Le Queux William

The Mysterious Three

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Содержание

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Chapter One
Concerns a Visitor

"Do you know a Mr Smithson, Gwen?" Sir Charles Thorold asked his wife abruptly as he stood astride before the big fire in the hall.

"Smithson?" Lady Thorold answered as she poured out the tea. "No. Who is he?"

"I have no idea. Never heard of him."

Then, addressing the butler, Sir Charles asked anxiously —

"Did he leave a card, James?"

"No, Sir Charles. He asked to see you – or her ladyship."

"Or me?" Lady Thorold exclaimed. "Why, how very mysterious. What was he like?"

"A tall, powerfully-built man, m'lady."

"A gentleman?"

"M'yes, m'lady. He came in a car."

As James said this in his grave, solemn way, I saw Vera Thorold's eyes twinkle with amusement. For Sir Charles's only child possessed that gift rare in a woman – a sense of humour.

"You are sure you have the name right?" Thorold said, after a moment's pause.

"Quite, Sir Charles. I think he was not going to give his name, as you were out. I asked him what name, and he seemed to hesitate, then he said: 'Oh, say Mr Smithson called, Sir Charles knows me,' and then he seemed to smile, Sir Charles."

"He seemed to smile. I wonder why?"

His master turned to Lady Thorold.

"What do you make of it, Gwen?"

"I make nothing of it," replied his wife. "Is it some friend of yours, Vera?"

"Mother, how ridiculous," the girl exclaimed; "as if I should have a friend called 'Smithson'!"

"Pardon me, Sir Charles, but – " broke in the butler.

"Well, what?"

"There is a portrait of him in the morning-room."

"A portrait?" gasped his master. "A portrait of Smithson! Then why the deuce didn't you say so before! Which is it? I should really like to know."

"There are so many portraits in the morning-room," Lady Thorold interrupted, "we had better go in, and James will show us which it is. He may have mistaken the name, after all."

We all got up from tea in the hall, made our way to the drawing-room, and thence into the morning-room, which opened out of it. There was plenty of daylight still. James came in after us, and went straight up to a framed panel portrait which stood

with others on a small table in a remote corner. It showed a tall handsome, clean-shaved man of three or four and thirty, of fine physique, seated astride a chair, his arms folded across the back of the chair as he faced the camera.

"This is the one, Sir Charles," the butler said, pointing to it.

I distinctly saw Lady Thorold give a start. Sir Charles, tanned though his face was by wind and sun, turned quite pale. Vera, who was standing by me at the moment, suddenly gripped my arm, I think unconsciously. As I glanced down at her I noticed that her eyes were set upon her mother. They had in them an expression of deep anxiety, almost of terror. Sir Charles was the first to recover his composure.

"Oh – that one," he exclaimed slowly, with a forced laugh. "Then there is no mystery at all. His giving the name 'Smithson' was of course his joke. Now we know why he smiled. Thank you, James. You can go."

I confess that I was puzzled. Indeed, I felt greatly mystified, and to some extent perturbed. I knew quite well by my host's tone and manner and by the look in Lady Thorold's eyes, perhaps most of all by that squeeze Vera had unconsciously given my arm, that all three had received some very unpleasant, apparently some terrible shock. But why? And what could have caused it? Who was that big man whose portrait stood framed there? What was his name? Why had he called himself "Smithson"? What was the mystery concerning him in relation to my hosts, or the mystery concerning my hosts in relation to him? My curiosity

was keenly aroused.

I don't think I am likely ever to forget that date – Wednesday, February 5, 1911, for it marks the beginning of a train of events so remarkable, I would call it amazing only I am not addicted to talking in superlatives. Yet I do assure you that I in no way exaggerate, and that the story I am about to tell is but a record of bare facts.

That February morning was quite bright and balmy, I remember it because it was the first day of the Waterloo Cup meeting. Rather warm, indeed, for hunting, and at the meet and the coverside the scraps of conversation one overheard referred chiefly to a big ball at Oakham.

Hounds had not been thrown into Colly Weston Wood more than a quarter of an hour when a piercing "View Holloa" echoed through the wood, and a long, lean, yellow-bodied fox broke away not two hundred yards from the spot where the majority of the field sat waiting on their impatient, fidgety mounts, and with a single glance behind him at the mottled pack streaming out of the cover in full cry, crossed a ploughed field, popped through a hedge and disappeared.

A few moments later came the usual wild stampede, and in less than a minute hounds and horses were fast disappearing in the distance, the music of the flying pack growing rapidly fainter in the distance.

By a singular stroke of ill-luck – or so I thought it then – I had got left. I had set my horse at a treacherous stake-and-

wattle fence, hoping thus to steal a march on the rest of the field galloping wildly for a couple of open gates. My horse had blundered, I daresay partly through my fault, and had staked himself, though only slightly. To cut a long story short, my day's amusement was over, for, after doing what I could to staunch the bleeding, I had to lead the poor beast all the way home to Houghton Park, a distance of at least eight miles.

Naturally I expected to be home long before my host, Sir Charles Thorold, and his wife and daughter, for as I entered the Park gates, with my lame animal crawling slowly after me, it was barely three o'clock. I was a good deal surprised, therefore to see Sir Charles and the two coming along another of the Park roads, and not a hundred yards away from me. They had entered by another gate.

"Hello, Ashton!" Thorold called out to me cheerily. "Why, where have you been, and what is amiss?"

I explained as soon as we were all together, and he sympathised. So did Miss Thorold. She was genuinely sorry I had missed the really splendid run.

"We all missed our second horses," she added, "and our animals were so dead beat that we decided to come home, though hounds were, I believe, going to draw again."

Her sympathy soothed me a good deal, for I think that even then I was in love with the tall, graceful, fair-haired girl who, on horseback, looked so perfectly bewitching. The exercise, the fresh air and the excitement of the morning's sport had

combined to give a colour to her cheeks and to impart a singular brightness to her eyes that together enhanced her quite exceptional loveliness.

Though I could remember her as a child, I had not seen her for eleven years until a fortnight previously, her father had invited me to Houghton Park, in Rutland. He had invited me the previous year, but on that occasion Vera had been away in Switzerland.

We had got rid of our muddy hunting kit, indulged in hot baths, and, feeling delightfully clean and comfortable and at peace with all the world, were at tea in the great hall of Houghton, a fine, many-gabled country mansion, with rows of twisted chimneys said to date back to a period of Elizabeth, when James the butler, calm and stately – I can see him still – had walked in his slow, dignified manner into the hall, to tell Sir Charles that "a gentleman had called shortly before he returned," a gentleman named Smithson.

We went back to the big oak-panelled hall to finish our tea, and though Sir Charles and Lady Thorold made light of the incident, and quickly changed the subject of conversation, the entire "atmosphere" seemed somehow different. Our relations appeared suddenly to have become quite strained.

Half an hour later I found Vera in the library. I had noticed that, since our return downstairs, my presence had been distasteful to her – or at least I thought so.

She was seated on a big settee, near the fire, pretending to read a newspaper, but her fingers twitched nervously, and presently I

saw one hand squeeze the paper convulsively.

I tossed away my cigarette, and crossed over to her.

"Vera," I said in a low tone, "tell me what is amiss. What has happened? why do you look so worried?"

We were alone, and the door was closed.

She looked up, and her eyes met mine. Her lips parted as if she were about to speak, then they shut tightly. Suddenly she bit her lip, and her big, expressive eyes filled with tears.

"Vera," I said very gently, sinking down beside her, for I felt a strange affinity between us – an affinity of soul, "What is it? What's the matter? Tell me, dear. I won't tell a soul."

I couldn't help it. My arm stole round her waist and my lips touched her cold forehead. Had she sprung away from me, turned upon me with flaming eyes and boxed my ears even, I should have been less surprised than at what happened, for never before had I taken such a liberty. Instead, she turned her pretty head, sank with a sigh upon my shoulder, and an instant later her arms encircled my neck. She was sobbing bitterly, so terribly that I feared she was about to become hysterical.

"Oh, Mr Ashton!" she burst out, "oh, if you only knew!"

"Knew what?" I whispered. "Tell me. I won't breathe it to a single living person."

"But that's it," she exclaimed as she still wept bitterly. "I don't know – but I suspect – I fear something so terribly, and yet I don't know what it is!"

This was an enigma I had not looked for.

"What is going to happen?" I asked, more to say something, anything, than to sit there speechless and supine.

"If only I knew I would tell you," she answered between her sobs, "I would tell you sooner than anybody because – oh, I love you so, I love you so!"

I shall never forget how my heart seemed to spring within me at those blessed words.

"Vera! My darling!"

She was in my arms. I was kissing her passionately. Now I knew what I had not before realised – I was desperately in love with Vera Thorold, this beautiful girl with the wonderful, deep eyes and the glorious hair, who when I had last seen her, had been still a child in short frocks, though lovely then.

Footsteps were approaching. Quickly we sprang apart as the door opened.

"Her ladyship wishes you to come at once, mademoiselle," said a voice in the shadow in what struck me as being rather a disagreeable tone, with a slightly foreign accent. It was Judith, Lady Thorold's French maid.

Vera rose at once. For a brief instant her eyes met mine. Then she was gone.

I sat there in the big book-lined room quite alone, smoking cigarette after cigarette, wondering and wondering. Who was "Smithson?" What was this strange, unexpected mystery? Above all, what was this trouble that Vera dreaded so, or was it merely some whim of her imagination? I knew her to be of a highly-

strung, super-sensitive nature.

The big grandfather-clock away in a corner hissed and wheezed for some moments, then slowly struck seven. I waited for the dressing gong to sound. Usually James, or the footman, Henry, appeared as soon as the clock had finished striking, and made an intolerable noise upon the gong. Five minutes passed, ten, fifteen. Evidently the gong had been forgotten, for Sir Charles dined punctually at the unfashionable hour of half-past seven. I rose and went upstairs to dress.

At the half-hour I came down and went towards the small drawing-room where they always assemble before dinner. To my surprise the room was in darkness.

"Something seems to be amiss to-night," I remember saying mentally as I switched on the light. The domestic service at Houghton was habitually like clockwork in its regularity.

A quarter to eight struck. Eight o'clock! I began to wonder if dinner had been put off. A quarter-past eight chimed out.

I went over to the fireplace and pressed the electric bell. Nobody came. I pressed it again. Finally I kept my finger pressed upon it.

This was ridiculous. Thoroughly annoyed, I went into the dining-room. It was in darkness. Then I made my way out to the servants' quarters. James was sitting in the pantry, in his shirt sleeves, smoking a cigar. A brandy bottle stood upon the dresser, and a syphon, also a half-empty tumbler.

"Is anything the matter, James?" I asked, with difficulty

concealing the irritation I felt.

"Not as I know of," he answered in rather a rude tone. I saw at once that he had been drinking.

"At what time is dinner?"

"Dinner?"

He laughed outright.

"There ain't no dinner. Why ain't you gone too?"

"Gone? Where?"

"With Sir Charles and her ladyship and Miss Vera and Judith."

"I don't understand you. What do you mean?"

"They went an hour ago, or more."

"Went where?"

"Oh, ask me another. I don't know."

James in his cups was a very different person from sober, respectful, deferential James. And then it came back to me that, about an hour before, I had heard a car going down the avenue, and wondered whose it was.

The sound of loud, coarse laughter reached me from the kitchen.

"Well, all I says is it's a pretty state of things," a woman's high, harsh voice exclaimed. I think it was the cook's. "Cleared and gone with bags and baggage as if the devil hisself was after 'em."

"P'r'aps 'e is," a man's voice, that I recognised as Henry's, announced, and again came peals of laughter.

This was a pleasant situation, certainly. My hosts vanished. The butler drunk. The servants apparently in rebellion!

Restlessly I paced the hall. My thoughts always work quickly, and my mind was soon made up.

First I went to the telephone, rang up the *Stag's Head Hotel* in Oakham, the nearest town – it was eight miles off – and asked the proprietor, whom I knew personally, to send me out a car as quickly as possible, also to reserve a room for me for the night. Then I went into the morning-room, tucked the big panel photograph, in its frame, under my arm, took it up to my room, and deposited it in the bottom of my valise. As I finished packing my clothes and other belongings I heard the car hooting as it came quickly up the long beech avenue leading from the lodge-gates.

My valise was not heavy, and I am pretty strong. Also I am not proud. I lifted it on to my bed, crouched down, hoisted the valise on to my back, as the railway porters do, carried it downstairs, and let the driver have it. He was a man I knew, and I noticed that he was grinning.

"Taking physical exercise, sir?" he asked lightly.

"Yes," I answered, "it's better sport than foxhunting."

He laughed outright, then helped me into my overcoat. A minute later we were on the road to Oakham.

And all the while the sad face of the girl for whom I had that evening declared my love – as I had last seen it, with her eyes set on mine as though in mute appeal – kept rising before me like a vision.

Chapter Two
Contains Certain Revelations

Until lunch-time next day I remained in Oakham, not knowing what to do, uncertain what steps to take.

I am a bachelor with a comfortable income, and, I am ashamed to say, an idler. Work never did really appeal to me. I try to compensate for not working by paying my taxes regularly and being as charitable as I can to people I come across and like, and whom the world seems to treat unjustly.

My father, Richard Ashton, was Colonel in the Blues. I was his only child, for my mother died in bringing me into the world to live at ease and waste my time. When my father died I found myself heir to a small property in Rutland, which I promptly let, and One Hundred and Eighty Thousand pounds safely invested – mostly in Consols. Sport in general, especially hunting and shooting, also reading, constitute my favourite forms of recreation. Generally I live in London, where I have a flat in King Street, St. James's.

I don't remember what made me do it, but while lunching at the *Stag's Head* I decided that I would take the car out to Houghton Park again. I think I was curious to see if any fresh development had taken place there.

Nobody answered my repeated rings at the front door, so I

went round to the back. The door was locked. I rang, and rang again, and knocked. But nobody came.

I walked right round the house. Every window was shut, and apparently fastened. The whole place was as still as death. Then I went to the stables. I could hear the occasional rattle of a headstall chain, but the horses were all locked in.

Having lit a cigar and told my driver to await my return, I sauntered aimlessly up into the woods – Houghton Park is one of the most beautifully wooded estates in Rutland, with a lake seven acres in extent hidden away in a delightfully picturesque spot surrounded by pine-grown hills. Several times during the past fortnight I had rambled up into these woods accompanied by Vera, and the association brought her back into my thoughts with renewed vividness. Where was she at that moment? What was she doing? Was she happy? Had any evil befallen her? When should I hear of her again? When should I see her?

These, and many other reflections, came crowding in confusion into my brain. What could be the meaning of this extraordinary mystery, so suddenly created, so unexpected? I had known Sir Charles and Lady Thorold many years, in fact since I was a child. For years they had lived in London – in Belgravia. Then, two years previously, they had rented Houghton Park and come to live there. The "County people" of Rutland are perhaps as conservative as any in England, and, knowing little about Sir Charles and Lady Thorold, who had received their title through political influence before settling in that county, they had not

made haste to call.

As soon, however, as it had become known that the new arrivals were extremely rich, also that Sir Charles meant to entertain largely, and was going to hunt, and that the Houghton covers were to be well preserved, the barriers of exclusiveness upon which the old families so pride themselves, had been quickly swept away.

Somewhat out of breath after my slow climb up through the woods, I rested at the top of the hill, from which a glorious view could be obtained of the picturesque landscape of early spring, that unfolded itself as far as sight could reach, a perfect panorama of our beautiful English scenery that Americans so much admire, probably because it affords so striking a contrast to their never-ending prairies and gigantic mountains. Upon the opposite side of the hill on which I stood, deep down in a ravine thick with brambles and undergrowth, the face of the placid lake glistened like a mirror between the budding trees, sparkling here and there with a blinding brightness where the sun shone straight upon it.

A pheasant springing into the air within a yard of me made me jump, and brought my wandering thoughts quickly back to earth. Why had I rambled up here? I could not say. I had walked and climbed in a kind of dream, so deeply was my mind engrossed with thoughts of what had happened and with conjectures as to the future. And now, unconsciously, my attention gradually became centred upon the lake, or rather upon a curious-looking, dark object among the weeds upon its surface, within a stone's

throw of the bank.

I glanced at my watch. It was barely three o'clock. I had nothing at all to do, so decided to make my way down through the undergrowth and find out what this strange object might be.

Yes, I had not been mistaken. The first impression I had formed had been the right one, though I had tried to persuade myself it could not be. I was standing on the bank now, not ten yards from the object, and I could see distinctly what it was. A human body, fully clothed, lay there motionless – a man's body, face downward, the head almost submerged.

My first thought was to plunge in and swim out to it and try to rescue the drowning man. But an instant's reflection caused me to refrain. The man, whoever he was, must be dead. He had been there a long time, or the head would not have sunk, nor, indeed, would the body have floated.

I made my way as quickly as I could along the footpath on the bank until I reached the boathouse, a hundred yards away. It was locked. With a big stone I shattered the padlock, and in a minute I was rowing towards the body.

With some difficulty I succeeded in hitching the painter round the feet. Having at last done so, I rowed back to the bank, towing the drowned man.

And there I turned the body over. It must have been in the water many hours, probably all night, I saw at once. And directly I saw the face I recognised it, drawn and disfigured though it was.

The drowned man was Thorold's butler, James.

What had happened? Had he fallen into the lake while under the influence of drink? Had he committed suicide? Or had he —

Somehow this last reflection startled me. Was it possible there had been foul play?

I had to leave the body there, for I found it impossible to lift it on to the bank without help.

"The great house," as the tenantry called it, was still locked when I got back there. Silence still reigned everywhere. The driver of my taxi was fast asleep on his seat.

When I prodded him with my stick he sat up with a start, and apologised.

"Get back to Oakham as quickly as you can," I said to him as I stepped into the car and slammed the door.

He turned his starting handle without result. He lifted the bonnet, and for a long time examined the machinery. Then, removing his coat, he wormed himself underneath the car, lying flat upon his back.

When at last he emerged he was red in the face and perspiring freely.

"Oh, by the way, sir," he said suddenly, picking up his coat and thrusting his hand into one of its pockets, "I think you dropped this."

As he stopped speaking he pulled his hand out and held out to me a little silver flask about four inches square.

I took it, and examined it.

"This isn't mine," I said. "Where did you find it?"

"Just there, sir," and he pointed to the ground beside the car.

When I looked at the flask again, I noticed that the tiny shield in the middle was engraved. The engraving was a cipher, which, on scrutinising closely, I made out to be the letters "D.P." intertwined.

I unscrewed the stopper and smelt the contents. The smell, though peculiar, was not wholly unfamiliar. Still, for the moment I could not classify it.

"Didn't you drop it, sir?"

"No."

"Then perhaps I had better take it," and he held out his hand.

"No, I'll keep it – you needn't be anxious," I said. "I have been staying here, and probably it belongs to somebody in the house, or to somebody who has called."

I fumbled in my pocket and produced two half-crowns, which at once allayed any conscientious squeamishness afflicting the driver at the thought of handing over his treasure-trove to a stranger.

But where was Vera? Where, indeed, were the Thorolds?

The chauffeur continued to overhaul his engine and its complicated mechanism. While he was thus engaged I poured a little of the fluid out of the flask, which was quite full. The colour was a dark, transparent brown, almost the shade of old brandy. Somehow I could not help thinking that this flask might —

And yet, why should it prove a clue? What reason was there to suppose it had been dropped by the strange visitor on the

previous day, the mysterious Smithson?

"Hullo, sir, this is curious!"

My driver was bending over the machinery he had been examining so closely. His hands, which had previously been in the gear-box resembled a nigger's, only they looked more slimy.

"What is it?" I asked, approaching him.

"The plugs have been tampered with. No wonder she wouldn't start. Look."

He was holding out a damaged sparking-plug.

I own a car and, being well acquainted with its intricacies, saw at once that what he said was true. Somebody – presumably while he was wandering about the lawns and back premises – must have lifted the bonnet and injured the plugs. There was no other solution. The car could not have travelled out from Oakham, or travelled at all, had that damage been done before.

We looked at each other, equally puzzled.

"You ain't been playing me a trick, sir?" he said suddenly, an expression of mistrust coming into his eyes.

"Oh, don't be a fool!" I answered irritably.

He turned sulky.

"Some one 'as, anyway," he grunted. "And it's just a chance I've some spare plugs with me."

He produced his tool-box, rummaged among its contents with his filthy hands, discovered what he wanted, and adjusted them. Then he shut down the bonnet with a vicious bang and set his engine going.

He was about to step on to his seat, when simultaneously a sharp report a good way off and the "zip" of a bullet close to us made us spring away in alarm.

Together, without uttering a word, we gazed up towards the wood on the hill, where the sound of the report had come from.

Another shot rang out. This time the bullet shattered the car headlight.

"Ah! God!" the driver gasped. "Help! I – I – "

Poor fellow. Those were his last words. Almost as he uttered them there came a third report, and the driver, shot through the head, collapsed into a heap beside the car.

And then, what I saw as I turned sharply, sent a shiver through me.

I held my breath. What further mystery was there?

Surely some great evil had fallen upon the house of the Thorolds.

Chapter Three
The Name of "Smithson."

A man was kneeling, facing me, on the outskirts of the wood on the hill, not a hundred yards away. His face was in shadow, and partly hidden by a slouch hat, so that I could hardly see it. The rifle he held was levelled at me – he was taking steady aim – his left arm extended far up the barrel, so that his hand came near the muzzle – the style adopted by all first-class shots, as it ensures deadly accuracy.

I am bound to confess that I completely lost my nerve. I sprang to one side almost as he fired. I had just enough presence of mind left to pick up the driver in my arms – even at the risk of my life I couldn't leave him there – lift him into the car, and slam the door. Then I jumped on to the driving-seat, put in the clutch – in a perfect frenzy of fear lest I myself should be shot at the next instant – and the car flew down the avenue.

Twice I heard reports, and with the second one came the sound of a whistling bullet. But it went wide of the mark.

The lodge came quickly into view. It was well out of sight of the wood on the hill where the shots had been fired. I uttered an exclamation as I saw that the big white gate was shut. It was hardly ever shut.

Slowing down, I brought the car to a standstill within a few

yards of the lodge, jumped out, and ran forward to open the gate.

It was fastened with a heavy chain, and the chain was securely padlocked.

Shouting failed to bring any one out of the lodge, so I clambered over the gate and knocked loudly at the door. But nobody answered, and, when I tried to open the door, I found it locked.

There seemed to be but one way out of the difficulty. I have said that I am strong, yet it needed all my strength to lift that heavy gate off its hinges. It fell with a crash back into the road, and I managed to drag it away to one side. Then starting the engine again, I set off once more for Oakham "all out."

I went straight to the hospital, but a brief examination of the poor fellow sufficed to assure the doctors that the man was already dead. Then I went to the police-station and told them everything I knew – how a man giving the name "Smithson" had called at Houghton Park to see Sir Charles Thorold; how Thorold had repudiated all knowledge of the man; how Sir Charles and Lady Thorold and their daughter, and Lady Thorold's maid, Judith – I did not know her surname – had suddenly left Houghton, and mysteriously disappeared; how I had, that afternoon, found the house shut up, though I had seen a man disappear from one of the windows; how I had discovered the butler's body in the lake; how my driver had been shot dead by some one hidden in a wood upon a hill, and how other shots had been fired at me by the assassin.

At first the police seemed inclined to detain me, but when I had convinced them that I was what they quaintly termed "a bona fide gentleman," and had produced what they called my "credentials," – these consisted of a visiting card, and of a letter addressed to me at Houghton Park – and given them my London address and telephone number, they let me go. I found out afterwards that, while they kept me talking at the station, they had telephoned to London, in order to verify my statements that I had a flat in King Street and belonged to Brooks's Club.

The coffee room of the *Stag's Head Hotel* that night was crowded, for it was the night of the Hunt Ball, and every available bed in the hotel had been engaged some days in advance. Those dining were all strangers to me, most of them young people in very high spirits.

"I've kept this table for you, sir," the head waiter said, as he conducted me across the room. "It is the best I could do; the other place at it is engaged."

"And by a beautiful lady, I hope," I answered lightly, for I knew this waiter to be something of a wag.

"No, sir," he answered with a grin, "by a gentleman with a beard. A charming gentleman, sir. You'll like him."

"Who is he? What is he like?"

"Oh, quite a little man, sir, with a nervous, fidgetty manner, and a falsetto voice. Ah," he added, lowering his voice, "here he comes."

There was a twinkle of merriment in the waiter's eyes, as

he turned and hurried away to meet the giant who had just entered the room. I don't think I had ever before seen so tall and magnificent-looking a man. He must have stood quite six feet four, and was splendidly built. His dark, deep-set eyes peered out with singular power from beneath bushy brows. He had a high, broad forehead, and thick black hair. His beard, well-trimmed, reached just below his white tie, for of course he was in evening clothes.

There was a noticeable lull in the buzz of conversation as the newcomer appeared, and all eyes were set upon him as he strolled with an easy, swinging gait across the room towards my table. I saw dowagers raise their lorgnettes and scrutinise him with great curiosity, mingled with approval, as he went along.

Instinctively I rose as he approached. I don't know why I did. I should not have risen had any ordinary stranger been brought over to my table to occupy a vacant seat. The man looked down at me, smiled – it was a most friendly, captivating smile – nodded genially, and then seated himself facing me. I am a bit of a snob at heart – most of us are, only we won't admit it – and I felt gratified at the reflected interest I knew was now being taken in me, for many people were staring hard at us both, evidently thinking that this remarkable-looking stranger must be Somebody, and that, as we were apparently acquainted, I must be Somebody too.

The waiter's eye caught mine, and I heard him give a low chuckle of satisfaction at the practical joke he had played upon me.

"I suppose you are also going to the ball, sir," the big man said to me in his great, deep voice, when he had told the waiter what to bring him.

"No, I'm not. I rather wish I were," I answered. "Unfortunately, however, I have to return to town to-night. Are you going?"

"To town?"

"No, to the ball."

He hesitated before answering.

"Yes – well, perhaps," he said, as he began his soup. "I am not yet certain. I want to go, but there are reasons why I should not," and he smiled.

"That sounds rather curious."

"It is very curious, but it is so."

"Do you mind explaining?"

"I do."

His eyes were set on mine. They seemed somehow to hold my gaze in fascination. There was in them an expression that was half ironical, half humorous.

"I believe this is the first time we have met," he said, after a pause.

"I'm quite sure it is," I answered. "You will forgive my saying so, but I don't think any one who had once met you could very well forget it."

He gave a great laugh.

"Perhaps you are right – ah! perhaps you are right," he said

laughing, wiping his moustache and mouth with his napkin. "Certainly I shall never forget you."

I began, for the first time, to feel rather uncomfortable. He seemed to talk in enigmas. He was evidently what I believe is called "a character."

"Do you know this part of the country well?" I asked, anxious to change the subject.

"Yes – and no," he answered slowly, thoughtfully.

This was getting tiresome. I began to think he was trying to make fun of me. I began to wish the waiter had not put him to sit at my table.

Presently he looked again across at me, and said quite suddenly —

"Look here, Mr Ashton, let us understand each other at once, shall we?"

His eyes looked into mine again, and I again felt quite uneasy. He knew my name. I felt distinctly annoyed at the waiter having told him my name without first asking my permission, as I concluded he must have done. It was a great liberty on his part, I considered – an impertinence, more especially as he had not mentioned this stranger's name to me.

"I shall not be at the ball – and yet I shall be there," the big man continued, as I did not speak. "Tell me, do you return to Houghton after going to London?"

"You seem to know a good deal about me, Mr – " I said, rather nettled, but hoping to draw his name from him.

He did not take the hint.

"Sir Charles is well, I hope? And Lady Thorold?" he went on. "And how is their charming daughter, Miss Vera? I have not seen her for some days. She seems to be as fond as ever of hunting. I think it a cold-blooded, brutal sport. In fact I don't call it 'sport' at all – twenty or so couples of hounds after one fox, and the chances all in favour of the hounds. I have told her so more than once, and I believe that in her heart she agrees with me. As a matter of fact, I'm here in Oakham, on purpose to call on Sir Charles to-morrow, on a matter of business."

I was astounded, also annoyed. Who on earth was this big man, who seemed to know so much, who spoke of Vera as though he knew her intimately and met her every day, and who apparently was acquainted also with Sir Charles and Lady Thorold, yet whom I had never before set eyes on, though I was so very friendly with the Thorolds?

The stranger had spoken of my well-beloved!

"You will forgive my asking you, I am sure," I said, curiosity getting the better of me, "but – well, I have not the pleasure of knowing your name. Do you mind telling me?"

"Mind telling you my name?" he exclaimed, with a look of surprise. "Why, not in the least. My name is – well – Smithson – if you like. Any name will do?"

He must have noticed my sudden change of expression, for he said at once —

"You seem surprised?"

"I – well, I am rather surprised. But you merely are not Smithson," I answered awkwardly. I was staring hard at him, scrutinising his face in order to discover some resemblance to the portrait which at that moment lay snugly at the bottom of my valise. The portrait showed a clean-shaven man, younger than this strange individual whom I had met, as I believed, for the first time, barely a quarter of an hour before. Age might have wrought changes, and the beard might have served as a disguise, but the man in the picture was certainly over thirty-four, and my companion here at dinner could not have been less than forty-five at most. Even the eyes, those betrayers of disguised faces, bore no resemblance that I could see to the eyes of the man in the picture. The beard and moustache of the man facing me were certainly not artificial. That I could see at a glance.

"Why are you surprised?" the man asked abruptly.

"It would take a long time to explain," I answered, equivocating, "but it is a curious coincidence that only yesterday I almost met a man named Smithson. I was wondering if he could be some relation of yours. He was not like you in face."

"Oh, so you know Smithson?"

"No, I don't know him. I have never met him. I said I *almost* met him."

"Have you never seen him, then?"

"Never in my life."

"And yet you say he is 'not like me in face.' How do you know he is not like me in face if you have never seen him?"

The sudden directness of his tone disconcerted me. For an instant I felt like a witness being cross-examined by a bullying Counsel.

"I've seen a portrait of him."

"Indeed?"

My companion raised his eyebrows.

"And where did you see a portrait of him?" he inquired pointedly.

This was embarrassing. Why was he suddenly so interested, so inquisitive? I had no wish to make statements which I felt might lead to my being dragged into saying all sorts of things I had no wish to say, especially to a stranger who, though he had led me to believe that he was acquainted with the Thorolds, apparently had no inkling of what had just happened at Houghton Park.

No inkling! I almost smiled as the thought occurred to me, and was quickly followed by the thought of the sensation the affair would create when the newspapers came to hear of what had happened, and began to "spread themselves" upon the subject, as they certainly would do very soon.

My companion's voice dispelled my wandering reflections.

"Where did you see the portrait of this other Smithson?" he asked, looking at me oddly.

"In a friend's house."

"Was it at Houghton Park?"

"In point of fact, it was."

His eyes seemed to read my thoughts, and I didn't like it. He

was silent for some moments. Then suddenly he rose.

"Well, Mr Ashton," he said quite genially, as he extended his hand, "I am glad that we have met, and I trust we shall meet again. 'In point of fact,' to use your own phrase, we shall, and very soon. Until then – good-bye. I have enjoyed our little conversation. It has been so – what shall I say – informal, and it was so unexpected. I did not expect to meet you to-night, I can assure you."

He was gone, leaving me in a not wholly pleasant frame of mind. The man puzzled me. Did I like him, or did I not? His personality attracted me, had done so from the moment I had set eyes on him framed in the doorway, but I was bound to admit that some of his observations had annoyed me. In particular, that remark: "We shall meet again, and very soon;" also his last words: "I did not expect to meet you to-night, I can assure you," caused me some uneasiness in the face of all that had happened. Indeed all through dinner his remarks had somehow seemed to bear some hidden meaning.

Chapter Four
Further Mystery

I had to go up to London that night. My lawyers had written some days previously that they must see me personally at the earliest possible moment on some matter to do with my investments, which they controlled entirely, and the letter had been left lying at my flat in King Street before being forwarded. And as the Oakham police had impressed upon me that my presence would be needed in Oakham within the next day or two, I had decided to run up to London, see my lawyers and get my interview with them over, and then return to Rutland as soon as possible.

Again and again, as the night express tore through the darkness towards St. Pancras, Vera's fair face and appealing eyes floated like a vision into my thoughts. I must see her again, at once – but how could I find her, and where? Would the police try to find her, and her father and mother? But why should they? After all, perhaps Sir Charles and Lady Thorold's flight from Houghton did not mean that they intended to conceal themselves. What reason could they have for concealment?

Then, all at once, an idea occurred to me. I smiled at my stupidity in not thinking of it before. There was the Thorolds' house in Belgrave Street. It had been shut up for a long time, but

perhaps for some reason they had suddenly decided to go back there. On my arrival at St. Pancras I would at once ring up that house and inquire if they were there.

But I was doomed to disappointment. While the porter was hailing a taxi for me, I went to the station telephone. There were plenty of Thorolds in the telephone-directory that hung inside the glass door, but Sir Charles' name was missing.

Determined not to be put off, I told the driver to go first to Belgrave Street. The number of the Thorolds' house was, I remembered, a hundred and two. By the time we got there it was past midnight. The house bore no sign of being occupied. I was about to ring, when a friendly constable with a bull's-eye lantern prevented me.

"It's empty, sir," he said; "has been for months and months, in fact as long as I can remember."

"But surely there is a caretaker," I exclaimed.

"Oh, there's a caretaker, a very old man," he answered with a grin. "But you won't get *him* to come down at this time of night. He's a character, he is."

There had been nothing in the newspapers that day, but, on the morning after, the bomb burst.

AMAZING STORY
WELL-KNOWN FAMILY VANISH
BUTLER'S BODY IN THE LAKE

Those headlines, in what news-editors call "war type," met my eyes as I unfolded the paper.

I was in bed, and my breakfast on the tray beside me grew cold while I devoured the three columns of close-set print describing everything that had occurred from the moment of Sir Charles' disappearance until the paper had gone to press.

I caught my breath as I came to my own name. My appearance was described in detail, names of my relatives were given, and a brief outline of my father's brilliant career – for he had been a great soldier – and then all my movements during the past two days were summarised.

I had last been seen, the account ran, dining at the *Stag's Head Hotel* with a gentleman, a stranger, whom nobody seemed to know anything about. He had come to the *Stag's Head* on the evening of Monday, April 1, engaged a bedroom and a sitting-room in the name of Davies, and he had left on the night of Wednesday, April 3. He had intended, according to the newspaper, to sleep at the *Stag's Head* that night, but between ten and eleven o'clock he had changed his mind, packed his suit-case, paid his bill, and left. Where he had come from, none knew; where he had gone, or why, none knew. How he had spent his time from his arrival until his departure, nobody had been able to discover.

"All that is known about him," ran the newspaper report, "is that he was a personal friend of Mr Richard Ashton, and that he dined at the *Stag's Head Hotel* with Mr Ashton on the Wednesday evening, his last meal in the hotel before his hurried departure."

This was horrible. It seemed to convey indirectly the

impression that I knew why the Thorolds had disappeared, and where they had gone. More, a casual reader might easily have been led to suppose that I was implicated in some dark plot, involving the death of the butler. I appeared in the light of a man of mystery, the friend of a man who might, for aught I knew, be some criminal, but whose name – this certainly interested me – he apparently intended should remain secret.

I turned over the page. Good heavens – my portrait! And the one portrait of myself that of all others I detested. Anybody looking at that particular portrait would at once say: "What a villainous man; he looks like a criminal!"

I remembered now, rather bitterly, making that very observation when the proofs had been sent to me by the photographer, and how my friends had laughed and said it was "quite true," and that it resembled a portrait in a Sunday paper of "the accused in Court."

There were also portraits of Sir Charles and Lady Thorold, and a pretty picture of Vera, the best that had ever been taken of her. But the one portrait that I felt ought to have been reproduced, though it was not, was one of the bearded giant, who had given his name as Davies.

Thoroughly disgusted, I turned without appetite to my tepid breakfast. I had hardly begun to eat, when the telephone at my bedside rang.

Was that Mr Richard Ashton's flat? asked a voice. Might the speaker speak to him?

Mr Ashton was speaking.

"Oh, this was the office of *The Morning*. The editor would greatly appreciate Mr Ashton's courtesy if he would receive one of his representatives. He would not detain him long."

I gulped a mouthful of tea, then explained that I would sooner not be interviewed. I was extremely sorry, I said, that my name had been dragged into this extraordinary affair.

The news-editor was persistent. I was firm. I always am firm when I am at the end of a telephone, but rarely on other occasions. Finally I rang off.

A brief interval. Then another ring. Well, what?

"The editor of the – "

"No," I answered as politely as I could. "I am extremely sorry. You see, I have just refused to be interviewed by *The Morning*, and it would hardly be fair to that journal if… Oh, *The Morning* was a paper of no consequence, was it? That made a difference, of course, but still… no… no… I was really sorry… I could not… I…"

I hung up the receiver. As I did so my man entered. There were four gentlemen downstairs, also a photographer. They wanted to know if —

"Tell them," I interrupted, "that I cannot see them. And, John – "

"Sir?"

"I am not at home to anybody – anybody at all. You understand?"

"Quite, sir."

I noticed that his tone was not quite as deferential as usual. I knew the reason. Of course he had seen this odious paper, or some paper more odious still. Probably he and the other servants in the building had been discussing me, and hazarding all sorts of wildly improbable stories about me.

The telephone bell rang again. I forget what I said. I think it was a short prayer, or an invocation of some kind. My first impulse was not to answer the 'phone again at all, but to let the thing go on ringing. It rang so persistently, however, that in desperation I pulled off the receiver.

"Who the dickens is it? What do you want?" I shouted.

I gasped.

"What! Vera? Where are you? I want to see you. I must see you at once!"

My love was in dire distress. I could hear emotion in her voice. My heart beat quickly in my eagerness.

"Oh, come to me – do come to me!" she was saying hurriedly in a low tone, as though fearful of some one overhearing her. "I'm in such trouble, and you alone can help me. Tell me when you will come. Tell me quickly. At any moment someone may catch me talking on the telephone."

"Where are you? Give me your address, quickly," I answered, feverishly. I was madly anxious to meet her again.

"We are in London – but we go to Brighton – to-day – this afternoon – "

"Your address in London, quick."

"Twenty-six Upper – "

There was a sudden clatter. The receiver had been put back. Some one had interrupted her.

I tapped the little lever of the instrument repeatedly.

"Number, please," a monotonous voice asked.

"What number was I talking to this instant?" I said, almost trembling with anxiety.

"I'm sure I don't know. What number do you want?"

"The number I've been talking to."

"I tell you I don't know it," replied the female operator.

"Can't you find it out?"

"I'll try. Hold the line, please."

After a brief interval, the voice said —

"It may have been double-two two two Mayfair. Shall I ring them for you?"

"Please do."

I waited.

"You're through."

"Hello, what is it?" a beery voice asked.

"I want to speak to Miss Vera Thorold?"

"Vera 'oo?"

"Thorold."

"Theobald? He's out."

"*Thorold*, Miss *Vera Thorold*," I shouted in despair.

"Oh, we ain't got no Veras here," the beery voice replied, and

I could picture the speaker's leer. "This ain't a ladies' seminary; it's Poulsen's Brewery Company, Limited. You're on the wrong number. Ring off."

And again the instrument was silent.

Vera had been cut off just at the moment she was about to reveal her whereabouts.

Almost beside myself with anxiety, I tried to collect my thoughts in order to devise some means of discovering Vera's whereabouts and getting into immediate communication with her. I even went to the telephone exchange, interviewed the manager, and told him the exact time, to the fraction of a minute, when I had been rung up, but though he did his best to help me, he could not trace the number.

I have a vivid imagination, and am of an exceptionally apprehensive disposition, which has led some men to declare that I meet trouble half-way, though that is a thing I am constantly warning my friends not to do. In this case, however, I found it impossible not to feel anxious, desperately anxious, about the one woman I really cared for in the whole world. She had appealed to me urgently for help, and I was impotent to help her.

Dejectedly I returned to my flat. The lift-boy was standing in the street, his hands in his pockets, the stump of a cheap cigarette between his lips. Without removing his hands from his pockets, or the cigarette-end from his mouth, he looked up at me with an offensive grin, and jerked out the sentence between his teeth —

"There's a lady here to see you – a Miss Thorold."

"Miss Thorold? Where is she? How long has she been here?" I exclaimed, quelling all outward appearance of excitement.

"About ten minutes. She's up in your rooms, sir. She said you knew her, and she'd wait till you came back."

"Vera!" I gasped involuntarily, and entered the lift, frantic with impatience.

At last. She was there – in my rooms, awaiting me with explanation!

Chapter Five
Puts Certain Questions

Rarely have I felt more put out, or more bitterly disappointed, than I did when I hurried into my flat, expecting to come face to face with Vera, my beloved, and longing to take her in my arms to kiss and comfort her.

Instead, I was confronted by a spinster aunt of Vera's whom I had met only three times before, and to whom I had, the first time I was introduced to her – she insisted upon never remembering me either by name or by sight, and each time needing a fresh introduction – taken an ineradicable dislike.

"Ah, Mr Ashton, I'm so glad you've come," she said without rising. "I have called to talk to you about a great many things – I daresay you can guess what they are – about all this dreadful affair at Houghton."

Now the more annoyed I feel with anybody of my own social standing, the more coldly polite I invariably become. It was so on this occasion.

"I should love to stay and talk to you, Miss Thorold," I answered, after an instant's pause, "but I have just been sitting at the bedside of a sick friend. To-day is the first day he has been allowed to see anybody. The doctor said he ought not to have allowed me in so soon, and he warned me to go straight home,

take off every stitch of clothing I have on, and send them at once to be disinfected."

"Oh, indeed?" she said rather nervously. "And what has been the matter with your friend?"

It was the question I wanted.

"Didn't I tell you?" I said. "It was smallpox."

My ruse proved even more successful than I had anticipated. Miss Thorold literally sprang to her feet, gathered up her satchel and umbrella, and with the hurried remark: "How perfectly monstrous – keep well away from me!" she edged her way round the wall to the door, and, calling to me from the little passage: "I will ring you on the telephone," went out of the flat, slamming the door after her.

But where was Vera? How could I discover her? I was beside myself with anxiety.

The Houghton affair created more than a nine days' wonder. The people of Rutland desperately resent anything in the nature of a scandal which casts a disagreeable reflection upon their county. I remember how some years ago they talked for months about an unpleasant affair to do with hunting.

"Even if it were true," some of the people who knew it to be true said one to another, "it ought never to have been exposed in that way. Think of the discredit it brings upon our county, and what a handle the Radicals and the Socialists will be able to make of it, if ever it is discovered that it really did occur."

And so it came about that, when I was called back to Oakham

two days later, to attend the double inquest, many of the people there, with whom I had been on quite friendly terms, looked at me more or less askance. It is not well to make oneself notorious in a tiny county like Rutland, I quickly discovered, or even to become notorious through no fault of one's own.

Shall I ever forget how, at the inquest, questions put to me by all sorts of uneducated people upon whom the duty devolved of inquiring into the mysterious affair connected with Houghton Park?

I suppose it was because there was nobody else to question, that they cross-examined me so closely and so foolishly.

Their inquiries were endless. Had I known the Thorolds long? Could I name the date when I first became acquainted with them? Was it a fact that I rode Sir Charles' horses while I was a guest at Houghton? About how often did I ride them? And on how many days did I hunt during the fortnight I spent at Houghton?

All my replies were taken down in writing. Then came questions concerning my friendship with Miss Thorold, and these annoyed me considerably. Was the rumour that I was engaged to be married to her true? Was there any ground for the rumour? Was I at all attached to her? Was she attached to me? Had we ever corresponded by letter? Was it a fact that we called each other by our Christian names? Was it not true, that on one evening at least, we had smoked cigarettes together, alone in her boudoir?

It was. This admission seemed to gratify my cross-questioners

considerably.

"And may I ask, Mr Ashton," asked a legal gentleman with a most offensive manner, as he looked me up and down, "if this took place with Sir Charles' knowledge?"

"Oh, yes it did. With his full knowledge and consent!"

"Oh, really. And you will pardon my asking, was Lady Thorold also aware that you and her daughter sat alone together late at night, smoking cigarettes and addressing each other by your Christian names?"

Now I am fairly even-tempered, but this local solicitor's objectionable insinuations ended by stirring me up. This, very likely, was what he desired that they should do.

"My dear sir," I exclaimed, "will you tell me if these questions of yours have any bearing at all upon the matter you are inquiring into, and if your very offensive innuendoes are intended as veiled, or rather as unveiled, insults to Miss Thorold or to myself?"

I heard some one near me murmur, "Hear, hear," at the back of the room. The comment encouraged me.

"You will not address me in that fashion again, please," my interlocutor answered hotly, reddening.

"In what fashion?"

"You will not call me 'your dear sir.' I object. I strongly object."

A titter of amusement trickled through the room. My adversary's fingers – for he had become an adversary – twitched.

"I was under the impression," he remarked pompously, "that

I was addressing a gentleman."

I am not good at smart retorts, but I got one in when I answered him.

"A gentleman – I?" I exclaimed blandly. "I assure you, my dear sir, that I don't pose as a gentleman. I am quite a common man – just like yourself."

Considerable laughter greeted this remark, but it was at once suppressed. Still, I knew that this single quick rejoinder had biased "the gallery" in my favour. Common people enjoy witnessing the discomfiture of any individual in authority.

Two days later, I left Oakham and returned to London, feeling like a schoolboy going home for Christmas.

The days went by. On the following week I again went to Oakham to attend the adjourned inquest. In the case of the butler, an open verdict was returned, but in the case of the driver, one of murder by some person unknown.

Of Vera I had had no news.

"Twenty-six Upper…" That might be in London, or in Brighton. It might even be in some other town. I thought it probable, however, that the address she had been about to give was a London address, so I had spent the day before the inquest in trying the various London "Uppers" contained in "Kelly's Directory."

Heavens, what an array! When my eyes fell upon the list, my heart sank. For there were no less than fifty-four "Uppers" scattered about the Metropolis. Some, obviously, might be ruled

out at once, or so I conjectured. Upper Street, Islington, for instance, close to the *Angel*, did not sound a likely "residential locality" – as the estate agents say – for people of Sir Charles and Lady Thorold's position to be staying in. Nor did Upper Bland near the *Elephant and Castle*, nor Upper Grange Road, off the Old Kent Road; nor Upper Chapman Street, Shadwell. On the other hand, Upper Brook Street; Upper George Street, Sloane Square; Upper Grosvenor Street, Park Lane; even Upper Phillimore Gardens, Kensington, seemed possible spots, and these and many other "Uppers" I tried, spinning from one to another in a taxi, until the driver began to look at me as though he had misgivings as to my sanity.

"Twenty-six don't seem to be your lucky number, sir," he said jocularly, when he had driven me to thirty-seven different "Uppers" and called in each at the house numbered twenty-six. "It wouldn't be twenty-six in some 'Lower' Street, or Place, or Road, or Gardens, would it, sir?"

He spoke only half in jest, but I resented his familiarity, and I told him so. His only comment, muttered beneath his breath, but loud enough for me to hear, was —

"Lummy! the cove's dotty in 'is own 'upper,' that's what *'ee* is."

On my return from Oakham I went to Brighton, wandering aimlessly about the streets and on the esplanade, hoping against hope that some fortunate turn in the wheel of Fate might bring me unexpectedly face to face with my sweet-faced beloved, whose prolonged and mysterious absence seemed to have made

my heart grow fonder. Alas! fate only grinned at me ironically.

Vera had vanished with her family – entirely vanished.

But not wholly ironically. I had been distressed to find that the little silver flask picked up at Houghton had been mislaid. For hours I had hunted high and low for it in my flat. John had turned out all my clothes, and pulled the pockets inside out, and I had bullied him for his carelessness in losing it, and almost accused him of stealing it.

It was while in the train on my way back to London, after my second futile visit to Brighton, that I sat down on something hard. Almost at once I guessed what it was. Briefly, there had been a hole in the inside breast-pocket of my overcoat. It had been mended by John's wife – whose duty it was to keep all my clothes in order – before I knew of its existence. Therefore, when I had naturally enough suspected there being a hole in one of my pockets, and sought one, I had found all the pockets intact. The woman had mended the hole without noticing that the little flask, which had dropped through it, lay hidden in the bottom of the lining.

I ripped open the lining at once, and pulled out the flask, delighted at the discovery. And, as soon as I reached town, I took the flask to a chemist I knew and asked him to analyse its contents. He would do so without delay, he said, and let me know on the following morning the result of his analysis.

"It's a mixture of gelsiminum and ether," he said, as soon as I entered his shop next day.

"Poison, of course," I remarked.

He smiled.

"Well, I should rather think so," he answered drily. "A few drops would send a strong man to sleep for ever, and there is enough of the fluid here to send fifty men to sleep – for ever. Therefore one wouldn't exactly take it for one's health."

So here was a clue – of a sort. The first clue! My spirits rose. My next step must be to discover the owner of the flask, presumably some one with initials "D.P.," and the reason he – or she – had carried this fluid about.

I lunched at Brooks's, feeling more than usually bored by the members I met there. Several men whom I had not seen for several weeks were standing in front of the smoking-room fire, and as I entered, and they caught sight of me, they all grinned broadly.

"'The accused then left the Court with his friends,'" one of them said lightly, as I approached. "'He was granted a free pardon, but bound over in his own recognisances to keep the peace for six months.'"

"You *have* been getting yourself into trouble, Dick, and no mistake," observed his neighbour – I am generally called Dick by my friends.

"Into trouble? What do you mean?" I retorted, nettled.

"Why – you know quite well," he answered. "This Houghton affair, the scandal about the Thorolds, of course. How came you to get mixed up in it? We like you, old man, but you know it

makes it a bit unpleasant for some of us. You know what people are. They will talk."

"I suppose you mean that men are judged by the company they keep, and that because I happened to be at Houghton at the time of that affair, and was unwillingly dragged into prominence by the newspapers, therefore that discredit reflects on me."

"Well, I should not have expressed it precisely in that way, but still – "

"Still what?"

"As you ask me, I suppose I must answer. I do think it rather unfortunate you should have got yourself mixed up in the business, and both Algie and Frank agree with me – don't you, Algie?" he ended, turning to his friend.

"Awe – er – awe – quite so, quite so. We were talking of you just as you came in, my dear old Dick, and we all agreed it was, awe – er – was – awe – a confounded pity you had anything to do with it. Bad form, you know, old Dick, all this notoriety. Never does to be unusual, singular, or different from other people – eh what? One's friends don't like it – and one don't like it oneself – what?"

Their shallow views and general mental vapidity, if I may put it so, jarred upon me. After spending ten minutes in their company, I went into the dining-room and lunched alone. Then I read the newspapers, dozed in an armchair for half-an-hour, and finally, at about four o'clock, returned to my flat in King Street. John met me on the stairs.

"Ah! there you are, sir," he exclaimed. "Did you meet them?"

"Meet whom?"

"Why, they haven't been gone not two minutes, so I thought you might have met them in the street, sir. They waited over half-an-hour."

"But who were they? What were their names?" I asked, irritated at John for not telling me at once the names of the visitors.

"A young lady and a gentleman – there's a card on your table, sir; I can't recall the names for the moment," he said, wrinkling his forehead as he scratched his ear to stimulate his memory. "The gentleman was extremely tall, quite a giant, with a dark beard."

I hurried up the stairs, for the lift was out of order, and let myself into my flat with my latch key. On the table, in my sitting-room, was a lady's card on a salver.

"Miss Thorold."

In Vera's handwriting were the words, scribbled in pencil across it —

"*So sorry we have missed you*."

Chapter Six
The House in the Square

I admit that I was dumbfounded.

Vera and her mysterious friend were together, calling in the most matter-of-fact way possible, and just as though nothing had happened! It seemed incredible!

All at once a dreadful thought occurred to me that made me catch my breath. Was it possible that my love was an actress, in the sense that she was acting a part? Had she cruelly deceived me when she had declared so earnestly that she loved me? The reflection that, were she practising deception, she would not have come to see me thus openly with the man with the black beard, relieved my feelings only a little. For how came she to be with Davies at all? And again, who was this man Davies? Also that telephone message a fortnight previously, how could I account for it under the circumstances?

"Oh, come to me – do come to me! I am in such trouble," my love had cried so piteously, and then had added: "You alone can help me."

Some one else, apparently, must have helped her. Could it have been this big, dark man?

And was he, in consequence, supplanting me in her affection? The thought held me breathless.

At times I am something of a philosopher, though my relatives laugh when I tell them so, and reply, "Not a philosopher, only a well-meaning fellow, and extremely good-natured" – a description I detest. Realising now the uselessness of worrying over the matter, I decided to make no further move, but to sit quiet and await developments.

"If you worry," I often tell my friends, "it won't in the least help to avert impending disaster, while if what you worry about never comes to pass, you have made yourself unhappy to no purpose."

A platitude? Possibly. But two-thirds of the words of wisdom uttered by great men, and handed down as tradition to a worshipping posterity, are platitudes of the most commonplace type, if you really come to analyse them.

Time hung heavily. It generally ends by hanging heavily upon a man without occupation. But put yourself for a moment in my place. I had lost my love, and those days of inactivity and longing were doubly tedious because I ached to bestir myself somehow, anyhow, to clear up a mystery which, though gradually fading from the mind of a public ever athirst for fresh sensation, was actively alive in my own thoughts – the one thought, indeed, ever present in my mind. Why had the Thorolds so suddenly and mysteriously disappeared?

Thus it occurred to me, two days after Davies and Vera had called at my flat, to stroll down into Belgravia and interview the caretaker at 102, Belgrave Street. Possibly by this time, I reflected, he might have seen Sir Charles Thorold, or heard from

him.

When I had rung three times, the door slowly opened to the length of its chain, and I think quite the queerest-looking little old man I had ever set eyes on, peered out. He gazed with his sharp, beady eyes up into my face for a moment or two, then asked, in a broken quavering voice —

"Are you another newspaper gen'leman?"

"Oh, no," I answered, laughing, for I guessed at once how he must have been harassed by reporters, and I could sympathise with him. "I am not a journalist – I'm only a gentleman."

Of course he was too old to note the satire, but the fact that I wore a silk hat and a clean collar, seemed to satisfy him that I must be a person of some consequence, and when I had assured him that I meant him no ill, but that, on the contrary, I might have something to tell him that he would like to hear, he shut the door, and I heard his trembling old hands remove the chain.

"And how long is it since Sir Charles was last here?" I said to him, when he had shown me into his little room on the ground floor, where a kettle purred on a gas-stove. "I know him well, you know; I was staying at Houghton Park when he disappeared."

He looked me up and down, surprised and apparently much interested.

"Were you indeed, sir?" he exclaimed. "Well, now – well, well!"

"Why don't you sit down and make yourself comfortable, my old friend," I went on affably. I drew forward his armchair, and

he sank into it with a grunt of relief.

"You are a very kind gen'leman, you are, very kind indeed," he said, in a tone that betrayed true gratitude. "Ah! I've known gen'lemen in my time, and I know a gen'leman when I sees one, I do."

"What part of Norfolk do you come from?" I asked, as I took a seat near him, for I knew the Norfolk brogue quite well.

He looked at me and grinned.

"Well, now, that's strange you knowing I come from Norfolk! But it's true. Oh, yes, it is right. I'm a Norfolk man. I was born in Diss. I mind the time my father – "

"Yes, yes," I interrupted, "we'll talk about that presently," for I could see that, once allowed to start on the subject of his relatives and his native county, he would talk on for an hour. "What I have come here this afternoon to talk to you about is Sir Charles Thorold. When was he last here?"

"It will be near two years come Michaelmas," he answered, without an instant's hesitation. "And since then I haven't set eyes on him – I haven't."

"And has this house been shut up all the time?"

"Ay, all that time. I mind the time my father used to tell me – "

I damned his father under my breath, and quickly stopped him by asking who paid him his wages.

"My wages? Oh, Sir Charles' lawyers, Messrs Spink and Peters, of Lincoln's Inn, pays me my wages. But they are not going to pay me any more. No. They are not going to pay me

any more now."

"Not going to pay you any more? What do you mean?"

"Give me notice to quit, they did, a week ago come Saturday."

"But why?"

"Orders from Sir Charles, they said. Would you like to see their letter, sir?"

"I should, if you have it by you."

It was brief, curt, and brutally frank —

"From Messrs Spink and Peters, Solicitors, 582, Lincoln's Inn, W.C.

"To William Taylor, Caretaker, —

"102, Belgrave Street, S.W.

"Messrs Spink and Peters are instructed by Sir Charles Thorold to inform William Taylor that owing to his advanced age his services will not be needed by Sir Charles Thorold after March 25. William Taylor is requested to acknowledge the receipt of this letter."

"They don't consider your feelings much," I said, as I refolded the letter and handed it back to him.

He seemed puzzled.

"Feelings, sir? What are those?" he asked. "I don't somehow seem to know."

"No matter. Under the circumstances it is, perhaps, as well you shouldn't know. Now, I want to ask you a few questions, my old friend – and look here, I am going, first of all, to make you a little present."

I slipped my fingers into my waistcoat pocket, produced a half-sovereign, and pressed it into the palm of his wrinkled old hand.

"To buy tobacco with – no, don't thank me," I said quickly, as he began to express gratitude. "Now, answer a few questions I am going to put to you. In the first place, how long have you been in Sir Charles' service?"

"Sixteen years, come Michaelmas," he answered promptly. "I came from Diss. I mind the time my father – "

"How did Sir Charles, or Mr Thorold as he was then, first hear of you?"

"He was in Downham Market. I was caretaker for the Reverend George Lattimer, and Sir Charles, I should say, Mr Thorold, came to see the house. I think he thought of buying it, but he didn't buy it. I showed him into every room, I remember, and as he was leaving he put his hand into his pocket, pulled out a sov'rin', and gave it to me, just as you have done. And then he said to me, he said: 'Ole man,' he said, 'would you like a better job than this?' Those were his very words, 'Ole man, would you like a better job than this?'"

He grinned and chuckled at the reflection, showing his toothless gums.

"And then he took you into his service. Did you come to London at once?"

"Ay, next week he brought me up, and I've been here ever since – in this house ever since. The Reverend George Lattimer

wor vexed with Sir Charles for a 'stealing' me from his service, as he said. I mind in Diss, when – "

"Was there any reason why Mr Thorold should engage you in such a hurry? Did he give any reason? It seems strange he should have engaged a man of your age, living away in Norfolk, and brought you up to London at a few days' notice."

"Oh, yes there was reason – there was a reason."

"And what was it?"

"Well, well, it was not p'raps 'xactly what you might call a 'reason,' it was what Sir Charles he calls a 'stipilation.' 'I have a stipilation to make, Taylor,' he said, when he engaged me. 'Yes, sir,' I said, 'and what might this, this stipilation be?' I said. 'It's like this, Taylor,' he said. 'I'll engage you and pay you well, and you will come with me to Lundon to-morrow, and you shall have two comfortable rooms in my house,' those were his very words, sir, 'and you will have little work to do, 'cept when I am out of Lundon, and you have to look after the house and act as caretaker. But there be a stipilation I must make.' 'And what might that stipilation be, sir?' I asked him. 'It's like this,' he said, a looking rather hard at me. 'You must never see or know anything that goes on in my Lundon 'ouse, when I am there, or when I am not. If you see or hear anything, you must forget it. Do you understand? Do we understand each other?' he said. And I have done that, sir, ever since Sir Charles engaged me. Never have I seen what happened in this house, nor have I heard what happened in this house, nor known what happened in this house.

I have kep' the stipilation, and I've served the master well."

"And for serving your master well, and doing your duty, you are rewarded by getting kicked out at a month's notice because of your 'advanced age.'"

The old man's eyes became suddenly moist as I said this, and I felt sorry I had spoken.

"Did you see or hear much you ought to have forgotten?" I hazarded, after a brief pause.

He peered up at me with an odd expression, then slowly shook his head.

"Have you actually forgotten all you saw and heard?" I inquired carelessly, as I lit a cigarette, "or do you only pretend?"

"I dusn't say, sir," he answered. "I dusn't say."

He looked to right and left, as it seemed to me instinctively, and as though to assure himself that no one else was present, that no one overheard him. It was evident to me that there was somebody he feared.

Several times I tried tactfully to "draw" him, but to no purpose.

"I should like to look over the house again," I said at last. "I know it well, for I stayed here often in days gone by, though I don't recollect ever seeing you here. How long is it since Sir Charles stayed here?"

"Three years come Lady Day," he answered.

"And has the house been empty ever since? Has it never been sub-let?"

"Never. Sir Charles never would sub-let it, though there were some who wanted it."

"Well, I will look over it, I think," I said, moving to rise. "I'm inclined to rent it myself; that's really why I am here."

He may, or may not, have believed the lie. Anyway, my suggestion filled him with alarm. He got up out of his chair.

"You can't, you can't," he exclaimed, greatly perturbed. He pushed his skinny hand into his jacket-pocket, and I heard him clutch his bunch of keys. "The doors are all locked – all locked."

"You have the keys; give them to me."

"I dusn't, I dusn't, indeed. All, you are a gen'leman, sir, you won't take the keys from an old man, sir, I know you won't."

"Sit down," I said, sharply.

Idle curiosity had prompted me to wish to go over the house. The old man's anxiety that I should not do so settled my determination. My thought travelled quickly.

"Have you a drop of anything to drink that you can give me?" I asked suddenly. "I should like a little whisky – or anything else will do."

Again the expression of dismay came into his old eyes.

"Don't tempt me, sir, ah, don't tempt me!" he exclaimed. "Sir Charles made me promise as long as I was with him I wouldn't touch a drop. I did once. Oh, I did once."

"And what happened?"

He hid his face in his hands, as if to shut out some horrid memory.

"Don't ask me what happened, sir, don't ask me. And I swore I wouldn't touch a drop again. And I haven't got a drop – except a cup of tea."

The kettle on the gas-stove had been boiling for some time. My intention – an evil one – when I had asked for something alcoholic, had been to induce the old man to drink with me until the effects of the whisky should cause him to overcome his scruples and hand over his keys. But tea!

At that moment my elbow rested on something hard in my pocket. Almost at the same moment an idea flashed into my brain. I tried to dispel it, but it wouldn't go. I allowed my mind to dwell upon it, and quickly it obsessed me.

Why, I don't know, but since the chemist had returned the little flask to me, after analysing its contents, I had carried it in my pocket constantly. It was there now. It was the flask that my elbow had pressed, recalling it to my mind.

"Twenty drops will send a strong man to sleep – for ever," he had said.

The words came back to me now. If it needed twenty drops to kill a strong man, surely a small dose could with safety be administered to a wiry little old man who, though decrepit, seemed still to possess considerable vitality. But would it be quite safe? Did I dare risk it?

"A cup of tea will do just as well," I said carelessly, tossing aside my cigarette. "No, don't you move. I see you have everything ready, and there are cups up on the shelf. Let me make

the tea. I like tea made in one way only."

I felt quite guilty when he answered —

"You are very kind, sir; you are very kind; you are a gen'leman."

It was easily and quickly done. I had my back to him. I poured the tea into the cups. Then I let about five drops of the fluid in the flask fall into a spoon. I put the spoon into his cup, and stirred his tea with it.

In a few moments I saw he was growing drowsy. His bony chin dropped several times on to his chest, though he tried to keep awake. He muttered some unintelligible words. In a few minutes he was asleep.

I took his pulse. Yes, it was still quite strong. I waited a moment or two. Then, slipping my hand into his jacket-pocket, I took out the bunch of keys noiselessly, turned out the gas-stove, and stepped quietly out of the room, closing the door behind me.

Chapter Seven
Treading among Shadows

The house was found very dirty and neglected. It contained but little furniture. Dust lay thickly upon everything. The windows, I was almost tempted to think, had not been opened since Sir Charles had last lived there three years ago. There was also a damp, earthy smell in the hall.

As I went slowly up the stairs, bare of carpet or any other covering, they creaked and groaned in a way that was astonishing, for the houses in Belgrave Street are not so very old. The noises the stairs made echoed higher up.

I had decided to enter the rooms on the ground floor last of all. The first floor looked strangely unfamiliar. When last I had been here the house had been luxuriously furnished, and somehow the landing, in its naked state, seemed larger than when I remembered it.

Ah! What fun we had had in that house long ago!

My friends the Thorolds had entertained largely, and their acquaintances had all been bright, amusing people, so different, as I had sometimes told my friends, from the colourless, stupid folk whose company one so often has to endure when staying in the houses of acquaintances. I often think, when mixing with such people, of the story of the two women discussing a certain

"impossible" young man, of a type one meets frequently.

"How deadly dull Bertie Fairbairn is," one of them said. "He never talks at all."

"Oh, he is better than his brother Reggie," the other answered. "Whenever you speak to Bertie he says, 'Right O!'"

The door of the apartment that had been the large drawing-room was locked. On the bunch of keys, I soon found the key that fitted, and I entered.

Phew, what a musty smell! Most oppressive. The blinds were drawn half-way down the windows and, by the look of them, had been so for some considerable time. The furniture that remained was all hidden under holland sheets, and the pictures on the walls, draped in dust-proof coverings, looked like the slabs of salted beef, and the sides of smoke-cured pork one sees hung in some farmhouses. The carpets were dusty, moth-eaten and rotten.

Gingerly, with thumb and forefinger, I picked up the corners of some of the furniture coverings. There was nothing but the furniture underneath, except in one instance, where I saw, upon an easy-chair, a plate with some mouldy remnants of food upon it. No wonder the atmosphere was foetid.

I was about to leave the room, glad to get out of it, when I noticed in a corner of the ceiling a dark, yellow-brown stain, about a yard in circumference. This struck me as curious, and I went over and stood under it, and gazed up at it, endeavouring to discover its origin. Then I saw that it was moist. I pulled up one of the blinds in order to see better, but my scrutiny failed to give

me any inkling as to the origin of the stain.

I went out, shut and locked the door, and entered several other rooms, the doors of all of which I found locked. One room was very like another, the only difference being that the smell in some was closer and nastier than the smell in others, though all the smells had, what I may call the same "flavour" – a "taste" of dry rot. I wondered if Sir Charles knew how his house was being neglected, how dirt and dust were being allowed to accumulate.

This was Lady Thorold's boudoir, if I remembered aright. The inside of the lock was so rusty that I had difficulty in turning the key. Everything shrouded, as elsewhere, but, judging from the odd projections in the coverings, I concluded that ornaments and bric-à-brac had been left upon the tables.

Nor was I mistaken. As I lifted the cloths and dust sheets, objects that I remembered seeing set about the room in the old days, became revealed. There were several beautiful statues, priceless pieces of antique furniture from Naples and Florence, curious carved wooden figures that Sir Charles had collected during his travels in the Southern Pacific, cloisonné vases from Tokio and Osaka, a barely decent sculpture bought by Sir Charles from a Japanese witch-doctor who lived a hermit's life on an island in the Inland Sea – how well I remembered Lady Thorold's emphatic disapproval of this figure, and her objection to her husband's displaying it in the way he did – treasures from different parts of China, from New Guinea, Burmah, the West Indies and elsewhere.

Another cloth I lifted. Beneath it were a number of photographs in frames, piled faces downward in heaps. I picked up some of them, and took them out to look at. A picture of Vera in a short frock, with a teddy-bear tucked under her arm, interested me; so did a portrait of Lady Thorold dressed in a fashion long since past; and so did a portrait of my old father in his Guards uniform. The rest were portraits of people I didn't know. I looked at one or two more, and was about to replace the frames where I had found them, when I turned up one that startled me.

It was a cabinet, in a bog-oak frame, of the man whose likeness had caused the commotion at Houghton, the man who had called himself Smithson. But it was not a portrait similar to the one I had taken away. The same man, undoubtedly, but in a different attitude, and apparently many years younger.

Closely I scrutinised it.

The enigma presented was complete. I am not a pilferer, but I considered that I should be justified in putting the portrait into my pocket, and I did so without another thought. Then I replaced all the frames where I had found them, and resumed my ramble over the house.

In the rest of the rooms on that floor, I found nothing further of interest. On the floor above, however, a surprise was in store for me.

The first two rooms were bedrooms, neglected-looking and very dusty. There were fewer coverings here. Dust was upon the

floor, on the beds, on the chairs and tables, on the window-sills, on the wash-stands, on the chests of drawers, on the mantelpiece – everywhere. In the next room, the door of which I was surprised to find unlocked, just the same. A table of dark mahogany was thickly coated with dust.

Hullo! Why, what was this? I thought at once of a detective friend of mine, and wondered what he would have said, what opinion he would have formed and what conclusion he would have come to, had he been in my place at that moment. For on the table, close to the edge of it, was the clear outline of a hand. Someone had quite recently – apparently within the last few hours, and certainly since the previous day – put his hand upon that dusty table. I scanned the outline closely; then suddenly I started.

There could be no doubt whatever – it was not the outline of Taylor's hand. The fingers that had rested there were long and tapering. This was not the impression of a man's hand, but of a woman's – of a woman's left hand.

Evidently some one had been in this room recently. From point to point I walked, looking for further traces, but there were none that I could see. What woman could have been in here so lately? And did the old man asleep downstairs know of her entry? He must have, for she could not have entered the house, had he not admitted her. I felt I was becoming quite a clever detective, with an exceptional gift for deduction from the obvious. Another gleam of intelligence led me to conclude

that this woman's presence in the house probably accounted for Taylor's determination not to let me go over the house.

I thought I heard a sound. I held my breath and stood still, listening intently, but the only sound that came to me was the distant shrill whistle of some one summoning a taxi. Outside in the passage, all was still as death. I walked to the end of the passage, peeped into other bedrooms, then returned to the room with the table bearing the imprint of the hand.

The windows overlooked Belgrave Street – double windows, which made the sound of the traffic down below inaudible. Carelessly I watched for some moments the vehicles and passers-by, unconsciously striving to puzzle out, meanwhile, the problem of the hand. Suddenly, two figures approaching along the pavement from the direction of Wilton Street, arrested my attention. They seemed familiar to me. As they came nearer, a strange feeling of excitement possessed me, for I recognised the burly form of Davies, or "Smithson," and as he had called himself, and, walking beside him, Sir Charles Thorold. The two appeared to be engaged in earnest conversation.

They disappeared where the street turned, and as I came away from the window I noticed, for the first time, that the room had another door, a door leading presumably into a dressing-room. I went over to it. It was locked.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.