holt Manor, four miles from the little village of Holt Stacey—and that happened to have been only three weeks from the present moment.

The taxi stopped abruptly, shattering my dreams. We had reached the club. Some letters were awaiting me. My spirits rose as I recognized the handwriting on one of them.

Dulcie wrote to say that her father hoped, if I were not "already booked," I would spend Christmas with them.

I was "already booked." I had accepted an invitation a month before to dine on Christmas Day with an hysterical aunt from whom I had expectations. Well, the expectations must take their chance. Then and there I sat down and wrote a long letter to Dulcie saying what joy the contents of her letter had given me, and a brief line to my aunt explaining that "unavoidable circumstances had arisen" which necessitated my cancelling my promise to come to her, much as I regretted doing so.

Snow was falling slowly and persistently, as it had done all the afternoon, when, about ten days later, I arrived at the little station of Holt Stacey, the nearest to Holt Manor. The motor brougham awaited my rather late train, and I was quickly installed among the fur rugs in its cosy interior and being whirled along the silent whiteness of the narrow lanes between the station and my destination. The weather was very cold, and I saw through the windows of the car that every branch and twig had its thick covering of pure white snow, while the thatched roofs of the tiny cottages we passed were heavily laden. By four o'clock in the afternoon most of the cottage windows were lit up, and the glow of the oil lamps shining through tiny panes on to the gleaming carpet of snow without, produced a most picturesque effect.

Now we were purring up the hilly drive; then rounding the sweep to the hall door. The man did not have to ring. Before he could get off the box I heard heavy footsteps leaping down the stairs three at a time and flying across the hall. The door was flung open, and a wild war-whoop from Dick announced my arrival to whoever cared to know of it.

"Good old sport!" shouted Dick, snatching the travelling-rug from my arm, after telling the footman behind him to "take Mr. Berrington's things to the green room in the west wing," and almost pushing me into the hall. "Good old sport! You're awfully late. We've all done tea."

I told him we had been quite half an hour after the scheduled time in starting from Paddington, and that the crowds had been enormous.

"Just what I told Dulcie," he exclaimed. "You don't want to see her, I suppose? What a beastly long time it seems since you were here! Three weeks, isn't it, since I was home, ill?"

In vain I endeavoured to quiet Dick's ringing voice as a girlish, lithe figure appeared between the curtains which divided the stairs from the hall, a figure clad in soft rosy silk with a little lacy tea-jacket over it, and with golden-brown hair waving naturally about a broad, white forehead, with starry brown eyes full of welcome. Taking my hand in hers quietly for an instant, Dulcie asked me what sort of journey I had had, and presently led me across the hall to the drawing-room.

"You will like to see father," she said. "He and Aunt Hannah are in the drawing-room; they've looked forward so much to your coming."

With a heart beating faster than usual I followed Dulcie. Her father I was always glad to see, and we were exceedingly good friends, having much in common. Of a good old county family, Sir Roland Challoner had succeeded late in life to the title on the sudden death in the hunting field of his father, Sir Nelson Challoner.

Dulcie's mother had died just after the birth of Dick, and Sir Roland had tried to make up the loss to Dulcie by getting his only and elderly sister Hannah—"Aunt Hannah" as she was inevitably called by all who stayed at Holt Manor, and in fact by everybody who had seen her more than twice—to come and live with him. And there at Holt she had, in her eccentric way, ever since superintended domestic arrangements and mothered his beautiful little girl and her only brother, by this time an obstreperous boy of fourteen, at Eton and on his way to Oxford.

Aunt Hannah was, as Dulcie expressed it, "rather a dear, quaint thing." But she was more than that, I thought. She had such a pungent wit, her sayings were at times so downright—not to say acrid—that many stood in terror of her and positively dreaded her quick tongue. I rather liked Aunt Hannah myself, perhaps because, by the greatest of good luck, I happened not to have done anything so far to incur her displeasure, which she was never backward in expressing forcibly, or, as Dick the schoolboy brother put it, "in no measured terms." Still, as it is the unexpected that always happens, I knew there might yet come a day when I should be called upon to break a lance with Aunt Hannah, and I must say I devoutly hoped that in the event of so deplorable an occurrence, heaven would vouchsafe me the victory. Steeped in intrigue up to her old ears, Aunt Hannah had, I believed, several times laid deep plans touching her niece's future—plans mysterious to the last degree, which seemed to afford her the liveliest satisfaction. None of these schemes, however, had succeeded up to the present, for Dulcie seemed with delightful inconsistence consistently to "turn down" the admirable suitors whom Aunt Hannah metaphorically dangled before her eyes. Yet so cleverly did she do this that, in some wondrous way known only to herself, she continued to retain them all in the capacity of firm friends, and apparently no hearts were ever permanently bruised.

As I say, I quite liked Aunt Hannah, and she had afforded me a good deal of innocent amusement during my not infrequent visits at Holt Manor. Certainly on these occasions I had managed to adopt, if not actually a brotherly, at any rate an almost brotherly demeanour towards Dulcie whenever the sharp-eyed old lady chanced to be in the vicinity. As a result, after much careful chaperonage, and even astute watching, of my manner towards her niece, Aunt Hannah had "slacked

off" delightfully, evidently regarding me as one of those stolid and casual nonentities who, from lack of much interest in anything can safely be trusted anywhere and under the most trying circumstances.

"Here is a telegram for you, Mike," Dulcie said to me one morning, when I had been several days at Holt and the slow routine of life was beginning to reassert itself in the sleepy village after the excitement created by Christmas. The sight of the envelope she handed to me sent my thoughts back to London, the very existence of which I seemed to have entirely forgotten during the past delightful days in this happy, peaceful spot. My gaze was riveted upon Dulcie, standing there before me, straight and slim in her dark violet breakfast gown, with its ruffles of old lace at neck and wrists, the warm light from the fire turning her fluffy brown hair to gold, as I mechanically tore open the envelope, then pulled the telegram out.

"You don't seem in a hurry to read it," she exclaimed lightly, as I sat there looking at her still, the telegram open in my hands.

I glanced down. It was from Osborne, and ran:

"Read report to-day's papers about Maresfield Gardens fire. Write me what you think about it.

"JACK OSBORNE."

I read it through again, then looked up at Dulcie, who still stood there before me.

"Have the papers come?" I asked.

She glanced up at the clock.

"They won't be here just yet," she answered. "We don't get them before midday, you know, and during these days they haven't arrived until lunch time, owing to Christmas."

"You can read it if you like," I said, handing her the telegram, for I had seen her glance at it inquisitively. "It will interest you enormously."

She made a little grimace when she had read it.

"'Interest me enormously,'" she said contemptuously, crumpling up the paper and tossing it into the grate. For some moments she did not speak.

"What fire was there at Maresfield Gardens?" she inquired suddenly, "and why does he ask you what you think about it?"

"Ah, so it does interest you a little," I exclaimed, taking hold of her hand and drawing her towards me, for as she stood there looking down at me she seemed somehow to magnetize me. "Sit by me, here, and I'll tell you."

I told her of the conversation at the club, of Lord Easterton's dinner, of Osborne's queer suggestion, of our visit to the house at Maresfield Gardens in the middle of the night, of our being admitted by the strange woman, including, of course, the incident of the serpent.

When I had finished, she looked at me seriously for some moments without speaking.

"I don't think I like that adventure," she said at last.

For a moment she paused.

"Don't go to that house again, Mike," she suddenly exclaimed. "Promise me you won't."

I was deliberating what reply I should make to this request, though I did not think it likely I should want to go to the house again, when our attention was distracted by the footman entering with the morning papers—we were sitting in the big hall, before the fire of blazing logs.

Dulcie sprang up and snatched the papers from the man, and Dick, bouncing in at that instant, exclaimed with mock solemnity:

"Oh fie! 'Thou shalt not snatch,' Dulcie, you are 'no lady.'"

"Thank heaven for that," she retorted quickly, then began to tantalize me by holding the papers just beyond my reach.

At last she gave me two, and Dick one, opened one herself, and sat upon the rest. They made quite a pile, for Sir Roland was one of those broad-minded men who like to read both sides on questions of any importance.

I soon found the report I sought. It occupied a prominent position, and was headed:

HAMPSTEAD FIRE MYSTERY BODY FOUND STABBED POLICE PUZZLED

The disastrous fire at Number 340 Maresfield Gardens, on Christmas Eve, has given rise to an interesting sequel.

I had not been aware that a fire had occurred there, and I read on:

It was confidently hoped that no lives had been lost, but about midday yesterday the charred body of a woman was discovered among the *débris*.

Upon careful examination it was ascertained beyond doubt that the body had been several times stabbed, apparently with some sharp weapon or instrument. All the wounds were in the breast, and it is stated that any one of them might have caused death.

The police are instituting searching inquiries, and a sensational announcement will most likely be made shortly. The origin of the conflagration remains a mystery. Apparently nobody occupied the house when the fire broke out, the sub-tenants, whose identity is veiled in obscurity, having left some days previously.

"Have you read the account in your paper?" I asked, turning to Dulcie as I put mine down.

"Yes," she answered, "I have just finished it. Isn't it terrible?"

"I have a theory," a boy's voice exclaimed suddenly. Dick, seated on the floor, tossed aside the newspaper I had thrown to him.

"That woman whose body has been found may have been stabbed, but I believe that big cobra had something to do with her death. I don't know why I think that, but I do. It's instinct, I suppose. Michael, I believe you were spoofed by that man Gastrell, whoever he is—absolutely spoofed."

"Good heavens, Dick!" I exclaimed in dismay, "how do you come to know what I have just told to Dulcie in confidence?"

"Oh, ask me another, old sport!" he cried out, and burst into laughter. "If you will 'exchange confidences'—isn't that the phrase?—with Dulcie, and be so engrossed that you don't notice me in the room—well, what can you expect?"

CHAPTER IV
IN FULL CRY

Riding to hounds is one of the few forms of sport which appeal to me, and I should like it better still if no fox or other creature were tortured.

On that point Dulcie and I had long been agreed; it was one of many questions upon which we saw eye to eye, for on some subjects our views differed.

"It seems to me grotesque," I remember her saying to me once, "that we English should hold up our hands in horror at the thought of bull-fights, while so many of us take pleasure in the hateful business of the kill in fox-hunting."

In reply I had explained to her that the art of diplomacy lies in seeing the beam in the other man's eye and drawing attention to it, while blinding oneself to the mote in one's own, and if possible convincing the other man that the mote does not exist. Dulcie, however, had her full share of intelligence, with the result that, in modern slang, she "wasn't taking any."

"In that case," she had retorted, "you should feel thankful that you are not a diplomat, Mike. You have your points, but tact and logic are not among them, you know!"

Sir Roland always mounted me when I stayed at Holt Manor in the hunting season, and already I had enjoyed two capital days' sport. Pressed to do so—and it had not needed great persuasion—instead of returning to town on the second Saturday after Christmas, I had stayed over the Sunday, for on the Monday hounds were to meet at the Manor House. All the other guests, with the exception of two cousins of Sir Roland's, had left on the Saturday, so that we were a family party to all intents; in secret I was determined that before the dawn of spring I should be a member of the family in reality.

Mounted on a well-shaped chestnut three parts thoroughbred, Dulcie had never, I thought, looked so wholly captivating as she did on that Monday morning; I overtook her, I remember, while the chattering cavalcade trotted from the meet at Holt Manor to the first cover to be drawn.

The first cover proved to be tenantless. So did a small, thickly underwooded copse. So did a stretch of bracken. So did a large pine wood some miles from Holt Manor, which was usually a sure find.

"You may say what you like," Dulcie exclaimed as the notes of the huntsman's horn warned us that the pack was once more being blown out of cover, "I maintain still that a drag hunt has advantages over a fox hunt—your red herring or your sack of aniseed rags never disappoint you, and you are bound to get a run."

As we turned out of the lane into a broad meadow, then broke into a hand canter across the soft, springy turf, to take up our position at a point where we could easily slip forward if hounds should find, I told Dulcie jokingly that if her father preserved foxes as carefully as he always said he did, these covers on his estate would not have been drawn blank.

She turned her head sharply.

"Father always says," she exclaimed, "that—"

But what he always said I never heard, for at that instant a piercing "Tally-ho!" rent the air, and, looking up, we saw a long, yellow, lean-bodied fox which apparently had jumped up within a hundred yards of the pack, lolloping unconcernedly towards a hedge near by. He reached the fence, paused, cast a single glance behind him at the fifteen or so couple of relentless four-footed pursuers, then popped calmly through a gap in the fence, and disappeared.

A few moments later hounds had settled to the line, and were streaming out across the broad, undulating pasture which spread away before us in the distance, cut here and there by thorn fences, a winding stream marked by pollards, and several post-and-rails. From all directions came the field, galloping at top speed for the only gate in the thick hedge, fifty yards ahead of us, crowding and

jostling one another in their anxiety to get through. Six or eight horsemen had cleared the fence at the few places where it was jumpable. Others were preparing to follow them. The music of the flying pack grew less distinct.

"Come along, Mike!" Dulcie called to me, turning her horse abruptly in the direction of the hedge, "we shall get left if we hang about here."

She was thirty yards from the hedge now—twenty—ten. Timing his stroke to a nicety her horse rose. An instant later he had cleared the fence, with a foot or more to spare. I followed, and almost as my mare landed I saw Dulcie lower her head and cast a backward glance.

Now we were sailing side by side over the broad, undulating pastures which form a feature of that part of Berkshire. A hundred yards ahead of us the pack tore ever onward, their sterns and noses mostly to the ground, their music rising at intervals—a confused medley of sound in various cadences, above which a single, deep, bell-like note seemed ever prominent, insistent.

"That's Merry Boy," Dulcie exclaimed as she began to steady her mount—a stiff post-and-rails was fifty yards in front of us. "I know his voice well. Dan always declares that Merry Boy couldn't blunder if he tried"—I knew Dan to be the huntsman.

On and on the pack swept, now heading apparently for a cover of dark pines visible upon a hill to the left of us, away against the skyline. In front of us and to right and left horses were clearing fences, which here were very numerous, some jumping well and freely, some blundering, some pecking on landing, a few falling. Yet, considering the size of the field, there was very little grief.

"Who is the girl in the brown habit?" I asked Dulcie, soon after we had negotiated a rather high-banked brook. I had noticed this girl in the brown habit almost from the beginning of the run—tall, graceful, a finished horsewoman, mounted on a black thoroughbred, and apparently unaccompanied, even by a groom.

"That?" Dulcie exclaimed, bringing her horse a little nearer, so that she need not speak too loud. "Oh, she is something of a mystery. She is a widow, though she can't be more than twenty-four or five. She lives at the Rook Hotel, in Newbury, and has three horses stabled there. She must have been there a couple of months, now. A few people have called upon her, including my father and Aunt Hannah, but nobody seems to know anything about her, who she is or was, or where she comes from. Doesn't she ride well? I like her, though as yet I hardly know her. She's so pretty, too, and has such a nice voice. I'll introduce you, if you like, if I get a chance later."

I remembered that this widow in the brown habit had been one of the first to arrive at the meet, but she had not dismounted. Dulcie also told me that she had dined at Holt once, and evinced great interest in the house. She had brought with her an old volume containing pictures of the place as it was in some early century, a book Sir Roland had never seen before, and that he had read with avidity, for everything to do with the past history of his house appealed to him. Mrs. Stapleton had ended by making him a present of the book, and before she had left, that night Sir Roland had shown her over the whole house, pointing out the priests' hiding-hole—a curious chamber which fifty years before had come to light while repairs were being made in the great hall chimney—also a secret door which led apparently nowhere.

"I think my father was greatly attracted by her," Dulcie said, "and I am not surprised. I think she is quite lovely, though in such a curious, irregular way; but besides that there is something awfully 'taking' about her. She doesn't, however, seem to 'go down' very well with the people about here; but then you know what county society is. She seems to have hardly any friends, and to live an almost solitary life."

Though I had spared her as much as I could, and though I ride barely ten stone seven, my mare was beginning to sob. Unbuttoning my coat and pulling out my watch as we still galloped along, I found that hounds had been running close on forty minutes without a moment's check.

"Dulcie," I said, coming up alongside her again, "my mare is nearly beat. Have you a second horse out?"

She told me she had not—that my mount would have been her second horse had she been out alone.

"Look," she exclaimed suddenly, "they have turned sharp to the right. Oh, I hope they won't kill! I feel miserable when they kill, especially when the fox has shown us such good sport."

I answered something about hounds deserving blood: about the way the farmers grumbled when foxes were not killed, and so on; but, woman-like, she stuck to her point and would listen to no argument.

"I hope they'll lose him in that cover just ahead," she exclaimed. "Hounds may deserve blood, but such a good fox as this deserves to get away, while as for the farmers—well, let them grumble!"

Half a minute later the pack disappeared into the dense pine wood. Then suddenly there was silence, all but the sound of horses galloping still; of horses blowing, panting, sobbing. From all directions they seemed to come.

"Whoo-whoop!"

The scream, issuing from the depths of the wood, rent the air. An instant later it came again:

"Whoo-whoo-*whoop*!"

There was a sound of cracking twigs, of a heavy body forcing its way through undergrowth, and the first whip crashed out of the cover, his horse stumbling as he landed, but recovering himself cleverly.

"Have they killed?" several voices called.

"No, worse luck—gone to ground," the hunt servant answered, and Dulcie, close beside me, exclaimed in a tone of exultation:

"Oh, good!"

I had dismounted, loosened my mare's girths, and turned her nose to the light breeze. Sweat was pouring off her, and she was still blowing hard.

"Shall I unmount you, Dulcie?" I asked.

She nodded, and presently she stood beside me while I attended to her horse.

"Ah, Mrs. Stapleton!" I heard her exclaim suddenly.

I had loosened the girths of Dulcie's horse, and now I looked up.

Seated upon a black thoroughbred, an exceedingly beautiful young woman gazed down with flushed face and shining eyes.

It was a rather strange face, all things considered. The features were irregular, yet small and refined. The eyes were bright and brown—at least not exactly brown; rather they were the colour of a brilliant red-brown wallflower, and large and full of expression. Her skin, though extremely clear, was slightly freckled.

Dulcie had exchanged a few remarks with her. Now she turned to me.

"Mike," she said, "I want to introduce you to Mrs. Stapleton. Mrs. Stapleton, do you know Mr. Berrington?"

The beautiful young widow, gazing down at me as I looked up at her and raised my hat, presently made some complimentary remark about my mount and the way she jumped, then added:

"I noticed her all through the run—she's just the stamp of animal I have been looking for. Is she for sale, by any chance, Mr. Berrington?"

I replied that the mare was not mine, that she must ask Miss Challoner or Sir Roland. For the instant it struck me as odd that, hunting regularly with this pack, she should not have recognized the animal, for I knew that Dulcie rode it frequently. Then I remembered that some people can no more recognize horses than they can recognize their casual friends when they meet them in the street, and the thought faded.

There was talk of digging out the fox—an operation which Dulcie and I equally detested—and that, added to the knowledge that we were many miles from Holt, also that our horses had had enough, made us decide to set out for home.

Looking back, for some reason, as we walked our horses away from the cover-side towards the nearest lane, I noticed the young widow seated erect upon her black horse, staring after us. I turned to shut the gate, after we had passed into the lane; she was still sitting there, outlined against the wood and apparently still staring in our direction.

Why, I don't know, but as I trotted quietly along the lane, to overtake Dulcie, whose horse was an exceptionally fast walker, I felt uneasy.

Presently my thoughts drifted into quite a different channel. All recollection of the day's sport, of the pretty widow I had just talked to, and of the impression she had left upon my mind, faded completely. I was thinking of someone else, someone close beside me, almost touching me, and yet—

Neither of us spoke. It was nearly four o'clock. The afternoon was quickly closing in. Away beyond the woods which sloped upward in the western distance until they touched the sky, the sun's blood-red beam pierced the slowly-rising mist rolling down into the valley where the pollards marked the winding course of the narrow, sluggish stream. Over brown woods and furrowed fields it cast a curious glow.

Now the light of the winter's sun, sinking still, fell full on my companion's face, I caught the outline of her profile, and my pulses seemed to quicken. Her hair was burnished gold. Her eyes shone strangely. Her expression, to my eyes, seemed to be entirely transformed. How young she looked at that instant, how absolutely, how indescribably attractive! Would she, I wondered, ever come to understand how deeply she had stolen into my heart? Until this instant I myself seemed not fully to have realized it.

Presently she turned her head. Her gaze rested on mine. Gravely, steadily, her wonderful brown eyes read—I firmly believe—what was in my soul: how madly I had come to love her. Without meaning to, I started. A sensation of thrilling expectancy took possession of me. I was approaching, I felt, the crisis of my life, the outcome of which must mean everything to both of us.

"You are very silent, Mike," she said in a low, and, as I thought, rather strained voice. "Is anything the matter?"

I swallowed before answering.

"Yes—something is the matter," I said limply.

"What?"

I caught my breath. How could she look into my eyes like that, ask that question—such a foolish question it seemed—as though I were naught to her but a stranger, or, at most, some merely casual acquaintance? Was it possible she realized nothing, suspected nothing, had no faint idea of the feeling I entertained for her?

"What is the matter?" she asked again, as I had not answered.

"Oh, it's something—well, something I can't well explain to you under the circumstances," I replied awkwardly, an anxious, hot feeling coming over me.

"Under what circumstances?"

"What circumstances!"

"Yes."

"This is our gap," I exclaimed hurriedly, as we came to a broken bank by the lane-side—I was glad of the excuse for not answering. I turned my mare's nose towards the bank, touched her with the spur, and at once she scrambled over.

Dulcie followed.

Around us a forest of pines, dark, motionless, forbidding, towered into the sky. To right and left moss-grown rides wound their way into the undulating cover, becoming tunnels in the distance as they vanished into blackness, for the day was almost spent.

Slowly we turned into the broader of the two rides. We still rode side by side. Still neither of us spoke. Now the moss beneath our horses' hoofs grew so thick and soft that their very footfalls became muffled.

Ten minutes must have passed. In the heart of the dense wood all was still as death, save for a pheasant's evening crow, and the sudden rush of a rabbit signalling danger to its companions.

"What circumstances, Mike?" Dulcie repeated. She spoke in a strange tone. Her voice was very low, as though she feared to break the silence which surrounded us.

Taken aback, I hesitated. We were very close together now—my leg touched her horse. Already, overhead in a moonless sky, the stars shone brightly. In the growing gloom her face was visible, though partly blurred.

"Why not stop here a moment?" I said, hardly knowing that I spoke, or why I spoke. My mouth had grown suddenly dry. The *timbre* of my voice somehow founded different. Without answering she shortened her reins, and her horse was still.

Why had we stopped? Why had I suggested our stopping? I saw her, in the darkness, turn her face to mine, but she said nothing.

"Dulcie!" I exclaimed suddenly, no longer able to control myself. Without knowing it I leant forward in my saddle. I could see her eyes, now. Her gaze was set on mine. Her lips were slightly parted. Her breast rose and fell.

Some strange, irresistible force seemed all at once to master me, deadening my will, my brain, my power of self-restraint. My arm was about her; I was drawing her towards me. I felt surprise that she should offer no resistance. My lips were pressed on hers….

* * * * *

She was kissing me feverishly, passionately. Her whole soul seemed to have become suddenly transformed. Her arms were about my neck—I could not draw away.

"Oh, Mike! Mike!" she gasped, "tell me you really mean it—that you are not just playing with me—flirting with me—tell me you … oh, I love you so, dearest. Ah, yes. I love you so, I love you so!"

It was very dark by the time we had made our way through the extensive wood—a short cut to Holt Manor—and were once more in the lanes, I felt strangely happy, and yet a curious feeling which I could neither explain nor account for obsessed me.

Our joy was so great—would it last? That was the purport of my sensation, if I may express it so. I longed at that moment to be able to look into the future. What had the Fates in store for me—for us both?

Perhaps it was as well I didn't know.

We had entered the park gates, and were half-way up the long avenue of tall elms and stately oaks, when I saw a light approaching through the darkness. It came nearer, and we guessed it must be a man on foot, carrying a lantern.

Now he was quite close.

"Is that Miss Dulcie? a voice inquired out of the blackness, as the light became stationary.

"Yes. That you, Churchill?" Dulcie called back.

Churchill was the head gardener. Born and bred on the estate, there were few things he loved better than to recall to mind, and relate to anybody sufficiently patient to listen to him, stories and anecdotes of the family. Of "Miss Dulcie" he would talk for an hour if you let him, telling you how he remembered her when she was "not so high," and of the things she had done and said as a child.

"What do you want, Churchill?" she called to him, as he remained silent.

Still for some moments he did not speak. At last he apparently plucked up courage.

"There's been sad doings at the house," he said, and his voice was strained.

"Sad doings!" Dulcie exclaimed in alarm. "Why, what do you mean?"

"There's been a shocking robbery, Miss Dulcie—shocking. You'll hear all about it when you go in. I thought it best to warn you about it. And Master Dick—"

He stopped abruptly.

"Good heavens, Churchill!" she cried out in great alarm, "quick, tell me what has happened, tell me everything. What about Master Dick?"

"He's been served shocking, Miss. Oh, it's a terrible affair. The whole house looted during the hunt breakfast this, morning, and Master Dick—"

"Yes! Yes!"

"Treated something crool."

"Dick! They haven't hurt Dick. Oh, don't say they have done him some injury!"

The tone of agony in her voice was piteous.

"He's come round now, Miss Dulcie, but he's been unconscious for hours. They put chloroform or something on him—Sir Roland himself found him in one of the upstairs rooms, lying on the floor just like dead."

"Oh, heavens, how awful! How is he now?"

"The two doctors are with him still, Miss, and as I come away, not ten minutes ago, they telled me he was goin' on as well as could be expected. It was at lunch time Sir Roland found him, and then the robbery was discovered. Every bit of jewellery's been stolen, 'tis said, and a whole chest-full of plate—the plate chests were open all the morning as some of the old silver had been used at the breakfast. The robbery must have took place during the meet, when the hall and rooms downstairs was full of people and all the servants as busy as could be. There was lots of cars there as you know, Miss, and the police think the thieves must have come in a car and gone into the house as if they were hunting-folk. But nobody don't seem to have seen any stranger going upstairs—the police say there must have been several thieves on the job. Master Dick may be able to tell something when he's hisself again, pore young gentleman."

We didn't wait to hear more, but set our horses into a smart trot up the avenue to the house.

CHAPTER V
HUGESSON GASTRELL AT HOME

A week had passed since Dulcie had promised to become my wife, and since the amazing robbery in broad daylight at Holt Manor.

I had been five days back in town, where I had some estate business to attend to. It was the evening of Hugesson Gastrell's house—warming reception in his newly furnished mansion in Cumberland Place, and the muster of well-known people was extraordinary.

Peers and peeresses, prosperous City financiers, celebrities of the drama and of the operatic stage, luminaries of the law, diplomats, and rich retired traders who had shed the "tradesman" and blossomed into "gentleman," jostled one another in the rooms and on the stairs. It is surprising how people will rush to the house of a wealthy man. At least one Duke was present, a Cabinet Minister too, also a distinguished Judge and two Archbishops, for I noticed them as I fought my way up into the room where music was being performed, music the quality of which the majority of the listeners gauged by the fees known to be paid to the artists engaged, and by the amount of newspaper publicity those artists' Press agents had succeeded in securing for them.

Nor were journalists lacking at this "interesting social function," as some of them afterwards termed it in their papers. In London I move a good deal in many kinds of society, and now I noticed, mingling in the crowd, several men and women I was in the habit of meeting frequently, though I did not know them to speak to—Press representatives whose exclusive duty I knew it to be to attend social gatherings of this description. As I edged my way through the dense throng I could hear my favourite composition, Dvorak's "Humoresque," being played on the violin by Beatrice Langley, who I had been told was to appear, and for a few brief minutes the crowd was hushed. To my chagrin the music ended almost as I succeeded in forcing my way into the room, so that I was in time only for the applause.

Now the hall and the large rooms where the guests were, were filled with the buzz of conversation. In two of these rooms supper was in progress, a supper in keeping with the sumptuousness, the luxury and the general extravagance noticeable everywhere.

For this house in Cumberland Place which he had rented from Lord Easterton lent itself admirably to Hugesson Gastrell's distorted ideas as to plenishing, at which some people laughed, calling them almost Oriental in their splendour and their lavishness. Upon entering, the idea conveyed was that here was a man who had suddenly found himself possessed of a great deal more money than he had ever expected to come by, and who, not being accustomed to wide means, had at once set to work to fling his fortune broadcast, purchasing, wherever he went, everything costly that took his fancy.

For after mounting some steps and entering under a wide portico, one found oneself in a spacious, lofty vestibule where two flights of warmly tinted marble steps, shallow and heavily carpeted, ran up to right and left to a wide gallery on three sides of the hall. The marble was so beautiful, the steps were so impressive to look upon, that one was forcibly reminded of the staircase in the Opera House in Paris, of course in miniature. On the lowest step on either side were carved marble pillars supporting nude figures of great size and bearing each an electric lamp gold-shaded to set off the yellow-tinted marble and the Turkey carpets of gold and of richest blue. In one corner stood a Mongolian monster, a green and gold dragon of porcelain resting on a valuable faience pedestal—a bit of ancient Cathay set down in the heart of London.

In their magnificence the reception rooms excelled even this hall, boasting, as they did, a heterogeneous collection of rare antiques, of valuable relics, and of *articles de virtu* from practically the world over. Everywhere they lay in strange confusion—on the mantelpieces, tops of cupboards, on

shelves, angle brackets, and on almost every table. Here was a delicate lute of jade, used by Chinese lovers of a thousand years ago. There stood silver lamps, carved most marvellously and once trimmed by vestal virgins, lamps from the temples of Herculaneum, of Rome and of Pompeii. Shadowy gods and goddesses, dragons, fetishes of more or less hideous mien, glared everywhere at one another in a manner most unpleasant. Porcelains; wonderful blue-patterned plates from Pekin; willow-patterned dishes from Japan; ancient hammered beer tankards from Bavaria and the Rhine; long-stemmed Venetian glasses of iridescent hues, were scattered everywhere in bewildering profusion. In an ante-room was a priceless crucifix in three different woods, from Ober-Ammergau; on the mantelpieces of three of the reception rooms were old French gilt clocks—the kind found nowadays only in secluded and old inns of the Bohemian Quartier Latin, inns which the tourist never sees, and where "collectors" are to all intents unknown. Set upon this landing of polished oak upon the first floor was a very ancient sundial, taken from some French château, a truly beautiful *objet d'art* in azure and faded gold, with foliated crest above, borne long ago, no doubt, by some highly pompous dignitary. Here and there, too, were suits of armour of beaten steel—glittering figures, rigid and erect and marvellously inlaid with several different metals. Two rooms of the building, I was told by a guest with whom I had entered into conversation, were set aside entirely as an armoury.

Hardly had I finished observing all this, and a great deal more besides, when a voice at my elbow exclaimed:

"Good evening, Mr. Berrington. I wonder, now, if you'll remember me—eh?"

As I turned, I instantly recognized the speaker.

"Of course I recollect you—Mrs. Stapleton," I exclaimed, looking into her eyes with, I am afraid, rather unconcealed admiration, for I don't pretend that I am not of a very susceptible nature. "I have met many people I know, this evening," I continued, "but this is an unlooked-for pleasure. I was told in Berkshire that you never came to town."

"Were you really?" she exclaimed with a ripple of merry laughter. "They seem, down there, to know more about one's movements than one knows oneself."

For an instant she paused.

"And how is your lovely and delightful friend—Dulcie Challoner?" she inquired presently. "Is she here to-night?"

"No," I said, wondering for the moment if she knew or suspected my secret, for our engagement had not yet been announced. "The Challoners don't know our host, though, judging by the people here to-night, he seems to know nearly everybody."

"Do you know him well? Have you known him long?" she inquired carelessly, letting her gaze rest on mine.

I told her that our acquaintanceship was very slight, that I had made his acquaintance in Geneva, and met him once afterwards in London.

"I don't know him well, either," she observed, then added with some emphasis, "He strikes me as being a most charming young man."

Naturally I agreed with her, though I had been unable to make up my mind whether, upon the whole, I liked him or not. I thought that upon the whole I didn't, seeing what strange things had happened.

"By the by," I said suddenly, "have you had supper?"

She answered that she had not, and added that she was "starving." Several people were emerging from one of the supper rooms, and thus it came that I presently found myself seated *tête-à-tête* with the beautiful widow, and at last beginning to enjoy an evening which until now I had found rather dull.

It was natural that we should presently speak of Berkshire and of Holt Manor, and soon we were discussing at length the subject of the robbery.

"And have the police as yet no clues?" Mrs. Stapleton suddenly asked.

"None, apparently. I suppose you have heard all about what happened, and the statements made by Sir Roland's little son, Dick Challoner."

"I know nothing beyond what I read in the newspapers," she replied. "The papers mentioned that Sir Roland's boy had been chloroformed by the thief or thieves—that was all so far as I remember."

"Yes," I answered, "he was chloroformed, but he need not have been according to his own account—and as he is extremely truthful and never boasts, I think we may believe his story. He had his head and shoulders in a big oak chest in his father's bedroom, where his father had sent him to find a hunting apron to lend to somebody, and when he stood upright again he heard two men talking, upon the opposite side of the screen which hid the oak chest.

"The voices were those of strangers, and the boy naturally supposed that the speakers were some friends of Sir Roland's. He was about to show himself, when he heard one of the men say:

"'She says this drawer has money in it: give me your key.'

"He heard a key being pushed into a drawer lock, the drawer pulled out, the chink of coin and the crackle of bank-notes. Then he heard the other man suddenly say:

"'Hurry up. They'll have got the plate by this time and be waiting for us.'

"The boy was awfully frightened, of course, but he didn't lose his head. Knowing that his presence must be discovered in a moment, he sprang out from behind the screen, intending to dash past the men and downstairs and give the alarm. Unfortunately he rushed right up against one of them, who instantly gripped him and clapped his hand over his mouth while the other man pressed his hand over his eyes—presumably to prevent Dick's being afterwards able to identify them. Dick says that one of the men twisted his arm until he couldn't stir without extreme pain, then told him that he must show them where the key of Sir Roland's safe was—a little safe in the wall in his bedroom. Dick knew where the key was—Sir Roland keeps it, it seems, in a drawer of his dressing-table—but he refused to tell, though the man screwed his arm until he nearly broke it—he strained it badly, and the poor little chap has it still in a sling. Then, finding that they could do nothing with him, and that nothing would make him 'peach,' as he says—though he says they threatened to hit him on the head—one of them pressed something over his mouth and nose, which seemed to suffocate him. What happened after that he doesn't know, as he lost consciousness."

"What a brave little boy," my beautiful companion exclaimed in a tone of admiration. "Did he say at all what the men were like?"

"He didn't catch even a glimpse of their faces, they pounced on him so quickly. But he says that both wore hunting kit, and he thinks both were tall. One wore pink."

"It was a carefully planned affair, anyway," Mrs. Stapleton said thoughtfully, as I refilled her glass with Pol Roger. "What was the actual value of the things stolen?"

"Sir Roland puts it at twelve or fourteen thousand pounds, roughly. You see, he had a lot of jewellery that had belonged to Lady Challoner and that would have been Miss Challoner's; most of that was stolen. It should have been in the safe, of course, but Sir Roland had taken it out the week before, intending to send it all to London to be thoroughly overhauled and cleaned—he was going to give it to Dulcie—to Miss Challoner on her twenty-first birthday; she comes of age next month, you know. It was in one of the drawers that the thieves unlocked, and they took most of it. They would have taken the lot, only some of it was in a back partition of the drawer, and they apparently overlooked it."

"But how did they manage to steal the plate? I read in some paper that a lot of plate was stolen."

"Heaven knows—but they got it somehow. The police think that other men, disguised probably as gentlemen's servants, must have made their way into the pantry during the hunt breakfast, while Sir Roland's servants were up to their eyes in work, attending to everybody, and have slipped it into bags and taken it out to a waiting motor. Strangers could easily have gone into the back premises like that, unnoticed, in the middle of the bustle and confusion. If Dick had told the men who bullied him

what they wanted to know, Sir Roland's safe would have been ransacked too, and several thousands of pounds more worth of stuff stolen, most likely. He is a little brick, that boy."

"He is, indeed. How long did he remain unconscious?"

"Until Sir Roland himself found him, just before lunch. The ruffians had pushed him under the bed, and if Sir Roland had not happened to catch sight of his foot, which protruded a little, the boy might have been left there until night, or even until next day, and the whole household have been hunting for him."

Mrs. Stapleton sipped some champagne, then asked:

"Is anybody suspected?"

"That's difficult to say," I answered. "Naturally the police think that one or other of the servants at Holt must know something of the affair, even have been an actual accomplice—but which? None of the servants has been there less than four years, it seems, and several have been in Sir Roland's service ten and fifteen years—the old butler was born on the estate. Sir Roland scouts the idea that any of his servants had a hand in the affair, and he told the police so at once. Even the fact that one of the thieves had, according to Dick, referred to some woman—he had said, '*She* says this drawer has money in it'—wouldn't make Sir Roland suspect any of the maids.

"The police then asked him in a roundabout way if he thought any of his guests could have had anything to say to it. Phew! How furious Sir Roland became with them! You should have seen him—I was with him at the time. Then suddenly he grew quite calm, realizing that they were, after all, only trying to do their duty and to help him to trace the thieves.

"'Up to the present I have not, so far as I am aware,' he said in that cold, dignified way of his, 'entertained criminals at Holt Manor or elsewhere. No, my man,' he ended, turning to the sergeant, or the inspector, or whatever he was, 'the men who have stolen my property were not any of my guests. You may set your minds at rest on that point.'"

Conversation drifted to other topics. Several times during supper I endeavoured to lead my beautiful companion on to talk about herself, but on each occasion she cleverly diverted conversation to some other subject. I confess that when she casually questioned me concerning my own affairs I was less successful in evading her inquiries; or it may have been that I, in common with most of my sex, like to talk freely about "self" and "self's" affairs, especially when the listener is a beautiful woman who appears to be sympathetic and deeply interested in all one has to say about oneself.

During that brief half-hour our intimacy grew apace. There are people with whom one seems to have been on terms of friendship, almost as though one had known them for years, within ten minutes after being introduced to them; others who, when one has known them quite a long time, seem still to remain comparatively strangers. Mrs. Stapleton belonged to the first group, although she spoke so little about herself. Yet I was not in the least attracted by her in the way Dulcie Challoner attracted me. I found her capital company; I could imagine our becoming great friends; I could think of her in the light of a *bonne camarade*. But that was all. As for feeling tempted to fall in love with her—but the bare thought was grotesque.

"What a charming, delightful girl that is—I mean Miss Challoner," Mrs. Stapleton exclaimed suddenly, when, after talking a great deal, we had been silent for a few moments. "And how exquisitely pretty," she added after an instant's pause.

I hardly knew what to say. I know enough of women to be aware that no woman is particularly anxious, save in exceptional cases, to listen to a panegyric on the charms and the physical attractions of some other woman. Therefore, after a moment's reflection, I answered with affected indifference:

"I think I agree with you. I have known her a number of years. Her father was a great friend of my father's."

"Indeed?" she replied, raising her eyebrows a little, then letting her gaze rest full on mine. "That is interesting. I am a believer in platonic friendships. I wonder if you are."

"Oh, of course," I said quickly. "It is ridiculous to suppose that a man and woman can't be friends without—without—"

"Yes?" she said encouragingly.

"Oh, well—I suppose I mean without falling in love with each other."

She smiled in a way that puzzled me a little, but said nothing.

"Do you mean in all cases?" she suddenly inquired.

"In most cases, anyway."

"And when would you make an exception?"

This was a problem I felt I could not solve. However, I made a dash at it.

"In the case of people of abnormally susceptible temperament," I said, "I suppose such people couldn't be friends without soon becoming—well, lovers."

"Ah, I see," she observed thoughtfully.

She was toying with a strawberry ice, and her lowered eyelids displayed the extraordinary length of their lashes. Certainly I was talking to an interesting and very lovely woman—though again here, as before in the hunting field in Berkshire, I found myself wondering in what her beauty consisted. Not a feature was regular; the freckles on nose and forehead seemed to show more plainly under the glare of the electric lights; the eyes were red-brown. But how large they were, and how they seemed to sparkle with intelligence!

She looked up suddenly. Her expression was serious now. Up to the present her eyes, while she talked, had been singularly animated, often full of laughter.

"Mr. Berrington, have you ever been in love?"

I was so surprised at this question, from a woman to whom I was practically a stranger, that I thought it best to treat it as a jest.

"Yes, a dozen times," I answered. "I am in love at this moment," I added lightly, as if joking.

"You need not have told me that," she said, serious still. "I knew it the moment I saw you both together. I asked—but only to hear what you would say."

"But—but—" I stammered, "I—you—that is I don't quite catch your meaning. When did you see 'us' both together—and who is the other person you are thinking of?"

She had finished her ice.

"Please give me some more champagne," she said.

I picked up the half-empty bottle, refilled her glass, then my own. She held out her glass until it clinked against mine.

"Here is health and long life to your friend on the chestnut," she exclaimed, smiling again, "and to you too. I only hope that your married life will be happier than—"

She checked herself. Her tongue had run away with her, and, as our lips touched our glasses, I mentally finished her sentence.

But who, I wondered, had her husband been?

People were still flocking into the room. Others were moving out. From a distance there came to us above the noise and the buzz of conversation the words of a song I love:

"Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix
Comme s'ouvre les fleurs
Aux baisers de l'aurore,
Mais O! Mon bien aime
Pour mieux secher mes pleurs
Que ta voix parle encore,
Dis moi qu'a Dalila
Tu reviens pour jamais.
Redis à ma tendresse

Les serments d'autrefois
Les serments que j'aimais.
Ah, réponds à ma tendresse,
Ah, verse-moi l'ivresse!"

"How gorgeous!" I exclaimed, straining my ears in a vain attempt to hear better. "Who is it?"

"Kirkby-Lunn," my companion answered quickly. "Are you fond—"

She stopped. Her face was partly turned. I saw a glance of recognition flash into her eyes and vanish instantly. Following the direction of her glance, my gaze rested upon the strange, striking woman I had seen but once but could not possibly forget. Mrs. Gastrell had just entered, and with her, to my astonishment, Jack Osborne. It was Jasmine Gastrell with whom my companion had exchanged that momentary glance of recognition.

"Are you fond of music?" Mrs. Stapleton asked, looking at me again.

"Very," I answered absently, "of music that is music."

For my attention had become suddenly distracted. How came this woman to be here, this woman who called herself Gastrell's wife? Lord Easterton was somewhere about, for I had seen him in the crowd. Such a striking woman would be sure to attract his attention, he would inquire who she was, he might even ask Gastrell, and then what would happen? What would Gastrell say? Was the woman actually his wife, or was she—

Mechanically I conversed with my companion for a minute or two longer, then suddenly she suggested that we should go.

"And let some of these starving people take our table," she added, as she prepared to rise.

Osborne and his singularly lovely companion were now seated at a table only a few yards off. His back was turned to us, and I had not caught Mrs. Gastrell's glance.

"D'you know who that is, that woman who has just come in?" I inquired carelessly, indicating her as I rose.

"That?" Mrs. Stapleton answered, looking full at her, and this time their eyes met in a cold stare. "No, I have no idea."

I confess that this flat untruth, spoken with such absolute *sang-froid,* somewhat disconcerted me. For I could not be in the least doubt that I had distinctly seen the two women greet each other with that brief glance of mutual recognition.

CHAPTER VI
THE HOUSE IN GRAFTON STREET

One afternoon, some days later, I was sitting in my flat in South Molton Street, smoking a pipe and carelessly skimming an evening paper, when my man brought me some letters which had just arrived.

Several I tossed aside unopened—I recognized the handwritings and was in no haste to absorb the contents of epistles from acquaintances whose company, at the best of times, "bored me stiff," as some Americans say. But the letter was there that I had expected in the morning, and at once I tore it open.

Dulcie wrote chiefly about herself—which was all I wanted to hear—about her father and "Aunt Hannah," while two pages she devoted to her little brother Dick, of whom she was inordinately fond.

Dick, she said, had shown the utmost pluck and endurance throughout his painful convalescence after his rough-and-tumble with the burglars. She told me how he had from the first sat up in bed with his "honourable wounds" upon him, bandaged and swathed, joking and making light of the occurrence now, as perhaps only the best breed of English schoolboy knows how. One thing still puzzled both little Dick and herself, and for that matter the whole family, she said—who could the woman be to whom the thieves had alluded? No word, added Dulcie, had as yet been forthcoming as to the whereabouts of any of the valuables stolen on that memorable day, either family jewels or plate, and the detectives at Scotland Yard acknowledged that so far matters were at a deadlock.

Further on in her newsy letter Dulcie made mention of the fascinating widow staying at the Rook Hotel in Newbury, and of her wish to know her better. She added incidentally that Mrs. Stapleton had been away since the day after the meet at Holt Manor, and that no one knew where she was staying. She hoped she would soon be back, she said, as she wished so much to renew her acquaintance, and to strengthen it. Dulcie then spoke of her Aunt Hannah, who had been particularly amusing and crochety of late, but added that she was really such a "dear" at heart that people all loved her when they came to know her well. "My dear," she wrote, "Aunt Hannah has surpassed herself lately. You know what vigorous likes and dislikes she takes, all of a sudden? Well, now Auntie has conceived an inordinate aversion for poor Mrs. Stapleton, and seems inclined not only to give her the cold shoulder, but to hound her down by saying the nastiest things about her, just as the other people in the county did when she first came to live among us. I rather believe that she had this feeling all along, more or less, but now she seems positively to hate her—though she confesses that she doesn't know why she does! Isn't that like Auntie? And now she has been asking me never to notice Mrs. Stapleton, and not to speak to her again when she returns, in fact to drop the acquaintance entirely—and that just as we have called, and I've tried to be nice to her out hunting, and we've had her to dine; I told you how taken father was with her, and how he took her all over the house and showed her simply everything. I really don't see why I should draw back now. Nor does father. As a matter of fact, I don't see how we can—it has gone too far—and just to satisfy one of dear old Auntie's whims! She has a good many, as you know, Mike. There is just this one thing, however, that sometimes one of her unaccountable whims or dislikes turns out to have been well grounded."

My darling then went on to speak of her father and of the happiness our engagement afforded him, happiness tempered, as she could not help knowing, by the sorrow her leaving him would bring to him, for the most wonderful confidence and companionship existed between father and daughter. This sadness, Dulcie went on, came out almost pathetically in her father's even added tenderness to her—he whose tenderness and affection had always been such a wonderful thing to her since her earliest childhood. But now, she said, her father sometimes followed her about the house and grounds when she had been absent from him for a short time, seeking occasion for talks with her, giving her

his confidence, and consulting her wishes on matters about the gardens and stables in a way that was quite touching. It was as though, now that the parting was so soon to take place, he could not get enough of his only daughter's company, as if the old man clung to her more than ever before.

The closely-written sheets dropped from my hand on to my knee. "Ah, my own little girl," I thought, "who wouldn't miss you—sadly, yes, terribly? Your delightful presence, the truth and honour that seem to be manifest in your smallest gesture, in every glance from your clear eyes; the companionship of your fearless intellect cutting through conventionalities like a knife, arriving at the right point with the unerring instinct of a woman, yet with the *naiveté* of a child."

Memories crowded in upon me, memories of all my happy days with Dulcie in the country—in the hunting field, in the gardens about her home, of afternoons spent among the books and prints and pictures in her father's quiet, book-lined library at Holt, of the evenings in the drawing-room at the piano, of hours of pleasant talk in the beautiful conservatories and on the grassy terraces, and by the lake-side below the tennis lawn. What, I thought, would life be like when at last I had her always with me, brightening my life, filling my own home—our home—with laughter and with the music of her voice! Again and again she rose to my enthralled vision, and ever she was Youth and Love, the vision crowned with the wonder of her nebulous, brown-gold hair as she gazed at me out of her sweet, clear eyes in which I seemed still to read unfathomable purity and truth.

It is a terrible thing to be in love. Some savage races there are which hold to the belief that the spirits of lovers changing places, give rise to the feverish mental upheaval which we prosaically term "falling in love," the spirits being restless at their enforced imprisonment and unsatisfied until they have returned each to its appointed sphere. Now that I have recovered from the affliction I sometimes wonder if it might not with advantage be treated as ordinary maladies and some passions are—with the aid of drugs. Perhaps some day it will be. Certainly it soon will be if the eugenists get their way.

And, thinking of the letter I had just read, which now lay folded in my pocket, my memory drifted backward. For since the day I had met Jack Osborne at Brooks's on his return from Nigeria, many incidents had occurred which puzzled me. Trifling incidents individually, no doubt, yet significant when considered in the concrete. There was the incident, for instance, of Sir Harry Dawson's declaring in a letter written to Lord Easterton from the Riviera that he had never met Gastrell, never heard of him even, though Lord Easterton had Gastrell's assurance that he knew Sir Harry Dawson and had intended to call upon him on the evening he had unwittingly entered Lord Easterton's house, which was next door.

Then there was something not quite normal in Gastrell's posing one day as a married man, the next as a bachelor; also in his pretending at one moment that he had never seen Osborne and myself before, yet admitting at the next that he had met us. True, he had advanced an apparently sound reason for this *volte-face* of his, but still—

The affair, too, in Maresfield Gardens. That surely was an "incident" which bordered on a mystery. I felt I should never forget our extraordinary reception that night—the "black out" house, as stage managers say; our repeated ringing the door bell; the slow unlocking and unbolting the door; the cautious inquiry; our wait in the darkness after our admission; the discovery of that horrible serpent with its chilling eyes; the locked door; the sudden entry of Gastrell, and his odd conversation.

Then the conflagration which had occurred a few days later, and the subsequent discovery among the *débris* of a body, charred and stabbed; the apparent ignorance of everybody as to whose body it was; the statement made by the police that none knew the names of the sub-tenants who had occupied that house when the fire had broken out, or what had since become of them—the actual tenant was in America. Without a doubt, I reflected as I knocked the ashes out of my pipe into the grate, something "queer" was going on, and I had inadvertently got myself mixed up in it.

The last "incident" to puzzle me had been that momentary glance of mutual recognition exchanged between the woman I knew only as "Mrs. Gastrell"—or "Jasmine Gastrell," as Osborne always spoke of her—and Mrs. Stapleton, and their subsequent apparent entire lack of recognition.

That, certainly, had been most odd. What could have been the cause of it? Why, knowing each other, did they all at once feign to be strangers? And the extraordinarily calm way Mrs. Stapleton had, looking me full in the eyes, assured me that she had never before even seen the woman she had just smiled at. Lastly—though this was of less consequence—how came Jack Osborne to be dancing attendance upon the woman I knew as "Mrs. Gastrell," when he had assured me as we drove away in the taxi from Maresfield Gardens that night that though he admired her he mistrusted her?

I had filled my pipe again, and, as I puffed at it to set it going, one more thought occurred to me. And this thought, I must say, perplexed me as much as any.

Hugesson Gastrell was said to have spent the whole of his life, until six months previously, in Australia and Tasmania. If that were so, then how did he come to have so large a circle of friends, or at any rate of acquaintances—acquaintances, too, of such distinction and high position? Was it possible he could in a few months have come to know all these peers and peeresses and baronets and knights, distinguished musicians and actors and actresses, leading members of the learned professions, and all the rest of the Society crowd who had thronged his house that evening?

Suddenly something I had been told at the club an hour or so before flashed back into my mind. Another club member besides Easterton had, it seemed, become acquainted with Gastrell through Gastrell's calling at the wrong house—by mistake.

A coincidence? Possibly. And yet—

I sucked meditatively at my pipe.

Suddenly the telephone rang. Easterton was speaking.

"What!" I exclaimed, in answer to the startling information he gave me. "When did he disappear?"

"Where was he last seen?"

"No, he has not been here. I haven't seen him since Gastrell's reception."

"Oh, yes, I saw you there."

"Yes, very extraordinary."

"No."

"Oh, no."

"Good. I'll come to you at once. Are you at Linden Gardens?"

"Very well, I'll come straight to the club."

Mechanically I hung up the receiver. Curious thoughts, strange conjectures, wonderings, arguments, crowded my brain in confusion. Five days had passed since the date of Gastrell's reception, when I had seen Jack Osborne at supper with the woman he had said he mistrusted. Since that evening, according to what Easterton had just told me, nobody had seen or heard of him. He had not been to his chambers; he had not left any message there or elsewhere; he had not written; he had neither telegraphed nor telephoned.

Where was he? What was he doing? Could some misfortune have befallen him? Had he—

I did not end the sentence my mind had formed. Instead I went out, hailed a taxi, and in a few minutes was on my way to Brooks's.

Outside a house in Grafton Street a group of people stood clustered about the door. Others, on the pavement opposite, stared up at the windows. Two policemen upon the doorstep prevented anyone from entering.

Leaning forward as my taxi sped by, I peered in through the open door of the house, then up at the windows, but there was nothing out of the ordinary to be seen. Further down the street we passed three policemen walking briskly along the pavement in the direction of the house.

"What's the commotion in Grafton Street?" I inquired of my driver as I paid him off at Brooks's.

"I've no idea, sir," he answered. "Looks as though there was trouble of some sort." Another fare hailed him, so our conversation ended.

I found Easterton awaiting me in a deserted card-room.

"This may be a serious affair, Berrington," he said in a tone of anxiety as I seated myself in the opposite corner of the big, leather-covered settee. "Here five days have gone by, and there isn't a sign of Jack Osborne, though he had not told anybody that he intended to absent himself, had not even hinted to anybody that he had any idea of doing so."

"You say he has not been seen since Gastrell's reception?"

"Not since then—five days ago. The fellows here at the club are getting quite alarmed about him—they want to advertise in the newspapers for news of his whereabouts."

"That means publicity, a shoal of inquiries, and maybe a scandal," I answered thoughtfully. "If Jack has intentionally disappeared for a day or two and all at once finds himself notorious he will be furious."

"Just what I tell them," Easterton exclaimed; "I wish you would back me up. You see, Jack hasn't any relatives to speak of, and those he has live abroad. Consequently the fellows here consider it is what the Americans call 'up to them' to institute inquiries, even if such inquiries should necessitate publicity."

I pondered for a moment or two.

"You know," I said, "Jack is a curious fellow in some ways—some call him a crank, but he isn't that. Still, he is something of a 'character,' and absolutely unconventional. I remember his making a bet, once, that he would punch out a boastful pugilist at the National Sporting Club—no, it wasn't at the N.S.C., it was at a place down East—'Wonderland,' they call it."

"And did he do it?" Easterton asked.

"Did he? By heaven, the poor chap he tackled was carried out unconscious at the end of the second round—Jack's bet was with Teddy Forsyth, and he pocketed a couple of ponies then and there."

"Did he really? Capital! And Teddy's such a mean chap; he didn't like partin', did he?"

"Like it? He went about for the rest of the night with a face like a funeral mute's."

"Capital!" Lord Easterton repeated. "But to return to the point, Jack's eccentricities and vagaries can have nothin' to do with his disappearance."

"Why not? How do you know?"

"Well, why should they? I only hope he hasn't gone and made a fool of himself in any way that'll make a scandal or get him into trouble. In a way, you know, we are connections. His mother and mine were second cousins. That's really why I feel that I ought to do somethin' to find out what has happened to him. Do you—do you think he can have got mixed up with some woman?"

"I won't say that I actually think so, but I think it's more than possible."

"No! Why? What woman?"

At that instant I remembered that the woman I had in my mind was the woman who on board the *Masonic* had, so Jack had told me, called herself Hugesson Gastrell's wife, and called herself his wife again at the house in Maresfield Gardens. But Gastrell had told Easterton, or at any rate led him to suppose, he was unmarried. How, then, could I refer to this woman by name without causing possible friction between Easterton and his tenant, Gastrell?

"I am afraid I can't tell you, Easterton," I said after an instant's hesitation. "I don't want to make mischief, and if what I think is possible is not the case, and I tell you about it, I shall have made mischief."

Easterton was silent. For some moments he remained seated in his corner of the settee, looking at me rather strangely.

"I quite understand what you mean, Berrington," he said at last. "Still, under the circumstances I should have thought—and yet no, I dare say you are right. I may tell you candidly, though, that I can't help thinkin' you must be mistaken in your supposition. Jack doesn't care about women in that way. He never has cared about them. The only thing he cares about is sport, though, of course, he admires a pretty woman, as we all do."

To that observation I deemed it prudent to make no reply, and at that moment a waiter entered and came across the room to us.

"Your lordship is wanted on the telephone," he said solemnly.

"Who is it?" Easterton asked, looking up.

"Scotland Yard, my lord."

"Oh, say, hold the line, and I'll come down."

"Have you informed the police, then?" I asked quickly, when the servant had left the room.

"Yes. I went to Scotland Yard this mornin', but I told them not to let a word about the disappearance get into the newspapers, if they could help it, until they heard further from me, and they promised they would respect my wish. You had better come down with me. They may have found out something."

I waited outside the glass hutch, which effectually shut in all sound, watching Lord Easterton's face below the electric light. His lips moved rapidly, and by the way his expression suddenly changed I judged that he was hearing news of importance. After talking for a minute or two he hung up the receiver, pushed open the door and came out. His face betrayed his emotion.

"Come over here," he said in a curious tone. "I have something to tell you."

I followed him a little way down the passage which led to the card-rooms. When we were out of sight and earshot of the club servants he stopped abruptly and turned to me.

"Jack has been found," he said quickly. "He was found gagged and bound in a house in Grafton Street half an hour ago. He is there now, and the police are with him."

"Good God!" I exclaimed. "How did they identify him?"

"He was not unconscious. The police want me to go there at once. Come."

We walked up to Grafton Street, as it was such a little way, also Easterton wanted to tell me more. The Inspector who had just spoken to him had not told him what had led to the police entering the house in Grafton Street, or if anybody else had been found upon the premises. He had only told him that Scotland Yard had for some weeks had the house under surveillance—they had suspected that something irregular was going on there, but they did not know what.

"I expect they have a pretty shrewd idea," Easterton added, as we crossed Piccadilly, "but they won't say what it is. Hello! Just look at the crowd!"

Up at the end of Dover Street, where Grafton Street begins, the roadway was blocked with people. When we reached the crowd we had some difficulty in forcing our way through it. A dozen policemen were keeping people back.

"Are you Lord Easterton?" the officer at the entrance asked, as Easterton handed him his card. "Ah, then come this way, please, m'lord. This gentleman a friend of yours? Follow the constable, please."

We were shown into a room on the ground floor, to the right of the hall. It was large, high-ceilinged, with a billiard table in the middle. Half a dozen men were standing about, two in police uniform; the remainder I guessed to be constables in plain clothes.

Suddenly I started, and uttered an exclamation.

Seated in a big arm-chair was Dulcie Challoner, looking pale, frightened. Beside her, with her back to me, stood Aunt Hannah!

CHAPTER VII
OSBORNE'S STORY

"Good heavens, Dulcie!" I exclaimed, hurrying across to her, "whatever are you doing here? And you, Aunt Hannah?"

At the sound of my voice Dulcie started up in her chair, and Aunt Hannah turned quickly. To my amazement they both looked at me without uttering. Dulcie's eyes were troubled. She seemed inclined to speak, yet afraid to. The expression with which Aunt Hannah peered at me chilled me.

"What is the meaning of this, Mr. Berrington?" she asked coldly, after a brief pause. Even in that moment of tense anxiety it struck me that Aunt Hannah looked and spoke as though reproving a naughty schoolboy.

"Meaning of what?" I said stupidly, astonishment for the moment deadening my intelligence.

"Of your bringing us up to London to find—this."

"Bringing you up? What do you mean, Miss Challoner?" I exclaimed, mystified.

In spite of my deep anxiety, a feeling of annoyance, of resentment, had come over me. No man likes to be made to look ridiculous, and here was I standing before a lot of constables, all of them staring in inquisitive astonishment at my being thus addressed by the old lady.

"Is this Mr. Berrington, madam?" an immensely tall, bull-necked, plain-clothes policeman, of pompous, forbidding mien, suddenly asked.

"Yes, officer, it is," she snapped. During all the time I had known her I had never seen her quite like this.

"See here," he said, turning to me, "I want your address, and for the present you will stay here."

I am considered good-tempered. Usually, too, I can control my feelings. There is a limit, however, to the amount of incivility I can stand, and this fellow was deliberately insulting me.

"How dare you speak like that to me!" I burst out. "What has this affair to do with me? Do you know who I am?"

"Aren't you Mr. Michael Berrington?" he inquired more guardedly, apparently taken aback at my outburst of indignation.

"I am."

"Then read that," he said, producing a telegram and holding it out before me.

It was addressed to:

"Miss Dulcie Challoner, Holt Manor, Holt Stacey," and ran:

"The police have recovered property which they believe to have been stolen from Holt Manor. Please come at once to 430 Grafton Street, Bond Street, to identify it. Shall expect you by train due Paddington 12:17. Please don't fail to come as matter very urgent.

"MICHAEL BERRINGTON."

It had been handed in at the office in Regent Street at 9:30 that morning, and received at Holt Stacey village at 9:43.

"How absurd! How ridiculous!" I exclaimed. "My name has been forged, of course. I never sent that telegram; this is the first I have seen or heard of it."

"That you will have to prove," the detective answered, with official stolidity.

"Surely, Aunt Hannah," I almost shouted—so excited did I feel—as I again turned to her, "you can't think I sent that telegram?"

"I certainly think nothing else," she replied, and her eyes were like shining beads. "Who would send a telegram signed with your name but you, or someone instructed by you?"

I saw that to argue with her in the frame of mind she was then in would be futile—my presentiment at Holt that some day I should fall foul of her had come true! I turned to the officer.

"I must see the original of that telegram," I said quickly, "and shall then quickly prove that it was not sent by me. How soon can I get hold of it?"

"Oh, we can see about it at once, sir," he answered much more civilly, for, pretending to look for something in my pocket, I had intentionally pulled out my leather wallet, containing two hundred pounds or more in notes, and opened it for an instant. There is nothing like the sight of paper money to ensure civility from a policeman disposed to be impertinent—I should like, in justice, to add that most policemen are not.

Also Easterton had come over and spoken to me, and of course pooh-poohed the idea of my having sent the telegram, which had just been shown to him. Dulcie stared at me with large, pathetic eyes, and I knew that, but for Aunt Hannah's so-to-speak mounting guard, she would have asked me endless questions instead of sitting there mute.

"You had better come with me and hear Jack Osborne's story," Easterton said some moments later. "The Inspector tells me he is upstairs, and still rather weak from the effect of the treatment he has received."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.