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PROLOGUE
The Affair of the Man Who Vanished

Mr. Maverick Narkom, Superintendent at Scotland Yard, flung aside the paper he was reading and wheeled round in his revolving desk-chair, all alert on the instant, like a terrier that scents a rat.

He knew well what the coming of the footsteps toward his private office portended; his messenger was returning at last.

Good! Now he would get at the facts of the matter, and be relieved from the sneers of carping critics and the pin pricks of overzealous reporters, who seemed to think that the Yard was to blame, and all the forces connected with it to be screamed at as incompetents if every evildoer in London was not instantly brought to book and his craftiest secrets promptly revealed.

Gad! Let them take on his job, then, if they thought the thing so easy! Let them have a go at this business of stopping at one's post until two o'clock in the morning trying to patch up the

jumbled fragments of a puzzle of this sort, if they regarded it as such child's play – finding an assassin whom nobody had seen and who struck with a method which neither medical science nor legal acumen could trace or name. *Then*, by James…

The door opened and closed, and Detective Sergeant Petrie stepped into the room, removing his hat and standing at attention.

"Well?" rapped out the superintendent, in the sharp staccato of nervous impatience. "Speak up! It was a false alarm, was it not?"

"No, sir. It's even worse than reported. Quicker and sharper than any of the others. He's gone, sir."

"Gone? Good God! you don't mean *dead*?"

"Yes, sir. Dead as Julius Cæsar. Total collapse about twenty minutes after my arrival and went off like that" – snapping his fingers and giving his hand an outward fling. "Same way as the others, only, as I say, quicker, sir; and with no more trace of what caused it than the doctors were able to discover in the beginning. That makes five in the same mysterious way, Superintendent, and not a ghost of a clue yet. The papers will be ringing with it to-morrow."

"Ringing with it? Can they 'ring' any more than they are doing already?" Narkom threw up both arms and laughed the thin, mirthless laughter of utter despair. "Can they say anything worse than they have said? Blame any more unreasonably than they have blamed? It is small solace for the overburdened taxpayer to reflect that he may be done to death at any hour of the night, and

that the heads of the institution he has so long and so consistently supported are capable of giving his stricken family nothing more in return than the "Dear me! dear me!" of utter bewilderment; and to prove anew that the efficiency of our boasted police-detective system may be classed under the head of "Brilliant Fiction." That sort of thing, day after day – as if I had done nothing but pile up failures of this kind since I came into office. No heed of the past six years' brilliant success. No thought for the manner in which the police departments of other countries were made to sit up and to marvel at our methods. Two months' failure and *that* doesn't count! By the Lord Harry! I'd give my head to make those newspaper fellows eat their words – gad, yes!"

"Why don't you, then, sir?" Petrie dropped his voice a tone or two and looked round over the angle of his shoulder as he spoke; then, recollecting the time and the improbability of anybody being within earshot, took heart of grace and spoke up bolder. "There's no use blinking the fact, Mr. Narkom; it was none of us – none of the regular force, I mean – that made the record of those years what it was. That chap Cleek was the man that did it, sir. You know that as well as I. I don't know whether you've fallen out with him or not; or if he's off on some secret mission that keeps him from handling Yard matters these days. But if he isn't, take my advice, sir, and put him on this case at once."

"Don't talk such rot!" flung out Narkom, impatiently. "Do you think I'd have waited until now to do it if it could be done? Put him on the case, indeed! How the devil am I to do it when I don't

know where on earth to find him? He cleared out directly after that Panther's Paw case six months ago. Gave up his lodgings, sacked his housekeeper, laid off his assistant, Dollops, and went the Lord knows where and why."

"My hat! Then that's the reason we never hear any more of him in Yard matters, is it? I wondered! Disappeared, eh? Well, well! You don't think he can have gone back to his old lay – back to the wrong 'uns and his old 'Vanishing Cracksman's' tricks, do you, sir?"

"No, I don't. No backslider about that chap, by James! He's not built that way. Last time I saw him he was out shopping with Miss Ailsa Lorne – the girl who redeemed him – and judging from their manner toward each other, I rather fancied – well, never mind! That's got nothing to do with you. Besides, I feel sure that if they had, Mrs. Narkom and I would have been invited. All he said was that he was going to take a holiday. He didn't say why, and he didn't say where. I wish to heaven I'd asked him. I could have kicked myself for not having done so when that she-devil of a Frenchwoman managed to slip the leash and get off scot free."

"Mean that party we nabbed in the house at Roehampton along with the Mauravanian baron who got up that Silver Snare fake, don't you, sir? Margot, the Queen of the Apaches. Or, at least, that's who you declared she was, I recollect."

"And that's who I still declare she was!" rapped in Narkom, testily, "and what I'll continue to say while there's a breath left

in me. I never actually saw the woman until that night, it is true, but Cleek told me she was Margot; and who should know better than he, when he was once her pal and partner? But it's one of the infernal drawbacks of British justice that a crook's word's as good as an officer's if it's not refuted by actual proof. The woman brought a dozen witnesses to prove that she was a respectable Austrian lady on a visit to her son in England; that the motor in which she was riding broke down before that Roehampton house about an hour before our descent upon it, and that she had merely been invited to step in and wait while the repairs were being attended to by her chauffeur. Of course such a chauffeur was forthcoming when she was brought up before the magistrate; and a garage-keeper was produced to back up his statement; so that when the Mauravanian prisoner 'confessed' from the dock that what the lady said was true, that settled it. *I* couldn't swear to her identity, and Cleek, who could, was gone – the Lord knows where; upon which the magistrate admitted the woman to bail and delivered her over to the custody of her solicitors pending my efforts to get somebody over from Paris to identify her. And no sooner is the vixen set at large than – presto! – away she goes, bag and baggage, out of the country, and not a man in England has seen hide nor hair of her since. Gad! if I could but have got word to Cleek at that time – just to put him on his guard against her. But I couldn't. I've no more idea than a child where the man went – not one."

"It's pretty safe odds to lay one's head against a brass farthing

as to where the woman went, though, I reckon," said Petrie, stroking his chin. "Bunked it back to Paris, I expect, sir, and made for her hole like any other fox. I hear them French 'tecs are as keen to get hold of her as we were, but she slips 'em like an eel. Can't lay hands on her, and couldn't swear to her identity if they did. Not one in a hundred of 'em's ever seen her to be sure of her, I'm told."

"No, not one. Even Cleek himself knows nothing of who and what she really is. He confessed that to me. Their knowledge of each other began when they threw in their lot together for the first time, and ceased when they parted. Yes, I suppose she did go back to Paris, Petrie – it would be her safest place; and there'd be rich pickings there for her and her crew just now. The city is *en fête*, you know."

"Yes, sir. King Ulric of Mauravania is there as the guest of the Republic. Funny time for a king to go visiting another nation, sir, isn't it, when there's a revolution threatening in his own? Dunno much about the ways of kings, Superintendent, but if there was a row coming up in *my* house, you can bet all you're worth I'd be mighty sure to stop at home."

"Diplomacy, Petrie, diplomacy! he may be safer where he is. Rumours are afloat that Prince What's-his-name, son and heir of the late Queen Karma, is not only still living, but has, during the present year, secretly visited Mauravania in person. I see by the papers that that ripping old royalist, Count Irma, is implicated in the revolutionary movement and that, by the king's orders, he has

been arrested and imprisoned in the Fort of Sulberga on a charge of sedition. Grand old johnny, that – I hope no harm comes to him. He was in England not so long ago. Came to consult Cleek about some business regarding a lost pearl, and I took no end of a fancy to him. Hope he pulls out all right; but if he doesn't – oh, well, we can't bother over other people's troubles – we've got enough of our own just now with these mysterious murders going on, and the newspapers hammering the Yard day in and day out. Gad! how I wish I knew how to get hold of Cleek – how I wish I did!"

"Can't you find somebody to put you on the lay, sir? some friend of his – somebody that's seen him, or maybe heard from him since you have?"

"Oh, don't talk rubbish!" snapped Narkom, with a short, derisive laugh. "Friends, indeed! What friends has he outside of myself? Who knows him any better than I know him – and what do I know of him, at that? Nothing – not where he comes from; not what his real name may be; not a living thing but that he chooses to call himself Hamilton Cleek and to fight in the interest of the law as strenuously as he once fought against it. And where will I find a man who has 'seen' him, as you suggest – or would know if he had seen him – when he has that amazing birth gift to fall back upon? *You* never saw his real face – never in all your life. *I* never saw it but twice, and even I – why, he might pass me in the street a dozen times a day and I'd never know him if I looked straight into his eyes. He'd come like a shot if he knew I

wanted him – gad, yes! But he doesn't; and there you are."

Imagination was never one of Petrie's strong points. His mind moved always along well-prepared grooves to time-honoured ends. It found one of those grooves and moved along it now.

"Why don't you advertise for him, then?" he suggested. "Put a Personal in the morning papers, sir. Chap like that's sure to read the news every day; and it's bound to come to his notice sooner or later. Or if it doesn't, why, people will get to knowing that the Yard's lost him and get to talking about it and maybe he'll learn of it that way."

Narkom looked at him. The suggestion was so bald, so painfully ordinary and commonplace, that, heretofore, it had never occurred to him. To associate Cleek's name with the banalities of the everyday Agony Column; to connect *him* with the appeals of the scullery and the methods of the raw amateur! The very outrageousness of the thing was its best passport to success.

"By James, I believe there's something in that!" he said, abruptly. "If you get people to talking… Well, it doesn't matter, so that he *hears*– so that he finds out I want him. You ring up the *Daily Mail* while I'm scratching off an ad. Tell 'em it's simply got to go in the morning's issue. I'll give it to them over the line myself in a minute."

He lurched over to his desk, drove a pen into the ink pot, and made such good haste in marshalling his straggling thoughts that he had the thing finished before Petrie had got farther than "Yes;

Scotland Yard. Hold the line, please; Superintendent Narkom wants to speak to you."

The Yard's requests are at all times treated with respect and courtesy by the controlling forces of the daily press, so it fell out that, late as the hour was, "space" was accorded, and, in the morning, half a dozen papers bore this notice prominently displayed:

"Cleek – Where are you? Urgently needed. Communicate at once. —*Maverick Narkom.*"

The expected came to pass; and the unexpected followed close upon its heels. The daily press, publishing the full account of the latest addition to the already long list of mysterious murders which, for a fortnight past, had been adding nervous terrors to the public mind, screamed afresh – as Narkom knew that it would – and went into paroxysms of the Reporters' Disease until the very paper was yellow with the froth of it. The afternoon editions were still worse – for, between breakfast and lunch time, yet another man had fallen victim to the mysterious assassin – and sheets pink and sheets green, sheets gray and sheets yellow were scattering panic from one end of London to the other. The police-detective system of the country was rotten! The Government should interfere – must interfere! It was a national disgrace that the foremost city of the civilized world should be terrorized in this appalling fashion and the author of the outrages remain undetected! Could anything be more appalling?

It could, and – it was! When night came and the evening

papers were supplanting the afternoon ones, that something "more appalling" – known hours before to the Yard itself – was glaring out on every bulletin and every front page in words like these:

LONDON'S REIGN OF TERROR

APPALLING ATROCITY IN

CLARGES STREET

SHOCKING DYNAMITE

OUTRAGE

Clarges Street! The old "magic" street of those "magic" old times of Cleek, and the Red Limousine, and the Riddles that were unriddled for the asking! Narkom grabbed the report the instant he heard that name and began to read it breathlessly.

It was the usual station advice ticked through to headquarters and deciphered by the operator there, and it ran tersely, thus:

"4:28 P. M. Attempt made by unknown parties to blow up house in Clarges Street, Piccadilly. Partially successful. Three persons injured and two killed. No clue to motive. Occupants, family from Essex. Only moved in two days ago. House been vacant for months previously. Formerly occupied by retired seafaring man named Capt. Horatio Burbage, who – "

Narkom read no farther. He flung the paper aside with a sort of mingled laugh and blub and collapsed into his chair with his eyes hidden in the crook of an upthrown arm, and the muscles of his mouth twitching.

"Now I know why he cleared out! Good old Cleek! Bully old Cleek!" he said to himself; and stopped suddenly, as though something had got into his throat and half choked him. But after a moment or two he jumped to his feet and began walking up and down the room, his face fairly glowing; and if he had put his thoughts into words they would have run like this:

"Margot's crew, of course. And he must have guessed that something of the sort would happen *some* time if he stopped there after that Silver Snare business at Roehampton – either from her lot or from the followers of that Mauravanian johnnie who was at the back of it. They were after him even in that little game, those two. I wonder why? What the dickens, when one comes to think of it, could have made the Prime Minister of Mauravania interest himself in an Apache trick to 'do in' an ex-cracksman? Gad! she flies high, sometimes, that Margot! Prime Minister of Mauravania! And the fool faced fifteen years hard to

do the thing and let her get off scot free! Faced it and – took it; and is taking it still, for the sake of helping her to wipe off an old score against a reformed criminal. Wonder if Cleek ever crossed *him* in something? Wonder if he, too, was on the 'crooked side' once, and wanted to make sure of its never being shown up? Oh, well, he got his medicine. And so, too, will this unknown murderer who's doing the secret killing in London, now that this Clarges Street affair is over. Bully old Cleek! Slipped 'em again! Had their second shot and missed you! Now you'll come out of hiding, old chap, and we shall have the good old times once more."

His eye fell upon the ever-ready telephone. He stopped short in his purposeless walking and nodded and smiled to it.

"We'll have you singing your old tune before long, my friend," he said, optimistically. "I know my man – gad, yes! He'll let no grass grow under *his* feet now that this thing's over. I shall hear soon – yes, by James! I shall."

His optimism was splendidly rewarded. Not, however, from the quarter nor in the manner he expected. It had but just gone half-past seven when a tap sounded, the door of his office swung inward, and the porter stepped into the room.

"Person wanting to speak with you, sir, in private," he announced. "Says it's about some Personal in the morning paper."

"Send him in – send him in at once!" rapped out Narkom excitedly. "Move sharp; and don't let anybody else in until I give

the word."

Then, as soon as the porter had disappeared, he crossed the room, twitched the thick curtains over the window, switched on the electric light, wheeled another big chair up beside his desk and, with face aglow, jerked open a drawer and got out a cigarette box which had not seen the light for weeks.

Quick as he was, the door opened and shut again before the lid of the box could be thrown back, and into the room stepped Cleek's henchman – Dollops.

"Hullo! You, is it, you blessed young monkey?" said Narkom gayly, as he looked up and saw the boy. "Knew I'd hear to-day – knew it, by James! Sent you for me, has he, eh? Is he coming himself or does he want me to go to him? Speak up, and – Good Lord! what's the matter with you? What's up? Anything wrong?"

Dollops had turned the colour of an under-baked biscuit and was looking at him with eyes of absolute despair.

"Sir," he said, moving quickly forward and speaking in the breathless manner of a spent runner – "Sir, I was a-hopin' it was a fake, and to hear you speak like that – Gawd's truth, guv'ner, you don't mean as it's real, sir, do you? That *you* don't know either?"

"Know? Know what?"

"Where he is – wot's become of him? Mr. Cleek, the guv'ner, sir. I made sure that you'd know if anybody would. That's wot made me come, sir. I'd 'a' gone off me bloomin' dot if I hadn't – after you a-puttin' in that Personal and him never a-turnin' up like he'd ort. Sir, do you mean to say as you don't know *where*

he is, and haven't seen him even yet?"

"No, I've not. Good Lord! haven't you?"

"No, sir. I aren't clapped eyes on him since he sent me off to the bloomin' seaside six months ago. All he told me when we come to part was that Miss Lorne was goin' out to India on a short visit to Cap'n and Mrs. 'Awksley – Lady Chepstow as was, sir – and that directly she was gone he'd be knockin' about for a time on his own, and I wasn't to worry over him. I haven't seen hide nor hair of him, sir, since that hour."

"Nor heard from him?" Narkom's voice was thick and the hand he laid on the chair-back hard shut.

"Oh, yes, sir, I've heard – I'd have gone off my bloomin' dot if I hadn't done *that*. Heard from him twice. Once when he wrote and gimme my orders about the new place he's took up the river – four weeks ago. The second time, last Friday, sir, when he wrote me the thing that's fetched me here – that's been tearin' the heart out of me ever since I heard at Charing Cross about wot's happened at Clarges Street, sir."

"And what was that?"

"Why, sir, he wrote that he'd jist remembered about some papers as he'd left behind the wainscot in his old den, and that he'd get the key and drop in at the old Clarges Street house on the way 'ome. Said he'd arrive in England either yesterday afternoon or this one, sir; but whichever it was, he'd wire me from Dover before he took the train. And he never done it, sir – my Gawd! he never done it in this world!"

"Good God!" Narkom flung out the words in a sort of panic, his lips twitching, his whole body shaking, his face like the face of a dead man.

"He never done it, I tell you!" pursued Dollops in an absolute tremble of fright. "I haven't never had a blessed line; and now this here awful thing has happened. And if he done what he said he was a-goin' to do – if he come to town and went to that house – "

If he said more, the clanging of a bell drowned it completely. Narkom had turned to his desk and was hammering furiously upon the call gong. A scurry of flying feet came up the outer passage, the door opened in a flash, and the porter was there. And behind him Lennard, the chauffeur, who guessed from that excited summons that there would be a call for *him*.

"The limousine – as quick as you can get her round!" said Narkom in the sharp staccato of excitement. "To the scene of the explosion in Clarges Street first, and if the bodies of the victims have been removed, then to the mortuary without an instant's delay."

He dashed into the inner room, grabbed his hat and coat down from the hook where they were hanging, and dashed back again like a man in a panic.

"Come on!" he said, beckoning to Dollops as he flung open the door and ran out into the passage. "If they've 'done him in' —*him!*– if they've 'got him' after all – Come on! come on!"

Dollops "came on" with a rush; and two minutes later the red limousine swung out into the roadway and took the distance

between Scotland Yard and Clarges Street at a mile-a-minute clip.

Arrival at the scene of the disaster elicited the fact that the remains – literally "remains," since they had been well-nigh blown to fragments – had, indeed, been removed to the mortuary; so thither Narkom and Dollops followed them, their fears being in no wise lightened by learning that the bodies were undeniably those of men. As the features of both victims were beyond any possibility of recognition, identification could, of course, be arrived at only through bodily marks; and Dollops's close association with Cleek rendered him particularly capable of speaking with authority regarding those of his master. It was, therefore, a source of unspeakable delight to both Narkom and himself, when, after close and minute examination of the remains, he was able to say, positively, "Sir, whatever's become of him, praise God, neither of these here two dead men is him, bless his heart!"

"So they didn't get him after all!" supplemented Narkom, laughing for the first time in hours. "Still, it cannot be doubted that whoever committed this outrage was after him, since the people who have suffered are complete strangers to the locality and had only just moved into the house. No doubt the person or persons who threw the bomb knew of Cleek's having at one time lived there as 'Captain Burbage' – Margot did, for one – and finding the house still occupied, and not knowing of his removal – why, there you are."

"Margot!" The name brought back all Dollops' banished fears. He switched round on the superintendent and laid a nervous clutch on his sleeve. "And Margot's 'lay' is Paris. Sir, I didn't tell you, did I, that it was from there the guv'ner wrote those two letters to me?"

"Cinnamon! From Paris?"

"Yes, sir. He didn't say from wot part of the city nor wot he was a-doin' there, anyways, but – my hat! listen here, sir. *They're* there – them Mauravanian johnnies – and the Apaches and Margot there, too, and you know how both lots has their knife into him. I dunno wot the Mauravanians is got against him, sir (he never tells nothin' to nobody, he don't), but most like it's summink he done to some of 'em that time he went out there about the lost pearl; but *they're* after him, and the Apaches is after him, and between the two!.. Guv'ner!" – his voice rose thin and shrill – "guv'ner, if one lot don't get him, the other may; and – sir – there's Apaches in London this very night. I know! I've seen 'em."

"Seen them? When? Where?"

"At Charing Cross station, sir, jist before I went to the Yard to see you. As I hadn't had no telegram from the guv'ner, like I was promised, I went there on the off chance, hopin' to meet him when the boat train come in. And there I see 'em, sir, a-loungin' round the platform where the Dover train goes out at nine to catch the night boat back to Calais, sir. I spotted 'em on the instant – from their walk, their way of carryin' of theirselves, their manner

of wearin' of their bloomin' hair. Laughin' among themselves they was and lookin' round at the entrance every now and then like as they was expectin' some one to come and join 'em; and I see, too, as they was a-goin' back to where they come from, 'cause they'd the return halves of their tickets in their hatbands. One of 'em, he buys a paper at the bookstall and sees summink in it as tickled him wonderful, for I see him go up to the others and point it out to 'em, and then the whole lot begins to larf like blessed hyenas. I spotted wot the paper was and the place on the page the blighter was a-pointin' at, so I went and bought one myself to see wot it was. Sir, it was that there Personal of yours. The minnit I read that, I makes a dash for a taxi, to go to you at once, sir, and jist as I does so, a newsboy runs by me with a bill on his chest tellin' about the explosion; and then, sir, I fair went off me dot."

They were back on the pavement, within sight of the limousine, when the boy said this. Narkom brought the car to his side with one excited word, and fairly wrenched open the door.

"To Charing Cross station – as fast as you can streak it!" he said, excitedly. "The last train for the night boat leaves at nine sharp. Catch it, if you rack the motor to pieces."

"Crumbs! A minute and a half!" commented Lennard, as he consulted the clock dial beside him; then, just waiting for Narkom and Dollops to jump into the vehicle, he brought her head round with a swing, threw back the clutch, and let her go full tilt.

But even the best of motors cannot accomplish the impossible. The gates were closed, the signal down, the last train already outside the station when they reached it, and not even the mandate of the law might hope to stay it or to call it back.

"Plenty of petrol?" Narkom faced round as he spoke and looked at Lennard.

"Plenty, sir."

"All right —*beat it!* The boat sails from Dover at eleven. I've got to catch it. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. But you could wire down and have her held over till we get there, Superintendent."

"Not for the world! She must sail on time; I must get aboard without being noticed – without some persons I'm following having the least cause for suspicion. Beat that train – do you hear me? —*beat* it! I want to get there and get aboard that boat before the others arrive. Do you want any further incentive than that? If so, here it is for you: Mr. Cleek's in Paris! Mr. Cleek's in danger!"

"Mr. Cleek? God's truth! Hop in sir, hop in! I'll have you there ahead of that train if I dash down the Admiralty Pier in flames from front to rear. Just let me get to the open road, sir, and I'll show you something to make you sit up."

He did. Once out of the track of all traffic, and with the lights of the city well at his back, he strapped his goggles tight, jerked his cap down to his eyebrows, and leaned over the wheel.

"For Mr. Cleek – do you hear?" he said, addressing the car as if it were a human being. "Now, then, show what you're made

of! There! Take your head! Now *go*, you vixen! GO!"

There was a sudden roar, a sudden leap; then the car shot forward as though all the gales of all the universe were sweeping it on, and the wild race to the coast began.

Narkom jerked down the blinds, turned on the light, and flung open the locker, as they pounded on.

"Dip in. Get something that can be made to fit you," he said to Dollops. "We can't risk any of those fellows identifying you as the chap who was hanging round the station to-night. Toss me over that wig – the gray one – in the far corner there. God knows what we're on the track of, but if it leads to Cleek I'll follow it to the end of time!" Then, lifting his voice until it sounded above the motor's roar, "Faster, Lennard, faster!" he called. "Give it to her! give it to her! We've got to beat that train if it kills us!"

They did beat it. The engine's light was not even in sight when the bright glare of the moon on the Channel's waters flashed up out of the darkness before them; nor was the sound of the train's coming even faintly audible as yet, when, a few minutes later, the limousine swung down the incline and came to a standstill within a stone's throw of the entrance to the pier, at whose extreme end the packet lay, with gangways down and fires up and her huge bulk rising and falling with the movements of the waves.

"Beat her, you see, sir," said Lennard, chuckling as he got down and opened the door for the superintendent to alight. "Better not go any nearer, sir, with the car. There's a chap down there standing by the gangplank and he seems interested in us

from the way he's watching. Jumped up like a shot and came down the gangplank the instant he heard us coming. Better do the rest of the journey afoot, sir, and make a pretence of paying me – as if I was a public taxi. What'll I do? Stop here until morning?"

"Yes. Put up at a garage; and if I don't return by the first boat, get back to town. Meantime, cut off somewhere and ring up the Yard. Tell 'em where I've gone. Now then, Dollops, come on!"

A moment later the limousine had swung off into the darkness and disappeared, and what might properly have been taken for a couple of English curates on their way to a Continental holiday moved down the long pier between the glimmering and inadequate lamps to the waiting boat. But long before they reached it the figure at the gangplank – the tall, erect figure of a man whom the most casual observer must have recognized as one who had known military training – had changed its alert attitude and was sauntering up and down as if, when they came nearer and the light allowed him to see what they were, he had lost all interest in them and their doings. Narkom gave the man a glance from the tail of his eye as they went up the gangplank and boarded the boat, and brief as that glance was, it was sufficient to assure him of two things: First, that the man was not only strikingly handsome but bore himself with an air which spoke of culture, birth, position; second, that he was a foreigner, with the fair hair and the slightly hooked nose which was so characteristic of the Mauravanians.

With Dollops at his side, Narkom slunk aft, where the lights

were less brilliant and the stern of the boat hung over the dark, still waters, and pausing there, turned and looked back at the waiting man.

A French sailor was moving past in the darkness. He stopped the man and spoke to him.

"Tell me," he said, slipping a shilling into the fellow's hand, "do you happen to know who that gentleman is, standing on the pier there?"

"Yes, m'sieur. He is equerry to his Majesty King Ulric of Mauravania. He has crossed with us frequently during his Majesty's sojourn in Paris."

"Gawd's truth, sir," whispered Dollops, plucking nervously at the superintendent's sleeve as the sailor, after touching his cap with his forefinger, passed on. "Apaches at one end and them Mauravanian johnnies at the other! I tell you they're a-workin' hand in hand for some reason – workin' against *him*!"

Narkom lifted a silencing hand and turned to move away where there would be less likelihood of anything they might say being overheard; for at that moment a voice had sounded and from a most unusual quarter. Unnoticed until now, a fisher's boat, which for some time had been nearing the shore, swept under the packet's stern and grazed along the stone front of the pier.

"Voila, m'sieur," said, in French, the man who sailed it. "Have I not kept my word and brought your excellency across in safety and with speed?"

"Yes," replied the passenger whom the fisher addressed. He

spoke in perfect French, and with the smoothness of a man of the better class. “You have done well indeed. Also it was better than waiting about at Calais for the morning boat. I can now catch the very first train to London. Fast is she? There is your money. Adieu!”

Then came the sound of some one leaving the boat and scrambling up the water stairs, and hard on the heels of it the first whistle of the coming train. Narkom, glancing round, saw a slouching, ill-clad fellow whose appearance was in distinct contrast with his voice and manner of speaking, come into view upon the summit of the pier. His complexion was sallow, his matted hair seemed to have gone for years uncombed; a Turkish fez, dirty and discoloured, was on his head, and over his arm hung several bits of tapestry and shining stuff which betokened his calling as that of a seller of Oriental draperies.

This much Narkom saw and would have gone on his way, giving the fellow no second thought, but that a curious thing happened. Moving away toward the footpath which led from the pier to the town, the pedler caught sight suddenly of the man standing at the gangplank; he halted abruptly, looked round to make sure that no one was watching, then, without more ado, turned round suddenly on his heel, walked straightway to the gangplank and boarded the boat. The Mauravanian took not the slightest heed of him, nor he of the Mauravanian. Afterward, when the train had arrived, Narkom thought he knew why. For the present he was merely puzzled to understand why this dirty,

greasy Oriental pedler who had been at the pains to cross the Channel in a fisher's boat should do so for the apparent purpose of merely going back on the packet to Calais.

By this time the train had arrived, the pier was alive with people, porters were running back and forth with luggage, and there was bustle and confusion everywhere. Narkom looked along the length of the vessel to the teeming gangway. The Mauravanian was still there, alert as before, his fixed eyes keenly watching.

A crowd came stringing along, bags and bundles done up in gaudy handkerchiefs in their hands, laughing, jostling, jabbering together in low-class French.

"Here they are, guv'ner – the Apaches!" said Dollops in a whisper. "That's the lot, sir. Keep your eye on them as they come aboard, and if they are with him – Crumbs! Not a sign; not a blessed one!" For the Apaches, stringing up the gangplank by twos and threes and coming within brushing distance of the waiting man, passed on as the Oriental pedler had passed on, taking no notice of him, nor he of them, nor yet of how, as they advanced, the pedler slouched forward and slipped into the thick of them.

"By James! one of them – that's what the fellow is!" said Narkom, as he observed this. "If during the voyage the Mauravanian speaks to one man of the lot – "

He stopped and sucked in his breath and let the rest of the sentence go by default. For of a sudden there had come into sight

upon the pier a dapper little French dandy, fuzzy of moustache, mincing of gait, with a flower in his buttonhole and a shining "topper" on his beautifully pomaded head; and it came upon Narkom with a shock of remembrance that he had seen this selfsame living fashion plate pass by Scotland Yard twice that very day!

Onward he came, this pretty monsieur, with his jaunty air and his lovely "wine-glass waist," onward, and up the gangway and aboard the packet; and there the Mauravanian still stood, looking out over the crowd and taking no more heed of him than he had taken of anybody else. But with the vanishing of this exquisite, to whom he had paid no heed, his alertness and his interest seemed somehow to evaporate; for he turned now and again to watch the sailors and the longshoremen at their several duties, and strolled leisurely aboard and stood lounging against the rail of the lower deck when the call of "All ashore that's going!" rang through the vessel's length, and was still lounging there when the packet cast off her mooring, and swinging her bows round in the direction of France, creamed her way out into the Channel and headed for Calais.

A wind, unnoticed in the safe shelter of the harbour, played boisterously across the chopping waves as the vessel forged outward, sending clouds of spray sweeping over the bows and along the decks, and such passengers as refrained from seeking the shelter of the saloon and smoke-room sought refuge by crowding aft.

"Come!" whispered Narkom, tapping Dollops' arm. "We can neither talk nor watch here with safety in this crowd. Let us go 'forrard.' Better a drenching in loneliness than shelter with a crowd like this. Come along!"

The boy obeyed without a murmur, following the larger and heavier built "curate" along the wet decks to the deserted bows, and finding safe retreat with him there in the dark shadow cast by a tarpaulin-covered lifeboat. From this safe shelter they could, by craning their necks, get a half view of the interior of the smoke-room through its hooked-back door; and their first glance in that direction pinned their interest, for the pretty "Monsieur" was there, smoking a cigarette and sipping now and again at a glass of absinthe which stood on a little round table at his elbow. But of the Mauravanian or the Apaches or of the Oriental pedler, there was neither sight nor sound, nor had there been since the vessel started.

"What do you make of it?" queried Narkom, when at the end of an hour the dim outlines of the French coast blurred the clear silver of the moonlit sky. "Have we come on a wild goose chase, do you think? What do you suppose has become of the Apaches and of the pedler chap?"

"Travellin' second class," said Dollops, after stealing out and making a round of the vessel and creeping back into the shadow of the lifeboat unseen. "Pallin' with 'em, he is, sir. Makin' a play of sellin' 'em things for their donahs – for the sake of appearances. One of 'em, he is; and if either that Frenchy or that

Mauravanian johnny is mixed up with them – lay low! Smeller to the ground, sir, and eyes and ears wide open! We'll know wot's wot now!"

For of a sudden the Mauravanian had come into view far down the wet and glistening promenade deck and was whistling a curious, lilting air as he strolled along past the open door of the smoke-room.

Just the mere twitch of "Monsieur's" head told when he heard that tune. He finished his absinthe, flung aside his cigarette, and strolled leisurely out upon the deck. The Mauravanian was at the after end of the promenade – a glance told him that. He set his face resolutely in the direction of the bows and sauntered leisurely along. He moved on quietly, until he came to the very end of the covered promenade where the curving front of the deckhouse looked out upon the spray-washed forward deck, then stopped and planted his back against it and stood silently waiting, not ten feet distant from where Narkom and Dollops crouched.

A minute later the Mauravanian, continuing what was to all appearances a lonely and aimless promenade round the vessel, came abreast of that spot and of him.

And then, the deluge!

"Monsieur" spoke out – guardedly, but in a clear, crisp tone that left no room for doubt upon *one* point, at least.

"Mon ami, it is done – it is accomplished," that crisp voice said. "You shall report that to his Majesty's ministers. Voila, it is done!"

"It is not done!" replied the Mauravanian, in a swift, biting, emphatic whisper. "You jump to conclusions too quickly. Here! take this. It is an evening paper. The thing was useless – he was not there!"

"Not there! Grande Dieu!"

"Sh-h! Take it – read it. I will see you when we land. Not here – it is too dangerous. Au revoir!"

Then he passed on and round the curve of the deckhouse to the promenade on the other side; and "Monsieur," with the paper hard shut in the grip of a tense hand, moved fleetly back toward the smoke-room.

But not unknown any longer.

"Gawd's truth – a woman!" gulped Dollops in a shaking voice.

"No, not a woman – a devil!" said Narkom through his teeth. "Margot, by James! Margot, herself! And what is he – what is Cleek? – that a king should enter into compact with a woman to kill him? Margot, dash her! Well, I'll have you now, my lady – yes, by James, I will!"

"Guv'ner! Gawd's truth, sir, where are you going?"

"To the operator in charge of the wireless – to send a message to the chief of the Calais police to meet me on arrival!" said Narkom in reply. "Stop where you are. Lay low! Wait for me. We'll land in a dozen minutes' time. I'll have that Jezebel and her confederates and I'll rout out Cleek and get him beyond the clutches of them if I tear up all France to do it."

"Gawd bless you, sir, Gawd bless you and forgive me!" said

Dollops with a lump in his throat and a mist in his eyes. "I said often you was a sosidge and a muff, sir, but you aren't – you're a man!"

Narkom did not hear. He was gone already – down the deck to the cabin of the wireless operator. In another moment he had passed in, shut the door behind him, and the Law at sea was talking to the Law ashore through the blue ether and across the moonlit waves.

It was ten minutes later. The message had gone its way and Narkom was back in the lifeboat's shadow again, and close on the bows the lamps of Calais pier shone yellow in the blue-and-silver darkness. On the deck below people were bustling about and making for the place where the gangplank was to be thrust out presently, and link boat and shore together. On the quay, customs officials were making ready for the coming inspection, porters were scuttling about in their blue smocks and peaked caps, and, back of all, the outlines of Calais Town loomed, shadowy and grim through the crowding gloom.

The loneliness of the upper deck offered its attractions to the Mauravanian and to Margot, and in the emptiness of it they met again – within earshot of the lifeboat where Narkom and the boy lay hidden – for one brief word before they went ashore.

"So, you have read: you understand how useless it was?" the Mauravanian said, joining her again at the deckhouse, where she stood with the crumpled newspaper in her hand. "His Majesty's purse cannot be lightened of all that promised sum for any such

bungle as this. Speak quickly; where may we go to talk in safety? I cannot risk it here – I will not risk it in the train. Must we wait until we reach Paris, mademoiselle? Or have you a lair of your own here?"

"I have 'lairs,' as you term them, in half the cities of France, Monsieur le Comte," she answered with a vicious little note of resentment in her voice. "And I do not work for nothing – no, not I! I paid for my adherence to his Majesty's Prime Minister and I intend to be paid for my services to his Majesty's self, even though I have this once failed. It must be settled, that question, at once and for all – now – to-night."

"I guessed it would be like that," he answered, with a jerk of his shoulders. "Where shall it be, then? Speak quickly. They are making the landing and I must not be seen talking with you after we go ashore. Where, then?"

"At the Inn of the Seven Sinners – on the Quai d'Lorme – a gunshot distant. Any cocher will take you there."

"Is it safe?"

"All my 'lairs' are safe, monsieur. It overhangs the water. And if strangers come, there is a trap with a bolt on the under side. One way: to the town and the sewers and forty other inns. The other: to a motor boat, always in readiness for instant use. You could choose for yourself should occasion come. You will not find the place shut – my 'lairs' never are. A password? No, there is none – for any but the Brotherhood. Nor will you need one. You remember old Marise of the 'Twisted Arm' in Paris? Well,

she serves at the Seven Sinners now. I have promoted Madame Serpice to the 'Twisted Arm'. She will know you, will Marise. Say to her I am coming shortly. She and her mates will raise the roof with joy, and – la! la! The gangway is out. They are calling all ashore. Look for me and my lads close on your heels when you arrive. Au revoir."

"Au revoir," he repeated, and slipping by went below and made his way ashore.

She waited that he might get well on his way – that none might by any possibility associate them – then turning, went down after him and out to the pier, where her crew were already forgathering; and when or how she passed the word to them that it was not Paris to-night but the Inn of the Seven Sinners, neither Narkom nor Dollops could decide, close as they came on after her, for she seemed to speak to no one.

"No Inn of the Seven Sinners for you to-night, my lady, if my friend M. Ducroix has attended to that wireless message properly," muttered Narkom as he followed her. "Look sharp, Dollops, and if you see a Sergeant de Ville let me know. They've no luggage, that lot, and, besides, they are natives, so they will pass the customs in a jiffy. Hullo! there goes that pedler chap – and without his fez or his draperies, b'gad! Through the customs like a flash, the bounder! And there go the others, too. And she after them – she, by James! God! Where are Ducroix and his men? Why aren't they here?" – looking vainly about for some sign of the Chief of Police. "I can't do anything without

him– here, on foreign soil. Why in heaven's name doesn't the man come?"

"Maybe he hasn't had time, guv'ner – maybe he wasn't on hand when the message arrived," hazarded Dollops. "It's not fifteen minutes all told since it was dispatched. So if – "

"There she goes! there she goes! Passed, and through the customs in a wink, the Jezebel!" interposed Narkom, in a fever of excitement, as he saw Margot go by the inspector at the door and walk out into the streets of the city. "Lord! if she slips me now – "

"She shan't!" cut in Dollops, jerking down his hat brim and turning up his collar. "Wait here till the cops come. I'll nip out after her and see where she goes. Like as not the cops'll know the place when you mention it; but if they don't – watch out for me; I'll come back and lead 'em."

Then he moved hurriedly forward, passed the inspector, and was gone in a twinkling.

For ten wretched minutes after he, too, had passed the customs and was at liberty to leave, Narkom paced up and down and fretted and fumed before a sound of clanking sabres caught his ear and, looking round, he saw M. Ducroix enter the place at the head of a detachment of police. He hurried to him and in a word made himself known.

"Ten million pardons, m'sieur; but I was absent when the message he shall be deliver," exclaimed Ducroix in broken English. "I shall come and shall bring my men as soon as he

shall be receive. M'sieur, who shall it be this great criminal you demand of me to arrest? Is he here?"

"No, no. A moment, Ducroix. Do you know a place called the Inn of the Seven Sinners?"

"Perfectly. It is but a stone's throw distant – on the Quai d'Lorme."

"Come with me to it, then. I'll make you the most envied man in France, Ducroix: I'll deliver into your hands that witch of the underworld, Margot, the Queen of the Apaches!"

Ducroix's face lit up like a face transfigured.

"M'sieur!" he cried. "That woman? You can give me that woman? You know her? You can recognize her? But, yes, I remember! You shall have her in your hands once in your own country, but she shall slip you, as she shall slip everybody!"

"She won't slip *you*, then, I promise you that!" said Narkom. "Reward and glory, both shall be yours. I have followed her across the channel, Ducroix. I know where she is to be found for a certainty. She is at the Inn of the Seven Sinners. Just take me there and I'll turn the Jezebel over to you."

Ducroix needed no urging. The prospect of such a capture made him fairly beside himself with delight. In twenty swift words he translated this glorious news to his men – setting them as wild with excitement as he was himself – then with a sharp, "Come, m'sieur!" he turned on his heel and led the breathless race for the goal.

Halfway down the narrow, ink-black street that led to the inn

they encountered Dollops pelting back at full speed.

"Come on, guv'ner, come on, all of you!" he broke out as he came abreast of them. "She's there – they're all there – kickin' up Meg's diversions, sir, and singin' and dancin' like mad. And, sir, he's there, too – the pedler chap! I see him come up and sneak in with the rest. Come on! This way, all of you."

If they had merely run before, they all but flew now; for this second assurance that Margot, the great and long-sought-for Margot, was actually within their reach served to spur every man to outdo himself; so that it was but a minute or two later when they came in sight of the inn and bore down upon it in a solid phalanx. And then – just then – when another minute would have settled everything – the demon of mischance chose to play them a scurvy trick.

All they knew of it was that an Apache coming out of the building for some purpose of his own looked up and saw them, then faced round and bent back in the doorway; that of a sudden a very tornado of music and laughter and singing and dancing rolled out into the night, and that when they came pounding up to the doorway, the fellow was lounging there serenely smoking; and, inside, his colleagues were holding a revel wild enough to wake the dead.

In the winking of an eye he was carried off his feet and swept on by this sudden inrush of the law; the door clashed open, the little slatted barrier beyond was knocked aside, and the police were pouring into the room and running headlong into a spinning

mass of wild dancers.

The band ceased suddenly as they appeared, the dancers cried out as if in a panic of alarm, and at Ducroix's commanding "Surrender in the name of the Law!" a fat woman behind the bar flung up her arms and voiced a despairing shriek.

"Soul of misfortune! for what, m'sieur – for what?" she cried. "It is no sin to laugh and dance. We break no law, my customers and I. What is it you want that you come in upon us like this?"

Ah, what indeed? Not anything that could be seen. A glance round the room showed nothing and no one but these suddenly disturbed dancers, and of Margot and the Mauravanian never a sign.

"M'sieur!" began Ducroix, turning to Narkom, whose despair was only too evident, and who, in company with Dollops, was rushing about the place pushing people here and there, looking behind them, looking in all the corners, and generally deporting themselves after the manner of a couple of hounds endeavouring to pick up a lost scent. "M'sieur, shall it be an error, then?"

Narkom did not answer. Of a sudden, however, he remembered what had been said of the trap and, pushing aside a group of girls standing over it, found it in the middle of the floor.

"Here it is – this is the way she got out!" he shouted. "Bolted, by James! bolted on the under side! Up with it, up with it – the Jezebel got out this way." But though Ducroix and Dollops aided him, and they pulled and tugged and tugged and pulled, they could not budge it one inch.

"M'sieur, no – what madness! He is not a trap – ? no, he is not a trap at all!" protested old Marise. "It is but a square where the floor broke and was mended! Mother of misfortune, it is nothing but that."

What response Narkom might have made was checked by a sudden discovery. Huddling in a corner, feigning a drunken sleep, he saw a man lying with his face hidden in his folded arms. It was the pedler. He pounced on the man and jerked up his head before the fellow could prevent it or could dream of what was about to happen.

"Here's one of them at least!" he cried, and fell to shaking him with all his force. "Here's one of Margot's pals, Ducroix. You shan't go empty-handed after all."

A cry of consternation fluttered through the gathering as he brought the man's face into view. Evidently they were past masters of the art of acting, these Apaches, for one might have sworn that every man and every woman of them was taken aback by the fellow's presence.

"Mother of Miracles! who shall the man be?" exclaimed Marise. "Messieurs, I know him not. I have not seen him in all my life before. Cochon, speak up! Who are you, that you come in like this and get a respectable widow in trouble, dog? Eh?"

The man made a motion first to his ears, then to his mouth, then fell to making movements in the sign language, but spoke never a word.

"La, la! he is a deaf mute, m'sieur," said Ducroix. "He hears

not and speaks not, poor unfortunate."

"Oh, doesn't he?" said Narkom with an ugly laugh. "He spoke well enough a couple of hours back, I promise you. My young friend here and I heard him when he paid off the fisherman who had carried him over to Dover just before he sneaked aboard the packet to come back with Margot and the Mauravanian."

The eyes of the Apaches flew to the man's face with a sudden keen interest which only they might understand; but he still stood, wagging his great head either drunkenly or idiotically, and pointing to ears and mouth.

"Lay hold of him – run him in!" said Narkom, whirling him across into the arms of a couple of stalwart Sergeants de Ville. "I'll go before the magistrate and lay a charge against him in the morning that will open your eyes when you hear it. One of a bloodthirsty, dynamiting crew, the dog! Lay fast hold of him! don't let him get away on your lives! God! to have lost that woman! to have lost her after all!"

It was a sore blow, certainly, but there was nothing to do but to grin and bear it; for to seek Margot at any of the inns which might communicate with the sewer trap, or to hunt for her and a motor boat on the dark water's surface, was in very truth like looking for a needle in a haystack, and quite as hopeless. He therefore, decided to go, for the rest of the night, to the nearest hotel; and waiting only to see the pedler carried away in safe custody, and promising to be on hand when he was brought up before the local magistrate in the morning, took Dollops by the

arm and dejectedly went his way.

The morning saw him living up to his promise; and long before the arrival of the magistrate or, indeed, before the night's harvest of prisoners was brought over from the lockup and thrust into the three little "detention rooms" below the court, he was there with Dollops and Ducroix, observing with wonder that groups of evil-looking fellows of the Apache breed were hanging round the building as he approached, and that later on others of the same kidney slipped in and took seats in the little courtroom and kept constantly whispering one to the other while they waited for the morning session to begin.

"Gawd's truth, guv'ner, look at 'em – the 'ole blessed place is alive with the bounders," whispered Dollops. "Wot do you think they are up to, sir? Makin' a rush and settin' the pedler free when he comes up before the Beak? There's twenty of 'em waitin' round the door if there's one."

Narkom made no reply. The arrival of the magistrate focussed all eyes on the bench and riveted his attention with the rest.

The proceedings opened with all the trivial cases first – the night's sweep of the dragnet: drunks and disorderlies, vagrants and pariahs. One by one these were brought in and paid their fines and went their way, unheeded; for this part of the morning's proceedings interested nobody, not even the Apaches. The list was dragged through monotonously; the last blear-eyed sot – a hideous, cadaverous, monkey-faced wretch whose brutal countenance sickened Narkom when he shambled up in his filthy

rags – had paid his fine, and gone his way, and there remained now but a case of attempted suicide to be disposed of before the serious cases began. This latter occupied the magistrate's time and attention for perhaps twenty minutes or so, then that, too, was disposed of; and then a voice was heard calling out for the unknown man arrested last night at the Inn of the Seven Sinners to be brought forward.

In an instant a ripple of excitement ran through the little court. The Apache fraternity sat up within and passed the word to the Apache fraternity without, and these stood at attention – close-lipped, dark-browed, eager, like human tigers waiting for the word to spring. Every eye was fixed on the door through which that pretended mute should be led in; but although others had come at the first call, he came not even at the second, and the magistrate had just issued an impatient command for the case to be called yet a third time, when there was a clatter of hasty footsteps and the keeper of the detention rooms burst into the court pale as a dead man and shaking in every nerve.

"M'sieur le Juge!" he cried out, extending his two arms. "Soul of Misfortunes, how shall I tell? He is not there – he is gone – he is escape, that unknown one. When I shall unlock the room and call for Jean Lamareau, the drunkard, at the case before the last, there shall come out of the dimness to me what I shall think is he and I shall bring him here and he shall be fine and dismissed. But, m'sieur, he shall not be Jean Lamareau after all! I shall go now and call for the unknown and I shall get no answer; I shall go

in and make of the place light, and there he shall be, that real Jean Lamareau – stripped of his clothes, choked to unconsciousness, alone on the floor, and the other shall have paid his fine and gone!"

A great cry went up, a wild confusion filled the court. The Apaches within rose and ran with the news to the Apaches without; and these, joining forces, scattered and ran through the streets in the direction the escaped prisoner had been seen to take.

But through it all Narkom sat there squeezing his hands together and laughing in little shaking gusts that had a heart throb wavering through them; for to him this could mean but one thing.

"Cleek!" he said, leaning down and shrilling a joyous whisper into Dollops' ear. "But one man in all the world could have done that thing – but one man in all the world would have dared. It was he – it was Cleek! God bless his bully soul!"

"Amen, sir," said Dollops, swallowing something; then he rose at Narkom's bidding and followed him outside.

A minute later a gamin brushing against them put out a grimy hand and said whiningly:

"Boulogne, messieurs. Quai des Anges. Third house back from the waterside; in time for the noon boat across to Folkestone. Give me two francs, please. The monsieur said you would if I said that to you when you came out."

The two francs were in his hand almost as he ceased speaking, and in less than a minute later a fiacre was whirling Narkom and

Dollops off to the railway station and the next outgoing train to Boulogne. It was still short of midday when they arrived at the Quai des Anges and made their way to the third house back from the waterside – a little tavern with a toy garden in front and a sort of bowered arcade behind – and there under an almond tree, with a cigarette between his fingers and a bunch of flowers in his buttonhole, they came upon *him* at last.

"Guv'ner! Oh, Gawd bless you, guv'ner, is it really you again?" said Dollops, rushing up to him like a girl to a lover.

"Yes, it is really I," he answered with one of his easy laughs. Then he rose and held out his hand as Narkom advanced; and for a moment or two they stood there palm in palm, saying not one word, making not one sound.

"Nearly did for me, my overzealous friend," said Cleek, after a time. "I could have kicked you when you turned up with that lot at the Seven Sinners. Another ten minutes and I'd have had that in my hands which would have compelled his Majesty of Mauravania to give Irma his liberty and to abdicate in his consort's favour. But you came, you dear old blunderer; and when I looked up and recognized you – well, let it pass! I was on my way back to London when I chanced to see Count Waldemar on watch beside the gangway of the Calais packet – he had slipped me, the hound, slipped me in Paris – and I saw my chance to run him down. Gad! it was a close squeak that, when you let those Apaches know that I had just crossed over from this side and had gone aboard the packet because I saw Waldemar. They guessed

then. I couldn't speak there, and I dared not speak in the court. They were there, on every hand – inside the building and out – waiting to knife me the instant they were sure. I had to get out – I had to get past them, and – voila."

He turned and laid an affectionate hand on Dollops' shoulder and laughed softly and pleasantly.

"New place all right, old chap? Garden doing well, and all my traps in shipshape order, eh?"

"Yes, sir, Gawd bless you, sir. Everything, sir, everything."

"Good lad! Then we'll be off to them. My holiday is over, Mr. Narkom, and I'm going back into harness again. You want me, I see, and I said I'd come if you did. Give me a few days' rest in old England, dear friend, and then – out with your riddles and I'm your man again."

CHAPTER I

"This will be it, I think, sir," said Lennard, bringing the limousine to a halt at the head of a branching lane, thick set with lime and chestnut trees between whose double wall of green one could catch a distant glimpse of the river, shining golden in the five o'clock light.

"Look! see! There's the sign post – 'To the Sleeping Mermaid' – over to the left there."

"Anything pinned to it or hanging on it?" Mr. Narkom spoke from the interior of the vehicle without making even the slightest movement toward alighting, merely glancing at a few memoranda scribbled on the back of a card whose reverse bore the words "Taverne Maladosie Quai des Anges, Boulogne," printed upon it in rather ornate script.

"A bit of rag, a scrap of newspaper, a fowl's feather – anything? Look sharp!"

"No, sir, not a thing of any sort that I can see from here. Shall I nip over and make sure?"

"Yes. Only don't give away the fact that you are examining it in case there should be anybody on the lookout. If you find the smallest thing – even a carpet tack – attached to the post, get back into your seat at once and cut off townward as fast as you can make the car travel."

"Right you are, sir," said Lennard, and forthwith did as he had

been bidden. In less than ninety seconds, however, he was back with word that the post's surface was as smooth as your hand and not a thing of any sort attached to it from top to bottom.

Narkom fetched a deep breath of relief at this news, tucked the card into his pocket, and got out immediately.

"Hang round the neighbourhood somewhere and keep your ears open in case I should have to give the signal sooner than I anticipate," he said; then twisted round on his heel, turned into the tree-bordered lane, and bore down in the direction of the river.

When still short, by thirty yards or so, of its flowered and willow-fringed brim, he came upon a quaint little diamond-paned, red-roofed, low-eaved house set far back from the shore, with a garden full of violets and primroses and flaunting crocuses in front of it, and a tangle of blossoming things crowding what once had been a bower-bordered bowling green in the rear.

"Queen Anne, for a ducat!" he commented as he looked at the place and took in every detail from the magpie in the old pointed-topped wicker cage hanging from a nail beside the doorway to the rudely carved figure of a mermaid over the jutting, flower-filled diamond-paned window of the bar parlour with its swinging sashes and its oak-beam sill, shoulder high from the green, sweet-smelling earth.

"How the dickens does he ferret out these places, I wonder? And what fool has put his money into a show like this in these days of advancement and enterprise? Buried away from the line

of traffic ashore and shut in by trees from the river. Gad! they can't do a pound's worth of business in a month at an out-of-the-way roost like this!"

Certainly, they were not doing much of it that day; for, as he passed through the taproom, he caught a glimpse of the landlady dozing in a deep chair by the window, and of the back of a by-no-means-smartly-dressed barmaid – who might have been stone deaf for all notice she took of his entrance – standing on a stool behind the bar dusting and polishing the woodwork of the shelves. The door of the bar parlour was open, and through it Narkom caught a glimpse of a bent-kneed, stoop-shouldered, doddering old man shuffling about, filling match-boxes, wiping ash trays, and carefully refolding the rumpled newspapers that lay on the centre table. That he was not the proprietor, merely a waiter, the towel over his arm, the shabby old dress coat, the baggy-kneed trousers would have been evidence enough without that added by the humble tasks he was performing.

"Poor devil! And at his age!" said Narkom to himself, as he noted the pale, hopeless-looking, time-worn face and the shuffling, time-bent body; then, moved by a sense of keen pity, he walked into the room and spoke gently to him.

"Tea for two, uncle – at a quarter-past five to the tick if you can manage it," he said, tossing the old man a shilling. "And say to the landlady that I'd like to have exclusive use of this room for an hour or two, so she can charge the loss to my account if she has to turn any other customers away."

"Thanky, sir. I'll attend to it at once, sir," replied the old fellow, pocketing the coin, and moving briskly away to give the order. In another minute he was back again, laying the cloth and setting out the dishes, while Narkom improved the time of waiting by straying round the room and looking at the old prints and cases of stuffed fishes that hung on the oak-panelled walls.

It still wanted a minute or so of being a quarter-past five when the old man bore in the tea tray itself and set it upon the waiting table; and, little custom though the place enjoyed, Narkom could not but compliment it upon its promptness and the inviting quality of the viands served.

"You may go," he said to the waiter, when the man at length bowed low and announced that all was ready; then, after a moment, turning round and finding him still shuffling about, "I say you may go!" he reiterated, a trifle sharply. "No, don't take the cosy off the teapot – leave it as it is. The gentleman I am expecting has not arrived yet, and – look here! will you have the goodness to let that cosy alone and to clear out when I tell you? By James! if you don't – Hullo! What the dickens was that?"

"That" was undoubtedly the tingle of a handful of gravel against the panes of the window.

"A sign that the coast is quite clear and that you have not been followed, dear friend," said a voice – Cleek's voice – in reply. "Shall we not sit down? I'm famishing." And as Narkom turned round on his heel – with the certainty that no one had entered the room since the door was closed and he himself before it – the tea

cosy was whipped off by a hand that no longer shook, the waiter's bent figure straightened, his pale, drawn features writhed, blent, settled into placid calmness and – the thing was done!

"By all that's wonderful – Cleek!" blurted out Narkom, delightedly, and lurched toward him.

"Sh-h-h! Gently, gently, my friend," he interposed, putting up a warning hand. "It is true Dollops has signalled that there is no one in the vicinity likely to hear, but although the maid is both deaf and dumb, recollect that Mrs. Condiment is neither; and I have no more wish for her to discover my real calling than I ever had."

"Mrs. Condiment?" repeated Narkom, sinking his voice, and speaking in a tone of agitation and amazement. "You don't mean to tell me that the old woman you employed as housekeeper when you lived in Clarges Street is here?"

"Certainly; she is the landlady. Her assistant is that same deaf and dumb maid-of-all-work who worked with her at the old house, and is sharing with her a sort of 'retirement' here. 'Captain Burbage' set the pair of them up in business here two days after his departure from Clarges Street and pays them a monthly wage sufficient to make up for any lack of 'custom.' All that they are bound to do is to allow a pensioner of the captain's – a poor old half-witted ex-waiter called Joseph – to come and go as he will and to gratify a whim for waiting upon people if he chooses to do so. What's that? No, the 'captain' does not live here. He and his henchman, Dollops, are supposed to be out of the country.

Mrs. Condiment does not know *where* he lives – nor will she ever be permitted to do so. You may, some day, perhaps – that is for the future to decide; but not at present, my dear friend; it is too risky."

"Why risky, old chap? Surely I can come and go in disguise as I did in the old days, Cleek? We managed secret visits all right then, remember."

"Yes – I know. But things have changed, Mr. Narkom. You may disguise yourself as cleverly as you please, but you can't disguise the red limousine. It is known and it will be followed; so, until you can get another of a totally different colour and appearance I'll ring you up each morning at the Yard and we can make our appointments over your private wire. For the present we must take no great risks. In the days that lie behind, dear friend, I had no 'tracker' to guard against but Margot, no enemies but her paltry crew to reckon with and to outwit. In these, I have many. They have brains, these new foes; they are rich, they are desperate, they are powerful; and behind them is the implacable hate and the malignant hand of – No matter! You wouldn't understand."

"I can make a devilish good guess, then," rapped in Narkom, a trifle testily, his vanity a little hurt by that final suggestion, and his mind harking back to the brief enlightening conversation between Margot and Count Waldemar that night on the spray-swept deck of the Channel packet. "Behind them is 'the implacable hate and the malignant hand' of the King of

Mauravania!"

"What utter rubbish!" Cleek's jeering laughter fairly stung, it was so full of pitying derision. "My friend, have you taken to reading penny novelettes of late? A thief-taker and a monarch! An ex-criminal and a king! I should have given you credit for more common sense."

"It was the King of Mauravania's equerry who directed that attempt to kill you by blowing up the house in Clarges Street."

"Very possibly. But that does not incriminate his royal master. Count Waldemar is not only equerry to King Ulric of Mauravania, but is also nephew to its ex-Prime Minister – the gentleman who is doing fifteen years' energetic labour for the British Government as a result of that attempt to trap me with his witless 'Silver Snare.'"

"Oh!" said Narkom, considerably crestfallen; then grasped at yet another straw with sudden, breathless eagerness. "But even then the head of the Mauravanian Government must have had some reason for wishing to 'wipe you out,'" he added, earnestly. "There could be no question of avenging an uncle's overthrow at that time. Cleek!" – his voice running thin and eager, his hand shutting suddenly upon his famous ally's arm – "Cleek, trust me! Won't you? Can't you? As God hears me, old chap, I'll respect it. Who are you? What are you, man?"

"Cleek," he made answer, calmly drawing out a chair and taking his seat at the table. "Cleek of Scotland Yard; Cleek of the Forty Faces – which you will. Who should know that better

than you whose helping hand has made me what I am?"

"Yes, but before, Cleek? What were you, who were you, in the days before?"

"The Vanishing Cracksman – a dog who would have gone on, no doubt, to a dog's end but for your kind hand and the dear eyes of Ailsa Lorne. Now give me my tea – I'm famishing – and after that we'll talk of this new riddle that needs unriddling for the honour of the Yard. Yes, thanks, two lumps, and just a mere dash of milk. Gad! It's good to be back in England, dear friend; it's good, it's good!"

CHAPTER II

"Five men, eh?" said Cleek, glancing up at Mr. Narkom, who for two or three minutes past had been giving him a sketchy outline of the case in hand. "A goodish many that. And all inside of the past six weeks, you say? No wonder the papers have been hammering the Yard, if, as you suggest, they were not accidental deaths. Sure they are not?"

"As sure as I am that I'm speaking to you at this minute. I had my doubts in the beginning – there seemed so little to connect the separate tragedies – but when case after case followed with exactly, or nearly exactly, the same details in every instance, one simply *had* to suspect foul play."

"Naturally. Even a donkey must know that there's food about if he smells thistles. Begin at the beginning, please. How did the affair start? When and where?"

"In the neighbourhood of Hampstead Heath at two o'clock in the morning. The constable on duty in the district came upon a man clad only in pajamas lying face downward under the wall surrounding a corner house – still warm but as dead as Queen Anne."

"In his pajamas, eh?" said Cleek, reaching for a fresh slice of toast. "Pretty clear evidence that that poor beggar's trouble, whatever it was, must have overtaken him in bed and that that bed was either in the vicinity of the spot where he was found,

or else the man had been carried in a closed vehicle to the place where the constable discovered him. A chap can't walk far in that kind of a get-up without attracting attention. And the body was warm, you say, when found. Hum-m! Any vehicle seen or heard in the vicinity of the spot just previously?"

"Not the ghost of one. The night was very still, and the constable must have heard if either cab, auto, carriage, or dray had passed in any direction whatsoever. He is positive that none did. Naturally, he thought, as you suggested just now, that the man must have come from some house in the neighbourhood. Investigation, however, proved that he did not – in short, that nobody could be found who had ever seen him before. Indeed, it is hardly likely that he could have been sleeping in any of the surrounding houses, for the neighbourhood is a very good one, and the man had the appearance of being a person of the labouring class."

"Any marks on the clothing or body?"

"Not one – beyond a tattooed heart on the left forearm, which caused the coroner to come to the conclusion later that the man had at some time been either a soldier or a sailor."

"Why?"

"The tattooing was evidently of foreign origin, he said, from the skilful manner in which it had been performed and the brilliant colour of the pigments used. Beyond that, the body bore no blemish. The man had not been stabbed, he had not been shot, and a post-mortem examination of the viscera proved

conclusively that he had not been poisoned. Neither had he been strangled, etherized, drowned, or bludgeoned, for the brain was in no way injured and the lungs were in a healthy condition. It was noticed, however, that the passages of the throat and nose were unduly red, and that there was a slightly distended condition of the bowels. This latter, however, was set down by the physicians as the natural condition following enteric, from which it was positive that the man had recently suffered. They attributed the slightly inflamed condition of the nasal passage and throat to his having either swallowed or snuffed up something – camphor or something of that sort – to allay the progress of the enteric, although even by analysis they were unable to discover a trace of camphor or indeed of any foreign substance whatsoever. The body was held in the public mortuary for several days awaiting identification, but nobody came forward to claim it; so it was eventually buried in the usual way and a verdict of 'Found Dead' entered in the archives against the number given to it. The matter had excited but little comment on the part of the public or the newspapers, and would never have been recalled but for the astonishing fact that just two nights after the burial a second man was found under precisely similar circumstances – only that this second man was clad in boots, undervest, and trousers. He was found in a sort of gulley (down which, from the marks on the side, he had evidently fallen), behind some furze bushes at a far and little frequented part of the heath. An autopsy established the fact that this man had died in a precisely similar manner to the first,

but, what was more startling, that he had evidently pre-deceased that first victim by several days; for, when found, decomposition had already set in."

"Hum-m-m! I see!" said Cleek, arching his brows and stirring his tea rather slowly. "A clear case of what Paddy would term 'the second fellow being the first one.' Go on, please. What next?"

"Oh, a perfect fever of excitement, of course; for it now became evident that a crime had been committed in both instances; and the Press made a great to-do over it. Within the course of the next fortnight it was positively frothing, throwing panic into the public mind by the wholesale, and whipping up people's fears like a madman stirring a salad; for, by that time a third body had been found – under some furze bushes, upward of half a mile distant from where the second had been discovered. Like the first body, this one was wearing night clothes; but it was in an even more advanced state of decomposition than the second, showing that the man must have died long before either of them!"

"Oho!" said Cleek, with a strong rising inflection. "What a blundering idiot! Our assassin is evidently a raw hand at the game, Mr. Narkom, and not, as I had begun to fancy, either a professional or the appointed agent of some secret society following a process of extermination against certain marked men. Neither the secret agent nor the professional bandit would be guilty of the extreme folly of operating several times in the same locality, be assured; and here is this muddling amateur letting

himself be lulled into a feeling of security by the failure of anybody to discover the bodies of the first victims, and then going at it again in the same place and the same way. For it is fair to assume, I daresay, that the fourth man was discovered under precisely similar circumstances to the first."

"Not exactly – very like them, but not exactly like them, Cleek. As a matter of fact, he was alive when found. I didn't credit the report when I first heard it (a newspaper man brought it to me), and sent Petrie to investigate the truth of it."

"Why didn't you believe the report?"

"Because it seemed so wildly improbable. And, besides, they had hatched up so many yarns, those newspaper reporters, since the affair began. According to this fellow, a tramp, crossing the heath in quest of a place to sleep, had been frightened half out of his wits by hearing a voice which *he* described as being like the voice of some one strangling, calling out in the darkness, 'Sapphires! Sapphires!' and a few moments later, when, as the reporter said, the tramp told him, he was scuttling away in a panic, he came suddenly upon the figure of a man who was dancing round and round like a whirling dervish, with his mouth wide open, his tongue hanging out, and the forefinger of each hand stuck in his nostril as if – "

"What's that? What's that?" Cleek's voice flicked in like the crack of a whip. "Good God! Dancing round in circles? His mouth open? His tongue hanging out? His fingers thrust into his nostrils? Was that what you said?"

"Yes. Why? Do you see anything promising in that fact, Cleek? It seems to excite you."

"Never mind about that. Stick to the subject. Was that report found to be correct, then?"

"In a measure, yes. Only, of course, one had to take the tramp's assertion that the man had been calling out 'Sapphires' upon faith, for when discovered and conveyed to the hospital, he was in a comatose condition and beyond making any sound at all. He died, without recovering consciousness, about twenty minutes after Petrie's arrival; and, although the doctors performed a post-mortem immediately after the breath had left his body, there was not a trace of anything to be found that differed in the slightest from the other cases. Heart, brain, liver, lungs – all were in a healthy condition, and beyond the reddened throat and the signs of recent enteric there was nothing abnormal."

"But his lips – his lips, Mr. Narkom? Was there a smear of earth upon them? Was he lying on his face when found? Were his fingers clenched in the grass? Did it look as if he had been biting the soil?"

"Yes," replied Narkom. "As a matter of fact there was both earth and grass in the mouth. The doctors removed it carefully, examined it under the microscope, even subjected it to chemical test in the hope of discovering some foreign substance mixed with the mass, but failed utterly to discover a single trace."

"Of course, of course! It would be gone like a breath, gone

like a passing cloud if it were that."

"If it were what? Cleek, my dear fellow! Good Lord! you don't mean to tell me you've got a clue?"

"Perhaps – perhaps – don't worry me!" he made answer testily; then rose and walked over to the window and stood there alone, pinching his chin between his thumb and forefinger and staring fixedly at things beyond. After a time, however:

"Yes, it could be that – assuredly it could be that," he said in a low-sunk voice, as if answering a query. "But in England – in this far land. In Malay, yes; in Ceylon, certainly. And sapphires, too – sapphires! Hum-m-m! They mine them there. One man had travelled in foreign parts and been tattooed by natives. So that the selfsame country – Just so! Of course! Of course! But who? But how? And in England?"

His voice dropped off. He stood for a minute or so in absolute silence, drumming noiselessly with his finger tips upon the window-sill, then turned abruptly and spoke to Mr. Narkom.

"Go on with the story, please," he said. "There was a fifth man, I believe. When and how did his end come?"

"Like the others, for the most part, but with one startling difference: instead of being undressed, nothing had been removed but his collar and boots. He was killed on the night I started with Dollops for the Continent in quest of you; and his was the second body that was not actually found *on* the heath. Like the first man, he was found under the wall which surrounds Lemmingham House."

"Lemmingham House? What's that – a hotel or a private residence?"

"A private residence, owned and occupied by Mr. James Barrington-Edwards."

"Any relation to that Captain Barrington-Edwards who was cashiered from the army some twenty years ago for 'conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman'?"

"The same man!"

"Oho! the same man, eh?" Cleek's tone was full of sudden interest. "Stop a bit! Let me put my thinking box into operation. Captain Barrington-Edwards – hum-m-m! That little military unpleasantness happened out in Ceylon, did it not? The gentleman had a fancy for conjuring tricks, I believe; even went so far as to study them firsthand under the tutelage of native fakirs, and was subsequently caught cheating at cards. That's the man, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Narkom, "that's the man. I'll have something startling to tell you in connection with him presently, but not in connection with that card-cheating scandal. He always swore that he was innocent of that. In fact, that it was a put-up job by one of the other officers for the sake of ruining him."

"Yes, I know – they all say that. It's the only thing they can say."

"Still, I always believed him, Cleek. He's been a pretty straightforward man in all my dealings with him, and I've had several. Besides which, he is highly respected these days. Then,

too, there's the fact that the fellow he said put up the job against him for the sake of blackening him in the eyes of his sweetheart, eventually married the girl, so it does look rather fishy. However, although it ruined Barrington-Edwards for the time being, and embittered him so that he never married, he certainly had the satisfaction of knowing that the fellow who had caused this trouble turned out an absolute rotter, spent all his wife's money and brought her down to absolute beggary, whereas, if she'd stuck to Barrington-Edwards she'd have been a wealthy woman indeed, to-day. He's worth half a million at the least calculation."

"How's that? Somebody die and leave him a fortune?"

"No. He had a little of his own. Speculated, while he was in the East, in precious stones and land which he had reason to believe likely to produce them; succeeded beyond his wildest hopes, and is to-day head of the firm of Barrington-Edwards, Morpeth & Firmin, the biggest dealers in precious stones that Hatton Garden can boast of."

"Oho!" said Cleek. "I see! I see!" and screwed round on his heel and looked out of the window again. Then, after a moment: "And Mr. Barrington-Edwards lives in the neighbourhood of Hampstead Heath, does he?" he asked quite calmly. "Alone?"

"No. With his nephew and heir, young Mr. Archer Blaine, a dead sister's only child. As a matter of fact, it was Mr. Archer Blaine himself who discovered the body of the fifth victim. Coming home at a quarter to one from a visit to an old college friend, he found the man lying stone dead in the shadow of the

wall surrounding Lemmingham House, and, of course, lost no time in dashing indoors for a police whistle and summoning the constable on point duty in the district. The body was at once given in charge of a hastily summoned detachment from the Yard and conveyed to the Hampstead mortuary, where it still lies awaiting identification."

"Been photographed?"

"Not as yet. Of course it will be – as were the other four – prior to the time of burial should nobody turn up to claim it. But in this instance we have great hopes that identification *will* take place on the strength of a marked peculiarity. The man is web-footed and – "

"The man is *what*?" rapped in Cleek excitedly.

"Web-footed," repeated Narkom. "The several toes are attached one to the other by a thin membrane, after the manner of a duck's feet; and on the left foot there is a peculiar horny protuberance like – "

"Like a rudimentary sixth toe!" interrupted Cleek, fairly flinging the eager query at him. "It is, eh? Well, by the Eternal! I once knew a fellow – years ago, in the Far East – whose feet were malformed like that; and if by any possibility – Stop a bit! A word more. Is that man a big fellow – broad shouldered, muscular, and about forty or forty-five years of age?"

"You've described him to a T, dear chap. There is, however, a certain other peculiarity which you have not mentioned, though that, of course, maybe a recent acquirement. The palm of the

right hand – ”

“Wait a bit! Wait a bit!” interposed Cleek, a trifle irritably. He had swung away from the window and was now walking up and down the room with short nervous steps, his chin pinched up between his thumb and forefinger, his brows knotted, and his eyes fixed upon the floor.

“Saffragam – Jaffna – Trincomalee! In all three of them – in all three!” he said, putting his running thoughts into muttered words. “And now a dead man sticks his fingers in his nostrils and talks of sapphires. Sapphires, eh? And the Saffragam district stuck thick with them as spangles on a Nautch girl’s veil. The Bareva for a ducat! The Bareva Reef or I’m a Dutchman! And Barrington-Edwards was in that with the rest. So was Peabody; so was Miles; and so, too, were Lieutenant Edgburn and the Spaniard, Juan Alvarez. Eight of them, b’gad – eight! And I was ass enough to forget, idiot enough not to catch the connection until I heard again of Jim Peabody’s web foot! But wait! Stop – there should be another marked foot if this is indeed a clue to the riddle, and so – ”

He stopped short in his restless pacing and faced round on Mr. Narkom.

“Tell me something,” he said in a sharp staccato. “The four other dead men – did any among them have an injured foot – the left or the right, I forget which – from which all toes but the big one had been torn off by a crocodile’s bite, so that in life the fellow must have limped a little when he walked? Did any of the

dead men bear a mark like that?"

"No," said Narkom. "The feet of all the others were normal in every particular."

"Hum-m-m! That's a bit of a setback. And I am either on the wrong track or Alvarez is still alive. What's that? Oh, it doesn't matter; a mere fancy of mine, that's all. Now let us get back to our mutton, please. You were going to tell me something about the right hand of the man with the web foot. What was it?"

"The palm bore certain curious hieroglyphics traced upon it in bright purple."

"Hieroglyphics, eh? That doesn't look quite so promising," said Cleek in a disappointed tone. "It is quite possible that there may be more than one web-footed man in the world, so of course – Hum-m-m! What were these hieroglyphics, Mr. Narkom? Can you describe them?"

"I can do better, my dear chap," replied the superintendent, dipping into an inner pocket and bringing forth a brown leather case. "I took an accurate tracing of them from the dead hand this morning, and – there you are. That's what's on his palm, Cleek, close to the base of the forefinger running diagonally across it."

Cleek took the slip of tracing paper and carried it to the window, for the twilight was deepening and the room was filling with shadows. In the middle of the thin, transparent sheet was traced this:

He turned it up and down, he held it to the light and studied it for a moment or two in perplexed silence, then of a sudden he faced round, and Narkom could see that his eyes were shining and that the curious one-sided smile, peculiar unto him, was looping up his cheek.

"My friend," he said, answering the eager query in the superintendent's look, "this is yet another vindication of Poe's theory that things least hidden are best hidden, and that the most complex mysteries are those which are based on the simplest principles. With your permission, I'll keep this" – tucking the tracing into his pocket – "and afterward I will go to the mortuary and inspect the original. Meantime, I will go so far as to tell you that I know the motive for these murders, I know the means, and if you will give me forty-eight hours to solve the riddle, at the end of that time I'll know the man. I will even go farther and tell you the names of the victims; and all on the evidence of your neat little tracing. The web-footed man was one, James Peabody, a farrier, at one time attached to the Blue Cavalry at Trincomalee, Ceylon. Another was Joseph Miles, an Irishman, bitten early with the 'wanderlust' which takes men everywhere, and in making rolling stones of them, suffers them to gather no moss. Still another – and probably, from the tattoo mark on his arm, the first victim found – was Thomas Hart, ablebodied

seaman, formerly in service on the P & O line; the remaining two were Alexander McCurdy, a Scotchman, and T. Jenkins Quegg, a Yankee. The latter, however, was a naturalized Englishman, and both were privates in her late Majesty's army and honourably discharged."

"Cleek, my dear fellow, are you a magician?" said Narkom, sinking into a chair, overcome.

"Oh, no, my friend, merely a man with a memory, that's all; and I happen to remember a curious little 'pool' that was made up of eight men. Five of them are dead. The other three are Juan Alvarez, a Spaniard, that Lieutenant Edgburn who married and beggared the girl Captain Barrington-Edwards lost when he was disgraced, and last of all the ex-Captain Barrington-Edwards himself. Gently, gently, my friend. Don't excite yourself. All these murders have been committed with a definite purpose in view, with a devil's instrument, and for the devil's own stake – riches. Those riches, Mr. Narkom, were to come in the shape of precious stones, the glorious sapphires of Ceylon. And five of the eight men who were to reap the harvest of them died mysteriously in the vicinity of Lemmingham House."

"Cleek! My hat!" Narkom sprang up as he spoke, and then sat down again in a sort of panic. "And he – Barrington-Edwards, the man that lives there —*deals* in precious stones. Then that man – "

"Gently, my friend, gently – don't bang away at the first rabbit that bolts out of the hole – it may be a wee one and you'll lose the buck that follows. *Two* men live in that house, remember;

Mr. Archer Blaine is Mr. Barrington-Edwards' heir as well as his nephew and – who knows?"

CHAPTER III

"Cinnamon! what a corroboration – what a horrible corroboration! Cleek, you knock the last prop from under me; you make certain a thing that I thought was only a woman's wild imaginings," said Narkom, getting up suddenly, all a-tremble with excitement. "Good heavens! to have Miss Valmond's story corroborated in this dreadful way."

"Miss Valmond? Who's she? Any relation to that Miss Rose Valmond whose name one sees in the papers so frequently in connection with gifts to Catholic Orphanages and Foundling Homes?"

"The same lady," replied Narkom. "Her charities are numberless, her life a psalm. I think she has done more good in her simple, undemonstrative way than half the guilds and missions in London. She has an independent fortune, and lives, in company with an invalid and almost imbecile mother, and a brother who is, I am told, studying for the priesthood, in a beautiful home surrounded by splendid grounds, the walls of which separate her garden from that of Lemmingham House."

"Ah, I see. Then she is a neighbour of Barrington-Edwards?"

"Yes. From the back windows of her residence one can look into the grounds of his. That is how – Cleek!" Mr. Narkom's voice shook with agitation – "You will remember I said, a little time back, that I would have something startling to tell you in

connection with Barrington-Edwards – something that was not connected with that old army scandal? If it had not been for the high character of my informant; if it had been any other woman in all England I should have thought she was suffering from nerves – fancying things as the result of an overwrought mind sent into a state of hysteria through all those abominable crimes in the neighbourhood; but when it was she, when it was Miss Valmond – "

"Oho!" said Cleek, screwing round suddenly. "Then Miss Valmond told you something with regard to Barrington-Edwards?"

"Yes – a horrible something. She came to me this morning looking as I hope I shall never see a good woman look again – as if she had been tortured to the last limit of human endurance. She had been fighting a silent battle for weeks and weeks she said, but her conscience would not let her keep the appalling secret any longer, neither would her duty to Heaven. Wakened in the dead of night by a sense of oppression, she had gone to her window to open it for air, and, looking down by chance into the garden of Lemmingham House, she had seen a man come rushing out of the rear door of Barrington-Edwards' place in his pajamas, closely followed by another, whom she believed to be Barrington-Edwards himself, and she had seen that man unlock the door in the side wall and push the poor wretch out into the road where he was afterward found by the constable."

"By Jupiter!"

"Ah, you may be moved when you connect that circumstance with what you have yourself unearthed. But there is worse to come. Unable to overcome a frightful fascination which drew her night after night to that window, she saw that same thing happen again to the fourth, and finally, the fifth man – the web-footed one – and that last time she saw the face of the pursuer quite plainly. It *was* Barrington-Edwards!"

"Sure of that, was she?"

"Absolutely. It was the positive certainty it was he that drove her at last to speak!"

Cleek made no reply, no comment; merely screwed round on his heel and took to pacing the floor again. After a minute however:

"Mr. Narkom," he said halting abruptly. "I suppose all my old duds are still in the locker of the limousine, aren't they? Good! I thought so. Give Lennard the signal, will you? I must risk the old car in an emergency like this. Take me first to the cable office, please; then to the mortuary, and afterward to Miss Valmond's home. I hate to torture her further, poor girl, but I must get all the facts of this, first hand."

He did. The limousine was summoned at once, and inside of an hour it set him down (looking the very picture of a solicitor's clerk) at the cable office, then picked up and set him down at the Hampstead mortuary, this time, making so good a counterpart of Petrie that even Hammond, who was on guard beside the dead man, said "Hullo, Pete, that you? Thought you was off duty to-

day," as he came in with the superintendent.

"Jim Peabody fast enough, Mr. Narkom," commented Cleek, when they were left together beside the dead man. "Changed, of course, in all the years, but still poor old Jim. Good-hearted, honest, but illiterate. Could barely more than write his name, and even that without a capital, poor chap. Let me look at the hand. A violet smudge on the top of the thumb as well as those marks on the palm, I see. Hum-m-m! Any letters or writing of any sort in the pockets when found? None, eh? That old bone-handled pocket knife there his? Yes, I'd like to look at it. Open it, please. Thanks. I thought so, I thought so. Those the socks he had on? Poor wretch! Down to that at last, eh? – down to that! Let me have one of them for a day or so, will you? and – yes – the photographs of the other four, please. Thanks very much. No, that's all. Now then, to call on Miss Valmond, if you don't mind. Right you are. Let her go, Lennard. Down with the blinds and open with the locker again, Mr. Narkom, and we'll 'dig' Mr. George Headland out of his two-months' old grave." And at exactly ten minutes after eight o'clock, Mr. George Headland *was* 'dug up' and was standing with Mr. Narkom in Rose Valmond's house listening to Rose Valmond's story from her own lips, and saying to himself, the while, that here surely was that often talked-of, seldom-seen creature, a woman with an angel's face.

How it distressed her, to tell again this story which might take away a human life, was manifest from the trembling of her sweet

voice, the painful twitching of her tender mouth, and the tears that rose so readily to her soft eyes.

"Oh, Mr. Headland, I can hardly reconcile myself to having done it even yet," she said pathetically. "I do not know this Mr. Barrington-Edwards but by sight, and it seems such a horrible thing to rise up against a stranger like that. But I couldn't keep it any longer; I felt that to do so would be equivalent to sharing his guilt, and the thought that if I kept silent I might possibly be paving the way to the sacrifice of other innocent lives almost drove me out of my mind."

"I can quite understand your feelings, Miss Valmond," said Cleek, touched to the very heart by the deep distress of her. "But may I say I think you have done right? I never yet knew Heaven to be anything but tender to those who do their duty, and you certainly have done yours – to yourself, to your fellow creatures, and to God!"

Before she could make any response to this, footsteps sounded from the outer passage, and a deep, rich, masculine voice said, "Rose, Rose dear, I am ready now," and almost in the same moment a tall, well-set-up man in priestly clothing crossed the threshold and entered the room. He stopped short as he saw the others and made a hasty apology.

"Oh, pardon me," he said. "I did not know that you had visitors, dear, otherwise – Eh, what? Mr. Narkom, is it not?"

"Yes, Mr. Valmond," replied the superintendent, holding out a welcoming hand. "It is I, and this is my friend and assistant,

Mr. George Headland. We have just been talking with your sister over her trying experience."

"Terrible – terrible is the proper word, Mr. Narkom. Like you, I never heard of it until to-day. It shocked me to the very soul, you may believe. Delighted to meet you, Mr. Headland. A new disciple, eh, Mr. Narkom? Another follower in the footsteps of the great Cleek? By the way, I see you have lost touch with that amazing man. I saw your advertisement in the paper the other day. Any clue to his whereabouts as yet?"

"Not the slightest!"

"Ah, that's too bad. From what I have heard of him he would have made short work of this present case had he been available. But pray pardon me if I rush off, my time is very limited. Rose, dear, I am going to visit Father Burns this evening and shall stop at the orphanage on the way, so if you have the customary parcel for the children – "

"It is upstairs, in my oratory, dear," she interposed. "Come with me – if the gentlemen will excuse us for a moment – and I will get it for you."

"May we not all go up, Miss Valmond?" interposed Cleek. "I should like, if you do not mind, to get a view of the garden of Lemmingham House from the window where you were standing that night, and to have you explain the positions of the two men if you will."

"Yes, certainly – come, by all means," she replied, and led the way forthwith. They had scarcely gone halfway down the

passage to the staircase, however, when they came abreast of the open doorway of a room, dimly lit by a shaded lamp, wherein an elderly woman sat huddled up in a deep chair, with her shaking head bowed over hands that moved restlessly and aimlessly – after the uneasy manner of an idiot's – and the shape of whose face could be but faintly seen through the veil of white hair that fell loosely over it.

Cleek had barely time to recall Narkom's statement regarding the semi-imbecile mother, when Miss Valmond gave a little cry of wonder and ran into the room.

"Why, mother!" she said in her gentle way, "whatever are you doing down here, dearest? I thought you were still asleep in the oratory. When did you come down?"

The imbecile merely mumbled and muttered, and shook her nodding head, neither answering nor taking any notice whatsoever.

"It is one of her bad nights," explained Miss Valmond, as she came out and rejoined them. "We can do nothing with her when she is like this. Horace, you will have to come home earlier than usual to-night and help me to get her to bed." Then she went on, leading the way upstairs, until they came at length to a sort of sanctuary where Madonna faces looked down from sombre niches, and wax lights burnt with a scented flame on a draped and cushioned prie dieu. Here Miss Valmond, who was in the lead, went in, and, taking a paper-wrapped parcel from beside the little altar, came back and put it in her brother's hand and

sent him on his way.

"Was it from there you saw the occurrence, Miss Valmond?" asked Cleek, looking past her into "the dim religious light" of the sanctuary.

"Oh, no," she made reply. "From the window of my bedroom, just on the other side of the wall. In here, look, see!" And she opened a door to the right and led them in, touching a key that flashed an electric lamp into radiance and illuminated the entire room.

It was a large room furnished in dull oak and dark green after the stately, sombre style of a Gothic chapel, and at one end there was a curtained recess leading to a large bow window. At the other there was a sort of altar banked high with white flowers, and at the side there was a huge canopied bed over the head of which hung an immense crucifix fastened to the wall that backed upon the oratory. It was a majestic thing, that crucifix, richly carved and exquisitely designed. Cleek went nearer and looked at it, his artistic eye captured by the beauty of it; and Miss Valmond, noting his interest, smiled.

"My brother brought me that from Rome," she said. "Is it not divine, Mr. Headland?"

"Yes," he said. "But you must be more careful of it, I fear, Miss Valmond. Is it not chipping? Look! Isn't this a piece of it?" He bent and picked a tiny curled sliver of wood from the narrow space between the two down-filled pillows of the bed, holding it out to her upon his palm. But, of a sudden, he smiled, lifted

the sliver to his nose, smelt it, and cast it away. “The laugh is on me, I fear – it’s only a cedar paring from a lead pencil. And now, please, I’d like to investigate the window.”

She led him to it at once, explaining where she stood on the eventful night; where she had seen the two figures pass, and where was the wall door through which the dying man had been thrust.

“I wish I might see that door clearer,” said Cleek; for night had fallen and the moon was not yet up. “Don’t happen to have such a thing as a telescope or an opera glass, do you, Miss Valmond?”

“My brother has a pair of field glasses downstairs in his room. Shall I run and fetch them for you?”

“I’d be very grateful if you would,” said Cleek; and a moment after she had gone. “Run down and get my sketching materials out of the locker, will you, Mr. Narkom?” he added. “I want to make a diagram of that house and garden.” Then he sat down on the window-seat and for five whole minutes was alone.

The field glasses and the sketching materials were brought, the garden door examined and the diagram made, Miss Valmond and Narkom standing by and watching eagerly the whole proceeding.

“That’s all!” said Cleek, after a time, brushing the charcoal dust from his fingers, and snapping the elastic band over the sketch book. “I know my man at last, Mr. Narkom. Give me until ten o’clock to-morrow night, and then, if Miss Valmond will let us in here again, I’ll capture Barrington-Edwards red-handed.”

“You are sure of him, then?”

"As sure as I am that I'm alive. I'll lay a trap that will catch him. I promise you that. So if Miss Valmond will let us in here again – "

"Yes, Mr. Headland, I will."

"Good! Then let us say at ten o'clock to-morrow night – here in this room; you, I, your brother, Mr. Narkom – all concerned!" said Cleek. "At ten to the tick, remember. Now come along, Mr. Narkom, and let me be about weaving the snare that shall pull this Mr. Barrington-Edwards to the scaffold." Speaking, he bowed to Miss Valmond, and taking Mr. Narkom's arm, passed out and went down the stairs to prepare for the last great act of tragedy.

CHAPTER IV

At ten to the tick on the following night, he had said, and at ten to the tick he was there – the old red limousine whirling him up to the door in company with Mr. Narkom, there to be admitted by Miss Valmond's brother.

"My dear Mr. Headland, I have been on thorns ever since I heard," said he. "I hope and pray it is right, this assistance we are giving. But tell me, please – have you succeeded in your plans? Are you sure they will not fail?"

"To both questions, yes, Mr. Valmond. We'll have our man to-night. Now, if you please, where is your sister?"

"Upstairs – in her own room – with my mother. We tried to get the mater to bed, but she is very fractious to-night and will not let Rose out of her sight for a single instant. But she will not hamper your plans, I'm sure. Come quickly, please – this way." Here he led them on and up until they stood in Miss Valmond's bedroom and in Miss Valmond's presence again. She was there by the window, her imbecile mother sitting at her feet with her face in her daughter's lap, that daughter's solicitous hand gently stroking her tumbled hair, and no light but that of the moon through the broad window illuminating the hushed and stately room.

"I keep my word, you see, Miss Valmond," said Cleek, as he entered. "And in five minutes' time if you watch from that

window you all shall see a thing that will amaze you."

"You have run the wretched man down, then, Mr. Headland?"

"Yes – to the last ditch, to the wall itself," he answered, making room for her brother to get by him and make a place for himself at the window. "Oh, it's a pretty little game he's been playing, that gentleman, and it dates back twenty years ago when he was kicked out of his regiment in Ceylon."

"In Ceylon! I – er – God bless my soul, was he ever in Ceylon, Mr. Headland?"

"Yes, Mr. Valmond, he was. It was at a time when there was what you might call a sapphire fever raging there, and precious stones were being unearthed in every unheard-of quarter. He got the fever with the rest, but he hadn't much money, so when he fell in with a lot of fellows who had heard of a Cingalese, one Bareva Singh, who had a reef to sell in the Saffragam district, they made a pool between them and bought the blessed thing, calling it after the man they had purchased it from, the Bareva Reef, setting out like a party of donkeys to mine it for themselves, and expecting to pull out sapphires by the bucketful."

"Dear me, dear me, how very extraordinary! Of course they didn't? Or – did they?"

"No, they didn't. A month's work convinced them that the ground was as empty of treasure as an eggshell, so they abandoned it, separated, and went their several ways. A few months ago, however, it was discovered that if they had had the implements to mine deeper, their dream would have been

realized, for the reef was a perfect bed of sapphires – and eight men held an equal share in it. The scheme, then, was to get rid of these men, secretly, one by one; for one – perhaps two men – to get the deeds held by the others; to pretend that they had been purchased from the original owners, and to prevent by murder those original owners from – "

He stopped suddenly and switched round. Miss Valmond had risen and so had her mother. He was on the pair of them like a leaping cat; there was a sharp click-click, a snarl, and a scream, and one end of a handcuff was on the wrist of each.

"Got you, Miss Rosie Edgburn! Got you, Señor Juan Alvarez!" he rapped out sharply; then in a louder tone, as the Reverend Horace made a bolt for the door: "Stop him, nab him, Mr. Narkom! Quick! Played sir, played. Come in, Petrie; come in, Hammond. Gentlemen, here they are, all three of them: Lieutenant Eric Edgburn, his daughter Rose, and Señor Juan Alvarez, the three brute beasts who sent five men to their death for the sake of a lode of sapphires and the devil's lust for gain!"

"It's a lie!" flung out the girl who had been known as Rose Valmond.

"Oh, no, it's not, you vixen! You loathsome creature that prostituted holy things and made a shield of religion to carry on a vampire's deeds. Look here, you beast of blasphemy: I know the secret of this," he said, and walked over and laid his hand on the crucifix at the head of the bed. "Petrie! round into the oratory with you. There's a nob at the side of the prayer desk – press it

when I shout. Oh, no, Miss Edgburn; no, I shan't dance circles nor put my fingers into my nose, nor bite the dust and die. Look how I dare it all. Now Petrie, *now*!"

And lo! as he spoke, out of the nostrils of the figure on the cross there rushed downward two streams of white vapour which beat upon the pillows and upon him, smothering both in white dust.

"Face powder, Miss Edgburn, only face powder from your own little case over there," he said. "I removed the devil's dust last night when I was in this room alone."

She made him no reply – only, like a cornered wretch, screamed out and fainted.

"Mr. Narkom, you have seen the method of administering the thing which caused the death of those five men; it is now only fair that you should know what that thing was," he said, turning to the superintendent. "It is known by two names – Devil's Dust and Dust of Death, and both suit it well. It is the fine, feathery powder that grows on the young shoots of the bamboo tree – a favourite method of secret killing with the natives of the Malay Peninsula and those of Madagascar, the Philippines and Ceylon. When blown into the nostrils of a living creature it produces first an awful agony of suffocation, a feeling as though the brain is coming down and exuding from the nostrils, then delirium, during which the victim invariably falls on his face and bites the earth; then comes death. Death without a trace, my friend, for the hellish dust all but evaporates, and the slight sediment that

remains is carried out of the system by the spasm of enteric it produces. That is the riddle's solution. As for the rest, those men were lured here by letters – from Alvarez – telling them of the reef's great fortune, of the necessity for coming at once and bringing their deeds with them, and impressing upon them the possibility of being defrauded if they breathed one word to a mortal soul about their leaving or why. They came, they were invited to spend the night and to sleep upon that accursed bed, and – the devil's dust did the rest. I traced that out through poor Jim Peabody's sock. It was one of the blue yarn kind that are given to the inmates of workhouses. I traced him through that; and the others through the photographs. Each had been known to have received a letter from London, and each had in turn vanished without a word. Poor chaps! Poor unhappy chaps! Let us hope, dear friend, that they have found 'the Place of Sapphires' after all."

CHAPTER V

"How did I come to suspect the girl?" said Cleek, answering Narkom's query, as they swung off through the darkness in the red limousine, leaving Edgburn and his confederates in the hands of the police. "Well, as a matter of fact, I did not suspect her at all, in the beginning – her saintly reputation saved her from any such thing as that. It was only when her father came in that I knew. And later, I knew even better – when I saw that pretended imbecile sitting there in that room; for the blundering fool had been ass enough to kick off his slippers and sit there in his stocking feet, and I spotted the Alvarez foot on the instant. Still, I didn't know but what the girl herself might be an innocent victim – a sort of dove in a vulture's nest – and it was not until I found that scrap of wood from a sharpened lead pencil that I began to doubt her. It was only when I promised that Barrington-Edwards should be trapped, that I actually knew. The light that flamed in her eyes in spite of her at that would have made an idiot understand. What's that? What should I suspect from the finding of that scrap of pencil? My dear Mr. Narkom, carry your mind back to that moment when I found the stain on poor Jim Peabody's thumb, and then examined the blade of his pocket knife. The marks on the latter showed clearly that the man had sharpened a pencil with it – and, of course, with the point of that pencil against the top of his thumb. By the peculiar bronze-like

shine of the streaks, and the small particles of dust adhering to the knife blade, I felt persuaded that the pencil was an indelible one – in short, one of those which write a faint, blackish-lilac hue which, on the application of moisture, turns to a vivid and indelible purple. The moisture induced by the act of thrusting his forefingers up his nostrils to allay the horrible sensation of the brain descending, which that hellish powder produces, together with the perspiration which comes with intense agony, had made such a change in the smears his thumb and forefinger bore, and left no room for doubt that at the time he was smitten he had either just begun or just concluded writing something with an indelible pencil which he had but recently sharpened. Poor wretch! he of all the lot had some one belonging to him that was still living – his poor old mother. It is very fair to suppose that, finding the Alvarez place so lavishly furnished, and having hopes that great riches were yet to be his, he sat down on that bed and began to write a few lines in his illiterate way to that mother before wholly undressing and getting between the sheets. The mark on his palm is a clear proof that when the powder suddenly descended upon him he involuntarily closed his hand on that letter and the perspiration transferred to his flesh the shape of the scrawl upon which it rested. Pardon? How did I know through that scrawl that I was really on the track, and that it was the Bareva Reef that was at the bottom of the whole game? My dear Mr. Narkom, I won't insult your intelligence by explaining that. All you have to do is to turn that tracing upside down and

look *through* it – or at it in a mirror – and you'll have the answer for yourself. What's that? The parcel the girl gave Edgburn to carry out on the pretext of taking it to an orphanage? Oh, that was how they were slowly getting rid of the victims' clothes. Cutting them up into little pieces and throwing them into the river, I suppose, or if not – "

He stopped suddenly, his ear caught by a warning sound; then turned in his seat and glanced through the little window at the back of the limousine.

"I thought as much," he said, half aloud; then leaned forward, caught up the pipe of the speaking tube, and signalled Lennard. "Look sharp – taxi following us!" he said. "Put on a sudden spurt – that chap will increase speed to keep pace with us – then pull up sharp and let the other fellow's impetus carry him by before he can help himself. Out with the light, Mr. Narkom – out with it quick!"

Both Lennard and his master followed instructions. Of a sudden the lights flicked out, the car leapt forward with a bound, then pulled up with a jerk that shook it from end to end. In that moment the taxi in the rear whizzed by them, and Narkom, leaning forward to look as it flashed past, saw seated within it the figure of Count Waldemar of Mauravania.

"By James! Did you see that, Cleek?" he cried, and switched round and made a grab for Cleek's arm.

But Cleek was not there. His seat was empty, and the door beside it was swinging ajar.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" exclaimed the superintendent, fairly carried out of himself – for, even in his old Vanishing Cracksman's days, when he had slipped the leash and eluded the police so often, the man had not made a more adroit, more silent, more successful getaway than this. "Of all the astonishing – ! Gad, an eel's a fool to him for slipping out of tight places. When did he go, I wonder, and where?"

Never very strong on matters of detail, here curiosity tricked him into absolute indiscretion. Sliding along the seat to the swinging door he thrust it open and leaned out into the darkness, for a purpose so evident that he who ran might read. That one who ran *did*, he had good reason to understand in the next instant, for, of a sudden, the taxi in advance checked its wild flight, swung round with a noisy scroo-op, and pelted back until the two vehicles stood cheek by jowl, so to speak, and the glare of its headlights was pouring full force upon Mr. Narkom and into the interior of the red limousine.

"Here! Dash your infernal impudence," began he, blinking up at the driver through a glare which prevented him seeing that the taxicab's leather blinds had been discreetly pulled down, and its interior rendered quite invisible; but before he could add so much as another word to his protest the chauffeur's voice broke in with a blandness and an accent which told its own story.

"Dix mille pardons, m'sieur," it commenced, then pulled itself up as if the owner of it had suddenly recollected himself – and added abruptly in a farcical attempt to imitate the jargon of the

fast-disappearing London cabby. “Keep of the ’air on, ole coq! Only wantin’ to arsk of the question civile. Lost my bloomin’ way. Put a cove on to the short cut to the ’Igh Street will yer, like a blessed Christian? I dunno where I are.”

Mr. Narkom was not suffered to make reply. Before he had more than grasped the fact that the speaker was undeniably a Frenchman, Lennard – out of the range of that dazzling light – had made the discovery that he was yet more undeniably a Frenchman of that class from which the Apaches are recruited, and stepped into the breach with astonishing adroitness.

“Oh, that’s the trouble, is it?” he interposed. “My hat! Why, of course we’ll put you on the way. Wot’s more, we’ll take you along and show you – won’t we, guv’ner, eh? – so as you won’t go astray till you gets there. ’Eads in and door shut, Superintendent,” bringing the limousine around until it pointed in the same direction as the taxicab. “Now then, straight ahead, and foller yer nose, Jules; we’ll be rubbin’ shoulders with you the whole blessed way. And as the Dook of Wellington said to Napoleon Bonaparte, ‘None of your larks, you blighter – you’re a-comin’ along with me!’”

That he was, was a condition of affairs so inevitable that the chauffeur made no attempt to evade it; merely put on speed and headed straight for the distant High Street for the purpose of getting rid of his escort as soon as possible; and Lennard, putting on speed, likewise, and keeping pace with him, ran him neck and neck, until the heath was left far and away behind, the darkness

gave place to a glitter of street lamps, the lonely roads to populous thoroughfares, and the way was left clear for Cleek to get off unfollowed and unmolested.

CHAPTER VI

Screened by that darkness, and close sheltered by the matted gorse which fringed and dotted the expanse of the nearby heath, he had been an interested witness to the entire proceeding.

"Played, my lad, played!" he commented, putting his thoughts into mumbled words of laughing approval, as Lennard, taking the taxicab under guard, escorted it and its occupants out of the immediate neighbourhood; then, excessive caution prompting him to quell even this little ebullition, he shut up like an oyster and neither spoke, nor moved, nor made any sound until the two vehicles were represented by nothing but a purring noise dwindling away into the distance.

When that time came, however, he rose, and facing the heath, forged out across its mist-wrapped breadth with that long, swinging, soldierly stride peculiar unto him, his forehead puckered with troubled thought, his jaw clamped, and his lips compressed until his mouth seemed nothing more than a bleak slit gashed in a gray, unpleasant-looking mask.

But after a while the night and the time and the place worked their own spell, and the troubled look dropped away; the dull eyes lighted, the grim features softened, and the curious crooked smile that was Nature's birth-gift to him broke down the rigid lines of the "bleak slit" and looped up one corner of his mouth.

It was magic ground, this heath – a place thick set as the Caves

of Manheur with the Sapphires of Memory – and to a nature such as his these things could not but appeal.

Here Dollops had come into his life – a starveling, an outcast; derelict even in the very morning time of youth – a bit of human wreckage that another ten minutes would have seen stranded forever upon the reefs of crime.

Here, too – on that selfsame night, when the devil had been cheated, and the boy had gone, and they two stood alone together in the mist and darkness – he had first laid aside the mask of respectability and told Ailsa Lorne the truth about himself! Of his Apache times – of his Vanishing Cracksman's days – and, in the telling, had watched the light die out of her dear eyes and dread of him darken them, when she knew.

But not for always, thank God! For, in later days – when Time had lessened the shock, when she came to know him better, when the threads of their two lives had become more closely woven, and the hope had grown to be something more than a mere possibility…

He laughed aloud, remembering, and with a sudden rush of animal spirits twitched off his hat, flung it up and caught it as it fell, after the manner of a happy boy.

God, what a world – what a glorious, glorious world! All things were possible in it if a man but walked straight and knew how to wait.

Well, please God, a part, at least, of *his* long waiting would be over in another month. *She* would be back in England then – her

long visit to the Hawksleys ended and nothing before her now but the pleasant excitement of trousseau days. For the coming autumn would see the final act of restitution made, the last Vanishing Cracksman debt paid, to the uttermost farthing; and when that time came… He flung up his hat again and shouted from sheer excess of joy, and forged on through the mist and darkness whistling.

His way lay across the great common to the Vale of Health district, and thence down a slanting road and a sloping street to the Hampstead Heath Station of the Tube Railway, and he covered the distance to such good effect that half-past eleven found him "down under," swaying to the rhythmic movement of an electric train and arrowing through the earth at a lively clip.

Ten minutes later he changed over to yet another underground system, swung on for half an hour or so through gloom and bad air and the musty smell of a damp tunnel before the drop of the land and the rise of the roadbed carried the train out into the open and the air came fresh and sweet and pure, as God made it, over field and flood and dewy garden spaces; and away to the west a prickle of lights on a quiet river told where the stars mirrored themselves in the glass of Father Thames.

At a toy station in the hush and loneliness of the pleasant country ways his long ride came to an end at last, and he swung off into the balm and fragrance of the night to face a two-mile walk along quiet, shadow-filled lanes and over wet wastes of young bracken to a wee little house in the heart of a green

wilderness, with a high-walled, old-world garden surrounding it, and, in the far background, a gloom of woodland smeared in darker purple against the purple darkness of the sky.

No light shone out from the house to greet him – no light could come from behind that screening wall, unless it were one set in an upper window – yet he was certain the place was not deserted; for, as he came up out of the darkness, catlike of tread and catlike of ear, he was willing to swear that he could catch the sound of some one moving about restlessly in the shadow of that high, brick wall – and the experiences of the night made him cautious of things that moved in darkness.

He stopped short, and remained absolutely still for half a minute, then, stooping, swished his hand through the bracken in excellent imitation of a small animal running, and shrilled out a note that was uncannily like the death squeal of a stoat-caught rabbit.

"Gawd's truth, guv'ner, is it you at last, sir? And me never seein' nor hearin' a blessed thing!" spoke a voice in answer, from the wall's foot; then a latch clicked and, as Cleek rose to his feet, a garden door swung inward, a rectangle of light shone in the darkness, and silhouetted against it stood Dollops.

"What are you doing out here at this time of night, you young monkey? Don't you know it's almost one o'clock?" said Cleek, as he went forward and joined the boy.

"Don't I know it, says you? Don't I *just*!" he gave back. "There aren't a minute since the night come on that I haven't counted,

sir – not a bloomin' one; and if you hadn't turned up just as you did – Well, let that pass, as the Suffragette said when she heaved 'arf a brick through the shop window. Gawd's truth, guv'ner, do you realise that you've been gone since yesterday afternoon and I haven't heard a word from you in all that time?"

"Well, what of that? It's not the first time by dozens that I've done the same thing. Why should it worry you at this late day? Look here, my young man, you're not developing 'nerves' are you? Because, if you are – Turn round and let's have a look at you! Why, you are as pale as a ghost, you young beggar, and shaking like a leaf. Anything wrong with you, old chap?"

"Not as I knows of," returned Dollops, making a brave attempt to smile and be his old happy-go-lucky, whimsical self, albeit he wasn't carrying it off quite successfully, for there was a droop to his smile and a sort of whimper underlying his voice, and Cleek's keen eyes saw that his hand groped about blindly in its effort to find the fastenings of the garden door.

"Leastwise, nothing as matters now that you are here, sir. And I *am* glad yer back, guv'ner – Lawd, yuss! 'Nothin' like company to buck you up,' as the bull said when he tossed the tinker; so of course – "

"Here! You let those fastenings alone. I'll attend to them!" rapped in Cleek's voice with a curious note of alarm in it, as he moved briskly forward and barred and locked the wall door. "If I didn't know that eating, not drinking, was your particular failing – "

Here he stopped, his half-uttered comment cut into by a bleating cry, and he screwed round to face a startling situation. For there was Dollops, leaning heavily against a flowering almond tree, his face like a dead face for colour, and his fingers clawing frantically at the lower part of his waistcoat, doubling and twisting in the throes of an internal convulsion.

The gravelled pathway gave forth two sharp scrunches, and Cleek was just in time to catch him as he lurched forward and sprawled heavily against him. The man's arms closed instinctively about the twisting, sweat-drenched, helpless shape, and with great haste and infinite tenderness gathered it up and carried it into the house; but he had scarcely more than laid the boy upon a sofa and lit the lamp of the small apartment which served them as a general living-room, when all the agony of uncertainty which beset his mind regarding the genesis of this terrifying attack vanished in a sudden rush of enlightenment.

All that was left of a bounteous and strikingly diversified afternoon tea still littered the small round dining table, and there, on one plate, lay the shells of two crabs, on another, the remains of a large rhubarb tart, on a third, the skins of five bananas leaning coquettishly up against the lid of an open pickle jar, and hard by there was a pint tumbler with the white blur of milk dimming it.

"Good Lord! The young anaconda!" blurted out Cleek, as he stood and stared at this appalling array. "No wonder, no wonder!" Then he turned round on his heel, looked at the writhing and

moaning boy, and in a sudden fever of doing, peeled off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and made a bolt for the kitchen stove, the hot-water kettle, and the medicine chest.

The result of Master Dollops' little gastronomic experiment scarcely needs to be recorded. It is sufficient to say that he had the time of his life that night; that he kept Cleek busy every minute for the next twenty-four hours wringing out flannels in hot water and dosing him with homely remedies, and that when he finally came through the siege was as limp as a wet newspaper and as feeble as a good many dry ones.

"What you need to pull yourself together is a change, you reckless young ostrich – a week's roughing it in the open country by field and stream, and as many miles as possible from so much as the odour of a pastry cook's shop," said Cleek, patting him gently upon the shoulder. "A nice sort of assistant you are – keeping a man out of his bed for twenty-four hours, with his heart in his mouth and his hair on end, you young beggar. Now, now, now! None of your blubbing! Sit tight while I run down and make some gruel for you. After that I'll nip out and 'phone through to the Yard and tell Mr. Narkom to have somebody look up a caravan that can be hired, and we'll be off for a week's 'gypsying' in Yorkshire, old chap."

He did – coming back later with a piece of surprising news. For it just so happened that the idea of a week's holiday-making, a week's rambling about the green lanes, the broad moors, and through the wild gorges of the West Riding, and living the simple

life in a caravan, appealed to Mr. Maverick Narkom as being the most desirable thing in the world at that moment, and he made haste to ask Cleek's permission to share the holiday with him. As nothing could have been more to his great ally's liking, the matter was settled forthwith. A caravan was hired by telegram to Sheffield, and at ten the next morning the little party turned its back upon London and fared forth to the pleasant country lands, the charm of laughing waters, and the magic that hides in trees.

For five days they led an absolutely idyllic life; loafing in green wildernesses and sleeping in the shadow of whispering woods; and this getting back to nature proved as much of a tonic to the two men as to the boy himself – refreshing both mind and body, putting red blood into their veins, and breathing the breath of God into their nostrils.

Having amply provisioned the caravan before starting, they went no nearer to any human habitation than they were obliged to do in passing from one district to another; and one day was so exact a pattern of the next that its history might have stood for them all: up with the dawn and the birds and into woodland pool or tree-shaded river; then gathering fuel and making a fire and cooking breakfast; then washing the utensils, harnessing the horses, and moving on again – sometimes Cleek driving, sometimes Narkom, sometimes the boy – stopping when they were hungry to prepare lunch just as they had prepared breakfast, then forging on again until they found some tree-hedged dell or bosky wood where they might spend the night, crooned to sleep

by the wind in the leaves, and watched over by the sentinel stars.

So they had spent the major part of the week, and so they might have spent it all, but that chance chose to thrust them suddenly out of idleness into activity, and to bring them – here, in this Arcadia – face to face again with the evils of mankind and the harsh duty of the law.

It had gone nine o'clock on that fifth night when a curious thing happened: they had halted for the night by the banks of a shallow, chattering stream which flowed through a wayside spinney, beyond whose clustering treetops they had seen, before the light failed, the castellated top of a distant tower and, farther afield, the weathercock on an uplifting church spire; they had supped and were enjoying their ease – the two men sprawling at full length on the ground enjoying a comfortable smoke, while Dollops, with a mouth harmonica, was doing "Knocked 'Em in the Old Kent Road," his back against a tree, his eyes upturned in ecstasy, his long legs stretched out upon the turf, and his feet crossed one over the other – and all about them was peace; all the sordid, money-grubbing, crime-stained world seemed millions of miles away, when, of a sudden, there came a swift rush of bodies – trampling on dead leaves and brushing against live ones – then a voice cried out commandingly, "Surrender yourselves in the name of the king!" and scrambling to a sitting position, they looked up to find themselves confronted by a constable, a gamekeeper, and two farm labourers – the one with drawn truncheon and the other three with cocked guns.

CHAPTER VII

"Hullo, I say!" began Mr. Narkom, in amazement. "Why, what the dickens – " But he was suffered to get no farther.

"You mind your P's and Q's! I warn you that anything you say will be used against you!" interjected sharply and authoritatively the voice of the constable. "Hawkins, you and Marlow keep close guard over these chaps while me and Mr. Simpkins looks round for the animal. I said it would be the work of gypsies, didn't I now, Mr. Simpkins?" addressing the gamekeeper. "Come on and let's have a look for the beast. Keep eyes peeled and gun at full cock, Mr. Simpkins, and give un both barrels if un makes to spring at us. This be a sharp capture, Mr. Simpkins – what?"

"Aye, but un seems to take it uncommon cool, Mr. Nippers – one of 'em's larfiin' fit to bust hisself!" replied the gamekeeper as Cleek slapped both thighs, and throwing back his head, voiced an appreciative guffaw. "Un doan't look much loike gypsies either from t' little as Ah can see of 'em in this tomfool loight. Wait a bit till Ah scoop up an armful o' leaves and throw 'em on the embers o' fire yon."

He did so forthwith; and the moment the dry leaves fell on the remnants of the fire which the caravanners had used to cook their evening meal there was a gush of aromatic smoke, a sudden puff, and then a broad ribbon of light rushed upward and dispelled every trace of darkness. And by the aid of that ribbon of light Mr.

Nippers saw something which made him almost collapse with astonishment and chagrin.

The great of the world may, and often do, forget their meetings with the small fry, but the small fry never cease to remember their meetings with the great, or to treasure a vivid remembrance of that immortal day when they were privileged to rub elbows with the elect.

Five years had passed since Mrs. Maverick Narkom, seeking a place wherein to spend the summer holidays with the little Narkoms and their nurses, had let her choice fall upon Winton-Old-Bridges and had dwelt there for two whole months. Three times during her sojourn her liege lord had come down for a week-end with his wife and children, and during one of these brief visits, meeting Mr. Ephraim Nippers, the village constable in the public highway, he had deigned to stop and speak to the man and to present him with a sixpenny cigar.

Times had changed since then; Mr. Nippers was now head constable for the district, but he still kept that cigar under a glass shade on the drawing-room whatnot, and he still treasured a vivid recollection of the great man who had given it to him and whom he now saw sitting on the ground with his coat off and his waistcoat unbuttoned, his moustache uncurled, wisps of dried grass clinging to his tousled hair, and all the dignity of office conspicuous by its absence.

"Oh, lummy!" said Mr. Nippers with a gulp. "Put down the hammers of them guns, you two – put 'em down quick! It's Mr.

Narkom – Mr. Maverick Narkom, superintendent at Scotland Yard!"

"Hullo!" exclaimed Mr. Narkom, shading his eyes from the firelight and leaning forward to get a clearer view of the speaker. "How the dickens do you know that, my man? And who the dickens are you, anyway? Can't say that I remember ever seeing your face before."

Mr. Nippers hastened to explain that little experience of five years ago; but the circumstance which had impressed itself so deeply upon his memory had passed entirely out of the superintendent's.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said he. "Can't say that I recall the occasion; but Mrs. Narkom certainly did stop at Winton-Old-Bridges some four or five summers ago, so of course it's possible. By the way, my man, what caused you to make this sudden descent upon us? And what are these chaps who are with you bearing arms for? Anything up?"

"Oh, lummy, sir, yes! A murder's just been committed – leastwise it's only just been discovered; but it can't have been long since it *was* committed, Mr. Narkom, for Miss Renfrew, who found him, sir, and give the alarm, she says as the poor dear gentleman was alive at a quarter to eight, 'cause she looked into the room at that time to ask him if there was anything he wanted, and he spoke up and told her no, and went on with his figgerin' just the same as usual."

"As usual?" said Cleek. "Why do you say 'as usual,' my friend?

Was the man an accountant of some sort?"

"Lummy! no, sir. A great inventor is what he is – or was, poor gentleman. Reckon you must 'a' heard of un some time or another – most everybody has. Nosworth is the name, sir – Mr. Septimus Nosworth of the Round House. You could see the tower of it over yon if you was to step out into the road and get clear of these trees."

Cleek was on his feet like a flash.

"Not the great Septimus Nosworth?" he questioned eagerly. "Not the man who invented Lithamite? – the greatest authority on high explosives in England? Not that Septimus Nosworth, surely?"

"Aye – him's the one, poor gentleman. I thought it like as the name would be familiar, sir. A goodish few have heard of un, one way and another."

"Yes," acquiesced Cleek. "Lithamite carried his name from one end of the globe to the other; and his family affairs came into unusual prominence in consequence. Widower, wasn't he? – hard as nails and bitter as gall. Had an only son, hadn't he? – a wild young blade who went the pace: took up with chorus girls, music hall ladies, and persons of that stripe, and got kicked out from under the parental roof in consequence."

"Lummy, now! think of you a-knowin' about all that!" said Mr. Nippers, in amazement. "But then, your bein' with Mr. Narkom and him bein' what he is – why, of course! Scotland Yard it do know everything, I'm told, sir."

"Yes – it reads the papers occasionally, Mr. Nippers," said Cleek. "I may take it from your reply, may I not, that I am correct regarding Mr. Septimus Nosworth's son?"

"Indeed, yes, sir – right as rain. Leastwise, from what I've heard. I never see the young gentleman, myself. Them things you mention happened before Mr. Nosworth come to live in these parts – a matter of some four years or more ago. Alwuss had his laboratory here, sir – built it on the land he leased from Sir Ralph Droger's father in the early sixties – and used to come over frequent and shut hisself in the Round House for days on end; but never come here to live until after that flare-up with Master Harry. Come then and built livin' quarters beside the Round House and, after a piece, fetched Miss Renfrew and old Patty Dax over to live with un."

"Miss Renfrew and old Patty Dax? Who are they?"

"Miss Renfrew is his niece, sir – darter of a dead sister. Old Patty Dax, she war the cook. I dunno what her be now, though – her died six months ago and un hired Mistress Armroyd in her place. French piece, her am, though bein' widder of a Lancashire man, and though I doan't much fancy foreigners nor their ways, this I will say: her keeps the house like a pin and her cookin's amazin' tasty – indeed, yes."

"You are an occasional caller in the servants' hall, I see, Mr. Nippers," said Cleek, serenely, as he took up his coat and shook it, preparatory to putting it on. "I think, Mr. Narkom, that in the interests of the public at large it will be well for some one a little

more efficient than the local constabulary to look into this case, so, if you don't mind making yourself a trifle more presentable, it will be as well for us to get Mr. Nippers to show us the way to the scene of the tragedy. While you are doing it I will put a few 'Headland' questions to our friend here if you don't mind assuring him that I am competent to advise."

"Right you are, old chap," said Narkom, taking his cue. "Nippers, this is Mr. George Headland, one of the best of my Yard detectives. He'll very likely give you a tip or two in the matter of detecting crimes, if you pay attention to what he says."

Nippers "paid attention" forthwith. The idea of being in consultation with any one connected with Scotland Yard tickled his very soul; and, in fancy, he already saw his name getting into the newspapers of London, and his fame spreading far beyond his native weald.

"I won't trouble you for the full details of the murder, Mr. Nippers," said Cleek. "Those, I fancy, this Miss Renfrew will be able to supply when I see her. For the present, tell me: how many other occupants does the house hold beyond these two of whom you have spoken – Miss Renfrew and the cook, Mrs. Armroyd?"

"None, sir, but the scullery maid, Emily, and the parlour maid, Clark. But both of them is out to-night, sir – havin' went to a concert over at Beattie Corners. A friend of Mistress Armroyd's sent her two tickets, and her not bein' able to go herself, her thought it a pity for 'em to be wasted, so her give 'em to the maids."

"I see, no male servants at all, then?"

"No, sir; not one. There's Jones – the handy man – as comes in mornin's to do the rough work and the haulin' and carryin' and things like that; and there's the gardener and Mr. Kemper – him as is Mr. Nosworth's assistant in the laboratory, sir – but none of 'em is ever in the house after five o'clock. Set against havin' men sleep in the house was Mr. Nosworth – swore as never another should after him and Master Harry had their fallin' out. Why, sir, he was that bitter he'd never even allow Mr. Charles to set foot in the place, just because him and Master Harry used to be friends – which makes it precious hard on Miss Renfrew, I can tell you."

"As how? Is this 'Mr. Charles' connected with Miss Renfrew in any way?"

"Lummy! yes, sir – he's her young man. Been sweet on each other ever since they was in pinafores; but never had no chance to marry because Mr. Charles – Mr. Charles Drummond is his full name, sir – he hasn't one shillin' to rub against another, and Miss Renfrew she's a little worse off than him. Never gets nothin', I'm told, for keepin' house for her uncle – just her food and lodgin' and clothes – and her slavin' like a nigger for him the whole blessed time. Keeps his books and superintends the runnin' of the house, she do, but never gets a brass farthin' for it, poor girl. I don't like to speak ill of the dead, Mr. Headland, sir, but this I must say: A rare old skinflint was Mr. Septimus Nosworth – wouldn't part with a groat unless un was forced to. But praise be, her'll get her dues now; fegs, yes! unless old skinflint went and

changed his will without her knowin'."

"Oho!" said Cleek, with a strong rising inflection. "His will was made in Miss Renfrew's favour, was it?"

"Aye. That's why her come and put up with un and all his hardheartedness – denyin' her the pleasure o' ever seein' her young man just because him and Master Harry had been friends and playmates when t' pair of un was just boys in knickers and broad collars. There be a stone heart for you."

"Rather. Now one more question: I think you said it was Miss Renfrew who gave the alarm when the murder was discovered, Mr. Nippers. How did she give it and to whom?"

"Eh, now! to me and Mistress Armroyd, of course. Me and her war sittin' in the kitchen havin' a bite o' supper at the time. Gorham, he war there, too, in the beginnin'; but un didn't stop, of course – 'twouldn't 'a' done for the pair of us to be off duty together."

"Oh! is Gorham a constable, then?"

"Aye – under constable: second to me. Got un appointed six months ago. Him had just gone a bit of a time when Miss Renfrew come rushin' in and shrieked out about the murder; but he heard the rumpus and came poundin' back, of course. I dunno what I'd 'a' done if un hadn't, for Miss Renfrew her went from one faintin' fit to another – 'twas just orful. Gorham helped Ah to carry her up to the sittin'-room, wheer Mistress Armroyd burnt feathers under her nose, and when we'd got her round a bit we all three went outside and round to the laboratory. That's when

we first see the prints of the animal's feet. Mistress Armroyd spied 'em first – all over the flower bed just under the laboratory window."

"Oho! then that is what you meant when you alluded to an 'animal' when you pounced down upon us, was it? I see. One word more: what kind of an animal was it? Or couldn't you tell from the marks?"

"No, sir, I couldn't – nobody could unless it might be Sir Ralph Droger. He'll be like to, if anybody. Keeps all sorts of animals and birds and things in great cages in Droger Park, does Sir Ralph. One thing I can swear to, though, sir: they warn't like the footprints of any animal as I ever see. Theer be a picture o' St. Jarge and the Dragon on the walls o' Town Hall at Birchampton, Mr. Headland, sir, and them footprints is more like the paws of that dragon than anything else I can call to mind. Scaly and clawed they is – like the thing as made 'em was part bird and part beast – and they're a good twelve inches long, every one of 'em."

"Hum-m-m! That's extraordinary. Deeply imprinted, are they?"

"Lummy! yes, sir. The animal as made 'em must have weighed ten or twelve stone at least. Soon as I see them, sir, I knowed I had my work cut out, so I left Gorham in charge of the house, rattled up these two men and Mr. Simpkins, here – which all three is employed at Droger Park, sir – and set out hot foot to look for gypsies."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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